

MISS ATTLA THE HUN

1

THROUGH FROST AND THAW, THROUGH WET AND DRY SEASONS, THE thing on the forest floor had waited many hundreds of years for a chance to live again. Not that it was dead. It was alive, aware, always alert to the passage of warm-blooded creatures in the dense woods around it. But only a small portion of its mind was required to monitor nearby animals for a possible host, while for the most part it was occupied with vivid dreams of previous, ancient lives that it had led on other worlds.

Deer, bears, badgers, squirrels, chipmunks, rabbits, possums, wolves, mice, foxes, raccoons, cougars, quail that had strayed in from the fields, dogs, toads, chameleons, snakes, worms, beetles, spiders, and centipedes had passed near enough to the thing to have been seized if they had been suitable. Some, of course, were not warm-blooded, which was one of the creature's primary requirements of a host. Those that did have warm blood - the mammals and the birds - did not meet the other important requirement: a high order of intelligence.

The thing did not grow impatient. It had found hosts in one form or another for millions upon millions of years. It was confident that it would eventually have an opportunity to ascend from its cold dreams and experience this new world, as it had experienced - and conquered - many others.

2

JAMIE WATLEY WAS IN LOVE WITH MRS. CASWELL. HE HAD CONSIDERABLE artistic talent, so he filled a tablet with drawings of his dream woman: Mrs. Caswell riding a wild horse; Mrs. Caswell taming a lion; Mrs. Caswell shooting a charging rhinoceros that was as big as a Mack truck; Mrs. Caswell as the Statue of Liberty, holding a torch high. He had not seen her ride a horse, tame a lion, or shoot a rhino; neither had he ever heard of her having performed any of those feats. And she certainly did not look like the Statue of Liberty (she was much prettier), but it seemed to Jamie that these imaginary scenes nevertheless portrayed the real Mrs. Caswell.

He wanted to ask Mrs. Caswell to marry him, although he was not confident about his chances. For one thing, she was well-educated, and he was not. She was beautiful, and he was homely. She was funny and outgoing, but he was shy. She was so sure of herself, in command of any situation - Remember the school fire back in September, when she single-handedly saved the building from burning to the ground? - while Jamie had difficulty coping with even minor crises. She was already married too, and Jamie felt guilty about wishing her husband dead. But if he were to have any hope at all of marrying Mrs. Caswell, the worst problem to be overcome was the difference in their ages; she was seventeen years older than Jamie, who was only eleven.

That Sunday night in late October, Jamie sat at the plank-topped, makeshift desk in his small bedroom, creating a new pencil drawing of Mrs. Caswell, his sixth-grade teacher. He depicted her in their classroom, standing beside her desk, dressed in the white robes of an angel. A wonderful light radiated from her, and all the kids - Jamie's classmates - were smiling at her. Jamie put himself into the picture - second row from the door, first desk - and, after some thought, he drew streams of small hearts rising from him the way fog rose from a block of Dry Ice.

Jamie Watley - whose mother was an alcoholic slattern and whose father was an alcoholic, frequently

unemployed mechanic - had never much cared for school until this year, when he had fallen under the spell of Mrs. Laura Caswell. Now, Sunday night was always the slowest night of the week because he was impatient for the start of school.

Downstairs, his mean-spirited, drunken father was arguing with his equally drunken mother. The subject was money, but the argument could as easily have been about the inedible dinner she had prepared, his eye for other women, her sloppy appearance, his poker losses, her constant whining, the lack of snack foods in the house, or which TV program they were going to watch. The thin walls of the decrepit house did little to muffle their voices, but Jamie was usually able to tune them out.

He started a new drawing. In this one, Mrs. Caswell was standing on a rocky landscape, wearing futuristic clothing, and battling an alien monster with a laser sword.

3

BEFORE DAWN, TEEL PLEEVEER DROVE HIS BATTERED, DIRTY, EIGHT-YEAR old jeep station wagon into the hills. He parked along an abandoned logging road deep in the forest. As dawn was breaking, he set out on foot with his deer rifle. The gun was a bolt-action Winchester Model 70 in .270 caliber, restocked in fine European walnut, with a four-power scope on Stith Streamline mounts, incorporating windage.

Teel loved the woods at dawn: the velvety softness of the shadows, the clear early light spearing down through the branches, the lingering smell of night dampness. He took great satisfaction from the feel of the rifle in his hand and from the thrill of the hunt, but most of all he enjoyed poaching.

Although he was the most successful real-estate wheeler and dealer in the county, a man of position and modest wealth, Teel was loath to spend a dollar when the same item could be had elsewhere for ninety-eight cents, and he refused to spend a penny when he could get what he wanted for free. He had owned a farm on the northeast edge of Pineridge, the county seat, where the state had decided to put the new turnpike interchange, and he'd made better than six hundred thousand dollars in profit by selling off pieces to motel and fast-food chains. That was the biggest of his deals but far from the only one; he would have been a rich man without it. Yet he bought a new jeep wagon only every ten years, owned one suit, and was notorious at Pineridge's Acme Supermarket for spending as much as three hours comparison shopping to save eighty cents on one order of groceries.

He never bought beef. Why pay for meat when the woods were full of it, on the hoof, free for the taking? Teel was fifty-three. He had been shooting deer out of season since he was seventeen, and he had never been caught. He had never particularly liked the taste of venison, and after having eaten uncounted thousands of pounds of the stuff over the past three and a half decades, he sometimes didn't look forward to dinner; however, his appetite always improved when he thought of all the money that he had kept in his pocket and out of the hands of cattle farmers, beef brokers, and members of the butchers' union.

After forty minutes of climbing the gently sloped, forested foothills without spotting deer spoor, Teel paused for a rest on a large flat rock between two big-cone pines. After he sat on the edge of the rock and put his rifle aside, he noticed something odd in the ground between his booted feet.

