

The Happy Man

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1.

I left her in the bedroom, and went and poured myself a drink. I felt it now; there wasn't any doubt. But I didn't want to tell her, not yet. I wanted to stretch it out for as long as I could. It had been so quick, this time.

In the meantime I wanted to see the kid.

I took my drink and went into his room and sat down on the edge of his bed. His night light was on; I could see I'd woken him. Maybe he'd heard me clinking bottles. Maybe he'd heard us making love.

Anyway, he was awake when I came in.

"Dad," he said.

"Peter."

"Something the matter?"

Peter was twelve. A good kid, a very good kid. He was just eleven when I died. All computers and stereo, back then. Heavy metal and D and D. Sorcerers, Dragons, the flaming pits of Hell, the whole bit. And music to match. After I died and came back he got real serious about things, forgot about the rock music and the imaginary Hells. Gave up his friends, too. I was pretty worried about that, and we had a lot of big talks. But he stayed serious. The one thing he stuck with was the computer, only now he used it to map out real Hell. My Hell.

Instead of answering his question I took another drink. He knew what was the matter.

"You going away?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Tell Mom yet?"

"Nope."

He scooted up until he was sitting on his pillow. I could see him thinking: *It was fast this time, Dad. Is it getting faster?* But he didn't say anything.

"Me and your mother," I said. "There's a lot of stuff we didn't get to, this time."

Peter nodded.

, "Well-" I began, then stopped. What did he understand? More than I guessed, probably. "Take good care of her," I said.

"Yeah."

I kissed his forehead. I knew how much he hated the smell of liquor, but he managed not to make a face. Good kid, etc.

Then I went in to see his mother.

It was while we were making love that I'd had the first inkling that the change was coming on, but I'd kept it to myself. There wasn't any purpose to ruining the mood; besides, I wasn't sure yet. It wasn't until afterward that I knew for sure.

But I had to tell her now. Another hour or so and I'd be gone.

I sat on the edge of the bed, just like with Peter. Only in this room it was dark. And she wasn't awake. I put my hand on her cheek, felt her breath against my palm. She murmured, and kissed my hand. I squeezed her shoulder until she figured out that I wanted her to wake up.

"Maureen," I said.

"Why aren't you sleeping?"

I wanted to undress again and get back under the covers. Curl myself around her and fall asleep. Not to say another word. Instead I said: "I'm going back."

"Going back?" Her voice was suddenly hoarse.

I nodded in the dark, but she got the idea.

"Damn you!"

I didn't see the slap coming. That didn't matter, since it wasn't for show. It rattled my teeth. By the time I recovered she was up against the headboard, curled into herself, sobbing weakly.

It wasn't usually this bad for her anymore. She'd numbed the part of herself that felt it the most. But it didn't usually happen this fast, either. I moved up beside her on the bed, and cradled her head in my hands. Let her cry a while against my chest. But she wasn't done yet. When she turned her face up it was still raw and contorted with her pain, tendons standing out on her neck.

"Don't say it like that," she gasped out between sobs. "I hate that so much-"

"What?" I tried to say it softly.

"Going 'back.' Like that's more real to you now, like that's where you belong, and this is the mistake, the exception-"

I couldn't think of what to say to stop her.

"-oh, God." I held her while she cried some more. "Just don't say it like that, Tom," she said when she could. "I can't stand it."

"I won't say it like that anymore," I said flatly.

She calmed somewhat. We sat still there in the dark, my arms around her.

"I'm sorry," she said after a while. She was still crying, but evenly now. "It's just so fast. Are you sure-"

"Yeah," I said.

"We hardly had any time," she said, sniffing. "I mean, I was just getting the feeling back, you know? When we were making love. It was so good, just now. Wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"I just thought it was the beginning of a good period again. I thought you'd be back for a while . . ."

I stroked her hair, not saying anything.

"Did you know when we were fucking?" she asked.

"No," I lied. "Not until after."

"I don't know if I can take it anymore, Tom. I can't watch you walk around like a zombie all the time. It's driving me crazy. Every day I look in your eyes, thinking *maybe he's back*, maybe he's about to come back, and you just stare at me. I try to hold your hand in the bed and then you need to scratch yourself or something and you just pull away without saying anything, like you didn't even notice. I can't live like this-"

"I'm sorry," I said, a little hollowly. I wasn't unsympathetic. But we'd been through it before. We always ended in the same place. We always would.

And frankly, once I'd absorbed the impact of her rage, the conversation lost its flavor. My thoughts were beginning to drift ahead, to Hell.

"Maybe you should live somewhere else," she said. "Your body, I mean. When you're not around. You could sleep down at the station or something."

"You know I can't do that."

"Oh no," she said. "I just remembered-"

"What?"

"Your uncle Frank, remember? When does he come?"

"Maybe I'll be back already before he shows up," I said. It wasn't likely.

I usually spent a week or so in Hell, when I went. Frank was due in four

days. "Anyway, he knows about me. There won't be any problem." She sighed. "I just hate having guests when you're gone-" "Frank's not a guest," I said. "He's family."

She changed the subject. "Did you forget the medication? Maybe if you took the medication-"

"I always take it," I said. "It doesn't work. It doesn't keep me here. You can't take a pill to keep your soul from migrating to Hell." "It's supposed to help, Tom."

"Well it doesn't matter, does it? I take it. Why do we have to talk about it?"

Now I'd hurt her a little. We were quiet. I felt her composing herself there, in my arms. Making her peace with my going away. Numbing herself.

The result was that we came a little closer together. I was able to share in her calm. We would be nice to each other from here on in. Things were back to normal.

But at the same time, we'd backed away from that perilous, agonized place where to be separated by this, or separated at all, even for a minute,

was too much to bear; from that place where all that mattered was our love, and where compromise was fundamentally wrong.

Normal was sometimes miles apart.

"You know what I hate the most?" she said. "That I don't even want to stay up with you. You'll only be around for what? A couple of hours more? I should want to get in every last minute. But I don't know what to say to you, really. There's nothing new to say about it. I feel like going to sleep."

"It's coming fast," I said, just to set her straight. "I think it's more like half an hour now."

"Oh," she said.

"But no hard feelings. Go to sleep. I understand."

"I have to," she said. "I have to get up in the morning. I feel sick from crying." She slid under the covers and hugged me at the waist. "Tom?" she said, in a smaller voice.

"Maureen."

"Is it getting faster?"

"It's just this one time," I said. "It probably doesn't mean anything. It's just painful to go through-"

"Okay," she said. "I love you, Tom."

"I love you too," I said. "Don't worry."

She went to sleep then, while I lay awake beside her, waiting to cross over.

If Maureen hadn't still been in school when I died that would have been the end of it. If she hadn't been in debt up to her ears, and still two years away from setting up an office. As it was I had to sit in cold pack for three months while her lawyer pushed her application through. Eventually the courts saw it her way: I was the breadwinner. So they thawed me out.

Now she was supposed to be happy. I kept food on the table, and she had her graduate degree. Her son grew up knowing his dad. It wasn't supposed to matter that my soul shuttled between my living body here on earth, and Hell. She wasn't supposed to complain about that.

Besides, it wasn't my fault.

2.

In Hell I'm a small boy.

Younger than Peter. Eight or nine, I'd guess.

I always start in the same place. The beginning is always the same. I'm at that table, in that damned garden, waiting for the witch.

Let me be more specific. I begin as a detail in a tableau: four of us

children are seated in a semi-circle around a black cast-iron garden table. We sit in matching iron chairs.

The lawn beneath us is freshly mowed; the gardener, if there is one, permits dandelions but not crabgrass.

At the edge of the lawn is a scrubby border of rosebushes. Beyond that, a forest.

Behind me, when I turn to look, there's a pair of awkward birch saplings. Behind them, the witch's house.

Smoke tumbles out of the slate chimney. The witch is supposed to be making us breakfast.

We're supposed to wait. Quietly.

Time is a little slow there, at Hell's entrance. I've waited there with the other children, bickering, playing with the silverware, curling the lace doily under my setting into a tight coil, for what seems like years.

Breakfast is never served. Never. The sun, which is hanging just beyond the tops of the trees, never sets.

Time stands still there. Which is not to say we sit frozen like statues. Far from it. We're a bunch of hungry children, and we make all kinds of trouble.

But I'm leaving something out.

We sit in a semi-circle. That's to make room for the witch's horse. The witch's horse takes up a quarter of the table. He's seated in front of a place like any other guest.

He's waiting for breakfast, too.

The witch's horse is disgusting. The veins under his eyes quiver as he squirms in his seat. His forelegs are chained and staked to keep him at the table. He's sitting on his tail, so he can't swat away the flies which gather and drink at the corners of his mouth. The witch's horse is wearing a rusted pair of cast-iron eyeglass-frames on his nose. They're for show, I guess, but they don't fit right. They chafe a pair of raw pink gutters into the sides of his nose.

