

Stephen King - Rainy Season

Rainy Season  
by Stephen King

It was half past five in the afternoon by the time John and Elise Graham finally found their way into the little village that lay at the center of Willow, Maine, like a fleck of grit at the center of some dubious pearl. The village was less than five miles from the Hempstead Place, but they took two wrong turns on the way. When they finally arrived on Main Street, both of them were hot and out of sorts. The Ford's air-conditioner had dropped dead on the trip from St. Louis, and it felt about a hundred and ten outside. Of course it wasn't anything at all like that, John Graham thought. As the old-timers said, it wasn't the heat, it was the humidity. He felt that today it would be almost possible to reach out and wring warm dribbles of water from the air itself. The sky overhead was a clear and open blue, but that high humidity made it feel as if it were going to rain any minute. Fuck that -- it felt as if it were raining already.

"There's the market Milly Cousins told us about," Elise said, and pointed.

John grunted. "Doesn't exactly look like the supermarket of the future."

"No," Elise agreed carefully. They were both being careful. They had been married almost two years and they still loved each other very much, but it had been a long trip across country from St. Louis, especially in a car with a broken radio and air-conditioner. John had every hope they would enjoy the summer here in Willow (they ought to, with the University of Missouri picking up the tab), but he thought it might take as long as a week for them to settle in and settle down. And when the weather turned yellow-dog hot like this, an argument could spin itself out of thin air. Neither of them wanted that kind of start to their summer.

John drove slowly down Main Street toward the Willow General Mercantile and Hardware. There was a rusty sign with a blue eagle on it hanging from one corner of the porch, and he understood this was also the postal substation. The General Mercantile looked sleepy in the afternoon light, with one single car, a beat-to-shit Volvo, parked beside the sign advertising

ITALIAN SANDWICHES • PIZZA • GROCS • FISHING LICENCES,

but compared with the rest of the town, it seemed to be all but bursting with life. There was a neon beer sign fizzing away in the window, although it would not be dark for almost three hours yet. Pretty radical, John thought. Sure hope the owner cleared that sign with the Board of Selectmen before he put it in.

"I thought Maine turned into Vacationland in the summer," Elise murmured.

"Judging from what we've seen so far, I think Willow must be a little off the tourist track," he replied.

They got out of the car and mounted the porch steps. An elderly man in a straw hat sat in a rocker with a cane seat, looking at them from shrewd little blue eyes. He was fiddling a home-made cigarette together and dribbling little bits of tobacco on the dog which lay crashed out at his feet. It was a big yellow dog of no particular make or model. Its paws lay directly beneath one of the rocker's curved runners. The old man took no notice of the dog, seemed not even to realize it was there, but the runner stopped a quarter of an inch from the vulnerable paws each time the old man rocked forward. Elise found this unaccountably fascinating.

"Good day to ye, lady n man," the old gentleman said.

"Hello," Elise answered, and offered him a small, tentative smile.

"Hi," John said. "I'm -- "

"Mr. Graham," the old man finished placidly. "Mr. and Missus Graham. Ones that took the Hempstead Place for the summer. Heard you was writin some kind of book."

"On the in-migration of the French during the seventeenth century," John agreed.

"Word sure gets around, doesn't it?"

"It do travel," the old party agreed. "Small town, don'tcha know." He stuck the cigarette in his mouth, where it promptly fell apart, sprinkling tobacco all over his legs and the dog's limp hide. The dog didn't stir. "Aw, flapdoodle," the old man said, and peeled the uncoiling paper from his lower lip. "Wife doesn't want me to smoke nummore anyway. She says she read it's givin her cancer as well as m'ownself."

"We came into town to get a few supplies," Elise said. "It's a wonderful old house, but the cupboard is bare."

"Ayuh," the old man said. "Good to meet you folks. I'm Henry Eden." He hung one bunched hand out in their direction. John shook with him, and Elise followed suit. They both did so with care, and the old man nodded as if to say he appreciated it.

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"I expected you half an hour ago. Must have taken a wrong turn or two, I guess. Got a lot of roads for such a small town, you know." He laughed. It was a hollow, bronchial sound that turned into a phlegmy smoker's cough. "Got a power of roads in willow, oh, ayuh!" And laughed some more.

John was frowning a little. "Why would you be expecting us?"

"Lucy Doucette called, said she saw the new folks go by," Eden said. He took out his pouch of Top tobacco, opened it, reached inside, and fished out a packet of rolling papers. "You don't know Lucy, but she says you know her grandniece, Missus."

"This is Milly Cousins's great-aunt we're talking about?" Elise asked.

"Yessum," Eden agreed. He began to sprinkle tobacco. Some of it landed on the cigarette paper, but most went onto the dog below. Just as John Graham was beginning to wonder if maybe the dog was dead, it lifted its tail and farted. So much for that idea, he thought. "In willow, just about everybody's related to everybody else. Lucy lives down at the foot of the hill. I was gonna call you m'self, but since she said you was comin in anyway..."

