

Stephen King - The House on Maple Street

The House on Maple Street
by Stephen King

Although she was only five, and the youngest of the Bradbury children, Melissa had very sharp eyes and it wasn't really surprising that she was the first to discover something strange had happened to the house on Maple Street while the Bradbury family was summering in England.

She ran and found her older brother, Brian, and told him something was wrong upstairs, on the third floor. She said she would show him, but not until he swore not to tell anyone what she had found. Brian swore, knowing it was their stepfather Lissa was afraid of; Daddy Lew didn't like it when any of the Bradbury children "got up to foolishness" (that was how he always put it), and he had decided that Melissa was the prime offender in that area. Lissa, who was stupid no more than she was blind, was aware of Lew's prejudices, and had become wary of them. In fact, all of the Bradbury children had become rather wary of their mother's second husband. It would probably turn out to be nothing, anyway, but Brian was delighted to be back home and willing enough to humor his baby sister (Brian was two full years her senior), at least for awhile; he followed her down the third-floor hallway without so much as a murmur of argument, and he only pulled her braids -- he called these braid-pulls "emergency stops" -- once.

They had to tiptoe past Lew's study, which was the only finished-off room up here, because Lew was inside, unpacking his notebooks and papers and muttering in an ill-tempered way.

Brian's thoughts had actually turned to what might be on TV tonight -- he was looking forward to a pig-out on good old American cable after three months of BBC and ITV -- when they reached the end of the hall.

What he saw beyond the tip of his little sister's pointing finger drove all thoughts of television from Brian Bradbury's mind.

"Now swear again!" Lissa whispered. "Never tell anyone, Daddy Lew or anyone, or hope to die!"

"Hope to die," Brian agreed, still staring, and it was a half-hour before he told his big sister, Laurie, who was unpacking in her room. Laurie was possessive of her room as only an eleven-year-old girl can be, and she gave Brian the very dickens for coming in without knocking, even though she was completely dressed.

"Sorry," Brian said, "but I gotta show you something. It's very weird."

"Where?" She went on putting clothes in her drawers as if she didn't care, as if there was nothing any dopey little seven-year-old could tell her which would be of the slightest interest to her, but when it came to eyes, Brian's weren't exactly dull. He could tell when Laurie was interested, and she was interested now.

"Upstairs. Third floor. End of the hall past Daddy Lew's study."

Laurie's nose wrinkled as it always did when Brian or Lissa called him that. She and Trent remembered their real father, and they didn't like his replacement at all. They made it their business to call him Just Plain Lew. That Lewis Evans clearly did not like this -- found it vaguely impertinent, in fact -- simply added to Laurie and Trent's unspoken but powerful conviction that it was the right way to address the man their mother (uck!) slept with these days.

"I don't want to go up there," Laurie said. "He's been in a pissy mood ever since we got back. Trent says he'll stay that way until school starts and he can settle back into his rut again."

"His door's shut. We can be quiet. Lissa n me went up and he didn't even know we were there."

"Lissa and I."

"Yeah. Us. Anyway, it's safe. The door's shut and he's talking to himself like he does when he's really into something."

"I hate it when he does that," Laurie said darkly. "Our real father never talked to himself, and he didn't use to lock himself in a room by himself, either."

"Well, I don't think he's locked in," Brian said, "but if you're really worried about him coming out, take an empty suitcase. We'll pretend like we're putting it in the closet where we keep them, if he comes out."

"What is this amazing thing?" Laurie demanded, putting her fists on her hips.

"I'll show you," Brian said earnestly, "but you have to swear on Mom's name and hope to die if you tell anyone." He paused, thinking, for a moment, and then added: "You specially can't tell Lissa, because I swore to her."

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Laurie's ears were finally all the way up. It was probably a big nothing, but she was tired of putting clothes away. It was really amazing how much junk a person could accumulate in just three months. "Okay, I swear."

They took along two empty suitcases, one for each of them, but their precautions proved unnecessary; their stepfather never came out of his study. It was probably just as well; he had worked up a grand head of steam, from the sound. The two children could hear him stamping about, muttering, opening drawers, slamming them shut again. A familiar odor seeped out from under the door -- to Laurie it smelled like smouldering athletic socks. Lew was smoking his pipe. She stuck her tongue out, crossed her eyes, and twiddled her fingers in her ears as they tiptoed by.

But a moment later, when she looked at the place Lissa had pointed out to Brian and which Brian now pointed out to her, she forgot Lew just as completely as Brian had forgotten about all the wonderful things he could watch on TV that night.

"What is it?" she whispered to Brian. "My gosh, what does it mean?"

"I dunno," Brian said, "but just remember, you swore on Mom's name, Laurie."

"Yeah, yeah, but --"

"Say it again!" Brian didn't like the look in her eyes. It was a telling look, and he felt she really needed a little reinforcement.

"Yeah, yeah, on Mom's name," she said perfunctorily, "but, Brian, jeezly crow --"

"And hope to die, don't forget that part."

"Oh, Brian, you are such a cheeser!"

"Never mind, just say you hope to die!"

"Hope to die, hope to die, okay?" Laurie said. "Why do you have to be such a cheeser, Bri?"

"Dunno," he said, smirking in that way she absolutely hated, "just lucky, I guess." She could have strangled him... but a promise was a promise, especially one given on the name of your one and only mother, so Laurie held on for over one full hour before getting Trent and showing him. She made him swear, too, and her confidence that Trent would keep his promise not to tell was perfectly justified. He was almost fourteen, and as the oldest, he had no one to tell... except a grownup. Since their mother had taken to her bed with a migraine, that left only Lew, and that was the same as no one at all.

The two oldest Bradbury children hadn't needed to bring up empty suitcases as camouflage this time; their stepfather was downstairs, watching some British fellow lecture on the Normans and Saxons (the Normans and Saxons were Lew's specialty at the college) on the VCR, and enjoying his favorite afternoon snack -- a glass of milk and a ketchup sandwich.

Trent stood at the end of the hall, looking at what the other children had looked at before him. He stood there for a long time.

"What is it, Trent?" Laurie finally asked. It never crossed her mind that Trent wouldn't know. Trent knew everything. So she watched, almost incredulously, as he slowly shook his head.

"I don't know," he said, peering into the crack. "Some kind of metal, I think. Wish I'd brought a flashlight." He reached into the crack and tapped. Laurie felt a vague sense of disquiet at this, and was relieved when Trent pulled his finger back.

"Yeah, it's metal."

"Should it be in there?" Laurie asked. "I mean, was it? Before?"

"No," Trent said. "I remember when they replastered. That was just after Mom married him. There wasn't anything in there then but laths."

"What are they?"

"Narrow boards," he said. "They go between the plaster and the outside wall of the house." Trent reached into the crack in the wall and once again touched the metal which showed dull white in there. The crack was about four inches long and half an inch across at its widest point. "They put in insulation, too," he said, frowning thoughtfully and then shoving his hands into the back pockets of his wash-faded jeans. "I remember. Pink, billowy stuff that looked like cotton candy."

"Where is it, then? I don't see any pink stuff."

"Me either," Trent said. "But they did put it in. I remember." His eyes traced the four-inch length of the crack. "That metal in the wall is something new. I wonder how much of it there is, and how far it goes. Is it just up here on the third floor, or..."

"Or what?" Laurie looked at him with big round eyes. She had begun to be a little

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frightened.

"Or is it all over the house," Trent finished thoughtfully.