The object was half buried in the soft, moist, black soil. It was also partly covered by decaying, brown pine needles. He reached down with one hand and brushed the needles away. The thing was the shape of

a football but appeared to be about twice as large. The surface was highly polished, as glossy as a ceramic glaze, and Teel knew the object must be man-made because no amount of wind and water abrasion could produce such a sheen. The thing was darkly mottled blue and black and green, and it had a strange beauty.

He was about to get off the rock, drop to his hands and knees, and dig the mysterious object out of the soil, when holes opened in several places across its surface. In the same instant, black and glossy plantlike tendrils exploded toward him. Some whipped around his head and neck, others around his arms, still others around his feet. In three seconds he was snared.

Seed, he thought frantically. Some crazy damn kind of seed no one's seen before.

He struggled violently, but he could not pull free of the black tendrils or break them. He could not even get up from the rock or move an inch to one side or the other.

He tried to scream, but the thing had clamped his mouth shut.

Because Teel was still looking straight down between his legs at the nightmarish seed, he saw a new, larger hole dilate in the center of it. A much thicker tendril - a stalk, really - rose swiftly out of the opening and came toward his face as if it were a cobra swaying up from a snake charmer's basket. Black with irregular midnight-blue spots, tapered at the top, it terminated in nine thin, writhing tendrils. Those feelers explored his face with a spider-soft touch, and he shuddered in revulsion. Then the stalk moved away from his face, curved toward his chest, and with horror he felt it growing with amazing rapidity through his clothes, through his skin, through his breastbone, and into his body cavity. He felt the nine tendrils spreading through him, and then he fainted before he could go insane.

4

ON THIS WORLD, ITS NAME WAS SEED. AT LEAST THAT WAS WHAT IT SAW in the mind of its first host. It was not actually a plant - nor an animal, in fact - but it accepted the name that Teel Pleever gave it.

Seed extruded itself entirely from the pod in which it had waited for hundreds of years and inserted all of its mass into the body of the host. Then it closed up the bloodless wounds by which it had entered Pleever.

It required ten minutes of exploration to learn more about human physiology than humans knew. For one thing, humans apparently didn't understand that they had the ability to heal themselves and to daily repair the effects of aging. They lived short lives, oddly unaware of their potential for immortality. Something had happened during the species' evolution to create a mind-body barrier that prevented them from consciously controlling their own physical being.

Strange.

Sitting on the rock between the pine trees, in the body of Teel Pleever, Seed took an additional eighteen minutes to acquire a full understanding of the depth, breadth, and workings of the human mind. It was one of the most interesting minds that Seed had encountered anywhere in the universe: complex, powerful - distinctly psychotic.

This was going to be an interesting incarnation.

Seed rose from the rock, picked up the rifle that belonged to its host, and headed down the forested hills toward the place where Teel Pleeve had parked the jeep wagon. Seed had no interest in deer poaching.

5

JACK CASWELL SAT AT THE KITCHEN TABLE, WATCHING HIS WIFE AS SHE got ready for school that Monday morning, and he knew beyond a doubt that he was the luckiest man in the world. Laura was so lovely, slender, long limbed, and shapely that Jack sometimes felt as if he were dreaming his life rather than actually living it, for surely in the real world he would not have merited a woman like Laura.

She took her brown-plaid scarf from one of the hooks by the back door and wrapped it around her neck, crossing the fringed ends over her breasts. Peering through the half-steamed window in the door, she read the outside temperature on the big thermometer mounted on the porch. "Thirty-eight degrees, and it's only the end of October."

Her thick, soft, shiny, chestnut-brown hair framed a perfectly proportioned face reminiscent of the old movie star Veronica Lake. She had enormous, expressive eyes so dark brown that they were almost black; they were the clearest, most direct eyes that Jack had ever seen. He doubted that anyone could look into those eyes and lie - or fail to love the woman behind them.

Removing her old brown cloth coat from another hook, slipping into it, closing the buttons, she said, "We'll have snow well before Thanksgiving this year, I'll bet, and the whitest Christmas in ages, and we'll be snowbound by January."

"Wouldn't mind being snowbound with you for maybe six or eight months," he said. "Just the two of us, snow up to the roof, so we'd have to stay in bed, under the covers, sharing body heat to survive."

Grinning, she came to him, bent, and kissed him on the cheek. "Jackson," she said, using her pet name for him, "the way you turn me on, we'd generate so darn much body heat that it wouldn't matter if the snow was a mile higher than the roof. Regardless of how cold it was outside, it'd be sweltering in here, temperature and humidity over a hundred degrees, jungle plants growing out of the floorboards, vines crawling up the walls, tropical molds in all the corners."

She went into the living room to get the briefcase that was on the desk at which she planned her school lessons.

Jack got up from the table. A little stiffer than usual this morning but still in good enough shape to shuffle around without his cane, he gathered up the dirty breakfast dishes. He was still thinking about what a lucky man he was.

She could have had any guy she wanted, yet she had chosen a husband with no better than average looks and with two bum legs that wouldn't hold him up if he didn't clamp them in metal braces every morning. With her looks, personality, and intelligence, she could have married rich or could have gone off to the big city to make her own fortune. Instead she had settled for the simple life of a teacher and the wife of a struggling writer, passing up mansions for this small house at the edge of the woods, forgoing limousines for a three-year-old Toyota.

When she bustled into the kitchen with her briefcase, Jack was putting the dishes in the sink. “Do you miss the limousines?”

She blinked at him. “What’re you talking about?”

He sighed and leaned against the counter. “Sometimes I worry that maybe ...”

She came to him. “That maybe what?”