"How did you know we'd be coming here?" John asked.

Henry Eden shrugged, as if to say where else is there to go?

"Did you want to talk to us?" Elise asked.

"Well, I kinda have to," Eden said. He sealed his cigarette and stuck it in his mouth. John waited to see if it would fall apart, as the other one had. He felt mildly disoriented by all this, as if he had walked unknowingly into some bucolic version of the CIA.

The cigarette somehow held together. There was a charred scrap of sandpaper tacked to one of the arms of the rocker. Eden struck the match on it and applied the flame to his cigarette, half of which incinerated on contact.

"I think you and Missus might want to spend tonight out of town," he finally said. John blinked at him. "Out of town? Why would we want to do that? We just got here."

"Good idea, though, mister," a voice said from behind Eden.

The Grahams looked around and saw a tall woman with slumped shoulders standing inside the Mercantile's rusty screen door. Her face looked out at them from just above an old tin sign advertising Chesterfield cigarettes -- TWENTY-ONE GREAT TOBACCOS MAKE TWENTY WONDERFUL SMOKES. She opened the door and came out on the porch. Her face looked sallow and tired but not stupid. She had a loaf of bread in one hand and a six-pack of Dawson's Ale in the other.

"I'm Laura Stanton," she said. "It's very nice to meet you. We don't like to seem unsociable in willow, but it's the rainy season here tonight."

John and Elise exchanged bewildered glances. Elise looked at the sky. Except for a few small fair-weather clouds, it was a lucid, unblemished blue.

"I know how it looks," the Stanton woman said, "but that doesn't mean anything, does it, Henry?"

"No'm," Eden said. He took one giant drag on his eroded cigarette and then pitched it over the porch rail.

"You can feel the humidity in the air," the Stanton woman said. "That's the key, isn't it, Henry?"

"Well," Eden allowed, "ayuh. But it is seven years. To the day."

"The very day," Laura Stanton agreed.

They both looked expectantly at the Grahams.

"Pardon me," Elise said at last. "I don't understand any of this. Is it some sort of local joke?"

This time Henry Eden and Laura Stanton exchanged the glances, then sighed at exactly the same moment, as if on cue.

"I hate this," Laura Stanton-said, although whether to the old man or to herself John Graham had no idea.

"Got to be done," Eden replied.

She nodded, and then sighed. It was the sigh of a woman who has set down a heavy burden and knows she must now pick it up again.

"This doesn't come up very often," she said, "because the rainy season only comes in willow every seven years -- "

"June seventeenth," Eden put in. "Rainy season every seven years on June seventeenth. Never changes, not even in leap-year. It's only one night, but rainy season's what it's always been called. Damned if I know why. Do you know why, Laura?"

"No," she said, "and I wish you'd stop interrupting, Henry. I think you're getting

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senile."

"Well, pardon me for livin, I just fell off the hearse," the old man said, clearly nettled.

Elise threw John a glance that was a little frightened. Are these people having us on? it asked. Or are they both crazy?

John didn't know, but he wished heartily that they had gone to Augusta for their supplies; they could have gotten a quick supper at one of the clam-stands along Route 17.

"Now listen," the Stanton woman said kindly. "We reserved a room for you at the Wonderview Motel out on the Woolwich Road, if you want it. The place was full, but the manager's my cousin, and he was able to clear one room out for me. You could come back tomorrow and spend the rest of the summer with us. We'd be glad to have you."

"If this is a joke, I'm not getting the point," John said.

"No, it's not a joke," she said. She glanced at Eden, who gave her a brisk little nod, as if to say Go on, don't quit now. The woman looked back at John and Elise, appeared to steel herself, and said, "You see, folks, it rains toads here in Willow every seven years. There. Now you know."

"Toads," Elise said in a distant, musing, Tell-me-I'm-dreaming-all-this voice.

"Toads, ayuh!" Henry Eden affirmed cheerfully.

John was looking cautiously around for help, if help should be needed. But Main Street was utterly deserted. Not only that, he saw, but shuttered. Not a car moved on the road. Not a single pedestrian was visible on either sidewalk.

We could be in trouble here, he thought. If these people are as nutty as they sound, we could be in real trouble. He suddenly found himself thinking of Shirley Jackson's short story "The Lottery" for the first time since he'd read it in junior high school.

"Don't you get the idea that I'm standin here and soundin like a fool 'cause I want to," Laura Stanton said. "Fact is, I'm just doin my duty. Henry, too. You see, it doesn't just sprinkle toads. It pours."

"Come on," John said to Elise, taking her arm above the elbow. He gave them a smile that felt as genuine as a six-dollar bill. "Nice to meet you folks." He guided Elise down the porch steps, looking back over his shoulder at the old man and the slump-shouldered, pallid woman two or three times as he did. It didn't seem like a good idea to turn his back on them completely.

