

## Hallucigenia by Laird Barron

*One of our most highly praised stories from 2005 was Laird Barron's hypnotizing and horrifying "The Imago Sequence" (from the May issue). Mr. Barron's follow-up is another ambitious, gravid tale of life's darkest sides. Be warned that this tale is not cheerful or upbeat, but we think it's another remarkable story from one of the most talented new writers around.*

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*And I remembered the cry of the peacocks.*

--Wallace Stevens

### 1.

The Bentley nosed into the weeds along the shoulder of the road and died. No fuss, no rising steam, nothing. Just the tick, tick, tick of cooling metal, the abrupt silence of the car's occupants. Outside was the shimmering country road, a desolate field, and a universe of humidity and suffocating heat.

Delaney was at the wheel, playing chauffeur for the Boss and the Boss's wife, Helen. He said to Helen, "She does this when it's hot. Vapor lock, probably." He yanked the lever, got out, and lighted a cigarette. His greased crewcut, distorted by the curve of the windshield, ducked beneath the hood.

Helen twisted, smiled at Wallace. "Let's walk around." She wagged her camera and did the eyebrow thing.

"Who are you, Newt Helmut?" Wallace was frying in the backseat, sweating like a bull, khakis welded to his hocks, thinking maybe he had married an alien. His big, lumpen nose was peeling. He was cranky.

Fresh from Arizona, Helen loved the bloody heat; loved tramping in briars and blackberry tangles where there were no lurking scorpions or snakes. She was a dynamo. Meanwhile, Wallace suffered the inevitable lobster sunburns of his Irish heritage. Bugs were furiously attracted to him. Strange plants gave him rashes. He wondered how fate could be so sadistic to arrange such a pairing.

Maybe Dad had been right. When he received the news of the impending nuptials, Wallace's father had worn an expression of a man who has been stabbed in the back and was mostly pained by the fact his own son's hand gripped the dagger. Paxton women were off limits! The families, though distanced by geography, were intertwined, dating back to when Dalton Smith and George Paxton served as officers during WWII. Dalton quailed at the very notion of his maverick sons mucking about with George's beloved granddaughter and obliterating a familial alliance decades in the forging. Well, maybe brother Payton could bag one, Payton was at least respectable, although that was hardly indemnity against foolishness--after all, *his* French actress was a neurotic mess. But Wallace? Out of the question entirely. Wallace Smith, eldest scion of the former senior senator of Washington State, was modestly wealthy from birth by virtue of a trust fund and no mean allowance from his father. Wallace, while having no particular interest in amassing a fortune, had always rankled at the notion he was anything less than a self-made man and proved utterly ingenious in the wide world of high finance and speculation. He dabbled in an assortment of ventures, but made his killing in real estate development. Most of his investments occurred offshore in poor, Asian countries like Vietnam and Thailand and Korea where dirt was cheap but not as cheap as the lives of peasant tenants who were inevitably dispossessed by their own hungry governments to make way for American-controlled shoe factories, four-star hotels and high-class casinos.

The trouble was, Wallace had been too successful too soon; he had lived the early life of any ten normal men. He had done the great white hunter bit in the heart of darkest Africa; had floated the Yellow River and hiked across the Gobi desert; climbed glaciers in Alaska and went skin diving in Polynesia. The whole time he just kept getting richer and the feats and stunts and adventures went cold for him, bit by bit, each mountain conquered. Eventually he pulled in his horns and became alarmingly sedentary and

complacent. In a manner of speaking, he became fat and content. Oh, the handsome, charismatic man of action was there, the high stakes gambler, the financial lion, the exotic lover--they were simply buried under forty extra pounds of suet following a decade of rich food and boredom. It was that professional ennui that provoked a midlife crisis and led him into the reckless pursuits of avocations best reserved for youngsters. Surfing and sweat lodges. Avant-garde poetry and experimental art. Psychedelic drugs, and plenty of them. He went so far as to have his dick pierced while under the influence. Most reckless of all, love. Specifically love for a college girl with world-beater ambitions. A college girl who could have been a daughter in another life.

Wallace returned Helen's smile in an act of will. "Why not? But I'm not doing anything kinky, no matter how much you pay me."

"Shucks," Helen said and bounced. Dressed in faded blue overalls, she resembled a slightly oversized Christmas elf.

Wallace grunted and followed. Hot as a kiln. It slapped him across florid jowls, doubled his vision momentarily. He absently unglued his tropical shirt from his paunch and took a survey. On the passenger side, below the gravel slope and rail, spread the field: A dead farm overrun with brittle grass and mustard-yellow clusters of dandelions on tall stalks. Centered in the morass, a solitary barn, reduced to postcard dimensions, half-collapsed. Farther on, more forest and hills.

He had lived around these parts, just west of Olympia, for ages. The field and its decaying barn were foreign. This was a spur, a scenic detour through a valley of failed farmland. He did not come this way often, had not ever really looked. It had been Helen's idea. She was eager to travel every back road, see what was over every new hill. They were not in a hurry--cocktails with the Langans at The Mud Shack were not for another hour and it was nothing formal. No business; Helen forbade it on this, their pseudo-honeymoon. The real deal would come in August, hopefully. Wallace's wrangling with certain offshore accounts and recalcitrant foreign officials had delayed the works long enough, which was why he did not argue, did not press his luck. They could do a loop on the Alcan if it made her happy.

*Caw-ca-caw!* A crow drifted toward the pucker brush. Wallace tracked it with his index finger and cocked thumb.

"You think somebody owns that?" Helen swept the field with a gesture. She uncapped the camera. Beneath denim straps her muscular shoulders shone slick as walnut.

"Yeah." Wallace was pretty sure what was coming. He glanced at his Gucci loafers with a trace of sadness. He called to Delaney. "What d'ya got, Dee?" Stalling.

Delaney muttered something about crabs. Then, "It ain't a vapor lock. Grab my tools. They're by the spare."

Wallace sprang the trunk, found the oily rag with the wrenches. He went around front, where a scowling Delaney sucked on another cigarette. The short, dusky man accepted the tools without comment. Greasy fingerprints marred his trousers. His lucky disco pants, tragically.

"Want me to call a wrecker?" Wallace tapped the cell phone at his hip. He made a note to send Delaney's pants to Mr. Woo, owner of the best dry cleaners this side of Tacoma. Mr. Woo was a magician with solvents.

Delaney considered, dismissed the idea with a shrug. "Screw it. I've got some electric tape, I'll fix it. If not, we'll get Triple-A out here in a bit."

"What can I do?"

"Stand there looking sexy, Boss. Or corral your woman before she wanders off into the woods."

Wallace noticed that his darling wife waded waist-deep in the grass, halfway across the clearing, her braids flopping merrily. He sighed, rolled his shoulders, and started trudging. Yelling at this distance was undignified. Lord, keeping track of her was worse than raising a puppy.

The crumbling grade almost tripped him. At the bottom, remnants of a fence--rotted posts, snares of wire. Barbs dug a red zigzag in his calf. He cursed, lumbered into the grass. It rose, coarse and brown, slapped his legs and buttocks. A dry breeze awoke and the yellow dandelion blooms swayed toward him.

Wallace's breath came too hard too quickly. Every step crackled. Bad place to drop a match. He remembered staring, mesmerized, at a California brushfire in the news. No way on God's green Earth--or in His dead grass sea--a walrus in loafers would outrace such a blaze. "Helen!" The shout emerged as a wheeze.

The barn loomed, blanked a span of the sky. Gray planks, roof gone to seed wherever it hadn't crumpled. Jagged windows. In its long shadow lay the tottered frame of a truck, mostly disintegrated and entangled in brambles. Wallace shaded his eyes, looking for the ruins of the house that must be nearby, spotted a foundation several yards away where the weeds thinned. Nothing left but shattered concrete and charred bits of timber.

No sign of Helen.

Wallace wiped his face, hoped she had not fallen into a hole. He opened his mouth to call again and stopped. Something gleamed near his feet, small and white. Squirrel bones caught in a bush. A mild surprise that the skeleton was intact. From his hunting experience, he knew scavengers reliably scattered such remains.

Wallace stood still then. Became aware of the silence, the pulse in his temple. Thirst gnawed him. He suddenly, completely, craved a drink. Whiskey.

And now it struck him, the absence of insects. He strained to detect the hum of bees among the flowers, the drone of flies among the droppings. Zero. The old world had receded, deposited him into a sterile microcosm of itself, a Chinese puzzle box. Over Wallace's shoulder, Delaney and the car glinted, miniature images on a miniature screen. A few dusty clouds dragged shadows across the field. The field flickered, flickered.

"Hey, Old Man River, you having a heart attack, or what?" Helen materialized in the vicinity of the defunct truck. The silver camera was welded to her right eye. Click, click.

"Don't make me sorry I bought that little toy of yours." Wallace shielded his eyes to catch her expression. "Unless maybe you're planning to ditch poetry and shoot a spread for *National Geographic*."

Helen snapped another picture. "Why, yes. I'm photographing the albino boor in its native habitat." She smiled coyly.

"Yah, okay. We came, we saw, we got rubbed by poison ivy. Time to move along before we bake our brains."

"I didn't see any ivy."

"Like you'd recognize it if it bit you on the ass, lady."

"Oh, I would, I would. I wanna take some pictures of that." Helen thrust the camera at the barn. Here was her indefatigable fascination--the girl collected relics and fragments, then let the images of sinister Americana stew in her brain until inspiration gave birth to something essay-worthy. The formula worked, without question. She was on her way to the top, according to the buzz. *Harper's*; *Poetry*; *The New Yorker*, and *Granta*--she was a force to be reckoned with and it was early in the game.

"There it is, fire when ready."

"I want to go inside for a quick peek."

"Ah, shit on that." Wallace's nose itched. The folds of his neck hung loose and raw. A migraine laid bricks in the base of his skull. "It isn't safe. I bet there's some big honking spiders, too. Black widows." He hissed feebly and made pinching motions.

"Well, yeah. That's why I want you to come with me, sweetness. Protect me from the giant, honking spiders."

"What's in it for me?"

She batted her lashes.

"A quick peek, you say."

"Two shakes of a lamb's tail," she said.

"Oh, in that case." Wallace approached the barn. "Interesting."

"What." Helen sounded preoccupied. She fiddled with the camera, frowning. "This thing is going hinky on me--I hope my batteries aren't dying."

"Huh. There's the driveway, and it's been used recently." The track was overgrown. It curved across the field like a hidden scar and joined the main road yonder. Boot prints sank into softer ground near the barn, tire treads and faint marks, as if something flat had swept the area incompletely. The boot prints were impressive--Wallace wore a thirteen wide, and his shoe resembled a child's alongside one.

"Kids. Bet this is a groovy spot to party," Helen said. "My senior year in high school, we used to cruise out to the gravel pits after dark and have bonfire parties. Mmm-mm, Black Label and Coors Light. I can still taste the vomit!"

Wallace did not see any cans, or bottles, or cigarette butts. "Yeah, guess so," he said. "Saw a squirrel skeleton. Damned thing was in one piece, too."

"Really. There're bird bones all over the place, just hanging in the bushes."

"Whole birds?"

"Yup. I shot pictures of a couple. Kinda weird, huh?"

Wallace hesitated at the entrance of the barn, peering through a wedge between the slat doors. The wood smelled of ancient tar, its warps steeped in decades of smoke and brutal sunlight, marinated in manure and urine. Another odor lurked beneath this--ripe and sharp. The interior was a blue-black aquarium. Dust revolved in sluggish shafts.

Helen nudged him and they crossed over.

The structure was immense. Beams ribbed the roof like a cathedral. Squared posts provided additional support. The dirt floor was packed tight as asphalt and littered with withered straw and boards. Obscured by gloom, a partition divided the vault; beyond that the murky impression of a hayloft.

"My god, this is amazing." Helen turned a circle, drinking in the ambience, her face butter-soft.

Along the near wall were ranks of shelves and cabinets. Fouled implements cluttered the pegboard and hooks--pitchforks, shovels, double-headed axes, mattocks, a scythe; all manner of equipment, much of it caked in the gray sediment of antiquity and unrecognizable. Wallace studied what he took to be a curiously-shaped bear trap, knew its serrated teeth could pulp a man's thighbone. Rust welded its mouth shut. He had seen traps like it in Argentina and Bengal. A diesel generator squatted in a notch between shelves, bolted to a concrete foot. Fresh grease welled in the battered case.

Was it cooler in here? Sweat dried on Wallace's face, his nipples stiffened magically. He shivered. His eyes traveled up and fixed upon letters chalked above the main doors. Thin and spiky and black, they spelled:

THEY WHO DWELL IN THE CRACKS

"Whoa," Wallace said. There was more, the writing was everywhere. Some blurred by grease and grit, some clear as:

FOOL

Or:

LUCTOR ET EMERGO

And corroded gibberish:

GODOFBLOATCHEMOSHBAALPEEORBELPHEGOR

"Honey? Yoo-hoo?" Wallace backed away from the yokel graffiti. He was sweating again. It oozed, stung his lips. His guts sloshed and prickles chased across his body. Kids partying? He thought not. Not kids.

"Wallace, come here!" Helen called from the opposite side of the partition. "You gotta check this out!"

He went, forcing his gaze from the profane and disturbing phrases. Had to watch for boards; some were studded with nails and wouldn't that take the cake, to get tetanus from this madcap adventure. "Helen, it's time to go."

"Okay, but look. I mean, Jesus." Her tone was flat.

He passed through a pool of light thrown down from a gap in the roof. Blue sky filled the hole. A sucker hole, that's what pilots called them. Sucker holes.

The stench thickened.

Three low stone pylons were erected as a triangle that marked the perimeter of a shallow depression. The pylons were rude phalluses carved with lunatic symbols. Within the hollow, a dead horse lay on its side, mired in filthy, stagnant water. The reek of feces was magnificently awful.

Helen touched his shoulder and pointed. Up.

The progenitor of all wasp nests sprawled across the ceiling like a fantastic alien city. An inverse complex

of domes and humps and dangling paper streamers. Wallace estimated the hive to be fully twelve feet in diameter. A prodigy of nature, a primordial specimen miraculously preserved in the depths of the barn. The depending strands jiggled from a swirl of air through a broken window. Some were pink as flesh; others a rich scarlet or lusterless purple-black like the bed of a crushed thumbnail.

Oddly, no wasps darted among the convolutions of the nest, nor did flies or beetles make merry among the feculent quagmire or upon the carcass of the horse. Silence ruled this roost surely as it did the field.

Wallace wished for a flashlight, because the longer he squinted the more he became convinced he was not looking at a wasp nest. This was a polyp, as if the very fabric of the wooden ceiling had nurtured a cancer, a tumor swollen on the bloody juices of unspeakable feasts. The texture was translucent in portions, and its membranous girth enfolded a mass of indistinct shapes. Knotty loops of rope, gourds, hanks of kelp.

Click, click.

Helen knelt on the rim of the hollow, aiming her camera at the horse. Her mouth was a slit in a pallid mask. Her exposed eye rolled.

Wallace pivoted slowly, too slowly, as though slogging through wet concrete. *She shouldn't be doing that. We really should be going.*

Click, click.

The horse trembled. Wallace groaned a warning. The horse kicked Helen in the face. She sat down hard, legs splayed, forehead a dented eggshell. And the horse was thrashing now, heeling over, breaching in its shallow cistern, a blackened whale, legs churning, hooves whipping. It shrieked from a dripping muzzle bound in razor wire. Wallace made an ungainly leap for his wife as she toppled sideways into the threshing chaos. A sledgehammer caught him in the hip and the barn began turning, its many gaps of light spinning like a carousel. He flung a hand out.

Blood and shit and mud, flowing. The sucker holes closed, one by one.