After school the next afternoon, Trent called a meeting of all four Bradbury children. It got off to a somewhat bumpy start, with Lissa accusing Brian of breaking what she called "your solemn swear" and Brian, who was deeply embarrassed, accusing Laurie of putting their mother's soul in dire jeopardy by telling Trent. Although he wasn't very clear on exactly what a soul was (the Bradburys were Unitarians), he seemed quite sure that Laurie had condemned Mother's to hell.

"Well," Laurie said, "you'll have to take some of the blame, Brian. I mean, you were the one who brought Mother into it. You should have had me swear on Lew's name. He could go to hell."

Lissa, who was young enough and kind-hearted enough not to wish anyone in hell, was so distressed by this line of discourse that she began to cry.

"Hush, all of you," Trent said, and hugged Lissa until she had regained most of her composure. "What's done is done, and I happen to think it all worked out for the best."

"You do?" Brian asked. If Trent said a thing was good, Brian would have died defending it, that went without saying, but Laurie had sworn on Mom's name.

"Something this weird needs to be investigated, and if we waste a lot of time arguing over who was right or wrong to break their promise, we'll never get it done."

Trent glanced pointedly up at the clock on the wall of his room, where they had gathered. It was twenty after three. He really didn't have to say any more. Their mother had been up this morning to get Lew his breakfast -- two three-minute eggs with whole-wheat toast and marmalade was one of his many daily requirements -- but afterward she had gone back to bed, and there she had remained. She suffered from dreadful headaches, migraines that sometimes spent two or even three days snarling and clawing at her defenseless (and often bewildered) brain before decamping for a month or so.

She would not be apt to see them on the third floor and wonder what they were up to, but "Daddy Lew" was a different kettle of fish altogether. With his study just down the hall from the strange crack, they could count on avoiding his notice -- and his curiosity -- only if they conducted their investigations while he was away, and that was what Trent's pointed glance at the clock had meant.

The family had returned to the States a full ten days before Lew was scheduled to begin teaching classes again, but he could no more stay away from the University once he was back within ten miles of it than a fish could live out of water. He had left shortly after noon, with a briefcase crammed full of papers he had collected at various spots of historical interest in England. He said he was going up to file these papers away. Trent thought that meant he'd cram them into one of his desk drawers, then lock his office and go down to the History Department's Faculty Lounge. There he would drink coffee and gossip with his buddies... except, Trent had discovered, when you were a college teacher, people thought you were dumb if you had buddies. You were supposed to say they were your colleagues. So he was away, and that was good, but he might be back at any time between now and five, and that was bad. Still, they had some time, and Trent was determined they weren't going to spend it squabbling about who swore what to who.

"Listen to me, you guys," he said, and was gratified to see that they actually were listening, their differences and recriminations forgotten in the excitement of an investigation. They had also been caught by Trent's inability to explain what Lissa had found. All three of them shared, at least to some extent, Brian's simple faith in Trent -- if Trent was puzzled by something, if Trent thought that something was strange and just possibly amazing, they all thought so.

Laurie spoke for all of them when she said: "Just tell us what to do, Trent -- we'll do it."

"Okay," Trent said. "We'll need some things." He took a deep breath and began explaining what they were.

Once they were convened around the crack at the end of the third-floor hallway, Trent held Lissa up so she could shine the beam of a small flashlight -- it was the one their mother used to inspect their ears, eyes, and noses when they weren't feeling well -- into the crack. They could all see the metal; it wasn't shiny enough to throw back a clear reflection of the beam, but it shone silkily just the same. Steel, was Trent's opinion -- steel, or some sort of alloy.

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"What's an alloy, Trent?" Brian asked.

Trent shook his head. He didn't know exactly. He turned to Laurie and asked her to give him the drill.

Brian and Lissa exchanged an uneasy glance as Laurie passed it over. It had come from the basement workshop, and the basement was the one remaining place in the house, which was their real father's. Daddy Lew hadn't been down there a dozen times since he had married Catherine Bradbury. The smaller children knew that as well as Trent and Laurie. They weren't afraid Daddy Lew would notice someone had been using the drill; it was the holes in the wall outside his study they were worried about. Neither one of them said this out loud, but Trent read it on their troubled faces. "Look," Trent said, holding the drill out so they could get a good look. "This is what they call a needle-point drill bit. See how tiny it is? And since we're only going to drill behind the pictures, I don't think we have to worry."

There were about a dozen framed prints along the third-floor hallway, half of them beyond the study door, on the way to the closet at the end where the suitcases were stored. Most of these were very old (and mostly uninteresting) views of Titusville, where the Bradburys lived.

"He doesn't even look at them, let alone behind them," Laurie agreed.

Brian touched the tip of the drill with one finger, and then nodded. Lissa watched, then copied both the touch and the nod. If Laurie said something was okay, it probably was; if Trent said so, it almost certainly was; if they both said so, there could be no question.

Laurie took down the picture, which hung closest to the small crack in the plaster and gave it to Brian. Trent drilled. They stood watching him in a tight little circle of three, like infielders encouraging their pitcher at a particularly tense moment of the game.

The drill bit went easily into the wall, and the hole it made was every bit as tiny as promised. The darker square of wallpaper, which had been revealed when Laurie took the print off its hook, was also encouraging. It suggested that no one had bothered taking the dark line engraving of the Titusville Public Library off its hook for a very long time.

After a dozen turns of the drill's handle, Trent stopped and reversed, pulling the bit free.

"Why'd you quit?" Brian asked.

"Hit something hard."

"More metal?" Lissa asked.

"I think so. Sure wasn't wood. Let's see." He shone the light in and cocked his head this way and that before shaking it decisively. "My head's too big. Let's boost Lissa."

Laurie and Trent lifted her up and Brian handed her the Pen Lite. Lissa squinted for a time, then said, "Just like in the crack I found."

"Okay," Trent said. "Next picture."

The drill hit metal behind the second, and the third, as well. Behind the fourth -- by this time they were quite close to the door of Lew's study -- it went all the way in before Trent pulled it out. This time when she was boosted up, Lissa told them she saw "the pink stuff."

"Yeah, the insulation I told you about," Trent said to Laurie. "Let's try the other side of the hall."

They had to drill behind four pictures on the east side of the corridor before they struck first wood-lath and then insulation behind the plaster... and as they were re-hanging the last picture, they heard the out-of-tune snarl of Lew's elderly Porsche turning into the driveway.

Brian, who had been in charge of hanging this picture -- he could just reach the hook on tip-toe -- dropped it. Laurie reached out and grabbed it by the frame on the way down. A moment later she found herself shaking so badly she had to hand the picture to Trent, or she would have dropped it herself.

"You hang it," she said, turning a stricken face to her older brother. "I would have dropped it if I'd been thinking about what I was doing. I really would."

Trent hung the picture, which showed horse-drawn carriages clopping through City Park, and saw it was hanging slightly askew. He reached out to adjust it, then pulled back just before his fingers touched the frame. His sisters and his brother thought he was something like a god; Trent himself was smart enough to know he was only a kid. But even a kid -- assuming he was a kid with half a brain -- knew that

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when things like this started to go bad, you ought to leave them alone. If he messed with it anymore, this picture would fall for sure, spraying the floor with broken glass, and somehow Trent knew it.

"Go!" he whispered. "Downstairs! TV room!" The back door slammed downstairs as Lew came in. "But it's not straight!" Lissa protested. "Trent, it's not -- " "Never mind!" Laurie said. "Do what Trent says!" Trent and Laurie looked at each other, wide-eyed. If Lew went into the kitchen to fix himself a bite to tide himself over until supper, all still might be well. If he didn't, he would meet Lissa and Brian on the stairs. One look at them and he'd know something was going on. The two younger Bradbury children were old enough to close their mouths, but not their faces. Brian and Lissa went fast.