The woman took a step toward them, and John almost stumbled and fell off the last step.

"It is a little hard to believe," she agreed. "You probably think I am just as nutty as a fruitcake."

"Not at all," John said. The large, phony smile on his face now felt as if it were approaching the lobes of his ears. Dear Jesus, why had he ever left St. Louis? He had driven nearly fifteen hundred miles with a busted radio and air-conditioner to meet Farmer Jekyll and Missus Hyde.

"That's all right, though," Laura Stanton said, and the weird serenity in her face and voice made him stop by the ITALIAN SANDWICHES sign, still six feet from the Ford. "Even people who have heard of rains of frogs and toads and birds and such don't have a very clear idea of what happens in Willow every seven years. Take a little advice, though: if you are going to stay, you'd be well off to stay in the house. You'll most likely be all right in the house."

"Might want to close y'shutters, though," Eden added. The dog lifted his tail and articulated another long and groaning dog-fart, as if to emphasize the point.

"We'll... we'll do that," Elise said faintly, and then John had the Ford's passenger door open and was nearly shovelling her inside.

"You bet," he said through his large frozen grin.

"And come back and see us tomorrow," Eden called as John hurried around the front of the Ford to his side. "You'll feel a mite safer around us tomorrow, I think." He paused, then added: "If you're still around at all, accourse."

John waved, got behind the wheel, and pulled out.

There was silence on the porch for a moment as the old man and the woman with the pale, unhealthy skin watched the Ford head back up Main Street. It left at a considerably higher speed than that at which it had come.

"Well, we done it," the old man said contentedly.

"Yes," she agreed, "and I feel like a horse's ass. I always feel like a horse's ass

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when I see the way they look at us. At me."

"Well," he said, "it's only once every seven years. And it has to be done just that way. Because -- "

"Because it's part of the ritual," she said glumly.

"Ayuh. It's the ritual."

As if agreeing it was so, the dog flipped up his tail and farted once more.

The woman booted it and then turned to the old man with her hands clamped on her hips. "That is the stinkiest mutt in four towns, Henry Eden!"

The dog arose with a grunt and staggered down the porch stairs, pausing only long enough to favor Laura Stanton with a reproachful gaze.

"He can't help it," Eden said.

She sighed, looking up the road after the Ford. "It's too bad," she said. "They seem like such nice people."

"Nor can we help that," Henry Eden said, and began to roll another smoke.

So the Grahams ended up eating dinner at a clam-stand after all. They found one in the neighboring town of Woolwich ("Home of the scenic wonderview Motel," John pointed out to Elise in a vain effort to raise a smile) and sat at a picnic table under an old, overspreading blue spruce. The clam-stand was in sharp, almost jarring contrast to the buildings on Willow's Main Street. The parking lot was nearly full (most of the cars, like theirs, had out-of-state licence plates), and yelling kids with ice cream on their faces chased after one another while their parents strolled about, slapped blackflies, and waited for their numbers to be announced over the loudspeaker. The stand had a fairly wide menu. In fact, John thought, you could have just about anything you wanted, as long as it wasn't too big to fit in a deep-fat fryer.

"I don't know if I can spend two days in that town, let alone two months," Elise said. "The bloom is off the rose for this mother's daughter, Johnny."

"It was a joke, that's all. The kind the natives like to play on the tourists. They just went too far with it. They're probably kicking themselves for that right now."

"They looked serious," she said. "How am I supposed to go back there and face that old man after that?"

"I wouldn't worry about it -- judging from his cigarettes, he's reached the stage of life where he's meeting everyone for the first time. Even his oldest friends."

Elise tried to control the twitching corners of her mouth, then gave up and burst out laughing. "You're evil!"

"Honest, maybe, but not evil. I won't say he had Alzheimer's, but he did look as if he might need a roadmap to find his way to the bathroom."

"Where do you suppose everyone else was? The town looked totally deserted."

"Bean supper at the Grange or a card-party at the Eastern Star, probably," John said, stretching. He peeked into her clam basket. "You didn't eat much, love."

"Love wasn't very hungry."

"I tell you it was just a joke" he said, taking her hands. "Lighten up."

"You're really, really sure that's all it was?"

"Really-really. I mean, hey -- every seven years it rains toads in Willow, Maine? It sounds like an outtake from a Steven Wright monologue."

She smiled wanly. "It doesn't rain," she said, "it pours."

"They subscribe to the old fisherman's credo, I guess -- if you're going to tell one, tell a whopper. When I was a kid at sleep-away camp, it used to be snipe hunts. This really isn't much different. And when you stop to think about it, it really isn't that surprising."

"What isn't?"

"That people who make most of their yearly income dealing with summer people should develop a summer-camp mentality."

