

Stephen King - You Know They Got a Hell of a Band

You Know They Got a Hell of a Band  
by Stephen King

when Mary woke up, they were lost. She knew it, and Clark knew it, too, although he didn't want to admit it at first; he was wearing his I'm Pissed So Don't Fuck with Me look, where his mouth kept getting smaller and smaller until you thought it might disappear altogether. And "lost" wasn't how Clark would put it; Clark would say they had "taken a wrong turn somewhere," and it would just about kill him to go even that far.

They'd set off from Portland the day before. Clark worked for a computer company -- one of the giants -- and it had been his idea that they should see something of the Oregon, which lay outside the pleasant, but humdrum upper-middle-class suburb of Portland where they lived -- an area that was known to its inhabitants as Software City. "They say it's beautiful out there in the boonies," he had told her. "You want to go take a look? I've got a week, and the transfer rumors have already started. If we don't see some of the real Oregon, I think the last sixteen months are going to be nothing but a black hole in my memory."

She had agreed willingly enough (school had let out ten days before and she had no summer classes to teach), enjoying the pleasantly haphazard, catch-as-catch-can feel of the trip, forgetting that spur-of-the-moment vacations often ended up just like this, with the vacationers lost along some back road which blundered its way up the overgrown butt-crack of nowhere. It was an adventure, she supposed -- at least you could look at it that way if you wanted -- but she had turned thirty-two in January, and she thought thirty-two was maybe just a little too old for adventures. These days her idea of a really nice vacation was a motel with a clean pool, bathrobes on the beds, and a hair-dryer that worked in the bathroom.

Yesterday had been fine, though, the countryside so gorgeous that even Clark had several times been awed to an unaccustomed silence. They had spent the night at a nice country inn just west of Eugene, had made love not once but twice (something she was most definitely not too old to enjoy), and this morning had headed south, meaning to spend the night in Klamath Falls. They had begun the day on Oregon State Highway 58, and that was all right, but then, over lunch in the town of Oakridge, Clark had suggested they get off the main highway, which was pretty well clogged with RVs and logging trucks.

"Well, I don't know..." Mary spoke with the dubiousness of a woman who has heard many such proposals from her man, and endured the consequences of a few. "I'd hate to get lost out there, Clark. It looks pretty empty." She had tapped one neatly shaped nail on a spot of green marked Boulder Creek Wilderness Area. "That word is wilderness, as in no gas stations, no rest rooms, and no motels."

"Aw, come on," he said, pushing aside the remains of his chicken-fried steak. On the juke, Steve Earle and the Dukes were singing "Six Days on the Road," and outside the dirt-streaked windows, a bunch of bored-looking kids were doing turns and pop-outs on their skateboards. They looked as if they were just marking time out there, waiting to be old enough to blow this town for good, and Mary knew exactly how they felt. "Nothing to it, babe. We take 58 a few more miles east... then turn south on State Road 42... see it?"

"Uh huh." She also saw that, while Highway 58 was a fat red line, State Road 42 was only a squiggle of black thread. But she'd been full of meatloaf and mashed potatoes, and hadn't wanted to argue with Clark's pioneering instinct while she felt like a boa constrictor that has just swallowed a goat. What she'd wanted, in fact, was to tilt back the passenger seat of their lovely old Mercedes and take a snooze. "Then," he pushed on, "there's this road here. It's not numbered, so it's probably only a county road, but it goes right down to Toketee Falls. And from there it's only a hop and a jump over to U.S. 97. So -- what do you think?"

"That you'll probably get us lost," she'd said -- a wisecrack she rather regretted later. "But I guess we'll be all right as long as you can find a place wide enough to turn the Princess around in."

"Sold American!" he said, beaming, and pulled his chicken-fried steak back in front of him. He began to eat again, congealed gravy and all.

"Uck-a-doo," she said, holding one hand up in front of her face and wincing. "How can you?"

"It's good," Clark said in tones so muffled only a wife could have understood him. "Besides, when one is traveling, one should eat the native dishes."

Stephen King - You Know They Got a Hell of a Band

"It looks like someone sneezed a mouthful of snuff onto a very old hamburger," she said. "I repeat: uck-a-doo."

They left Oakridge in good spirits, and at first all had gone swimmingly. Trouble hadn't set in until they turned off S.R. 42 and onto the unmarked road, the one Clark had been so sure was going to breeze them right into Toketee Falls. It hadn't seemed like trouble at first; county road or not, the new way had been a lot better than Highway 42, which had been potholed and frost-heaved, even in summer. They had gone along famously, in fact, taking turns plugging tapes into the dashboard player. Clark was into people like Wilson Pickett, Al Green, and Pop Staples. Mary's taste lay in entirely different directions.

"What do you see in all these white boys?" he asked as she plugged in her current favorite -- Lou Reed's New York.

"Married one, didn't I?" she asked, and that made him laugh.

The first sign of trouble came fifteen minutes later, when they came to a fork in the road. Both forks looked equally promising.

"Holy crap," Clark said, pulling up and popping the glove compartment open so he could get at the map. He looked at it for a long time. "That isn't on the map."

"Oh boy, here we go," Mary said. She had been on the edge of a doze when Clark pulled up at the unexpected fork, and she was feeling a little irritated with him.

"Want my advice?"

"No," he said, sounding a little irritated himself, "but I suppose I'll get it. And I hate it when you roll your eyes at me that way, in case you didn't know."

"What way is that, Clark?"

"Like I was an old dog that just farted under the dinner table. Go on, tell me what you think. Lay it on me. It's your nickel."

"Go back while there's still time. That's my advice."

"Uh-huh. Now if you only had a sign that said REPENT."

"Is that supposed to be funny?"

"I don't know, Mare," he said in a glum tone of voice, and then just sat there, alternating looks through the bug-splattered windshield with a close examination of the map. They had been married for almost fifteen years, and Mary knew him well enough to believe he would almost certainly insist on pushing on... not in spite of the unexpected fork in the road, but because of it.

When Clark Willingham's balls are on the line, he doesn't back down, she thought, and then put a hand over her mouth to hide the grin that had surfaced there.

She was not quite quick enough. Clark glanced at her, one eyebrow raised, and she had a sudden discomfiting thought: if she could read him as easily as a child's storybook after all this time, then maybe he could do the same with her.

"Something?" he asked, and his voice was just a little too thin. It was at that moment -- even before she had fallen asleep, she now realized -- that his mouth had started to get smaller. "Want to share, sweetheart?"

She shook her head. "Just clearing my throat."

He nodded, pushed his glasses up on his ever-expanding forehead, and brought the map up until it was almost touching the tip of his nose. "Well," he said, "it's got to be the left-hand fork, because that's the one that goes south, toward Toketee Falls. The other one heads east. It's probably a ranch road, or something."

"A ranch road with a yellow line running down the middle of it?"

Clark's mouth grew a little smaller. "You'd be surprised how well-off some of these ranchers are," he said.

She thought of pointing out to him that the days of the scouts and pioneers were long gone, that his testicles were not actually on the line, and then decided she wanted a little doze-off in the afternoon sun a lot more than she wanted to squabble with her husband, especially after the lovely double feature last night. And, after all, they were bound to come out somewhere, weren't they?

With that comforting thought in her mind and Lou Reed in her ears, singing about the last great American whale, Mary Willingham dozed off. By the time the road Clark had picked began to deteriorate, she was sleeping shallowly and dreaming that they were back in the Oakridge cafe where they had eaten lunch. She was trying to put a quarter in the jukebox, but the coin-slot was plugged with something that looked like flesh. One of the kids who had been outside in the parking lot walked past her with his skateboard under his arm and his Trailblazers hat turned around on his head.

What's the matter with this thing? Mary asked him.

Stephen King - You Know They Got a Hell of a Band

The kid came over, took a quick look, and shrugged. Aw, that ain't nothing, he said. That's just some guy's body, broken for you and for many. This is no rinky-dink operation we got here; we're talking mass culture, sugar-muffin.

Then he reached up, gave the tip of her right breast a tweak -- not a very friendly one, either -- and walked away. When she looked back at the jukebox, she saw it had filled up with blood and shadowy floating things that looked suspiciously like human organs.

Maybe you better give that Lou Reed album a rest, she thought, and within the pool of blood behind the glass, a record floated down onto the turntable -- as if at her thought -- and Lou began to sing "Busload of Faith."

While Mary was having this steadily more unpleasant dream, the road continued to worsen, the patches spreading until it was really all patch. The Lou Reed album -- a long one -- came to an end, and began to recycle. Clark didn't notice. The pleasant look he had started the day with was entirely gone. His mouth had shrunk to the size of a rosebud. If Mary had been awake, she would have coaxed him into turning around miles back. He knew this, just as he knew how she would look at him if she woke up now and saw this narrow swatch of crumbling hot-top -- a road only if one thought in the most charitable of terms -- with piney woods pressing in close enough on both sides to keep the patched tar in constant shadow. They had not passed a car headed in the other direction since leaving S.R. 42.

He knew he should turn around -- Mary hated it when he got into shit like this, always forgetting the many times he had found his way unerringly along strange roads to their planned destinations (Clark Willingham was one of those millions of American men who are firmly convinced they have a compass in their heads) -- but he continued to push on, at first stubbornly convinced that they must come out in Toketee Falls, then just hoping. Besides, there really was no place to turn around. If he tried to do it, he would mire the Princess to her hubcaps in one of the marshy ditches which bordered this miserable excuse for a road... and God knew how long it would take to get a tow-truck in here, or how far he'd have to walk just to call one.

Then, at last, he did come to a place where he could have turned around -- another fork in the road -- and elected not to do so. The reason was simple: although the right fork was rutted gravel with grass growing up the middle, the leftward-tending branch was once again wide, well-paved, and divided by a bright stroke of yellow. According to the compass in Clark's head, this fork headed due south. He could all but smell Toketee Falls. Ten miles, maybe fifteen, twenty at the outside.

