

Stephen King - The Ten O 'Clock People

The Ten O 'Clock People
by Stephen King

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Pearson tried to scream but shock robbed his voice and he was able to produce only a low, choked whuffling -- the sound of a man moaning in his sleep. He drew in breath to try it again, but before he could get started, a hand seized his left arm just above the elbow in a strong pincers grip and squeezed.

"It'd be a mistake," the voice that went with the hand said. It was pitched only half a step above a whisper, and it spoke directly into Pearson's left ear. "A bad one. Believe me, it would."

Pearson looked around. The thing which had occasioned his desire -- no, his need -- to scream had disappeared inside the bank now, amazingly unchallenged, and Pearson found he could look around. A good-looking young black man in a cream-colored suit had grabbed him. Pearson didn't know him, but he recognized him; he sight-recognized most of the odd little sub-tribe he'd come to think of as the Ten O'clock People... as, he supposed, they recognized him.

The good-looking young black man was watching him warily.

"Did you see it?" Pearson asked. The words came out in a high-pitched, nagging whine that was totally unlike his usual confident speaking voice.

The good-looking young black man had let go of Pearson's arm when he became reasonably convinced that Pearson wasn't going to shock the plaza in front of The First Mercantile Bank of Boston with a volley of wild screams; Pearson immediately reached out and gripped the young black man's wrist. It was as if he were not yet capable of living without the comfort of the other man's touch. The good-looking young black man made no effort to pull away, only glanced down at Pearson's hand for a moment before looking back up into Pearson's face.

"I mean, did you see it? Horrible! Even if it was makeup... or some kind of mask someone put on for a joke..."

But it hadn't been make-up and it hadn't been a mask. The thing in the dark-gray Andre Cyr suit and five-hundred-dollar shoes had passed very close to Pearson, almost close enough to touch (God forbid, his mind interjected with a helpless cringe of revulsion), and he knew it hadn't been make-up or a mask. Because the flesh on the huge protuberance Pearson supposed was its head had been in motion, different parts moving in different directions, like the bands of exotic gases surrounding some planetary giant.

"Friend," the good-looking young black man in the cream-colored suit began, "you need -- "

"What was it?" Pearson broke in. "I never saw anything like that in my life! It was like something you'd see in a, I don't know, a sideshow... or... or..."

His voice was no longer coming from its usual place inside his head. It seemed to be drifting down from someplace above him, instead -- as if he'd fallen into a snare or a crack in the earth and that high-pitched, nagging voice belonged to somebody else, somebody who was speaking down to him.

"Listen, my friend -- "

There was something else, too. When Pearson had stepped out through the revolving doors just a few minutes ago with an unlit Marlboro between his fingers, the day had been overcast -- threatening rain, in fact. Now everything was not just bright but over-bright. The red skirt on the pretty blonde standing beside the building fifty feet or so farther down (she was smoking a cigarette and reading a paperback) screamed into the day like a firebell; the yellow of a passing delivery boy's shirt stung like the barb of a wasp. People's faces stood out like the faces in his daughter Jenny's beloved Pop-Up books.

And his lips... he couldn't feel his lips. They had gone numb, the way they sometimes did after a big shot of novocaine.

Pearson turned to the good-looking young man in the cream-colored suit and said, "This is ridiculous, but I think I'm going to faint."

"No, you're not," the young man said, and he spoke with such assurance that Pearson believed him, at least temporarily. The hand gripped his arm above the elbow again, but much more gently this time. "Come on over here -- you need to sit down."

There were circular marble islands about three feet high scattered around the broad plaza in front of the bank, each containing its own variety of late summer/early fall flowers. There were Ten O'clock People sitting on the rims of most of these

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upscale flower tubs, some reading, some chatting, some looking out at the passing rivers of foot-traffic on the sidewalks of Commercial Street, but all of them also doing the thing that made them Ten O'Clock People, the thing Pearson had come downstairs and outside to do himself. The marble island closest to Pearson and his new acquaintance contained asters, their purple miraculously brilliant to Pearson in his heightened state of awareness. Its circular rim was vacant, probably because it was going on for ten past the hour now, and people had begun to drift back inside. "Sit down," the young black man in the cream-colored suit invited, and although Pearson tried his best, what he ended up doing felt more like falling than sitting. At one moment he was standing beside the reddish-brown marble island, and then somebody pulled the pins in his knees and he landed on his ass. Hard.

"Bend over now," the young man said, sitting down beside him. His face had remained pleasant throughout the entire encounter, but there was nothing pleasant about his eyes; they combed rapidly back and forth across the plaza.

"why?"

"To get the blood back into your head," the young black man said. "But don't make it look like that. Make it look like you're just smelling the flowers."

"Look like to who?"

"Just do it, okay?" The smallest tinge of impatience had crept into the young man's voice.

Pearson leaned his head over and took a deep breath. The flowers didn't smell as good as they looked, he discovered -- they had a weedy, faintly dog-pissy smell. Still, he thought his head might be clearing just a tiny bit.

"Start saying the states," the black man ordered. He crossed his legs, shook out the fabric of his pants to preserve the crease, and brought a package of winstons out of an inner pocket. Pearson realized his own cigarette was gone; he must have dropped it-in that first shocked moment, when he had seen the monstrous thing in the expensive suit crossing the west side of the plaza.

"The states," he said blankly.

The young black man nodded, produced a lighter that was probably quite a bit less expensive than it looked at first glance, and lit his cigarette. "Start with this one and work your way west," he invited.

"Massachusetts... New York, I suppose... or Vermont if you start from upstate... New Jersey..." Now he straightened up a little and began to speak with greater confidence. "Pennsylvania, west Virginia, Ohio, Illinois -- "

The black man raised his eyebrows. "west Virginia, huh? You sure?"

Pearson smiled a little. "Pretty sure, yeah. I might have got Ohio and Illinois bass-ackwards, though."

The black man shrugged to show it didn't matter, and smiled. "You don't feel like you're going to faint anymore, though -- I can see you don't -- and that's the important part. want a butt?"

"Thank you," Pearson said gratefully. He did not just want a butt; he felt that he needed one. "I had one, but I lost it. what's your name?"

The black man poked a fresh winston between Pearson's lips and snapped a light to it. "Dudley Rhinemann. You can call me Duke."

Pearson dragged deeply on the cigarette and looked toward the revolving doors which gave ingress upon all the gloomy depths and cloudy heights of The First Mercantile.

"That wasn't just a hallucination, was it?" he asked. "what I saw... you saw it, too, right?"

Rhinemann nodded.

"You didn't want him to know I saw him," Pearson said. He spoke slowly, trying to put it together on his own. His voice was back in its usual spot again, and that alone was a big relief.

Rhinemann nodded again.

"But how could I not see him? And how could he not know it?"

"Did you see anyone else getting ready to holler themselves into a stroke like you were?" Rhinemann asked. "See anybody else even looking the way you were? Me, for instance?"

Pearson shook his head slowly. He now felt more than just frightened; he felt totally lost.

"I got between you and him the best I could, and I don't think he saw you, but for a second or two there it was close. You looked like a man who just saw a mouse crawl out of his meatloaf. You're in Collateral Loans, aren't you?"

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"Oh yes -- Brandon Pearson. Sorry."

"I'm in Computer Services, myself. And it's okay. Seeing your first batman can do that to you."

Duke Rhinemann stuck out his hand and Pearson shook it, but most of his mind was one turn back. Seeing your first batman can do that to you, the young man had said, and once Pearson had jettisoned his initial image of the Caped Crusader swinging his way between the art-deco spires of Gotham City, he discovered that wasn't a bad term at all. He discovered something else, as well, or perhaps rediscovered it: it was good to have a name for something that had frightened you. It didn't make the fright go away, but it went a long way toward rendering the fright manageable. Now he deliberately replayed what he had seen, thinking Batman, it was my first batman, as he did.

He had come out through the revolving doors thinking of only one thing, the same thing he was always thinking about when he came down at ten -- how good that first rush of nicotine was going to feel when it hit his brain. It was what made him a part of the tribe; it was his version of phylacteries or tattooed cheeks.

He had first registered the fact that the day had gotten even darker since he'd come in at eight-forty-five, and had thought: we'll be puffing our cancer-sticks in the pouring rain this afternoon, the whole damned bunch of us. Not that a little rain would stop them, of course; the Ten O'clock People were nothing if not persistent. He remembered sweeping his eyes across the plaza, doing a quick attendance check -- so quick it was really almost unconscious. He had seen the girl in the red skirt (and wondered again, as he always did, if anyone who looked that good would be any good in the sack), the young be-bop janitor from the third floor who wore his cap turned around while he was mopping the floors in the John and the snack-bar, the elderly man with the fine white hair and the purple blotches on his cheeks, the young woman with the thick glasses, narrow face, and long straight black hair. He had seen a number of others he vaguely recognized, as well. One of them, of course, had been the good-looking young black man in the cream-colored suit.

If Timmy Flanders had been around, Pearson probably would have joined him, but he wasn't, and so Pearson had moved toward the center of the plaza instead, meaning to sit on one of the marble islands (the very one he was sitting on now, in fact). Once there he would have been in an excellent position to calculate the length and curves of Little Miss Red Skirt's legs -- a cheap thrill, granted, but one made do with the materials at hand. He was a well-married man with a wife he loved and a daughter he adored, he'd never come even close to cheating, but as he approached forty, he had discovered certain imperatives surfacing in his blood like sea-monsters. And he didn't know how any man could help staring at a red skirt like that, wondering just a little if the woman was wearing matching underwear beneath.

He had barely gotten moving when the newcomer had turned the corner of the building and begun mounting the plaza steps. Pearson had caught movement in the corner of his eye, and under ordinary circumstances he would have dismissed it -- it was the red skirt he had been concentrating on just then, short, tight, and as bright as the side of a fire engine. But he had looked, because, even seen from the corner of his eye and with other things on his mind, he had registered something wrong with the face and the head that went with the approaching figure. So he had turned and looked, canceling sleep for God knew how many nights to come.

The shoes were all right; the dark-gray Andre Cyr suit, looking as solid and as dependable as the door of the bank vault in the basement, was even better; the red tie was predictable but not offensive. All of this was fine, typical top-echelon banker's attire for a Monday morning (and who but a top-echelon banker could come in at ten o'clock in the first place?). It wasn't until you got to the head that you realized that you had either gone crazy or were looking at something for which there was no entry in the World Book Encyclopedia.

But why didn't they run? Pearson wondered now, as a raindrop fell on the back of his hand and another fell on the clean white paper of his half-smoked cigarette. They should have run screaming, the way the people run from the giant bugs in those fifties monster movies. Then he thought, But then... I didn't run, either.

True enough, but it wasn't the same. He hadn't run because he'd been frozen in place. He had tried to scream, however; it was just that his new friend had stopped him before he could throw his vocal cords back into gear.

Batman. Your first batman.

Above the broad shoulders of this year's most Eminently Acceptable Business Suit and

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the knot in the red Sulka power-tie had loomed a huge grayish-brown head, not round but as misshapen as a baseball that has taken a whole summer's worth of bashing. Black lines -- veins, perhaps -- pulsed just below the surface of the skull in meaningless roadmap squiggles, and the area that should have been its face but wasn't (not in any human sense, anyway) had been covered with lumps that bulged and quivered like tumors possessed of their own terrible semi-sentient life. Its features were rudimentary and pushed together -- flat black eyes, perfectly round, that stared avidly from the middle of its face like the eyes of a shark or some bloated insect; malformed ears with no lobes or pinnae. It hadn't had a nose, at least none that Pearson could recognize, although two tusk-like protuberances had jutted from the spiny tangle of hair that grew just below the eyes. Most of the thing's face had been mouth -- a huge black crescent ringed with triangular teeth. To a creature with a mouth like that, Pearson had thought later, bolting one's food would be a sacrament.