"That woman didn't act like it was a joke. I'll tell you the truth, Johnny -- she sort of scared me."

John Graham's normally pleasant face grew stern and hard. The expression did not look at home on his face, but neither did it look faked or insincere.

"I know," he said, picking up their wrappings and napkins and plastic baskets. "And there's going to be an apology made for that. I find foolishness for the sake of foolishness agreeable enough, but when someone scares my wife -- hell, they scared me a little, too -- I draw the line. Ready to go back?"

"Can you find it again?"

He grinned, and immediately looked more like himself. "I left a trail of

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breadcrumbs."

"How wise you are, my darling," she said, and got up. She was smiling again, and John was glad to see it. She drew a deep breath -- it did wonders for the front of the blue chambray work-shirt she was wearing -- and let it out. "The humidity seems to have dropped."

"Yeah." John deposited their waste into a trash basket with a left-handed hook shot and then winked at her. "So much for rainy season."

But by the time they turned onto the Hempstead Road, the humidity had returned, and with a vengeance. John felt as if his own tee-shirt had turned into a clammy mass of cobweb clinging to his chest and back. The sky, now turning a delicate shade of evening primrose, was still clear, but he felt that, if he'd had a straw, he could have drunk directly from the air.

There was only one other house on the road, at the foot of the long hill with the Hempstead Place at the top. As they drove past it, John saw the silhouette of a woman standing motionless at one of the windows and looking out at them.

"Well, there's your friend Milly's great-aunt," John said. "She sure was a sport to call the local crazies down at the general store and tell them we were coming. I wonder if they would have dragged out the whoopee cushions and joy-buzzers and chatter teeth if we'd stayed a little longer."

"That dog had his own built-in joy-buzzer."

John laughed and nodded.

Five minutes later they were turning into their own driveway. It was badly overgrown with weeds and dwarf bushes, and John intended to take care of that little situation before the summer got much older. The Hempstead Place itself was a rambling country farmhouse, added to by succeeding generations whenever the need -- or maybe just the urge -- to do some building happened to strike. A barn stood behind it, connected to the house by three rambling, zig-zag sheds. In this flush of early summer, two of the three sheds were almost buried in fragrant drifts of honeysuckle.

It commanded a gorgeous view of the town, especially on a clear night like this one.

John wondered briefly just how it could be so clear when the humidity was so high.

Elise joined him in front of the car and they stood there for a moment, arms around each other's waists, looking at the hills, which rolled gently off in the direction of Augusta, losing themselves in the shadows of evening.

"It's beautiful," she murmured.

"And listen," he said.

There was a marshy area of reeds and high grass fifty yards or so behind the barn, and in it a chorus of frogs sang and thumped and snapped the elastics God had for some reason stretched in their throats.

"Well," she said, "the frogs are all present and accounted for, anyway."

"No toads, though." He looked up at the clear sky, in which Venus had now opened her coldly burning eye. "There they are, Elise! Up there! Clouds of toads!"

She giggled.

" 'Tonight in the small town of willow,' " he intoned, " 'a cold front of toads met a warm front of newts, and the result was -- ' "

She elbowed him. "You," she said. "Let's go in."

They went in. And did not pass Go. And did not collect two hundred dollars.

They went directly to bed.

Elise was startled out of a satisfying drowse an hour or so later by a thump on the roof. She got up on her elbows. "What was that, Johnny?"

"Huzz," John said, and turned over on his side.

Toads, she thought, and giggled... but it was a nervous giggle. She got up and went to the window, and before she looked for anything, which might have fallen on the ground, she found herself looking up at the sky.

It was still cloudless, and now shot with a trillion spangled stars. She looked at them, for a moment hypnotized by their simple silent beauty.

Thud.

She jerked back from the window and looked up at the ceiling. whatever it was, it had hit the roof just overhead.

"John! Johnny! wake up!"

"Huh? what?" He sat up, his hair all tangled tufts and clock-springs.

"It's started," she said, and giggled shrilly. "The rain of frogs."

"Toads," he corrected. "Ellie, what are you talking ab -- "

Thud-thud.

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He looked around, then swung his feet out of bed.

"This is ridiculous," he said softly and angrily.

"What do you m -- "

Thud-CRASH! There was a tinkle of glass downstairs.

"Oh, goddam," he said, getting up and yanking on his blue-jeans. "Enough. This is just... fucking... enough."

Several soft thuds hit the side of the house and the roof. She cringed against him, frightened now. 'What do you mean?'

'I mean that crazy woman and probably the old man and some of their friends are out there throwing things at the house," he said, "and I am going to put a stop to it right now. Maybe they've held onto the custom of shivareeing the new folks in this little town, but -- "

THUD! SMASH! From the kitchen.

"God-DAMN!" John yelled, and ran out into the hall.

"Don't leave me!" Elise cried, and ran after him.