If I stay at the table and wait for breakfast, subtle changes do occur. Most often the other children get restless, and begin to argue or play, and the table is jostled, and the silverware clatters, and the horse snorts in fear, his yellow eyes leaking. Sometimes a snake or a fox slithers across the lawn and frightens the horse, and he rattles his chains, and the children murmur and giggle. Once a bird flew overhead and splattered oily white birdshit onto the teapot. It was a welcome distraction, like anything else.

Every once in a while the children decide to feel sorry for the horse, and mount a campaign to lure him forward and pluck the glasses from his nose, or daub at his gashes with a wadded-up doily. I tried to help them once, when I was new to Hell. I felt sorry for the horse, too. That was before I saw him and the witch ride together in the forest. When I saw them ride I knew the horse and the witch were in it together.

Seeing them ride, howling and grunting through the trees, is one of the worst things I experience in all of Hell. After the first time I didn't feel sorry for the horse at all.

Whatever the cause, disturbances at the garden table are always resolved the same way. The activity reaches some pitch, the table seems about to overturn, when suddenly there's a sound at the door of the witch's house. We all freeze in our places, breath held. Even the horse knows to sit stock still, and the only sound that remains is the buzzing of the flies.

We all watch for movement at the door of the witch's house. On the slim hope that maybe, just this once, it's breakfast time. The door opens, just a crack, just enough, and the witch slips out. She's smiling. She's very beautiful, the witch. The most beautiful woman I've ever seen, actually. She's got a great smile. The witch walks out across the lawn, and stops halfway between her door and the table. By now we're all slumped obediently in our seats again. My heart, to be honest, is in my throat.

I'm in love.

"Breakfast will be ready soon," sings the witch. "So just sit quietly, don't bother horse, and before you know it I'll have something delicious on the table-"

And then she turns and slips back through her doorway and we start all over again.

That's how Hell begins. Maybe if I were a little more patient-waited, say, a thousand years, instead of just a hundred-breakfast would appear. But then, knowing Hell, I'm not sure I'd want to see what the witch has been cooking up all this time.

But I don't wait at all anymore. I get up and walk away from the table right away.

Time in Hell doesn't start until you get up from the garden table.

3.

The Hell in the computer starts out the same way mine does: in the garden.

Peter laid it all out like Dungeons and Dragons, like a role-playing computer game. We entered a long description of the scene; the other children, the witch's horse, the witch. It was Peter's idea, when I came back with my first tentative reports of what I'd gone through, to map it out with the computer. I think he had the idea that it was like one of his dungeons, and that if we persisted we would eventually find a way out. . . .

So Peter's "Dad" character wakes up at the garden table, same as I do.

And when Peter types in a command, like GET UP FROM THE TABLE, WALK NORTH ACROSS

THE LAWN, his "Dad" goes to explore a computer version of the Hell I inhabit.

I don't soft-pedal it. I report what I see, and he enters it into the computer. Factually, we're recreating my Hell. The only thing I spare him are my emotional responses. I omit my fear at what I encounter, my rage at living these moments again and again, my unconscionable lust for the witch. . . .

4.

When I crossed over that night, after fighting with Maureen, I didn't dawdle at the garden table. I was bored with that by now. I pushed my chair back and started in the direction Peter and I call "North"; the opposite direction from the witch's house. I ran on my eight-year-old legs across the lawn, through a gap in the border of rosebushes, and into the edge of the forest.

The north was my favored direction at the moment, because I'd explored it the least. Oh, Hell goes on forever in every direction, of course. But I don't always get that far. I explored the territories nearest the witch's garden most thoroughly, in any direction; as I get farther out it gets less and less familiar. I just don't always get very far out.

And the nearby territories to the north just seemed less *hackneyed* to me at the moment.

The forest to the north quickly gives way to an open field. It's called the Field of Tubers, because of the knuckled roots that grow there. Sort of like carrots, or potatoes, or knees. Like carrots in that they're orange, like potatoes in the way the vines link them all together, under the ground. Like knees, or elbows, in the way they twitch, and bleed when you kick them.

The first few times I came to the Field of Tubers I tried to run across. Now I walk, slowly, carefully. That way I avoid falling into the breeding holes. The holes don't look like much if you don't step on them; just little circular holes, like wet anthills in the dirt. They throb a little. But if your foot lands on them they gape open, the entrance stretching like a mouth, and you fall in.

The breeding holes are about four feet deep, and muddy. Inside, the newborn tubers writhe in heaps. They're not old enough to take root yet. It's a mess.

Sure, you can run across the field, scrambling back out of the breeding holes, scraping the crushed tubers off the bottom of your shoes. You get to the other side of the field either way. It's not important. Myself, I walk.

Time, which is frozen at the witch's breakfast table, starts moving once I pass through the forest. But time in Hell takes a very predictable course. The sun, which has been sitting at the top of the trees, refusing to set, goes down as I cross the Field of Tubers. It's night when I reach the other side, no matter how long it takes me to cross. If I run, looking back over my shoulder, I can watch the sun plummet through the treetops and disappear. Of course, if I run looking back over my shoulder I trip over the tubers and fall into the breeding holes, constantly. If I dawdle in the field, squatting at the edge of a breeding hole, poking it with my finger to watch it spasm open, the sun refuses to set.

But why would I ever want to do that?

5.

When I first came back, when they warmed me up and put me back together, they didn't send me home right away. I had to spend a week in an observation ward, and on the fourth day they sent a doctor in to let me know where I stood.

"You'll be fine," he said. "You won't have any trouble holding down your job. Most people won't know the difference. But you will cross over." "I've heard," I said.

"It shouldn't affect your public life," he said. "You'll be able to carry on most conversations in a perfunctory way. You just won't seem very interested in personal questions. Your mind will appear to be wandering. And you won't be very affectionate. Your co-workers won't notice, but your wife will."

"I won't want to fuck her," I said.

"No, you won't."

"Okay," I said. "How often will I go?"

"That varies from person to person. Some get lucky, and cross over just once or twice for the rest of their lives. It's rare, but it does happen. At the other extreme, some spend most of their time over there. For most, it's somewhere in between."

"You're not saying anything."

"That's right; I'm not. But I should say that how often you cross over isn't always as important as how you handle it. The stress of not knowing is as bad or worse than actually going through it. The anticipation. It can cast a pall over the times when you're back. A lot of marriages . . . don't survive the resurrection."

"And there's no way to change it."

"Not really. You'll get a prescription for Valizax. It's a hormone that stimulates the secretions of a gland associated, in some studies, with the migration. Some people claim it helps, and maybe it does, in their cases. Or maybe it's just a placebo effect. And then there's therapy."

"Therapy?"

"They'll give you the brochure when you leave. There are several support groups for migrators. Some better than others. We recommend one in particular. It's grounded in solid psychoanalytic theory, and like the drug, some people have said it improves the condition. But that's not for me to say."

I went to the support group. The good one. Once. I don't know what I was expecting. There were seven or eight people there that night, and a group counselor who I learned wasn't resurrected, had never made the trips back and forth from his own Hell. After some coffee and uneasy socializing we went and sat in a circle. They went around, bringing each other up to date on their progress, and the counselor handed out brownie points for every little epiphany. When they got to me they wanted to hear about my Hell.

Only they didn't call it Hell. They called it a "psychic landscape." And I quickly learned that they wanted me to consider it symbolic. The counselor wanted me to explain what my Hell *meant*.

I managed to contain my anger, but I left at the first break.

Hell doesn't *mean* anything. Excuse me-*my* Hell doesn't mean anything. Maybe yours does.

But mine doesn't. That's what makes it Hell.

And it's not symbolic. It's very, very real. .

6.

On the other side of the Field of Tubers, if I go straight over the crest, is the grove of the robot maker. A dense patch of trees nestled at the base of a hill.

The moon is up by this time.

The robot maker is an old man. A tired old man. He putters around in the grove in a welder's helmet, but he never welds. His robots are put together with wire and tinsnips. They're mostly pathetic. Half of them barely make it up to the combat pavilion before collapsing. He made better ones, once, if you believe him. He's badly in need of a young apprentice.

That's where I come in.

"Boy, you're here," he says when I arrive. He hands me a pliers or a ball peen hammer. "Let me show what I'm working on," he says. "I'll let you help." He tries to involve me in his current project, whatever it is. Whatever heap of refuse he's currently animating.

His problem, which he describes to me at length, is that his proudest creation, Colonel Eagery, went renegade on his way up to the battle pavilion. Back when the robot maker was young and strong, and built robots with fantastic capabilities, Colonel Eagery, he says, was his triumph, but the triumph went sour. The robot rebelled, and set up shop on the far side of the mountains, building evil counterparts to the robot maker's creations. The strong, evil robots that so routinely demolish the robot maker's own

robots out on the battle pavilion.

I have two problems with this story.

First of all, I know Colonel Eagery, and he isn't a robot. Oh no. I know all too well that Eagery, who I also call the Happy Man, is flesh and blood.

The second is that the robot maker is too old and feeble for me to imagine that he's ever been able to build anything capable and effective at all, let alone something as capable and effective as I know Eagery to be.

Besides, Hell doesn't have a *before*. Hell is stuck in time, repeating endlessly. Hell doesn't have a past. It just *is*. The robot maker is always old and ineffectual, and he always has been.

