

ADAMTROYCASTRO

LOCUSTS

1.

One got in just before dawn. That's when they always got in. That's when the skies just opened up with billions of them, and the thumpthumpthump of their tiny forms smashing against the house became the only sound in the known universe. That's when the few of us still left alive huddled together in Sharon's basement under an old canvas tarpaulin, spending the night as we always did, breathing each others' breath, smelling each others' sweat, feeling each others' sanity wither beneath the constant tattoo of little bodies smashing against brick walls.

Then the pounding meant nothing, because all of a sudden there was a Locust flying around in the room with us, her gossamer wings making soft whispery sounds as they feather-dusted the soot from the ceiling. She made a low pass over our heads, chittering in the high-pitched rhythmic tones I'd always imagined a form of sonar, showing no sign that she sensed us as anything other than a shapeless mound below her.

We might have been able to hide from her forever, had my poor deaf, blind, and mad wife Jane not chosen that moment to start screaming again, with all five of her mouths at once.

"Stu!" Claudette hissed. "Stop her --"

She didn't get to say anything else. The Locust strafed us, her glittering rainbow-trail neatly slicing the tarpaulin, and Claudette's neck, like tissue paper. Her blood geysered against the underside of the canvas, splattering the rest of us like hot rain.

Jane just went on screaming. But by then her multiple voices were just a small part of the choir, because we were all screaming. Peter was screaming because Claudette had been his wife, and Sharon was screaming for everybody to stay calm dammit, and Bob was screaming because his shellshocked brain wasn't capable of anything else, and Nancy was screaming because she wanted everybody to know it was all Jane's fault, and I was screaming because I was scrabbling out from under the mined tarpaulin, aerosol bug spray in hand, to face the Locust before it killed the rest of us.

It wasn't as dark in the basement as it should have been. The lights weren't working anymore; they hadn't worked in weeks, because nothing electrical worked anymore, not even flashlights -- but the Locust emitted a soft white halo that lit up the whole room. Her rainbow trail was already fading into intangibility where it had sliced through Claudette, but the freshest sections, immediately behind her, shimmered and sparkled like a symphony of color, lending the room

around us the trippy lighting of a fever dream. It was magical and ageless and Disneyesque and deadly.

As was the little monster itself, who turned in mid-air to face me. It was a rare thing to get this close a look at a living one; mostly, the only ones we got to see were smashed and broken corpses. We'd never actually seen an ugly one, not even once in all the months since the skies first turned dark with them, but this one was a knockout, blessed with more than her share of the ageless, innocent, and utterly androgynous beauty they all possessed. Some of them had always been marginally identifiable as males, others as females; this one was lithe and athletic and cute and looked exactly like any other pre-adolescent mall brat, except that she was six inches tall, covered head to toe with a light pink down, and flitting through the air on colorful butterfly wings. As she giggled with high-pitched helium delight, I could have easily found myself too charmed into immobility to react. But her eyes -- -- the Locust smiled winsomely and went for me at full speed, a rainbow blur cracking the air behind her like a whip.

I lit the bug spray and let the little bitch have a jet of white flame right in the face. She screeched and fell back, trailing black smoke. I kept the flame steady, even as she spiralled toward the floor, incinerating her, burning even the ashes, all the while screaming at the top of my lungs.

My friends and neighbors were still cowering under the remains of the tarpaulin when the can ran out of propellant, God alone knows how much later. I dropped

it, knelt by the blackened smear on the basement floor, covered my face with my hands, and sobbed.

Sharon was the only one to come out of hiding to get me. She walked stiffly, and hesitantly, as if unsure the ground wouldn't open up under her feet. The Rorschach stains left by Claudette's blood were already beginning to dry on the remains of her blouse; they'd already dried on her prematurely graying hair, dyeing the silvered brown a shinier shade of black. She put a sticky hand on my shoulder and croaked, "That took balls, Stu."

I looked at my empty hands and said nothing.

"You saved us," she said.

The thing had had my daughter Rachel's eyes.

One of their favorite tricks: looking like somebody you loved, and wouldn't hurt in a million years.

But Rachel was gone. She wasn't dead. At least, I didn't think she was dead; she certainly wasn't human, but I didn't consider that dead. Those distinctions didn't mean as much as they used to. Suffice it to say that she wasn't exactly my daughter anymore . . .

I said, "So what?"

Sharon sat down beside me, respecting my need for silence, but unwilling to leave me alone.

As if any of us would ever be alone again, in the world ruled by Locusts. 2.

Our fellow survivors didn't emerge from underneath the tarpaulin until just before dawn, when the thumpthumpthump petered away to a dead silence, and Sharon went to open the doors that let daylight, of a kind, shine down into the basement where the last of the neighborhood's survivors spent their nights huddled in darkness. Even then they emerged only one or two at a time, starting with the once-arrogant, now haggard and freshly widowed Peter. He'd been an arrogant, buttoned-down, criminal lawyer, back when there was still such a thing as law, of either the legal or natural variety. He'd been a good one, too, with a reputation for bullying judges and getting away with it. But he'd seen something; early in the Plague, something which shattered him, rendered all his strength a lie, and left him speaking only in stutters and walking only with tiny, hesitant, beaten steps. He'd lost his children the same night Jane and I lost ours; he'd just lost Claudette, who'd managed to hold on to her strength until the very end; and what was left of him just wasn't very much. When Sharon hopped up and put her arms around him, to whisper her usual little inadequate words of comfort, Peter didn't hear her. Peter didn't hear anything.

Nancy came out right behind him: hard, polished, elegant, sharp-as-a-razor's edge Nancy, who as usual didn't look upset at all, who instead looked rather pleased, as she always did when she emerged unscathed and thus superior to those

who'd died. Even splattered with Claudette's blood, she remained in tight control, the only one of us who hadn't aged lifetimes in the past few weeks, the only one who in this awful new world actually seemed to thrive . . . a fact not a major surprise to those of us who'd had to endure living on the same block as her. Among other things, she'd been the kind of neighbor who liked making lists and complaining to the cops. She fixed her bright violet eyes on mine. "I think it's time we had a little talk," she said.

As always, there was a little added edge to the word "I." She gave it three syllables, which was appropriate, considering how frequently she used it to begin sentences.

"I'm not in the mood," I said.

"That's too bad. We should have had this out long ago."

There was no long ago, in this situation; the Locusts had only been around for three weeks. But Nancy was right. There'd always been a big hate brewing between us, for as long as we'd known each other; all the years she'd harassed us from her perch just down the block, I'd known it would finally come down to a confrontation. I'd just hoped it wouldn't come now, with the blood of another friend still drying on my shirt. "What do you want?"