“Well, that you don’t have much in life, certainly not as much as you ought to have. Laura, you were born for limousines, mansions, ski chalets in Switzerland . You deserve them.”

She smiled. “You sweet, silly man. I’d be bored in a limousine. I like to drive. It’s fun to drive. Heck, if I lived in a mansion, I’d rattle around like a pea in a barrel. I like cozy places. Since I don’t ski, chalets aren’t any use to me. And though I like their clocks and chocolates, I can’t abide the way the Swiss yodel all the time.”

He put his hands on her shoulders. “Are you really happy?”

She looked directly into his eyes. “You’re serious about this, aren’t you?”

“I worry that I can’t give you enough.”

“Listen, Jackson , you love me with all your heart, and I know you do. I feel it all the time, and it’s a love that most women will never experience. I’m happier with you than I ever thought I could be. And I enjoy my work too. Teaching is immensely satisfying if you really try to jam knowledge into those little demons. Besides, you’ll be famous someday, the most famous writer of detective novels since Raymond Chandler. I just know it. Now, if you don’t stop being a total booby, I’m going to be late for work.”

She kissed him again, went to the door, blew him another kiss, went outside, and descended the porch steps to the Toyota parked in the gravel driveway.

He grabbed his cane from the back of one of the kitchen chairs and used it to move more quickly to the door than he could have with only the assistance of his leg braces. Wiping the steam from the cold pane of glass, he watched her start the car and race the engine until, warmed up, it stopped knocking. Clouds of vapor plumed from the exhaust pipe. She drove out to the county road and off toward the elementary school three miles away. Jack stayed at the window until the white Toyota had dwindled to a speck and vanished.

Though Laura was the strongest and most self-assured person Jack had ever known, he worried about her. The world was hard, full of nasty surprises, even here in the rural peace of Pine County . And people, including the toughest of them, could get ground up suddenly by the wheels of fate, crushed and broken in the blink of an eye.

“You take care of yourself,” he said softly. “You take care and come back to me.”

SEED DROVE TEEL PLEEVEER'S BATTERED OLD JEEP WAGON TO THE END OF the abandoned logging road and turned right onto a narrow blacktop lane. In a mile the hills descended into flatter land, and the forest gave way to open fields.

At the first dwelling, Seed stopped and got out of the jeep. Drawing upon its host's store of knowledge, Seed discovered this was "the Halliwell place." At the front door, it knocked sharply.

Mrs. Halliwell, a thirtyish woman with amiable features, answered the knock. She was drying her hands on her blue-and-white-checkered apron. "Why, Mr. Pleeveer, isn't it?"

Seed extruded tendrils from its host's fingertips. The swift, black lashes whipped around the woman, pinning her. As Mrs. Halliwell screamed, a much thicker stalk burst from Pleeveer's open mouth, shot straight to the woman, and bloodlessly pierced her chest, fusing with her flesh as it entered her.

She never finished her first scream.

Seed took control of her in seconds. The tendrils and stalks linking the two hosts parted in the middle, and the glistening, blue-spotted black alien substance flowed partly back into Teel Pleeveer and partly into Jane Halliwell.

Seed was growing.

Searching Jane Halliwell's mind, Seed learned that her two young children had gone to school and that her husband had taken the pickup into Pineridge to make a few purchases at the hardware store. She had been alone in the house.

Eager to acquire new hosts and expand its empire, Seed took Jane and Teel out to the jeep wagon and drove back onto the narrow lane, heading toward the county road that led into Pineridge.

7

MRS. CASWELL ALWAYS BEGAN THE MORNING WITH A HISTORY LESSON. Until he had landed in her sixth-grade class, Jamie Watley had thought that he didn't like history, that it was dull. When Mrs. Caswell taught history, however, it wasn't only interesting but fun.

Sometimes she made them act out roles in great historical events, and each of them got to wear a funny hat suitable to the character he was portraying. Mrs. Caswell had the most amazing collection of funny hats. Once, when teaching a lesson about the Vikings, she had walked into the room wearing a horned helmet, and everyone had busted a gut laughing. At first Jamie had been a bit embarrassed for her; she was his Mrs. Caswell, after all, the woman he loved, and he couldn't bear to see her behaving foolishly. But then she showed them paintings of Viking longboats with intricately carved dragons on the prows, and she began to describe what it was like to be a Viking sailing unknown misty seas in the ancient days before there were maps, heading out into unknown waters where - as far as people of that time knew you might actually meet up with dragons or even fall off the edge of the earth, and as she talked her voice grew softer, softer, until everyone was leaning forward, until it seemed as if they were transported from their classroom onto the deck of a small ship, with storm waves crashing all around them and a mysterious dark shore looming out of the wind and rain ahead. Now Jamie had ten drawings of Mrs. Caswell as a Viking, and they were among his favorites in his secret gallery.

Last week a teaching evaluator name Mr. Enright had monitored a day of Mrs. Caswell's classes. He was a neat little man in a dark suit, white shirt, and red bow tie. After the history lesson, which had been about life in medieval times, Mr. Enright wanted to question the kids to see how much they grasped of what they had been taught. Jamie and the others were eager to answer, and Enright was impressed. "But, Mrs. Caswell," he said, "you're not exactly teaching them the six-grade level, are you? This seems more like about eighth-grade material to me."

Ordinarily, the class would have reacted positively to Enright's statement, seizing on the implied compliment. They would have sat up straight at their desks, puffed out their chests, and smiled smugly. = But they had been coached to react differently if this situation arose, so they slumped in their chairs and tried to look exhausted.

Mrs. Caswell said, "Class, what Mr. Enright means is that he's afraid I'm pushing you too fast, too hard. You don't think that I demand too much of you?"

The entire class answered with one voice: "Yes!"

