

STEPHEN KING

The Collective

A collection of Poems, Short Stories, and other
Works by Stephen King

Phantom Press
2000

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This collection is a work in progress. As more items are discovered, they will be added. All items in this book are short stories, poems, and other items published by Stephen King, but not found in any book released by his publishing company at this point in time. The purpose of this book is to have one archive for all of the material.

xxXsTmXxx

THIS COPY IS DATED:
06/2000

FOR
PATTY

STEPHEN
KING

An Evening at GODs

A one minit play, 1990

DARK STAGE. Then a spotlight hits a papier-mache globe, spinning all by itself in the middle of darkness. Little by little, the stage lights COME UP, and we see a bare-stage representation of a living room: an easy chair with a table beside it (there's an open bottle of beer on the table), and a console TV across the room. There's a picnic cooler-full of beer under the table. Also, a great many empties. GOD is feeling pretty good. At stage left, there's a door.

GOD a big guy with a white beard is sitting in the chair, alternately reading a book (When Bad Things Happen to Good People) and watching the tube. He has to crane whenever he wants to look at the set, because the floating globe (actually hung on a length of string, I imagine) is in his line of vision. There's a sitcom on TV. Every now and then GOD chuckles along with the laugh-track.

There is a knock at the door.

GOD (big amplified voice)

Come in! Verily, it is open unto you!

The door opens. In comes ST. PETER, dressed in a snazzy white robe. He's also carrying a briefcase.

GOD

Peter! I thought you were on vacation!

ST. PETER

Leaving in half an hour, but I thought I'd bring the papers for you to sign.

How are you, GOD?

GOD

Better. I should know better than to eat those chili peppers. They burn me at both ends. Are those the letters of transmission from hell?

ST. PETER

Yes, finally. Thank GOD. Excuse the pun.

He removes some papers from his briefcase. GOD scans them, then holds out his hand impatiently, ST PETER has been looking at the floating globe. He looks back, sees GOD is waiting, and puts a pen in his out-stretched hand. GOD scribbles his signature. As he does, ST. PETER goes back to gazing at the globe.

ST. PETER

So Earth's still there, Huh? After All these years.

GOD hands the papers back and looks up at it. His gaze is rather irritated.

GOD

Yes, the housekeeper is the most forgetful bitch in the universe.

An EXPLOSION OF LAUGHTER from the TV. GOD cranes to see. Too late.

GOD

Damm, was that Alan Alda?

ST. PETER

It may have been, sir I really couldn't see.

GOD

Me, either.

He leans forward and crushes the floating globe to powder.
GOD (immensely satisfied)
There. Been meaning to do that for a long time. Now I can see the TV..
ST. PETER looks sadly at the crushed remains of the earth.
ST. PETER
Umm... I believe that was Alan Alda's world, GOD.
GOD
So? (Chuckles at the TV) Robin Williams! I LOVE Robin Williams!
ST. PETER
I believe both Alda and Williams were on it when you..umm...passed Judgement, sir.
GOD
Oh, I've got all the videotapes. No problem. Want a beer?
As ST. PETER takes one, the stage-lights begin to dim. A spotlight come up on the remains on the globe.
ST. PETER
I actually sort of liked that one, GOD Earth, I mean.
GOD
It wasn't bad, but there's more where that came from. Now let's Drink to your vacation!
They are just shadows in the dimness now, although it's a little easier to see GOD, because there's a faint nimbus of light around his head. They clink bottles. A roar of laughter from the TV.

GOD
Look! It's Richard Pryor! That guy kills me! I suppose he was...
ST. PETER
Ummm... yessir.
GOD
Shit. (Pause) Maybe I better cut Down on my drinking. (Pause)
Still... It WAS in the way.
Fade to black, except for the spotlight on the ruins of the floating globe.
ST. PETER
Yessir.
GOD (muttering)
My son got back, didn't he?
ST. PETER
Yessir, some time ago.
GOD
Good. Everything's hunky-dory, then.
THE SPOTLIGHT GOES OUT.
(Author's note: GOD'S VOICE should be as loud as possible.)

Copyright 1982 by Stephen King.
'Before the Play,' was first published in Whispers,
Vol. 5, No. 1-2, August 1982.

A BEDROOM IN THE WEE HOURS OF THE MORNING

Coming here had been a mistake, and Lottie Kilgallon didn't like to admit her mistakes.

And I won't admit this one, she thought with determination as she stared up at the ceiling that glimmered overhead
Her husband of 10 days slumbered beside her sleeping the sleep of the just was how some might have put it. Others, more honest, might have called it the sleep of the monumentally stupid. He was William Pillsbury of the Westchester Pillsburys, only son and heir of Harold M. Pillsbury, old and comfortable money. Publishing was what they liked to talk about because publishing was a gentleman's profession, but there was also a chain of New England textile mills, a foundry in Ohio, and extensive agricultural holdings in the South - cotton and citrus and fruit. Old money was always

better than nouveau riche, but either way they had money falling out of their assholes. If she ever said that aloud to Bill, he would undoubtedly go pale and might even faint dead away. No fear, Bill. Profanation of the Pillsbury family shall never cross my lips. It had been her idea to honeymoon at the Overlook in Colorado, and there had been two reasons for this. First, although it was tremendously expensive (as the best resorts were), it was not a "hep" place to go, and Lottie did not like to go to the hep places. Where did you go on your honeymoon. Lottie? Oh, this perfectly, wonderful resort hotel in Colorado - the Overlook. Lovely place. Quite out of the way but so romantic. And her friends - whose stupidity was exceeded in most cases only by that of William Pillsbury - himself - would look at her in dumb - literally! - wonder. Lottie had done it again.

Her second reason had been of more personal importance. She had wanted to honeymoon at the Overlook because Bill wanted to go to Rome. It was imperative to find out certain things as soon as possible. Would she be able to have her own way immediately? And if not, how long would it take to grind him down? He was stupid, and he had followed her around like a dog with its tongue hanging out since her debutante ball, but would he be as malleable after the ring was slipped on as he had been before? Lottie smiled a little in the dark despite her lack of sleep and the bad dreams she had had since they arrived here. Arrived here, that was the key phrase. "Here" was not the American Hotel in Rome but the Overlook in Colorado. She was going to be able to manage him just fine, and that was the important thing. She would only make him stay another four days (she had originally planned on three weeks, but the bad dreams had changed that), and then they could go back to New York. After all, that was where the action

was in this August of 1929. The stock market was going crazy, the sky was the limit, and Lottie expected to be an heiress to multimillions instead of just one or two million by this time next

year. Of course there were some weak sisters who claimed the market was riding for a fall, but no one had ever called Lottie Kilgallon a weak sister.

Lottie Kilgallon. Pillsbury now at least that's the way I'll have to sign my checks, of course. But inside I'll always be Lottie Kilgallon. Because he's never going to touch me Not inside where it counts.

The most tiresome thing about this first contest of her marriage was that Bill actually liked the Overlook. He was up even, day at two minutes past the crack of dawn, disturbing what ragged bits of sleep she had managed after the restless nights, staring eagerly out at the sunrise like some sort of disgusting Greek nature boy. He had been hiking two or three times, he had gone on several nature rides with other guests, and bored her almost to the point of screaming with stories about the horse he rode on these jaunts, a bay mare named Tessie. He had tried to get her to go on these outings with him, but Lottie refused. Riding meant slacks, and her posterior was just a trifle too-wide for slacks. The idiot had also suggested that she go hiking with him and some of the others - the caretaker's son doubled as a guide, Bill enthused, and he knew a hundred trails. The amount of game you saw, Bill said, would make you think it was 1829, instead of a hundred years later. Lottie had dumped cold water on this idea too.

"I believe, darling, that all hikes should be one-way, you see."

"One-way?" His wide Anglo-Saxon brow crippled and croggled into its usual expression of befuddlement. "How can you have a one-way hike, Lottie?"

"By hailing a taxi to take you home when your feet begin to hurt," she replied coldly,

The barb was wasted. He went without her, and came back glowing. The stupid bastard was getting a tan.

She had not even enjoyed their evenings of bridge in the downstairs recreation room, and that was most unlike her. She was something of a barracuda at bridge, and if it had been ladylike to play for stakes in mixed company, she could have brought a cash dowry to her marriage (not that she would have, of course). Bill was a good bridge partner, too; he had both qualifications: He understood the basic rules and he allowed Lottie to dominate him. She thought it was poetic justice that her new husband spent most of their bridge evenings as the dummy.

Their partners at the Overlook were the Compsons occasionally, the Vereckers more frequently. Dr. Verecker was in his early 70s, a surgeon who had retired after a near-fatal heart attack. His wife smiled a lot, spoke softly, and had eyes like shiny nickels. They played only adequate bridge, but they kept beating Lottie and Bill. On the occasions when the men played against the women, the

men ended up trouncing Lottie and Malvina Verecker. When Lottie and Dr. Verecker played Bill and Malvina, she and the doctor usually won, but there was no pleasure in it because Bill was a dullard and Malvina, could not see the game of bridge as anything but a social tool.

Two nights before, after the doctor and his wife had made a bid of four clubs that, they had absolutely no right to make, Lottie had mused the cards in a sudden flash of pique that was very unlike her. She usually kept her feelings under much better control.

"You could have led into my spades on that third trick!" she rattled at Bill. "That would have put a stop to it right there!"

"But dear," said Bill, flustered, "I thought you were thin in spades."

"If I had been thin in spades, I shouldn't have bid two of them, should I? Why I continue to play this game with you I don't know!"

The Vereckers blinked at them in mild surprise. Later that evening Mrs. Verecker, she of the nickel-bright eyes, would tell her husband that she had thought them such a nice couple, so loving, but when she ruffled the cards like that she had looked just like a shrew.

Bill was staring at her with jaws agape.

"I'm very sorry," said Lottie, gathering up the reins of her control and giving them an inward shake. "I'm off my feed a little, I suppose. I haven't been sleeping well."

"That's a pity," said the doctor. "Usually this mountain air—we're almost 12,000 feet above sea level, you know is very conducive to good rest. Less oxygen, you know. The body doesn't—"

"I've had bad dreams," Lottie told him shortly.

And so she had. Not just bad dreams but nightmares. She had never been much of one to dream (which said something disgusting and Freudian about, her psyche, no doubt), even as a child. Oh, yes, there had been some pretty humdrum affairs, mostly he only one she could remember that, came even close to being a nightmare was one in which she had been delivering a Good Citizenship speech at the school assembly and had looked down to discover she had forgotten to put on her dress. Later someone had told her almost everyone had a dream like that at some point or another.

The dreams she had had at the Overlook were much worse. It was not a case of one dream or two repeating themselves with variations; they were all different. Only the setting of each was similar: In each one she found herself in a different part of the Overlook Hotel. Each dream would begin with an awareness on her part that she was dreaming and that something terrible and frightening was going to happen to her in the course of the dream. There was an inevitability about it that was particularly awful.

In one of them she had been hurrying for the elevator because she was late for dinner, so late that Bill had already gone down before

her in a temper.

She rang for the elevator, which came promptly and was empty except for the operator. She thought too late that it was odd; at mealtimes you could barely wedge yourself in. The stupid hotel was only half full, but the elevator had a ridiculously small capacity. Her unease heightened as the elevator descended and continued to descend ... for far too long a time. Surely they must have reached the lobby or even the basement by now, and still the operator did not open the doors, and still the sensation of downward motion continued. She tapped him on the shoulder with mixed feelings of indignation and panic, aware too late of how spongy he felt, how strange, like a scarecrow stuffed with rotten straw. And as he turned his head and grinned at her she saw that the elevator was being piloted by a dead man, his face a greenish-white corpselike hue, Ms eyes sunken, his hair under his cap lifeless and sere. The fingers wrapped around the switch were fallen away to bones.

Even as she filled her lungs to shriek, the corpse threw the switch over and uttered, "Your floor, madam," in a husky, empty voice. The door drew open to reveal flames and basalt plateaus and the stench of brimstone. The elevator operator had taken her to hell. In another dream it was near the end of the afternoon and she was on the playground. The light was curiously golden, although the sky overhead was black with thunderheads. Membranes of shower danced between two of the saw-toothed peaks further west. It was like a Brueghel, a moment of sunshine and low pressure. And she felt something beside her. Moving. Something in the topiary. And she turned to see with frozen horror that it was the topiary: The hedge animals had left their places and were creeping toward her, the lions, the buffalo, even the rabbit that usually looked so comic and friendly. Their horrid hedge features were bent on her as they

moved slowly toward the playground on their hedge paws, green and silent and deadly under the black thunderheads.

In the one she had just awakened from, the hotel had been on fire. She had awakened in their room to find Bill gone and smoke drifting slowly through the apartment. She fled in her nightgown but lost her direction in the narrow halls, which were obscured by smoke. All the numbers seemed to be gone from the doors, and there was no way to tell if you were running toward the stairwell and elevator or away from them. She rounded a corner and saw Bill standing outside the window at the end, motioning her forward. Somehow she had run all the way to the back of the hotel; he was standing out there on the fire escape landing. Now there was heat baking into her back through the thin, filmy stuff of her nightgown. The place must be in flames behind her, she thought. Perhaps it had been the boiler. You had to keep an eye on the boiler, because if you didn't, she would creep on you. Lottie started forward and suddenly something wrapped around her arm like a python, holding her back. It was one of the fire hoses she had seen along the corridor walls, white canvas hose in a bright red frame. It had come alive somehow, and it writhed and coiled around her, now securing a leg, now her other arm. She was held fast and it was getting hotter, hotter. She could hear the angry

crackle of the flames now only feet behind her. The wallpaper was peeling and blistering. Bill was gone from the fire-escape landing. And then she had been-

She had been awake in the big double bed, no smell of smoke, with Bill Pillsbury sleeping the sleep of the justly stupid beside her. She was running sweat, and if it, weren't so late she would get up to shower. It was quarter past three in the morning.

Dr. Verecker had offered to give her a sleeping medicine, but Lottie had refused. She distrusted any concoction you put in your body to knock out your mind. It was like giving up command of

your ship voluntarily, and she had sworn to herself that she would never do that.

But what would she do for the next four clays? Well, Verecker played shuffleboard in the mornings with his nickelayed wife. Perhaps she would look him up and get the prescription after all. Lottie looked up at the white ceiling high above her, glimmering ghostlike, and admitted again that the Overlook had been a very bad mistake. None of the ads for the Overlook in the New Yorker or The American Mercury mentioned that the place's real specialty seemed to be giving people the whimsams. Four more days, and that was plenty. It had been a mistake, all right, but a mistake she would never admit, or have to admit. In fact, she was sure she could.

You had to keep an eye on the boiler, because if you didn't., she would creep up on you. What did that mean, anyway? Or was it just one of those nonsensical things that sometimes came to you in dreams, so much gibberish? Of course, there was undoubtedly a boiler in the basement or somewhere to heat the place; even summer resorts had to have heat, sometimes, didn't they? If only to supply hot water. But creep? Would a boiler creep?

You had to keep an, eye on, the boiler.

It was like one of those crazy riddles:

Why is a mouse when it runs, when is a raven like a writing desk, what is a creeping boiler? Was it, like the hedges, maybe? She'd had a dream where the hedges crept. And the fire hose that had what - what? - slithered?

A chill touched her. It was not good to think much about the dreams in the night, in the dark. You could ... well, you could bother yourself. It was better to think about the things you would be doing when you got back to New York, about how you were going to convince Bill that a baby was a bad idea for a while, until

he got firmly settled in the vice presidency his father had awarded him as a wedding present-

She'll creep on you.

- and how you were going to encourage him to bring his work home so he would get used to the idea that she was going to be involved with it, very much involved.

Or did the whole hotel, creep? Was that the answer?

I'll make him a good wife, Lottie thought frantically. We'll work at

it the same way we always worked at being bridge partners. He knows the rules of the game and he knows enough to let me run him. It will be just like the bridge, just like that, and if we've been off our game up here that, doesn't mean anything, it's just the hotel, the dreams-

An affirming voice: That's it. The whole place. It... creeps.

"Oh, shit," Lottie Kilgallon whispered in the dark. It was dismaying for her to realize just how badly her nerves were shot.

As on the other nights, there would be no more sleep for her now. She would lie here in bed until the sun started to come up and then she would get an uneasy hour or so.

Smoking in bed was a bad habit, a terrible habit., but she had begun to leave her cigarettes in an ashtray on the floor by the bed in case of the dreams. Sometimes it calmed her. She reached down to get the ashtray and the thought burst on her like a revelation: It does creep, the whole place - like it's alive!

And that was when the hand reached out unseen from under the bed and gripped her wrist firmly ... almost lecherously. A fingerlike canvas scratched suggestively against her palm and something was under there, something had been under there the whole time, and Lottie began to scream. She screamed until her

throat was raw and hoarse and her eyes were bulging from her face and Bill was awake and pallid with terror beside her.

When he put on the lamp she leaped from the bed, retreated into the farthest corner of the room and curled up with her thumb in her mouth.

Both Bill and Dr. Verecker tried to find out what was wrong; she told them but she was still sucking her thumb, so it was some time before they realized she was saying, "It crept under the bed. It crept under the bed."

And even though they flipped up the coverlet and Bill actually lifted up the whole bed by its foot off the floor to show her there was nothing under there, not even a litter of dust kitties, she would not come out of the corner. When the sun came up, she did at last come out of the corner. She took her thumb out of her mouth. She stayed away from the bed. She stared at, Bill Pillsbury from her clown-white face.

"We're going back to New York," she said. "This morning."

"Of course," Bill muttered. "Of course, dear."

Bill Pillsbury's father died of a heart attack two weeks after the stock-market crash. Bill and Lottie could not keep the company's head above water. Things went from bad to worse. In the years that followed she thought often of their honeymoon at the Overlook Hotel, and the dreams, and the canvas hand that had crept out from under the bed to squeeze her own. She thought about those things more and more. She committed suicide in a Yonkers motel room in 1949, a woman who was prematurely gray and prematurely lined. It had been 20 years and the hand that had gripped her wrist when she reached down to get her cigarettes had never really let go. She left a one-sentence suicide note written on Holiday Inn stationery. The note said: "I wish we had gone to Rome."

AND NOW THIS WORD FROM NEW HAMPSHIRE

In that long, hot summer of 1953, the summer Jacky Torrance turned 6, his father came home one night from the hospital and broke Jacky's arm. He almost killed the boy. He was drunk. Jacky was sitting on the front porch reading a Combat Casey comic book when his father came down the street, listing to one side, torpedoed by beer somewhere down the line. As he always did, the boy felt a mixture of love-hate-fear rise in his chest at the sight of the old man, who looked like a giant, malevolent ghost in his hospital whites. Jacky's father was an orderly at the Berlin Community Hospital. He was like God, like Nature-sometimes lovable, sometimes terrible. You never knew which it would be. Jacky's mother feared and served him. Jacky's brothers hated him. Only Jacky, of all of them, still loved him in spite of the fear and the hate, and sometimes the volatile mixture of emotions made him want to cry out at the sight of his father coming, to simply cry out: "I love you, Daddy! Go away! Hug me! I'll kill you! I'm so afraid of you! I need you!" And his father seemed to sense in his stupid way-he was a stupid man, and selfish - that all of them had gone beyond him but Jacky, the youngest, knew that the only way he could touch the others was to bludgeon them to attention. But with Jacky there was still love, and there had been times when he had cuffed the boy's mouth into running blood and then hugged him with a frightful force, the killing force just, barely held back by some other thing, and Jackie would let himself be hugged deep into the atmosphere of malt and hops that hung around his old man forever, quailing, loving, fearing. He leaped off the step and ran halfway down the path before something stopped him. "Daddy?" he said. "Where's the car?" Torrance came toward him, and Jacky saw how very drunk he was. "Wrecked it up," he said thickly.

"Oh..." Careful now. Careful what you say. For your life, be careful. "That's too bad" His father stopped and regarded Jacky from his stupid pig eyes. Jacky held his breath. Somewhere behind his father's brow, under the lawn-mowed brush of his crew cut, the scales were turning. The hot, afternoon stood still while Jacky waited, staring up anxiously into his father's face to see if his father would throw a rough bear arm around his shoulder, grinding Jacky's cheek against the rough, cracked leather of the belt that held up his white pants and say, "Walk with me into the house, big boy." in the hard and contemptuous way that was the only way he could even approach love without destroying himself - or if it would be something else. Tonight it was something else. The thunderheads appeared on his father's brow. "What do you mean, 'That's too bad'? What kind of shit is that?" "Just...too bad, Daddy. That's all I meant. it's-" Torrance's hand swept out at the end of his arm, huge hand, hamhock arm, but speedy, yes, very speedy, and Jacky went down with church bells in his head and a split lip.

"Shutup" his father said, giving it a broad A.
Jacky said nothing. Nothing would do any good now. The balance had swung the wrong way.
"You ain't gonna sass me," said Torrance. "You won't sass your daddy. Get up here and take your medicine."
There was something in his face this time, some dark and blazing thing. And Jacky suddenly knew that this time there might be no hug at the end of the blows, and if there was he might, be unconscious and unknowing ... maybe even dead.
He ran.

Behind him, his father let out a bellow of rage and chased him., a flapping specter in hospital whites, a juggernaut of doom following his son from the front yard to the back.
Jacky ran for his life. The tree house, he was thinking. He can't get up there; the ladder nailed to the tree won't hold him. I'll get up there, talk to him; maybe he'll go to sleep - Oh, God, please let him go to sleep - he was weeping in terror as he ran.
"Come back here, goddammit!" His father was roaring behind him.
"Come back here and take your medicine! Take it like a man!"
Jacky flashed past the back steps. His mother, that thin and defeated woman, scrawny in a faded housedress, had come out through the screen door from the kitchen, just as Jacky ran past with his father in pursuit. She opened her mouth as if to speak or cry out, but her hand came up in a fist and stopped whatever she might have said, kept it safely behind her teeth. She was afraid for her son, but more afraid that her husband would turn on her.
"No, you don't! Come back here!"
Jacky reached the large elm in the backyard, the elm where last year his father had smoke-drugged a colony of wasps then burned their nest with gasoline. The boy went up the haphazardly hung nailed-on rungs like greased lightning, and still he was nearly not fast enough. His father's clutching, enraged hand grasped the boy's ankle in a grip like flexed steel, then slipped a little and succeeded only in pulling off Jacky's loafer. Jacky went up the last, three rungs and crouched on the floor of the tree house, 12 feet above the ground, panting and crying on his hands and knees.
His father seemed to go crazy. He danced around the tree like an Indian, Bellowing his rage. He slammed his fists into the tree, making bark fly and bringing lattices of blood to his knuckles. He kicked it. His huge moon face was white with frustration and red with anger.

"Please, Daddy," Jacky moaned. "Whatever I said ... I'm sorry I said it..."
"Come down! You come down out of there take your fucking medicine, you little cur! Right now!"
"I Will ... I will If you promise not to ... to hit me too hard ... not hurt me... just spank me but not hurt me..."
"Get out of that tree!" his father screamed.
Jacky looked toward the house but that was hopeless. His mother

had retreated somewhere far away, to neutral ground.

"GET OUT RIGHT NOW!"

"Oh, Daddy, I don't dare!" Jacky cried out, and that was the truth. Because now his father might kill him.

There was a period of stalemate. A minute, perhaps, or perhaps two. His father circled the tree, puffing and blowing like a whale. Jacky turned around and around on his hands and knees, following the movements. They were like parts of a visible clock.

The second or third time he came back to the ladder nailed to the tree, Torrance stopped. He looked speculatively at the ladder. And laid his hands on the rung before his eyes. He began to climb.

"No, Daddy, it won't hold you," Jacky whispered.

But his father came on relentlessly, like fate, like death, like doom.

Up and up, closer to the tree house. One rung snapped off under his hands and he almost fell but caught the next one with a grunt and a lunge. Another one of the rungs twisted around from the horizontal to the perpendicular under his weight with a rasping scream of pulling nails, but it did not give way, and then the working, congested face was visible over the edge of the tree-house floor, and for that one moment of his childhood Jack Torrance had his father at bay; if he could have kicked that face

with the foot that still wore its loafer, kicked it where the nose terminated between the piggy eyes, he could have driven his father backward off the ladder, perhaps killed him (If he had killed him, would anyone have said anything but Thanks, Jacky"?) But it was love that stopped him, and love that, let him just his face in his hands and give up as first one of his father's pudgy, short-fingered hands appeared on the boards and then the other.

"Now, by God," his father breathed. He stood above his huddled son like a giant.

"Oh, Daddy," Jacky mourned for both of them. And for a moment his father paused, his face sagged into lines of uncertainty, and Jacky felt a thread of hope.

Then the face drew up. Jacky could smell the beer, and his father said, "I'll teach you to sass me," and all hope was gone as the foot swung out, burying itself in Jacky's belly, driving the wind from his belly in a whoosh. as he flew from the tree-house platform and fell to the ground, turning over once and landing on the point of his left elbow, which snapped with a greenstick crack. He didn't even have breath enough to scream. The last thing he saw before he blacked out was his father's face, which seemed to be at the end of a long, dark tunnel. It, seemed to be filling with surprise, the way a vessel may fill with some pale liquid.

He's just starting to know what he did, Jacky thought incoherently. And on the heels of that, a thought with no meaning at all, coherent or otherwise, a thought, that chased him into the blackness as he fell back on the chewed and tattered grass of the back lawn in a faint:

What you see is what you'll be, what YOU see is what you'll be, what you-

The break in his arm was cleanly healed in six months. The nightmares went, on much longer. In a way, they never stopped.

THE OVERLOOK HOTEL, THIRD FLOOR, 1958

The murderers came up the stairs in their stocking feet. The two men posted outside the door of the Presidential Suite never heard them. They were young, dressed in Ivy League suits with the cut of the jackets a little wider than the fashion of the day decreed. You couldn't wear a .357 Magnum concealed in a shoulder holster and be quite in fashion. They were discussing whether or not the Yankees could take yet another pennant. It was lacking two days of September, and as usual, the pinstripers looked formidable. Just talking about the Yankees made them feel a little better. They were New York boys, on loan from Walt Abruzzi, and they were a long way from home.

The man inside was a big wheel in the Organization. That was all they knew all they wanted to know. "You do your job, we all get well," Abruzzi had told them. "What's to know?"

They had heard things,, of course. That there was a place in Colorado that was completely neutral ground. A place where even a crazy little West Coast hood like Tony Giorgio could sit down and have a fancy brandy in a balloon glass with the Gray Old Men who saw him as some sort of homicidal stinging insect to be crushed. A place where guys from Boston who had been used to putting each other in the trunks of cars behind bowling alleys in Malden or into garbage cans in Roxbury could get together and play gin and tell jokes about the Polacks. A place where hatchets could be buried or unearthed, pacts made, plans laid. A place where warm people could sometimes cool off.

Well, here they were, and it wasn't so much - in fact, both of them were homesick for New York, which was why they were talking about the Yankees. But they never saw New York or the Yankees again.

Their voices reached down the hall to the stairwell where the murderers stood six risers down, with their stocking-covered heads just below line of sight, if you happened to be looking down the hall from the door of the Presidential Suite. There were three of them on the stairs, dressed in dark pants and coats, carrying shotguns with the barrels sawed off to six inches. The shotguns were loaded with expanding buckshot.

One of the three motioned and they walked up the stairs to the hall. The two outside the door never even saw them until the murderers were almost on top of them. One of them was saying animatedly, "Now you take Ford. Who's better in the American League than Whitey Ford? No, I want to ask you that sincerely, because when it comes to the stretch he just

The speaker looked up and saw three black shapes with no discernable faces standing not 10 paces away. For a moment he could not believe it. They were just standing there. He shook his head, fully expecting them to go away like the floating black specks you sometimes saw in the darkness. They didn't. Then he knew.

"What's the matter?" his buddy said.

The young man who had been speaking about Whitey Ford clawed under his jacket for his gun. One of the murderers placed the butt of his shotgun against a leather pad strapped to his belly beneath his dark turtleneck. And pulled both triggers. The blast in the narrow hallway was deafening. The muzzle flash was like summer lightning, purple in its brilliance. A stink of cordite. The young man was blown backward down the hall in a disintegrating cloud of Ivy League jacket, blood, and hair. His arm looped over backward, spilling the Magnum from his dying fingers, and the pistol thumped harmlessly to the carpet with the safety still on.

The second young man did not even make an effort to go for his gun. He stuck his hands high in the air and wet his pants at the same time.

"I give up, don't shoot me, it's OK-!"

"Say hello to Albert Anastasia when you get down there, punk", one of the murderers said, and placed the butt of his shotgun against his belly.

"I ain't a. problem, I ain't a problem!" the young man screamed in a thick Bronx accent, and then the blast of the shotgun lifted him out of his shoes and he slammed back against the silk wallpaper with its delicate raised pattern. He actually stuck for a moment before collapsing to the hall floor.

The three of them walked to the door of the suite. One of them tried the knob. "Locked."

"OK."

The third man, who hadn't shot yet, stood in front of the door, leveled his weapon slightly above the knob, and pulled both triggers. A jagged hole appeared in the door, and light rayed through. The third man reached through the hole and grasped the deadbolt on the other side. There was a pistol shot, then two more. None of the three flinched.

There was a snap as the deadbolt gave, and then the third man kicked the door open. Standing in the wide sitting room in front of the picture window, which now showed a view only of darkness, was a man of about 35 wearing only jockey shorts. He held a pistol in each hand and as the murderers walked in he began to fire at them, spraying bullets wildly. Slugs peeled splinters from the door frame, dug furrows in the rug, dusted plaster down from the ceiling. He fired five times, and the closest he came to any of his assassins was a bullet that twitched the pants of the second man at the left knee.

They raised their shotguns with almost military precision.

The man in the sitting room screamed, threw both guns on the floor, and ran for the bedroom. The triple blast caught him just outside the door and a wet fan of blood, brains, and bits of flesh splashed across the cherrystriped wallpaper. He fell through the open bedroom doorway, half in and half out.

"Watch the door," the first man said, and dropped his smoking shotgun to the rug. He reached into his coat pocket, brought out a

bone-handled switchblade, and thumbed the chrome button. He approached the dead man, who was lying in the doorway on his side. He squatted beside the corpse and yanked down the front of the man's jockey shorts.

Down the hall the door to one of the other suites opened and a pallid face peered out. The third man raised his shotgun and the face jerked back in. The door slammed. A bolt rattled frantically. The first man rejoined them.

'All right," he said. "Down the stairs and out the back door. Let's go."

They were outside and climbing into the parked car three minutes later. They left the Overlook behind them, standing gilded in mountain moonlight, white as bone under high stars. The hotel would stand long after the three of them were as dead as the three they had left behind.

The Overlook was at home with the dead.

The Blue Air Compressor
Stephen King

first appeared in
Onan, 1971

The house was tall, with an incredible slope of shingled roof. As he walked up toward it from the shore road, Gerald Nately thought it was almost a country in itself, geography in microcosm. The roof dipped and rose at varying angles above the main building and two strangely-angled wings; a widow's walk skirted a mushroom-shaped cupola which looked toward the sea; the porch, facing the dunes and lusterless September scrubgrass was longer than a Pullman car and screened in. The high slope of roof made the house seem to beetle its brows and loom above him. A Baptist grandfather of a house.

He went to the porch and after a moment of hesitation, through the screen door to the fanlighted one beyond. There was only a wicker chair, a rusty porch swing, and an old discarded knitting basket to watch him go. Spiders had spun silk in the shadowy upper corners. He knocked.

There was silence, inhabited silence. He was about to knock again when a chair someplace inside wheezed deeply in its throat. It was a tired sound. Silence. Then the slow, dreadfully patient sound of old, overburdened feet finding their way up the hall. Counterpoint of cane: Whock... whock... whock...

The floorboards creaked and whined. A shadow, huge and unformed in the pearled glass, bloomed on the fanlight. Endless

sound of fingers laboriously solving the riddle of chain, bolt, and hasp lock. The door opened. "Hello," the nasal voice said flatly. "You're Mr. Nately. You've rented the cottage. My husband's cottage."

"Yes." Gerald said, his tongue swelling in his throat. "That's right. And you're--"

"Mrs. Leighton," the nasal voice said, pleased with either his quickness or her name, though neither was remarkable. "I'm Mrs. Leighton."

* * *

this woman is so goddam fucking big and old she looks like oh
jesus christ print dress she must be six-six and fat my god Shes fat
as a hog can't smell her white hair long white hair her legs those
redwood trees ill that movie a Lank she could be a tank she could
kill me her voice is out of any context like a kazoo jesus if i laugh i
can't laugh can she be seventy god how does she walk and the cane
her hands are bigger than my feet like a goddam tank she could go
through oak oak for christs sake.

* * *

"You write." She hadn't offered him in.

"That's about the size of it," he said, and laughed to cover his own sudden shrinking from that metaphor.

"Will you show me some after you get settled?" she asked. Her eyes seemed perpetually luminous and wistful. They were not touched by the age that had run riot in the rest of her

* * *

wait get that written down

* * *

image: "age had run riot in her with luxuriant fleshiness: she was like a wild sow let loose in a great and dignified house to shit on the carpet, gore at the welsh dresser and send the crystal goblets and wine-glasses all crash-atumble, to trample the wine colored divans to lunatic puffs of springs and stuffing, to spike the mirrorbright finish of the great hall floor with barbarian hoofprints and flying puddles of urine"

okay Shes there its a story i feel her

* * *

body, making it sag and billow.

"If you like," he said. "I didn't even see the cottage from the Shore Road, Mrs. Leighton. Could you tell me where--"

"Did you drive in?"

"Yes. I left my car over there.'" He pointed beyond the dunes, toward the road.

A smile, oddly one-dimensional, touched her lips. "That's why. You can only see a blink from the road: unless you're walking, you miss it." She pointed west at a slight angle away from the dunes and the house. "There. Right over that little hill."

"All right," he said, then stood there smiling. He really had no idea how to terminate the interview.

"Would you like to come in for some coffee? Or a Coca-Cola?"

"Yes," he said instantly.

She seemed a little taken back by his instant agreement. He had, after 211, been her husband's friend, not her own. The face loomed above Gerald, moonlike, disconnected, undecided. Then she led him into the elderly, waiting house.

She had tea. He had Coke, Millions of eyes seemed to watch them. He felt like a burglar, stealing around the hidden fiction he could Make of her, carrying only his own youthful winsomeness and a psychic flashlight.

* * *

My own name, of course, is Steve King, and you'll pardon my intrusion on your mind-or I hope you will. I could argue that the drawing-aside of the curtain of presumption between reader and author is permissible because I am the writer; i.e., since it's my story I'll do any goddam thing I please with it-but since that leaves the reader out of it completely, that is not valid. Rule One for all writers is that the teller is not worth a tin tinker's fart when compared to the listener. Let us drop the matter, if we may. I am intruding for the same reason that the Pope defecates: we both have to.

You should know that Gerald Nately was never brought to the dock; his crime was not discovered. He paid all the same. After writing four twisted, monumental, misunderstood novels, he cut his own head off with an ivory-figured guillotine purchased in Kowloon.

I invented him first during a moment of eight o'clock boredom in a class taught by Carroll F. Terrell of the University of Maine English faculty. Dr. Terrell was speaking of Edgar A. Poe, and I thought

ivory guillotine Kowloon

twisted woman of shadows, like a pig
some big house

The blue air compressor did not come until later. It is desperately important that the reader be made cognizant of these facts.

* * *

He did show her some of his writing. Not the important part, the story he was writing about her, but fragments of poetry, the spine of a novel that had ached in his mind for a year like embedded shrapnel, four essays. She was a perceptive critic, and addicted to marginal notations with her black felt-tip pen. Because she sometimes dropped in when lie was gone to the village, he kept the story hidden in the back shed.

September melted into cool October, and the story was completed, mailed to a friend, returned with suggestions (bad ones), rewritten. He felt it was good, but not quite right. Some indefinable was missing. The focus was a shade fuzzy. He began to toy, with the idea of giving it to her for Criticism, rejected it, toyed with it again. After all. the story was her; he never doubted she could supply the final vector.

His attitude concerning her became increasing]- unhealthy; he was fascinated by her huge, animalistic bulk, by the slow, tortoise-like way she trekked across the space between the house and the

cottage.

* * *

image: "mammoth shadow of decay swaying across the shadowless sand, cane held in one twisted hand, feet clad in huge canvas shoes which pump and push at the coarse grains, face like a serving platter, puffy dough arms, breasts like drumlins, a geography in herself, a country of tissue"

* * *

by her reedy, vapid voice; but at the same time he loathed her, could not stand her touch. lie began to feel like the young man in "The Tell-Tale Heart, " by Edgar A. Poe. He felt lie could stand at her bedroom door for endless midnights, shining one Tay of light on her sleeping eye, ready to pounce and rip the instant it flashed open.

The urge to show her the story itched at him maddeningly. He had decided, by the first day of December, that he would do it. The decision-making did not relieve him, as it is supposed to do in the novels, but it did leave him with a feeling of antiseptic pleasure. It was right that it should be so-an omega that quite dovetailed with he alpha. And it was omega; he was vacating the cottage on he fifth of December. On this day he had just returned from the Stowe Travel Agency in Portland, where he had booked passage for the Far East. He had done this almost on the spur of the moment: the decision to go and the decision to show his manuscript to Mrs. Leighton had come together, almost as if he had been guided by an invisible hand.

* * *

In truth, he was guide; by an invisible hand-mine.

* * *

The day was white with overcast and the promise of snow lurked in its throat. The dunes seemed to foreshadow the winter already, as Gerald crossed them between the slate-roofed house of her dominion and the low stone cottage of his. The sea, sullen and gray, curled on the shingle of beach. Gulls rode the slow swells like buoys.

He Crossed the top of the last dune and knew she it-as there-her cane, with its white bicycle handgrip at the base, stood against the side of the door. Smoke rifted from the toy chimney.

Gerald went up the board steps, kicked sand from his high-topped shoes to make her aware of his presence, and then went in.

"Hi, Mrs. Leighton!"

But the tiny living room and the kitchen both stood empty. The ship's clock on the mantle ticked only for itself and for Gerald. Her gigantic fur coat lay draped over the rocker like Some animal sail.

A small fire had been laid in the fireplace, and it glowed and crackled busily. The teapot was on the gas range in the kitchen, and one teacup stood on the counter, still waiting for water. He peered into the narrow hall which led to the bedroom.

"Mrs. Leighton?"

Hall and bedroom both empty.

He was about to turn back to the kitchen when the mammoth chuckles began. They were large, helpless shakings of laughter, the kind that stays hidden for years and ages like wine. (There is also an Edgar A. Poe story about wine.)

The chuckles evolved into large bellows of laughter. They came from behind the door to the right of Gerald's bed, the last door in the cottage. From the tool-shed.

* * *

my balls are crawling like in grammar school the old bitch shes laughing she found it the old fat shebitch goddam her goddam her goddam her you old whore youre doing that cause im out here you old she bitch whore you piece of shit

* * *

He went to the door in one step and pulled it open. She was sitting next to the small space-heater in the shed, her dress pulled up over oak-stump knees to allow her to sit cross-legged, and his manuscript was held, dwarfed, in her bloated hands.

Her laughter roared and racketed around him. Gerald Nately saw bursting colors in front of his eyes. She it-as a slug, a maggot, a gigantic crawling thing evolved in the cellar of the shadowy house by the sea. a dark bug that had swaddled itself in grotesque human form.

In the flat light from the one cobwebbed window her face became a hanging graveyard moon, pocked by the Sterile craters of her eyes and the Tagged earthquake rift of her mouth.

"Don't you laugh," Gerald said stiffly.

"Oh Gerald," she said, laughing all the same. "This is such a bad story. I don't blame you for using a penname. it's-" she wiped tears of laughter from her eyes "it's abominable!"

He began to walk toward her stiffly.

"You haven't made me big enough, Gerald. That's the trouble. I'm too big for you. Perhaps Poe, or Dostoyevsky, or Melville. . . but not you, Gerald. Not even under your royal pen-name. Not you.

Not you.

She began to laugh again, huge racking explosions of sound.

"Don't you laugh," Gerald said stiffly.

* * *

The tool-shed, after the manner of Zola:

Wooden walls, which showed occasional chinks of light, surrounded rabbit-traps hung and slung in corners; a pair of dusty, unstrung snow-shoes; a rusty spaceheater showing flickers of yellow flame like cat's eyes; Tales; 2 shovel; hedgeclippers; an ancient green hose coiled like a garter-snake; four bald tires stacked like doughnuts; a rust), Winchester rifle with no bolt; a twohanded saw; a dusty work-bench covered with nails, screws, bolts, washers, two hammers, a plane, a broken level, a dismantled

carburetor which one sat inside a 1949 Packard convertible; a 4 hp. air-compressor painted electric blue, plugged into an extension

cord running back into the house.

* * *

"Don't you laugh," Gerald said again, but she continued to rock back and forth, holding her stomach and flapping the manuscript with her wheezing breath like a white bird. His hand found the rusty Winchester rifle and he pole-axed her with it.

* * *

Most horror stories are sexual in nature.

I'm sorry to break in with this information, but feel I must in order to make the way clear for the grisly conclusion of this piece, which is (at least psychologically) a clear metaphor for fears of sexual impotence on in), part. Mrs. Leighton's large mouth is symbolic of the vagina; the hose of the compressor is a penis. Her female bu Ik huge and overpowering, is a mythic representation of the sexual fear that lives in every male, to a greater or lesser degree: that the woman, with her opening, is a devouter.

* * *

In the works of Edgar A. Poe, Stephen King, Gerald Nately, and others who practice this particular literary form, we are apt to find locked rooms, dungeons. empty mansions (all symbols of the womb); scenes of living burial (sexual impotence); the dead returned from the grave (necrophilia); grotesque monsters or human be ings (externalized fear of the sexual act itself); torture and/or murder (a viable alternativ e to the sexual act). These possibilities are not always valid, but the postfreild reader and writer must take them into consideration when attempting the genre.

Abnormal psychology has become a part of the human experience.

* * *

She made thick, unconscious noises in her throat as he whirled around madly, looking for an instrument; her head lolled brokenly on the thick stalk of her neck.

* * *

He seized the hose of the air-compressor.

"All right," he said thickly. "All right, now. All Tight."

* * *

bitch fat old bitch youve had yours not big enough is that right well youll be bigger youll be bigger still

* * *

He ripped her head back by the hair and rammed the hose into her mouth, into her gullet. She screamed around it, a scund like a cat.

* * *

Part of the inspiration for this story came from an old E. C. horror comic boo), which I bought in a Lisbon Falls drugstore. In one particular story, a husband and wife murdered each other simultaneous))- in mutually ironic (and brilliant) fashion. He was very fat; she was very thin. He shoved the hose of an aircompressor down her throat and blew her up to dirigible size. On his way downstairs a booby-trap she had rigged fell on him and squashed him to a shadow.

Any author who tells you he has never plagiarized is 2 liar. A good author begins with bad ideas and improbabilities and fashions them

into comments on the human condition.

In a horror story, it is imperative that the grotesque be elevated to the status of the abnormal.

* * *

The compressor turned on with a whoosh and a chug. The hose flew out of Mrs. Leighton's mouth. Giggling and gibbering, Gerald stuffed it back in. Her feet drummed and thumped on the floor. The flesh of her cheeks and diaphragm began to swell rhythmically. Her eyes bulged, and became glass marbles. Her torso began to expand.

* * *

here it is here it is you lousy louse are you big enough yet are you big enough

* * *

The compressor wheezed and racketed. Mrs. Leighton swelled like a beachball. Her lungs became Straining blowfish.

* * *

Fiends! Devils' Dissemble no more! Here! Here! It is the beating of his hideous heart!

* * *

She seemed to explode all at once.

* * *

Sitting in a boilin hotel room in Bombay, Gerald re-wrote the story he had begun at the cottage on the other side of the world. The original title had been "The Hog." After some deliberation he retitled it "The Blue Air Compressor."

He had resolved it to his own satisfaction. There was a certain lack of motivation concerning the final scene where the fat old woman was murdered, but he did not see that as a fault. In "The Tell-Tale Heart," Edgar A. Poe's finest story, there is no real motivation for

the murder of the old man, and that was as it should be. The motive is not the point.

* * *

She got very big just before the end: even her legs swelled up to twice their normal size. At the very end, her tongue popped out of her mouth like a party-favor.

* * *

After leaving Bombay, Gerald Nately went on to Hong Kong, then to Kowloon. The ivory guillotine caught his fancy immediately.

* * *

As the author, I can see only one correct omega to this story, and that is to tell you how Gerald Nately got rid of the body. He tore up the floor boards of the shed, dismembered Mrs. Leighton, and buried the sections in the sand beneath.

When he notified the police that she had been rmissing for a week, the local constable and a State Policeman came at once. Gerald entertained them quite naturally, even offering them coffee. He heard no beating heart, but then--the interview was conducted in the big house.

On the following day he flew away, toward Bombay, Hong Kong, and Kowloon.

The Cat from Hell

By STEPHEN

KING

First appeared in
Cavalier Magazine, 1971

Halston thought the old man in the wheelchair looked sick, terrified, and ready to die. He had experience in seeing such things. Death was Halston's business; he had brought it to eighteen men and six women in his career as an independent hitter. He knew the death look.

The house - mansion, actually - was cold and quiet. The only sounds were the low snap of the fire on the big stone hearth and the low whine of the November wind outside.

"I want you to make a kill," the old man said. His voice was quavery and high, peevish. "I understand that is what you do."

"Who did you talk to?" Halston asked.

"With a man named Saul Loggia. He says you know him."

Halston nodded. If Loggia was the go-between, it was all right. And if there was a bug in the room, anything the old man - Drogan - said was entrapment.

"Who do you want hit?"

Drogan pressed a button on the console built into the arm of his wheelchair and it buzzed forward. Closeup, Halston could smell the yellow odors of fear, age, and urine all mixed.

They disgusted him, but he made no sign. His face was still and smooth. "Your victim is right behind you," Drogan said softly. Halston moved quickly. His reflexes were his life and they were always set on a filed pin. He was off the couch, falling to one knee, turning, hand inside his specially tailored sport coat, gripping the handle of the short-barreled .45 hybrid that hung below his armpit in a spring-loaded holster that laid it in his palm at a touch. A moment later it was out and pointed at ... a cat.

For a moment Halston and the cat stared at each other. It was a strange moment for Halston, who was an unimaginative man with no superstitions. For that one moment as he knelt on the floor with the gun pointed, he felt that he knew this cat, although if he had ever seen one with such unusual markings he surely would have remembered.

Its face was an even split: half black, half white. The dividing line ran from the top of its flat skull and down its nose to its mouth, straight-arrow. Its eyes were huge in the gloom, and caught in each

nearly circular black pupil was a prism of firelight, like a sullen coal of hate.

And the thought echoed back to Halston: We know each other, you and I. Then it passed. He put the gun away and stood up. "I ought to kill you for that, old man. I don't take a joke."

"And I don't make them," Drogan said. "Sit down. Look in here." He had taken a fat envelope out from beneath the blanket that covered his legs.

Halston sat. The cat, which had been crouched on the back of the sofa, jumped lightly down into his lap. It looked up at Halston for a moment with those huge dark eyes, the pupils surrounded by thin green-gold rings, and then it settled down and began to purr. Halston looked at Drogan questioningly.

"He's very friendly," Drogan said. "At first. Nice friendly pussy has killed three people in this household. That leaves only me. I am old, I am sick ... but I prefer to die in my own time."

"I can't believe this," Halston said. "You hired me to hit a cat?"

"Look in the envelope, please."

Halston did. It was filled with hundreds and fifties, all of them old. "How much is it?"

"Six thousand dollars. There will be another six when you bring me proof that the cat is dead. Mr. Loggia said twelve thousand was your usual fee?"

Halston nodded, his hand automatically stroking the cat in his lap. It was asleep, still purring. Halston liked cats. They were the only animals he did like, as a matter of fact. They got along on their own. God - if there was one - had made them into perfect, aloof killing machines. Cats were the hitters of the animal world, and Halston gave them his respect.

"I need not explain anything, but I will," Drogan said. "Forewarned is forearmed, they say, and I would not want you to go into this lightly. And I seem to need to justify myself. So you'll not think I'm insane."

Halston nodded again. He had already decided to make this peculiar hit, and no further talk was needed. But if Drogan wanted to talk, he would listen. "First of all, you know who I am? Where the money comes from?"

"Drogan Pharmaceuticals."

"Yes. One of the biggest drug companies in the world. And the cornerstone of our financial success has been this." From the pocket of his robe he handed Halston a small, unmarked vial of pills. "Tri-Dormal-phenobarbin, compound G. Prescribed almost exclusively for the terminally ill. It's extremely habit-forming, you see. It's a combination painkiller, tranquilizer, and mild hallucinogen. It is remarkably helpful in helping the terminally ill face their conditions and adjust to them."

"Do you take it?" Halston asked.

Drogan ignored the question. "It is widely prescribed throughout the world. It's a synthetic, was developed in the fifties at our New

Jersey labs. Our testing was confined almost solely to cats, because of the unique quality of the feline nervous system."

"How many did you wipe out?"

Drogan stiffened. "That is an unfair and prejudicial way to put it."

Halston shrugged.

"In the four-year testing period which led to FDA approval of Tri-Dormal-G, about fifteen thousand cats ... uh, expired."

Halston whistled. About four thousand cats a year. "And now you think this one's back to get you, huh?"

"I don't feel guilty in the slightest," Drogan said, but that quavering, petulant note was back in his voice. "Fifteen thousand test animals died so that hundreds of thousands of human beings -
"

"Never mind that," Halston said. Justifications bored him.

"That cat came here seven months ago. I've never liked cats. Nasty, disease-bearing animals ... always out in the fields ... crawling around in barns ... picking up God knows what germs in their fur ... always trying to bring something with its insides falling out into the house for you to look at ... it was my sister who wanted to take it in. She found out. She paid." He looked at the cat sleeping on Halston's lap with dead hate.

"You said the cat killed three people."

Drogan began to speak. The cat dozed and purred on Halston's lap under the soft, scratching strokes of Halston's strong and expert killer's fingers.

Occasionally a pine knot would explode on the hearth, making it tense like a series of steel springs covered with hide and muscle. Outside the wind whined around the big stone house far out in the Connecticut countryside. There was winter in that wind's throat. The old man's voice droned on and on.

Seven months ago there had been four of them here-Drogan, his sister Amanda, who at seventy-four was two years Drogan's elder, her lifelong friend Carolyn Broadmoor ("of the Westchester Broadmoors," Drogan said), who was badly afflicted with emphysema, and Dick Gage, a hired man who had been with the Drogan family for twenty years. Gage, who was past sixty himself, drove the big Lincoln Mark IV, cooked, served the evening sherry. A day maid came in. The four of them had lived this way for nearly two years, a dull collection of old people and their family retainer. Their only pleasures were The Hollywood Squares and waiting to see who would outlive whom.

Then the cat had come.

"It was Gage who saw it first, whining and skulking around the house. He tried to drive it away He threw sticks and small rocks at

it, and hit it several times. But it wouldn't go. It smelled the food, of course. It was little more than a bag of bones. People put them out beside the road to die at the end of the summer season, you know. A terrible, inhumane thing."

"Better to fry their nerves?" Halston asked.

Drogan ignored that and went on. He hated cats. He always had. When the cat refused to be driven away, he had instructed Gage to put out poisoned food. Large, tempting dishes of Calo cat food spiked with Tri-Dormal-G, as a matter of fact. The cat ignored the food. At that point Amanda Drogan had noticed the cat and had insisted they take it in. Drogan had protested vehemently, but Amanda - had gotten her way. She always did, apparently. "But she found out," Drogan said. "She brought it inside herself, in her arms. It was purring, just as it is now. But it wouldn't come near me. It never has ... yet. She poured it a saucer of milk. 'Oh, look at the poor thing, it's starving,' she cooed. She and Carolyn both cooed over it. Disgusting. It was their way of getting back at me, of course. They knew the way I've felt about felines ever since the Tri-Dormal-G testing program twenty years ago. They enjoyed teasing me, baiting me with it." He looked at Halston grimly. "But they paid."

In mid-May, Gage had gotten up to set breakfast and found Amanda Drogan lying at the foot of the main stairs in a litter of broken crockery and Little Friskies. Her eyes bulged sightlessly up at the ceiling. She had bled a great deal from the mouth and nose. Her back was broken, both legs were broken, and her neck had been literally shattered like glass.

"It slept in her room," Drogan said. "She treated it like a baby ... 'Is oo hungwy, darwing? Does oo need to go out and do poopos!' Obscene, coming from an old baffle-ax like my sister. I think it woke her up, meowing. She got his dish. She used to say that Sam didn't really like his Friskies unless they were wetted down with a

little milk. So she was planning to go downstairs. The cat was rubbing against her legs. She was old, not too steady on her feet. Half asleep. They got to the head of the stairs and the cat got in front of her ... tripped her .. ."

Yes, it could have happened that way, Halston thought. In his mind's eye he saw the old woman falling forward and outward, too shocked to scream. The Friskies spraying out as she tumbled head over heels to the bottom, the bowl smashing. At last she comes to rest at the bottom, the old bones shattered, the eyes glaring, the nose and ears trickling blood. And the purring cat begins to work its way down the stairs, contentedly munching Little Friskies ... "What did the coroner say?" he asked Drogan. "Death by accident, of course. But I knew."

"Why didn't you get rid of the cat then? With Amanda gone?" Because Carolyn Broadmoor had threatened to leave if he did, apparently. She was hysterical, obsessed with the subject. She was a sick woman, and she was nutty on the subject of spiritualism. A Hartford medium had told her (for a mere twenty dollars) that Amanda's soul had entered Sam's feline body. Sam had been Amanda's, she told Drogan, and if Sam went, she went. Halston, who had become something of an expert at reading between the lines of human lives, suspected that Drogan and the old Broadmoor bird had been lovers long ago, and the old dude was reluctant to let her go over a cat.

"It would have been the same as suicide," Drogan said. "In her mind she was still a wealthy woman, perfectly capable of packing

up that cat and going to New York or London or even Monte Carlo with it. In fact she was the last of a great family, living on a pittance as a result of a number of bad investments in the sixties. She lived on the second floor here in a specially controlled, superhumidified room. The woman was seventy, Mr. Halston. She

was a heavy smoker until the last two years of her life, and the emphysema was very bad. I wanted her here, and if the cat had to stay ..."

Halston nodded and then glanced meaningfully at his watch.

"Near the end of June, she died in the night. The doctor seemed to take it as a matter of course ... just came and wrote out the death certificate and that was the end of it. But the cat was in the room. Gage told me."

"We all have to go sometime, man," Halston said.

"Of course. That's what the doctor said. But I knew. I remembered. Cats like to get babies and old people when they're asleep. And steal their breath."

"An old wives' tale."

"Based on fact, like most so-called old wives' tales," Drogan replied.

"Cats like to knead soft things with their paws, you see. A pillow, a thick shag rug... or a blanket. A crib blanket or an old person's blanket. The extra weight on a person who's weak to start with ..." Drogan trailed off, and Halston thought about it. Carolyn Broadmoor asleep in her bedroom, the breath rasping in and out of her damaged lungs, the sound nearly lost in the whisper of special humidifiers and air conditioners. The cat with the queer black-and-white markings leaps silently onto her spinster's bed and stares at her old and wrinkle-grooved face with those lambent, black-and-green eyes. It creeps onto her thin chest and settles its weight there, purring..., and the breathing slows ... slows ... and the cat purrs as the old woman slowly smothers beneath its weight on her chest. He was not an imaginative man, but Halston shivered a little.

"Drogan," he said, continuing to stroke the purring cat. "Why don't you just have it put away? A vet would give it the gas for twenty dollars."

Drogan said, "The funeral was on the first day of July, I had Carolyn buried in our cemetery plot next to my sister. The way she would have wanted it. On July third I called Gage to this room and handed him a wicker basket..., a picnic hamper sort of thing. Do you know what I mean?"

Halston nodded.

"I told him to put the cat in it and take it to a vet in Milford and have it put to sleep. He said, 'Yes, sir,' took the basket, and went out. Very like him. I never saw him alive again. There was an accident on the turnpike. The Lincoln was driven into a bridge abutment at better than sixty miles an hour. Dick Gage was killed instantly. When they found him there were scratches on his face." Halston was silent as the picture of how it might have been formed

in his brain again. No sound in the room but the peaceful crackle of the fire and the peaceful purr of the cat in his lap. He and the cat together before the fire would make a good illustration for that Edgar Guest poem, the one that goes: "The cat on my lap, the hearth's good fire/ ... A happy man, should you enquire."
Dick Gage moving the Lincoln down the turnpike toward Milford, beating the speed limit by maybe five miles an hour. The wicker basket beside him - a picnic hamper sort of thing. The chauffeur is watching traffic, maybe he's passing a big cab-over Jimmy and he doesn't notice the peculiar black-on-one-side, white-on-the-other face that pokes out of one side of the basket. Out of the driver's side. He doesn't notice because he's passing the big trailer truck and that's when the cat jumps onto his face, spitting and clawing, its talons raking into one eye, puncturing it, deflating it, blinding it. Sixty and the hum of the Lincoln's big motor and the other paw is hooked over the bridge of the nose, digging in with exquisite,

damning pain - maybe the Lincoln starts to veer right, into the path of the Jimmy, and its airhorn blares ear-shatteringly, but Gage can't hear it because the cat is yowling, the cat is spread-eagled over his face like some huge furry black spider, ears laid back, green eyes glaring like spotlights from hell, back legs jittering and digging into the soft flesh of the old man's neck. The car veers wildly back the other way. The bridge abutment looms. The cat jumps down and the Lincoln, a shiny black torpedo, hits the cement and goes up like a bomb.

Halston swallowed hard and heard a dry click in his throat. "And the cat came back?"

Drogan nodded. "A week later. On the day Dick Gage was buried, as a matter of fact. Just like the old song says. The cat came back."

"It survived a car crash at sixty? Hard to believe."

"They say each one has nine lives. When it comes back ... that's when I started to wonder if it might not be a...a..."

"Hellcat?" Halston suggested softly.

"For want of a better word, yes. A sort of demon sent ..."

"To punish you."

"I don't know. But I'm afraid of it. I feed it, or rather, the woman who comes in to do for me feeds it. She doesn't like it either. She says that face is a curse of God. Of course, she's local." The old man tried to smile and failed. "I want you to kill it. I've lived with it for the last four months. It skulks around in the shadows. It looks at me. It seems to be ... waiting. I lock myself in my room every night and still I wonder if I'm going to wake up one early and find it ... curled up on my chest ... and purring."

The wind whined lonesomely outside and made a strange hooting noise in the stone chimney.

"At last I got in touch with Saul Loggia. He recommended you. He called you a stick, I believe."

"A one-stick. That means I work on my own."

"Yes. He said you'd never been busted, or even suspected. He said

you always seem to land on your feet.... like a cat."

Halston looked at the old man in the wheelchair. And his long-fingered, muscular hands were lingering above the cat's neck.

"I'll do it now, if you want me to," he said softly. "I'll snap its neck. It won't even know-"

"No!" Drogan cried. He drew in a long, shuddering breath. Color had come up in his sallow cheeks. "Not... not here. Take it away."

Halston smiled humorlessly. He began to stroke the sleeping cat's head and shoulders and back very gently again. "All right," he said. "I accept the contract. Do you want the body?"

"No. Kill it. Bury it." He paused. He hunched forward in the wheelchair like some ancient buzzard. "Bring me the tail," he said. "So I can throw it in the fire and watch it burn."

Halston drove a 1973 Plymouth with a custom Cyclone Spoiler engine. The car was jacked and blocked, and rode with the hood pointing down at the road at a twenty degree angle. He had rebuilt the differential and the rear end himself. The shift was a Pensy, the linkage was Hearst. It sat on huge Bobby Unser Wide Ovals and had a top end of a little past one-sixty.

He left the Drogan house at a little past 9:30. A cold rind of crescent moon rode overhead through the tattering November clouds. He rode with all the windows open, because that yellow stench of age and terror seemed to have settled into his clothes and he didn't like it. The cold was hard and sharp, eventually numbing, but it was good. It was blowing that yellow stench away. He got off the turnpike at Placer's Glen and drove through the silent town,

which was guarded by a single yellow blinker at the intersection, at a thoroughly respectable thirty-five. Out of town, moving up S.R. 35, he opened the Plymouth up a little, letting her walk. The tuned Spoiler engine purred like the cat had purred on his lap earlier this evening. Halston grinned at the simile. They moved between frost-white November fields full of skeleton cornstalks at a little over seventy.

The cat was in a double-thickness shopping bag, tied at the top with heavy twine. The bag was in the passenger bucket seat. The cat had been sleepy and purring when Halston put it in, and it had purred through the entire ride. It sensed, perhaps, that Halston liked it and felt at home with it. Like himself, the cat was a one-stick.

Strange hit, Halston thought, and was surprised to find that he was taking it seriously as a hit. Maybe the strangest thing about it was that he actually liked the cat, felt a kinship with it. If it had managed to get rid of those three old crocks, more power to it ... especially Gage, who had been taking it to Milford for a terminal date with a crew-cut veterinarian who would have been more than happy to bundle it into a ceramic-lined gas chamber the size of a microwave oven. He felt a kinship but no urge to renege on the hit. He would do it the courtesy of killing it quickly and well. He would park off the road beside one of those November-barren fields and take it out of the bag and stroke it and then snap its neck and sever its tail with his pocketknife. And, he thought, the body I'll bury honorably, saving it from the scavengers. I can't save it from the worms, but I can save it from the maggots.

He was thinking these things as the car moved through the night like a dark blue ghost and that was when the cat walked in front of his eyes, up on the dashboard, tail raised arrogantly, its black-and-white face turned toward him, its mouth seeming to grin at him. "Ssssshhh-" Halston hissed. He glanced to his right and caught a glimpse of the double-thickness shopping bag, a hole chewed - or

clawed - in its side. Looked ahead again., and the cat lifted a paw and batted playfully at him. The paw skidded across Halston's forehead. He jerked away from it and the Plymouth's big tires wailed on the road as it swung erratically from one side of the narrow blacktop to the other.

Halston batted at the cat on the dashboard with his fist. It was blocking his field of vision. It spat at him, arching its back, but it didn't move. Halston swung again, and instead of shrinking away, it leaped at him.

Gage, he thought. Just like Gage -

He stamped the brake. The cat was on his head, blocking his vision with its furry belly, clawing at him, gouging at him. Halston held the wheel grimly. He struck the cat once, twice, a third time. And suddenly the road was gone, the Plymouth was running down into the ditch, thudding up and down on its shocks. Then, impact, throwing him forward against his seat belt, and the last sound he heard was the cat yowling inhumanly, the voice of a woman in pain or in the throes of sexual climax.

He struck it with his closed fists and felt only the springy, yielding flex of its muscles.

Then, second impact. And darkness.

* * *

The moon was down. It was an hour before dawn.

The Plymouth lay in a ravine curdled with groundmist. Tangled in its grille was a snarled length of barbed wire. The hood had come unlatched, and tendrils of steam from the breached radiator drifted out of the opening to mingle with the mist.

No feeling in his legs.

He looked down and saw that the Plymouth's firewall had caved in with the impact. The back of that big Cyclone Spoiler engine block had smashed into his legs, pinning them.

Outside, in the distance, the predatory squawk of an owl dropping onto some small, scurrying animal.

Inside, close, the steady purr of the cat.

It seemed to be grinning, like Alice's Cheshire had in Wonderland.

As Halston watched it stood up, arched its back, and stretched. In a sudden limber movement like rippled silk, it leaped to his shoulder. Halston tried to lift his hands to push it off.

His arms wouldn't move.

Spinal shock, he thought. Paralyzed. Maybe temporary. More likely permanent.

The cat purred in his ear like thunder.

"Get off me," Halston said. His voice was hoarse and dry. The cat

tensed for a moment and then settled back. Suddenly its paw batted Halston's cheek, and the claws were out this time. Hot lines of pain down to his throat.

And the warm trickle of blood.

Pain.

Feeling.

He ordered his head to move to the right, and it complied. For a moment his face was buried in smooth, dry fur. Halston snapped at the cat. It made a startled, disgruntled sound in its throat - yowk! - and leaped onto the seat. It stared up at him angrily, ears laid back. "Wasn't supposed to do that, was I?" Halston croaked. The cat opened its mouth and hissed at him. Looking at that strange,

schizophrenic face, Halston could understand how Drogan might have thought it was a hellcat. It-

His thoughts broke off as he became aware of a dull, tingling feeling in both hands and forearms.

Feeling. Coming back. Pins and needles.

The cat leaped at his face, claws out, spitting.

Halston shut his eyes and opened his mouth. He bit at the cat's belly and got nothing but fur. The cat's front claws were clasped on his ears, digging in. The pain was enormous, brightly excruciating. Halston tried to raise his hands.

They twitched but would not quite come out of his lap.

He bent his head forward and began to shake it back and forth, like a man shaking soap out of his eyes. Hissing and squalling, the cat held on. Halston could feel blood trickling down his cheeks. It was hard to get his breath. The cat's chest was pressed over his nose. It was possible to get some air in by mouth, but not much. What he did get came through fur. His ears felt as if they had been doused with lighter fluid and then set on fire.

He snapped his head back and cried out in agony - he must have sustained a whiplash when the Plymouth hit. But the cat hadn't been expecting the reverse and it flew off. Halston heard it thud down in the back seat.

A trickle of blood ran in his eye. He tried again to move his hands, to raise one of them and wipe the blood away.

They trembled in his lap, but he was still unable to actually move them. He thought of the .45 special in its holster under his left arm. If I can get to my piece, kitty, the rest of your nine lives are going in a lump sum.

More tingles now. Dull throbs of pain from his feet, buried and surely shattered under the engine block, zips and tingles from his legs - it felt exactly the way a limb that you've slept on does when it's starting to wake up. At that moment Halston didn't care about his feet. It was enough to know that his spine wasn't severed, that he wasn't going to finish out his life as a dead lump of body attached to a talking head.

Maybe I had a few lives left myself.

Take care of the cat. That was the first thing. Then get out of the

wreck - maybe someone would come along, that would solve both problems at once. Not likely at 4:30 in the morning on a back road like this one, but barely possible. And-

And what was the cat doing back there?

He didn't like having it on his face, but he didn't like having it behind him and out of sight, either. He tried the rearview mirror, but that was useless. The crash had knocked it awry and all it reflected was the grassy ravine he had finished up in.

A sound from behind him, like low, ripping cloth.

Purring.

Hellcat my ass. It's gone to sleep back there.

And even if it hadn't, even if it was somehow planning murder, what could it do? It was a skinny little thing, probably weighed all of four pounds soaking wet. And soon ... soon he would be able to move his hands enough to get his gun. He was sure of it.

Halston sat and waited. Feeling continued to flood back into his body in a series of pins-and-needles incursions. Absurdly (or maybe in instinctive reaction to his close brush with death) he got an erection for a minute or so. Be kind of hard to beat off under present circumstances, he thought.