"I want you to realize who just got Claudette killed."

Bob Something, who'd been a painting contractor working at the Johnsons' just

around the bend, who had worked late the night the Locusts first started to fall and who had first staggered into our makeshift shelter incapable of speaking more than half a dozen coherent words at a time, emerged from beneath the tarpaulin, his bovine eyes as black and uncomprehending as any other dumb animal delivered to the slaughterhouse. Bob was even worse off than Peter, he'd regressed almost all the way to infancy. Oh, he managed sentences sometimes -- but never anything clear enough to explain what had happened to him, or how the Johnsons had died, or where he'd picked up the disquieting bums that made rags of his paint-speckled overalls. He just shuffled around waiting for us to tell him what to do next . . .

That left only one figure still rocking back and forth under the tarpaulin -- the one Nancy clearly held responsible for Claudette's death. Jane. I fixed Nancy with the kind of look I hoped would frighten her off. "Forget it."

"The little freak almost got us all killed," Nancy said. "It's time we got rid of her."

The figure under the tom tarpaulin moaned with five separate voices, none even remotely human, all begging wordlessly for a release that wouldn't come. I'd never been able to accept that as what had become of the woman I'd married. It didn't matter that I'd fallen out of love with her years ago, that I'd cheated on her frequently, that we'd discussed divorce often, and that we'd stayed together mostly out of inertia and misplaced concern for the children, she was still Jane . . . barely. I faced Nancy dead-on. "We don't throw anybody out.

That's the role. But we won't stop you from leaving if you can't live with it."

Nancy searched the room for somebody willing to join her in taking offense. But Peter was slipping into catatonia, Bob was not much better, and Sharon was staring at her with open hostility that once upon a time I never would have dreamt I'd see on her beautiful face. Disgusted, Nancy treated me with one last glare of compressed hate -- the kind of look that leaves men afraid of having their throats slit while they sleep -- then turned away and stomped up the stairs to the front yard.

Sharon and I met each other's eyes, recognizing there both the understanding that Nancy might be right, and the agreement that it didn't matter. We'd all lost everything: our children, our families, our civilization, the rational world, even, to varying degrees, our humanity. If we started evicting people to take their own chances with the Locusts, we'd be giving up the only part of ourselves that still made survival matter. The only part that separated us from somebody like Nancy .

Bob blinked plaintively. "Eat?"

"Yeah," Sharon said, in a tone weary of everything. "Eat." 3.

About two weeks ago, there'd been a night of red fire that turned all the canned food within travelling distance to an inedible foul-smelling black tar. By then, of course, we'd already known that food was going to be a problem, sooner or later, we were running out of everything in our combined larder, and we'd



learned the hard way that raiding the local supermarkets was a Very Bad Idea.

The only thing left to eat, now, was the same thing killing us.

The Locusts.

Every single morning, now, we staggered from Sharon 's house -- one of only three brick-masonry homes on the street -- and into a once-fashionable suburban neighborhood now a landscape right out of hell. The wood-frame houses were all skeletal rains, so honeycombed with Locust tunnels that only stubbornness kept them standing. The parked cars were all twisted, misshapen, semi-melted hulks, like sick compromises between Dali and Detroit . The sky was a multicolored haze of dissolving rainbow-trails. And the trees had all turned to something crystalline that made jarring music in high winds. But the worst thing around us remained the corpses of last night's Locusts, they'd fallen by the billions, and their smashed little bodies were ankle-deep in all directions. They were all naked, they were all dead, and they all looked like little winged people, but in the hours before the diamond-shaped sun burned them away, they were also all flesh and they could all be eaten. They even tasted nice; their skin had a tangy spice that tasted a lot like barbecued chicken.

But just because they tasted good, that didn't necessarily mean they were good to eat.

Sometimes the special sauce just didn't agree with you.

Today, as I knelt alongside the others picking through the grisly buffet, one hand keeping a tight grip on Jane's leash, I found myself thinking of Eddie for the first time in days. Eddie had been Sharon 's husband, a security consultant by trade, and midlist crime novelist by inclination, who had first taken charge of our survival. It had been his idea for us to pool our resources defending one house instead of ten. He'd been responsible for dubbing them Locusts. He'd been the first one to take a bite out of one and pronounce them edible, and unfortunately, the first to find out the hidden risks . . .

. . . we'd all had Reactions. Some of us had experienced three or four or five, one on top of the other, each one transforming us a little, each one taking us a little bit further away from humanity. Some of the changes were funny, in a way: Bob had unnaturally big brown Keane-painting eyes, Peter was now covered by a layer of bright yellow fuzz, Sharon had cat's whiskers and three extra fingers on each hand, I had a ridge of jagged spines along both shoulders, and Nancy had a forked tongue and featureless slit where she'd once sported lips. We were all lucky, if you considered what had happened to Eddie, or what had happened to our children . . . or what had happened to Jane.

We all grazed anyway -- albeit by and large separately, afraid to meet each other's eyes. It wasn't like we had any choice.

After about twenty minutes, Sharon worked her way over to me, pretending to be casual. Only a total paranoid would have seen conspiratorial in her manner, but we were all paranoid, and to me, it seemed as blatant as all hell. When she

reached my side, she flashed a brave little smile, raised a little winged figure to her mouth and bit off its head. Three bites later, she'd swallowed it down, and stopped smiling. "Christ, Stu. We're down to six. Can you believe we're down to six?"

I winced. "Pretty pathetic, isn't it?"

"Tragic is what it is," she said desolately. "I keep trying to tell myself that it can't last forever, that sooner or later we'll learn the rules and get through this -- and sometimes I even manage to believe it -- but it's just not happening that way, is it? At this rate we're not even going to make it through the week."

I'd privately come to the same conclusion, but it hurt to hear it coming from Sharon. "You can't say that. For all we know, we might already be through the worst of it."

"Yeah. And maybe everything we've seen so far is just a coming attraction for whatever comes next."

She turned away then, hugging herself tightly to deny the spasms threatening to shake her to pieces. She didn't cry, of course; she'd always been the kind of person capable of fighting off tears when she had to. But it was a struggle . . . and though I ached for the words capable of giving her hope again, there just weren't any in me, and I was pretty sure that they would have been lies anyway.

The best I could do was reach out and squeeze her shoulder, as she pulled herself together . . . and even then she flinched from my touch, not wanting anything to do with me until she was finished.

When she spoke again, it was without turning around. "This isn't even what I wanted to talk to you about. I wanted to talk about . . . her."