His very first thought as he stared at this horrible apparition -- an apparition carrying a slim Bally briefcase in one beautifully manicured hand -- was It's the Elephant Man. But, he now realized, the creature had been nothing at all like the misshapen but essentially human creature in that old movie. Duke Rhinemann was closer to the mark; those black eyes and that drawn-up mouth were features he associated with furry, squeaking things that spent their nights eating flies and their days hanging head-down in dark places.

But none of that was what had caused him to try that first scream; that need had come when the creature in the Andre Cyr suit walked past him, its bright, bug-like eyes already fixed on the revolving doors. It was at its closest in that second or two, and it was then that Pearson had seen its tumorous face somehow moving below the mottles of coarse hair which grew from it. He didn't know how such a thing could possibly be, but it was -- he was watching it happen, observing the man's flesh crawling around the lumpy curves of its skull and rippling along the thick cane-head shape of its jaw in alternating bands. Between these he caught glimpses of some gruesome raw pink substance that he didn't even want to think about... yet now that he remembered, it seemed that he could not stop thinking about it.

More raindrops splattered on his hands and face. Next to him on the curved lip of marble, Rhinemann took a final drag on his cigarette, pitched it away, and stood up. "Come on," he said. "Starting to rain."

Pearson looked at him with wide eyes, then looked toward the bank. The blonde in the red skirt was just going in, her book now tucked under her arm. She was being closely followed (and closely observed) by the old party with the tycoon's shock of fine white hair.

Pearson flicked his eyes back to Rhinemann and said, "Go in there? Are you serious? That thing went in there!"

"I know."

"You want to hear something totally nuts?" Pearson asked, tossing his own cigarette away. He didn't know where he was going now, home, he supposed, but he knew one place he was most assuredly not going, and that was back inside The First Mercantile Bank of Boston.

"Sure," Rhinemann agreed. "Why not?"

"That thing looked quite a lot like our revered Chief Executive Officer, Douglas Keefer... until you got to the head, that is. Same taste in suits and briefcases."

"What a surprise," Duke Rhinemann said.

Pearson measured him with an uneasy eye. "What do you mean?'"

"I think you already know, but you've had a tough morning and so I'll spell it out. That was Keefer."

Pearson smiled uncertainly. Rhinemann didn't smile back. He got to his feet, gripped Pearson's arms, and pulled the older man forward until their faces were only inches apart.

"I saved your life just now. Do you believe that, Mr. Pear-son?"

Pearson thought about it and discovered that he did. That alien, bat-like face with its black eyes and clustered bunches of teeth hung in his mind like a dark flare.

"Yes. I guess I do."

"Okay. Then do me the credit of listening carefully as I tell you three things -- will you do that?"

"I... yes, sure."

"First thing: that was Douglas Keefer, CEO of The First Mercantile Bank of Boston,

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close friend of the Mayor, and, incidentally, honorary chairman of the current Boston Children's Hospital fund-drive. Second thing: there are at least three more bats working in the bank, one of them on your floor. Third thing: you are going back in there. If you want to go on living, that is."

Pearson gaped at him, momentarily incapable of reply -- if he'd tried, he would have produced only more of those fuzzy whuffling sounds.

Rhinemann took him by the elbow and pulled him toward the revolving doors. "Come on, buddy," he said, and his voice was oddly gentle. "The rain is really starting to come down. If we stay out here much longer we'll attract attention, and people in our position can't afford to do that."

Pearson went along with Rhinemann at first, then thought of the way the black nests of lines on the thing's head had pulsed and squiggled. The image brought him to a cold stop just outside the revolving doors. The smooth surface of the plaza was now wet enough to reveal another Brandon Pearson below him, a shimmery reflection that hung from his own heels like a bat of a different color. "I... I don't think I can," he said in a halting, humble voice.

"You can," Rhinemann said. He glanced momentarily down at Pearson's left hand.

"Married, I see -- with kids?"

"One. A daughter." Pearson was looking into the bank's lobby. The glass panels in the revolving door were polarized, making the big room beyond them look very dark. Like a cave, he thought. A batcave filled with half-blind disease-carriers.

"You want your wife and kid to read in the paper tomorrow that the cops dragged Da-Da out of Boston Harbor with his throat cut?"

Pearson looked at Rhinemann with wide eyes. Raindrops splattered against his cheeks, his forehead.

"They make it look like junkies did it," Rhinemann said, "and it works. It always works. Because they're smart, and because they've got friends in high places. Hell, high places is what they're all about."

"I don't understand you," Pearson said. "I don't understand any of this."

"I know you don't," Rhinemann returned. "This is a dangerous time for you, so just do what I tell you. What I'm telling you is to get back to your desk before you're missed, and roll through the rest of the day with a smile on your face. Hold onto that smile, my friend -- don't let go of it no matter how greasy it gets." He hesitated, then added: "If you screw up, it's probably gonna get you killed."

The rainwater made bright tracks down the young man's smooth dark face, and Pearson suddenly saw what had been there all along, what he had missed only because of his own shock: this man was terrified, and he had risked a great deal to keep Pearson from stumbling into some awful trap.

"I really can't stay out here any longer," Rhinemann said. "It's dangerous."

"Okay," Pearson said, a little astounded to hear his own voice coming out in normal, even measures. "Then let's go back to work."

Rhinemann looked relieved. "Good man. And whatever you see the rest of the day, don't show surprise. You understand?"

"Yes," Pearson said. He didn't understand anything.

"Can you clear your desk early and leave around three?"

Pearson considered it, then nodded. "Yeah. I guess I could do that."

"Good. Meet me around the corner on Milk Street."

"All right."

"You're doin' great, man," Rhinemann said. "You're going to be fine. See you at three." He entered the revolving door and gave it a push. Pearson stepped into the segment behind him, feeling as though he had somehow left his mind out there in the plaza... all of it, that was, except for the part that already wanted another cigarette.

The day crawled, but everything was all right until he came back from lunch (and two cigarettes) with Tim Flanders. They stepped out of the elevator on the third floor and the first thing Pearson saw was another batman... except this one was actually a batwoman wearing black patent-leather heels, black nylon hose, and a formidable silk tweed suit -- Samuel Blue was Pearson's guess. The perfect power outfit... until you got to the head nodding over it like a mutated sunflower, that was.

"Hullo, gents." A sweet contralto voice spoke from somewhere behind the harelipped hole that was its mouth.

It's Suzanne Holding, Pearson thought. It can't be, but it is.

"Hello, Suzy darlin'," he heard himself say, and thought: If she comes near me...

tries to touch me... I'll scream. I won't be able to help it, no matter what the kid told me.

"Are you all right, Brand? You look pale."

"A little touch of whatever's going around, I guess," he said, astounded all over again at the natural ease of his voice. "I think I'm getting on top of it, though."

"Good," Suzanne Holding's voice said from behind the bat's face and the strangely motile flesh. "No French kissing until you're all better, though -- in fact, don't even breathe on me. I can't afford to be sick with the Japanese coming in on Wednesday."

No problem, sweetheart -- no problem, you better believe it.

"I'll try to restrain myself."

"Thanks. Tim, will you come down to my office and look at a couple of spread-sheet summaries?"

Timmy Flanders slipped an arm around the waist of the sexily prim Samuel Blue suit, and before Pearson's wide eyes, he bent and planted a little kiss on the side of the thing's tumor-raddled, hairy face. That's where Timmy sees her cheek, Pearson thought, and he felt his sanity suddenly slip like greasy cable wound around the dram of a winch. Her smooth, perfumed cheek -- that's what he's seeing, all right, and what he thinks he's kissing. Oh my God. Oh my God.

"There!" Timmy exclaimed, and gave the creature a small cavalier's bow. "One kiss and I am your servant, dear lady!"

He tipped Pearson a wink and began walking the monster in the direction of her office. As they passed the drinking fountain, he dropped the arm he had hung about her waist. The short and meaningless little peacockIpeahen courting dance -- a ritual that had somehow developed over the last ten years or so in business relationships where the boss was female and the aide was male -- had now been performed, and they drew away from Pearson as sexual equals, talking nothing but dry numbers.

Marvelous analysis, Brand, Pearson thought distractedly as he turned away from them. You should have been a sociologist. And almost had been -- it had been his college minor, after all.

As he entered his office he became aware that his whole body was running with a slow slime of sweat. Pearson forgot sociology and began rooting for three o'clock again. At two-forty-five he steeled himself and poked his head into Suzanne Holding's office. The alien asteroid of her head was tilted toward the blue-gray screen of her computer, but she looked around when he said "knock-knock," the flesh on her strange face sliding restlessly, her black eyes regarding him with the cold avidity of a shark studying a swimmer's leg.

"I gave Buzz Carstairs the Corporate Fours," Pearson said. "I'm going to take the Individual Form Nines home with me, if that's okay. I've got my backup discs there."

"Is this your coy way of saying you're going AWOL, my dear?" Suzanne asked. The black veins bulged unspeakably on top of her bald skull; the lumps which surrounded her features quivered, and Pearson realized one of them was leaking a thick pinkish substance that looked like bloodstained shaving cream.

He made himself smile. "You caught me."

"Well," Suzanne said, "we'll just have to have the four o'clock orgy without you today, I guess."

"Thanks, Suze." He turned away.

"Brand?"

He turned back, his fear and revulsion threatening to turn into a bright white freeze of panic, suddenly very sure that those avid black eyes had seen through him and that the thing masquerading as Suzanne Holding was going to say, Let's stop playing games, shall we? Come in and close the door. Let's see if you taste as good as you look.

Rhinemann would wait awhile, then go on to wherever he was going by himself.

Probably, Pearson thought, he'll know what happened. Probably he's seen it before.

"Yes?" he asked, trying to smile.

She looked at him appraisingly for a long moment without speaking, the grotesque slab of head looming above the sexy lady exec's body, and then she said, "You look a little better this afternoon." The mouth still gaped, the black eyes still stared with all the expression of a Raggedy Ann doll abandoned under a child's bed, but Pearson knew that anyone else would have seen only Suzanne Holding, smiling prettily at one of her junior executives and exhibiting just the right degree of Type A

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concern. Not exactly Mother Courage, but still caring and interested.

"Good," he said, and decided that was probably too limp. "Great!"

"Now if we could only get you to quit smoking."

"Well, I'm trying," he said, and laughed weakly. The greasy cable around that mental winch slipped again. Let me go, he thought. Let me go, you horrible bitch, let me get out of here before I do something too nutso to be ignored.

"You'd qualify for an automatic upgrade on your insurance, you know," the monster said. Now the surface of another of those tumors broke open with a rotten little chup! sound and more of that pink stuff began to ooze out.

"Yeah, I know," he said. "And I'll give it serious consideration, Suzanne. Really."

"You do that," she said, and swung back toward the glowing computer screen. For a moment he was stunned, unable to grasp his good fortune. The interview was over. By the time Pearson left the building it was pouring, but the Ten O'Clock People -- now they were the Three O'clock People, of course, but there was no essential difference -- were out just the same, huddled together like sheep, doing their thing. Little Miss Red Skirt and the janitor who liked to wear his cap turned around backward were sheltering beneath the same sodden section of the Boston Globe. They looked uncomfortable and damp around the edges, but Pearson envied the janitor just the same. Little Miss Red Skirt wore Giorgio; he had smelled it in the elevator on several occasions. And she made little silky rustling noises when she moved, of course.

What the hell are you thinking about? he asked himself sternly, and replied in the same mental breath: Keeping my sanity, thank you very much. Okay by you?