He did at least consider turning back, however. When he told Mary so later, he saw doubt in her eyes, but it was true. He decided to go on because Mary was beginning to stir, and he was quite sure that the bumpy, potholed stretch of road he'd just driven would wake her up if he turned back... and then she would look at him with those wide, beautiful blue eyes of hers. Just look. That would be enough.

Besides, why should he spend an hour and a half going back when Toketee Falls was just a spin and a promise away? Look at that road, he thought. You think a road like that is going to just peter out?

He put the Princess back in gear, started down the left fork, and sure enough, the road petered out. Over the first hill, the yellow line disappeared again. Over the second, the paving gave out and they were on a rutted dirt track with the dark woods pressing even closer on either side and the sun -- Clark was aware of this for the first time -- now sliding down the wrong side of the sky.

The pavement ended too suddenly for Clark to brake and baby the Princess onto the new surface, and there was a hard, spring-jarring thud that woke Mary. She sat up with a jerk and looked around with wide eyes. "Where -- " she began, and then, to make the afternoon utterly perfect and complete, the smoky voice of Lou Reed sped up until he was gabbling out the lyrics to "Good Evening, Mr. Waldheim" at the speed of Alvin and the Chipmunks.

"Oh!" she said, and punched the eject button. The tape belched out, followed by an ugly brown afterbirth -- coils of shiny tape.

The Princess hit a nearly bottomless pothole, lurched hard to the left, and then threw herself up and out like a clipper ship corkscrewing through a stormwave.

"Clark?"

"Don't say anything," he said through clenched teeth. "We're not lost. This will turn back to tar in just a minute or two -- probably over the next hill. We are not lost."

Stephen King - You Know They Got a Hell of a Band

Still upset by her dream (even though she could not quite remember what it had been), Mary held the ruined tape in her lap, mourning it. She supposed she could buy another one... but not out here. She looked at the brooding trees, which seemed to belly right up to the road like starving guests at a banquet and guessed it was a long way to the nearest Tower Records.

She looked at Clark, noted his flushed cheeks and nearly nonexistent mouth, and decided it would be politic to keep her own mouth shut, at least for the time being. If she was quiet and non-accusatory, he would be more likely to come to his senses before this miserable excuse for a road petered out in a gravel pit or quicksand bog.

"Besides, I can't very well turn around," he said, as if she had suggested that very thing.

"I can see that," she replied neutrally.

He glanced at her, perhaps wanting to fight, perhaps just feeling embarrassed and hoping to see she wasn't too pissed at him -- at least not yet -- and then looked back through the windshield. Now there were weeds and grass growing up the center of this road, too, and the way was so narrow that if they did happen to meet another car, one of them would have to back up. Nor was that the end of the fun. The ground beyond the wheel-ruts looked increasingly untrustworthy; the scrubby trees seemed to be jostling each other for position in the wet ground.

There were no power-poles on either side of the road. She almost pointed this out to Clark, and then decided it might be smarter to hold her tongue about that, too. He drove on in silence until they came around a down-slanting curve. He was hoping against hope that they would see a change for the better on the far side, but the overgrown track only went on as it had before. It was, if anything, a little fainter and a little narrower, and had begun to remind Clark of roads in the fantasy epics he liked to read -- stories by people like Terry Brooks, Stephen Donaldson, and, of course, J. R. R. Tolkien, the spiritual father of them all. In these tales, the characters (who usually had hairy feet and pointed ears) took these neglected roads in spite of their own gloomy intuitions, and usually ended up battling trolls or boggarts or mace-wielding skeletons.

"Clark -- "

"I know," he said, and hammered the wheel suddenly with his left hand -- a short, frustrated stroke that succeeded only in honking the horn. "I know." He stopped the Mercedes, which now straddled the entire road (road? hell, lane was now too grand a word for it), slammed the transmission into park, and got out. Mary got out on the other side, more slowly.

The balsam smell of the trees was heavenly, and she thought there was something beautiful about the silence, unbroken as it was by the sound of any motor (even the far-off drone of an airplane) or human voice... but there was something spooky about it, as well. Even the sounds she could hear -- the tu-whit! of a bird in the shadowy firs, the sigh of the wind, the rough rumble of the Princess's diesel engine -- served to emphasize the wall of quiet encircling them.

She looked across the Princess's gray roof at Clark, and it was not reproach or anger in her gaze but appeal: Get us out of this, all right? Please?

"Sorry, hon," he said, and the worry she saw in his face did nothing to soothe her. "Really."

She tried to speak, but at first no sound came out of her dry throat. She cleared it and tried again. "What do you think about backing up, Clark?"

He considered it for several moments -- the tu-whit! bird had time to call again and be answered from somewhere deeper in the forest -- before shaking his head. "Only as a last resort. It's at least two miles back to the last fork in the road -- "

"You mean there was another one?"

He winced a little, dropped his eyes, and nodded. "Backing up... well, you see how narrow the road is, and how mucky the ditches are. If we went off..." He shook his head and sighed.

"So we go on."

"I think so. If the road goes entirely to hell, of course, I'll have to try it."

"But by then we'll be in even deeper, won't we?" So far she was managing, and quite well, she thought, to keep a tone of accusation from creeping into her voice, but it was getting harder and harder to do. She was pissed at him, quite severely pissed, and pissed at herself, as well -- for letting him get them into this in the first place, and then for coddling him the way she was now.

Stephen King - You Know They Got a Hell of a Band

"Yes, but I like the odds on finding a wide place up ahead better than I like the odds on reversing for a couple of miles along this piece of crap. If it turns out we do have to back out, I'll take it in stages -- back up for five minutes, rest for ten, back up for five more." He smiled lamely. "It'll be an adventure."

"Oh yes, it'll be that, all right," Mary said, thinking again that her definition for this sort of thing was not adventure but pain in the ass. "Are you sure you aren't pressing on because you believe in your heart that we're going to find Toketee Falls right over the next hill?"

For a moment his mouth seemed to disappear entirely and she braced for an explosion of righteous male wrath. Then his shoulders sagged and he only shook his head. In that moment she saw what he was going to look like thirty years from now, and that frightened her a lot more than getting caught on a back road in the middle of nowhere.

"No," he said. "I guess I've given up on Toketee Falls. One of the great rules of travel in America is that roads without electrical lines running along at least one side of them don't go anywhere."

So he had noticed, too.

"Come on," he said, getting back in. "I'm going to try like hell to get us out of this. And next time I'll listen to you."

Yeah, yeah, Mary thought with a mixture of amusement and tired resentment. I've heard that one before. But before he could pull the transmission stick on the console down from park to drive, she put her hand over his. "I know you will," she said, turning what he'd said into a promise. "Now get us out of this mess."

"Count on it," Clark said.

"And be careful."

"You can count on that, too." He gave her a small smile that made her feel a little better, then engaged the Princess's transmission. The big gray Mercedes, looking very out of place in these deep woods, began to creep down the shadowy track again. They drove another mile by the odometer and nothing changed but the width of the cart-track they were on: it grew narrower still. Mary thought the scruffy firs now looked not like hungry guests at a banquet but morbidly curious spectators at the site of a nasty accident. If the track got any narrower, they would begin to hear the squall of branches along the sides of the car. The ground under the trees, meanwhile, had gone from mucky to swampy; Mary could see patches of standing water, dusty with pollen and fallen pine needles, in some of the dips. Her heart was beating much too fast, and twice she had caught herself gnawing at her nails, a habit she thought she had given up for good the year before she married Clark. She had begun to realize that if they got stuck now, they would almost certainly spend the night camped out in the Princess. And there were animals in these woods -- she had heard them crashing around out there. Some of them sounded big enough to be bears. The thought of meeting a bear while they stood looking at their hopelessly mired Mercedes made her swallow something that felt and tasted like a large lint ball.

"Clark, I think we'd better give it up and try backing. It's already past three o'clock and --"

"Look," he said, pointing ahead. "Is it a sign?"

She squinted. Ahead, the lane rose toward the crest of a deeply wooded hill. There was a bright blue oblong standing near the top. "Yes," she said. "It's a sign, all right."

"Great! Can you read it?"

"Uh-huh -- it says IF YOU CAME THIS FAR, YOU REALLY FUCKED up."

He shot her a complex look of amusement and irritation. "Very funny, Mare."

"Thank you, Clark. I try."

"We'll go to the top of the hill, read the sign, and see what's over the crest. If we don't see anything hopeful, we'll try backing. Agreed?"

"Agreed."

He patted her leg, then drove cautiously on. The Mercedes was moving so slowly now that they could hear the soft sound of the weeds on the crown of the road whickering against the undercarriage. Mary really could make out the words on the sign now, but at first she rejected them, thinking she had to be mistaken -- it was just too crazy. But they drew closer still, and the words didn't change.

"Does it say what I think it does?" Clark asked her.

Mary gave a short, bewildered laugh. "Sure... but it must be someone's idea of a

Stephen King - You Know They Got a Hell of a Band

joke. Don't you think?"

"I've given up thinking -- it keeps getting me into trouble. But I see something that isn't a joke. Look, Mary!"

Twenty or thirty feet beyond the sign -- just before the crest of the hill -- the road widened dramatically and was once more both paved and lined. Mary felt worry roll off her heart like a boulder. Clark was grinning. "Isn't that beautiful?" She nodded happily, grinning herself. They reached the sign and Clark stopped. They read it again:

Welcome to Rock and Roll Heaven, Ore.

WE COOK WITH GAS! SO WILL YOU!

Jaycees • Chamber of Commerce • Lions • Elks

"It's got to be a joke," she repeated.

"Maybe not."

"A town called Rock and Roll Heaven? Puh-leeze, Clark."

