

Copperhead

by Gene Wolfe

The telephone in the study rang ten minutes before the news came on. The new President picked it up and said hello.

"Mister President?"

"Speaking." Only eighteen people were supposed to have the number. For an instant, the new President wondered how many actually did.

"This is Marsha. Boone's killed himself."

The new President was silent, conscious that there were a thousand things to say and unable to say even the least of them. In his mind's eye he saw the leaves, a drift of red, yellow, and gold autumn leaves at the foot of the tree on the hill. Leaves still touched with green here and there, and the stirring under those leaves.

"He left a note. I haven't been able to find out what was in it."

"Don't."

"Don't?"

"It will be damaging to us in some way. They'll find out, Marsha, and they'll throw it in our faces. We'll know a lot more about it than we want to then, and you're needed for other things."

"He was my husband, Mr. President. The divorce—"

"I know."

"It wasn't—wasn't final. Not yet. I want to know why he killed himself."

He recalled it exactly. "There was a crash in Idaho in August," the general had said. "We found this in the wreckage."

"Are you still there, Mr. President?"

The irony almost overcame him, but he managed to say, "Still here."

"He hung himself with—with a telephone cord from the chandelier in the dining room. That's what they told me. He stood on a chair, a— a chair on top of the table. He p-put the cord around his neck ..."

The new President turned on the TV and pressed the MUTE button. It was easy, he thought. All the buttons were so easy.

"I need to know, Mr. President. I need to find out."

"You know."

"I need to see the letter."

"Then do." He murmured comforting words, his friendship with Boone and Marsha, the great contribution Boone had made to his administration. After a time that seemed long, the silent TV showed him with Boone, with Boone and Marsha, with Boone at the convention. Eventually he hung up.

The phone rang again at once. He picked it up and said, "I ought to get call waiting on this thing."

"Yes, Mr. President, you should." There was no humor in Rance's voice, none at all.

"I was about to call you. Boone's hung himself."

"I was calling to tell you. This phone was busy."

"There's a suicide note. Do you have it?"

"No, sir."

"Get it. Don't let the press get it, and don't let Marsha see it. The cops will have it. Find out if they've made copies. If they have, destroy them."

"Do you want to see it, Mr. President?"

He did not. He knew what would be in it, and knew that it would sicken him. "No," he said. Elsewhere in the house another phone was ringing. He got up from his chair and kicked the door shut. Peggy would get it, and Peggy, seeing the closed door, would stall them. Or stall them anyway, door closed or not. "Maybe I'll want to see it later. Not now. I want you to find her and bring her here."

"Find who, Mr. President?"

"Who the hell do you think?"

"Jane Doe?"

"You're watching her, or you're damned well supposed to be."

"We are." Rance said.

"A hell of a lot of good it did. Bring her here. Now!"

"Won't you be going back to Washington, Mr. President?"

Rage would help nothing. He had told the general to leave the Changer with him. He had done that. He himself had pressed the button. It had pressed very easily. He made his voice calm, and was gratified to hear it. He did not sound like a man who was controlling his voice at all. "I'm going to stay here, George, until this blows over a little. First the murder, then this. Washington will be a zoo."

"I'm sure you're right, Mr. President."

"I know I am. Fortunately we've got three years until the next election."

"Longer than that, Mr. President."

"Nearly three years until the next campaign." Although no one was watching, the new President made himself smile. Smiles showed in your voice. "That's what matters. How fast can you get her here, George?"

"Can we play rough, Mr. President? If she doesn't want to come?" Rance was stalling, giving himself time

to think. That showed in your voice, too.

"Yes. Absolutely."

"What about Karen?"

The new President had not thought of that, but he would need to talk to Karen. Karen wanted a big job, but had she earned one? Controlling the redhead was like neck-reining a tiger. Perhaps she had. Assistant Secretary of Labor might be enough. "Yes," he said. "Bring Karen, if she can come. If she can't, don't wait for her."

"Five hours, Mr. President."

He glanced at his wrist. "Eleven tonight, our time."