But I never say this. My role is just as predetermined as the robot maker's. I humor him. When I'm passing through this part of Hell I'm the robot maker's apprentice. I make a show of interest in his latest project. I help him steer it up to the combat pavilion. I can't say why. That's just the way things are in this corner of Hell.

This time, when I entered the grove, I found the robot maker already heading up toward the pavilion.

He'd built a little robot terrier this time. It was surprisingly mobile and lively, yipping and snapping at the robot maker's heels. I fell in with them, and the robot maker put his heavy, dry hand on my shoulder. The mechanical terrier sniffed at my shoes and barked once, then ran ahead, rooting frantically in the moss.

"He's a good one, boy," said the robot maker. "I think he's got a bit of your spark in him. This one's got a fighting chance against whatever the Colonel's cooked up."

It didn't, of course. I couldn't bring myself to look at the poor little mechanical terrier. It was about to be killed. But I didn't say anything.

At this point in our hike through the grove the witch and the witch's horse ride by. It's another dependable part of my clockwork Hell. They turn up at about this point in my journey-the moon just up, a breeze stirring-whichever direction I choose. It's a horrible sight, but it's one I've gotten used to. Like just about everything else.

The horse is a lot more imposing freed from his stakes at the table.

He's huge and sweaty and hairy, his nostrils dilated wide, his lips curled back. He's not wearing those funny glasses anymore. The witch rides him cowboy style, bareback. She bends her head down and grunts exhortations into the horse's ear. She's still beautiful, I guess. And I still love her-sort of. I feel mixed up about the witch when she rides, actually. A combination of fear and pity and shame. An odd sense that she wouldn't do it if she didn't somehow *have* to. That the horse is somehow doing it to her. But mostly I'm just afraid. As they rode through the grove now I stood frozen in place with fear, just like the first time.

The robot maker did what he always does: covered my eyes with his bony hand and muttered, "Terrible, terrible! Not in front of the boy!" I peered through his fingertips, compelled to watch.

And then they were gone, snorting away into the night, and we were alone in the grove again. The terrier yipped after them angrily. The robot maker shook his head, gripped my shoulder, and we walked on.

The pavilion sits on a plateau at the edge of the woods. The base is covered with trees, invisible until you're there. The battle area, up on top, is like a ruined Greek temple. The shattered remains of the original roof are piled around the edges. The pavilion itself is littered with the glowing, radioactive shambles of the robot maker's wrecked creations. The pavilion is so infused with radiation that normal physics don't apply there; some of the ancient robots still flicker back into flame when the wind picks up, and sometimes one of the wrecks goes into an accelerated decline and withers into ashes, as though years of entropy have finally caught up with it. The carcasses tell the story of the robot maker's decline; his recent robots are less ambitious and formidable, and their husks are correspondingly more pathetic. Many of the newer ones simply failed on their way up to the pavilion; their ruined bodies litter the pathway up the hill.

But not the terrier. He bounded up the hill ahead of us, reached the crest, and disappeared over the top. The robot maker and I hurried after him, not wanting him to lose his match before we'd even seen what he was fighting.

His opponent was a wolfman robot. Like from an old horror movie, its face more human than dog. It was a perfect example of how the robot maker's creations were so badly overmatched: what chance does a house pet have against a wolfman? It was often like this, a question of several degrees of sophistication. Standing on two feet, the wolfman towered over the terrier. It spoke too, taunting the little dog, who could only yip and growl in response.

"Here, boy," cackled the wolfman. "Come on, pup. Come to daddy. Here we go." He gestured beckoningly. The terrier barked and reared back. "Come on, boy. Jeez." He looked to us for sympathy as we approached. "Lookit this. Here boy, I'm not gonna hurt you. I'm not gonna hurt you. I'm just gonna wring your fucking neck. Come on. COME HERE YOU GODDAMN LITTLE PIECE OF SHIT!" The wolfman lunged, scrambling down and seizing the terrier by the neck, and took a bite on the forearm for his trouble. I heard metal grate on metal. "Ow! Goddammit. That does it." He throttled the little robot, which squealed until its voice was gone. "This is gonna hurt me more than it hurts you," said the wolfman, even as he tossed the broken scrap-metal carcass aside. The robot maker and I just stood, staring in stupid wonder.

"Ahem," said the wolfman, picking himself up. "Boy. Where was I? Oh, well. Some other fucking time." He turned his back and walked away, clearing his throat, picking imaginary pieces of lint from his body, tightening an imaginary tie like Rodney Dangerfield.

As soon as the wolfman was over the edge of the pavilion and out of sight the robot maker ran to his ruined terrier and threw his skeletal body over it in sorrow, as though he could shield it from some further indignity. I turned away. I hated the robot maker's weeping. I didn't want to have to comfort him again. The sight of it, frankly, made me sick. It was one of Hell's worst moments. Besides, hanging around the pavilion weeping over his failures was how the robot maker had soaked up so much radiation, and gotten so old. If I stuck around I might get like him.

I snuck away.

7.

A few months after my brush with the support group I met another migrator in a bar.

I'd come back from Hell that afternoon, at work. I reinhabited my body while I was sitting behind the mike, reading out a public service announcement. For once I kept my cool; didn't tell anyone at the station, didn't call Maureen at home. I'd stopped at the bar on my way home, just to get a few minutes for myself before I let Maureen and Peter know I was back.

I got talking to the guy at my right. I don't remember how, but it came out that he was a migrator, too. Just back, like me. We started out boozily jocular, then got quiet as we compared notes, not wanting to draw attention to ourselves, not wanting to trigger anyone's prejudices.

He told me about his Hell, which was pretty crazy. The setting was urban, not rural. He started out on darkened city streets, chased by

Chinamen driving garbage trucks and shooting at him with pistols. There was a nuclear war; the animals mutated, grew intelligent and vicious. It went on from there.

I told him about mine, and then I told him about the support group and what I'd thought of it.

"Shit, yes," he said. "I went through that bullshit. Don't let them try.

to tell you what you're going through. They don't know shit. They can't know what we go through. They aren't *there*, man."

I asked him how much of his time he spent in Hell.

"Sheeit. I'm not back here one day for every ten I spend *there*. I work in a bottling plant, man. Quality control. I look at bottles all day, then I go out drinking with a bunch of other guys from the plant. Least that's what they tell me. When I come back I don't even *know* those guys.

Buncha strangers. When I come back"-he raised his glass-"I go out drinking alone."

I asked him about his wife. He finished his drink and ordered another one before he said anything. "She got sick of waiting around, I guess," he said. "I don't blame her. Least she got me brought back. I owe her *that*."

We traded phone numbers. He wasn't exactly the kind of guy I'd hang around with under ordinary circumstances, but as it was we had a lot in common.

I called a few times. His answering machine message was like this:

"Sorry, I don't seem to be *home* right now. Leave a message at the tone and I'll call you as soon as I'm *back*."

Maureen told me he called me a few times, too. Always while I was away.

8.

When I leave the robot maker at the pavilion I usually continue north, to the shrunken homes, in the garden of razor blades. The garden begins on the far side of the pavilion. A thicket of trees, at the entrance, only the trees are leafed with razor blades. The moonlight is reflected off a thousand tiny mirrors; it's quite pretty, really. The forest floor is layered with fallen razorblades. They never rust, because it never rains in Hell.

The trees quickly give way to a delicately organized garden, laced with paths, and the bushes and flowers, like the trees before them, are covered with razorblades. The paths wend around to a clearing, and in the middle of the clearing are the shrunken homes. They're built into a gigantic dirt mound, like a desert mesa inhabited by Indians, or a gigantic African anthill. Hundreds of tiny doorways and windows are painstakingly carved out of the mound. Found objects are woven into the structure; shirt buttons, safety pins, eyeglass frames, and nail clippers. But no razor blades.

The shrunken humans are just visible as I approach. Tiny figures in little cloth costumes, busily weaving or cooking or playing little ball games on the roofs and patios of the homes. I never get any closer than that before the storm hits.

It's another part of Hell's program. The witch storm rises behind the trees just as I enter the clearing. The witch storm is a tiny, self-contained hurricane, on a scale, I suppose, to match the shrunken homes. A black whirlwind about three times my size. It's a rainless hurricane, an entity of wind and dust that roils into action without warning and sends the shrunken humans scurrying for cover inside the mound.

With good reason. The storm tears razorblades from the treetops and off the surface of the paths and sends them in a whirling barrage against the sides of the shrunken homes. By the time the storm finishes, what was once a detailed, intricate miniature civilization is reduced to an undifferentiated heap of dust and dirt.

There's nothing I can do to stop it. I tried at first. Planted myself between the shrunken homes and the witch storm and tried to fend it off. What I got for- my trouble was a rash of tiny razor cuts on my arms and face. By the time the storm retreated I'd barely protected a square foot of the mound from the assault.

The storm is associated with the witch. Don't ask me why. There are times, though, when I think I see a hint of her figure in its whirling form.

If I forget the mound and run for cover I can usually avoid feeling the brunt of it. Running away, I might take a few quick cuts across the shoulders or the backs of my legs, but that's it.

