

Stephen King - The Moving Finger

The Moving Finger
by Stephen King

When the scratching started, Howard Mitla was sitting alone in the Queens apartment where he lived with his wife. Howard was one of New York's lesser-known certified public accountants. Violet Mitla, one of New York's lesser-known dental assistants, had waited until the news was over before going down to the store on the corner to get a pint of ice cream. Jeopardy was on after the news, and she didn't care for that show. She said it was because Alex Trebek looked like a crooked evangelist, but Howard knew the truth: Jeopardy made her feel dumb.

The scratching sound was coming from the bathroom just off the short squib of hall that led to the bedroom. Howard tightened up as soon as he heard it. It wasn't a junkie or a burglar in there, not with the heavy-gauge mesh he had put over all the windows two years ago at his own expense. It sounded more like a mouse in the basin or the tub. Maybe even a rat.

He waited through the first few questions, hoping the scratching sound would go away on its own, but it didn't. When the commercial came on, he got reluctantly up from his chair and walked to the bathroom door. It was standing ajar, allowing him to hear the scratching sound even better.

Almost certainly a mouse or a rat. Little paws clicking against the porcelain.

"Damn," Howard said, and went into the kitchen.

Standing in the little space between the gas stove and the refrigerator were a few cleaning implements -- a mop, a bucket filled with old rags, a broom with a dustpan snugged down over the handle. Howard took the broom in one hand, holding it well down toward the bristles, and the dustpan in the other. Thus armed, he walked reluctantly back through the small living room to the bathroom door. He cocked his head forward. Listened.

Scratch, scratch, scritch-scratch.

A very small sound. Probably not a rat. Yet that was what his mind insisted on conjuring up. Not just a rat but a New York rat, an ugly, bushy thing with tiny black eyes and long whiskers like wire and snaggle teeth protruding from below its V-shaped upper lip. A rat with attitude.

The sound was tiny, almost delicate, but nevertheless --

Behind him, Alex Trebek said, "This Russian madman was shot, stabbed, and strangled... all in the same night."

"Who was Lenin?" one of the contestants responded.

"Who was Rasputin, peabrain," Howard Mitla murmured. He transferred the dustpan to the hand holding the broom, then snaked his free hand into the bathroom and turned on the light. He stepped in and moved quickly to the tub crammed into the corner below the dirty, mesh-covered window. He hated rats and mice, hated all little furry things that squeaked and scuttered (and sometimes bit), but he had discovered as a boy growing up in Hell's Kitchen that if you had to dispatch one of them, it was best to do it quickly. It would do him no good to sit in his chair and ignore the sound; Vi had helped herself to a couple of beers during the news, and the bathroom would be her first stop when she returned from the market. If there was a mouse in the tub, she would raise the roof... and demand he do his manly duty and dispatch it anyway. Posthaste.

The tub was empty save for the hand-held shower attachment. Its hose lay on the enamel like a dead snake.

The scratching had stopped either when Howard turned on the light or when he entered the room, but now it started again. Behind him. He turned and took three steps toward the bathroom basin, raising the broomhandle as he moved.

The fist wrapped around the handle got to the level of his chin and then froze. He stopped moving. His jaw came unhinged. If he had looked at himself in the toothpaste-spotted mirror over the basin, he would have seen shiny strings of spittle, as gossamer as strands of spiderweb, gleaming between his tongue and the roof of his mouth.

A finger had poked its way out of the drain-hole in the basin.

A human finger.

For a moment it froze, as if aware it had been discovered. Then it began to move again, feeling its wormlike way around the pink porcelain. It reached the white rubber plug, felt its way over it, then descended to the porcelain again. The scratching noise hadn't been made by the tiny claws of a mouse after all. It was the

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nail on the end of that finger, tapping the porcelain as it circled and circled. Howard gave voice to a rusty, bewildered scream, dropped the broom, and ran for the bathroom door. He hit the tile wall with his shoulder instead, rebounded, and tried again. This time he got out, swept the door shut behind him, and only stood there with his back pressed against it, breathing hard. His heartbeat was hard, toneless Morse code high up in one side of his throat.

He couldn't have stood there for long -- when he regained control of his thoughts, Alex Trebek was still guiding that evening's three contestants through Single Jeopardy -- but while he did, he had no sense of time passing, where he was, or even who he was.

What brought him out of it was the electronic whizzing sound that signaled a Daily Double square. "The category is Space and Aviation," Alex was saying. "You currently have seven hundred dollars, Mildred -- how much do you wish to wager?" Mildred, who did not have game-show-host projection, muttered something inaudible in response. Howard moved away from the door and back into the living room on legs, which felt like pogo-sticks. He still had the dustpan in one hand. He looked at it for a moment and then let it fall to the carpet. It hit with a dusty little thump.

"I didn't see that," Howard Mitla said in a trembling little voice, and collapsed into his chair.

"All right, Mildred -- for five hundred dollars: This Air Force test site was originally known as Miroc Proving Ground."

Howard peered at the TV. Mildred, a mousy little woman with a hearing aid as big as a clock-radio screwed into one ear, was thinking deeply.

"I didn't see that," he said with a little more conviction.

"What is... Vandenberg Air Base?" Mildred asked.

"What is Edwards Air Base, birdbrain," Howard said. And, as Alex Trebek confirmed what Howard Mitla already knew, Howard repeated: "I didn't see that at all."

But Violet would be back soon, and he had left the broom in the bathroom.

Alex Trebek told the contestants -- and the viewing audience -- that it was still anybody's game, and they would be back to play Double Jeopardy, where the scores could really change, in two shakes of a lamb's tail. A politician came on and began explaining why he should be re-elected. Howard got reluctantly to his feet. His legs felt a little more like legs and a little less like pogo-sticks with metal fatigue now, but he still didn't want to go back into the bathroom.

Look, he told himself, this is perfectly simple. Things like this always are. You had a momentary hallucination, the son of thing that probably happens to people all the time. The only reason you don't hear about them more often is because people don't like to talk about them... having hallucinations is embarrassing. Talking about them makes people feel the way you're going to feel if that broom is still on the floor in there when Vi comes back and asks what you were up to.

"Look," the politician on TV was saying in rich, confidential tones. "When you get right down to cases, it's perfectly simple: do you want an honest, competent man running the Nassau County Bureau of Records, or do you want a man from upstate, a hired gun who's never even --"

"It was air in the pipes, I bet," Howard said, and although the sound which had taken him into the bathroom in the first place had not sounded the slightest bit like air in the pipes, just hearing his own voice -- reasonable, under control again -- got him moving with a little more authority.

And besides -- Vi would be home soon. Any minute, really.

He stood outside the door, listening.

Scratch, scratch, scratch. It sounded like the world's smallest blind man tapping his cane on the porcelain in there, feeling his way around, checking out the old surroundings.

"Air in the pipes!" Howard said in a strong, declamatory voice, and boldly threw the bathroom door open. He bent low, grabbed the broomhandle, and snatched it back out the door. He did not have to take more than two steps into the little room with its faded, lumpy linoleum and its dingy, mesh-crisscrossed view on the airshaft, and he most certainly did not look into the bathroom sink.

He stood outside, listening.

Scratch, scratch. Scritch-scratch.

He returned the broom and dustpan to the little nook in the kitchen between the stove and the refrigerator and then returned to the living room. He stood there for a moment, looking at the bathroom door. It stood ajar, spilling a fan of yellow

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light into the little squib of hall.

You better go turn off the light. You know how VI raises the roof about stuff like that. You don't even have to go in. Just reach through the door and flick it off. But what if something touched his hand while he was reaching for the light switch? What if another finger touched his finger?

How about that, fellows and girls?

He could still hear that sound. There was something terribly relentless about it. It was maddening.

Scratch. Scritch. Scratch.

On the TV, Alex Trebek was reading the Double Jeopardy categories. Howard went over and turned up the sound a little. Then he sat down in his chair again and told himself he didn't hear anything from the bathroom, not a single thing.

Except maybe a little air in the pipes.