Duke Rhinemann was standing under the awning of the flower shop just around the corner, his shoulders hunched, a cigarette in the corner of his own mouth. Pearson joined him, glanced at his watch, and decided he could wait a little longer. He poked his head forward a little bit just the same, to catch the tang of Rhinemann's cigarette. He did this without being aware of it.

"My boss is one of them," he told Duke. "Unless, of course, Douglas Keefer is the sort of monster who likes to cross-dress."

Rhinemann grinned ferociously and said nothing.

"You said there were three others. Who are the other two?"

"Donald Fine. You probably don't know him -- he's in Securities. And Carl Grosbeck."

"Carl... the Chairman of the Board? Jesus!"

"I told you," Rhinemann said. "High places are what these guys're all about -- Hey, taxi!"

He dashed out from beneath the awning, flagging the maroon-and-white cab he had spotted cruising miraculously empty through the rainy afternoon. It swerved toward them, spraying fans of standing water. Rhinemann dodged agilely, but Pearson's shoes and pantscuffs were soaked. In his current state, it didn't seem terribly important. He opened the door for Rhinemann, who slid in and scooted across the seat. Pearson followed and slammed the door.

"Gallagher's Pub," Rhinemann said. "It's directly across from -- "

"I know where Gallagher's is," the driver said, "but we don't go anywhere until you dispose of the cancer-stick, my friend." He tapped the sign clipped to the taximeter. SMOKING IS NOT PERMITTED IN THIS LIVERY, it read.

The two men exchanged a glance. Rhinemann lifted his shoulders in the half-embarrassed, half-surlly shrug that has been the principal tribal greeting of the Ten O'Clock People since 1990 or so. Then, without a murmur of protest, he pitched his quarter-smoked Winston out into the driving rain.

Pearson began to tell Rhinemann how shocked he had been when the elevator doors had opened and he'd gotten his first good look at the essential Suzanne Holding, but Rhinemann frowned, gave his head a minute shake, and swivelled his thumb toward their driver. "We'll talk later," he said.

Pearson subsided into silence, contenting himself with watching the rain-streaked high-rises of midtown Boston slip by. He found himself almost exquisitely attuned to the little street-life scenes going on outside the taxicab's smeary window. He was especially interested in the little clusters of Ten O'Clock People he observed standing in front of every business building they passed. Where there was shelter, they took it; where there wasn't, they took that, too -- simply turned up their collars, hooded their hands protectively over their cigarettes, and smoked anyway. It occurred to Pearson that easily ninety per cent of the posh midtown high-rises they were passing were now no-smoking zones, just like the one he and Rhinemann

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worked in. It occurred to him further (and this thought came with the force of a revelation) that the Ten O'Clock People were not really a new tribe at all but the raggedy-ass remnants of an old one, renegades running before a new broom that intended to sweep their bad old habit clean out the door of American life. Their unifying characteristic was their unwillingness or inability to quit killing themselves; they were junkies in a steadily shrinking twilight zone of acceptability. An exotic social group, he supposed, but not one that was apt to last very long. He guessed that by the year 2020, 2050 at the latest, the Ten O'Clock People would have gone the way of the dodo.

Oh shit, -wait a minute, he thought. We're just the last of the world's diehard optimists, that's all -- most of us don't bother with our seatbelts, either, and we'd love to sit behind home plate at the ballpark if they'd just take down that silly fucking screen.

"What's so funny, Mr. Pearson?" Rhinemann asked him, and Pearson became aware he was wearing a broad grin.

"Nothing," Pearson said. "Nothing important, at least."

"Okay; just don't freak out on me."

"Would you consider it a freak-out if I asked you to call me Brandon?"

"I guess not," Rhinemann said, and appeared to think it over. "As long as you call me Duke and we don't get down to BeeBee or Buster or anything embarrassing like that."

"I think you're safe on that score. Want to know something?"

"Sure."

"This has been the most amazing day of my life."

Duke Rhinemann nodded without returning Pearson's smile. "And it's not over yet," he said.

Pearson thought that Gallagher's had been an inspired choice on Duke's part -- a clear Boston anomaly, more Gilley's than Cheers, it was the perfect place for two bank employees to discuss matters which would have left their nearest and dearest with serious questions about their sanity. The longest bar Pearson had ever seen outside of a movie curved around a large square of shiny dance-floor on which three couples were currently dry-humping dreamily as Marty Stuart and Travis Tritt harmonized on "This One's Gonna Hurt You."

In a smaller place the bar proper would have been packed, but the patrons were so well spaced along this amazing length of mahogany-paved racetrack that brass-rail privacy was actually achievable; there was no need for them to search out a booth in the dim nether reaches of the room. Pearson was glad. It would be too easy to imagine one of the batpeople, maybe even a bat-couple, sitting (or roosting) in the next booth and listening intently to their conversation.

Isn't that what they call a bunker mentality, old buddy? he thought. Certainly didn't take you long to get there, did it?

No, he supposed not, but for the time being he didn't care. He was just grateful he would be able to see in all directions while they talked... or, he supposed, while Duke talked.

"Bar's okay?" Duke asked, and Pearson nodded.

It looked like one bar, Pearson reflected as he followed Duke beneath the sign which read smoking permitted this section only, but it was really two... the way that, back in the fifties, every lunch-counter below the Mason-Dixon had really been two: one for the white folks and one for the black. And now as then, you could see the difference. A Sony almost the size of a cineplex movie screen overlooked the center of the no-smoking section; in the nicotine ghetto there was only an elderly Zenith bolted to the wall (a sign beside it read: feel free to ask for CREDIT, WE WILL FEEL FREE TO TELL YOU TO FUCK OFF).

The surface of the bar itself was dirtier down here -- Pearson thought at first that this must be just his imagination, but a second glance confirmed the dingy look of the wood and the faint overlapping rings that were the Ghosts of Schooners Past. And, of course, there was the sawy, yellowish odor of tobacco smoke. He swore it came puffing up from the barstool when he sat down, like popcorn farts out of an elderly movie-theater seat. The newscaster on their battered, smoke-bleared TV appeared to be dying of zinc poisoning; the same guy playing to the healthy folks farther down the bar looked ready to run the four-forty and then bench-press his weight in blondes.

Welcome to the back of the bus, Pearson thought, looking at his fellow Ten O'Clock

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People with a species of exasperated amusement. Oh well, mustn't complain; in another ten years smokers won't even be allowed on board.

"Cigarette?" Duke asked, perhaps displaying certain rudimentary mind-reading skills. Pearson glanced at his watch, then accepted the butt, along with another light from Duke's Ianx-classy lighter. He drew deep, relishing the way the smoke slid into his pipes, even relishing the slight swimming in his head. Of course the habit was dangerous, potentially lethal; how could anything that got you off like this not be? It was the way of the world, that was all.

"What about you?" he asked as Duke slipped his cigarettes back into his pocket.

"I can wait a little longer," Duke said, smiling. "I got a couple of puffs before we got in the cab. Also, I have to pay off the extra one I had at lunch."

"You ration yourself, huh?"

"Yeah. I usually only allow myself one at lunch, but today I had two. You scared the shit out of me, you know."

"I was pretty scared myself."

The bartender came over, and Pearson found himself fascinated at the way the man avoided the thin ribbon of smoke rising from his cigarette. I doubt if he even knows he's doing it... but if I blew some in his face, I bet he'd come over the top and clean my clock for me.

"Help you gentlemen?"

Duke ordered Sam Adamses without consulting Pearson. When the bartender left to get them, Duke turned back and said, "Stretch it out. This'd be a bad time to get drunk. Bad time to even get tight."

Pearson nodded and dropped a five-dollar bill on the counter when the bartender came back with the beers. He took a deep swallow, then dragged on his cigarette. There were people who thought a cigarette never tasted better than it did after a meal, but Pearson disagreed; he believed in his heart that it wasn't an apple that had gotten Eve in trouble but a beer and a cigarette.

"So what'd you use?" Duke asked him. "The patch? Hypnosis? Good old American willpower? Looking at you, I'd guess it was the patch."

If it had been Duke's humorous effort at a curve-ball, it didn't work. Pearson had been thinking about smoking a lot this afternoon. "Yeah, the patch," he said. "I wore it for two years, starting just after my daughter was born. I took one look at her through the nursery window and made up my mind to quit the habit. It seemed crazy to go on setting fire to forty or fifty cigarettes a day when I'd just taken on an eighteen-year commitment to a brand-new human being." With whom I had fallen instantly in love, he could have added, but he had an idea Duke already knew that.

"Not to mention your life-long commitment to your wife."

"Not to mention my wife," Pearson agreed.

"Plus assorted brothers, sisters-in-law, debt-collectors, ratepayers, and friends of the court."

Pearson burst out laughing and nodded. "Yeah, you got it."

"Not as easy as it sounds, though, huh? When it's four in the morning and you can't sleep, all that nobility erodes fast."

Pearson grimaced. "Or when you have to go upstairs and turn a few cartwheels for Grosbeck and Keefer and Fine and the rest of the boys in the boardroom. The first time I had to do that without grabbing a cigarette before I walked in... man, that was tough."

"But you did stop completely for at least awhile."

Pearson looked at Duke, only a trifle surprised at this prescience, and nodded. "For about six months. But I never quit in my mind, do you know what I mean?"

"Of course I know."

"Finally I started chipping again. That was 1992, right around the time the news stories started coming out about how some people who smoked while they were still wearing the patch had heart attacks. Do you remember those?"

"Uh-huh," Duke said, and tapped his forehead. "I got a complete file of smoking stories up here, my man, alphabetically arranged. Smoking and Alzheimer's, smoking and blood-pressure, smoking and cataracts... you know."

"So I had my choice," Pearson said. He was smiling a small, puzzled smile -- the smile of a man who knows he has behaved like a horse's ass, is still behaving like a horse's ass, but doesn't really know why. "I could quit chipping or quit wearing the patch. So I -- "

"Quit wearing the patch!" they finished together, and then burst into a gust of

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laughter that caused a smooth-browed patron in the no-smoking area to glance over at them for a moment, frowning, before returning his attention to the newscast on the tube.

"Life's one fucked-up proposition, isn't it?" Duke asked, still laughing, and started to reach inside his cream-colored jacket. He stopped when he saw Pearson holding out his pack of Marlboros with one cigarette popped up. They exchanged another glance, Duke's surprised and Pearson's knowing, and then burst into another mingled shout of laughter. The smooth-browed guy glanced over again, his frown a little deeper this time. Neither man noticed. Duke took the offered cigarette and lit it. The whole thing took less than ten seconds, but it was long enough for the two men to become friends.

"I smoked like a chimney from the time I was fifteen right up until I got married back in '91," Duke said. "My mother didn't like it, but she appreciated the fact that I wasn't smoking rock or selling it, like half the other kids on my street -- I'm talking Roxbury, you know -- and so she didn't say too much.

"Wendy and I went to Hawaii for a week on our honeymoon, and the day we got back, she gave me a present." Duke dragged deep and then feathered twin jets of blue-gray smoke from his nose. "She found it in the Sharper Image catalogue, I think, or maybe it was one of the other ones. Had some fancy name, but I don't remember what it was; I just called the goddamned thing Pavlov's Thumbscrews. Still, I loved her like fire -- still do, too, you better believe it -- so I rared back and gave it my best shot. It wasn't as bad as I thought it would be, either. You know the gadget I'm talking about?"

"You bet," Pearson said. "The beeper. It makes you wait a little longer for each cigarette. Lisabeth -- my wife -- kept pointing them out to me while she was pregnant with Jenny. About as subtle as a wheelbarrow of cement falling off a scaffold, you know."