I frowned. "Who?"

"You know who I mean. I think she's going to be a problem."

I glanced at Nancy, who was about twenty yards away, scouting the carnage for the Locusts that looked safest to eat. As I watched, she lifted a tiny corpse to her mouth and unceremoniously bit off its legs. It emitted a high-pitched scream, as they tended to do whenever they weren't quite dead. She chewed, apparently unbothered. I shuddered. "She's always been a problem. So?"

"So," Sharon faced me again, "I think she's planning something."

Out of reflex, I glanced at my wife, afraid she'd hear us. Force of habit, really. I was still always a bit guilty talking to Sharon when Jane was around. But Jane couldn't hear or see anything. Not without eyes or ears. As far as she was concerned, this was only mealtime, and as she busily scooped up enough bodies to satisfy her multiple mouths, I protectively tightened my grip on the rope that kept her from wandering off. "Like what? A coup d'etat? Declaring herself group leader and sentencing Jane to death? That's ludicrous. Nobody

would stand for that. They all hate her too much."

"That may have been true when there were twenty of us," Sharon said, licking a spot of blood from the corner of her mouth. "And when there were fifteen, and when there were ten. When she was completely outnumbered by people who couldn't stand her but had taken her in only because it was the decent thing to do.

That's changed, Stu. Now we're all walking wounded, and she's the only one left as strong as she ever was."

"She still wouldn't try anything," I said, with fading certainty. "We outnumber her five to one."

Her whiskers twitched. "By what accounting? Jane's helpless, Bob's only slightly better, and once Peter gets over the shock of what's happened, his first thought is naturally going to be that Jane got his wife killed. Because as far as that goes, Nancy actually has a point. That leaves just you and me, against her. And I really don't think she's going to wait until the odds are even money. She hates us too much."

I looked at Nancy, who was even now wading through the little corpses to the place where Peter stood alone, too shellshocked to forage. We were too far away to hear her false sympathy, but I was sure I knew what it would sound like: Come on, Dear. I know it's hard. But you've got to keep fighting. You've got to keep up your strength. It's what Claudette would have wanted. Don't thank me, I've only got your interests at heart . . .

Smooth talk like that wouldn't work on Peter, I thought. The man had lived his whole life dealing with smooth talk. He wouldn't be swayed by a woman who'd spent her own life spying on neighbors with binoculars and filing police complaints on kids who dared play their stereos for an hour upon returning from school. I couldn't imagine that. Could I?

"She won't stop," Sharon said, wiping an unwashed lock of hair from her eyes.

"Ever. Remember when she found out about you and me?"

I couldn't forget. The woman had taken so much malicious pleasure in telling everybody the sordid details that it must have killed her when the marriages, if not the friendships, eventually survived. "You've made your point," I said. "But I'll be damned if I know what we can do about it."

"You know exactly what we can do about it."

I started to tell her it was out of the question, that it was crazy, that there were some lines I just wouldn't cross, even that when the craziness started, Eddie had taken me in, despite all the bad history between us . . .

Then, somewhere behind me, Bob screamed. 4.

It was the kind of high bubbling scream that emerges only when no scream can be enough to express the pain. Eddie had screamed that way when he was crushed to jelly by his own constricting ribs. Frank had screamed that way when his guts

came shooting out his mouth like novelty snakes. Jane had screamed that way when her eyes and ears became empty sockets lined with sharp clacking teeth. We all knew the sound. It was the sound people make when their humanity is ripped away, and we all lived in terror of the inevitable day when we'd make it ourselves.

Bob made that sound now, right behind me.

Sharon happened to be facing him when it happened, and I could tell from the look in her eyes that it was bad. I turned, and saw him writhing on the ground, clutching his right arm. It was longer than his arm had any right to be.

Shinier, too. And redder. And it came to a point that glowed like a miniature star . . .

Sharon had already recognized the object for what it was, and was diving for cover against the side of the house. My realization was just a fraction of a second slower, but when the truth sunk in, my heart almost burst from shock.

It was something we'd seen only once before, the day we lost our children. The day my daughter came skipping in from outside to show Mommy and Daddy what she'd found . . .

. . . a changestone.

"Christ!" I shouted, flinging Jane to one side. "Bob, don't move that thing --"

He convulsed with agony, swinging his transformed arm through the air before him. The pointy end trailed a cloud of oddly incandescent dust. Dust that gave off the sound of wind chimes as it ignited the ground with glowing green fire.

Somewhere a million miles away, Peter and Nancy were screaming for somebody to let them know what was happening. Jane was crawling around on the ground, chattering panic in half a dozen alien voices. Sharon was circling behind Bob, looking for her first opportunity to bring him down. I didn't have the time to deal with any of them: not with Bob casting random uncontrolled change in every direction. I leaped away from a puff of glowing dust, only narrowly escaping whatever it would have done to me, and again shouted for Bob to get down. He convulsed a second time, and something very much like a flaming rocket left his transformed hand and shot into the sky, exploding in the air somewhere high above us.

No longer capable of anything except trying to throw away the burning thing attached to his arm, Bob drew back for another useless swing.

It was the only chance I'd get. I leaped over the glowing green place and clutched at his wrist.

Once again, Sharon was faster than me. She'd already grabbed Bob from behind, one arm wrapped around his neck, the other pulling his arm into a half-nelson. In his straggles, he whirled, lifting her off the ground and swinging her legs against my side. I tripped, compensated, reached out to help Sharon hold his arms behind his back.



Through his pain he recognized me, with a pathetically trusting "Stu . . .?"

"Yes," I gasped.

". . . HURTS . . ."

". . . I know . . ."

He shuddered uncontrollably. His arm seized up. Another cloud of dust exploded from the wand, momentarily hiding Sharon's face from view, I heard her choking on it, heard the moan that let me know it had done something to her, and the little cry as she released Bob and stepped back, in a belated attempt to escape. Some of the dust landed on my hands and tingled painfully, as magic started to work there too, but I couldn't run away screaming the way I wanted to; I just forced Bob to the ground, pinned his arm to his side, and kneeled on his back to keep him from getting up again.

The ground he'd zapped had turned to polished emerald. I found it difficult to care.

Peter was shaking. Nancy was giving me a look not far removed from a triumphant smile. Jane was crawling around obliviously, stuffing little Locust bodies into her collection of hungry salivating mouths. Sharon was nowhere to be seen.

"Hurts," Bob said.

"Sharon?" I called.

There was no answer.

"SHARON!"

I could see the others looking around, too, their eyes just dawning with the realization that she was gone.