A dawn-line was appearing in the eastern sky. Somewhere a bird sang.

Halston tried his hands again and got them to move an eighth of an inch before they fell back.

Not yet. But soon.

A soft thud on the seatback beside him. Halston turned his head and looked into the black-white face, the glowing eyes with their huge dark pupils.

Halston spoke to it.

"I have never blown a hit once I took it on, kitty. This could be a first. I'm getting my hands back. Five minutes, ten at most. You want my advice? Go out the window. They're all open. Go out and take your tail with you."

The cat stared at him.

Halston tried his hands again. They came up, trembling wildly. Half an inch. An inch. He let them fall back limply. They slipped off his lap and thudded to the Plymouth's seat. They glimmered there palely, like large tropical spiders.

The cat was grinning at him.

Did I make a mistake?, he wondered confusedly. He was a creature of hunch, and the feeling that he had made one was suddenly overwhelming. Then the cat's body tensed, and even as it leaped, Halston knew what it was going to do and he opened his mouth to scream.

The cat landed on Halston's crotch, claws out, digging.

At that moment, Halston wished he had been paralyzed. The pain was gigantic, terrible. He had never suspected that there could be such pain in the world. The cat was a spitting coiled spring of fury, clawing at his balls.

Halston did scream, his mouth yawning open, and that was when the cat changed direction and leaped at his face, leaped at his mouth. And at that moment Halston knew that it was something more than a cat. It was something possessed of a malign, murderous intent.

He caught one last glimpse of that black-and-white face below the flattened ears, its eyes enormous and filled with lunatic hate. It had gotten rid of the three old people and now it was going to get rid of John Halston.

It rammed into his mouth, a furry projectile. He gagged on it. Its front claws pinwheeled, tattering his tongue like a piece of liver. His stomach recoiled and he vomited. The vomit ran down into his windpipe, clogging it, and he began to choke.

In this extremity, his will to survive overcame the last of the impact paralysis. He brought his hands up slowly to grasp the cat. Oh my God, he thought.

The cat was forcing its way into his mouth, flattening its body, squirming, working itself farther and farther in. He could feel his jaws creaking wider and wider to admit it.

He reached to grab it, yank it out, destroy it ...and his hands clasped only the cat's tail.

Somehow it had gotten its entire body into his mouth. Its strange, black-and-white face must be crammed into his very throat.

A terrible thick gagging sound came from Halston's throat, which was swelling like a flexible length of garden hose.

His body twitched. His hands fell back into his lap and the fingers drummed senselessly on his thighs. His eyes sheened over, then glazed. They stared out through the Plymouth's windshield blankly at the coming dawn.

Protruding from his open mouth was two inches of bushy tail ... half black, half white. It switched lazily back and forth. It disappeared.

A bird cried somewhere again. Dawn came in breathless silence then, over the frost-rimmed fields of rural Connecticut.

The farmer's name was Will Reuss.

He was on his way to Placer's Glen to get the inspection sticker renewed on his farm truck when he saw the late-morning sun twinkle on something in the ravine beside the road. He pulled over and saw the Plymouth lying at a drunken, canted angle in the ditch, barbed wire tangled in its grille like a snarl of steel knitting. He worked his way down and then sucked in his breath sharply.

"Holy moley," he muttered to the bright November day. There was a guy sitting bolt upright behind the wheel, eyes open and glaring emptily into eternity. The Roper organization was never going to include him in its presidential poll again. His face was smeared with blood. He was still wearing his seat belt.

The driver's door had been crimped shut, but Reuss managed to get it open by yanking with both hands. He leaned in and unstrapped the seat belt, planning to check for ID. He was reaching for the coat when he noticed that the dead guy's shirt was rippling, just above the belt buckle. Rippling ... and bulging. Splotches of blood began to bloom there like sinister roses.

"What the Christ?" He reached out, grasped the dead man's shirt,

and pulled it up.
Will Reuss looked - and screamed.
Above Halston's navel, a ragged hole had been clawed in his flesh.
Looking out was the gore-streaked black-and-white face of a cat,
its eyes huge and glaring.

Reuss staggered back, shrieking, hands clapped to his face. A score
of crows took cawing wing from a nearby field.
The cat forced its body out and stretched in obscene languor.
Then it leaped out the open window. Reuss caught sight of it
moving through the high dead grass and then it was gone.
It seemed to be in a hurry, he later told a reporter from the local
paper.
As if it had unfinished business.

The Dark Man
Stephen King

Published in
"Ubris", 1969 and later in Moth, 1970.

I have stridden the fuming way
of sun-hammered tracks and
smashed cinders;
I have ridden rails
and bumed sterno in the
gantry silence of hob jungles:
I am a dark man.
I have ridden rails
and passed the smuggery
of desperate houses with counterfeit chimneys
and heard from the outside
the inside clink of cocktail ice
while closed doors broke the world -

and over it all a savage sickle moon
that bummed my eyes with bones of light.
I have slept in glaring swamps
where musk-reek rose
to mix with the sex smell of rotting cypress stumps
where witch fire clung in sunken
psycho spheres of baptism -
and heard the suck of shadows

where a gutted columned house
leeches with vines
speaks to an overhung mushroom sky
I have fed dimes to cold machines
in all night filling stations
while traffic in a mad and flowing flame
streaked red in six lanes of darkness,
and breathed the cleaver hitchhike wind
within the breakdown lane with thumb levelled
and saw shadowed faces made complacent
with heaters behind safety glass
faces that rose like complacent moons
in riven monster orbits.
and in a sudden jugular flash
cold as the center of a sun
I forced a girl in a field of wheat
and left her sprawled with the virgin bread
a savage sacrifice
and a sign to those who creep in
fixed ways:
I am a dark man.

Donovan's Brain
Stephen King
Published in "Moth", 1970

Shratt came on limping
obsessed
he tried to run down a little girl
and there was a drag of pain
in his left
kidney

horror

he signed checks with Donovan's name
and made mad love with Donovan's woman.
poor Shratt!
warped and sucked by desert wine
raped by the brain of that monstrous man
shadowed by his legless shadow

Shratt, driven by a thing
(you know about that Thing, don't you?)
in an electric tank:
(AMPS-AMPS-AMPS-AMPS-)
demented paranoia
from "BEYOND THE GRAVE! !"
but the tragedy
was Shratt -oh,
I could weep for Shratt.

For The Birds
Stephen King

From

" Bred Any Good Rooks Lately? "

Okay, this is a science fiction joke.
It seems like in 1995 or so the pollution in the atmosphere of London has started to kill off all the rooks. And the city government is very concerned because the rooks roosting on the cornices and the odd little crannies of the public buildings are a big attraction. The Yanks with their Kodaks, if you get it. So they say, " What are we going to do? "
They get a lot of brochures from places with climates similar to London's so they can raise the rooks until the pollution problem is finally licked. One place with a similar climate, but low pollution count, turns to be Bangor, Maine. So they put an ad in the paper soliciting bird fanciers and talk to a bunch of guys in the trade. Finally, they engage this one guy at the rate of \$50,000 a year to raise rooks. They send an ornithologist over on the concord with two cases of rook eggs packed in these shatterproof cases - they keep the shipping compartment constantly heated and all that stuff. So this guy has a new business - North American Rook Farms, Inc. He goes to work right off incubating new rooks so London will not become a rookless city. The only thing is, the London City Council is really impatient, and every day they send him a telegram that says: " Bred Any Good Rooks lately? "

THE
HARDCASE
SPEAKS

STEPHEN KING

From
Contraband #2

In fields and christless allies the psalter is handed
greedily around with purple bottles of cheap port
punctuated by the sodium lightness glare of freights
rising past hobo cinder gantries and pitless bramble
hollows:
Dukane, Grand Rapids, Cedar Forks, Harlow, Dover-
Foxcroft,
names from the back platform of the A-train
so don't gimme that shit don't gimme that crap
I'll put the hoodoo on you, I can do it, it comes in a can
in 1954 in a back alley behind a bar they
found a lady cut in four pieces and written in her juice on
the bricks above
he had scrawled PLEASE STOP ME BEFORE I KILL
AGAIN in letters that leaned and
draggled so they called him The Cleveland Torso Murderer
and never caught him,
it figures
all these liberals are brainless
if you want to see jeans just peak into any alabaster
gravel pit in Mestalinas
all these liberals have hairy shirts

Real life is in the back row of a 2nd run movie house in
Utica, have you been
there
this guy with his hair greased back was drunk
and getting drunker when I sat down and his face kept
twisting; he cried I'm a
goddamn stupid sonofabitch but doan choo try to tell me
nothin I didn't he

might have come from Cleveland
if the stars are right I can witch you I can make your hair
fall out
You don't need hairy jeans to stand outside a Safeway
store in Smalls Falls and watch a cloud under the high
blue sky ripple the last shadows of summer over the asphalt
parking lot two
acres wide
A real hack believes blackboards are true
for myself I would turn them all soft like custard scoop
them feed them to blackbirds save corn for murderers
in huge and ancient Buicks sperm grows on seatcovers
and flows upstream toward the sound of Chuck Berry
once I saw a drunk in Redcliff and he had stuffed a
newspaper in his mouth he

jigged jubilantly
around a two shadowed light pole
I could gun you down with magic nose bullets
There are still drugstore saints
Still virgins pedalling bikes with playing cards affixed to
the rear spokes
with clothespins
The students have made things up
The liberals have shit themselves and produced a satchel-
load of smelly
numbers
Radicals scratch secret sores and pore over back numbers
bore a little hole in your head sez I insert a candle
light a light for Charlie Starkweather and let
your little light shine shine shine
play bebop
buy styrofoam dice on 42nd street
eat sno-cones and read Lois Lane
Learn to do magic like me and we will drive to Princeton
in an old Ford with four retread skins and a loose manifold
that boils up the
graphite stink of freshcooked

exhaust we will do hexes with Budweiser pentagrams and
old
Diamond matchboxes
chew some Red Man and let the juice down your chin when
you spit
sprinkle sawdust on weird messes
buy some plastic puke at Atlantic City
throw away your tape player and gobble Baby Ruths
Go now. I think you are ready.

Harrison State Park '68
Stephen King

Published in "Ubris", 1968

"All mental disorders are simply detective strategies
for handling difficult life situations."

---Thomas Szasz

'And I feel like homemade shit.'

---Ed Sanders

- Can you do it ?
She asked shrewdly
From the grass where her nylon legs
in gartered splendor
made motions.
- Can you do it ?
 Ah!

What do I say?
What are the cools?
Jimmy Dean?
Robert Mitchum?
Soupy Sales?

Modern Screen Romances is a tent on the grass
Over a dozen condoms in a quiet box
and the lady used to say
(before she passed away)
- If you can't be an athlete,
be an athletic supporter.

The moon is set.
A cloud scum has covered the stars.

A man with a gun has passed
this way
BUT -
we do not need your poets.
Progressed beyond them to
Sony
Westinghouse
Cousin Brucie
the Doors
and do I dare
mention Sonny and Cher ?

I remember Mickey Rooney
as Pretty Boy Floyd
and he was the shortest Pretty Boy Floyd
on record
coughing his enthusiastic
guts out in the last
reel.

We have not spilt the blood.
They have spilt the blood.
A little girl lies dead
On the hopscotch grid
No matter
- Can you do it?
She asked shrewdly
With her Playtex living bra
cuddling breasts
softer than a handful of wet Fig Newtons.

Old enough to bleed
Old enough to slaughter
The old farmer said
And grinned at the white
Haystack sky
With sweaty teeth

(radiation radiation
your grandchildren will be monsters)
I remember a skeleton
In Death Valley
A cow in the sunbleached throes of antiseptic death

and someone said:
- Someday there will be skeletons
on the median strip of the Hollywood Freeway
staring up at exhaust-sooty pigeons
amidst the flapping ruins of

Botany 500

call me Ishmael.
I am a semen.
- Can you do it?
She asked shrewdly
When the worms begin
their midnight creep
and the dew has sunk white to
milk the grass...

And the bitter tears
Have no ducts
The eyes have fleshed in.
Only the nose knows that
A loser is always the same.

There is a sharp report.
It slices the night cleanly
And thumps home with a tin can spannnng!
Against the Speed Limit sign down the road.
Laughter
The clean clear sound of a bolt levered back...
Silence...
Spannnng!
"Aileen, if poachers poached peaches, would the
poachers peel the peaches to eat with poached eggs
poached before peaches?"

oh don't
don't
please touch me
but don't
don't
and I reach for your hand
but touch only the radiating live pencils
of your bones:
-- Can you do it?

IN A HALF WORLD
OF TERROR

Stephen King

First appeared in
Stories Of Suspense, a.k.a.
I Was A Teenage Graverobber 1966

It was like a nightmare. Like some unreal dream that you wake up from the next morning. Only this nightmare was happening. Ahead of me I could see Rankin's flashlight; a large yellow eye in the sultry summer darkness. I tripped over a gravestone and almost went sprawling. Rankin whirled on me with a hissed oath. "Do you want to wake up the caretaker, you fool?" I muttered a reply and we crept forward. Finally, Rankin stopped and shone the flashlight's beam on a freshly chiseled gravestone. On it, it read:

DANILE WHEATHERBY
1899 1962

He has joined his beloved wife in a better land. I felt a shovel thrust into my hands and suddenly I was sure that I couldn't go through with it. But I remembered the bursar shaking his head and saying, "I'm afraid we can't give you any more time, Dan. You'll have to leave today. If I could help in any way, I would, believe me ..."

I dug into the still soft earth and lifted it over my shoulder. Perhaps fifteen minutes later my shovel came in contact with wood. The two of us quickly excavated the hole until the coffin stood revealed under Rankin's flashlight. We jumped down and heaved the coffin up.

Numbed, I watched Rankin swing the spade at the locks and seals. After a few blows it gave and we lifted the lid. The body of Daniel Wheatherby looked up at us with glazed eyes. I felt horror gently wash over me. I had always thought that the eyes closed when one died.

"Don't just stand there," Rankin whispered, "it's almost four. We've got to get out of here!"

We wrapped the body in a sheet and lowered the coffin back into the earth. We shoveled rapidly and carefully replaced the sod. The dirt we had missed was scattered.

By the time we picked up the white-sheeted body, the first traces of dawn were beginning to lighten the sky in the east. We went through the hedge that skirted the cemetery and entered the woods that fronted it on the west. Rankin expertly picked his way through it for a quarter of a mile until we came to the car, parked where we had left it on an overgrown and unused wagon track that had once

been a road. The body was put into the trunk. Shortly thereafter, we joined the stream of commuters hurrying for the 6.00 train. I looked at my hands as if I had never seen them before. The dirt under my fingernails had been piled up on top of a man's final resting place not twenty-four hours ago. It felt unclean. Rankin's attention was directed entirely on his driving. I looked at him and realized that he didn't mind the repulsive act that we had just performed. To him it was just another job. We turned off the main road and began to climb the twisting, narrow dirt road. And then we came out into the open and I could see it, the huge rambling Victorian mansion that sat on the summit of the steep grade. Rankin drove around back and wordlessly up to the steep rock face of a bluff that rose another forty feet upward, slightly to the right of the house. There was a hideous grinding noise and a portion of the hill large enough to carve an entrance for the car slid open. Rankin drove in and killed the engine. We were in a small, cube-like room that served as a hidden garage. Just then, a door at the far end slid open and a tall, rigid man approached us.

Steffen Weinbaum's face was much like a skull; his eyes were deep-set and the skin was stretched so tautly over his cheekbones that his flesh was almost transparent.

"Where is it?" His voice was deep, ominous.

Wordlessly, Rankin got out and I followed his lead. Rankin opened the trunk and we pulled the sheet-swaddled figure out.

Weinbaum nodded slowly.

"Good, very good. Bring him into the lab."

CHAPTER TWO

When I was thirteen, my parents were killed in an automobile crash. It left me an orphan and should have landed me in an orphan's home. But my father's will disclosed the fact that he had left me a substantial sum of money and I was self-reliant. The welfare people never came around and I was left in the somewhat bizarre role as the sole tenant of my own house at thirteen. I paid the mortgage out of the bank account and tried to stretch a dollar as far as possible.

By the time I was eighteen and was out of school, the money was low, but I wanted to go to college. I sold the house for \$10,000.00 through a real estate buyer. In early September, the roof fell in. I received a very nice letter from Erwin, Erwin and Bradstreet, attorneys at law. To put it in layman's language, it said that the department store at which my father had been employed had just got around to a general audit of their books. It seemed that there was \$15,000.00 missing and that they had proof that my father had stolen it. The rest of the letter merely stated that if I didn't pay up the \$15,000.00 we'd got to court and they would try to get double the amount.

It shook me up and a few questions that should have stood out in my mind just didn't register as a result. Why didn't they uncover the error earlier? Why were they offering to settle out of court? I went down to the office of Erwin, Erwin, & Bradstreet and talked the matter over. To make a long story short, I paid the sum there were asking, I had no more money.

The next day I looked up the firm of Erwin, Erwin & Bradstreet in the phone book. It wasn't listed. I went down to their office and found a For Rent sign on the door. It was then that I realized that I had been conned like gullible kid which, I reflected miserably was what I was.

I bluffed my way through the first for months of college but finally they discovered that I hadn't been properly registered.

That same day I met Rankin at a bar. It was my first experience in a tavern. I had a forged driver's license and I bought enough whiskey to get drunk. I figured that it would take about two straight whiskeys since I had never had anything but a bottle of beer now and then prior to that night.

One felt good, two made my trouble seem rather inconsequential. I was nursing my third when Rankin entered the bar.

He sat on the stool next to me and looked attentively at me.

"You got troubles?" I asked rudely.

Rankin smiled. "Yes, I'm out to find a helper."

"Oh, yeah?" I asked, becoming interested. "You mean you want to hire somebody?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'm your man."

He started to say something and then changed his mind.

"Let's go over to a booth and talk it over, shall we?"

We walked over to a booth and I realized that I was listing slightly.

Rankin pulled the curtain.

"That's better. Now, you want a job?"

I nodded.

"Do you care what it is?"

"No. Just how much does it pay?"

"Five hundred a job."

I lost a little bit of the rosy fog that encased me. Something was wrong here. I didn't like the way he used the word "job".

"Who do I have to kill?" I asked with a humorless smile.

"You don't'. But before I can tell you what it is, you'll have to talk with Mister Weinbaum."

"Who's he?"

"A scientist."

More fog evaporated. I got up.

"Uh-uh. No making a human guinea pig out of yours truly. Get yourself another boy."

"Don't be silly," he said, "No harm will come to you."

Against my better judgement, I said, "Okay, let's go."

CHAPTER 3

Weinbaum approached the subject of my duties after a tour of the house, including the laboratory. He wore a white smock and there was something about him that made me crawl inside. He sat down in the living room and motioned me into a seat. Rankin had disappeared. Weinbaum stared at me with fixed eyes and once again I felt a blast of icy coldness sweep over me.

"I'll put it to you bluntly," he said, "my experiments are too complicated to explain in any detail, but they concern human flesh. Dead human flesh."

I was becoming intensely aware that his eyes burnt with flickering fires. He looked like a spider ready to engulf a fly, and this whole house was his web. The sun was striking fire to the west and deep pools of shadows were spreading across the room, hiding his face, but leaving the glittering eyes as they shifted in the creeping darkness.

He was still speaking. "Often, people bequeath their bodies to scientific institutes for study. Unfortunately, I'm only one man, so I have to resort to other methods."

Horror leapt grinning from the shadows and across my mind there flitted the black picture of two men digging by the light of an uncertain moon. A shovel struck wood the noise chilled my soul. I rose quickly.

"I think I can find my own way out, Mr. Weinbaum."

He laughed softly. "Did Rankin tell you how much this job pays?"

"I'm not interested."

"Too bad. I was hoping you could see it my way. It wouldn't take a year before you would make enough money to return to college."

I started, and got the uncanny feeling that this man was searching my soul.

"How much do you know about me? How did you find out?"

"I have my ways." He chuckled again. "Will you reconsider?"

I hesitated.

"Shall we put it on a trial basis?" he asked softly. "I'm quite sure that we can both reach a mutual satisfaction."

I got the eerie feeling that I was talking to the devil himself, that somehow I had been tricked into selling my soul.

"Be here at 8.00 sharp, the night after next," he said.

That was how it started.

As Rankin and I laid the sheeted body of Daniel Whetherby on the lab table, lights flashed on behind sheeted oblongs that looked like glass tanks.

"Weinbaum " I had dropped the title, Mister, without thinking, "I think "

"Did you say something?" he asked, his eyes boring into mine. The laboratory seemed far away. There were only the two of us, sliding through a half-world peopled with horrors beyond the imagination.

Rankin entered in a white smock coat and broke the spell by saying, "All ready, professor."

At the door, Rankin stopped me. "Friday, at eight."
A shudder, cold and terrible raced up my spine as I looked back.
Weinbaum had produced a scalpel and the body was unsheeted.
They looked at me strangely and I hurried out.
I took the car and quickly drove down the narrow dirt road. I didn't
look back. The air was fresh and warm with a promise of budding

summer. The sky was blue with fluffy white clouds fleeting along
in the warm summer breeze. The night before seemed like a
nightmare, a vague dream, that, as all nightmares, is unreal and
transparent when the bright light of day shines upon it. But as I
drove past the wrought iron gates of the Crestwood Cemetery I
realized that this was no dream. Four hours ago my shovel had
removed the dirt that covered the grave of Daniel Weatherby.
For the first time a new thought occurred to me. What was the
body of Daniel Weatherby being used for at that moment? I
shoved the thought into a deep corner of my mind and let out onto
the go-pedal. The care screamed ahead I put my thoughts into
driving, glad to put the terrible thing I had done out of my mind,
for a short time, anyway.

CHAPTER FOUR

The California countryside blurred by as I tried for the maximum
speed. The tyres sang on the curve and, as I came out of it, several
things happened in rapid succession.
I saw a panel truck crazily parked right on the broken white line, a
girl of about eighteen running right toward my car, an older man
running after her. I slammed on the brakes and they exploded like
bombs. I jockeyed the wheel and the California sky was suddenly
under me. Then everything was right-side up and I realized that I
had flipped right over and up. For a moment I was dazed, then a
scream, shrill and high, piercing, slit my head.
I opened the door and sprinted toward the road. The man had the
girl and was yanking her toward the panel truck. He was stronger
than her and winning, but she was taking an inch of skin for every
foot he made.

He saw me.

"You stay out of this, buddy. I'm her legal guardian."
I halted and shook the cobwebs out of my brain. It was exactly
what he had been waiting for. He let go with a haymaker that got
me on the corner of the chin and knocked me sprawling. He
grabbed the girl and practically threw her into the cab.
By the time that I was on me feet he was around to the driver's
side and peeling out. I took a flying leap and made the roof just as
he took off. I was almost thrown off, but I clawed through about
five layers of paint to stay on. Then I reached through the open
window and got him by the neck. He cursed and grabbed my hand.
He yanked, the truck spun crazily off the ledge of a steep
embankment.

The last thing I remember is the nose of the truck pointing straight down. Then my enemy saved my life by viciously yanking my arm. I tumbled off just as the truck plunged over the cliff. I landed hard, but the rock I landed on was harder. Everything slid away.

Something cool touched my brow as I came to. The first thing I saw was the flashing red light on top of the official looking car parked by the embankment. I sat bolt upright and soft hands pushed me down. Nice hands, the hands of the girl who had landed me into this mess.

Then there was a Highway Patrolman over me and an official voice said, "The ambulance is coming. How do you feel?"

"Bruised," I said and sat up again. "But tell the ambulance to go away. I'm all right."

I tried to sound flippant. The last thing I needed after last night's 'job' was the police.

"How about telling me about it?" the policeman said, producing a notebook. Before I answered, I walked over to the embankment. My stomach flipped over backwards. The panel truck was nose-deep in California dirt and my sparring partner was turning that good California soil into a reddish mud with his own blood. He lay grotesquely, sprawled half in, half out of the cab. The photographers were getting their pictures. He was dead.

I turned back. The patrolman looked at me as if he expected me to throw up, but, after my new job, my stomach was admirably strong.

"I was driving out of the Belwood district," I said, "I came around that curve ..."

I told the rest of the story with the girl's help. Just as I finished the ambulance came to a halt. Despite my protestations and those of my still-unnamed girl friend, we were hustled into the back.

Two hours later we had a clean bill of health from the patrolman and the doctors and we were requested to be witnesses at the inquest set for the next week.

I saw my car at the curb. It was a little worse for wear, but the flats had been replaced. There was a witnessed bill on the dash for a wrecker, tires, and clean-up squad! It came to about \$250.00 half of the last night's pay-check.

"You look preoccupied," the girl said.

I turned to her. "Um, yeah. Well, we almost got killed together this morning, how about telling me your name and having lunch together?"

"Okay," she said. "The name's Vicki Pickford. Yours?"

"Danny," I said unemotionally as we pulled away from the curb. I switched the subject rapidly. "What was going on this morning? Did I hear that guy say that he was your legal guardian?"

"Yes" she replied.

I laughed. "The name is Danny Gerad. You'll get that out of the afternoon papers."

She smiled gravely. "All right. He was my guardian. He was also a drunkard and an all-around crumb."

Her cheeks flamed red. The smile was gone. "I hated him and I'm glad he's dead."

She gave me a sharp glance and for a moment I saw fear shine wetly in her eyes; then she recovered her self-control. We parked and ate lunch.

Forty minutes later I paid the check out of my newly acquired cash and walked back out to the car.

"Where to?" I asked.

"Bonaventure Motel," she said. "That's where I'm staying."

She saw curiosity jump into my eyes and sighed, "All right, I was running away. My Uncle David caught up with me and tried to drag me back to the house. When I told him I wouldn't go, he dragged me out to the truck. We were going around that curve when I wrenched the wheel out of his hands. Then you came along."

She closed up like a clam and I didn't try to get any more out of her. There was something wrong about her story. I didn't press her. I drove her into the parking lot and killed the engine.

"When can I see you again?" I asked. "A movie tomorrow?"

"Sure," she replied.

"I'll pick you up at 7.30," I said and drove out, thoughtfully pondering the events that had befallen me in the last twenty-four hours.

CHAPTER FIVE

When I entered the apartment the phone was ringing. I picked it up and Vicki, accident and the bright workaday world of suburban California faded into the half-world of phantom-people shadows.

The voice that whispered coldly out of the receiver was Weinbaum's

"Troubles?" He spoke softly, but there was an ominous tone in his voice.

"I had an accident," I replied.

"I read about it in the paper ..." Weinbaum's voice trailed off.

Silence hung between us for a moment and then I said, "Does this mean you're canning me?"

I hoped that he would say yes; I didn't have the guts to resign.

"No," he said softly, "I just wanted to make sure that you didn't reveal anything about the work you're doing for me."

"Well, I didn't" I told him curtly.

"The night after this," he reminded me, "At eight."

There was a click and then the dial tone. I shivered and hung up the receiver. I had the oddest feeling that I had just broken connection with the grave.

The next morning at 7.30 sharp, I picked up Vicki at the Bonaventure Motel. She was all decked out in an outfit that made her look stunning. I made a low whistle; she flushed prettily. We didn't talk about the accident.

The movie was good and we held hands part of the time, ate popcorn part of the time and kissed once or twice. All in all, a pleasant evening.

The second feature was just drawing to the climax when an usher came down the aisle.

He was stopping at every row and looked peeved. Finally, he stopped at ours. He swept the flashlight down the row and asked* "Mr. Gerad? Daniel Gerad?"

"Yes" I asked, feeling guilt and fear run through me. "There's a gentleman on the phone, sir. He says it's a matter of life or death." Vicki gave me a startled look and I followed the usher hurriedly. That let out the police. I mentally took stock of my only remaining relatives. Aunt Polly, Grandma Phibbs and my great-uncle Charlie. They were all healthy as far as I knew.

You could have knocked me over with a feather when I picked up the telephone and heard Rankin's voice.

He spoke rapidly and a raw note of fear was in his voice. "Get out here, right now! We need "

There were sounds of a a scuffle, a muffled scream, then a click and the empty dial tone.

I hung, up and hurried back for Vicki. "Come on," I said.

She followed without questioning me. At first I wanted to drive her back to the motel but the muffled scream made me decide that this was an emergency. I didn't like either Rankin or Weinbaum, but I knew I would have to help them.

We took off.

"What is it?" Vicki asked anxiously as I stamped on the go-pedal and let the car unwind.

"Look," I said, "something tells me that you've got your secrets about your guardian. I've got some of my own. Please, don't ask." She didn't say another word.

I took possession of the passing lane. The speedometer climbed from seventy-five to eighty-five, kept rising and trembled on the verge of ninety. I pulled into the turnoff on two wheels and the car bounced, clung and exploded up the road.

Grim and gaunt against the overcast sky, I could see the house. I pulled the car to a stop and was out in a second.

"Wait here," I cried over my shoulder to Vicki.

There was a light on in the laboratory and I flung the door open. It was empty but ransacked. The place was a mess of broken test tubes, smashed apparatus, and, yes, bloodstains that trailed through the half-open door that led to the darkened garage. Then I noticed the green liquid that was flowing over the floor in sticky rivulets. For the first time I noticed that one of the several sheeted tanks had been broken. I walked over to the other three. The lights inside them were off and the sheets that draped them let by no hint of what might have been under them - or, for that matter, what was under them.

I had no time to see. I didn't like the looks of blood, still fresh and uncoagulated, that led out of the front door into the garage. I swung open the door and entered the garage. It was dark and I didn't know where the light switch was. I cursed myself for not

bringing the flashlight that was in the glove compartment. I advanced a few steps and realized that there was a cold draft blowing against my face. I advanced toward it. The light from the lab threw a golden shaft of light along the garage floor, but it was next to nothing, in the Styngan blackness of the garage. All my childish fears of the dark returned. Once again I entered the realms of terror that only a child can know. I realized that the shadow that leered at me from out of the dark might not be dispelled by bright light.

Suddenly, my right foot went down. I realized that the draft was coming from a stairway I had almost fallen down. For a moment I debated, then turned and hurried back through the lab and out to the car.

Chapter Six

Vicki pounced on me as soon as I opened the door. "Danny, what are you doing here?"

Her tone of voice made me look at her. In the sickly yellow glow of the light her face was terrified.

"I'm working here," I said shortly.

"At first I didn't realize where we were," she said softly. I was only here once before.

"You've been here?" I exclaimed. "When? "Why?"

"One night," she said quietly "I brought Uncle David his lunch. He forgot it."

The name rang a bell. She saw me grasping for it. "My guardian," she said. "Perhaps I'd better tell you the whole story. Probably, you know that people don't get appointed guardians when they drink. Well, Uncle David didn't always do those things. When my mother and father were killed in a train-wreck four years ago, my Uncle David was the kindest person you could imagine. The court appointed him my guardian until I came of age, with my complete support."

For a moment she was quiet, living in memories and the expression that flitted rapidly through her eyes was not pretty. Then she went on.

"Two years ago the company he was working for as a night watchman folded up and my uncle was out of a job. He was out of work for almost half a year. We were getting desperate, with

only unemployment checks to feed us and college looming up for me. Then he got a job. It was a good paying one and it brought in fabulous sums. I used to joke with him about the banks he robbed. One night he looked at me and said, 'Not banks.'"

I felt fear and guilt tap me on the shoulder with cold fingers. Vicki went on.

"He started to get mean. He started bringing home whisky and getting drunk. The times I asked him about his job he evaded me. One night he told me point-blank to mind my own business."

"I watched him decay before my very eyes. Then one night he let a name slip - Weinbaum, Steffen Weinbaum. A couple of weeks

later he forgot his midnight lunch. I looked up the name in the telephone book and took it out to him. He flew into the most terrible rage I have ever seen."

"In the weeks that followed he was away more and more at this terrible house. One night, when he came home he beat me. I decided to run away. To me, the Uncle David I knew was dead. He caught me - and you came along." She fell silent.

I was shaken right down to my boots. I had a very good idea what Vicki's uncle did for a living. The time Rankin had signed me up coincided with the time Vicki's guardian would have been cracking up. I almost drove away then, despite the wild shambles the lab was in, despite the secret stairway, despite the blood trail on the floor. But then a faraway, thin scream reached us. I thumbed the glove compartment button, and reached in, fumbled around and got the flashlight.

Vicki's hand went to my arm "No, Danny. Please, Don't. I know that there's something terrible going on here. Drive away from it!" The scream sounded again, this time fainter, and I made up my mind. I grabbed the flashlight. Vicki saw my intention. "All right, I'm coming with you."

"Uh-uh," I said. "You stay here. I've got a feeling that there's something ... loose out there. You stay here."

She unwillingly sat back. I shut the door and ran back to the lab. I didn't pause, but went back into the garage. The flashlight illuminated the dark hole where the wall had slid away to reveal the staircase. My blood pounding thickly in my temples, I ventured down into it. I counted the steps, shining the flashlight at the featureless walls, at the impenetrable darkness below. "Twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three "

At thirty, the stairway suddenly became a short passage. I started cautiously along it, wishing that I had a revolver, or even a knife to make me feel a little less naked and vulnerable.

Suddenly a scream, terrible and thick with fear soon sounded in the darkness ahead of me. It was the sound of terror, the sound of a man confronted with something out of the deepest pits of horror. I broke into a run. As I ran I realized that the draft was blowing coldly against my face. I reasoned that the tunnel must come out in the outdoors. I stumbled over something.

It was Rankin, lying in a pool of his own blood, his eyes staring in glazed horror at the ceiling. The back of his head was bashed in. Ahead of me I heard a pistol shot, a curse, and another scream. I ran on and almost fell on my face as I stumbled over more stairs. I climbed and saw stairs framed vaguely in an opening screened with underbrush above me. I pushed it aside and came upon a startling tableau: a tall figure silhouetted against the sky that could only be Weinbaum, a revolver hanging in his hand, looking down at the shadowed ground. Even the starlight was blotted out as the hanging clouds that had parted briefly, closed together again. He heard me and wheeled quickly, his eyes glazing like red lanterns in the dark.

"Oh, it you Gerad."

"Rankin's dead." I told him.

"I know." he said, "You could have prevented it if you had come a little quicker"

"Now just hold on," I said, becoming angry. "I hurried "

I was cut off by a sound that has hounded me through nightmares ever since, a hideous mewing sound, like that of some gigantic rat in pain. I saw calculation, fear, and finally decision flicker across Weinbaum's face in a matter of seconds. I fell back in terror.

"What is it?" I choked.

He casually shone the light down into the pit, for all his affected casualness, I noticed that his eyes were averted by something.

The thing mewed again and I felt another spasm of fear. I craned to see what horror lay in that pit, the horror that made even Weinbaum scream in abject terror. And just before I saw, a horrible wall of terror rose and fell from the vague outline of the house.

Weinbaum jerked his flashlight from the pit and shone it in my face.

"Who was that? Whom did you bring up here?"

But I had my own flashlight trained as I ran through the passage way, Weinbaum close behind. I had recognized the scream. I had heard it before, when a frightened girl almost ran into my car as she fled her maniac of a guardian.

Vicki!

CHAPTER SEVEN

I heard Weinbaum gasp as we entered the lab. The place was swimming in the green, liquid. The other two cases were broken!. I didn't pause, but ran past the shattered, empty cases and out the door. Weinbaum did not follow me.

The car was empty, the door on the passengers side open. I shone my light over the ground. Here and there were footprints of a girl wearing high heels, a girl who had to be Vicki. The rest of the tracks were blotted out by a monstrous something I hesitate to call it a track. It was more as if something huge had dragged itself into the woods. Its hugeness was testified, too, as I noticed the broken saplings and crushed underbrush.

I ran back into the lab where Weinbaum was sitting, face pale and drawn, regarding the three shattered empty tanks. The revolver was on the table and I grabbed it and made for the door.

"Where do you think you're going with that?" he demanded, rising.

"Out to hunt for Vicki," I snarled. "And if she's hurt or " I didn't finish.

I hurried out into the velvet darkness of the night. Gun in hand, flashlight in the other, I plunged into the woods, following the trail blazed by something that I didn't want to think about. The vital question that burned in my mind was whether it had Vicki or was still trailing her. If it had her...

My question was answered by a piercing scream not too far away from me.

Faster now, I ran and suddenly burst into a clearing.

Perhaps it is because I want to forget, or perhaps it is only because the night was dark and beginning to become foggy, but I can only

remember how Vicki caught sight of my flashlight, ran to me, buried her head against my shoulder and sobbed.

A huge shadow moved toward me, mewing horribly, driving me almost mad with terror. Stumblingly, we fled from the horror in the dark, back toward the comforting lights of the lab, away from the unseen terror that lurked in the dark. My fear-crazed brain was putting two and two together and coming up with five.

The three cases had contained three something from the darkest pits of a twisted mind. One had broken loose. Rankin and Weinbaum had been after it. It had killed Rankin, but Weinbaum had trapped it in the concealed pit. The second one was floundering in the woods now and I suddenly remembered that whatever-it-was, was huge and that it had a hard time lifting itself along. Then I realized that it had trapped Vicki in a gully. It had started down easy enough! But getting up? I was almost positive that it couldn't.

Two were out of commission. But where was the third? My question was answered very suddenly but a scream from the lab. And ... mewing.

CHAPTER EIGHT

We ran up to the lab door and threw it open. It was empty. The screams and the terrible mewing sounds came from the garage. I ran through, and ever since have been glad that Vicki stayed in the lab and was spared the sight that had wakened me from a thousand awful nightmares.

The lab was darkened and all that I could make out was a huge shadow moving sluggishly. And the screams! Screams of terror, the screams of a man faced with a monster from the pits of hell. It mewed horribly and seemed to pant in delight.

My hand moved around for a light switch. There, I found it! Light flooded the room, illuminating a tableau of horror that was the result of the grave thing I had performed, I and the dead uncle. A huge, white maggot twisted on the garage floor, holding Weinbaum with long suckers, raising him towards its dripping, pink mouth from which horrid mewing sounds came. Veins, red and pulsating, showed under its slimy flesh and millions of squirming tiny maggots - in the blood vessels, in the skin, even forming a huge eye that stared out at me. A huge maggot, made up of hundreds of millions of maggots, the feasters on the dead flesh that Weinbaum had used so freely.

In a half-world of terror I fired the revolver again and again. It mewed and twitched.

Weinbaum screamed something as he was dragged inexorably

toward the waiting mouth. Incredibly, I made it out over the hideous sound that the creature was making.

"Fire it! In the name of heaven, fire it!"

Then I saw the sticky pools of green liquid which had trickled over the floor from the laboratory. I fumbled for my lighter, got it and frantically thumbed it. Suddenly I remembered that I had forgotten to put a flint in. I reached for matches, got one and fired the others. I threw the pack just as Weinbaum screamed his last. I saw his body through the translucent skin of the creature, still twitching as thousands of maggots leeches onto it. Retching, I threw the now flaring matches into the green ooze. It was flammable, just as I had thought. It burst into bright flames. The creature was twisted into a horrid ball of pulsing, putrid flesh.

I turned and stumbled out to where Vicki stood, shaking and white faced.

"Come on!" I said, "Let's get out of here! The whole place is going to go up!"

We ran out to the car and drove away rapidly.

CHAPTER NINE

There isn't too much left to say. I'm sure that you have all read about the fire that swept the residential Belwood District of California, leveling fifteen square miles of woods and residential homes. I couldn't feel too badly about that fire. I realize that hundreds might have been killed by the gigantic maggot-things that Weinbaum and Rankin were breeding. I drove out there after the fire. The whole place was smoldering ruins. There was no discernable remains of the horror that we had battled that final night, and, after some searching, I found a metal cabinet. Inside there were three ledgers.

Once of them was Weinbaum's diary. It clears up a lot. It revealed that they were experimenting on dead flesh, exposing it to gamma rays. One day they observed a strange thing. The few maggots that had crawled over the flesh were growing, becoming a group.

Eventually they grew together, forming three separate large maggots. Perhaps the radioactive bomb had speed up the evolution. I don't know.

Furthermore, I don't want to know.

In a way, I suppose, I assisted in Rankin's death; the flesh of the body whose grave I had robbed had fed perhaps the very creature that had killed him.

I live with that thought. But I believe that there can be forgiveness. I'm working for it. Or, rather, we're working for it.

Vicki and I. Together.

THE END

IN THE KEY CHORD OF
DAWN

STEPHEN KING

first appeared in
Contraband#2 Onan 1971

In the key-chords of dawn
all waters are depthless.
The fish flash recalls
timberline clefts where water
pours between the rocks of frost.
We live the night and wait
for the day dream
(we fished the Mississippi with
Norville as children
catching mostly crawdaddies from
the brown silk water)
when we say "love is responsibility";
our poles are adrift in a sea of compliments.
Now you fish for me and I for you.
The line, the red bobber, the worm on the hook: the fishing more
than the
eating: bones and scales and gutting knife make a loom of
complexity so we are
forced to say "fishing is responsibility"
and put away our poles.

Jhonathan and the Witches
Stephen King

From
First Words 1993, King wrote this 1956

Once upon a time there was a boy named Jhonathan. He was smart,

handsome, and very brave. But, Jhonathan was cobblers son. One days his father said, "Jhonathan, you must go and seek your fortune. You are old enough." Jhonathan, being a smart boy knew he better ask the king for work. So, he set out.

On the way, he met a rabbit who was a fairy in disguise. The scared thing was being pursued by hunters and jumped into Jhonathans arms. When the hunters came up Jhonathan pointed excitedly and shouts, "That way, that way !" After the hunters had gone, the rabbit turned into a fairy and said, "you have helped me. I will give you three wishes. What are they?" But Jhonathan could not think of anything, so the fairy agreed to give him when he needed them.

So Jhonathan kept walking until he made the kingdom without incident.

So he went to the king and asked for work.

But, as luck would have it, the king was in a very bad mood that day. So he vented his mood on Jhonathan.

"Yes there is something you can do. On yonder Mountain there are three witches. If you can kill them, I will give you 5,000 crowns. If you cannot do it I will have your head! You have 20 days." With this he dismissed Jhonathan.

"Now what am I to do?", thought Jhonathan. Well I shall try.

The he remembered the three wishes granted him and set out door the mountain.

* * *

Now Jhonathan was at the mountain and was just going to wish for a knife to kill the witch, when he heard a voice in his ear, "The first witch cannot be pierced."

The second witch cannot be pierced or smothered.

The third cannot be pierced, smothered and is invisible.

With this knowledge Jhonathan looked about and saw no one.

Then he remembered the fairy, and smile.

He then went in search of the first witch.

At last he found her. She was in a cave near the foot of the mountain, and was a mean looking hag.

He remembered the fairy words, and before the witch could do anything but give him an ugly look, he wished she should be smothered. And Lo! It was done.

Now he went higher in search of the second witch. There was a second cave higher up. There he found the second witch. He was about to wish her smothered when he remembered she could not be smothered. And the before the witch could do anything but give him an ugly look, he had wished her crushed. And Lo! It was done Now he had only to kill the third witch and he would have the 5,000 crowns. But on the way up, he was plagued with thoughts of how?

Then he it upon a wonderful plan.

The, he saw the last cave. He waited outside the entrance until he

heard the witches footsteps. He then picked up a couple of big rocks and wishes. He then wished the witch a normal woman and Lo! She became visible and then Jhonathan struck her head with the rocks he had. Jhonathan collected his 5,000 crowns and he and his father lived happily ever after.

The End

STEPHEN
KING

Keyholes

The
Leprechaun

by
Stephen King

Incomplete novel King was writing for his son Owen in 1983. King had written several pages of the story in longhand in a notebook and then transcribed them. While on a trip to California, he wrote about 30 more pages of the story in the same notebook, which was lost off the back of his motorcycle (somewhere in coastal New Hampshire) on a trip from Boston to Bangor. He mentioned that he could reconstruct what was lost, but had not gotten around to it (as of June, 1983). The only part that still exists today is the 5 typescript pages that had been transcribed. The 5 pages, plus a 3-page cover letter to a senior editor at Viking are now owned by a King collector.

Once upon a time--which is how all the best stories start-- a little

boy named Owen was playing outside his big red house. He was pretty bored because his big brother and big sister, who could always think of things to do, were in school. His daddy was working, and his mom was sleeping upstairs. She asked him if he would like a nap, but Owen didn't really like naps. He thought they were boring.

He played with his G.I. Joe men for awhile, and then he went around to the back and swung on the swing for awhile. He gave the tetherball a big hit with his first--ka-bamp!--and watched the rope wind up as the ball went around and around the pole. He saw his big sister's softball bat lying in the grass and wished Chris, the big boy who sometimes came to play with him, was there to throw him a few pitches. But Chris was in school too. Owen walked around the house again. He thought he would pick some flowers for his mother. She liked flowers pretty well.

He got around to the front of the house and that was when he saw Springsteen in the grass. Springsteen was his big sister's new cat. Owen liked most cats, but he didn't like Springsteen much. He

was big and black, with deep green eyes that seemed to see everything. Every day Owen had to make sure that Springsteen wasn't trying to eat Butler. Butler was Owen's guinea pig. When Springsteen thought no one was around, he would jump up on the shelf where Butler's big glass cage was and stare in through the screen on top with his hungry green eyes. Springsteen would sit there, all crouched down, and hardly move at all. Springsteen's tail would wag back and forth a little, and sometimes one of his ears would flick a bit, but that was all. I'll get in there pretty soon, you cruddy little guinea pig, Springsteen seemed to say. And when I get you, I'll eat you! Better believe it! If guinea pigs say prayers, you better say yours!

Whenever Owen saw Springsteen the cat up on Butler's shelf, he would make him get down. Sometimes Springsteen put his claws out (although he knew better than to try to put them in Owen) and Owen imagined the black cat saying, You caught me this time, but so what? Big deal! Someday you won't! And then, yum! yum! dinner is served! Owen tried to tell people that Springsteen wanted to eat Butler, but nobody believed him.

"Don't worry, Owen," Daddy said, and went off to work on a novel that's what he did for work.

"Don't worry, Owen," Mommy said, and went off to work on a novel--because that was what she did for work, too.

"Don't worry, Owen" Big Brother said, and went off to watch The Tomorrow People on TV.

"You just hate my cat!" Big sister said, and went off to play The Entertainer on the piano.

But no matter what they said, Owen knew he'd better keep a good old eye on Springsteen, because Springsteen certainly did like to kill things. Worse, he liked to play with them before he killed them. Sometimes Owen would open the door in the morning and

there would be a dead bird on the doorstep. Then he would look further, and there would be Springsteen crouched on the porch rail, the tip of his tail switching slightly and his big green eyes looking at Owen, as if to say: Ha! I got another one... and you couldn't stop me, could you? Then Owen would ask permission to bury the dead bird. Sometimes his mommy or daddy would help him.

So when Owen saw Springsteen on the grass of the front lawn, all crouched down with his tail twirching, he thought right away that the cat might be playing with some poor, hurt little animal. Owen forgot about picking flowers for his mom and ran over to see what Springsteen had caught.

At first he thought Springsteen didn't have anything at all. Then the cat leaped, and Owen heard a very tiny scream from the grass. He saw something green and blue between Springsteen had was shrieking and trying to get away. And now Owen saw something else-little spots of blood on the grass.

"No!" Owen shouted. "Get away, Springsteen!" The cat flattened his ears back and turned towards the sound of Owen's voice. His big green eyes glared. The green and blue thing between Springsteen paws squiggled and wiggled and got away. I started to run and Owen saw it was a person, a little tiny man wearing a green hat made out of a leaf. The little man looked back over his shoulder, and Owen saw how scared the little guy was. He was no bigger than the mice Springsteen sometimes killed in their big dark cellar. The little man had a cut down one of his cheeks from one of Springsteen's claws.

Springsteen hissed at Owen and Owen could almost hear him say:

"Leave me alone, he's mine and I'm going to have him!"

Then Springsteen jumped for the little man again, just as quick as a cat can jump-and if you have a cat of your own, you'll know that is very fast. The little man in the grass tried to dodge away, but he didn't quite make it, Owen saw the back of the little man's shirt

tear open as Springsteen's claws ripped it apart. And, I am sorry to say, he saw more blood and heard the little man cry out in pain. He went tumbling in the grass. His little leaf hat went flying. Springsteen got ready to jump again.

"No, Springsteen, no!" Owen cried. "Bad cat!"

He grabbed Springsteen. Springsteen hissed again, and his needle-sharp teeth sank into one of Owen's hands. It hurt worse than a doctor's shot. "Ow!" Owen yelled, tears coming to his eyes. But he didn't let go of Springsteen. Now Springsteen started clawing at Owen, but Owen would not let go. He ran all the way to the driveway with Springsteen in his hands. Then he put Springsteen down. "Leave him alone, Springsteen!" Owen said, and, trying to think of the very worst thing he could, he added: "Leave him alone or I'll put you in the Oven and bake you like a pizza!"

Springsteen hissed, showing his teeth. His tail switched back and forth-not just the tip now but the whole thing.

"I don't care if you are mad!" Owen yelled at him. He was still crying a little, because his hands hurt as if he had put them in the fire. They were both bleeding, one from Springsteen biting him and one from Springsteen clawing him. "You can't kill people on our lawn even if they are little!"

Springsteen hised again and backed away. Okay, his mean green eyes seemed to say. Okay for this time. Next time... we'll see! Then he turned and ran away. Owen hurried back to see it the little man was all right.

At first he thought the little man was gone. Then he saw the blood on the grass, and the little leaf hat. The little man was nearby, lying on his side. The reason Owen hadn't been able to see him at first was the little man's shirt was the exact color of the grass. Owen touched him gently with his finger. He was terribly afraid the little

man was dead. But when Owen touched him, the little man groaned and sat up.

"Are you all right?" Owen asked.

The fellow in the grass made a face and clapped his hands to his ears. For a moment Owen thought Springsteen must have hurt the little guy's head as well as his back, and then he realized that his voice must sound like thunder to such a small person. The little man in the grass was not much longer than Owen's thumb. This was Owen's first good look at the little fellow he had rescued, and he saw right away why the little man had been so hard to find again. His green shirt was not just the color of grass; it was grass. Carefully woven blades of green grass. Owen wondered how come they didn't turn brown.

Silence
Stephen King

Published in "Moth", 1970

Nothing
but the insect whine of
chemicals moving between
refrigerator walls:
the mind becomes CONFSSIONAL
(enamel)
murder
lurks
I stand with books in hand
the feary silence of fury
waiting
for the furnace to kick on

Skybar
by Brian Hartz &
Stephen King

The following story was written from a contest with Doubleday books to promote the 1982 "Do it Yourself Bestseller" book edited by Tom Silberkleit and Jerry Biederman.

There were many authors featured in the book, including Belva Plain and Isaac Asimov. Each writer provided the beginning and ending to a story.

It was up to the reader to provide the middle, hence the name "Do It Yourself Bestseller."

As part of the promotion, Doubleday books held a national contest to see who could write the best middle portion.

Each winner was chosen by the individual writer - in this case, Stephen King. Brian Hartz was 18 at the time it was written.

This story contains strong language and material that may be unsuitable for younger readers.

There were twelve of us when we went in that night, but only two of us came out - my friend Kirby and me. And Kirby was insane. All of the things I'm going to tell you about happened twelve years ago. I was eleven then, in the sixth grade. Kirby was ten and in the fifth. In those days, before gas shot up to \$1.40 a gallon or more (as I recall the best deal in town was at Dewey's Sunoco, where you could get hi-test for 31.9 cents, plus double S&H Green stamps), Skybar Amusement Park was still a growing concern; its great double Ferris wheel turned endlessly against a summer sky, and you could hear the great, grinding mechanical laugh of the fun-house clown even at my house, five miles inland, when the wind was right

Yeah, Skybar was the place to go, all right - you could blast away with the .22 of your choice at Pop Dupree's Dead Eye Shootin' Gallery, you could ride the Whip until you puked, wander into the Mirror Labyrinth, or look at the Adults Only freak tent and wonder what was in there...you especially wondered when the people came out, white-faced, some of the women crying, or hysterical. Brant Callahan said it was all just a fake, whatever it was, but sometimes I saw the doubt even in Brant's tough gray eyes.

Then, of course, the murders started, and eventually Skybar was shut down. The double Ferris stood frozen against the sky, and the only sound the mechanical clown's mouth produced was the lunatic hooting of the sea breeze. We went in, the twelve of us, and. . .but I'm getting ahead of myself. It began just after school let out that June; it began when Randy Stayner, a seventh-grader from the junior high school, was thrown from the highest point of the SkyCoaster. I was there that day - Kirby was with me, in fact - and we both heard his scream as he came down.

It was one of the strangest ways for a person to die - the shadowed Ferris wheel turned in the sunlight, the bumper cars honked and

sparked the roof and walls of Spunky's Dodge 'Em, the carousel

spun wildly to the rise and fall of horses and lions, and the steady beat of its repeating tune echoed throughout the park. A man balancing his screaming son in one hand, ice cream cones in the other, little kids with cotton candy racing to see who's first to get on Sandee's Spinning Sombrero, and in the midst of all the peaceful confusion, Randy Stayner performing a one-time solo swan dive 100 feet into the solid steel tracks of the SkyCoaster. For a while, I wasn't all too sure the people around me weren't thinking it was just an act - a Saturday afternoon performance by a skilled diver. When blood and bone hit, however, it was clear the act was over. And then, as if to clear the whole thing up with a final attempt to achieve his original goal, he rolled lazily over the bottom rails of the SkyCoaster into the brown murky water of Skybar Pond, swirls of red and grey following him.

The SkyCoaster was shut down the day of Randy's dive, and despite weeks of dragging the pond's bottom, his body was never found. Authorities concluded that his remains had drifted under a sandbar or some unmarked passageway, and all search ceased after four weeks.

Skybar lost a lot of customers after that. Most people were afraid to go there, and other businesses in the town began to boom because of it. In fact, Starboard Cinema, which showed horror movies to an audience of four or five during the parks better days now showed repeats of "I was a Teen Age Werewolf" to sell-out crowds. More and more, people drifted away from Skybar until it was shut down for good.

It was during those last few weeks that the worst accidents started happening. A morning worker, reaching under a car on the Whip for a paper cup, caught his arm on the supporting bar between two clamps just as a faulty circuit started the machine. He was crushed between two cars. Another worker was fixing a bottom rail on the Ferris wheel when a 500 pound car dropped off the top and smeared him onto the asphalt below. These and several other rides

were shut down, and when the only thing left open was Pop Dupree's .22 gallery and the Adults Only freak tent, the spark ran out of Skybar's amusement, and it was forced to shut down after its third year in operation.

It had only been closed for two months when Brant Callahan came up with his plan that night. We were in a group of five camping in back of John Wilkenson's dad's workshop, in a single five-man Sportsman pup tent illuminated by four flashlights shining on back issues of Famous Detective Stories, when he stood up (or rather scuffled on his knees, due to the height of the tent) and proposed we all do something to separate the pussies from the men.

I tossed aside my Mystery of the Haunted Hearse, leaned teach in the glow of Dewey Howardson's light, and squinted halfway at the hulking shadow crouching by the double-flap zipper door. No one else appeared to pay any attention to him.

"Come on, lard-asses!" he shouted. "Are ya all just going to sit around playing Dick-fucking-Tracy all night?"

Kirby slapped at the bugs attacking his glowing arm and looked from Brant, to me, to the rest of the guys still gazing with mild interest at their Alfred Hitchcock tales of suspense, unaware of any other activities going on in their presence. I gazed at my watch. It was 11:30.

"What the hell are you raving about, Brant?" His face came to life now that he was being noticed, and he looked at me with great excitement, like some dumb little kid who was about to tell some terrible secret and was getting the great flood of details together to form a top-confidential plan.

"The SkyCoaster."

Dewey looked over the top of his magazine and shot Brant a look of mild interest.

"Skybar's SkyCoaster?"

"'Course, ya damn idiot. What other roller coaster ya gonna find in Starboard? Now the way I figger it, we could make it over the barbed wire and inside to the SkyCoaster easy enough."

"What the fuck for?" I asked. Brant was always pulling stunts like this, and it was no telling what the crazy bastard was up to this time. I remember one year when we were out smashing coins on the BY&W tracks by Harrow's Point, Brant got tired of watching trains run over his pennies and dimes and dared us to take on a real challenge. Whenever Brant came up with a real challenge, you could almost always count on calling up the You Asked For It or Ripleys Believe It or Not crews for live coverage. Not that the challenge was anything like that man from Brazil who swallowed strips of razor blades, or that fat lady from Ohio who balanced fire sticks on her forehead - Brant's dares were far more challenging than those. And, as young volunteers from his reluctant audience, we were obligated to take part in them or kiss our reputation for bravery goodbye.

Brant reached into his pants pocket that day and pulled out a small cardboard box wrapped tightly with a red rubber band.

Unwrapping it, he revealed four or five shiny copper bullets, the kind I used to see on reruns of Mannix when Mike Connors would stop blasting away at crime rings long enough to load up his revolver again. They were different from T.V., though. On the tube they appeared to be no more than tiny pieces of dull plastic jammed into a Whamco Cap Pistol. In front of me then, they sat mystically in Brant's hand, the shells glittering bright rays of light in the late afternoon sun, the tip of greyish lead heavily refusing to reflect any light at all.

Then Brant clapped them all together in a fist and headed up the bank toward the tracks. I started after him, half expecting him to wheel out a gun for them at any minute, hoping he was just going to relieve himself rather than starting to open fire on something, or

trying some other dangerous stunt. It was dangerous, as it turned

out, but I didn't say anything. I just stood there by the rails, taking a plug off the chewing tobacco Dewey brought along, my mind watching from some faraway place as he set them up single file on the left rail.

"The train wheels should set 'em off the second they hit," he smiled smugly, eagerly forming his plan. "All we have to do is stand here by the rails until they do. How's that for a challenge, huh? Oh, and the first one to jump is pussy of the year."

I didn't say anything. but I thought a lot about it. About how stupid it was, how dangerous it was, and how weird a persons brain had to be to think things like that up. I thought about how I should bug out right then, just yell "Screw you, Brant!" and take off for home. But that would have made me green. And if it was one thing we all had to show each other back then, it was that we were no cowards. So there we were, Brant, John, Dewey, me, and Kirby, although Kirby wouldn't set foot near the tracks, bullets or no bullets, with a train coming (he began to conveniently get sick on the tobacco and had to lie down). We lined up next to the rails, determination in our eyes as the bullets gleamed in front of us. John was the first one to hear the train, and as we stepped closer to Brant's orders, I could hear him softly muttering a short prayer over and over to himself. Dewey stood on the far right side of me, the last person in our Fearless Freddy Fan Club

Then the first heavy rumbling of the cars came, John reeled as it got louder, and I thought surely he was going to collapse over the tracks, but he didn't, and we all stood still as the train came on. The churning squeak of the wheels hit our ears, and I stared blankly at the bullets in front of us, thinking how small they seemed under the wheels of the 4:40. But the more I looked, the larger they began to appear, until it seemed they were almost the size of cannonballs. I shut my eyes and prayed with John.

In the distance. the whistle rang out a terrifyingly loud Hooooo-HOO Hoooo, and I was sure it was on top of us, sure that I would feel the cracks of lead pounding in my ears any second, feel the hot metal in my legs. Then the steady thud-thud-thud of its wheels grinding closer bit into my ears, and I screamed. turned, and fell down the slope to where the black gravel ended and the high meadowy grass began. I ran and didn't stop or look back until I was what felt like at least a mile away, and then collapsed in the stickery high grass, my hands and knees filling with sharp pain. Behind me, five or six bullets roared into the air consecutively, and I wondered vaguely how Mike Connors could stand such a loud sound every time he squeezed the trigger. My ears filled up with a steady EEEEEEEEEEEEE, and I lay back in the grass, my hair full of stickers, my pride full of shame.

Then Kirby was in front of me, telling me I was all right. I sat up in the grass, and down the hm about ten or fifteen feet from me, Brant, Dewey, and John sat puffing loudly, laughing, out of breath. The air filled with smoke and I collapsed again into the high sea of shrub and stickers, feeling fine.

Brant admitted time after time that we were all brave for going along with him that day, but he never brought up the fact that we all had run away, he and Dewey in the lead. Somewhere in my

mind, the fact appeared to me that somewhere in Brant, his ego ended and his brains began. That's why I listened along with the others, and why we all wound up going with him that night when he began scheming up another mastermind stunt.

"First we make it over the fence. When we do, we head for the SkyCoaster. Here's the trick: we'll all meet in the station and start up the tracks - not the wooden beams - the tracks, and, in single file, climb to the King drop, then back down." "You're fuckin nuts, Brant." "Maybe. But at least I'm not fuckin' pussy." "Who's pussy?" I asked, pulling my Converse All-Star tennis shoes on. "You in?" asked Kirby, his lower jaw shaking. It was almost like

that shaking jaw and those glassy, scared deer eyes of his were trying to pull me back, to help me forget about the dare and get back to reading another chapter in Amazing Detective Stories - as if that once shaking jaw were a sonar, bouncing off waves of detection and coming up with the same reading: Dangerous Barrier Ahead.

"Don't be ridiculous, Kirb. 'Course I'm goin'" I shot a glance at John and Dewey, who both gave me nods of bravery and confidence, mixed highly with regrets of Brant's ever being with us that night. We left the flashlights on in the tent in case John's dad peeked out the back windows of his house to check on us. It turned out he never did.

Skybar can be pretty damn dark at night with no lights on. Few people know that like I do since most have only seen it in the daytime with sunlight bouncing off of the metal roofs of Pop Dupree's and the Adults Only freak tent or at night with the magical lights blazing lazily around on the Ferris wheel and bulbs flashing crazily in single file, creating a racing form of neon display up and down the hills of the 100 foot high SkyCoaster. There were no lights that night, however. No lights, no moon, no light clouds, zilchamundo. Brant had stopped on the way to pick up a couple of his friends from the White Dragons. The Dragons were a street gang that held a high position in the field of respect with all wise kids back then, and luckily they brought spare flashlights, matches for their cigarettes, and 5-inch steel Randell switchblades (in case some maniacal drunk or thug was claiming the park space as a home base for his operations).

Both of the White Dragon members appeared to be gods in the eyes of all of us that evening - their hair slicked back to their scalps James Dean style, black leather jackets with pale, fire breathing dragons on them, a general air of confidence and security beaming off them as if they were more protective beacons for us than general good company joining us in the daredevil fun.

Five more members of the Dragons were to meet us after a field party they were having up on Grange's Point. Brant hadn't let us in on that fact at first, but when I found out they were supposed to meet us at the front gate at 12:30. more confidence rose in me, and it began to feel more like we were heading toward a late game of

craps or penny ante poker instead of a 100 foot climb on slick poles. What we didn't know was that they were practically carrying the party with them, each with a bottle of Jack Daniel's Black label, or Southern Comfort, or Everclear, and each was singing in racketsy unison the agonizing 75th stanza to "99 Bottles of Beer." Excitement heaved up my chest to my throat as we approached the outer gate, and I can still remember how mystic and strange the park looked in the dark night air. The chain fence stretched onward in both directions to what seemed infinity, sealing us out from its unknown hidden powers, and I recall that it almost seemed that it was shielding Skybar inside, preventing it from wielding its wrath on the innocent people living outside its domain. Once you crossed the barrier, however, there was no turning back. Here was where the two worlds divided, and the choice was made - pussy or man. Everybody was anxious to get inside the park's gates to prove where he stood. With the gang you felt cold and nervous while awaiting the wrath of whatever might be lurking inside-but outside, the chances of surviving any lurking danger alone made you even more nervous- jittery enough to crawl up into a ball and piss your pants at every crack of a twig. So, you see, it's not that we all wanted to go inside. But even if we were scared to death of climbing the cold rails of the SkyCoaster, staying alone while the rest of the bunch climbed over and ventured inside was even worse than the original dare itself. Surprisingly enough, Kirby was the first one up the fence to lay his jacket across the barbed wire and hop to the soft asphalt of Skybar on the other side. The rest of us followed, thud, sputt, thud sounding through the night air as we each dropped to the ground

on the other side. We were in now. Eddie Frachers, the shorter of the two White Dragons, lit up a smoke, flicked on the flashlight, and led the way with Brant.

The station was empty when we got to the steel rails of the coaster, and climbing the steps to the gate station was an unusual experience in itself since there was no waiting in line for an hour while an old man standing in front of you blew cigarette fumes in your face in the riding hot sun as your stomach turned putred, your facial skin pale. Now it was home free between the coaster and us, free space all the way.

Hurry hurry step right up!

The metal floor thundered hundreds of beats under our feet as we made our way across the vacant station to the terminal gates, and I looked several times over my shoulder as we walked the deserted leading board, my senses ready for anything that might decide to go more than "bump" in the night. I was the first one to hear it, in fact, and my body grew limp, my bowels limp with it when I heard the direction it was coming from - the coaster cars.

They all sat in front of us, grey and orange from rust and age, their silent features corrupting the night with an evil air, and I recall standing there as the others began to hear it too, my hands shaking, legs drooping, mouth hanging open stupidly as I attempted to say something - I don't know what - and nothing would come out.

I don't know how long we all stood there, waiting for something, anything to happen. The cars seemed mystic in their own way as

they stood their ground and refused to let us any nearer by chanting some evil spell among themselves to keep us back. A spell is one thing, but if you've ever thought you heard a car (or possibly some dangerous lunatic hiding behind a car) singing something, you'd understand how we all felt that night. Even Brant and the two White Dragons appeared motionless in the soft glow from the

flashlight, but somehow Eddie brought the flashlight up to meet whatever was occupying the first car.

"Hey! Turn it off damnit!"

A surge of relief at its at least being human swelled up in me, but I still stood there, motionless and quivering, even as Eddie and the rest of the bunch, even Kirby, started toward the coaster. I must have still been in a daze, because I found myself wanting to stop them, to pull them back to me, to end it all, turn around and get the hell back over the fence. But I still stood there as fog rolled around my eyes and my sight blurred, leaving only my ears to tell me the horrible fate of our party.

"What the hell are you..." ". . . are you sure that it's them . . ." "What are they doing here like this..." A long, ear-piercing scream followed, the kind women usually scream in those horror movies at Starboard Cinema when the vampire wraps his cape around his victim and starts sucking the living blood out of her. It rose to almost unbelievable splitting levels then faded away with suppressed laughter followed by "59 bottles of beer on the wall, 59 bottles of beer..."

A hand touched my shoulder and I reeled to find Kirby at my feet, telling me that the other guys had gone ahead without me and I'd better hurry up. I ran and caught up with them by the main track, where they had already begun the climb. Brant was first, then the White Dragons, and then Dewey and John, clinging tightly to the steel tracks behind them. I ran the 20 feet to the final, highest 100 foot drop, and started up after them.

The cold steel rails clapped clamily into my skin as I started shinnying up, looking to where Brant and the Dragons were perched high above. I couldn't weigh the amount of energy I had left to figure how I was gonna climb 100 fucking feet barehanded. It's kind of like that joke about the little ant crawling up the

elephant's hind leg with rape on its mind. I probably wouldn't make it, but I had high hopes.