Vi Mitla was one of those women who move with such dainty precision that they seem almost fragile... but Howard had been married to her for twenty-one years, and he knew there was nothing fragile about her at all. She ate, drank, worked, danced, and made love in exactly the same way: con brio. She came into the apartment like a pocket hurricane. One large arm curled a brown paper sack against the right side of her bosom. She carried it through into the kitchen without pausing. Howard heard the bag crackle, heard the refrigerator door open and then close again. When she came back, she tossed Howard her coat. "Hang this up for me, will you?" she asked. "I've got to pee. Do I ever! whew!"

Whew! was one of Vi's favorite exclamations. Her version rhymed with P.U., the child's exclamation for something smelly.

"Sure, Vi," Howard said, and rose slowly to his feet with Vi's dark-blue coat in his arms. His eyes never left her as she went down the hall and through the bathroom door.

"Con Ed loves it when you leave the lights on, Howie," she called back over her shoulder.

"I did it on purpose," he said. "I knew that'd be your first stop."

She laughed. He heard the rustle of her clothes. "You know me too well -- people will say we're in love."

You ought to tell her -- warn her, Howard thought, and knew he could do nothing of the kind. What was he supposed to say? Watch out, Vi, there's a finger coming out of the basin drainhole, don't let the guy it belongs to poke you in the eye if you bend over to get a glass of water?

Besides, it had just been a hallucination, one brought on by a little air in the pipes and his fear of rats and mice. Now that some minutes had gone by, this seemed almost plausible to him.

Just the same, he only stood there with Vi's coat in his arms, waiting to see if she would scream. And, after ten or fifteen endless seconds, she did.

"My God, Howard!"

Howard jumped, hugging the coat more tightly to his chest. His heart, which had begun to slow down, began to do its Morse-code number again. He struggled to speak, but at first his throat was locked shut.

"What?" he managed finally. "What, Vi? What is it?"

"The towels! Half of em are on the floor! Sheesh! What happened?"

"I don't know," he called back. His heart was thumping harder than ever, and it was impossible to tell if the sickish, pukey feeling deep down in his belly was relief or terror. He supposed he must have knocked the towels off the shelf during his first attempt to exit the bathroom, when he had hit the wall.

"It must be spookies," she said. "Also, I don't mean to nag, but you forgot to put the ring down again."

"Oh -- sorry," he said.

"Yeah, that's what you always say," her voice floated back. "Sometimes I think you want me to fall in and drown. I really do!" There was a clunk as she put it down herself. Howard waited, heart thumping away, her coat still hugged against his chest.

"He holds the record for the most strikeouts in a single game," Alex Trebek read.

"Who was Tom Seaver?" Mildred snapped right back.

"Roger Clemens, you nitwit," Howard said.

Pwoosh! There went the flush. And the moment he was waiting for (Howard had just realized this consciously) was now at hand. The pause seemed almost endless. Then he

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heard the squeak of the washer in the bathroom faucet marked H (he kept meaning to replace that washer and kept forgetting), followed by water flowing into the basin, followed by the sound of Vi briskly washing her hands.

No screams.

Of course not, because there was no finger.

"Air in the pipes," Howard said with more assurance, and went to hang up his wife's coat.

She came out, adjusting her skirt. "I got the ice cream," she said, "cherry-vanilla, just like you wanted. But before we try it, why don't you have a beer with me, Howie? It's this new stuff. American Grain, it's called. I never heard of it, but it was on sale so I bought a six-pack. Nothing ventured, nothing gained, am I right?"

"Hardy-har," he said, wrinkling his nose. Vi's penchant for puns had struck him as cute when he first met her, but it had staled somewhat over the years. Still, now that he was over his fright, a beer sounded like just the thing. Then, as Vi went out into the kitchen to get him a glass of her new find, he realized he wasn't over his fright at all. He supposed that having a hallucination was better than seeing a real finger poking out of the drain of the bathroom basin, a finger that was alive and moving around, but it wasn't exactly an evening-maker, either.

Howard sat down in his chair again. As Alex Trebek announced the Final Jeopardy category -- it was The Sixties -- he found himself thinking of various TV shows he'd seen where it turned out that a character who was having hallucinations either had (a) epilepsy or (b) a brain tumor. He found he could remember a lot of them.

"You know," Vi said, coming back into the room with two glasses of beer, "I don't like the Vietnamese people who run that market. I don't think I'll ever like them. I think they're sneaky."

"Have you ever caught them doing anything sneaky?" Howard asked. He himself thought the Lahs were exceptional people... but tonight he didn't care much one way or the other.

"No," Vi said, "not a thing. And that makes me all the more suspicious. Also, they smile all the time. My father used to say,

'Never trust a smiling man.' He also said... Howard, are you feeling all right?"

"He said that?" Howard asked, making a rather feeble attempt at levity.

"Tres amusant, cheri. You look as pale as milk. Are you coming down with something?" No, he thought of saying, I'm not coming down with something -- that's too mild a term for it. I think I might have epilepsy or maybe a brain tumor, Vi -- how's that for coming down with something?

"It's just work, I guess," he said. "I told you about the new tax account. St. Anne's Hospital."

"What about it?"

"It's a rat's nest," he said, and that immediately made him think of the bathroom again -- the sink and the drain. "Nuns shouldn't be allowed to do bookkeeping. Someone ought to have put it in the Bible just to make sure."

"You let Mr. Lathrop push you around too much," Vi told him firmly. "It's going to go on and on unless you stand up for yourself. Do you want a heart attack?"

"No." And I don't want epilepsy or a brain tumor, either. Please, God, make it a one-time thing. Okay? Just some weird mental burp that happens once and never again. Okay? Please? Pretty please? With some sugar on it?

"You bet you don't," she said grimly. "Arlene Katz was saying just the other day that when men under fifty have heart attacks, they almost never come out of the hospital again. And you're only forty-one. You have to stand up for yourself, Howard. Stop being such a pushover."

"I guess so," he said glumly.

Alex Trebek came back on and gave the Final Jeopardy answer: "This group of hippies crossed the United States in a bus with writer Ken Kesey." The Final Jeopardy music began to play. The two men contestants were writing busily. Mildred, the woman with the microwave oven in her ear, looked lost. At last she began to scratch something. She did it with a marked lack of enthusiasm.

Vi took a deep swallow from her glass. "Hey!" she said. "Not bad! And only two-sixty-seven a six-pack!"

Howard drank some himself. It was nothing special, but it was wet, at least, and cool. Soothing.

Neither of the male contestants was even close. Mildred was also wrong, but she, at least, was in the ball-park. "Who were the Merry Men?" she had written.

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"Merry Pranksters, you dope," Howard said.

Vi looked at him admiringly. "You know all the answers, Howard, don't you?"

"I only wish I did," Howard said, and sighed.

Howard didn't care much for beer, but that night he helped himself to three cans of Vi's new find nevertheless. Vi commented on it, said that if she had known he was going to like it that much, she would have stopped by the drugstore and gotten him an IV hookup. Another time-honored Vi-ism. He forced a smile. He was actually hoping the beer would send him off to sleep quickly. He was afraid that, without a little help, he might be awake for quite awhile, thinking about what he had imagined he'd seen in the bathroom sink. But, as Vi had often informed him, beer was full of vitamin P, and around eight-thirty, after she had retired to the bedroom to put on her nightgown, Howard went reluctantly into the bathroom to relieve himself. First he walked over to the bathroom sink and forced himself to look in.

Nothing.

This was a relief (in the end, a hallucination was still better than an actual finger, he had discovered, despite the possibility of a brain tumor), but he still didn't like looking down the drain. The brass cross-hatch inside that was supposed to catch things like clots of hair or dropped bobby-pins had disappeared years ago, and so there was only a dark hole rimmed by a circle of tarnished steel. It looked like a staring eyesocket.

Howard took the rubber plug and stuck it into the drain.

That was better.