Except for Nancy's.

Meeting her gaze, I realized she knew.

She'd seen what I'd been too busy to see, and it had made her day. And she didn't mind me knowing it. Quite the contrary -- she was, typically, really getting off on being the one who hoarded the bad news . . .

"HURTS!" Bob moaned.

First things first: I turned my attention away from Nancy, and toward poor Bob's metamorphosis. The physical changes were most obvious below the wrist, but it was easy to see the energy of the changestone coursing through the flesh of his upper arm. It traveled in bursts of light, each pulsating like a little explosion, each white-hot with the kind of fire that didn't need to burn to scar

you. The changestone itself wasn't able to contain it; the sparkling dust puffed from the glowing tip every time he took a breath.

My hands throbbed. I didn't want to know what had been done to them.

Peter pulled himself together enough to yank me from my paralysis: "S-shouldn't we be . . . doing something?"

I said, "Go search the house for belts. Ropes. Anything we can use to keep this arm strapped to his side. Also a sheet to wrap it in. Maybe if we keep it contained it won't be as dangerous."

"You don't really believe that," Nancy said.

She was right, but I faced her down anyway. Giving in to her on this would be giving in to her on everything. She'd be the boss, the way she'd always wanted to be.

I said, "Now."

She went. No further argument. Somehow, that didn't make me feel any better. Especially since she went with a big broad smile on her face, and Peter followed close behind her, as clingingly as a lost puppy.

I remained where I was, kneeling atop a transformed man I'd barely known, within

sight of the transformed woman I'd married, achingly aware of the missing transformed woman I'd loved, feeling the magic work its damage on my skin, thinking of nothing but the Locusts, the tiny, adorable Locusts, coming again tonight, in the billions. I remembered seeing them on television, that first time: that live aerial shot of Manhattan, just before sundown, covered from end to end with a great writhing carpet of them, just like a corpse being devoured by ants. I remembered some of the buildings actually changing recognizably, under that barrage, in ways my human eyes refused to accept. I remembered the President breaking in on the coverage to announce that the army had pronounced them contained. The strange things that had started happening to his face just before the networks went to test pattern forever.

I knelt there, on Bob's chest, trying not to look at the leering face that had appeared on the sun, and remembered what it had been like to once think there was could be a limit to the madness . . . 5.

Inside. Later. The Children's Room. A chamber filled with kid-sized shadows, some gibbering on the walls, others moving freely through the air, leaving trails of darkness wherever they went.

I was already responsible for keeping an eye on Janey, so it stood to reason that I also become responsible for keeping an eye on Bob. Why not? Give me two dangerous things for the price of one. And I didn't mind, not particularly. I'd lost everything anyway. After that, spending my few remaining days shepherding a madwoman and a brain-damaged human bomb was practically a walk in the park. La de da.

So I sat at the little writing desk that had once belonged to Sharon's daughter Katie, and I stroked my wife's hair, and I guarded Bob to make sure he didn't writhe free of his restraints, and I watched the shadows capering on the walls, and I didn't once think about what the others were doing until I heard the knock on the door.

That was unusual. We always kept the door in here slightly ajar. Bad things happened to people who locked themselves in. But then, since the Locusts, bad things happened no matter what we did . . . I grunted. "Come in."

Peter entered, his eyes bloodshot circles on a face entirely covered with golden fur. I admired his ability to cope; it couldn't have been easy for him to come in here, today, what with the distorted shadows of his four children doing somersaults on the mist-shrouded walls. I could barely stand being in here myself, and my kids hadn't changed shape nearly as much as his. His barely looked like children at all, I thought . . .

He was also carrying an axe. Ed's axe. Ed had kept in shape by chopping his own firewood. It didn't occur to me to wonder what Peter would be doing with it.

He spoke in the hesitant tones of a man unaccustomed to speech. "We looked all around the house, even in the attic and basement. There's no sign of Sharon."

"Thank you," I said, thinking that I didn't exactly trust Nancy to lead a

motivated search. "How are you holding up?"

He gazed at the wall, where the silhouette of a hulking ogre-shaped thing grabbed and ate the silhouette of something resembling a snake. "It's funny," he said, in a voice so far away I knew he didn't really register what he saw. "The way the human mind works. The way this . . . insanity . . . has affected me. If Claudette had died a week ago I might have . . . I think I would have . . . gone insane. I loved her, you know."

"I know." They'd been the neighborhood's perpetual honeymooners; unlike me and Jane, or Sharon and Eddie, or anybody else on the street, they'd always seemed perfect together, joined in the way marriage was advertised to work in the storybooks. They always been so overly cuddly-kissy that the rest of us had openly mocked them for it, while secretly envying them what they had. "I'm sorry, Pete."

He stared at the axe, as if trying to lose himself in its reassuring solidity.

"I should be crazy with grief. But I feel . . . nothing. Like none of this is real. Like I'm a million miles away from myself, and all of this is just . . . something I made up: like all I have to do is focus my eyes the right way and there won't be any Locusts and the whole world will be back the way it's supposed to be. But then I look in the mirror, and I see what I'm becoming and . . . I realize it's never going to end . . . and I can't even find a reason to care. What's wrong with me, Stu?"

It was a blatant plea for sympathy, and I was the wrong person to ask. Between

Jane and Sharon and my children and the bubbling sensation in my hands, I was so wrapped up in my own problems that I shouldn't have had any room to comfort anybody else. But he needed somebody, and there was nobody else available, so I stood up, intent on doing what I could.

I was halfway across the room when he emitted a sound that was half-gasp, half-howl . . .

. . . and buried the axe deep in my chest.

I registered the look in his eyes before I registered the impact. It was half-horror, half-release. The release meant he'd been steeling himself for the blow and hadn't been sure he was able to go through with it. The horror meant he still wasn't sure.

There was no pain. No blood, either. I didn't have time to wonder why. Shock alone made me stagger back, away from him, and his eyes, and the blade buried in my heart. I managed only three steps -- followed by Peter, who wouldn't or couldn't let go of the axe handle, and was pulled along like a dog being dragged by its leash -- before I tripped on Bob and began to fall.

I didn't want to fall. It seemed important, somehow, that I not fall. But there was only one solid object in reach.

My fingers closed around the axe handle, pulling it and Peter down with me as I

fell. He released it and hit the floor beside me with a loud gasp. I didn't notice when I landed. I just stared at the strange foreign pole rising from my chest . . . and at my own hands, knotting and boiling as they gripped the polished wood. The flesh there was churning like the ocean during a tropical storm, complete miniature tsunamis rippling my arms in waves.