"Why not? There's Truth or Consequences, New Mexico, Dry Shark, Nevada, and a town in Pennsylvania called Intercourse. So why not a Rock and Roll Heaven in Oregon?"

She laughed giddily. The sense of relief was really incredible. "You made that up."

"What?"

"Intercourse, Pennsylvania."

"I didn't. Ralph Ginzberg once tried to send a magazine called Eros from there. For the postmark. The Feds wouldn't let him. Swear. And who knows? Maybe the town was founded by a bunch of communal back-to-the-land hippies in the sixties. They went establishment -- Lions, Elks, Jaycees -- but the original name stayed." He was quite taken with the idea; he found it both funny and oddly sweet. "Besides, I don't think it matters. What matters is we found some honest-to-God pavement again, honey. The stuff you drive on."

She nodded. "So drive on it... but be careful."

"You bet." The Princess nosed up onto the pavement, which was not asphalt but a smooth composition surface without a patch or expansion-joint to be seen. "Careful's my middle n --"

Then they reached the crest of the hill and the last word died in his mouth. He stamped on the brake-pedal so hard that their seatbelts locked, then jammed the transmission lever back into park.

"Holy wow!" Clark said.

They sat in the idling Mercedes, open-mouthed, looking down at the town below.

It was a perfect jewel of a town nestled in a small, shallow valley like a dimple. Its resemblance to the paintings of Norman Rockwell and the small-town illustrations of Currier & Ives was, to Mary, at least, inescapable. She tried to tell herself it was just the geography; the way the road wound down into the valley, the way the town was surrounded by deep green-black forest -- leagues of old, thick firs growing in unbroken profusion beyond the outlying fields -- but it was more than the geography, and she supposed Clark knew it as well as she did. There was something too sweetly balanced about the church steeples, for instance -- one on the north end of the town common and the other on the south end. The barn-red building off to the east had to be the school-house, and the big white one off to the west, the one with the bell-tower on top and the satellite dish to one side, had to be the town hall. The homes all looked impossibly neat and cozy, the sorts of domiciles you saw in the house-beautiful ads of pre-world war II magazines like The Saturday Evening Post and American Mercury.

There should be smoke curling from a chimney or two, Mary thought, and after a little examination, she saw that there was. She suddenly found herself remembering a story from Ray Bradbury's The Martian Chronicles. "Mars Is Heaven," it had been called, and in it the Martians had cleverly disguised the slaughterhouse so it had looked like everybody's fondest hometown dream.

"Turn around," she said abruptly. "It's wide enough here, if you're careful."

He turned slowly to look at her, and she didn't care much for the expression on his face. He was eyeing her as if he thought she had gone crazy. "Honey, what are you --"

"I don't like it, that's all." She could feel her face growing warm, but she pushed on in spite of the heat. "It makes me think of a scary story I read when I was a teenager." She paused. "It also makes me think of the candy-house in 'Hansel and Gretel.'"

Stephen King - You Know They Got a Hell of a Band

He went on giving her that patented I Just Don't Believe It stare of his, and she realized he meant to go down there -- it was just another part of the same wretched testosterone blast that gotten them off the main road in the first place. He wanted to explore, by Christ. And he wanted a souvenir, of course. A tee-shirt bought in the local drugstore would do, one that said something cute like

I'VE BEEN TO ROCK AND ROLL HEAVEN

AND YOU KNOW THEY GOT A HELL OF A BAND.

"Honey -- " It was the soft, tender voice he used when he intended to jolly her into something or die trying.

"Oh, stop. If you want to do something nice for me, turn us around and drive us back to Highway 58. If you do that, you can have some more sugar tonight. Another double helping, even, if you're up to it."

He fetched a deep sigh, hands on the steering wheel, eyes straight ahead. At last, not looking at her, he said: "Look across the valley, Mary. Do you see the road going up the hill on the far side?"

"Yes, I do."

"Do you see how wide it is? How smooth? How nicely paved?"

"Clark, that is hardly -- "

"Look! I believe I even see an honest-to-God bus on it." He pointed at a yellow bug trundling along the road toward town, its metal hide glittering hotly in the afternoon sunlight. "That's one more vehicle than we've seen on this side of the world."

"I still -- "

He grabbed the map which had been lying on the console, and when he turned to her with it, Mary realized with dismay that the jolly, coaxing voice had temporarily concealed the fact that he was seriously pissed at her. "Listen, Mare, and pay attention, because there may be questions later. Maybe I can turn around here and maybe I can't -- it's wider, but I'm not as sure as you are that it's wide enough. And the ground still looks pretty squelchy to me."

"Clark, please don't yell at me. I'm getting a headache."

He made an effort and moderated his voice. "If we do get turned around, it's twelve miles back to Highway 58, over the same shitty road we just traveled -- "

"Twelve miles isn't so much." She tried to sound firm, if only to herself, but she could feel herself weakening. She hated herself for it, but that didn't change it. She had a horrid suspicion that this was how men almost always got their way: not by being right but by being relentless. They argued like they played football, and if you hung in there, you almost always finished the discussion with cleat-marks all over your psyche.

"No, twelve miles isn't so much," he was saying in his most sweetly reasonable I-am-trying-not-to-strangle-you-Mary voice, "but what about the fifty or so we'll have to tack on going around this patch of woods once we get back on 58?"

"You make it sound as if we had a train to catch, Clark!"

"It just pisses me off, that's all. You take one look down at a nice little town with a cute little name and say it reminds you of Friday the 13th, Part XX or some damn thing and you want to go back. And that road over there" -- he pointed across the valley -- "heads due south. It's probably less than half an hour from here to Toketee Falls by that road."

"That's about what you said back in Oakridge -- before we started off on the Magical Mystery Tour segment of our trip."

He looked at her a moment longer, his mouth tucked in on itself like a cramp, then grabbed the transmission lever. "Fuck it," he snarled. "We'll go back. But if we meet one car on the way, Mary, just one, we'll end up backing into Rock and Roll Heaven. So -- "

She put her hand over his before he could disengage the transmission for the second time that day.

"Go on," she said. "You're probably right and I'm probably being silly." Rolling over like this has got to be bred in the goddam bone, she thought. Either that, or I'm just too tired to fight.

She took her hand away, but he paused a moment longer, looking at her. "Only if you're sure," he said.

And that was really the most ludicrous thing of all, wasn't it? Winning wasn't enough for a man like Clark; the vote also had to be unanimous. She had voiced that unanimity many times when she didn't feel very unanimous in her heart, but she

Stephen King - You Know They Got a Hell of a Band

discovered that she just wasn't capable of it this time.

"But I'm not sure," she said. "If you'd been listening to me instead of just putting up with me, you'd know that. Probably you're right and probably I'm just being silly -- your take on it makes more sense than mine does, I admit that much, at least, and I'm willing to soldier along -- but that doesn't change the way I feel. So you'll just have to excuse me if I decline to put on my little cheerleader's skirt and lead the Go Clark Go cheer this time."

"Jesus!" he said. His face was wearing an uncertain expression that made him look uncharacteristically -- and somehow hate fully -- boyish. "You're in some mood, aren't you, honey-bunch?"

"I guess I am," she said, hoping he couldn't see how much that particular term of endearment grated on her. She was thirty-two, after all, and he was almost forty-one. She felt a little too old to be anyone's honeybunch and thought Clark was a little too old to need one.

Then the troubled look on his face cleared and the Clark she liked -- the one she really believed she could spend the second half of her life with -- was back. "You'd look cute in a cheerleader's skirt, though," he said, and appeared to measure the length of her thigh. "You would."

"You're a fool, Clark," she said, and then found herself smiling at him almost in spite of herself.

"That's correct, ma'am," he said, and put the Princess in gear.

The town had no outskirts, unless the few fields, which surrounded it, counted. At one moment they were driving down a gloomy, tree-shaded lane; at the next there were broad tan fields on either side of the car; at the next they were passing neat little houses.

The town was quiet but far from deserted. A few cars moved lazily back and forth on the four or five intersecting streets that made up downtown, and a handful of pedestrians strolled the sidewalks. Clark lifted a hand in salute to a bare-chested, potbellied man who was simultaneously watering his lawn and drinking a can of Olympia. The potbellied man, whose dirty hair straggled to his shoulders, watched them go by but did not raise his own hand in return.

Main Street had that same Norman Rockwell ambience, and here it was so strong that it was almost a feeling of *deja vu*. Robust, mature oaks shaded the walks, and that was somehow just right. You didn't have to see the town's only watering hole to know that it would be called The Dew Drop Inn and that there would be a lighted clock displaying the Budweiser Clydesdales over the bar. The parking spaces were the slanting type; there was a red-white-and-blue barber pole turning outside The Cutting Edge; a mortar and pestle hung over the door of the local pharmacy, which was called The Tuneful Druggist. The pet shop (with a sign in the window saying WE HAVE SIAMESE IF YOU PLEASE) was called White Rabbit. Everything was so right you could just shit. Most right of all was the town common at the center of town.

There was a sign hung on a guy-wire above the bandshell, and Mary could read it easily, although they were a hundred yards away. CONCERT TONIGHT, it said.

She suddenly realized that she knew this town -- had seen it many times on late-night TV. Never mind Ray Bradbury's hellish vision of Mars or the candy-house in "Hansel and Gretel"; what this place resembled more than either was The Peculiar Little Town people kept stumbling into in various episodes of The Twilight Zone. She leaned toward her husband and said in a low, ominous voice: "We're traveling not through a dimension of sight and sound, Clark, but of mind. Look!" She pointed at nothing in particular, but a woman standing outside the town's Western Auto saw the gesture and gave her a narrow, mistrustful glance.

"Look at what?" he asked. He sounded irritated again, and she guessed that this time it was because he knew exactly what she was talking about.