2.

*"You're a violent man," Helen said without emphasis. Her eyes were large and cool. "Ever hurt anyone?"*

*Wallace had barely recovered his wits from sex. Their first time, and in a hot tub no less. He was certainly a little drunk, more than a little adrenalized, flushed and heaving. They had eventually clambered onto the deck and lay as the stars whirled.*

*Helen pinched him, hard. "Don't you even think about lying to me," she hissed. "Who was it?"*

*"It's going to be you if you do that again," he growled.*

*She pinched him again, left a purple thumbprint on his bicep.*

*Wallace yelled, put her in a mock headlock, kissed her.*

*Helen said, "I'm serious. Who was it?"*

*"It's not important."*

*Helen sat up, wrapped herself in a towel. "I'm going inside."*

"What?"

"I'm going inside."

*"Harold Carter. We were dorm mates," Wallace said, finally. He was sinking into himself, then, seeing it again with the clarity of fire. "Friend of ours hosted an off-campus poker club. Harold took me once. I wasn't a gambler and it was a rough crowd aiming to trim the fat off rich college kids like ourselves. I wouldn't go back, but Harold did. He went two, three nights a week, sometimes spent the entire weekend. Lost his shirt. Deeper he got, the harder he clawed. Addiction, right? After a while, his dad's checks weren't enough. He borrowed money--from me, from his other buddies, his sister. Still not enough. One day, when he was very desperate, he stole my wallet. It was the week after Christmas vacation and I had three hundred bucks. He blew it at a strip club. Didn't even pay off his gambling marker. I remember waiting up for him when he straggled in at dawn, looking pale and beat. He had glitter on his cheeks from the dancers, for God's sake. He smiled at me with the game face, said hi, and I busted him in the mouth. He lost his uppers, needed stitches. I drove him to the hospital. Only time I ever punched anyone." Which skirted being a lie only by definition. He had flattened a porter in Kenya with the butt of a rifle and had smashed a big, dumb Briton in the face with a bottle of Jameson during a pub brawl in Dublin. They'd had it coming. The porter had tried to abscond with some money and an antique Bowie knife. The Brit was just plain crazy-mean and drunk as a bull in rut. Wallace was not going to talk about that, though.*

*They lay, watching constellations burn. Helen said, "I'll go to Washington, if I'm still invited."*

*"Yes! What changed your mind?"*

*She didn't say anything for a while. When she spoke, her tone was troubled. "You're a magnet. Arizona sucks. It just feels right."*

*"Don't sound so happy about it."*

*"It's not that. My parents hate you. Mother ordered me to dump your ass, find somebody not waiting in line for a heart bypass. Not in those words, but there it was." Helen laughed. "So let's get the hell out of here tomorrow--don't tell anybody. I'll call my folks after we settle in."*

*Wallace's chest ballooned with such joy he was afraid his eyes were going to spring leaks. "Sounds good," he said gruffly. "Sounds good."*

Wallace stood in the gaping cargo door of a Huey. The helicopter cruised above a sandy coast, perhaps the thin edge of a desert. The sea was rigid blue like a watercolor. A white car rolled on the winding road and the rotor shadow chopped it in half. He recognized the car as his own from college--he had sold it to an Iranian immigrant for seventy-five dollars, had forgotten to retrieve a bag of grass from the trunk and spent a few sweaty months praying the Iranian would not know what it was if he ever found it. Was Delaney driving? Wallace wondered why a Huey--he had never served in the military, not even the reserves or the Coast Guard. Too young by a couple of years for Vietnam, and too old for anything that came about during the bitter end of the Cold War. Then he remembered--after the horse broke his leg, he had been airlifted to Harbor View in Seattle.

Soundless, except for Mr. Woo's voice, coming from everywhere and nowhere. God had acquired a Cantonese accent, apparently.

"Mr. Wallace, you are very unlucky in love, I think," Mr. Woo said from the shining air. He was not unkind.

"Three strikes," Wallace said with a smile. He smiled constantly. No one mentioned it, but he was aware. His face ached and he could not stop. "Gracie divorced me. Right out of college, so it doesn't count. A practice run. Beth was hell on wheels. She skinned me alive for what--ten years? If I'd known what kind of chicks glom onto real estate tycoons, I would've jumped a freight train and lived the hobo life. You have no idea, my friend. I didn't really divorce her, I escaped. After Beth, I made a solemn vow to never marry again. Every few years I'd just find some mean, ugly woman and buy her a house. Helen's different. The real deal."

"Oh, Mr. Wallace? I thought you live in big house in Olympia."

"I owned several, in the old days. She took the villa in Cancun. Too warm for me anyway."

"But this one, this young girl. You killed her."

"She's not dead. The doctors say she might come 'round any day. Besides, she's faster than I am. I can't keep up."

"A young girl needs discipline, Mr. Wallace. You must watch over her like a child. She should not be permitted to wander. You are very unlucky."

The chopper melted. Mr. Woo's wrinkled hands appeared first, then a plastic bag with Wallace's suit on a hanger. A wobbly fan rattled above the counter. "Here is your ticket, Mr. Wallace. Here is some Reishi mushroom for Mrs. Wallace. Take it, please."

"Thanks, Woo." Wallace carefully accepted his clothes, carried them from the dingy, chemical-rich shop with the ginger gait of a man bearing holy artifacts. It was a ritual he clung to as the universe quaked around him. With so much shaking and quaking he wondered how the birds balanced on the wire, how leaves stayed green upon their branches.

Delaney met him at the car, took the clothes and held the door. He handed Wallace his walking stick, waited for him to settle in the passenger seat. Delaney had bought Wallace an Irish blackthorn as a welcome home present. An elegant cane, it made Wallace appear more distinguished than he deserved, Delaney said. Wallace had to agree--his flesh sagged like a cheap gorilla suit, minus the hair, and his bones were too prominent. His eyes were the color of bad liver, and his broad face was a garden of broken veins.

There were reasons. Two hip operations, a brutal physical therapy regimen. Pain was a faithful companion. Except, what was with the angry weals on his neck and shoulders? Keloid stripes, reminiscent of burns or lashes. Helen was similarly afflicted; one had festered on her scalp and taken a swath of hair. Their origin was on the tip of Wallace's tongue, but his mind was in neutral, gears stripped, belts whirring, and nothing stuck. He knocked back a quart of vodka a day, no problem, and had started smoking again. A pack here or there--who was counting? He only ate when Delaney forced the issue. Hells bells, if he drank enough martinis he could live on the olives.

Delaney drove him home. They did not talk. Their relationship had evolved far beyond the necessity of conversation. Wallace stared at the trees, the buildings. These familiar things seemed brand new each time he revisited them. The details were exquisitely rendered, but did not con him into accepting the fishbowl. Artificial: the trees, the houses, the windup people on the shaded streets. Wallace examined his hands: artificial too. The sinews, the soft tissues and skeletal framework were right there in the X-ray sunlight. He was Death waiting to dance as the guest of honor at *Da de los Muertos*.

Wallace was no longer in the car. The car melted. It did not perturb him. He was accustomed to jumpcuts, seamless transitions, waking dreams. Doctor Green said he required more sleep or the



hallucinatory episodes would intensify, destroy his ability to function. Wallace wondered if he ever slept at all. There was no way to be certain. The gaps in his short-term memory were chasms.

He was at home in the big house his fortune built, seated stiffly on the sofa Beth, ex-wife number two, had procured from Malaysia along with numerous throw rugs, vases, and some disturbing artwork depicting fertility goddesses and hapless mortals. He did not like the décor, had never gotten around to selling it at auction. Funny that Beth took half of everything and abandoned these items so punctiliously selected and obtained at prohibitive expense. Wallace's closest friend, Skip Arden, suggested that Beth always hoped things would change for the better, that she might regain favor. Skip offered to burn the collection for him.

Wallace's house was a distorted reflection of the home he had grown up in, a kind of anti-mirror. This modern house was designed by a famous German architect that Beth read of in a foreign art directory. Multi-tiered in the fashion of an antique citadel, and, as a proper citadel, it occupied a hill. There was an ivy-covered wall, a garden, and maple trees. Mt. Rainier fumed patiently in its quarter of the horizon. At night, lights twinkled in the town and inched along the highway. Wallace's personal possessions countered the overwhelming Baroque overtones--his hunting trophies, which included a den crammed with the mounted heads of wild boars, jaguars, and gazelles; and his gun collection, a formidable floor-to-ceiling chestnut-paneled cabinet that contained a brace of armament ranging from an assortment of knives and daggers native to three dozen nationalities, to an even greater array of guns--from WWII American issue Browning .45 automatics up to show-stopping big-game rifles: the Model 76 African .416 and his pride and joy, a Holland & Holland .500, which had come to him from the private collection of a certain Indian prince, and was capable of sitting a bull elephant on its ass. Littered throughout the rambling mansion was the photographic evidence of his rough and wild youth; mostly black and white and shot by compatriots long dead or succumbed to stultified existences similar to his own. The weapons and the photographs grounded his little hot air balloon of sanity, but they also led to *thinking*, and he had never been one to dwell on the past, to suffer introspection. They were damning, these fly-buzz whispers that built and built with each stroke of the minute hand, each wallowing undulation of the ice in his drink. *You always wanted to be Hemingway. Run with the bulls; fire big guns and drink the cantinas dry. Maybe you'll end up like the old man, after all. Let's look at those pistols again, hmm?* And when such thoughts grew too noisy, he took another snort of bourbon and quieted the crowd in his skull.

Outside his skull, all was peaceful. Just Wallace, Helen, Helen's aides, Cecil and Kate, Delaney, and Bruno and Thor, a pair of mastiffs that had been trained by Earl Hutchison out in Yelm. The dogs were quietly ubiquitous as they patrolled the house and the grounds. The gardener called on Friday; the housecleaner and her team every other weekend. They had keys; no one else bothered Wallace except Wallace's friends.

These friends came and went unexpectedly. Ghosts flapping in skins. Who? Skip and Randy Freeman made frequent guest appearances. Barret and Macy Langan; Manfred and Elizabeth Steiner. Wallace thought he had seen his own father, though that was unlikely. Dad divided his time between the VFW, the Masonic Temple, and the Elks Lodge, and according to reports, his participation at social gatherings was relegated to playing canasta, drinking gin, and rambling about "The Big One" as if he had jubilantly kissed a nurse in Times Square to celebrate V-Day only last week.

"She's getting worse," Skip said as he helped himself to Wallace's liquor. "You should ship her to Saint Pete's and be done with it. Or send her home to ma and pa. Whatever you've got to do to get out from under this mess." He was talking about Helen, although he could have been discussing a prize Hereford, or an expensive piece of furniture. His own wife hated him and refused to live under his roof, it was said. Skip, a reformed attorney-at-law, was older and fatter than Wallace. Skip drank more, too, but somehow appeared to be in much better shape. His craggy features were ruddy as Satan under thick,

white hair. Egregiously blunt, he got away with tons of indiscretions because he was a basso profundo who made Perry Mason sound like a Vienna choirboy. Jaws slackened when he started rumbling.

"Is she?" Wallace nodded abstractedly. "I hadn't noticed."

"Yes she is, and yes you have," said Randy Freeman, the radical biologist. Radical was accurate--he had bought *The Anarchist's Cookbook* and conducted some experiments in a gravel pit up past the Mima Mounds. Which was how he had blown off his right hand. His flesh-tone prosthesis was nice, but it was not fooling anybody. He had recently completed a study of the behavior of crows in urban environments and planned to write a book. Randy was a proponent of human cloning for spare parts.

Skip said, "Nine months. Enough is enough, for the love of Pete, you could've given birth. Pull yourself together, get back on the horse. Uh, so to speak. You should work." He gestured broadly. "Do *something* besides grow roots on your couch and gawk."

"Yeah," said Randy.

"I do things, Skip. Look, I got my dry cleaning. Here it is. I pick it up every Thursday." Wallace patted the crinkly plastic, rubbed it between his fingers.

"You're taking those pills Green prescribed."

"Sure, sure," Wallace said. Delaney sorted the pills and brought them with a glass of water at the right hour. Good thing, too. There were so many, Wallace would have been confused as to which, where, and when.

"Well, stop taking them. Now."

"Okay." It was all the same to Wallace.

"He can't stop taking them--not all at once," Randy said. "Wallace, what you gotta do is cut back. I'll talk to Delaney."

"We'll talk to Delaney about this, all right. That crap is eating your brain," Skip said. "I'll give you some more free advice. You sue those sonsofbitches that own that Black Hills property. Jerry Premus is champing at the bit to file a claim."

"Yeah ... he keeps calling me," Wallace said. "I'm not suing anybody. We shouldn't have been there."

"Go on thinking that, Sparky. Premus will keep the papers warm in case your goddamned senses return," Skip said.

Wallace said, "She *is* getting worse. I hear strange noises at night, too." It was more than strange noises, wasn't it? What about the figure he glimpsed in the garden after dusk? A hulking shadow in a robe and a tall, conical hat. The getup was similar to but infinitely worse than the ceremonial garb a Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan might wear. The costumed figure blurred in his mind and he was not certain if it existed as anything other than a hallucination, an amalgam of childhood demons, trauma, and drugs.

He looked from his reflection in the dark window and his friends were already gone, slipped away while he was gathering wool. Ice cubes collapsed in his glass. The glass tilted slackly in his hand. "Nine months. Maybe Skipperoo's got a point. Maybe I need to wheel and deal, get into the old groove. What do you think, Mr. Smith?" Wallace spoke to his glum reflection and his reflection was stonily silent.

"Mr. Smith?" Cecil's voice crackled over the intercom, eerily distorted. They had installed the system

long ago, but never used it much until after the accident. It was handy, despite the fact it almost gave Wallace a coronary whenever it started unexpectedly broadcasting. "Do you want to see Helen?"

Wallace said, "Yes; be right up," although he was sickened by the prospect. Helen's face was a mess, a terrible, terrible mess, and it was not the only thing. Whenever Wallace looked at her, if he really looked at her a bit more closely after the initial knee-jerk revulsion, the clouds in his memory began to dissolve. Wallace did not like that, did not like the funhouse parade of disjointed imagery, the shocking volume of the animal's screams, the phantom reek of putrescence. The triple pop of Delaney's nickel-plated automatic as he fired into the horse's head. Wallace preferred his thick comforter of pill- and alcohol-fueled numbness.

Dalton had asked him, *You really love this girl? She isn't like one of your chippies you can bang for a few years and buy off with a divorce settlement. This is serious, sonny boy.*

*Yeah, Dad. 'Course, I do.*

She a trophy? Better Goddamn well not be. Don't shit where you eat.

Dad, I love her.

*Good God. You must have it bad. Never heard a Smith say that before....*

Wallace pressed the button again. "Is she awake?"

"Uh, yes. I just finished feeding her."

"Oh, good." Wallace walked slowly, not acknowledging Delaney's sudden presence at his elbow. Delaney was afraid he would fall, shatter his fragile hip.

One of Wallace's private contractors had converted a guestroom into Helen's quarters. A rectangular suite with a long terrace over the garden. Hardwood floors and vaulted ceilings. They needed ample space to house her therapy equipment--the hydraulic lift and cargo net to transport her into the changing room, the prototype stander which was a device designed to prevent muscle atrophy by elevating her to a vertical plane on a rectangular board. She screamed torture when they did this every other afternoon and wouldn't quit until Cecil stuck headphones over her ears and piped in Disney music.