He stepped away from the sink, put up the toilet ring (Vi complained bitterly if he forgot to put it down when he was through, but never seemed to feel any pressing need to put it back up when she was), and addressed the John. He was one of those men who only began to urinate immediately when the need was extreme (and who could not urinate at all in crowded public lavatories -- the thought of all those men standing in line behind him just shut down his circuits), and he did now what he almost always did in the few seconds between the aiming of the instrument and the commencement of target practice: he recited prime numbers in his mind.

He had reached thirteen and was on the verge of flowing when there was a sudden sharp sound from behind him: pwuck! His bladder, recognizing the sound of the rubber plug being forced sharply out of the drain even before his brain did, clamped shut immediately (and rather painfully).

A moment later that sound -- the sound of the nail clipping lightly against the porcelain as the questing finger twisted and turned -- began again. Howard's skin went cold and seemed to shrink until it was too small to cover the flesh beneath. A single drop of urine spilled from him and plinked in the bowl before his penis actually seemed to shrink in his hand, retreating like a turtle seeking the safety of its shell.

Howard walked slowly and not quite steadily over to the washbasin. He looked in. The finger was back. It was a very long finger, but seemed otherwise normal. Howard could see the nail, which was neither bitten nor abnormally long, and the first two knuckles. As he watched, it continued to tap and feel its way around the basin.

Howard bent down and looked under the sink. The pipe, which came out of the floor, was no more than three inches in diameter. It was not big enough for an arm.

Besides, it made a severe bend at the place where the sink trap was. So just what was that finger attached to? What could it be attached to?

Howard straightened up again, and for one alarming moment he felt that his head might simply detach itself from his neck and float away. Small black specks flocked across his field of vision.

I'm going to faint! he thought. He grabbed his right earlobe and yanked it once, hard, the way a frightened passenger who has seen trouble up the line might yank the Emergency Stop cord of a railroad car. The dizziness passed... but the finger was still there.

It was not a hallucination. How could it be? He could see a tiny bead of water on the nail, and a tiny thread of whiteness beneath it -- soap, almost surely soap. Vi had washed her hands after using the John.

It could be a hallucination, though. It still could be. Just because you see soap and water on it, does that mean you can't be imagining it? And listen, Howard -- if you're not imagining it, what's it doing in there? How did it get there in the first place? And how come Vi didn't see it?

Call her, then -- call her in! his mind instructed, and in the next microsecond

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countermanded its own order. No! Don't do that! Because if you go on seeing it and she doesn't --

Howard shut his eyes tight and for a moment lived in a world where there were only red flashes of light and his own crazy heartbeat.

When he opened them again, the finger was still there.

"What are you?" he whispered through tightly stretched lips. "What are you, and what are you doing here?"

The finger stopped its blind explorations at once. It swivelled -- and then pointed directly at Howard. Howard blundered a step backward, his hands rising to his mouth to stifle a scream. He wanted to tear his eyes away from the wretched, awful thing, wanted to flee the bathroom in a rush (and never mind what Vi might think or say or see)... but for the moment he was paralyzed and unable to tear his gaze away from the pink-white digit, which now resembled nothing so much as an organic periscope. Then it curled at the second knuckle. The end of the finger dipped, touched the porcelain, and resumed its tapping circular explorations once more.

"Howie?" Vi called. "Did you fall in?"

"Be right out!" he called back in an insanely cheery voice.

He flushed away the single drop of pee which had fallen into the toilet, then moved toward the door, giving the sink a wide berth. He did catch sight of himself in the bathroom mirror, however; his eyes were huge, his skin wretchedly pale. He gave each of his cheeks a brisk pinch before leaving the bathroom, which had become, in the space of one short hour, the most horrible and inexplicable place he had ever visited in his life.

When Vi came out into the kitchen to see what was taking him so long, she found Howard looking into the refrigerator.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"A Pepsi. I think I'll go down to Lah's and get one."

"On top of three beers and a bowl of cherry-vanilla ice cream? You'll bust, Howard!"

"No, I won't," he said. But if he wasn't able to offload what his kidneys were holding, he might.

"Are you sure you feel all right?" Vi was looking at him critically, but her tone was gentler now -- tinged with real concern. "Because you look terrible. Really."

"Well," he said reluctantly, "there's been some flu going around the office. I suppose --"

"I'll go get you the damned soda, if you really need it," she said.

"No you won't," Howard interposed hastily. "You're in your nightgown. Look -- I'll put on my coat."

"When was the last time you had a soup-to-nuts physical, Howard? It's been so long I've forgotten."

"I'll look it up tomorrow," he said vaguely, going into the little foyer where their coats were hung. "It must be in one of the insurance folders."

"Well you better! And if you insist on being crazy and going out, wear my scarf!"

"Okay. Good idea." He pulled on his topcoat and buttoned it facing away from her, so she wouldn't see how his hands were shaking. When he turned around, Vi was just disappearing back into the bathroom. He stood there in fascinated silence for several moments, waiting to hear if she would scream this time, and then the water began to run in the basin. This was followed by the sound of Vi brushing her teeth in her usual manner: con brio.

He stood there a moment longer, and his mind suddenly offered its verdict in four flat, non-nonsense words: I'm losing my grip.

It might be... but that didn't change the fact that if he didn't take a whiz very soon, he was going to have an embarrassing accident. That, at least, was a problem he could solve, and Howard took a certain comfort in the fact. He opened the door, began to step out, then paused to pull Vi's scarf off the hook.

When are you going to tell her about this latest fascinating development in the life of Howard Mitla? his mind inquired suddenly.

Howard shut the thought out and concentrated on tucking the ends of the scarf into the lapels of his overcoat.

The Mitla apartment was on the fourth floor of a nine-story building on Hawking Street. To the right and half a block down, on the corner of Hawking and Queens Boulevard, was Lah's Twenty-Four-Hour Delicatessen and Convenience Market. Howard turned left and walked to the end of the building. Here was a narrow alleyway, which gave on the airshaft at the rear of the building. Trash-bins lined both sides of the

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alley. Between them were littery spaces where homeless people -- some but by no means of them winos -- often made their comfortless newspaper beds. No one seemed to have taken up residence in the alley this evening, for which Howard was profoundly grateful.

He stepped between the first and second bins, unzipped, and urinated copiously. At first the relief was so great that he felt almost blessed in spite of the evening's trials, but as the flow slackened and he began to consider his position "again, anxiety started creeping back in.

His position was, in a word, untenable.

Here he was, peeing against the wall of the building in which he had a warm, safe apartment, looking over his shoulder all the while to see if he was being observed. The arrival of a junkie or a mugger while he was in such a defenseless position would be bad, but he wasn't sure that the arrival of someone he knew -- the Fensters from 2C, for instance, or the Dattlebaums from 3F -- wouldn't be even worse. What could he say? And what might that motormouth Alicia Fenster say to Vi?

He finished, zipped his pants, and walked back to the mouth of the alley. After a prudent look in both directions, he proceeded down to Lah's and bought a can of Pepsi-Cola from the smiling, olive-skinned Mrs. Lah.

"You look pale tonight, Mr. Mit-ra," she said through her constant smile. "Peering all right?"

Oh yes, he thought. I'm fearing just fine, thank you, Mrs. Lah. Never better on that score.

"I think I might have caught a little bug at the sink," he told her. She began to frown through her smile and he realized what he had said. "At the office, I mean."

"Better bunder up walm," she said. The frown line had smoothed out of her almost ethereal forehead. "Radio say cold weather is coming."

"Thank you," he said, and left. On his way back to the apartment, he opened the Pepsi and poured it out on the sidewalk. Considering the fact that his bathroom had apparently become hostile territory, the last thing he needed tonight was any more to drink.

When he let himself in again, he could hear Vi snoring softly in the bedroom. The three beers had sent her off quickly and efficiently. He put the empty soda can on the counter in the kitchen, and then paused outside the bathroom door. After a moment or two, he tilted his head against the wood.

Scratch-scratch. Scritch-scratch-scratch.

"Dirty son of a bitch," he whispered.