Kirby never touched the rails. I couldn't blame him after the train event, maybe something happened to him when he was younger, or something. Kirby told me a lot of things best left confidential, but he never told me anything about it either. He may not have wanted to climb, but to me he was no pussy.

A lot of things go through your mind when you're 45 feet off the ground climbing rail by rail on a ladder without rungs. One hundred feet of sheer pole climbing with occasional crosspieces to hang on to isn't much, and you begin to wonder, What if Dewey slips and falls into me? What if I lose my grip and sail to the

bottom? How will I get down once I'm up there? Can drunk Dragons fly? And then you look at the bottom, and all of your fears are summed up in one phrase:

Don't look down.

Hand over hand, pull over pull, I made my way upward, trusting that the pace of those above me wasn't too slow. I never really looked up to where Brant and his friends were while I was climbing. Even to this day I remember the blackness of the night sky mixing well with my own blackout as I shut my eyes tightly to the things around me. I was climbing to the top, and I just couldn't stop. Hand over hand. That's when the screaming started, loud and forceful, over and over, with an occasional splashing behind it as if someone below were enjoying a late night swim and horseplay in the murky pond. Ignoring my own rule, I shot a glance down. God, how weird it looked. If you've ever been on a roller coaster right as it goes down the steepest slope, you can understand the feeling; the depth, the rails shooting together as they plummet below right as you drop over the top. Imagine yourself frozen in that position. Below, the rails meet and your stomach assumes a new position in your throat. And standing on those gleaming rails,

still holding Eddie's flashlight and stained with the dark was Kirby, gazing back up at me, a look of confusion, horror and what to do next? written across his face. He scared the hell out of me the way he just stood there, arms at his side, staring at me but saying nothing.

"What the hell's the matter with you?" I shouted down with extra force. No answer. "Kirby, what's wrong?" By then I knew damn well what was wrong. The tracks had begun to drum under my hands, and the frame of the SkyCoaster itself had begun to sway rhythmically from side to side. Then the awful sound of the roar of a coaster car spinning around some distant bend, fading out, then coming back in, fading out again-and coming back with thunderous racket that sent my stomach and my heart both jumping on top of my tonsils.

Then Brant screamed. It was like the scream of a woman's that I described earlier, but louder, blending in with the steady clack-clack-clack of a chain-dragged coaster car on an electrified track. I didn't ask any questions, but simply locked both hands together, swung both feet together and slid down the rail to the bottom. If you've ever been on a roller car as it plummets the final hill - the Granddaddy drop - you'll probably know the feeling of fear that builds up in you. There's always a chance that you may fly from the car to the steel tracks below as the force presses your spine against the back cover and shakes you with head-splitting strength to the bottom. There was no car for me to ride in that night -no seat, no belt, no safety bar to pull against my slumped torso. And as I sailed to the bottom, my mind made a different rule that I was forced to follow - Don't look.

The wind stopped suddenly in my hair, and I realized that I was down on the bottom rails of the coaster, hanging dreadfully close to the murky waters of Skybar Pond. And as I hung there momentarily I could picture Randy Stayner waiting below, a mossy green hand beginning to emerge to the surface, and as I

imagined this, I also visualized others like him in a sea of arms, reaching for my dangling shirt tail as I hung there, all of them coming up to the surface to get me, or desperately reaching out as they were dragged down. A splurge of violent bubbling water popped to the surface, jolting me back to Skybar and, getting to my feet, I pulled myself to the shore and somehow managed to pull Kirby with me. He was still standing in a daze, eyes fixed on the tracks where the coaster car was falling toward us.

And as we ran through the depot station past the empty coaster cars, I could hear the steady thud-thud-thud of the one car advancing on us. I shot a glance over my shoulder as we both ran on, my feet and eyes growing with every step.

Then I let go of Kirby. I can't clearly remember when, but I remember all that ran through my mind was Run Like Hell! I flew up the chain link fence behind Pop Dupree's, cutting my hands severely on the barbed wire. After jumping to the safe ground on the other side, I didn't stop running until I was almost a mile away on Granges Point, where I could still hear the soft screaming laughter of the seabreeze through the Funhouse clown, and could see the vague form of the SkyCoaster winding through the trees. Somewhere behind one of the tents - I can still swear it was the freak tent - a light glowed softly. I sat there, staring at it, wondering if it was Kirby trying to find his way out of the dark. Then I heard the cracking grass of footsteps behind me and whirled to find Kirby standing in front of me. My legs were shaking, and my teeth began to chatter softly, and he walked up to me and put his arm around me.

"It's okay. We made it. We're pretty brave, huh? Right up and right down those rails. We're far away from it now, though. We're not there now" I stared at him and wondered how the hell he got there. I couldn't recall dragging him with me. I couldn't believe how calm he stood there-how he acted like it was all a scary movie at Starboard Cinema and we were walking home in the dark trying to

calm ourselves down. Then he turned me toward the park and started to walk away.

"Coming?" "Kirb, you're headin' the wrong way."

I turned toward home and started to run again. After a while. Kirby came running up to me, and we didn't stop until we were five miles away from Skybar and on my front porch. I can still see the horror in poor Kirby's eyes as he saw his best friends and the Dragons drop to death before him. Even after seeing that smiling, rotting freak clambering from behind the safety bar of the coaster car that had rolled over Brant and the others, he stuck with me at the bottom and didn't run. The only ones who acted as bravely as Kirby were the drunk Dragons who jumped at the first sight of the coaster car coming toward them. Maybe it was bravery, maybe it was the liquor, but it doesn't matter because the 100 foot dive to the pond was a mistake either way. Brant and the rest may have tried to slide, but they never made it to safety and the authorities

still haven't pulled their bodies from the murky pond waters to this day.

And still, in my dreams, I feel Kirby taking my hand and telling me it was okay; we were safe, we were home free. And then I heard the thud-thud-thud of a single SkyCoaster car rolling toward us. I want to tell Kirby not to look - "Don't look, man!" I scream, but the words won't come out. He does look. And as the car rolls up to the deserted station, we see Randy Stayner lolling behind the safety bar, his head driven almost into his chest. The fun-house clown begins to scream laughter somewhere behind us, and Kirby begins to scream with it. I try to run, but my feet tangle in each other and I fall, sprawling. Behind me I can see Randy's corpse pushing the safety bar back and he begins to stumble toward me, his dead, shredded fingers hooked into seeking claws. I see these things in my dreams, and in the moments before I wake, screaming, in my wife's arms, I know what the grown-ups must have seen that summer in the freak tent that was for Adults Only. I

see these things in my dreams, yes, but when I visit Kirby in that place where he still lives, that place where all the windows are cross-hatched with heavy mesh, I see them in his eyes. I take his hand and his hand is cold, but I sit with him and sometimes I think: These things happened to me when I was young.

SLADE
Stephen King

"Slade." The Maine Campus June-August 1970. "Slade" is in some ways the most exciting of King's uncollected juvenalia, an engaging explosion of off the wall humor, literary pastiche, and cultural criticism, all masquerading as a Western - the adventures of Slade and his quest for Miss Polly Peachtree of Paduka. Published in several installments in the UMO college newspaper during the summer following King's graduation, the story is most important in showing King reveling in the joy of writing.

-excerpt from "The Annotated Guide to Stephen King, p.45.

It was almost dark when Slade rode into Dead Steer Springs. He was tall in the saddle, a grim faced man dressed all in black. Even the handles of his two sinister .45s, which rode low on his hips, were black. Ever since the early 1870s, when the name of Slade had begun to strike fear into the stoutest of Western hearts, there

had been many whispered legends about his dress. One story had it that he wore black as a perpetual emblem of mourning for his Illinois sweetheart, Miss Polly Peachtree of Paduka, who passed tragically from this vale of tears when a flaming Montgolfer balloon crashed into the Peachtree barn while Polly was milking the cows. But some said he wore black because Slade was the Grim Reaper's agent in the American Southwest - the devil's handyman. And then there were some who thought he was queerer than a three-dollar bill. No one, however, advanced this last idea to his face.

Now Slade halted his huge black stallion in front of the Brass Cuspidor Saloon and climbed down. He tied his horse and pulled one of his famous Mexican cigars from his breast pocket. He lit it and let the acrid smoke drift out onto the twilight air. From inside the bat-wing doors of the Brass Cuspidor came noises of drunken revelry. A honkytonk piano was beating out "Oh, Them Golden Slippers."

A faint shuffling noise came to Slade's keen ears, and he wheeled around, drawing both of his sinister.45s in a single blur of motion "Watch it there, mister!"

Slade shovelled his pistols back into their holsters with a snarl of contempt. It was an old man in a battered Confederate cap, dusty jeans and suspenders. Either the town drunk or the village idiot, Slade surmised. The old man cackled, sending a wave of bad breath over to Slade. "Thought you wuz gonna hole me fer sure, Stranger."

Slade smoked and looked at him.

"Yore Jack Slade, ain'tchee, Pard?" The old man showed his toothless gums in another smile. "Reckon Miss Sandra of the Bar-T hired you, that right? She's been havin' a passel of trouble with Sam Columbine since her daddy died an' left her to run the place." Slade smoked and looked at him. - The old man suddenly rolled his eyes. "Or mebbe yore workin' fer Sam Columbine hisseif - that it? I heer he's been hiring a lot of real hardcases to help pry Miss Sandra off'n the Bar-T. Is that-"

"Old man," Slade said, "I hope you run as fast as you talk. Because if you don't, you're gonna be takin' from a plot six feet long an' three wide."

The old sourdough grimaced with sudden fear. "You-you wouldn't-"

Slade drew one sinister.45.

The old geezer started to run in grotesque flying hops. Slade sighted carefully along the barrel of his sinister.45 and winged him once for luck. Then he dropped his gun back into its holster, turned and strode into the Brass Cuspidor, pushing the bat-wing doors wide.

Every eye in the place turned to stare at him. Faces went white. The bartender dropped the knife he was using to cut off the foamy beer heads. The fancy dan gambler at the back table dropped three aces out of his sleeve - two of them were clubs. The piano player fell off his stool, scrambled up, and ran out the back door. The bartender's dog, General Custer, whined and crawled under the card table. And standing at the bar, calmly downing a straight shot

of whiskey, was John "The Backshooter" Parkinan, one of Sam Columbine's top guns.

A horrified whisper ran through the crowd. "Slade!" "It's Jack Slade!" "It's Slade!"

There was a sudden general rush for the doors. Outside someone ran down the street, screaming.

"Slade's in town! Lock yore doors! Jack Slade is in town an' God help whoever he's after!"

"Parkman!" Slade gritted.

Parkman turned to face Slade. He was chewing a match between his ugly snagged teeth, and one hand hovered over the notched butt of his sinister .41.

"What're you doin' in Dead Steer, Slade?"

"I'm working fer a sweet lady name of Sandra Dawson," Slade said laconically. "How about yoreself, 'Backshooter'?"

"Workin' fer Sam Columbine, an' go to hell if you don't like the sound of it, Pard."

"I don't," Slade growled, and threw away his cigar. The bartender, who was trying to dig a hole in the floor, moaned.

"They say yer fast, Slade."

"Fast enough."

Backshooter grinned evilly. "They also say yore queerer'n a three dollar bill."

"Fill yore hand, you slimy, snaky son of a bitch!" Slade yelled. "The Backshooter" went for his gun, but before he had even touched the handle both of Slade's sinister .45s were out and belching lead. "Backshooter" was thrown back against the bar, where he crumpled.

Slade re-holstered his guns and walked over to Parkman, his spurs jingling. He looked down at him. Slade was a peace-loving man at heart, and what was more peace-loving than a dead body? The

thought filled him with quiet joy and a sad yearning for his childhood sweetheart, Miss Polly Peachtree of Paduka, Illinois. The bartender hurried around the bar and looked at the earthly remains of John "The Backshooter" Parkman.

"It ain't possible!" He breathed. "Shot in the heart six times and you could cover all six holes with a twenty-dollar gold piece!" Slade pulled one of his famous Mexican cigars from his breast pocket and lit up. "Better call the undertaker an' cart him out afore he stinks."

The bartender gave Slade a nervous grin and rushed out through the bat-wings. Slade went behind the bar, poured himself a shot of Digger's Rye(190 proof), and thought about the lonely life of a gun for hire. Every man's hand turned against you, never sure if the deck was loaded, always expecting a bullet in the back or the gall bladder, which was even worse. It was sure hard to do your business with a bullet in the gall bladder. The batwing doors of the Brass Cuspidor were thrown open, and Slade drew both of his sinister.45s with a quick, flowing motion. But it was a girl - a

beautiful blonde with a shape which would have made Ponce de Leon forget about the fountain of youth - Hubba-hubba, Slade thought to himself. His lips twisted into a thin, lonely smile as he re-holstered his guns. Such a girl was not for him, he was true - to the memory of Polly Peachtree, his one true love.

"Are you Jack Slade?" The blonde asked, parting her lovely red lips, which were the color of cherry blossoms in the month of May.

"Yes ma'am," Slade said, knocking off his shot of Digger's Rye and pouring another.

"I'm Sandra Dawson," she said, coming over to the bar.

"I figgered," Slade said.

Sandra came forward and looked down at the sprawled body of John "The Backshooter" Parkman with burning eyes. "This is one of the men that murdered my father!" She cried "One of the low, murdering swine that Sam Columbine hired!"

"I reckon," Slade said.

Sandra Dawson's bosom heaved. Slade was keeping an eye on it, just for safety's sake. "Did you dispatch him, Mr. Slade?"

"I shore did, ma'am. And it was my pleasure."

Sandra threw her arms around Slade's neck and kissed him, her full lips burning against his own. "You're the man I've been looking for," she breathed, her heart racing. "Anything I can do to help you, Slade, anything -"

Slade shoved her away and drew deeply on his famous Mexican cigar to regain his composure. "Reckon you took me wrong, ma'am. I'm bein' true to the memory of my one true love, Miss Polly Peachtree of Paduka, Illinois. But anything I can do to help you -"

'You can, you can!' She breathed. "That's why I wrote you. Sam Columbine is trying to take over my ranch, the Bar-T! He murdered my father, and now he's trying to scare me off the land so he can buy it cheap and sell it dear when the Great Southwestern Railroad decides to put a branch line through here! He's hired a lot of hardcases like this one-" she prodded "The Backshooter" with the toe of her shoe- "and he's trying to scare me out!" She looked at Slade pleadingly. "Can you help me?"

"I reckon so," Slade said. "Just don't get yore bowels in an uproar, ma'am."

"Oh, Slade!" She whispered. She was just melting into his arms when the bartender rushed back into the saloon, with the undertaker in tow. By this time the bartender's dog, General

Custer, had crawled out from under the card table and was eating John "The Backshooter" Parkman's vest.

"Miss Dawson! Miss Dawson!" The bartender yelled. "Mose Hart, yore top hand, just rode into town! He says the Bar-T bunkhouse is on fire!"

But before Sandra Dawson could reply, Slade was on his way.

Before a minute had passed, he was galloping toward the fire at Sandra Dawson's Bar-T ranch.

Slade's huge black stallion, Stokely, carried him rapidly up Winding Bluff Road toward the sinister fire glow on the horizon. As he rode, a grim determination settled over him like warm butter. To find Sam Columbine and put a crimp in his style! When he arrived at Sandra Dawson's Bar-T ranch the bunkhouse was a red ball of flame. And standing in front of it, laughing evilly, were three of Sam Columbine's gunmen--Sunrise Jackson, Shifty Jack Mulloy, and Doc Logan. Doc Logan himself was rumored to have sent twelve sheep-ranchers to Boot Hill in the bloody Abeliene range war. But at that time Slade had been spending his days in a beautiful daze with his one true love, Miss Polly Peachtree of Paduka, Illinois. She had since been killed in a dreadful accident, and now Slade was cold steel and hot blood - not to mention his silk underwear with the pretty blue flowers. He climbed down from his stallion and pulled one of his famous Mexican cigars from his pocket. "What're you boys doin' here?" He asked calmly.

"Havin' a little clambake!" Sunrise Jackson said, dropping one hand to the butt of his sinister.50 caliber horse-pistol "Maw, haw-, haw!",

A wounded cowpoke ran out of the red-flickering shadows. "They put fire to the bunkhouse!" He said. "That one--" he pointed at Doc

Logan--"said they wuz doin'it on the orders of that murderin' skunk Sam Columbine!"

Doc Logan pulled leather and blew three new holes in the wounded cowpoke, who flopped. "Thought he looked hot from all that fire," Doc told Slade, "so I ventilated him. Haw', 'haw,haw!" "You can always tell a low murderin' puckerbelly by the way he laughs," Slade said, dropping his hands over the butts of his sinister.45s.

"Is that right?" Doc said. "How do they laugh?"

"Haw, haw, haw," Slade gritted.

"Pull leather, you Republican skunk!" Shifty Jack Mulloy yelled, and went for his gun, Slade yanked both of his sinister.45s out in a smooth sweep and blasted Shifty Jack before Mulloy's

piece had even cleared leather. Sunrise Jackson was already blasting away, and Slade felt a bullet shave by his temple. Slade hit the dirt and let Jackson have it. He took two steps backward and fell over, dead as a turtle with smallpox.

But Doc Logan was running. He vaulted into the saddle of an Indian pony with a shifty eye and slapped its flank. Slade squeezed off two shots at him, but the light was tricky, Logan's pony jumped the shakepole fence and was gone into the darkness - to report back to Sam Columbine, no doubt.

Slade walked over to Sunrise Jackson and rolled him over with his boot. Jackson had a hole right between the eyes. Then he went over to Shifty Jack Mulloy, who was gasping his last.

"You got me, Pard!" Shifty Jack gasped. "I feel worse'n a turtle with smallpox"

'You never shoulda called me a Republican." Slade snarled down at him. He showed Shifty Jack his Gene McCarthy button and then blasted him.

Slade holstered his sinister.45 and threw away the smoldering butt of his famous Mexican cigar. He started toward the darkened ranch-house to make sure that no more of Sam Columbine's men were lurking within. He was almost there when the front door was ripped open and someone ran out.

Slade drew in one lightning movement and blasted away, the gunflashes from the barrels of his sinister.45 lighting the dark with bright flashes. Slade walked over and lit a match. He had bagged Sing-Loo, the Chinese cook.

"Well," Slade said sadly, holstering his gun and feeling a great wave of longing for his one true love, Miss Polly Peachtree of Paduka, "I guess you can't win them all."

He started to reach for another famous Mexican cigar, changed his mind and rolled a joint. After he had begun to see all sorts of interesting blue and green lights in the sky, he climbed back on his sinister black scallion and started towards Dead Steer Springs.

When he got back to the Brass Cuspidor saloon, Mose Hart, the top hand at the Bar-T rushed out, holding a bottle of Digger's Rye in one hand, with which he had been soothing his jangled nerves.

"Slade!" He yelled. "Miss Dawson's been kidnapped by Sam Columbine!"

Slade got down from his huge black stallion, Stokely, and lit up a famous Mexican cigar. He was still brooding over Sing-Loo, the Chinese cook at the Bar-T, who he had drilled by mistake.

"Ain't you going after her?" Hart asked, his eyes rolling wildly.

"Sam Columbine may try to rape her - or even rob her! Ain't you gonna get on their trail?"

"Right now," Slade snarled, "I'm gonna check into the Dead Steer Springs Hotel and catch a good night's sleep. Since I got to this damn town I have had to blast three gunslingers and one Chinese cook and I'm mighty tired."

"Yeah," Hart said sympathetically, "It must really make you feel turrible, havin' snuffed out four human lives in the space of six hours."

"That's right," Slade said, tying Stokely to the hitching rack, "And I got blisters on my trigger finger. Do you know where I could get some Solarcaine?"

Hart shook his head, and so Slade started down towards the hotel, his spurs jingling below the heels of his Bonanza cowboy boots (they had elevator lifts inside the heels, Slade was very sensitive about his height). When old men and pregnant ladies saw him coming they took to the other side of the street. One small boy came up and asked for his autograph. Slade, who didn't want to encourage that sort of thing, shot him in the leg and walked on. At the hotel he asked for a room, and the trembling clerk said the second floor suite was available, and Slade went up. He undressed, then put his boots on again, and climbed into bed. He was asleep in moments.

Around one in the morning, while Slade was dreaming sweetly of

his childhood sweetheart Miss Polly Paduka of Peachtree, Illinois, the window was eased up little by little, without even a squeak to alert Slade's keen ears. The shape that crept in was frightful indeed - for if Jack Slade was the most feared gunslinger in the American Southwest, the Hunchback Fred Agnew was the most detested killer. He was a two foot three inch midget with a hump big enough for a camel halfway down his crooked back. In one hand he held a three foot Arabian skinning knife (and although Hunchback Fred had never skinned an Arab with it, he was known to have put it to work changing the faces of three U.S. marshals,

two county sheriffs and an old lady from Boston on the way to Arizona to recuperate from Parkinson's disease). In the other hand he held a large box made of woven river reeds. He slid across the floor in utter silence, holding his Arabian skinning knife ready, should Slade awake. Then he carefully put the box down on the chair by the bed. Grinning fiendishly, he opened the lid and pulled out a twelve-foot python named Sadie Hawkins. Sadie had been Hunchback Fred's bosom companion for the last twelve years, and had saved the terrifying little man from death many times.

"Do your stuff, hon." Fred whispered affectionately. Sadie seemed to almost grin at him as Hunchback Fred kissed her on her dead black mouth. The snake slid onto the bed and began to crawl towards Slade's head. Giggling fiendishly, Hunchback Fred retreated to the corner to watch the fun. Sadie wiggled in slow S-curves up the side of the bed, and drew back to strike. In that instant, the faint hiss of scales on the sheet came to Slade's ears.

A woman was in bed with him! That was his first thought as he rolled off the bed and onto the floor, grabbing for the sinister derringer that was always strapped to his right calf. Sadie struck at the pillow where his head had been only a second before.

Hunchback Fred screamed with disappointment and threw his three-foot Arabian skinning knife, which nicked the corner of one of Slade's earlobes and quivered in the floor.

Slade fired the derringer and Hunchback Fred fell back against the wall, knocking the picture Niagara Falls off the dresser. His sinister career was at an end.

Carefully avoiding the python (which seemed to have gone to sleep on the bed), Slade got dressed. It was time to go out to Sam

Columbine's ranch and put an end to that slimy coyote once and for all.

Strapping on the twin gunbelts of his sinister .45s, Slade went downstairs. The desk clerk looked at him even more nervously than before. "D-did I hear a shot?" He asked.

"Don't think so," Slade said, "But you better go up and close the window by the bed. I left it open -"

"Yessir, Mr. Slade. Of course. Of course."

And then Slade was off, grimly determined to find Sam Columbine

and put a crimp in his style once and for all.

Slade shoved his way into the Brass Cuspidor where the foreman of Sandra Dawson's Bar-T, Mose Hart, was leaning over the bar with a bottle of Digger's Rye (206 proof) in one hand.

"Okay, you slimy drunkard," Slade gritted, pulling Hart around and yanking the bottle out of his hand. "Where is Sam Columbine's ranch? I'm going to get that rotten liver-eater, he just sent Hunchback Fred Agnew up against me."

"Hunchback Fred?!" Hart gasped, going white as a sheet. "And you're still alive?"

"I filled him full of lead," Slade said grimly. "He should have known that putting a snake in my bed was a no-no."

"Hunchback Fred Agnew," Hart whispered, still awed, "There was talk that he might be the next Vice President of the American Southwest."

Slade let go of a grating laugh that even made the bartenders dog, General Custer, cringe.

"W'ell I reckon that now he can be Vice President of Hell!" Slade proclaimed. He motioned to the bartender, who was standing at the far end of the bar reading a western novel.

"Bartender! What have you got for mixed drinks?"

The bartender approached cautiously, tucking the dog-eared copy of Blood Brides of Sitting Bull into his back pocket. "

Wal, Mr. Slade, we got about the usual - The Geronimo, The Fort Bragg Backbreaker, Popskull Pete, Sourdough Armpit -"

"How about a shot of Digger's Rye (206 proof)?" Mose Hart said with a glassy grin.

"Shut up," Slade growled. He turned to the bartender and drew one of his sinister.45s.

"If you don't produce a drink that I ain't never had before, friend, you're gonna be pushing up daisies before dawn."

The bartender went white, "W-well, we do have drink of my own invention, Mr. Slade. But it's so potent that I done stopped serving them. I got plumb tired of having people pass out on the roulette wheel"

"What's it called?"

"We call it a zombie," the bartender said.

"Well mix me up three of them and make it fast!" Slade commanded.

"Three zombies?" Mose Hart said with popping eyes. "M'God, are you crazy?"

Slade turned to him coldly "Friend, smile when you say that."

Hart smiled and took another drink of Digger's Rye.

"Okay," Slade said, when the three drinks had been placed in front of him. They came in huge beer steins and smelled like the wrath of God. He drained the first one at a single draught, blew out his breath, staggered a little, and lit one of his famous Mexican cigars. Then he turned to Mose.

"Now just where is Sam Columbine's ranch?" He asked.

"Three miles west and across the ford," Mose said. "It's called the Rotten Vulture Ranch"

"That figursh," Slade said, draining his second drink to the ice-cubes. He was beginning to feel a trifle woozy. It probably had something to do with the lateness of the hour, he thought, and began to work on his third drink.

"Say " Mose Hart said timidly, "I don't really think you're in any shape to go up against Sam Columbine, Slade. He's apt to put a crimp in your style."

"Doan tell me w'hat to do," Slade, swaggering over to pat General Custer. He breathed in the dog's face and General Custer promptly went to sleep. "If there'sh one thing that I can do, it's lick my holder, I mean hold my liquor. Ho get out of my way before I blon you in tno."

"The door's out the other way," the bartender said cautiously.

"Coursh it is. You think I doan tinow where I'm goin'?"

Slade staggered across the bar, stepping on General Custer's tail (the dog didn't wake up) and managed to make his way out through the batwing doors where he almost fell off the sidewalk. Just then a steely arm clamped his elbow. Slade looked around blearily.

"I'm Deputy Marshall Hoagy Charmichael," the stranger said, "and rm taking yuh in-"

"On what charge?" Slade asked.

"Public intoxication. Now let's go."

Slade burped. "Everything happen'sh to me," he groaned. The two of them started off for the Dead Steer Springs jail.

After Slade was sprung from the pokey, Sandra Dawson's top hand, Mose Hart, went his bail. Slade filled both Hart an Deputy Marshall Hoagy Charmichael full of lead (blame it on his terrible hangover). Then, mounting his huge black stallion, Stokely, Slade made it out to the Rotten Vulture Ranch to have it out once an for all with Sam Columbine.

But Columbine was not there. He was off torturing ex border guards, leaving Sandra Dawson under the watch of three trusted henchmen - Big Fran Nixon, "Quick Draw" John Mitchell, and Shifty Ron Ziegfeld. After a heated shootout, Slade dropped al three of them in their slimy tracks and freed the fair Sandra. The acrid, choking smell of gunsmoke filled the room where the lovely Sandra Dawson had been held prisoner. As she saw Slade standing tall and victorious, with a sinister.45 in each hand and a Mexican cigar clenched between his teeth, her eyes filled with love and passion.

"Slade!" she cried, jumping to her feet and running to him. "'I'm saved! Thank heaven! When Sam Columbine got back from torturing the Mexican border guards, he was going to feed me to his alligators! You came just in time!"

"Damn right," Slade gritted. "I always do. Steve King sees to that." Her firm, supple, silken fleshed body swooned into his arms, and her lush lips sought Slade's mouth with ripe humid passion. Slade promptly clubbed her over the head with one sinister.45 and threw his Mexican cigar away, a snarl pulling at his lips.

"Watch it," he growled "my mom told me about girls like you."

And he strode off to find Sam Columbine.

Slade strode out of the bunk-room leaving Sandra Dawson in the smoke-filled chamber to rub the bump on her head where he had clouted her with the barrel of his sinister.45. He mounted his huge black stallion, Stokely, and headed for the border, where Sam Columbine was torturing Mexican customs men with the help of his A No.1 Top Gun - "Pinky" Lee. The only two men in the American Southwest that could ever approach "Pinky" for pure, dad-ratted evil were Hunchback Fred Agnew (who Slade gunned down three weeks ago) and Sam Columbine himself. "Pinky" had gotten his infamous nickname during the Civil War when he rode with Captain Quantrill and his Regulators. While passed out in the kitchen of a fancy bordello in Bleeding Heart, Kansas, a Union officer named Randolph P. Sorghum dropped a homemade bomb down the kitchen chimney. "Pinky" lost all his hair, his eyebrows, and all the fingers on his left hand, except for the forth, and smallest. His hair and eyebrows grew back. His fingers did not. He has, however, still faster than greased lightning and meaner than heIl. He had sworn to find Randolph P. Sorghum some day and stake him over the nearest anthill.

But Slade was not worried about Lee, because his heart was pure and his strength was as ten.

In a short time the agonized screams of the Mexican customs officials told him he was nearing the border. He dismounted, tied Stokely to a parking-meter and advanced through the sagebrush as noiselessly as a cat. The night was dark and moonless.

"No More! amigo!" The guard was screaming. "I confess! I confess! I am - who am I?"

"Fergetful bastid, ain't ye?" Pinky said. "Yore Randolph P. Sorghum, the sneakun' low life that blew off 90% 0' my hand durin' the Civil War."

"I admit it! I admit it!"

Slade had crept close enough now to see what was happening. Lee had the customs official tied to a straight-backed chair, with his bare feet on a hassock. Both feet were coated with honey and Lee's trained bear, Whomper, was licking it off with his long tongue.

"I can't stand it!" The guard screamed. "I am thesee whatyoumacalluma, Sorghum!"

"Caught you at last!" Lee gloated. He pulled out his sinister Buntline Special and prepared to blow the poor old fellow all the way to Trinidad. Sam Columbine, who was standing far back in the shadows, was ready to bring in the next guard.

Slade stood up suddenly. "Okay, you two skulkin' varmits! Hold it right there!"

Pinky Lee dropped to his chest, fanning the hammer of his sinister Buntline Special. Slade felt bullets race all around him. He fired back twice, but curse it - the hammers of his two sinister .45s only clicked on empty chambers. He had forgotten to load up after downing the three badmen back at the Rotten Vulture.

Lee rolled to cover behind a barrel of taco chips. Columbine was

already crouched behind a giant bottle of mayonnaise that had been air-dropped a month before after the worst flood disaster in American Southwest history (why drop mayonnaise after a disaster? None of your damn business).

"Who's that out there?" Lee yelled.

Slade thought quickly. "It's Randolph P. Sorghum" Hh cried. "The real McCoy, Lee! And this time I'm gunna blow off more than three fingers!"

His crafty challenge had the desired effect. Pinky rushed rashly (or rashly rushed if you preferred) from cover, his sinister Buntline Special blazing. "I'll blow ya apart!" he yelled "I'll -"

But at that moment Slade carefully put a bullet through his head. Pinky Lee flopped, his evil days done.

"Lee?" Sam Columbine called. "Pinky: You out there:" A craven cowardly note had crept into his voice. "I just dropped him, Columbine!" Slade yelled. "And now it's just you and me...and I'm comin' to get you!"

Sinister.45s blazing, a Mexican cigar clamped between his teeth, Slade started down the hill after Sam Columbine.

Halfway down the slope, Sam Columbine let loose such a volley of shots that Slade had to duck behind a barrel cactus. He could not get off a clear shot at Columbine because the wily villain had hidden behind a convenient, giant bottle of mayonnaise.

"Slade!" Columbine yelled. "It's time we settled this like men! Holster yore gun and I'll holster mine! Then we'll come out an' draw! The better man will walk away!"

"Okay, you lowdown sidewinder!" Slade yelled back. He holstered his sinister.45s and stepped out from behind the barrel cactus. Columbine stepped out from behind the bottle of mayonnaise. He was a tall man with an olive complexion and an evil grin. His hand hovered over the barrel of the sinister Smith & Wesson pistol that hung on his hip.

"Well, this is it, pard!" Slade sneered. There was a Mexican cigar clamped between his teeth as he started to walk toward Columbine.

"Say hello to everyone in hell for me, Columbine!"

"We'll see," Columbine sneered back, but his knees were knocking as he halted, ready for the showdown.

"Okay!" Slade called. "Go fer yore gun!"

"Wait," Someone screamed. "Wait, wait, WAIT!"

They both stared. It was Sandra Dawson! She was running toward them breathless.

"Slade!" She cried. "Slade!"

"Get down!" Slade growled. "Sam Columbine is-"

"I had to tell you, Slade! I couldn't let you go off, maybe to get killed! And you'd never know!"

"Know what?" Slade asked.

"That I'm Polly Peachtree!"

Slade gaped at her. "But you can't be Polly Peachtree! She was my one true love and she was killed by a flaming Montgolfer balloon

while milking the cows!"

"I escaped but I had amnesia!" She cried. "It's all just come back to me tonight. Look!" And she pulled off a blond wig she had been wearing. She was indeed the beautiful Polly Peachtree of Paduka, returned from the dead!

"POLLY!!!"

"SLADE!!!"

Slade rushed to her and they embraced, Sam Columbine forgotten. Slade was just about to ask her how things were going when Sam Columbine, evil rat that he was, crept up behind him and shot Slade in the back three times.

"Thank God!" Polly whispered as she and Sam embraced "At last. he's gone and we are free, my darling!"

Yeah," Sam growled "How are things going Polly?"

tYou don't know how terrible it's been," she sobbed "Not only was he killing everybody, but he was queerer than a three-dollar bill."

"Well it's over," Sam said.

"Like fun!" Slade said. He sat up and blasted them both. "Good thing I was wearing my bullet proof underwear," he said lighting a new Mexican cigar. He stared at the cooling bodies of Sam Columbine and Polly Peachtree, and a great wave of sadness swept over him. He threw away his cigar and lit a joint. Then he walked over to where he had tethered Stokely, his black stallion. He wrapped his arms around Stokely's neck and held him close.

"At last, darling," Slade whispered. "We're alone."

After a long while, Slade and Stokely rode off into the sunset in search of new adventures.

THE END

Squad D
Stephen King

Written for
Dangerous Visions #3

Billy Clewson died all at once, with nine of the ten other members of D Squad on April 8, 1974. It took his mother two years, but she got started right away on the afternoon the telegram announcing her son's death came, in fact. Dale Clewson simply sat on the bench in the front hall for five minutes, the sheet of yellow flimsy paper dangling from his fingers, not sure if he was going to faint or puke or scream or what. When he was able to get up, he went into the living room. He was in time to observe Andrea down the last swallow of the first drink and pour the post-Billy era's second drink. A good many more drinks followed - it was really amazing,

how many drinks that small and seemingly frail woman had been able to pack into a two-year period. The written cause - that which appeared on her death certificate - was liver dysfunction and renal failure. Both Dale and the family doctor knew that was formalistic icing on an extremely alcoholic cake - baba au rum, perhaps. But

only Dale knew there was a third level. The Viet Cons had killed their son in a place called Ky Doe, and Billy's death had killed his mother.

It was three years - three years almost to the day - after Billy's death on the bridge that Dale Clewson began to believe that he must be going mad.

Nine, he thought. There were nine. There were always nine. Until now.

Were there? His mind replied to itself. Are you sure? Maybe you really counted - the lieutenant's letter said there were nine, and Bortman's letter said there were nine. So just how can you be so sure? Maybe you just assumed.

But he hadn't just assumed, and he could be sure because he knew how many nine was, and there had been nine boys in the D Squad photograph which had come in the mail, along with Lieutenant Anderson's letter.

You could be wrong, his mind insisted with an assurance that was slightly hysterical. You're been through a lot these last couple of years, what with losing first Billy and then Andrea. You could be wrong.

It was really surprising, he thought, to what insane lengths the human mind would go to protect its own sanity.

He put his finger down on the new figure - a boy of Billy's age, but with blonde crewcut hair, looking no more than sixteen, surely too young to be on the killing ground. He was sitting cross-legged in front of Gibson, who had, according to Billy's letters, played the guitar, and Kimberley, who told lots of dirty Jokes. The boy with the blonde hair was squinting slightly into the sun - so were several of the others, but they had always been there before. The new boy's fatigue shirt was open, his dog tags lying against his hairless chest.

Dale went into the kitchen, sorted through what he and Andrea had always called "the jumble drawers," and came up with an old, scratched magnifying glass. He took it and the picture over the living room window, tilted the picture so there was no glare, and held the glass over the new boy's dog-tags. He couldn't read them. Thought, in fact, that the tags were both turned over and lying face down against the skin.

And yet, a suspicion had dawned in his mind - it ticked there like the clock on the mantle. He had been about to wind that clock when he had noticed the change in the picture. Now he put the picture back in its accustomed place, between a photograph of Andrea and Billy's graduation picture, found the key to the clock. And wound it.

Lieutenant's Anderson's letter had been simple enough. Now Dale

found it in his study desk and read it again. Typed lines on Army stationary. The prescribed follow-up to the telegram, Dale had supposed. First: Telegram. Second: Letter of Condolence from Lieutenant. Third: Coffin, One Boy Enclosed. He had noticed then and noticed again now that the typewriter Anderson used had a Flying "o". Clewson kept coming out Clewson.

Andrea had wanted to tear the letter up. Dale insisted that they keep it. Now he was glad.

Billy's squad and two others had been involved in a flank sweep of a jungle quadrant of which Ky Doe was the only village. Enemy contact had been anticipated, Anderson's letter said, but there hadn't been any. The Cong which had been reliably reported to be in the area had simply melted away into the jungle - it was a trick with which the American soldiers had become very familiar over the previous ten years or so.

Dale could imagine them heading back to their base at Homan, happy, relieved. Squads A and C had waded across the Ky River, which was almost dry. Squad D used the bridge. Halfway across, it

blew up. Perhaps it had been detonated from downstream. More likely, someone - perhaps even Billy himself - had stepped on the wrong board. All nine of them had been killed. Not a single survivor.

God - if there really is such a being - is usually kinder than that, Dale thought. He put Lieutenant Anderson's letter back and took out Josh Bortman's letter. It had been written on blue-lined paper from what looked like a child's tablet. Bortman's handwriting was nearly illegible, the scrawl made worse by the writing implement - a soft-lead pencil. Obviously blunt to start with, it must have been no more than a nub by the time Bortman signed his name at the bottom. In several places Bortman had borne down hard enough with his instrument to tear the paper.

It had been Bortman, the tenth man, who sent Dale and Andrea the squad picture, already framed, the glass over the photo miraculously unbroken in its long trip from Homan to Saigon to San Francisco and finally to Binghamton, New York.

Bortman's letter was anguished. He called the other nine "the best friends I ever had in my life, I loved them all like they was my brothers."

Dale held the blue-lined paper in his hand and looked blankly through his study door and toward the sound of the ticking clock on the mantelpieces. When the letter came, in early May of 1974, he had been too full of his own anguish to really consider Bortman's. Now he supposed he could understand it - a little, anyway. Bortman had been feeling a deep and inarticulate guilt. Nine letters from his hospital bed on the Homan base, all in that pained scrawl, all probably written with that same soft-lead pencil. The expense of having nine enlargements of the Squad D photograph made, and framed, and mailed off. Rites Of atonement with a soft-lead pencil, Dale thought, folding the letter again and putting it back in the drawer with Anderson's. As if he had killed them by taking their picture. That's really what was between the

lines, wasn't it? "Please don't hate me, Mr. Clewson, please don't think I killed your son and the other's by--"

In the other room the mantelpiece clock softly began to chime the hour of five.

Dale went back into the living room, and took the picture down again.

What you're talking about is madness.

Looked at the boy with the short blonde hair again.

I loved them all like they was my brothers.

Turned the picture over.

Please don't think I killed your son - all of your sons - by taking their picture. Please don't hate me because I was in the Homan base hospital with bleeding haemorrhoids instead of on the Ky Doe bridge with the best friends I ever had in my life. Please don't hate me, because I finally caught up, it took me ten years of trying, but I finally caught up.

Written on the back, in the same soft-lead pencil, was this notation:

Jack Bradley Omaha, Neb.

Billy Clewson Binghamton, NY.

Rider Dotson Oneonta, NY

Charlie Gibson Payson, ND

Bobby Kale Henderson, IA

Jack Kimberley Truth or Consequences. NM

Andy Moulton Faraday, LA Staff Sgt. I

Jimmy Oliphant Beson, Del.

Asley St. Thomas Anderson, Ind.

*Josh Bortman Castle Rock, Me.

He had put his own name last, Dale saw - he had seen all of this before, or course, and had noticed it... but had never really noticed it until now, perhaps. He had put his name last, out of alphabetical order, and with an asterisk.

The asterisk means "still alive." The asterisk means "don't hate me."

Ah, but what you're thinking is madness, and you damned well know it.

Nevertheless, he went to the telephone, dialled 0, and ascertained that the area code for Maine was 207. He dialed Maine directory assistance, and ascertained that there was a single Bortman family in Castle Rock.

He thanked the operator, wrote the number down, and looked at the telephone.

You don't really intend to call those people, do you?

No answer - only the sound of the ticking clock. He had put the picture on the sofa and now he looked at it - looked first at his own son, his hair pulled back behind his head, a bravo little moustache trying to grow on his upper lip, frozen forever at the age of twenty-one, and then at the new boy in that old picture, the boy with the short blonds hair, the boy whose dog-tags were twisted so they lay face-down and unreadable against his chest. He thought of the way Josh Bortman had carefully segregated himself from the others, thought of the asterisk, and suddenly his eyes filled with warm

tears.

I never hated you, son, he thought. Nor did Andrea, for all her grief. Maybe I should have picked up a pen and dropped you a note saying so, but honest to Christ, the thought never crossed my mind.

He picked up the phone now and dialled the Bortman number in Castle Rock, Maine.

Busy.

He hung up and sat for five minutes, looking out at the street where Billy had learned to ride first a trike, then a bike with trainer wheels, then a two-wheeler. At eighteen he had brought home the final improvement - a Yamaha 500. For just a moment he could see Billy with paralysing clarity, as if he might walk through the door and sit down.

He dialled the Bortman number again. This time it rang. The voice on the other end managed to convey an unmistakable impression of wariness in just two syllables. "Hello?" At that same moment, Dale's eyes fell on the dial of his wristwatch and read the date - not for the first time that day, but it was the first time it really sunk in. It was April 9th. Billy and the others had died eleven years ago yesterday. They -

"Hello?" the voice repeated sharply. "Answer me, or I'm hanging up! Which one are you?"

Which one are you? He stood in the ticking living room, cold, listening to words croak out of him mouth.

"My name is Dale Clewson, Mr. Bortman. My son--"

"Clewson. Billy Clewson's father." Now the voice was flat, inflectionless.

"Yes, that's--"

"So you say."

Dale could find no reply. For the first time in his life, he really was tongue-tied.

"And has your picture of Squad D changed, too?"

"Yes." It came out in a strangled little gasp.

Bortman's voice remained inflectionless, but it was nonetheless filled with savagery. "You listen to me, and tell the others. There's going to be tracer equipment on my phone by this afternoon. If it's some kind of joke, you fellows are going to be laughing all the way to jail, I can assure you."

"Mr. Bortman--"

"Shut up! First someone calling himself Peter Moulton calls, supposedly from Louisiana, and tells my wife that our boy has suddenly showed up in a picture Josh sent them of Squad D. She's still having hysterics over that when a woman purporting to be Bobby Kale's mother calls with the same insane story. Next, Oliphant! Five minutes ago, Rider Dotson's brother! He says. Now you."

"But Mr. Bortman--"

"My wife is Upstairs sedated, and if all of this is a case or 'Have you got Prince Albert in a can,' I swear to God -"

"You know it isn't a joke," Dale whispered. His fingers felt cold and numb - ice cream fingers. He looked across the room at the photograph. At the blonde boy. Smiling, squinting into the camera. Silence from the other end.

"You know it isn't a joke, so what happened?"

"My son killed himself yesterday evening," Bortman said evenly.

"If you didn't know it."

"I didn't. I swear."

Bortman signed. "And you really are calling from long distance, aren't you?"

"From Binghamton, New York."

"Yes. You can tell the difference--local from long distance, I mean. Long distance has a sound...a...a hum..."

Dale realized, belatedly, that expression had finally crept into that voice. Bortman was crying.

"He was depressed off and on, ever since he got back from Nam, in late 1974," Bortman said. "it always got worse in the spring, it always peaked around the 8th of April when the other boys ... and your son..."

"Yes," Dale said.

"This year, it just didn't ... didn't peak."

There was a muffled honk-Bortman using his handkerchief.

"He hung himself in the garage, Mr. Clewson."

"Christ Jesus," Dale muttered. He shut his eyes very tightly, trying to ward off the image. He got one which was arguably even worse - that smiling face, the open fatigue shirt, the twisted dog-tags. "I'm sorry."

"He didn't want people to know why he wasn't with the others that day, but of course the story got out." A long, meditative pause from Bortman's end. "Stories like that always do."

"Yes. I suppose they do."

"Joshua didn't have many friends when he was growing up, Mr. Clewson. I don't think he had any real friends until he got to Nam. He loved your son, and the others."

Now it's him. comforting me.

"I'm sorry for your loss;" Dale said. "And sorry to have bothered you at a time like this. But you'll understand ... I had to."

"Yes. Is he smiling, Mr. Clewson? The others ... they said he was smiling."

Dale looked toward the picture beside the ticking clock. "He's smiling."

"Of course he is. Josh finally caught up with them."

Dale looked out the window toward the sidewalk where Billy had once ridden a bike with training wheels. He supposed he should say something, but he couldn't seem to think of a thing. His stomach hurt. His bones were cold.

"I ought to go, Mr. Clewson. In case my wife wakes up." He paused. "I think I'll take the phone off the hook."

"That might not be a bad idea."

"Goodbye, Mr. Clewson."
"Goodbye. Once again, my sympathies."
"And mine, too."

Click.

Dale crossed the room and picked up the photograph of Squad D. He looked at the smiling blonde boy, who was sitting cross-legged in front of Kimberley and Gibson, sitting casually and comfortably on the ground as if he had never had a haemorrhoid in his life, as if he had never stood atop a stepladder in a shadowy garage and slipped a noose around his neck.

Josh finally caught up with them.

He stood looking fixedly at the photograph for a long time before realizing that the depth of silence in the room had deepened. The clock had stopped.

THAT FEELING, YOU
CAN ONLY SAY WHAT
IT IS IN FRENCH

STEPHEN KING
From
The New Yorker, 1998

A second honeymoon in the Florida Keys. What could be more relaxing?

FLOYD, what's that over there? Oh shit. The man's voice speaking these words was vaguely familiar, but the words themselves were just a disconnected snip of dialogue, the kind of thing you heard when you were channel-surfing with the remote. There was no one named Floyd in her life. Still, that was the start. Even before she saw the little girl in the red pinafore, there were those disconnected words.

But it was the little girl who brought it on strong. "Oh-oh, I'm getting that feeling," Carol said.

The girl in the pinafore was in front of a country market called Carson's "Beer, Wine, Groc, Fresh Bait, Lottery" - crouched down with her butt between her ankles and the bright-red apron-dress tucked between her thighs, playing with a doll. The doll was yellow-haired and dirty the kind that's round and stuffed and boneless in the body.

"What feeling?" Bill asked.

"You know. The one you can only say what it is in French. Help me here."

"Deja vu," he said.

"That's it," she said, and turned to look at the little girl one more time. She'll have the doll by one leg, Carol thought. Holding it upside down by one leg with its grimy yellow hair hanging down. But the little girl had abandoned the doll on the store's splintery gray steps and had gone over to look at a dog caged up in the back of a station wagon. Then Bill and Carol Shelton went around a curve in the road and the store was out of sight.

"How much farther?" Carol asked.

Bill looked at her with one eyebrow raised and his mouth dimpled at one corner - left eyebrow right dimple, always the same. The look that said, You think I'm amused, but I'm really irritated For the ninety-trillionth or so time in the marriage, I'm really irritated You don't know that, though, because you can only see about two inches into me and then your vision fails.

But she had better vision than he realized; it was one of the secrets of the marriage. Probably he had a few secrets of his own. And there were, of course, the ones they kept together.

"I don't know" he said. "I've never been here."

"Once you get over the causeway and onto Sanibel Island, there's only one," he said. "It goes across to Captiva, and there it ends. But before it does we'll come to Palin House. That I promise you."

The arch in his eyebrow began to flatten. The dimple began to fill in. He was returning to what she thought of as the Great Level. She had come to dislike the Great Level, too, but not as much as the eyebrow and the dimple, or his sarcastic way of saying "Excuse me?" when you said something he considered stupid, or his habit of pooching out his lower lip when he wanted to appear thoughtful and deliberative.

"Bill?"

"Do you know anyone named Floyd?"

"There was Floyd Denning. He and I ran the downstairs snack bar at Christ the Redeemer in our senior year. I told you about him, didn't I? He stole the Coke money one Friday and spent the weekend in New York with his girlfriend. They suspended him and expelled her. What made you think of him?"

"I don't know," she said. Easier than telling him that the Floyd with whom Bill had gone to high school wasn't the Floyd the voice in her head was speaking to. At least, she didn't think it was.

Second honeymoon, that's what you call this, she thought, looking at the palms a that lined Highway 867, a white bird that stalked along the shoulder like an angry preacher, and a sign that read "Seminoke Wildlife Park, Bring a Carfull for \$10." Florida the Sunshine State. Florida the Hospitality State. Not to mention Florida the Second-Honeymoon State. Florida, where Bill Shelton and Carol Shelton, the former Carol O'Neill, of Lynn, Massachusetts, came on their first honeymoon twenty-five years before. Only that was on the other side, the Atlantic side, at a little cabin colony, and there were cockroaches in the bureau drawers.

He couldn't stop touching me. That was all right, though, in those days I wanted to be touched Hell I wanted to be torched like Atlanta in "Gone with the wind," and he torched me, rebuilt me, torched me again. Now it's silver. Twenty-five is silver. And sometimes I get that feeling.

They were approaching a curve, and she thought, Three crosses on the right side of the road. Two small ones flanking a bigger one. The small ones are clapped-together wood. The one in the middle is white birch with a picture on it, a tiny photograph of the seventeen-year-old boy who lost control of his car on this curve, one drunk night that was his last drunk night, and this is where his girlfriend and her girlfriends marked the spot -

Bill drove around the curve. A pair of black crows, plump and shiny, lifted off from something pasted to the macadam in a splat of blood. They had eaten so well that Carol wasn't sure they were going to get out of the way until they did. There were no crosses, not on the left, not on the right. Just roadkill in the middle, a woodchuck or something, now passing beneath a luxury car that had never been north of the Mason-Dixon Line.

Floyd, what's that over there?

"What's wrong?"

"Huh?" She looked at him, bewildered, feeling a little wild.

"You're sitting bolt upright. Got a cramp in your back?"

"Just a slight one." She settled back by degrees. "I had that feeling again. The *deja vu*."

"Is it gone?"

'Yes," she said, but she was lying. It had retreated a little, but that was all. She'd had this before, but never so continuously. It came up and went down, but it didn't go away. She'd been aware of it ever since that thing about Floyd started knocking around in her head - and then the little girl in the red pinafore.

But, really, hadn't she felt something before either of those things? Hadn't it actually started when they came down the steps of the Lear 35 into the hammering heat of the Fort Myers sunshine? Or even before? En route from Boston?

They were coming to an intersection. Overhead was a flashing yellow light, and she thought, To the right is a used-car lot and a sign for the Sanibel Community Theatre.

Then she thought, No, it'll be like the crosses that weren't there. It's a strong feeling but it's a false feeling.

Here was the intersection. On the right there was a used-car lot-Palm-dale Motors. Carol felt a real jump at that, a stab of something sharper than disquiet. She told herself to quit being stupid. There had to be car lots all over Florida and if you predicted one at every intersection sooner or later the law of averages made you a prophet. It was a trick mediums had been using for hundreds of years.

Besides, there's no theatre sign.

But there was another sign. It was Mary the Mother of God, the ghost of all her childhood days, holding out her hands the way she did on the medallion Carol's grandmother had given her for her tenth birthday. Her grandmother had pressed it into her hand and

looped the chain around her fingers, saying, "Wear her always as you grow, because all the hard days are coming. " She had worn it, all right. At Our Lady of Angels grammar and middle school she had worn it, then at St. Vincent de Paul high. She wore the medal until breasts grew around it like ordinary miracles, and then someplace, probably on the class trip to Hampton Beach, she had lost it. Coming home on the bus she had tongue-kissed for the first time. Butch Soucy had been the boy; and she had been able to taste the cotton candy he'd eaten.

Mary on that long-gone medallion and Mary on this billboard had exactly the same look, the one that made you feel guilty of thinking impure thoughts even when all you were thinking about was a peanut-butter sandwich. Beneath Mary, the sign said "Mother of Mercy Charities Help the Florida Homeless Won't You Help Us?"

Hey there, Mary, what's the story.

More than one voice this time; many voices, girls' voices, chanting ghost voices. There were ordinary miracles; there were also ordinary ghosts. You found these things out as you got older.

"What's wrong with you?" She knew that voice as well as she did the eyebrow-and-dimple look. Bill's I'm-only-pretending-to-be-pissed tone of voice, the one that meant he really was pissed, at least a little.

"Nothing." She gave him the best smile she could manage.

"You really don't seem like yourself Maybe you shouldn't have slept on the plane.

'You're probably right," she said, and not just to be agreeable, either. After all, how many women got a second honeymoon on Captiva Island for their twenty-fifth anniversary? Round trip on a chartered Learjet? Ten days at one of those places where your money was no good (at least until MasterCard coughed up the bill

at the end of the month) and if you wanted a massage a big Swedish babe would come and pummel you in your six-room beach house?

Things had been different at the start. Bill, whom she'd first met at a crosstown high-school dance and then met again at college three years later (another ordinary miracle), had begun their married life working as a janitor, because there were no openings in the computer industry. It was 1973, and computers were essentially going nowhere and they were living in a grotty place in Revere, not on the beach but close to it, and all night people kept going up the stairs to buy drugs from the two sallow creatures who lived in the apartment above them and listened endlessly to dopey records from the sixties. Carol used to lie awake waiting for the shouting to start, thinking, We won't ever get out of here, we'll grow old and die within earshot of Cream and Blue Cheer and the fucking Dodgem cars down on the beach.

Bill, exhausted at the end of his shift, would sleep through the noise, lying on his side, sometimes with one hand on her hip. And when it wasn't there she often put it there, especially if the

creatures upstairs were arguing with their customers. Bill was all she had. Her parents had practically disowned her when she married him. He was a Catholic, but the wrong sort of Catholic. Gram had asked why she wanted to go with that boy when anyone could tell he was shanty; how could she fall for all his foolish talk, why did she want to break her father's heart. And what could she say?

It was a long distance from that place in Revere to a private jet soaring at forty-one thousand feet; a long way to this rental car; which was a Crown Victoria-what the goodfellas in the gangster movies invariably called a Crown Vic heading for ten days in a place where the tab would probably be... well, she didn't even want to think about it.

Floyd?... Ohshit.

"Carol? What is it now?"

"Nothing," she said. Up ahead by the road was a little pink bungalow, the porch flanked by palms - seeing those trees with their fringy heads lifted against the blue sky made her think of Japanese Zeros coming in low; their underwing machine guns firing, such an association clearly the result of a youth misspent in front of the TV - and as they passed a black woman would come out. She would be drying her hands on a piece of pink towelling and would watch them expressionlessly as they passed, rich folks in a Crown Vic headed for Captiva, and she'd have no idea that Carol Shelton once lay awake in a ninety-dollar-a-month apartment, listening to the records and the drug deals upstairs, feeling something alive inside her, something that made her think of a cigarette that had fallen down behind the drapes at a party, small and unseen but smoldering away next to the fabric.

"Hon?"

"Nothing, I said." They passed the house. There was no woman. An old man - white, not black-sat in a rocking chair, watching them pass. There were rimless glasses on his nose and a piece of ragged pink towelling, the same shade as the house, across his lap.

"I'm fine now. Just anxious to get there and change into some shorts."

His hand touched her hip where he had so often touched her during those first days - and then crept a little farther inland. She thought about stopping him (Roman hands and Russian fingers, they used to say) and didn't. They were, after all, on their second honeymoon. Also, it would make that expression go away.

"Maybe," he said, "we could take a pause. You know, after the dress comes off and before the shorts go on."

"I think that's a lovely idea," she said, and put her hand over his, pressed both more tightly against her. Ahead was a sign that would

read "Palm House 3 Mi. on Left" when they got close enough to see it.

The sign actually read "Palm House 2 Mi. on Left." Beyond it was another sign, Mother Mary again, with her hands outstretched and

that little electric shimmy that wasn't quite a halo around her head. This version read "Mother of Mercy Charities Help the Florida Sick - Won't You Help Us?"

Bill said, "The next one ought to say 'Burma Shave.'"

She didn't understand what he meant, but it was clearly a joke and so she smiled. The next one would say "Mother of Mercy Charities Help the Florida Hungry;" but she couldn't tell him that. Dear Bill. Dear in spite of his sometimes stupid expressions and his sometimes unclear allusions. He'll most likely leave you, and you know something? If you go through with it that's probably the best luck you can expect. This according to her father. Dear Bill, who had proved that just once, just that one crucial time, her judgment had been far better than her father's. She was still married to the man her Gram had called "the big boaster." At a price, true, but everyone paid a price.

Her head itched. She scratched at it absently, watching for the next Mother of Mercy billboard.

Horrible as it was to say, things had started turning around when she lost the baby. That was just before Bill got a job with Beach Computers, out on Route 128; that was when the first winds of change in the industry began to blow.

Lost the baby, had a miscarriage - they all believed that except maybe Bill. Certainly her family had believed it: Dad, Mom, Gram. "Miscarriage" was the story they told, miscarriage was a Catholic's story if ever there was one. Hey, Mary, what's the story, they had sometimes sung when they skipped rope, feeling daring, feeling sinful, the skirts of their uniforms flipping up and down

over their scabby knees. That was at Our Lady of Angels, where Sister Annunciata would spank your knuckles with her ruler if she caught you gazing out the window during Sentence Time, where Sister Dormatilla would tell you that a million years was but the first tick of eternity's endless clock (and you could spend eternity in Hell, most people did, it was easy). In Hell you would live forever with your skin on fire and your bones roasting. Now she was in Florida, now she was in a Crown Vic sitting next to her husband, whose hand was still in her crotch; the dress would be wrinkled but who cared if it got that look off his face, and why wouldn't the feeling stop?

She thought of a mailbox with "Raglan" painted on the side and an American-flag decal on the front, and although the name turned out to be "Reagan" and the flag a Grateful Dead sticker; the box was there. She thought of a small black dog trotting briskly along the other side of the road, its head down, sniffing, and the small black dog was there. She thought again of the billboard and, yes, there it was: "Mother of Mercy Charities Help the Florida Hungry - Won't You Help Us?"

Bill was pointing. "There-see? I think that's Palm House. No, not where the billboard is, the other side. Why do they let people put those things up out here, anyway?"

"I don't know." Her head itched. She scratched, and black dandruff began falling past her eyes. She looked at her fingers and was horrified to see dark smudges on the tips; it was as if someone had just taken her fingerprints.

"Bill?" She raked her hand through her blond hair and this time the flakes were bigger. She saw they were not flakes of skin but flakes of paper. There was a face on one, peering out of the char like a face peering out of a botched negative.

"Bill?"

"What? Wh-" Then a total change in his voice, and that frightened her more than the way the car swerved. "Christ, honey, what's in your hair?"

The face appeared to be Mother Teresa's. Or was that just because she'd been thinking about Our Lady of Angels? Carol plucked it from her dress, meaning to show it to Bill, and it crumbled between her fingers before she could. She turned to him and saw that his glasses were melted to his cheeks. One of his eyes had popped from its socket and then split like a grape pumped full of blood.

And I knew it, she thought. Even before I turned, I knew it. Because I had that feeling.

A bird was crying in the trees. On the billboard, Mary held out her hands. Carol tried to scream. Tried to scream.

"CAROL?"

It was Bill's voice, coming from a thousand miles away. Then his hand - not pressing the folds of her dress into her crotch, but on her shoulder.

"You O.K., babe?"

She opened her eyes to brilliant sunlight and her ears to the steady hum of the Learjet's engines. And something else-pressure against her eardrums. She looked from Bill's mildly concerned face to the dial below the temperature gauge in the cabin and saw that it had wound down to 28,000.

"Landing?" she said, sounding muzzy to herself "Already?"

"It's fast, huh?" Sounding pleased, as if he had flown it himself instead of only paying for it. "Pilot says we'll be on the ground in Fort Myers in twenty minutes. You took a hell of a jump, girl."

"I had a nightmare."

He laughed-the plummy ain't-you-the-silly-billy laugh she had come really to detest. "No nightmares allowed on your second honeymoon, babe. What was it?"

"I don't remember," she said, and it was the truth. There were only fragments: Bill with his glasses melted all over his face, and one of the three or four forbidden skip rhymes they had sometimes chanted back in fifth and sixth grade. This one had gone Hey there, Mary, what's the story... and then something-something-something. She couldn't come up with the rest. She could remember Jangle-tangle jingle-bingle, I saw your daddy's great big dingle, but she couldn't remember the one about Mary-Mary helps the Florida sick, she thought, with no idea of what the thought meant, and just then there was a beep as the pilot turned the seatbelt light on. They had started their final descent. Let the wild rumpus start, she thought, and tightened her belt.

"You really don't remember?" he asked, tightening his own. The little jet ran through a cloud filled with bumps, one of the pilots in the cockpit made a minor adjustment, and the ride smoothed out again. "Because usually, just after you wake up, you can still remember. Even the bad ones."

"I remember Sister Annunciata, from Our Lady of Angels. Sentence Time."

"Now, that's a nightmare."

Ten minutes later the landing gear came down with a whine and a thump. Five minutes after that they landed.

"They were supposed to bring the car right out to the plane," Bill said, already starting up the Type A shit. This she didn't like, but at least she didn't detest it the way she detested the plummy laugh and his repertoire of patronizing looks. "I hope there hasn't been a hitch."

There hasn't been, she thought, and the feeling swept over her full force. I'm going to see it out the window on my side in just a second or two. It's your total Florida vacation car, a great big white goddam Cadillac, or maybe it's a Lincoln - And, yes, here it came, proving what? Well, she supposed, it proved that sometimes when you had deja vu what you thought was going to happen next really did happen next. It wasn't a Caddy or a Lincoln after all, but a Crown Victoria - what the gangsters in a Martin Scorsese film would no doubt call a Crown Vic.

"Whoo," she said as he helped her down the steps and off the plane. The hot sun made her feel dizzy.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing, really. I've got deja' vu. Left over from my dream, I guess. We've been here before, that kind of thing."

"It's being in a strange place, that's all," he said, and kissed her cheek. "Come on, let the wild rumpus start."

They went to the car. Bill showed his driver's license to the young woman who had driven it out. Carol saw him check out the hem of her skirt, then sign the paper on her clipboard.

She's going to drop it, Carol thought. The feeling was now so strong it was like being on an amusement-park ride that goes just a little too fast; all at once you realize you're edging out of the Land of Fun and into the Kingdom of Nausea. She'll drop it, and Bill will say "Whoopsy-daisy" and pick it up for her, get an even closer look at her legs.

But the Hertz woman didn't drop her clipboard. A white courtesy van had appeared, to take her back to the Butler Aviation terminal. She gave Bill a final smile-Carol she had ignored completely-and opened the front passenger door. She stepped up, then slipped.

"Whoopsy-daisy, don't be crazy," Bill said, and took her elbow, steadying her. She gave him a smile, he gave her well-turned legs a

goodbye look, and Carol stood by the growing pile of their luggage and thought, Hey there, Mary...

"Mrs. Shelton?" It was the co-pilot. He had the last bag, the case

with Bill's laptop inside it, and he looked concerned. "Are you all right? You're very pale."

Bill heard and turned away from the departing white van, his face worried. If her strongest feelings about Bill were her only feelings about Bill, now that they were twenty-five years on, she would have left him when she found out about the secretary, a Clairol blonde too young to remember the Clairol slogan that went "If I have only one life to live," etc., etc. But there were other feelings. There was love, for instance. Still love. A kind that girls in Catholic-school uniforms didn't suspect, a weedy species too tough to die.

Besides, it wasn't just love that held people together. Secrets held them, and common history, and the price you paid.

"Carol?" he asked her. "Babe? All right?"

She thought about telling him no, she wasn't all right, she was drowning, but then she managed to smile and said, "It's the heat, that's all. I feel a little groggy - Get me in the car and crank up the air-conditioning. I'll be fine."

Bill took her by the elbow (Bet you're not checking out my legs, though, Carol thought. You know where they go, don't you?) and led her toward the Crown Vic as if she were a very old lady. By the time the door was closed and cool air was pumping over her face, she actually had started to feel a little better.

If the feeling comes back, I'll tell him, Carol thought. I'll have to. It's just too strong Not normal

Well, deja vu was never normal, she supposed - it was something that was part dream, part chemistry, and (she was sure she'd read

this, maybe in a doctor's office somewhere while waiting for her gynecologist to go prospecting up her fifty-two-year-old twat) part the result of an electrical misfire in the brain, causing new experience to be identified as old data. A temporary hole in the pipes, hot water and cold water mingling. She closed her eyes and prayed for it to go away.

Oh, Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee.

Please ("Oh puh-lease," they used to say), not back to parochial school. This was supposed to be a vacation, not - Floyd - what's that over there? Oh shit!

Oh SHIT!

Who was Floyd? The only Floyd Bill knew was Floyd Doming (or maybe it was Darling), the kid he'd run the snack bar with, the one who'd run off to New York with his girlfriend. Carol couldn't remember when Bill had told her about that kid, but she knew he had.

Jast quit it, girl. There's nothing here for you. Slam the door on the whole train of thought.

And that worked. There was a final whisper - what's the story and then she was just Carol Shelton, on her way to Captiva Island, on her way to Palin House with her husband the renowned software designer, on their way to the beaches and those rum drinks with the little paper umbrellas sticking out of them.

They passed a Publix market. They passed an old black man minding a roadside fruit stand - he made her think of actors from

the thirties and movies you saw on the American Movie Channel, an old yassuh-boss type of guy wearing bib overalls and a straw hat with a round crown. Bill made small talk, and she made it right back at him. She was faintly amazed that the little girl who had worn a Mary medallion every day from ten to sixteen had become

this woman in the Donna Karan dress - that the desperate couple in that Revere apartment were these middle-aged rich folks rolling down a lush aisle of palms - but she was and they were. Once in those Revere days he had come home drunk and she had hit him and drawn blood from below his eye. Once she had been in fear of Hell, had lain half-drugged in steel stirrups, thinking, I'm damned, I've come to damnation. A million years, and that's only the first tick of the clock.

They stopped at the causeway tollbooth and Carol thought, The toll-taker has a strawberry birthmark on the left side of his forehead, all mixed in with his eyebrow.