"There's a signpost up ahead! We're entering -- "

"Oh, cut it out, Mare," he said, and abruptly swung into an empty parking slot halfway down Main Street.

"Clark!" she nearly screamed. "What are you doing?"

He pointed through the windshield at an establishment with the somehow not-cute name of The Rock-a-Boogie Restaurant.

"I'm thirsty. I'm going in there and getting a great big Pepsi to go. You don't have to come. You can sit right here. Lock all the doors, if you want." So saying, he opened his own door. Before he could swing his legs out, she grabbed his shoulder.

"Clark, please don't."



Stephen King - You Know They Got a Hell of a Band

He looked back at her, and she saw at once that she should have canned the crack about The Twilight Zone -- not because it was wrong but because it was right. It was that macho thing again. He wasn't stopping because he was thirsty, not really; he was stopping because this freaky little burg had scared him, too. Maybe a little, maybe a lot, she didn't know that, but she did know that he had no intention of going on until he had convinced himself he wasn't afraid, not one little bit.

"I won't be a minute. Do you want a ginger ale, or something?"

She pushed the button that unlocked her seatbelt. "What I want is not to be left alone."

He gave her an indulgent, I-knew-you'd-come look that made her feel like tearing out a couple of swatches of his hair.

"And what I also want is to kick your ass for getting us into this situation in the first place," she finished, and was pleased to see the indulgent expression turn to one of wounded surprise. She opened her own door. "Come on. Piddle on the nearest hydrant, Clark, and then we'll get out of here."

"Piddle... ? Mary, what in the hell are you talking about?"

"Sodas!" she nearly screamed, all the while thinking that it was really amazing how fast a good trip with a good man could turn bad. She glanced across the street and saw a couple of longhaired young guys standing there. They were also drinking Oily and checking out the strangers in town. One was wearing a battered top-hat. The plastic daisy stuck in the band nodded back and forth in the breeze. His companion's arms crawled with faded blue tattoos. To Mary they looked like the sort of fellows who dropped out of high school their third time through the tenth grade in order to spend more time meditating on the joys of drive-train linkages and date rape. Oddly enough, they also looked somehow familiar to her.

They saw her looking. Top-Hat solemnly raised his hand and twiddled his fingers at her. Mary looked away hurriedly and turned to Clark. "Let's get our cold drinks and get the hell out of here."

"Sure," he said. "And you didn't need to shout at me, Mary. I mean, I was right beside you, and -- "

"Clark, do you see those two guys across the street?"

"What two guys?"

She looked back in time to see Top-Hat and Tattoos slipping through the barber-shop doorway. Tattoos glanced back over his shoulder, and although Mary wasn't sure, she thought he tipped her a wink.

"They're just going into the barber shop. See them?"

Clark looked, but only saw a closing door with the sun reflecting eye-watering shards of light from the glass. "What about them?"

"They looked familiar to me."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. But I find it somehow hard to believe that any of the people I know moved to Rock and Roll Heaven, Oregon, to take up rewarding, high-paying jobs as street-corner hoodlums."

Clark laughed and took her elbow. "Come on," he said, and led her into The Rock-a-Boogie Restaurant.

\* \* \*

The Rock-a-Boogie went a fair distance toward allaying Mary's fears. She had expected a greasy spoon, not much different from the dim (and rather dirty) pit-stop in Oakridge where they'd eaten lunch. They entered a sun-filled, agreeable little diner with a funky fifties feel instead: blue-tiled walls; chrome-chased pie case; tidy yellow-oak floor; wooden paddle fans turning lazily overhead. The face of the wall-clock was circled with thin tubes of red and blue neon. Two waitresses in aqua-colored rayon uniforms that looked to Mary like costumes left over from American Graffiti were standing by the stainless-steel pass-through between the restaurant and the kitchen. One was young -- no more than twenty and probably not that -- and pretty in a washed-out way. The other, a short woman with a lot of frizzy red hair, had a brassy look that struck Mary as both harsh and desperate... and there was something else about her, as well: for the second time in as many minutes, Mary had the strong sensation that she knew someone in this town.

A bell over the door tinkled as she and Clark entered. The waitresses glanced over.

"Hi, there," the younger one said. "Be right with you."

"Naw; might take awhile," the redhead disagreed. "We're awful busy. See?" She swept an arm at the room, deserted as only a small-town restaurant can be at the afternoon

Stephen King - You Know They Got a Hell of a Band

balances perfectly between lunch and dinner, and laughed cheerily at her own witticism. Like her voice, the laugh had a husky, splintered quality that Mary associated with Scotch and cigarettes. But it's a voice I know, she thought. I'd swear it is.

She turned to Clark and saw he was staring at the waitresses, who had resumed their conversation, as if hypnotized. She had to tug his sleeve to get his attention, then tug it again when he headed for the tables grouped on the left side of the room. She wanted them to sit at the counter. She wanted to get their damned sodas in take-out cups and then blow this joint.

"What is it?" she whispered.

"Nothing," he said. "I guess."

"You looked like you swallowed your tongue, or something."

"For a second or two it felt like I had," he said, and before she could ask him to explain, he had diverted to look at the jukebox.

Mary sat down at the counter.

"Be right with you, ma'am," the younger waitress repeated, and then bent closer to hear something else her whiskey-voiced colleague was saying. Looking at her face, Mary guessed the younger woman wasn't really very interested in what the older one had to say.

"Mary, this is a great juke!" Clark said, sounding delighted. "It's all fifties stuff! The Moonglows... The Five Satins... Shep and the Limelites... La Vern Baker! Jeez, La Vern Baker singing 'Tweedlee Dee'! I haven't heard that one since I was a kid!"

"Well, save your money. We're just getting take-out drinks, remember?"

"Yeah, yeah."

He gave the Rock-Ola one last look, blew out an irritated breath, and then joined her at the counter. Mary pulled a menu out of the bracket by the salt and pepper shakers, mostly so she wouldn't have to look at the frown-line between his eyes and the way his lower lip stuck out. Look, he was saying without saying a word (this, she had discovered, was one of the more questionable long-term effects of being married). I won our way through the wilderness while you slept, killed the buffalo, fought the Injuns, brought you safe and sound to this nifty little oasis in the wilderness, and what thanks do I get? You won't even let me play "Tweedlee Dee" on the jukebox! Never mind, she thought. We'll be gone soon, so never mind.

Good advice. She followed it by turning her full attention to the menu. It harmonized with the rayon uniforms, the neon clock, the juke, and the general decor (which, while admirably subdued, could still only be described as Mid-Century Rebob). The hot dog wasn't a hot dog; it was a Hound Dog. The cheeseburger was a Chubby Checker and the double cheeseburger was a Big Bopper. The specialty of the house was a loaded pizza; the menu promised "Everything on It But the (Sam) Cooke!"

"Cute," she said. "Poppa-ooo-mow-mow, and all that."

"What?" Clark asked, and she shook her head.

The young waitress came over, taking her order pad out of her apron pocket. She gave them a smile, but Mary thought it was perfunctory; the woman looked both tired and unwell. There was a cold sore perched above her upper lip, and her slightly bloodshot eyes moved restlessly about the room. They touched on everything, it seemed, but her customers.

"Help you folks?"

Clark moved to take the menu from Mary's hand. She held it away from him and said, "A large Pepsi and a large ginger ale. To go, please."

"Y'all oughtta try the cherry pie!" the redhead called over in her hoarse voice. The younger woman flinched at the sound of it. "Rick just made it! You gonna think you died and went to heaven!" She grinned at them and placed her hands on her hips.

"Well, y'all are in Heaven, but you know what I mean."

"Thank you," Mary said, "but we're really in a hurry, and --"

"Sure, why not?" Clark said in a musing, distant voice. "Two pieces of cherry pie." Mary kicked his ankle -- hard -- but Clark didn't seem to notice. He was staring at the redhead again, and now his mouth was hung on a spring. The redhead was clearly aware of his gaze, but she didn't seem to mind. She reached up with one hand and lazily fluffed her improbable hair.

"Two sodas to go, two pieces of pie for here," the young waitress said. She gave them another nervous smile while her restless eyes examined Mary's wedding ring, the sugar shaker, one of the overhead fans. "You want that pie a la mode?" She bent and

Stephen King - You Know They Got a Hell of a Band

put two napkins and two forks on the counter.

"Y -- " Clark began, and Mary overrode him firmly and quickly. "No."

The chrome pie case was behind the far end of the counter. As soon as the waitress walked away in that direction, Mary leaned over and hissed: "why are you doing this to me, Clark? You know I want to get out of here!"

"That waitress. The redhead. Is she -- "

"And stop staring at her!" Mary whispered fiercely. "You look like a kid trying to peek up some girl's skirt in study hall!"

He pulled his eyes away... but with an effort. "Is she the spit-image of Janis Joplin, or am I crazy?"

Startled, Mary cast another glance at the redhead. She had turned away slightly to speak to the short-order cook through the pass-through, but Mary could still see at least two-thirds of her face, and that was enough. She felt an almost audible click in her head as she superimposed the face of the redhead over the face on record albums she still owned -- vinyl albums pressed in a year when nobody owned Sony walkmen and the concept of the compact disc would have seemed like science fiction, record albums now packed away in cardboard boxes from the neighborhood liquor mart and stowed in some dusty attic alcove; record albums with names like Big Brother and the Holding Company, Cheap Thrills, and Pearl. And the face of Janis Joplin -- that sweet, homely face, which had grown old and harsh and wounded far too soon. Clark was right; this woman's face was the spitting image of the face on those old albums. Except it was more than the face, and Mary felt fear swarm into her chest, making her heart feel suddenly light and stuttery and dangerous.

It was the voice.