He went to bed without brushing his teeth for the first time since his two-week stint at Camp High Pines, when he had been twelve and his mother had forgotten to pack his toothbrush.

And lay in bed beside Vi, wakeful.

He could hear the sound of the finger making its ceaseless exploratory rounds in the bathroom sink, the nail clicking and tap-dancing. He couldn't really hear it, not with both doors closed, and he knew this, but he imagined he heard it, and that was just as bad.

No, it isn't, he told himself. At least you know you're imagining it. With the finger itself you're not sure.

This was but little comfort. He still wasn't able to get to sleep, and he was no closer to solving his problem. He did know he couldn't spend the rest of his life making excuses to go outside and pee in the alley next to the building. He doubted if he could manage that for even forty-eight hours. And what was going to happen the next time he had to take a dump, friends and neighbors? There was a question he'd never seen asked in a round of Final Jeopardy, and he didn't have a clue what the answer might be. Not the alley, though -- he was sure of that much, at least. Maybe, the voice in his head suggested cautiously, you'll get used to the damned thing.

No. The idea was insane. He had been married to Vi for twenty-one years, and he still found it impossible to go to the bathroom when she was in there with him. Those circuits just overloaded and shut down. She could sit there cheerily on the John, peeing and talking to him about her day at Dr. Stone's while he shaved, but he could not do the same. He just wasn't built that way.

If that finger doesn't go away on its own, you better be prepared to make some changes in the way you're built, then, the voice told him, because I think you're going to have to make some modifications in the basic structure.

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He turned his head and glanced at the clock on the bed-table. It was quarter to two in the morning... and, he realized dolefully, he had to pee again.

He got up carefully, stole from the bedroom, passed the closed bathroom door with the ceaseless scratching, tapping sounds still coming from behind it, and went into the kitchen. He moved the step-stool in front of the kitchen sink, mounted it, and aimed carefully into the drain, ears cocked all the while for the sound of Vi getting out of bed.

He finally managed... but not until he had reached three hundred and forty-seven in his catalogue of prime numbers. It was an all-time record. He replaced the step-stool and shuffled back to bed, thinking: I can't go on like this. Not for long. I just can't.

He bared his teeth at the bathroom door as he passed it.

When the alarm went off at six-thirty the next morning, he stumbled out of bed, shuffled down to the bathroom, and went inside.

The drain was empty.

"Thank God," he said in a low, trembling voice. A sublime gust of relief -- relief so great it felt like some sort of sacred revelation -- blew through him. "Oh, thank G -- "

The finger popped up like a Jack popping out of a Jack-in-the-box, as if the sound of his voice had called it. It spun around three times, fast, and then bent as stiffly as an Irish setter on point. And it was pointing straight at him.

Howard retreated, his upper lip rising and falling rapidly in an unconscious snarl. Now the tip of the finger curled up and down, up and down... as if it were waving at him. Good morning, Howard, so nice to be here.

"Fuck you," he muttered. He turned and faced the toilet. He tried resolutely to pass water... and nothing. He felt a sudden lurid rush of rage... an urge to simply whirl and pounce on the nasty intruder in the sink, to rip it out of its cave, throw it on the floor, and stamp on it in his bare feet.

"Howard?" Vi asked blearily. She knocked on the door. "Almost done?"

"Yes," he said, trying his best to make his voice normal. He flushed the toilet.

It was clear that Vi would not have known or much cared if he sounded normal or not, and she took very little interest in how he looked. She was suffering from an unplanned hangover.

"Not the worst one I ever had, but still pretty bad," she mumbled as she brushed past him, hiked her nightdress, and plopped onto the Jakes. She propped her forehead in one hand. "No more of that stuff, please and thank you. American Grain, my rosy red ass. Someone should have told those babies you put the fertilizer on the hops before you grow em, not after. A headache on three lousy beers! Gosh! Well -- you buy cheap, you get cheap. Especially when it's those creepy Lahs doing the selling. Be a dollface and get me some aspirin, will you, Howie?"

"Sure," he said, and approached the sink carefully. The finger was gone again. Vi, it seemed, had once more frightened it off. He got the aspirin out of the medicine cabinet and removed two. When he reached to put the bottle back, he saw the tip of the finger protrude momentarily from the drain. It came out no more than a quarter of an inch. Again it seemed to execute that miniature wave before diving back out of sight.

I'm going to get rid of you, my friend, he thought suddenly. The feeling that accompanied the thought was anger -- pure, simple anger -- and it delighted him. The emotion cruised into his battered, bewildered mind like one of those huge Soviet icebreakers that crush and slice their way through masses of pack-ice with almost casual ease. I am going to get you. I don't know how yet, but I will.

He handed Vi the aspirin and said, "Just a minute -- I'll get you a glass of water."

"Don't bother," Vi said drearily, and crunched both tablets between her teeth.

"Works faster this way."

"I'll bet it plays hell on your insides, though," Howard said. He found he didn't mind being in the bathroom very much at all, as long as Vi was in here with him.

"Don't care," she said, more drearily still. She flushed the toilet. "How are you this morning?"

"Not great," he said truthfully.

"You got one, too?"

"A hangover? No. I think it's that flu-bug I told you about. My throat's sore, and I think I'm running a fever."

"What?"

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"Fever," he said. "Fever's what I meant to say."

"Well, you better stay home." She went to the sink, selected her toothbrush from the holder, and began to brush vigorously.

"Maybe you better, too," he said. He did not want Vi to stay home, however; he wanted her right by Dr. Stone's side while Dr. Stone filled cavities and did root canals, but it would have been unfeeling not to have said something.

She glanced up at him in the mirror. Already a little color was returning to her cheeks, a little sparkle to her eye. Vi also recovered con brio. "The day I call in sick at work because I've got a hangover will be the day I quit drinking altogether," she said. "Besides, the doc's gonna need me. We're pulling a complete set of uppers. Dirty job, but somebody's gotta do it."

She spat directly into the drain and Howard thought, fascinated: The next time it pops up, it'll have toothpaste on it. Jesus!

"You stay home and keep warm and drink plenty of fluids," Vi said. She had adopted her Head Nurse Tone now, the tone which said If you're not taking all this down, be it on your own head. "Catch up on your reading. And, by the bye, show that Mr. Hot Shit Lathrop what he's missing when you don't come in. Make him think twice."

"That's not a bad idea at all," Howard said.

She kissed him on the way by and dropped him a wink. "Your Shrinking Violet knows a few of the answers, too," she said. By the time she left to catch her bus half an hour later, she was singing lustily, her hangover forgotten.

The first thing Howard did following Vi's departure was to haul the step-stool over to the kitchen sink and whiz into the drain again. It was easier with Vi out of the house; he had barely reached twenty-three, the ninth prime number, before getting down to business.

With that problem squared away -- at least for the next few hours -- he walked back into the hall and poked his head through the bathroom door. He saw the finger at once, and that was wrong. It was impossible, because he was way over here, and the basin should have cut off his view. But it didn't and that meant --

"What are you doing, you bastard?" Howard croaked, and the finger, which had been twisting back and forth as if to test the wind, turned toward him. There was toothpaste on it, just as he had known there would be. It bent in his direction... only now it bent in three places, and that was impossible, too, quite impossible, because when you got to the third knuckle of any given finger, you were up to the back of the hand.

It's getting longer, his mind gibbered. I don't know how that can happen, but it is -- if I can see it over the top of the basin from here, it must be at least three inches long... maybe more!

He closed the bathroom door gently and staggered back into the living room. His legs had once again turned into malfunctioning pogo-sticks. His mental ice-breaker was gone, flattened under a great white weight of panic and bewilderment. No iceberg this; it was a whole glacier.

Howard Mitla sat down in his chair and closed his eyes. He had never felt more alone, more disoriented, or more utterly powerless in his entire life. He sat that way for quite some time, and at last his fingers began to relax on the arms of his chair. He had spent most of the previous night wide-awake. Now he simply drifted off to sleep while the lengthening finger in his bathroom drain tapped and circled, circled and tapped.