There was no mark-the toll-taker was just an ordinary guy in his late forties or early fifties, iron-gray hair in a buzz cut, horn-rimmed specs, the kind of guy who says, "Y'all have a nahce tahm, okai?"-but the feeling began to come back, and Carol realized that now the things she thought she knew were things she really did know, at first not all of them, but then, by the time they neared the little market on the right side of Route 41, it was almost everything.

The market's called Corson's and there's a little gid outfront, Carol thought. She's wearing a red pinafore. She's got a doll, a dirty old yellow-haired thing, that she's left on the store steps so she can look at a dog in the back of a station wagon.

The name of the market turned out to be Carson's, not Corson's, but everything else was the same. As the white Crown Vic passed, the little girl in the red dress turned her solemn face in Carol's direction, a country girl's face, although what a girl from the toolies could be doing here in rich folks' tourist country, her and her dirty yellow-headed doll, Carol didn't know.

Here's where I ask Bill how much farther, only I won't do it. Because I have to break out of this cycle, this groove. I have to.

"How much farther?" she asked him. He says there's only one road, we can't get lost. He says he promises me we'll get to the Palm House with no problem. And, by the way, who's Floyd?

Bill's eyebrow went up. The dimple beside his mouth appeared.

"Once you get over the causeway and onto Sanibel Island, there's only one road," he said. Carol barely heard him. He was still talking about the road, her husband who had spent a dirty weekend in bed with his secretary two years ago, risking all they had done and all they had made, Bill doing that with his other face on, being the Bill Carol's mother had warned would break her heart. And later Bill trying to tell her he hadn't been able to help himself, her wanting to scream, I once murdered a child for you, the potential of a child, anyway. How high is that price? And is this what I get

in return? To reach my fifties and find out that my husband had to get into some Clairol girl's pants?

Tell him! she shrieked. Make him pull over and stop, make him do anything that will break you free-change one thing, change everything! You can do it if you could put your feet up in those stirrups, you can do anything!

But she could do nothing, and it all began to tick by faster. The two overfed crows lifted off from their splatter of lunch. Her husband asked why she was sitting that way, was it a cramp, her saying, Yes, yes, a cramp in her back but it was easing. Her mouth quacked on about *deja vu* just as if she weren't drowning in it, and the Crown Vic moved forward like one of those sadistic Dodge cars at Revere Beach. Here came Palmdale Motors on the right. And on the left? Some kind of sign for the local community theatre, a production of "Naughty Marietta."

No, it's Mary, not Marietta. Mary, mother of Jesus, Mary, mother of God, she's got her hands out....

Carol bent all her will toward telling her husband what was happening, because the right Bill was behind the wheel, the right

Bill could still hear her. Being heard was what married love was all about.

Nothing came out. In her mind Gram said, "All the hard days are coming." In her mind a voice asked Floyd what was over there, then said, "Oh shit," then screamed "Oh shit!"

She looked at the speedometer and saw it was calibrated not in miles an hour but thousands of feet: they were at twenty-eight thousand. Bill was telling her that she shouldn't have slept on the plane and she was agreeing.

There was a pink house coming up, little more than a bungalow, fringed with palm trees that looked like the ones you saw in the Second World War movies, fronds framing incoming Learjets with their machine guns blazing-

Blazing. Burning hot. All at once the magazine he's holding turns into a torch. Holy Mary, mother of God, hey there, Mary, what's the story-

They passed the house. The old man sat on the porch and watched them go by. The lenses of his rimless glasses glinted in the sun. Bill's hand established a beachhead on her hip. He said something about how they might pause to refresh themselves between the doffing of her dress and the donning of her shorts and she agreed, although they were never going to get to Palm House. They were going to go down this road and down this road, they were for the white Crown Vic and the white Crown Vic was for them, forever and ever amen.

The next billboard would say "Palm House 2 Mi." Beyond it was the one saying that Mother of Mercy Charities helped the Florida sick. Would they help her?

Now that it was too late she was beginning to understand.

Beginning to see the light the way she could see the subtropical sun sparkling off the water on their left. Wondering how many

wrongs she had done in her life, how many sins if you liked that word, God knew her parents and her Gram certainly had, sin this and sin that and wear the medallion between those growing things the boys look at. And years later she had lain in bed with her new husband on hot summer nights, knowing a decision had to be made, knowing the clock was ticking, the cigarette butt was smoldering, and she remembered making the decision, not telling him out loud because about some things you could be silent. Her head itched. She scratched it. Black flecks came swirling down past her face. On the Crown Vic's instrument panel the speedometer froze at sixteen thousand feet and then blew out, but Bill appeared not to notice.

Here came a mailbox with a Grateful Dead sticker pasted on the front; here came a little black dog with its head down, trotting busily, and God how her head itched, black flakes drifting in the air like fallout and Mother Teresa's face looking out of one of them.

"Mother of Mary Charities Help the Florida Hungry-Won't You Help Us?"

Floyd What's that over there? Oh shit

She has time to see something big. And to read the word "Delta."

"Bill? Bill?"

His reply, clear enough but nevertheless coming from around the rim of the universe: "Christ, honey, what's in your hair?"

She plucked the charred remnant of Mother Teresa's face from her hair and held it out to him, the older version of the man she had married, the secretary fucking man she had married, the man who had nonetheless rescued her from people who thought that you could live forever in paradise if you only lit enough candles and wore the blue blazer and stuck to the approved skipping rhymes -

Lying there with this man one hot summer night while the drug deals went on upstairs and Iron Butterfly sang "In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida" for the nine-billionth time, she had asked what he thought you got, you know, after. When your part in the show is over. He had taken her in his arms and held her, down the beach she had heard the jangle-jingle of the mid-way and the bang of the Dodgem cars and Bill - Bill's glasses were melted to his face.

One eye bulged out of its socket. His mouth was a bloodhole. In the trees a bird was crying, a bird was screaming, and Carol began to scream with it, holding out the charred fragment of paper with Mother Teresa's picture on it, screaming, watching as his cheeks turned black and his forehead swarmed and his neck split open like a poisoned goiter, screaming, she was screaming, somewhere Iron Butterfly was singing "In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida" and she was screaming.

"CAROL?"

It was Bill's voice, from a thousand miles away. His hand was on her, but it was concern in his touch rather than lust.

She opened her eyes and looked around the sun-brilliant cabin of the Lear 35, and for a moment she understood everything in the way one understands the tremendous import of a dream upon the first moment of waking. She remembered asking him what he

believed you got, you know, after, and he had said you probably got what you'd always thought you would get, that if Jerry Lee Lewis thought he was going to Hell for playing boogie-woogie, that's exactly where he'd go. Heaven, Hell, or Grand Rapids, it was your choice or the choice of those who had taught you what to believe. It was the human mind's final great service: the perception of eternity in the place where you'd always expected to spend it. "Carol? You O.K., babe?" In one hand was the magazine he'd been reading, a Newsweek with Mother Teresa on the cover. "SAINTHOOD NOW?" it said in white.

Looking around wildly at the cabin, she was thinking, it happens at sixteen thousand feet I have to tell them, I have to warn them. But it was fading, all of it, the way those feelings always did. They went like dreams, or cotton candy turning into a sweet mist just above your tongue.

"Landing? Already." She felt wide awake, but her voice sounded thick and muzzy.

"It's fast, huh?" he said, sounding pleased, as if he'd flown it himself instead of paying for it. "Floyd says we'll be on the ground in-"

"Who?" she asked. The cabin of the little plane was warm but her fingers were cold. "Who?"

"Floyd. You know, the pilot" He pointed his thumb toward the cockpit's left-hand seat. They were descending into a scrim of clouds. The plane began to shake. "He says we'll be on the ground in Fort Myers in twenty minutes. You took a hell of a jump, girl. And before that you were moaning."

Carol opened her mouth to say it was that feeling, the one you could only say what it was in French, something vu or rous, but it was fading and all she said was "I had a nightmare."

There was a beep as Floyd the pilot switched the seat-belt light on. Carol turned her head. Somewhere below, waiting for them now and forever, was a white car from Hertz, a gangster car, the kind the characters in a Martin Scorsese movie would probably call a Crown Vic. She looked at the cover of the news magazine, at the face of Mother Teresa, and all at once she remembered skipping rope behind Our Lady of Angels, skipping to one of the forbidden rhymes, skipping to the one that went Hey there, Mary, what's the story, save my ass from Purgatory

All the hard days are coming, her Gram had said. She had pressed the medal into Carol's palm, wrapped the chain around her fingers. The hard days are coming.

THE GLASS
FLOOR

STEPHEN KING

 Appeared in:
 "Weird Tales" Fall, 1990
 Starlight Mystery Stories, 1967

INTRODUCTION

In the novel *Deliverance*, by James Dickey, there is a scene where a country fellow who lives way up in the back of beyond whangs his hand with a tool while repairing a car. One of the city men who are looking for a couple of guys to drive their cars downriver asks this fellow, Griner by name, if he's hurt himself. Griner looks at his bloody hand, then mutters: "Naw - it ain't as bad as I thought." That's the way I felt after re-reading "The Glass Floor," the first story for which I was ever paid, after all these years. Darrell Schweitzer, the editor of *Weird Tales* invited me to make changes if I wanted to, but I decided that would probably be a bad idea. Except for two or three word-changes and the addition of a paragraph break (which was probably a typographical error in the first place), I've left the tale just as it was. If I really did start making changes, the result would be an entirely new story.

"The Glass Floor" was written, to the best of my recollection, in the summer of 1967, when I was about two months shy of my twentieth birthday. I had been trying for about two years to sell a story to Robert A.W. Lowndes, who edited two horror/fantasy magazines for *Health Knowledge* (*The Magazine of Horror* and *Startling Mystery Stories*) as well as a vastly more popular digest called *Sexology*. He had rejected several submissions kindly (one of them, marginally better than "The Glass Floor," was finally published in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* under the title "Night of the Tiger"), then accepted this one when I finally got around to submitting it. That first check was for thirty-five dollars. I've cashed many bigger ones since then, but none gave me more satisfaction; someone had finally paid me some real money for something I had found in my head!

The first few pages of the story are clumsy and badly written - clearly the product of an unformed story-teller's mind - but the last

bit pays off better than I remembered; there is a genuine frisson in what Mr. Wharton finds waiting for him in the East Room. I suppose that's at least part of the reason I agreed to allow this mostly unremarkable work to be reprinted after all these years. And there is at least a token effort to create characters which are more than paper-doll cutouts; Wharton and Reynard are

antagonists, but neither is "the good guy" or "the bad guy." The real villain is behind that plastered-over door. And I also see an odd echo of "The Glass Floor" in a very recent work called "The Library Policeman." That work, a short novel, will be published as part of a collection of short novels called Four Past Midnight this fall, and if you read it, I think you'll see what I mean. It was fascinating to see the same image coming around again after all this time.

Mostly I'm allowing the story to be republished to send a message to young writers who are out there right now, trying to be published, and collecting rejection slips from such magazines as F&SF Midnight Graffiti, and, of course, Weird Tales, which is the granddaddy of them all. The message is simple: you can learn, you can get better, and you can get published.

If that Little spark is there, someone will probably see it sooner or later, gleaming faintly in the dark. And, if you tend the spark nestled in the kindling, it really can grow into a large, blazing fire. It happened to me, and it started here.

I remember getting the idea for the story, and it just came as the ideas come now - casually, with no flourish of trumpets. I was walking down a dirt road to see a friend, and for no reason at all I began to wonder what it would be like to stand in a room whose floor was a mirror. The image was so intriguing that writing the story became a necessity. It wasn't written for money; it was written so I could see better. Of course I did not see it as well as I had hoped; there is still that shortfall between what I hope I will accomplish and what I actually manage. Still, I came away from it

with two valuable things: a salable story after five years of rejection slips, and a bit of experience. So here it is, and as that fellow Griner says in Dickey's novel, it ain't really as bad as I thought.

- Stephen King

Wharton moved slowly up the wide steps, hat in hand, craning his neck to get a better look at the Victorian monstrosity that his sister had died in. It wasn't a house at all, he reflected, but a mausoleum - a huge, sprawling mausoleum. It seemed to grow out of the top of the hill like an outsized, perverted toadstool, all gambrels and gables and jutting, blank-windowed cupolas. A brass weather-vane surmounted the eighty degree slant of shake-shingled roof, the tarnished effigy of a leering little boy with one hand shading eyes Wharton was just as glad he could not see.

Then he was on the porch, and the house as a whole was cut off from him. He twisted the old-fashioned bell, and listened to it echo hollowly through the dim recesses within. There was a rose-tinted fanlight over the door, and Wharton could barely make out the date 1770 chiseled into the glass. Tomb is right, he thought.

The door suddenly swung open. "Yes, sir?" The housekeeper stared out at him. She was old, hideously old. Her face hung like limp dough on her skull, and the hand on the door above the chain was grotesquely twisted by arthritis.

"I've come to see Anthony Reynard," Wharton said. He fancied he could even smell the sweetish odor of decay emanating from the rumpled silk of the shapeless black dress she wore.

"Mr Reynard isn't seein' anyone. He's mournin'."

"He'll see me," Wharton said. "I'm Charles Wharton. Janine's brother."

"Oh." Her eyes widened a little, and the loose bow of her mouth worked around the empty ridges of her gums. "Just a minute." She disappeared, leaving the door ajar.

Wharton stared into the dim mahogany shadows, making out high-backed easy chairs, horse-hair upholstered divans, tall narrow-shelved bookcases, curlicued, floridly carven wainscoting.

Janine, he thought. Janine, Janine, Janine. How could you live here? How in hell could you stand it?

A tall figure materialized suddenly out of the gloom, slope-shouldered, head thrust forward, eyes deeply sunken and downcast. Anthony Reynard reached out and unhooked the door-chain.

"Come in, Mr. Wharton," he said heavily.

Wharton stepped into the vague dimness of the house, looking up curiously at the man who had married his sister. There were rings beneath the hollows of his eyes, blue and bruised-looking. The suit he wore was wrinkled and hung limp on him, as if he had lost a great deal of weight. He looks tired, Wharton thought. Tired and old.

"My sister has already been buried?" Wharton asked.

"Yes." He shut the door slowly, imprisoning Wharton in the decaying gloom of the house. "My deepest sorrow, sir. Wharton. I loved your sister dearly." He made a vague gesture. "I'm sorry." He seemed about to add more, then shut his mouth with an abrupt snap. When he spoke again, it was obvious he had bypassed whatever had been on his lips. "Would you care to sit down? I'm sure you have questions.

"I do. Somehow it came out more curtly than he had intended.

Reynard sighed and nodded slowly. He led the Way deeper into the living room and gestured at a chair. Wharton sank deeply into it, and it seemed to gobble him up rather than give beneath him. Reynard sat next to the fireplace and dug for cigarettes. He offered them wordlessly to Wharton, and he shook his head. He waited until Reynard lit his cigarette, then asked, "Just how did she die? Your letter didn't say much.

Reynard blew out the match and threw it into the fireplace. It landed on one of the ebony iron fire-dogs, a carved gargoyle that stared at Wharton with toad's eyes.

"She fell," he said. "She was dusting in one of the other rooms, up along the eaves. We were planning to paint, and she said it would have to be well-dusted before we could begin. She had the ladder. It slipped. Her neck was broken." There was a clicking sound in his throat as he swallowed.

"She died - instantly?"

"Yes." He lowered his head and placed a hand against his brow. "I was heartbroken.

The gargoyle leered at him, squat torso and flattened, sooty head. Its mouth was twisted upward in a weird, gleeful grin, and its eyes seemed turned inward at some private joke. Wharton looked away from it with an effort. "I want to see where it happened.

Reynard stubbed out his cigarette half-smoked. "You can't.

"I'm afraid I must," Wharton said coldly. "After all, she was my . . .

"It's not that," Reynard said. "The room has been partitioned off. That should have been done a long time ago.

"If it's just a matter of prising a few boards off a door...

"You don't understand. The room has been plastered off completely. There's nothing but a wall there.

Wharton felt his gaze being pulled inexorably back to the fire-dog. Damn the thing, what did it have to grin about?

"I can't help it. I want to see the room."

Reynard stood suddenly, towering over him. "Impossible."

Wharton also stood. "I'm beginning to wonder if you don't have something to hide in there," he said quietly.

"Just what are you implying?"

Wharton shook his head a little dazedly. What was he implying? That perhaps Anthony Reynard had murdered his Sister in this Revolutionary War-vintage crypt? That there might be something more sinister here than shadowy corners and hideous iron fire-dogs?

"I don't know what I'm implying," he said slowly, "except that Janine was shoveled under in a hell of a hurry, and that you're acting damn strange now."

For moment the anger blazed brighter, and then it died away, leaving only hopelessness and dumb sorrow. "Leave me alone," he mumbled. "Please leave me alone, Mr. Wharton."

"I can't. I've got to know . . ."

The aged housekeeper appeared, her face thrusting from the

shadowy cavern of the hall. "Supper's ready, Mr. Reynard."
"Thank you, Louise, but I'm not hungry. Perhaps Mr. Wharton ...
?" Wharton shook his head.
"Very well, then. Perhaps we'll have a bite later."
"As you say, sir." She turned to go. "Louise?" "Yes, sir?"
"Come here a moment.
Louise shuffled slowly back into the room, her loose tongue
slopping wetly over her lips for a moment and then disappearing.
"Sir?"
"Mr. Wharton seems to have some questions about his sister's
death. Would you tell him all you know about it?"
"Yes, sir." Her eyes glittered with alacrity. "She was dustin', she
was. Dustin' the East Room. Hot on paintin' it, she was. Mr.
Reynard here, I guess he wasn't much interested, because ...

"Just get to the point, Louise," Reynard said impatiently.
"No," Wharton said. "Why wasn't he much interested?"
Louise looked doubtfully from one to the other.
"Go ahead," Reynard said tiredly. "He'll find out in the village if he
doesn't up here.
"Yes, sir." Again he saw the glitter, caught the greedy purse of the
loose flesh of her mouth as she prepared to impart the precious
story. "Mr. Reynard didn't like no one goin' in the East Room. Said
it was dangerous."
"Dangerous?"
"The floor," she said. "The floor's glass. It's a mirror. The whole
floor's a mirror. "
Wharton turned to Reynard, feeling dark blood suffuse his face.
"You mean to tell me you let her go up on a ladder in a room with
a glass floor?"
"The ladder had rubber grips," Reynard began. "That wasn't why ...
"You damned fool," Wharton whispered. "You damned, bloody
fool.
"I tell you that wasn't the reason!" Reynard shouted suddenly. "I
loved your sister! No one is sorrier than I that she is dead! But I
warned her! God knows I warned her about that floor!"
Wharton was dimly aware of Louise staring greedily at them,
storing up gossip like a squirrel stores up nuts. "Get her out of
here," he said thickly.
"Yes," Reynard said. "Go see to supper. "
"Yes, sir." Louise moved reluctantly toward the hall, and the
shadows swallowed her.

"Now," Wharton said quietly. "It seems to me that you have some
explaining to do, Reynard. This whole thing sounds funny to me.
Wasn't there even an inquest?"
"No," Reynard said. He slumped back into his chair suddenly, and
he looked blindly into the darkness of the vaulted overhead ceiling.
"They know around here about the - East Room."
"And just what is there to know?" Wharton asked tightly
"The East Room is bad luck," Reynard said. "Some people might

even say it's cursed.

"Now listen," Wharton said, his ill temper and unladen grief building up like steam in a teakettle, "I'm not going to be put off, Reynard. Every word that comes out of your mouth makes me more determined to see that room. Now are you going to agree to it or do I have to go down to that village and ... ?"

"Please." Something in the quiet hopelessness of the word made Wharton look up. Reynard looked directly into his eyes for the first time and they were haunted, haggard eyes. "Please, Mr. Wharton. Take my word that your sister died naturally and go away. I don't want to see you die!" His voice rose to a wail. "I didn't want to see anybody die!"

Wharton felt a quiet chill steal over him. His gaze skipped from the grinning fireplace gargoyle to the dusty, empty-eyed bust of Cicero in the corner to the strange wainscoting carvings. And a voice came from within him: Go away from here. A thousand living yet insentient eyes seemed to stare at him from the darkness, and again the voice spoke... "Go away from here."

Only this time it was Reynard.

"Go away from here," he repeated. "Your sister is beyond caring and beyond revenge. I give you my word..."

"Damn your word!" Wharton said harshly. "I'm going down to the sheriff, Reynard. And if the sheriff won't help me, I'll go to the county commissioner. And if the county commissioner won't help me ...

"Very well." The words were like the faraway tolling of a churchyard bell.

"Come."

Reynard led the way into the hall, down past the kitchen, the empty dining room with the chandelier catching and reflecting the last light of day, past the pantry, toward the blind plaster of the corridor's end.

This is it, he thought, and suddenly there was a strange crawling in the pit of his stomach.

"I..." he began involuntarily.

"What?" Reynard asked, hope glittering in his eyes.

"Nothing. "

They stopped at the end of the hall, stopped in the twilight gloom. There seemed to be no electric light. On the floor Wharton could see the still-damp plasterer's trowel Reynard had used to wall up the doorway, and a straggling remnant of Poe's "Black Cat" clanged through his mind:

"I had walled the monster up within the tomb..."

Reynard handed the trowel to him blindly. "Do whatever you have to do, Wharton. I won't be party to it. I wash my hands of it. Wharton watched him move off down the hall with misgivings, his hand opening and closing on the handle of the trowel. The faces of the Little-boy weathervane, the fire-dog gargoyle, the wizened housemaid all seemed to mix and mingle before him, all grinning at something he could not understand. Go away from here ...

With a sudden bitter curse he attacked the wall, hacking into the soft, new plaster until the trowel scraped across the door of the East Room. He dug away plaster until he could reach the doorknob. He twisted, then yanked on it until the veins stood out in his temples .

The plaster cracked, schismed, and finally split. The door swung ponderously open, shedding plaster like a dead skin.

Wharton stared into the shimmering quicksilver pool.

It seemed to glow with a light of its own in the darkness, ethereal and fairy-like. Wharton stepped in, half-expecting to sink into warm, pliant fluid.

But the floor was solid.

His own reflection hung suspended below him, attached only by the feet, seeming to stand on its head in thin air. It made him dizzy just to look at it.

Slowly his gaze shifted around the room. The ladder was still there, stretching up into the glimmering depths of the mirror. The room was high, he saw. High enough for a fall to he winced - to kill.

It was ringed with empty bookcases, all seeming to lean over him on the very threshold of imbalance. They added to the room's strange, distorting effect.

He went over to the ladder and stared down at the feet. They were rubbershod, as Reynard had said, and seemed solid enough. But if the ladder had not slid, how had Janine fallen?

Somehow he found himself staring through the floor again. No, he corrected himself. Not through the floor. At the mirror; into the mirror . . .

He wasn't standing on the floor at all he fancied. He Was poised in thin air halfway between the identical ceiling and floor, held up only by the stupid idea that he was on the floor. That was silly, as anyone could see, for there was the floor, way down there. . . .

Snap out of it!' he yelled at himself suddenly. He was on the floor, and that was nothing but a harmless reflection of the ceiling. It would only be the floor if I was standing on my head, and I'm not; the other me is the one standing on his head. . . .

He began to feel vertigo, and a sudden lump of nausea rose in his throat. He tried to look away from the glittering quicksilver depths of the mirror, but he couldn't.

The door.. where was the door? He suddenly wanted out very badly.

Wharton turned around clumsily, but there were only crazily-tilted bookcases and the jutting ladder and the horrible chasm beneath his feet.

"Reynard!" He screamed. "I'm falling! "

Reynard came running, the sickness already a gray lesion on his heart. It was done; it had happened again.

He stopped at the door's threshold, Staring in at the Siamese twins staring at each other in the middle of the two-roofed, no-floored room.

"Louise," he croaked around the dry ball of sickness in his throat.

"Bring the pole."

Louise came shuffling out of the darkness and handed the hook-ended pole to Reynard. He slid it out across the shining quicksilver pond and caught the body sprawled on the glass. He dragged it slowly toward the door, and when he could reach it, he pulled it

out. He stared down into the contorted face and gently shut the staring eyes.

"I'll want the plaster," he said quietly.

"Yes, sir."

She turned to go, and Reynard stared somberly into the room. Not for the first time he wondered if there was really a mirror there at all. In the room, a small pool of blood showed on the floor and ceiling, seeming to meet in the center, blood which hung there quietly and one could wait forever for it to drip.

The King Family &
The Wicked Witch

STEPHEN KING

Illustrated by King's children
Flint Magazine

EDITOR'S NOTE:

Stephen King and I went to college together. No, we were not the best of friends, but we did share a few brews together at University Motor Inn. We did work for the school newspaper at the same time. No, Steve and I are not best friends. But I sure am glad he made it. He worked hard and believed in himself. After eight million book sales, it's hard to remember him as a typically broke student. We all knew he'd make it through.

Last January I wrote of a visit with Steve over the holiday vacation. We talked about his books, Carrie - Salems Lot. The Shinning. and the soon to be released, The Stand. We talked about how Stanley Kubrick wants to do the film versions of his new books. We didn't talk about the past much though. We talked of the future - his kids, FLINT ...

He gave me a copy of a story he had written for his children. We

almost ran it then, but there was much concern on the staff as to how it would be received by our readers. We didn't run it. Well, we've debated long enough. It's too cute for you not to read it. We made the final decision after spending in evening watching TV last week. There were at least 57 more offensive things said, not to mention all the murders, rapes, and wars...we decided to let you be the judge. If some of you parents might be offended by the word 'fart', you'd better not read it - but don't stop your kids, they'll love it!

On the Secret Road in the town of Bridgton, there lived a wicked witch. Her name was Witch Hazel.
How wicked was Witch Hazel? Well, once she had changed a Prince from the Kingdom of New Hampshire into a woodchuck. She turned a little kid's favorite kitty into whipped cream. And she liked to turn mommies' baby carriages into big piles of horse-turds while the mommies and their babies were shopping.
She was a mean old witch.
The King family lived by Long Lake In Bridgton, Maine. They were nice people.
There was a daddy who wrote books. There was a mommy who wrote poems and cooked food. There was a girl named Naomi who was six years old. She went to school. She was tall and straight and brown. There was a boy named Joe who was four years old. He went to school too, although he only went two days a week. He was short and blonde with hazel eyes.
And Witch Hazel hated the Kings more than anyone else In Bridgton. Witch Hazel especially hated the Kings because they were the happiest family In Bridgton. She would peer out at their bright red Cadillac when it passed her dirty, falling down haunted house with mean hateful eyes. Witch Hazel hated bright colors. She would see the mommy reading Joe a story on the bench outside the drug store and her bony fingers would itch to cast a spell. She would see the daddy talking to Naomi on their way home from school in the red Cadillac or the blue truck, and she would want to reach out her awful arms and catch them and pop into her witches cauldron.
And finally, she cast her spell.
One day Witch Hazel put on a nice dress. She went to the Bridgton Beauty Parlor and had her hair permed. She put on a pair of

Rockers from Fayva (an East Coast shoe store chain). She looked almost pretty.
She bought some of daddy's books at the Bridgton Pharmacy. Then she drove out to the Kings' house and pretended she wanted daddy to sign his books. She drove in a car. She could have ridden her

broom, but she didn't want the Kings to know she was a witch. And in her handbag were four magic cookies. Four evil. magic cookies.

Four cookies! Four cookies full of black magic!

The banana cookie, the milk bottle cookie, and worst of all, two crying cookies. Don't let her in Kings!' Oh please don't let her in! But she looked so nice. . . and she was smiling. . . and she had the daddy's books. soooo....they let her in. Daddy signed her book, mommy offered her tea. Naomi asked if she would like to see her room.

Joe asked if she would like to see him write his name. Witch Hazel smiled and smiled. It almost broke her face to smile.

"You have been so nice to me that I would like to be nice to you." said Witch Hazel. "I have baked four cookies. A cookie for each King."

"Cookies!" Shouted Naomi "Hooray!"

"Cookies" Shouted Joe. "Cookies!"

That was awfully nice," laid mommy. "You shouldn't have."

"But we're glad you did." said the daddy.

They took the cookies. Witch Hazel smiled. And when she was in her car she shrieked and cackled with laughter. She laughed so hard that her cat Basta hissed and shrank away from her. Witch Hazel was happy when her wicked plan succeeded.

"I will like this banana cookie." Daddy said. He ate it and what a terrible thing happened. His nose turned into a banana and when he went down to his office to work on his book much later that terrible day the only word he could write was banana.

It was Witch Hazel's wicked magic Banana Cookie.

Poor Daddy!

"I will like this milk-bottle cookie." Mommy said. "What a funny name for a cookie. She ate it and (the evil cookie turned her hands into milk-bottles.

What an awful thing. Could she fix the food with Milk-bottles for hands? Could she type? No! She could not even pick her nose.

Poor Mommy!

"We will like these crying cookies." Naomi and Joe said. What a funny name for a cookie." They each ate one and they began to cry! They cried and cried and could not stop! The tears streamed out of their eyes. There were puddles on the rug. Their clothes got aII wet. They couldn't eat good meals because they were crying. They even cried in their sleep.

It was all because of Witch Hazel's evil crying cookies.

The Kings were not the happiest family in Bridgton anymore. Now they were the saddest family in Bridgton. Mommy didn't want to go shopping because everybody laughed at her milk-bottle hands. Daddy couldn't write books because all the words came out banana and it was hard to see the typewriter anyway because his nose was a banana. And Joe and Naomi just cried and cried and cried. Witch Hazel was as happy as wicked witch ever gets. It was her greatest spell.

One day, about a month after the horrible day of the four cookies Mommy was walking in the woods. It was about the only thing she

liked to do with her milk-bottle hands. And in the woods she found a woodchuck caught in a trap.

Poor thing! It was almost dead from fright and pain. There was blood all over the trap.

"Poor old thing," Mommy said. "I'll get you out of that nasty trap." But could she open the trap with milk bottles for hands? No.

So she ran for Daddy and Naomi and Joe. Fifteen minutes later all four Kings were standing around the poor bloody woodchuck in the trap. The Kings were not bloody, but what a strange, sad sight they were! Daddy had a banana in the middle of his face. Mommy had milk-bottle hands. And the two children could not stop crying.

"I think we can get him out." Daddy said. "Yes." Mummy said. "I think we can get him out if we all work together. And I will start. I will give the poor thing a drink of milk from my hands." And she gave him a drink. She felt a little better. Naomi and Joe were trying to open the jaws of the cruel trap while the woodchuck looked at them hopefully. But the trap would not open. It was an old trap, and its hinges and mean sharp teeth were clogged with rust.

"It will not open." Naomi said and cried harder than ever. "No. it will not open at all!"

"I can't open it." Joe said and cried his eyes. The tears streamed out of his eyes and down his cheeks. "I can't open it either."

And Daddy said. "I know what to do. I think." Daddy bent over the hinge of the trap with his funny banana nose. He squeezed the end of it with both hands. Ouch! It hurt! But out came six drops of banana oil. They fell onto the rusty hinge of the trap, one drop at a time.

"Now try," said Daddy.

This time the trap opened easily.

"Hooray!" shouted Naomi.

"He's out! He's out!" Shouted Joe.

"We have all worked together." said Mommy. "I gave the woodchuck milk. Daddy oiled the trap with his banana nose. And Naomi and Joe opened the trap to let him out."

And then they all felt a little better, for the first time since Witch Hazel cast her wicked spell.

And have you guessed yet? Oh, I bet you have. The woodchuck was really not a woodchuck at all. He was the Prince of the Kingdom of New Hampshire who had also fallen under the spell of Wicked Witch Hazel.

When the trap was opened the spell was broken, and instead of a woodchuck, a radiant Prince in a Brooks Brothers suit stood before the King family.

"You have been kind to me even, in your own sadness." said the Prince, "and that is the most difficult thing of all. And so through the power vested in me, the spell of the wicked witch is broken and you are free!"

Oh, happy day.

Daddy's banana nose disappeared and was replaced with his own nose, which was not too handsome but certainly better than a

slightly squeezed banana. Mommy's milk-bottles were replaced with her own pink hands.

Best of all, Naomi and Joe stopped crying. They began to smile, then they began to laugh! Then the Prince of New Hampshire began to laugh Then Daddy and Mommy began to laugh The Prince danced with Mommy and Naomi and carried Joe on his shoulders. He shook hands with Daddy and said he had admired Daddy's books before he had been turned into a woodchuck.

All five of them went back to the nice house by the lake, and Mommy made tea for everyone. They all sat at the table and drank their tea.

"We ought to do something about that witch," Mommy said. "So the can't do something wicked to someone else." . -

"I think that is true." said the Prince. "And it so happens that I know one spell myself. It will get rid of her."

He whispered to Daddy. Ha whispered to Mommy. He whispered to Naomi and Joe, and they nodded and giggled and laughed.

That very afternoon they drove up to Witch Hazel's haunted house on the Secret Road. Basta, the cat, looked at them with his big yellow eyes, hissed, and ran away.

They did not drive up in the Kings' pretty red Cadillac, or in the Prince's Mist Grey Mercedes 390SL. They drove up in an old, old car that wheezed and blew oil.

They were wearing old clothes with fleas jumping out of them.

They wanted to look poor to fool Witch Hazel.

They went up and the Prince knocked on the door.

Witch Hazel ripped the door open. She was wearing a tall black hat. There was a wart on the end of her nose. She smelled of frog's blood and owls' hearts and ant's eyeballs, because she had been whipping up horrible brew to make more black magic cookies.

"What do you want?" she rasped at them. She didn't recognize them in their old clothes. "Get out. I'm busy!"

"We are a poor family on our way to California to pick oranges."

the Prince said. "What has that to do with me?" The witch

shrieked. "I ought to turn you into oranges for disturbing me! Now good day!"

She tried to close the door but the Prince put his foot in it. Naomi and Joe shoved it back open.

"We have something to sell you." Daddy said. "It is the wickedest cookie in the world. If you eat it. It will make you the wickedest witch in the world, even wickeder than Witch Indira in India. We will sell it to you for one thousand dollars."

"I don't buy what I can steal!" Witch Hazel shrieked. She snatched the cookie and gobbled it down "Now I will be the wickedest witch in the whole world!" And she cackled so loudly that the shutters fell off her house.

But the Prince wasn't sorry. He was glad. And Mommy wasn't sorry, because she had baked the cookie. And Daddy wasn't sorry,

because he had gone to New Hampshire to get the 300 year-old baked beans that went into the cookie. Naomi and Joe? They just laughed and laughed, because they knew that it wasn't a Wicked Cookie that Witch Hazel had just eaten.

It was a Farting Cookie.

Witch Hazel felt something funny.

She felt it building in her tummy and her behind. It felt like a of gas. It felt like an explosion looking for a place to happen.

"What have you done to me!" she shrieked. "Who are you?'"

"I am the Prince of New Hampshire.'" The Prince cried, raising his face to she could see it clearly for the first time.

"And we are the Kings." Daddy said. "Shame on you for turning my wife's hands into milk bottles! Double shame on you for turning my nose into a banana. Triple shame on you for making

my Naomi and my Joe cry all day and all night. But we've fixed you now, Wicked Witch Hazel!"

"You won't be casting anymore spells." said Naomi. "Because you are going to the moon!"

"I'm not going to the moon!" Witch Hazel screeched so loudly that the chimney fell on the lawn. "I'm going to turn you all into cheap antiques that not even tourists will buy!"

"No you're not." said Joe, "because you ate the magic cookie. You ate the magic farting cookie."

The wicked witch foamed and frothed. She tried to cast her spell. But it was too late: the Farting Cookie had done its work. She felt a big fart coming on. She squeezed her butt to keep it in until she could cast her spell, but it was too late.

WHONK! Went the fart. It blew all the fur off her cat, Basta. It blew in the windows. And Witch Hazel went up in the air like a rocket.

"Get me down!'" Witch Hazel screamed. Witch Hazel came down all right. She came down on her fanny. And when she came down, she let another fart.

DRRRRRRAPPP! Went the fart. It was so windy it knocked down the witch's home and the Bridgton Trading Post. You could see Dom Cardozl sitting on the toilet where he had been pooping. It was all that was left of the Trading Post except for one bureau that had been made in Grand Rapids

The witch went flying up into the sky. She flew up and up until she was as small as a speck of coal dust.

"Get me down. " Witch Hazel called, sounding very small and far away.

"You'll come down all right." Naomi said.

Down came Witch Hazel.

"Yeeaaaahhhh'" she screamed falling out of the sky.

Just before she could hit the ground and be crushed (as maybe she deserved), she cut another fart, the biggest one of all the smell was like two million egg salad sandwiches. And the sound was KA-

HIONK!!!

Up she went again

"Goodbye, Witch Hazel " yelled Mommy waving. "Enjoy the moon."

"Hope you stay a long time"' called Joe.

Up and up went Witch Hazel until she was out of sight. During the news that night the Kings and the Prince of New Hampshire heard Barbara Walters report that a UFW had been seen by a 74 7 airplane over Bridgton. Maine - an unidentified flying witch. And that was the end of wicked Witch Hazel. She is on the moon now, and probably still farting.

And the Kings are the happiest family in Bridgton again. They often exchange visits with the Prince of New Hampshire, who is now now King. Daddy writes books and never uses the word banana. Mommy uses her hands more than ever. And Joe and Naomi King hardly ever cry.

As for Witch Hazel, she was never seen again, and considering those terrible farts she was letting when she left, that is probably a good thing!

THE END

THE LITTLE
SISTERS OF
ELURIA

STEPHEN KING

From:

Legends: The Book Of Fantasy 1998

INTRODUCTION

The Gunslinger (1982)

The Drawing of the Three (1987)

The Waste Lands (1991)

Wizard and Glass (1997)

These novels, using thematic elements from Robert Browning's poem 'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came'. tell the saga of Roland, last of the gunslingers, who embarks on a quest to find the Dark Tower for reasons that the author has yet to reveal. Along the way, Roland encounters the remains of what was once a thriving

society, feudal in nature but technologically quite advanced, that now has fallen into decay and ruin. King combines elements of fantasy with science fiction into a surreal blend of past and future. The first book, *The Gunslinger*, introduces Roland, who is chasing the Dark Man, an enigmatic sorcerer figure, across a vast desert. Through flashbacks, the reader learns that Roland was a member of a noble family in the Dark Tower world, and that that world may or may not have been destroyed with help from the Dark Man. Along the way, Roland encounters strange inhabitants of this unnamed world, including Jake, a young boy who, even though he is killed by the end of the first book, will figure prominently in later volumes. Roland does catch up with the Dark Man, and learns that he must seek out the Dark Tower to find the answers to the questions of why he must embark on this quest and what is contained in the Tower.

The next book, *The Drawing of the Three*, shows Roland recruiting three people from present-day Earth to join him on his way to the Dark Tower. They are Eddie, a junkie 'mule' working for the Mafia; Suzannah, a paraplegic with multiple personalities; and

Jake, whose arrival is startling to Roland, who sacrificed Jake in his own world during his pursuit of the Dark Man. Roland saves Jake's life on Earth, but the resulting schism nearly drives him insane. Roland must also help the other two battle their own demons, Eddie's being his heroin addiction and guilt over not being able to save his brother's life, and Suzannah's the war between her different personalities, one a kind and gentle woman, the other a racist psychopath. Each of the three deals with their problems with the help of the others, and together the quartet set out on the journey to the Tower.

The third book, *The Waste Lands*, chronicles the first leg of that journey, examining the background of the three Earth-born characters in detail. The book reaches its climax when Jake is kidnapped by a cult thriving in the ruins of a crumbling city, led by a man known only as Flagg (a character who has appeared in several of King's other novels as the embodiment of pure evil). Roland rescues Jake and the group escapes the city on a monorail system whose artificial intelligence program has achieved sentience at the cost of its sanity. The monorail challenges them to a riddle-contest, with their lives as the prize if they can stump the machine, who claims to know every riddle ever created.

Wizard and Glass, the fourth volume in the series, finds Roland, Jake, Eddie and Suzannah continuing their journey towards the Dark Tower, moving through a deserted part of Mid-World that is eerily reminiscent of twentieth-century Earth. During their travels they encounter a thinny, a dangerous weakening of the barrier between different times and places. Roland recognizes it and realizes that his world is breaking down faster than he had thought. The thinny prompts him to recall the first time he encountered it, many years before on a trip out west with his friends Cuthbert and Alain, when Roland had just earned his gunslinger status. It is this story - of the three boys uncovering a plot against the ruling government and of Roland's first love, a girl named Susan Delgado - that is the central focus of the book. While the three manage to

destroy the conspirators, Susan is killed during the fight by the townspeople of Hambry. The story gives Jake, Eddie and Suzannah new insight into Roland's background and why he may sacrifice them to attain his ultimate goal of saving his world. The book ends with the foursome moving onward once more towards the Tower.

THE LITTLE SISTERS OF ELURIA
BY STEPHEN KING

[Author's Note: The Dark Tower books begin with Roland of Gilead, the last gunslinger in an exhausted world that has 'moved on', pursuing a magician in a black robe. Roland has been chasing Walter for a very long time. In the first book of the cycle, he finally catches up. This story, however, takes place while Roland is still casting about for Walter's trail. A knowledge of the books is therefore not necessary for you to understand - and hopefully enjoy -the story which follows. S.K.]

I. Full Earth. The Empty Town. The Bells. The Dead Boy.
The Overturned Wagon. The Green Folk.

On a day in Full Earth so hot that it seemed to suck the breath from his chest before his body could use it, Roland of Gilead came to the gates of a village in the Desatoya Mountains. He was travelling alone by then, and would soon be travelling afoot, as well. This whole last week he had been hoping for a horse-doctor, but guessed such a fellow would do him no good now, even if this town had one. His mount, a two-year-old roan, was pretty well done for.

The town gates, still decorated with flowers from some festival or other, stood open and welcoming, but the silence beyond them was all wrong. The gunslinger heard no clip-clop of horses, no rumble

of wagon-wheels, no merchants' huckstering cries from the marketplace. The only sounds were the low hum of crickets (some sort of bug, at any rate; they were a bit more tuneful than crickets, at that), a queer wooden knocking sound, and the faint, dreamy tinkle of small bells.

Also, the flowers twined through the wrought-iron staves of the ornamental gate were long dead.

Between his knees, Topsy gave two great, hollow sneezes - K'chow! K'chow! - and staggered sideways. Roland dismounted, partly out of respect for the horse, partly out of respect for himself - he didn't want to break a leg under Topsy if Topsy chose this moment to give up and canter into the clearing at the end of his path.

The gunslinger stood in his dusty boots and faded jeans under the beating sun, stroking the roan's matted neck, pausing every now and then to yank his fingers through the tangles of Topsy's mane, and stopping once to shoo off the tiny flies clustering at the corners of Topsy's eyes. Let them lay their eggs and hatch their maggots there after Topsy was dead, but not before.

Roland thus honoured his horse as best he could, listening to those distant, dreamy bells and the strange wooden tocking sound as he did. After a while he ceased his absent grooming and looked thoughtfully at the open gate.

The cross above its centre was a bit unusual, but otherwise the gate was a typical example of its type, a western commonplace which was not useful but traditional - all the little towns he had come to in the last tenmonth seemed to have one such where you came in (grand) and one more such where you went out (not so grand).

None had been built to exclude visitors, certainly not this one. It stood between two walls of pink adobe that ran into the scree for a distance of about twenty feet on either side of the road and then simply stopped. Close the gate, lock it with many locks, and all that meant was a short walk around one bit of adobe wall or the other.

Beyond the gate, Roland could see what looked in most respects like a perfectly ordinary High Street - an inn, two saloons (one of which was called The Bustling Pig; the sign over the other was too

faded to read), a mercantile, a smithy, a Gathering Hall. There was also a small but rather lovely wooden building with a modest bell-tower on top, a sturdy fieldstone foundation on bottom, and a gold-painted cross on its double doors. The cross, like the one over the gate, marked this as a worshipping place for those who held to the Jesus-man. This wasn't a common religion in Mid-World, but far from unknown; that same thing could have been said about most forms of worship in those days, including the worship of Baal, Asmodeus, and a hundred others. Faith, like everything else in the world these days, had moved on. As far as Roland was concerned, God o' the Cross was just another religion which taught that love and murder were inextricably bound together - that in the end, God

always drank blood.

Meanwhile, there was the singing hum of insects which sounded almost like crickets. The dreamlike tinkle of the bells. And that queer wooden thumping, like a fist on a door. Or on a coffin top. Something here's a long way from right, the gunslinger thought. Ware, Roland; this place has a reddish odour.

He led Topsy through the gate with its adornments of dead flowers and down the High Street. On the porch of the mercantile, where the old men should have congregated to discuss crops, politics, and the follies of the younger generation, there stood only a line of empty rockers. Lying beneath one, as if dropped from a careless (and long-departed) hand, was a charred corncob pipe. The hitching-rack in front of The Bustling Pig stood empty; the windows of the saloon itself were dark. One of the batwing doors had been yanked off and stood propped against the side of the building; the other hung ajar, its faded green slats splattered with maroon stuff that might have been paint but probably wasn't. The shopfront of the livery stable stood intact, like the face of a ruined woman who has access to good cosmetics, but the double barn behind it was a charred skeleton. That fire must have happened on a rainy day, the gunslinger thought, or the whole

damned town would have gone up in flames; a jolly spin and raree for anyone around to see it.

To his right now, halfway up to where the street opened into the town square, was the church. There were grassy borders on both sides, one separating the church from the town's Gathering Hall, the other from the little house set aside for the preacher and his family (if this was one of the Jesus-sects which allowed its shamans to have wives and families, that was; some of them, clearly administered by lunatics, demanded at least the appearance of celibacy). There were flowers in these grassy strips, and while they looked parched, most were still alive. So whatever had happened here to empty the place out had not happened long ago. A week, perhaps. Two at the outside, given the heat.

Topsy sneezed again - K'chow! - and lowered his head wearily. The gunslinger saw the source of the tinkling. Above the cross on the church doors, a cord had been strung in a long, shallow arc. Hung from it were perhaps two dozen tiny silver bells. There was hardly any breeze today, but enough so these small bells were never quite still ... and if a real wind should rise, Roland thought, the sound made by the tintinnabulation of the bells would probably be a good deal less pleasant; more like the strident parley of gossips' tongues.

'Hello!' Roland called, looking across the street at what a large falsefronted sign proclaimed to be the Good Beds Hotel. 'Hello, the town!'

No answer but the bells, the tunesome insects, and that odd wooden clunking. No answer, no movement ... but there were folk here. Folk or something. He was being watched. The tiny hairs on the nape of his neck had stiffened.

Roland stepped onward, leading Topsy towards the centre of town, puffing up the unlaid High Street dust with each step. Forty paces

further along, he stopped in front of a low building marked with a single curt word: LAW. The Sheriffs office (if they had such this far from the Inners) looked remarkably similar to the church - wooden boards stained a rather forbidding shade of dark brown above a stone foundation.

The bells behind him rustled and whispered.

He left the roan standing in the middle of the street and mounted the steps to the LAW office. He was very aware of the bells, the sun beating against his neck, and of the sweat trickling down his sides. The door was shut but unlocked. He opened it, then winced back, half-raising a hand as the heat trapped inside rushed out in a soundless gasp. If all the closed buildings were this hot inside, he mused, the livery barns would soon not be the only burned-out hulks. And with no rain to stop the flames (and certainly no volunteer fire department, not any more), the town would not be long for the face of the earth.

He stepped inside, trying to sip at the stifling air rather than taking deep breaths. He immediately heard the low drone of flies.

There was a single cell, commodious and empty, its barred door standing open. Filthy skin-shoes, one of the pair coming unsewn, lay beneath a bunk sodden with the same dried maroon stuff which had marked The Bustling Pig. Here was where the flies were, crawling over the stain, feeding from it.

On the desk was a ledger. Roland turned it towards him and read what was embossed upon its red cover:

REGISTRY OF MISDEEDS & REDRESS
IN THE YEARS OF OUR LORD
ELURIA

So now he knew the name of the town, at least - Eluria. Pretty, yet somehow ominous, as well. But any name would have seemed

ominous, Roland supposed, given these circumstances. He turned to leave, and saw a closed door secured by a wooden bolt. He went to it, stood before it for a moment, then drew one of the big revolvers he carried low on his hips. He stood a moment longer, head down, thinking (Cuthbert, his old friend, liked to say that the wheels inside Roland's head ground slow but exceedingly fine), and then retracted the bolt. He opened the door and immediately stood back, levelling his gun, expecting a body (Eluria's Sheriff, mayhap) to come tumbling into the room with his throat cut and his eyes gouged out, victim of a MISDEED in need of REDRESS

Nothing.

Well, half a dozen stained jumpers which longer-term prisoners probably required to wear, two bows, a quiver of arrows, an old, dusty motor, a rifle that had probably last been fired a hundred years agog and a mop ... but in the gunslinger's mind, all that came down to nothing. Just a storage closet.

He went back to the desk, opened the register, and leafed through it. Even the pages were warm, as if the book had been baked. In a way, he supposed it had been. If the High Street layout had been

different, he might have expected a large number of religious offences to be recorded, but he wasn't surprised to find none here - if the Jesus-man church had coexisted with a couple of saloons, the churchfolk must have been fairly reasonable.

What Roland found were the usual petty offences, and a few not so petty - a murder, a horse-thieving, the Distressal of a Lady (which probably meant rape). The murderer had been removed to a place called Lexingworth to be hanged. Roland had never heard of it. One note towards the end read Green folk sent hence. It meant nothing to Roland. The most recent entry was this: 12/Fe/99. Chas. Freeborn, cattle-theef to be tried.

Roland wasn't familiar with the notation 12/Fe/99, but as this was a long stretch from February, he supposed Fe might stand for Full Earth. In any case, the ink looked about as fresh as the blood on the bunk in the cell, and the gunslinger had a good idea that Chas. Freeborn, cattle-theef, had reached the clearing at the end of his path.

He went out into the heat and the lacy sound of bells. Topsy looked at Roland dully, then lowered his head again, as if there were something in the dust of the High Street which could be cropped. As if he would ever want to crop again, for that matter.

The gunslinger gathered up the reins, slapped the dust off them against the faded no-colour of his jeans, and continued on up the street. The wooden knocking sound grew steadily louder as he walked (he had not holstered his gun when leaving LAW, nor cared to holster it now), and as he neared the town square, which must have housed the Eluria market in more normal times, Roland at last saw movement.

On the far side of the square was a long watering trough, made of iron-wood from the look (what some called 'seequoiah' out here), apparently fed in happier times from a rusty steel pipe which now jutted waterless above the trough's south end. Lolling over one side of this municipal oasis, about halfway down its length, was a leg clad in faded grey pants and terminating in a well-chewed cowboy boot.

The chewer was a large dog, perhaps two shades greyer than the corduroy pants. Under other circumstances, Roland supposed the mutt would have had the boot off long since, but perhaps the foot and lower calf inside it had swelled. In any case, the dog was well on its way to simply chewing the obstacle away. It would seize the boot and shake it back and forth. Every now and then the boot's heel would collide with the wooden side of the trough, producing another hollow knock. The gunslinger hadn't been so wrong to think of coffin tops after all, it seemed.

Why doesn't it just back off a few steps, jump into the trough, and have at him? Roland wondered. No water coming out of the pipe, so it can't be afraid of drowning.

Topsy uttered another of his hollow, tired sneezes, and when the dog lurched around in response, Roland understood why it was

doing things the hard way. One of its front legs had been badly broken and crookedly mended. Walking would be a chore for it, jumping out of the question. On its chest was a patch of dirty white fur. Growing out of this patch was black fur in a roughly cruciform shape. A Jesus-dog, mayhap, hoping for a spot of afternoon communion.

There was nothing very religious about the snarl which began to wind out of its chest, however, or the roll of its rheumy eyes. It lifted its upper lip in a trembling sneer, revealing a goodish set of teeth.

'Light out,' Roland said. 'While you can.'

The dog backed up until its hindquarters were pressed against the chewed boot. It regarded the oncoming man fearfully, but clearly meant to stand its ground. The revolver in Roland's hand held no significance for it. The gunslinger wasn't surprised - he guessed the dog had never seen one, had no idea it was anything other than a club of some kind, which could only be thrown once.

'Hie on with you, now,' Roland said, but still the dog wouldn't move.

He should have shot it - it was no good to itself, and a dog that had acquired a taste for human flesh could be no good to anyone else - but he somehow didn't like to. Killing the only thing still living in this town (other than the singing bugs, that was) seemed like an invitation to bad luck.

He fired into the dust near the dog's good forepaw, the sound crashing into the hot day and temporarily silencing the insects. The

dog could run, it seemed, although at a lurching trot that hurt Roland's eyes ... and his heart, a little, too. It stopped at the far side of the square, by an overturned flatbed wagon (there looked to be more dried blood splashed on the freighter's side), and glanced back. It uttered a forlorn howl that raised the hairs on the nape of Roland's neck even further.

Then it turned, skirted the wrecked wagon, and limped down a lane which opened between two of the stalls. This way towards Eluria's back gate, Roland guessed.

Still leading his dying horse, the gunslinger crossed the square to the ironwood trough and looked in.

The owner of the chewed boot wasn't a man but a boy who had just been beginning to get his man's growth - and that would have been quite a large growth indeed, Roland judged, even setting aside the bloating effects which had resulted from being immersed for some unknown length of time in nine inches of water simmering under a summer sun.

The boy's eyes, now just milky balls, stared blindly up at the gunslinger like the eyes of a statue. His hair appeared to be the white of old age, although that was the effect of the water; he had likely been a towhead. His clothes were those of a cowboy, although he couldn't have been much more than fourteen or sixteen. Around his neck, gleaming blearily in water that was slowly turning into a skin stew under the summer sun, was a gold medallion.

Roland reached into the water, not liking to but feeling a certain obligation. He wrapped his fingers around the medallion and

pulled. The chain parted, and he lifted the thing, dripping, into the air.

He rather expected a Jesus-man sigil - what was called the crucifix or the rood -but a small rectangle hung from the chain, instead. The object looked like pure gold. Engraved into it was this legend:

James

Loved of Family, Loved of GOD

Roland, who had been almost too revolted to reach into the polluted water (as a younger man, he could never have brought himself to that), was now glad he'd done it. He might never run into any of those who had loved this boy, but he knew enough of ka to think it might be so. In any case, it was the right thing. So was giving the kid a decent burial ... assuming, that was, he could get the body out of the trough without having it break apart inside the clothes.

Roland was considering this, trying to balance what might be his duty in this circumstance against his growing desire to get out of this town, when Topsy finally fell dead.

The roan went over with a creak of gear and a last whuffling groan as it hit the ground. Roland turned and saw eight people in the street, walking towards him in a line, like beaters who hope to flush out birds or drive small game. Their skin was waxy green. Folk wearing such skin would likely glow in the dark like ghosts. It was hard to tell their sex, and what could it matter - to them or anyone else? They were slow mutants, walking with the hunched deliberation of corpses reanimated by some arcane magic. The dust had muffled their feet like carpet. With the dog banished, they might well have gotten within attacking distance if Topsy hadn't done Roland the favour of dying at such an opportune moment. No guns that Roland could see; they were armed with clubs. These were chair-legs and table-legs, for the most part, but Roland saw one that looked made rather than seized - it had a

bristle of rusty nails sticking out of it, and he suspected it had once - been the property of a saloon bouncer, possibly the one who kept school in The Bustling Pig.

Roland raised his pistol, aiming at the fellow in the centre of the line. Now he could hear the shuffle of their feet, and the wet snuffle of their breathing. As if they all had bad chest-colds.

Came out of the mines, most likely, Roland thought. There are radium mines somewhere about. That would account for the skin. I wonder that the sun doesn't kill them.

Then, as he watched, the one on the end - a creature with a face like melted candle-wax - did die ... or collapsed, at any rate. He (Roland was quite sure it was a male) went to his knees with a low, gobbling cry, groping for the hand of the thing walking next to him - something with a lumpy bald head and red sores sizzling on its neck. This creature took no notice of its fallen companion, but kept its dim eyes on Roland, lurching along in rough step with its remaining companions.

'Stop where you are!' Roland said. "Ware me, if you'd live to see day's end! 'Ware me very well!'

He spoke mostly to the one in the centre, who wore ancient red suspenders over rags of shirt, and a filthy bowler hat. This gent had only one good eye, and it peered at the gunslinger with a greed as horrible as it was unmistakable. The one beside Bowler Hat (Roland believed this one might be a woman, with the dangling vestiges of breasts beneath the vest it wore) threw the chair-leg it held. The arc was true, but the missile fell ten yards short. Roland thumbed back the trigger of his revolver and fired again. This time the dirt displaced by the slug kicked up on the tattered remains of Bowler Hat's shoe instead of on a lame dog's paw.

The green folk didn't run as the dog had, but they stopped, staring at him with their dull greed. Had the missing folk of Eluria finished up in these creatures' stomachs? Roland couldn't believe it . . . although he knew perfectly well that such as these held no scruple against cannibalism. (And perhaps it wasn't cannibalism, not really; how could such things as these be considered human, whatever they might once have been?) They were too slow, too stupid. If they had dared come back into town after the Sheriff had run them out, they would have been burned or stoned to death. Without thinking about what he was doing, wanting only to free his other hand to draw his second gun if the apparitions didn't see reason, Roland stuffed the medallion which he had taken from the dead boy into the pocket of his jeans, pushing the broken fine-link chain in after.

They stood staring at him, their strangely twisted shadows drawn out behind them. What next? Tell them to go back where they'd come from? Roland didn't know if they'd do it, and in any case had decided he liked them best where he could see them. And at least there was no question now about staying to bury the boy named James; that conundrum had been solved.

'Stand steady,' he said in the low speech, beginning to retreat. 'First fellow that moves -'

Before he could finish, one of them - a thick-chested troll with a pouty toad's mouth and what looked like gills on the sides of his wattled neck - lunged forward, gibbering in a high-pitched and peculiarly flabby voice.

It might have been a species of laughter. He was waving what looked like a piano-leg.

Roland fired. Mr Toad's chest caved in like a bad piece of roofing. He ran backwards several steps, trying to catch his balance and clawing at his chest with the hand not holding the piano-leg. His

feet, clad in dirty red velvet slippers with curled-up toes, tangled in each other and he fell over, making a queer and somehow lonely gargling sound. He let go of his club, rolled over on one side, tried to rise, and then fell back into the dust. The brutal sun glared into his open eyes, and as Roland watched, white tendrils of steam began to rise from his skin, which was rapidly losing its green

undertint. There was also a hissing sound, like a gob of spit on top of a hot stove.

Saves explaining, at least, Roland thought, and swept his eyes over the others. 'All right; he was the first one to move. Who wants to be the second?'

None did, it seemed. They only stood there, watching him, not coming at him ... but not retreating, either. He thought (as he had about the crucifix-dog) that he should kill them as they stood there, just draw his other gun and mow them down. It would be the work of seconds only, and child's play to his gifted hands, even if some ran. But he couldn't.

Not just cold, like that. He wasn't that kind of killer ... at least, not yet.

Very slowly, he began to step backwards, first bending his course around the watering trough, then putting it between him and them. When Bowler Hat took a step forward, Roland didn't give the others in the line a chance to copy him; he put a bullet into the dust of High Street an inch in advance of Bowler Hat's foot.

'That's your last warning,' he said, still using the low speech. He had no idea if they understood it, didn't really care. He guessed they caught this tune's music well enough. 'Next bullet I fire eats up someone's heart. The way it works is, you stay and I go. You get this one chance. Follow me, and you all die. It's too hot to play games and I've lost my -'

'Booh!' cried a rough, liquidy voice from behind him. There was unmistakable glee in it. Roland saw a shadow grow from the shadow of the overturned freight wagon, which he had now almost reached, and had just time to understand that another of the green folk had been hiding beneath it.

As he began to turn, a club crashed down on Roland's shoulder, numbing his right arm all the way to the wrist. He held on to the gun and fired once, but the bullet went into one of the wagon-wheels, smashing a wooden spoke and turning the wheel on its hub with a high screeching sound. Behind him, he heard the green folk in the street uttering hoarse, yapping cries as they charged forward. The thing which had been hiding beneath the overturned wagon was a monster with two heads growing out of his neck, one with the vestigial, slack face of a corpse. The other, although just as green, was more lively. Broad lips spread in a cheerful grin as he raised his club to strike again.

Roland drew with his left hand - the one that wasn't numbed and distant. He had time to put one bullet through the bushwhacker's grin, flinging him backwards in a spray of blood and teeth, the bludgeon flying out of his relaxing fingers. Then the others were on him, clubbing and drubbing.

The gunslinger was able to slip the first couple of blows, and there was one moment when he thought he might be able to spin around to the rear of the overturned wagon, spin and turn and go to work with his guns. Surely he would be able to do that. Surely his quest for the Dark Tower wasn't supposed to end on the sun-blasted street of a little far-western town called Eluria, at the hands of half a dozen green-skinned slow mutants. Surely ka could not be so cruel.

But Bowler Hat caught him with a vicious sidehand blow, and Roland crashed into the wagon's slowly spinning rear wheel instead of skirting around it. As he went to his hands and knees,

still scrambling and trying to turn, trying to evade the blows which rained down on him, he saw there were now many more than half a dozen. Coming up the street towards the town square were at least thirty green men and women. This wasn't a clan but a damned tribe of them. And in broad, hot daylight! Slow mutants were, in his experience, creatures that loved the dark, almost like toadstools with brains, and he had never seen any such as these before. They - The one in the red vest was female. Her bare breasts swinging beneath the dirty red vest were the last things he saw clearly as they gathered around and above him, bashing away with their clubs. The one with the nails studded in it came down on his lower right calf, sinking its stupid rusty fangs in deep. He tried again to raise one of the big guns (his vision was fading, now, but that wouldn't help them if he got to shooting; he had always been the most hellishly talented of them; Jamie DeCurry had once proclaimed that Roland could shoot blindfolded, because he had eyes in his fingers), and it was kicked out of his hand and into the dust. Although he could still feel the smooth sandalwood grip of the other, he thought it was nevertheless already gone. He could smell them - the rich, rotted smell of decaying meat. Or was that only his hands, as he raised them in a feeble and useless effort to protect his head? His hands, which had been in the polluted water where flecks and strips of the dead boy's skin floated?

The clubs slamming down on him, slamming down all over him, as if the green folk wanted not just to beat him to death but to tenderize him as they did so. And as he went down into the darkness of what he most certainly believed would be his death, he heard the bugs singing, the dog he had spared barking, and the bells hung on the church door ringing. These sounds merged together into strangely sweet music. Then that was gone, too; the darkness ate it all.

II. Rising. Hanging Suspended. White Beauty.
Two Others. The Medallion.

The gunslinger's return to the world wasn't like coming back to consciousness after a blow, which he'd done several times before, and it wasn't like waking from sleep, either. It was like rising. I'm dead, he thought at some point during this process ... when the power to think had been at least partially restored to him. Dead and rising into whatever afterlife there is. That's what it must be. The singing I hear is the singing of dead souls. Total blackness gave way to the dark grey of rainclouds, then to the lighter grey of fog. This brightened to the uniform clarity of a heavy mist moments before the sun breaks through. And through it all was that sense of rising, as if he had been caught in some mild

but powerful updraught.

As the sense of rising began to diminish and the brightness behind his eyelids grew, Roland at last began to believe he was still alive. It was the singing that convinced him. Not dead souls, not the heavenly host of angels sometimes described by the Jesus-man preachers, but only those bugs. A little like crickets, but sweeter-voiced. The ones he had heard in Eluria.

On this thought, he opened his eyes.

His belief that he was still alive was severely tried, for Roland found himself hanging suspended in a world of white beauty - his first bewildered thought was that he was in the sky, floating within a fair-weather cloud. All around him was the reedy singing of the bugs. Now he could hear the tinkling of bells, too.

He tried to turn his head and swayed in some sort of harness. He could hear it creaking. The soft singing of the bugs, like crickets in the grass at the end of day back home in Gilead, hesitated and broke rhythm. When it did, what felt like a tree of pain grew up

Roland's back. He had no idea what its burning branches might be, but the trunk was surely his spine. A far deadlier pain sank into one of his lower legs ~ in his confusion, the gunslinger could not tell which one. That's where the club with the nails in it got me, he thought. And more pain in his head. His skull felt like a badly cracked egg. He cried out, and could hardly believe that the harsh crow's caw he heard came from his own throat. He thought he could also hear, very faintly, the barking of the cross-dog, but surely that was his imagination.

Am I dying? Have I awakened once more at the very end?

A hand stroked his brow. He could feel it but not see it - fingers trailing across his skin ' pausing here and there to massage a knot or a line. Delicious, like a drink of cool water on a hot day. He began to close his eyes, and then a horrible idea came to him: suppose that hand were green, its owner wearing a tattered red vest over her hanging dug's?

What if it is? What could you do?

'Hush, man,' a young woman's voice said ... or perhaps it was the voice of a girl. Certainly the first person Roland thought of was Susan, the girl from Mejis, she who had spoken to him as thee.

'Where ... where . . .'

'Hush, stir not. 'Tis far too soon.'

The pain in his back was subsiding now, but the image of the pain as a tree remained, for his very skin seemed to be moving like leaves in a light breeze. How could that be?

He let the question go - let all questions go - and concentrated on the small, cool hand stroking his brow.

'Hush, pretty man, God's love be upon ye. Yet it's sore hurt ye are. Be still. Heal.'

The dog had hushed its barking (if it had ever been there in the first place), and Roland became aware of that low, creaking sound again. It reminded him of horse-tethers, or something - hangropes -

he didn't like to think of. Now he believed he could feel pressure beneath his thighs, his buttocks, and perhaps . . . yes ... his shoulders.

I'm not in a bed at all. I think I'm above a bed. Can that be? He supposed he could be in a sling. He seemed to remember once, as a boy, that some fellow had been suspended that way in the horse-doctor's room behind the Great Hall. A stablehand who had been burned too badly by kerosene to be laid in a bed. The man had died, but not soon enough; for two nights, his shrieks had filled the sweet summer air of the Gathering Fields.

Am I burned, then, nothing but a cinder with legs, hanging in a sling?

The fingers touched the centre of his brow, rubbing away the frown forming there. And it was as if the voice which went with the hand had read his thoughts, picking them up with the tips of her clever, soothing fingers.

'Ye'll be fine if God wills, sai,' the voice which went with the hand said. 'But time belongs to God, not to you.'

No, he would have said, if he had been able. Time belongs to the Tower.

Then he slipped down again, descending as smoothly as he had risen, going away from the hand and the dreamlike sounds of the singing insects and chiming bells. There was an interval that might have been sleep, or perhaps unconsciousness, but he never went all the way back down.

At one point he thought he heard the girl's voice, although he couldn't be sure, because this time it was raised in fury, or fear, or

both. 'No!' she cried. 'Ye can't have it off him and ye know it! Go your course and stop talking of it, do!'