In the ear of her memory she heard Janis's chilling, spiraling howl at the beginning of "Piece of My Heart." She laid that bluesy, boozy shout over the redhead's Scotch-and-Marlboros voice, just as she had laid one face over the other, and knew that if the waitress began to sing that song, her voice would be identical to the voice of the dead girl from Texas.

Because she is the dead girl from Texas. Congratulations, Mary -- you had to wait until you were thirty-two, but you've finally made the grade; you've finally seen your first ghost.

She tried to dispute the idea, tried to suggest to herself that a combination of factors, not the least of them being the stress of getting lost, had caused her to make too much of a chance resemblance, but these rational thoughts had no chance against the dead certainty in her guts: she was seeing a ghost.

Life within her body underwent a strange and sudden sea-change. Her heart sped up from a beat to a sprint; it felt like a pumped-up runner bursting out of the blocks in an Olympic heat. Adrenaline dumped, simultaneously tightening her stomach and heating her diaphragm like a swallow of brandy. She could feel sweat in her armpits and moisture at her temples. Most amazing of all was the way color seemed to pour into the world, making everything -- the neon around the clock-face, the stainless-steel pass-through to the kitchen, the sprays of revolving color behind the juke's facade -- seem simultaneously unreal and too real. She could hear the fans paddling the air overhead, a low, rhythmic sound like a hand stroking silk, and smell the aroma of old fried meat rising from the unseen grill in the next room. And at the same time, she suddenly felt herself on the edge of losing her balance on the stool and swooning to the floor in a dead faint.

Get hold of yourself, woman! she told herself frantically. You're having a panic attack, that's all -- no ghosts, no goblins, no demons, just a good old-fashioned whole-body panic attack, you've had them before, at the start of big exams in college, the first day of teaching at school, and that time before you had to speak to the P.T.A. You know what it is and you can deal with it. No one's going to do any fainting around here, so just get hold of yourself, do you hear me?

She crossed her toes inside her low-topped sneakers and squeezed them as hard as she could, concentrating on the sensation, using it in an effort to draw herself back to reality and away from that too-bright place she knew was the threshold of a faint. "Honey?" Clark's voice, from far away. "You all right?" "Yes, fine." Her voice was also coming from far away... but she knew it was closer than it would have been if she'd tried to speak even fifteen seconds ago. Still pressing her crossed toes tightly together, she picked up the napkin the waitress had left, wanting to feel its texture -- it was another connection to the world and another way to break the panicky, irrational (it was irrational, wasn't it? surely it was) feeling which had

Stephen King - You Know They Got a Hell of a Band

gripped her so strongly. She raised it toward her face, meaning to wipe her brow with it, and saw there was something written on the underside in ghostly pencil strokes that had torn the fragile paper into little puffs. Mary read this message, printed in jagged capital letters:

GET OUT WHILE YOU STILL CAN.

"Mare? what is it?"

The waitress with the coldsore and the restless, scared eyes was coming back with their pie. Mary dropped the napkin into her lap. "Nothing," she said calmly. As the waitress set the plates in front of them, Mary forced herself to catch the girl's eyes with her own. "Thank you," she said.

"Don't mention it," the girl mumbled, looking directly at Mary for only a moment before her eyes began to skate aimlessly around the room again.

"Changed your mind about the pie, I see," her husband was saying in his most infuriatingly indulgent Clark Knows Best voice. Women! this tone said. Gosh, aren't they something? Sometimes just leading them to the waterhole isn't enough -- you gotta hold their heads down to get em started. All part of the job. It isn't easy being a man, but I do my goldurn best.

"Well, it looks awfully good," she said, marveling at the even tone of her voice. She smiled at him brightly, aware that the redhead who looked like Janis Joplin was keeping an eye on them.

"I can't get over how much she looks like -- " Clark began, and this time Mary kicked his ankle as hard as she could, no fooling around. He drew in a hurt, hissing breath, eyes popping wide, but before he could say anything, she shoved the napkin with its penciled message into his hand.

He bent his head. Looked at it. And Mary found herself praying -- really, really praying -- for the first time in perhaps twenty years. Please, God, make him see it's not a joke. Make him see it's not a joke because that woman doesn't just look like Janis Joplin, that woman is Janis Joplin, and I've got a horrible feeling about this town, a really horrible feeling.

He raised his head and her heart sank. There was confusion on his face, and exasperation, but nothing else. He opened his mouth to speak... and it went right on opening until it looked as if someone had removed the pins from the place where his jaws connected.

Mary turned in the direction of his gaze. The short-order cook, dressed in immaculate whites and wearing a little paper cap cocked over one eye, had come out of the kitchen and was leaning against the tiled wall with his arms folded across his chest. He was talking to the redhead while the younger waitress stood by, watching them with a combination of terror and weariness.

If she doesn't get out of here soon, it'll just be weariness, Mary thought. Or maybe apathy.

The cook was almost impossibly handsome -- so handsome that Mary found herself unable to accurately assess his age. Between thirty-five and forty-five, probably, but that was the best she could do. Like the redhead, he looked familiar. He glanced up at them, disclosing a pair of wide-set blue eyes fringed with gorgeous thick lashes, and smiled briefly at them before returning his attention to the redhead. He said something that made her caw raucous laughter.

"My God, that's Rick Nelson," Clark whispered. "It can't be, it's impossible, he died in a plane crash six or seven years ago, but it is."

Mary opened her mouth to say he must be mistaken, ready to brand such an idea ludicrous even though she herself now found it impossible to believe that the redheaded waitress was anyone but the years-dead blues shouter Janis Joplin. Before she could say anything, that click -- the one which turned vague resemblance into positive identification -- came again. Clark had been able to put the name to the face first because Clark was nine years older, Clark had been listening to the radio and watching American Bandstand back when Rick Nelson had been Ricky Nelson and songs like "Be-Bop Baby" and "Lonesome Town" were happening hits, not just dusty artifacts restricted to the golden oldie stations which catered to the now-graying baby boomers. Clark saw it first, but now that he had pointed it out to her, she could not unsee it.

what had the redheaded waitress said? Y'all oughtta try the cherry pie! Rick just made it!

There, not twenty feet away, the fatal plane crash victim was telling a joke -- probably a dirty one, from the looks on their faces -- to the fatal drug o.d.

Stephen King - You Know They Got a Hell of a Band

The redhead threw back her head and bellowed her rusty laugh at the ceiling again. The cook smiled, the dimples at the corners of his full lips deepening prettily. And the younger waitress, the one with the cold sore and the haunted eyes, glanced over at Clark and Mary, as if to ask Are you watching this? Are you seeing this? Clark was still staring at the cook and the waitress with that alarming expression of dazed knowledge, his face so long and drawn that it looked like something glimpsed in a funhouse mirror.

They'll see that, if they haven't already, Mary thought, and we'll lose any chance we still have of getting out of this nightmare. I think you better take charge of this situation, kiddo, and quick. The question is, what are you going to do?

She reached for his hand, meaning to grab it and squeeze it, then decided that wouldn't do enough to alter his slack-jawed expression. She reached further and squeezed his balls instead... as hard as she dared. Clark jerked as if someone had zapped him with a laser and swung toward her so fast he almost fell off his stool.

"I left my wallet in the car," she said. Her voice sounded -brittle and too loud in her own ears. "Would you get it for me... ? Clark?"

She looked at him, lips smiling, eyes locked on his with complete concentration. She had read, probably in some shit-intensive woman's magazine while waiting to get her hair done, that when you lived with the same man for ten or twenty years, you forged a low-grade telepathic link with your partner. This link, the article went on to suggest, came in mighty handy when your hubby was bringing the boss home to dinner without phoning ahead or when you wanted him to bring a bottle of Amaretto from the liquor store and a carton of whipping cream from the supermarket. Now she tried -- tried with all her might -- to send a far more important message.

Go, Clark. Please go. I'll give you ten seconds, and then come on the run. And if you're not in the driver's seat with the key in the ignition, I have a feeling we could be seriously fucked here.

And at the same time, a deeper Mary was saying timidly: This is all a dream, isn't it? I mean... it is, isn't it?

Clark was looking at her carefully, his eyes watering from the tweak she had given him... but at least he wasn't complaining about it. His eyes shifted to the redhead and the short-order cook for a moment, saw they were still deep in their own conversation (now she appeared to be the one who was telling a joke), and then shifted back to her.

"It might have slid under the seat," she said in her too-loud, too-brittle voice before he could reply. "It's the red one."

After another moment of silence -- one that seemed to last forever -- Clark nodded slightly. "Okay," he said, and she could have blessed him for his nicely normal tone, "but no fair stealing my pie while I'm gone."

"Just get back before I finish mine and you'll be okay," she said, and tucked a forkful of cherry pie into her mouth. It had absolutely no taste at all to her, but she smiled. God, yes. Smiled like the Miss New York Apple Queen she had once been. Clark started to get off his stool, and then, from somewhere outside, came a series of amplified guitar chops -- not chords but only open strums. Clark jerked, and Mary shot out one hand to clutch his arm. Her heart, which had been slowing down, broke into that nasty, scary sprint again.

The redhead and the cook -- even the younger waitress, who, thankfully, didn't look like anyone famous -- glanced casually toward the plate-glass windows of the Rock-a-Boogie.

"Don't let it get you, hon," the redhead said. "They're just startin to tune up for the concert tonight."

"That's right," the short-order cook said. He regarded Mary with his drop-dead blue eyes. "We have a concert here in town most every night."

Yes, Mary thought. Of course. Of course you do.

A voice both toneless and godlike rolled across from the town common, a voice almost loud enough to rattle the windows. Mary, who had been to her share of rock shows, was able to place it in a clear context at once -- it called up images of bored, long-haired roadies strolling around the stage before the lights went down, picking their way with easy grace between the forests of amps and mikes, kneeling every now and then to patch two power-cords together.