Mrs. Caswell pretended to look startled. "Oh, now, I don't overwork you."

Melissa Fedder, who had the enviable ability to cry on cue, burst into tears, as if the strain of being one of Mrs. Caswell's students were just too much to bear.

Jamie stood, shaking in make-believe terror, and delivered his one speech with practiced emotion: "Mr. En-Enright, we can't t-t-take it any more. She never lets up on us. N-n-never. We c-c-call her Miss Attila the Hun."

Other kids began to voice rehearsed complaints to Mr. Enright:

"-never gives us a recess--"

"-four hours of homework every night--"

"-too much--"

"-only sixth-graders--"

Mr. Enright was genuinely appalled.

Mrs. Caswell stepped toward the class, scowling, and made a short chopping motion with her hand.

Everyone instantly fell silent, as if afraid of her. Melissa Fedder was still crying, and Jamie worked hard at making his lower lip tremble.

"Mrs. Caswell," Mr. Enright said uneasily, "uh, well, perhaps you should consider sticking closer to the sixth-grade texts. The stress created by--"

"Oh!" Mrs. Caswell said, feigning horror. "I'm afraid it's too late, Mr. Enright. Look at the poor dears! I'm afraid I've worked them to death."

At this cue, all the kids in the class fell forward on their desks, as if they had collapsed and died.

Mr. Enright stood in startled silence for a moment, then broke into laughter, and all the kids laughed too, and Mr. Enright said, “Mrs. Caswell, you set me up! This was staged.”

“I confess,” she said, and the kids laughed harder.

“But how did you know I’d be concerned about your pushing them past sixth-grade material?”

“Because everyone always underestimates kids,” Mrs. Caswell said. “The approved curriculum never challenges them. Everyone worries so much about psychological stress, the problems associated with being an overachiever, and the result is that kids are actually encouraged to be underachievers. But I know kids, Mr. Enright, and I tell you they’re a much tougher, smarter bunch than anyone gives them credit for being. Am I right?”

The class loudly assured her that she was right.

Mr. Enright surveyed the class, pausing to study each child’s face, and it was the first time all morning that he had really looked at them. At last he smiled. “Mrs. Caswell, this is a wonderful thing you’ve got going here.”

“Thank you,” said Mrs. Caswell.

Mr. Enright shook his head, smiled more broadly, and winked. “Miss Attila the Hun indeed.”

At that moment Jamie was so proud of Mrs. Caswell and so in love with her that he had to struggle valiantly to repress tears far more genuine than those of Melissa Fedder.

Now, on the last Monday morning in October, Jamie listened to Miss Attila the Hun as she told them what medical science was like in the Middle Ages (crude) and what alchemy was (lead into gold and all sorts of crazy-fascinating stuff), and in a while he could no longer smell the chalk dust and child scents of the classroom but could almost smell the terrible, reeking, sewage-spattered streets of medieval Europe.

8

IN HIS TEN-FOOT-SQUARE OFFICE AT THE FRONT OF THE HOUSE, JACK Caswell sat at an ancient pine desk, sipping coffee and rereading the chapter he’d written the previous day. He made a lot of pencil corrections and then switched on his computer to enter the changes.

In the three years since his accident, unable to return to work as a game warden for the department of forestry, he had struggled to fulfill his lifelong desire to be a writer. (Sometimes, in his dreams, he could still see the big truck starting to slide on the ice-covered road, and he felt his own car entering a sickening spin too, and the bright headlights were bearing down on him, and he pumped the brake pedal, turned the wheel into the slide, but he was always too late. Even in the dreams, he was always too late.) He had written four fast-paced detective novels in the last three years, two of which had sold to New York publishers, and he had also placed eight short stories in magazines.

Until Laura came along, his two great loves had been the outdoors and books. Before the accident, he had often hiked miles up into the mountains, to places remote and serene, with his backpack half filled with food, half with paperbacks. Augmenting his supplies with berries and nuts and edible roots, he had remained for days in the wilderness, alternately studying the wildlife and reading. He was equally a man of

nature and civilization; though it was difficult to bring nature into town, it was easy to carry civilization - in the form of books - into the wild heart of the forest, allowing him to satisfy both halves of his cleft soul.

These days, cursed with legs that would never again support him on a journey into the hills, he had to be content with the pleasures of civilization - and, damn it, he soon had to make a better living with his writing than he had managed thus far. From the sales of eight stories and two well-reviewed novels spread over three years, he had not earned a third as much as Laura's modest teaching salary. He was a long way from reaching the best-seller lists, and life at the lower end of the publishing business was far from glamorous. Without his small disability pension from the department of forestry, he and Laura would have had serious difficulty keeping themselves housed, clothed, and fed.

When he remembered the worn brown cloth coat in which Laura had gone off to school that morning, he grew sad. But the thought of her in that drab coat also made him more determined than ever to write a breakthrough book, earn a fortune, and buy her the luxuries that she deserved.

The strange thing was that if he had not been in the accident, he would not have met Laura, would not have married her. She'd been at the hospital visiting a sick student, and on the way out she had seen Jack in the hall. He was in a wheelchair, sullenly roaming the corridors. Laura was incapable of passing an obviously depressed man in a wheelchair without attempting to cheer him. Filled with self-pity and anger, he rebuffed her; however, rejection only made Laura try harder. He didn't know what a bulldog she was, but he learned. Two days later, when she returned to visit her student, she paid a call on Jack as well, and soon she was coming every day just to see him. When he resigned himself to life in a wheelchair, Laura insisted that he work longer and harder with a therapist every day and that he at least try to learn to walk with braces and a cane. After some time, when the therapist had only moderate success with him, Laura wheeled him, protesting, into the therapy room every day and put him through the exercises a second time. Before long, her indomitable spirit and optimism infected Jack. He became determined to walk again, and then he did walk, and somehow learning to walk led to love and marriage. So the worst thing that had ever happened to him - the leg-crushing collision - had brought him to Laura, and she was far and away the best thing that had ever happened to him.