He dreamed he was a contestant on Jeopardy -- not the new, big-money version but the original daytime show. Instead of computer screens, a stagehand behind the game-board simply pulled up a card when a contestant called for a particular answer. Art Fleming had replaced Alex Trebek, with his slicked-back hair and somehow prissy poor-boy-at-the-party smile. The woman in the middle was still Mildred, and she still had a satellite downlink in her ear, but her hair was teased up into a Jacqueline Kennedy bouffant and a pair of cat's-eye frames had replaced her wire-rimmed glasses.

And everyone was in black and white, him included.

"Okay, Howard," Art said, and pointed at him. His index finger was a grotesque thing, easily a foot long; it stuck out of his loosely curled fist like a pedagogue's pointer. There was dried toothpaste on the nail. "It's your turn to select."

Howard looked at the board and said, "I'd like Pests and Vipers for one hundred, Art."

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The square with \$100 on it was removed, revealing an answer which Art now read: "The best way to get rid of those troublesome fingers in your bathroom drain."

"What is..." Howard said, and then came up blank. A black-and-white studio audience stared silently at him. A black-and-white camera man dollied in for a close-up of his sweat-streaked black-and-white face. "What is... um..."

"Hurry up, Howard, you're almost out of time," Art Fleming cajoled, waving his grotesquely elongated finger at Howard, but Howard was a total blank. He was going to miss the question, the hundred bucks would be deducted from his score, he was going to go into the minus column, he was going to be a complete loser, they probably wouldn't even give him the lousy set of encyclopedias...

A delivery truck on the street below backfired loudly. Howard sat up with a jerk, which almost pitched him out of his chair.

"What is liquid drain-cleaner?" he screamed. "What is liquid drain-cleaner?"

It was, of course, the answer. The correct answer.

He began to laugh. He was still laughing five minutes later, as he shrugged into his topcoat and stepped out the door.

Howard picked up the plastic bottle the toothpick-chewing clerk in the Queens Boulevard Happy Handyman Hardware Store had just set down on the counter. There was a cartoon woman in an apron on the front. She stood with one hand on her hip while she used the other hand to pour a gush of drain-cleaner into something that was either an industrial sink or Orson Welles's bidet. DRAIN-EZE, the label proclaimed. TWICE the strength of most leading brands! Opens bathroom sinks, showers, and drains IN MINUTES! Dissolves hair and organic matter!

"Organic matter," Howard said. "Just what does that mean?"

The clerk, a bald man with a lot of warts on his forehead, shrugged. The toothpick poking out between his lips rolled from one side of his mouth to the other. "Food, I guess. But I wouldn't stand the bottle next to the liquid soap, if you know what I mean."

"Would it eat holes in your hands?" Howard asked, hoping he sounded properly horrified.

The clerk shrugged again. "I guess it ain't as powerful as the stuff we used to sell -- the stuff with lye in it -- but that stuff ain't legal anymore. At least I don't think it is. But you see that, don'tcha?" He tapped the skull-and-crossbones POISON logo with one short, stubby finger. Howard got a good look at that finger. He had found himself noticing a lot of fingers on his walk down to the Happy Handyman.

"Yes," Howard said. "I see it."

"Well, they don't put that on just because it looks, you know, sporty. If you got kids, keep it out of their reach. And don't gargle with it." He burst out laughing, the toothpick riding up and down on his lower lip.

"I won't," Howard said. He turned the bottle and read the fine print. Contains sodium hydroxide and potassium hydroxide. Causes severe burns on contact. Well, that was pretty good. He didn't know if it was good enough, but there was a way to find out, wasn't there?

The voice in his head spoke up dubiously. What if you only make it mad, Howard? What then?

Well... so what? It was in the drain, wasn't it?

Yes... but it appears to be growing.

Still -- what choice did he have? On this subject the little voice was silent.

"I hate to hurry you over such an important purchase," the clerk said, "but I'm by myself this morning and I have some invoices to go over, so --"

"I'll take it," Howard said, reaching for his wallet. As he did so, his eye caught something else -- a display below a sign, which read FALL CLEARANCE SALE. "What are those?" he asked. "Over there?"

"Those?" the clerk asked. "Electric hedge-clippers. We got two dozen of 'em last June, but they didn't move worth a damn."

"I'll take a pair," said Howard Mitla. He began to smile, and the clerk later told police he didn't like that smile. Not one little bit.

Howard put his new purchases on the kitchen counter when he got home, pushing the box containing the electric hedge-clippers over to one side, hoping it would not come to those. Surely it wouldn't. Then he carefully read the instructions on the bottle of Drain-Eze.

Slowly pour 'I4 bottle into drain... let stand fifteen minutes. Repeat application if necessary.

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But surely it wouldn't come to that, either... would it?

To make sure it wouldn't, Howard decided he would pour half the bottle into the drain. Maybe a little bit more. He struggled with the safety cap and finally managed to get it off. He then walked through the living room and into the hall with the white plastic bottle held out in front of him and a grim expression -- the expression of a soldier who knows he will be ordered over the top of the trench at any moment -- on his usually mild face.

Wait a minute! the voice in his head cried out as he reached for the doorknob, and his hand faltered. This is crazy! You KNOW it's crazy! You don't need drain-cleaner, you need a psychiatrist! You need to lie down on a couch somewhere and tell someone you imagine -- that's right, that's the word, IMAGINE -- there's a finger stuck in the bathroom sink, a finger that's growing!

"Oh no," Howard said, shaking his head firmly back and forth. "No way."

He could not -- absolutely could not -- visualize himself telling this story to a psychiatrist... to anyone, in fact. Suppose Mr. Lathrop got wind of it? He might, too, through Vi's father. Bill DeHorne had been a CPA in the firm of Dean, Green, and Lathrop for thirty years. He had gotten Howard his initial interview with Mr. Lathrop, had written him a glowing recommendation... had, in fact, done everything but give him the job himself. Mr. DeHorne was retired now, but he and John Lathrop still saw a lot of each other. If Vi found out her Howie was going to see a shrink (and how could he keep it from her, a thing like that?), she would tell her mother -- Vi told her mother everything. Mrs. DeHorne would tell her husband, of course.

And Mr. DeHorne --

Howard found himself imagining the two men, his father-in-law and his boss, sitting in leather wingback chairs in some mythic club or other, the kind of wingback chairs that were studded with little gold nailheads. He saw them sipping sherry in this vision; the cut-glass decanter stood on the little table by Mr. Lathrop's right hand. (Howard had never seen either man actually drink sherry, but this morbid fantasy seemed to demand it.) He saw Mr. DeHorne -- who was now doddering into his late seventies and had all the discretion of a housefly -- lean confidentially forward and say, You'll never believe what my son-in-law Howard's up to, John. He's going to see a psychiatrist! He thinks there's a finger in his bathroom sink, you see. Do you suppose he might be taking drugs of some son?

And maybe Howard didn't really think all that would happen. He thought there was a possibility it might -- if not in just that way then in some other -- but suppose it didn't? He still couldn't see himself going to a psychiatrist. Something in him -- a close neighbor of that something that would not allow him to urinate in a public bathroom if there was a line of men behind him, no doubt -- simply refused the idea. He would not get on one of those couches and supply the answer -- There's a finger sticking out of the bathroom sink -- so that some goatee-wearing head-shrinker could pelt him with questions. It would be like Jeopardy in hell.

He reached for the knob again.

Call a plumber, then! the voice yelled desperately. At least do that much! You don't have to tell him what you see! Just tell him the pipe's clogged! Or tell him your wife lost her wedding ring down the drain! Tell him ANYTHING!

But that idea was, in a way, even more useless than the idea of calling a shrink. This was New York, not Des Moines. You could lose the Hope Diamond down your bathroom sink and still wait a week for a plumber to make a housecall. He did not intend to spend the next seven days slinking around Queens, looking for gas stations where an attendant would accept five dollars for the privilege of allowing Howard Mitla to move his bowels in a dirty men's room underneath this year's Bardahl calendar.