He flicked up the hallway light-switch before plunging downstairs. Soft thumps and thuds struck the house in an increasing rhythm, and Elise had time to think, How many people from town are out there? How many does it take to do that? And what are they throwing? Rocks wrapped in pillowcases?

John reached the foot of the stairs and went into the living room. There was a large window in there, which gave on the same view, which they had admired earlier. The window was broken. Shards and splinters of glass lay scattered across the rug. He started toward the window, meaning to yell something at them about how he was going to get his shotgun. Then he looked at the broken glass again, remembered that his feet were bare, and stopped. For a moment he didn't know what to do. Then he saw a dark shape lying in the broken glass -- the rock one of the imbecilic, interbred bastards had used to break the window, he assumed -- and saw red. He might have charged to the window anyway, bare feet or no bare feet, but just then the rock twitched.

That's no rock, he thought. That's a --

"John?" Elise asked. The house rang with those soft thuds now. It was as if they were being bombarded with large, rotten-soft hailstones. "John, what is it?"

"A toad," he said stupidly. He was still looking at the twitching shape in the litter of broken glass, and spoke more to himself than to his wife.

He raised his eyes and looked out the window. What he saw out there struck him mute with horror and incredulity. He could no longer see the hills or the horizon -- hell, he could barely see the barn, and that was less than forty feet away.

The air was stuffed with falling shapes.

Three more of them came in through the broken window. One landed on the floor, not far from its twitching mate. It came down on a sharp sliver of window-glass and black fluid burst from its body in thick ropes.

Elise screamed.

The other two caught in the curtains, which began to twist and jerk as if in a fitful breeze. One of them managed to disentangle itself. It struck the floor and then hopped toward John.

He groped at the wall with a hand, which felt as if it were no part of him at all. His fingers stumbled across the light-switch and flipped it up.

The thing hopping across the glass-littered floor toward him was a toad, but it was also not a toad. Its green-black body was too large, too lumpy. Its black-and-gold eyes bulged like freakish eggs. And bursting from its mouth, unhinging the jaw, was a bouquet of large, needle-sharp teeth.

It made a thick croaking noise and bounded at John as if on springs. Behind it, more toads were falling in through the window. The ones which struck the floor had either died outright or been crippled, but many others -- too many others -- used the curtains as a safety-net and tumbled to the floor unharmed.

"Get out of here!" John yelled to his wife, and kicked at the toad which -- it was insane, but it was true -- was attacking him. It did not flinch back from his foot but sank that mouthful of crooked needles first over and then into his toes. The pain was immediate, fiery, and immense. Without thinking, he made a half-turn and kicked the wall as hard as he could. He felt his toes break, but the toad broke as well, splattering its black blood onto the wainscoting in a half-circle, like a fan. His toes had become a crazy road-sign, pointing in all directions at once.

Elise was standing frozen in the hall doorway. She could now hear window-glass

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shattering all over the house. She had put on one of John's tee-shirts after they had finished making love, and now she was clutching the neck of it with both hands. The air was full of ugly croaking sounds.

"Get out, Elise!" John screamed. He turned, shaking his bloody foot. The toad which had bitten him was dead, but its huge and improbable teeth were still caught in his flesh like a tangle of fishhooks. This time he kicked at the air, like a man punting a football, and the toad finally flew free.

The faded living-room carpet was now covered with bloated, hopping bodies. And they were all hopping at them.

John ran to the doorway. His foot came down on one of the toads and burst it open. His heel skidded in the cold jelly, which popped out of its body, and he almost fell. Elise relinquished her death-grip on the neck of her tee-shirt and grabbed him. They stumbled into the hall together and John slammed the door, catching one of the toads in the act of hopping through. The door cut it in half. The top half twitched and juddered on the floor, its toothy, black-lipped mouth opening and closing, its black-and-golden pop-eyes goggling at them.

Elise clapped her hands to the sides of her face and began to wail hysterically. John reached out to her. She shook her head and cringed away from him, her hair falling over her face.

The sound of the toads hitting the roof was bad, but the croakings and chirrupings were worse, because these latter sounds were coming from inside the house... and all over the house. He thought of the old man sitting on the porch of the General Mercantile in his rocker, calling after them: Might want to close y 'shutters. Christ, why didn't I believe him?

And, on the heels of that: How was I supposed to believe him? Nothing in my whole life prepared me to believe him!

And, below the sound of toads thudding onto the ground outside and toads squashing themselves to guts and goo on the roof, he heard a more ominous sound: the chewing, splintering sound of the toads in the living room starting to bite their way through the door. He could actually see it settling more firmly against its langes as more and more toads crowded their weight against it. He turned around and saw toads hopping down the main staircase by the dozens.

"Elise!" He grabbed at her. She kept shrieking and pulling away from him. A sleeve of the tee-shirt tore free. He looked at the ragged chunk of cloth in his hand with perfect stupidity for a moment and then let it flutter down to the floor.