When he rose back to consciousness the second time, he was no stronger in body, but a little more himself in mind. What he saw when he opened his eyes wasn't the inside of a cloud, but at first that same phrase - white beauty - recurred to him. It was in some ways the most beautiful place Roland had ever been in his life ... partially because he still had a life, of course, but mostly because it was so fey and peaceful.

It was a huge room, high and long. When Roland at last turned his head - cautiously, so cautiously - to take its measure as well as he could, he thought it must run at least two hundred yards from end to end. It was built narrow, but its height gave the place a feeling of tremendous airiness.

There were no walls or ceilings such as those he was familiar with, although it was a little like being in a vast tent. Above him, the sun struck and diffused its light across billowy panels of thin white silk, turning them into the bright swags which he had first mistaken for clouds. Beneath this silk canopy, the room was as grey as twilight. The walls, also silk, rippled like sails in a faint breeze. Hanging from each wall-panel was a curved rope bearing small bells. These lay against the fabric and rang in low and charming unison, like wind-chimes, when the walls rippled.

An aisle ran down the centre of the long room; on either side of it were scores of beds, each made up with clean white sheets and headed with crisp white pillows. There were perhaps forty on the

far side of the aisle, all empty, and another forty on Roland's side. There were two other occupied beds here, one next to Roland on his left. This fellow
It's the boy. The one who was in the trough.

The idea ran goosebumps up Roland's arms and gave him a nasty, superstitious start. He peered more closely at the sleeping boy. Can't be. You're just dazed, that's all; it can't be. Yet closer scrutiny refused to dispel the idea. It certainly seemed to be the boy from the trough, probably ill (why else would he be in a place like this?) but far from dead; Roland could see the slow rise and fall of his chest, and the occasional twitch of the fingers which dangled over the side of the bed.

You didn't get a good enough look at him to be sure of anything, and after a few days in that trough, his own mother couldn't have said for sure who it was.

But Roland, who'd had a mother, knew better than that. He also knew that he'd seen the gold medallion around the boy's neck. just before the attack of the green folk, he had taken it from this lad's corpse and put it in his pocket. Now someone - the proprietors of this place, most likely, they who had sorcerously restored the lad named James to his interrupted life - had taken it back from Roland and put it around the boy's neck again.

Had the girl with the wonderfully cool hand done that? Did she in consequence think Roland a ghoul who would steal from the dead? He didn't like to think so. In fact, the notion made him more uncomfortable than the idea that the young cowboy's bloated body had been somehow returned to its normal size and then reanimated. Further down the aisle on this side, perhaps a dozen empty beds away from the boy and Roland Deschain, the gunslinger saw a third inmate of this queer infirmary. This fellow looked at least four times the age of the lad, twice the age of the gunslinger. He had a long beard, more grey than black, that hung to his upper chest in two straggly forks. The face above it was sun-darkened, heavily lined, and pouched beneath the eyes. Running from his left cheek and across the bridge of his nose was a thick dark mark

which Roland took to be a scar. The bearded man was either asleep or unconscious - Roland could hear him snoring - and was suspended three feet above his bed, held up by a complex series of white belts that glimmered in the dim air. These crisscrossed each other, making a series of figure eights all the way around the man's body. He looked like a bug in some exotic spider's web. He wore a gauzy white bed-dress. One of the belts ran beneath his buttocks, elevating his crotch in a way that seemed to offer the bulge of his privates to the grey and dreaming air. Further down his body, Roland could see the dark shadow-shapes of his legs. They appeared to be twisted like ancient dead trees. Roland didn't like to think in how many places they must have been broken to look like that. And yet they appeared to be moving. How could they be, if the bearded man was unconscious? It was a trick of the light,

perhaps, or of the shadows ... perhaps the gauzy singlet the man was wearing was stirring in a light breeze, or ... Roland looked away, up at the billowy silk panels high above, trying to control the accelerating beat of his heart. What he saw hadn't been caused by the wind, or a shadow, or anything else. The man's legs were somehow moving without moving ... as Roland had seemed to feel his own back moving without moving. He didn't know what could cause such a phenomenon, and didn't want to know, at least not yet.

'I'm not ready,' he whispered. His lips felt very dry. He closed his eyes again, wanting to sleep, wanting not to think about what the bearded man's twisted legs might indicate about his own condition.

But

But you'd better get ready.

That was the voice that always seemed to come when he tried to slack off, to scamp a job, or take the easy way around an obstacle. It was the voice of Cort, his old teacher. The man whose stick they had all feared, as boys. They hadn't feared his stick as much as his

mouth, however. His jeers when they were weak, his contempt when they complained or tried whining about their lot.

Are you a gunslinger, Roland? If you are, you better get ready.

Roland opened his eyes again and turned his head to the left again.

As he did, he felt something shift against his chest.

Moving very slowly, he raised his right hand out of the sling that held it. The pain in his back stirred and muttered. He stopped moving until he decided the pain was going to get no worse (if he was careful, at least), then lifted the hand the rest of the way to his chest. It encountered finely-woven cloth. Cotton. He lowered his chin to his breastbone and saw he was wearing a bed-dress like the one draped on the body of the bearded man.

Roland reached beneath the neck of the gown and felt a fine chain.

A little further down, his fingers encountered a rectangular metal shape. He thought he knew what it was, but had to be sure. He pulled it out, still moving with great care, trying not to engage any of the muscles in his back. A gold medallion. He dared the pain, lifting it until he could read what was engraved upon it:

James

Loved of family, Loved of GOD

He tucked it into the top of the bed-dress again and looked back at the sleeping boy in the next bed - in it, not suspended over it. The sheet was only pulled up to the boy's ribcage, and the medallion lay on the pristine white breast of his bed-dress. The same medallion Roland now wore. Except ...

Roland thought he understood, and understanding was a relief.

He looked back at the bearded man, and saw an exceedingly strange thing: the thick black line of scar across the bearded man's cheek and nose was gone. Where it had been was the pinkish-red mark of a healing wound ... a cut, or perhaps a slash.

I imagined it.

No, gunslinger, Cort's voice returned. Such as you was not made to imagine. As you well know.

The little bit of movement had tired him out again ... or perhaps it was the thinking which had really tired him out. The singing bugs and chiming bells combined and made something too much like a lullaby to resist. This time when Roland closed his eyes, he slept.

III. Five Sisters. Jenna. The Doctors of Eluria.

The Medallion. A Promise of Silence.

When Roland awoke again, he was at first sure that he was still sleeping. Dreaming. Having a nightmare.

Once, at the time he had met and fallen in love with Susan Delgado, he had known a witch named Rhea - the first real witch of Mid-World he had ever met. It was she who had caused Susan's death, although Roland had played his own part. Now, opening his eyes and seeing Rhea not just once but five times over, he thought: This is what comes of remembering those old times. By conjuring Susan, I've conjured Rhea of the Coos, as well. Rhea and her sisters.

The five were dressed in billowing habits as white as the walls and the panels of the ceiling. Their antique crones' faces were framed in wimples just as white, their skin as grey and runnelled as droughted earth by comparison. Hanging like phylacteries from the bands of silk imprisoning their hair (if they indeed had hair) were lines of tiny bells which chimed as they moved or spoke. Upon the snowy breasts of their habits was embroidered a blood-red rose ... the sigil of the Dark Tower. Seeing this, Roland thought: I am not dreaming. These harridans are real.

'He wakes!' one of them cried in a gruesomely coquettish voice.

'Oooo!'

'Ooooh!'

'Ah!'

They fluttered like birds. The one in the centre stepped forward, and as she did, their faces seemed to shimmer like the silk walls of the ward. They weren't old after all, he saw - middle-aged, perhaps, but not old.

Yes. They are old. They changed.

The one who now took charge was taller than the others, and with a broad, slightly bulging brow. She bent towards Roland, and the bells which fringed her forehead tinkled. The sound made him feel sick, somehow, and weaker than he had felt a moment before. Her hazel eyes were intent. Greedy, mayhap. She touched his cheek for a moment, and a numbness seemed to spread there. Then she glanced down, and a look which could have been disquiet cramped her face. She took her hand back.

'Ye wake, pretty man. So ye do. 'Tis well.'

'Who are you? Where am I?'

'We are the Little Sisters of Eluria,' she said. 'I am Sister Mary. Here is Sister Louise, and Sister Michela, and Sister Coquina -'

'And Sister Tamra,' said the last. 'A lovely lass of one-and-twenty.'

She giggled. Her face shimmered, and for a moment she was again as old as the world. Hooked of nose, grey of skin. Roland thought

once more of Rhea.

They moved closer, encircling the complication of harness in which he lay suspended, and when Roland shrank away, the pain roared up his back and injured leg again. He groaned. The straps holding him creaked.

'Ooooo!'

'It hurts!'

'Hurts him!'

'Hurts so fierce!'

They pressed even closer, as if his pain fascinated them. And now he could smell them, a dry and earthy smell. The one named Sister Michela reached out

'Go away! Leave him! Have I not told ye before?'

They jumped back from this voice, startled. Sister Mary looked particularly annoyed. But she stepped back, with one final glare (Roland would have sworn it) at the medallion lying on his chest. He had tucked it back under the bed-dress at his last waking, but it was out again now.

A sixth sister appeared, pushing rudely in between Mary and Tamra. This one perhaps was only one-and-twenty, with flushed cheeks, smooth skin, and dark eyes. Her white habit billowed like a dream. The red rose over her breast stood out like a curse.

'Go! Leave him!'

'Oooo, my dear!' cried Sister Louise in a voice both laughing and angry. 'Here's Jenna, the baby, and has she fallen in love with him?'

'She has!' laughed Tamra. 'Baby's heart is his for the purchase,'

'Oh, so it is!' agreed Sister Coquina.

Mary turned to the newcomer, lips pursed into a tight line. 'Ye have no business here, saucy girl.'

'I do if I say I do,' Sister Jenna replied. She seemed more in charge of herself now. A curl of black hair had escaped her wimple and

lay across her forehead in a comma. 'Now go. He's not up to your jokes and laughter.'

'Order us not,' Sister Mary said, 'for we never joke. So you know, Sister Jenna.'

The girl's face softened a little, and Roland saw she was afraid. It made him afraid for her. For himself, as well. 'Go,' she repeated.

'Tis not the time. Are there not others to tend?'

Sister Mary seemed to consider. The others watched her. At last she nodded, and smiled down at Roland. Again her face seemed to shimmer, like something seen through a heat-haze. What he saw (or thought he saw) beneath was horrible and watchful. 'Bide well, pretty man,' she said to Roland. 'Bide with us a bit, and we'll heal ye.'

What choice have I? Roland thought.

The others laughed, birdlike titters which rose into the dimness like ribbons. Sister Michela actually blew him a kiss.

'Come, ladies!' Sister Mary cried. 'We'll leave Jenna with him a bit

in memory of her mother, who we loved well!' And with that, she led the others away, five white birds flying off down the centre aisle, their skirts nodding this way and that.

'Thank you,' Roland said, looking up at the owner of the cool hand... for he knew it was she who had soothed him.

She took up his fingers as if to prove this, and caressed them. 'They mean ye no harm,' she said ... yet Roland saw she believed not a word of it, nor did he. He was in trouble here, very bad trouble.

'What is this place?'

'Our place,' she said simply. 'The home of the Little Sisters of Eluria. Our convent, if 'ee like.'

'This is no convent,' Roland said, looking past her at the empty beds. It's an infirmary. Isn't it?'

'A hospital,' she said, still stroking his fingers. 'We serve the doctors ... and they serve us.' He was fascinated by the black curl lying on the cream of her brow - would have stroked it, if he had dared reach up. Just to tell its texture. He found it beautiful because it was the only dark thing in all this white. The white had lost its charm for him. 'We are hospitallers ... or were, before the world moved on.'

'Are you for the Jesus-man?'

She looked surprised for a moment, almost shocked, and then laughed merrily. 'No, not us!'

'If you are hospitallers ... nurses ... where are the doctors?'

She looked at him, biting at her lip, as if trying to decide something. Roland found her doubt utterly charming, and he realized that, sick or not, he was looking at a woman as a woman for the first time since Susan Delgado had died, and that had been long ago. The whole world had changed since then, and not for the better.

'Would you really know?'

'Yes, of course,' he said, a little surprised. A little disquieted, too. He kept waiting for her face to shimmer and change, as the faces of the others had done. It didn't. There was none of that unpleasant dead-earth smell about her, either.

Wait, he cautioned himself. Believe nothing here, least of all your senses. Not yet.

'I suppose you must,' she said with a sigh. It tinkled the bells at her forehead, which were darker in colour than those the others wore - not black like her hair but charry, somehow, as if they had been hung in the smoke of a campfire. Their sound, however, was

brightest silver. 'Promise me you'll not scream and wake the pube in yonder bed.'

'Pube?'

'The boy. Do ye promise?'

'Aye,' he said, falling into the half-forgotten patois of the Outer Arc without even being aware of it. Susan's dialect. 'It's been long since I screamed, pretty.'

She coloured more definitely at that, roses more natural and lively

than the one on her breast mounting in her cheeks.

'Don't call pretty what ye can't properly see,' she said.

'Then push back the wimple you wear.'

Her face he could see perfectly well, but he badly wanted to see her hair - hungered for it, almost. A full flood of black in all this dreaming white. Of course it might be cropped, those of her order might wear it that way, but he somehow didn't think so.

'No, 'tis not allowed.'

'By who?'

'Big Sister.'

'She who calls herself Mary?'

'Aye, her.' She started away, then paused and looked back over her shoulder. In another girl her age, one as pretty as this, that look back would have been flirtatious. This girl's was only grave.

'Remember your promise.'

'Aye, no screams.'

She went to the bearded man, skirt swinging. In the dimness, she cast only a blur of shadow on the empty beds she passed. When she reached the man (this one was unconscious, Roland thought,

not just sleeping), she looked back at Roland once more. He nodded.

Sister Jenna stepped close to the suspended man on the far side of his bed, so that Roland saw her through the twists and loops of woven white silk. She placed her hands lightly on the left side of his chest, bent over him ... and shook her head from side to side, like one expressing a brisk negative. The bells she wore on her forehead rang sharply, and Roland once more felt that weird stirring up his back, accompanied by a low ripple of pain. It was as if he had shuddered without actually shuddering, or shuddered in a dream.

What happened next almost did jerk a scream from him; he had to bite his lips against it. Once more the unconscious man's legs seemed to move without moving ... because it was what was on them that moved. The man's hairy shins, ankles, and feet were exposed below the hem of his bed-dress. Now a black wave of bugs moved down them. They were singing fiercely, like an army column that sings as it marches.

Roland remembered the black scar across the man's cheek and nose - the scar which had disappeared. More such as these, of course. And they were on him, as well. That was how he could shiver without shivering. They were all over his back. Battening on him.

No, keeping back a scream wasn't as easy as he had expected it to be.

The bugs ran down to the tips of the suspended man's toes, then leaped off them in waves, like creatures leaping off an embankment and into a swimming hole. They organized themselves quickly and easily on the bright white sheet below, and began to march down to the floor in a battalion about a foot wide. Roland couldn't get a good look at them, the distance was too far and the light too dim, but he thought they were perhaps twice the

size of ants, and a little smaller than the fat honeybees which had swarmed the flowerbeds back home.

They sang as they went.

The bearded man didn't sing. As the swarms of bugs which had coated his twisted legs began to diminish, he shuddered and groaned. The young woman put her hand on his brow and soothed him, making Roland a little jealous even in his revulsion at what he was seeing.

And was what he was seeing really so awful? In Gilead, leeches had been used for certain ailments - swellings of the brain, the armpits, and the groin, primarily. When it came to the brain, the leeches, ugly as they were, were certainly preferable to the next step, which was trepanning.

Yet there was something loathsome about them, perhaps only because he couldn't see them well, and something awful about trying to imagine them all over his back as he hung here, helpless. Not singing, though. Why? Because they were feeding? Sleeping? Both at once?

The bearded man's groans subsided. The bugs marched away across the floor, towards one of the mildly rippling silken walls. Roland lost sight of them in the shadows.

Jenna came back to him, her eyes anxious. 'Ye did well. Yet I see how ye feel; it's on your face.'

'The doctors,' he said.

'Yes. Their power is very great, but. . .' She dropped her voice. 'I believe that drover is beyond their help. His legs are a little better, and the wounds on his face are all but healed, but he has injuries where the doctors cannot reach.' She traced a hand across her midsection, suggesting the location of these injuries, if not their nature.

'And me?' Roland asked.

'Ye were ta'en by the green folk,' she said. 'Ye must have angered them powerfully, for them not to kill ye outright. They roped ye and dragged ye, instead. Tamra, Michela, and Louise were out gathering herbs. They saw the green folk at play with ye, and bade them stop, but - ,

'Do the muties always obey you, Sister Jenna

She smiled, perhaps pleased he remembered her name. 'Not always, but mostly. This time they did, or ye'd have now found the clearing in the trees.'

'I suppose so.'

'The skin was stripped almost clean off your back - red ye were from nape to waist. Ye'll always bear the scars, but the doctors have gone far towards healing ye. And their singing is passing fair, is it not?'

'Yes,' Roland said, but the thought of those black things all over his back, roosting in his raw flesh, still revolted him. 'I owe you thanks, and give it freely. Anything I can do for you -

'Tell me your name, then. Do that.'

'I'm Roland of Gilead. A gunslinger. I had revolvers, Sister Jenna. Have you seen them?'

'I've seen no shooters,' she said, but cast her eyes aside. The roses bloomed in her cheeks again. She might be a good nurse, and fair, but Roland thought her a poor liar. He was glad. Good liars were common. Honesty, on the other hand, came dear.

Let the untruth pass for now, he told himself. She speaks it out of fear, I think.

'Jenna!' The cry came from the deeper shadows at the far end of the infirmary - today it seemed longer than ever to the gunslinger - and

Sister Jenna jumped guiltily. 'Come away! Ye've passed words enough to entertain twenty men! Let him sleep!'

'Aye!' she called, then turned back to Roland. 'Don't let on that I showed you the doctors.'

'Mum is the word, Jenna.'

She paused, biting her lip again, then suddenly swept back her wimple. It fell against the nape of her neck in a soft chiming of bells. Freed from its confinement, her hair swept against her cheeks like shadows.

'Am I pretty? Am I? Tell me the truth, Roland of Gilead - no flattery. For flattery's kind only a candle's length.'

'Pretty as a summer night.'

What she saw in his face seemed to please her more than his words, because she smiled radiantly. She pulled the wimple up again, tucking her hair back in with quick little finger-pokes. 'Am I decent?'

'Decent as fair,' he said, then cautiously lifted an arm and pointed at her brow. 'One curl's out ... just there.'

'Aye, always that one to devil me.' With a comical little grimace, she tucked it back. Roland thought how much he would like to kiss her rosy cheeks ... and perhaps her rosy mouth, for good measure.

'All's well,' he said.

'Jenna!' The cry was more impatient than ever. 'Meditations!'

'I'm coming just now!' she called, and gathered her voluminous skirts to go. Yet she turned back once more, her face now very grave and very serious. 'One more thing,' she said in a voice only a step above a whisper. She snatched a quick look around. 'The gold medallion ye wear - ye wear it because it's yours. Do'ee understand ... James?'

'Yes.' He turned his head a bit to look at the sleeping boy. 'This is my brother.'

'If they ask, yes. To say different would be to get Jenna in serious trouble.'

How serious he did not ask, and she was gone in any case, seeming to flow along the aisle between all the empty beds, her skirt caught up in one hand. The roses had fled from her face, leaving her cheeks and brow ashy. He remembered the greedy look on the faces of the others, how they had gathered around him in a tightening knot ... and the way their faces had shimmered. Six women, five old and one young.

Doctors that sang and then crawled away across the floor when

dismissed by jingling bells.

And an improbable hospital ward of perhaps a hundred beds, a ward with a silk roof and silk walls ...

... and all the beds empty save three.

Roland didn't understand why Jenna had taken the dead boy's medallion from his pants pocket and put it around his neck, but he had an idea that if they found out she had done so, the Little Sisters of Eluria might kill her.

Roland closed his eyes, and the soft singing of the doctor-insects once again floated him off into sleep.

IV. A Bowl of Soup. The Boy
in the Next Bed. The Night-Nurses.

Roland dreamed that a very large bug (a doctor-bug, mayhap) was flying around his head and banging repeatedly into his nose - collisions which were annoying rather than painful. He swiped at the bug repeatedly, and although his hands were eerily fast under ordinary circumstances, he kept missing it. And each time he missed, the bug giggled.

I'm slow because I've been sick, he thought.

No, ambushed. Dragged across the ground by slow mutants, saved by the Little Sisters of Eluria.

Roland had a sudden, vivid image of a man's shadow growing from the shadow of an overturned freight-wagon; heard a rough, gleeful voice cry, 'Booh!'

He jerked awake hard enough to set his body rocking in its complication of slings, and the woman who had been standing beside his head, giggling as she tapped his nose lightly with a wooden spoon, stepped back so quickly that the bowl in her other hand slipped from her fingers.

Roland's hands shot out, and they were as quick as ever - his frustrated failure to catch the bug had been only part of his dream.

He caught the bowl before more than a few drops could spill. The woman - Sister Coquina - looked at him with round eyes.

There was pain all up and down his back from the sudden movement but it was nowhere near as sharp as it had been before, and there was no sensation of movement on his skin. Perhaps the 'doctors' were only sleeping, but he had an idea they were gone. He held out his hand for the spoon Coquina had been teasing him with (he found he wasn't surprised at all that one of these would tease a sick and sleeping man in such a way; it only would have

surprised him if it had been Jenna), and she handed it to him, her eyes still big.

'How speedy ye are!' she said. ``Twas like a magic trick, and you still rising from sleep!'

'Remember it, sai,' he said, and tried the soup. There were tiny bits of chicken floating in it. He probably would have considered it bland under other circumstances, but under these, it seemed ambrosial. He began to eat greedily.

'What do 'ee mean by that?' she asked. The light was very dim now, the wall-panels across the way a pinkish-orange that suggested sunset. In this light, Coquina looked quite young and pretty ... but it was a glamour, Roland was sure; a sorcerous kind of make-up.

'I mean nothing in particular.' Roland dismissed the spoon as too slow, preferring to tilt the bowl itself to his lips. In this way he disposed of the soup in four large gulps. 'You have been kind to me'

'Aye, so we have!' she said, rather indignantly.

'- and I hope your kindness has no hidden motive. If it does, Sister, remember that I'm quick. And, as for myself, I have not always been kind.'

She made no reply, only took the bowl when Roland handed it back. She did this delicately, perhaps not wanting to touch his fingers. Her eyes dropped to where the medallion lay, once more hidden beneath the breast of his bed-dress. He said no more, not wanting to weaken the implied threat by reminding her that the man who made it was unarmed, next to naked, and hung in the air because his back couldn't yet bear the weight of his body.

'Where's Sister Jenna?' he asked.

'Oooo!' Sister Coquina said, raising her eyebrows. 'We like her, do we? She makes our heart go . . .' She put her hand against the rose on her breast and fluttered it rapidly.

'Not at all, not at all,' Roland said, 'but she was kind. I doubt she would have teased me with a spoon, as some would.'

Sister Coquina's smile faded. She looked both angry and worried.

'Say nothing of that to Mary, if she comes by later. Ye might get me in trouble.'

'Should I care?'

'I might get back at one who caused me trouble by causing little Jenna trouble,' Sister Coquina said. 'She's in Big Sister's black books, just now, anyway. Sister Mary doesn't care for the way Jenna spoke to her about ye ... nor does she like it that Jenna came back to us wearing the Dark Bells.'

This was no sooner out of her mouth before Sister Coquina put her hand over that frequently imprudent organ, as if realizing she had said too much.

Roland, intrigued by what she'd said but not liking to show it just now, only replied: 'I'll keep my mouth shut about you, if you keep your mouth shut to Sister Mary about Jenna.'

Coquina looked relieved. 'Aye, that's a bargain.' She leaned forward confidingly. 'She's in Thoughtful House. That's the little cave in the hillside where we have to go and meditate when Big Sister decides we've been bad. She'll have to stay and consider her impudence until Mary lets her out.' She paused, then said abruptly: 'Who's this beside ye? Do ye know?'

Roland turned his head and saw that the young man was awake, and had been listening. His eyes were as dark as Jenna's.

'Know him?' Roland asked, with what he hoped was the right touch of scorn. 'Should I not know my own brother?'

'Is he, now, and him so young and you so old?' Another of the sisters materialized out of the darkness: Sister Tamra, who had called herself one-and-twenty. In the moment before she reached Roland's bed, her face was that of a hag who will never see eighty again ... or ninety. Then it shimmered and was once more the plump, healthy countenance of a thirty-year-old matron. Except for the eyes. They remained yellowish in the corneas, gummy in the corners, and watchful.

'He's the youngest, I the eldest,' Roland said. 'Betwixt us are seven others, and twenty years of our parents' lives.'

'How sweet! And if he's yer brother, then ye'll know his name, won't ye? Know it very well.'

Before the gunslinger could flounder, the young man said: 'They think you've forgotten such a simple hook as John Norman. What culleens they be, eh, Jimmy?'

Coquina and Tamra looked at the pale boy in the bed next to Roland's, clearly angry ... and clearly trumped. For the time being, at least.

'You've fed him your muck,' the boy (whose medallion undoubtedly proclaimed him John, Loved of Family, Loved of God) said 'Why don't you go, and let us have a natter?'

'Well!' Sister Coquina huffed. 'I like the gratitude around here, so I do!'

'I'm grateful for what's given me,' Norman responded, looking at her steadily, 'but not for what folk would take away.'

Tamra snorted through her nose, turned violently enough for her swirling dress to push a draught of air into Roland's face, and then took her leave. Coquina stayed a moment.

'Be discreet, and mayhap someone ye like better than ye like me will get out of hack in the morning, instead of a week from tonight.'

Without waiting for a reply, she turned and followed Sister Tamra. Roland and John Norman waited until they were both gone, and then Norman turned to Roland and spoke in a low voice. 'My brother. Dead?'

Roland nodded. 'The medallion I took in case I should meet with any of his people. It rightly belongs to you. I'm sorry for your loss.'

'Thankee-sai.' John Norman's lower lip trembled, then firmed. 'I knew the green men did for him, although these old biddies wouldn't tell me for sure. They did for plenty, and cotched the rest.'

'Perhaps the Sisters didn't know for sure.'

'They knew. Don't you doubt it. They don't say much, but they know plenty. The only one any different is Jenna. That's who the old battle-axe meant when she said "your friend". Aye?'

Roland nodded. 'And she said something about the Dark Bells. I'd know more of that, if would were could.'

'She's something special, Jenna is. More like a princess - someone

whose place is made by bloodline and can't be refused - than like the other Sisters. I lie here and look like I'm asleep - it's safer, I think - but I've heard 'em talking. Jenna's just come back among 'em recently, and those Dark Bells mean something special ... but Mary's still the one who swings the weight. I think the Dark Bells are only ceremonial, like the rings the old Barons used to hand down from father to son. Was it she who put Jimmy's medal around your neck?'

'Yes.'

'Don't take it off, whatever you do.' His face was strained, grim. 'I don't know if it's the gold or the God, but they don't like to get too close. I think that's the only reason I'm still here.' Now his voice dropped all the way to a whisper. 'They ain't human.'

'Well, perhaps a bit fey and magical, but-'

'No!' With what was clearly an effort, the boy got up on one elbow. He looked at Roland earnestly. 'You're thinking about hubber-women, or witches. These ain't hubbers, nor witches, either. They ain't human!'

'Then what are they?'

'Don't know.'

'How came you here, John?'

Speaking in a low voice, John Norman told Roland what he knew of what had happened to him. He, his brother, and four other young men who were quick and owned good horses had been hired as scouts, riding drogue-and-forward, protecting a long-haul caravan of seven freightwagons taking goods - seeds, food, tools, mail, and four ordered brides - to an unincorporated township called Tejuas some two hundred miles further west of Eluria. The scouts rode fore and aft of the goods-train in turn and turn about fashion; one brother rode with each party because, Norman explained, when they were together they fought like ... well ...

'Like brothers,' Roland suggested.

John Norman managed a brief, pained smile. 'Aye,' he said. The trio of which John was a part had been riding drogue, about two miles behind the freight-wagons, when the green mutants had sprung an ambush in Eluria.

'How many wagons did you see when you got there?' he asked Roland. 'Only one. Overturned.'

'How many bodies?'

'Only your brother's.'

John Norman nodded grimly. 'They wouldn't take him because of the medallion, I think.'

'The muties?'

'The Sisters. The muties care nothing for gold or God. These bitches, though . . . ' He looked into the dark, which was now almost complete. Roland felt lethargy creeping over him again, but it wasn't until later that he realized the soup had been drugged.

'The other wagons?' Roland asked. 'The ones not overturned?'

'The muties would have taken them, and the goods, as well,'

Norman said. 'They don't care for gold or God; the Sisters don't care for goods. Like as not they have their own foodstuffs, something I'd as soon not think of. Nasty stuff ... like those bugs.' He and the other drogue riders galloped into Eluria, but the fight was over by the time they got there. Men had been lying about, some dead but many more still alive. At least two of the ordered brides had still been alive, as well. Survivors able to walk were being herded together by the,, 'green folk - John Norman remembered the one in the bowler hat very well, and the woman in the ragged red vest.

Norman and the other two had tried to fight. He had seen one of his parads gutshot by an arrow, and then he saw no more - someone had cracked him over the head from behind, and the lights had gone out.

Roland wondered if the ambusher had cried 'Booh!' before he had struck, but didn't ask.

'When I woke up again, I was here,' Norman said. 'I saw that some of the others - most of them - had those cursed bugs on them.'

'Others?' Roland looked at the empty beds. In the growing darkness, they glimmered like white islands. 'How many were brought here?'

'At least twenty. They healed ... the bugs healed 'em ... and then, one by one, they disappeared. You'd go to sleep, and when you woke up there'd, be one more empty bed. One by one they went, until only me and that, one down yonder was left.'

He looked at Roland solemnly.

'And now you.'

'Norman,' Roland's head was swimming. 'I-'

'I reckon I know what's wrong with you,' Norman said. He seemed to speak from far away . . . perhaps from all the way around the curve of the earth. 'It's the soup. But a man has to eat. A woman, too. If she's a natural woman, anyway. These ones ain't natural. Even Sister Jenna's not natural. Nice don't mean natural.' Further and further away. 'And she'll be like them in the end. Mark me well.'

'Can't move.' Saying even that required a huge effort. It was like moving boulders.

'No.' Norman suddenly laughed. It was a shocking sound, and echoed in the growing blackness which filled Roland's head. 'It ain't just sleepmedicine they put in their soup; it's can't-move-medicine, too. There's nothing much wrong with me, brother ... so why do you think I'm still here?'

Norman was now speaking not from around the curve of the earth but perhaps from the moon. He said: 'I don't think either of us is ever going to see the sun shining on a flat piece of ground again.' You're wrong about that, Roland tried to reply, and more in that vein, as well, but nothing came out. He sailed around to the black side of the moon, losing all his words in the void he found there.

Yet he never quite lost awareness of himself. Perhaps the dose of

'medicine' in Sister Coquina's soup had been badly calculated, or perhaps it was just that they had never had a gunslinger to work their mischief on, and did not know they had one now.

Except, of course, for Sister Jenna - she knew.

At some point in the night, whispering, giggling voices and lightly chiming bells brought him back from the darkness where he had been biding, not quite asleep or unconscious. Around him, so constant he now barely heard it, were the singing 'doctors'. Roland opened his eyes. He saw pale and chancy light dancing in the black air. The giggles and whispers were closer. Roland tried to turn his head and at first couldn't. He rested, gathered his will into a hard blue ball, and tried again. This time his head did turn. Only a little, but a little was enough.

It was five of the Little Sisters - Mary, Louise, Tamra, Coquina, Michela. They came up the long aisle of the black infirmary, laughing together like children out on a prank, carrying long tapers in silver holders, the bells lining the forehead-bands of their wimples chiming little silver runs of sound. They gathered about the bed of the bearded man. From within their circle, candleglow rose in a shimmery column that died before it got halfway to the silken ceiling.

Sister Mary spoke briefly. Roland recognized her voice, but not the words - it was neither low speech nor the High, but some other language entirely. One phrase stood out - can de lach, mi him en tow - and he had no idea what it might mean.

He realized that now he could hear only the tinkle of bells - the doctor-bugs had stilled.

'Ras me! On! On!' Sister Mary cried in a harsh, powerful voice. The candles went out. The light which had shone through the

wings of their wimples as they gathered around the bearded man's bed vanished, and all was darkness once more.

Roland waited for what might happen next, his skin cold. He tried to flex his hands and feet, and could not. He had been able to move his head perhaps fifteen degrees; otherwise he was as paralysed as a fly neatly wrapped up and hung in a spider's web.

The low jingling of bells in the black ... and then sucking sounds. As soon as he heard them, Roland knew he'd been waiting for them. Some part of him had known what the Little Sisters of Eluria were, all along.

If Roland could have raised his hands, he would have put them to his ears to block those sounds out. As it was, he could only lie still, listening and waiting for them to stop.

For a long time - for ever, it seemed - they did not. The women slurped and grunted like pigs snuffling half-liquefied feed out of a trough. There was even one resounding belch, followed by more whispered giggles (these, ended when Sister Mary uttered a single curt word - 'Hais!'). And once there was a low, moaning cry - from the bearded man, Roland was quite sure. If so, it was his last on this side of the clearing.

In time, the sound of their feeding began to taper off. As it did, the bugs began to sing again - first hesitantly, then with more confidence. The whispering and giggling recommenced. The candles were re-lit. Roland was by now lying with his head turned

in the other direction. He didn't want them to know what he'd seen, but that wasn't all; he had no urge to see more on any account. He had seen and heard enough.

But the giggles and whispers now came his way. Roland closed his eyes concentrating on the medallion which lay against his chest. I don't know if it's the gold or the God, but they don't like to get too close, John Norman had said. It was good to have such a thing to

remember as the Little Sister drew nigh, gossiping and whispering in their strange other tongue, but the medallion seemed a thin protection in the dark.

Faintly, at a great distance, Roland heard the cross-dog barking. As the Sisters circled him, the gunslinger realized he could smell them. It was a low, unpleasant odour, like spoiled meat. And what else would they smell of, such as these?

'Such a pretty man it is.' Sister Mary. She spoke in a low, meditative tone.

'But such an ugly sigil it wears.' Sister Tamra.

'We'll have it off him!' Sister Louise.

'And then we shall have kisses!' Sister Coquina.

'Kisses for all!' exclaimed Sister Michela, with such fervent enthusiasm that they all laughed.

Roland discovered that not all of him was paralysed, after all. Part of him had, in fact, arisen from its sleep at the sound of their voices and now stood tall. A hand reached beneath the bed-dress he wore, touched that stiffened member, encircled it, caressed it. He lay in silent horror, feigning sleep, as wet warmth almost immediately spilled from him. The hand remained where it was for a moment, the thumb rubbing up and down the wilting shaft. Then it let him go and rose a little higher. Found the wetness pooled on his lower belly. Giggles, soft as wind. Chiming bells. Roland opened his eyes the tiniest crack and looked up at the ancient faces laughing down at him in the light of their candles - glittering eyes, yellow cheeks, hanging teeth that jutted over lower lips. Sister Michela and sister Louise appeared to have grown goatees, but of course that wasn't the darkness of hair but of the bearded man's blood. Mary's hand was cupped. She passed it from Sister to Sister; each licked from her palm in the candlelight.

Roland closed his eyes all the way and waited for them to be gone. Eventually they were.

I'll never sleep again, he thought, and was five minutes later lost to himself and the world.

V. Sister Mary. A Message. A Visit from Ralph.

Norman's Fate. Sister Mary Again.

When Roland awoke, it was full daylight, the silk roof overhead a bright white and billowing in a mild breeze. The doctor-bugs were singing contentedly. Beside him on his left, Norman was heavily asleep with his head turned so far to one side that his stubbly cheek

rested on his shoulder.

Roland and John Norman were the only ones here. Further down on their side of the infirmary, the bed where the bearded man had been was empty, its top sheet pulled up and neatly tucked in, the pillow neatly nestled in a crisp white case. The complication of slings in which his body had rested was gone.

Roland remembered the candles - the way their glow had combined and streamed up in a column, illuminating the Sisters as they gathered around the bearded man. Giggling. Their damned bells jingling.

Now, as if summoned by his thoughts, came Sister Mary, gliding along rapidly with Sister Louise in her wake. Louise bore a tray, and looked nervous. Mary was frowning, obviously not in good temper.

To be grumpy after you've fed so well? Roland thought. Fie, Sister. She reached the gunslinger's bed and looked down at him. 'I have little to thank ye for, sai,' she said with no preamble.

'Have I asked for your thanks?' he responded in a voice that sounded as dusty and little-used as the pages of an old book. She took no notice. 'Ye've made one who was only impudent and restless with her place outright rebellious. Well, her mother was the same way, and died of it not long after returning Jenna to her proper Place. Raise your hand, thankless man.'

'I can't. I can't move at all.'

'Oh, cully! Haven't you heard it said "fool not your mother 'less she's out of face"? I know pretty well what ye can and can't do. Now raise your hand.'

Roland raised his right hand, trying to suggest more effort than it, actually took. He thought that this morning he might be strong enough to slip free of the slings ... but what then? Any real walking would be beyond him for hours yet, even without another dose of 'medicine' . . . and behind Sister Mary, Sister Louise was taking the cover from a fresh bowl of soup. As Roland looked at it, his stomach rumbled.

Big Sister heard and smiled a bit. 'Even lying in bed builds an appetite in a strong man, if it's done long enough. Wouldn't you say so, Jason brother of John?'

'My name is James. As you well know, Sister.'

'Do I?' She laughed angrily. 'Oh, la! And if I whipped your little sweetheart hard enough and long enough - until the blood jumped her back like drops of sweat, let us say - should I not whip a different name out of her? Or didn't ye trust her with it, during your little talk?'

'Touch her and I'll kill you.'

She laughed again. Her face shimmered; her firm mouth turned into something that looked like a dying jellyfish. 'Speak not of killing to us cully, lest we speak of it to you.'

'Sister, if you and Jenna don't see eye to eye, why not release her from her vows and let her go her course?'

'Such as us can never be released from our vows, nor be let go. Her mother tried and then came back, her dying and the girl sick. Why, it was we nursed Jenna back to health after her mother was nothing but dirt in the breeze that blows out towards End-World, and how little she thanks us! Besides, she bears the Dark Bells, the sigil of our sisterhood. Of our ka-tet. Now eat - yer belly says ye're hungry!'

Sister Louise offered the bowl, but her eyes kept drifting to the shape the medallion made under the breast of his bed-dress. Don't like it, do you? Roland thought, and then remembered Louise by candlelight, the freighter's blood on her chin, her ancient eyes eager as she leaned forward to lick his spend from Sister Mary's hand.

He turned his head aside. 'I want nothing.'

'But ye're hungry!' Louise protested. 'If'ee don't eat, James, how will'ee get'ee strength back?'

'Send Jenna. I'll eat what she brings.'

Sister Mary's frown was black. 'Ye'll see her no more. She's been released from Thoughtful House only on her solemn promise to double her time of meditation ... and to stay out of the infirmary. Now eat, James, or whoever ye are. Take what's in the soup, or we'll cut ye with knives and rub it in with flannel poultices. Either way, makes no difference to us. Does it? Louise?'

'Nar,' Louise said. She still held out the bowl. Steam rose from it, and the good smell of chicken.

'But it might make a difference to you.' Sister Mary grinned humourlessly, baring her unnaturally large teeth. 'Flowing blood's risky around here. The doctors don't like it. It stirs them up.'

It wasn't just the bugs that were stirred up at the sight of blood, and Roland knew it. He also knew he had no choice in the matter of the soup. He took the bowl from Louise and ate slowly. He would have given much to wipe but the look of satisfaction he saw on Sister Mary's face.

'Good,' she said after he had handed the bowl back and she had peered inside to make sure it was completely empty. His hand thumped back into the sling which had been rigged for it, already too heavy to hold up. He could feel the world drawing away again. Sister Mary leaned forward, the billowing top of her habit touching the skin of his left shoulder. He could smell her, an aroma both ripe and dry, and would have gagged if he'd had the strength.

'Have that foul gold thing off ye when yer strength comes back a little - put it in the pissoir under the bed. Where it belongs. For to be even this close to where it lies hurts my head and makes my throat close.'

Speaking with enormous effort, Roland said: 'If you want it, take it. How can I stop you, you bitch?'

Once more her frown turned her face into something like a thunderhead. He thought she would have slapped him, if she had dared touch him so close to where the medallion lay. Her ability to touch seemed to end above his waist, however.

'I think you had better consider the matter a little more fully,' she said. 'I can still have Jenna whipped, if I like. She bears the Dark Bells, but I am the Big Sister. Consider that very well.'

She left. Sister Louise followed, casting one look - a strange combination of fright and lust - back over her shoulder. Roland thought, I must get out of here - I must. Instead, he drifted back to that dark place which wasn't quite sleep. Or perhaps he did sleep, at least for a while; perhaps he dreamed.

Fingers once more caressed his fingers, and lips first kissed his ear and then whispered into it: 'Look beneath your pillow, Roland ... but let no one know I was here.'

At some point after this, Roland opened his eyes again, half-expecting to see Sister Jenna's pretty young face hovering above him, and that comma of dark hair once more poking out from beneath her wimple. There was no one. The swags of silk overhead were at their brightest, and although it was impossible to tell the hours in here with any real accuracy, Roland guessed it to be around noon. Perhaps three hours since his second bowl of the Sisters' soup.

Beside him, John Norman still slept, his breath whistling out in faint, nasal snores.

Roland tried to raise his hand and slide it under his pillow. The hand wouldn't move. He could wiggle the tips of his fingers, but that was all. He waited, calming his mind as well as he could, gathering his patience.' Patience wasn't easy to come by. He kept thinking about what Norman had said - that there had been twenty survivors of the ambush ... at least to start with. One by one they went, until only me and that one down yonder was left. And now you.

The girl wasn't here. His mind spoke in the soft, regretful tone of Alain, one of his old friends, dead these many years now. She wouldn't dare, not with the others watching. That was only a dream you had.

But Roland thought perhaps it had been more than a dream.

Some length of time later - the slowly shifting brightness overhead made him believe it had been about an hour - Roland tried his hand again. This time he was able to get it beneath his pillow. This was puffy and soft, tucked snugly into the wide sling which supported the gunslinger's neck. At first he found nothing, but as his fingers

worked their slow way deeper, they touched what felt like a stiffish bundle of thin rods.

He paused, gathering a little more strength (every movement was like swimming in glue), and then burrowed deeper. It felt like a dead bouquet. Wrapped around it was what felt like a ribbon. Roland looked around to make sure the ward was still empty and Norman still asleep, then drew out what was under the pillow. It was six brittle stems of fading green with brownish reed-heads at the tops. They gave off a strange, yeasty aroma that made Roland think of early-morning begging expeditions to the Great House kitchens as a child - forays he had usually made with Cuthbert. The reeds were tied with a wide white silk ribbon, and smelled like burned toast. Beneath the ribbon was a fold of cloth. Like

everything else in this cursed place, it seemed, the cloth was of silk.

Roland was breathing hard and could feel drops of sweat on his brow. Still alone, though - good. He took the scrap of cloth and unfolded it. Printed painstakingly in blurred charcoal letters, was this message:

NIBBLE HEDS. Once each hour. Too
much, CRAMPS or DETH.
TOMORROW NITE. Can't be sooner.
BE CAREFUL!

No explanation, but Roland supposed none was needed. Nor did he have any option; if he remained here, he would die. All they had to do was have the medallion off him, and he felt sure Sister Mary was smart enough to figure a way to do that.

He nibbled at one of the dry reed-heads. The taste was nothing like the toast they had begged from the kitchen as boys; it was bitter in his throat and hot in his stomach. Less than a minute after his

nibble, his heart-rate had doubled. His muscles awakened, but not in a pleasant way, as after good sleep; they felt first trembly and then hard, as if they were gathered into knots. This feeling passed rapidly, and his heartbeat was back to normal before Norman stirred awake an hour or so later, but he understood why Jenna's note had warned him not to take more than a nibble at a time - this was very powerful stuff.

He slipped the bouquet of reeds back under the pillow, being careful to brush away the few crumbs of vegetable matter which had dropped to the sheet. Then he used the ball of his thumb to blur the painstaking charcoaled words on the bit of silk. When he was finished, there was nothing on the square but meaningless smudges. The square he also tucked back under his pillow.

When Norman awoke, he and the gunslinger spoke briefly of the young scout's home - Delain, it was, sometimes known jestingly as Dragon's Lair, or Liar's Heaven. All tall tales were said to originate in Delain. The boy asked Roland to take his medallion and that of his brother home to their parents, if Roland was able, and explain as well as he could what had happened to James and John, sons of Jesse.

'You'll do all that yourself,' Roland said.

'No.' Norman tried to raise his hand, perhaps to scratch his nose, and was unable to do even that. The hand rose perhaps six inches, then fell back to the counterpane with a small thump. 'I think not. It's a pity for us to have run up against each other this way, you know - I like you.'

'And I you, John Norman. Would that we were better met.'

'Aye. When not in the company of such fascinating ladies.'

He dropped off to sleep again soon after. Roland never spoke with him again ... although he certainly heard from him. Yes. Roland

was lying above his bed, shamming sleep, as John Norman screamed his last.

Sister Michela came with his evening soup just as Roland was getting past the shivery muscles and galloping heartbeat that resulted from his second nibble of brown reed. Michela looked at his flushed face with some concern, but had to accept his assurances that he did not feel feverish; she couldn't bring herself to touch him and judge the heat of his skin for herself - the medallion held her away.

With the soup was a popkin. The bread was leathery and the meat inside it tough, but Roland demolished it greedily, just the same. Michela watched with a complacent smile, hands folded in front of her, nodding from time to time. When he had finished the soup, she took the bowl back from him carefully, making sure their fingers did not touch.

'Ye're healing,' she said. 'Soon you'll be on yer way, and we'll have just yer memory to keep, Jim.'

'Is that true?' he asked quietly.

She only looked at him, touched her tongue against her upper lip, giggled, and departed. Roland closed his eyes and lay back against hi pillow, feeling lethargy steal over him again. Her speculative eyes ... he peeping tongue. He had seen women look at roast chickens and joints of mutton that same way, calculating when they might be done.

His body badly wanted to sleep, but Roland held on to wakefulness for what he judged was an hour, then worked one of the reeds out from under the pillow. With a fresh infusion of their 'can't-move-medicine' in his system, this took an enormous effort, and he wasn't sure he could have done it at all, had he not separated this one reed from the ribbon holding the others. Tomorrow night, Jenna's note had said. If that meant escape, the idea seemed

preposterous. The way he felt now, he might be lying in this bed until the end of the age.

He nibbled. Energy washed into his system, clenching his muscles and racing his heart, but the burst of vitality was gone almost as soon as it came, buried beneath the Sisters' stronger drug. He could only hope ... and sleep.

When he woke it was full dark, and he found he could move his arms and legs in their network of slings almost naturally. He slipped one of the reeds out from beneath his pillow and nibbled cautiously. She had left half a dozen, and the first two were now almost entirely consumed.

The gunslinger put the stem back under the pillow, then began to shiver like a wet dog in a downpour. I took too much, he thought. I'll be lucky not to convulse -

His heart, racing like a runaway engine. And then, to make matters worse, he saw candlelight at the far end of the aisle. A moment later he heard the rustle of their gowns and the whisk of their slippers.

Gods, why now? They'll see me shaking, they'll know

Calling on every bit of his willpower and control, Roland dosed his eyes and concentrated on stilling his jerking limbs. If only he had been in bed instead of in these cursed slings, which seemed to tremble as if with their own ague at every movement!

The Little Sisters drew closer. The light of their candles bloomed

red within his closed eyelids. Tonight they were not giggling, nor whispering amongst themselves. It was not until they were almost on top of him that Roland became aware of the stranger in their midst - a creature that breathed through its nose in great, slobbery gasps of mixed air and snot.

The gunslinger lay with his eyes closed, the gross twitches and jumps of his arms and legs under control, but with his muscles still knotted arid crampy, thrumming beneath the skin. Anyone who looked at him closely would see at once that something was wrong with him. His heart was larruping away like a horse under the whip, surely they must see

But it wasn't him they were looking at - not yet, at least.

'Have it off him,' Mary said. She spoke in a bastardized version of the low speech Roland could barely understand. 'Then t'other 'un. Go on, Ralph.'

'U'se has whik-sky?' the slobberer asked, his dialect even heavier than Mary's. Use has 'backky?'

'Yes, yes, plenty whisky and plenty smoke, but not until you have these wretched things off!' Impatient. Perhaps afraid, as well.

Roland cautiously rolled his head to the left and cracked his eyelids open.

Five of the six Little Sisters of Eluria were clustered around the far side of the sleeping John Norman's bed, their candles raised to cast their light upon him. It also cast light upon their own faces, faces which would have given the strongest man nightmares. Now, in the ditch of the night, their glammers were set aside, and they were but ancient corpses in voluminous habits.

Sister Mary had one of Roland's guns in her hand. Looking at her holding it, Roland felt a bright flash of hate for her, and promised himself she would pay for her temerity.

The thing standing at the foot of the bed, strange as it was, looked almost normal in comparison to the Sisters. It was one of the green folk.

Roland recognized Ralph at once. He would be a long time forgetting that bowler hat.

Now Ralph walked slowly around to the side of Norman's bed closest to Roland, momentarily blocking the gunslinger's view of the Sisters. The mutie went all the way to Norman's head, however, clearing the hags to Roland's slitted view once more. Norman's medallion lay exposed - the boy had perhaps waken enough to take it out of his bed-dress, hoping it would protect him better so. Ralph picked it up in his melted-tallow hand. The Sister watched eagerly in the glow of their candles as the green man stretched to the end of its chain. . . and then put it down again. Their faces droop in disappointment.

'Don't care for such as that,' Ralph said in his clotted voice. 'Want whik-sky! Want 'backky!'

'You shall have it,' Sister Mary said. 'Enough for you and all you verminous clan. But first, you must have that horrid thing off him!

both of them! Do you understand? And you shan't tease us.'

'Or what?' Ralph asked. He laughed. It was a choked and gargly sound the laughter of a man dying from some evil sickness of the throat an lungs, but Roland still liked it better than the giggles of the Sisters 'Or what, Sisser Mary, you'll drink my bluid? My bluid'd drop'ee dead where'ee stand, and glowing in the dark!' Mary raised the gunslinger's revolver and pointed it at Ralph. 'Take that wretched thing, or you die where you stand.'

'And die after I've done what you want, likely.'

Sister Mary said nothing to that. The others peered at him with their black eyes.

Ralph lowered his head, appearing to think. Roland suspected hi friend Bowler Hat could think, too. Sister Mary and her cohorts might, not believe that, but Ralph had to be trig to have survived as long as he had. But of course when he came here, he hadn't considered Roland's guns.

'Smasher was wrong to give them shooters to you,' he said at last. 'Give em and not tell me. Did u'se give him whik-sky? Give him 'backky?'

'That's none o' yours,' Sister Mary replied. 'You have that goldpiece off the boy's neck right now, or I'll put one of yonder man's bullets in what's left of yer brain.'

'All right,' Ralph said. 'Just as you wish, sai.'

Once more he reached down and took the gold medallion in his melted fist. That he did slow; what happened after, happened fast. He snatched it away, breaking the chain and flinging the gold heedlessly into the dark. With his other hand he reached down, sank his long and ragged nails into John Norman's neck, and tore it open.

Blood flew from the hapless boy's throat in a jetting, heart-driven gush more black than red in the candlelight, and he made a single bubbly cry. The women screamed - but not in horror. They screamed as women do in a frenzy of excitement. The green man was forgotten; Roland was forgotten; all was forgotten save the life's blood pouring out of John Norman's throat.

They dropped their candles. Mary dropped Roland's revolver in the same hapless, careless fashion. The last the gunslinger saw as Ralph darted away into the shadows (whisky and tobacco another time, wily Ralph must have thought; tonight he had best concentrate on saving his own life) was the sisters bending forward to catch as much of the flow as they could before it dried up.

Roland lay in the dark, muscles shivering, heart pounding, listening to the harpies as they fed on the boy lying in the bed next to his own. It seemed to go on for ever, but at last they had done with him. The Sisters re-lit their candles and left, murmuring.

When the drug in the soup once more got the better of the drug in the reeds, Roland was grateful ... yet for the first time since coming here, his sleep was haunted.

In his dream he stood looking down at the bloated body in the

town trough, thinking of a line in the book marked REGISTRY OF MISDEEDS & REDRESS. Green folk sent hence, it had read, and perhaps the green folk had been sent hence, but then a worse tribe had come. The Little Sisters of Eluria, they called themselves. And a year hence, they might be the Little Sisters of Tejuas, or of Kambero, or some other far-western village. They came with their bells and their bugs ... from where? Who knew? Did it matter? A shadow fell beside his on the scummy water of the trough. Roland tried to turn and face it. He couldn't; he was frozen in place. Then a green hand grasped his shoulder and whirled him about. It was Ralph. His bowler hat was cocked back on his head; John Norman's medallion, now red with blood, hung around his neck.

'Booh!' cried Ralph, his lips stretching in a toothless grin. He raised a big revolver with worn sandalwood grips. He thumbed the hammer back

- and Roland jerked awake, shivering all over, dressed in skin both wet and icy cold. He looked at the bed on his left. It was empty, the sheet pulled up and tucked about neatly, the pillow resting above it in its snowy sleeve. Of John Norman there was no sign. It might have been empty for years, that bed.

Roland was alone now. Gods help him, he was the last patient of the Little Sisters of Eluria, those sweet and patient hospitallers. The last human being still alive in this terrible place, the last with warm blood flowing in his veins.

Roland, lying suspended, gripped the gold medallion in his fist and looked across the aisle at the long row of empty beds. After a little

while, he brought one of the reeds out from beneath his pillow and nibbled at it.

When Mary came fifteen minutes later, the gunslinger took the bowl she brought with a show of weakness he didn't really feel. Porridge instead of soup this time ... but he had no doubt the basic ingredient was still the same.

'How well ye look this morning, sai,' Big Sister said. She looked well herself - there were no shimmers to give away the ancient wampir hiding inside her. She had supped well, and her meal had firmed her up. Roland, stomach rolled over at the thought. 'Ye'll be on yer pins in no time, I warrant.'

'That's shit,' Roland said, speaking in an ill-natured growl. 'Put me on my pins and you'd be picking me up off the floor directly after. I've start to wonder if you're not putting something in the food.' She laughed merrily at that. 'La, you lads! Always eager to blame weakness on a scheming woman! How scared of us ye are - aye, way down in yer little boys' hearts, how scared ye are!'

'Where's my brother? I dreamed there was a commotion about him in the night, and now I see his bed's empty.'

Her smile narrowed. Her eyes glittered. 'He came over fevery and pitched a fit. We've taken him to Thoughtful House, which has been home to contagion more than once in its time.'

To the grave is where you've taken him, Roland thought. Mayhap that is a Thoughtful House, but little would you know it, sai, one way or another.

'I know ye're no brother to that boy,' Mary said, watching him eat.

Already Roland could feel the stuff hidden in the porridge draining his strength once more. 'Sigil or no sigil, I know ye're no brother to him. Why do you lie? 'Tis a sin against God.'

'What gives you such an idea, sai?' Roland asked, curious to see if she would mention the guns.

'Big Sister knows what she knows. Why not 'fess up, Jimmy? Confession's good for the soul, they say.'

'Send me Jenna to pass the time, and perhaps I'd tell you much,' Roland said.

The narrow bone of smile on Sister Mary's face disappeared like chalkwriting in a rainstorm. 'Why would ye talk to such as her?'

'She's passing fair,' Roland said. 'Unlike some.'

Her lips pulled back from her overlarge teeth. 'Ye'll see her no more, cully. Ye've stirred her up, so you have, and I won't have that.'

She turned to go. Still trying to appear weak and hoping he would not overdo it (acting was never his forte), Roland held out the empty porridge bowl. 'Do you not want to take this?'

'Put it on your head and wear it as a nightcap, for all of me. Or stick it ill your ass. You'll talk before I'm done with ye, cully - talk till I bid you shut up and then beg to talk some more!'

On this note she swept regally away, hands lifting the front of her skirt off the floor. Roland had heard that such as she couldn't go about in daylight, and that part of the old tales was surely a lie. Yet another part was almost true, it seemed: a fuzzy, amorphous shape kept pace with her, running along the row of empty beds to her right, but she cast no real shadow at all.

VI. Jenna. Sister Coquina. Tamra, Michela, Louise.

The Cross-Dog. What Happened in the Sage.

That was one of the longest days of Roland's life. He dozed, but never deeply; the reeds were doing their work, and he had begun to believe that he might, with Jenna's help, actually get out of here. And there was the matter of his guns, as well - perhaps she might be able to help there, too.

He passed the slow hours thinking of old times - of Gilead and his friends, of the riddling he had almost won at one Wide Earth Fair. In the end another had taken the goose, but he'd had his chance, aye. He thought of his mother and father; he thought of Abel Vannay, who had limped his way through a life of gentle goodness, and Eldred Jonas, who had limped his way through a life of evil ... until Roland had blown him loose of his saddle, one fine desert day.

He thought, as always, of Susan.

If you love me, then love me, she'd said ... and so he had.

So he had.

In this way the time passed. At rough hourly intervals, he took one of the reeds from beneath his pillow and nibbled it. Now his muscles didn't tremble so badly as the stuff passed into his system, nor his heart pound so fiercely. The medicine in the reeds no longer had to battle the Sisters' medicine so fiercely, Roland thought; the reeds were winning.

The diffused brightness of the sun moved across the white silk ceiling of the ward, and at last the dimness which always seemed to hover at bed-level began to rise. The long room's western wall bloomed with the rose-melting-to-orange shades of sunset.

It was Sister Tamra who brought him his dinner that night - soup and another popkin. She also laid a desert lily beside his hand. She

smiled she did it. Her cheeks were bright with colour. All of them were bright with colour today, like leeches which had gorged until they were almost to bursting.

'From your admirer, Jimmy,' she said. 'She's so sweet on ye! The I means "Do not forget my promise". What has she promised ye, Jimmy brother of Johnny?'

'That she'd see me again, and we'd talk.'

Tamra laughed so hard that the bells lining her forehead jingled. She clasped her hands together in a perfect ecstasy of glee. 'Sweet as honey

Oh, yes!' She bent her smiling gaze on Roland. 'It's sad such a promise can never be kept. Ye'll never see her again, pretty man.' She took the bowl. 'Big Sister has decided.' She stood up, still smiling. 'Why not take that ugly gold sigil off?'

'I think not.'

'Yer brother took his off - look!' She pointed, and Roland spied the gold medallion lying far down the aisle, where it had landed when Ralph threw it.

Sister Tamra looked at him, still smiling.

'He decided it was part of what was making him sick, and cast it away Ye'd do the same, were ye wise.'

Roland repeated: 'I think not.'

'So,' she said dismissively, and left him alone with the empty beds glimmering in the thickening shadows.

Roland hung on, in spite of growing sleepiness, until the hot colours bleeding across the infirmary's western wall had cooled to ashes. Then he nibbled one of the reeds and felt strength - real strength, not a jittery, heart-thudding substitute - bloom in his body. He looked towards where the castaway medallion gleamed in the

last light and made a silent promise to John Norman: he would take it with the other one to Norman's kin, if ka chanced that he should encounter them in his travels.

Feeling completely easy in his mind for the first time that day, the gunslinger dozed. When he awoke it was full dark. The doctor-bugs were singing with extraordinary shrillness. He had taken one of the reeds out from under the pillow and had begun to nibble on it when a cold voice said, 'So - Big Sister was right. Ye've been

keeping secrets.'

Roland's heart seemed to stop dead in his chest. He looked around and saw Sister Coquina getting to her feet. She had crept in while he was dozing and hidden under the bed on his right side to watch him. 'Where did ye get that?' she asked. 'Was it 'He got it from me.' Coquina whirled about. Jenna was walking down the aisle towards them. Her habit was gone. She still wore her wimple with its foreheadfringe of bells, but its hem rested on the shoulders of a simple checkered shirt. Below this she wore jeans and scuffed desert boots. She had something in her hands. It was too dark for Roland to be sure, but he thought YOU,' Sister Coquina whispered with infinite hate. 'When I tell Big Sister -

`you'll tell no one anything,' Roland said.

If he had planned his escape from the slings which entangled him, he no doubt would have made a bad business of it, but, as always, the gunslinger did best when he thought least. His arms were free in a moment; so was his left leg. His right caught at the ankle, however, twisting, hanging him up with his shoulders on the bed and his leg in the air.

Coquina turned on him, hissing like a cat. Her lips pulled back from teeth that were needle-sharp. She rushed at him, her fingers splayed. The nails at the ends of them looked sharp and ragged.

Roland clasped the medallion and shoved it out towards her. She recoiled from it, still hissing, and whirled back to Sister Jenna in a flare of white skirt. 'I'll do for ye, ye interfering trull!' she cried in a low, harsh voice.

Roland struggled to free his leg and couldn't. It was firmly caught, the shitting sling actually wrapped around the ankle somehow, like a noose.

Jenna raised her hands, and he saw he had been right: it was his revolvers she had brought, holstered and hanging from the two old gunbelts he had worn out of Gilead after the last burning.

'Shoot her, Jenna! Shoot her!'

Instead, still holding the holstered guns up, Jenna shook her head as she had on the day when Roland had persuaded her to push back her wimple so he could see her hair. The bells rang with a sharpness that seemed to go into the gunslinger's head like a spike. The Dark Bells. The sigil of their ka-tet. What The sound of the doctor-bugs rose to a shrill, reedy scream that was eerily like the sound of the bells Jenna wore. Nothing sweet about them now. Sister Coquina's hands faltered on their way to Jenna's throat; Jenna herself had not so much as flinched or blinked her eyes.

'No,' Coquina whispered. 'You can't!'

'I have,' Jenna said, and Roland saw the bugs. Descending from the legs of the bearded man, he'd observed a battalion. What he saw coming from the shadows now was an army to end all armies; had they been men instead of insects, there might have been more than all the men who had ever carried arms in the long and bloody history of World.

Yet the sight of them advancing down the boards of the aisle was what Roland would always remember, nor what would haunt his

dream for a year or more; it was the way they coated the beds. These were turning black two by two on both sides of the aisle, like pairs of dim rectangular lights going out. Coquina shrieked and began to shake her own head, to ring her bells. The sound they made was thin and pointless compared to the sharp ringing of the Dark Bells.

Still the bugs marched on, darkening the floor, blacking out the bed. Jenna darted past the shrieking Sister Coquina, dropped Roland's beside him, then yanked the twisted sling straight with one hard pull. Roland slid his leg free.

'Come,' she said. 'I've started them, but staying them could be a different thing.'

Now Sister Coquina's shrieks were not of horror but of pain. The bugs had found her.

'Don't look,' Jenna said, helping Roland to his feet. He thought that never in his life had he been so glad to be upon them. 'Come. We must be quick - she'll rouse the others. I've put your boots and clothes aside the path that leads away from here - I carried as much as I could. How ye? Are ye strong?'

'Thanks to you.' How long he would stay strong Roland didn't know... and right now it wasn't a question that mattered. He saw Jenna snatch up two of the reeds - in his struggle to escape the slings, they had scattered all over the head of the bed - and then they were hurrying up the aisle, away from the bugs and from Sister Coquina, whose cries were now failing.

Roland buckled on his guns and tied them down without breaking stride.

They passed only three beds on each side before reaching the flap of the tent . . . and it was a tent, he saw, not a vast pavilion. The silk walls and ceiling were fraying canvas, thin enough to let in the

light of a threequarters Kissing Moon. And the beds weren't beds at all, but only a double row of shabby cots.

He turned and saw a black, writhing hump on the floor where Sister Coquina had been. At the sight of her, Roland was struck by an unpleasant thought.

'I forgot John Norman's medallion!' A keen sense of regret - almost of mourning - went through him like wind.

Jenna reached into the pocket of her jeans and brought it out. It glimmered in the moonlight.

'I picked it up off the floor.'

He didn't know which made him gladder - the sight of the medallion or the sight of it in her hand. It meant she wasn't like the others.

Then, as if to dispel that notion before it got too firm a hold on him, she said: 'Take it, Roland - I can hold it no more.' And, as he took it, he saw unmistakable marks of charring on her fingers.

He took her hand and kissed each burn.

'Thankee-sai,' she said, and he saw she was crying. 'Thankee, dear. To be kissed so is lovely, worth every pain. Now . . .'

Roland saw her eyes shift, and followed them. Here were bobbing lights descending a rocky path. Beyond them he saw the building where the Little Sisters had been living - not a convent but a ruined hacienda that looked a thousand years old. There were three candles; as they drew closer, Roland saw that there were only three sisters. Mary wasn't among them.

He drew his guns.

'Oooo, it's a gunslinger-man he is!' Louise.

'A scary man!' Michela.

'And he's found his ladylove as well as his shooters!' Tamra.

'His slut-whore!' Louise.

Laughing angrily. Not afraid ... at least, not of his weapons.

'Put them away,' Jenna told him, and when she looked, saw that he already had.

The others, meanwhile, had drawn closer.

'Ooo, see, she cries!' Tamra.

'Doffed her habit, she has!' Michela. 'Perhaps it's her broken vows she cries for.'

'Why such tears, pretty?' Louise.

'Because he kissed my fingers where they were burned,' Jenna said.

'I've never been kissed before. It made me cry.'

'Oooooo!'

'Luv-ly!'

'Next he'll stick his thing in her! Even luv-lier!'

Jenna bore their japes with no sign of anger. When they were done, she said: 'I'm going with him. Stand aside.'

They gaped at her, counterfeit laughter disappearing in shock.

'No!' Louise whispered. 'Are ye mad? Ye know what'll happen!'

'No, and neither do you,' Jenna said. 'Besides, I care not.' She half-turned and held her hand out to the mouth of the ancient hospital tent. It was a faded olive-drab in the moonlight, with an old red cross drawn on its roof.

Roland wondered how many towns the Sisters had been to With this tent which was so small and plain on the outside, so huge and

gloriously on the inside. How many towns and over how many years.

Now, cramming the mouth of it in a black, shiny tongue, were doctor-bugs. They had stopped their singing. Their silence was somehow terrible.

'Stand aside or I'll have them on ye,' Jenna said.

'Ye never would!' Sister Michela cried in a low, horrified voice.

'Aye. I've already set them on Sister Coquina. She's a part of the medicine, now.'

Their gasp was like cold wind passing through dead trees. Nor was all that dismay directed towards their own precious hides. What Jenna had done was clearly far outside their reckoning.

'Then you're damned,' Sister Tamra said.

'Such ones to speak of damnation! Stand aside.'