This time I ran so fast I barely took a cut. I ducked underneath a bush

that was already stripped clean of blades; its branches protected me. I listened as the storm ravaged the mound, then faded away. A smell of ozone was in the air.

When I looked up again I was looking into the face of Colonel Eagery.
The Happy Man.

9.

The only thing that's not predictable, in Hell, the only thing that doesn't happen according to some familiar junction of time and locale, is the appearance of The Happy Man. He's a free operator. He's his own man. He comes and goes as he pleases, etc.

He's also my ticket home.

When Colonel Eagery is done with me I go back. Back to home reality, back to Maureen and Peter and the radio station where I work. I get to live my life again. No matter where he appears, no matter which tableau he disturbs, Eagery's appearance means I get to go back.

After he's done with me.

Before I left the support group the counselor-the one who'd never even been to Hell-told me to focus on what he called the "reentry episode." He told me that the situation that triggered return was usually the key to Hell, the source of the unresolved tension. The idea, he said, was to identify the corresponding episode in your own past. . . .

I could only laugh.

There's nothing in my life to correspond to Eagery. There couldn't be. Eagery is the heart of my Hell.

He's Hell itself. If there had been anything in my life to even approximate The Happy Man I wouldn't be here to tell you about it. I'd be a whimpering, sniveling wreck in a straight-jacket somewhere. Nothing I've encountered in the real world comes close.

Not in my reality.

Frankly, if something in the real world corresponds to Colonel Eagery, I don't want to know about it.

10.

The Happy Man lifted me over his shoulder and carried me out of the garden of razorblades, into the dark heart of the woods. When we got to a quiet moonlit grove he set me down.

"There you go, Tom," he said, dusting himself off. He's the only one in Hell who knows my name. "Boy, what a scene. Listen, let's keep it to ourselves, what do you say? Our little secret, okay? A midnight rondee voo."

The Happy Man is always urgently conspiratorial. It's a big priority with him. I feel I should oblige him, though I'm not always sure what he's referring to. I nodded now.

"Yeah." He slapped me on the back, a little too hard. "You and me, the midnight riders, huh? Lone Ranger and Tonto. What do you mean 'we,' white man? Heh. I told you that one? It's like this . . ."

He told me a long, elaborate joke which I failed to understand. Nonetheless, I sat cross-legged in the clearing, rapt.

At the end he laughed for both of us, a loud, sloppy sound that echoed in the trees. "Oh yeah," he said, wiping a tear from his eye. "Listen, you want some candy? Chocolate or something?" He rustled in a kit bag. "Or breakfast. It's still pretty early. I bet that goddamned witch didn't feed you kids any breakfast, did she?" He took out a bowl and a spoon, then poured in milk and dry cereal from a cardboard box.

The cereal, when I looked, consisted of little puffed and sugar-coated penises, breasts, and vaginas, floating innocently in the milk.

I tried not to gag, or let him see I was having any trouble getting it down. I wanted to please Colonel Eagery, wanted to let him know I was thankful. While I ate he whistled, and unpacked the neckties from his bag.

I watched, curious. "You like these?" he said, holding them up. "Yeah.

You'll get to wear them someday. Look real sharp, too. Like your dad. World-beater, that's what you feel like in a necktie." He began knotting them together to make a set of Topes, then looped them around the two nearest trees. "Here," he said, handing me one end. "Pull on this. Can you pull it loose?"

I put down the bowl of cereal and tugged on the neckties.

"Can you? Pull harder."

I shook my head.

"Yeah, they're tough all right. Don't worry about it, though. Your dad couldn't break it either. That's American craftsmanship." He nodded at the cereal. "You done with that? Yeah? C'mere."

I went.

This is my curse: I trust him. Every time. I develop skepticism about the other aspects of Hell; the witch's overdue breakfast, the robot maker's pathetic creations, but Colonel Eagery I trust every time. I am made newly innocent.

"Here," he said. "Hold this." He put one end of the rope in my right hand, and began tying the other end to my left. "Okay." He moved to the right. "What do you mean we, white man? Heh. Cowboys and Indians, Tom. Lift your leg up here-that's a boy. Okay." He grunts over the task of binding me, legs splayed between the two trees. "You an Indian, Tom? Make some noise and let's see."

I started crying.

"Oh, no, don't do that," said The Happy Man, gravely. "Show the Colonel that you're a good sport, for chrissakes. Don't be a girl. You'll-you'll ruin all the fun." His earnestness took me by surprise; I felt guilty. I didn't want to ruin anyone's fun. So I managed to stop crying. "That's it, Tommy. Chin up." It wasn't easy, lying there like a low-slung hammock in the dirt, my arms stretched over my head, to put my chin up. I decided it would be enough to smile. "There you go," said Eagery. "God, you're pretty."

The last knot secured, he turned away to dig in his bag, and emerged with a giant, clownish pair of scissors. I squirmed, but couldn't get away. He inserted the blade in my pants cuff and began snipping apart the leg of the corduroys. "Heigh ho! Don't move, Tom. You wouldn't want me to clip something off here, would you?" He quickly scissored up both sides, until my pants were hanging in shreds from my outstretched legs, then snipped the remaining link so they fell away. A few quick strokes of the scissors and he'd eliminated my jockey shorts too. "Huh." He tossed the scissors aside and ran his hands up my legs. "Boy, that's smooth. Like a baby."

When he caressed me I got hard, despite my fear.

"Okay. Okay. That feel good? Aw, look at that." He was talking to himself now. A steady patter which he kept up over the sound of my whimpering. "Look here Tom, I got one too. Big-size. Daddy-size." He straddled me. "Open up for the choo-choo, Tommy. Uh."

I didn't pass out this time until he flipped me over, my arms and legs twisted, my stomach and thighs pressed into the dirt. Blackness didn't come until then.

Then I crossed back over.

Another safe passage back from Hell, thanks again to The Happy Man.

11.

If anyone at the station had questions about my behavior, they kept them to themselves.

I came back on mike again. "-bumper to bumper down to the Dumbarton . . ." I trailed away in the middle of the traffic report and punched in a commercial break on cart. "Anyone got something to drink?" I said, into the station intercom.

"I think there's some beer in the fridge," said Andrew, the support technician on shift, poking his head into the studio.

"Keep this going," I said, and left. He could run a string of ads, or punch in one of our prerecorded promos. It wasn't a major deviation. The station fridge was full of rotting, half-finished lunches and pint cartons of sour milk, plus a six-pack of lousy beer. It wasn't Johnnie Walker, but it would do. I needed to wash the memory of Eagery's flesh out of my mouth . . .

I leaned against the wall of the lounge and quietly, methodically, downed the beer.

The programming was piped into the lounge, and I listened as Andrew handled my absence. He loaded in a stupid comedy promo; the words "Rock me" from about a million old songs, spliced together into a noisy barrage. Then his voice came over the intercom. "Lenny's down here, Tom. Take off if you want." I didn't need a second hint. In ten minutes I was trapped in the bumper to bumper myself, listening to the station on my car radio.

Maureen's car wasn't in the driveway when I pulled up. She was still at work. No reason to hurry home if she thought I was still away, I suppose. But the lights were on. Peter was home. And, as it turned out, so was Uncle Frank. I'd forgotten about the visit, but while I was away he'd set up in the guestroom.

He and Peter were sitting together in front of the computer, playing Hell. They looked up when I came in, and Peter recognized the change in the tone of my voice right away. Smart kid.

"Hey, Dad." He made a show of introducing us, so Frank would understand that there was a change.

"Dad, Uncle Frank's here." Frank and I shook hands.

I hadn't seen my father's brother for seven or eight years, and in that time he'd aged decades. He was suddenly a grey old man. It immediately made me wonder how my father would look if he were still around.

"Tommy," Frank said. "It's been a long time." His voice was as faded and weak as everything else. I could hear him trying to work out the difference between me now and the zombie version he'd been living with for the past few days.

I didn't let him wonder for too long. I gave his hand a good squeeze, and then I put my arms around him. I needed the human contact anyway, after Hell.

"I need a drink," I said. "Frank?" I cocked my head toward the living room. Uncle Frank nodded.

The kid got the drift on his own. "I'll see you later, Dad." He turned back to his computer, made a show of being involved.

I led Frank to the couch and poured us both a drink.

Though I hadn't seen him since before I died, Uncle Frank knew all about my situation. We wrote letters, and every once in a while spoke on the phone. Frank had never married, and after my father died he and I were one another's only excuse for "family." He wasn't well off, but he'd wired Maureen some cash when I died. In letters he'd been generous, too, sympathetic and unsuperstitious. I'd unloaded a certain measure of my guilt and shame at what my resurrection had done to the marriage in the letters, and he was always understanding. But I could see now that he was having to make an effort, in person, not to appear uncomfortable. He'd been living with my soulless, mechanical self for a few days, and he'd presumably gotten used to that. But now his eyes told me that he needed to figure out who he was talking to.