Peter scrambled away. "Oh God," he wailed. "I'm sorry, Stu, I didn't mean it, I didn't even think what I was doing . . ."

I pulled the axe from my chest. The blade emerged clean and dry. I tossed it to one side and ran boiling fingers over a smooth, unmarked chest, which felt too much like molten steel and too little like human skin.

Somehow, that was much worse than any wound could have possibly been . . .

". . . but she told me to get it, that it was our only chance to survive, and I said I couldn't, and she said I had to, she couldn't do it herself, you wouldn't let us anywhere near him . . ."

He went on like that for a while, about how it was all Nancy's idea, how he must have been half-crazy himself to listen to her, and how he was sorry, oh God, he was so sorry. I was beyond caring. It was too much easier to just lie here, flat on my back, as if I was really wounded, and not deal with the insane sucker-punches that came ten a day in the world after the Locusts. Jane crawled out the door, her whiny nonsense babble punctuating the clicks of the fangs in her eye sockets; I did nothing. Bob woke up and shrieked in sudden agony, the



blanket wrapped around his transformed arm swelling like a balloon as another burst of deadly light exploded from the changestone at its tip; I did nothing. Peter backed against the wall trying to get away from me; the dark childlike shapes drifting across the plaster suddenly changed direction and went for him, wrapping him in tentacles of shadow . . . and I did nothing. I didn't even react when the shadows curled around my own skin and I realized they were going after both of us. There was simply no goddamn point.

The children slipped off the walls, silent and gray and undefined, less like ghosts than random patterns of light and shadow. There were more of them than there should have been, as if they'd been multiplying in the places they now inhabited, and as they converged on me and Peter, they whispered foul things in words from no human language. About all I got from it was that they were cold and afraid and they hated what they'd become.

Peter was still sobbing as the shadows engulfed him.

My daughter Rachel whispered: Are you scared, Daddy?

I was. God help us all, I was.

And the last thing I heard before I lost consciousness was the fluttering of little wings. 6.

We'd been discussing the Locusts, and where they'd come from; arguing about

whether they were aliens, or angels, or creatures that had yet to be named; and Eddie had taken the position that they'd always existed, at the edges of Man's civilization, their numbers acceptably low until now.

"There must have been a predator," Eddie said.

It was early in the plague. Before we lost our children, before we sought common refuge in Eddie and Sharon's house. Ten of us were on a foraging expedition to the local supermarket. We were just beginning to run out of food, then; we hadn't yet suffered the evil miracle that forced us to find an alternative to food; and we only risked the trip --three whole blocks -because we still thought the only alternative was starving to death. That's when we were still acting like survivalists, carrying hunting rifles we actually believed would make a difference.

(Yeah. Right. We got to the supermarket, and came back empty-handed. Only now there were five of us instead of ten . . . the other five seized by the ravenous things that had once been wrapped in plastic among the frozen meats. The hunting rifles had been useless against them. It would be the last time we'd ever venture any real distance from the house. But that day, on our way to be massacred, we still had faith in our own ability that the world would be fair to us. And when Eddie talked, we listened; after all, he always knew what he was talking about.)

"What kind of predator?" asked Claudette.

"I don't know. Something that kept their populations down, prevented them from overrunning their environment, kept them from becoming . . . Lemmings? . . . no. Locusts." His lips smacked around the word; it was the first time he'd called them that, and for everybody in earshot it sounded like an official christening.

"Whatever it was, it's not around anymore. We must have done something to kill it off . . . or at least bring its population down so low that it can't effectively make a difference anymore."

As everybody chewed on that, I said, "If you're right, and that's the explanation, we're in trouble."

Eddie glanced at me, openly surprised I'd dared to speak in his presence; ever since that thing with Sharon, we'd tended to stay out of each other's way.

"Why?"

"First law of wildlife management," I said. "Whenever the prey gets too numerous, the predators multiply faster to compensate. If the old predators are gone, then new ones evolve. Either way, we're going to have to worry about them next . . . and they're going to be worse."

Everybody looked at each other. All of a sudden, nobody wanted to think about the predators anymore. The Locusts were bad enough. They were already utterly destroying the world we'd known, turning it into something frightening and alien, in which we might not have a place . . . if there was something worse on the horizon, we might as well just place the barrels of our rifles in our

mouths, pull the triggers, and be done with it. It would save us all a hell of a lot of wasted effort . . .

. . . but we wouldn't know for sure until it happened.

And so we turned away from conversation and just concentrated in making our way through streets littered with tiny humanoid corpses. Nobody said anything else until we reached the shopping center where the supermarket stood waiting for us.

And where five of us then died . . . 7.

Wherever we were, it was dark. A strange kind of darkness, signifying not only the absence of light, but also the addition of something deeper and colder.

Peter was in here with me -- and he was screaming, loudly and continuously, with more air than could realistically be held by a single pair of lungs -- but he was a thousand miles away, too far away to reach; he'd sunken into the darkness a lot faster than I. The neighborhood children surrounded both of us, jeering with voices that cut like barbed steel, in sentences that stung like salt poured directly into an open wound. They were delighted to have adults in here with them, where they could have all sorts of fun torturing us with the force of their combined hate.

I didn't mind. I was relieved. It was over. I didn't have to spend any more nights listening to the Locusts pound the walls, and wonder which of my friends would still be alive the next time the sun set. I didn't have to spend any more

days watching our humanity recede from us one mutation at a time. I was only in hell . . . and if it was a hell that could give the children some satisfaction, then so much the better. I was sick of fighting.

Somewhere, much farther away, somebody shouted my name.

It was some woman's voice: cold, distant, and distorted, like words spoken underwater. I knew her from somewhere, but didn't care enough to figure out where. Let somebody else answer her. I'd lost.

Stu! she cried again, insistently.

Leave me alone, I thought.

Stu! Dammit! Come out of there! If not for me, then for Jane! "Jane?"

I thought of the woman I'd married, whom I once thought I'd loved, whom I'd considered beautiful until the silence started to rise between us; picturing her in her wedding dress, elegant as she'd been that day, but wearing the freakish face she wore now.

I preferred the darkness.

Stu! She's in trouble!

That voice really did sound familiar . . .

I waved my hands before me. They were flaming red things that trailed streaks of incandescent light. They were translucent, too; if I looked close, I could see the skeleton beneath the skin . . . a skeleton that had changed in troublesome ways, with bumps and protrusions that failed to match the shape of my fingers.

Why bother?

Stu!

A thousand miles away, my fingers brushed against something solid: a wooden floor.