They did. Roland walked past them and they shrank away from

him. but they shrank from her more.

'Damned?' he asked after they had skirted the haci and reached the path beyond it. The Kissing Moon glimmered above a tumbled scree of rocks. In its light Roland could see a small black opening low on the scarp. He guessed it was the cave the Sisters called Thoughtful House. 'What did they mean, damned?'

'Never mind. All we have to worry about now is Sister Mary. I like not that we haven't seen her.'

She tried to walk faster, but he grasped her arm and turned her about. He could still hear the singing of the bugs, but faintly; they were leaving the place of the Sisters behind. Eluria, too, if the compass in his head was still working; he thought the town was in the other direction. The husk of the town, he amended.

'Tell me what they meant.'

'Perhaps nothing. Ask me not, Roland - what good is it? 'Tis done, the bridge burned. I can't go back. Nor would if I could.' She looked down, biting her lip, and when she looked up again, Roland saw fresh tears falling on her cheeks. 'I have supped with them. There were times when I couldn't help it, no more than you could help drinking their wretched soup, no matter if you knew what was in it.'

Roland remembered John Norman saying A man has to eat... a woman, too. He nodded.

'I'd go no further down that road. If there's to be damnation, let it be of my choosing, not theirs. My mother meant well by bringing me back to them, but she was wrong.' She looked at him shyly and fearfully ... but met his eyes. 'I'd go beside ye on yer road, Roland of Gilead. For as long as I may, or as long as ye'd have me.'

'You're welcome to your share of my way,' he said. 'And I am `Blessed by your company, he would have finished, but before he could, a voice spoke from the tangle of moonshadow ahead of them, where the path at last climbed out of the rocky, sterile valley in which the Little Sisters had practised their glamours.'

'It's a sad duty to stop such a pretty elopement, but stop it I must.' Sister Mary came from the shadows. Her fine white habit with its bright red rose had reverted to what it really was: the shroud of a corpse. Caught, hooded in its grimy folds, was a wrinkled, sagging face from which two black eyes stared. They looked like rotted dates. Below them, exposed by the thing's smile, four great incisors gleamed.

Upon the stretched skin of Sister Mary's forehead, bells tinkled ... but not the Dark Bells, Roland thought. There was that.

'Stand clear,' Jenna said. 'Or I'll bring the can tam on ye.'

'No,' Sister Mary said, stepping closer, 'ye won't. They'll not stray so far from the others. Shake your head and ring those damned bells until the clappers fall out, and still they'll never come.' Jenna did as bid, shaking her head furiously from side to side. The Dark Bells rang piercingly, but without that extra, almost psychic tone-quality that had gone through Roland's head like a spike. And

the doctor-bugs

what Jenna had called the can tam - did not come.

Smiling ever more broadly (Roland had an idea Mary herself hadn't been completely sure they wouldn't come until the experiment was made), the corpse-woman closed in on them, seeming to float above the ground. Her eyes flicked towards him. 'And put that away,' she said.

Roland looked down and saw that one of his guns was in his hand. He had no memory of drawing it.

'Unless it's been blessed or dipped in some sect's holy wet - blood, water, semen - it can't harm such as I, gunslinger. For I am more shade than substance ... yet still the equal to such as yerself, for all that.'

She thought he would try shooting her, anyway; he saw it in her eyes. Those shooters are all ye have, her eyes said. Without 'em, you might as well be back in the tent we dreamed around ye, caught up in our slings and awaiting our pleasure.

Instead of shooting, he dropped the revolver back into its holster and launched himself at her with his hands out. Sister Mary uttered a scream that was mostly surprise, but it was not a long one; Roland's fingers clamped down on her throat and choked the sound off before it was fairly started.

The touch of her flesh was obscene - it seemed not just alive but various beneath his hands, as if it was trying to crawl away from

him. He could feel it running like liquid, flowing, and the sensation was horrible beyond description. Yet he clamped down harder, determined to choke the I out of her.

Then there came a blue flash (not in the air, he would think later; that flash happened inside his head, a single stroke of lightning as she touch off some brief but powerful brainstorm), and his hands flew away from h neck. For one moment his dazzled eyes saw great wet gouges in her flesh - gouges in the shapes of his hands. Then he was flung backwards hitting the scree on his back and sliding, striking his head on a jutting rock hard enough to provoke a second, lesser, flash of light.

'Nay, my pretty man,' she said, grimacing at him, laughing with those terrible dull eyes of hers. 'Ye don't choke such as I, and I'll take ye slow yer impertinence - cut ye shallow in a hundred places to refresh my thirst First, though, I'll have this vowless girl ... and I'll have those damned bells off her, in the bargain.'

'Come and see if you can!' Jenna cried in a trembling voice, and shook her head from side to side. The Dark Bells rang mockingly, provokingly

Mary's grimace of a smile fell away. 'Oh, I can,' she breathed. Her mouth yawned. In the moonlight, her fangs gleamed in her gums like bone needles poked through a red pillow. 'I can and I -' There was a growl from above them. It rose, then splintered into a volley of snarling barks. Mary turned to her left, and in the moment before the snarling thing left the rock on which it was standing, Roland could clearly read the startled bewilderment on Big Sister's face.

It launched itself at her, only a dark shape against the stars, legs outstretched so it looked like some sort of weird bat, but even

before it crashed into the woman, striking her in the chest above

her half-raise arms and fastening its own teeth on her throat, Roland knew exactly what it was.

As the shape bore her over on to her back, Sister Mary uttered a gibbering shriek that went through Roland's head like the Dark Bells themselves. He scrambled to his feet, gasping. The shadowy thing tore at her, forepaws on either side of her head, rear paws planted on the grave-shroud above her, chest, where the rose had been.

Roland grabbed Jenna, who was looking down at the fallen Sister with a kind of frozen fascination.

'Come on!' he shouted. 'Before it decides it wants a bite of you, too!'

The dog took no notice of them as Roland pulled Jenna past. It had torn

Sister Mary's head mostly off. Her flesh seemed to be changing, somehow - decomposing, very likely - but whatever was happening, Roland did not want to see it. He didn't want Jenna to see it, either.

They half-walked, half-ran to the top of the ridge, and when they got there paused for breath in the moonlight, heads down, hands linked, both of them gasping harshly.

The growling and snarling below them had faded, but was still faintly audible when Sister Jenna raised her head and asked him, 'What was it? you know - I saw it in your face. And how could it attack her? We all have power over animals, but she has - had - the most.'

'Not over that one.' Roland found himself recalling the unfortunate boy in the next bed. Norman hadn't known why the medallions kept the Sisters at arm's length - whether it was the gold or the God. Now Roland knew the answer. 'It was a dog. Just a town-dog.'

I saw it in the square, before the green folk knocked me out and took me to the Sisters. I suppose the other animals that could run away did run away, but not that one. it had nothing to fear from the Little Sisters of Eluria, and somehow it knew it didn't. It bears the sign of the Jesus-man on its chest. Black fur on white. just an accident of its birth, I imagine. In any case, it's done for her now. I knew it was lurking around. I heard it barking two or three times.'

'Why?' Jenna whispered. 'Why would it come? Why would it stay? And why would it take on her as it did?'

Roland of Gilead responded as he ever had and ever would when such useless, mystifying questions were raised: 'Ka. Come on. Let's get as far as we can from this place before we hide up for the day.'

As far as they could turned out to be eight miles at most ... and probably, Roland thought as the two of them sank down in a patch of sweet-smelling sage beneath an overhang of rock, a good deal less. Five, perhaps. It was him slowing them down; or rather, it was the residue of the poison in the soup. When it was clear to him

that he could not go farther without help, he asked her for one of the reeds. She refused, saying that the stuff in it might combine with the unaccustomed exercise to burst his heart.

'Besides,' she said as they lay back against the embankment of the little nook they had found, 'they'll not follow. Those that are left - Michela, Louise, Tamra - will be packing up to move on. They know to leave when the time comes; that's why the Sisters have survived as long as they have. As We have. We're strong in some ways, but weak in many more. Sister

Mary forgot that. It was her arrogance that did for her as much as the cross-dog, I think.'

She had cached not just his boots and clothes beyond the top of the ridge, but the smaller of his two purses, as well. When she tried

apologize for not bringing his bedroll and the larger purse (she'd tried she said, but they were simply too heavy), Roland hushed her with a finger to her lips. He thought it a miracle to have as much as he did. And besides (this he did not say, but perhaps she knew it, anyway), the guns were the only things which really mattered. The guns of his father, and his father before him, all the way back to the days of Arthur Eld when dreams about dragons had still walked the earth.

'Will you be all right?' he asked her as they settled down. The moon had set, but dawn was still at least three hours away. They were surrounded the sweet smell of the sage. A purple smell, he thought it then ... and ever after. Already he could feel it forming a kind of magic carpet under him, which would soon float him away to sleep. He thought he had never been so tired.

'Roland, I know not.' But even then, he thought she had known. Her mother had brought her back once; no mother would bring her back again. And she had eaten with the others, had taken the communion of the Sisters. Ka was a wheel; it was also a net from which none ever escaped.

But then he was too tired to think much of such things ... and what good would thinking have done, in any case? As she had said, the bridge was burned. Even if they were to return to the valley, Roland guess they would find nothing but the cave the Sisters had called Thoughtful House. The surviving Sisters would have packed their tent of bad dreams and moved on, just a sound of bells and singing insects moving down the late night breeze.

He looked at her raised a hand (it felt heavy), and touched the curl which once more lay across her forehead.

Jenna laughed, embarrassed. 'That one always escapes. It's wayward Like its mistress.'

She raised her hand to poke it back in, but Roland took her fingers before she could. 'It's beautiful,' he said. 'Black as night and as beautiful as forever.'

He sat up - it took an effort; weariness dragged at his body like soft hands. He kissed the curl. She closed her eyes and sighed. He felt her trembling beneath his lips. The skin of her brow was very cool;

the dark curve of the wayward curl like silk.

'Push back your wimple, as you did before,' he said.

She did it without speaking. For a moment he only looked at her. Jenna looked back gravely, her eyes never leaving his. He ran his hands through her hair, feeling its smooth weight (like rain, he thought, rain with weight), then took her shoulders and kissed each of her cheeks. He drew back for a moment.

'Would ye kiss me as a man does a woman, Roland? On my mouth?'

Aye.

And, as he had thought of doing as he lay caught in the silken infirmary tent, he kissed her lips. She kissed back with the clumsy sweetness of one who has never kissed before, except perhaps in dreams. Roland thought to make love to her then - it had been long and long, and she was beautiful but he fell asleep instead, still kissing her.

He dreamed of the cross-dog, barking its way across a great open landscape. He followed, wanting to see the source of its agitation, and soon he did. At the far edge of that plain stood the Dark Tower, its smoky stone outlined by the dull orange ball of a setting sun, its fearful windows rising in a spiral. The dog stopped at the sight of it and began to howl.

Bells - peculiarly shrill and as terrible as doom - began to ring. Dark bells, he knew, but their tone was as bright as silver. At their

sound, the dark windows of the Tower glowed with a deadly red light - the red of poisoned roses. A scream of unbearable pain rose in the night.

The dream blew away in an instant, but the scream remained, now unravelling to a moan. That part was real - as real as the Tower, brooding in its place at the very end of End-World. Roland came back to the brightness of dawn and the soft purple smell of desert sage. He had drawn both his guns, and was on his feet before he had fully realized he was awake.

Jenna was gone. Her boots lay empty beside his purse. A little distance from them, her jeans lay as flat as discarded snakeskins. Above them was her shirt. It was, Roland observed with wonder, still tucked into the pants. Beyond them was her empty wimple, with its fringe of bells lying on the powdery ground. He thought for a moment that they were ringing, mistaking the sound he heard at first.

Not bells but bugs. The doctor-bugs. They sang in the sage, sounding a bit like crickets, but far sweeter.

'Jenna?'

No answer ... unless the bugs answered. For their singing suddenly stopped.

'Jenna?'

Nothing. Only the wind and the smell of the sage.

Without thinking about what he was doing (like play-acting, reasoned thought was not his strong suit), he bent, picked up the wimple, and shook it. The Dark Bells rang.

For a moment there was nothing. Then a thousand small dark creatures came scurrying out of the sage, gathering on the broken earth. Roland thought of the battalion marching down the side of

the freighter's and took a step back. Then he held his position. As, he saw, the bugs holding theirs.

He believed he understood. Some of this understanding came from his memory of how Sister Mary's flesh had felt under his hands... how it had felt various, not one thing but many. Part of it was what she had said: I have supped with them. Such as them might never die but they might change.

The insects trembled, a dark cloud of them blotting out the white powdery earth.

Roland shook the bells again.

A shiver ran through them in a subtle wave, and then they began form a shape. They hesitated as if unsure of how to go on, regrouped, began again. What they eventually made on the whiteness of the sand there between the blowing fluffs of lilac-coloured sage was one of Great Letters: the letter C.

Except it wasn't really a letter, the gunslinger saw; it was a curl. They began to sing, and to Roland it sounded as if they were singing his name.

The bells fell from his unnerved hand, and when they struck ground and chimed there, the mass of bugs broke apart, running every direction. He thought of calling them back - ringing the bell again might do that - but to what purpose? To what end?

Ask me not, Roland. 'Tis done, the bridge burned.

Yet she had come to him one last time, imposing her will over thousand various parts that should have lost the ability to think when the whole lost its cohesion . . . and yet she had thought, somehow enough to make that shape. How much effort might that have taken?

They fanned wider and wider, some disappearing into the sage, some trundling up the sides of rock overhang, pouring into the cracks where they would, mayhap, wait out the heat of the day. They were gone. She was gone.

Roland sat down on the ground and put his hands over his face. He thought he might weep, but in time the urge passed; when he raised his head again, his eyes were as dry as the desert he would eventually come to, still following the trail of Walter, the man in black.

If there's to be damnation, she had said, let it be of my choosing, not theirs.

He knew a little about damnation himself ... and he had an idea that the lessons, far from being done, were just beginning.

She had brought him the purse with his tobacco in it. He rolled a cigarette and smoked it hunkered over his knees. He smoked it down to a glowing roach, looking at her empty clothes the while, remembering the steady gaze of her dark eyes. Remembering the scorch-marks on her fingers from the chain of the medallion. Yet she had picked it up, because she had known he would want it; had dared that pain, and Roland now wore both around his neck.

When the sun was fully up, the gunslinger moved on west. He

would find another horse eventually, or a mule, but for now he was content to walk. All that day he was haunted by a ringing, singing sound in his ears, like bells. Several times he stopped and looked around, sure he would see a dark following shape flowing over the ground, chasing after as the shadows of our best and worst memories chase after, but no shape was ever there. He was alone in the low hill country west of Eluria. Quite alone.

The Night
of The Tiger

STEPHEN KING

From
Fantasy & Science Fiction, 1978

I first saw Mr. Legere when the circus swung through Steubenville, but I'd only been with the show for two weeks; he might have been making his irregular visits indefinitely. No one much wanted to talk about Mr. Legere, not even that last night when it seemed that the world was coming to an end -- the night that Mr. Indrasil disappeared.

But if I'm going to tell it to you from the beginning, I should start by saying that I'm Eddie Johnston, and I was born and raised in Sauk City. Went to school there, had my first girl there, and worked in Mr. Lillie's five-and-dime there for a while after I graduated from high school. That was a few years back... more than I like to count, sometimes. Not that Sauk City's such a bad place; hot, lazy summer nights sitting on the front porch is all right for some folks, but it just seemed to itch me, like sitting in the same chair too long. So I quit the five-and-dime and joined Farnum & Williams' All-American 3-Ring Circus and Side Show. I did it in a moment of giddiness when the calliope music kind of fogged my judgment, I guess.

So I became a roustabout, helping put up tents and take them down, spreading sawdust, cleaning cages, and sometimes selling cotton candy when the regular salesman had to go away and bark for Chips Baily, who had malaria and sometimes had to go someplace far away, and holler. Mostly things that kids do for free passes -- things I used to do when I was a kid. But times change. They don't seem to come around like they used to.

We swung through Illinois and Indiana that hot summer, and the crowds were good and everyone was happy. Everyone except Mr. Indrasil. Mr. Indrasil was never happy. He was the lion tamer, and he looked like old pictures I've seen of Rudolph Valentine. He was tall, with handsome, arrogant features and a shock of wild black hair. And strange, mad eyes -- the maddest eyes I've ever seen. He was silent most of the time; two syllables from Mr. Indrasil was a

sermon. All the circus people kept a mental as well as a physical distance, because his rages were legend. There was a whispered story about coffee spilled on his hands after a particularly difficult performance and a murder that was almost done to a young roustabout before Mr. Indrasil could be hauled off him. I don't know about that. I do know that I grew to fear him worse than I had cold-eyed Mr. Edmont, my high school principal, Mr. Lillie, or even my father, who was capable of cold dressing-downs that would leave the recipient quivering with shame and dismay. When I cleaned the big cats' cages, they were always spotless. The memory of the few times I had the vituperative wrath of Mr. Indrasil called down on me still have the power to turn my knees watery in retrospect.

Mostly it was his eyes - large and dark and totally blank. The eyes, and the feeling that a man capable of controlling seven watchful cats in a small cage must be part savage himself.

And the only two things he was afraid of were Mr. Legere and the circus's one tiger, a huge beast called Green Terror.

As I said, I first saw Mr. Legere in Steubenville, and he was staring into Green Terror's cage as if the tiger knew all the secrets of life and death.

He was lean, dark, quiet. His deep, recessed eyes held an expression of pain and brooding violence in their green-flecked depths, and his hands were always crossed behind his back as he stared moodily in at the tiger.

Green Terror was a beast to be stared at. He was a huge, beautiful specimen with a flawless striped coat, emerald eyes, and heavy fangs like ivory spikes. His roars usually filled the circus grounds - fierce, angry, and utterly savage. He seemed to scream defiance and frustration at the whole world.

Chips Baily, who had been with Farnum & Williams since Lord knew when, told me that Mr. Indrasil used to use Green Terror in his act, until one night when the tiger leaped suddenly from its perch and almost ripped his head from his shoulders before he could get out of the cage. I noticed that Mr. Indrasil always wore, his hair long down the back of his neck.

I can still remember the tableau that day in Steubenville. It was hot, sweatingly hot, and we had a shirtsleeve crowd. That was why Mr. Legere and Mr. Indrasil stood out. Mr. Legere, standing silently by the tiger cage, was fully dressed in a suit and vest, his face unmarked by perspiration. And Mr. Indrasil, clad in one of his beautiful silk shirts and white whipcord breeches, was staring at

them both, his face dead-white, his eyes bulging in lunatic anger, hate, and fear. He was carrying a currycomb and brush, and his hands were trembling as they clenched on them spasmodically. Suddenly he saw me, and his anger found vent. "You!" He shouted. "Johnston!"

"Yes sir?" I felt a crawling in the pit of my stomach. I knew I was about to have the wrath of Indrasil vented on me, and the thought turned me weak with fear. I like to think I'm as brave as the next, and if it had been anyone else, I think I would have been fully determined to stand up for myself. But it wasn't anyone else. It was Mr. Indrasil, and his eyes were mad.

"These cages, Johnston. Are they supposed to be clean?" He pointed a finger, and I followed it. I saw four errant wisps of straw and an incriminating puddle of hose water in the far corner of one.

"Y-yes, sir," I said, and what was intended to be firmness became palsied bravado.

Silence, like the electric pause before a downpour. People were beginning to look, and I was dimly aware that Mr. Legere was staring at us with his bottomless eyes.

"Yes, sir?" Mr. Indrasil thundered suddenly. "Yes, sir? Yes, sir? Don't insult my intelligence, boy! Don't you think I can see? Smell? Did you use the disinfectant?"

"I used disinfectant yes----"

"Don't answer me back!" He screeched, and then the sudden drop in his voice made my skin crawl. "Don't you dare answer me back." Everyone was staring now. I wanted to retch, to die. "Now you get the hell into that tool shed, and you get that disinfectant and swab out those cages," he whispered, measuring every word. One hand suddenly shot out, grasping my shoulder. "And don't you ever, ever, speak back to me again."

I don't know where the words came from, but they were suddenly there, spilling off my lips. "I didn't speak back to you, Mr. Indrasil, and I don't like you saying I did. I-- resent it. Now let me go." His face went suddenly red, then white, then almost saffron with rage. His eyes were blazing doorways to hell.

Right then I thought I was going to die.

He made an inarticulate gagging sound, and the grip on my shoulder became excruciating. His right hand went up...up...up, and then descended with unbelievable speed.

If that hand had connected with my face, it would have knocked me senseless at best. At worst, it would have broken my neck. It did not connect.

Another hand materialized magically out of space, right in front of me. The two straining limbs came together with a flat Smacking sound. It was Mr. Legere.

"Leave the boy alone," he said emotionlessly.

Mr. Indrasil stared at him for a long second, and I think there was nothing so unpleasant in the whole business as watching the fear of

Mr. Legere and the mad lust to hurt (or to kill!) mix in those

terrible eyes.

Then he turned and stalked away.

I turned to look at Mr. Legere. "Thank you," I said.

"Don't thank me." And it wasn't a "don't thank me," but a "don't thank me.'" Not a gesture of modesty but a literal command. In a sudden flash of intuition empathy if you will I understood exactly what he meant by that comment. I was a pawn in what must have been a long combat between the two of them. I had been captured by Mr. Legere rather than Mr. Indrasil. He had stopped the lion tamer not because he felt for me, but because it gained him an advantage, however slight, in their private war.

"What's your name?" I asked, not at all offended by what I had inferred. He had, after all, been honest with me.

"Legere," he said briefly. He turned to go.

"Are you with a circus?" I asked, not wanting to let him go so easily. "You seemed to know --- him."

A faint smile touched his thin lips, and warmth kindled in his eyes for a moment; "No. You might call me a-policeman." And before I could reply, he had disappeared into the surging throng passing by. The next day we picked up stakes and moved on.

I saw Mr. Legere again in Danville and, two weeks later, in Chicago. In the time between I tried to avoid Mr. Indrasil as much as possible and kept the cat cages spotlessly clean. On the day before we pulled out for St. Louis, I asked Chips Baily and Sally O'Hara, the red-headed wire walker, if Mr. Legere and Mr. Indrasil knew each other. I was pretty sure they did, because Mr. Legere was hardly following the circus to eat our fabulous lime ice.

Sally and Chips looked at each other over their coffee cups. "No one knows much about what's between those, two," she said. "But it's been going on for a long time maybe twenty years. Ever since Mr. Indrasil came over from Ringling Brothers, and maybe before that."

Chips nodded. "This Legere guy picks up the circus almost every year when we swing through the Midwest and stays with us until we catch the train for Florida in Little Rock. Makes old Leopard Man touchy as one of his cats."

"He told me he was a police-man," I said. "What do you suppose he looks for around here? You don't suppose Mr. Indrasil--?"

Chips and Sally looked at each other strangely, and both just about broke their backs getting up. "Got to see those weights and counter weights get stored right," Sally said, and Chips muttered something not too convincing about checking on the rear axle of his U-Haul.

And that's about the way any conversation concerning Mt. Indrasil or Mr. Legere usually broke up--- hurriedly, with many hard-forced excuses.

We said farewell to Illinois and comfort at the same time. A killing hot spell came on, seemingly at the very instant we crossed the border, and it stayed with us for the next month and a half, as we moved slowly across Missouri and into Kansas. Everyone grew short of temper, including the animals. And that, of course, included the cats, which were Mr. Indrasil's responsibility. He rode the roustabouts unmercifully, and myself in particular. I grinned and tried to bear it, even though I had my own case of prickly heat.

You just don't argue with a crazy man, and I'd pretty well decided that was what Mr. Indrasil was.

No one was getting any sleep, and that is the curse of all circus performers. Loss of sleep slows up reflexes, and slow reflexes make for danger. In Independence Sally O'Hara fell seventy-five

feet into the nylon netting and fractured her shoulder. Andrea Solienni, our bareback rider, fell off one of her horses during rehearsal and was knocked unconscious by a flying hoof. Chips Baily suffered silently with the fever that was always with him, his face a waxen mask, with cold perspiration clustered at each temple. And in many ways, Mr. Indrasil had the roughest row to hoe of all. The cats were nervous and short-tempered, and every time he stepped into the Demon Cat Cage, as it was billed, he took his life in his hands. He was feeding the lions ordinate amounts of raw meat right before he went on, something that lion tamers rarely do, contrary to popular belief. His face grew drawn and haggard, and his eyes were wild.

Mr. Legere was almost always there, by Green Terror's cage, watching him. And that, of course, added to Mr. Indrasil's load. The circus began eyeing the silk-shirted figure nervously as he passed, and I knew they were all thinking the same thing I was: He's going to crack wide open, and when he does ---

When he did, God alone knew what would happen.

The hot spell went on, and temperatures were climbing well into the nineties every day. It seemed as if the rain gods were mocking us. Every town we left would receive the showers of blessing.

Every town we entered was hot, parched, sizzling.

And one night, on the road between Kansas City and Green Bluff, I saw something that upset me more than anything else.

It was hot -- abominably hot. It was no good even trying to sleep. I rolled about on my cot like a man in a fever-delirium, chasing the sandman but never quite catching him. Finally I got up, pulled on my pants, and went outside.

We had pulled off into a small field and drawn into a circle. Myself and two other roustabouts had unloaded the cats so they could catch whatever breeze there might be. The cages were there now,

painted dull silver by the swollen Kansas moon, and a tall figure in white whipcord breeches was standing by the biggest of them. Mr. Indrasil.

He was baiting Green Terror with a long, pointed pike. The big cat was padding silently around the cage, trying to avoid the sharp tip. And the frightening thing was, when the staff did punch into the tiger's flesh, it did not roar in pain and anger as it should have. It maintained an ominous silence, more terrifying to the person who knows cats than the loudest of roars.

It had gotten to Mr. Indrasil, too. "Quiet bastard, aren't you?" He grunted. Powerful arms flexed, and the iron shaft slid forward. Green Terror flinched, and his eyes rolled horribly. But he did not make a sound. "Yowl!" Mr. Indrasil hissed. "Go ahead and yowl,

you monster Yowl!" And he drove his spear deep into the tiger's flank.

Then I saw something odd. It seemed that a shadow moved in the darkness under one of the far wagons, and the moonlight seemed to glint on staring eyes -- green eyes.

A cool wind passed silently through the clearing, lifting dust and rumpling my hair.

Mr. Indrasil looked up, and there was a queer listening expression on his face. Suddenly he dropped the bar, turned, and strode back to his trailer.

I stared again at the far wagon, but the shadow was gone. Green Tiger stood motionlessly at the bars of his cage, staring at Mr. Indrasil's trailer. And the thought came to me that it hated Mr. Indrasil not because he was cruel or vicious, for the tiger respects these qualities in its own animalistic way, but rather because he was a deviate from even the tiger's savage norm. He was a rogue. That's the only way I can put it. Mr. Indrasil was not only a human tiger, but a rogue tiger as well.

The thought jelled inside me, disquieting and a little scary. I went back inside, but still I could not sleep.

The heat went on.

Every day we fried, every night we tossed and turned, sweating and sleepless. Everyone was painted red with sunburn, and there were fistfights over trifling affairs. Everyone was reaching the point of explosion.

Mr. Legere remained with us, a silent watcher, emotionless on the surface, but, I sensed, with deep-running currents of - what? Hate? Fear? Vengeance? I could not place it. But he was potentially dangerous, I was sure of that. Perhaps more so than Mr. Indrasil was, if anyone ever lit his particular fuse.

He was at the circus at every performance, always dressed in his nattily creased brown suit, despite the killing temperatures. He stood silently by Green Terror's cage, seeming to commune deeply with the tiger, who was always quiet when he was around.

From Kansas to Oklahoma, with no letup in the temperature. A day without a heat prostration case was a rare day indeed. Crowds were beginning to drop off; who wanted to sit under a stifling canvas tent when there was an air-conditioned movie just around the block?

We were all as jumpy as cats, to coin a particularly applicable phrase. And as we set down stakes in Wildwood Green, Oklahoma, I think we all knew a climax of some sort was close at hand. And most of us knew it would involve Mr. Indrasil. A bizarre occurrence had taken place just prior to our first Wildwood performance. Mr. Indrasil had been in the Demon Cat Cage, putting the ill-tempered lions through their paces. One of them missed its balance on its pedestal, tottered and almost regained it.

Then, at that precise moment, Green Terror let out a terrible, ear-

splitting roar.

The lion fell, landed heavily, and suddenly launched itself with rifle-bullet accuracy at Mr. Indrasil. With a frightened curse, he heaved his chair at the cat's feet, tangling up the driving legs. He darted out just as the lion smashed against the bars.

As he shakily collected himself preparatory to re-entering the cage, Green Terror let out another roar -- but this one monstrously like a huge, disdainful chuckle.

Mr. Indrasil stared at the beast, white-faced, then turned and walked away. He did not come out of his trailer all afternoon. That afternoon wore on interminably. But as the temperature climbed, we all began looking hopefully toward the west, where huge banks of thunderclouds were forming.

"Rain, maybe," I told Chips, stopping by his barking platform in front of the sideshow.

But he didn't respond to my hopeful grin. "Don't like it," he said. "No wind. Too hot. Hail or tornadoes." His face grew grim. "It ain't no picnic, ridin' out a tornado with a pack of crazy-wild animals all over the place, Eddie. I've thanked God mor'n once when we've gone through the tornado belt that we don't have no elephants.

"Yeah" he added gloomily, "you better hope them clouds stay right on the horizon."

But they didn't. They moved slowly toward us, cyclopean pillars in the sky, purple at the bases and awesome blue-black through the cumulonimbus. All air movement ceased, and the heat lay on us like a woolen winding-shroud. Every now and again, thunder would clear its throat further west.

About four, Mr. Farnum himself, ringmaster and half-owner of the circus, appeared and told us there would be no evening performance; just batten down and find a convenient hole to crawl into in case of trouble. There had been corkscrew funnels spotted in several places between Wildwood and Oklahoma City, some within forty miles of us.

There was only a small crowd when the announcement came, apathetically wandering through the sideshow exhibits or ogling the animals. But Mr. Legere had not been present all day; the only person at Green Terror's cage was a sweaty high-school boy with clutch of books. When Mr. Farnum announced the U.S. Weather Bureau tornado warning that had been issued, he hurried quickly away.

I and the other two roustabouts spent the rest of the-afternoon working our tails off, securing tents, loading animals back into their wagons, and making generally sure that everything was nailed down.

Finally only the cat cages were left, and there was a special arrangement for those. Each cage had a special mesh "breezeway" accordioned up against it, which, when extended completely, connected with the Demon Cat Cage. When the smaller cages had to be moved, the felines could be herded into the big cage while they were loaded up. The big cage itself rolled on gigantic casters and could be muscled around to a position where each cat could be let back into its original cage. It sounds complicated, and it was,

but it was just the only way.

We did the lions first, then Ebony Velvet, the docile black panther that had set the circus back almost one season's receipts. It was a tricky business coaxing them up and then back through the breezeways, but all of us preferred it to calling Mr. Indrasil to help.

By the time we were ready for Green Terror, twilight had come --- a queer, yellow twilight that hung humidly around us. The sky above had taken on a flat, shiny aspect that I had never seen and which I didn't like in the least.

"Better hurry," Mr. Farnum said, as we laboriously trundled the Demon Cat Cage back to where we could hook it to the back of Green Terror's show cage. "Barometer's falling off fast." He shook his head worriedly. "Looks bad, boys. Bad.'" He hurried on, still shaking his head.

We got Green Terror's breezeway hooked up and opened the back of his cage. "In you go," I said encouragingly.

Green Terror looked at me menacingly and didn't move.

Thunder rumbled again, louder, closer, sharper. The sky had gone jaundice, the ugliest color I have ever seen. Wind-devils began to pick jerkily at our clothes and whirl away the flattened candy wrappers and cotton-candy cones that littered the area.

"Come on, come on," I urged and poked him easily with the blunt-tipped rods we were given to herd them with.

Green Terror roared ear-splittingly, and one paw lashed out with blinding speed. The hardwood pole was jerked from my hands and splintered as if it had been a greenwood twig. The tiger was on his feet now, and there was murder in his eyes.

"Look," I said shakily. "One of you will have to go get Mr. Indrasil, that's all. We can't wait around."

As if to punctuate my words, thunder cracked louder, the clapping of mammoth hands.

Kelly Nixon and Mike McGregor flipped for it; I was excluded because of my previous run-in with Mr. Indrasil. Kelly drew the task, threw us a wordless glance that said he would prefer facing the storm and then started off.

He was gone almost ten minutes. The wind was picking up velocity now, and twilight was darkening into a weird six o'clock night. I was scared, and am not afraid to admit it. That rushing, featureless sky, the deserted circus grounds, the sharp, tugging wind-vortices all that makes a memory that will stay with me always, undimmed.

And Green Terror would not budge into his breezeway.

Kelly Nixon came rushing back, his eyes wide. "I pounded on his door for 'most five minutes!" He gasped. "Couldn't raise him!"

We looked at each other, at a loss. Green Terror was a big investment for the circus. He couldn't just be left in the open. I turned bewilderedly, looking for Chips, Mr. Farnum, or anybody who could tell me what to do. But everyone was gone. The tiger

was our responsibility. I considered trying to load the cage bodily into the trailer, but I wasn't going to get my fingers in that cage. "Well, we've just got to go and get him," I said. "The three of us. Come on." And we ran toward Mr. Indrasil's trailer through the gloom of coming night.

We pounded on his door until he must have thought all the demons of hell were after him. Thankfully, it finally jerked open. Mr. Indrasil swayed and stared down at us, his mad eyes rimmed and oversheened with drink. He smelled like a distillery.

"Damn you, leave me alone," he snarled.

"Mr. Indrasil --" I had to shout over the rising whine of the wind. It was like no storm I had ever heard of or read about, out there. It was like the end of the world .

"You," he gritted softly. He reached down and gathered my shirt up in a knot. "I'm going to teach you a lesson you'll never forget."

He glared at Kelly and Mike, cowering back in the moving storm shadows. "Get out!"

They ran. I didn't blame them; I've told you -- Mr. Indrasil was crazy. And not just ordinary crazy -- he was like a crazy animal, like one of his own cats gone bad.

"All right," he muttered, staring down at me, his eyes like hurricane lamps. "No juju to protect you now. No grisgris." His lips twitched in a wild, horrible smile. "He isn't here now, is he? We're two of a kind, him and me. Maybe the only two left. My nemesis -- and I'm his." He was rambling, and I didn't try to stop him. At least his mind was off me.

"Turned that cat against me, back in '58. Always had the power more'n me. Fool could make a million -- the two of us could make a million if he wasn't so damned high and mighty...what's that?"

It was Green Terror, and he had begun to roar ear-splittingly.

"Haven't you got that damned tiger in?" He screamed, almost falsetto. He shook me like a rag doll.

"He won't go!" I found myself yelling back. "You've got to --"

But he flung me away. I stumbled over the fold-up steps in front of his trailer and crashed into a bone-shaking heap at the bottom.

With something between a sob and a curse, Mr. Indrasil strode past me, face mottled with anger and fear.

I got up, drawn after him as if hypnotized. Some intuitive part of me realized I was about to see the last act played out.

Once clear of the shelter of Mr. Indrasil's trailer, the power of the wind was appalling. It screamed like a runaway freight train. I was an ant, a speck, an unprotected molecule before that thundering, cosmic force.

And Mr. Legere was standing by Green Terror's cage.

It was like a tableau from Dante. The near-empty cage-clearing inside the circle of trailers; the two men, facing each other silently, their clothes and hair rippled by the shrieking gale; the boiling sky above; the twisting wheatfields in the background, like damned

souls bending to the whip of Lucifer.

"It's time, Jason," Mr. Legere said, his words flayed across the clearing by the wind.

Mr. Indrasil's wildly whipping hair lifted around the livid scar across the back of his neck. His fists clenched, but he said nothing. I could almost feel him gathering his will, his life force, his id. It gathered around him like an unholy nimbus.

And, then, I saw with sudden horror that Mr. Legere was unhooking Green Terror's breezeway -- and the back of the cage was open!

I cried out, but the wind ripped my words away.

The great tiger leaped out and almost flowed past Mr. Legere. Mr. Indrasil swayed, but did not run. He bent his head and stared down at the tiger.

And Green Terror stopped.

He swung his huge head back to Mr. Legere, almost turned, and then slowly turned back to Mr. Indrasil again. There was a terrifyingly palpable sensation of directed force in the air, a mesh of conflicting wills centered around the tiger. And the wills were evenly matched.

I think, in the end, it was Green Terror's own will -- his hate of Mr. Indrasil -- that tipped the scales.

The cat began to advance, his eyes hellish, flaring beacons. And something strange began to happen to Mr. Indrasil. He seemed to be folding in on himself, shriveling, accordioning. The silk-shirt

lost shape, the dark, whipping hair became a hideous toadstool around his collar.

Mr. Legere called something across to him, and, simultaneously, Green Terror leaped.

I never saw the outcome. The next moment I was slammed flat on my back, and the breath seemed to be sucked from my body. I caught one crazily tilted glimpse of a huge, towering cyclone funnel, and then the darkness descended.

When I awoke, I was in my cot just aft of the grainery bins in the all-purpose storage trailer we carried. My body felt as if it had been beaten with padded Indian clubs.

Chips Baily appeared, his face lined and pale. He saw my eyes were open and grinned relievedly. "Didn't know as you were ever gonna wake up. How you feel?"

"Dislocated," I said. "What happened? How'd I get here?"

"We found you piled up against Mr. Indrasil's trailer. The tornado almost carried you away for a souvenir, m'boy."

At the mention of Mr. Indrasil, all the ghastly memories came flooding back. "Where is Mr. Indrasil? And Mr. Legere?"

His eyes went murky, and he started to make some kind of an evasive answer.

"Straight talk," I said, struggling up on one elbow. "I have to know, Chips. I have to."

Something in my face must have decided him. "Okay. But this isn't exactly what we told the cops -- in fact we hardly told the cops any of it. No sense havin' people think we're crazy. Anyhow, Indrasil's gone. I didn't even know that Legere guy was around."

"And Green Tiger?"

Chips' eyes were unreadable again. "He and the other tiger fought to death."

"Other tiger? There's no other ---"

"Yeah, but they found two of 'em, lying in each other's blood. Hell of a mess. Ripped each other's throats out."

"What -- where --"

"Who knows? We just told the cops we had two tigers. Simpler that way." And before I could say another word, he was gone. And that's the end of my story -- except for two little items. The words Mr. Legere shouted just before the tornado hit: "When a man and an animal live in the same shell, Indrasil, the instincts determine the mold!"

The other thing is what keeps me awake nights. Chips told me later, offering it only for what it might be worth. What he told me was that the strange tiger had a long scar on the back of its neck.

THE
REPLOIDS

Stephen King

Appeared in
Night Visions #5, 1988

No one knew exactly how long it had been going on. Not long. Two days, two weeks; it couldn't have been much longer than that, Cheyney reasoned. Not that it mattered. It was just that people got to watch a little more of the show with the added thrill of knowing the show was real. When the United States - the whole world - found out about the Reploids, it was pretty spectacular. just as well, maybe. These days, unless it's spectacular, a thing can go on damned near forever. It is neither believed nor disbelieved. It is simply part of the weird Godhead mantra that made up the accelerating flow of events and experience as the century neared its end. It's harder to get peoples' attention. It takes machine-guns in a crowded airport or a live grenade rolled up the aisle of a bus load of nuns stopped at a roadblock in some Central American country overgrown with guns and greenery. The Reploids became national - and international - news on the morning of November 30, 1989, after what happened during the first two chaotic minutes of the Tonight Show taping in Beautiful Downtown Burbank, California, the night before.

The floor manager watched intently as the red sweep secondhand moved upward toward the twelve. The studio audience clockwatched as intently as the floor manager. When the red sweep second-hand crossed the twelve, it would be five o'clock and taping of the umpty-umptyeth Tonight Show would commence. As the red second-hand passed the eight, the audience stirred and muttered with its own peculiar sort of stage fright. After all, they represented America, didn't they? Yes!

"Let's have it quiet, people, please," the floor manager said pleasantly, and the audience quieted like obedient children. Doc Severinsen's drummer ran off a fast little riff on his snare and then held his sticks easily between thumbs and fingers, wrists loose, watching the floor manager instead of the clock, as the show - people always did. For crew and performers, the floor manager

was the clock. When the second-hand passed the ten, the floor manager counted down aloud to four, and then held up three fingers, two fingers, one finger ... and then a clenched fist from which one finger pointed dramatically at the audience. An APPLAUSE sign lit up, but the studio audience was primed to whoop it up; it would have made no difference if it had been written in Sanskrit.

So things started off just as they were supposed to start off: dead on time. This was not so surprising; there were crewmembers on the Tonight Show who, had they been LAPD officers, could have retired with full benefits. The Doc Severinsen band, one of the best showbands in the world, launched into the familiar theme: Ta-da-da-Da-da ... and the large, rolling voice of Ed McMahon cried enthusiastically: "From Los Angeles, entertainment capital of the world, it's The Tonight Show, live, with Johnny Carson! Tonight, Johnny's guests are actress Cybill Shepherd of Moonlighting!" Excited applause from the audience. "Magician Doug Henning!" Even louder applause from the audience. "Pee Wee Herman!" A fresh wave of applause, this time including hoots of joy from Pee Wee's rooting section. "From Germany, the Flying Schnauzers, the world's only canine acrobats!" Increased applause, with a mixture of laughter from the audience. "Not to mention Doc Severinsen, the world's only Flying Bandleader, and his canine band!"

The band members not playing horns obediently barked. The audience laughed harder, applauded harder.

In the control room of Studio C, no one was laughing.

A man in a loud sport-coat with a shock of curly black hair was standing in the wings, idly snapping his fingers and looking across the stage at Ed, but that was all.

The director signaled for Number Two Cam's medium shot on Ed for the umpty-umptyeth time, and there was Ed on the ON SCREEN monitors. He barely heard someone mutter, "Where the hell is he?" before Ed's rolling tones announced, also for the

umpty-umptieth time: "And now heeere's JOHNNY!"

Wild applause from the audience.

"Camera Three," the director snapped.

"But there's only that--"

"Camera Three, goddammit!"

Camera Three came up on the ON SCREEN monitor, showing every TV director's private nightmare, a dismally empty stage ... and then someone, some stranger, was striding confidently into that empty space, just as if he had every right in the world to be there, filling it with unquestionable presence, charm, and authority. But, whoever he was, he was most definitely not Johnny Carson. Nor was it any of the other familiar faces TV and studio audiences had grown used to during Johnny's absences. This man was taller than Johnny, and instead of the familiar silver hair, there was a luxuriant cap of almost Pan-like black curls. The stranger's hair was so black that in places it seemed to glow almost blue, like Superman's hair in the comic-books. The sport-coat he wore was not quite loud enough to put him in the Pleesda-Meetcha-Is-This-The-Missus? car salesman category, but Carson would not have touched it with a twelve-foot pole.

The audience applause continued, but it first seemed to grow slightly bewildered, and then clearly began to thin.

"What the fuck's going on?" someone in the control room asked.

The director simply watched, mesmerized.

Instead of the familiar swing of the invisible golf-club, punctuated by a drum-riff and high-spirited hoots of approval from the studio

audience, this dark-haired, broad-shouldered, loud-jacketed, unknown gentleman began to move his hands up and down, eyes flicking rhythmically from his moving palms to a spot just above his head - he was miming a juggler with a lot of fragile items in the air, and doing it with the easy grace of the long-time showman. It was only something in his face, something as subtle as a shadow, that told you the objects were eggs or something, and would break if dropped. It was, in fact, very like the way Johnny's eyes followed the invisible ball down the invisible fairway, registering one that had been righteously stroked ... unless, of course, he chose to vary the act, which he could and did do from time to time, and without even breathing hard.

He made a business of dropping the last egg, or whatever the fragile object was, and his eyes followed it to the floor with exaggerated dismay. Then, for a moment, he froze. Then he glanced toward Cam Three Left ... toward Doc and the orchestra, in other words.

After repeated viewings of the videotape, Dave Cheyney came to what seemed to him to be an irrefutable conclusion, although many of his colleagues - including his partner - questioned it.

"He was waiting for a sting," Cheyney said. "Look, you can see it on his face. It's as old as burlesque."

His partner, Pete Jacoby, said, "I thought burlesque was where the girl with the heroin habit took off her clothes while the guy with the heroin habit played the trumpet."

Cheyney gestured at him impatiently. "Think of the lady that used to play the piano in the silent movies, then. Or the one that used to

do schmaltz on the organ during the radio soaps." Jacoby looked at him, wide-eyed. 'Mid they have those things when you were a kid, daddy?" he asked in a falsetto voice.

"Will you for once be serious?" Cheyney asked him. "Because this is a serious thing we got here, I think."

"What we got here is very simple. We got a nut."

"No," Cheyney said, and hit rewind on the VCR again with one hand while he lit a fresh cigarette with the other. "What we got is a seasoned performer who's mad as hell because the guy on the snare dropped his cue." He paused thoughtfully and added: "Christ, Johnny does it all the time. And if the guy who was supposed to lay in the sting dropped his cue, I think he'd look the same way. By then it didn't matter. The stranger who wasn't Johnny Carson had time to recover, to look at a flabbergasted Ed McMahon and say, "The moon must be full tonight, Ed - do you think - " And that was when the NBC security guards came out and grabbed him.

"Hey! What the fuck do you think you're - "

But by then they had dragged him away.

In the control room of Studio C, there was total silence. The audience monitors picked up the same silence. Camera Four was swung toward the audience, and showed a picture of one hundred and fifty stunned, silent faces. Camera Two, the one medium-close on Ed McMahon, showed a man who looked almost cosmically befuddled.

The director took a package of Winstons from his breast pocket, took one out, put it in his mouth, took it out again and reversed it so the filter was facing away from him, and abruptly bit the cigarette in two. He threw the filtered half in one direction and spat the unfiltered half in another.

"Get up a show from the library with Rickles," he said. "No Joan Rivers. And if I see Totie Fields, someone's going to get fired." Then he strode away, head down. He shoved a chair with such violence on his way out of the control room that it struck the wall,

rebounded, nearly fractured the skull of a white-faced intern from USC, and fell on its side.

One of the PA's told the intern in a low voice, "Don't worry; that's just Fred's way of committing honorable seppuku."

The man who was not Johnny Carson was taken, bellowing loudly not about his lawyer but his team of lawyers, to the Burbank Police Station. In Burbank, as in Beverly Hills and Hollywood Heights, there is a wing of the police station which is known simply as "special security functions." This may cover many aspects of the sometimes crazed world of Tinsel-Town law enforcement. The cops don't like it, the cops don't respect it ... but they ride with it. You don't shit where you eat. Rule One.

"Special security functions" might be the place to which a coke-snorting movie-star whose last picture grossed seventy million dollars might be conveyed; the place to which the battered wife of an extremely powerful film producer might be taken; it was the

place to which the man with the dark crop of curls was taken. The man who showed up in Johnny Carson's place on the stage of Studio C on the afternoon of November 29th identified himself as Ed Paladin, speaking the name with the air of one who expects everyone who hears it to fall on his or her knees and, perhaps, genuflect. His California driver's license, Blue Cross - Blue Shield card, Amex and Diners' Club cards, also identified him as Edward Paladin.

His trip from Studio C ended, at least temporarily, in a room in the Burbank PD's "special security" area. The room was panelled with tough plastic that almost did look like mahogany and furnished with a low, round couch and tasteful chairs. There was a cigarette box on the glass-topped coffee table filled with Dunhills, and the magazines included Fortune and Variety and Vogue and Billboard and GQ. The wall-to-wall carpet wasn't really ankle-deep but looked it, and there was a CableView guide on top of the large-

screen TV. There was a bar (now locked), and a very nice neo-Jackson Pollock painting on one of the walls. The walls, however, were of drilled cork, and the mirror above the bar was a little bit too large and a little bit too shiny to be anything but a piece of one-way glass.

The man who called himself Ed Paladin stuck his hands in his just-too-loud sport-coat pockets, looked around disgustedly, and said: "An interrogation room by any other name is still an interrogation room."

Detective 1st Grade Richard Cheyney looked at him calmly for a moment. When he spoke, it was in the soft and polite voice that had earned him the only halfkidding nickname "Detective to the Stars." Part of the reason he spoke this way was because he genuinely liked and respected show people. Part of the reason was because he didn't trust them. Half the time they were lying they didn't know it.

"Could you tell us, please, Mr Paladin, how you got on the set of The Tonight Show, and where Johnny Carson is?"

"Who's Johnny Carson?"

Pete Jacoby - who wanted to be Henny Youngman when he grew up, Cheyney often thought - gave Cheyney a momentary dry look every bit as good as a Jack Benny deadpan. Then he looked back at Edward Paladin and said, "Johnny Carson's the guy who used to be Mr Ed. You know, the talking horse? I mean, a lot of people know about Mr Ed, the famous talking horse, but an awful lot of people don't know that he went to Geneva to have a species-change operation and when he came back he was-"

Cheyney often allowed Jacoby his routines (there was really no other word for them, and Cheyney remembered one occasion when Jacoby had gotten a man charged with beating his wife and infant son to death laughing so hard that tears of mirth rather than

remorse were rolling down his cheeks as he signed the confession that was going to put the bastard in jail for the rest of his life), but

he wasn't going to tonight. He didn't have to see the flame under his ass; he could feel it, and it was being turned up. Pete was maybe a little slow on the uptake about some things, and maybe that was why he wasn't going to make Detective 1st for another two or three years ... if he ever did.

Some ten years ago a really awful thing had happened in a little nothing town called Chowchilla. Two people (they had walked on two legs, anyway, if you could believe the newsfilm) had hijacked a busload of kids, buried them alive, and then had demanded a huge sum of money. Otherwise, they said, those kiddies could just stay where they were and swap baseball trading cards until their air ran out. That one had ended happily, but it could have been a nightmare. And God knew Johnny Carson was no busload of schoolkids, but the case had the same kind of fruitcake appeal: here was that rare event about which both the Los Angeles Times-Mirror and The National Enquirer would hobnob on their front pages. What Pete didn't understand was that something extremely rare had happened to them: in the world of day-to-day police work, a world where almost everything came in shades of gray, they had suddenly been placed in a situation of stark and simple contrasts: produce within twenty-four hours, thirty-six at the outside, or watch the Feds come in ... and kiss your ass goodbye. Things happened so rapidly that even later he wasn't completely sure, but he believed both of them had been going on the unspoken presumption, even then, that Carson had been kidnapped and this guy was part of it.

"We're going to do it by the numbers, Mr Paladin," Cheyney said, and although he was speaking to the man glaring up at him from one of the chairs (he had refused the sofa at once), his eyes flicked briefly to Pete. They had been partners for nearly twelve years, and a glance was all it took.

No more Comedy Store routines, Pete.

Message received.

"First comes the Miranda Warning," Cheyney said pleasantly. "I am required to inform you that you are in the custody of the Burbank City Police. Although not required to do so immediately, I'll add that a preliminary charge of trespassing-

"Trespassing!" An angry flush burst over Paladin's face.

"-on property both owned and leased by the National Broadcasting Company has been lodged against you. I am Detective 1st Grade Richard Cheyney. This man with me is my partner, Detective 2nd Grade Peter Jacoby. We'd like to interview you."

"Fucking interrogate me is what you mean."

"I only have one question, as far as interrogation goes," Cheyney said. "Otherwise, I only want to interview you at this time. In other words, I have one question relevant to the charge which has been lodged; the rest deal with other matters."

"Well, what's the fucking question?"

"That wouldn't be going by the numbers," Jacoby said.

Cheyney said: "I am required to tell you that you have the right-

"To have my lawyer here, you bet," Paladin said. "And I just decided that before I answer a single fucking question, and that includes where I went to lunch today and what I had, he's going to

be in here. Albert K. Dellums."

He spoke this name as if it should rock both detectives back on their heels, but Cheyney had never heard of it and could tell by Pete's expression that he hadn't either.

Whatever sort of crazy this Ed Paladin might turn out to be, he was no dullard. He saw the quick glances which passed between the

two detectives and read them easily. You know him? Cheyney's eyes asked Jacoby's, and Jacoby's replied, Never heard of him in my life.

For the first time an expression of perplexity - it was not fear, not yet - crossed Mr Edward Paladin's face.

"Al Dellums," he said, raising his voice like some Americans overseas who seem to believe they can make the waiter understand if they only speak loudly enough and slowly enough. "Al Dellums of Dellums, Carthage, Stoneham, and Tayloe. I guess I shouldn't be all that surprised that you haven't heard of him. He's only one of the most important, well-known lawyers in the country." Paladin shot the left cuff of his just-slightly-too-loud sport-coat and glanced at his watch. "If you reach him at home, gentlemen, he'll be pissed. If you have to call his club - and I think this is his club-night - he's going to be pissed like a bear."

Cheyney was not impressed by bluster. If you could sell it at a quarter a pound, he never would have had to turn his hand at another day's work. But even a quick peck had been enough to show him that the watch Paladin was wearing was not just a Rolex but a Rolex Midnight Star. It might be an imitation, of course, but his gut told him it was genuine. Part of it was his clear impression that Paladin wasn't trying to make an impression - he'd wanted to see what time it was, no more or less than that. And if the watch was the McCoy ... well, there were cabin-cruisers you could buy for less. What was a man who could afford a Rolex Midnight Star doing mixed up in something weird like this?

Now he was the one who must have been showing perplexity clear enough for Paladin to read it, because the man smiled - a humorless skinning-back of the lips from the capped teeth. "The air-conditioning in here's pretty nice," he said, crossing his legs and flicking the crease absently. "You guys want to enjoy it while you can. It's pretty muggy walking a beat out in Watts, even this time of year."

In a harsh and abrupt tone utterly unlike his bright pitter-patter Comedy Store voice, Jacoby said: "Shut your mouth, jag-off." Paladin jerked around and stared at him, eyes wide. And again Cheyney would have sworn it had been years since anyone had spoken to this man in that way. Years since anyone would have dared.

"What did you say?"

"I said shut your mouth when Detective Cheyney is talking to you. Give me your lawyer's number. I'll see that he is called. In the meantime, I think you need to take a few seconds to pull your head

out of your ass and look around and see exactly where you are and exactly how serious the trouble is that you are in. I think you need to reflect on the fact that, while only one charge has been lodged against you, you could be facing enough to put you in the slam well into the next century ... and you could be facing them before the sun comes up tomorrow morning."

Jacoby smiled. It wasn't his howaya-folks-anyone-here-from-Duluth Comedy Store smile, either. Like Paladin's, it was a brief pull of the lips, no more.

"You're right - the air-conditioning in here isn't halfbad. Also, the TV works and for a wonder the people on it don't look like they're seasick. The coffee's good - perked, not instant. Now, if you want to make another two or three wisecracks, you can wait for your legal talent in a holding cell on the fifth floor. On Five, the only entertainment consists of kids crying for their mommies and winos puking on their sneakers. I don't know who you think you are and I don't care, because as far as I'm concerned, you're nobody. I never saw you before in my life, never heard of you before in my life, and if you push me enough I'll widen the crack in your ass for you."

"That's enough," Cheyney said quietly.

"I'll retool it so you could drive a Ryder van up there, Mister Paladin - you understand me? Can you grok that?"

Now Paladin's eyes were all but hanging from their sockets on stalks. His mouth was open. Then, without speaking, he removed his wallet from his coat pocket (some kind of lizard-skin, Cheyney thought, two months' salary ... maybe three). He found his lawyer's card (the home number was jotted on the back, Cheyney noted it was most definitely not part of the printed matter on the front) and handed it to Jacoby. His fingers now showed the first observable tremor.

"Pete?"

Jacoby looked at him and Cheyney saw it was no act; Paladin had actually succeeded in pissing his easy-going partner off. No mean feat.

"Make the call yourself."

"Okay." Jacoby left.

Cheyney looked at Paladin and was suddenly amazed to find himself feeling sorry for the man. Before he had looked perplexed; now he looked both stunned and frightened, like a man who wakes from a nightmare only to discover the nightmare is still going on. "Watch closely," Cheyney said after the door had closed, "and I'll show you one of the mysteries of the West. West LA, that is." He moved the neo-Pollock and revealed not a safe but a toggle switch. He flicked it, then let the painting slide back into place. "That's one-way glass," Cheyney said, cocking a thumb at the too-large mirror over the bar.

"I am not terribly surprised to hear that," Paladin said, and Cheyney reflected that, while the man might have some of the shitty egocentric habits of the Veddy Rich and Well-Known in LA,

he was also a near-superb actor: only a man as experienced as he was himself could have told how really close Paladin was to the ragged edge of tears.

But not of guilt, that was what was so puzzling, so goddamn-maddening.

Of perplexity.

He felt that absurd sense of sorrow again, absurd because it presupposed the man's innocence: he did not want to be Edward Paladin's nightmare, did not want to be the heavy in a Kafka novel where suddenly nobody knows where they are, or why they are there.

"I can't do anything about the glass," Cheyney said. He came back and sat down across the coffee table from Paladin, "but I've just killed the sound. So it's you talking to me and vice-versa." He took a pack of Kents from his breast pocket, stuck one in the corner of his mouth, then offered the pack to Paladin. "Smoke?"

Paladin picked up the pack, looked it over, and smiled. "Even my old brand. I haven't smoked one since night Yul Brynner died, Mr Cheyney. I don't think ant to start again now."

Cheyney put the pack back into his pocket. "Can we talk?" he asked.

Paladin rolled his eyes. "Oh my God, it's Joan Raiford."

"Who?"

"Joan Raiford. You know, "I took Elizabeth Taylor to Marine World and when she saw Shamu the Whale she asked me if it came with vegetables?" I repeat, Detective Cheyney: grow up. I have no reason in the world to believe that switch is anything but a dummy. My God, how innocent do you think I am?"

Joan Raiford? Is that what he really said?, Joan Raiford?

"What's the matter?" Paladin asked pleasantly. He crossed his legs the other way. "Did you perhaps think you saw a clear path? Me breaking down, maybe saying I'd tell everything, everything, just don't let 'em fry me, copper?"

With all the force of personality he could muster, Cheyney said: "I believe things are very wrong here, Mr Paladin. You've got them wrong and I've got them wrong. When your lawyer gets here, maybe we can sort them out and maybe we can't. Most likely we can't. So listen to me, and for God's sake use your brain. I gave you the Miranda Warning. You said you wanted your lawyer present. If there was a tape turning, I've bugged my own case. Your lawyer would have to say just one word - enticement - and you'd walk free, whatever has happened to Carson. And I could go to work as a security guard in one of those flea-bitten little towns down by the border."

"You say that," Paladin said, "but I'm no lawyer.

But ... Convince me, his eyes said. Yeah, let's talk about this, lees see if we can't get together, because you're right, something is weird. So ... convince me.

"Is your mother alive?" Cheyney asked abruptly.

"What - yes, but what does that have to-"

"You talk to me or I'm going to personally take two CHP motorcycle cops and the three of us are going to rape your mother

tomorrow!" Cheyney screamed. "I'm personally going to take her up the ass! Then we're going to cut off her tits and leave them on the front lawn! So you better talk!"

Paladin's face was as white as milk: a white so white it is nearly blue.

"Now are you convinced?" Cheyney asked softly. 'I'm not crazy. I'm not going to rape your mother. But with a statement like that

on a reel of tape, you could say you were the guy on the grassy knoll in Dallas and the Burbank police wouldn't produce the tape. I want to talk to you, man. What's going on here?"

Paladin shook his head dully and said, "I don't know."

In the room behind the one-way glass, Jacoby joined Lieutenant McEachern, Ed McMahon (still looking stunned), and a cluster of technical people at a bank of high-tech equipment. The LAPD chief of police and the mayor were rumored to be racing each other to Burbank.

"He's talking?" Jacoby asked.

"I think he's going to," McEachern said. His eyes had moved toward Jacoby once, quickly, when he came in. Now they were centered only on the window. The men seated on the other side, Cheyney smoking, relaxed, Paladin tense but trying to control it, looked slightly lowish through the one-way glass. The sound of their voices was clear and undistorted through the overhead speakers - a top-of-the-line Bose in each corner.

Without taking his eyes off the men, McEachern said: "You get his lawyer?"

Jacoby said: "The home number on the card belongs to a cleaning woman named Howlanda Moore."

McEachern flicked him another fast glance.

"Black, from the sound, delta Mississippi at a guess. Kids yelling and fighting in the background. She didn't quite say I'se gwine whup you if you don't quit!, but it was close. She's had the number three years. I re-dialed twice.

"Jesus," McEachern, said. "Try the office number?"

"Yeah," Jacoby replied. "Got a recording. You think ConTel's a good buy, Loot?"

McEachern flicked his gray eyes in Jacoby's direction again.

"The number on the front of the card is that of a fairly large stock brokerage," Jacoby said quietly. "I looked under lawyers in the Yellow Pages. Found no Albert K. Dellums. Closest is an Albert Dillon, no middle initial. No law firm like the one on the card."

"Jesus please us," McEachern said, and then the door banged open and a little man with the face of a monkey barged in. The mayor had apparently won the race to Burbank.

"What's going on here?" he said to McEachern.

"I don't know," McEachern said.

"All right," Paladin said wearily. "Let's talk about it. I feel, Detective Cheyney, like a man who had just spent two hours or so on some disorienting amusement park ride. Or like someone

slipped some LSD into my drink. Since we're not on the record, what was your one interrogatory? Let's start with that."

"All right," Cheyney said. "How did you get into the broadcast complex, and how did you get into Studio C?"

"Those are two questions."

"I apologize."

Paladin smiled faintly.

"I got on the property and into the studio," he said, "the same way I've been getting on the property and into the studio for over twenty years. My pass. Plus the fact that I know every security guard in the place. Shit, I've been there longer than most of them."

"May I see that pass?" Cheyney asked. His voice was quiet, but a large pulse beat in his throat.

Paladin looked at him warily for a moment, then pulled out the lizard-skin wallet again. After a moment of rifling, he tossed a perfectly correct NBC Performer's Pass onto the coffee table.

Correct, that was, in every way but one.

Cheyney crushed out his smoke, picked it up, and looked at it. The pass was laminated. In the corner was the NBC peacock, something only long-timers had on their cards. The face in the photo was the face of Edward Paladin. Height and weight were correct. No space for eye-color, hair-color, or age, of course; when you were dealing with ego. Walk softly, stranger, for here there be tygers.

The only problem with the pass was that it was salmon pink.

NBC Performer's Passes were bright red.

Cheyney had seen something else while Paladin was looking for his pass. "Could you put a one-dollar bill from your wallet on the coffee table there?" he asked softly.

"Why?"

"I'll show you in a moment," Cheyney said. "A five or a ten would do as well."

Paladin studied him, then opened his wallet again. He took back his pass, replaced it, and carefully took out a one-dollar bill. He turned it so it faced Cheyney. Cheyney took his own wallet (a scuffed old Lord Buxton with its seams unravelling; he should replace it but found it easier to think of than to do) from his jacket pocket, and removed a dollar bill of his own. He put it next to Paladin's, and then turned them both around so Paladin could see them right-side-up-so Paladin could study them.

Which Paladin did, silently, for almost a full minute. His face slowly flushed dark red ... and then the color slipped from it a little at a time. He'd probably meant to bellow WHAT THE FUCK IS

GOING ON HERE? Cheyney thought later, but what came out was a breathless little gasp: -what-

"I don't know," Cheyney said.

On the right was Cheyney's one, gray-green, not brand-new by any means, but new enough so that it did not yet have that rumped, limp, shopworn look of a bill which has changed hands many

times. Big number 1's at the top corners, smaller 1's at the bottom corners. FEDERAL RESERVE NOTE in small caps between the top 1's and THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA in larger ones. The letter A in a seal to the left of Washington, along with the assurance that THIS NOTE IS LEGAL TENDER, FOR ALL DEBTS, PUBLIC AND PRIVATE. It was a series 1985 bill, the signature that of James A. Baker III. Paladin's one was not the same at all. The 1's in the four corners were the same; THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA was the same; the assurance that the bill could be used to pay all public and private debts was the same. But Paladin's one was a bright blue. Instead of FEDERAL RESERVE NOTE it said CURRENCY OF GOVERNMENT. Instead of the letter A was the letter F. But most of all it was the picture of the man on the bill that drew Cheyney's attention, just as the picture of the man on Cheyney's bill drew Paladin's. Cheyney's gray-green one showed George Washington. Paladin's blue one showed James Madison.

Stephen King

The Crate

First appeared in:
Gallery magazine 1979
Available in comic book form in:
Creepshow

Dexter Stanley was scared. More; he felt as if that central axle that binds us to the state we call sanity were under a greater strain than it had ever been under before. As he pulled up beside Henry Northrup's house on North Campus Avenue that August night, he felt that if he didn't talk to someone, he really, would go crazy. There was no one to talk to but Henry Northrup. Dex Stanley was the head of the zoology department, and once might have been university president if he had been better at academic politics. His wife had died twenty years before, and they had been childless. What remained of his own family was all west of the Rockies. He was not good at making friends.

Northrup was an exception to that. In some ways, they were two of a kind; both had been disappointed in the mostly meaningless, but always vicious, game of university politics. Three years before, Northrup had made his run at the vacant English department chairmanship. He had lost, and one of the reasons had undoubtedly been his wife, Wilma, an abrasive and unpleasant woman. At the few cocktail parties Dex had attended where English people and zoology people could logically mix, it seemed he could always recall the harsh mule-bray of her voice, telling some new faculty wife to "call me Billie, dear everyone does!"

Dex made his way across the lawn to Northrup's door at a stumbling run. It was Thursday, and Northrup's unpleasant spouse took two classes on Thursday nights. Consequently, it was Dex and Henry's chess night. The two men had been playing chess together for the last eight years.

Dex rang the bell beside the door of his friend's house; leaned on it. The door opened at last and Northrup was there.

"Dex," he said. I didn't expect you for another--"

Dex pushed in past him. "Wilma," he said. "Is she here?"

"No, she left fifteen minutes ago. I was just making myself some chow. Dex, you look awful."

They had walked under the hall light, and it illuminated the cheesy pallor of Dex's face and seemed to outline wrinkles as deep and dark as fissures in the earth. Dex was sixty-one, but on the hot August night, he looked more like ninety.

"I ought to." Dex wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Well, what is it?"

"I'm afraid I'm going crazy, Henry. Or that I've already gone."

"You want something to eat? Wilma left cold ham."

"I'd rather have a drink. A big one."

"All right."

"Two men dead, Henry," Dex said abruptly. "And I could be blamed. Yes, I can see how I could be blamed. But it wasn't me. It was the crate. And I don't even know what's in there!" He uttered a wild laugh.

"Dead?" Northrup said. "What is this, Dex?"

"A janitor. I don't know his name. And Gereson. A graduate student. He just happened to be there. In the way of... whatever it was."

Henry studied Dex's face for a long moment and then said, "I'll get us both a drink."