For my part, I was making an adjustment to the changes in Frank. In my memory he was permanently in his forties, a more garrulous and eccentric version of my father. Frank had been the charismatic oddball in the family, never without a quip, never quite out of the doghouse, but always expansive and charming. I'd

often, thought that my falsely genial on-radio persona was based on a pale imitation of Frank. Only now he just seemed tired and old.

"You've got a nice set-up here, Tom," he said quietly.

"That's Maureen's work," I said. "She busts her ass keeping it all together."

Frank nodded. "I've seen."

"How long you staying with us?"

Now Frank snickered in a way that recalled, if only faintly, the man I remembered. "How long you have me?"

"You don't need to be back?" How Frank made his living had always been unclear. He'd been a realtor at some point, then graduated to the nebulous status of "consultant." Professional bullshitter was always my hunch.

But now he said: "I'm not going back. I think I want to set up out here for a while."

"Well, for my part you're welcome to stick around until you find a place," I said. He'd sounded uncomfortable, and I decided not to pry. "It's really up to Maureen, you understand. The burden's on her--"

"Oh, I've been helping out," he said quickly. "I've become quite a chef, actually . . ."

The way he trailed away told me I'd probably already eaten several of his meals. "I'm sure," I said. There was a pause. "Listen, Frank, let's break the ice. I don't remember shit about what happens while I'm away. Treat me like a newborn babe when I come back. One who nurses on a whiskey tumbler."

I watched him relax. He lowered his eyes and said: "I'm sorry, Tom. I haven't been around family, I mean *real* family, for so long. . . . It's got me thinking about the past. You know. . . ." He looked up sharply. "You're a grown man. Have been for a long time. But your dad and your mom and you as a little kid, me coming to visit-that's how I remember you. Always will, I think."

"I understand." I worked on my whiskey.

"Anyway-" He waved his hand dismissively. "It's good to see you finally. Good to see the three of you together, making it go."

"I'm glad it looks good." I could only be honest. "It isn't always easy."

"Oh, I didn't mean, I mean, yes. Of course. And anything, any little thing I can do to help-" He watched my eyes for reaction, looking terribly uncomfortable. "And, uh, Tom?",

I nodded.

"I already mentioned this to Maureen and Peter. Uh, you don't seem to pick up the phone when you're away, but now that you're back-""Yes?"

"If you do pick up the phone, if anyone calls, *I'm not here*, okay?" "Sure, Frank."

"I just need to create a little distance right now," he said obscurely.

I wasn't sure whether to press him on the point. My chance was taken away, anyway, by Maureen's arrival. She walked in and peered at us over the top of a couple of bags of groceries, then took them on into the kitchen without saying a word. She knew I was back. The drink in my hand told her all she needed to know.

Frank got up and hurried into the kitchen behind her. I heard him insist on putting away the groceries by himself.

Then Maureen came out. I put my drink on the coffee table and stood up and we stood right next to each other, close without quite touching for a long time. Quiet, knowing that when words came things might get too complicated again. In the background I could hear Frank putting the groceries into the fridge and the gentle, hurried tapping of Peter's fingers on his keyboard.

Maureen and I sat on the couch and kissed.

"Hey," came Frank's voice eventually. "Pete and I were talking about catching a movie or something. We could get a slice of pizza too, take the car and be back in a few hours-"

"Peter?" I said.

He appeared in the doorway, right on cue. "Yeah, Dad, there's a new Clive Barker movie-"

"Homework?"

"Didn't get any."

I gave Frank the car keys and twenty bucks for pizza, or whatever. I was being tiptoed around, sure, but I didn't let myself feel patronized. The few breaks I get I earn, twice over.

They left, and Maureen and I went back to kissing on the couch. We still hadn't exchanged a word. After a while we went into the bedroom like that, affectionate, silent. We didn't get around to words until an hour or so later.

Turned out it was just as well.

12.

Maureen had closed her eyes and rolled over on her side, curled against me. But the muscles of her mouth were tight; she wasn't asleep. I put my hand in her hair and said her name. She said mine.

"How's it been?" I said.

She waited a while before answering. "I don't know, Tom. Okay, I guess."

"I wasn't gone too long this time," I said, though it didn't need saying. She sighed. "That last one just took something out of me."

"What are you saying?"

She spoke quietly, tonelessly, into the crook of my arm. "I don't know how long you'll be around. I can't trust it anymore. I feel like if I let myself relax I'll get ripped off again."

There wasn't any answer to that, so I shut up and let the subject drop. "Peter all right?"

"Yes. Always. He's going to be on some debating thing now. I think he likes having Frank around."

"Do you?"

She didn't answer the question. "He's so different from when I first met him, Tom. When we got married. I thought he was such a buffoon. Such a loud, intrusive character." She laughed. "I was afraid we'd have a son like him. Now he's so *polite*."

"He's a guest in your house," I pointed out.

"It's not just that," she said. "He's gotten old, I guess."

"He said he's been cooking. Is he in your way? He'll go if I tell him to." "He wants to move out here. Did he tell you that?"

"Yes," I said. And thought *as well as something odd about the telephone*. I didn't say it. "But he's got money, I think. We'll find him a place-" I stopped. She still hadn't said whether she wanted him around, and the gap was beginning to irritate me. I was sensitive enough to her by now that I noticed what wasn't being said.

And she was smart enough to notice my irritation.

"He's fine, really," she said quickly. "He's actually quite a help, cooking . . ."

"Yes?"

"I've just gotten used to being alone, Tom. With you gone, and Peter out with his friends. I've had a lot of freedom."

The skin on my back began to crawl. I took my hand out of her hair. "Say it," I said.

She sighed. "I'm trying to. I've been lonely, Tom. And I don't mean lonely for some odd old relative of yours to sleep in the guestroom, either." "Is it someone I know?"

"No."

I thought I could manage a couple more questions before I blew my cool. "Does Peter know?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Jesus, Tom. Yes, I'm sure." "What about Frank?"

"What about him? I didn't tell him. I can't imagine how he'd guess." "There aren't any letters, then. Or weird phone calls. You aren't being sloppy-"

"No, Tom."

That was all I could take. In pretty much one motion I got up and put on my pants. Almost burst a blood

vessel buttoning my shirt. Then I surprised myself: I didn't hit her.

Instead I put on my shoes and went to the kitchen for a bottle, and sat down on the couch in the moonlight and drank.

It wasn't any good: I couldn't be in the house. I put on a jacket and took the bottle for a walk around the neighborhood.

13.

To the west, in my Hell, there's a place I call the ghost town. It's like a western movie set, with cheap façades passing for buildings, and if anyone lives there, they're hiding. The moon lights the main street from behind a patch of trees, throwing cigarette butts and crumpled foil wrappers discarded there into high relief. Sometimes I can make out hoofprints in the dust.

In the middle of the street is a naked, crying baby.

Gusts of wind rise as I walk through the ghost town, and they grow stronger as I approach the baby, whipping the dust and refuse of the street into its face. The baby's crying chokes into a cough, sputters, then resumes, louder than before. The baby is cold, I can tell; I'm cold myself, there in the ghost town. By the time I reach down to pick up the baby, the wind tearing through my little chest, I'm seeking its warmth as much as offering my own.

If I pick up the baby it turns into The Happy Man. Instantly. Every time.

I've already said what happens when The Happy Man appears.

Needless to say, then, I avoid the ghost town. I steer a wide berth around it. I often avoid the west altogether. As much as I want to go back to my life, I can't bring myself to pick up the baby, knowing that I'm bringing on Colonel Eagery. I'm not capable of it. And I'm not comfortable walking through that town, feeling the rising wind and listening to the baby's cries, and not doing anything. Hell seems so contingent on my actions; maybe if I don't go in that direction there isn't a baby in the first place. I'd like to think so.

Anyway, it had been months since I'd walked through the ghost town. But I walked through it that night, in my dreams. I don't know why.

14.

I woke up still dressed and clutching the bottle, on the living room couch. What woke me was the noise in the kitchen. Maureen making breakfast for Peter.

Head low, I slunk past the kitchen doorway and into the bedroom.

By the time I woke again Peter was off to school, and Maureen was out too, at work. I put myself through the shower, then called the station and said I wasn't coming in. They took it all right.

When I went back out I found Uncle Frank making coffee, enough for two. I accepted a cup and grunted my thanks.

"Can you handle some eggs?" he asked. "There's an omelet I've been meaning to try. You can be my guinea pig . . ."

I cleared my throat. "Uh, sure," I said.

He went into action while I let the coffee work on my mood. I was impressed, actually. Frank seemed to have diverted some of his eccentric passion into cookery. He knew how to use all the wedding-present stuff

that Maureen and I had let gather dust. The smells charmed me halfway out of my funk.

"Here we go." He juggled it out of the pan and onto a plate, sprinkled some green stuff on top and put it in front of me. I waited for him to cut it in half, and when he didn't I said: "What about you?"

"Oh," he said. "I ate before. Please."

I put the whole thing away without any trouble. Frank sipped his coffee and watched while I ate. "I used to cook for you when you were a little boy," he said. "Course then it was eggs in bacon grease, smeared with catsup."