That's it, Stu! Come on!

The darkness clutched at me with childlike fingers. I reached for the floor ahead of me, and crawled toward the light. Wherever I touched it, the wood charred.

Oh, thank God . . . I thought I'd lost you . . .

I recognized the landscape forming around me: the Children's Room. It was a place filled with shadows, but still one blindingly bright compared to the one I now strove to escape. There was a crumpled, bloody figure lying in a heap on a floor -- clearly a corpse, but I couldn't tell whose.

I also recognized the voice egging me on: "Sharon?"

It was like that was the magic word. The room clicked into existence, like a picture suddenly given the proper focus. I gasped as a million red hot pins and needles jabbed at my unaccountably naked legs, then looked behind me, and saw the abyss I'd just escaped: an indistinct, shadowy something that throbbed in the place where Sharon's children had once kept their toy chest. It was universes deep, that darkness . . . and I couldn't imagine how I'd found my way out, even with Sharon's help.

Sharon.

She was alive . . . !

The thought made me leap to my feet. "Sharon!

This time she didn't answer. I whiffed around in circles, searching every corner of the room, barely even noticing the dead body as I shook with frustration at not being able to find her. Other realizations came more slowly. I registered only that I was completely naked; that the boiling effect had spread from my hands to every inch of my exposed skin; that hot air rose from me like steam.

Then, and only then, did I note that poor, brain-fried, bad-luck Bob had been murdered. His wide-open eyes, which stared at the cracked ceiling in awed

incomprehension, were the only parts of his face that remained recognizable, everything below that had been turned to raw meat by repeated blows from same axe Peter had used on me. The axe itself still stood imbedded in the floor beside the place where the arm had been violently amputated at the elbow. The blood pooled around the stump still bubbled with bursts of arcane light; beautiful in its own way, but still impossible in ways that hurt my eyes to look at.

My eyes watered. I'd never known Bob sane, and his life before the plague remained entirely a mystery to me . . . but I was sure he'd been a good man once, who may have had a family somewhere, and probably would have tried to return to them, had he been capable of remembering them at all. He didn't deserve anything that had happened to him. Then again, none of us did. Not even Nancy . . .

I remembered Peter saying that his attack on me had been Nancy's idea. He said that he would have had to kill me to get It.

What It was he talking about?

Then I realized . . . and if I'd ever imagined myself so anaesthetized by the daily horrors of life under the Locusts that nothing could ever make my heart race again, I now discovered that I was wrong.

The changestone. That's what she'd sent Peter after; what Peter would have had to kill me to take.



She'd killed Bob to amputate the changestone.

Panicky, I yelled "SHARON!"

Something behind me rustled: a sound as insubstantial as a slip of paper slipping off a desktop and onto the floor.

"Stu," she whispered.

I whirled, desperate to see her face . . .

. . . and was utterly unsurprised to find her gone . . . a fading rainbow trail the only sign that anybody had been here at all. 8.

Nancy and Jane weren't anywhere I looked, not even in the basement, though we were fast approaching the time of day when nobody would be safe anywhere else. I went outside to look for them, and stood miserably under the twilit sky, paralyzed by rage and worry, unable to think of anything except the rainbow trails just starting to appear over the sea of battered rooftops, until I happened to glance down the street and register that the door of Nancy's house was wide open for the first time since the beginning of the siege.

An invitation.

The first Locust of the night went for me just as I set foot on Nancy's driveway. She was the fastest one I'd ever seen, and she went right for my face, the rainbow trail igniting from heat-friction behind her. Just as she seemed about to drill a hole right through my forehead I caught a glimpse of the expression on an angelic tomboy face painted in bright cartoony colors and distinguished by a pair of astonishingly beautiful blue eyes: realization. I'd never seen the look on a Locust before. She could have sliced right into me, but she veered off with six inches to spare. I turned to see where she'd gone, saw her rainbow trail receding toward the sky in a straight line. First Star on the Left, Straight On Till Morning.

"I'll be damned," I said. Then cursed myself for my choice of words. It was probably true, after all.

Two more went for me before I made it to Nancy's front door; they also changed their minds at the last second. Interesting, but absolutely no guarantee I'd be safe when they started falling by the millions.

I went in. I'd only been inside her house once before, seven years earlier, when Jane and I had first moved into the neighborhood and were still discounting all the warnings to stay away from Nancy as idle gossip. After all, just because everybody said she was crazy didn't mean she really was, right? Maybe she was just a poor divorced woman who'd had the colossal misfortune to rub some people the wrong way and get unfairly pegged the neighborhood crank. So what? We were new people, forming our impressions from scratch.

Two hours later, we'd left wondering, Jeez, what the hell is that woman's problem?

From the looks of things, the place hadn't changed much since then. It was still a nightmarish mishmash of shiny silver wallpaper, black leather upholstery, mahogany elephants, and silkscreen prints of random geometric shapes in triangular metallic frames. As before, all the seat cushions were preserved in plastic, as a bequest to hapless future generations. The only difference now was that all of it was a shambles: the furniture had been piled up near the broken windows, and the walls were spotted with the impact craters left by crashing Locusts. It looked like the aftermath of a war, and I supposed it was, since back when the Plague first struck, she'd spent four whole days defending the place alone before finally agreeing to join the rest of us defending Sharon and Eddie's. Too late, I realized that she'd showed more guts than any of us . . .

Before I decided where to look first, I heard a half-dozen thumps on the roof. More kamikaze Locusts, giving their all for gravity. They'd be swarming through the windows soon. Reason to hurry.

I found what was left of Nancy down a flight of stone steps, in a basement brightly lit from the glow of her skin.

It was almost funny. I understood why the changestone had been an irresistible temptation for her; it was ultimate power, after all. You just waved it, and caused miracles wherever you happened to point. But if I'd learned anything from

life after the Locusts, it was that life with too many miracles is just another form of chaos.

That chaos had eaten Nancy alive.

She was in there somewhere, I supposed. She had to be, a shapeless impossible thing not an arm or a tentacle or any kind of limb but something else, was still threatening me with the changestone. But nothing else about her was recognizable, everything changed constantly, with every additional puff of glowing dust that landed on the billowing liquid mass that had once been her skin. Every few seconds, a recognizable feature drifted to the surface -- an arm, or a mouth, or a complete face -- before breaking up, drifting apart, and sinking once again. The face was too distorted to be easily identifiable as human, let alone Nancy; but from the way it grimaced, with every fresh transformation, it was clearly in agony. And every time it writhed, the protrusion that held the changestone trembled violently, releasing fresh sparkling energy with every twitch; most of which landed on whatever Nancy had become, instantly changing some small piece of her to something worse. I wondered how long it had taken her to totally lose control of what she had. An hour, maybe? Two? Had she turned into this the second she picked up the changestone, and somehow made it home anyway?