Helen lay in bed, propped by a rubber wedge and pillows. During the accident, her brain was deprived of sufficient oxygen for several minutes. Coupled with the initial blunt trauma, skull fractures, and bacterial contamination, the effects were devastating. Essentially, the accident had rendered Helen an adult fetus. Her right hand, curled tight as a hardwood knot, was callused from habitual gnawing. She possessed minimal control of her left hand, could gesture randomly and convulsively grasp objects. Cecil splinted it a few hours a day, as he did her twisted feet, to prevent her tendons from shortening. Her lack of a swallow reflex made tube-feeding a necessity. She choked on drool. It was often impossible to tell if she could distinguish one visitor from another, or if she could see anything at all. Cortical blindness, the doctors said. The worst part was the staph infection she contracted from her open head wound. The dent in her skull would not heal. It refused to scab and was constantly inflamed. The doctors kept changing her medication and predicting a breakthrough, but Wallace could tell they were worried. She had caught a strain resistant to antibiotics and was essentially screwed.

"Hi, Mr. Smith." Cecil carefully placed the feeding apparatus into a dish tub. He was a rugged fellow, close to Helen's age. Built like a linebacker, he was surprisingly gentle and unobtrusive. He faithfully performed his myriad duties and retreated into the adjoining chamber. It was always he or his counterpart, the RN Kate, a burly woman who said even less than Cecil. She dressed in an official

starched white pinafore over her conservative dresses with a white hat. Wallace knew when she was around because she favored quaint, polished wooden shoes that click-clocked on the bare floors. Ginger Rogers, he privately called her. Ginger Rogers tapping through the halls.

Helen flinched and moaned when Wallace took her hand. Startle reflex, was the medical term. She smiled flaccidly, eyes vacant as buttons. She smelled of baby powder and antiseptic.

Wallace heard himself say, "Hey, darling, how was dinner?" Meanwhile, it was the raw wound in her forehead that commanded his attention, drew him with grim certainty, compounded his sense of futility and doom.

Abruptly exhausted, he whispered farewell to Helen and shuffled upstairs and crawled into bed.

3.

After the world waned fuzzy and velvet-dim, he was roused by the noises he had mentioned to Skip and Ken. The night noises.

He pretended it was a dream--the blankets were heavy, his flesh was heavy, he was paralyzed but for the darting of his eyes, the staccato drum roll in his chest. The noises came through the walls and surrounded his bed. Faint sounds, muffled sounds. Scratching and scrabbling, hiccupping and slithering. Soft, hoarse laughter floated up to his window from the garden.

Wallace stashed a .357 magnum in the dresser an arm's length from his bed. He could grab that pistol and unload it at the awful giant he imagined was prowling among the rosebushes and forsythia and snowball trees. He closed his eyes and made fists. Could not raise them to his ears. The room became black as pitch and settled over him and pressed down upon him like a leaden shroud. Grains of plaster dusted the coverlet. *Pitter-pat, pitter-pat.*

4.

Detective Adams caught Wallace on a good morning. It was Wallace's fifty-first birthday and unseasonably cold, with a threat of rain. Wallace was killing a bottle of Hennessy Private Reserve he'd received from Skip as an early present and shaking from a chill that had no name. However, Wallace was coherent for the first time in months. Delaney had reduced the pills per Skip's orders and it was working. He was death-warmed-over, but his faculties were tripping along the tracks right on schedule. He toyed with the idea of strangling Delaney, of hanging him by the heels. His mood was mitigated solely by the fact he was not scheduled for therapy until Thursday. Possibly he hated therapy more than poor shrieking Helen did.

Detective Adams arrived unannounced and joined Wallace on the garden patio at the glass table with the forlorn umbrella. Adams actually resembled a cop to Wallace, which meant he dressed like the homicide cops on the television dramas. He wore a gray wool coat that matched the streaks in his hair. A square guy, sturdy and genial, though it was plain this latter was an affectation, an icebreaker. His stony eyes were too frank for any implication of friendliness to survive long. He flicked a glance at the mostly empty bottle by Wallace's wrist. "Hey there, Mr. Smith, you're looking better every time I swing by. Seriously though, it's cold. Sure you should be hanging around like this? You might get pneumonia or something. My aunt lives over in Jersey. She almost croaked a couple years ago."

"Pneumonia?"

"Nah, breast cancer. Her cousin died of pneumonia. Longshoreman."

Wallace was smoking unfiltered Cheyenne cigarettes in his plush tiger-striped bathrobe. His feet were tinged blue as day-old fish. His teeth chattered. "Just when you think spring is here, winter comes back to

whack us in the balls. One for the road, eh?"

Detective Adams smiled. "How's everything? Your hip...?"

"Mostly better. Bones are healed, so they say. Hurts like hell."

"How's your wife?"

"Helen's parents are angry. They want me to send her to Arizona, pay for a home. They're ... yeah, it's screwed up."

"Ah. Are you planning to do that?"

"Do what."

"Send her home."

"She's got a lot of family in the southwest.... Lot of family." Wallace lighted another cigarette after a few false starts.

"Maybe sending your wife to Arizona is a good idea, Mr. Smith. Heck, a familiar setting with familiar faces, she might snap out of this. Never know."

Wallace smoked. "Fuck 'em. What's new with you, Detective?"

"Not a darned thing, which is pretty normal in my field. I just thought I'd touch base, see if any more details had occurred to you since our last palaver."

"When was that?"

"Huh? Oh, let me check." Adams flipped open a notebook. "About three weeks. You don't remember."

"I do now," Wallace said. "I'm still a little mixed up, you see. My brain is kind of woozy."

"Yeah," Adams turned up the wattage of his smile. "I boxed some. Know what you mean."

"You talk to Delaney? Delaney saw the whole thing."

"I've spoken to everyone. But, to be perfectly clear, Delaney didn't actually see *everything*. Did he?"

"Delaney shot the horse."

"Yes, I saw the casings. A fine job under pressure."

This had also been present in each interview; an undercurrent of suspicion. Wallace said, "So, Detective, I wonder. You think I smashed her head in with a mallet, or what?"

"Then broke your own hip and somehow disposed of the weapon before Mr. Delaney made the scene? Nah, I don't suppose I think anything along those lines. The case bothers me, is all. It's a burr under my saddle blanket, heh. We examined the scene thoroughly. And ... without a horse carcass, we're kinda stuck."

"You think Delaney did it." Wallace nodded and took a drag. "You think me and Delaney are in it together. Hey, maybe we're lovers and Helen was cramping our style. Or maybe I wanted Helen's money. Oops, I have plenty of my own. Let me ponder this, I'll come up with a motive." He chuckled and lighted another cigarette from the dwindling stub of his current smoke.

Wallace's humor must have been contagious. Detective Adams laughed wryly. He raised his blocky cop hands. "Peace, Mr. Smith. Nothing like that. The evidence was crystal--that horse, wherever it went, just about did for the two of you. Lucky things turned out as well as they did."

"I don't feel so lucky, Detective."

"I guess not. My problem is, well, heck, it's not actually a problem. There's something odd about what happened to you, Mr. Smith. Something weird about that property. It's pretty easy to forget how it was, standing in there, in the barn, screening the area for evidence. Too easy. Those pylons were a trip. Boy howdy!"

"Don't," Wallace said. He did not want to consider the pylons, the traps, or the graffiti. The imagery played havoc with his guts.

"Lately, I get the feeling someone is messing with my investigation."

"Please don't," Wallace said, louder.

"My report was altered, Mr. Smith. Know what that means? Somebody went into the files and rewrote portions of the paperwork. That doesn't happen at the department. Ever."

"Goddamn it!" Wallace slammed his fist on the table, sent the whiskey bottle clattering. His mind went crashing back to the barn where he had regained consciousness for several seconds--Helen beside him in the muck, dark blood pulsing over her exposed brain, surging with her heartbeat. He covered his eyes. "Sorry. But I can't handle talking about this. I don't like to think about what happened. I do whatever I can to not think about it."

"Don't be offended--I need to ask this." Adams was implacable as an android, or a good telemarketer. "You aren't into any sort of cult activity, are you? Rich folks get bored, sometimes they get mixed up with stuff they shouldn't. I've seen it before. There's a history in these parts."

"There's history wherever you go, detective. You ought to ask the people who own that property--"

"The Choates. Morgan Choate."

"They're the ones with all the freaky cult bullshit going on."

"Believe me, I'd love to find Aleister Crowley's nephew was shacking there, something like that. Solve all my headaches. The Choate place was foreclosed on three years ago. Developer from Snoqualmie holds the deed. This guy doesn't know squat--he bought the land at auction, never set foot on it in his life. Anybody could be messing around out there."

Wallace did not give a tinker's damn about who or what might be going on, he was simply grateful they would be grinding that barn into dust and fairly soon.

Detective Adams waited a moment. Then, softly as a conspirator, "Strange business is going on, Mr. Smith. Like I said--we checked your story very carefully. The Smith name carries weight in this neck of the woods, I assure you. My boss would have my balls if I hassled you."

"Come on, my pappy isn't a senator anymore. I'm not exactly his favorite, anyway."

"Just doing my job, and all that."

"I understand, Detective. Hell, bad apples even fell off the Kennedy tree. Right?"

"I'm sure you're not a bad apple. You seem to be a solid citizen. You pay your taxes, you hire locally, and you give to charity."

"Don't forget, I donated to the Policeman's Ball five years running."

"That's a write-off, sure, but it's worth what you paid. Ask me, your involvement is purely happenstance. You're a victim. I don't understand the whole picture, yet. If there's anything you haven't told me, if you saw something.... Well, I'd appreciate any help you might give me."

Wallace lifted his head, studied Adams closely. The cop was frayed--bulging eyes latticed with red veins, a twitch, cheeks rough as Brillo. Adams's cologne masked the sour musk of hard liquor. His clothes were wrinkled as if he'd slept in them. Wallace said, "As far as I'm concerned, it's over. I want to move on."

"Understandable, Mr. Smith. You've got my number. You know the drill." The detective stood, peered across the landscaped grounds to the forest. A peacock strutted back and forth. A neighbor had raised them in the distant past; the man lost his farm and the peacocks escaped into the wild. The remaining few haunted the woods. The bird's movements were mechanical. Back and forth. "Do me a favor. Be careful, Mr. Smith. It's a mean world."

Wallace watched Adams climb into a brown sedan, drive off with the caution of an elderly woman. The brake lights flashed, and Adams leaned from the window and appeared to vomit.

Daylight drained fast after that.

## 5.

Wallace pulled on the loosest fitting suit in his wardrobe, which was not difficult considering how the pounds had melted from him during his long recovery. He knotted a tie and splashed his face with cologne and crippled his way downstairs to the liquor cabinet and fixed himself a double scotch on the rocks. He downed that and decided on another for the road. Sweat dripped from him and his shirt stuck to the small of his back and hips. He sweated nonstop, it seemed, as if the house were a giant sauna and yet he routinely dialed the thermostat down to the point where he could see his own breath.

Pain nibbled at him, worried at his will. He resisted the urge to swallow some of the heavy-duty pills in his coat pocket--promises to keep. Then he went somewhat unsteadily to the foyer with its granite tiles and a marble statue of some nameless Greek wrestler and the chandelier on its black chain, a mass of tiered crystal as unwieldy as any that ever graced the ballroom of a Transylvanian castle or a doomed luxury liner, and reported to Delaney. Delaney eyed him critically, dusted lint from his shoulder and straightened his tie while Wallace dabbed his face with a silk, monogrammed handkerchief, one of a trove received on birthdays and Christmases past, and still the sweat rilled from his brow and his neck and he wilted in his handsome suit. Delaney finally opened the front door and escorted him to the car. The air was cold and tasted of smog from the distant highway. Delaney started the engine and drove via the darkened back roads into Olympia. They crossed the new Fourth Avenue Bridge with its extra-wide sidewalks and faux Gaslight Era lampposts that conveyed a gauzy and oh so cozy glow and continued downtown past unlit shop windows and locked doors to a swanky restaurant called The Marlin. The Marlin was old as money and had been the *It* spot of discerning socialites since Wallace's esteemed father was a junior senator taking lobbyists and fellow lawmakers out for highballs and graft.

Everyone was waiting inside at a collection of candlelit tables near the recessed end of the great varnished bar. People, already flushed with their martinis and bourbons and cocktails, rose to shake his hand and clap his back or hug him outright and they reeked of booze and perfume and hairspray and cigarettes and talked too loudly as they jostled for position around him. The Johnsons and Steiners attended as a unit, which made sense since so many of their kids were intermarried--it was exceedingly

difficult to determine where the branches and the roots of the respective family trees ended or began; Barb and Michael Cotter; old man Bloomfield, the former city councilman, and his nephew Regis, a tobacco lobbyist who kept rubbing his eyes and professing irritation at all the secondhand smoke; Skip Arden, doing his best John Huston as The Man from the South, in a vanilla suit hand-sewn by a Hong Kong tailor of legendary distinction; Jacob Wilson, recent heir to the Wilson fortune, who matched Skip in girth and verbosity, if not in taste or wit, and Jacob's bodyguard, Frank, a swarthy man in a bomber jacket who sat at the bar with Delaney and pretended inattentiveness to anything but the lone Rolling Rock beer he would order for the duration of the evening; Randy Freeman, wild-eyed behind rimless glasses and dressed way down in a wrinkled polo shirt, khaki pants, and sandals, and his lovely, staid wife, Janice; the Jenson twins down from Bellevue, Ted and Russell, who worked for Microsoft's public relations department--they were smooth as honey and slippery as eels; Jerry Premus, Wallace's hired gun in matters legal, who was twice as smooth and twice as slippery as the Jenson brothers combined; a couple of youngish unidentified women with big hair and skimpy gowns, glittering with the kind of semi-valuable jewelry Malloy's on State Avenue might rent by the evening (Wallace forgot their names on contact and figured they must be with a couple of the unattached men); and dear old Dad himself lurched from the confusion to kiss Wallace's cheek and mutter a gruff how do ye do? Wallace looked over Dalton Smith's shoulder, counting faces, and there were another half dozen that he did not recognize, and who knew if they were hangers-on or if his faculties were still utterly short-circuited? He decided to play it safe and put on his biggest movie-star grin for all concerned and bluff his way to the finish line.

Skip took charge of the event, dinging his glass of champagne to summon collective attention. He proposed a toast to Wallace's regenerative capabilities, his abundance of stalwart comrades, and his continued speedy recovery, upon which all assembled cried, "Here, here!" and drank. No one mentioned Helen. She sat amongst them, nonetheless. Wallace, ensconced at the head of the main table like a king, with his most loyal advisers, Skip and Randy, at either hand, saw her shadow in the faces that smiled too merrily and then concentrated with abject diligence on their salmon and baked potatoes in sour cream, or in the pitying expressions blocked by swiftly raised glasses of wine or the backs of hands as heads swiveled to engage neighbors in hushed conversation. Not that such clandestine tactics were necessary: Wallace's exhaustion, his entrenched apathy, precluded any intemperate outburst, and Skip's thunderous elocution mercifully drowned out the details anyway.

Wallace was fairly saturated and so nursed his drink and picked at his birthday prime rib and tried to appear at least a ghost of his former gregarious self. Matters were proceeding apace until the fifth or six round of drinks arrived and Mel Redfield started in on Vietnam and the encroachment of French and American factories upon traditional indigenous agrarian cultures. Wallace suddenly feared he might do something rash. He set aside his glimmering knife, grinned and told Mel to hold that thought. He lurched to his feet, miraculously without upsetting a mass of tableware and half-full glasses, and made for the restrooms farther back where it was sure to be dim and quiet. Delaney, alert as any guard dog, cocked his head and then rose to follow, and subsided at a look from Wallace.