Screwy. Life sure was screwy.

In the new novel on which he was working, he was trying to write about that screwiness: the bizarre way that bad things could lead to blessings while blessings sometimes ended in tragedy. If he could thread that observation through a detective story in such a way as to explore the more profound aspects of it, he might be able to write not only a big-money book but also a book of which he could be proud.

He poured another cup of coffee and was about to start a new chapter when he looked out the window to the left of his desk and saw a dirty, dented jeep station wagon pull off the county road into his driveway.

Wondering who could be calling, he immediately levered himself up from the chair and grabbed his cane. He needed time to get to the front door, and he hated to keep people waiting.

He saw the jeep stop in front of the house. Both doors flew open, and a man and a woman got out.

Jack recognized the man, Teel Pleeve, whom he knew slightly. Just about everyone in Pine County knew Pleeve, but Jack figured that, like him, most folks didn't really know the man well.

The woman was vaguely familiar to him. She was about thirty, attractive, and he thought perhaps she had a child in Laura's class and that he had seen her at a school function. In only a housedress and an

apron, she was not properly clothed for the chilly October morning.

By the time Jack caned halfway across the office, his visitors had begun to knock on the front door.

9

SEED PULLED OFF THE HIGHWAY AS SOON AS IT SAW THE NEXT DWELLING. After centuries of dreamy half-life, it was eager to expand into more hosts. From Pleevever, it knew that five thousand people lived in the town of Pineridge, in which Seed intended to arrive by noon. Within two days, three at most, it would assume control of every one of the town's citizens and then would spread throughout Pine County, until it seized the bodies and imprisoned the minds of all twenty thousand residents in that entire rural area.

Although spread among many hosts, Seed remained a single entity with a single consciousness. It could live simultaneously in tens of millions or even billions of hosts, absorbing sensory input from billions of eyes and billions of ears and billions of noses, mouths, and hands, without risking confusion or information overload. In its countless millions of years of drifting through the galaxies, on the more than one hundred planets where it had thrived, Seed had never encountered another creature with its unique talent for physical schizophrenia.

Now it took its two captives out of the jeep and marched them across the lawn to the front-porch steps of the small white house.

From Pine County it would send its hosts outward, fanning across this continent, then to others, until every human being on the face of the earth had been claimed. Throughout this period, it would destroy neither the mind nor the individual personality of any host but would imprison each while it used the host's body and store of knowledge to facilitate its conquest of the world. Teel Pleevever, Jane Halliwell, and all the others would be horribly aware during their months of total enslavement: aware of the world around them, aware of the monstrous acts they were committing, and aware of Seed nesting within them.

It walked its two hosts up the porch steps and used Pleevever to knock loudly on the front door.

When no man, woman, or child on earth remained free, Seed would advance to the next stage, the Day of Release, abruptly allowing its hosts to resume control of their bodies, though in each of them would remain an aspect of the puppetmaster, always gazing out through their eyes and monitoring their thoughts. By the Day of Release, of course, at least half of the hosts would be insane. Others, having held on to sanity in hope of eventual release from torment, would be rocked by the realization that even after regaining control of themselves, they must endure the cold, parasitic presence of the intruder forever; they too would then go slowly mad. That was what always happened. A smaller group would inevitably seek solace in religion, forming a socially disruptive cult that would worship Seed. And the smallest group of all, the tough ones, would remain sane and either adapt to Seed's presence or seek ways to evict it, a crusade that would not prove successful.

Seed rapped on the door again. Perhaps no one was at home.

"Coming, coming," a man called from inside.

Ah, good.

Following the Day of Release, the fate of this sorry world would conform to the usual pattern: mass suicides, millions of homicides committed by psychopaths, complete and bloody social collapse, and an irreversible slide into anarchy, barbarism.

Chaos.

Creating chaos, spreading chaos, nurturing chaos, observing and relishing chaos were Seed's only purposes. The thing had been born in the genesis explosion at the start of time. Before that, it had been part of the supreme chaos of supercondensed matter in the time before time began. When that great undifferentiated ball of genesis matter exploded, the universe was formed; unprecedented order arose in the void, but Seed was not part of that order. It was a remnant of precreation chaos; protected by an invincible shell, it drifted forth into the blossoming galaxies, in the service of entropy.

A man opened the door. He was leaning on a cane.

"Mr. Pleever, isn't it?" he said.

From Jane Halliwell, Seed extruded black tendrils.

The man with the cane cried out as he was seized.

A blue-spotted black stalk burst from Jane Halliwell's mouth, pierced the crippled man's chest, and in seconds Seed had its third host: Jack Caswell.

The man's legs had been so badly damaged in an accident that he wore metal braces. Because Seed did not want to be slowed down by a crippled host, it healed Caswell's body and shucked off the braces.

Drawing upon Caswell's knowledge, Seed discovered that no one else was at home. It also learned that Caswell's wife taught at an elementary school and that this school, containing at least a hundred and sixty children and their teachers, was only three miles away. Rather than stop at every dwelling on the road into Pineridge, Seed could more effectively go to the school, seize control of everyone, and then spread out with all those hosts in every direction.

Jack Caswell, though imprisoned by Seed, was privy to his alien master's thoughts, because they shared the same cerebral tissue and neural pathways. Upon realizing that the school was to be attacked, Caswell's trapped mind squirmed violently, trying to slip free of its shackles.