My throat suddenly tightened in a choking spasm. I spurted coffee and bits of eggs across the table, almost into Frank's lap. He got up and slapped at my back, but by then it was over.

"Jeez," I said. "Some kind of hangover thing. I'm sorry . . ."

"Relax, Tom." He got me a glass of water. "Probably the memory of those old breakfasts. . . ." He laughed.

"Yeah." *Or the thought of Maureen and her new pal in the sack . . .* I didn't say it, though. I suddenly felt intense shame. Frank represented

my family, he stood in for my dad. I didn't want him to know the reason for my bender.

"Listen, Tom," he said. "What say we go down to the water today? That's not a long drive, is it?"

"Sounds great," I admitted. "I need to get out of the house."

An hour later we parked out by the marina and walked down to the strip of beach. I expected Uncle Frank to tire quickly; instead I had to

hurry to keep up. I felt like I was seeing him slowly come back to life,

first in the kitchen, concocting the omelet, and now out here on the beach. He seemed to sense the deadness and emptiness in me and tried valiantly to carry on both ends of a chatty conversation. I heard glimpses of the old raconteur in his voice, which only made me wonder more what had sent it into hiding in the first place.

"Frank," I said, when he came to the end of a story, "what happened? What's got you on the run?"

He took a deep breath and looked out over the water. "I was hoping that wouldn't come up, Tom. I don't want to get you or Maureen into it . . ."

"I'll decide what I want to get into," I said. "Besides, it doesn't necessarily protect us to keep us in the dark."

He turned and looked me in the eye. "That's a point. It's-it's the mob, Tom. Only it's not so simple anymore, to just say mob. There's a blurry territory where it crosses over into some federal agency . . . anyway, it's enough to say that I got crossed up with some real bad guys. I screwed 'em on some property." He was looking out to sea again, and I couldn't read his expression.

"I'm not sure how much they really care, or how long before they get distracted by something else. Could be they just wanted to throw a scare at me. I just know it felt like time to get out of town for a while."

"God, Frank. I'm sorry. That sounds tough."

"Ah, it's all my own goddamn fault. Anyway, I won't stay much longer at your place. I would have gone already if you weren't-you know, away. And Pete seemed-I don't know. I felt like I could be of some use. It took my mind off my own problems."

"Stay as long as you like, Frank."

He smiled grimly. "I'm not necessarily in the right, you know . . ."

"Don't bother," I said. "When you go through some of the shit I've gone through it gives you a different perspective. Right isn't always a relevant concept. You're family."

He turned and looked at me, then. Hard. Suddenly he wasn't just my cliched notion of "Uncle Frank" anymore; he was a complex, intelligent, and not always easy to comprehend man whom I'd known since before I could remember. Maybe it was just my emotional state, but for a moment I was terrified.

"Thanks, Tom."

"Uh, don't mention it."

We looked out over the water for a while then, without saying anything.

"I'm hip to Maureen," said Frank after a while.

I probably tightened my fists in my pockets, but that was it.

"There isn't really anything to say," he went on. "Just that you've got my sympathy."

"Don't hold it against her," I said. "I make it pretty tough. My-my whole set-up makes it pretty tough."

"Yeah."

"Have you met him?" I asked.

"Nope. Just a phone call I wasn't supposed to hear. Not her fault. My ears tend to prick up at the sound of the phone right now."

"Peter?"

"Jeez. I don't think so, Tom. Not that I know of. But he's a smart kid." "No kidding."

We came to a high place over the water, with a concrete platform and a rusted steel railing. I leaned on it and smelled the mist. Birds wheeled overhead. I thought about the night before, and wondered what I was going to say to Maureen the next time I saw her.

After a while I guess I choked up a little. "God damn," I said. "I didn't even get to see my kid last night."

"That's not your fault," said Frank quietly.

"I always hang out with the kid, Frank. I'm never so wrapped up in my goddamned problems that I don't have time for him. I only just got back."

Frank got a cheerleader tone in his voice again. "Let's go pick him up at school," he said. "Smart guy like him can miss half a day." "I don't know."

"C'mon. It's easy. You just show up and they turn him over. Big treat, makes him a celebrity with all his pals."

"You do this a lot?"

Frank got suddenly serious. "Uh, no," he said. He almost sounded offended, for no reason I could discern. "They'd never turn the child over to anyone but his mother or father." He turned away, the mood between us suddenly and inexplicably sour.

"Something the matter?" I said.

He closed his eyes for a minute. "Sorry, Tom. I guess I just suddenly had an image of my friends from back east showing up at the schoolyard. I'm just being paranoid . . ."

We exchanged a long look.

"Let's go," I said.

15.

It was a relief to learn what a pain in the ass it was to get a kid out of school halfway through the day.

We had to fill out a visitor's form just to go to the office, and then we had to fill out another form to get permission to yank Peter from class, and then a secretary walked us to the classroom anyway.

It turned out it was a computer class. A bunch of the kids there had played Peter's software Hell, which made me a visiting celebrity. I had to shake a bunch of little hands to get back out.

Frank was right: the visit would make Peter the most popular kid in school tomorrow.

We went out for hamburgers downtown, then we went back home. If Peter was disturbed by my drunken sprawl on the couch that morning he did a good job of covering it up. He and Frank were full of computer talk, and I could see how well they were getting along.

Eventually we got around to the traditional post-Hell update, Peter and I huddled at the computer, punching in whatever new information I'd picked up on my trip. This time Frank sat in.

"Robot maker built a terrier," I said. "A little livelier than the usual crap . . ." Peter typed it into the proper file. "But Eagery's thing was a robot wolfman, as tall as me-me *now*, not in Hell. He could talk. He sounded like Eagery, actually." I turned to Frank. "The Happy Man's personality has a way of pervading his robots . . ."

Peter's cross-reference check flagged the wolfman entry, and he punched up the reference. "In the south,

dad, remember? You met a wolfman, a real one, in the woods. You played Monopoly with him, then he turned into Colonel Eagery."

"Yeah, yeah. Never saw him again."

"Boy," said Frank, speaking for the first time since we'd punched up Hell. "You guys are thorough. What do you think the wolfman means?" I froze up inside.

But before I could speak Peter turned, twisted his mouth and shook his head. "Hell doesn't *mean* anything," he said. "That's not the right approach." He'd heard the spiel a dozen times from me, and I guessed he'd sensed my tenderness on the issue; he was sticking up for his dad.

Then he surprised me by taking it further. "Hell is like an alternate world, like in *X-Men*. It's a real place, like here, only different. If you were going down the street and you met a wolfman you wouldn't ask what it *means*. You'd run, or whatever."

Frank, who hadn't noticed my discomfort, winked at me and said: "Okay, Pete. I stand corrected." Peter and I went back to our entry, more or less ignoring Frank. A few minutes later Maureen's car pulled up in the driveway. I tried not to let my sudden anxiety show, for the kid's sake.

"Tom."

She stood in Peter's doorway, still in her coat. When I looked up she didn't say anything more, just inclined her head in the direction of the bedroom. I gave Frank the seat beside Peter at the computer, and followed her.

"Look at you," she said when we were out of earshot.

"What?"

"When you're not drunk you're retreating into the computer. It's just as bad, you know. Computer Hell. You've found a way to be there all the time, one way or another. You don't live here anymore."

"Maureen-"

"What's worse is the way you're taking him *with* you. Making him live in your Hell, too. Making him think it's something great. When you're not here he and his friends spend all day in front of that thing, living your Hell for you. Does it make you feel less lonely? Is that it?"

"I live here." I knew I had to keep my voice quiet and steady and fierce or she'd talk right over me, and soon we'd be shouting. I didn't want it to escalate. "Last thing I knew I lived here with *you*. Maybe that's not the way it is anymore. But I live here. Seems to me it's you who's got one foot out the door."

There was a moment of silence and then it hit me. Call me stupid, but it was the first time I felt the impact. *Last night, making love, had been goodbye*. The gulf between us now was enormous. Things weren't going to suddenly get better.

It would take a huge amount of very hard, very painful work to fix it, if it could be fixed at all.

"Do you ever think of the effect it has on *him*?" She was sticking to safe territory. I didn't blame her. She had a lot of it. "You and your goddamned *inner landscape*-"

She broke off, sobbing. It was as though she'd been saving those words, and their release had opened the floodgates. It also occurred to me that she was opting for tears so I wouldn't attack her, and I felt a little cheated.

Anyway, I took her in my arms. I'm not completely stupid.

"I don't want him to live like that," she said. Her fists balled against my chest for a moment, then her body went slack, and I had to hold her up while she cried. After a minute we sat on the edge of the bed.

"I don't know, Tom. I don't know what's happening."

"Well, neither do I." I felt suddenly exhausted and hollow. "I mean, it seems like the ball's in your court-" I could feel her tensing up against my shoulder. So I dropped it.

I smelled onions frying in butter. I listened: Frank was cooking again, and explaining the recipe to Peter.

"It's not an inner landscape," I said quietly. "It's a place where I live half my life. I get to share that with my son-"

She pulled away from me and stood up, straightened her clothes. Then she went into the living room, without looking back.