Wallace hesitated at the men's room, limped past it and pushed through the big metal door that let into the alley. The exit landing faced a narrow, dirty street and the sooty, featureless rear wall of Gossen's Fine Furniture. A sodium lamp illuminated a Dumpster and a mound of black garbage bags piled at the bottom of the metal stairs. He sagged against the railing, fumbled out his cigarettes, got one going and smoked it almost convulsively. Restaurant noises pulsed dimly through the wall. Water dripped from the gutters and occasionally car horns echoed from blocks farther off, tires screeched and a woman laughed, high and maniacal--the mating cry of the hopelessly sloshed female.

He finished his cigarette and began another and was almost human again when someone called to him.

"Hey." The voice floated from the thicker shadows of the alley. It was a husky voice, its sex muted by the



acoustics of the asphalt and concrete. "Hey, mister."

Wallace dragged on his cigarette and peered into the darkness. The muscles in his neck and shoulders bunched. His hand shook. He opened his mouth to answer that odd, muffled voice and could not speak. His throat was too tight. What did it remind him of? Something bad, something tickling the periphery of his consciousness, a warning. A certain quality of the voice, its inflection and cadence, harkened recollections of hunting for tigers in the high grass in India, of chopping like Pizarro through the Peruvian jungles on the trail of jaguars--of *being* hunted.

"Mister." The voice was close now. "I can see you. Please. *Prease*." The last word emerged in a patently affected accent, a mockery of the Asian dialect. A low, wheezy chuckle accompanied this. "*Prease, mistuh. You put a hotel in my rice paddy, mistuh.*"

Wallace dropped his cigarette. He turned and groped for the door handle and it was slick with condensation. He pushed hard and the handle refused to budge. Locked. "Ah, sonofabitch!" He slumped against the door, face to the alley, and clutched his cane, wished like hell he had not been too lazy and vain to strap on one of his revolvers, which he never carried after the accident because the weight dragged on his shoulder. His heart lay thick and heavy. He gulped to catch his breath.

The sodium lamp dimmed. "*Mistuh Smith. Where you goin' Mistuh Smith?*" Someone stood across the way, partially hidden by the angle of the building.

*Jesus Christ, what is he wearing?* Wallace could not quite resolve the details because everything was mired in varying shades of black, but the figure loomed very tall and very broad and was most definitely crowned with bizarre headgear reminiscent of a miter or a witch's hat. Wallace's drunkenness and terror peeled back in an instant of horrible clarity. Here was the figure that had appeared in his fever dreams--the ghastly, robed specter haunting the grounds of his estate. The lamp flickered and snuffed and Wallace was trapped in a cold black box. He reached back and began to slap the door feebly with his left hand.

"Wally. It is *soo* nice to meet you in the flesh." The voice emanated from a spot near Wallace's foot and it was easy to imagine the flabby, deranged face of a country bumpkin grinning up between the stairs. "Are you afraid? Are you afraid, sweetheart? Don't be afraid ... *boss man*. They're about to cut the cake."

Wallace slapped the door, slapped the door. It was futile as tapping the hull of a battleship. A rancid odor wafted to him--the stench of fleshy rot and blood blackening in the belly of a sluice. "W-what do you want?"

"I want to show you something beautiful."

"I'm--I'm not interested. No cash."

"Father saw you that day. What Father sees, He covets. He covets you, Wally-dear."

Wallace's stomach dropped into his shoes. "Who are you?"

The other laughed, a low, moist chuckle of unwholesome satisfaction. "Me? A sorcerer. The shade of Tommy Tune. The Devil's left hand. One of the inheritors of the Earth." Something rattled on the steps. Fingernails, perhaps. "I am a digger of holes, an opener of doors. I am here to usher in the dark." The odor grew more pungent. Glutted intestines left to swell in greenhouse heat; a city stockyard in July. Flies droned and complained. Flies were suddenly everywhere. "He lives in the cracks, Wally. The ones that run through everything. In the cracks between yesterday and tomorrow. Crawl into the dark, and there He is, waiting...."

"Look, I--just leave me alone, okay. Okay?" Wallace brushed flies from his hair, his lips, and nose.  
"Don't push me, fella."

"Wifey met Him and you shall too. Everyone shall meet Him in good, sweet time. You'll scream a hymn to the black joy He brings."

Wallace lunged and thrust at the voice with his cane and struck a yielding surface. The cane was wrenched from his fingers with such violence his hand tore and bled. He stumbled and his traitorous hip gave way. He went to his knees, bruised them on the grating. Pain telescoped from his hip and stabbed his eyes--not quite the sense of broken bone, but it hurt, sweet Christ did it ever. Fingers clamped onto his wrist and yanked him flat. The hand was huge and impossibly powerful and Wallace was stuck fast, his arm stretched over the edge of the landing and to the limits of his shoulder socket, his cheek pressed against metal. The dying remnants of his cigarette smoldered several inches from his eye. Sloppy, avaricious lips opened against his palm. The tongue was clammy and large as a preposterously gravid slug and it lapped between Wallace's fingers and sucked them into a cavernous mouth.

Wallace thrashed and lowed like a cow that has been hamstrung. Teeth nicked him, might have snipped his fingers at the knuckle, he could tell from the size and sharpness of them. A great, Neolithic cannibal was making love to his hand. Then his hand slipped deeper, as the beast grunted and gulped and the mouth closed softly over his forearm, his elbow, and this couldn't be possible, no way the esophageal sheath of a monstrous throat constricted around his biceps with such force his bones creaked together, no way that he was being swallowed alive, that he was going to disappear into the belly of a giant--

The world skewed out of focus.

The door jarred open and light and music surged from the restaurant interior. "Boss, they want to cut the cake ... Boss! What the hell?" Delaney knelt beside him and rolled him over.

Wallace clutched his slick fingers against the breast of his suit and laughed hysterically. "I dropped my cane," he said.

"What are you doing out here?" Delaney gripped Wallace's forearms and lifted him to his feet. "You okay? Oh, jeez--you're bleeding! You break anything?"

"Needed some air ... I'm fine." Wallace smiled weakly and sneaked a glance at the alley as he hurriedly wiped his face with his left sleeve. The lamp was still dead and the wedge of light from the open door did not travel far. He considered spilling his guts. Delaney would call the cops and the cops would find what? Nothing, and then they would ask to see his prescription and probably ask if he should be mixing Demerol with ten different kinds of booze. Oh, and by the way, what really happened in that barn. Go on: you can tell us. "I'm okay. Slipped is all."

Delaney leaned over the railing and peered down. "I'll go find your cane--"

"No! I, uh, busted it. Cheap wood."

"Cheap wood! Know what I shelled out for that?"

"No, really. I'm freezing. We'll get a new one tomorrow."

Delaney did not appear convinced. "It broke?"

"Yeah. C'mon, Dee. Let's go and get this party over with, huh?"

"That's the spirit, Mr. S.," Delaney steadied him and said no more, but Wallace noticed he did not

remove his hand from his pocket until they were safely inside and among friends.

6.

The remainder of the evening dragged to pieces like old fearful Hector come undone behind Achilles' cart and eventually Wallace was home and unpacked from the car. He collapsed into bed and was asleep before Delaney clicked off the lights.

Wallace dreamt of making love to Helen again.

They occupied a rocky shelf above Sun Devil Stadium, screwing like animals on a scratchy Navajo blanket. It was dusk, the stadium was deserted. Helen muttered into the blanket. Wallace pulled her ponytail to raise her head, because he thought he heard a familiar syllable or phrase. Something guttural, something darksome. His passion cooled to a ball of pig iron in his belly. The night air grew bitter, the stars sharp.

Helen said in a metallic voice, *There is a hole no man can fill.*

Wallace flew awake and sat pop-eyed and gasping. Clock said 3:39 a.m. He got out of bed, switched on the lamp, and slumped in its bell of dull light, right hand tucked against his chest. His hand was thickly bandaged and it itched. The contours of the bedroom seemed slightly warped, window frames and doorways were too skinny and pointy. The floor was cold. The lamp bulb imploded with a sizzle that nearly stopped his heart and darkness rushed in like black water filling a muddy boot print.

He did not feel welcome.

Delaney stood in the kitchen eating a sandwich over the sink. He was stripped to the waist. "You want me to fix you one?" he asked when Wallace padded in. He lived in the old gardener's cottage, used a second key to come and go as he pleased. Wallace had contemplated asking him to move into the downstairs guestroom and decided it was too much of an imposition. Delaney had women over from the clubs; he enjoyed loud music. Best to leave him at the end of a long leash.

Wallace waved him off, awkwardly poured a glass of milk with his left hand, sloshed in some rum from an emergency bottle in a counter drawer. He held his glass with trembling fingers, eyeballing the slimy bubbles before they slid into his mouth; poured another. He leaned against the stainless steel refrigerator. The kitchen was designed for professional use--Beth had retained a chef on the payroll for a while. That was when the Smith House was the epicenter of cocktail socials and formal banquets. The Mayor and his entourage had attended on several occasions. The middleweight champion of the world. A porn star and his best girl. With people like that dropping in, you had better have a chef. Anymore, Delaney did the cooking. Delaney, king of cold cuts.

Wallace said, "How'd you get that one?" He meant the puckered welt on Delaney's ribcage.

Delaney scraped his plate in the sink, ran the tap. "I was a pretty stupid kid," he said.

"And all that's changed?"

Delaney said, "Des Moines is a tough town. We were tough kids. A big crew. We caused some trouble. People got hurt."

Wallace knew about Delaney's record, his history of violence, the prisons he had toured. He knew all that in a peripheral way, but had never pried into Delaney's past, never dug up the nitty-gritty details. Guys like him, you left well enough alone. The confession did not surprise him. It was Delaney's nature and a large reason why Wallace hired him when the investment money began to attract unwanted

attention. Delaney knew exactly how to deal with people who gave Wallace grief.

Delaney sat on a stool, arms crossed. He directed his gaze at the solid black window, which gave back only curved reflections of the room and its haggard occupants. "Most of us went to the pen, or died. Lots of drinking, lots of dope. Everybody carried. I got shot for the first time when I was sixteen. We knocked over this pool hall on the South End--me and Lonnie Chavez and Ruby Pharaoh. Some guy popped up and put two .32 slugs through my chest. The hospital was a no-go, so Ruby Pharaoh and Chavez loaded me in Ruby's caddy and took me to a field. Chavez's dad was an Army corpsman; he lifted some of his old man's meds and performed home surgery." The small man shook his head with a wry grin. "Hell, it was like the old Saturday matinee westerns we watched as kids--Chavez heating up his knife with a Zippo and Ruby pouring Wild Turkey all over my chest. Hurt like a sonofabitch, let me say. Chavez hid me in a chicken coop until the whole thing blew over. I was real weak, so he fed me. Changed my bandages, brought me comic books and cigs. I never had a brother."

"Me either," Wallace said. "Mine was too young and I left home before he got outta diapers. But I gotta be honest, I always thought of you as a son."

"You ain't my daddy, Mr. S. You're too rich to be my daddy. You like the young pussy, though. He did too and it caused him no end of trouble."

"That cop was by today."

"Yeah."

"He seems edgy. Seems worried."

"Yeah."

"Dee, when you came into the barn, did you see anything, I don't know, weird?" Wallace hesitated. "Besides the obvious, I mean. These burns on my back; I can't figure how I got them. And what happened to the horse?"

Delaney shrugged. "What's the matter, Mr. S? Cop got you spooked too?"

"I don't need him for that." Wallace placed his glass in the sink. "What happened to the horse, Dee?"

"I blew its head off, Boss." Delaney lighted a cigarette, passed it to Wallace, fired another and smoked it between his middle and fourth fingers, palm slightly cupped to his lips. During the reign of Beth, smoking had been forbidden in the house. Didn't matter anymore.

"I want cameras in tomorrow. Get Savage over here, tell him I've seen the light," Wallace said.

"Cameras, huh."

"Look ... I've seen somebody sneaking around at night. I suspected I was hallucinating and maybe that's all it is. I think one of the Choates is around."

"Dogs woulda ripped his balls off."

"I want the cameras. That's it."

"Okay. Where?"

"Where ... the gate, for certain. Front door. Pool building. Back yard. We don't use the tool shed. Savage can run everything through there. Guess I'll need to hire a security guy--"

"A couple of guys."

"A couple of guys, right. Savage can take care of that too."

"It'll be a job. A few days, at least."

"Yeah? Well, sooner he gets started...."

"Okay. Is that all?"

Wallace nodded. "For now. I haven't decided. 'Night, Dee."

"'Night, Boss."

7.

Billy Savage of Savage and Sons came in before noon the following day and talked to Delaney about Wallace's latest security needs. Savage had silver, greased-down hair, a golfer's tan, and a denture-perfect smile. Wallace watched from his office window as Savage and Delaney walked around the property. Savage took notes on a palm-sized computer while Delaney pointed at things. It took about an hour. Savage left and returned after lunch with three vans loaded with men and equipment. Delaney came into the office and gave Wallace a status report. The guys would be around for two or three days if all went according to plan. Savage had provided him a list of reliable candidates for security guards. Wallace nodded blearily. He was deep into a bottle of blue label Stoli by then. He'd told Delaney he trusted his judgment--*Hire whoever you want, Dee. Tell Cecil to leave Helen be for a while. I'm sick of that screaming.*

*She's asleep, Mr. S. They doped her up last night and she's been dead to the world ever since.*

*Oh.* Wallace rubbed his eyes and it was night again. He lolled in his leather pilot's chair and stared out at the cruel stars and the shadows of the trees. "You have to do something, Wally, old bean. You really do." He nodded solemnly and took another swig. He fumbled around in the dark for the phone and finally managed to thumb the right number on his speed dialer. Lance Pride, of the infamous Pride Agency, sounded as if he had been going a few rounds with a bottle himself. But the man sobered rather swiftly when he realized who had called him at this *god-awful* hour. "Wallace. What's wrong?"

Wallace said, "It's about the accident."

"Yeah. I thought it might be." And after nearly thirty seconds of silence, Pride said, "Exactly what do you want? Maybe we should do this in person--"

"No, no, nothing heavy," Wallace said. "Write me the book on the Choates. Forward and back."

Pride laughed bleakly and replied that would make for some unpleasant bedtime reading, but not to worry. "Are we looking at ... ahem, payback?" He had visited the hospital, sent flowers, et cetera. Back in the olden days, when Wallace was between wives and Pride had only gotten started, they frequented a few of the same seedy haunts and closed down their share. Of course, if Wallace wanted satisfaction over what had happened to Helen, he need but ask. Friend discount and everything. The detective was not a strong-arm specialist per se, however he had a reputation for diligence and adaptation. Before the arrival of Delaney, Wallace had employed Pride to acquire the goods on more than one recalcitrant landowner--and run off a couple that became overly vengeful. Pride was not fussy about his methods; a quality that rendered him indispensable. "I'll skin your cat, all right," was his motto.

8.

It was a busy week. On Tuesday, Doctor Green paid a visit, shined a light in his eyes and took his pulse

and asked him a lot of pointed questions and wrote a prescription for sleeping pills and valium. Dr. Green wagged his finger and admonished him to return to physical therapy--Hesse, the massively thewed therapist at the Drover Clinic, had tattled regarding Wallace's spotty attendance. Wednesday, the hospital sent a private ambulance for Helen and whisked her off to her monthly neurological examination. She came home in the afternoon with a heart monitor attached to her chest. Kate told Wallace it was strictly routine, they simply wanted to collect data. She smiled a fake smile when she said it and he was grateful.

He sat with Helen for a couple of hours in the afternoons while Kate did laundry and made the bed and filled out the reams of paperwork necessary to the documentation of Helen's health care service. Helen was losing weight. There were circles beneath her vacant eyes and she smelled sick in the way an animal does when it stops eating and begins to waste from the inside. There was also the crack in her face. The original small fracture had elongated into a moist fissure. Wallace gazed in queasy fascination at the pink, crusty furrow that began at her hairline and closed her right eye and blighted her cheekbone. The doctors had no explanation for the wound or its steady encroachment. They had taken more blood and run more scans, changed some medications and increased the dosage of others and indicated in the elegant manner of professional bearers of bad tidings that it was a crap shoot.