Seed was surprised by the vigor and persistence with which the man resisted. With Pleever and the Halliwell woman, it had noticed that human beings - as they called themselves - possessed a far more powerful will than any species with which it had previously enjoyed contact. Now Caswell proved to have a considerably stronger will than either Pleever or Halliwell. Here was a species that obviously struggled relentlessly to create order out of chaos, that tried to make sense of existence, and that was determined to impose order on the natural world by the sheer power of its will. Seed was going to take special pleasure in leading humanity into chaos, degeneration, and ultimately into devolution.

Seed shoved the man's mind into an even darker, tighter corner than that to which it first confined him, chained him more securely. Then, in the form of its three hosts, it set out for the elementary school.

JAMIE WATLEY WAS EMBARRASSED TO ASK MRS. CASWELL FOR PERMISSION to go to the bathroom. He wanted her to think that he was special, wanted her to notice him in a way that she did not notice the other kids, wanted her to love him as much as he loved her - but how could she think that he was special if she knew that he had to pee like any other boy? He was being silly, of course. Having to go to the bathroom was nothing to be ashamed about. Everyone peed. Even Mrs. Caswell

No! He wouldn't think about that. Impossible.

But all through the history lesson he did keep thinking about his own need to pee, and by the time they were finished with history and halfway through math, he could no longer contain himself.

"Yes, Jamie?"

"May I have a lavatory pass, Mrs. Caswell?"

"Certainly."

The lavatory passes were on a corner of her desk, and he had to walk by her to reach them. He hung his head and refused to look at her because he didn't want her to see that he was blushing brightly. He snatched the pass off the desk and hurried into the hall.

Unlike other boys, he did not dawdle in the restroom. He was eager to get back to class so he could listen to Mrs. Caswell's musical voice and watch her move back and forth through the room.

When he came out of the lav, three people were entering the end of the corridor through the outside door to the parking lot: a man dressed in hunting clothes, a woman in a housedress, and a guy in khaki pants and a maroon sweatshirt. They were an odd trio.

Jamie waited for them to pass because they looked as if they were in a hurry about something and might knock him down if he got in their way. Besides, he suspected that they might ask where to find the principal or the school nurse or somebody important, and Jamie enjoyed being helpful. As they drew abreast of him, they turned toward him, as one.

He was snared.

11

SEED WAS NOW FOUR.

By nightfall it would be thousands.

In its four parts, it walked down the hall toward the classroom to which Jamie Watley had been returning.

A year or two hence, after the entire population of the world had become part of Seed, when bloodshed and chaos were then initiated with the Day of Release, the entity would remain entirely on - planet only a few weeks to witness firsthand the beginning of the human decline. Then it would form a new shell, fill that vessel with part of itself, and break free of the earth's gravity. Returning to the void, it would drift for

tens of thousands or even millions of years until it found another likely world, where it would descend and await contact with a member of the dominant species.

During its long cosmic journeying, Seed would remain in contact with the billions of parts of itself that it left behind on earth, although only as long as those fragments had hosts to inhabit. In a way, therefore, it would never really leave this planet until the last human being was destroyed centuries hence in one terminal act of chaotic violence, whereupon the remaining bit of earthbound Seed would die with that final host.

Seed reached the door of Laura Caswell's classroom.

The minds of Jack Caswell and Jamie Watley, hot with anger and fear, tried to melt through the shackles in which Seed bound them, and it paused briefly to cool them down and establish full control. Their bodies twitched, and they made gurgling sounds as they strove to scream a warning. Seed was shocked by the rebellion; while having no slightest chance of success, their resistance was nevertheless greater than any it had ever before encountered.

Exploring the minds of Jack and Jamie, Seed discovered that their impressive, stubborn exercise of will had been powered not by fear for themselves but by fear for Laura Caswell, teacher of one and wife of the other. They were angry about their own enslavement, yes, but they were even angrier about the possibility of Laura being possessed. They were both in love with her, and the purity of that love gave them the strength to resist the horror that had engulfed them.

Interesting..

Seed had encountered the concept of love among half of the species that it had destroyed on other worlds, but nowhere had it perceived the force of love as strongly as in these human beings. Now it realized for the first time that the will of an intelligent creature wasn't the only important power in the employ of universal order; love also fulfilled that function. And in a species that had both a strong will and an unusually well-developed ability to love, Seed had found the most formidable enemy of chaos.

Not formidable enough, of course. Seed was unstoppable, and within twenty-four hours all of Pineridge would be absorbed.

Seed opened the classroom door. The four of it went inside.

12

LAURA CASWELL WAS SURPRISED TO SEE HER HUSBAND ENTER THE ROOM with Richie Halliwell's mother, that old scoundrel Teel Pleevee, and Jamie. She couldn't imagine what any of them, other than Jamie, was doing there. Then she realized that Jack was walking, actually walking, not shuffling, not dragging himself along stiff legged but walking easily like any man.

Before the wonder of Jack's recovery could sink in, before Laura could ask him what was happening, even as her students were turning in their seats, terror struck. Jamie Watley held his hands toward a classmate, Tommy Albertson, and hideous, black, wormlike tendrils erupted from his fingertips. They lashed around Tommy, and as the snared boy cried out, a repulsive snakelike thing burst from Jamie's breastbone and pierced Tommy's chest, linking them obscenely.

The children screamed and pushed up from their desks to flee, but with astonishing speed they were attacked and silenced. Hateful, glossy worms and thicker snakes spewed forth from Mrs. Halliwell, Pleever, and Jack. Three more of Laura's nineteen students were seized. Suddenly Tommy Albertson and the other contaminated children joined in the attack; worms and snakes erupted from them toward new victims only seconds after they themselves had first been pierced.

Miss Garner, the teacher in the next room, stepped through the door to see what the shouting was about. She was taken before she could cry out.