Duke nodded, smiling, and when the bartender drifted by, he pointed at their glasses and told him to do it again. Then he turned back to Pearson. "Except for using Pavlov's Thumbscrews instead of the patch, the rest of my story's the same as yours. I got all the way to the place where the machine plays a shitty little version of the Freedom Chorus, or something, but the habit crept back. It's harder to kill than a snake with two hearts." The bartender brought the fresh beers. Duke paid this time, took a sip of his, and said, "I have to make a telephone call. Take about five minutes."

"Okay," Pearson said. He glanced around, saw the bartender had once more retreated to the relative safety of the no-smoking section (The unions'II have two bartenders in here by 2005, he thought, one for the smokers and one for the non-smokers), and turned back to Duke again. When he spoke this time, he pitched his voice lower. "I thought we were going to talk about the batmen."

Duke appraised him with his dark-brown eyes for a moment and then said, "We have been, my man. We have been."

And before Pearson could say anything else, Duke had disappeared into the dim (but almost entirely smokeless) depths of Gallagher's, bound for wherever the pay phones were hidden away.

2

He was gone closer to ten minutes than to five, and Pearson was wondering if maybe he should go back and check on him when his eye was drawn to the television, where the news anchor was talking about a furor that had been touched off by the Vice President of the United States. The Veep had suggested in a speech to the National Education Association that government-subsidized daycare centers should be re-evaluated and closed wherever possible.

The picture switched to videotape shot earlier that day at some Washington, D.C., convention center, and as the newsclip went from the wide establishing shot and lead-in narration to the close-up of the V.P. at his podium, Pearson gripped the edge of the bar with both hands, squeezing tightly enough to sink his fingers a little way into the padding. One of the things Duke had said that morning on the plaza came back to him: They've got friends in high places. Hell, high places is what they're all about.

"We have no grudge against America's working mothers," the misshapen bat-faced monster standing in front of the podium with the blue Vice Presidential seal on it was saying, "and no grudge against the deserving poor. We do feel, however -- "

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A hand dropped on Pearson's shoulder, and he had to bite his lips together to keep the scream inside them. He looked around and saw Duke. A change had come over the young man -- his eyes were sparkling brightly, and there were fine beads of sweat on his brow. Pearson thought he looked as if he'd just won the Publishers Clearing House sweepstakes.

"Don't ever do that again," Pearson said, and Duke froze in the act of climbing back onto his stool. "I think I just ate my heart."

Duke looked surprised, then glanced up at the TV. Understanding dawned on his face.

"Oh," he said. "Jesus, I'm sorry, Brandon. Really. I keep forgetting that you came in on this movie in the middle."

"What about the President?" Pearson asked. He strained to keep his voice level and almost made it. "I guess I can live with this asshole, but what about the President? Is he -- "

"No," Duke said. He hesitated, then added: "At least, not yet."

Pearson leaned toward him, aware that the strange numbness was stealing back into his lips again. "What do you mean, not yet? What's happening, Duke? What are they? Where do they come from? What do they do and what do they want?"

"I'll tell you what I know," Duke said, "but first I want to ask you if you can come to a little meeting with me this evening. Around six? You up for that?"

"Is it about this?"

"Of course it is."

Pearson ruminated. "All right. I'll have to call Lisabeth, though."

Duke looked alarmed. "Don't say anything about -- "

"Of course not. I'll tell her La Belle Dame sans Merci wants to go over her precious spread-sheets again before she shows them to the Japanese. She'll buy that; she knows Holding's all but fudging her frillies about the impending arrival of our friends from the Pacific Rim. Sound okay to you?"

"Yes."

"It sounds okay to me, too, but it feels a little sleazy."

"There's nothing sleazy about wanting to keep as much space as possible between your wife and the bats. I mean, it's not a massage-parlor I want to take you to, bro."

"I suppose not. So talk."

"All right. I guess I better start by telling you about your smoking habits."

The juke, which had been silent for the last few minutes, now began to emit a tired-sounding version of Billy Ray Cyrus's golden clunker, "Achy Breaky Heart."

Pearson stared at Duke Rhinemann with confused eyes and opened his mouth to ask what his smoking habits had to do with the price of coffee in San Diego. Only nothing came out. Nothing at all.

"You quit... then you started chipping... but you were smart enough to know that if you weren't careful, you'd be right back where you started in a month or two," Duke said. "Right?"

"Yes, but I don't see -- "

"You will." Duke took his handkerchief out and mopped his brow. Pearson's first impression when the man had come back from using the phone had been that Duke was all but blowing his stack with excitement. He stood by that, but now he realized something else: he was also scared to death. "Just bear with me."

"Okay."

"Anyway, you've worked out an accommodation with your habit. A whatdoyoucallit, modus vivendi. You can't bring yourself to quit, but you've discovered that's not the end of the world -- it's not like being a coke-addict who can't let go of the rock or a boozehound who can't stop chugging down the Night Train. Smoking's a bastard of a habit, but there really is a middle ground between two or three packs a day and total abstinence."

Pearson was looking at him, wide-eyed, and Duke smiled.

"I'm not reading your mind, if that's what you think. I mean, we know each other, don't we?"

"I suppose we do," Pearson said thoughtfully. "I just forgot for a minute that we're both Ten O'clock People."

"We're what?"

So Pearson explained a little about the Ten O'Clock People and their tribal gestures (surlly glances when confronted by no smoking signs, surlly shrugs of acquiescence when asked by some accredited authority to Please Put Your Cigarette Out, Sir), their tribal sacraments (gum, hard candies, toothpicks, and, of course, little

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Binaca push-button spray cans), and their tribal litanies (I'm quitting for good next year being the most common).

Duke listened, fascinated, and when Pearson had finished he said, "Jesus Christ, Brandon! You've found the Lost Tribe of Israel! Crazy fucks all wandered off following Joe Camel!"

Pearson burst out laughing, earning another annoyed, puzzled look from the smooth-faced fellow over in NoSmo.

"Anyway, it all fits in," Duke told him. "Let me ask you something -- do you smoke around your kid?"

"Christ, no!" Pearson exclaimed.

"Your wife?"

"Nope, not anymore."

"When was the last time you had a butt in a restaurant?"

Pearson considered it and discovered a peculiar thing: he couldn't remember.

Nowadays he asked to be seated in the no-smoking section even when he was alone, deferring his cigarette until after he'd finished, paid up, and left. And the days when he had actually smoked between courses were long in the past, of course.

"Ten O'Clock People," Duke said in a marveling voice. "Man, I love that -- I love it that we have a name. And it really is like being part of a tribe. It -- "

He broke off suddenly, looking out one of the windows. A Boston city cop was walking by, talking to a pretty young woman. She was looking up at him with a sweetly mingled expression of admiration and sex-appeal, totally unaware of the black, appraising eyes and glaring triangular teeth just above her.

"Jesus, would you look at that," Pearson said in a low voice.

"Yeah," Duke said. "It's becoming more common, too. More common every day." He was quiet for a moment, looking into his half-empty beer schooner. Then he seemed to almost physically shake himself out of his reverie. "Whatever else we are," he told Pearson, "we're the only people in the whole goddam world who see them."

"What, just smokers?" Pearson asked incredulously. Of course he should have seen that Duke was leading him here, but still...

"No," Duke said patiently. "Smokers don't see them. Non-smokers don't see them, either." He measured Pearson with his eyes. "Only people like us see them, Brandon -- people who are neither fish nor fowl."

"Only Ten O'Clock People like us."

When they left Gallagher's fifteen minutes later (Pearson had first called his wife, told her his manufactured tale of woe, and promised to be home by ten), the rain had slackened to a fine drizzle and Duke proposed they walk awhile. Not all the way to Cambridge, which was where they would end up, but far enough for Duke to fill in the rest of the background. The streets were nearly deserted, and they could finish their conversation without looking back over their shoulders.

"In a bizarre way, it's sort of like your first orgasm," Duke was saying as they walked through a gauzy groundmist in the direction of the Charles River. "Once that kicks into gear, becomes a part of your life, it's just there for you. Same with this. One day the chemicals in your head balance just right and you see one. I've wondered, you know, how many people have just dropped dead of fright at that moment. A lot, I bet."

Pearson looked at the bloody smear of a traffic-light reflection on the shiny black pavement of Boylston Street and remembered the shock of his first encounter.

"They're so awful. So hideous. The way their flesh seems to move around on their heads... there's really no way to say it, is there?"

Duke was nodding. "They're ugly motherfuckers, all right. I was on the Red Line, headed back home to Milton, when I saw my first one. He was standing on the downtown platform at Park Street Station. We went right by him. Good thing for me I was in the train and goin away, because I screamed."

"What happened then?"

Duke's smile had become, at least temporarily, a grimace of embarrassment. "People looked at me, then looked away real quick. You know how it is in the city; there's a nut preachin about how Jesus loves Tupperware on every street corner."

Pearson nodded. He knew how it was in the city, all right. Or thought he had, until today.

"This tall redheaded geek with about a trillion freckles on his face sat down in the seat beside me and grabbed my elbow just about the same way I grabbed yours this morning. His name is Robbie Delray. He's a housepainter. You'll meet him tonight at

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Kate's."

"What's Kate's?"

"Specialty bookstore in Cambridge. Mysteries. We meet there once or twice a week. It's a good place. Good people, too, mostly. You'll see. Anyway, Robbie grabbed my elbow and said, 'You're not crazy, I saw it too. It's real -- it's a batman.' That was all, and he could have been spoutin from the top end of some amphetamine high for all I knew... except I had seen it, and the relief..."

"Yes," Pearson said, thinking back to that morning. They paused at Storrow Drive, waited for a tanker truck to go by, and then hurried across the puddly street. Pearson was momentarily transfixed by a fading spray-painted graffito on the back of a park bench, which faced the river. the aliens have landed, it said.

WE ATE 2 AT LEGAL SEAFOOD.

"Good thing for me you were there this morning," Pearson said. "I was lucky."

Duke nodded. "Yeah, man, you were. When the bats fuck with a dude, they fuck with him -- the cops usually pick up the pieces in a basket after one of their little parties. You hear that?"

Pearson nodded.

"And nobody knows the victims all had one thing in common -- they'd cut down their smoking to between five and ten cigarettes a day. I have an idea that sort of similarity's a little too obscure even for the FBI."

"But why kill us?" Pearson asked. "I mean, some guy goes running around saying his boss is a Martian, they don't send out the National Guard; they put the guy in the boobyhatch!"

"Come on, man, get real," Duke said. "You've seen these cuties."

"They... like to?"

"Yeah, they like to. But that's getting the cart before the horse. They're like wolves, Brandon, invisible wolves that keep working their way back and forth through a herd of sheep. Now tell me -- what do wolves want with sheep, aside from getting their jollies off every time they kill one?"

"They... what are you saying?" Pearson's voice dropped to a whisper. "Are you saying that they eat us?"

"They eat some part of us," Duke said. "That's what Robbie Delray believed on the day I met him, and that's what most of us still believe."

"Who's us, Duke?"

"The people I'm taking you to see. We won't all be there, but this time most of us will be. Something's come up. Something big."

"What?"

To that Duke would only shake his head and ask, "You ready for a cab yet? Getting too mildewy?"

Pearson was mildewy, but not ready for a cab. The walk had invigorated him... but not just the walk. He didn't think he could tell Duke this -- at least not yet -- but there was a definite upside to this... a romantic upside. It was as if he had fallen into some weird but exciting boy's adventure story; he could almost imagine the N. C. Wyeth illustrations. He looked at the nimbuses of white light revolving slowly around the streetlamps, which soldiered their way up Storrow Drive and smiled a little. Something big has come up, he thought. Agent X-9 has slipped in with good news from our underground base... we've located the batpoison we've been looking for!