Meanwhile, men in coveralls traipsed all over the grounds setting up alarms and cameras; Delaney interviewed a dozen or so security guard applicants from the agency Billy Savage recommended.

Wallace observed from the wings, ear glued to the phone while his subordinates in Seattle and abroad informed him about the status of his various acquisitions and investments. His team was soldiering on quite adequately and he found his attention wandering to more immediate matters: securing his property from the depredations of that ghoulish figure and getting to the bottom of the Choate mystery.

Pride had the instincts of a blue ribbon bird dog and he did not disappoint Wallace's expectations. The detective only required three days to track down an eyewitness to history, one Kurt Bruenig of the Otter Creek Bruenigs.

"The Choates were unsavory, you bet." Kurt Bruenig wiped his mustache, took a long sip of ice tea. A barrel of a man, with blunt fingers, his name stitched on the breast of an oil-stained coverall. His wrecker was parked outside their window booth of the Lucky Bucket in downtown Olympia. "Nasty folk, if you must know. Why *do* you want to know, Mr. Smith?"

Wallace punched the speed dial on his cell. It rang, rang, rang. "Damn," he muttered. His head felt like a soccer ball. He cracked the seal on a packet of aspirin and stirred seltzer water in a shabby plastic drinking glass. He swallowed the aspirin, chased them with the seltzer, and held on tight while his guts seasawed into the base of his throat.

"Somethin' wrong?"

"How's your lunch?" Wallace gestured at the man's demolished fish and chips basket.

"Fine."

"Yes? How's the fat check you got in your pocket? Look, there's more in it for you, but I'm asking, and my business is mine." Wallace caught Delaney's eye at the bar, and Delaney resumed watching the Dodgers clobber the Red Sox on the big screen.

"Hey, no problem." Bruenig shrugged affably. Tow truck drivers dealt with madmen on a daily basis. "The Choates ... our homestead was the next one over, butted up against Otter Creek."

"Pretty area," Wallace said. He placed a small recorder on the table and adjusted the volume. "Please speak clearly, Mr. Bruenig. You don't mind, do you?"

"Uh, no. Sure. It went to hell. Anyways, they were around before us, 'bout 1895. My great-granddaddy pitched his tent in 1910. Those old boys were cats 'n dogs from the get go. The Choates were Jews--claimed to be Jews. Had some peculiar customs that didn't sit well with my kin, what with my kin bein' Baptists and all. Not that my great-granddaddy was the salt of the Earth, mind you--he swindled his way into our land from what I've been told. I suppose a fair amount of chicanery watered my family tree. We come from Oklahoma and Texas, originally. Those as stayed behind got rich off of cattle and oil. Those of us as headed west, you see what we did with ourselves." He nodded at the wrecker, wiped his greasy fingers on a napkin. "My dad and his tried their hands at farmin'. Pumpkins, cabbage. Had a Christmas tree farm for a few years. Nothin' ever came of it. My sister inherited when my dad passed away. She decided it wasn't worth much, sold out to an East Coast fella. Same as bought the Choate place. But the Choates, they packed it in first. Back in '83--right after their house burned down. We heard one of 'em got drunk and knocked over a lantern. Only thing survived was the barn. Like us, there weren't many of them around at the end. Morgan, he was the eldest. His kids, Hank and Carlotta--they were middle-aged, dead now. Didn't see 'em much. Then there was Josh and Tyler. I was in school with those two. Big, big boys. They played line on a couple football teams that took state."

"How big would you say they were?" Wallace asked.

"Aw, that's hard to say. Josh, he was the older one, the biggest. Damned near seven foot tall. And thick--pig farmers. I remember bumpin' into Josh at the fillin' station, probably four years outta high school. He was a monster. I saw him load a fifty-five-gallon drum into the back of his flatbed. Hugged it to his chest and dropped it on the tailgate like nothin'. He moved out to the Midwest, somewhere. Lost his job when the brewery went tits-up. Tyler, he's doin' a hard stretch in Walla Walla. Used to be a deputy in the Thurston County Sheriff's department. Got nailed for accessory to murder and child pornography. You remember that brouhaha about the ring of devil worshippers supposed to operate all over Olympia and Centralia? They say a quarter of the department was involved, though most of it got hushed by the powers that be. He was one of those unlucky assholes they let dangle in the wind."

Wallace hadn't paid much attention to that scandal. In those days he had been in the throes of empire building and messy divorces. He said, "That's what you meant by nasty folk?"

"I mean they were dirty. Not dirt under the nails from honest labor, either. I'm talkin' 'bout sour-piss and blood and old grotty shit on their coveralls. Josh and Tyler came to school smellin' half dead, like they'd slaughtered pigs over the weekend and not bothered to change. Nobody wanted to handle their filthy money when they paid down to the feed store. As for the devil worshipping, maybe it's true, maybe not. The Satanist rap was sort of the cherry on top, you might say. The family patriarch, Kaleb Choate, was a scientist, graduated from a university in Europe. It was a big deal in the 1890s and people in these parts were leery on account of that. A Jew *and* a scientist? That was askin' a bit much. He worked with Tesla--y'know, the Tesla Coil guy. My understanding is Tesla brought him to America to work in his laboratory and didn't cotton to him and they had a fallin' out, but I dunno much about all that. One more weird fact, y'know? Wasn't long before rumors were circulatin' 'bout how old man Choate was robbin' crypts down to the Oddfellows Cemetery and performin' unnatural experiments on farm animals and Chinamen. We had a whole community of those Chinese and they weren't popular, so nobody got too riled if one turned up missin', or what-have-you. And a bunch of 'em did disappear. Authorities claimed they moved to Seattle and Tacoma where the big Chinese communities were, or that they sailed back to China and just forgot to tell anybody, or that they ran off and got themselves killed trespassing. Still, there were rumors, and by the time my great-granddaddy arrived, Kaleb Choate's farm was considered off limits for good honest Christians. 'Course there was more. Some people took it into their heads that

Choate was a wizard or a warlock, that he came from a long line of black magicians. There were a few, like the Teagues on Waddel Creek and the Bakkers over to the eastern Knob Hills, who swore he could mesmerize a fella by lookin' into his eyes, that he could fly, that he fed those Chinamen to demons in return for ... well, there it kinda falls apart. The Choates had land and that was about it. They were dirt poor when I was a kid--sorta fallen into ruin, y'might say. If Old Poger made a bargain with 'em, then they got royally screwed from the looks of it. I wonder 'bout the flyin' part on account of my sister and her boyfriend, Wooly Clark, claimed Josh could levitate like those yogis in the Far East, swore to Jesus they saw him do it in the woods behind the school once when they were necking. But hell, I dunno. My sister, she's a little soft in the brain, so there's no tellin' what she did or didn't see....

"Anyhow, the Bruenigs and the Choates had this sort of simmerin' feud through the years--Kaleb kicked the bucket in the forties, but our families kept fightin'. Property squabbles, mainly. Their pigs caused some problems, came onto our land and destroyed my grandma's garden more than once. The kids on both sides liked to cause trouble, beat hell out of each other whenever they could. I guess the grown men pulled that too. My uncles got in a brawl with some of the Choates at the Lucky Badger; all of 'em were eighty-six'd for life and Uncle Clover did a month in the county lockup for bustin' a guy over the noggin with a chair."

Wallace said, "So, did you ever notice anything unusual going on?"

"You mean, like was the deal with Tyler an isolated incident or were the old rumors all true? Maybe we had a bona fide witch coven next door?" Bruenig shook his head. "There were some strange happenin's, I'll grant. More complicated than witches, though."

"Complicated?"

"That's right, partner. Look at the history, you'll notice a few of the Choates were eggheads. Heck of a deal to be an egghead yet spend your whole life on a farm, isn't it? Buncha friggin' cloistered monks--unnatural. You had Kaleb's son, Morgan, he owned the land until they sold out and he was a recluse, nobody ever saw him, but I heard tell he was an astronomer, wrote a book or somethin'. Then you got Paul Choate--Dr. Creepy, the kids called him; he taught physics at Evergreen in the seventies and did some research for NASA. But he wasn't even the smartest of the litter. We knew at least three more of those guys coulda done the same. Hell, Josh was a genius in school. He just hated class; bored him. Me, I always thought they were contacted by aliens. That's why they all acted so weird."

"You're shitting me," Wallace said.

"No, sir. You gonna sit there and tell me you don't believe in the ETs? This is the twenty-first century, pal. You oughta read Carl Sagan."

"You read Carl Sagan?"

"'Cause I drive a wrecker I'm a dumbass? Read Sagan, there's plenty of funky stuff goin' on in the universe."

"Okay, okay," Wallace said. "Tell me about the aliens."

"Like I said, it goes all the way back to the beginnin', if you pay attention. Within a decade of Kaleb Choate's arrival, folks started reportin' peculiar sightin's. Goat men in the Waddel Creek area, two-headed calves, lights over the Capitol Forest--no airplanes to explain that away. Not then. People saw UFOs floatin' around the Choate fields month after month in 1915 and 1916, right when the action in Europe was gettin' heavy. Some of it's in the papers, some it was recorded by the police department and private citizens, the library. It's a puzzle. You find a piece here and there, pretty quick things take shape.



Anyhow, this went on into the fifties and sixties, but by then the entire country was in the middle of the saucer scare, so the authorities assumed mass hysteria. There were still disappearances too, except now it wasn't the Chinese--the Chinese had moseyed to greener pastures by the late forties. Nope, this was mostly run of the mill, God fearin' townies. Don't get me wrong, we aren't talking 'bout bus loads. Three or four kids, a couple wives, a game warden and a census taker, some campers. More than our share of bums dropped off the face of the Earth, but you know that didn't amount to a hill of beans. These disappearances are spread thin. Like somebody, or somethin', was bein' damn careful not to rouse the natives.

"Of course, as a kid I was all-fired curious 'bout morbid crap, pestered my dad constantly. I pried a little out of him; more I learned Hardy Boys style. Got to tell you, my daddy wouldn't talk 'bout the Choates if he could help it; he'd spit when someone mentioned 'em. Me and my sister got ambitious and dug into the dirty laundry. We even spied on 'em. Mighty funny how often they used to get visitors from town. Rich folks. Suits from the Capitol drove out there. Real odd, considerin' the Choates have always been looked down on as white trash--homegrown eggheads or not. That's what got me thinkin'. That and I saw Morgan and his boys diggin' in their fields at night."

"Mass graves?" Wallace said dryly.

Bruenig barked a wad of phlegm into his basket. "Huh! Better believe it crossed my mind. Told my pappy and his eyes got hard. Seems Granddad saw 'em doin' the same thing in *his* day. Near as we could tell they were laying pipe or cable, all across their property. They owned about three thousand acres, so there's miles of it, whatever it is. Then there were the pylons--"

"Pylons. Where'd you see those?" Wallace's interest sharpened.

"Farther back on their land. Long time ago a road wound around there--it's overgrown now, but when it was cleared there were these rocks sittin' out in the middle of nowhere. Sorta like that Stonehenge deal, except it was just one or two in each field. Jesse, my sister, counted twenty of 'em scattered 'round. She said they looked like peckers, and I have to admit they did bear a resemblance."

"Any idea who made them?"

"Nah. I mentioned it to a young geologist fella, worked for the BLM. He got interested, said he was gonna interview the Choates, see if they'd built on tribal grounds. Never heard from him again, though. He was barkin' up the wrong tree anyway. Those rocks are huge: least two tons each. How the Indians supposed to move that kinda load? Otter Creek--puhlease. Not in your lifetime. Plus, I never seen rock looked like those pylons. We don't have obsidian 'round here. Naw, those things are ancient and the ETs shipped 'em in from somewhere else. Probably markers, like pyramids and crop circles. Then the Choates come along and use 'em to communicate with the aliens. Help 'em with their cattle mutilations and their abductions. Don't ask me why the aliens need accomplices. No way we'll ever understand what makes a Gray tick."

Wallace turned off the recorder, slipped it in his pocket. "Is that all, Mr. Bruenig? Anything else you want to add that I might find useful?"

"Well, sir, I reckon I don't truly know what that could be. My advice is to steer clear of the Choate place, if you're thinkin' of muckin' 'round that way. You aren't gonna find any arrowheads or souvenirs worth your time. Don't know that I hold with curses, but that land's got a shadow over it. I sure as hell don't poke my nose around there."

Wallace's favorite was the dead woman on the rocker.

Beth had hated it, said the artist, a local celebrity named Miranda Carson, used too much wax. The sculpture was indeed heavy; it required two burly movers to install it in the gallery. Wallace did not care, he took morbid pleasure in admiring the milky eyes, the tangled strands of real hair the artist collected from her combs. In low light, the wax figure animated, transformed into a young woman, knees drawn to chin, meditating upon the woods behind the house, the peacocks and the other things that lurked. Wallace once loaned the piece, entitled *Remembrance*, to the UW library; brought it home after an earthquake shattered an arm and damaged the torso. Carson had even driven over and performed a hasty repair job. The cracks were still evident, like scars. Macabre and beautiful.

The gallery was populated by a dozen other sculptures, a menagerie orphaned by Beth's departure and Wallace's general disinterest. Wallace wandered among them, cell phone glued to his ear, partially aware of Skip's buzzing baritone. Wallace thought the split in the dead girl's body seemed deeper. More jagged.

"--so Randy and I'll go today. Unless you want to come. Might be what you need."

"Say again?" Wallace allowed himself to be drawn into the cathode. It dawned on him that he had made a serious tactical error in confiding the Bruenig interview to Skip. They had discussed the Choate legend over drinks the prior evening and Wallace more than half expected his friend to laugh, shake his snowy head and call him a damn fool for chasing his tail. Instead, Skip had kept mum and sat stroking his beard with a grim, thoughtful expression. Now, after a night's sleep, the story had gestated and hatched as a rather dubious scheme to nip Wallace's anxieties at their roots.

"Randy and I'll scope out that property this afternoon. He wants to see that nest you were going on about at the hospital. He said it sounds weird. I told him it's dried up. He refuses to listen, of course."

"Wait-wait." Wallace rubbed his temple. "You plan to go to the barn."

"Uh-hmm, right."

"To what--look at the nest?"

"That's what I've been saying. I'm thinking noon, one o'clock. We'll have dinner at the Oyster House. It's lobster night."

"Lobster night, yeah. Skip?"

"What?"

"Forget about the nest. You're right, it won't be there, they migrate, I think. And the barn's condemnable, man. It's dangerous. Scary people hang around--maybe druggies, I dunno. Bad types." Wallace's hand was slippery. He was afraid he might drop the phone.

"Oh yeah? Well it just so happens I called Lyle Ferguson--your old pal Lyle, remember him? He landed the bid and he says they're planning to commence tearing down the barn and all that sort of thing on Monday or Tuesday. So time is of the essence, as they say."

"Skip--"

"Hey, Wally. I'm driving here. You don't want to come with us?" Skip's voice crackled.

"No. Uh, say hi to Fergie, if you see him."

"Okay, buddy. I'm driving, I gotta go. Call you tomorrow." Click.

"Uh, huh." Wallace regarded a bust on a plinth. It was the half-finished head of a woman wearing thick lipstick. A crack had begun to divide the plaster face.

He had had Pride check into Bruenig's story about the BLM geologist and the monoliths. The geologist was named Chuck Doolittle and he abruptly quit his post six years ago, dropped everything and departed the state of Washington, although nobody at the department had a handle on where he might have emigrated. As for the so-called monoliths, the bureau disavowed knowledge of any such structures, and while the former Choate property did overlap tribal grounds, it had long ago been legally ceded to the county. No mystery at all.