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They arrived at ten fifty-five in a black Lincoln Navigator, three FBI agents, Karen, and Jane Doe. He had told the Secret Service to get out and stay out, and had telephoned the Secretary of the Treasury when they had refused. They were a hundred yards or more away from the house, every one of them.

Now he ordered the FBI agents to return to their vehicle and stand by, and waved Karen and Jane Doe in. The former looked smart, competent, and horribly tired; as always the latter was so lovely that it was only with difficulty that he kept himself from gawking at her.

"You're beat," he told Karen. "Jane and I are going into the den to talk. Alone."

Karen nodded, and the tall and superlatively graceful woman he had named Jane Doe smiled enigmatically and brushed hair the color of new copper wire away from her face.

"I know you've done a lot," he said. "I know you've done the best you could at an impossible job. I want you to understand that I know that, no matter what else I may say tonight and no matter what happens tonight. Do you?"

"Yes, Mr. President."

Her voice had been so low that he had scarcely heard her. As he spoke again, he wondered whether she knew about Boone. If she did not, this certainly was not the time to tell her. "It may be hours—I don't know. I may need more from you tonight, and I may not. I don't know that, either. I want you go into my wife's bedroom and lie down. She's in Washington, so you won't be disturbed. If there's anything in there you need, take it. Cosmetics. Clean whatever. I'll square it with her."

"I'll be all right, Mr. President. Don't worry about me."

"Try to get to sleep. That's what I'm saying."

She nodded. "I will, Mr. President."

"I'm going back tomorrow, and when I get back I'll make a slot for you. Something in State, some nice, quiet country where they speak English, Madame Ambassador."

The other woman laughed, the summons of golden bells.

"You come in here with me," he told her, and shut the door behind them, and locked it.

" 'Ou douh nawt leek mee."

"My feelings about you no longer matter." He waited for her to sit down, then sat down himself. It was in his desk drawer, the left upper drawer.

He got it out, turned it over in his hands for a few seconds, and laid it on his desk. In appearance it was a lopsided oval of black plastic with three red buttons, remarkable only in that its black was the black of space, a deeper black than any human technology was capable of, and in that its buttons might easily have been drops of fresh blood.

" 'Ou 'ad dawt vhen Aw coom."

"Yes, I did." The sunlit hilltop, the accumulation of fallen leaves at the base of the tree were back, more vivid than ever. "I slipped it into my pocket." He cleared his throat. "I shouldn't have had it at all, and I had my hands full with you."

She laughed again; her eyes were of every conceivable color, depending as it seemed upon the lighting and her mood. Just now they too gleamed scarlet.

Like the eyes of a white rat, the new President thought. Could she have been a pet in the place from which she came? A laboratory animal? "I never told you about this," he said aloud. "I'm going to tonight, because I owe it to you. You don't like to listen—"

She smiled, and her perfect teeth looked both whiter and sharper than any other woman's teeth.

"Or sit still. You don't have to listen if you don't want to. If you want to get up and wander around, that's fine. But I'm going to say it."

"Aw siht awn 'ou lahp? Aw siht vher steal. Naw mahter 'ow meany vherthds, Aw lesson."

"No."

"Naw vahn vahtches." She was clearly amused.

He shook his head. "I had been working hard. Not only after my inauguration, but for more than a year before it. Working twelve or thirteen hours every day without a break. Spring came and my wife and I came back here; I meant to take three days off—a long weekend. Some people in Spokane started burning things again, and my three days turned out to be eighteen hours. I went back to Washington and back to work."

"Aw douh nawt vhook. Aw douh nawt naw ahbawt dhees." She rose more gracefully than any dancer, seeming to float from the chair.

"Fall came. Football season. I'd lost twenty pounds, and I was yelling at everybody. My wife had to stay in Washington, but I cleared my desk and flew back here. I wanted to drink beer and watch football. Most of all, I wanted to sleep."

She poked the fire as a child would, gratified by the cloud of sparks.

"I was here a day and half when General Martens called. There had never really been a crash before. All that about Roswell was nonsense, but this time there'd been a real crash or something that looked like

one, and they had an artifact that still worked. I should have kept my damned mouth shut, but I said bring it here. I wanted to see it."