Trent and Laurie came behind, more slowly, listening. There was a moment of almost unbearable suspense when the only sounds were the little kids' footsteps on the stairs, and then Lew bawled up at them from the kitchen: "keep it down, can't you? Your mother's taking a nap!" And if that doesn't wake her up, Laurie thought, nothing will.

Late that night, as Trent was drowsing off to sleep, Laurie opened the door of his room, came in, and sat down beside him on the bed.

"You don't like him, but that's not all," she said.

"Who-who?" Trent asked, peeling a cautious eyelid.

"Lew," she said quietly. "You know who I mean, Trent."

"Yeah," he said, giving up. "And you're right. I don't like him."

"You're scared of him, too, aren't you?"

After a long, long moment, Trent said: "Yeah. A little."

"Just a little?"

"Maybe a little more than a little," Trent said. He winked at her, hoping for a smile, but Laurie only looked at him, and Trent gave up. She wasn't going to be diverted, at least not tonight.

"Why? Do you think he might hurt us?"

Lew shouted at them a lot, but he had never put his hands on them. No, Laurie suddenly remembered, that wasn't quite true. One time when Brian had walked into his study without knocking, Lew had given him a spanking. A hard one. Brian had tried not to cry, but in the end he had. And Mom had cried, too, although she hadn't tried to stop the spanking. But she must have said something to him later on, because Laurie had heard Lew shouting at her.

Still, it had been a spanking, not child abuse, and Brian could be an insufferable cheese-dog when he put his mind to it.

Had he been putting his mind to it that night? Laurie wondered now. Or had Lew spanked her brother and made him cry over something, which had only been an honest, little kid's mistake? She didn't know, and had a sudden and unwelcome insight, the sort of thought that made her think Peter Pan had had the right idea about never wanting to grow up: she wasn't sure she wanted to know. One thing she did know: who the real cheese-dog around here was.

She realized Trent hadn't answered her question, and gave him a poke. "Cat got your tongue?"

"Just thinking," he said. "It's a toughie, you know?"

"Yes," she said soberly. "I know."

This time she let him think.

"Nah," he said at last, and laced his hands together behind his head. "I don't think so, Sprat." She hated to be called that, but tonight she decided to let it go. She couldn't remember Trent ever speaking to her this carefully and seriously. "I don't think he would... but I think he could." He got up on one elbow and looked at her even more seriously. "But I think he's hurting Mom, and I think it gets a little worse for her every day."

"She's sorry, isn't she?" Laurie asked. Suddenly she felt like crying. Why were adults so stupid sometimes about stuff kids could see right away? It made you want to kick them. "She never wanted to go to England in the first place... and there's the way he shouts at her sometimes..."

"Don't forget the headaches," Trent said flatly. "The ones he says she talks herself into. Yeah, she's sorry, all right."

"Would she ever... you know..."

"Divorce him?"

"Yes," Laurie said, relieved. She wasn't sure she could have brought the word out

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herself, and had she realized how much she was her mother's daughter in that regard, she could have answered her own question.

"No," Trent said. "Not Mom."

"Then there's nothing we can do," Laurie sighed.

Trent said in a voice so soft she almost couldn't hear it: "Oh yeah?"

During the next week and a half, they drilled other small holes around the house when there was no one around to see them: holes behind posters in their various rooms, behind the refrigerator in the pantry (Brian was able to squeeze in and just had room to use the drill), in the downstairs closets. Trent even drilled one in a dining-room wall, high up in one corner where the shadows never quite left. He stood on top of the stepladder while Laurie held it steady.

There was no metal anywhere. Just lath.

The children forgot for a little while.

One day about a month later, after Lew had gone back to teaching full-time, Brian came to Trent and told him there was another crack in the plaster on the third floor, and that he could see more metal behind it. Trent and Lissa came at once. Laurie was still in school, at band practice.

As on the occasion of the first crack, their mother was lying down with a headache. Lew's temper had improved once he was back at school (as Trent and Laurie had been sure it would), but he'd had a crackerjack argument with their mother the night before, about a party he wanted to have for fellow faculty members in the History Department. If there was anything the former Mrs. Bradbury hated and feared, it was playing hostess at faculty parties. Lew had insisted on this one, however, and she had finally given in. Now she was lying in the shadowy bedroom with a damp towel over her eyes and a bottle of Fiorinal on the night-table while Lew was presumably passing around invitations in the Faculty Lounge and clapping his colleagues on the back.

The new crack was on the west side of the hallway, between the study door and the stairwell.

"You sure you saw metal in there?" Trent asked. "We checked this side, Bri."

"Look for yourself," Brian said, and Trent did. There was no need of a flashlight; this crack was wider, and there was no question about the metal at the bottom of it. After a long look, Trent told them he had to go to the hardware store, right away.

"Why?" Lissa asked.

"I want to get some plaster. I don't want him to see that crack." He hesitated, then added: "And I especially don't want him to see the metal inside it."

Lissa frowned at him. "Why not, Trent?"

But Trent didn't exactly know. At least, not yet.

They started drilling again, and this time they found metal behind all the walls on the third floor, including Lew's study. Trent snuck in there one afternoon with the drill while Lew was at the college and their mother was out shopping for the upcoming faculty party.

The former Mrs. Bradbury looked very pale and drawn these days -- even Lissa had noticed -- but when any of the children asked her if she was okay, she always flashed a troubling, over-bright smile and told them never better, in the pink, rolling in clover. Laurie, who could be blunt, told her she looked too thin. Oh no, her mother responded, Lew says I was turning into a blob over in England -- all those rich teas. She was just trying to get back into fighting trim, that was all. Laurie knew better, but not even Laurie was blunt enough to call her mother a liar to her face. If all four of them had come to her at once -- ganged up on her, so to speak -- they might have gotten a different story. But not even Trent thought of doing that.

One of Lew's advanced degrees was hanging on the wall over his desk in a frame. While the other children clustered outside the door, nearly vomiting with terror, Trent removed the framed degree from its hook, laid it on the desk, and drilled a pinhole in the center of the square where it had been. Two inches in, the drill hit metal.

Trent carefully rehung the degree -- making very sure it wasn't crooked -- and came back out.

Lissa burst into tears of relief, and Brian quickly joined her; he looked disgusted but seemed unable to help himself. Laurie had to struggle very hard against her own tears.

They drilled holes at intervals along the stairs to the second floor and found metal

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behind these walls, too. It continued roughly halfway down the second-floor hallway as it proceeded toward the front of the house. There was metal behind the walls of Brian's room, but behind only one wall of Laurie's.

"It hasn't finished growing in here," Laurie said darkly.

Trent looked at her, surprised. "Huh?"

Before she could reply, Brian had a brainstorm.

"Try the floor, Trent!" he said. "See if it's there, too."

Trent thought it over, shrugged, and drilled into the floor of Laurie's room. The drill went in all the way with no resistance, but when he peeled back the rug at the foot of his own bed and tried there, he soon encountered solid steel... or solid whatever-it-was.

Then, at Lissa's insistence, he stood on a stool and drilled up into the ceiling, eyes slitted against the plaster-dust that sifted down into his face.

"Boink," he said after a few moments. "More metal. Let's quit for the day."

Laurie was the only one who saw how deeply troubled Trent looked.

That night after lights-out, it was Trent who came to Laurie's room, and Laurie didn't even pretend to be sleepy. The truth was, neither of them had been sleeping very well for the last couple of weeks.