"The excitement wears off, believe me," Duke said dryly.

Pearson turned his head, startled.

"Around the time they fish your second friend out of Boston Harbor with half his head gone, you realize Tom Swift isn't going to show up and help you whitewash the goddam fence."

"Tom Sawyer," Pearson muttered, and wiped rainwater out of his eyes. He could feel himself flushing.

"They eat something that our brains make, that's what Robbie thinks. Maybe an enzyme, he says, maybe some kind of special electrical wave. He says it might be the same thing that lets us -- some of us, anyway -- see them, and that to them we're like tomatoes in a farmer's garden, theirs to take whenever they decide we're ripe."

"Me, I was raised Baptist and I'm willing to cut right to the chase -- none of that Farmer John crap. I think they're soul-suckers."

"Really? Are you putting me on, or do you really believe that?"

Duke laughed, shrugged, and looked defiant, all at the same time. "Shit, I don't

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know, man. These things came into my life about the same time I decided heaven was a fairytale and hell was other people. Now I'm all fucked up again. But that doesn't really matter. The important thing, the only thing you have to get straight and keep straight, is that they have plenty of reasons to kill us. First because they're afraid of us doing just what we're doing, getting together, organizing, trying to put a hurt on them..."

He paused, thought it over, shook his head. Now he looked and sounded like a man holding dialogue with himself, trying yet again to answer some question, which has held him sleepless over too many nights.

"Afraid? I don't know if that's exactly true. But they're not taking many chances, about that there's no doubt. And something else there's no doubt about, either -- they hate the fact that some of us can see them. They fucking hate it. We caught one once and it was like catching a hurricane in a bottle. We -- "

"Caught one!"

"Yes indeed," Duke said, and offered him a hard, mirthless grin. "We bagged it at a rest area on 1-95, up by Newburyport. There were half a dozen of us -- my friend Robbie was in charge we took it to a farmhouse, and when the boatload of dope we'd shot into it wore off -- which it did much too fast -- we tried to question it, to get better answers to some of the questions you've already asked me. We had it in handcuffs and leg-irons; we had so much nylon rope wrapped around it that it looked like a mummy. You know what I remember best?"

Pearson shook his head. His sense of living between the pages of a boy's adventure story had quite departed.

"How it woke up," Duke said. "There was no in-between. One second it was knocked-out-loaded and the next it was wide-awake, staring at us with those horrible eyes they have. Bat's eyes. They do have eyes, you know -- people don't always realize that. That stuff about them being blind must have been the work of a good press-agent.

"It wouldn't talk to us. Not a single word. I think it knew it wasn't going to ever leave that barn, but there was no fear in it. Only hate. Jesus, the hate in its eyes!"

"What happened?"

"It snapped the handcuff-chain like it was tissue-paper. The leg-irons were tougher -- and we had it in those special Long John boots you can nail right to the floor -- but the nylon boat-rope... it started to bite through it where it crossed its shoulders. With those teeth -- you've seen them -- it was like watching a rat gnaw through twine. We all stood there like bumps on a log. Even Robbie. We couldn't believe what we were seeing... or maybe it had us hypnotized. I've wondered about that a lot, you know, if that might not have been possible. Thank God for Lester Olson. We'd used a Ford Econoline van that Robbie and Moira stole, and Lester'd gotten paranoid that it might be visible from the turnpike. He went out to check, and when he came back in and saw that thing almost free except for its feet, he shot it three times in the head. Just pop-pop-pop."

Duke shook his head wonderingly.

"Killed him," Pearson said. "Just pop-pop-pop."

His voice seemed to have risen out of his head again, as it had on the plaza in front of the bank that morning, and a horrid yet persuasive idea suddenly came to him: that there were no bat-people. They were a group hallucination, that was all, not much different from the ones peyote users sometimes had during their drug-assisted circle jerks. This one, unique to the Ten O'clock People, was brought on by just the wrong amount of tobacco. The folks Duke was taking him to meet had killed at least one innocent person while under the influence of this mad idea, and might kill more. Certainly would kill more, if given time. And if he didn't get away from this crazed young banker soon, he might end up being a part of it. He had already seen two of the batpeople... no, three, counting the cop, and four counting the Vice President. And that just about tore it, the idea that the Vice President of the United States --

The look on Duke's face led Pearson to believe that his mind was being read for the third record-breaking time. "You're starting to wonder if maybe we've all gone

Looney Tunes, you included," Duke said. "Is that right?"

"Of course it is," Pearson said, a little more sharply than he had intended.

"They disappear," Duke said simply. "I saw the one in the barn disappear."

"What?"

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"Get transparent, turn to smoke, disappear. I know how crazy it sounds, but nothing I could ever say would make you understand how crazy it was to actually be there and watch it happen.

"At first you think it's not real even though it's going on right in front of you; you must be dreaming it, or maybe you stepped into a movie somehow, one full of killer special effects like in those old Star Wars movies. Then you smell something that's like dust and piss and hot chili-peppers all mixed together. It stings your eyes, makes you want to puke. Lester did puke, and Janet sneezed for an hour afterward. She said ordinarily only ragweed or cat-dander does that to her. Anyway, I went up to the chair where he'd been. The ropes were still there, and the handcuffs, and the clothes. The guy's shirt was still buttoned. The guy's tie was still knotted. I reached out and unzipped his pants -- careful, like his pecker was gonna fly outta there and rip my nose off -- but all I saw was his underwear inside his pants. Ordinary white Jockey shorts. That was all, but that was enough, because they were empty, too. Tell you something, my brother -- you ain't seen weird until you've seen a guy's clothes all put together in layers like that with no guy left inside em."

"Turn to smoke and disappear," Pearson said. "Jesus Christ."

"Yeah. At the very end, he looked like that." He pointed to one of the streetlights with its bright revolving nimbus of moisture.

"And what happens to..." Pearson stopped, unsure for a moment how to express what he wanted to ask. "Are they reported missing? Are they..." Then he knew what it was he really wanted to know. "Duke, where's the real Douglas Keefer? And the real Suzanne Holding?"

Duke shook his head. "I don't know. Except that, in a way, it's the real Keefer you saw this morning, Brandon, and the real Suzanne Holding, too. We think that maybe the heads we see aren't really there, that our brains are translating what the bats really are -- their hearts and their souls -- into visual images."

"Spiritual telepathy?"

Duke grinned. "You got a way with words, bro -- that'll do.

You need to talk to Lester. When it comes to the batpeople, he's damn near a poet." The name rang a clear bell, and after a moment's thought, Pearson thought he knew why.

"Is he an older guy with lots of white hair? Looks sort of like an aging tycoon on a soap opera?"

Duke burst out laughing. "Yeah, that's Les."

They walked on in silence for awhile. The river rippled mystically past on their right, and now they could see the lights of Cambridge on the other side. Pearson thought he had never seen Boston looking so beautiful.

"The batpeople come in, maybe no more than a germ you inhale..." Pearson began again, feeling his way.

"Yeah, well, some folks go for the germ idea, but I'm not one of em. Because, dig: you never see a batman janitor or a bat-woman waitress. They like power, and they're moving into the power neighborhoods. Did you ever hear of a germ that just picked on rich people, Brandon?"

"No."

"Me either."

"These people we're going to meet... are they..." Pearson was a little amused to find he had to work to bring the next thing out. It wasn't exactly a return to the land of boys' books, but it was close. "Are they resistance fighters?"

Duke considered this, then both nodded and shrugged -- a fascinating gesture, as if his body were saying yes and no at the same time. "Not yet," he said, "but maybe, after tonight, we will be."

Before Pearson could ask him what he meant by that, Duke had spotted another cab cruising empty, this one on the far side of Storrow Drive, and had stepped into the gutter to flag it. It made an illegal U-turn and swung over to the curb to pick them up.

In the cab they talked Hub sports -- the maddening Red Sox, the depressing Patriots, the sagging Celtics -- and left the batpeople alone, but when they got out in front of an isolated frame house on the Cambridge side of the river (Kate's mystery bookshop was written on a sign that showed a hissing black cat with an arched back), Pearson took Duke Rhinemann's arm and said, "I have a few more questions."

Duke glanced at his watch. "No time, Brandon -- we walked a little too long, I

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guess."

"Just two, then."

"Jesus, you're like that guy on TV, the one in the old dirty raincoat. I doubt if I can answer them, anyway -- I know a hell of a lot less about all this than you seem to think."

"When did it start?"

"See? That's what I mean. I don't know, and the thing we caught sure wasn't going to tell us -- that little sweetheart wouldn't even give us its name, rank, and serial number. Robbie Delray, the guy I told you about, says he saw his first one over five years ago, walking a Lhasa Apso on Boston Common. He says there have been more every year since. There still aren't many of them compared to us, but the number has been increasing... exponentially?... is that the word I want?"

"I hope not," Pearson said. "It's a scary word."

"What's your other question, Brandon? Hurry up."

"What about other cities? Are there more bats? And other people who see them? what do you hear?"

"We don't know. They could be all over the world, but we're pretty sure that America's the only country in the world where more than a handful of people can see them."

"Why?"

"Because this is the only country that's gone bonkers about cigarettes... probably because it's the only one where people believe -- and down deep they really do -- that if they just eat the right foods, take the right combination of vitamins, think enough of the right thoughts, and wipe their asses with the right kind of toilet-paper, they'll live forever and be sexually active the whole time. When it comes to smoking, the battle-lines are drawn, and the result has been this weird hybrid. Us, in other words."

"Ten O'Clock People," Pearson said, smiling.

"Yep -- Ten O'Clock People." He looked past Pearson's shoulder. "Moira! Hi!"

Pearson was not exactly surprised to smell Giorgio. He looked around and saw Little Miss Red Skirt.

"Moira Richardson, Brandon Pearson."

"Hello," Pearson said, and took her outstretched hand. "Credit Assistance, isn't it?"

"That's like calling a garbage collector a sanitation technician," she said with a cheerful grin. It was a grin, Pearson thought, that a man could fall in love with, if he wasn't careful.

"Credit checks are what I actually do. If you want to buy a new Porsche, I check the records to make sure you're really a Porsche kind of guy... in a financial sense, of course."

"Of course," Pearson said, and grinned back at her.

"Cam!" she called. "Come on over here!"

It was the janitor who liked to mop the John with his cap turned around backward. In his streetclothes he seemed to have gained about fifty IQ points and a rather amazing resemblance to Armand Assante. Pearson felt a small pang but no real surprise when he put an arm around Moira Richardson's delectable little waist and a casual kiss on the corner of her delectable little mouth. Then he offered Brandon his hand.

"Cameron Stevens."

"Brandon Pearson."

"I'm glad to see you here," Stevens said. "I thought you were gonna high-side it this morning for sure."

"How many of you were watching me?" Pearson asked. He tried to replay ten o'clock in the plaza and discovered he couldn't -- it was lost in a white haze of shock, for the most part.

"Most of us from the bank who see them," Moira said quietly. "But it's okay, Mr. Pearson -- "

"Brandon. Please."

She nodded. "We weren't doing anything but rooting for you, Brandon. Come on, Cam." They hurried up the steps to the porch of the small frame building and slipped inside. Pearson caught just a glimpse of muted light before the door shut. Then he turned back to Duke.

"This is all real, isn't it?" he asked.

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Duke looked at him sympathetically. "Unfortunately, yes." He paused, and then added, "But there's one good thing about it."

"Oh? What's that?"

Duke's white teeth flashed in the drizzly dark. "You're about to attend your first smoking-allowed meeting in five years or so," he said. "Come on -- let's go in."