Upstairs, the sound of Locusts striking the house became a steadily increasing drumbeat; and for the first time since the Plague began I thought I could hear a chorus of their little screams.

It wouldn't be long before one found its way in here . . .

I took a step closer. The changestone flared. A beam of glowing red light speared me in the chest, drilling a hole the size of a basketball through my ribs. The cement wall behind me crumbled into dust where the beam had exited my back. I stood there, waiting for death to claim me. Then I realized I was still alive, looked down and saw the steaming flesh of my chest spread out to patch the wound.

Only the shock made me weak. I fell to my knees, and muttered, "You shouldn't have done it, Nancy."

Her voice rumbled, shaking the walls. "Do what?"

"Taken the changestone. You shouldn't have taken the changestone."

Her laugh was like an entire mountain range crumbling to dust. "I had to. Somebody had to take control."

"You call this control? Come on! Look at yourself!"

The shapeless mass breathed in and out, its hot breath billowing wetly against the walls. What it produced next could have been a sob. "My husband was a real bastard, Stu."

I stirred. "What?"

"My husband. Francis. You never met him, did you? He died a long time ago, before you moved in. He was a real bastard. One of the worst. He used to knock me around all the time. He finally left the day I broke his ribs." The rumble took on a satisfied, chop-licking tone: "I'm glad he's dead. I'm glad they're all dead."

Somewhere nearby, glass shattered. That was a shock. I didn't see how there could be any unbroken windows left, anywhere in the known world. I stood up -- aware that parts of me were starting to glow With little wisps of flame -- listened to the distant patter of little flying things crashing against the walls just upstairs, and said, "Nancy . . . where's my wife?"

"Around." Her skin grew spikes, became smooth like glass, then developed facets, like a polished diamond. "You can't be killed, Stu. Did you know that? That should make you happy. From this moment on, even magic can't touch you anymore. You can go wherever you want, do whatever you want, eat whatever you want, fuck whatever you want; you'll always be the same age, and you'll always be what you are now. You hit the jackpot, Stu. You're the Superman of the new millennium. I envy you that."

Invulnerability in the world after the Locusts wasn't a gift I wanted any part of. I said, "Jane. Where's Jane?"

Astonishingly enough, she giggled -- a sound I wouldn't have expected to hear

from her in a lifetime. "The first thing I wished for was omniscience. I know anything I want to know, now -- I just have to concentrate on knowing it, and the answer comes to me. I know how many people are still alive, and how many would be better off dead. I know that Japan is covered by a free-standing pillar of salt water three miles high. I know that there's one city in Europe -- Brussels, if you care -- where the Locusts don't fall at all, but where the people are starving to death, and killing each other for food. I know that there's a small town over in Iowa where all the people are rooted to the ground like plants, and helpless to stop Locusts from nibbling little pieces of their flesh at night. And I know that the worst is still coming -- that the Plague set to arrive in just about one year will make this one look like a holiday. And the Plague that arrives a year after that -- well, Stu, my old friend, let's just say I'm glad I'll probably be dead by then. I wouldn't enjoy that one at all. It's too bad for you that you'll still be alive, to see what I'm talking about . . ."

I had no doubt that all of it was true; if I permitted myself to think about what it meant, I'd lose whatever sanity I had left. The words burst from me in a scream: "Where's Jane, dammit?"

The jellylike thing contracted once, then turned inside out, and seemed to boil. When a mouth drifted to the surface, it was smiling. "She's upstairs. In my bedroom. I did something nice for her. If you want, you can go visit . . . I've made the floors conveniently fireproof for you."

Upstairs.

Where the thumpthumpthump of their tiny forms impacting against the walls of Nancy's house was fast becoming the only sound in the entire universe.

I whirled and ran for the stairs . . . only to be frozen by a final anguished shriek. "STU!"

Almost against my will, I turned, to face her again . . . and saw that the chaos had sprouted a new face, this one an eight-year-old girl recognizable as the child she'd once been. The girl wasn't exactly cute (she was a little too plain for that), but neither was she burdened by the pinched, constipated look that adults like Nancy permanently stamp on their faces with years of anger and bitterness and self-hatred. She was somebody who could have been saved from that, had she been reached early enough . . . instead of left alone to eventually live the worst possible life she could.

The self-portrait struck me as hard as anything the Locusts had ever done to us.

The little girl started to cry. "Nobody . . . ever liked me, Stu . . . nobody.

Not my parents . . . or my husband . . . or the people I worked with . . . or my neighbors . . . nobody. None of them . . . ever really . . . liked me. Do you know how terrible that is . . . to live your whole life . . . without anybody in the world ever giving a shit whether you live or die?"

The house was vibrating with the hum of little wings. The Locusts must have been



swarming everywhere, by then: lining the walls like maggots on roadkill, turning the air itself as thick as syrup.

"S-stu?" the little girl pleaded.

I said, "Live with it," and abandoned her. 9.

THE LOCUSTS THEMSELVES were easy. Like Nancy said, there was nothing they could do to hurt me; I just walked uncaring into the mad, swarming cloud and let the little bastards sizzle and bum wherever they touched me. Some lived for quite a while, fused to my skin and unable to pull themselves away; their little blackened bodies writhing and convulsing all along my arms and shoulders. When I was halfway up the stair to the second floor, two who must have imagined themselves self-sacrificing heroes went for my eyes; they burst into flame before they got anywhere near me and only succeeded in dusting me with cremation ash.

By the time I was halfway up the stairs to the second floor, the swarm was so dense that the air was liquid with them. They formed a ball with me at its center, trying to smother my fire beneath the combined weight of their skin. It didn't work. I just marched onward, incinerating hundreds with every step, trailing as much flesh-flavored smoke as a firebombed city.

Just before I found Nancy's bedroom, Sharon spoke to me from somewhere just behind my right ear: You won't be able to save her, Stu.

I whirled but didn't find her.

I'm sorry. But it's true. You won't be able to save her, any more than you were able to save me. But you'll be able to save the Others.

"WHAT OTHERS, DAMMIT!?! WE'RE THE LAST TWO LEFT!"

She's not going to make it, Stu. She's not built for it.

I fled through a burning wall of Locusts, made splinters of the wall to Nancy's bedroom, and found out what she meant.