"Elise, goddammit!"

She shrieked and drew back again.

Now the first toads had reached the hall floor and were hopping eagerly toward them. There was a brittle tinkle as the fanlight over the door shattered. A toad whizzed through it, struck the carpet, and lay on its back, mottled pink belly exposed, webbed feet twitching in the air.

He grabbed his wife, shook her. "We have to go down cellar! We'll be safe in the cellar!"

"No!" Elise screamed at him. Her eyes were giant floating zeros, and he understood she was not refusing his idea of retreating to the cellar but refusing everything. There was no time for gentle measures or soothing words. He bunched the front of the shirt she was wearing in his fist and yanked her down the hall like a cop dragging a recalcitrant prisoner to a squad car. One of the toads which had been in the vanguard of those hurrying down the stairs leaped gigantically and snicked its mouthful of darning-needles shut around a chunk of space occupied by Elise's bare heel a second before.

Halfway down the hall, she got the idea and began to come with him of her own accord. They reached the door. John turned the knob and yanked it, but the door wouldn't move.

"Goddam!" he cried, and yanked it again. No good. Nothing.

"John, hurry!"

She looked back over her shoulder and saw toads flooding down the hall toward them, taking huge crazy sproings over each other's back, falling on each other, striking the faded rambler-rose wallpaper, landing on their backs and being overrun by their mates. They were all teeth and gold-black eyes and heaving, leathery bodies.

"JOHN, PLEASE! PL -- "

Then one of them leaped and batted on her left thigh just above the knee. Elise screamed and seized it, her fingers punching through its skin and into its dark

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liquid workings. She tore it free and for a moment, as she raised her arms, the horrid thing was right in front of her eyes, its teeth gnashing like a piece of some small but homicidal factory machine. She threw it as hard as she could. It cart-wheeled in the air and then splattered against the wall just opposite the kitchen door. It did not fall but stuck fast in the glue of its own guts.

"JOHN! OH JESUS. JOHN!"

John Graham suddenly realized what he was doing wrong. He reversed the direction of his effort, pushing the door instead of pulling it. It flew open, almost spilling him forward and down the stairs, and he wondered briefly if his mother had had any kids that lived. He flailed at the railing, caught hold of it, and then Elise almost knocked him down again, bolting past him and down the stairs, screaming like a firebell in the night.

Oh she's going to fall, she can't help but fall, she's going to fall and break her neck --

But somehow she did not. She reached the cellar's earth floor and collapsed in a sobbing heap, clutching at her torn thigh.

Toads were leaping and hopping in through the open cellar doorway.

John caught his balance, turned, and slapped the door shut. Several of the toads caught on their side of the door leaped right off the landing, struck the stairs, and fell through the spaces between the risers. Another took an almost vertical leap straight up, and John was suddenly shaken by wild laughter -- a sudden bright image of Mr. Toad of Toad Hall on a pogo-stick instead of in a motor-car had come to him. Still laughing, he balled his right hand into a fist and punched the toad dead center in its pulsing, flabby chest at the top of its leap, while it hung in perfect equilibrium between gravity and its own expended energy. It zoomed off into the shadows, and John heard a soft bonk! as it struck the furnace.

He scrabbled at the wall in the dark, and his fingers found the raised cylinder, which was the old-fashioned toggle light-switch. He flipped it, and that was when Elise began to scream again. A toad had gotten tangled in her hair. It croaked and twisted and turned and bit at her neck, rolling itself into something, which resembled a large, misshapen curler.

Elise lurched to her feet and ran in a large circle, miraculously avoiding a tumble over the boxes, which had been stacked and stored down here. She struck one of the cellar's support posts, rebounded, then turned and banged the back of her head twice, briskly, against it. There was a thick gushing sound, a squirt of black fluid, and then the toad fell out of her hair, tumbling down the back of her tee-shirt, leaving dribbles of ichor.

She screamed, and the lunacy in that sound chilled John's blood. He half-ran, half-stumbled down the cellar stairs and enfolded her in his arms. She fought him at first and then surrendered. Her screams gradually dissolved into steady weeping. Then, over the soft thunder of the toads striking the house and the grounds, they heard the croaking of the toads, which had fallen down here. She drew away from him, her eyes shifting wildly from side to side in their shiny-white sockets.

"Where are they?" she panted. Her voice was hoarse, almost a bark, from all the screaming she had done. "Where are they, John?"

But they didn't have to look; the toads had already seen them, and came hopping eagerly toward them.

The Grahams retreated, and John saw a rusty shovel leaning against the wall. He grabbed it and beat the toads to death with it as they came. Only one got past him. It leaped from the floor to a box and from the box it jumped at Elise, catching the cloth of her shirt in its teeth and dangling there between her breasts, legs kicking.