"Dhees dhing 'ou shaw mee? Eet dhaws nawt eent'res mee."

"There are other universes." The new President's voice fell. "All the astrophysicists say so. The Changer accesses them. Point it at something, press a button, and you get its cognate. Sometimes. Maybe all the time, but maybe sometimes the cognate is so close you can't tell anything's happened. Did I tell you we went up on the hill?"

"'Ou deed nawt." She sat down again and crossed her legs. "Aw rhemember dhawt 'ill. Aw vhas colt."

He nodded. "You were naked. General Martens didn't want to talk in the house—he was afraid of listening devices, really paranoid about them. We walked clear across the big meadow and climbed the hill. I sat on a rock up there, and he on a fallen tree. I'd started to sit down beside him, but he didn't want that, and at first I didn't understand. Later I got it—he was afraid I'd grab it."

She laughed.

"Which I did, in a way. He showed it to me, but he didn't want me to touch it. I was President, goddamnit, and he was trying to give me orders. I made him give it to me and leave it with me. I told him I'd give it back to him when I was through with it.

"Then I sat there on that rock and watched him walk back to the house—back to his blue Air Force Chevy. I turned the Changer over and over in my hands, and I thought, "By God, this President stuff can be fun once in a while. It's about time."

"Vhat ahbawt mee?"

"I'm getting to that. There's a big maple up there. It was fifteen or twenty feet from where I was sitting, and its leaves were thick all around it." He paused, remembering. "Half its leaves had fallen, or about that. After the general's car went into Three Mile Woods, I looked at them. I don't know why, but I did. Perhaps I had heard something."

He paused, cleared his throat. "Suddenly they moved, stirred. There was only a very light breeze so it wasn't that. There was something in there, something under the leaves, and I guess my hand tightened on the Changer. It must have, because there you were."

"Ahh!"

"Yes. You know the rest. You know a lot more, too. Things you won't tell about the place you came from." He knew he should pick up the Changer at this point, but he discovered that he was unable to do so. He pointed to it instead. "I'm going to change you again. You know why, unless you're a lot stupider than I think you are."

"'Ou dheenk Aw dell 'ou vhife."

"No. No, I take it back. Yes, that and a couple of dozen other things. I'm going to offer you a last chance. Do you want to stay here?"

"Aw douh nawt car."

"I offer it anyway. You've always said you don't remember the place you came from, the other universe. I'll be frank, since this is likely to be our last conversation. You've lied to us. Tell me the truth, and it's

possible—just possible—that something you say will change my mind. Do you want to try?"

She rose again and went to the window, staring out into the spring night. "Ees zo confuse."

He waited; and when she did not speak again, he said, "There are three buttons, and I don't know which one I pressed. I may send you back. But I may simply send you someplace else. I don't know. This is your last chance."

"Vhas a goose." She turned, and her eyes were the color of heaven, and she was the loveliest woman the new President had ever seen. "Nawt lak 'ou. Aw zay, 'ou vhill nawt neffer grawnt offer mee agan." She shrugged. "Dhoss bhoyes, de vhun keels de odder. Aw douh nawthing."

He said, "The first time I heard you talk like this I fell for it hook, line, and sinker."

He had reached for the Changer as he spoke. Her hand had to travel twice as far, but it struck like a snake. For an instant—perhaps it was half a second, perhaps less—she held it and looked at him, savoring the moment; and her eyes were as black as the Changer itself, a blackness in which red sparks danced. Her thumb depressed one of the red buttons.

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His clothing collapsed in a heap. She did not see it, seeing only the naked man who stood before the chair in which the new President had sat. So tall was he that his head nearly brushed the ceiling; and so glorious was he that one felt that the ceiling had risen so that his head would not brush it.

"Because you have done this, cursed be you." His voice was like an organ, his hand like a vise as he caught her by the throat. "Upon your belly you shall go, and the dust you shall eat, and I shall crush your head under my heel."

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In his new realm, where Time sang like a brook, the new President picked himself up and stood stock-still to listen. The trees in a wood far away were barking; on the cliff that rose behind him, a mountain ram winded its horns.

The End