3

The foyer and the bookstore beyond it were dark; the light -- along with a murmur of voices -- was filtering up the steep staircase to their left.

"Well," Duke said, "this is the place. To quote the Dead, what a long strange trip it's been, right?"

Pearson agreed.

"Is Kate a Ten O'Clock Person?"

"You better believe it,"

"The owner? Nope. I only met her twice, but I have an idea she's a total non-smoker. This place was Robbie's idea. As far as Kate knows, we're The Boston Society of Hardboiled Yeggs."

Pearson raised his eyebrows. "Say again?"

"A small group of loyal fans that meets every week or so to discuss the works of Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, Ross Macdonald, people like that. If you haven't read any of those guys, you probably ought to. It never hurts to be safe. It's not that hard; some of them are actually pretty good."

They descended with Duke in the lead -- the staircase was too narrow for them to walk abreast -- and passed through an open doorway into a well-lit, low-ceilinged basement room that probably ran the length of the converted frame house above. About thirty folding chairs had been set up, and an easel covered with a blue cloth had been placed before them. Beyond the easel were stacked shipping cartons from various publishers. Pearson was amused to see a framed picture on the left-hand wall, with a sign reading dashiell hammett: all hail our fearless leader beneath it.

"Duke?" a woman asked from Pearson's left. "Thank God -- I thought something had happened to you."

She was someone else Pearson recognized: the serious-looking young woman with the thick glasses and long, straight black hair. Tonight she looked a lot less serious in a pair of tight faded jeans and a Georgetown University tee-shirt beneath which she was clearly braless. And Pearson had an idea that if Duke's wife ever saw the way this young woman was looking at her husband, she would probably drag Duke out of the basement of Kate's by the ear, and never mind all the batpeople in the world.

"I'm fine, darlin," he said. "I was bringing along another convert to the Church of the Fucked-Up Bat, that's all. Janet Brightwood, Brandon Pearson."

Brandon shook her hand, thinking: You're the one who kept sneezing.

"It's very nice to meet you, Brandon," she said, and then went back to smiling at Duke, who looked a little embarrassed at the intensity of her gaze. "Want to go for coffee after?" she asked him.

"Well... we'll see, darlin. Okay?"

"Okay," she said, and her smile said she'd wait three years to go out for coffee with Duke, if that was the way Duke wanted it.

What am I doing here? Pearson suddenly asked himself. This is totally insane... like an A.A. meeting in a psycho ward.

The members of the Church of the Fucked-Up Bat were taking ashtrays from a stack on one of the book cartons and lighting up with obvious relish as they took their seats. Pearson estimated that there were going to be few if any folding chairs left over when everyone had gotten settled.

"Got just about everyone," Duke said, leading him to a pair of seats at the end of the back row, far from where Janet Brightwood was presiding over the coffeemaker.

Pearson had no idea if this was coincidental or not. "That's good... mind the window-pole, Brandon."

The pole, with a hook on the end to open the high cellar windows, was leaning against one whitewashed brick wall. Pearson had inadvertently kicked it as he sat down. Duke grabbed it before it could fall and possibly gash someone, moved it to a marginally safer location, then slipped up the side aisle and snagged an ashtray.

"You are a mind-reader," Pearson said gratefully, and lit up. It felt incredibly strange (but rather wonderful) to be doing this as a member of such a large group. Duke lit his own cigarette, then pointed it at the skinny, freckle-splattered man

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now standing by the easel. Freckles was deep in conversation with Lester Olson, who had shot the batman, pop-pop-pop, in a Newburyport barn.

"The redhead is Robbie Delray," Duke said, almost reverently. "You'd hardly pick him as The Savior of His Race if you were casting a miniseries, would you? But he might turn out to be just that."

Delray nodded at Olson, clapped him on the back, and said something that made the white-haired man laugh. Then Olson returned to his seat -- front row center -- and Delray moved toward the covered easel.

By this time all the seats had been taken, and there were even a few people standing at the back of the room near the coffee-maker. Conversation, animated and jittery, zinged and caromed around Pearson's head like pool-balls after a hard break. A mat of blue-gray cigarette smoke had already gathered just below the ceiling.

Jesus, they're cranked, he thought. Really cranked. I bet the bomb-shelters in London felt this way back in 1940, during the Blitz.

He turned to Duke. "who'd you talk to? who told you something big was up tonight?"

"Janet," Duke said without looking at him. His expressive brown eyes were fixed on Robbie Delray, who had once saved his sanity on a Red Line train. Pearson thought he saw adoration as well as admiration in Duke's eyes.

"Duke? This is a really big meeting, isn't it?"

"For us, yeah. Biggest I've ever seen."

"Does it make you nervous? Having so many of your people in the same place?"

"No," Duke said simply. "Robbie can smell bats. He... shhhh, here we go."

Robbie Delray, smiling, raised his hands, and the babble quieted almost at once.

Pearson saw Duke's look of adoration on many other faces. Nowhere did he see less than respect.

"Thanks for coming," Delray said quietly. "I think we've finally got what some of us have been waiting four or five years for."

This sparked spontaneous applause. Delray let it go on for a few moments, looking around the room, beaming. Finally he held his hands up for quiet. Pearson discovered a disconcerting thing as the applause (in which he had not participated) tapered off: he didn't like Duke's friend and mentor. He supposed he might be experiencing a touch of jealousy -- now that Delray was doing his thing at the front of the room, Duke Rhinemann had clearly forgotten Pearson existed -- but he didn't think that was all of it. There was something smug and self-congratulatory in that hands-up, be-quiet gesture; something that expressed a slick politician's almost unconscious contempt for his audience.

Oh, get off it, Pearson told himself. You can't know anything like that.

True, quite true, and Pearson tried to sweep the intuition out of his mind, to give Delray a chance, if only for Duke's sake.

"Before we begin," Delray went on, "I'd like to introduce you to a brand-new member of the group: Brandon Pearson, from deepest, darkest Medford. Stand up for a second or two, Brandon, and let your new friends see what you look like."

Pearson gave Duke a startled look. Duke grinned, shrugged, then pushed Pearson's shoulder with the heel of his hand. "Go on, they won't bite."

Pearson was not so sure of that. Nevertheless he got up, face hot, all too aware of the people craning around to check him out. He was most particularly aware of the smile on Lester Olson's face -- like his hair, it was somehow too dazzling not to be suspect.

His fellow Ten O'Clock People began to applaud again, only this time it was him they were applauding: Brandon Pearson, middle-echelon banker and stubborn smoker. He found himself wondering again if he hadn't somehow found his way into an A.A. meeting that was strictly for (not to mention run by) psychos. When he dropped back into his seat, his cheeks were bright red.

"I could have done without that very well, thanks," he muttered to Duke.

"Relax," Duke said, still grinning. "It's the same for everybody. And you gotta love it, man, don't you? I mean, shit, it's so nineties."

"It's nineties, all right, but I don't gotta love it," Pearson said. His heart was pounding too hard and the flush in his cheeks wasn't going away. It felt, in fact, as if it was deepening. What is this? he wondered. A hot-flash? Male menopause? what?

Robbie Delray bent over, spoke briefly to the bespectacled brunette woman sitting next to Olson, glanced at his watch, then stepped back to the covered easel and faced the group again. His freckled, open face made him look like a Sunday choirboy

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apt to get up to all sorts of harmless dickens -- frogs down the backs of girls' blouses, short-sheeting baby brother's bed, that sort of thing -- during the other six days of the week.

"Thanks, folks, and welcome to our place, Brandon," he said.

Pearson muttered that he was glad to be here, but it wasn't true -- what if his fellow Ten O'Clock People turned out to be a bunch of raving New Age assholes?

Suppose he ended up feeling about them as he did about most of the guests he saw on Oprah, or the well-dressed religious nuts who used to pop up on The P.T.L. Club at the drop of a hymn? What then?

Oh, quit it, he told himself. You like Duke, don't you?

Yes, he did like Duke, and he thought he was probably going to like Moira

Richardson, too... once he got past the sexy outer layer and was able to appreciate the person inside, that was. There would undoubtedly be others he'd end up liking as well; he wasn't that hard to please. And he had forgotten, at least temporarily, the underlying reason they were all here in this basement: the batpeople. Given the threat, he could put up with a few nerds and New Agers, couldn't he?

He supposed he could.

Good! Great! Now just sit back, relax, and watch the parade.

He sat back, but found he couldn't relax, at least not completely. Part of it was being the new boy. Part of it was his strong dislike for this sort of forced social interaction -- as a rule, he viewed people who used his first name on short notice and without invitation as hijackers of a sort. And part of it...

Oh, stop! Don't you get it yet? You have no choice in the matter!

An unpleasant thought, but one it was hard to dispute. He had crossed a line that morning when he had casually turned his head and seen what was really living inside Douglas Keefer's clothes these days. He supposed he had known at least that much, but it wasn't until tonight that he had realized how final that line was, how small was the chance of his ever being able to cross back to the other side of it again. To the safe side.

No, he couldn't relax. At least not yet.

"Before we get down to business, I want to thank you all for coming on such short notice," Robbie Delray said. "I know it's not always easy to break away without raising eyebrows, and sometimes it's downright dangerous. I don't think it'd be exaggerating to say that we've been through a lot of hell together... a lot of high water, too..."

A polite, murmured chuckle from the audience. Most of them seemed to be hanging on Delray's every word.

"... and no one knows any better than I do how difficult it is to be one of the few people who actually know the truth. Since I saw my first bat, five years ago..."

Pearson was already fidgeting, experiencing the one sensation he would not have expected tonight: boredom. For the day's strange passage to have ended as it was ending, with a bunch of people sitting in a bookstore basement and listening to a freckled housepainter give what sounded like a bad Rotary Club speech...

Yet the others seemed utterly enrapt; Pearson glanced around again to confirm this to himself. Duke's eyes shone with that look of total fascination -- a look similar to the look Pearson's childhood dog, Buddy, had worn when Pearson got its food-dish out of the cupboard under the sink. Cameron Stevens and Moira Richardson sat with their arms around each other and gazed at Robbie Delray with starry absorption. Ditto Janet Brightwood. Ditto the rest of the little group around the Bunn-O-Matic. Ditto everyone, he thought, except Brand Pearson. Come on, sweetheart; try to get with the program.

Except he couldn't, and in a weird way it was almost as if Robbie Delray couldn't, either. Pearson looked back from his scan of the audience just in time to see Delray snatch another quick glance at his watch. It was a gesture Pearson had grown very familiar with since he'd joined the Ten O'Clock People. He guessed that the man was counting down the time to his next cigarette.

As Delray rambled on, some of his other listeners also began to fall out a little -- Pearson heard muffled coughs and a few shuffling feet. Delray sailed on regardless, seemingly unaware that, loved resistance leader or no, he was now in danger of overstaying his welcome.

"... so we've managed the best we can," he was saying, "and we've taken our losses as best we can, too, hiding our tears the way I guess those who fight in the secret wars have always had to, all the time holding onto our belief that a day will come

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when the secret is out, and we'll -- "

-- Boink, another quick peek at the old Casio --

" -- be able to share our knowledge with all the men and women out there who look but do not see."

Savior of His Race? Pearson thought. Jesus please us. This guy sounds more like Jesse Helms during a filibuster.

He glanced at Duke and was encouraged to see that, while Duke was still listening, he was shifting in his seat and showing signs of coming out of his trance.

Pearson touched his face again and found it was still hot. He lowered the tips of his fingers to his carotid artery and felt his pulse -- still racing. It wasn't the embarrassment at having to stand up and be looked over like a Miss America finalist now; the others had forgotten his existence, at least temporarily. No, it was something else. Not a good something else, either. "... we've stuck with it and stuck to it, we've done the footwork even when the music wasn't to our taste..." Delray was droning.