"Stand still!" John barked at her. He dropped the shovel, took two steps forward, grabbed the toad, and hauled it off her shirt. It took a chunk of cloth with it. The cotton strip hung from one of its fangs as it twisted and pulsed and wriggled in John's hands. Its hide was warty, dry but horridly warm and somehow busy. He snapped his hands into fists, popping the toad. Blood and slime squirted out from between his fingers.

Less than a dozen of the little monsters had actually made it through the cellar door, and soon they were all dead. John and Elise clung to each other, listening to the steady rain of toads outside.

John looked over at the low cellar windows. They were packed and dark, and he



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suddenly saw the house as it must look from the outside, buried in a drift of squirming, lunging, leaping toads.

"We've got to block the windows," he said hoarsely. "Their weight is going to break them, and if that happens, they'll pour in."

"With what?" Elise asked in her hoarse bark of a voice. "What can we use?"

He looked around and saw several sheets of plywood, elderly and dark, leaning against one wall. Not much, perhaps, but something.

"That," he said. "Help me to break it up into smaller pieces."

They worked quickly and frantically. There were only four windows in the cellar, and their very narrowness had caused the panes to hold longer than the larger windows upstairs had done. They were just finishing the last when they heard the glass of the first shatter behind the plywood... but the plywood held.

They staggered into the middle of the cellar again, John limping on his broken foot. From the top of the stairway came the sound of the toads eating their way through the cellar door.

"What do we do if they eat all the way through it?" Elise whispered.

"I don't know," he said... and that was when the door of the coal-chute, unused for years but still intact, suddenly swung open under the weight of all the toads which had fallen or hopped onto it, and hundreds of them poured out in a high-pressure jet.

This time Elise could not scream. She had damaged her vocal chords too badly for that.

It did not last long for the Grahams in the cellar after the coal-chute door gave way, but until it was over, John Graham screamed quite adequately for both of them. By midnight, the downpour of toads in willow had slackened off to a mild, croaking drizzle.

At one-thirty in the morning, the last toad fell out of the dark, starry sky, landed in a pine tree near the lake, hopped to the ground, and disappeared into the night. It was over for another seven years.

Around quarter past five, the first light began to creep into the sky and over the land. Willow was buried beneath a writhing, hopping, complaining carpet of toads. The buildings on Main Street had lost their angles and corners; everything was rounded and hunched and twitching. The sign on the highway, which read:

WELCOME TO WILLOW, MAINE,  
THE FRIENDLY PLACE!

Looked as if someone had put about thirty shotgun shells through it. Flying toads, of course, had made the holes. The sign in front of the General Mercantile, which advertised:

ITALIAN SANDWICHES • PIZZA •  
GROCS • FISHING LICENCES

Had been knocked over. Toads played leapfrog on and around it. There was a small toad convention going on atop each of the gas-pumps at Donny's Sunoco. Two toads sat upon the slowly swinging iron arm of the weathervane atop the willow Stove Shop like small misshapen children on a merry-go-round.

At the lake, the few floats which had been put out this early (only the hardiest swimmers dared the waters of Lake Willow before July 4th, however, toads or no toads) were piled high with toads, and the fish were going crazy with so much food almost within reach. Every now and then there was a plip! plip! sound as one or two of the toads jostling for place on the floats were knocked off and some hungry trout or salmon's breakfast was served. The roads in and out of town -- there were a lot of them for such a small town, as Henry Eden had said -- were paved with toads. The power was out for the time being; free-falling toads had broken the power-lines in any number of places. Most of the gardens were ruined, but Willow wasn't much of a farming community, anyway. Several people kept fairly large dairy herds, but they had all been safely tucked away for the night. Dairy farmers in Willow knew all about rainy season and had no wish to lose their milkers to the hordes of leaping, carnivorous toads. What in the hell would you tell the insurance company?

As the light brightened over the Hempstead Place, it revealed drifts of dead toads on the roof, rain-gutters that had been splintered loose by dive-bombing toads, a dooryard that was alive with toads. They hopped in and out of the barn, they stuffed the chimneys, and they hopped nonchalantly around the tires of John Graham's Ford and sat in croaking rows on the front seat like a church congregation waiting for the services to start. Heaps of toads, mostly dead, lay in drifts against the

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building. Some of these drifts were six feet deep.

At 6:05, the sun cleared the horizon, and as its rays struck them, the toads began to melt.

Their skins bleached, turned white, then appeared to become transparent. Soon a vapor that gave off a vaguely swampy smell began to trail up from the bodies and little bubbly rivulets of moisture began to course down them. Their eyes fell in or fell out, depending on their positions when the sun hit them. Their skins popped with an audible sound, and for perhaps ten minutes it sounded as if champagne corks were being drawn all over Willow.

They decomposed rapidly after that, melting into puddles of cloudy white shmeg that looked like human semen. This liquid ran down the pitches of the Hempstead Place's roof in little creeks and dripped from the eaves like pus.