"What did you mean?" Trent whispered, sitting down beside her.

"About what?" Laurie asked, getting up on one elbow.

"You said it hadn't finished growing in your room. What did you mean?"

"Come on, Trent -- you're not dumb."

"No, I'm not," he agreed without conceit. "Maybe I just want to hear you say it, Sprat."

"If you call me that, you never will."

"Okay. Laurie, Laurie, Laurie. You satisfied?"

"Yes. That stuff's growing all over the house." She paused. "No, that's not right. It's growing under the house."

"That's not right, either."

Laurie thought about it, then sighed. "Okay," she said. "It's growing in the house. It's stealing the house. Is that good enough, Mr. Smarty?"

"Stealing the house..." Trent sat quietly beside her on the bed, looking at her poster of Chrissie Hynde and seeming to taste the phrase she had used. At last he nodded and flashed the smile she loved. "Yes -- that's good enough."

"Whatever you call it, it acts like it's alive."

Trent nodded. He had already thought of this. He had no idea how metal could be alive, but he was damned if he saw any way around her conclusion, at least for the present.

"But that isn't the worst."

"What is?"

"It's sneaking." Her eyes, fixed solemnly on his, were big and frightened. "That's the part I really don't like. I don't know what started it or what it means, and I don't really care. But it's sneaking."

She ran her fingers into her heavy blonde hair and pushed it back from her temples. It was a fretful, unconscious gesture that reminded Trent achingly of his dad, whose hair had been that exact same shade.

"I feel like something's going to happen, Trent, only I don't know what, and it's like being in a nightmare you can't get all the way out of. Does it feel like that to you sometimes?"

"A little, yeah. But I know something's going to happen. I might even know what."

She bolted to a sitting position and grabbed his hands. "You know? What? What is it?"

"I can't be sure," Trent said, getting up. "I think I know, but I'm not ready to say what I think yet. I have to do some more looking."

"If we drill many more holes, the house is apt to fall down!"

"I didn't say drilling, I said looking."

"Looking for what?"

"For something that isn't here yet -- that hasn't grown yet. But when it does, I don't think it will be able to hide."

"Tell me, Trent!"

"Not yet," he said, and planted a small, quick kiss on her cheek. "Besides -- curiosity killed the Sprat."

"I hate you!" she cried in a low voice, and flopped back down with the sheet over

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her head. But she felt better for having talked with Trent, and slept better than she had for a week.

Trent found what he was looking for two days before the big party. As the oldest, he perhaps should have noticed that his mother had begun to look alarmingly unhealthy, her skin drawn shiny over her cheekbones, her complexion so pale it had taken on an ugly yellow underlight. He should have noticed how often she was rubbing at her temples, although she denied -- almost in a panic -- that she had a migraine, or had had one for over a week.

He did not notice these things, however. He was too busy looking.

In the four or five days between his after-bedtime talk with Laurie and the day he found what he was looking for, he went through every closet in the big old house at least three times; through the crawlspace above Lew's study five or six times; through the big old cellar half a dozen times.

It was in the cellar that he finally found it.

This was not to say he hadn't found peculiar things in other places; he most certainly had. There was a knob of stainless steel poking out of the ceiling of a second-floor closet. A curved metal armature of some kind had burst through the side of the luggage-closet on the third floor. It was a dim, polished gray... until he touched it. When he did that, it flushed a dusky rose color, and he heard a faint but powerful humming sound deep in the wall. He snatched his hand back as if the armature had been hot (and at first, when it turned a color he associated with the burners on the electric stove, he could have sworn it was). When he did that, the curved metal thing went gray again. The humming stopped at once.

The day before, in the attic, he had observed a cobweb of thin, interlaced cables growing in a low dark corner under the eave. Trent had been crawling around on his hands and knees, not doing anything but getting hot and dirty, when he had suddenly spied this amazing phenomenon. He froze in place, staring through a tangle of hair as the cables spun themselves out of nothing at all (or so it looked, anyway), met, wrapped around each other so tightly they seemed to merge, and then continued spreading until they reached the floor, where they drilled in and anchored themselves in dreamy little puffs of sawdust. They seemed to be creating some sort of limber bracework, and it looked as if it would be very strong, able to hold the house together through a lot of buffeting and hard knocks.

What buffeting, though?

What hard knocks?

Again, Trent thought he knew. It was hard to believe, but he thought he knew. There was a little closet at the north end of the cellar, far beyond the workshop area and the furnace. Their real father had called this "the wine-cellar," and although he'd put up only about two dozen bottles of plonk (this word had always made their mother giggle), they were all carefully stored in crisscrossing racks he had made himself.

Lew came in here even less frequently than he went into the workshop; he didn't drink wine. And although their mother had often taken a glass or two with their dad, she no longer drank wine either. Trent remembered how sad her face had looked the one time Bri had asked her why she never had a glass of plonk in front of the fire anymore.

"Lew doesn't approve of drinking," she had told Brian. "He says it's a crutch."

There was a padlock on the wine-cellar door, but it was only there to make sure the door didn't swing open and let in the heat from the furnace. The key hung right next to it, but Trent didn't need it. He'd left the padlock undone after his first investigation, and no one had come along to press it shut since then. So far as he knew, no one came to this end of the cellar at all anymore.

He was not much surprised by the sour whiff of spilled wine that greeted him as he approached the door; it was just another proof of what he and Laurie already knew -- the changes were winding themselves quietly all through the house. He opened the door, and although what he saw frightened him, it didn't really surprise him.

Metal constructions had burst through two of the wine-cellar's walls, tearing apart the racks with their diamond-shaped compartments and pushing the bottles of Bollinger and Mondavi and Battiglia onto the floor, where they had broken.

Like the cables in the attic crawlspace, whatever was forming here -- growing, to use Laurie's word -- hadn't finished yet. It spun itself into being in sheens of light that hurt Trent's eyes and made him feel a little sick to his stomach.

No cables here, however, and no curved struts. What was growing in his real father's

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forgotten wine-cellar looked like cabinets and consoles and instrument panels. And, as he looked, vague shapes humped themselves up in the metal like the heads of excited snakes, gained focus, became dials and levers and read-outs. There were a few blinking lights. Some of these actually began to blink as he looked at them. A low sighing sound accompanied this act of creation.

Trent took one cautious step farther into the little room; an especially bright red light, or series of them, had caught his eye. He sneezed as he stepped forward -- the machines and consoles pushing across the old concrete had stirred up a great deal of dust.

The lights which had snagged his attention were numbers. They were under a glass strip on a metal construct which was spinning its way out of a console. This new thing looked like some sort of chair, although no one sitting in it would have been very comfortable. At least, no one with a human shape, Trent thought with a little shiver.

The glass strip was in one of the arms of this twisted chair -- if it was a chair. And the numbers had perhaps caught his eye because they were moving.

72:34:18

became 72:34:17

and then 72:34:16.

Trent looked at his watch, which had a sweep second hand, and used it to confirm what his eyes had already told him. The chair might or might not really be a chair, but the numbers under the glass strip were a digital clock. It was running backward. Counting down, to be perfectly accurate. And what would happen when that read-out finally went from 00:00:01 to 00:00:00 some three days from this very afternoon? He was pretty sure he knew. Every American boy knows one of two things happen when a backward-running clock finally reads zeros across the board: an explosion or a lift-off.

Trent thought there was too much equipment, too many gadgets, for it to be an explosion.