Then do it fast, the voice said, giving up. At least do it fast.

On this Howard's two minds were united. He was, in truth, afraid that if he didn't act fast -- and keep on acting -- he would not act at all.

And surprise it, if you can. Take off your shoes.

Howard thought this was an extremely useful idea. He acted upon it at once, easing off first one loafer and then the other. He found himself wishing he had thought to put on some rubber gloves in case of backsplatter, and wondered if Vi still kept a pair under the kitchen sink. Never mind, though. He was screwed up to the sticking point. If he paused to go back for the rubber gloves now, he might lose his courage... maybe temporarily, maybe for good.

He eased open the bathroom door and slipped inside.

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The Mitla bathroom was never what one would call a cheery place, but at this time of day, almost noon, it was at least fairly bright. Visibility wouldn't be a problem... and there was no sign of the finger. At least, not yet. Howard tiptoed across the room with the bottle of drain-cleaner clutched tightly in his right hand. He bent over the sink and looked into the round black hole in the center of the faded pink porcelain.

Except it wasn't dark. Something was rushing up through that blackness, hurrying up that small-bore, oozy pipe to greet him, to greet its good friend Howard Mitla. "Take this!" Howard screamed, and tilted the bottle of Drain-Eze over the sink. Greenish-blue sludge spilled out and struck the drain just as the finger emerged. The result was immediate and terrifying. The glop coated the nail and the tip of the finger. It went into a frenzy, whirling like a dervish around and around the limited circumference of the drain, spraying off small blue-green fans of Drain-Eze. Several droplets struck the light-blue cotton shirt Howard was wearing and immediately ate holes in it. These holes fizzed brown lace at the edges, but the shirt was rather too large for him, and none of the stuff got through to his chest or belly. Other drops stippled the skin of his right wrist and palm, but he did not feel these until later. His adrenaline was not just flowing; it was at flood tide.

The finger blurted up from the drain -- joint after impossible joint of it. It was now smoking, and it smelled like a rubber boot sizzling on a hot barbecue grill. "Take this! Lunch is served, you bastard!" Howard screamed, continuing to pour as the finger rose to a height of just over a foot, rising out of the drain like a cobra from a snake-charmer's basket. It had almost reached the mouth of the plastic bottle when it wavered, seemed to shudder, and suddenly reversed its field, zipping back down into the drain. Howard leaned farther over the basin to watch it go and saw just a retreating flash of white far down in the dark. Lazy tendrils of smoke drifted up.

He drew a deep breath, and this was a mistake. He inhaled a great double lungful of Drain-Eze fumes. He was suddenly, violently sick. He vomited forcefully into the basin and then staggered away, still gagging and trying to retch.

"I did it!" he shouted deliriously. His head swam with the combined stench of corrosive chemicals and burned flesh. Still, he felt almost exalted. He had met the enemy and the enemy, by God and all the saints, was his. His!

"Hidey-ho! Hidey-fucking-ho! I did it! I -- "

His gorge rose again. He half-knelt, half-swooned in front of the toilet, the bottle of Drain-Eze still held stiffly out in his right hand, and realized too late that Vi had put both the ring and the lid down this morning when she vacated the throne. He vomited all over the fuzzy pink toilet-seat cover and then fell forward into his own gloop in a dead faint.

He could not have been unconscious for long, because the bathroom enjoyed full daylight for less than half an hour even in the middle of summer -- then the other buildings cut off the direct sunlight and plunged the room into gloom again.

Howard raised his head slowly; aware he was coated from hairline to chin-line with sticky, foul-smelling stuff. He was even more aware of something else. A clattering sound. It was coming from behind him, and it was getting closer.

He turned his head, which felt like an overfilled sandbag, slowly to his left. His eyes slowly widened. He hitched in breath and tried to scream, but his throat locked.

The finger was coming for him.

It was easily seven feet long now, and getting longer all the time. It curved out of the sink in a stiff arc made by perhaps a dozen knuckles, descended to the floor, then curved again (Double-jointed! some distant commentator in his disintegrating mind reported with interest). Now it was tapping and feeling its way across the tile floor toward him. The last nine or ten inches were discolored and smoking. The nail had turned a greenish-black color. Howard thought he could see the whitish shine of bone just below the first of its knuckles. It was quite badly burned, but it was not by any stretch of the imagination dissolved.

"Get away," Howard whispered, and for a moment the entire grotesque, jointed contraption came to a halt. It looked like a lunatic's conception of a New Year's Eve party-favor. Then it slithered straight toward him. The last half a dozen knuckles flexed and the tip of the finger wrapped itself around Howard Mitla's ankle.

"No!" he screamed as the smoking Hydroxide Twins -- Sodium and Potassium -- ate

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through his nylon sock and sizzled his skin. He gave his foot a tremendous yank. For a moment the finger held -- it was very strong -- and then he pulled free. He crawled toward the door with a huge clump of vomit-loaded hair hanging in his eyes. As he crawled he tried to look back over his shoulder, but he could see nothing through his coagulated hair. Now his chest had unlocked and he gave voice to a series of barking, frightful screams.

He could not see the finger, at least temporarily, but he could hear the finger, and now it was coming fast, tictictictictic right behind him. Still trying to look back over his shoulder, he ran into the wall to the left of the bathroom door with his shoulder. The towels fell off the shelf again. He went sprawling and at once the finger was around his other ankle, flexing tight with its charred and burning tip. It began to pull him back toward the sink. It actually began to pull him back.

Howard uttered a deep and primitive howl -- a sound such as had never before escaped his polite set of CPA vocal cords -- and flailed at the edge of the door. He caught it with his right hand and gave a huge, panicky yank. His shirttail pulled free all the way around and the seam under his right arm tore loose with a low purring sound, but he managed to get free, losing only the ragged lower half of one sock.

He stumbled to his feet, turned, and saw the finger feeling its way toward him again. The nail at the end was now deeply split and bleeding.

Need a manicure, bud, Howard thought, and uttered an anguished laugh. Then he ran for the kitchen.

Someone was pounding on the door. Hard.

"Mitla! Hey, Mitla! What's going on in there?" Feeney, from down the hall. A big loud Irish drunk. Correction: a big loud nosy Irish drunk.

"Nothing I can't handle, my bog-trotting friend!" Howard shouted as he went into the kitchen. He laughed again and tossed his hair off his forehead. It went, but fell back in exactly the same jellied clump a second later. ' 'Nothing I can't handle, you better believe that! You can take that right to the bank and put it in your NOW account!"

"What did you call me?" Feeney responded. His voice, which had been truculent, now became ominous as well. "Shut up!" Howard yelled. "I'm busy!" "I want the yelling to stop or I'm calling the cops!" ' 'Fuck off!' Howard screamed at him. Another first. He tossed his hair off his forehead, and clump! Back down it fell.

"I don't have to listen to your shit, you little four-eyes creep!" Howard raked his hands through his vomit-loaded hair and then flung them out in front of him in a curiously Gallic gesture -- Et voila! it seemed to say. Warm juice and shapeless gobbets splattered across vi's white kitchen cabinets. Howard didn't even notice. The hideous finger had seized each of his ankles once, and they burned as if they were wearing circlets of fire. Howard didn't care about that, either. He seized the box containing the electric hedge-clippers. On the front, a smiling dad with a pipe parked in his gob was trimming the hedge in front of an estate-sized home. "You having a little drug-party in there?" Feeney inquired from the hall.

"You better get out of here, Feeney, or I'll introduce you to a friend of mine!" Howard yelled back. This struck him as incredibly witty. He threw his head back and yodeled at the kitchen ceiling, his hair standing up in strange jags and quills and glistening with stomach juices. He looked like a man who has embarked upon a violent love affair with a tube of Brylcreem.

"Okay, that's it," Feeney said. "That's it. I'm callin the cops."

Howard barely heard him. Dennis Feeney would have to wait; he had bigger fish to fry. He had ripped the electric hedge-clippers from the box, examined them feverishly, saw the battery compartment, and pried it open.