16.

I lay back on the bed, only meaning to buy some time. But I must have been depleted, morally and otherwise, and I fell asleep, and slept through dinner.

When I woke again the house was dark. Peter was in his room; I could see the glow of the night light in the hallway. Maureen was slipping into bed beside me.

When I reached for her she pushed me away.

I didn't make it into a big deal. I didn't feel particularly angry, not at the time. In a few minutes we were both asleep again.

17.

When I woke again it was to the sun streaming in across the bed, heating me to a sweat under the covers. It was Saturday; no work for me or Maureen, no school for Peter. But Maureen was gone. I didn't feel too good, and I lay there for a while just looking at the insides of my eyelids. There wasn't any noise in the house, and I suspected they'd all gone out somewhere to get out from under the shadow of you-know-who.

I didn't let it bug me: I took a nice slow shower and went into the kitchen and made some coffee and toast.

But I was wrong. Peter was home. He wandered into the kitchen while I was cleaning up, and said: "Hey, Dad."

This time I could see he knew something was wrong. I didn't have what it took to keep it from him, and I guess he didn't have what it took to keep it from me, either.

"Hey, Pete," I said. "Where's your mom?"

"They went out shopping," he said. "Also to look at some place for Uncle Frank to live."

I nodded. "What you doing?"

"I don't know. Just some game stuff I got from Jeremy."

"It looks like a pretty nice day out there-"

"I know, I know. I heard it already, from Mom." He looked down at his feet.

There was a minute or two of silence while I finished clearing the table.

"I guess I should offer to 'throw the old pigskin around' or something," I said. "But the truth is I don't feel up to it right now . . ."

The truth was my guts were churning. I couldn't focus on the kid. Seeing him left alone just made me think of Maureen and where she probably was right now. Frank was almost certainly playing the beard for her, and "shopping" by himself. If they came home with packages she'd have to unpack them to know what was in them.

"That's okay," he said seriously. "I don't think we have an old pigskin anyway."

I managed a smile.

"I'll be in my room, okay Dad?" "Okay, Peter."

Pretty soon I heard him tapping at his computer again. I sat and nursed the cold coffee and ran my thoughts through some pretty repetitive and unproductive loops. And then it hit me.

Just a twinge at first. But unmistakable.

I was on my way back to Hell.

I realized I'd felt inklings earlier that morning, in the shower, even in bed, and hadn't let myself notice. It was already pretty far along. I was probably an hour or so away from crossing over.

By this time I'd perfected a kind of emotional shorthand. I went through all the traditional stages in the space of a few seconds: denial, bargaining, fear, etc. But underlying them all, this time, was a dull, black rage.

I'd almost never had so short a time back. That hurt. The fact that I was crossing over while Maureen

was holed up in her midday love nest hurt more. Unless she came back in the next hour I wouldn't get in another word. I couldn't make up, couldn't plead, and I couldn't threaten, either, or issue an ultimatum.

All the words I'd been rehearsing in my

head flew right out the window. She would come home to find me a zombie again.

I felt my claim on her, and my claim on my own life—Peter, the apartment, everything—slipping away. I had a sudden, desperate need

to at least see Peter. I would cram two weeks worth of unfinished business into the next hour. I got up and went into his room, my head whirling.

He turned from the computer when I appeared in his doorway. "Hey, Dad," he said. "Look at this. I had an idea about Hell."

I went and sat down beside him. I was afraid to open my mouth, afraid

of what would or wouldn't come out. I wanted to put on a big show of fatherly affection but I couldn't think of a damned thing to say.

Peter pretended not to notice. "Look." He'd punched up our entry for

the starting point: the breakfast table, the horse, and the witch's house. "You get up from the table," he said. "You go off through the hedge in

some direction, east, west, north, south. But there's a direction you never go in. It's so obvious; I can't believe we never thought of it."

It wasn't obvious to me, and I felt irritation. "Where? What direction?"

"*The witch's house*. You want breakfast, right? Why not just go in and get some? Why not find out what she's doing in there?"

The idea terrified me instantly. Me, a little boy, barging into the house of that beautiful, unapproachable woman . . . but Peter didn't know about the emotional content of Hell. I'd kept that from him. "It's an idea," conceded. "Uh, yeah. It's an idea."

"It could be the key to the whole thing, Dad. Who knows. You've got to find out."

"The purloined letter," I said, talking more to myself than to Peter. "What?"

"The purloined letter," I said. "It's from a famous story. The idea of something so obvious, just sitting right out there in plain sight, but nobody notices . . ." I was drifting off into talking to myself again. I couldn't stay focused on Peter. I was thinking about Maureen and her friend, and my thoughts were very, very murky.

"Will you try?" said Peter. "Will you check it out?"

"I might," I snapped, suddenly angry. It was as though he knew I was about to go back. As though he knew and didn't care, almost as though he were taunting me. But of course he didn't know. I hadn't said anything.

He pretended he hadn't heard the tension in my voice, and went on, bright-eyed. "It could be nothing, really. Just another stupid dead end. Or the door is locked or something . . ."

"No, no," I said, wanting to reassure him now. "It's a good idea, Pete. An inspiration . . ."

We drifted off into a mutually embarrassed silence.

"Is Uncle Frank a lot like my grandfather?" asked Peter suddenly. "Well, no. Not really. Why?"

"I dunno. He just seems so different from you. It's hard for me to see how you might be related. I can't imagine what your dad was like." "Different how?"

"Oh, you know, Dad. You're so serious. Uncle Frank seems like he's almost younger than you."

"Younger?"

"He's just sillier, that's all. He says weird things. I can't really explain, but it's like he's some kind of cartoon character, or somebody you'd tell me about in a story. He reminds me of somebody from Hell, like the robot maker, or—"

That's where Peter stopped, because I hit him.

Hit him hard. Knocked him out of his chair and onto the floor.

My anger had been spiraling while he spoke. I thought about Frank out covering Maureen's ass, the two of them leaving the kid alone so she could squeeze in a quick lay, and that got me thinking about all the

manipulative, unpleasant things Frank had done over the years. And now the kid was falling for it, falling for the image of the wacky, irresponsible, cartoon-character uncle who picked you up at school in the middle of the day, who seemed so much more charismatic than boring old Dad.

I remembered falling for it myself, and I wondered if my father ever felt anything like the jealousy I felt now.

Peter sat on the floor, whimpering. I held my hand up to my face and looked at it, astonished.

Then I walked out of the room. I couldn't face him. I couldn't think of what to say.

Besides, I was going to Hell.

I was glad. It was where I belonged.

18.

I sat at the table for a long time, watching the horse quiver and twitch as the flies crawled over his lips, watching the other children giggle and whisper and play with their silverware, listening to the sound of insects in the woods beyond the hedge, smelling the smoke that trailed out of the witch's chimney, quietly seething. I don't think I ever hated my Hell as badly as I did now. Now that my other life, my real life, had become a Hell, too.

Eventually I got out of my seat. But I couldn't bring myself to run for the hedge to the north, or in any direction for that matter. I stood on the grass beside my chair, paralyzed by Peter's suggestion.

After a minute or so I took a first, tentative step across the grass, toward the witch's hut. It seemed like a mile to the cobblestone steps at the door. I tried the handle; it turned easily. The room was dark. I stepped inside.

The Happy Man was turned away from me, facing the table, his pants down around his ankles, his pale, hairy buttocks squeezed together. Splayed out on the table, her bare legs in the air, was the witch. The Happy Man had one hand over her mouth, the other on her breasts.

"Oh, shit," he said, when he heard me come in. He stopped thrusting and hurriedly pulled up his pants.

"What are you doing in here?" He turned away, left the witch scrambling to cover herself on the table.

Despite my astonishment at finding Eagery in the hut, I managed to ogle her for a moment. She was beautiful.

"Breakfast," I got out. "I wanted breakfast."

"Oh, yeah?" The Happy Man didn't sound playful. He was advancing on me fast. I tried to turn and leave but he grabbed me and pinned me against the wall. "Breakfast is served," he said. He lifted me by my belt and took me to the stove. I could feel its heat as I dangled there. He opened the door with his free hand. Inside there was a pie baking; it smelled wonderful. The breakfast we'd always hoped for. Eagery dropped me onto the open door.

My hands and knees immediately burned. I heard myself pleading,, but The Happy Man didn't pay any attention; he began pushing the door closed, wedging me into the hot oven with the pie, battering at my dangling arms and legs until I pulled them in, then slamming the door closed and leaning on it with his full weight.

I fell into the pie, and burning sugar stuck to my back. I think I screamed. Eagery kicked at the oven, jolting it off the floor, until I was silent. Eventually I died.

Died back into my own life, of course. Peter was right. He'd discovered a shortcut. Lucky me.

19.

I came back in the house this time, sitting alone in the living room, watching television. That's how I spend a lot of my zombie hours, according to Maureen. It was midday, and I suspected I hadn't been away long at all. I checked my watch. Sure enough, less than twenty-four hours had passed. It was the second day of the weekend; my shortest stay in

Hell ever, by several days.