In a single minute all but four thoroughly terrorized children had been taken firmly under the control of some nightmare organism. The four survivors - including Jane Halliwell's son, Richie - gathered around Laura; two were stunned into silence and two were crying. She pushed the kids behind her, into a corner by the chalkboard, and stood between them and the monstrosity that wanted them.

Fifteen possessed children, Pleever, Mrs. Halliwell, Miss Garner, and Jack gathered before her, staring with predatory intensity. For a moment all were still and silent. In their eyes she saw not merely reflections of their own tortured souls but the inhuman hunger of the thing that had taken control of them.

Laura was scared and sick at heart to think of that glistening black thing curled inside her Jack, but she was not hobbled by either confusion or disbelief, because she had seen her share of the movies that, for decades, had been preparing the world for precisely this nightmare. Invaders from Mars. Invasion of the Body Snatchers. The War of the Worlds. She knew immediately that something from beyond the stars had at last found the earth.

The question was: Could it be stopped - and how?

She realized that she was holding her chalkboard pointer as if it were a mighty sword and as if the nineteen alien-infected people in front of her would be kept at bay by that useless weapon. Silly. Nevertheless, she did not cast the pointer aside but thrust it forward challengingly.

She was dismayed to see her hand shaking. She hoped that the four children crouching behind her were not aware that she was in the grip of terror.

From the possessed group that confronted her, three moved slowly forward: Jane Halliwell, Jamie Watley, and Jack.

"Stay back," she warned.

They took another step toward her.

A bead of perspiration trickled down Laura's right temple.

Mrs. Halliwell, Jack, and Jamie advanced another step.

Suddenly they didn't seem to be as well controlled as the others, because they began to twitch and jerk with muscle spasms. Jack said, "Nooooo," in a horrible, low, agonized voice. And Jane Halliwell said, "Please, please," and shook her head as if to deny the orders that she had been given. Jamie was trembling violently and holding his hands to his head as though trying to get at the thing inside him and wrench it out.

Why were these three being forced to complete the subjugation of the classroom? Why not others?

Laura's mind worked feverishly, sensing an advantage, searching for it, but not sure if she would recognize it when she found it. Perhaps the thing in Jane Halliwell wanted her to infect her own son, Richie, who hid behind Laura's skirts, as a test of its control over the woman. And for the same reason it might want Jack to experience the horror of inducting his wife into this colony of the damned. As for poor Jamie ... well, Laura was aware of the boy's fierce crush on her, so maybe he was being tested as well, to see if he could be made to attack the person he loved.

But if they had to be tested, their master was not yet entirely certain of its dominance. And where it had doubt, surely its intended victims had hope.

13

SEED WAS IMPRESSED WITH THE RESISTANCE EXHIBITED BY THREE OF ITS hosts when the moment came to infect their loved ones.

The mother was furious at the thought of her son being brought into the fold. She pried at the restraints on her mind and struggled fiercely to regain her body. She posed a mildly difficult problem of control, but Seed squeezed her consciousness into an even tighter, darker place than that to which it had at first condemned her. It pushed her mind down, down, as if it were thrusting her into a pool of water, and then it weighted her in that deep place as if stacking heavy stones upon her.

Jamie Watley was equally troublesome, motivated as he was by pure, clean puppy love. But Seed reasserted authority over Jamie as well, stopped the boy's muscle spasms, and forced him forward toward the woman and children in the corner of the room.

The husband, Jack Caswell, was the most difficult of the three, for his will was the strongest; and his love was the most powerful. He raged against confinement, actually bent the bars of his mental prison, and would have gladly killed himself before taking Seed to Laura Caswell. For more than a minute he resisted his master's orders, and for one startling moment he seemed about to break free of control, but at last Seed squeezed him into full if grudging compliance.

The fourteen other captured children in Mrs. Caswell's sixth-grade class were easily seized and controlled, although they also exhibited signs of rebellion. As the teacher backed into the corner, as the three chosen hosts approached her, a hot wave of rage went through every child in the room, for they all loved her and could not bear the thought of her possessed. Seed clamped down on them at once, hard, and their brief exertions of will faded like sparks on an arctic wind.

Under the guidance of Seed, Jack Caswell stepped in front of his wife. He tore the pointer out of her hand and threw it aside.

Seed burst from Jack's fingertips, seized Laura, and held her, although she struggled fiercely to pull free. Opening the mouth of its host, Seed shot forth a thick stalk, pierced the woman's breast, and surged into her, triumphant.

14

NO!

Laura felt it slithering along her nervous system, questing coldly in her brain, and she denied it. With the iron determination that she had brought to her campaign to make Jack walk, with the unlimited patience that she always brought to the instruction of her students, with the unshakable sense of self-worth and individuality with which she faced every day of her life, she fought the thing at every turn. When it cast restraining bands of psychic energy around her mind, she snapped them and threw them off. When it tried to drag her into a dark place and imprison her there under psychic stones, she threw off those weights as well and soared to the surface. She sensed the thing's surprise, and she took advantage of its confusion, delving into its mind, learning about it. In an instant she realized that it dwelled in all the minds of its hosts simultaneously, so she reached out to Jack and found him-

I love you, Jack, I love you more than life itself-

and she tore at his mental bonds with all the enthusiasm that she had shown when assisting him in therapeutic exercises for his ruined legs. Questing outward across the psychic net by which Seed linked its hosts, she found Jamie Watley-