He left. Dex wandered into the living room, past the low table where the chess table had already been set up, and stared out the graceful bow window. That thing in his mind, that axle or whatever it was, did not feel so much in danger of snapping now. Thank God for Henry.

Northrup came back with two pony glasses choked with ice. Ice from the fridge's automatic icemaker, Stanley thought randomly. Wilma "just call me Billie, everyone does" Northrup insisted on all

the modern conveniences... and when Wilma insisted on a thing, she did so savagely.

Northrup filled both glasses with Cutty Sark. He handed one of them to Stanley, who sipped Scotch over his fingers, stinging a small cut he'd gotten in the lab a couple of days before. He hadn't realized until then that his hands were shaking. He emptied half the glass and the Scotch boomed in his stomach, first hot, then spreading a steady warmth.

"Sit down, man," Northrup said.

Dex sat, and drank again. Now it was a lot better. He looked at Northrup, who was looking levelly back over the rim of his own glass. Dex looked away, out at the bloody orb of moon sitting over the rim of the horizon, over the university, which was supposed to be the seat of rationality, the forebrain of the body politic. How did that jibe with the matter of the crate? With the screams? With the blood?

"Men are dead?" Northrup said at last.

"Are you sure they're dead?"

"Yes. The bodies are gone now. At least, I think they are. Even the bones... the teeth... but the blood... the blood, you know..."

"No, I don't know anything. You've got to start at the beginning."

Stanley took another drink and set his glass down. "Of course I do," he said. "Yes. It begins just where it ends. With the crate. The janitor found the crate..."

Dexter Stanley had come into Amberson Hall, sometimes called the Old Zoology Building, that afternoon at three o'clock. It was a blaringly hot day, and the campus looked listless and dead, in spite

of the twirling sprinklers in front of the fraternity houses and the Old Front dorms.

The Old Front went back to the turn of the century, but Amberson Hall was much older than that. It was one of the oldest buildings on a university campus that had celebrated its tricentennial two years previous. It was a tall brick building, shackled with ivy that seemed to spring out of the earth like green, clutching hands. Its narrow windows were more like gun slits than real windows, and Amberson seemed to frown at the newer buildings with their glass walls and curvy, unorthodox shapes.

The new zoology building, Cather Hall, had been completed eight months before, and the process of transition would probably go on for another eighteen months. No one was completely sure what would happen to Amberson then. If the bond issue to build the new gym found favor with the voters, it would probably be demolished. He paused a moment to watch two young men throwing a Frisbee back and forth. A dog ran back and forth between them, glumly chasing the spinning disc. Abruptly the mutt gave up and flopped in the shade of a poplar. A VW with a NO NUKES sticker on the back deck trundled slowly past, heading for the Upper Circle. Nothing else moved. A week before, the final summer session had ended and the campus lay still and fallow, dead ore on summer's anvil.

Dex had a number of files to pick up, part of the seemingly endless process of moving from Amberson to Cather. The old building seemed spectrally empty. His footfalls echoed back dreamily as he

walked past closed doors with frosted glass panels, past bulletin boards with their yellowing notices and toward his office at the end of the first-floor corridor. The cloying smell of fresh paint hung in the air.

He was almost to his door, and jingling his keys in his pocket, when the janitor popped out of Room 6, the big lecture hall, startling him.

He grunted, then smiled a little shamefacedly, the way people will when they've gotten a mild zap. "You got me that time," he told the janitor.

The janitor smiled and twiddled the gigantic key ring clipped to his belt. "Sorry, Perfesser Stanley," he said. "I was hopin' it was you. Charlie said you'd be in this afternoon."

"Charlie Gereson is still here?" Dex frowned. Gereson was a grad student who was doing an involved--and possibly very important--paper on negative environmental factors in long-term animal migration. It was a subject that could have a strong impact on area farming practices and pest control. But Gereson was pulling almost fifty hours a week in the gigantic (and antiquated) basement lab. The new lab complex in Cather would have been exponentially better suited to his purposes, but the new labs would not be fully equipped for another two to four months... if then.

"Think he went over the Union for a burger," the janitor said. "I told him myself to quit a while and go get something to eat. He's been here since nine this morning. Told him myself. Said he ought to get some food. A man don't live on love alone."

The janitor smiled, a little tentatively, and Dex smiled back. The janitor was right; Gereson was embarked upon a labor of love. Dex had seen too many squadrons of students just grunting along and making grades not to appreciate that... and not to worry about Charlie Gereson's health and well-being from time to time.

"I would have told him, if he hadn't been so busy," the janitor said, and offered his tentative little smile again. "Also, I kinda wanted to show you myself."

"What's that?" Dex asked. He felt a little impatient. It was chess night with Henry; he wanted to get this taken care of and still have time for a leisurely meal at the Hancock House.

"Well, maybe it's nothin'," the janitor said. "But... well, this buildin is some old, and we keep turnin things up, don't we?"

Dex knew. It was like moving out of a house that has been lived in for generations. Halley, the bright young assistant professor who had been here for three years now, had found half a dozen antique clips with small brass balls on the ends. She'd had no idea what the clips, which looked a little bit like spring-loaded wishbones, could be. Dex had been able to tell her. Not so many years after the Civil War, those clips had been used to hold the heads of white mice, who were then operated on without anesthetic. Young Halley, with her Berkeley education and her bright spill of Farrah Fawcett-Majors golden hair, had looked quite revolted. "No anti-

vivisectionists in those days," Dex had told her jovially. "At least not around here." And Halley had responded with a blank look that probably disguised disgust or maybe even loathing. Dex had put his foot in it again. He had a positive talent for that, it seemed. They had found sixty boxes of *The American Zoologist* in a crawlspace, and the attic had been a maze of old equipment and mouldering reports. Some of the impedimenta no one--not even Dexter Stanley--could identify. In the closet of the old animal pens at the back of the building, Professor Viney had found a complicated gerbil-run with exquisite glass panels. It had been accepted for display at the Museum of Natural Science in Washington. But the finds had been tapering off this summer, and Dex thought Amberson Hall had given up the last of its secrets. "What have you found?" he asked the janitor.

"A crate. I found it tucked right under the basement stairs. I didn't open it. It's been nailed shut, anyway."

Stanly couldn't believe that anything very interesting could have escaped notice for long, just by being tucked under the stairs. Tens of thousands of people went up and down them every week during the academic year. Most likely the janitor's crate was full of department records dating back twenty-five years. Or even more prosaic, a box of *National Geographics*.

"I hardly think--"

"It's a real crate," the janitor broke in earnestly. "I mean, my father was a carpenter, and this crate is built tile way he was building 'em back in the twenties. And he learned from his father."

"I really doubt if--"

"Also, it's got about four inches of dust on it. I wiped some off and there's a date. Eighteen thirty-four."

That changed things. Stanley looked at his watch and decided he could spare half an hour.

In spite of the humid August heat outside, the smooth tile-faced throat of the stairway was almost cold. Above them, yellow frosted globes cast a dim and thoughtful light. The stair levels had once been red, but in the centers they shaded to a dead black where the feet of years had worn away layer after layer of resurfacing. The silence was smooth and nearly perfect.

The janitor reached the bottom first and pointed under the staircase. "Under here," he said.

Dex joined him in staring into a shadowy, triangular cavity under the wide staircase. He felt a small tremor of disgust as he saw where the janitor had brushed away a gossamer veil of cobwebs. He supposed it was possible that the man had found something a

little older than postwar records under there, now that he actually looked at the space. But 1834?

"Just a second," the janitor said, and left momentarily. Left alone, Dex hunkered down and peered in. He could make out nothing but a deeper patch of shadow in there. Then the janitor returned with a

hefty four-cell flashlight. "This'll show it up."

"What were you doing under there anyway?" Dex asked.

The janitor grinned. "I was only standin here tryin to decide if I should buff that second-floor hallway first or wash the lab windows. I couldn't make up my mind, so I flipped a quarter. Only I dropped it and it rolled under there." He pointed to the shadowy, triangular cave. "I prob'ly would have let it go, except that was my only quarter for the Coke machine. So I got my flash and knocked down the cobwebs, and when I crawled under to get it, I saw that crate. Here, have a look."

The janitor shone his light into the hole. Motes of disturbed dust preened and swayed lazily in the beam. The light struck the far wall in a spotlight circle, rose to the zigzag undersides of the stairs briefly, picking out an ancient cobweb in which long-dead bugs hung mumified, and then the light dropped and centered on a crate about five feet long and two-and-a-half wide. It was perhaps three feet deep. As the janitor had said, it was no knocked-together affair made out of scrap-boards. It was neatly constructed of a smooth, dark heavy wood. A coffin, Dexter thought uneasily. It looks like a child's coffin.

The dark color of the wood showed only a fan-shaped swipe on the side. The rest of the crate was the uniform dull gray of dust. Something was written on the side-stenciled there.

Dex squinted but couldn't read it. He fumbled his glasses out of his breast pocket and still couldn't. Part of what had been stenciled on

was obscured by the dust--not four inches of it, by any means, but an extraordinarily thick coating, all the same.

Not wanting to crawl and dirty his pants, Dex duck-walked under the stairway, stifling a sudden and amazingly strong feeling of claustrophobia. The spit dried in his mouth and was replaced by a dry, woolly taste, like an old mitten. He thought of the generations of students trooping up and down these stairs, all male until 1888, then in coeducational platoons, carrying their books and papers and anatomical drawings, their bright faces and clear eyes, each of them convinced that a useful and exciting future lay ahead ... and here, below their feet, the spider spun his eternal snare for the fly and the trundling beetle, and here this crate sat impassively, gathering dust, waiting...

A tendril of spidersilk brushed across his forehead and he swept it away with a small cry of loathing and an uncharacteristic inner cringe.

"Not very nice under there, is it?" the janitor asked sympathetically, holding his light centered on the crate. "God, I hate tight places."

Dex didn't reply. He had reached the crate. He looked at the letters that were stenciled there and then brushed the dust away from them. It rose in a cloud, intensifying that mitten taste, making him cough dryly. The dust hung in the beam of the janitor's light like old magic, and Dex Stanley read what some long-dead chief of lading had stenciled on this crate.

SHIP TO HORLICKS UNIVERSITY, the top line read. VIA
JULIA CARPENTER, read the middle line. The third line read
simply: ARCTIC EXPEDITION.

Below that, someone had written in heavy black charcoal strokes:
JUNE 19, 1834. That was the one line the janitor's hand-swipe had
completely cleared.

ARCTIC EXPEDITION, Dex read again. His heart began to
thump. "So what do you think?" the janitor's voice floated in.
Dex grabbed one end and lifted it. Heavy. As he let it settle back
with a mild thud, something shifted inside--he did not hear it but
felt it through the palms of his hands, as if whatever it was had
moved of its own volition. Stupid, of course. It had been an almost
liquid feel, as if something not quite jelled had moved sluggishly.
ARCTIC EXPEDITION.

Dex felt the excitement of an antiques collector happening upon a
neglected armoire with a twenty-five dollar price tag in the back
room of some hick-town junk shop ... an armoire that just might be
a Chippendale. "Help me get it out," he called to the janitor.
Working bent over to keep from slamming their heads on the
underside of the stairway, sliding the crate along, they got it out
and then picked it up by the bottom. Dex had gotten his pants dirty
after all, and there were cobwebs in his hair.
As they carried it into the old-fashioned, train-terminal-sized lab,
Dex felt that sensation of shift inside the crate again, and he could
see by the expression on the janitor's face that he had felt it as well.
They set it on one of the formica-topped lab tables. The next one
over was littered with Charlie Gereson's stuff--notebooks, graph
paper, contour maps, a Texas Instruments calculator.
The janitor stood back, wiping his hands on his double-pocket gray
shirt, breathing hard. "Some heavy mother," he said. "That bastard
must weigh two hunnert pounds. You okay, Perfesser Stanley?"
Dex barely heard him. He was looking at the end of the box, where
there was yet another series of stencils:
PAELLA/SANTIAGO/SAN FRANCISCO/CHICAGO/NEW
YORK/HORLICKS
"Perfesser--"

"Paella," Dex muttered, and then said it again, slightly louder. He
was seized with an unbelieving kind of excitement that was held in
check only by the thought that it might be some sort of hoax.

"Paella!"

"Paella, Dex?" Henry Northrup asked. The moon had risen in the
sky, turning silver.

"Paella is a very small island south of Tierra del Fuego," Dex said.
"Perhaps the smallest island ever inhabited by the race of man. A
number of Easter Island-type monoliths were found there just after
World War II. Not very interesting compared to their bigger
brothers, but every bit as mysterious. The natives of Paella and
Tierra del Fuego were Stone-Age people. Christian missionaries
killed them with kindness."

"I beg your pardon?"

"It's extremely cold down there. Summer temperatures rarely range
above the mid-forties. The missionaries gave them blankets, partly

so they would be warm, mostly to cover their sinful nakedness. The blankets were crawling with fleas, and the natives of both islands were wiped out by European diseases for which they had developed no immunities. Mostly by smallpox."

Dex drank. The Scotch had lent his cheeks some color, but it was hectic and flaring--double spots of flush that sat above his cheekbones like rouge.

"But Tierra del Fuego--and this Paella--that's not the Arctic, Dex. It's the Antarctic."

"It wasn't in 1834," Dex said, setting his glass down, careful in spite of his distraction to put it on the coaster Henry had provided. If Wilma found a ring on one of her end tables, his friend would have hell to pay. "The terms subarctic, Antarctic and Antarctica weren't invented yet. In those days there was only the north arctic and the south arctic."

"Okay."

"Hell, I made the same kind of mistake. I couldn't figure out why Frisco was on the itinerary as a port of call. Then I realized I was figuring on the Panama Canal, which wasn't built for another eighty years or so.

"An Arctic expedition? In 1834?" Henry asked doubtfully.

"I haven't had a chance to check the records yet," Dex said, picking up his drink again. "But I know from my history that there were 'Arctic expeditions' as early as Francis Drake. None of them made it, that was all. They were convinced they'd find gold, silver, jewels, lost civilizations, God knows what else. The Smithsonian Institution outfitted an attempted exploration of the North Pole in, I think it was 1881 or '82. They all died. A bunch of men from the Explorers' Club in London tried for the South Pole in the 1850's. Their ship was sunk by icebergs, but three or four of them survived. They stayed alive by sucking dew out of their clothes and eating the kelp that caught on their boat, until they were picked up. They lost their teeth. And they claimed to have seen sea monsters."

"What happened, Dex?" Henry asked softly.

Stanley looked up. "We opened the crate," he said dully. "God help us, Henry, we opened the crate."

He paused for a long time, it seemed, before beginning to speak again.

"Paella?" the janitor asked. "What's that?"

"An island off the tip of South America," Dex said. "Never mind. Let's get this open." He opened one of the lab drawers and began to rummage through it, looking for something to pry with."

"Never mind that stuff," the janitor said. He looked excited himself now. "I got a hammer and chisel in my closet upstairs. I'll get 'em. Just hang on."

He left. The crate sat on the table's formica top, squat and mute. It sits squat and mute, Dex thought, and shivered a little. Where had that thought come from? Some story? The words had a cadenced

yet unpleasant sound. He dismissed them. He was good at dismissing the extraneous. He was a scientist.

He looked around the lab just to get his eyes off the crate. Except for Charlie's table, it was unnaturally neat and quiet--like the rest of the university. White-tiled, subway-station walls gleamed freshly under the overhead globes; the globes themselves seemed to be double--caught and submerged in the polished formica surfaces, like eerie lamps shining from deep quarry water. A huge, old-fashioned slate blackboard dominated the wall opposite the sinks. And cupboards, cupboards everywhere. It was easy enough--too easy, perhaps--to see the antique, sepia-toned ghosts of all those old zoology students, wearing their white coats with the green cuffs, their hairs marcelled or pomaded, doing their dissections and writing their reports...

Footfalls clattered on the stairs and Dex shivered, thinking again of the crate sitting there--yes, squat and mute--under the stairs for so many years, long after the men who had pushed it under there had died and gone back to dust.

Paella, he thought, and then the janitor came back in with a hammer and chisel.

"Let me do this for you, perfesser?" he asked, and Dex was about to refuse when he saw the pleading, hopeful look in the man's eyes. "Of course," he said. After all, it was this man's find.

"Prob'ly nothin in here but a bunch of rocks and plants so old they'll turn to dust when you touch 'em. But it's funny; I'm pretty hot for it."

Dex smiled noncommittally. He had no idea what was in the crate, but he doubted if it was just plant and rock specimens. There was that slightly liquid shifting sensation when they had moved it.

"Here goes," the janitor said, and began to pound the chisel under the board with swift blows of the hammer. The board hiked up a bit, revealing a double row of nails that reminded Dex absurdly of teeth. The janitor levered the handle of his chisel down and the board pulled loose, the nails shrieking out of the wood. He did the same thing at the other end, and the board came free, clattering to the floor. Dex set it aside, noticing that even the nails looked different, somehow--thicker, squarer at the tip, and without that blue-steel sheen that is the mark of a sophisticated alloying process.

The janitor was peering into the crate through the long, narrow strip he had uncovered. "Can't see nothin," he said. "Where'd I leave my light?"

"Never mind," Dex said. "Go on and open it."

"Okay." He took off a second board, then a third. Six or seven had been nailed across the top of the box. He began on the fourth, reaching across the space he had already uncovered to place his chisel under the board, when the crate began to whistle.

It was a sound very much like the sound a teakettle makes when it has reached a rolling boil, Dex told Henry Northrup; no cheerful whistle this, but something like an ugly, hysterical shriek by a tantrumy child. And this suddenly dropped and thickened into a low, hoarse growling sound. It was not loud, but it had a primitive, savage sound that stood Dex Stanley's hair up on the slant. The

janitor stared around at him, his eyes widening... and then his arm

was seized. Dex did not see what grabbed it; his eyes had gone instinctively to the man's face.

The janitor screamed, and the sound drove a stiletto of panic into Dex's chest. The thought that came unbidden was: This is the first time in my life that I've heard a grown man scream--what a sheltered life I've led!

The janitor, a fairly big guy who weighed maybe two hundred pounds, was suddenly yanked powerfully to one side. Toward the crate. "Help me!" He screamed. "Oh help doc it's got me it's biting me it's biting meeeee--"

Dex told himself to run forward and grab the janitor's free arm, but his feet might as well have been bonded to the floor. The janitor had been pulled into the crate up to his shoulder. That crazed snarling went on and on. The crate slid backwards along the table for a foot or so and then came firmly to rest against a bolted instrument mount. It began to rock back and forth. The janitor screamed and gave a tremendous lunge away from the crate. The end of the box came up off the table and then smacked back down. Part of his arm came out of the crate, and Dex saw to his horror that the gray sleeve of his shirt was chewed and tattered and soaked with blood. Smiling crescent bites were punched into what he could see of the man's skin through the shredded flaps of cloth. Then something that must have been incredibly strong yanked him back down. The thing in the crate began to snarl and gobble. Every now and then there would be a breathless whistling sound in between.

At last Dex broke free of his paralysis and lunged creakily forward. He grabbed the janitor's free arm. He yanked ... with no result at all. It was like trying to pull a man who has been handcuffed to the bumper of a trailer truck.

The janitor screamed again--a long, ululating sound that rolled back and forth between the lab's sparkling, white-tiled walls. Dex could see the gold glimmer of the fillings at the back of the man's mouth. He could see the yellow ghost of nicotine on his tongue. The janitor's head slammed down against the edge of the board he had been about to remove when the thing had grabbed him. And this time Dex did see something, although it happened with such mortal, savage speed that later he was unable to describe it adequately to Henry. Something as dry and brown and scaly as a desert reptile came out of the crate--something with huge claws. It tore at the janitor's straining, knotted throat and severed his jugular vein. Blood began to pump across the table, pooling on the formica and jetting onto the white-tiled floor. For a moment, a mist of blood seemed to hang in the air.

Dex dropped the janitor's arm and blundered backward, hands clapped flat to his cheeks, eyes bulging.

The janitor's eyes rolled wildly at the ceiling. His mouth dropped open and then snapped closed. The click of his teeth was audible

even below that hungry growling. His feet, clad in heavy black work shoes, did a short and jittery tap dance on the floor. Then he seemed to lose interest. His eyes grew almost benign as they looked raptly at the overhead light globe, which was also blood-spattered. His feet splayed out in a loose V. His shirt pulled out of his pants, displaying his white and bulging belly.

"He's dead," Dex whispered. "Oh, Jesus."

The pump of the janitor's heart faltered and lost its rhythm. Now the blood that flowed from the deep, irregular gash in his neck lost its urgency and merely flowed down at the command of indifferent gravity. The crate was stained and splashed with blood. The snarling seemed to go on endlessly. The crate rocked back and forth a bit, but it was too well-braced against the instrument mount

to go very far. The body of the janitor lolled grotesquely, still grasped firmly by whatever was in there. The small of his back was pressed against the lip of the lab table. His free hand dangled, sparse hair curling on the fingers between the first and second knuckles. His big key ring glimmered chrome in the light. And now his body began to rock slowly this way and that. His shoes dragged back and forth, not tap dancing now but waltzing obscenely. And then they did not drag. They dangled an inch off the floor... then two inches..., then half a foot above the floor. Dex realized that the janitor was being dragged into the crate. Tile nape of his neck came to rest against the board fronting the far side of the hole in the top of the crate. He looked like a man resting in some weird Zen position of contemplation. His dead eyes sparkled. And Dex heard, below the savage growling noises, a smacking, rending sound. And the crunch of a bone.

Dex ran.

He blundered his way across the lab and out the door and up the stairs. Halfway up, he fell down, clawed at the risers, got to his feet, and ran again. He gained the first floor hallway and sprinted down it, past the closed doors with their frosted-glass panels, past the bulletin boards. He was chased by his own footfalls. In his ears he could hear that damned whistling.

He ran right into Charlie Gereson's arms and almost knocked him over, and he spilled the milk shake Charlie had been drinking all over both of them.

"Holy hell, what's wrong?" Charlie asked, comic in his extreme surprise. He was short and compact, wearing cotton chinos and a white tee shirt. Thick spectacles sat grimly on his nose, meaning business, proclaiming that they were there for a long haul.

"Charlie," Dex said, panting harshly. "My boy... the janitor... the crate... it whistles... it whistles when it's hungry and it whistles

again when it's full... my boy ... we have to ... campus security ... we We..."

"Slow down, Professor Stanley," Charlie said. He looked concerned and a little frightened. You don't expect to be seized by the senior professor in your department when you had nothing

more aggressive in mind yourself than charting the continued outmigration of sandflies. "Slow down, I don't know what you're talking about."

Stanley, hardly aware of what he was saying, poured out a garbled version of what had happened to the janitor. Charlie Gereson looked more and more confused and doubtful. As upset as he was, Dex began to realize that Charlie didn't believe a word of it. He thought, with a new kind of horror, that soon Charlie would ask him if he had been working too hard, and that when he did, Stanley would burst into mad cackles of laughter.

But what Charlie said was, "That's pretty far out, Professor Stanley."

"It's true. We've got to get campus security over here. We--"

"No, that's no good. One of them would stick his hand in there, first thing." He saw Dex's stricken look and went on. "If I'm having trouble swallowing this, what are they going to think?"

"I don't know," Dex said. "I... I never thought..."

"They'd think you just came off a helluva toot and were seeing Tasmanian devils instead of pink elephants," Charlie Gereson said cheerfully, and pushed his glasses up on his pug nose. "Besides, from what you say, the responsibility has belonged with zo all along... like for a hundred and forty years."

"But..." He swallowed, and there was a click in his throat as he prepared to voice his worst fear. "But it may be out."

"I doubt that," Charlie said, but didn't elaborate. And in that, Dex saw two things: that Charlie didn't believe a word he had said, and that nothing he could say would dissuade Charlie from going back down there.

Henry Northrup glanced at his watch. They had been sitting in the study for a little over an hour; Wilma wouldn't be back for another two. Plenty of time. Unlike Charlie Gereson, he had passed no judgment at all on the factual basis of Dex's story. But he had known Dex for a longer time than young Gereson had, and he didn't believe his friend exhibited the signs of a man who has suddenly developed a psychosis. What he exhibited was a kind of bug-eyed fear, no more or

less than you'd expect to see a man who has had an extremely close call with... well, just an extremely close call.

"He went down, Dex?"

"Yes. He did."

"You went with him?"

"Yes."

Henry shifted position a little. "I can understand why he didn't want to get campus security until he had checked the situation himself. But Dex, you knew you were telling the flat-out truth, even if he didn't. Why didn't you call?"

"You believe me?" Dex asked. His voice trembled. "You believe me, don't you, Henry?"

Henry considered briefly. The story was mad, no question about that. The implication that there could be something in that box big enough and lively enough to kill a man after some one hundred and forty years was mad. He didn't believe it. But this was Dex... and he didn't disbelieve it either.

"Yes," he said.

"Thank God for that," Dex said. He groped for his drink. "Thank God for that, Henry."

"It doesn't answer the question, though. Why didn't you call the campus cops?"

"I thought... as much as I did think... that it might not want to come out of the crate, into the bright light. It must have lived in the dark for so long... so very long... and ... grotesque as this sounds... I thought it might be pot-bound, or something. I thought ... well, he'll see it... he'll see the crate... the janitor's body... he'll see the blood... and then we'd call security. You see?" Stanley's eyes pleaded with him to see, and Henry did. He thought that, considering the fact that it had been a snap judgment in a pressure situation, that Dex had thought quite clearly. The blood. When the young graduate student saw the blood, he would have been happy to call in the cops.

"But it didn't work out that way."

"No." Dex ran a hand through his thinning hair.

"Why not?"

"Because when we got down there, the body was gone."

"It was gone?"

"That's right. And the crate was gone, too."

When Charlie Gereson saw the blood, his round and good-natured face went very pale. His eyes, already magnified by his thick spectacles, grew even huger. Blood was puddled on the lab table. It had run down one of the table legs. It was pooled on the floor, and beads of it clung to the light globe and to the white tile wall. Yes, there was plenty of blood.

But no janitor. No crate.

Dex Stanley's jaw dropped. "What the fuck!" Charlie whispered. Dex saw something then, perhaps the only thing that allowed him to keep his sanity. Already he could feel that central axle trying to pull free. He grabbed Charlie's shoulder and said, "Look at the blood on the table!"

"I've seen enough," Charlie said.

His Adam's apple rose and fell like an express elevator as he struggled to keep his lunch down.

"For God's sake, get hold of yourself," Dex said harshly. "You're a zoology major. You've seen blood before."

It was the voice of authority, for that moment anyway. Charlie did get a hold of himself, and they walked a little closer. The random pools of blood on the table were not as random as they had first appeared. Each had been neatly straight-edged on one side.

"The crate sat there," Dex said. He felt a little better. The fact that the crate really had been there steadied him a good deal. "And look there." He pointed at the floor. Here the blood had been smeared into a wide, thin trail. It swept toward where the two of them stood, a few paces inside the double doors. It faded and faded, petering out altogether about halfway between the lab table and the doors. It

was crystal clear to Dex Stanley, and the nervous sweat on his skin went cold and clammy.

It had gotten out.

It had gotten out and pushed the crate off the table. And then it had pushed the crate... where? Under the stairs, of course. Back under the stairs. Where it had been safe for so long.

"Where's the... the..." Charlie couldn't finish.

"Under the stairs," Dex said numbly. "It's gone back to where it came from."

"No. The..." He jerked it out finally. "The body."

"I don't know," Dex said. But he thought he did know. His mind would simply not admit the truth.

Charlie turned abruptly and walked back through the doors.

"Where are you going?" Dex called shrilly, and ran after him.

Charlie stopped opposite the stairs. The triangular black hole beneath them gaped. The janitor's big four-cell flashlight still sat on the floor. And beside it was a bloody scrap of gray cloth, and one of the pens that had been clipped to the man's breast pocket.

"Don't go under there, Charlie! Don't." His heartbeat whammed savagely in his ears, frightening him even more.

"No," Charlie said. "But the body..."

Charlie hunkered down, grabbed the flashlight, and shone it under the stairs. And the crate was there, shoved up against the far wall, just as it had been before, squat and mute. Except that now it was free of dust and three boards had been pried off the top.

The light moved and centered on one of the janitor's big, sensible work shoes. Charlie drew breath in a low, harsh gasp. The thick leather of the shoe had been savagely gnawed and chewed. The laces hung, broken, from the eyelets. "It looks like somebody put it through a hay baler," he said hoarsely.

"Now do you believe me?" Dex asked.

Charlie didn't answer. Holding onto the stairs lightly with one hand, he leaned under the overhang--presumably to get the shoe. Later, sitting in Henry's study, Dex said he could think of only one reason why Charlie would have done that--to measure and perhaps categorize the bite of the thing in the crate. He was, after all, a zoologist, and a damned good one.

"Don't!" Dex screamed, and grabbed the back of Charlie's shirt. Suddenly there were two green gold eyes glaring over the top of

the crate. They were almost exactly the color of owls' eyes, but smaller. There was a harsh, chattering growl of anger. Charlie recoiled, startled, and slammed the back of his head on the underside of the stairs. A shadow moved from the crate toward him at projectile speed. Charlie howled. Dex heard the dry purr of his shirt as it ripped open, the click as Charlie's glasses struck the floor and spun away. Once more Charlie tried to back away. The thing began to snarl--then the snarls suddenly stopped. And Charlie Gereson began to scream in agony.

Dex pulled on the back of his white tee shirt with all his might. For

a moment Charlie came backwards and he caught a glimpse of a furry, writhing shape spread-eagled on the young man's chest, a shape that appeared to have not four but six legs and the flat bullet head of a young lynx. The front of Charlie Gereson's shirt had been so quickly and completely tattered that it now looked like so many crepe streamers hung around his neck.

Then the thing raised its head and those small green gold eyes stared balefully into Dex's own. He had never seen or dreamed such savagery. His strength failed. His grip on the back of Charlie's shirt loosened momentarily.

A moment was all it took. Charlie Gereson's body was snapped under the stairs with grotesque, cartoonish speed. Silence for a moment. Then the growling, smacking sounds began again.

Charlie screamed once more, a long sound of terror and pain that was abruptly cut off... as if something had been clapped over his mouth.

Or stuffed into it.

Dex fell silent. The moon was high in the sky. Half of his third drink--an almost unheard-of phenomenon--was gone, and he felt the reaction setting in as sleepiness and extreme lassitude.

"What did you do then?" Henry asked. What he hadn't done, he knew, was to go to campus security; they wouldn't have listened to such a story and then released him so he could go and tell it again to his friend Henry.

"I just walked around, in utter shock, I suppose. I ran up the stairs again, just as I had after... after it took the janitor, only this time there was no Charlie Gereson to run into. I walked... miles, I suppose. I think I was mad. I kept thinking about Ryder's Quarry. You know that place?"

"Yes," Henry said.

"I kept thinking that would be deep enough. If... if there would be a way to get that crate out there. I kept... kept thinking..." He put his hands to his face. "I don't know. I don't know anymore. I think I'm going crazy."

"If the story you just told is true, I can understand that," Henry said quietly. He stood up suddenly. "Come on. I'm taking you home."

"Home?" Dex looked at this friend vacantly. "But--"

"I'll leave a note for Wilma telling her where we've gone and then we'll call... who do you suggest, Dex? Campus security or the state police?"

"You believe me, don't you? You believe me? Just say you do."

"Yes, I believe you," Henry said, and it was the truth. "I don't know what that thing could be or where it came from, but I believe you." Dex Stanley began to weep.

"Finish your drink while I write my wife," Henry said, apparently not noticing the tears. He even grinned a little. "And for Christ's sake, let's get out of here before she gets back."

Dex clutched at Henry's sleeve. "But we won't go anywhere near Amberson Hall, will we? Promise me, Henry! We'll stay away

from there, won't we?"

"Does a bear shit in the woods?" Henry Northrup asked. It was a three-mile drive to Dex's house on the outskirts of town, and before they got there, he was half-asleep in the passenger seat.

"The state cops, I think," Henry said. His words seemed to come from a great distance. "I think Charlie Gereson's assessment of the campus cops was pretty accurate. The first one there would happily stick his arm into that box."

"Yes. All right." Through the drifting, lassitudinous aftermath of shock, Dex felt a dim but great gratitude that his friend had taken over with such efficiency. Yet a deeper part of him believed that Henry could not have done it if he had seen the things he had seen. "Just... the importance of caution ..."

"I'll see to that," Henry said grimly, and that was when Dex fell asleep.

He awoke the next morning with August sunshine making crisp patterns on the sheets of his bed. Just a dream, he thought with indescribable relief. All some crazy dream.

But there was a taste of Scotch in his mouth--Scotch and something else. He sat up, and a lance of pain bolted through his head. Not the sort of pain you got from a hangover, though; not even if you were the type to get a hangover from three Scotches, and he wasn't.

He sat up, and there was Henry, sitting across the room. His first thought was that Henry needed a shave. His second was that there was something in Henry's eyes that he had never seen before-- something like chips of ice. A ridiculous thought came to Dex; it passed through his mind and was gone. Sniper's eyes. Henry

Northrup, whose specialty is the earlier English poets, has got sniper's eyes.

"How are you feeling, Dex?"

"A slight headache," Dex said. "Henry... the police... what happened?"

"The police aren't coming," Northrup said calmly. "As for your head, I'm very sorry. I put one of Wilma's sleeping powders in your third drink. Be assured that it will pass."

"Henry, what are you saying?"

Henry took a sheet of notepaper from his breast pocket. "This is the note I left my wife. It will explain a lot, I think. I got it back after everything was over. I took a chance that she'd leave it on the table, and I got away with it."

"I don't know what you're--"

He took the note from Henry's fingers and read it, eyes widening.

Dear Billie,

I've just had a call from Dex Stanley. He's hysterical. Seems to have committed some sort of indiscretion with one of his female grad students. He's at Amberson Hall. So is the girl. For God's sake, come quickly. I'm not sure exactly what the situation is, but a woman's presence may be imperative, and under the circumstances, a nurse from the infirmary just won't do. I know you don't like Dex much, but a scandal like this could ruin his career. Please come.

Henry.

"What in God's name have you done?" Dex asked hoarsely.

Henry plucked the note from Dex's nerveless fingers, produced his Zippo, and set flame to the corner. When it was burning well, he dropped the charring sheet of paper into an ashtray on the windowsill.

"I've killed Wilma," he said in the same calm voice. "Ding-dong, the wicked bitch is dead." Dex tried to speak and could not. That central axle was trying to tear loose again. The abyss of utter insanity was below. "I've killed my wife, and now I've put myself into your hands."

Now Dex did find his voice. It had a sound that was rusty yet shrill. "The crate," he said. "What have you done with the crate?" "That's the beauty of it," Henry said. "You put the final piece in the jigsaw yourself. The crate is at the bottom of Ryder's Quarry." Dex groped at that while he looked into Henry's eyes. The eyes of his friend. Sniper's eyes. You can't knock off your own queen, that's not in anyone's rules of chess, he thought, and restrained an urge to roar out gales of rancid laughter. The quarry, he had said. Ryder's Quarry. It was over four hundred feet deep, some said. It was perhaps twelve miles east of the university. Over the thirty years that Dex had been here, a dozen people had drowned there, and three years ago the town had posted the place.

"I put you to bed," Henry said. "Had to carry you into your room. You were out like a light. Scotch, sleeping powder, shock. But you were breathing normally and well. Strong heart action. I checked those things. Whatever else you believe, never think I had any intention of hurting you, Dex."

"It was fifteen minutes before Wilma's last class ended, and it would take her another fifteen minutes to drive home and another fifteen minutes to get over to Amberson Hall. That gave me forty-five minutes. I got over to Amberson in ten. It was unlocked. That was enough to settle any doubts I had left."

"What do you mean?"

"The key ring on the janitor's belt. It went with the janitor." Dex shuddered.

"If the door had been locked--forgive me, Dex, but if you're going to play for keeps, you ought to cover every base--there was still time enough to get back home ahead of Wilma and burn that note.

"I went downstairs--and I kept as close to the wall going down those stairs as I could, believe me..."

Henry stepped into the lab and glanced around. It was just as Dex had left it. He slicked his tongue over his dry lips and then wiped his face with his hand. His heart was thudding in his chest. Get hold of yourself, man. One thing at a time. Don't look ahead. The boards the janitor had pried off the crate were still stacked on the lab table. One table over was the scatter of Charlie Gereson's lab notes, never to be completed now. Henry took it all in, and then pulled his own flashlight--the one he always kept in the glovebox

of his car for emergencies--from his back pocket. If this didn't qualify as an emergency, nothing did.

He snapped it on and crossed the lab and went out the door. The light bobbed uneasily in the dark for a moment, and then he trained it on the floor. He didn't want to step on anything he shouldn't. Moving slowly and cautiously, Henry moved around to the side of the stairs and shone the light underneath. His breath paused, and then resumed again, more slowly. Suddenly the tension and fear were gone, and he only felt cold. The crate was under there, just as Dex had said it was. And the janitor's ballpoint pen. And his shoes. And Charlie Gereson's glasses.

Henry moved the light from one of these artifacts to the next slowly, spotlighting each. Then he glanced at his watch, snapped

the flashlight off and jammed it back in his pocket. He had half an hour. There was no time to waste.

In the janitor's closet upstairs he found buckets, heavy-duty cleaner, rags... and gloves. No prints. He went back downstairs like the sorcerer's apprentice, a heavy plastic bucket full of hot water and foaming cleaner in each hand, rags draped over his shoulder. His footfalls clacked hollowly in the stillness. He thought of Dex saying, It sits squat and mute. And still he was cold.

He began to clean up.

"She came," Henry said. "Oh yes, she came. And she was... excited and happy."

"What?" Dex said.

"Excited," he repeated. "She was whining and carping the way she always did in that high, unpleasant voice, but that was just habit, I think. All those years, Dex, the only part of me she wasn't able to completely control, the only part she could never get completely under her thumb, was my friendship with you. Our two drinks while she was at class. Our chess. Our... companionship."

Dex nodded. Yes, companionship was the right word. A little light in the darkness of loneliness. It hadn't just been the chess or the drinks; it had been Henry's face over the board, Henry's voice recounting how things were in his department, a bit of harmless gossip, a laugh over something.

"So she was whining and bitching in her best 'just call me Billie' style, but I think it was just habit. She was excited and happy, Dex. Because she was finally going to be able to get control over the last ... little.., bit." He looked at Dex calmly. "I knew she'd come, you see. I knew she'd want to see what kind of mess you gotten yourself into, Dex."

"They're downstairs," Henry told Wilma. Wilma was wearing a bright yellow sleeveless blouse and green pants that were too tight for her. "Right downstairs." And he uttered a sudden, loud laugh. Wilma's head whipped around and her narrow face darkened with suspicion. "What are you laughing about?" She asked in her loud, buzzing voice. "Your best friend gets in a scrape with a girl and you're laughing?"

No, he shouldn't be laughing. But he couldn't help it. It was sitting under the stairs, sitting there squat and mute, just try telling that thing in the crate to call you Billie, Wilma--and another loud laugh escaped him and went rolling down the dim first-floor hall like a depth charge.

"Well, there is a funny side to it," he said, hardly aware of what he was saying. "Wait'Il you see. You'll think--"

Her eyes, always questing, never still, dropped to his front pocket, where he had stuffed the rubber gloves.

"What are those? Are those gloves?"

Henry began to spew words. At the same time he put his arm around Wilma's bony shoulders and led her toward the stairs.

"Well, he's passed out, you know. He smells like a distillery. Can't guess how much he drank. Threw up all over everything. I've been cleaning up. Hell of an awful mess, Billie. I persuaded the girl to stay a bit. You'll help me, won't you? This is Dex, after all."

"I don't know," she said, as they began to descend the stairs to the basement lab. Her eyes snapped with dark glee. "I'll have to see what the situation is. You don't know anything, that's obvious. You're hysterical. Exactly what I would have expected."

"That's right," Henry said. They had reached the bottom of the stairs. "Right around here. Just step right around here."

"But the lab's that way--"

"Yes... but the girl..." And he began to laugh again in great, loonlike bursts.

"Henry, what is wrong with you?" And now that acidic contempt was mixed with something else--something that might have been fear.

That made Henry laugh harder. His laughter echoed and rebounded, filling the dark basement with a sound like laughing banshees or demons approving a particularly good jest. "The girl, Billie," Henry said between bursts of helpless laughter. "That's what's so funny, the girl, the girl has crawled under the stairs and won't come out, that what's so funny, ah-heh-heh-hahahahaa--"

And now the dark kerosene of joy lit in her eyes; her lips curled up like charring paper in what the denizens of hell might call a smile. And Wilma whispered, "What did he do to her?"

"You can get her out," Henry babbled, leading her to the dark, triangular, gaping maw. "I'm sure you can get her out, no trouble, no problem." He suddenly grabbed Wilma at the nape of the neck and the waist, forcing her down even as he pushed her into the space under the stairs.

"What are you doing?" she screamed querulously. "What are you doing, Henry?"

"What I should have done a long time ago," Henry said, laughing.

"Get under there, Wilma. Just tell it to call you Billie, you bitch." She tried to turn, tried to fight him. One hand clawed for his wrist-- he saw her spade-shaped nails slice down, but they clawed only air. "Stop it, Henry!" She cried. "Stop it right now! Stop this foolishness! I--I'll scream!"

"Scream all you want!" he bellowed, still laughing. He raised one foot, planted it in the center of her narrow and joyless backside, and pushed. "I'll help you, Wilma! Come on out! Wake up,

whatever you are! Wake up! Here's your dinner! Poison meat!

Wake up! Wake up!"

Wilma screamed piercingly, an inarticulate sound that was still more rage than fear.

And then Henry heard it.

First a low whistle, the sound a man might make while working alone without even being aware of it. Then it rose in pitch, sliding up the scale to an earsplitting whine that was barely audible. Then it suddenly descended again and became a growl... and then a hoarse yammering. It was an utterly savage sound. All his married life Henry Northrup had gone in fear of his wife, but the thing in the crate made Wilma sound like a child doing a kindergarten tantrum. Henry had time to think: Holy God, maybe it really is a Tasmanian devil... it's some kind of devil, anyway.

Wilma began to scream again, but this time it was a sweeter tune-- at least to the ear of Henry Northrup. It was a sound of utter terror. Her yellow blouse flashed in the dark under the stairs, a vague beacon. She lunged at the opening and Henry pushed her back, using all his strength.

"Henry!" She howled. "Henreeeee!"

She came again, head first this time, like a charging bull. Henry caught her head in both hands, feeling the tight, wiry cap of her curls squash under his palms. He Pushed. And then, over Wilma's shoulder, he saw something that might have been the gold-glinting eyes of a small owl. Eyes that were infinitely cold and hateful. The yammering became louder, reaching a crescendo. And when it struck at Wilma, the vibration running through her body was enough to knock him backwards.

He caught one glimpse of her face, her bulging eyes, and then she was dragged back into the darkness. She screamed once more. Only once.

"Just tell it to call you Billie," he whispered.

Henry Northrup drew a great, shuddering breath.

"It went on ... for quite a while," he said. After a long time, maybe twenty minutes, the growling and the... the sounds of its feeding... that stopped, too. And it started to whistle. Just like you said, Dex. As if it were a happy teakettle or something. It whistled for maybe five minutes, and then it stopped. I shone my light underneath again. The crate had been pulled out a little way. There was... fresh blood. And Wilma's purse had spilled everywhere. But it got both of her shoes. That was something, wasn't it?"

Dex didn't answer. The room basked in sunshine. Outside, a bird sang.

"I finished cleaning the lab," Henry resumed at last. "It took me another forty minutes, and I almost missed a drop of blood that was on the light globe ... saw it just as I was going out. But when I was done, the place was as neat as a pin. Then I went out to my car and drove across campus to the English department. It was getting late, but I didn't feel a bit tired. In fact, Dex, I don't think I ever felt

more clear-headed in my life. There was a crate in the basement of the English department. I flashed on that very early in your story. Associating one monster with another, I suppose."

"What do you mean?"

"Last year when Badlinger was in England--you remember Badlinger, don't you?"

Dex nodded. Badlinger was the man who had beaten Henry out for the English department chair... partly because Badlinger's wife was bright, vivacious and sociable, while Henry's wife was a shrew. Had been a shrew.

"He was in England on sabbatical," Henry said. "Had all their things crated and shipped back. One of them was a giant stuffed

animal. Nessie, they call it. For his kids. That bastard bought it for his kids. I always wanted children, you know. Wilma didn't. She said kids get in the way.

"Anyway, it came back in this gigantic wooden crate, and Badlinger dragged it down to the English department basement because there was no room in the garage at home, he said, but he didn't want to throw it out because it might come in handy someday. Meantime, our janitors were using it as a gigantic sort of wastebasket. When it was full of trash, they'd dump it into the back of the truck on trash day and then fill it up again.

"I think it was the crate Badlinger's damned stuffed monster came back from England in that put the idea in my head. I began to see how your Tasmanian devil could be gotten rid of. And that started me thinking about something else I wanted to be rid of. That I wanted so badly to be rid of.

"I had my keys, of course. I let myself in and went downstairs. The crate was there. It was a big, unwieldy thing, but the janitors' dolly was down there as well. I dumped out the little bit of trash that was in it and got the crate onto the dolly by standing it on end. I pulled it upstairs and wheeled it straight across the mall and back to Amberson."

"You didn't take your car?"

"No, I left my car in my space in the English department parking lot. I couldn't have gotten the crate in there, anyway."

For Dex, new light began to break. Henry would have been driving his MG, of course--an elderly sportscar that Wilma had always called Henry's toy. And if Henry had the MG, then Wilma would have had the Scout--a jeep with a fold-down back seat. Plenty of storage space, as the ads said.

"I didn't meet anyone," Henry said. "At this time of year--and at no other--the campus is quite deserted. The whole thing was almost

hellishly perfect. I didn't see so much as a pair of headlights. I got back to Amberson Hall and took Badlinger's crate downstairs. I left it sitting on the dolly with the open end facing under the stairs. Then I went back upstairs to the janitors' closet and got that long pole they use to open and close the windows. They only have those poles in the old buildings now. I went back down and got ready to

hook the crate--your Paella crate--out from under the stairs. Then I had a bad moment. I realized the top of Badlinger's crate was gone, you see. I'd noticed it before, but now I realized it. In my guts."

"What did you do?"

"Decided to take the chance," Henry said. "I took the window pole and pulled the crate out. I eased it out, as if it were full of eggs. No ... as if it were full of Mason jars with nitroglycerine in them."

Dex sat up, staring at Henry. "What... what..."

Henry looked back somberly. "It was my first good look at it, remember. It was horrible." He paused deliberately and then said it again: "It was horrible, Dex. It was splattered with blood, some of it seemingly grimed right into tile wood. It made me think of... do you remember those joke boxes they used to sell? You'd push a little lever and tile box would grind and shake, and then a pale green hand would come out of the top and push the lever back and snap inside again. It made me think of that."

"I pulled it out--oh, so carefully--and I said I wouldn't look down inside, no matter what. But I did, of course. And I saw..." His voice dropped helplessly, seeming to lose all strength. "I saw Wilma's face, Dex. Her face."

"Henry, don't--"

"I saw her eyes, looking up at me from that box. Her glazed eyes. I saw something else, too. Something white. A bone, I think. And a black something. Furry. Curled up. Whistling, too. A very low whistle. I think it was sleeping."

"I hooked it out as far as I could, and then I just stood there looking at it, realizing that I couldn't drive knowing that thing could come out at any time... come out and land on the back of my neck. So I started to look around for something--anything--to cover the top of Badlinger's crate."

"I went into the animal husbandry room, and there were a couple of cages big enough to hold the Paella crate, but I couldn't find the goddamned keys. So I went upstairs and I still couldn't find anything. I don't know how long I hunted, but there was this continual feeling of time... slipping away. I was getting a little crazy. Then I happened to poke into that big lecture room at the far end of the hall--"

"Room 6?"

"Yes, I think so. They had been painting the walls. There was a big canvas dropcloth on the floor to catch the splatters. I took it, and then I went back downstairs, and I pushed the Paella crate into Badlinger's crate. Carefully!... you wouldn't believe how carefully I did it, Dex."

When the smaller crate was nested inside the larger, Henry uncinched the straps on the English department dolly and grabbed the end of the dropcloth. It rustled stiffly in the stillness of Amberson Hall's basement. His breathing rustled stiffly as well. And there was that low whistle. He kept waiting for it to pause, to change. It didn't. He had sweated his shirt through; it was plastered to his chest and back.

Moving carefully, refusing to hurry, he wrapped the dropcloth around Badlinger's crate three times, then four, then five. In the dim light shining through from the lab, Badlinger's crate now

looked mummified. Holding the seam with one splayed hand, he wrapped first one strap around it, then the other. He cinched them tight and then stood back a moment. He glanced at his watch. It was just past one o'clock. A pulse beat rhythmically at his throat.

Moving forward again, wishing absurdly for a cigarette (he had given them up sixteen years before), he grabbed the dolly, tilted it back, and began pulling it slowly up the stairs.

Outside, the moon watched coldly as he lifted the entire load, dolly and all, into the back of what he had come to think of as Wilma's Jeep--although Wilma had not earned a dime since the day he had married her. It was the biggest lift he had done since he had worked with a moving company in Westbrook as an undergraduate. At the highest point of the lift, a lance of pain seemed to dig into his lower back. And still he slipped it into the back of the Scout as gently as a sleeping baby.

He tried to close the back, but it wouldn't go up; the handle of the dolly stuck out four inches too far. He drove with the tailgate down, and at every bump and pothole, his heart seemed to stutter. His ears felt for the whistle, waiting for it to escalate into a shrill scream and then descend to a guttural howl of fury waiting for the hoarse rip of canvas as teeth and claws pulled their way through it. And overhead the moon, a mystic silver disc, rode the sky.

"I drove out to Ryder's Quarry," Henry went on. "There was a chain across the head of the road, but I geared the Scout down and got around. I backed right up to the edge of the water. The moon was still up and I could see its reflection way down in the blackness, like a drowned silver dollar. I went around, but it was a long time before I could bring myself to grab the thing. In a very real way, Dex, it was three bodies... the remains of three human beings. And I started wondering...where did they go? I saw Wilma's face, but it looked ... God help me, it looked all flat, like a Halloween mask. How much of them did it eat, Dex? How much could it eat? And I started to understand what you meant about that central axle pulling loose."

"It was still whistling. I could hear it, muffled and faint, through that canvas dropcloth. Then I grabbed it and I heaved... I really

believe it was do it then or do it never. It came sliding out... and I think maybe it suspected, Dex... because, as the dolly started to tilt down toward the water it started to growl and yammer again ... and the canvas started to ripple and bulge ... and I yanked it again. I gave it all I had ... so much that I almost fell into the damned quarry myself. And it went in. There was a splash ... and then it was gone. Except for a few ripples, it was gone. And then the ripples were gone, too."

He fell silent, looking at his hands.

"And you came here," Dex said.

"First I went back to Amberson Hall. Cleaned under the stairs.

Picked up all of Wilma's things and put them in her purse again.

Picked up the janitor's shoe and his pen and your grad student's

glasses. Wilma's purse is still on the seat. I parked the car in our-- in my--driveway. On the way there I threw the rest of the stuff in the river."

"And then did what? Walked here?"

"Yes."

"Henry, what if I'd waked up before you got here? Called the police?"

Henry Northrup said simply: "You didn't."

They stared at each other, Dex from his bed, Henry from the chair by the window.

Speaking in tones so soft as to be nearly inaudible, Henry said, "The question is, what happens now? Three people are going to be reported missing soon. There is no one element to connect all three. There are no signs of foul play; I saw to that. Badlinger's crate, the dolly, the painters' dropcloth--those things will be reported missing too, presumably. There will be a search. But the

weight of the dolly will carry the crate to the bottom of the quarry, and ... there are really no bodies, are there, Dex?"

"No," Dexter Stanley said. "No, I suppose there aren't."

"But what are you going to do, Dex? What are you going to say?"

"Oh, I could tell a tale," Dex said. "And if I told it, I suspect I'd end up in the state mental hospital. Perhaps accused of murdering the janitor and Gereson, if not your wife. No matter how good your cleanup was, a state police forensic unit could find traces of blood on the floor and walls of that laboratory. I believe I'll keep my mouth shut."

"Thank you," Henry said. "Thank you, Dex."

Dex thought of that elusive thing Henry had mentioned companionship. A little light in the darkness. He thought of playing chess perhaps twice a week instead of once. Perhaps even three times a week... and if the game was not finished by ten, perhaps playing until midnight if neither of them had any early morning classes, instead of having to put the board away (and, as likely as not, Wilma would just "accidentally" knock over the pieces "while dusting," so that the game would have to be started all over again the following Thursday evening). He thought of his friend, at last free of that other species of Tasmanian devil that killed more slowly but just as surely--by heart attack, by stroke, by ulcer, by high blood pressure, yammering and whistling in the ear all the while.

Last of all, he thought of the janitor, casually flicking his quarter, and of the quarter coming down and rolling under the stairs, where a very old horror sat squat and mute, covered with dust and cobwebs, waiting... biding its time...

What had Henry said? The whole thing was almost hellishly perfect.

"No need to thank me, Henry," he said.

Henry stood up. "If you got dressed," he said, "you could run me down to the campus. I could get my MG and go back home and

report Wilma missing."

Dex thought about it. Henry was inviting him to cross a nearly invisible line, it seemed, from bystander to accomplice. Did he want to cross that line?

At last he swung his legs out of bed. "All right, Henry."

"Thank you, Dexter."

Dex smiled slowly. "That's all right," he said. "After all, what are friends for?"

STEPHEN KING

The Revelations Of 'Becka Paulson

From Rolling Stone Magazine 1984

An excerpt from The Tommyknockers

What happened was simple enough at least, at the start. What happened was that Rebecca Paulson shot herself in the head with her husband Joe's .22-caliber pistol. This occurred during her annual spring cleaning, which took place this year (as it did most years) around the middle of June. 'Becka had a way of falling behind in such things.

She was standing on a short stepladder and rummaging through the accumulated junk on the high shelf in the downstairs hall closet while the Paulson cat, a big brindled tom named Ozzie Nelson, sat in the living-room doorway, watching her. From behind Ozzie came the anxious voices of Another World, blaring out of the Paulsons' big old Zenith TV which would later become something much more than a TV.

'Becka pulled stuff down and examined it, hoping for something that was still good, but not really expecting to find such a thing. There were four or five knitted winter caps, all moth-eaten and unraveling. She tossed them behind her onto the hall floor. Here was a Reader's Digest Condensed Book from the summer of 1954, featuring Run Silent, Run Deep and Here's Goggle. Water damage had swelled it to the size of a Manhattan telephone book. She tossed it behind her. Ah! Here was an umbrella that looked salvageable ... and a box with something in it.

It was a shoebox. Whatever was inside was heavy. When she tilted the box, it shifted. She took the lid off, also tossing this behind her (it almost hit Ozzie Nelson, who decided to split the scene). Inside the box was a gun with a long barrel and imitation wood-grip handles.

"Oh," she said. "That." She took it out of the box, not noticing that it was cocked, and turned it around to look into the small beady eye of the muzzle, believing that if there was a bullet in there she would see it.

She remembered the gun. Until five years ago, Joe had been a member of Derry Elks. Some ten years ago (or maybe it had been fifteen), Joe had bought fifteen Elks raffle tickets while drunk. 'Becka had been so mad she had refused to let him put his manthing in her for two weeks. The first prize had been a Bombardier Skidoo, second prize an Evinrude motor. This .22 target pistol had been the third prize.

He had shot it for a while in the backyard, she remembered plinking away at cans and bottles until 'Becka complained about the noise. Then he had taken it up to the gravel pit at the dead end of their road, although she had sensed he was losing interest, even then he'd just gone on shooting for a while to make sure she didn't think she had gotten the better of him. Then it had disappeared. She had thought he had swapped it for something a set of snow tires, maybe, or a battery but here it was.

She held the muzzle of the gun up to her eye, peering into the darkness, looking for the bullet. She could see nothing but darkness. Must be unloaded, then.

I'll make him get rid of it just the same, she thought, backing down the stepladder. Tonight. When he gets back from the post office. I'll stand right up to him. "Joe" I'll say, "it's no good having a gun sitting around the house even if there's no kids around and it's unloaded. You don't even use it to shoot bottles anymore." That's what I'll say.

This was a satisfying thing to think, but her undermind knew that she would of course say no such thing. In the Paulson house, it was Joe who mostly picked the roads and drove the horses. She supposed that it would be best to just dispose of it herself put it in a plastic garbage bag under the other rickrack from the closet shelf. The gun would go to the dump with everything else the next time Vinnie Margolies stopped by to pick up their throw-out. Joe would not miss what he had already forgotten the lid of the box had been thick with undisturbed dust. Would not miss it, that was, unless she was stupid enough to bring it to his attention.

'Becka reached the bottom of the ladder. Then she stepped backward onto the Reader's Digest Condensed Book with her left foot. The front board of the book slid backward as the rotted binding gave way. She tottered, holding the gun with one hand and flailing with the other. Her right foot came down on the pile of knitted caps, which also slid backward. As she fell she realised that she looked more like a woman bent on suicide than on cleaning.

Well, it ain't loaded, she had time to think, but the gun was loaded, and it had been cocked; cocked for years, as if waiting for her to come along. She sat down hard in the hallway and when she did the hammer of the pistol snapped forward. There was a flat, unimportant bang not much louder than a baby firecracker in a tin cup, and a .22 Winchester short entered 'Becka Paulson's brain just above the left eye. It made a small black hole what was the faint blue of just-bloomed irises around the edges.

Her head thumped back against the wall, and a trickle of blood ran from the hole into her left eyebrow. The gun, with a tiny thread of

white smoke rising from its muzzle, fell into her lap. Her hands drummed lightly up and down on the floor for a period of about five seconds, her right leg flexed, then shot straight out. Her loafer flew across the hall and hit the far wall. Her eyes remained open for the next thirty minutes, the pupils dilating and constricting, dilating and constricting.

Ozzie Nelson came to the living-room door, miaowed at her, and then began washing himself.

She was putting supper on the table that night before Joe noticed the Band-Aid over her eye. He had been home for an hour and a half, but just lately he didn't notice much at all around the house he seemed preoccupied with something, far away from her a lot of the time. This didn't bother her as much as it might have once at least he wasn't always after her to let him put his manthing into her ladyplace.

"What'd you do to your head?" he asked as she put a bowl of beans and a plate of red hot dogs on the table.

She touched the Band-Aid vaguely. Yes what exactly had she done to her head? She couldn't really remember. The whole middle of the day had a funny dark place in it, like an inkstain. She remembered feeding Joe his breakfast and standing on the porch as he headed off to the post office in his Wagoneer that much was crystal clear. She remembered doing the white load in the new Sears washer while Wheel of Fortune blared from the TV. That was also clear. Then the inkstain began. She remembered putting in the colors and starting the cold cycle. She had the faintest, vaguest recollection of putting a couple of Swanson's Hungary man frozen dinners in the oven for herself 'Becka Paulson was a hefty eater but after that there was nothing. Not until she had awakened sitting on the living-room couch. She had changed from slacks and her flowed smock into a dress and high heel; she had put her hair in braids. There was something heavy in her lap and on her shoulders and her forehead tickled. It was Ozzie Nelson. Ozzie was standing with his hind legs in her crotch and his forepaws on her shoulders. He was busily licking blood off her forehead and out of her eyebrow. She swotted Ozzie away from her lap and then looked at the clock. Joe would be home in an hour and she hadn't even started dinner. Then she had touched her head, which throbbed vaguely.

"Becka?"

"What?" She sat down at her place and began to spoon beans onto her plate.

"I asked you what you did to your head?"

"Bumped it," she said ... although, when she went down to the bathroom and looked at herself in the mirror, it hadn't looked like a bump; it had looked like a hole. "I just bumped it."

"Oh," he said, losing interest. He opened the new issue of Sports Illustrated which had come that day and immediately fell into a daydream. In it he was running his hands slowly over the body of Nancy Voss an activity he had been indulging in the last six weeks or so. God bless the United States Postal Authority for sending Nancy Voss from Falmouth to Haven, that was all he could say. Falmouth's

loss was Joe Paulson's gain. He had whole days when he was quite sure he had died and gone to heaven, and his pecker hadn't been so frisky since he was nineteen and touring West Germany with the U.S. Army. It would have taken more than a Band-Aid on his wife's forehead to engage his full attention.

'Becka helped herself to three hot dogs, paused to debate a moment, and then added a fourth. She doused the dogs and the beans with ketchup and then stirred everything together. The result looked a bit like the aftermath of a bad motorcycle accident. She poured herself a glass of grape Kool-Aid from the pitcher on the table (Joe had a beer) and then touched the Band-Aid with the tips of her fingers she had been doing that ever since she put it on. Nothing but a cool plastic strip. That was okay ... but she could feel the circular indentation beneath. The hole. That wasn't so okay.

"Just bumped it," she murmured again, as if saying would make it so. Joe didn't look up and 'Becka began to eat.

Hasn't hurt my appetite any, whatever it was, she thought. Not that much ever does probably nothing ever will. When they say on the radio that all those missiles are flying and it's the end of the world. I'll probably go right on eating until one of those rockets lands on Haven.

She cut herself a piece of bread from the homemade loaf and began mopping up bean juice with it.

Seeing that ... that mark on her forehead had unnerved her at the time, unnerved her plenty. No sense kidding about that, just as there was no sense kidding that it was just a mark, like a bruise. And in case anyone ever wanted to know, 'Becka thought, she would tell them that looking into the mirror and seeing that you had an extra hole in your head wasn't one of life's cheeriest experiences. Your head, after all, was where your brains were. And as for what she had done next

She tried to shy away from that, but it was too late.

Too late, 'Becka, a voice tolled in her mind it sounded like her dead father's voice.

She had stared at the hole, stared at it and stared at it, and then she had pulled open the drawer to the left of the sink and had pawed through her few meager items of makeup with hands that didn't seem to belong to her. She took out her eyebrow pencil and then looked into the mirror again.

She raised the hand holding the eyebrow pencil with the blunt end towards her, and slowly began to push it into the hole in her forehead. No, she moaned to herself, stop it, 'Becka, you don't want to do this

But apparently part of her did, because she went right on doing it. There was no pain and the eyebrow pencil was a perfect fit. She pushed it in an inch, then two, then three. She looked at herself in the mirror, a woman in a flowered dress who had a pencil sticking out of her head. She pushed it in a fourth inch.

Not much left, 'Becka, be careful, wouldn't want to lose it in there, I'd rattle when you turned over in the night, wake up Joe

She tittered hysterically.

Five inches in and the blunt end of the eyebrow pencil had finally encountered resistance. It was hard, but a gentle push also communicated a feeling of sponginess. At the same moment the whole world turned a brilliant, momentary green and an interlacing of memories jiggled through her mind sledding at four in her older brother's snowsuit, washing high school blackboards, a '59 Impala her Uncle Bill had owned, the smell of cut hay.

She pulled the eyebrow pencil out of her head, shocked back to herself, terrified that blood would come gushing out of the hole. But no blood came, nor was there any blood on the shiny surface of the eyebrow pencil. Blood or ... or ...

But she would not think of that. She threw the pencil back into the drawer and slammed the draw shut. Her first impulse, to cover the hole, came back, stronger than ever.

She swung the mirror away from the medicine cabinet and grabbed the tin box of Band-Aids. It fell from her trembling fingers and cluttered into the basin. 'Becka had cried out at the sound and then told herself to stop it, just stop it. Cover it up, make it gone. That

was the thing to do; that was the ticket. Never mind the eyebrow pencil, just forget that she had none of the signs of brain injury she had seen on the afternoon stories and Marcus Welby, M.D., that was the important thing. She was all right. As for the eyebrow pencil, she would just forget that part.

And so she had, at least until now. She looked at her half-eaten dinner and realized with a sort of dull humor that she had been wrong about her appetite she couldn't eat another bite.

She took her plate over to the garbage and scrapped what was left into the can, while Ozzie wound restlessly around her ankles. Joe didn't look up from his magazine. In his mind, Nancy Voss was asking him again if that tongue of his was as long as it looked.

She woke up in the middle of the night from some confusing dream in which all the clocks in the house had been talking in her father's voice. Joe lay beside her, flat on his back in his boxer shorts, snoring.

Her hand went to the Band-Aid. The hole didn't hurt, didn't exactly throb, but it itched. She rubbed at it gently, afraid of another of those dazzling green flashes. None came.

She rolled over on her side and thought: You got to go to the doctor, 'Becka. You got to get that seen to. I don't know what you did, but

No, she answered herself. No doctor. She rolled to her other side, thinking she would be awake for hours now, wondering, asking herself frightened questions. Instead, she was asleep again in moments.

In the morning the hole under the Band-Aid hardly itched at all, and that made it easier not to think about. She made Joe his breakfast and saw him off to work. She finished washing the dishes and took out the garbage. They kept it in a little shed beside the house that Joe had built, a structure not much bigger than a doghouse. You had to lock it up or the coons came out of the woods and made a mess.

She stepped in, wrinkling her nose at the smell, and put the green bag down with the others. Vinnie would be by in Friday or

Saturday and then she would give the shed a good airing. As she was backing out, she saw a bag that hadn't been tied up like the others. A curved handle, like the handle of a cane protruded from the top.

Curious, she pulled it out and saw it was an umbrella. A number of moth-eaten, unraveling hats came out with the umbrella.

A dull warning sound in her head. For a moment she could almost see through the inkstain to what was behind it, to what had happened to her

(bottom it's in the bottom something heavy something in a box what Joe don't remember won't)

yesterday. But did she want to know?

No.

She didn't.

She wanted to forget.

She backed out of the little shed and rebolted the door with hands that trembled the slightest bit.

A week later (she still changed the band-Aid each morning, but the wound was closing up she could see the pink new tissue filling it when she shone Joe's flashlight into it and peered into the bathroom mirror) 'Becka found out what half of have already either knew or surmised that Joe was cheating on her. Jesus told her. In the last three days or so, Jesus had told her the most amazing, terrible, distressing things imaginable. They sickened her, they destroyed her sleep, they were destroying her sanity ... but were they wonderful? Weren't they just! And would she stop listening, simply tip Jesus over on His face, perhaps scream at Him to shut up? Absolutely not. For one thing, he was the Savior. For another thing, there was a grisly sort of compulsion in knowing the things Jesus told her.

Jesus was on top of the Paulsons' Zenith television and He had been in that same spot for just about twenty years. Before resting atop the Zenith, He had rested atop two RCAs (Joe Paulson had always bought American). This was a beautiful 3-D picture of Jesus that Rebecca's sister, who lived in Portsmouth, had sent her. Jesus was dressed in a simple white robe, and He was holding a Shepard's staff.