He thought something had gotten into the house while they were in England. Some sort of spore, perhaps, that had drifted through space for a billion years before being caught in the gravitational pull of the earth, spiraling down through the atmosphere like a bit of milkweed fluff caught in a mild breeze, and finally falling into the chimney of a house in Titusville, Indiana.

Into the Bradburys' house in Titusville, Indiana.

It might have been something else entirely, of course, but the spore idea felt right to Trent, and although he was the oldest of the Bradbury kids, he was still young enough to sleep well after eating a pepperoni pizza at 9:00 p.m., and to believe completely in his own perceptions and intuitions. And in the end, it didn't really matter, did it? What mattered was what had happened.

And, of course, what was going to happen. When Trent left the wine-cellar this time, he not only snapped the padlock's arm closed, he took the key as well.

Something terrible happened at Lew's faculty party. It happened at quarter of nine, only forty-five minutes or so after the first guests arrived, and Trent and Laurie later heard Lew shouting at their mother that the only goddam consideration she had shown him was getting up to her foolishness early -- if she'd waited until ten o'clock or so, there would have been fifty or more people circulating through the living room, dining room, kitchen, and back parlor.

"What the hell's the matter with you?" Trent and Laurie heard him yelling at her, and when Trent felt Laurie's hand creep into his like a small cold mouse, he held it tightly. "Don't you know what people are going to say about this? Don't you know how people in the department talk? I mean, really, Catherine -- it was like something out of the Three Stooges!"

Their mother's only reply was soft, helpless sobbing, and for just one moment Trent felt a horrible, unwilling burst of hate for her. Why had she married him in the first place? Didn't she deserve this for being such a fool?

Ashamed of himself, he pushed the thought away, made it gone, and turned to Laurie. He was appalled to see tears pouring down her cheeks, and the mute sorrow in her eyes went to his heart like a knife-blade.

"Great party, huh?" she whispered, scrubbing at her cheeks with the heels of her palms.

"Right, Sprat," he said, and hugged her so she could cry against his shoulder without being heard. "It'll make my top-ten list at the end of the year, no sweat."

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It seemed that Catherine Evans (who had never wished more bitterly to be Catherine Bradbury again) had been lying to everyone. She had been in the grip of a screaming-blue migraine for not just a day or two days this time but for the last two weeks. During that time she had eaten next to nothing and lost fifteen pounds. She had been serving canapes to Stephen Krutchmer, the head of the History Department, and his wife when the colors went out of everything and the world suddenly swam away from her. She had rolled bonelessly forward, spilling a whole tray of Chinese pork rolls onto the front of Mrs. Krutchmer's expensive Norma Kamali dress, which had been purchased for just this occasion.

Brian and Lissa had heard the commotion and had come creeping down the stairs in their pajamas to see what was going on, although both of them -- all four children, for that matter -- had been strictly forbidden by Daddy Lew to leave the upper floors of the house once the party began. "University people don't like to see children at faculty parties," Lew had explained brusquely that afternoon. "It sends all sorts of mixed signals."

When they saw their mother on the floor in a circle of kneeling, concerned faculty members (Mrs. Krutchmer was not there; she had run for the kitchen, wanting to get some cold water on the front of her dress before the sauce-stains could set) they had forgotten their stepfather's firm order and had run in, Lissa crying, Brian bellowing in excited dismay. Lissa managed to kick the head of Asian Studies in the left kidney. Brian, who was two years older and thirty pounds heavier, did even better: he knocked the fall semester's guest lecturer, a plump babe in a pink dress and curly-toed evening slippers, smack into the fireplace. She sat there, dazed, in a large puff of gray-black ashes.

"Mom! Mommy!" Brian cried, shaking the former Catherine Bradbury. "Mommy! Wake up!" Mrs. Evans stirred and moaned.

"Get upstairs," Lew said coldly. "Both of you."

When they showed no signs of obeying, Lew put his hand on Lissa's shoulder and tightened it until she squeaked with pain. His eyes blazed at her out of a face, which had gone dead pale except for red spots as bright as dime-store rouge in the center of each cheek.

"I'll take care of this," he said through teeth so tightly clamped they refused to entirely unlock even to speak. "You and your brother go upstairs right n -- "

"Take your hand off her, you son of a bitch," Trent said clearly.

Lew -- and all the party-goers who had arrived early enough to witness this entertaining sideshow -- turned toward the archway between the living room and the hallway. Trent and Laurie stood there, side by side. Trent was as pale as his stepfather, but his face was calm and set. There were people at the party -- not many but a few -- who had known Catherine Evans's first husband, and they agreed later that the resemblance between father and son was extraordinary. That it was, in fact, almost as though Bill Bradbury had come back from the dead to confront his ill-tempered replacement.

"I want you to go upstairs," Lew said. "All four of you. There's nothing here to concern you. Nothing to concern you at all."

Mrs. Krutchmer had come back into the room, the bosom of her Norma Kamali damp but reasonably free of stains.

"Get your hand off Lissa," Trent said.

"And get away from our mother," Laurie said.

Now Mrs. Evans was sitting up, her hands to her head, looking around dazedly. The headache had popped like a balloon, leaving her disoriented and weak but at last out of the agony she had endured for the last fourteen days. She knew she had done something terrible, embarrassed Lew, perhaps even disgraced him, but for the moment she was too grateful that the pain had stopped to care. The shame would come later. Now she only wanted to go upstairs -- very slowly -- and lie down.

"You'll be punished for this," Lew said, looking at his four stepchildren in the nearly perfect shocked silence of the living room. He didn't look at them all at once but one at a time, as if marking the nature and extent of each crime. When his gaze fell on Lissa, she began to cry. "I'm sorry for their misbehavior," he said to the room at large. "My wife is a bit lax with them, I'm afraid. What they need is a good English nanny -- "

"Don't be a jackass, Lew," Mrs. Krutchmer said. Her voice was very loud but not very tuneful; she sounded a bit like a jackass in full bray herself. Brian jumped, clutched his sister, and also gave way to tears. "Your wife fainted. They were

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concerned, that's all."

"Quite right, too," the guest lecturer said, struggling to extract her considerable bulk from the fireplace. Her pink dress was now a splotchy gray and her face was streaked with soot. Only her shoes with their absurd but engaging curly tips seemed to have escaped, but she looked quite unperturbed by the whole thing. "Children should care about their mothers. And husbands about their wives."

She looked pointedly at Lew Evans as she said this last, but Lew missed her gaze; he was marking Trent and Laurie's progress as they assisted their mother up the stairs. Lissa and Brian trailed along behind, like an honor guard.

The party went on. The incident was more or less papered over, as unpleasant incidents at faculty parties usually are. Mrs. Evans (who had slept three hours a night at most since her husband had announced his intention of throwing a party) was asleep almost as soon as her head touched the pillow, and the children heard Lew downstairs, booming out bonhomie without her. Trent suspected that he was even a little relieved not to have to contend with his scurrying, frightened mouse of a wife anymore.

He never once broke away to come up and check on her.

Not once. Not until the party was over.

After the last guest had been shown out, he walked heavily upstairs and told her to wake up... which she did, obedient in this as she had been in everything else since the day when she had made the mistake of telling the minister she did and Lew that she would.

Lew poked his head into Trent's room next and measured the children with his gaze. "I knew you'd all be in here," he said with a satisfied little nod. "Conspiring. You're going to be punished, you know. Yes indeed. Tomorrow. Tonight I want you to go right to bed and think about it. Now go to your rooms. And no creeping around, either."