I turned off the television and went into the kitchen to make myself some coffee. The house was empty. The day was pretty bright, and I suspected they'd gone out for a picnic or something up at the park. I had a few hours alone with my thoughts.

Still, it wasn't until I heard their car in the driveway that I had my big idea.

I had the tube on again. That was part of it. It had something to do with not wanting to face them, too. Not knowing what to say to Maureen, or Peter. When I heard the car pull up I felt my tongue go numb in my mouth.

By the time Maureen got her key in the door it was a fully hatched plan. I stared at the television as they came in, keeping my breath steady, trying not to meet their eyes. There was a moment of silence as Maureen checked me out and determined that I was still away, in Hell. Then the conversation picked up again, like I wasn't even there.

"-what's he watching?"

"That horrible cop thing. Peter, for god's sake, turn it down. I don't want to listen to that. Or change the channel-," To Frank: "He won't notice. If he doesn't like it he'll just get up and go away. But he never

does. I've seen him sit through hours and hours of Peter's horror things . . ."

I would have enjoyed proving her wrong, but I didn't want to risk anything that would blow my cover. So I sat there while Peter flipped the dial, settling eventually on the news.

The lead story was a minor quake in L.A., and like all good Californians they took the bait, crowded around me on the couch for a look at the damage: a couple of tilted cars on a patch of split pavement, a grandmother face down on her lawn, pet dog sniffing at her displaced wig. Maureen and Frank sat to my left, and Peter pushed up close to me at my right. It was our first physical contact in a long time-unless you counted the punch.

But Peter didn't sit still for very long. He squirmed in his seat until Maureen noticed.

"Mom?" he said. When he leaned forward I saw the big purple bruise I'd left on the side of his face.

"What?"

He held his nose and made a face. "I think Dad needs a shower."

20.

The quality of their disregard was terrifying. I wasn't, as I'd flattered myself by imagining, a monster in their midst, a constant reminder of a better life that had eluded them. They weren't somber or mournful at all. They coped. I was a combination of a big, stupid pet and an awkward, unplugged appliance too big for the closet. I was in the way. It was too soon for them to begin hoping-or dreading-that I'd come back, and in the meantime I was a hungry, smelly nuisance.

When Maureen leaned in close and suggested I go clean myself up I knew to agree politely and follow the suggestion. I welcomed the chance to get away from them and reconnoiter, anyway.

When I emerged from my shower they were already at the table eating. I suppose I shouldn't have expected an invitation. They'd set a place for me, and I went and sat in it, and ate, quietly, and listened while they talked.

The subject of Peter's "injury" came up only once, and then just barely. I gathered that Frank and Maureen had decided to suppress any discussion, to play it down, and hope that Peter was still young enough that he would just plain forget. Find some childlike inner resource for blurring experience into fantasy.

Maybe they would confront me later, when I came back, with Peter out at a friend's house. But the subject was obviously taboo right now.

The discussion mostly centered on Frank's plans. The apartment he was looking at, and some second thoughts he seemed to be having about settling in this area. I sensed an undercurrent, between him and Maureen, of what wasn't being discussed: Frank's trouble. The phone calls he was avoiding. Yet more stuff for Peter not to hear. I wondered, though, knowing Peter's smarts, how much he was picking up anyway.

I was dying for a drink. I tried not to let it show on my face.

After the meal Frank pleaded exhaustion, and went into the guest-room, and Maureen read a book on the bed. I set up in front of the television and tried not to think about what I was doing or why I was doing it. I walked though the apartment a couple of times on my way to the bathroom, and when I passed Peter's door he looked up from his computer, and I had to struggle not to meet his eye. He would have admired my ruse, and I would have liked to let him in on it, but that wasn't possible. So I stalked past his room like a zombie, and he turned back to his homework. I spent most of the evening on the couch, slogging through prime time. After Maureen tucked Peter into bed I followed her into the bedroom.

She made the phone call about five minutes after she turned off the lights. "Philip?" she whispered.

A pause.

"Can you talk? I couldn't sleep." Pause. "No, he's right here in bed with me. Of course he can't hear. I mean it doesn't matter, even if he can. No. No. It's not that." She sighed. "I just miss you."

I guess he talked a bit.

"You do?" she said, her voice half-melted. I hadn't heard her that way in a while. "Philip. Yes, I know.

But it's not that easy. You know. Yes. I wish I could." They went on like that. Her voice was quiet enough that Peter and Frank wouldn't hear, but in the darkened bedroom it was like a stage play. I could almost make out her boyfriend's tinny replies over the phone.

Then she giggled and said: "I'm touching myself too."

Thank god it was dark. My face must have been crimson. I felt the room whirling like a centrifuge, the bed at the center, and my body felt like it was made of lead. I weighed a thousand or a million pounds and I was crushed into my place there on the bed beside Maureen by the pressure of gravity. I couldn't move. I felt my blood pounding in my wrists and temples.

Why was I there? What was I trying to prove?

I knew, dimly, that I'd had some reason for the deception, that some part of me had insisted that there was something I could learn, something vital.

It couldn't have been this, though. I didn't need this.

So what was I after? What

I sat bolt upright in the bed, dislodging the covers.

"Huh?" said Maureen. "Nothing, nothing. Listen, I have to go, I'll call you back." She hung up and turned on the light. I turned and looked at her in shock. She opened her mouth to scream, and somehow I got my hand over her mouth first. I wrestled her down against the bed, pushed her face into the pillow, twisted her arm behind her back, put my weight on her.

I could hear her yelling my name into the pillow, wetly. Her ears were bright red.

I tightened my grip on her arm. "Shhh," I said, closer to her ear. "No noise. No noise." I listened at the hall, alert now, panicked. I had to convince her. "No noise."

"You're dead," she hissed when I let her up for air. "All I have to do is report you. You're dead." Her eyes were slits.

"Shhh." I let her go, forgot her. Focused on the hall.

There wasn't any light. Peter's night light was out, or his door was closed. Impossible. Peter wouldn't permit it.

Someone was in the house. Frank's pals.

I slid into my pants, silently. I was operating with my Hell-reflexes now, and they were good. There wasn't going to be any hostage. I would make sure of that. I would have complete surprise.

I turned back to Maureen. "Call your pal," I whispered. "Keep it quiet. Have him bring in the cops, but

quiet, and slow." She looked at me, stunned out of her outrage. "I'm serious. Call him. And stay in here. Whatever happens."

I didn't leave her time for questions. In my pants and bare feet I crept out into the hall and made my way to Peter's door.

Inside I heard him whimpering quietly, as if through a gag. I burst in.

Peter was spread-eagled on his bed, bound with neckties. His pajamas were in shreds around his ankles. Frank, who wasn't wearing anything at all, was kneeling on the side of the bed, as if praying over Peter's helpless body. One hand was resting lightly on Peter's stomach. In the other hand he held his own penis. His pubic hair was white. He looked up at me, and his eyes widened for a moment, then fell. And then he grinned. His hands stayed where they were.

I picked up Peter's keyboard and smashed it against Frank's white skull. He straightened up and stopped grinning, and reached back to feel his head.

"Tommy," he said, his voice soft, almost beguiling.

I drew the keyboard back like a baseball bat and hit him again. This time I drew blood. I didn't stop hitting him until he fell back against the floor, his mouth open, his eyes full of tears, his erection wilting.

Peter watched the whole thing from the bed, his mouth gagged, his eyes wide. When I dropped the keyboard and looked up he met my eyes, for a minute. Then I looked away. I found his floppy discs for Hell, the main disc and the backup, and I tore them in half and tossed them onto the floor, beside Frank. Peter didn't get untied until the police showed up. Maureen was hiding in her room and I, try as I might, just couldn't bring myself to *touch* him.

6.

I live alone now. The settlement went like this: I see Peter every other weekend-if I happen to be back from Hell, that is-and only in the company of his mother. And I don't go anywhere near the house. Yes, Uncle Frank was Colonel Eagery, aka The Happy Man. He'd molested me as a boy, right in our house, while my father was away, and with my mother in the kitchen making breakfast. I remember it all now.

And yes, I killed him.

Needless to say, there wasn't any mob on his trail. The call he'd been dreading was the Baltimore police. He was on the run from a molestation offense.

Like I said, I live alone. It's a pretty nice place, and a lot closer to the station. There's a pretty nice bar around the corner. Different crowd every night.

Yes, I still go to Hell, but it's different now. There isn't any horse, or witch, or Happy Man. There isn't even a forest.

When I go to Hell now it's like this:

I'm back in the house with Maureen and Peter. I live with them again. But I'm unable to speak, or reach out to them: I'm a zombie. I start by sitting in front of the television, flipping channels, and then eventually I wander around the house, brushing past Maureen, but never able to speak to her, never able to take her hand or hold her or lead her into the bedroom. After a while I go and stand in the doorway of Peter's room. He turns and looks up at me, but I look away, afraid to meet his eye. I pretend to look the other way, and he goes back to his computer.

And that's it. I spend the rest of the time standing in his doorway, looking over his shoulder at the computer screen.

Watching him play my Hell.

-for Stanley Ellin