"Test!" this voice cried. "Test-one, test-one, test-one!"

Another guitar chop, still not a chord but close this time. Then a drum-run. Then a fast trumpet riff lifted from the chorus of "Instant Karma," accompanied by a light

Stephen King - You Know They Got a Hell of a Band

rumble of bongos. CONCERT TONIGHT, the Norman Rockwell sign over the Norman Rockwell town common had said, and Mary, who had grown up in Elmira, New York, had been to quite a few free concerts-on-the-green as a child. Those really had been Norman Rockwell concerts, with the band (made up of guys wearing their Volunteer Fire Department kit in lieu of the band uniforms they couldn't afford) tootling their way through slightly off-key Sousa marches and the local Barber Shop Quartet (Plus Two) harmonizing on things like "Shenandoah" and "I've Got a Gal from Kalama-zoo." She had an idea that the concerts in Rock and Roll Heaven might be quite different from those childhood musicales where she and her friends had run around waving sparklers as twilight drew on for night. She had an idea that these concerts-on-the-green might be closer to Goya than to Rockwell.

"I'll go get your wallet," he said. "Enjoy your pie."

"Thank you, Clark." She put another tasteless forkful of pie in her mouth and watched him head for the door. He walked in an exaggerated slow-motion saunter that struck her feverish eye as absurd and somehow horrid: / don't have the slightest idea that I'm sharing this room with a couple of famous corpses, Clark's ambling, sauntering stride was saying. What, me worry?

Hurry up! she wanted to scream. Forget about the gunslinger strut and move your ass! The bell jingled and the door opened as Clark reached for the knob, and two more dead Texans came in. The one wearing the dark glasses was Roy Orbison. The one wearing the hornrims was Buddy Holly.

All my exes come from Texas, Mary thought wildly, and waited for them to lay their hands on her husband and drag him away.

" 'Scuse me, sir," the man in the dark glasses said politely, and instead of grabbing Clark, he stepped aside for him. Clark nodded without speaking -- Mary was suddenly quite sure he couldn't speak -- and stepped out into the sunshine.

Leaving her alone in here with the dead. And that thought seemed to lead naturally to another one, even more horrible: Clark was going to drive off without her. She was suddenly sure of it. Not because he wanted to, and certainly not because he was a coward -- this situation went beyond questions of courage and cowardice, and she supposed that the only reason they both weren't gibbering and drooling on the floor was because it had developed so fast -- but because he just wouldn't be able to do anything else. The reptile that lived on the floor of his brain, the one in charge of self-preservation, would simply slither out of its hole in the mud and take charge of things.

You've got to get out of here, Mary, the voice in her mind -- the one that belonged to her own reptile -- said, and the tone of that voice frightened her. It was more reasonable than it had any right to be, given the situation, and she had an idea that sweet reason might give way to shrieks of madness at any moment.

Mary took one foot off the rail under the counter and put it on the floor, trying to ready herself mentally for flight as she did so, but before she could gather herself, a narrow hand fell on her shoulder and she looked up into the smiling, knowing face of Buddy Holly.

He had died in 1959, a piece of trivia she remembered from that movie where Gary Busey had played him. 1959 was over thirty years gone, but Buddy Holly was still a gawky twenty-three-year-old who looked seventeen, his eyes swimming behind his glasses and his adam's apple bobbing up and down like a monkey on a stick. He was wearing an ugly plaid jacket and a string tie. The tie's clasp was a large chrome steer-head. The face and the taste of a country bumpkin, you would have said, but there was something in the set of the mouth that was too wise, somehow, too dark, and for a moment the hand gripped her shoulder so tightly she could feel the tough pads of callus on the ends of the fingers -- guitar calluses.

"Hey there, sweet thang," he said, and she could smell clove gum on his breath.

There was a silvery crack, hair-thin, zigzagging across the left lens of his glasses. "Ain't seen you roun' these parts before."

Incredibly, she was lifting another forkful of pie toward her mouth, her hand not hesitating even when a clot of cherry filling plopped back onto her plate. More incredibly, she was slipping the fork through a small, polite smile.

"No," she said. She was somehow positive that she couldn't let this man see she had recognized him; if he did, any small chance she and Clark might still have would evaporate. "My husband and I are just... you know, passing through."

And was Clark passing through even now, desperately keeping to the posted speed

Stephen King - You Know They Got a Hell of a Band

limit while the sweat trickled down his face and his eyes rolled back and forth from the mirror to the windshield and back to the mirror again? was he?

The man in the plaid sportcoat grinned, revealing teeth that were too big and much too sharp. "Yep, I know how that is, all right -- y'all seen hoot, n now you're on your way to holler. That about the size of it?"

"I thought this was hoot," Mary said primly, and that made the newcomers first looks at each other, eyebrows raised, and then shout with laughter. The young waitress looked from one to the other with her frightened, bloodshot eyes.

"That ain't half-bad," Buddy Holly said. "You and y'man ought to think about hangin on a little while, though. Stay for the concert tonight, at least. We put on one heckuva show, if I do say so myself." Mary suddenly realized that the eye behind the cracked lens had filled up with blood. As Holly's grin widened, pushing the corners of his eyes into a squint, a single scarlet drop spilled over his lower lid and tracked down his cheek like a tear. "Isn't that right, Roy?"

"Yes, ma'am, it is," the man in the shades said. "You have to see it to believe it." "I'm sure that's true," Mary said faintly. Yes, Clark was gone. She was sure of it now. The Testosterone Kid had run like a rabbit, and she supposed that soon enough the frightened young girl with the cold sore would lead her into the back room, where her own rayon uniform and order pad would be waiting.

"It's somethin to write home about," Holly told her proudly. "I mean to say." The drop of blood fell from his face and pinked onto the seat of the stool Clark had so recently vacated. "Stick around. You'll be glad y'did." He looked to his friend for support.

The man in the dark glasses had joined the cook and the waitresses; he dropped his hand onto the hip of the redhead, who put her own hand over it and smiled up at him. Mary saw that the nails on the woman's short, stubby fingers had been gnawed to the quick. A Maltese cross hung in the open V of Roy Orbison's shirt. He nodded and flashed a smile of his own. "Love to have you, ma'am, and not just for the night, either -- draw up and set a spell, we used to say down home."

"I'll ask my husband," she heard herself saying, and completed the thought in her mind: If I ever see him again, that is.

"You do that, sugar pie!" Holly told her. "You just do that very thing!" Then, incredibly, he was giving her shoulder one final squeeze and walking away, leaving her a clear path to the door. Even more incredibly, she could see the Mercedes's distinctive grille and peace-sign hood ornament still outside.

Buddy joined his friend Roy, winked at him (producing another bloody tear), then reached behind Janis and goosed her. She screamed indignantly, and as she did, a flood of maggots flew from her mouth. Most struck the floor between her feet, but some clung to her lower lip, squirming obscenely.

The young waitress turned away with a sad, sick grimace, raising one blocking hand to her face. And for Mary Willingham, who suddenly understood they had very likely been playing with her all along, running ceased to be something she had planned and became an instinctive reaction. She was up and off the stool like a shot and sprinting for the door.

"Hey!" the redhead screamed. "Hey, you didn't pay for the pie! Or the sodas, either! This ain't no Dine and Dash, you crotch! Rick! Buddy! Get her!"

Mary grabbed for the doorknob and felt it slip through her fingers. Behind her, she heard the thump of approaching feet. She grabbed the knob again, succeeded in turning it this time, and yanked the door open so hard she tore off the overhead bell. A narrow hand with hard calluses on the tips of the fingers grabbed her just above the elbow. This time the fingers were not just squeezing but pinching; she felt a nerve suddenly go critical, first sending a thin wire of pain from her elbow all the way up to the left side of her jaw and then numbing her arm.

She swung her right fist back like a short-handled croquet mallet, connecting with what felt like the thin shield of pelvic bone above a man's groin. There was a pained snort -- they could feel pain, apparently, dead or not -- and the hand holding her arm loosened. Mary tore free and bolted through the doorway, her hair standing out around her head in a bushy corona of fright.

Her frantic eyes locked on the Mercedes, still parked on the street. She blessed Clark for staying. And he had caught all of her brainwave, it seemed; he was sitting behind the wheel instead of groveling under the passenger seat for her wallet, and he keyed the Princess's engine the moment she came flying out of the Rock-a-Boogie. The man in the flower-decorated top-hat and his tattooed companion were standing

Stephen King - You Know They Got a Hell of a Band

outside the barber shop again, watching expressionlessly as Mary yanked open the passenger door. She thought she now recognized Top-Hat -- she had three Lynyrd Skynyrd albums, and she was pretty sure he was Ronnie Van Zant. No sooner had she realized that than she knew who his illustrated companion was: Duane Allman, killed when his motorcycle skidded beneath a tractor-trailer rig twenty years ago. He took something from the pocket of his denim jacket and bit into it. Mary saw with no surprise at all that it was a peach.

Rick Nelson burst out of the Rock-a-Boogie. Buddy Holly was right behind him, the entire left side of his face now drenched in blood.

"Get in!" Clark screamed at her. "Get in the fucking car, Mary!"

She threw herself into the passenger bucket head-first and he was backing out before she could even make a try at slamming the door. The Princess's rear tires howled and sent up clouds of blue smoke. Mary was thrown forward with neck-snapping force when Clark stamped the brake, and her head connected with the padded dashboard. She groped behind her for the open door as Clark cursed and yanked the transmission down into drive.

Rick Nelson threw himself onto the Princess's gray hood. His eyes blazed. His lips were parted over impossibly white teeth in a hideous grin. His cook's hat had fallen off, and his dark-brown hair hung around his temples in oily snags and corkscrews.

"You're coming to the show!" he yelled.