"C-cells," he muttered, laughing. "Good! That's good! No problem there!"

He yanked open one of the drawers to the left of the sink, pulling with such force that the stop broke off and the drawer flew all the way across the kitchen, striking the stove and landing upside down on the linoleum floor with a bang and a clatter. Amid the general rick-rack -- tongs, peelers, graters, paring knives, and garbage-bag ties -- was a small treasure-trove of batteries, mostly C-cells and square nine-volts. Still laughing -- it seemed he could no longer stop laughing -- Howard fell on his knees and grubbed through the litter. He succeeded in cutting the pad of his right palm quite badly on the blade of a paring knife before seizing two of the C-cells, but he felt this no more than he felt the burns he had sustained when he had been backsplashed. Now that Feeney had at last shut his braying Irish donkey's mouth, Howard could hear the tapping again. Not coming from the sink now,

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though -- huh-uh, no way. The ragged nail was tapping on the bathroom door... or maybe the hall floor. He had neglected to close the door, he now remembered. "Who gives a fuck?" Howard asked, and then he screamed: "WHO GIVES A FUCK, I SAID! I'M READY FOR YOU, MY FRIEND! I'M COMING TO KICK ASS AND CHEW BUBBLEGUM, AND I'M ALL OUT OF BUBBLEGUM! YOU'LL WISH YOU'D STAYED DOWN THE DRAIN!"

He slammed the batteries into the compartment set into the handle of the hedge-clippers and tried the power switch. Nothing.

"Bite my crank!" Howard muttered. He pulled one of the batteries out, reversed it, and put it back in. This time the blades buzzed to life when he pushed the switch, snicking back and forth so rapidly they were only a blur.

He started for the kitchen door, then made himself switch the gadget off and go back to the counter. He didn't want to waste time putting the battery cover back in place -- not when he was primed for battle -- but the last bit of sanity still flickering in his mind assured him that he had no choice. If his hand slipped while he was dealing with the thing, the batteries might pop out of the open compartment, and then where would he be? why, facing the James Gang with an unloaded gun, of course. So he fiddled the battery cover back on, cursing when it wouldn't fit and turning it in the other direction.

"You wait for me, now!" he called back over his shoulder. "I'm coming! we're not done yet!"

At last the battery cover snapped down. Howard strode briskly back through the living room with the hedge-clippers held at port arms. His hair still stood up in punk-rock quills and spikes. His shirt -- now torn out under one arm and burned in several places -- flapped against his round, tidy stomach. His bare feet slapped on the linoleum. The tattered remains of his nylon socks swung and dangled about his ankles.

Feeney yelled through the door, "I called them, birdbrain! You got that? I called the cops, and I hope the ones who show up are all bog-trotting Irishmen, just like me!"

"Blow it out your old tan tailpipe," Howard said, but he was really paying no attention to Feeney. Dennis Feeney was in another universe; this was just his quacking, unimportant voice coming in over the sub-etheric. Howard stood to one side of the bathroom door, looking like a cop in a TV show... only someone had handed him the wrong prop and he was packing a hedge-clipper instead of a .38. He pressed his thumb firmly on the power button set high on the handle of the hedge-clippers. He took a deep breath... and the voice of sanity, now down to a mere gleam, offered a final thought before packing up for good. Are you sure you want to trust your life to a pair of electric hedge-clippers you bought on sale?

"I have no choice," Howard muttered, smiling tightly, and lunged inside.

The finger was still there, still arced out of the sink in that stiff curve that reminded Howard of a New Year's Eve party-favor, the kind that makes a farting, honking sound and then unrolls toward the unsuspecting bystander when you blow on it. It had filched one of Howard's loafers. It was picking the shoe up and slamming it petulantly down on the tiles again and again. From the look of the towels scattered about, Howard guessed the finger had tried to kill several of those before finding the shoe.

A weird joy suddenly suffused Howard -- it felt as if the inside of his aching, woozy head had been filled with green light.

"Here I am, you nitwit!" he yelled. "Come and get me!"

The finger popped out of the shoe, rose in a monstrous ripple of joints (Howard could actually hear some of its many knuckles cracking), and floated rapidly through the air toward him. Howard turned on the hedge-clippers and they buzzed into hungry life. So far, so good.

The burned, blistered tip of the finger wavered in front of his face, the split nail weaving mystically back and forth. Howard lunged for it. The finger feinted to the left and slipped around his left ear. The pain was amazing. Howard simultaneously felt and heard a grisly ripping sound as the finger tried to tear his ear from the side of his head. He sprang forward, seized the finger in his left fist, and sheared through it. The clippers lugged down as the blades hit the bone, the high buzzing of the motor becoming a rough growl, but it had been built to clip through small, tough branches and there was really no problem. No problem at all. This was Round Two, this was Double Jeopardy, where the scores could really change, and Howard Mitla was

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racking up a bundle. Blood flew in a fine haze and then the stump pulled back. Howard blundered after it, the last ten inches of the finger hanging from his ear like a coat hanger for a moment before dropping off.

The finger lunged at him. Howard ducked and it went over his head. It was blind, of course. That was his advantage. Grabbing his ear like that had just been a lucky shot. He lunged with the clippers, a gesture which looked almost like a fencing thrust, and sheared off another two feet of the finger. It thumped to the tiles and lay there, twitching.

Now the rest of it was trying to pull back.

"No you don't," Howard panted. "No you don't, not at all!"

He ran for the sink, slipped in a puddle of blood, almost fell, and then caught his balance. The finger was blurring back down the drain, knuckle after knuckle, like a freight-train going into a tunnel. Howard seized it, tried to hold it, and couldn't -- it went sliding through his hand like a greased and burning length of clothesline. He sliced forward again nevertheless, and managed to cut off the last three feet of the thing just above the point where it was whizzing through his fist. He leaned over the sink (holding his breath this time) and stared down into the blackness of the drain. Again he caught just a glimpse of retreating white.

"Come on back anytime!" Howard Mitla shouted. "Come back anytime at all! I'll be right here, waiting for you!"

He turned around, releasing his breath in a gasp. The room still smelled of drain-cleaner. Couldn't have that, not while there was still work to do. There was a wrapped cake of Dial soap behind the hot-water tap. Howard picked it up and threw it at the bathroom window. It broke the glass and bounced off the crisscross of mesh behind it. He remembered putting that mesh in -- remembered how proud of it he had been. He, Howard Mitla, mild-mannered accountant, had been TAKING CARE OF THE OLD HOMESTEAD. Now he knew what TAKING CARE OF THE OLD HOMESTEAD was really all about. Had there been a time when he had been afraid to go into the bathroom because he thought there might be a mouse in the tub, and he would have to beat it to death with a broomhandle? He believed so, but that time -- and that version of Howard Mitla -- seemed long ago now.

He looked slowly around the bathroom. It was a mess. Pools of blood and two chunks of finger lay on the floor. Another leaned askew in the basin. Fine sprays of blood fanned across the walls and stippled the bathroom mirror. The basin was streaked with it.

"All right," Howard sighed. "Clean-up time, boys and girls." He turned the hedge-clippers on again and began to saw the various lengths of finger he had cut off into pieces small enough to flush down the toilet.

The policeman was young and he was Irish -- O'Bannion was his name. By the time he finally arrived at the closed door of the Mitla apartment, several tenants were standing behind him in a little knot. With the exception of Dennis Feeney, who wore an expression of high outrage, they all looked worried.

O'Bannion knocked on the door, then rapped, and finally hammered.

"You better break it down," Mrs. Javier said. "I heard him all the way up on the seventh floor."

"The man's insane," Feeney said. "Probably killed his wife."

"No," said Mrs. Dattlebaum. "I saw her leave this morning, just like always."

"Doesn't mean she didn't come back again, does it?" Mr. Feeney asked truculently, and Mrs. Dattlebaum subsided.

"Mr. Mitter?" O'Bannion called.

"It's Mitla" Mrs. Dattlebaum said. "With an I."

