

UNCOLLECTED
STORIES

STEPHEN KING

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JHONATHAN AND THE WITCHES

From *First Words: Earliest Writing from Favorite Contemporary Authors* (1993). King wrote this in 1956 at the age of 9 for his Aunt Gert who used to pay him a quarter per story.

Once upon a time there was a boy named Jhonathan. He was smart, handsome, and very brave. But Jhonathan was a cobbler's son. One day his father said, "Jhonathan, you must go and seek your fortune. You are old enough."

Jhonathan, being a smart boy, knew he better ask the king for work. So he set out. On the way, he met a rabbit who was a fairy in disguise. The scared thing was being pursued by hunters and jumped into Jhonathan's arms. When the hunters came up Jhonathan pointed excitedly and shouts, "That way, that way!"

After the hunters had gone, the rabbit turned into a fairy and said, "You have helped me. I will give you three wishes. What are they?"

But Jhonathan could not think of anything, so the fairy agreed to give him when he needed them. So Jhonathan kept walking until he made the kingdom without incident. So he went to the king and asked for work. But, as luck would have it, the king was in a very bad mood that day. So he vented his mood on Jhonathan.

"Yes there is something you can do. On yonder Mountain there are three witches. If you can kill them, I will give you 5,000 crowns. If you cannot do it I will have your head! You have 20 days." With this he dismissed Jhonathan.

"Now what am I to do?" thought Jhonathan. "Well I shall try."

Then he remembered the three wishes granted him and set out for the mountain.

Now Jhonathan was at the mountain and was just going to wish for a knife to kill the witch, when he heard a voice in his ear, "The first witch cannot be pierced. The second witch cannot be pierced or smothered. The third cannot be pierced, smothered and is invisible."

With this knowledge Jhonathan looked about and saw no one. Then he remembered the fairy, and smiled. He then went in search of the first witch. At last he found her. She was in a cave near the foot of the mountain, and was a mean looking hag. He remembered the fairy words, and before the witch could do anything but give him an ugly look, he wished she should be smothered. And Lo! It was done. Now he went higher in search of the second witch. There was a second cave

higher up. There he found the second witch. He was about to wish her smothered when he remembered she could not be smothered. And the before the witch could do anything but give him an ugly look, he had wished her crushed. And Lo! It was done Now he had only to kill the third witch and he would have the 5,000 crowns. But on the way up, he was plagued with thoughts of how?

Then he hit upon a wonderful plan. Then, he saw the last cave. He waited outside the entrance until he heard the witch's footsteps. He then picked up a couple of big rocks and wishes. He then wished the witch a normal woman and Lo! She became visible and then Jhonathan struck her head with the rocks he had. Jhonathan collected his 5,000 crowns and he and his father lived happily ever after.

PEOPLE, PLACES AND THINGS

Self-published book of one-page stories that King co-authored with school friend Chris Chelsey at the age of 13 (Triad Publishing 1960). The complete contents read:

- Foreword – Stephen King
- ‘The Hotel at the End of the Road’** – Stephen King*
- ‘Genius’** – Chris Chelsey
- ‘Top Forty News, Weather, and Sports’** – Chris Chelsey
- ‘Bloody Child’** – Chris Chelsey
- ‘I’ve Got to Get Away!’** – Stephen King**
- ‘The Dimension Warp’** – Stephen King (listed in contents, now lost)
- ‘The Thing at the Bottom of the Well’** – Stephen King
- ‘Reward’** – Chris Chelsey
- ‘The Stranger’** – Stephen King
- ‘A Most Unusual Thing’** – Chris Chelsey
- ‘Gone’** – Chris Chelsey
- ‘They’ve Come’** – Chris Chelsey
- ‘I’m Falling’** – Stephen King (listed in contents, now lost)
- ‘The Cursed Expedition’** – Stephen King
- ‘The Other Side of the Fog’** – Stephen King
- ‘Scared’** – Chris Chelsey
- ‘Curiosity Kills the Cat’** – Chris Chelsey
- ‘Never Look Behind You’** – Stephen King and Chris Chelsey

*Published in the *Market Guide for Young Writers* (4th Edition), by Writer’s Digest Books, this story was printed exactly as it originally appeared. In 1986, the story was slated to be published in *Flip* magazine, but the student literary magazine ceased publication before the story made it to press. It was finally published in 1993.

**Published in *Famous Monsters of Filmland* magazine, No. 202, Spring ’94 under the title *The Killer*. The story was originally written from the main character’s point of view. In 1963, when he was 14, King rewrote the story in third person and submitted it to *Spacemen* magazine, a companion to *Famous Monsters*, but it was rejected. It was finally published in *Famous Monsters* 31 years later.

THE HOTEL AT THE END OF THE ROAD

“Faster!” Tommy Riviera said. “Faster!”

“I’m hitting 85 now,” Kelso Black said.

“The cops are right behind us,” Riviera said. “Put it up to 90.” He leaned out the window. Behind the fleeing car was a police car, with siren wailing and red light flashing.

“I’m hitting the side road ahead,” Black grunted. He turned the wheel and the car turned into the winding road – spraying gravel.

The uniformed policeman scratched his head. “Where did they go?”

His partner frowned. “I don’t know. They just – disappeared.”

“Look,” Black said. “Lights ahead.”

“It’s a hotel,” Riviera said wonderingly. “Out on this wagon track, a hotel! If that don’t beat all! The police’ll never look for us there.”

Black, unheeding of the car’s tires, stamped on the brake. Riviera reached into the back seat and got a black bag. They walked in.

The hotel looked just like a scene out of the early 1900s.