"Fuck you!" Clark yelled back. He found drive and floored the accelerator. The Princess's normally sedate diesel engine gave a low scream and shot forward. The apparition continued to cling to the hood, snarling and grinning in at them.

"Buckle your seatbelt!" Clark bellowed at Mary as she sat up.

She snatched the buckle and jammed it home, watching with horrified fascination as the thing on the hood reached forward with its left hand and grabbed the windshield wiper in front of her. It began to haul itself forward. The wiper snapped off. The thing on the hood glanced at it, tossed it overboard, and reached for the wiper on Clark's side.

Before he could get it, Clark tramped on the brake again -- this time with both feet. Mary's seatbelt locked, biting painfully into the underside of her left breast. For a moment there was a terrible feeling of pressure inside her, as if her guts were being shoved up into the funnel of her throat by a ruthless hand. The thing on the hood was thrown clear of the car and landed in the street. Mary heard a brittle crunching sound, and blood splattered the pavement in a starburst pattern around its head.

She glanced back and saw the others running toward the car. Janis was leading them, her face twisted into a hag-like grimace of hate and excitement.

In front of them, the short-order cook sat up with the boneless ease of a puppet. The big grin was still on his face.

"Clark, they're coming!" Mary screamed.

He glanced briefly into the rear-view, then floored the accelerator again. The Princess leaped ahead. Mary had time to see the man sitting in the street raise one arm to shield his face, and wished that was all she'd had time to see, but there was something else, as well, something worse: beneath the shadow of his raised arm, she saw he was still grinning.

Then two tons of German engineering hit him and bore him under. There were crackling sounds that reminded her of a couple of kids rolling in a pile of autumn leaves. She clapped her hands over her ears -- too late, too late -- and screamed.

"Don't bother," Clark said. He was looking grimly into the rear-view mirror. "We couldn't have hurt him too badly -- he's getting up again."

"What?"

"Except for the tire-track across his shirt, he's -- " He broke off abruptly, looking at her. "Who hit you, Mary?"

"What?"

"Your mouth is bleeding. Who hit you?"

She put a finger to the corner of her mouth, looked at the red smear on it, then tasted it. "Not blood -- pie," she said, and uttered a desperate, cracked laugh.

"Get us out of here, Clark, please get us out."

"You bet," he said, and turned his attention back to Main Street, which was wide and -- for the time being, at least -- empty. Mary noticed that, guitars and amps on the town common or not, there were no power-lines on Main Street, either. She had no idea where Rock and Roll Heaven was getting its power (well... maybe some idea), but



Stephen King - You Know They Got a Hell of a Band

it certainly wasn't from Central Oregon Power and Light.

The Princess was gaining speed as all diesels seem to - not fast, but with a kind of relentless strength -- and chumming a dark brown cloud of exhaust behind her. Mary caught a blurred glimpse of a department store, a bookstore, and a maternity shop called Rock and Roll Lullabye. She saw a young man with shoulder-length brown curls standing outside The Rock Em & Sock Em Billiards Emporium, his arms folded across his chest and one snakeskin boot propped against the whitewashed brick. His face was handsome in a heavy, pouting way, and Mary recognized him at once.

So did Clark. "That was the Lizard King himself," he said in a dry, emotionless voice.

"I know. I saw."

Yes -- she saw, but the images were like dry paper bursting into flame under a relentless, focused light which seemed to fill her mind; it was as if the intensity of her horror had turned her into a human magnifying glass, and she understood that if they got out of here, no memories of this Peculiar Little Town would remain; the memories would be just ashes blowing in the wind. That was the way these things worked, of course. A person could not retain such hellish images, such hellish experiences, and remain rational, so the mind turned into a blast-furnace, crisping each one as soon as it was created.

That must be -- why most people can still afford the luxury of disbelieving in ghosts and haunted houses, she thought. Because when the mind is turned toward the terrifying and the irrational, like someone who is turned and made to look upon the face of Medusa, it forgets. It has to forget. And God! Except for getting out of this hell, forgetting is the only thing in the world I want.

She saw a little cluster of people standing on the tarmac of a Cities Service station at an intersection near the far end of town. They wore frightened, ordinary faces above faded ordinary clothes. A man in an oil-stained mechanic's coverall. A woman in a nurse's uniform -- white once, maybe, now a dingy gray. An older couple, she in orthopedic shoes and he with a hearing aid in one ear, clinging to each other like children who fear they are lost in the deep dark woods. Mary understood without needing to be told that these people, along with the younger waitress, were the real residents of Rock and Roll Heaven, Oregon. They had been caught the way a pitcher-plant catches bugs.

"Please get us out of here, Clark," she said. "Please." Something tried to come up her throat and she clapped her hands over her mouth, sure she was going to upchuck. Instead of vomiting, she uttered a loud belch that burned her throat like fire and tasted of the pie she had eaten in the Rock-a-Boogie.

"We'll be okay. Take it easy, Mary."

The road -- she could no longer think of it as Main Street now that she could see the end of town just ahead -- ran past the Rock and Roll Heaven Municipal Fire Department on the left and the school on the right (even in her heightened state of terror, there seemed something existential about a citadel of learning called the Rock and Roll Grammar School). Three children stood in the playground adjacent to the school, watching with apathetic eyes as the Princess tore past. Up ahead, the road curved around an outcrop with a guitar-shaped sign planted on it: YOU ARE NOW

- LEAVING ROCK AND ROLL HEAVEN •
- GOODNIGHT SWEETHEART GOODNIGHT. •

Clark swung the Princess into the curve without slowing, and on the far side, there was a bus blocking the road.

It was no ordinary yellow school bus like the one they had seen in the distance as they entered town; this one raved and rioted with a hundred colors and a thousand psychedelic swoops, an oversized souvenir of the Summer of Love. The windows flocked with butterfly decals and peace signs, and even as Clark screamed and brought his feet down on the brake, she read, with a fatalistic lack of surprise, the words floating up the painted side like overfilled dirigibles: THE MAGIC BUS.

Clark gave it his best, but wasn't quite able to stop. The Princess slid into The Magic Bus at ten or fifteen miles an hour, her wheels locked and her tires smoking fiercely. There was a hollow bang as the Mercedes hit the tie-dyed bus amidships. Mary was thrown forward against her safety harness again. The bus rocked on its springs a little, but that was all.

"Back up and go around!" she screamed at Clark, but she was nearly overwhelmed by a suffocating intuition that it was all over. The Princess's engine sounded choppy, and Mary could see steam escaping from around the front of her crumpled hood; it

Stephen King - You Know They Got a Hell of a Band

looked like the breath of a wounded dragon. When Clark dropped the transmission lever down into reverse, the car backfired twice, shuddered like an old wet dog, and stalled.

Behind them, they could hear an approaching siren. She wondered who the town constable would turn out to be. Not John Lennon, whose life's motto had been Question Authority, and not the Lizard King, who was clearly one of the town's pool-shooting bad boys. Who? And did it really matter? Maybe, she thought, it'll turn out to be Jimi Hendrix. That sounded crazy, but she knew her rock and roll, probably better than Clark, and she remembered reading somewhere that Hendrix had been a jump-jockey in the 101st Airborne. And didn't they say that ex-service people often made the best law-enforcement officials?

You're going crazy, she told herself, then nodded. Sure she was. In a way it was a relief. "What now?" she asked Clark dully.

He opened his door, having to put his shoulder into it because it had crimped a little in the frame. "We run," he said.

"What's the point?"

"You saw them; do you want to be them?"

That rekindled some of her fear. She released the clasp of her seatbelt and opened her own door. Clark came around the Princess and took her hand. As they turned back toward The Magic Bus, his grip tightened painfully as he saw who was stepping off -- a tall man in an open-throated white shirt, dark dungarees, and wrap-around sunglasses. His blue-black hair was combed back from his temples in a lush and impeccable duck's ass 'do. There was no mistaking those impossible, almost hallucinatory good looks; not even sunglasses could hide them. The full lips parted in a small, sly smile.

A blue-and-white police cruiser with ROCK AND ROLL HEAVEN P.O. written on the doors came around the curve and screeched to a stop inches from the Princess's back bumper. The man behind the wheel was black, but he wasn't Jimi Hendrix after all. Mary couldn't be sure, but she thought the local law was Otis Redding.

The man in the shades and black jeans was now standing directly in front of them, his thumbs hooked into his belt-loops, his pale hands dangling like dead spiders.

"How y'all t'day?" There was no mistaking that slow, slightly sardonic Memphis drawl, either. "Want to welcome you both to town. Hope you can stay with us for awhile. Town ain't much to look at, but we're neighborly, and we take care of our own." He stuck out a hand on which three absurdly large rings glittered. "I'm the mayor round these parts. Name's Elvis Presley."

Dusk, of a summer night.

As they walked onto the town common, Mary was again reminded of the concerts she had attended in Elmira as a child, and she felt a pang of nostalgia and sorrow penetrate the cocoon of shock which her mind and emotions had wrapped around her. So similar... but so different, too. There were no children waving sparklers; the only kids present were a dozen or so huddled together as far from the bandshell as they could get, their pale faces strained and watchful. The kids she and Clark had seen in the grammar-school play-yard when they made their abortive run for the hills were among them.

And it was no quaint brass band that was going to play in fifteen minutes or half an hour, either -- spread across the band-shell (which looked almost as big as the Hollywood Bowl to Mary's eyes) were the implements and accessories of what had to be the world's biggest -- and loudest, judging from the amps -- rock-and-roll band, an apocalyptic bebop combination that would, at full throttle, probably be loud enough to shatter window-glass five miles away. She counted a dozen guitars on stands and stopped counting. There were four full drum-sets... bongos... congas... a rhythm section... circular stage pop-ups where the backup singers would stand... a steel grove of mikes.