Neither Lissa nor Brian did any "creeping around," certainly; they were too exhausted and emotionally wrung out to do anything but go to bed and fall immediately asleep. But Laurie came back down to Trent's room in spite of "Daddy Lew," and the two of them listened in silent dismay as their stepfather upbraided their mother for daring to faint at his party... and as their mother wept and offered not a word of argument or even demurral.

"Oh, Trent, what are we going to do?" Laurie asked, her voice muffled against his shoulder.

Trent's face was extraordinarily pale and still. "Do?" he said. "Why, we're not going to do anything, Sprat."

"We have to! Trent, we have to! We have to help her!"

"No, we don't," Trent said. A small and somehow terrible smile played around his lips. "The house is going to do it for us." He looked at his watch and calculated.

"At around three-thirty-four tomorrow afternoon, the house is going to do it all." There were no punishments in the morning; Lew Evans was too preoccupied with his eight o'clock seminar on Consequences of the Norman Conquest. Neither Trent nor Laurie was very surprised at this, but both were extremely grateful. He told them he would see them in his study that night, one by one, and "mete a few fair strokes to each." Once this threat in the form of an obscure quotation had been given, he marched out with his head up and his briefcase clasped firmly in his right hand.

Their mother was still asleep when his Porsche snarled its way down the street. The two younger kids were standing by the kitchen with their arms around each other, looking to Laurie like an illustration from a Grimm's fairytale. Lissa was crying. Brian was keeping a stiff upper lip, at least so far, but he was pale and there were purple pouches under his eyes. "He'll spank us," Brian said to Trent. "And he spans hard, too."

"Nope," Trent said. They looked at him hopefully but dubiously. Lew had, after all, promised spankings; even Trent was not to be spared this painful indignity.

"But, Trent --" Lissa began.

"Listen to me," Trent said, pulling a chair out from the table and sitting on it backward in front of the two little ones. "Listen carefully, and don't you miss a single word. It's important, and none of us can screw up."

They stared at him silently with their big green-blue eyes.

"As soon as school is out, I want you two to come right home... but only as far as the corner. The corner of Maple and Walnut. Have you got that?"

"Ye-ess," Lissa said hesitantly. "But why, Trent?"

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"Never mind," Trent said. His own eyes -- also green-blue -- were sparkling, but Laurie thought it wasn't a good-humored sparkle; she thought, in fact, that there was something dangerous about it. "Just be there. Stand by the mailbox. You have to be there by three o'clock, three-fifteen at the latest. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Brian said, speaking for both of them. "We got it."

"Laurie and I will already be there, or we'll be there right after you get there."

"How are we going to do that, Trent?" Laurie asked. "We don't even get out of school until three o'clock, and I have band practice, and the bus takes --"

"We're not going to school today," Trent said.

"No?" Laurie was nonplussed.

Lissa was horrified. "Trent!" she said. "You can't do that! That's... that's... hookey!"

"And about time, too," Trent said grimly. "Now you two get ready for school. Just remember: the corner of Maple and Walnut at three o'clock, three-fifteen at the absolute latest. And whatever you do, don't come all the way home." He stared at Brian and Lissa so fiercely that they looked back with frightened dismay, drawing together for mutual comfort once again. Even Laurie was frightened. "Wait for us, but don't you dare come back into this house," he said. "Not for anything."

When the little kids were gone, Laurie seized his shirt and demanded to know what was going on.

"It has something to do with what's growing in the house, I know it does, and if you want me to play hookey and help you, you better tell me what it is, Trent Bradbury!"

"Mellow out, I'll tell you," Trent said. He carefully removed his shirt from Laurie's tight grip. "And quiet down. I don't want you to wake up Mom. She'll make us go to school, and that's no good."

"Well, what is it? Tell me!"

"Come on downstairs," Trent said. "I want to show you something."

He led her downstairs to the wine-cellar.

Trent wasn't completely sure Laurie would ride along with what he had in mind -- it seemed awfully... well, final... even to him -- but she did. If it had just been a matter of enduring a spanking from "Daddy Lew," he didn't think she would have, but Laurie had been as deeply affected by the sight of her mother lying senseless on the living-room floor as Trent had been by his stepfather's unfeeling reaction to it.

"Yeah," Laurie said bleakly. "I think we have to." She was looking at the blinking numbers on the arm of the chair. They now read

07:49:21.

The wine-cellar was no longer a wine-cellar at all. It stank of wine, true enough, and there were the piles of shattered green glass on the floor amid the twisted ruins of their father's wine-racks, but it now looked like a madman's version of the control-bridge on the Starship Enterprise. Dials whirled. Digital read-outs flickered, changed, flickered again. Lights blinked and flashed.

"Yeah," Trent said. "I think so, too. That son of a bitch, shouting at her like that!"

"Trent, don't."

"He's a jerk! A bastard! A dickhead!"

But this was just a foul-mouthed version of whistling past the graveyard, and both of them knew it. Looking at the strange agglomeration of instruments and controls made Trent feel almost sick with doubt and unease. He was reminded of a book his dad had read him when he was a child, a Mercer Mayer story where a creature called a Stamp-Eating Trollusk had popped a little girl into an envelope and mailed her to Whom It May Concern. Wasn't that pretty much what he was proposing they do to Lew Evans?

"If we don't do something, he'll kill her," Laurie said in a low voice.

"Huh?'" Trent whipped his head around so fast it hurt his neck, but Laurie wasn't looking at him. She was looking at the red numbers of the countdown. They reflected backward off the lenses of the spectacles she wore on schooldays. She seemed almost hypnotized, unaware Trent was looking at her, perhaps even unaware that he was there.

"Not on purpose," she said. "He might even be sad. For a while, anyway. Because I think he does love her, sort of, and she loves him. You know -- sort of. But he'll make her worse and worse. She'll get sick all the time, and then... one day..."

She broke off and looked at him, and something in her face scared Trent worse than anything in their strange, changing, sneaking house had been able to do.

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"Tell me, Trent," she said. Her hand grasped his arm. It was very cold. "Tell me how we're going to do it."

They went up to Lew's study together. Trent was prepared to ransack the place if that was what it took, but they found the key in the top drawer, tucked neatly into an envelope with the word study printed on it in Lew's small, neat, somehow hemorrhoidal printing. Trent pocketed it. They left the house together just as the shower on the second floor went on, meaning their mom was up.

They spent the day in the park. Although neither of them spoke of it, it was the longest day either of them had ever lived through. Twice they saw the beat-cop and hid in the public toilets until he was gone. This was no time to be caught playing truant and bundled off to school.

At two-thirty, Trent gave Laurie a quarter and walked her to the phone booth on the east side of the park.

"Do I have to?" she asked. "I hate to scare her, especially after last night."

"Do you want her in the house when whatever happens, happens?" Trent asked. Laurie dropped the quarter into the telephone with no further protest.

It rang so many times that she became sure their mother had gone out. That might be good, but it might also be bad. It was certainly worrisome. If she was out, it was entirely possible that she might come back before --

"Trent, I don't think she's h -- "

"Hello?" Mrs. Evans said in a sleepy voice.

"Oh, hi, Mom," Laurie said. "I didn't think you were there."

"I went back to bed," she said with an embarrassed little laugh. "I can't seem to get enough sleep, all of a sudden. I suppose if I'm asleep I can't think about how horrible I was last night -- "

"Oh, Mom, you weren't horrible. When a person faints, it isn't because she wants to -- "

"Laurie, why are you calling? Is everything okay?"

"Sure, Mom... well..."

Trent poked her in the ribs. Hard.

Laurie, who had been slumping (growing smaller, it almost seemed), straightened up in a hurry. "I hurt myself in gym. Just... you know, a little. It's not bad."