"Oh, crap," O'Bannion said, and hit the door with his shoulder. It burst open and he went inside, closely followed by Mr. Feeney. "You stay here, sir," O'Bannion instructed.

"The hell I will," Feeney said. He was looking into the kitchen, with its strew of implements on the floor and the splatters of vomit on the kitchen cabinets. His eyes were small and bright and interested. "The guy's my neighbor. And after all, I was the one who made the call."

"I don't care if you made the call on your own private hotline to the Commish," O'Bannion said. "Get the hell out of here or you're going down to the station with this guy Mittle."

"MitIo," Feeney said, and slunk unwillingly toward the door to the hallway, casting glances back at the kitchen as he went.

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O'Bannion had sent Feeney back mostly because he didn't want Feeney to see how nervous he was. The mess in the kitchen was one thing. The way the place smelled was another -- some sort of chemistry-lab stink on top, some other smell underneath it. He was afraid the underneath smell might be blood.

He glanced behind him to make sure that Feeney had gone back all the way -- that he was not lingering in the foyer where the coats were hung -- and then he advanced slowly across the living room. When he was beyond the view of the onlookers, he unsnapped the strap across the butt of his pistol and drew it. He went to the kitchen and looked all the way in. Empty. A mess, but empty. And... what was that splattered across the cabinets? He wasn't sure, but judging by the smell -- A noise from behind him, a little shuffling sound, broke the thought off and he turned quickly, bringing his gun up.

"Mr. Mitla?"

There was no answer, but the little shuffling sound came again. From down the hall. That meant the bathroom or the bedroom. Officer O'Bannion advanced in that direction, raising his gun and pointing its muzzle at the ceiling. He was now carrying it in much the same way Howard had carried the hedge-clippers.

The bathroom door was ajar. O'Bannion was quite sure this was where the sound had come from, and he knew it was where the worst of the smell was coming from. He crouched, and then pushed the door open with the muzzle of his gun.

"Oh my God," he said softly.

The bathroom looked like a slaughterhouse after a busy day. Blood sprayed the walls and ceiling in scarlet bouquets of spatter. There were puddles of blood on the floor, and more blood had run down the inside and outside curves of the bathroom basin in thick trails; that was where the worst of it appeared to be. He could see a broken window, a discarded bottle of what appeared to be drain-cleaner (which would explain the awful smell in here), and a pair of men's loafers lying quite a distance apart from each other. One of them was quite badly scuffed.

And, as the door swung wider, he saw the man.

Howard Mitla had crammed himself as far into the space between the bathtub and the wall as he could get when he had finished his disposal operation. He held the electric hedge-clippers on his lap, but the batteries were flat; bone was a little tougher than branches after all, it seemed. His hair still stood up in its wild spikes. His cheeks and brow were smeared with bright streaks of blood. His eyes were wide but almost totally empty -- it was an expression Officer O'Bannion associated with speed-freaks and crackheads.

Holy Jesus, he thought. The guy was right -- he DID kill his wife. He killed somebody, at least. So where's the body?

He glanced toward the tub but couldn't see in. It was the most likely place, but it also seemed to be the one object in the room which wasn't streaked and splattered with gore.

"Mr. Mitla?" he asked. He wasn't pointing his gun directly at Howard, but the muzzle was most certainly in the neighborhood.

"Yes, that's my name," Howard said in a hollow, courteous voice. "Howard Mitla, CPA, at your service. Did you come to use the toilet? Go right ahead. There's nothing to disturb you now. I think that problem's been taken care of. At least for the time being."

"Uh, would you mind getting rid of the weapon, sir?"

"Weapon?" Howard looked at him vacantly for a moment, and then seemed to understand.

"These?" He raised the hedge-clippers, and the muzzle of Officer O'Bannion's gun for the first time came to rest on Howard himself.

"Yes, sir."

"Sure," Howard said. He tossed the clippers indifferently into the bathtub. There was a clatter as the battery-hatch popped out.

"Doesn't matter. The batteries are flat, anyway. But... what I said about using the toilet? On more mature consideration, I guess I'd advise against it."

"You would?" Now that the man was disarmed, O'Bannion wasn't sure exactly how to proceed. It would have been a lot easier if the victim were on view. He supposed he'd better cuff the guy and then call for backup. All he knew for sure was that he wanted to get out of this smelly, creepy bathroom.

"Yes," Howard said. "After all, consider this, Officer: there are five fingers on a hand... just one hand, mind you... and... have you ever thought about how many holes to the underworld there are in an ordinary bathroom? Counting the holes in the

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faucets, that is? I make it seven." Howard paused and then added, "Seven is a prime -- which is to say, a number divisible only by one and itself." "Would you want to hold out your hands for me, sir?" Officer O'Bannion said, taking his handcuffs from his belt.

"Vi says I know all the answers," Howard said, "but Vi's wrong." He slowly held out his hands.

O'Bannion knelt before him and quickly snapped a cuff on Howard's right wrist.

"Who's Vi?"

"My wife," Howard said. His blank, shining eyes looked directly into Officer O'Bannion's. "She's never had any problem going to the bathroom while someone else is in the room, you know. She could probably go while you were in the room."

Officer O'Bannion began to have a terrible yet weirdly plausible idea: that this strange little man had killed his wife with a pair of hedge-clippers and then somehow dissolved her body with drain-cleaner -- and all because she wouldn't get the hell out of the bathroom while he was trying to drain the dragon.

He snapped the other cuff on.

"Did you kill your wife, Mr. Mitla?"

For a moment Howard looked almost surprised. Then he lapsed back into that queer, plastic state of apathy again. "No," he said. "Vi's at Dr. Stone's. They're pulling a complete set of uppers. Vi says it's a dirty job, but somebody has to do it. Why would I kill Vi?"

Now that he had the cuffs on the guy, O'Bannion felt a little better, a little more in control of the situation. "Well, it looks like you offed someone."

"It was just a finger," Howard said. He was still holding his hands out in front of him. Light twinkled and ran along the chain between the handcuffs like liquid silver. "But there are more fingers than one on a hand. And what about the hand's owner?" Howard's eyes shifted around the bathroom, which had now gone well beyond gloom; it was filling up with shadows again. "I told it to come back anytime," Howard whispered, "but I was hysterical. I have decided I... I am not capable. It grew, you see. It grew when it hit the air."

Something suddenly splashed inside the closed toilet. Howard's eyes shifted in that direction. So did Officer O'Bannion's. The splash came again. It sounded as if a trout had jumped in there.

"No, I most definitely wouldn't use the toilet," Howard said. "I'd hold it, if I were you, Officer. I'd hold it just as long as I possibly could, and then use the alley beside the building."

O'Bannion shivered.

Get hold of yourself, boyo, he told himself sternly. You get hold of yourself, or you'll wind up as nutty as this guy.

He got up to check the toilet.

"Bad idea," Howard said. "A really bad idea."

"What exactly happened in here, Mr. Mitla?" O'Bannion asked. "And what have you stored in the toilet?"

"What happened? It was like... like..." Howard trailed off, and then began to smile. It was a relieved smile... but his eyes kept creeping back to the closed lid of the toilet. "It was like Jeopardy," he said. "In fact, it was like Final Jeopardy. The category is The Inexplicable. The Final Jeopardy answer is, 'Because they can.' Do you know what the Final Jeopardy question is, Officer?"

Fascinated, unable to take his eyes from Howard's, Officer O'Bannion shook his head. "The Final Jeopardy question," Howard said in a voice that was cracked and roughened from screaming, "is: 'Why do terrible things sometimes happen to the nicest people?' That's the Final Jeopardy question. It's all going to take a lot of thought. But I have plenty of time. As long as I stay away from the... the holes."

The splash came again. It was heavier this time. The vomitous toilet seat bumped sharply up and down. Officer O'Bannion got up, walked over, and bent down. Howard looked at him with some interest.

"Final Jeopardy, Officer," said Howard Mitla. "How much do you wish to wager?"

O'Bannion thought about it for a moment... then grasped the toilet seat and wagered it all.