The common itself was filled with folding chairs -- Mary estimated somewhere between seven hundred and a thousand -- but she thought there were no more than fifty spectators actually present, and probably less. She saw the mechanic, now dressed in clean jeans and a Perma-Pressed shirt; the pale, once-pretty woman sitting next to him was probably his wife. The nurse was sitting all by herself in the middle of a long empty row. Her face was turned upward and she was watching the first few glimmering stars come out. Mary looked away from this one; she felt if she looked at that sad, longing face too deeply, her heart would break.

Of the town's more famous residents there was currently no sign. Of course not;

Stephen King - You Know They Got a Hell of a Band

their day-jobs were behind them now and they would all be backstage, duding up and checking their cues. Getting ready for tonight's rilly big shew. Clark paused about a quarter of the way down the grassy central aisle. A puff of evening breeze tousled his hair, and Mary thought it looked as dry as straw. There were lines carved into Clark's forehead and around his mouth that she had never seen before. He looked as if he had lost thirty pounds since lunch in Oakridge. The Testosterone Kid was nowhere in evidence, and Mary had an idea he might be gone for good. She found she didn't care much, one way or the other. And by the way, sugarpie-honeybunch, how do you think you look? "Where do you want to sit?" Clark asked. His voice was thin and uninterested -- the voice of a man who still believes he might be dreaming. Mary spotted the waitress with the coldsore. She was on the aisle about four rows down, now dressed in a light-gray blouse and cotton skirt. She had thrown a sweater over her shoulders. "There," Mary said, "beside her." Clark led her in that direction without question or objection. The waitress looked around at Mary and Clark, and Mary saw that her eyes had at least settled down tonight, which was something of a relief. A moment later she realized why: the girl was cataclysmically stoned. Mary looked down, not wanting to meet that dusty stare any longer, and when she did, she saw that the waitress's left hand was wrapped in a bulky white bandage. Mary realized with horror that at least one finger and perhaps two were gone from the girl's hand. "Hi," the girl said. "I'm Sissy Thomas." "Hello, Sissy. I'm Mary Willingham. This is my husband, Clark." "Pleased to meet you," the waitress said. "Your hand..." Mary trailed off, not sure how to go on. "Frankie did it." Sissy spoke with the deep indifference of one who is riding the pink horse down Dream Street. "Frankie Lymon. Everyone says he was the sweetest guy you'd ever want to meet when he was alive and he only turned mean when he came here. He was one of the first ones... the pioneers, I guess you'd say. I don't know about that. If he was sweet before, I mean. I only know he's meaner than cat-dirt now. I don't care. I only wish you'd gotten away, and I'd do it again. Besides, Crystal takes care of me." Sissy nodded toward the nurse, who had stopped looking at the stars and was now looking at them. "Crystal takes real good care. She'll fix you up, if you want -- you don't need to lose no fingers to want to get stoned in this town." 3 "My wife and I don't use drugs," Clark said, sounding , pompous. Sissy regarded him without speaking for a few moments. Then "she said, "You will." "When does the show start?" Mary could feel the cocoon of shock starting to dissolve, and she didn't much care for the feeling. "Soon." "How long do they go on?" Sissy didn't answer for nearly a minute, and Mary was getting ready to restate the question, thinking the girl either hadn't heard or hadn't understood, when she said: "A long time. I mean, the show will be over by midnight, they always are, it's a town ordinance, but still... they go on a long time. Because time is different here. It might be... oh, I dunno... I think when the guys really get cooking, they sometimes go on for a year or more." A cold gray frost began creeping up Mary's arms and back. She tried to imagine having to sit through a year-long rock show and couldn't do it. This is a dream and you'll wake up, she told herself, but that thought, persuasive enough as they stood listening to Elvis Presley in the sunlight by The Magic Bus, was now losing a lot of its force and believability. "Drivin out this road here wouldn't do you no good no how," Elvis had told them. "It don't go no place but Umpqua Swamp. No roads in there, just a lot of polk salad. And quicksand." He had paused then, the lenses of his shades glittering like dark furnaces in the late-afternoon sun. "And other things." "Bears," the policeman who might be Otis Redding had volunteered from behind them. "Bears, yep," Elvis agreed, and then his lips had curled up in the too-knowing smile Mary remembered so well from TV and the movies. "And other things." Mary had begun: "If we stay for the show..." Elvis nodded emphatically. "The show! Oh yeah, you gotta stay for the show! We really rock. You just see if we don't."

Stephen King - You Know They Got a Hell of a Band

"Ain't nothin' but a stone fact," the policeman had added.

"If we stay for the show... can we go when it's over?"

Elvis and the cop had exchanged a glance that had looked serious but felt like a smile. "Well, you know, ma'am," the erstwhile king of Rock and Roll said at last, "we're real far out in the boonies here, and attractin' an audience is kinda slow work... although once they hear us, everybody stays around for more... and we was kinda hopin' you'd stick around yourselves for awhile. See a few shows and kind of enjoy our hospitality." He had pushed his sunglasses up on his forehead then, for a moment revealing wrinkled, empty eyesockets. Then they were Elvis's dark-blue eyes again, regarding them with somber interest.

"I think," he had said, "you might even decide you want to settle down."

There were more stars in the sky now; it was almost full dark. Over the stage, orange spots were coming on, soft as night-blooming flowers, illuminating the mike-stands one by one.

"They gave us jobs," Clark said dully. "He gave us jobs. The mayor. The one who looks like Elvis Presley."

"He is Elvis," Sissy Thomas said, but Clark just went on staring at the stage. He was not prepared to even think this yet, let alone hear it.

"Mary is supposed to go to work in the Be-Bop Beauty Bar tomorrow," he went on. "She has an English degree and a teacher's certificate, but she's supposed to spend the next God-knows-how-long as a shampoo girl. Then he looked at me and he says, 'whuh bo\i-chew, sir? whuh-c/jore speciality?' " Clark spoke in a vicious imitation of the mayor's Memphis drawl, and at last a genuine expression began to show in the waitress's stoned eyes. Mary thought it was fear.

"You hadn't ought to make fun," she said. "Makin fun can get you in trouble around here... and you don't want to get in trouble." She slowly raised her bandage-wrapped hand. Clark stared at it, wet lips quivering, until she lowered it into her lap again, and when he spoke again, it was in a lower voice.

"I told him I was a computer software expert, and he said there weren't any computers in town... although they 'sho would admiah to git a Ticketron outlet or two.' Then the other guy laughed and said there was a stockboy's job open down at the superette, and --"

A bright white spotlight speared the forestage. A short man in a sportcoat so wild it made Buddy Holly's look tame strode into its beam, his hands raised as if to stifle a huge comber of applause.

"Who's that?" Mary asked Sissy.

"Some oldtime disc jockey who used to run a lot of these shows. His name is Alan Tweed or Alan Breed or something like that. We hardly ever see him except here. I think he drinks. He sleeps all day -- that I do know."

And as soon as the name was out of the girl's mouth, the cocoon which had sheltered Mary disappeared and the last of her disbelief melted away. She and Clark had stumbled into Rock and Roll Heaven, but it was actually Rock and Roll Hell. This had not happened because they were evil people; it had not happened because the old gods were punishing them; it had happened because they had gotten lost in the woods, that was all, and getting lost in the woods was a thing that could happen to anybody.

"Got a great show for ya tonight!" the emcee was shouting enthusiastically into his mike. "We got the Big Bopper... Freddie Mercury, just in from London-Town... Jim Croce... my main man Johnny Ace..."

Mary leaned toward the girl. "How long have you been here, Sissy?"

"I don't know. It's easy to lose track of time. Six years at least. Or maybe it's eight. Or nine."

"... Keith Moon of The Who... Brian Jones of the Stones... that cute li'l Florence Bollard of the Supremes... Mary Wells..."

Articulating her worst fear, Mary asked: "How old were you when you came?"

"Cass Elliot... Janis Joplin..."

"Twenty-three."

"King Curtis... Johnny Bumette..."

"And how old are you now?"

"Slim Harpo... Bob 'Bear' Hite... Stevie Ray Vaughan..."

"Twenty-three," Sissy told her, and on stage Alan Freed went on screaming names at the almost empty town common as the stars came out, first a hundred stars, then a thousand, then too many to count, stars that had come out of the blue and now glittered everywhere in the black; he tolled the names of the drug o.d.'s, the

Stephen King - You Know They Got a Hell of a Band

alcohol o.d.'s, the plane crash victims and the shooting victims, the ones who had been found in alleys and the ones who had been found in swimming pools and the ones who had been found in roadside ditches with steering columns poking out of their chests and most of their heads torn off their shoulders; he chanted the names of the young ones and the old ones, but mostly they were the young ones, and as he spoke the names of Ronnie Van Zant and Steve Gaines, she heard the words of one of their songs tolling in her mind, the one that went Oooh, that smell, can't you smell that smell, and yes, you bet, she certainly could smell that smell; even out here, in the clear Oregon air, she could smell it, and when she took Clark's hand it was like taking the hand of a corpse.

"Awwwwwwlllll RIIIIIIYYYYYGH!" Alan Freed was screaming. Behind him, in the darkness, scores of shadows were trooping onto the stage, lit upon their way by roadies with Penlites. "Are you ready to PAAAARTY?"

No answer from the scattered spectators on the common, but Freed was waving his hands and laughing as if some vast audience were going crazy with assent. There was just enough light left in the sky for Mary to see the old man reach up and turn off his hearing aid.

"Are you ready to BOOOOOGIE?"

This time he was answered -- by a demonic shriek of saxophones from the shadows behind him.

"Then let's go... BECAUSE ROCK AND ROLL WILL NEVER DIE!"

As the show-lights came up and the band swung into the first song of that night's long, long concert -- "I'll Be Doggone," with Marvin Gaye doing the vocal -- Mary thought: That's what I'm afraid of. That's exactly what I'm afraid of.