"What did you do? Jesus, you're not calling from the hospital, are you?"

"Gosh, no," Laurie said hastily. "It's just a sprained knee. Mrs. Kitt asked if you could come and bring me home early. I don't know if I can walk on it. It really hurts."

"I'll come right away. Try not to move it at all, honey. You could have torn a ligament. Is the nurse there?"

"Not right now. Don't worry, Mom, I'll be careful."

"Will you be in the nurse's office?"

"Yes," Laurie said. Her face was as red as the side of Brian's Radio Flyer wagon.

"I'll be right there."

"Thanks, Mom. Bye."

She hung up and looked at Trent. She drew in a deep breath and then let it out in a long, trembly sigh.

"That was fun," she said in a voice which was close to tears.

He hugged her tight. "You did great," he said. "Lots better than I could have, Spr -- Laurie. I'm not sure she would have believed me."

"I wonder if she'll ever believe me again?" Laurie asked bitterly.

"She will," Trent said. "Come on."

They went over to the west side of the park, where they could watch Walnut Street. The day had turned cold and dim. Thunderheads were forming overhead, and a chilly wind was blowing. They waited for five endless minutes and then their mother's Subaru passed them, heading rapidly toward Greendowne Middle School, where Trent and Laurie went... where we go when we're not playing hookey, that is, Laurie thought. "She's really humming," Trent said. "I hope she doesn't get into an accident, or something."

"Too late to worry about that now. Come on." Laurie had Trent's hand and was pulling him back to the telephone kiosk again. "You get to call Lew, you lucky devil."

He put in another quarter and punched the number of the History Department office, referring to a card he had taken from his wallet. He had barely slept a wink the night before, but now that things were set in motion, he found himself cool and calm... so cool, in fact, that he was almost refrigerated. He glanced at his watch.

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Quarter to three. Less than an hour to go. Thunder rumbled faintly in the west.

"History Department," a woman's voice said.

"Hi. This is Trent Bradbury. I need to speak with my stepfather, Lewis Evans, please."

"Professor Evans is in class," the secretary said, "but he'll be out at -- "

"I know, he's got Modern British History until three-thirty. But you better get him, just the same. It's an emergency. It concerns his wife." A pointed, calculated pause, and then he added: "My mom."

There was a long pause, and Trent felt a moment of faint alarm. It was as if she were thinking of refusing or dismissing him, emergency or no emergency, and that was most definitely not in the plan.

"He's in Oglethorpe, right next door," she said finally. "I'll get him myself. I'll have him call home as soon as -- "

"No, I have to hold on," Trent said.

"But -- "

"Please, will you just stop goofing with me and go get him?" he asked, allowing a ragged, harried note into his voice. It wasn't hard.

"All right," the secretary said. It was impossible to tell if she was more disgruntled or worried. "If you could tell me the nature of the -- "

"No," Trent said.

There was an offended sniff, and then he was on hold.

"Well?" Laurie asked. She was dancing from foot to foot like someone who needs to go to the bathroom.

"I'm on hold. They're getting him."

"What if he doesn't come?"

Trent shrugged. "Then we're sunk. But he'll come. You wait and see." He wished he could be as confident as he sounded, but he did still believe this would work. It had to work.

"We left it until awful late."

Trent nodded. They had left it until awful late, and Laurie knew why. The study door was solid oak, plenty strong, but neither of them knew anything about the lock.

Trent wanted to make sure Lew had only the shortest time possible to test it.

"What if he sees Brian and Lissie on the corner when he comes home?"

"If he gets as hot under the collar as I think he will, he wouldn't notice them if they were on stilts and wearing Day-Glo duncecaps," Trent said.

"Why doesn't he answer the darn phone?" Laurie asked, looking at her watch.

"He will," Trent said, and then their stepfather did.

"Hello?"

"It's Trent, Lew. Mom's in your study. Her headache must have come back, because she fainted. I can't wake her up. You better come home right away."

Trent was not surprised at his stepfather's first stated object of concern -- it was, in fact, an integral part of his plan -- but it still made him so angry his fingers turned white on the telephone.

"My study? My study? What the hell was she doing in there?"

In spite of his anger, Trent's voice came out calmly. "Cleaning, I think." And then tossed the ultimate bait to a man who cared a great deal more for work than wife:

"There are papers all over the floor."

"I'll be right there," Lew rapped, and then added: "If there are any windows open in there, shut them, for God's sake. There's a storm coming." He hung up without saying goodbye.

"Well?" Laurie asked as Trent hung up.

"He's on his way," Trent said, and laughed grimly. "The son of a bitch was so stirred up he didn't even ask what I was doing home from school. Come on."

They ran back to the intersection of Maple and Walnut. The sky had grown very dark now, and the sound of thunder had become almost constant. As they reached the blue U.S. mailbox on the corner, the streetlights along Maple Street began to come on two by two, marching away from them up the hill.

Lissa and Brian hadn't arrived yet.

"I want to come with you, Trent," Laurie said, but her face proclaimed her a liar. It was very pale, and her eyes were too large, swimming with unshed tears.

"No way," Trent said. "Wait here for Brian and Lissa."

At their names, Laurie turned and looked down Walnut Street. She saw two kids coming, hurrying along with lunchboxes bouncing in their hands. Although they were

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too far away to make out faces, she was pretty sure it was them, and she told Trent. "Good. The three of you go behind Mrs. Redland's hedge there and wait for Lew to pass. Then you can come up the street, but don't go in the house and don't let them, either. Wait for me outside."

"I'm afraid, Trent." The tears had begun to spill down her cheeks now.

"Me too, Sprat," he said, and kissed her swiftly on the forehead. "But it'll all be over soon."

Before she could say anything else, Trent went running up the street toward the Bradburys' house on Maple Street. He glanced at his watch as he ran. It was twelve past three.

The house had a still, hot air that scared him. It was as if gunpowder had been spilled in every corner, and people he could not see were standing by to light unseen fuses. He imagined the clock in the wine-cellar ticking relentlessly away, now reading

00:19:06. What if Lew was late?

No time to worry about that now.

Trent raced up to the third floor through the still, combustible air. He imagined he could feel the house stirring now, coming alive as the countdown neared its conclusion. He tried to tell himself that imagination was all it was, but part of him knew better.

He went into Lew's study, opened two or three file-cabinets and desk drawers at random, and threw the papers he found all over the floor. This took only a few moments, but he was just finishing when he heard the Porsche coming up the street. Its engine wasn't snarling today; Lew had wound it up to a scream.

Trent stepped out of the office and into the shadows of the third-floor hallway, where they had drilled the first holes what seemed like a century ago. He rammed his hand into his pocket for the key, and his pocket was empty except for an old, crumpled lunch-ticket.

I must have lost it running up the street. It must have bounced right out of my pocket.

He stood there, sweating and frozen, as the Porsche squealed into the driveway. Its engine cut out. The driver's door opened and slammed shut. Lew's footsteps ran for the back door. Thunder crumped like an artillery shell in the sky, a stroke of bright lightning forked through the gloom, and, somewhere deep in the house, a powerful motor turned over, uttered a low, muffled bark, and then began to hum.

Jesus, oh dear Jesus, what do I do? What can I do? He's bigger than me! If I try to hit him over the head, he'll --

He had slipped his left hand into his other pocket, and his thoughts broke off as it touched the old-fashioned metal teeth of the key. At some point during the long afternoon in the park, he must have transferred it from one pocket to the other without even being aware of it.

Gasping, heart galloping in his stomach and throat as well as in his chest, Trent faded back down the hall to the luggage-closet, stepped inside, and pulled the accordion-style doors most of the way shut in front of him.