The only hitch, insomuch as Pride was concerned, was the fact certain records pertaining to the Choate farm were missing from the county clerk's office. According to a truncated file index, the Choate folder once contained numerous photos of unidentified geological formations, or possibly manmade constructs of unknown origin. The series began in 1927, the latter photographs being dated as late as 1971. Pride located eight black-and-white pictures taken in 1954 through 1959 that displayed some boulders and indistinct earth heaves akin to the Mima Mounds. Unfortunately, the remainder of the series, some ninety-eight photos, was missing and unaccounted for since an office fire at the old courthouse in '79.

Wallace went into Helen's suite, waited near the door while Cecil massaged Helen's cramped thigh muscles. Kate had arrived early. The burly nurse dabbed Helen's brow with a washcloth and murmured encouragement. Helen's fish-black eyes rolled with blindness and fear. There was nothing of comprehension or sanity in them, and the cleft in her forehead and cheek was livid as a gangrenous brand. She howled and howled without inflection, the flat repeating utterance of an institutionalized mind.

Wallace limped upstairs to his office, turned up the radio. His hip throbbed fiercely--sympathy pangs. His hand itched with fading scabs. What had happened to him that night in the alley behind the Marlin? What was happening now? He found some Quaaludes in a drawer, chased them with a healthy belt of JD, and put his head down in his arms, a kindergartner again.

10.

Wallace was standing in Skip's dining room. Wallace's feet were nailed down with railroad spikes.

"Why'd you let them go?" Delaney asked. Delaney slouched against a cabinet, smoking.

Watery light washed out the details. Randy's prosthesis shone upon the table, plastic fingers blooming in a vase. A two-inch crack separated the fancy tiled ceiling. There was movement inside. Squirming.

Skip swaggered from the kitchen and plunged oversized hands into a bowl of limp, yellow noodles. He drew forth a clump, steaming and dripping, plopped it on his head as a wig. Grinned the wacky grin of a five-year-old stoned out of his gourd on cough syrup.

"Why are you doing that?" Wallace tried to modulate his voice; his voice was scratchy, was traitorously shrill.

Skip drooled and capered, shook fistfuls of noodles like pom-poms.

Wallace said, "Where's Randy? Skip, is Randy here?"

"Nope."

"Where is he?"

"With the god of the barn-b-barn--b-barn barn barn barn!"

"Skip, where's Randy?"

"In the barn with Bay-el, Bay-el, Bay-el. Playing a game." Skip hummed a ditty to his noodles, cast Wallace a sidelong glance of infinite slyness. "Snufalupagus LOVES raw spaghetti. No sauce, no way! I pretend it's worms. Worms get big, Wallace. You wouldn't believe how big some worms get. Worms crawl inside your guts and make babies. They crawl up your nose, your ears, into your mouth. If somebody grinds you into itty-bitty pieces and a worm eats you, it'll know all the stuff you did." He lowered his voice. "They can crawl up your butt and make ya do the hula dance and jabber like Margie Thatcher on crank!"

"Where's Randy?"

"Playing sock puppets." Skip began ramming noodles down his throat. "He's Kermit de Frog!"

"Should've stopped them, Boss. Now they've stirred up the wasps' nest. You're fucked." Delaney stubbed his cigarette and walked through the wall.

Wallace awoke in darkness, fearful and disoriented. He had drunkenly migrated to his bedroom at some fuzzy period and burrowed into the covers. He remembered long, narrow corridors, bloody nebulas splattered against leaded glass, and kirlian figures scorched into the walls: skeletal fragments of clawing hands and gaping mouths.

*Wallace*, Helen said. She was there with him in the room, wedged high in the corner of the walls where they joined the ceiling. She gleamed white as bone and her eyes and mouth and the crack in her face were black as the pits between the stars. *There's a hole you can't fill*, she said.

Wallace screamed in his throat, a mangled, pathetic cry. The clouds moved across the moon and reshaped the shadows on the wall and Helen was not hanging there with her black black eyes, her covetous mouth, or the stygian worm that fed on her face. There were only moonbeams and the reflections of branches like skinned fingers against the plaster.

Wallace lay trembling. Eventually he drifted away and slept with the covers over his head. He flinched at the chorus of night sounds, each knock upon the door.

11.

"Skip. Are you eating? Where've you been?"

"Nothing, Wallace. I'm tired."

"Skip, it's three. I've been calling for hours. Why don't you come over."

"Ahh, no thanks. I'm gonna sleep a while. I'm tired."

"Skip."

"Yeah?"

"Where's Randy? He doesn't answer his phone."

"Dunno. Try him at the office. Little bastard's always working late."

"I tried his office, Skip."

"Okay. That's right. He's out of town. On business."

"Business. What kind of business?"

"Dunno. Business."

"Where did he go, exactly? Skip? Skip, you still there?"

"Dunno. He won't be around much, I guess. There's a lot of business."

"Skip--"

"Wallace, I gotta sleep, now. Talk to you later. I'm very tired."

12.

Wallace sat on the steps, new cane across his knees, Bruno and Thor poised at his flanks like statuary come alive. The sun bled red and gold. The trees would be getting green buds any day now. He listened to the birds mating in the branches. The graveyard-shift security guard, a gray, melancholy fellow named Tom, was going off-duty. He came over to smoke a cigarette and introduce himself to his new boss. He was a talker, this dour, gaunt Tom. He used to drive school buses until his back went south--lower lumbar was a killer, yessiree. He was an expert security technician. Twenty-four years on the job; he had seen everything. The other two guys, Charlie and Dante, were kids, according to Tom. He promised to keep an eye on them for Wallace, make certain they were up to standard. Wallace said thanks and asked Tom to bring him the nightly surveillance video. The guard asked if he meant all four of them and Wallace considered that a moment before deciding, no, only the video feed from the garden area. Tom fetched it from the guard shack and handed it over without comment. The look on his face sufficed--he was working for a lunatic.

Wallace plugged the CD into the player on his theater-sized plasma television in the den. He called Randy's house and talked to Janice while silent, grainy night images flickered on the screen. Janice said Randy had left a cryptic message on the answering machine and nothing since. He had rambled about taking a trip and signed off by yelling, *Hallucigenia! Hallucigenia sparsa! It's a piece of something bigger--waaay bigger, honey!* Janice was unhappy. Randy had pulled crazy stunts before. He dodged lengthy stays in Federal penitentiaries as a college student and she had been there for the entire, wild ride. She expected the phone to ring at any moment and him to be in prison, or a hospital. What if he tried to sneak into Cuba again? What if he blew off his other hand? Who was going to wipe his ass then? Wallace reassured her that nothing of the sort was going to happen and made her promise to call when she heard anything.

Lance Pride dropped in to report his progress. Pride was lanky, a one-time NBA benchwarmer back in the seventies. He dressed in stale tweeds and emanated a palpable sense of repressed viciousness. His eyes were hard and small. He glanced at the video on the television and did not comment.

Pride confessed Joshua Choate appeared to be a dead end. His last known residence was a trailer court on the West Side of Olympia and he had abandoned the premises about three years ago. The former Ph.D. farm boy had not applied for a driver's license, a credit card, a job application, or anything else. Maybe he was living on the street somewhere, maybe he had skipped the country, maybe he was dead. Nobody had seen him lately, of that much Pride was certain.

Pride strewed a bundle of newspaper clippings on the coffee table, artifacts he had unearthed pertaining to Paul, Tyler, and Josh: stories detailing the promotion of Tyler Choate and a file picture of the young deputy sheriff grinning as he loomed near a Thurston County police cruiser, and another of him shackled and bracketed by guards after he had been exposed as a mastermind cultist; a shot of Joshua when he had been selected as an All-American tackle--his wide, flabby face was nearly identical to his brother's; articles from the mid-sixties following Paul Choate's hiring at the newly founded Evergreen State College

and his brief and largely undocumented collaboration with NASA regarding cosmic microwave background radiation. There were school records for Tyler and Josh--four-point-oh students and standout football players. Major universities had courted them with every brand of scholarship. Tyler did his time at Washington State, majored in psychology, perfect grades, but no sports, and joined the sheriff's department. Meanwhile, Josh earned a degree in physics at Northwestern, advanced degrees in theoretical physics from Caltech and MIT, and then dropped off the radar forever. Tyler eventually became implicated in a never-fully-explained scandal involving Satanism and rape and got dropped in a deep, dark hole. The only other curious detail regarding the younger brothers was the fact both of them had been banned from every casino within two hundred miles of Olympia. None of the joints ever caught them cheating, but they were unstoppable at the blackjack tables, and the houses became convinced the boys counted cards.

None of it seemed too useful and Wallace barely skimmed the surface items before conceding defeat and shoving the pile aside. Pride just smiled dryly and said he'd make another pass at things. He had a lead on the company that had sold the Choates a ton of fabricated metals in the sixties and seventies. Unfortunately the company had gone under, but he was looking into former employees. He told Wallace to hang onto the newspaper clippings and left with a promise to check in soon.

Wallace moped around the house, mixing his vodka with lots of orange juice in a feeble genuflection toward sobriety. He picked up the newspaper photo of Josh Choate aged seventeen, in profile with his shoulder pads on. He wore a slight smile, and his pixelated eye was inscrutable. *I am a loyal son. I am here to usher in the dark.*

The day was bright and hot like it often was in Western Washington during the spring. The garden filled the television with static gloom. Upstairs, Helen began to scream. Wallace was out of orange juice.

He called Lyle Ferguson. The contractor was cordial as ever. He was moving crews into the Otter Creek Housing Development, AKA: the old Choate place as of that morning. Yeah, Skip Arden had called him, sure; asked whether he could nose around the property. No problem, Ferguson had said, just don't trip and break anything. Pylons? Oh, yeah, they found some rocks on the site. Nothing a bulldozer couldn't handle....

13.

The next day Wallace became impatient and had Delaney drive him to the branch office of Fish and Wildlife. Short visit. Randy Freeman's supervisor told Wallace that Randy had two months' vacation saved. The lady thought perhaps he had gone to Canada. Next, he phoned the number Detective Adams gave him and got the answering machine. He hit the number for the front desk and was told Detective Adams was on sick leave--would he care to leave a message or talk to another officer?

Wallace sat in the rear of the Bentley, forehead pressed against the glass as they waited in traffic beside Sylvester Park. Two lean, sun-dried prostitutes washed each other's hair in the public drinking fountain. Nearby, beat cops with faces the shade of raw flank steak loomed over a shirtless man sprawled in the grass. The man laughed and flipped the cops off and a pug dog yapped raucously at the end of a rope tied to the man's belt.

Delaney chewed on a toothpick. He said, "Boss, where are we going with this?"

Wallace shrugged and wiped his face, his neck. His thoughts were shrill and inchoate.

"Well, I don't think it's a good idea," Delaney said.

"You should've kept feeding me my pills. Then we wouldn't be sitting here."

"You need to see a shrink. This is what they call the grieving process."

"Think I'm in the denial stage?"

"I don't know what stage to call it. You aren't doing so hot. You're running in circles." The car moved again. Delaney drove with the window rolled down, his arm on the frame. "Your wife isn't going to recover. It's a bitch and it hurts, I know. But she isn't going to come around, Mr. S. She won't ever be the woman you married. And you got to face that fact, look it dead in the eye. 'Cause, till you do, whatever screws are rattling loose in your head are going to keep on rattling." He glanced over at Wallace. "I'm sorry to say that. I'm real sorry."

"Don't be sorry," Wallace smiled, thin and sad. "Just stick with me if you can. I'll talk to that Swedish psychiatrist Green recommended. Ha, I've been ducking that guy since I got out of the hospital. I'll do that, but there's something else. I have to find out what the Choates were doing on that property."

"Pit bull, aren't you, Boss?" There was admiration mixed with the melancholy.

"Bruenig said the man moved out of state. He's wrong. Choate's in the neighborhood. Maybe he lives here, maybe he's visiting, hiding under a bridge. Whatever. I saw his tracks at the barn and I think he's been creeping around the garden. I told you." *Saw him in the alley, too, didn't you, Wally?* He shuddered at the recollection of that febrile mouth closing on him.

"Yup, you saw tracks. Almost a year ago," Delaney said. "If they were even his."

"Trust me, they were. Pride's running skips on him, although I'm getting the feeling this fellow isn't the type who's easy to find. That's why I've got Pride tracking down whoever sold the Choates the materials for their projects in the back forty. Maybe you can call in a favor with the Marconi boys, or Cortez, see if you can't turn up some names. I gotta know."

"Maybe you don't wanna know."

"Dee ... something's wrong. People are dying."

Delaney looked at him in the rearview mirror.

"You better believe it," Wallace said. "Stop acting like my wet nurse, damn it."

Delaney stared straight ahead. "Okay," he said.

"Thank you," Wallace said, slightly ashamed. He lighted a cigarette as a distraction.

They went to Skip's home, idled at the gate. Delaney leaned out and pressed on the buzzer until, finally, a butler emerged with apologies from the master of the house. The servant, a rigid, ramrod of a bloke, doubtless imported directly from the finest Hampton school of butlery, requested that they vacate the premises at once. Wallace waited until the butler was inside. He hurled a brandy flask Skip gave him some birthday past, watched with sullen pleasure as it punched a hole through a parlor window. Delaney laughed in amazement, shoved Wallace into the car, left rubber smoking on the breeze.

Wallace and Delaney were sitting in the study playing cards and eating a dinner of tuna fish sandwiches and Guinness when Lyle Ferguson called to say the barn had been razed. Ferguson hoped Helen would be more at peace. There was an awkward silence and then the men exchanged meaningless pleasantries and hung up.

"It's done," Wallace said. He drank the last of his beer and set the dead soldier near its mates.

Delaney dragged on his cigarette and tossed his cards down. He said, "Thing is, no matter how much you cut, cancer always comes back."

Wallace chose not to acknowledge that. "Next week, I'll hunt for the rest of those pylons, the ones in the woods, and take a jackhammer to them. I'll dynamite them if it comes to that."

"Not big on respecting cultural artifacts, are we?"

"I have a sneaking suspicion that it's better for us whatever culture they belong to is dead and in the ground." Wallace missed his little brother. The kid was an ace; he would have known what was what with Bruenig's story, the crazy altar in the barn, the pylons.

"I saw Janice yesterday. She's losing her marbles. Randy was supposed to take her and the kids to Yellowstone for spring vacation. She called the cops."

"I have two postcards from him." What Wallace didn't say was that there was something strange about the cards. They were unstamped, for one. And they seemed too old, somehow, their picturesque photographs of Mount Rainier and the Mima Mounds yellowing at the edges, as if they'd lingered on a gift shop rack for decades. Which, in fact, made sense when he checked the photo copyrights and saw the dates 1958 and 1971.

"Sure you do." Delaney dropped his butt into an empty bottle, pulled another cigarette from behind his ear and lighted it. His eyes were bloodshot. "Hate to admit it ... but I was a little stoned that day. When everything happened. Nothing major--I wasn't impaired, I mean."

"Hey, it doesn't matter. I'm not going to bust your chops over something stupid like that."

"No. It's important. I wasn't totally fucked up, but I don't completely trust my recollections either. Not *completely*."

"What're you talking about?"

"I pulled you out of the barn first. Then I ran in for Mrs. S. You're not supposed to move a person with injuries. Know why I moved her?"

Wallace's mouth was full of sand. He shook his head.

"Because it took the horse, Mr. S. The horse was already trussed like a fly in a spiderweb and hanging. I still see its hooves twitching. I didn't look too close. Figured I wouldn't have the balls to go under there and grab your wife." Delaney's mouth turned down. "That wasp nest of yours ... it had a face," he said and looked away. "An old man's face."