It's what you felt before, Brand Pearson told himself. It's the fear that you've stumbled into a group of people sharing the same lethal hallucination.

"No, it's not," he muttered. Duke turned toward him, eyebrows raised, and Pearson shook his head. Duke turned his attention back to the front of the room.

He was scared, all right, but not of having fallen in with some weird thrill-kill cult. Maybe the people in this room -- some of them, at least -- had killed, maybe that interlude in the Newburyport barn had happened, but the energy necessary for such desperate endeavors was not evident here tonight, in this roomful of yuppies being watched over by Dashiell Hammett. All he felt here was sleepy half-headedness, the sort of partial attention that enabled people to get through dull speeches like this without falling asleep or walking out.

"Robbie, get to the point!" some kindred spirit shouted from the back of the room, and there was nervous laughter.

Robbie Delray shot an irritated glance in the direction the voice had come from, then smiled and checked his watch again. "Yeah, okay," he said. "I got rambling, I admit it. Lester, will you help me a sec?"

Lester got up. The two men went behind a stack of book cartons and came back carrying a large leather trunk by the straps. They set it down to the right of the easel.

"Thanks, Les," Robbie said.

Lester nodded and sat back down.

"What's in the case?" Pearson murmured into Duke's ear.

Duke shook his head. He looked puzzled and suddenly a little uncomfortable... but maybe not as uncomfortable as Pearson felt.

"Okay, Mac's got a point," Delray said. "I guess I got carried away, but it feels like a historic occasion to me. On with the show."

He paused for effect, and then whipped aside the blue cloth on the easel. His audience sat forward on their folding chairs, prepared to be amazed, then sat back with a small collective whoosh of disappointment. It was a black-and-white photograph of what looked to be an abandoned warehouse. It had been enlarged enough so that the eye could easily sort through the litter of papers, condoms, and empty wine-bottles in the loading bays, and read the tangle of spray-painted wit and wisdom on the wall. The biggest of these said riot grrrls rule.

A whispered babble of murmurs went through the room.

"Five weeks ago," Delray said impressively, "Lester, Kendra, and I trailed two batmen to this abandoned warehouse in the Clark Bay section of Revere."

The dark-haired woman in the round rimless glasses sitting next to Lester Olson looked around self-importantly... and then Pearson was damned if she didn't glance down at her watch.

"They were met at this point" -- Delray tapped one of the trash-littered loading bays -- "by three more batmen and two batwomen. They went inside. Since then, six or seven of us have set up a rotating watch on this place. We have established -- "

Pearson glanced around at Duke's hurt, incredulous face. He might as well have had why wasn't i picked? tattooed on his forehead.

" -- that this is some sort of meeting ground for the bats in the Boston metro area -- "

The Boston Bats, Pearson thought, great name for a baseball team. And then it came back again, the doubt: Is this me, sitting here and listening to this craziness? Is

it really?

In the wake of this thought, as if the memory had somehow been triggered by his momentary doubt, he again heard Delray telling the assembled Fearless Bat Hunters that their newest recruit was Brandon Pearson, from deepest, darkest Medford. He turned back to Duke and spoke quietly into his ear.

"When you spoke to Janet on the phone -- back in Gallagher's -- you told her you were bringing me, right?"

Duke gave him an impatient I'm-trying-to-listen look in which there was still a trace of hurt. "Sure," he said.

"Did you tell her I was from Medford?"

"No," Duke said. "How would I know where you're from? Let me listen, Brand!" And he turned back.

"We have logged over thirty-five vehicles -- luxury cars and limos, for the most part -- visiting this abandoned warehouse in the middle of nowhere," Delray said. He paused to let this sink in, snatched another quick peek at his watch, and hurried on. "Many of these have visited the site ten or a dozen times. The bats have undoubtedly congratulated themselves on having picked such an out-of-the-way spot for their meeting-hall or social club or whatever it is, but I think they're going to find they've painted themselves into a corner instead. Because... pardon me just a sec, guys..."

He turned and began a quiet conversation with Lester Olson. The woman named Kendra joined them, her head going back and forth like someone watching a Ping-Pong match. The seated audience watched the whispered conference with expressions of bewilderment and perplexity.

Pearson knew how they felt. Something big, Duke had promised, and from the feel of the place when they'd come in, everyone else had been promised the same. "Something big" had turned out to be a single black-and-white photo showing nothing but an abandoned warehouse wallowing in a sea of trash, discarded underwear, and used rubbers. What the fuck is wrong with this picture?

The big deal's got to be in the trunk, Pearson thought. And by the way, Freckles, how did you know I came from Medford? That's one I'm saving for the Q-and-A after the speech, believe me.

That feeling -- flushed face, pounding heart, above all else the desire for another cigarette -- was stronger than ever. Like the anxiety attacks he'd sometimes had back in college. What was it? If it wasn't fear, what was it?

Oh, it's fear, all right -- it's just not fear of being the only sane man in the snake-pit. You know the bats are real; you're not crazy and neither is Duke and neither is Moira or Cam Stevens or Janet Brightwood. But something is wrong with this picture just the same... really wrong. And I think it's him. Robbie Delray, housepainter and Savior of His Race. He knew where I was from. Brightwood called him and told him Duke was bringing someone from the First Merc, Brandon Pearson's his name, and Robbie checked on me. Why would he do that? And how did he do it?

In his mind he suddenly heard Duke Rhinemann saying, They're smart... they've got friends in high places. Hell, high places is what they're all about.

If you had friends in high places, you could check on a fellow in a hurry, couldn't you? Yes. People in high places had access to all the right computer passwords, all the right records, all the numbers that made up all the right vital statistics... Pearson jerked in his seat like a man waking from a terrible dream. He kicked his foot out involuntarily and it struck the base of the window-pole. It started to slide. Meanwhile, the whispering at the front of the room broke up with nods all around.

"Les?" Delray asked. "Would you and Kendra give me another little helping hand?"

Pearson reached to grab the window-pole before it could fall and brain someone -- maybe even slice someone's scalp open with the wicked little hook on top. He caught it, started to place it back against the wall, and saw the goblin-face peering in the basement window. The black eyes, like the eyes of a Raggedy Ann doll abandoned under a bed, stared into Pearson's wide blue ones. Strips of flesh rotated like bands of atmosphere around one of the planets astronomers called gas giants. The black snakes of vein under the lumpy, naked skull pulsed. The teeth glimmered in its gaping mouth.

"Just help me with the snaps on this darned thing," Delray was saying from the other end of the galaxy. He gave a friendly little chuckle. "They're a little sticky, I guess."

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For Brandon Pearson, it was as if time had doubled back on itself to that morning: once again he tried to scream and once again shock robbed his voice and he was able to produce only a low, choked whuffling -- the sound of a man moaning in his sleep. The rambling speech.

The meaningless photograph.

The constant little peeks at the wristwatch.

Does it make you nervous? Having so many of your people in the same place? he had asked, and Duke had replied, smiling: No. Robbie can smell bats.

This time there was no one to stop him, and this time Pearson's second effort was a total success.

"It's a set-up!" he screamed, leaping to his feet. "it's a SET-UP, WE HAVE TO GET OUT OF HERE!"

Startled faces craned around to look at him... but there were three that didn't have to crane. These belonged to Delray, Olson, and the dark-haired woman named Kendra.

They had just solved the latches and opened the trunk. Their faces were full of shock and guilt... but no surprise. That particular emotion was absent.

"Siddown, Iman!" Duke hissed. "Have you gone era -- "

Upstairs, the door crashed open. Bootheels clumped across the floor toward the stairwell.

"What's happening?" Janet Brightwood asked. She spoke directly to Duke. Her eyes were wide and frightened. "what's he talking about?"

"get out!" Pearson roared. "get the fuck out of here! he told it to you backward! we're the ones in the trap!"

The door at the head of the narrow staircase leading to the basement crashed open, and from the shadows up there came the most appalling sounds Pearson had ever heard -- it was like listening to a pack of pit-bulls baying over a live baby thrown into their midst.

"Who's that?" Janet screamed. "who's that up there?" Yet there was no question on her face; her face knew perfectly well who was up there. what was up there.

"Calm down!" Robbie Delray shouted to the confused group of people, most of whom were still sitting on their folding chairs. "They've promised amnesty! Do you hear me? Do you understand what I'm saying? They've given me their solemn -- "

At that moment the cellar window to the left of the one through which Pearson had seen the first batface shattered inward, spraying glass across the stunned men and women in the first row along the wall. An Armani-clad arm snaked through the jagged opening and seized Moira Richardson by the hair. She screamed and beat at the hand holding her... which was not really a hand at all, but a bundle of talons tipped with long, chitinous nails.

Without thinking, Pearson seized the window-pole, darted forward, and launched the hook at the pulsing batlike face peering in through the broken window. The hook drove into one of the thing's eyes. A thick, faintly astringent ink pattered down on Pearson's upthrust hands. The batman uttered a baying, savage sound -- it didn't sound like a scream of pain to Pearson, but he supposed he was allowed to hope -- and then it fell backward, pulling the window-pole out of Pearson's hands and into the drizzly night. Before the creature disappeared from view entirely, Pearson saw white mist begin to drift off its tumorous skin, and smelled a whiff of (dust urine hot chili-peppers)

something unpleasant.

Cam Stevens pulled Moira into his arms and looked at Pearson with shocked, disbelieving eyes. All around them were men and women wearing that same blank look, men and women frozen like a herd of deer in the headlights of an oncoming truck. They don't look much like resistance fighters to me, Pearson thought. They look like sheep caught in a shearing-pen... and the bastard of a judas goat who led them in is standing up there at the front of the room with his co-conspirators.

The savage baying upstairs was getting closer, but not as fast as Pearson might have expected. Then he remembered how narrow the staircase was -- too narrow for two men to walk abreast -- and said a little prayer of thanks as he shoved forward. He I grabbed Duke by the tie and hauled him to his feet. "Come on," he said. "We're blowing this joint. Is there a back door?"

"I... don't know." Duke was rubbing one temple slowly and forcefully, like a man who has a bad headache. "Robbie did this? Robbie? Can't be, man... can it?" He looked at Pearson with pitiful, stunned intensity.

"I'm afraid so, Duke. Come on."

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He got two steps toward the aisle, still holding onto Duke's tie, then stopped. Delray, Olson, and Kendra had been rooting in the trunk, and now they flashed pistol-sized automatic weapons equipped with ridiculous-looking long wire stocks. Pearson had never seen an Uzi outside of the movies and TV, but he supposed that was what these were. Uzis or close relatives, and what the fuck did it matter, anyway? They were guns.

"Hold it," Delray said. He appeared to be speaking to Duke and Pearson. He was trying to smile and producing something that looked like the grimace of a death row prisoner who has just been notified it's still on. "Stay right where you are." Duke kept moving. He was in the aisle now, and Pearson was right beside him. Others were getting up, following their lead, pressing forward but looking nervously back over their shoulders at the doorway giving on the stairs. Their eyes said they didn't like the guns, but they liked the snarling, baying sounds drifting down from the first floor even less.

"Why, man?" Duke asked, and Pearson saw he was on the verge of tears. He held out his hands, palms up. "Why would you sell us out?"

"Stop, Duke, I'm warning you," Lester Olson said in a scotch-mellowed voice.

"The rest of you stay back, too!" Kendra snapped. She did not sound mellow at all. Her eyes rolled back and forth in their sockets, trying to cover the whole room at once.