Lew was galumphing up the stairs, bawling his wife's name over and over at the top of his voice. Trent saw him appear, hair standing up in spikes (he must have been running a hand through it as he drove), his tie askew, big drops of sweat standing out on his broad, intelligent forehead, eyes squinted down to furious little slits.

"Catherine!" he bawled, and ran down the hall into the office.

Before he could even get all the way in, Trent was out of the luggage-closet and running soundlessly back down the hall. He would have just one chance. If he missed the keyhole... if the tumblers failed to turn at the first twist of the key...

II either of those things happens, I'll fight with him, he had time to think. III can't send him alone, I'll make damn sure to take him with me.

He grabbed the door and banged it shut so hard that a little film of dust shot out of the cracks between the hinges. He caught one glimpse of Lew's startled face. Then the key was in the lock. He twisted it, and the bolt shot across an instant before Lew struck the door.

"Hey!" Lew shouted. "Hey, you little bastard, what are you doing? Where's Catherine? Let me out of here!"

The knob twisted fruitlessly back and forth. Then it stopped, and Lew rained a fusillade of blows on the door.

"Let me out of here right now Trent Bradbury before you get the worst beating of

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your goddamned life!"

Trent backed slowly across, the hall. When his shoulders struck the far wall, he gasped. The key to the study, which he had removed from the keyhole without even thinking about it, dropped from his fingers and thumped to the faded hall-runner between his feet. Now that it was done, reaction set in. The world began to look wavery, as if he were under water, and he had to fight to keep from fainting himself. Only now, with Lew locked in, his mother sent off on a wild-goose chase, and the other kids safely tucked away behind Mrs. Redland's overgrown yew hedge, did he realize that he had never really expected it would work at all. If "Daddy Lew" was surprised to find himself locked in, Trent Bradbury was absolutely amazed. The doorknob of the study twisted back and forth in short sharp half-circles.

"let me out, goddammit!"

"I'll let you out at quarter of four, Lew," Trent said in an uneven, trembling voice, and then a little giggle escaped him. "If you're still here at quarter of four, that is."

Then, from downstairs: "Trent? Trent, are you all right?"

Dear God, that was Laurie.

"Are you, Trent?"

And Lissa!

"Hey, Trent! Y'okay?"

And Brian.

Trent looked at his watch and was horrified to see it was 3:31... going on 3:32. And suppose his watch was slow?

"Get out!" he screamed at them, plunging down the hallway toward the stairs. "Get out of this house!"

The third-floor hallway seemed to stretch out before him like taffy; the faster he ran, the farther it seemed to stretch ahead of him. Lew rained blows on the door and curses on the air; thunder boomed; and, from deep within the house came the ever-more-urgent sound of machines waking to life.

He reached the stairwell at last and hurried down, his upper body so far out in front of his legs that he almost fell. Then he was whirling around the newel post and hurtling down the flight of stairs between the second floor and the first, toward where his brother and two sisters waited, looking up at him.

"Out!" he screamed, grabbing them, shoving them toward the open door and the stormy blackness outside. "Quick!"

"Trent, what's happening?" Brian asked. "What's happening to the house? It's shaking!"

It was, too -- a deep vibration that rose up through the floor and rattled Trent's eyeballs in their sockets. Plaster-dust began to sift down into his hair.

"No time! Out! Fast! Laurie, help me!"

Trent swept Brian into his arms. Laurie grabbed Lissa under the arms of her dress and stumbled out the door with her.

Thunder bammed. Lightning twisted across the sky. The wind that had been gasping earlier now began to roar like a dragon.

Trent heard an earthquake building under the house. As he ran out through the door with Brian, he saw electric-blue light, so bright it left afterimages on his eyes for almost an hour (he reflected later he was lucky not to have been blinded), shoot out through the narrow cellar windows. It cut across the lawn in rays that looked almost solid. He heard the glass break. And, just as he passed through the door, he felt the house rising under his feet.

He jumped down the front steps and grabbed Laurie's arm. They stumble-staggered down the walk to the street, which was now as black as night with the coming of the storm.

There they turned back and watched it happen.

The house on Maple Street seemed to gather itself. It no longer looked straight and solid; it seemed to jitter, like a comic-strip picture of a man on a pogo-stick.

Huge cracks ran out from it, not only in the cement walk but in the earth surrounding it. The lawn pulled apart in huge pie-shaped turves of grass. Roots strained blackly upward below the green, and the whole front yard seemed to become bubble-shaped, as if it were straining to hold the house before which it had spread so long.

Trent cast his eyes up to the third floor, where the light in Lew's study still shone. Trent thought the sound of breaking glass had come -- was still coming --

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from up there, then dismissed the idea as imagination -- how could he hear anything in all that racket? It was only a year later that Laurie told him she was quite sure she had heard their stepfather screaming from up there.

The foundation of the house first crumbled, then cracked, and then sundered with a croak of exploding mortar. Brilliant cold blue fire lanced out. The children covered their eyes and staggered back. The engines screamed. The earth pulled up and up in a last agonized holding action... and then let go. Suddenly the house was a foot above the ground, resting on a pad of bright blue fire.

It was a perfect lift-off.

Atop the center roof peak, the weathervane spun madly.

The house rose slowly at first, then began to gather speed. It thundered upward on its flaring pad of blue fire, the front door clapping madly back and forth as it went.

"My toys!" Brian bleated, and Trent began to laugh wildly.

The house reached a height of thirty yards, seemed to poise itself for its great leap upward, then blasted into the rushing spate of night-black clouds.

It was gone.

Two shingles came floating down like large black leaves.

"Look out, Trent!" Laurie cried out a second or two later, and shoved him hard enough to knock him over. The rubber-backed welcome mat thwacked into the street where he had been standing.

Trent looked at Laurie. Laurie looked back.

"That would've smarted like big blue heck if it'd hit you on the head," she told him, "so you just better not call me Sprat anymore, Trent."

He looked at her solemnly for several seconds, and then began to giggle. Laurie joined in. So did the little ones. Brian took one of Trent's hands; Lissa took the other. They helped pull him to his feet, and then the four of them stood together, looking at the smoking cellar-hole in the middle of the shattered lawn. People were coming out of their houses now, but the Bradbury children ignored them. Or perhaps it would be truer to say the Bradbury children didn't know they were there at all.

"Wow," Brian said reverently. "Our house took off, Trent."

"Yeah," Trent said.

"Maybe wherever it's going, there'll be people who want to know about the Normans and the Sexies," Lissa said.

Trent and Laurie put their arms around each other and began to shriek with mingled laughter and horror... and that was when the rain began to pelt down.

Mr. Slattery from across the street joined them. He didn't have much hair, but what he did have was plastered to his gleaming skull in tight little bunches.

"What happened?" he screamed over the thunder, which was almost constant now. "What happened here?"

Trent let go of his sister and looked at Mr. Slattery. "True Space Adventures," he said solemnly, and that set them all off again.

Mr. Slattery cast a doubtful, frightened look at the empty cellar-hole, decided discretion was the better part of valor, and retreated to his side of the street.

Although it was still pouring buckets, In

did not invite the Bradbury children to join him. Nor did they care. They sat down on the curb, Trent and Laurie in the middle, Brian and Lissa on the sides.

Laurie leaned toward Trent and whispered in his ear: "We're free."

"It's better than that," Trent said. "She is."

Then he put his arms around all of them -- by stretching, he could just manage -- and they sat on the curb in the pouring rain and waited for their mother to come home.