"Dee--"

"Randy was an okay dude. He deserves a pyre. You gonna deal, or what?"

15.

Night seeped down. It rained. The power came and went, stuttered in the wires. Wallace picked up on the second ring. The caller ID said, UNKNOWN NAME-UNKNOWN NUMBER.

"Hi, Wally. Your friend is right." The mouth on the other end was too close to the receiver, was full, sensual, and malicious.



Wallace's face stiffened. "Josh?"

"Cancer always returns because time is a ring. And a ring ... well, that's just a piece of metal around a hole." A wave of crackling interference drowned the connection.

"Josh!" No answer; only low, angry static.

The LED said,

THEREISAHOLENOMANCANFILLTHEREISAHOLENOMANCANFILLTHEREISAHOLENO  
MANCANFILL. Then nothing.

16.

Friday morning, Charlie, the dayshift security guard, brought Wallace a densely wrapped parcel from Lance Pride. The shipping address was a small town in Eastern Washington called Drummond and it had been written in a thin, backward slanting style that Wallace didn't recognize.

Wallace cut the package open and found a tape cassette and a battered shoebox jammed with musty papers--personal correspondence from the appearance. It bothered him, this delivery from Pride. Why not in person? Why not a phone call, at least? Goosebumps covered his arms.

Wallace retreated to his office. He made a drink and sat at his desk near the window that looked across the manicured lawn, the sleeping garden, and far out into the woods. He finished his drink without tasting it and fixed another and drank that too. Then he filled his glass again, no ice this time, no frills, and put the tape in the machine and pressed the button. The wall above his desk shifted from red to maroon and a chill breeze fluttered drapes. The afternoon light slid toward the edge of the Earth.

After seconds of static and muffled curses, Pride cleared his throat and began to speak.

"Wallace, hi. This is Wednesday evening and ... where am I. Uh, I'm at the Lone Tree Motel outside of Drummond on Highway 32 and I recently finished interviewing Tyler Choate. It's about two in the a.m. and I haven't slept since I dunno, so cut me slack if this starts to drag. The guards confiscated my tape recorder at the door, but Tyler gave me a notepad so I could write it down for later. He wanted to be certain you got your money's worth ... I'll try to hit the highlights as best I can. Bear with me....

"Okay, I went looking for the manufacturer that might've sold the Choates aluminum tubes, pipes or what have you. I called some people, did some digging, and came up with a name--Elijah Salter. Salter was a marine, vet of the Korean War; rode with the cavalry as a gunner and engineering specialist--survived Operation Mousetrap and had the Bronze Star and Ike's signature to prove it. This leatherneck Bronze Star-winner came home after the war, started a nice family and went back to school where he discovered he was a real whizbang mechanical engineer. He graduated and signed on with a metal fabrication plant over in Poulsbo. Calaban Industries. This plant makes all kinds of interesting stuff, mostly for aerospace companies and a certain East Coast college that was rigging a twenty-mile-long atom-smasher--more on that later.

"Well, old Sergeant Salter climbed the ladder to plant manager, got the keys to the executive washroom, the Club Med package, free dental. They gave him plenty of slack and he jumped at it, opened a sideline with his own special clientele--among these, the Choates. Struck me as a tad eerie, this overseer of a high tech company keeping a group of hicks in his black book, and I decided to run it to ground. Wasn't tough to track Salter, he'd retired in '84, renovated a villa near here. I kid you not, a dyed-in-the-wool Spanish villa like where Imperial era nobility cooled their heels. I couldn't believe my ex-jarhead could afford a spread that posh--guy had palm trees, marble fountains, you name it. You woulda been jealous. Tell you what: his sidelines musta been lucrative.

"Made it big, made it real big, and after Salter got over the shock of meeting me in his den with my revolver pointed at his gut, he offered me a scotch and soda and praised Kaleb Choate to the heavens. Claimed not to know any of the rest of the clan that was still alive. Oh, he knew *of* them, he'd corresponded with Paul Choate occasionally, but they hadn't ever met in person or anything like that. I didn't get it--Kaleb's been in the ground since 1947, but what the hell.

"The sergeant had gone soft, the way a lion in a cage goes soft--he still had that bloody gleam in his eye when he gestured at the house and said his patrons took care of their own.

"Patrons? The way it slithered out of his mouth, way he sneered when he said it, didn't make me too comfortable. Also, when he's bragging about all the wonderful things these patrons did for him, I noticed a painting hanging over the piano. Damned thing was so dark it was almost black and that's why it took me a while to make out it wasn't actually a portrait, it was a picture of a demon. Or something. Guy in a suit like muckety-mucks wore in the Roaring Twenties, but his head was sort of, well, deformed, I guess is the best way to put it. Like I said, though, the oil was so dark I couldn't quite figure what I was seeing--just that it reminded me of a beehive sittin' on a man's neck. That, and the hands were about as long as my forearm. Reminded me of spooky stories my granny used to tell about Australia during the Depression. The aborigines have this legend about desert spirits called the Mimis. The Mimis are so thin they turn sideways and slip through a crack in the wall. They grab snotty kids, drag 'em underground. Don't know why I thought of that--maybe the long, snaky hands rang a bell. Granny used to scare the holy shit outta us kids with her campfire tales.

"Now I'm studying Salter's dcor a bit more closely and, yep, he's got funky Gothic crap going on everywhere. Salter goes, sure, ya, ya betcha, we laid some aluminum cables on the Choate property; set up a few other gadgets too--but these projects were simply improvements on systems that had been in place for decades. I asked him what the idea was behind these cables, and he titters something about flytraps and keyholes. Kaleb Choate had been investigating alternate forms of energy and that's why he buried pipes and wires everywhere; he was building a superconductor, although his version was different, a breakthrough because it operated at high temperature. He used it to develop a whole bunch of toys. Salter used the word *squid* to describe them, except I don't think that's quite right either. Here it is--superconducting quantum interference device. SQUID, that's cute, huh. Oh, yeah ... about the weird rocks you saw. Those pylons scattered around the area have been there for thousands of years. Some ancient tribe set 'em up to achieve a prehistoric version of Kaleb's machine, kinda like the Pyramids were before their time. Those rocks are highly radioactive--but Salter said the radiation is of unknown origin, something today's science boys haven't classified, even.

"Said if I want to know the *dirty details*, I should speak with the Choate brothers. I didn't appreciate that answer much, so I bopped him around. He starts babbling at me in a foreign language--dunno *what* language, probably Korean, but it made my skin prickle--this old savage on his belly by the pool, grinning and yammering and leaking from his nose. Then Salter just stops all of a sudden and stares at me and he's obviously disgusted. I got a gun on him, I ain't afraid to hurt him a little or a lot, and here he is shaking his head as if I'm some brat who's shat his diaper at a dinner party. He says he hopes I live so long as to bear witness and join the great revelry. Says my skin will fly from a flagpole. And all the pistol-whipping in the world wouldn't encourage him to say anything else. Not in English, anyhow. I ransacked his house, found a shoebox of letters and postcards from P., M., and T. Choate to Salter dated 1967 through 2002, and there were some drawings of things the Choates were building; blueprints.... Oh, and I swiped a rolodex chock full of interesting names. Creepy bastard had the Lieutenant Governor's home number, I kid you not. Guy's handwriting was goddamned sloppy, but I spotted one for Tyler Choate, the ex-sheriff's deputy. I decided Salter was right--best to have a chat with Tyler, get it straight from the source.

"Choate was my only choice. According to the records, Tyler and Joshua were the last of the breed, discounting obscure family branches, illegitimate kids, and so on. Since I'd been striking out with Josh, and Tyler's doing twenty to life in the state pen, I went the easy route.

"Tyler's not at Walla Walla anymore; there'd been some razzle-dazzle with the paperwork and he got transferred north to a max security facility. Place called Station 3, between Lind and Marengo on the Rattlesnake Flat.

"Choate surprised me. Friendly. Real damned friendly. Strange accent; spoke very distinctly, as if he were a 'right proper' gentleman, not a con nabbed for assorted nastiness. In fact, I got the impression he was eager for my visit. Lonely. Didn't care what I was after, either. I gave him a cockamamie story, naturally, but I needn't have bothered. Sonofabitch was rubbing his hands together over the phone.

"It was a date. Long drive and I hate going east. Once you climb over the mountains it's nothing but wheat fields, desert, and blowing dust. This Station 3 was on the outskirts of the Hanford Nuclear Reservation. It sat at the end of a dirt road in the middle of a prairie. The earth is black in those parts; salt deposits. Humongous black rocks and pine trees scattered around. Coyotes, jackrabbits, and rattlesnakes.

"I went by an Indian reservation; heard there's a pretty nice casino, but I didn't check. The Station itself was depressing--a bunch of crappy concrete houses inside a storm fence with rusty rolls of barbwire on top. Some buses were parked near the loading docks, the kind that are painted gray and black with mesh on the windows, said FRANKLIN COUNTY CORRECTIONS in big letters. A reject military base is how it looked.

"Way, way out in a field men were hoeing rows in biblical tradition; seems the prison industry, such as it is, revolves around selling potatoes and carrots to the local tribe. A dozen cons in jumpsuits milled in the yard, pulling weeds, busting asphalt to make way for the new parking lot. Don't know why they needed one--the screws and admin parked in a garage and there were maybe three cars in front, counting mine.

"After I handed my I.D. to the guards in the gatehouse, they buzzed me through to a short, uncovered promenade. Heavy gauge chain link made a funnel toward the main complex and as I walked I noticed there's graffiti on the concrete walls. Some of it'd been whitewashed, but only some. I saw SHAITAN IS THE MASTER and PRAISE BELIAL. BOW TO CHEMOSH O MAGGOTS. THE OLD ONE IS COMING. Frankly, it gave me the willies. Told myself they hadn't gotten around to scrubbing those sections. They'd missed a spot or two. Uh-huh.

"I was beginning to regret my impulsive nature. Not as if I'm green, or anything; I've been locked inside the kit kat for a minor beef. More than the graffiti was playing on my nerves, though. The guards seemed off key. The whole bunch of them were sluggish as hornets drunk on hard cider. Swear to God one was jacking off up in the tower; his rifle kinda bounced on its shoulder strap.

"Warden Loveless, he's this pencil-dick bean counter with thick glasses; he didn't blink while we were jawing. Sounded like one of my undergrad English lit profs, droned through his nose. Don't recall his little list of rules and regs, but I can't forget him drooling on his collar. He kept dabbing it with a fancy handkerchief. I tried not to stare, but damn.

"The warden says he's glad I made it, he thought I had changed my mind, and he sounded relieved, joked about sending some of the boys to bring me in if I hadn't come. Warden Loveless says Tyler Choate is expecting me, that we should go visit him right away, and let me tell you the only reason I didn't turn on my heel and walk out was there were several men holding carbines at half mast and staring at me with zombie eyes, and I think some of them were drooling too. See, I coulda sworn Loveless said, *Master*

instead of Tyler. Acoustics were pretty screwed up in there, though.

"Loveless takes me on a walking tour of the prison. Place probably hadn't been remodeled since the forties or fifties, exposed pipe and those grilled-in bulbs. Damp and foul as a latrine, mildew creeping in every joint. Damned dark; seemed like most of the lights had been busted and never replaced. Another odd detail--three quarters of the cells were empty. We've got the planet's most crowded prison system and this place is deserted.

"We rode an elevator to the sublevels, a steel cage like coal miners crowd into. Down, way down. The cage rattled and groaned and I never realized before that I'm claustrophobic. Okay, something funny happened to me. The walls closed in and my collar got tight. I ... started seeing things. No sound, only images, clear as day, like my mind was the Bijou running a matinee horror flick.

"That goddamned barn of yours. My mom and pop squirming in a lake of worms. Helen grinning at me. Jellyfish. I hate those things. Got stung once in Virginia when I spent the summer with my cousin. I nearly drowned. Goddamned things. I saw other stuff, stuff I don't want to remember. So damn real I got vertigo, thought the floor was gonna drop from under me.

"Maybe I'm not claustrophobic, maybe it was something else. Fumes. Stress. My daddy had shellshock when he came home from Korea. Flipped his wig every so often, beat the hell outta his fellow drunks at the tavern. When he was like that, he'd sit in his rocker till the a.m., cleaning his Winchester and staring at nothing, face of a china plate. Said he saw the gooks coming, too many, not enough bullets, stabbed so many his bayonet got dull as a butter knife. My old man drank wood grain alcohol through a funnel; smelled like a refinery before he died.

"Riding down in that elevator, I bet my face looked like his when he was fighting ghosts. I played it cool, gritted my teeth and thought about the Red Sox batting order, getting laid by the chick who used to come by the Mud Shack every Thursday with her sister, whatever happy shit I could dream up on short notice. The vertigo and the visions went away when we hit bottom. A broken circuit. After a few steps it was easy to think the whole episode was a brain fart, my bout with the pink elephants. Yeah, I had DT's. Been trying to kick the sauce, and you know how that is.... My hands were doing the Parkinson's polka.

"Loveless called this level the Isolation Ward; told me to follow the lights to H Block; said he'd wait for me. No rush. Choate didn't entertain every day.

"More graffiti. More by a thousand fold. Numbers, symbols, gibberish. It covered the tunnel walls, ceiling, the cell bars. Probably inside the cells too, but those things were black as a well-digger's asshole. Kicker is, I saw one of the fellas responsible for the artwork--this scrawny man in filthy dungarees was doing the honors. Must've been eighty years old; His ribs stuck out and his eyes were milky. Blind as hell. He carted a couple buckets of black and white paint and was slapping brush-loads onto the concrete. After he'd made a nice mess, he'd get a different brush to start turning the shapeless gobs into letters and such. Precise as a surgeon, too. Kind of fascinating except for the parts I could read were little gems like: **WORMS OF THE MAW WILL FEED ON THY LIVER** and **INFIDELS WILL CHOKE ON THE MASTER'S SHIT**.

"There was a guard station and a gate. While the gate was grinding open I heard music up ahead, distorted by the echoes of clanging metal and my heart. Thought I was gonna have a coronary right there. A bloody glow oozed from the mouth of a cell. It was the only light after the wimpy fluorescent strip in the guard shack.

"Tyler Choate had himself a cozy pad there in the bowels of Station 3. They'd even removed the door; it was lying farther down the hall, as if somebody had chucked it aside for the recycling man. Chinese

paper lamps were everywhere, floating in the dark; that's what gave off the red glow. The bunks had been ripped out, replaced by a hammock and some chairs. Bamboo. Oriental rugs, a humongous vase with a dead fern. Big wooden cabinets loaded with knickknacks, bric-a-bracs and liquor. Sweet Jesus, the old boy loves his liquor. Found out later most of the doodads were from China, the Polynesian Islands, a bunch of places I can't pronounce. Who would've guessed this hick deputy for a traveling man, right?

"Music was coming from an antique record player--the type with a horn and a hand crank. A French diva sang the blues and Tyler Choate soaked her up in a big reed chair, feet propped, eyes closed. Real long hair; oily black in a pony tail looped around his neck. He looked like a Satanic Buddha--skinny on the ends and bloated in the middle.

"I noticed the shoe collection. Dozens and dozens of shoes and boots, lined up neat as you please along the wall and into the shadows of the adjoining cell where the red light didn't quite reach. None of them were the right size for Choate--his slippers were enormous; the size of snowshoes, easy. Tailor-made for sure.

"Then he says to me, *Welcome to the Mandarin Suite, Mr. Pride. Take off your shoes.* His voice was lispy, like the queers that hang around beauty parlors. But not like that either. This was different. He sounded ... amused. Smug.