"We never had a chance," Delray told Duke. He sounded as if he were pleading. "They were onto us, they could have taken us anytime, but they offered me a deal. Do you understand? I didn't sell out; I never sold out. They came to me." He spoke vehemently, as if this distinction actually meant something to him, but the shuttling blinks of his eyes signaled a different message. It was as if there were some other Robbie Delray inside, a better Robbie Delray, one who was trying frantically to dissociate himself from this shameful act of betrayal.

"You're a fucking liar!" Duke Rhinemann shrieked in a voice breaking with hurt betrayal and furious understanding. He leaped at the man who had saved his sanity and perhaps his life on a Red Line train... and then everything swooped down at Pearson could not have seen it all, yet it seemed that somehow he did. He saw Robbie Delray hesitate, then turn his weapon sideways, as if he intended to club Duke with the barrel instead of shooting him. He saw Lester Olson, who had shot the batman in the Newburyport barn pop-pop-pop before losing his guts and deciding to try and cut a deal, lodge the wire stock of his own gun against the buckle of his belt and pull the trigger. He saw momentary blue licks of fire appear in the ventilation holes in the barrel, and heard a hoarse hack!hack!hack!hack! that Pearson supposed was the way automatic weapons sounded in the real world. He heard something invisible slice the air an inch in front of his face; it was like hearing a ghost gasp. And he saw Duke flung backward with blood spraying up from his white shirt and splattering on his cream-colored suit. He saw the man who had been standing directly behind Duke stumble to his knees, hands clapped over his eyes, bright blood oozing out from between the knuckles.

Someone -- maybe Janet Brightwood -- had shut the door between the staircase and this downstairs room before the meeting started; now it banged open and two batmen wearing the uniforms of the Boston Police squeezed in. Their small, pushed-together faces stared savagely out of their oversized, strangely restless heads.

"Amnesty!" Robbie Delray was screaming. The freckles on his face now stood out like brands; the skin upon which they had been printed was ashy-white. "Amnesty! I've been promised amnesty if you'll just stand where you are and put up your hands!" Several people -- those who had been clustered around the coffeemaker, for the most part -- did raise their hands, although they continued to back away from the uniformed batmen as they did it. One of the bats reached forward with a low grunt, seized a man by the front of his shirt, and yanked him toward it. Almost before Pearson realized it had happened, the thing had torn out the man's eyes. The thing looked at the jellied remains resting on its strange, misshapen palm for a moment, then popped them into its mouth.

As two more bats lunged in through the door, looking around with their blackly gleaming little eyes, the other police-bat drew its service revolver and fired three times, seemingly at random, into the crowd.

"No!" Pearson heard Delray scream. "No, you promised!"

Janet Brightwood grabbed the Bunn, lifted it over her head, and threw it at one of the newcomers. It struck with a muted metallic bonging and spewed hot coffee all

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over the thing. This time there was no mistaking the pain in that shriek. One of the police-bats reached for her. Brightwood ducked, tried to run, was tripped... and suddenly she was gone, lost in a stampede toward the front of the room.

Now all the windows were breaking, and somewhere close by Pearson could hear approaching sirens. He saw the bats breaking into two groups and running down the sides of the room, clearly bent on driving the panic-stricken Ten O'Clock People into the storage area behind the easel, which had now been knocked over.

Olson threw down his weapon, grabbed Kendra's hand, and bolted in that direction. A bat-arm snaked down through one of the cellar windows, grabbed a handful of his theatrical white hair, and hauled him upward, choking and gargling. Another hand appeared through the window, and a thumbnail three inches long opened his throat and let out a scarlet flood.

Your days of popping off batmen in barns on the coast are all over, my friend, Pearson thought sickly. He turned toward the front of the room again. Delray stood between the open trunk and the fallen easel, his gun now dangling from one hand, his eyes shocked nearly to vacancy. When Pearson pulled the wire stock from his fingers, the man made no attempt to resist.

"They promised us amnesty," he told Pearson. "They promised."

"Did you really think you could trust things that looked like that?" Pearson asked, and then drove the wire stock into the center of Delray's face with all the force he could muster. He heard something break -- probably Delray's nose -- and the thoughtless barbarian which had awakened within his banker's soul cheered with rude savagery.

He started toward a passage zig-zagging between the stacked cartons -- one that had been widened by the people who had already bolted their way through -- then paused as gunfire erupted behind the building. Gunfire... screams... roars of triumph.

Pearson whirled and saw Cam Stevens and Moira Richardson standing at the head of the aisle between the folding chairs. They wore identical shocked expressions and were holding hands. Pearson had time to think, That's how Hansel and Gretel must have looked after they finally got out of the candy-house. Then he bent down, picked up Kendra's and Olson's weapons, and handed one to each.

Two more bats had come in through the rear door. They moved casually, as if all were going according to plan... which, Pearson supposed, it was. The action had moved to the rear of the house now -- that was where the pen really was, not in here, and the bats were doing a lot more than just shearing.

"Come on," he said to Cam and Moira. "Let's get these fucks."

The batmen at the rear of the room were late in realizing that a few of the refugees had decided to turn and fight. One of them spun around, possibly to run, struck a new arrival, and slipped in the spilled coffee. They both went down. Pearson opened fire on the one remaining on its feet. The machine-pistol made its somehow unsatisfying hack!hack!hack! sound and the bat was driven backward, its alien face breaking open and letting out a cloud of stinking fog... it was as if, Pearson thought, they really were just illusions.

Cam and Moira got the idea and opened fire on the remaining bats, catching them in a withering field of fire that knocked them back against the wall and then sent them to the floor, already oozing out of their clothes in an insubstantial mist that to Pearson smelled quite a lot like the asters in the marble flower-islands outside The First Mercantile.

"Come on," Pearson said. "If we go now, we might have a chance."

"But -- " Cameron began. He looked around, starting to come out of his daze. That was good; Pearson had an idea they'd all have to be wide-awake if they were going to have a chance of getting out of this.

"Never mind, Cam," Moira said. She had also looked around, and noted the fact that they were the only ones, human or bat, left in here. Everyone else had gone out the back. "Let's just go. I think maybe the door we came in through would be our best bet."

"Yes," Pearson said, "but not for long."

He spared one last look at Duke, who lay on the floor with his face frozen in an expression of pained disbelief. He wished there were time to close Duke's eyes, but there wasn't. "Let's go," he said, and they went.

By the time they reached the door which gave on the porch -- and Cambridge Avenue beyond it -- the gunfire coming from the rear of the house had begun to taper off. How many dead? Pearson wondered, and the answer which first occurred -- all of them

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-- was horrible but too plausible to deny. He supposed one or two others might have slipped through, but surely no more. It had been a good trap, set quietly and neatly around them while Robbie Delray ran his gums, stalling for time and checking his watch... probably waiting to give some signal which Pearson had preempted.

If I'd woken up a little earlier, Duke might still be alive, he thought bitterly. Perhaps true, but if wishes were horses, beggars would ride. This wasn't the time for recriminations.

One police-bat had been left to stand sentry on the porch, but it was turned in the direction of the street, possibly watching for unwanted interference. Pearson leaned through the open door toward it and said, "Hey, you ugly ringmeat asshole -- got a cigarette?"

The bat turned.

Pearson blew its face off.

Shortly after one the next morning, three people -- two men and a woman, wearing torn nylons and a dirty red skirt -- ran beside a freight-train pulling out of the South Station shipping yards. The younger of the two men leaped easily into the square mouth of an empty boxcar, turned, and held out his hands to the woman.

She stumbled and cried out as one of her low heels broke. Pearson put an arm around her waist (he got a heartbreakingly faint whiff of Giorgio below the much fresher smell of her sweat and her fear), ran with her that way, then yelled for her to jump. As she did, he grabbed her hips and boosted her toward Cameron Stevens's reaching hands. She caught them and Pearson gave her a final rough shove to help Stevens haul her aboard.

Pearson had fallen behind in his effort to help her, and now he could see the fence which marked the edge of the train yards not far ahead. The freight was gliding through a hole in the chainlink, but there would be no room for both it and Pearson; if he didn't get aboard, and quickly, he would be left behind in the yard.

Cam glanced around the open boxcar door, saw the approaching fence, and held his hands out again. "Come on!" he shouted. "You can do it!"

Pearson couldn't have -- not back in the old two-pack-a-day life, anyway. Now, however, he was able to find a little extra, both in his legs and in his lungs. He sprinted along the treacherous bed of trash-littered cinders beside the tracks, temporarily outrunning the lumbering train again, holding his hands out and up, stretching his fingers to touch the hands above him as the fence loomed. Now he could see the cruel interfacings of barbed wire weaving in and out of the chainlink diamonds.

The eye of his mind opened wide in that moment and he saw his wife sitting in her chair in the living room, her face puffy with crying and her eyes red. He saw her telling two uniformed policemen that her husband had gone missing. He even saw the stack of Jenny's Pop-Up books on the little table beside her. Was that really going on? Yes; in one form or another, he supposed it was. And Lisabeth, who had never smoked a single cigarette in her whole life, would not be aware of the black eyes and fanged mouths beneath the young faces of the policemen sitting across from her on the couch; she would not see the oozing tumors or the black, pulsing lines which crisscrossed their naked skulls.

Would not know. Would not see.

God bless her blindness, Pearson thought. Let it last forever.

He stumbled toward the dark behemoth that was a westbound Conrail freight, toward the orange fluff of sparks which spiraled up from beneath one slowly turning steel wheel.

"Run!" Moira shrieked, and leaned out of the boxcar door farther, her hands imploring. "Please, Brandon -- just a little more!"

"Hurry up, you gluefoot!" Cam screamed. "Watch out for the fucking fence!"

Can't, Pearson thought. Can't hurry up, can't watch out for the fence, can't do any more. Just want to lie down. Just want to sleep.

Then he thought of Duke and managed to put on a little more speed after all. Duke hadn't been old enough to know that sometimes people lose their guts and sell out, that sometimes even the ones you idolize do that, but he had been old enough to grab Brand Pearson's arm and keep him from killing himself with a scream. Duke wouldn't have wanted him to be left behind in this stupid trainyard.

He managed one last sprint toward their outstretched hands, watching the fence now seeming to leap toward him out of the corner of his eye, and seized Cam's fingers. He jumped, felt Moira's hand clamp firmly under his armpit, and then he was

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squirming aboard, pulling his right foot into the boxcar a split second before the fence would have torn it off, loafer and all.

"All aboard for Boy's Adventure," he gasped, "illustrations by N. C. Wyeth!"

"what?" Moira asked. "what did you say?"

He turned over and looked up at them through a matted tangle of hair, resting on his elbows and panting. "Never mind. Who's got a cigarette? I'm dying for One."

They gawped at him silently for several seconds, looked at each other, then burst into wild shouts of laughter at exactly the same moment. Pearson guessed that meant they were in love.

As they rolled over and over on the floor of the boxcar, clutching each other and howling, Pearson sat up and slowly began to investigate the inside pockets of his filthy, torn suitcoat.

"Ahhh," he said as his hand entered the second one and felt the familiar shape. He hauled out the battered pack and displayed it. "Here's to victory!"

The boxcar trundled west across Massachusetts with three small red embers glowing in the dark of the open doorway. A week later they were in Omaha, spending the mid-morning hours of each day idling along the downtown streets, watching the people who take their coffee-breaks outside even in the pouring rain, looking for Ten O'Clock People, hunting for members of the Lost Tribe, the one that wandered off following Joe Camel.

By November there were twenty of them having meetings in the back room of an abandoned hardware store in La Vista.

They mounted their first raid early the following year, across the river in Council Bluffs, and killed thirty very surprised mid-western bat-bankers and bat-executives. It wasn't much, but Brand Pearson had learned that killing bats had at least one thing in common with cutting down on your cigarette intake: you had to start somewhere.