The living toads died; the dead ones simply rotted to that white fluid. It bubbled briefly and then sank slowly into the ground. The earth sent up tiny ribands of steam, and for a little while every field in Willow looked like the site of a dying volcano.

By quarter of seven it was over, except for the repairs, and the residents were used to them.

It seemed a small price to pay for another seven years of quiet prosperity in this mostly forgotten Maine backwater.

At five past eight, Laura Stanton's beat-to-shit Volvo turned into the dooryard of the General Mercantile. When Laura got out, she looked paler and sicker than ever. She was sick, in fact; she still had the six-pack of Dawson's Ale in one hand, but now all the bottles were empty. She had a vicious hangover.

Henry Eden came out on the porch. His dog walked behind him.

"Get that mutt inside, or I'm gonna turn right around and go home," Laura said from the foot of the stairs.

"He can't help passing gas, Laura."

"That doesn't mean I have to be around when he lets rip," Laura said. "I mean it, now, Henry. My head hurts like a bastard, and the last thing I need this morning is listening to that dog play Hail Columbia out of its asshole."

"Go inside, Toby," Henry said, holding the door open.

Toby looked up at him with wet eyes, as if to say Do I have to? Things were just getting interesting out here.

"Go on, now," Henry said.

Toby walked back inside, and Henry shut the door. Laura waited until she heard the latch snick shut, and then she mounted the steps.

"Your sign fell over," she said, handing him the carton of empties.

"I got eyes, woman," Henry said. He was not in the best temper this morning, himself. Few people in Willow would be. Sleeping through a rain of toads was a goddam hard piece of work. Thank God it only came once every seven years, or a man would be apt to go shit out of his mind.

"You should have taken it in," she said.

Henry muttered something she didn't quite catch.

"What was that?"

"I said we should have tried harder," Henry said defiantly. "They was a nice young couple. We should have tried harder."

She felt a touch of compassion for the old man in spite of her thudding head, and laid a hand on his arm. "It's the ritual," she said.

"Well, sometimes I just feel like saying frig the ritual!"

"Henry!" She drew her hand back, shocked in spite of herself.

But he wasn't getting any younger, she reminded herself. The wheels were getting a little rusty upstairs, no doubt.

"I don't care," he said stubbornly. "They seemed like a real nice young couple. You said so, too, and don't try to say you didn't."

"I did think they were nice," she said. "But we can't help that, Henry. Why, you said so yourself just last night."

"I know," he sighed.

"We don't make them stay," she said. "Just the opposite. We warn them out of town. They decide to stay themselves. They always decide to stay. They make their own decision. That's part of the ritual, too."

"I know," he repeated. He drew a deep breath and grimaced. "I hate the smell afterward. Whole goddam town smells like clabbered milk."

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"It'll be gone by noon. You know that."

"Ayuh. But I just about hope I'm underground when it comes around again, Laura. And if I ain't, I hope somebody else gets the job of meetin whoever comes just before rainy season. I like bein able to pay m' bills when they come due just as well as anybody else, but I tell you, a man gets tired of toads. Even if it is only once every seven years, a man can get damned tired of toads."

"A woman, too," she said softly.

"Well," he said, looking around with a sigh, "I guess we might try puttin some of this damn mess right, don't you?"

"Sure," she said. "And, you know, Henry, we don't make ritual, we only follow it."

"I know, but -- "

"And things could change. There's no telling when or why, but they could. This might be the last time we have rainy season. Or next time no one from out of town might come -- "

"Don't say that," he said fearfully. "If no one comes, the toads might not go away like they do when the sun hits em."

"There, you see?" she asked. "You have come around to my side of it, after all."

"Well," he said, "it's a long time. Ain't it. Seven years is a long time."

"Yes."

"They was a nice young couple, weren't they?"

"Yes," she said again.

"Awful way to go," Henry Eden said with a slight hitch in his voice, and this time she said nothing. After a moment, Henry asked her if she would help him set his sign up again. In spite of her nasty headache, Laura said she would -- she didn't like to see Henry so low, especially when he was feeling low over something he could control no more than he could control the tides or the phases of the moon.

By the time they'd finished, he seemed to feel a little better.

"Ayuh," he said. "Seven years is a hell of a long time."

It is, she thought, but it always passes, and rainy season always comes around again, and the outsiders come with it, always two of them, always a man and a woman, and we always tell them exactly what is going to happen, and they don't believe it, and what happens... happens.

"Come on, you old crock," she said, "offer me a cup of coffee before my head splits wide open."

He offered her a cup, and before they had finished, the sounds of hammers and saws had begun in town. Outside the window they could look down Main Street and see people folding back their shutters, talking and laughing.

The air was warm and dry, the sky overhead was a pale and hazy blue, and in willow, rainy season was over.