"The elevator ride had rattled me, sure, sure, but not enough to account for the dread that fell on me as I stood in that dungeon and gawped at him. I felt woozy again, same as the elevator, worse than the elevator. Swear, he coulda been beaming these terrible thoughts into my head. I kept seeing Randy Freeman's face, all splattered and buried in mud. Why would I see such a thing, Wally? Doesn't make sense.

"When Choate stood to shake my hand, I nearly crapped my pants. I knew from the files the Choate brothers were tall, but I swear he wasn't much shy of eight feet, and an axe-handle broad. He wore a white silk shirt with stains around the pits. He smelled rank. Rank as sewage, a pail of fish guts gone to the maggots. A fly landed on his wrist, crawled into his sleeve. Bruenig wasn't jiving about those kids being filthy.

"My hand disappeared into Choate's and I decided that I'd really and truly screwed up. Like sticking my hand into a crack in the earth and watching it shut. Except, he didn't pulp my bones, didn't yank me in close for a hillbilly waltz, nothing like that. He said he was happy to meet a real live P.I., made me sit in the best chair and poured Johnny Walker Black in greasy shot glasses, drank to my health. All very cordial and civilized. He asked if I had met his brother, and I said no, but Josh was hanging around your house and it really had to stop. He agreed that Josh was on the rude side--he'd always been a touch wild. Choate asked what you thought about the barn, if you'd figured it out yet. I said no and he laughed, said since you hadn't blown your brains out, you must not know the whole truth, which, to me, sounded like some more hocus pocus crap was in the offing. I wasn't wrong on that count. Did I know anything about String Theory? He thought I looked like a guy who might dabble in particle physics between trailing unfaithful husbands and busting people's heads. I told him I'm more of a Yeats man and he said poetry was an inferior expression of the True Art. What about molecular biology; surely I craved to understand how we apes rose from primordial slime. No? Supersymmetry? Hell no, says I and he chuckled and filled my glass. Guess the Bruenig spiel was right about a few things. The Choate men were scientists, always have been interested in the stars and nature, time travel and all sorts of esoteric shit. Mostly they studied how animals and insects live, how, lemme see ... how *biological organisms adapt and evolve in deep quantum time. The very nature of space time itself.* Choate said the family patriarchs had been prying into that particular branch of scientific research since before the Dark Ages.

"What was Kaleb's interest? Tyler said, *Hypermuation and punctuated equilibrium*. Started in on those SQUIDS Salter told me about. Kaleb wanted to accelerate his own genetic evolution. He grafted these homemade SQUIDS onto his brain and that jumpstarted the process. I can just imagine the operation. Brrr. He survived without lobotomizing himself and it was a roaring success. The implant heightened his mental acuity by an incredible degree, which led to more inventions--*Devices Tesla never dreamt of--never dared!* Jesus Louise ... shoulda seen Tyler Choate's face when he said that. He leered at me like he intended to make me his *numero uno* bitch.

"What kind of devices, you may be asking. See, Grandpa figured there was a way to configure electromagnetic pulses to create a black hole, or a kind of controlled tear in subatomic matter, and I heard some think-tank guys in Boston tried the very same thing a few years ago, so between you and me, maybe the geezer wasn't totally bonkers, but anyhow. Kaleb wanted to use this black hole, or whatever the hell it's supposed to be, to access a special radioactive energy. They'd detected traces of it in the pylons, like Salter said, and Tyler confirmed the radiation doesn't exist anywhere in the known spectrum.

"I'm blitzed and feeling a bit kamikaze, so I ask, where's it come from, then? *Out there*, is how Tyler put it. *Out there in the great Dark*. So picture this: this friggin' psycho hillbilly leaning over me with his face painted like blood in the lamplight, sneering about *ineffable mysteries* and flexing his monster hands as if he's practicing to choke a camel. He grins and says Grandpa Kaleb bored a hole in space and crawled through. Tyler started spouting truly wild-ass stuff. Some bizarre mumbo-jumbo about a vast rift, the cosmic version of the Marianas Trench. He said very old and truly awful things are drifting in the dark and it's damned lucky for us apes that these huge, blind things haven't taken any notice of planet Earth.

"Tyler said Kaleb became *The door and the bridge. The mouth of the pit*. And if that wasn't enough, Tyler and Josh are hanging around because the rest of Kaleb's heirs have been taken to His bosom, rejoined the fold. Tyler and Josh had been left with us chickens to, I dunno, guard the henhouse or something. To make things ready. Ready for what? *For the Old Man, of course. For his return*. I didn't press him on that.

"Another thing ... The bonus effect of Kaleb's gizmo's electromagnetic pulse is it's real nifty for shutting off car engines and stranding people near the ol' farm ... I asked why they wanted to strand people near their property and he just looked at me. Scary, man. He said, *Why? Because it gives Him tremendous pleasure to meet new and interesting people. Grandfather always liked people. Now He loves them. Sadly, folks don't drop by too often. We keep Him company as best we can. We're good boys like that*.

"By this point I was pretty much past wasted and I know he went on and on, but most of it flew over my head. One thing that stuck with me as I got ready to stagger outta there, is he clamped one giant paw on my shoulder and said with that creepy smile of his, *Out there is a relative term, it's closer than you might think. Oh my, the great Dark is only as far away as your closet when you kill the light ... as your reflection when it thinks you aren't looking. Bye, bye and see you soon*.

"I beat it topside. Barefoot. Bastard kept my shoes.... "Pride's narrative faltered and was replaced by a thumping noise in the background. A chair squeaked. He spoke from a distance, perhaps the motel room door. "Yeah? Oh, hey--" His voice degenerated into jags of a garbled conversation followed by a long, blank gap; then a wheeze like water gurgling in a hose. Another gap. Someone coughed and chuckled. Then silence.

Wallace gazed at the rolling wheels as dead air hissed through the speaker. He emptied the dingy shoebox on his desk, pushed the yellow papers like a man shuffling dominos or tarot cards. He poured another drink from the dwindling bottle, squinted at the cramped script done in bleeding ink, whole

paragraphs deformed by water stains and stains of other kinds and the depredations of silverfish. There were schematics, as Delaney had promised--arcane, incomprehensible figures with foreign notations.

The house was dark but for the lamp on Wallace's desk. The walls shuddered from a blast of wind. Rain smacked hard against the windows. Floorboards creaked heavily and Wallace strained to detect the other fleeing sound--a rustling, a whisper, an inhalation like a soft, weak moan. He wiped his face and listened, but there was nothing except whistling pipes. He poured another drink and now the bottle was dry.

He sifted through the letters, sprinkling them with vodka because his hands were trembling. He studied one dated February 1971. It was somewhat legible:

*Eli,*

*The expedition has gone remarkably well, thanks to your timely assistance. It is indeed as Grandfather says, "Per aspera ad astra that we seek communion and grace from our patrons of antiquity." I shall keep you apprised of developments. Yours, P. Choate.*

Another, from June 1971:

*Grandfather has sent word from the gulf, Ab ovo, as it were. It is as they promised ... and more. His words to me: "Non sum qualis eram." It is the truth. He is the door and the bridge and we are grateful. On the day all doors are thrown open, you shall be remembered and honored for your service to the Grand Estate. Thank you, dear friend. Yours, P. Choate.*

He counted roughly three dozen others, including some photographs, mostly ruined. He paused at a warped and faded postcard picturing a ramshackle barn in a field. It was unclear whether this was an etching or an actual photograph--the perspective featured the southeast face of the barn and the road in the distance. He could barely make out the Bentley on the shoulder, a man working under the raised hood. The back of the card was unstamped and grimy with fingerprints. It had been addressed to Mr. Wallace Smith of 1313 Vineland Drive. October 6, 1926:

*Hello, Wallace.*

*Helen wishes you were here.*

*Regards, K. Choate.*

Wallace's belly sank into itself. What could it possibly mean?

*Grandfather always liked people. Now he loves them.*

The house shook again and Wallace dropped the card. He was nauseated. "Mr. Smith?" The intercom squawked and he almost pissed himself. "--to say good night?" Kate was nearly unintelligible over the intercom.

"What!" He nearly shattered the plastic from the force of his blow. He took a breath, said in a more reasonable tone, "I'll be there in a minute."

The desk lamp flickered. *I am here to usher in the dark.* Wallace dialed Pride's cell number and received no answer. He pushed away from the desk, stood, and shuffled in a dream to the hallway. A draft ran cold around his ankles and when he thumbed the switch, the lights hesitated in their sockets, grudgingly ignited and shone dim and milky. Shadows spread across the floor and climbed the walls.

Wallace plodded forward and ended up at Helen's door. Helen's door was made of thick oak and decorated with filigreed panels. He stood before the oak door and breathed through his mouth, blowing like a dray horse.

*Cancer always returns.*

Wallace turned the knob and pushed into Helen's apartment. He slapped the switch and nothing happened. The dimensions were all wrong; the room had become an undersea cavern where a whale had bloated on its gasses and putrefied. Objects assumed phantom shapes in the sleepy murk: the therapy table and its glinting buckles; a pinewood armoire; a scattering of chairs; the unmade bed, a wedge of ivory sheets and iron lattice near the opaque window.

Wallace detected a hushed, sticky sound. The muffled squelch of a piglet snuffling its mother's teat, smacking and slobbering with primal greed. As he turned toward the disturbance, something damp and slender tickled the back of his neck. Then his scalp, his left ear, his cheek. Something like moist jelly strands entangled him. These tendrils floated everywhere, a veritable hanging garden of angel's hair gently undulating in the crosshatched light from the hallway. Wallace cried out and batted the strands like a man flailing at cobwebs.

He gaped up into the blue-black shadows and did not comprehend the puzzle of dangling feet, one in a shoe, the other encased in hosiery; or the legs, also wrapped in nylon hose that terminated at the hem of a skirt. Wallace did not recognize the mannequin extremities, jittering feebly with each impulse of a live current. The left shoe, a square, wooden thing with a blunt nose, plopped onto the hardwood as the legs quivered and slid upward, vanishing to mid-thigh attended by the sound of a squishing sponge.

Wallace was confused; his mind twittered with half-formed memories, fragmented pictures. All circuits busy, please try again. He thought, *Kate's shoe. Kate's shoe is on the floor. Kate's legs. Where's the rest of her. Where oh where oh fuck me.* He beheld it then, an elephantine mass lodged in the ceiling, an obscene scribble of shivering tapioca and multi-jointed limbs. A gory fissure traversed its axis and disgorged the myriad glutinous threads. The behemoth wore a wicked old man's face with a clotted vandyke, a hooked nose, and wet, staring eyes that shone like cinders of dead stars. The old man patiently sucked Kate the Nurse into his mouth. Ropes of viscid yolk dripped from the corners of the old man's lips and pattered on the floor. Wallace thought with hysterical glee, *Gulper eel, gulper eel!* Which was an eel that lived in the greatest depths and could quite handily unhinge its skull to swallow large prey.

Wallace reeled.

The bloody fissure throbbed and seeped; and following the convulsion, he discovered the abomination's second head. He glimpsed Helen's pallid torso, her drooping breasts and slack face--an alto-relievo sculpted from wax at the apex of the monstrous coagulation of her body. The crack nearly divided her face and skull and it fractured the ceiling with a jagged chasm that traveled far beyond the reach of any light.

Helen opened her eyes and smiled at Wallace. Her smile was sweet and infinitely mindless. Her mouth formed a perfect black circle that began to dilate fantastically and she craned her overlong neck as if to kiss him.

Wallace screamed and stumbled away. He was a man slogging in mud. The vermiculate tendrils boiled around him, coiled in his hair, draped his shoulders and slithered down the collar of his shirt.

He was still screaming when he staggered into the hall and yanked the door shut. He crabbed two steps sideways and tottered. His legs gave way and the floor and walls rolled and then he was prone with his right arm flung out before him in a ghastly imitation of a breast stroke.



A wave of lassitude suffused him, as if the doctor had given him a yeoman's dose of morphine, and in its wake, pins and needles, and hollowness. Countless tendrils had oozed through the doorjamb, the spaces between the hinges, the keyhole, and burrowed into him so snugly he was vaguely aware of their insistent twitches and tugs. Dozens were buried in the back of his hand and arm, reshaping the veins and arteries; more filaments nested in his back, neck and skull, everywhere. As he watched, unable to blink, their translucence flushed a rich crimson that flowed back toward their source, drawn inexorably by an imponderable suction.

He went under.

18.

Wallace regained consciousness.

The veins in his hand had collapsed and the flesh was pale and sunken like the cracked hand of a mummy. Near his cheek rested a sandal that surely belonged to a giant. The sandal was caked in filth and blood.

"Are you sleeping, brother Wallace?" Josh said. "I want to show you something beautiful." He opened the door. Wallace's eyes rolled up as he was steadily drawn across the threshold and into darkness.

*Oh, sweetheart*, Helen said eagerly.

19.

Delaney came in that morning and boiled himself a cup of instant coffee and poured a bowl of cereal and had finished both before he realized something was wrong. The house lay vast and quiet except for small sounds. Where was the hubbub of daily routine? Helen had usually begun shrieking by now, and Cecil inevitably put on one of the old classical heavies like Mozart or Beethoven in hopes of calming her down. Not today--today nothing stirred except the periodic rush of air through the ducts.

Delaney lighted a cigarette and smoked and tried to convince himself he was jumpy over nothing. He went upstairs and found Wallace's bedroom empty. Near Helen's suite, he came across a muddy track. The shoe print was freakishly large. Delaney pulled a switchblade from his pocket and snicked it open. He put his hand on the door knob and now his nerves were jangling full alarm like they sometimes had back in the bad old days of gang battles and liquor store hold-ups and dodging Johnny Law. The air was supercharged. And the doorknob was sticky. He stepped back and regarded, stoic as a wolf in the face of the unknown, his red fingers. A fly hummed and circled his head.

He bounced the switchblade in his palm and decided, to hell with it, he was going in, and then a woman giggled and whispered something and part of the something contained *Delaney*. He knew that voice. It had been months since he heard it last. "Screw this noise," he said, very matter of fact. He turned and loped for the stairs.

Delaney calmed by degrees once he was outside, and walked swiftly across the waterlogged grounds to his cottage where he threw a few essentials into his ancient sea bag--the very one his daddy brought home from the service--checked his automatic and stuffed it under his shirt. He started his Cadillac and rolled to the gate. His breathing had slowed, he had combed his hair and gotten a grip and was almost normal on the surface. At least his hands had stopped shaking. He forced a cool, detached smile. The smile that said, *Hello, officer. Why, yes, everything is fine.*

Charlie the guard was a pimply twenty-something with disheveled hair and an ill-fitting uniform. He was obviously hung over and scarcely glanced up at Delaney as he buzzed the gate. "See ya, Mr. Dee."

"Hey, any trouble lately? Ya know--anything on the cameras?"

Charlie shrugged. "Nah. Well, uh, the feed's been kinda wonky off 'n on."

"Wonky?"

"Nothin' to worry 'bout, Mr. Dee. We ain't seen any prowlers."

"What about the night fella?"

"Uh, Tom. He woulda said somethin' if there was a problem. Why?"

"No reason. I figured as much. You take care, partner." Delaney pushed his sunglasses into place and gave the guard a little two-finger salute. He cast a quick, final glance at the house in his rearview mirror, but the view was spoiled by a crack in the glass. Had that been there before? He tacked it on his list of things-to-do once he got wherever he was going. Where was he going? Far away, that was certain.

Delaney gunned the engine and cruised down the driveway. He vanished around the bend as Charlie set aside his copy of *Sports Illustrated* to answer the phone. "Uh, yeah. Oh, mornin', Mr. Smith. Uh... Okay, sure. Right now? Yessir!" Charlie hung up with a worried expression. It was only his second week on the job. He walked briskly to the big house, opened the door, and hurried inside.