Jane lay on the bed, above the covers, in a ruffled pink nightgown. It wasn't one of hers; she would have considered it ridiculous. It must have been Nancy's.

She was asleep. The Locusts with her weren't disturbing her at all. There were uncounted thousands of them, all beautiful, all terrible, turning the furniture into shapeless mounds, and lining the walls like living coats of paint . . . and though they surrounded her on all sides, they left her alone and unhurt, for once preferring a passive role as spectators. There were no fading rainbow-trails anywhere; they'd been motionlessly awaiting this moment for a long time.

Thousands of big moist eyes followed my progress to the foot of her bed.

When I stopped and looked down at her, some of the Locusts chattered to each other, like noisy patrons in a movie theatre. I wondered if they even understood what they were seeing, then wondered, with equal bleakness, if I did.

Nancy had done a nice thing for her, all right.

Something that almost seemed a miracle, until I devoted two seconds to thinking about the intentions behind it.

She was Jane again.

Nancy had corrected all the changes the Locusts had made in her. The ranged sockets were gone, replaced by standard-issue (albeit closed and sleeping) eyes, and a close approximation of normal ears. She seemed a full ten years younger; she slept beatifically, peacefully, contentedly, the way she had slept a long, long time ago, when we were young and in love and I was still capable of wanting to stare at her face as she slept. Once upon a time I'd been endlessly fascinated by that face. But the fascination had gradually melted away, taking the love with it . . . and reducing us to strangers sharing the same house.

Her half-smile testified to pleasant dreams. The kind only possible for someone who's never lived in a world transformed beyond all recognition by the Locusts. But I didn't need to see that to know that she'd remember nothing. Nancy would have taken care of that.

It was almost as nice as Nancy had advertised: one last night of peace in a world that had no peace left. Until I considered the kind of world Jane would face when she woke up.

I stood there, helpless, unable to decide whether to stay, leave, defend her, or kill her . . . until she took the decision from me, by roiling over, and murmuring the first intelligible word she'd uttered in weeks: "Stu?"

All around the room, the Locusts rustled their little diaphanous wings. Maybe they'd attack her now. Or maybe they'd wait for her to wake up. I wondered if it mattered, and decided that it didn't. Whatever happened, I'd never be able to stop them all, if they went for her.

I answered her in a voice like grinding stones: "Yes?"

"I . . . had a bad dream, Stu . . . it didn't make any sense . . ."

"I know. It's okay. Go back to sleep. You don't have to wake up yet."

Her eyebrows knit in a concerned frown. Groggy as she was, she obviously knew something was terribly wrong. In that moment, I fell in love with her all over again -- the last, pointless, desperate love of a man faced with something he'd carelessly thrown away and would never ever be able to get back.

She rolled over. Opened her eyes. Saw for the very first time what I had become.

The Locusts didn't give her any time to react. They just launched themselves from all four walls and converged on her as she sat up in bed. I don't even think she saw them at all, even as the air around us turned black with them. In that instant, she saw nothing at all but me.

I screamed, "GET DOWN!", and flipped the mattress, ejecting her from bed even as a hundred glittering rainbows sliced the air where she'd been. She cried out as she hit the hardwood floor. The mattress landed on edge behind her, instantly reduced to a thousand shreds of canvas-and-foam-rubber shrapnel as a squadron of tiny figures approaching from the other side punched right through, the white stuffing flapping from their little bodies like streamers. They emerged flying low over Jane, slicing deep furrows in her arms and legs. Locusts pelted me from all sides as I ran around the end of the bed, just in time to see her scramble for shelter underneath.

Then the room went bright with criss-crossing rainbow-trails: millions of them, each written over the others, like fingerpainting done by God.

None of them hurt me. Like Nancy said, they couldn't.

But wherever Jane was, behind all that, I could do nothing more to help her. All I could do was stand there and burn. 10.

Jane was gone when morning burned the Locusts away. I found the nightgown shredded to confetti beneath what was left of the bed. Some of the shreds were

sticky with her blood. Some weren't. There was no body at all. Common sense told me she was dead, and that the Locusts simply hadn't left anything for me to find; my heart told me she'd escaped, though it's beyond me where she could have gone. It doesn't matter. I think she escaped, and I think she found other survivors, and I think she found contentment of a kind among them, and even if none of that's true, then it still remains a good thought to warm me, in the lonely places where I now walk.

The Plagues Nancy foretold did come eventually, scouring what was left of the earth like armies of flame; and they were, as she advertised, worse than anything the Locusts had brought us, though not nearly as bad as the Plagues that arrived next. There are still a few scattered people left clinging to life here and there, though they don't much resemble people anymore, and truth to tell, I'm not quite sure they're worth calling human. They have nothing much to say to me, and I have nothing much to say to them. We get along as well as anything does.

Sharon's still around. She still speaks to me, sometimes, her voice tantalizingly close; she refuses to tell me, if she even could, where she's gone or what she's become. Sometimes she tells me I have a destiny, but she has never explained what she means. Every once in a while she laughs as if at a joke only she knows. When she does, I wish I could cry, because then she sounds most like the Sharon I loved, the rest of the time, she's like an echo of an echo, or a multiple-generation copy of a recording more a reminder of Sharon than Sharon herself. I've never caught a single glimpse of what she's become. But she's still the closest thing I have to a friend. Maybe the closest thing anybody has

to a friend. And these days, the closest anybody ever gets to happily ever after.

It doesn't stop me from being lonely. But maybe that's the point.

Locusts continue to fall, and I continue to feed on them, but they're not all that important, anymore; they're just another detail of a world that continues to change beyond all recognition. Mountain ranges have become sharp teeth floating on boiling horizons. Pain is a sentient ocean, death a liquid memory. Icicles sing fire and angels turn to stone. Changedoors slip sideways along the fading slaves of gravity. I've stopped trying to understand what I see. I'm the only constant, the only immortal, and though I walk through this place untouched and unharmed, I still can't fit each day's fresh plunge into nightmare into a mind capable of remembering the lost world of cable TV, nuclear weapons, shopping malls and AIDS. Sometimes I simply go mad, but even that's no escape, since there's no form of insanity so extreme that the rampant madness of the new world cannot exceed it and render me sane again by comparison.

Sharon whispers to me at night. She says I have much to do. She says that the others are depending on me.

I hope so. It would be nice to think I still had a purpose in this life. I haven't believed that for a long, long time.

I only know this: that when I fall asleep on my bed of dancing time, I can only

face the mingling concentric cubes of sky and hope they stay in place for a  
while yet . . . because I like them, and I know from experience that this means  
I won't like whatever comes to take their place.