You're a sweet kid, Jamie, the sweetest, and I've always wanted to tell you that it doesn't matter what kind of people your parents are, doesn't matter if they're selfish mean-spirited drunks; what matters is that you have the capacity to be far better than they are; you have the capacity to love and to learn and to know the joy of a fulfilling life-

and Seed swarmed over her, trying to draw her consciousness back into her own body, out of the minds of the others. However, in spite of its billions of years of experience and its vast knowledge acquired from hundreds of doomed species, it found itself unequal to the task. Laura examined it and judged it inferior because it did not need love, could not give love. Its will was weaker than human will because humans could love, and in their love they found a reason to strive, a reason to seek order out of chaos, to make better lives for those whom they cherished. Love gave purpose to will and made it infinitely stronger. To some species, Seed might be a welcome master, offering the false security of a single purpose, a single law. But to humankind, Seed was anathema-

Tommy, you can tear loose if you'll think of your sister Edna, because I know you love Edna more than anything; and you, Melissa, you must think of your father and mother because they love you so much, because they almost lost you when you were a baby (did you know that?) and losing you would have broken them; and you, Helen, you're one heck of a little girl, and I couldn't love you more if you were my own, you have such a sweet concern for others, and I know you can throw this damn thing off because you're all love from head to toe; and you, Jane Halliwell, I know you love your son and your husband because your love for Richie is so evident in the self-confidence you've given him and in the manners and courtesy you've taught him; you, Jimmy Corman, oh, yes, you talk tough and you act tough, but I know how much you love your brother Harry and how sad it makes you that Harry was born with a deformed hand, and I know that if someone made fun of poor Harry's twisted hand, you'd fight him with every bit of strength you have, so turn that love for Harry against this thing, this Seed, and destroy it, don't let it have you because if it gets you then it'll get Harry too-

and Laura walked into the room, among the possessed, touching them, hugging this one, lovingly squeezing the hand of the next one, looking into their eyes and using the power of love to bring them to her, out of their darkness and into the light with her.

AS HE SHATTERED THE BONDS THAT HELD HIM, AS HE CAST OFF SEED, Jamie Watley experienced a wave of dizziness and actually blacked out for an instant, not even long enough to collapse to the floor. Blackness flickered through him, and he swayed, but he came to his senses as his knees were buckling. He grabbed the edge of Mrs. Caswell's desk and steadied himself.

When he looked around the classroom, he saw the adults and the other children in similar shaky postures. Many were looking down in disgust, and Jamie saw that they were staring at the slick, mucus-wet black substance of Seed, which had been expelled from them and which writhed in pieces on the classroom floor.

Most of the alien tissue seemed to be dying, and a few pieces were actually decomposing with an awful stench. But suddenly one lump coalesced into the shape of a football. In seconds it formed a mottled blue-green-black shell, and as if bazooka-shot, it exploded through the ceiling of the room, showering them with plaster and bits of lath. It smashed through the roof of the one-story schoolhouse and disappeared straight up into the blue October sky.

TEACHERS AND KIDS CAME FROM ALL OVER THE BUILDING TO FIND OUT what had happened, and later the police arrived. The following day, both uniformed air-force officers and plainclothes government men visited the Caswell house among others. Throughout, Jack would not move far from Laura. He preferred to hold her - or at least her hand - and when they had to separate for a few minutes, he held fast to a mental picture of her, as if that image were a psychic totem that guaranteed her safe return.

Eventually the furor subsided, and the reporters went away, and life returned to normal - or as close to normal as it would ever be. By Christmas, Jack's nightmares began to diminish in both frequency and vividness, though he knew that he would need years to scrub out the residue of fear that was left from Seed's possession of him.

On Christmas Eve, sitting on the floor in front of the tree, sipping wine and eating walnuts, he and Laura exchanged gifts, for Christmas Day itself was always reserved for visiting their families. When the packages had been opened, they moved to a pair of armchairs in front of the fireplace.

After sitting quietly for a while, sipping at a final glass of wine and watching the flames, Laura said, "I've got one more gift that will have to be opened soon."

"One more? But I've nothing more for you."

"This is a gift for everyone," she said.

Her smile was so enigmatic that Jack was instantly intrigued. He leaned sideways in his chair and reached for her hand. "What're you being so mysterious about?"

"The thing healed you," she said.

His legs were propped on a hassock, as healthy and useful as they had been before his accident.

“At least some good came of it,” he said.

“More than you know,” she said. “During those awful moments when I was trying to expel the thing from my mind and body, while I was trying to get the kids to expel it from theirs, I was acutely aware of the creature’s own mind. Heck, I was within its mind. And since I’d noticed that you were healed and figured the creature must have been responsible for knitting up your legs, I poked around in its thoughts to see how it had worked that miracle.”

“You don’t mean-“

“Wait,” she said, pulling her hand from his. She slipped off her chair, dropped to her knees, leaned toward the fireplace, and thrust her right hand into the leaping flames.

Jack cried out, grabbed her, and pulled her back.

Grinning, Laura held up blistered fingers as raw as butchered beef, but even as Jack gasped in horror, he saw that her flesh was healing. In moments the blisters faded, the skin re-formed, and her hand was undamaged.

“The power’s within all of us,” she said. “We just have to learn how to use it. I’ve spent the past two months learning, and now I’m ready to teach others. You first, then my kids at school, then the whole darn world.”

Jack stared at her in astonishment.

She laughed with delight and threw herself into his arms. “It’s not easy to learn, Jackson. Oh, no! It’s hard. It’s hard. You don’t know how many nights I’ve sat up while you slept, working at it, trying to apply what I learned from Seed. There were times when my head felt as if it would burst with the effort, and trying to master the healing talent leaves you physically exhausted in a way I’ve never been before. It hurts all the way down in your bones. There were times when I despaired. But I learned. And others can learn. No matter how hard it is, I know I can teach them. I know I can, Jack.”

Regarding her with love but also with a new sense of wonder, Jack said, “Yeah, I know you can too. I know you can teach anything to anyone. You may be the greatest teacher who ever lived.”

“Miss Attila the Hun,” she said, and she kissed him.