Because the picture had been created ('Becka considered "made" much too mundane a word for a likeness which seemed so real you could almost stick your hand into it) before the Beatles and the changes they had wreaked on male hairstyles, His hair was not too long, and perfectly neat. The Christ on 'Becka Paulson's TV combed His hair a little bit like Elvis Presley after Elvis got out of the army. His eyes were brown and mild and kind. Behind Him, in perfect perspective, sheep as white as the linens in TV soap commercials trailed away into the distance. 'Becka and her sister Corinne and her brother Roland had grown up on a sheep farm in New Gloucester, and 'Becka knew from personal experience that sheep were never that white and uniformly woolly, like little fair weather clouds that had fallen to earth. But, she reasoned, if Jesus could turn water into wine and bring the dead back to life, there was no reason at all why He couldn't make the shit caked around a bunch of lambs' rumps disappear if He wanted to.

A couple of times Joe had tried to move that picture off the TV,

and she supposed that now she new why, oh yessirree Bob, oh yes indeedy. Joe of course, had his trumped-up tales. "it doesn't seem right to have Jesus on top of the television while we're watching Three's Company or Charlie's Angels" he'd say. "Why don't you put it up on your bureau, 'Becka? Or ... I'll tell you what! Why not put it up on your bureau until Sunday, and then you can bring it down and out it back on the TV while you watch Jimmy Swaggart and Rex Humbard and Jerry Falwell? I'll bet Jesus likes Jerry Falwell one hell of a lot better than he likes Charlie's Angels."

She refused.

"When it's my turn to have the Thursday-night poker game, the guys don't like it," he said another time. "No one wants to have Jesus Christ looking at them while He tries to fill a flush or draw to an inside straight."

"Maybe they feel uncomfortable because they know gambling's the Devil's work," 'Becka said.

Joe, who was a good poker player, bridled. "then it was the Devil's work that bought you your hair dryer and that garnet ring you

like so well," he said. "better take 'em back for refunds and give the money to the Salvation Army. Wait, I think I got the receipts in my den."

She allowed as how Joe could turn the 3-D picture of Jesus around to face the wall on the one Thursday night a month that he had his dirty-talking, beer-swilling friends in to play poker ... but that was all.

And now she knew the real reason he wanted to get rid of that picture. He must have had an idea all along that that picture was a magic picture. Oh ... she supposed sacred was a better word, magic was for pagans headhunters and Catholics and people like that but the came almost to one and the same, didn't they? All along Joe must have sensed that picture was special, that it would be the means by which his sin would be found out.

Oh, she supposed she must have had some idea of what all his recent preoccupation had meant, must have known there was a reason why he was never after her at night anymore. But the truth was, that had been a relief sex was just as her mother had told her it would be, nasty and brutish, sometimes painful and always humiliating. Had she also smelled perfume on his collar from time to time? If so, she had ignored that, too, and she might have gone on ignoring it indefinitely if the picture of Jesus on the Sony hadn't begun to speak on July 7th. She realized now that she had ignored a third factor, as well; at about the same time the pawings had stopped the perfume smells had begun, old Charlie Estabrooke had retired and a woman named Nancy Voss had come up from the Falmouth post office to take his place. She guessed that the Voss woman (whom, 'Becka had now come to think of simply as The Hussy) was perhaps five years older than her and Joe, which would make her around fifty, but she was a trim, well-kept and handsome fifty. 'Becka herself had put on a little weight during her marriage, going from one hundred and twenty-six to a hundred and ninety-three, most of that since Byron, their only chick and child, had flown from the nest.

She could have gone on ignoring it, and perhaps what would even have been for the best. If The Hussey really enjoyed the

animalism of sexual congress, with its gruntings and thrustings and that final squirt of sticky stuff that smelled faintly like codfish and looked like cheap dish detergent, then it only proved that The Hussy was little more than an animal herself and of course it freed 'Becka of a tiresome, if ever more occasional, obligation. But when the picture of Jesus spoke up, telling her exactly what was going on, it became impossible to ignore. She knew that something would have to be done.

The picture first spoke at just past three in the afternoon on Thursday. This was eight days after shooting herself in the head and about four days after her resolution to forget it was a hole and not just a mark had begun to take effect. 'Becka was coming back into the living room from the kitchen with a little snack (half a coffeecake and a beer stein filled with Kool-Aid) to watch General Hospital. She no longer really believed that Luke would ever find Laura, but she could not quite find it in her heart to completely give up hope.

She was bending down to turn on the Zenith when Jesus said, "'Becka, Joe is putting the boots to that Hussey down at the pee-oh just about every lunch hour and sometimes after punching out time in the afternoon. Once he was so randy he drove it to her while he was supposed to be helping her sort the mail. And do you know what? She never even said 'At least wait until I get the first-class into the boxes.' "

'Becka screamed and spilled her Kool-Aid down the front of the TV. It was a wonder, she thought later, when she was able to think at all, that the picture tube didn't blow. Her coffeecake went on the rug.

"And that's not all," Jesus told her. He walked halfway across the picture, His robe fluttering around His ankles, and sat down on a rock that jutted out of the ground. He held His staff between his knees and looked at her grimly. "There's a lot going on in Haven. Why, you wouldn't believe the half of it."

'Becka screamed again and fell on her knees. One of them landed squarely on her coffeecake and squirted raspberry filling into the face of Ozzie Nelson, who had crept into the living room to see what was going on. "My Lord! My Lord!" 'Becka shrieked. Ozzie

ran, hissing, for the kitchen, where he crawled under the stove with red goo dripping from his whiskers. He stayed under there the rest of the day.

"Well, none of the Paulsons was ever any good," Jesus said. A sheep wandered towards Him and He whacked it away, using His staff with an absentminded impatience that reminded 'Becka, even in her current frozen state, of her long-dead father. The sheep went, rippling slightly through the 3-D effect. It disappeared from the picture, actual seeming to curve as it went off the edge ... but that was just an optical illusion, she felt sure. "No good at all, "Jesus went on. "Joe's granddad was a whoremaster of the purest sense, as you well know, 'Becka. Spent his whole life pecker-led. And when he came up here, do you know what we said? 'No room!' that's what we said." Jesus leaned forward, still holding His staff. "'Go see Mr.

Splitfoot down below,' we said. 'You'll find your haven-home, all right. But you may find you new landlord a hard taskmaster,' we said." Incredibly, Jesus winked at her ... and that was when 'Becka fled, shrieking, from the house.

She stopped in the backyard, panting, her hair, a mousy blond that was really not much of any color at all, hanging in her face. Her heart was beating so fast in her chest that it frightened her. No one had heard her shriekings and carryings-on, thank the Lord; she and Joe lived far out on the Nista Road, and their nearest neighbors were the Brodskys were half a mile away. If anyone had heard her, they would have thought there was a crazywoman down at Joe and 'Becka Paulson's.

Well there is a crazywoman at the Paulsons', isn't there? she thought. If you really think that picture of Jesus started to talk to you, why, you really must be crazy. Daddy'd beat you three shades of blue for thinking such a thing one shade for lying, another shade for believing the lie, and a third for raising your voice. 'Becka, you are crazy. Pictures don't talk.

No ... and it didn't, another voice spoke up suddenly. That voice came out of your own head, 'Becka. I don't know how it could

be ... how you could know such things ... but that's what happened. Maybe it had something to do with what happened to you last week, or maybe not, but you made that picture of Jesus talk your own self. It didn't really no more than that little rubber Topo Gigio mouse on the Ed Sullivan Show.

But somehow the idea that it might have something to do with that ... that
(hole)

other thing was scarier than the idea that the picture itself had spoken, because that was the sort of thing they sometimes had on Marcus Welby, like that show about the fellow who had the brain tumor and it was making him wear his wife's nylon stockings and step-ins. She refused to allow it mental houseroom. It might be a miracle. After all, miracles happened every day. There was the Shroud of Turin, and the cures at Lourdes, and that Mexican fellow who had a picture of the Virgin Mary burned into the surface of a taco or an enchilada or something. Not to mention those children that had made the headlines of one of the tabloids children who cried rocks. Those were all bona fide miracles (the children who wept rocks was, admittedly, a rather gritty one), as uplifting as a Jimmy Swaggart sermon. Hearing voices was only crazy.

But that's what happened. And you've been hearing voices for quite a little while now, haven't you? You've been hearing His voice. Joe's voice. And that's where it came from, not from Jesus but from Joe, from Joe's head

"No," 'Becka whimpered. "No, I ain't heard any voices in my head."

She stood by her clothesline in the hot backyard, looking blankly off toward the woods on the other side of the Nista Road, blue-gray-hazy in the heat. She wrung her hands in front of her and begun to weep.

"I ain't no heard no voices in my head."

Crazy, her dead father's implacable voice replied. Crazy with

the heat. You come on over here, 'Becka Bouchard, I'm gonna beat you three shades of blister-blue for that crazy talk.

"I ain't heard no voices in my head," 'Becka moaned. "That picture really did talk, I swear, I can't do ventriloquism!"

Better believe the picture. If it was the hole, it was a brain tumor, sure. If it was the picture, it was a miracle. Miracles came from God. Miracles came from Outside. A miracle could drive you crazy and the dear God knew she felt like she was going crazy now but it didn't mean you were crazy, or that your brains were scrambled. As for believing that you could hear other people's thoughts ... that was just crazy.

'Becka looked down at her legs and saw blood gushing from her left knee. She shrieked again and ran back into the house to call the doctor, MEDIX, somebody. She was in the living room again, pawing at the dial with the phone to her ear, when Jesus said:

"That's raspberry filling from your coffeecake, 'Becka. Why don't you just relax, before you have a heart attack?"

She looked at the TV, the telephone receiver falling to the table with a clunk. Jesus was still sitting on the rock outcropping. It looked as though He had crossed His legs. It was really surprising how much He looked like her own father ... only He didn't seem forbidding, ready to be hitting angry at a moment's notice. He was looking at her with a kind of exasperated patience.

"Try it and see if I'm not right," Jesus said.

She touched her knee gently, wincing, expecting pain. There was none. She saw the seeds in the red stuff and relaxed. She licked the raspberry filling off her fingers.

"Also," Jesus said, "you have got to get these ideas about hearing voices and going crazy out of your head. It's just Me. And I can talk to anyone I want to, any way I want to."

"Because you're the Savior," 'Becka whispered.

"That's right," Jesus said, and looked down. Below Him, a couple of animated salad bowls were dancing in appreciation of the hidden Valley Ranch Dressing which they were about to receive.

"And I'd like you to please turn that crap off, if you don't mind. We don't need that thing running. Also, it makes My feet tingle."

'Becka approached the TV and turned it off.

"My Lord," she whispered.

Now it was Sunday, July 10th. Joe was lying fast asleep out in the backyard hammock with Ozzie lying limply across him ample stomach like a black and white fur stole. She stood in the living room, holding the curtain back with her left hand and looking out at Joe. Sleeping in the hammock, dreaming of The Hussy, no doubt dreaming of throwing her down in a great big pile of catalogs from Carroll Reed and fourth-class junk mail and then how would Joe and his piggy poker-buddies out it? "putting the boots to her."

She was holding the curtain with her left hand because she had a handful of square nine-volt batteries in her right. She had bought them yesterday down at the town hardware store. Now she let

the curtain drop and took the batteries into the kitchen, where she was assembling a little something on the counter. Jesus had told her how to make it. She told Jesus she couldn't build things. Jesus told her not to be a cussed fool. If she could follow a recipe, she could build this little gadget. She was delighted to find that Jesus was absolutely right. It was not only easy, it was fun. A lot more fun than cooking, certainly; she had never really had the knack for that. Her cakes almost always fell and her breads almost never rose. She had begun this little thing yesterday, working with the toaster, the motor from her old Hamilton-Beach blender, and a funny board full of electronic things which had come from the back of an old radio in the shed. She thought she would be done long before Joe woke up and came in to watch the Red Sox on TV at two o'clock.

Actually, it was funny how many ideas she'd had in the last few days. Some Jesus had told her about; others just seemed to come to her at odd moments.

Her sewing machine, for instance she'd always wanted one of those attachments that made the zigzag stitches, but Joe had told her she would have to wait until he could afford to buy her a new machine (and that would probably be along about the twelfth of Never, if she knew Joe). Just four days ago she had seen how, if she just moved the button stitcher and added a second needle where it had

been at an angle of forty-five degrees to the first needle, she could make all the zigzags she wanted. All it took was a screwdriver even a dummy like her could use one of those and it worked just as well as you could want. She saw that the camshaft would probably warp out of true before long because of the weight differential, but there were ways to fix that, too, when it happened.

Then there was the Electrolux. Jesus had told her about that one. Getting her ready for Joe, maybe. It had been Jesus who told her how to use Joe's little butane welding torch, and that made it easier. She had gone over to Derry and bought three of those electronic Simon games at KayBee Toys. Once she was back home she broke them open and pulled out the memory boards. Following Jesus' instructions, she connected the boards and wired Eveready dry cells to the memory circuits she had created. Jesus told her how to program the Electrolux and power it (she had in fact, already figured this out for herself, but she was much too polite to tell Him so). Now it vacuumed the kitchen, living room, and downstairs bathroom all by itself. It had a tendency to get caught under the piano bench or in the bathroom (where it just kept on butting its stupid self against the toilet until she came running to turn it around), and it scared the granola out of Ozzie, but it was still an improvement over dragging a thirty-pound vac around like a dead dog. She had much more time to catch up on the afternoon stories and now these included true stories Jesus told her. Her new, improved Electrolux used juice awfully fast, though, and sometimes it got tangled in its own electrical cord. She thought she might just scratch the dry cells and hook up a motorcycle battery to it one day soon. There would be time after this problem of Joe and The Hussy had been solved.

Or ... just last night. She had lain awake in bed long after Joe was snoring beside her, thinking about numbers. It occurred to 'Becka (who had never gotten beyond Business Math in high school)

that if you gave numbers letter values, you could un-freeze them you could turn them into something that was like Jell-O. When they the numbers were letters, you could pour them into any old mold you liked. Then you could turn the letters back into numbers, and

that was like putting the Jell-O into the fridge so it would set, and keep the shape of the mold when you turned it out onto a plate later on.

That way you could always figure things out, 'Becka had thought, delighted. She was unaware that her fingers had gone to the spot above her left eye and were rubbing, rubbing, rubbing. For instance, just look! You could make things fall into a line every time by saying $ax + bx + c = 0$, and that proves it. It always works. It's like Captain Marvel saying Shazam! Well, there is the zero factor; you can't let "a" be zero or that spoils it. But otherwise

She had lain awake a while longer, considering this, and then had fallen asleep, unaware that she had just reinvented the quadratic equation, and polynomials, and the concept of factoring.

Ideas. Quite a few of them just lately.

'Becka picked up Joe's little blowtorch and lit it deftly with a kitchen match. She would have laughed last month if you'd told her she would ever be working with something like this. But it was easy. Jesus had told her exactly how to solder the wires to the electronics board from the old radio. It was just like fixing up the vacuum cleaner, only this idea was even better.

Jesus had told her a lot of other things in the last three days or so. They had murdered her sleep (and what little sleep she had gotten was nightmare-driven), they had made her afraid to show her face in the village itself (I'll always know when you've done something wrong, 'Becka, her father had told her, because your face just can't keep a secret), they had made her lose her appetite. Joe, totally bound up in his work, the Red Sox, and his Hussy, noticed none of these things ... although he had noticed the other night as he watched television that 'Becka was gnawing her fingernails, something she had never done before it was, in fact, one of the many things she nagged him about. But she was doing it now, all right; they were bitten right down to the quick. Joe Paulson considered this for all of twelve seconds before looking back at the Sony TV and losing himself in dreams of Nancy Voss's billowy white breasts.

Here were just a few of the afternoon stories Jesus had told her which had caused 'Becka to sleep poorly and to begin biting her fingernails at the advanced age of forty-five:

In 1973, Moss Harlingen, one of Joe's poker buddies, had murdered his father. They had been hunting deer up in Greenville and it had supposedly been one of those tragic accidents, but the shooting of Abel Harlingen had been no accident. Moss simply lay up behind a fallen tree with his rifle and waited until his father splashed towards him across a small stream about fifty yards down the hill from where Moss was. Moss shot his father carefully and deliberately through the

head. Moss thought he had killed his father for money. His (Moss's) business, Big Ditch Construction, had two notes falling due with two different banks, and neither bank would extend because of the other. Moss went to Abel, but Abel refused to help, although he could afford to. So Moss shot his father and inherited a lot of money as soon as the county coroner handed down his verdict of death by misadventure. The note was paid and Moss Harlingen really believed (except perhaps in his deepest dreams) that he had committed the murder for gain. The real motive had been something else. Far in the past, when Moss was ten and his little brother Emery but seven, Abel's wife went south to Rhode Island for one whole winter. Moss's and Emery's uncle had died suddenly, and his wife needed help getting on her feet. While their mother was gone, there were several incidents of buggery in the Harlingens' Troy home. The buggery stopped when the boy's mother came back, and the incidents were never repeated. Moss had forgotten all about them. He never remembered lying awake in the dark anymore, lying awake in mortal terror and watching the doorway for the shadow of his father. He had absolutely no recollection of lying with his mouth pressed against his forearm, hot salty tears of shame and rage squeezing out of his eyes and coursing down his face to his mouth as Abel

Harlingen slathered lard onto his cock and then slid it up his son's back door with a grunt and a sigh. It had all made so little impression on Moss that he could not remember biting his arm until it bled to keep from crying out, and he certainly could not remember Emery's breathless little cries from the next bed "Please, no, daddy, please not me tonight, please, daddy, please no." Children, of course, forget very easily. But some subconscious memory must have lingered, because when Moss Harlingen actually pulled the trigger, as he had dreamed of doing every night for the last thirty-two years of his life, as the echoes first rolled away and then rolled back, finally disappearing into the great forested silence of the up-Maine wilderness, Moss whispered: "Not you, Em, not tonight." That Jesus had told her this not two hours after Moss had stopped in to return a fishing rod which belonged to Joe never crossed 'Becka's mind.

- 1 Alice Kimball, who taught at the Haven Grammar School, was a lesbian. Jesus told 'Becka this Friday, not long after the lady herself, looking large and solid and respectable in a green pant suit, had stopped by, collecting for the American Cancer Society.
- 2 Darla Gaines, the pretty seventeen-year-old girl who brought the Sunday paper, had half an ounce of "bitchin' reefer" between the mattress and box spring of her bed. Jesus told 'Becka not fifteen minutes after Darla had come by on Saturday to collect for the last five weeks (three dollars plus a fifty-cent tip 'Becka now wished she had withheld). That she and her boyfriend smoked the reefer in Darla's bed after doing what they called "the horizontal bop." They did the horizontal bop and smoked reefer almost every weekday from two until three

o'clock or so. Darla's parents both worked at Splended Shoe in Derry and they didn't get home until well past four.

3 Hank Buck, another of Joe's poker buddies, worked at a large supermarket in Bangor and hated his boss so much that a year ago he had put half a box of Ex-Lax in the man's chocolate

shake when he, the boss, sent Hank out to McDonald's to get his lunch one day. The boss had shit his pants promptly at quarter past three in the afternoon, as he was slicing luncheon meat in the deli of Paul's Down-East Grocery Mart. Hank managed to hold on until punching-out time, and then he sat in his car, laughing until he almost shit his pants. "He laughed," Jesus told 'Becka. "He laughed. Can you believe that?"

And these things were only the tip of the iceberg, so to speak. It seemed that Jesus knew something unpleasant or upsetting about everyone everyone 'Becka herself came in contact with, anyway. She couldn't live with such an awful outpouring.

But she didn't know if she could live without it anymore, either.

One thing was certain she had to do something. Something.

"You are doing something," Jesus said. He spoke from behind her, from the picture on top of the TV of course He did and the idea that the voice was coming from inside her own head, and that it was a cold mutation of her own thoughts ... that was nothing but a dreadful passing illusion. "In fact, you're almost done with this part, 'Becka. Just solder that red wire to that point beside the long doohickey ... not that one, the one next to it ... that's right. Not too much solder! It's like Brylcreem, 'Becka. A little dab'll do ya."

Strange, hearing Jesus Christ talk about Brylcreem.

Joe woke up at quarter of two, tossed Ozzie off his lap, strolled to the back of his lawn, had a comfortable whizz into the poison ivy back there, then headed into the house to watch the Yankees and the Red Sox. He opened the refrigerator in the kitchen, glancing briefly at the little snips of wire on the counter and wondering just what the hell his wife had been up to. Then he dismissed it and grabbed a quart of Bud.

He padded into the living room. 'Becka was sitting in her rocking chair, pretending to read a book. Just ten minutes before Joe came in, she had finished wiring her little gadget into the Zenith console television, following Jesus' instructions to the letter.

"You got to be careful, taking the back off a television, 'Becka," Jesus had told her. "More juice back there than there is in a Bird's Eye warehouse."

"Thought you'd have this all warmed up for me," Joe said.

"I guess you can do it," 'Becka said.

"Ayuh, guess I can," Joe said, completing the last conversational exchange the two of them would ever have.

He pushed the button that made the TV come on and better than two thousand volts of electricity slammed into him. His eyes popped wide open. When the electricity hit him, his hand clenched hard enough to break the bottle in his hand and drive brown glass

into his palm and fingers. Beer foamed and ran.

"EEEEEEEEOOOOOOOAAARRRRRRRRUMMMMMMMM!"

Joe screamed.

His face began to turn black. Blue smoke began to pour from his hair. His finger appeared nailed to the Zenith's ON button. A picture popped up on the TV. It showed Joe and Nancy Voss screwing on the post office floor in a litter of catalogues and Congressional newsletters and sweepstakes announcements from Publishers' Clearing House.

"No!" 'Becka screamed, and the picture changed. Now she saw Moss Harlingen behind a fallen pine, slightly down the barrel of a .30-.30. the picture changed and she saw Darla Gaines and her boyfriend doing the horizontal bop in Darla's upstairs bedroom while Rick Springfield stared at them from the wall.

Joe Paulson's clothes burst into flames.

The living room was filled with the hot smell of cooking beer.

A moment later, the 3-D picture of Jesus exploded.

"No!" 'Becka shrieked, suddenly understanding that it had been her all along, her, her, her, she had thought everything up, she had read their thoughts, somehow read their thoughts, it had been the hole in her head and it had done something to her mind had suped it up somehow. The picture on the TV changed again and she saw herself backing down the stepladder with the .22 pistol in her hand, pointed

toward her she looked like a woman bent on suicide rather than on cleaning.

Her husband was turning black before her very eyes.

She ran to him, seized his shredded, wet hand and ... and was herself galvanized by electricity. She was no more able to let go than Brer Rabbit had been after he slapped the tar baby for insolence.

Jesus oh Jesus, she thought as the current slammed into her, driving her up on her toes.

And a mad, cackling voice, the voice of her father, rode in her brain: Fooled you, 'Becka! Fooled you, didn't I? Fooled you good!

The back of the television, which she had screwed back on after she had finished with her alterations (on the off-chance that Joe might look back there), exploded backward in a mighty blue flash of light. Joe and 'Becka Paulson tumbled to the carpet. Joe was already dead. And by the time the smouldering wallpaper behind the TV had ignited the, 'Becka was dead, too.

STEPHEN
KING

THE ROAD VIRUS HEADS NORTH
Appears in novel

published in 1999

Richard Kinnell wasn't frightened when he first saw the picture at the yard sale in Rosewood.

He was fascinated by it, and he felt he'd had the good luck to find something which might be very special, but fright? No. It didn't occur to him until later ("not until it was too late," as he might have written in one of his own numbingly successful novels) that he had felt much the same way about certain illegal drugs as a young man.

He had gone down to Boston to participate in a PEN/New England conference titled "The Threat of Popularity." You could count on PEN to come up with such subjects, Kinnell had found; it was actually sort of comforting. He drove the two hundred and sixty miles from Derry rather than flying because he'd come to a plot impasse on his latest book and wanted some quiet time to try to work it out.

At the conference, he sat on a panel where people who should have known better asked him where he got his ideas and if he ever scared himself. He left the city by way of the Tobin Bridge, then got on Route 1. He never took the turnpike when he was trying to work out problems; the turnpike lulled him into a state that was like dreamless, waking sleep. It was restful, but not very creative. The stop-and-go traffic on the coast road, however, acted like grit inside an oyster-it created a fair amount of mental activity ... and sometimes even a pearl.

Not, he supposed, that his critics would use that word. In an issue of Esquire last year, Bradley Simons had begun his review of Nightmare City this way: "Richard Kinnell, who writes like Jeffery Dahmer cooks, has suffered a fresh bout of projectile vomiting. He has titled this most recent mass of ejecta Nightmare City."

Route 1 took him through Revere, Malden, Everett, and up the coast to Newburyport. Beyond Newburyport and just south of the

Massachusetts-New Hampshire border was the tidy little town of Rosewood. A mile or so beyond the town center, he saw an array of cheap-looking goods spread out on the lawn of a two-story Cape. Propped against an avocado-colored electric stove was a sign reading YARD SALE. Cars were parked on both sides of the road, creating one of those bottlenecks which travelers unaffected by the yard sale mystique curse their way through. Kinnell liked yard sales, particularly the boxes of old books you sometimes found at them. He drove through the bottleneck, parked his Audi at the head of the line of cars pointed toward Maine and New Hampshire, then walked back.

A dozen or so people were circulating on the littered front lawn of the blue-and-gray Cape Cod. A large television stood to the left of the cement walk, its feet planted on four paper ashtrays that were doing absolutely nothing to protect the lawn. On top was a sign

reading MAKE AN OFFER-YOU MIGHT BE SURPRISED. An electrical cord, augmented by an extension, mailed back from the TV and through the open front door. A fat woman sat in a lawn chair before it, shaded by an umbrella with CINZANO printed on the colorful scalloped flaps. There was a card table beside her with a cigar box, a pad of paper, and another handlettered sign on it. This sign read ALL SALES CASH, ALL SALES FINAL. The TV was on, turned to an afternoon soap opera where two beautiful young people looked on the verge of having deeply unsafe sex. The fat woman glanced at Kinnell, then back at the TV. She looked at it for a moment, then looked back at him again. This time her mouth was slightly sprung.

Ah, Kinnell thought, looking around for the liquor box lined with paperbacks that was sure to be here someplace, a fan. He didn't see any paperbacks, but he saw the picture, leaning against an ironing board and held in place by a couple of plastic laundry baskets, and his breath stopped in his throat. He wanted it at once.

He walked over with a casualness that felt exaggerated and dropped to one knee in front of it. The painting was a watercolor, and technically very good. Kinnell didn't care about that; technique didn't interest him (a fact the critics of his own work had duly noted). What he liked in works of art was content, and the more unsettling the better. This picture scored high in that department. He knelt between the two laundry baskets, which had been filled with a jumble of small appliances, and let his fingers slip over the glass facing of the picture. He glanced around briefly, looking for others like it, and saw none - only the usual yard sale art collection of Little Bo Peeps, praying hands, and gambling dogs.

He looked back at the framed watercolor, and in his mind he was already moving his suitcase into the backseat of the Audi so he could slip the picture comfortably into the trunk.

It showed a young man behind the wheel of a muscle car-maybe a Grand Am, maybe a GTX, something with a T-top, anyway - crossing the Tobin Bridge at sunset. The T-top was off, turning the black car into a half-assed convertible. The young man's left arm was cocked on the door, his right wrist was draped casually over the wheel. Behind him, the sky was a bruise-colored mass of yellows and grays, streaked with veins of pink. The young man had lank blond hair that spilled over his low forehead. He was grinning, and his parted lips revealed teeth which were not teeth at all but fangs.

Or maybe they're filed to points, Kinnell thought. Maybe he's supposed to be a cannibal.

He liked that; liked the idea of a cannibal crossing the Tobin Bridge at sunset. In a Grand Am. He knew what most of the audience at the PEN panel discussion would have thought - Oh, yes, great picture for Rich Kinnell he probably wants it for inspiration, a feather to tickle his tired old gorge into one more fit of projectile vomiting-but most of those folks were ignoramuses, at least as far as his work went, and what was more, they treasured

their ignorance, cossetted it the way some people inexplicably treasured and cossetted those stupid, mean-spirited little dogs that yapped at visitors and sometimes bit the paperboy's ankles. He hadn't been attracted to this painting because he wrote horror stories; he wrote horror stories because he was attracted to things like this painting. His fans sent him stuff - pictures, mostly - and he threw most of them away, not because they were bad art but because they were tiresome and predictable. One fan from Omaha had sent him a little ceramic sculpture of a screaming, horrified monkey's head poking out of a refrigerator door, however, and that one he had kept. It was unskillfully executed, but there was an unexpected juxtaposition there that lit UP his dials. This painting had some of the same quality, but it was even better. Much better. As he was reaching for it, wanting to pick it up right now, this second, wanting to tuck it under his arm and proclaim his intentions, a voice spoke up behind him: "Aren't you Richard Kinnell?"

He jumped, then turned. The fat woman was standing directly behind him, blotting out most of the immediate landscape. She had put on fresh lipstick before approaching, and now her mouth had been transformed into a bleeding grin.

"Yes, I am," he said, smiling back.

Her eyes dropped to the picture. "I should have known you'd go right to that," she said, simpering. "It's so You."

"It is, isn't it?" he said, and smiled his best celebrity smile. "How much would you need for it?"

"Forty-five dollars," she said. "I'll be honest with you, I started it at seventy, but nobody likes it, so now it's marked down. If you come back tomorrow, you can probably have it for thirty." The simper had grown to frightening proportions. Kinnell could see little gray spit-buds in the dimples at the comers of her stretched mouth.

"I don't think I want to take that chance," he said. "I'll write you a check right now."

The simper continued to stretch; the woman now looked like some grotesque John Waters parody. Divine does Shirley Temple. "I'm really not supposed to take checks, but all right," she said, her tone that of a teenage girl finally consenting to have sex with her boyfriend. "Only while you have your pen out, could you write an autograph for my daughter? Her name is Michela?"

"What a beautiful name," Kinnell said automatically. He took the picture and followed the fat woman back to the card table. On the TV next to it, the lustful young people had been temporarily displaced by an elderly woman gobbling bran flakes.

"Michela reads all your books," the fat woman said. "Where in the world do you get all those crazy ideas?"

"I don't know," Kinnell said, smiling more widely than ever. "They just come to me. Isn't that amazing? "

The yard sale minder's name was Judy Diment, and she lived in the house next door. When Kinnell asked her if she knew who the artist happened to be, she said she certainly did; Bobby Hastings had done it, and Bobby Hastings was the reason she was selling off

the Hastings' things. "That's the only painting he didn't bum," she said. "Poor Iris! She's the one I really feel sorry for. I don't think George cared much, really. And I know he didn't understand why she wants to sell the house." She rolled her eyes in her large, sweaty face - the old can-you-imagine-that look. She took Kinnell's check when he tore it off, then gave him the pad where she had written down all the items she'd sold and the prices she'd obtained for them. "Just make it out to Michela," she said. "Pretty please with sugar on it?" The simper reappeared, like an old acquaintance you'd hoped was dead.

"Uh-huh," Kinnell said, and wrote his standard thanks-for-being-a-fan message. He didn't have to watch his hands or even think about it anymore, not after twenty-five years of writing autographs. "Tell me about the picture, and the Hastingses."

Judy Diment folded her pudgy hands in the manner of a woman about to recite a favorite story.

"Bobby was just twenty-three when he killed himself this spring. Can you believe that? He was the tortured genius type, you know, but still living at home." Her eyes rolled, again asking Kinnell if he could imagine it. "He must have had seventy, eighty paintings, plus all his sketchbooks. Down in the basement, they were." She pointed her chin at the Cape Cod, then looked at the picture of the fiendish young man driving across the Tobin Bridge at sunset.

"Iris-that's Bobby's mother - said most of them were real bad, lots worse'n this. Stuff that'd curl your hair." She lowered her voice to a whisper, glancing at a woman who was looking at the Hastings' mismatched silverware and a pretty good collection of old McDonald's plastic glasses in a Honey, I Shrank the Kids motif.

"Most of them had sex stuff in them."

"Oh no," Kinnell said.

"He did the worst ones after he got on drugs," Judy Diment continued. "After he was dead-he hung himself down in the basement, where he used to paint-they found over a hundred of those little bottles they sell crack cocaine in. Aren't drugs awful, Mr. Kinnell?"

"They sure are."

"Anyway, I guess he finally just got to the end of his rope, no pun intended. He took all of his sketches and paintings out into the back yard-except for that one, I guess - and burned them. Then he hung himself down in the basement. He pinned a note to his shirt.

It said, 'I can't stand what's happening to me.' Isn't that awful, Mr. Kinnell? Isn't that just the awfulest thing you ever heard?"

'Yes,' Kinnell said, sincerely enough. "It just about is."

'Like I say, I think George would go right on living in the house if he had his druthers,' Judy Diment said. She took the sheet of paper with Michela's autograph on it, held it up next to Kinnell's check, and shook her head, as if the similarity of the signatures amazed her. "But men are different."

"Are they?"

"Oh, yes, much less sensitive. By the end of his life, Bobby Hastings was just skin and bone, dirty all the time-you could smell him - and he wore the same T-shirt, day in and day out. It had a picture of the Led Zeppelins on it. His eyes were red, he had a scraggle on his cheeks that you couldn't quite call a beard, and his pimples were coming back, like he was a teenager again. But she loved him, because a mother's love sees past all those things." The woman who had been looking at the silverware and the glasses came over with a set of Star Wars placemats. Mrs. Diment took five I dollars for them, wrote the sale carefully down on her pad below "ONE DOZ. ASSORTED POTHOLDERS & HOTPADS," then turned back to Kinnell.

They went out to Arizona," she said, "to stay with Iris's folks. I know George is looking for work out there in Flagstaff-he's a draftsman-but I don't know if he's found any yet. If he has, I suppose we might not ever see them again here in Rosewood. She marked out all the stuff she wanted me to sell-Iris did - and told me I could keep twenty percent for my trouble. I'll send a check for the rest. There won't be much." She sighed.

"The picture is great," Kinnell said.

"Yeah, too bad he burned the rest, because most of this other stuff is your standard yard sale crap, pardon my French. What's that?" Kinnell had turned the picture around. There was a length of Dymotape pasted to the back.

"A tide, I think."

"What does it say?"

He grabbed the picture by the sides and held it up so she could read it for herself This put the picture at eye level to him, and he studied it eagerly, once again taken by the simpleminded weirdness of the subject; kid behind the wheel of a muscle car, a kid with a nasty, knowing grin that revealed the filed points of an even nastier set of teeth.

It fits, he thought. If ever a title fussed a painting, this one does.

"The Road Virus Heads North," she read. "I never noticed that when my boys were lugging stuff out. Is it the tide, do you think?"

"Must be." Kinnell couldn't take his eyes off the blond kid's grin. I know something, the grin said. I know something you never will.

"Well, I guess you'd have to believe the fella who did this was high on drugs," she said, sounding upset - authentically upset, Kinnell thought. "No wonder he could kill himself and break his mamma's heart."

"I've got to be heading north myself," Kinnell said, tucking the picture under his arm. "Thanks for-"

"Mr. Kinnell?"

"Yes?"

"Can I see your driver's license?" She apparently found nothing ironic or even amusing in this request. "I ought to write the number on the back of your check."

Kinnell put the picture down so he could dig for his wallet. "Sure.

You bet."

The woman who'd bought the Star Wars placemats had paused on her way back to her car to watch some of the soap opera playing on the lawn TV. Now she glanced at the picture, which Kinnell had propped against his shins.

"Ag," she said. "Who'd want an ugly old thing like that? I'd think about it every time I turned the lights out."

"What's wrong with that?" Kinnell asked.

Kinnell's Aunt Trudy lived in Wells, which is about six miles north of the Maine - New Hampshire border. Kinnell pulled off at the exit which circled the bright green Wells water tower, the one with the comic sign on it (KEEP MAINE GREEN, BRING MONEY in letters four feet high), and five minutes later he was turning into the driveway of her neat little saltbox house. No TV sinking into the lawn on paper ashtrays here, only Aunt Trudy's amiable masses of flowers. Kinnell needed to pee and hadn't wanted to take care of that in a roadside rest stop when he could come here, but he also wanted an update on all the family gossip. Aunt Trudy retailed the best; she was to gossip what Zabar's is to deli. Also, of course, he wanted to show her his new acquisition.

She came out to meet him, gave him a hug, and covered his face with her patented little birdy-kisses, the ones that had made him shiver all over as a kid.

"Want to see something?" he asked her. "It'll blow your pantyhose off."

"What a charming thought," Aunt Trudy said, clasping her elbows in her palms and looking at him with amusement.

He opened the trunk and took out his new picture. It affected her, all right, but not in the way he had expected. The color fell out of

her face in a sheet-he had never seen anything quite like it in his entire life. "It's horrible," she said in a tight, controlled voice. "I hate it. I suppose I can see what attracted you to it, Richie, but what you play at, it does for, real. Put it back in your trunk, like a good boy. And when you get to the Saco River, why don't you pull over into the breakdown lane and throw it in?"

He gaped at her. Aunt Trudy's lips were pressed tightly together to stop them trembling, and now her long, thin hands were not just clasping her elbows but clutching them, as if to keep her from flying away. At that moment she looked not sixty-one but ninety-one.

"Auntie?" Kinnell spoke tentatively, not sure what was going on here. "Auntie, what's wrong?"

"That." she said, unlocking her right hand and pointing at the picture. "I'm surprised you don't feel it more strongly yourself, an imaginative guy like you."

Well, he felt something, obviously he had, or he never would have unlimbered his checkbook in the first place. Aunt Trudy was feeling something else, though ... or something more. He turned the picture around so he could see it (he had been holding it out for her, so the side with the Dymotaped title faced him), and looked at it again. What he saw hit him in the chest and belly like a one-two punch.

The picture had changed, that was punch number one. Not much,

but it had dearly changed. The young blond man's smile was wider, revealing more of those filed cannibal-teeth. His eyes were squinted down more, too, giving his face a look which was more knowing and nastier than ever.

The degree of a smile ... the vista of sharpened teeth widening slightly ... the tilt and squint of the eyes ... all pretty subjective stuff. A person could be mistaken about things like that, and of

course he hadn't really studied the painting before buying it. Also, there had been the distraction of Mrs. Diment, who could probably talk the cock off a brass monkey.

But there was also punch number two, and that wasn't subjective.

In the darkness of the Audi's trunk, the blond young man had turned his left arm, the one cocked on the door, so that Kinnell could now see a tattoo which had been hidden before. It was a vine-wrapped dagger with a bloody tip. Below it were words.

Kinnell could make Out DEATH BEFORE, and he supposed you didn't have to be a big best-selling novelist to figure out the word that was still hidden. DEATH BEFORE DISHONOR was, after all, just the sort of a thing a hoodoo traveling man like this was apt to have on his arm. And an ace of spades or a pot plant on the other one, Kinnell thought.

"You hate it, don't you, Auntie?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, and now he saw an even more amazing thing: she had turned away from him, pretending to look out at the street (which was dozing and deserted in the hot afternoon sunlight), so she wouldn't have to look at the picture. "In fact, Auntie loathes it. Now put it away and come on into the house. I'll bet you need to use the bathroom."

Aunt Trudy recovered her savoir faire almost as soon as the watercolor was back in the trunk. They talked about Kinnell's mother (Pasadena), his sister (Baton Rouge), and his ex-wife, Sally (Nashua). Sally was a space-case who ran an animal shelter out of a double-wide trailer and published two newsletters each month. Survivors was filled with astral info and supposedly true tales of the spirit world; Visitors contained the reports of people who'd had close encounters with space aliens. Kinnell no longer went to fan conventions which specialized in fantasy and horror. One Sally in a lifetime, he sometimes told people, was enough.

When Aunt Trudy walked him back out to the car, it was fourthirty and he'd turned down the obligatory dinner invitation. "I can get most of the way back to Derry in daylight, if I leave now."

"Okay," she said. "And I'm sorry I was so mean about your picture. Of course you like it, you've always liked your ... your oddities. It just hit me the wrong way. That awful face." She shuddered. "As if we were looking at him . . . and he was looking right back." Kinnell grinned and kissed the tip of her nose. "You've got quite an imagination yourself, sweetheart."

"Of course, it runs in the family. Are you sure you don't want to use the facility again before you go?"

He shook his head. "That's not why I stop, anyway, not really."

"Oh? Why do you?"

He grinned. "Because you know who's being naughty and who's being nice. And you're not afraid to share what you know."

"Go on, get going," she said, pushing at his shoulder but clearly pleased. "If I were you, I'd want to get home quick. I wouldn't want that nasty guy riding along behind me in the dark, even in the trunk. I mean, did you see his teeth? Ag!"

He got on the turnpike, trading scenery for speed, and made it as far as the Gray service area before deciding to have another look at the picture. Some of his aunt's unease had transmitted itself to him like a germ, but he didn't think that was really the problem. The problem was his perception that the picture had changed.

The service area featured the usual gourmet chow - burgers by Roy Rogers, cones by TCBY - and had a small, littered picnic and dogwalking area at the rear. Kinnell parked next to a van with Missouri plates, drew in a deep breath, let it out. He'd driven to Boston in order to kill some plot gremlins in the new book, which was pretty ironic. He'd spent the ride down working out what he'd

say on the panel if certain tough questions were tossed at him, but none had been - once they'd found out he didn't know where he got his ideas, and yes, he did sometimes scare himself, they'd only wanted to know how you got an agent.

And now, heading back, he couldn't think of anything but the damned picture.

Had it changed? If it had, if the blond kid's arm had moved enough so he, Kinnell, could read a tattoo which had been partly hidden before, then he could write a column for one of Sally's magazines. Hell, a fourpart series. If, on the other hand, it wasn't changing, then ... what? He was suffering a hallucination? Having a breakdown? That was crap. His life was pretty much in order, and he felt good. Had, anyway, until his fascination with the picture had begun to waver into something else, something darker.

"Ah, fuck, you just saw it wrong the first time," he said out loud as he got out of the car. Well, maybe. Maybe. It wouldn't be the first time his head had screwed with his perceptions. That was also a part of what he did. Sometimes his imagination got a little ...well ...

"Feisty," Kinnell said, and opened the trunk. He took the picture out of the trunk and looked at it, and it was during the space of the ten seconds when he looked at it without remembering to breathe that he became authentically afraid of the thing, afraid the way you were afraid of a sudden dry rattle in the bushes, afraid the way you were when you saw an insect that would probably sting if you provoked it.

The blond driver was grinning insanely at him now - yes, at him, Kinnell was sure of it - with those filed cannibal-teeth exposed all the way to the gumlines. His eyes simultaneously glared and laughed. And the Tobin Bridge was gone. So was the Boston skyline. So was the sunset. It was almost dark in the painting now, the car and its wild rider illuminated by a single streetlamp that ran a buttery glow across the road and the car's chrome. It looked to

Kinnell as if the car (he was pretty sure it was a Grand Am) was on the edge of a small town on Route 1, and he was pretty sure he knew what town it was—he had driven through it himself only a few hours ago.

"Rosewood," he muttered. "That's Rosewood. I'm pretty sure." The Road Virus was heading north, all right, coming up Route 1 just as he had. The blond's left arm was still cocked out the window, but it had rotated enough back toward its original position so that Kinnell could no longer see the tattoo. But he knew it was there, didn't he? Yes, you bet.

The blond kid looked like a Metallica fan who had escaped from a mental asylum for the criminally insane.

"Jesus," Kinnell whispered, and the word seemed to come from someplace else, not from him. The strength suddenly ran out of his body, ran out like water from a bucket with a hole in the bottom, and he sat down heavily on the curb separating the parking lot from the dog-walking zone. He suddenly understood that this was the truth he'd missed in all his fiction, this was how people really reacted when they came face-to-face with something which made no rational sense. You felt as if you were bleeding to death, only inside your head.

"No wonder the guy who painted it killed himself," he croaked, still staring at the picture, at the ferocious grin, at the eyes that were both shrewd and stupid.

There was a note pinned to his shirt, Mrs. Diment had said. "I can't stand what's happening to me. " Isn't that awful, Mr. Kinnell? Yes, it was awful, all right.

Really awful.

He got up, gripping the picture by its top, then strode across the dog-walking area. He kept his eyes trained strictly in front of him,

looking for canine land mines. He did not look down at the picture. His legs felt trembly and untrustworthy, but they seemed to support him all right. just ahead, close to the belt of trees at the rear of the service area, was a pretty young thing in white shorts and a red halter. She was walking a cocker spaniel. She began to smile at Kinnell, then saw something in his face that straightened her lips out in a hurry. She headed left, and fast. The cocker didn't want to go that fast so she dragged it, coughing, in her wake.

The scrubby pines behind the service area sloped down to a boggy area that stank of plant and animal decomposition. The carpet of pine needles was a road litter fallout zone: burger wrappers, paper soft drink cups, TCBY napkins, beer cans, empty wine-cooler bottles, cigarette butts. He saw a used condom lying like a dead snail next to a torn pair of panties with the word TUESDAY stitched on them in cursive girly-girl script.

Now that he was here, he chanced another look down at the picture. He steeled himself for further changes even for the possibility that the painting would be in motion, like a movie in a frame - but there was none. There didn't have to be, Kinnell realized; the blond kid's face was enough. That stone-crazy grin. Those pointed teeth. The face said, Hey, old man, guess what? I'm

done fucking with civilization. I'm a representative of the real generation X, the next millennium is tight here behind the wheel of this fine, high-steppin' mo-sheen.

Aunt Trudy's initial reaction to the painting had been to advise Kinnell that he should throw it into the Saco River. Auntie had been right. The Saco was now almost twenty miles behind him, but...

"This'll do," he said. "I think this'll do just fine."

He raised the picture over his head like a guy holding up some kind of sports trophy for the postgame photographers and then heaved it down the slope. It flipped over twice, the frame catching

winks of hazy late-day sun, then struck a tree. The glass facing shattered. The picture fell to the ground and then slid down the dry, needle-carpeted slope, as if down a chute. It landed in the bog, one corner of the frame protruding from a thick stand of reeds.

Otherwise, there was nothing visible but the strew of broken glass, and Kinnell thought that went very well with the rest of the litter. He turned and went back to his car, already picking up his mental trowel. He would wall this incident off in its own special niche, he thought ... and it occurred to him that that was probably what most people did when they ran into stuff like this. Liars and wannabees (or maybe in this case they were wannasees) wrote up their fantasies for publications like Survivors and called them truth; those who blundered into authentic occult phenomena kept their mouths shut and used those trowels. Because when cracks like this appeared in your life, you had to do something about them; if you didn't, they were apt to widen and sooner or later everything would fall in.

Kinnell glanced up and saw the pretty young thing watching him apprehensively from what she probably hoped was a safe distance. When she saw him looking at her, she turned around and started toward the restaurant building, once more dragging the cocker spaniel behind her and trying to keep as much sway out of her hips as possible.

You think I'm crazy, don't you pretty girl? Kinnell thought. He saw he had left his trunk lid up. It gaped like a mouth. He slammed it shut. You and half the fiction-reading population of America, I guess. But I'm not crazy. Absolutely not. I just made a little mistake, that's all. Stopped at a yard sale I should have passed up. Anyone could have done it. You could have done it. And that picture

"What picture?" Rich Kinnell asked the hot summer evening, and tried on a smile. "I don't see any picture."

He slid behind the wheel of his Audi and started the engine. He looked at the fuel gauge and saw it had dropped under a half. He was going to need gas before he got home, but he thought he'd fill the tank a little further up the line. Right now all he wanted to do was to put a belt of miles - as thick a one as possible - between him and the discarded painting.

Once outside the city limits of Derry, Kansas Street becomes Kansas Road. As it approaches the incorporated town limits (an area that is actually open countryside), it becomes Kansas Lane. Not long after,, Kansas Lane passes between two fieldstone posts. Tar gives way to gravel. What is one of Derry's busiest downtown streets eight miles east of here has become a driveway leading up a shallow hill, and on moonlit summer nights it glimmers like something out of an Alfred Noyes poem. At the top of the hill stands an angular, handsome barn-board structure with reflectorized windows, a stable that is actually a garage, and a satellite dish tilted at the stars. A waggish reporter from the Derry News once called it the House that Gore Built ... not meaning the vice president of the United States. Richard Kinnell simply called it home, and he parked in front of it that night with a sense of weary satisfaction. He felt as if he had lived through a week's worth of time since getting up in the Boston Harbor hotel that morning at nine o'clock.

No more yard sales, he thought, looking up at the moon. No more yard sales ever.

I "Amen," he said, and started toward the house. He probably should stick the car in the garage, but the hell with it. What he wanted right now was a drink, a light meal - something microwaveable - and then sleep. Preferably the kind without dreams. He couldn't wait to put this day behind him.

He stuck his key in the lock, turned it, and punched 3817 to silence the warning bleep from the burglar alarm panel. He turned on the front hall light, stepped through the door, pushed it shut behind

him, began to turn, saw what was on the wall where his collection of framed book covers had been just two days ago, and screamed. In his head he screamed. Nothing actually came out of his mouth but a harsh exhalation of air. He heard a thump and a tuneless little jingle as his keys fell out of his relaxing hand and dropped to the carpet between his feet.

The Road Virus Heads North was no longer in the puckerbrush behind the Gray turnpike service area.

It was mounted on his entry wall.

It had changed yet again. The car was now parked in the driveway of the yard sale yard. The goods were still spread out everywhere glassware and furniture and ceramic knickknacks (Scottie dogs smoking pipes, bare-assed toddlers, winking fish), but now they gleamed beneath the light of the same skullface moon that rode in the sky above Kinnell's house. The TV was still there, too, and it was still on, casting its own pallid radiance onto the grass, and what lay in front of it, next to an overturned lawn chair. Judy Diment was on her back, and she was no longer all there. After a moment, Kinnell saw the rest. It was on the ironing board, dead eyes glowing like fifty-cent pieces in the moonlight. The Grand Am's taillights were a blur of red-pink watercolor paint. It was Kinnell's first look at the car's back deck. Written across it in Old English letters were three words: THE ROAD VIRUS.

Makes perfect sense, Kinnell thought numbly. Not him, his car.

Except for a guy like this, there's probably not much difference.

"This isn't happening," he whispered, except it was. Maybe it

wouldn't have happened to someone a little less open to such things, but it was happening. And as he stared at the painting he found himself remembering the little sign on Judy Diment's card table. ALL SALES CASH, it had said (although she had taken his

check, only adding his driver's license ID number for safety's sake). And it had said something else, too.

ALL SALES FINAL.

Kinnell walked past the picture and into the living room. He felt like a stranger inside his own body, and he sensed part of his mind groping for the trowel he had used earlier. He seemed to have misplaced it.

He turned on the TV, then the Toshiba satellite tuner which sat on top of it. He turned to V-14, and all the time he could feel the picture out there in the hall, pushing at the back of his head. The picture that had somehow beaten him here.

"Must have known a shortcut," Kinnell said, and laughed.

He hadn't been able to see much of the blond in this version of the picture, but there had been a blur behind the wheel which Kinnell assumed had been him. The Road Virus had finished his business in Rosewood. It was time to move north. Next stop

He brought a heavy steel door down on that thought, cutting it off before he could see all of it. "After all, I could still be imagining all this," he told the empty living room. Instead of comforting him, the hoarse, shaky quality of his voice frightened him even more. "This could be ... But he couldn't finish. All that came to him was an old song, belted out in the pseudo-hip style of some early '50s Sinatra done: This could be the start of something BIG ...

The tune oozing from the TV's stereo speakers wasn't Sinatra but Paul Simon, arranged for strings. The white computer type on the blue screen said WELCOME TO NEW ENGLAND NEWSWIRE.

There were ordering instructions below this, but Kinnell didn't have to read them; he was a Newswire junkie and knew the drill by heart. He dialed, punched in his Mastercard number, then 508.

"You have ordered Newswire for [slight pause] central and northern Massachusetts," the robot voice said. "Thank you very m-
-"

Kinnell dropped the phone back into the cradle and stood looking at the New England Newswire logo, snapping his fingers nervously. "Come on," he said. "Come on, come on."

The screen flickered then, and the blue background became green. Words began scrolling up, something about a house fire in Taunton. This was followed by the latest on a dog-racing scandal, then tonight's weather - clear and mild. Kinnell was starting to relax, starting to wonder if he'd really seen what he thought he'd seen on the entryway wall or if it had been a bit of travel-induced fugue, when the TV beeped shrilly and the words BREAKING NEWS appeared. He stood watching the caps scroll up.

NENphAUG19/8:40P A ROSEWOOD WOMAN HAS BEEN
BRUTALLY MURDER-ED WHILE DOING A FAVOR FOR AN

ABSENT FRIEND. 38-YEAR-OLD JUDITH DIMENT WAS SAVAGELY HACKED TO DEATH ON THE LAWN OF HER NEIGHBOR'S HOUSE, WHERE SHE HAD BEEN CONDUCTING A YARD SALE. NO SCREAMS WERE HEARD AND MRS. DIMENT WAS NOT FOUND UNTIL EIGHT O'CLOCK, WHEN A NEIGHBOR ACROSS THE STREET CAME OVER TO COMPLAIN ABOUT LOUD TELEVISION NOISE. THE NEIGHBOR, DAVID GRAVES, SAID THAT MRS. DIMENT HAD BEEN DECAPITATED. "HER HEAD WAS ON THE IRONING BOARD," HE SAID. "IT WAS THE MOST AWFUL THING I'VE EVER SEEN IN MY LIFE." GRAVES SAID HE HEARD NO SIGNS OF A STRUGGLE, ONLY THE TV AND, SHORTLY BEFORE FINDING THE BODY, A LOUD CAR, POSSIBLY EQUIPPED WITH A GLASSPACK MUFFLER, ACCELERATING AWAY FROM THE VICINITY ALONG ROUTE ONE. SPECULATION

THAT THIS VEHICLE MAY HAVE BELONGED TO THE KILLER

Except that wasn't speculation; that was a simple fact. Breathing hard, not quite panting, Kinnell hurried back into the entryway. The picture was still there, but it had changed once more. Now it showed two glaring white circles - headlights - with the dark shape of the car hulking behind them. He's on the move again, Kinnell thought, and Aunt Trudy was on top of his mind now - sweet Aunt Trudy, who always knew who had been naughty and who had been nice. Aunt Trudy, who lived in Wells, no more than forty miles from Rosewood. "God, please God, please send him by the coast road," Kinnell said, reaching for the picture. Was it his imagination or were the headlights farther apart now, as if the car were actually moving before his eyes ... but stealthily, the way the minute hand moved on a Pocket watch? "Send him by the coast road, please." He tore the picture off the wall and ran back into the living room with it. The screen was in place before the fireplace, of course; it would be at least two months before a fire was wanted in here. Kinnell batted it aside and threw the painting in, breaking the glass fronting-which he had already broken once, at the Gray service area - against the firedogs. Then he pelted for the kitchen, wondering what he would do if this didn't work either. It has to, he thought. It will because it has to, and that's A there is to it. He opened the kitchen cabinets and pawed through them, spilling the oatmeal, spilling a canister of salt, spilling the vinegar. The bottle broken open on the counter and assaulted his nose and eyes with the high stink. Not there. What he wanted wasn't there.

He raced into the pantry, looked behind the door - nothing but a plastic bucket and an 0 Cedar - and then on the shelf by the dryer. There it was, next to the briquettes.

Lighter fluid.

He grabbed it and ran back, glancing at the telephone on the kitchen wall as he hurried by. He wanted to stop, wanted to call Aunt Trudy. Credibility wasn't an issue with her; if her favorite nephew called and told her to get out of the house, to get out light now, she would do it ... but what if the blond kid followed her? Chased her?

And he would. Kinnell knew he would.

He hurried across the living room and stopped in front of the fireplace.

"Jesus," he whispered. "Jesus, no."

The picture beneath the splintered glass no longer showed oncoming headlights. Now it showed the Grand Am on a sharply curving piece of road that could only be an exit ramp. Moonlight shone like liquid satin on the car's dark flank. In the background was a water tower, and the words on it were easily readable in the moonlight. KEEP MAINE GREEN, they said. BRING MONEY.

Kinnell didn't hit the picture with the first squeeze of lighter fluid; his hands were shaking badly and the aromatic liquid simply ran down the unbroken part of the glass, blurring the Road Virus's back deck. He took a deep breath, aimed, then squeezed again. This time the lighter fluid squirted in through the jagged hole made by one of the firedogs and ran down the picture, cutting through the paint, making it run, turning a Goodyear Wide Oval into a sooty teardrop.

Kinnell took one of the ornamental matches from the jar on the mantel, struck it on the hearth, and poked it in through the hole in

the glass. The painting caught at once, fire billowing up and down across the Grand Am and the water tower. The remaining glass in the frame turned black, then broke outward in a shower of flaming pieces. Kinnell crunched them under his sneakers, putting them out before they could set the rug on fire.

He went to the phone and punched in Aunt Trudy's number, unaware that he was crying. On the third ring, his aunt's answering machine picked up. "Hello," Aunt Trudy said, "I know it encourages the burglars to say things like this, but I've gone up to Kennebunk to watch the new Harrison Ford movie. If you intend to break in, please don't take my china pigs. If you want to leave a message, do so at the beep."

Kinnell waited, then, keeping his voice as steady as possible, he said:

"It's Richie, Aunt Trudy. Call me when you get back, okay? No matter how late."

He hung up, looked at the TV, then dialed Newswire again, this time punching in the Maine area code. While the computers on the other end processed his order, he went back and used a poker to jab at the blackened, twisted thing in the fireplace. The stench was ghastly - it made the spilled vinegar smell like a flower patch in comparison-but Kinnell found he didn't mind. The picture was entirely gone, reduced to ash, and that made it worthwhile.

Mat if it comes back again?

"It won't," he said, putting the poker back and returning to the TV.

"I'm sure it won't."

But every time the news scroll started to recycle, he got up to check. The picture was just ashes on the hearth ... and there was no word of elderly women being murdered in the Wells-Saco-Kennebunk area of the state. Kinnell kept watching, almost expecting to see A GRAND AM MOVING AT HIGH SPEED

CRASHED INTO A KENNEBUNK MOVIE THEATER
TONIGHT, KILLING AT LEAST TEN, but nothing of the sort
showed up.

At a quarter of eleven the telephone rang. Kinnell snatched it up.

"Hello?"

"It's Trudy, dear. Are you all right?"

"Yes, fine."

"You don't sound fine," she said. "Your voice sounds trembly and funny. What's wrong? What is it?" And then, chilling him but not really surprising him: "It's that picture you were so pleased with, isn't it? That goddamned picture!"

It calmed him somehow, that she should guess so much ... and, of course, there was the relief of knowing she was safe.

"Well, maybe," he said. "I had the heebie-jeebies all the way back here, so I burned it. In the fireplace."

She's going to find out about Judy Diment, you know, a voice inside warned. She doesn't have a twenty-thousand-dollar satellite hookup, but she does subscribe to the Union-Leader and this'll be on the front page. She'll put two and two together. She's far from stupid.

Yes, that was undoubtedly true, but further explanations could wait until the morning, when he might be a little less freaked ... when he might've found a way to think about the Road Virus without losing his mind ... and when he'd begun to be sure it was really over.

"Good!" she said emphatically. "You ought to scatter the ashes, too!" She paused, and when she spoke again, her voice was lower.

"You were worried about me, weren't you? Because you showed it to me.

"A little, yes."

"But you feel better now?"

He leaned back and closed his eyes. It was true, he did. "Uh-huh. How was the movie?"

"Good. Harrison Ford looks wonderful in a uniform. Now, if he'd just get rid of that little bump on his chin . . ."

"Good night, Aunt Trudy. We'll talk tomorrow."

"Will we?"

"Yes," he said. "I think so."

He hung up, went over to the fireplace again, and stirred the ashes with the poker. He could see a scrap of fender and a ragged little flap of road, but that was it. Fire was what it had needed all along, apparently. Wasn't that how you usually killed supernatural emissaries of evil? Of course it was. He'd used it a few times himself, most notably in *The Departing*, his haunted train station novel.

"Yes, indeed," he said. "Bum, baby, bum."

He thought about getting the drink he'd promised himself, then remembered the spilled bottle of vinegar (which by now would probably be soaking into the spilled oatmeal-what a thought). He decided he would simply go on upstairs instead. In a book-one by Richard Kinnell, for instance - sleep would be out of the question after the sort of thing which had just happened to him.

In real life, he thought he might sleep just fine.

He actually dozed off in the shower, leaning against the back wall with his hair full of shampoo and the water beating on his chest. He was at the yard sale again, and the TV standing on the paper ashtrays was broadcasting Judy Diment. Her head was back on, but Kinnell could see the medical examiner's primitive industrial stitch work; it circled her throat like a grisly necklace. "Now this New

England Newswire update," she said, and Kinnell, who had always been a vivid dreamer, could actually see the stitches on her neck stretch and relax as she spoke. "Bobby Hastings took all his paintings and burned them, including yours, Mr. Kinnell ... and it is yours, as I'm sure you know. All sales are final, you saw the sign. Why, you just ought to be glad I took your check."

Burned all his paintings, yes, of course he did, Kinnell thought in his watery dream. He couldn't stand what was happening to him, that's what the note said, and when you get to that point in the festivities, you don't pause to see if you want to except one special piece of work from the bonfire. It's just that you got something special into The Road Virus Heads North, didn't you, Bobby? And probably completely by accident. You were talented, I could see that right away, but talent has nothing to do with what's going on in that picture.

"Some things are just good at survival," Judy Diment said on the TV. "They keep coming back no matter how hard you try to get rid of them. They keep coming back like viruses."

Kinnell reached out and changed the channel, but apparently there was nothing on all the way around the dial except for The Judy Diment Show.

"You might say he opened a hole into the basement of the universe," she was saying now. "Bobby Hastings, I mean. And this is what drove out. Nice, isn't it?"

Kinnell's feet slid then, not enough to go out from under him completely, but enough to snap him to.

He opened his eyes, winced at the immediate sting of the soap (Prell had run down his face in thick white rivulets while he had been dozing), and cupped his hands under the shower-spray to splash it away. He did this once and was reaching out to do it again when he heard something. A ragged rumbling sound.

Don't be stupid, he told himself. All you hear is the shower. The rest is only imagination.

Except it wasn't.

Kinnell reached out and turned off the water.

The rumbling sound continued. Low and powerful. Coming from outside.

He got out of the shower and walked, dripping, across his bedroom on the second floor. There was still enough shampoo in his hair to make him look as if it had turned white while he was dozing-as if his dream of Judy Diment had turned it white.

My did I ever stop at that yard sale? he asked himself, but for this he had no answer. He supposed no one ever did.

The rumbling sound grew louder as he approached the window overlooking the driveway-the driveway that glimmered in the summer moonlight like something out of an Alfred Noyes poem.

As he brushed aside the curtain and looked out, he found himself thinking of his ex-wife, Sally, whom he had met at the World Fantasy Convention in 1978. Sally, who now published two magazines out of

her trailer home, one called Survivors, one called Visitors. Looking down at the driveway, these two tides came together in Kinnell's mind like a double image in a stereopticon.

He had a visitor who was definitely a survivor.

The Grand Am idled in front of the house, the white haze from its twin chromed tailpipes rising in the still night air. The Old English letters on the back deck were perfectly readable. The driver's side door stood open, and that wasn't all; the light spilling down the porch steps suggested that Kinnell's front door was also open.

Forgot to lock it, Kinnell thought, wiping soap off his forehead with a hand he could no longer feel. Forgot to reset the burglar alarm, too . not that it would have made much difference to this guy.

Well, he might have caused it to detour around Aunt Trudy, and that was something, but just now the thought brought him no comfort.

Survivors.

The soft rumble of the big engine, probably at least a 442 with a four-barrel carb, reground valves, fuel injection.

He turned slowly on legs that had lost all feeling, a naked man with a headful of soap, and saw the picture over his bed, just as he'd known he would. In it, the Grand Am stood in his driveway with the driver's door open and two plumes of exhaust rising from the chromed tailpipes. From this angle he could also see his own front door, standing open, and a long man-shaped shadow stretching down the hall.

Survivors.

Survivors and visitors.

Now he could hear feet ascending the stairs. It was a heavy tread, and he knew without having to see that the blond kid was wearing motorcycle boots. People with DEATH BEFORE DISHONOR tattooed on their arms always wore motorcycle boots, just as they always smoked unfiltered Camels. These things were like a national law.

And the knife. He would be carrying a long, sharp knife - more of a machete, actually, the sort of knife that could strike off a person's head in a single sweeping stroke.

And he would be grinning, showing those filed cannibal-teeth.

Kinnell knew these things. He was an imaginative guy, after all. He didn't need anyone to draw him a picture. "No," he whispered, suddenly conscious of his global nakedness, suddenly freezing all the way around his skin. "No, please, go away." But the footfalls kept coming, of course they did. You couldn't tell a guy like this to go away. It didn't work; it wasn't the way the story was supposed to end. Kinnell could hear him nearing the top of the stairs. Outside the Grand Am went on rumbling in the moonlight. The feet coming down the hall now, worn bootheels rapping on polished hardwood. A terrible paralysis had gripped Kinnell. He threw it off with an effort and bolted toward the bedroom door, wanting to lock it before the thing could get in here, but he slipped in a puddle of soapy water and this time he did go down, flat on his back on the oak planks, and what he saw as the door clicked open and the motorcycle boots crossed the room toward where he lay, naked and with his hair full of Prell, was the picture hanging on the wall over his bed, the picture of the Road Virus idling in front of his house with the driver's side door open. The driver's side bucket seat, he saw, was full of blood. I'm going outside, I think, Kinnell thought, and closed his eyes.

Will We Close the Book on Books?
BY STEPHEN KING

From: Visions of the 21st Century
Time Magazine, June 2000

Book lovers are the Luddites of the intellectual world. I can no more imagine their giving up the printed page than I can imagine a picture in the New York Post showing the Pope technoboogieing the night away in a disco. My adventure in cyberspace ("Riding the Bullet", available on any computer near you) has confirmed this idea dramatically. My mail and the comments on my website (www.stephenking.com) reflect two things: first, readers enjoyed the story; second, most didn't like getting it on a screen, where it appeared and then disappeared like Aladdin's genie.

Books have weight and texture; they make a pleasant presence in the hand. Nothing smells as good as a new book, especially if you get your nose right down in the binding, where you can still catch an acrid tang of the glue. The only thing close is the peppery smell of an old one. The odor of an old book is the odor of history, and for me, the look of a new one is still the look of the future.

I suspect that the growth of the Internet has actually been something of a boon when it comes to reading: people with more Beanie Babies than books on their shelves spend more time reading than they used to as they surf from site to site. But it's not a book, dammit, that perfect object that speaks without speaking,

needs no batteries and never crashes unless you throw it in the corner. So, yes, there'll be books. Speaking personally, you can have my gun, but you'll take my book when you pry my cold, dead fingers off the binding.

NOT FOR SALE

This PDF file was created for educational, scholarly, and Internet archival use ONLY.

With utmost respect & courtesy to the author, NO money or profit will ever be made from this text or it's distribution.

xxXsTmXxx
06/2000