Riviera rang the bell impatiently. An old man shuffled out. “We want a room,” Black said.

The man stared at them silently.

“A room,” Black repeated.

The man turned around to go back into his office.

“Look, old man,” Tommy Riviera said. “I don’t take that from anybody.” He pulled out his thirty-eight. “Now you give us a room.”

The man looked ready to keep going, but at last he said: “Room five. End of the hall.”

He gave them no register to sign, so they went up. The room was barren except for an iron double bed, a cracked mirror, and soiled wallpaper.

“Aah, what a crummy joint,” Black said in disgust. “I’ll bet there’s enough cockroaches here to fill a five-gallon can.”

The next morning when Riviera woke up, he couldn’t get out of bed. He couldn’t move a muscle. He was paralyzed. Just then the old man came into view. He had a needle which he put into Black’s arms.

“So you’re awake,” he said. “My, my, you two are the first additions to my museum in twenty-five years. But you’ll be well preserved. And you won’t die. “You’ll go with the rest of my collection of living museum. Nice specimens.”

Tommy Riviera couldn’t even express his horror.

I'VE GOT TO GET AWAY

“What am I doing here?” Suddenly I wondered. I was terribly frightened. I could remember nothing, but here I was, working in an atomic factory assembly line. All I knew was that I was Denny Phillips. It was as if I had just awakened from a slumber. The place was guarded and the guards had guns. They looked like they meant business. There were others working and they looked like zombies. They looked like they were prisoners.

But it didn't matter. I had to find out who I was what I was doing.

I had to get away!

I started across the floor. One of the guards yelled, “Get back there!”

I ran across the room, bowled over a guard and ran out the door. I heard gun blasts and knew they were shooting at me. But the driving thought persisted:

I've got to get away!

There was another set of guards blocking the other door. It looked like I was trapped, until I saw a boom swing down. I grabbed it and was pulled over three hundred feet to the next landing. But it was no good. There was a guard there. He shot at me. I felt all weak and dizzy...I fell into a great dark pit...

One of the guards took off his hat and scratched his head.

“I dunno Joe, I just dunno. Progress is a great thing – but that x-238A Denny Phillips, name...they're great robots...but they go haywire, now and then, and it seems like they was looking for something...almost human. Oh well.”

A truck drove away, and the sign on its side said: ACME ROBOT REPAIR.

Two weeks later, Denny Phillips was back on the job – blank look in his eyes. But suddenly...

His eyes become clear and, the overwhelming thought comes to him: I'VE GOT TO GET AWAY!!

THE THING AT THE BOTTOM OF THE WELL

Oglethorpe Crater was an ugly, mean little wretch. He dearly loved plaguing the dog and cat, pulling the wings from flies and watching worms squirm as he slowly pulled them apart. (This lost its fun when he heard worms feel no pain).

But his mother, fool as she was, was blind to his faults and sadistic traits. One day the cook threw open the door in near hysterics and Oglethorpe and Mommy came home from a movie.

“That awful little boy tied a rope across the cellar stairs so when I went down to get potatoes, I fell and almost killed myself!” she screamed.

“Don’t believe her! Don’t believe her! She hates me!” cried Oglethorpe, tears springing into his eyes. And poor little Oglethorpe began sobbing as if his little heart would break.

Mommy fired the cook and Oglethorpe, dear little Oglethorpe, went up to his room where he poked pins in his dog, Spotty. When mommy asked why Spotty was crying, Oglethorpe said he got some glass in his foot. He said he would pull it out. Mommy thought dear little Oglethorpe a good Samaritan.

Then one day, while Oglethorpe was in the field looking for more things to torture, he spied a deep, dark well. He called down, thinking he’d hear an echo.

“Hello!”

But a soft voice called up, “Hello, Oglethorpe”

Oglethorpe looked down, but he could see nothing. “Who are you” Oglethorpe asked.

“Come on down,” said the voice, “And we’ll have jolly fun.”

So Oglethorpe went down.

The day passed and Oglethorpe didn’t come back. Mommy called the police and a manhunt was formed. For over a month they hunted for dear little Oglethorpe. Just when they were about to give up, they found Oglethorpe in a well, dead as a door-nail.

But how he must have died!

His arms were pulled out, like people pull flies’ wings. Pins had been stuck in his eyes and there were other tortures too horrible to mention.

As they covered his body (what was left of it), and tramped away, it actually seemed that they heard laughter coming from the bottom of the well.

THE STRANGER

Kelso Black laughed.

He laughed until his sides were splitting and the bottle of cheap whiskey he held clenched in his hands slopped on the floor.

Dumb cops! It had been so easy. And now he had fifty grand in his pockets. The guard was dead - but it was his fault! He got in the way.

With a laugh, Kelso Black raised the bottle to his lips. That was when he heard it. Footsteps on the stairs that led to the attic where he was holed up.

He drew his pistol. The door swung open.

The stranger wore a black coat and a hat pulled over his eyes.

“Hello, hello.” he said. “Kelso, I've been watching you. You please me immensely.” The stranger laughed and it sent a thrill of horror through him.

“Who are you?”

The man laughed again. “You know me. I know you. We made a pact about an hour ago, the moment you shot that guard.”

“Get out!” Black’s voice rose shrilly. “Get out! Get out!”

“It’s time for you to come, Kelso” the stranger said softly “After all – we have a long way to go.”

The stranger took off his coat and hat. Kelso Black looked into that Face.

He screamed.

Kelso Black screamed and screamed and screamed.

But the stranger just laughed and in a moment, the room was silent. And empty.

But it smelled strongly of brimstone.

THE CURSED EXPEDITION

“Well,” said Jimmy Keller, looking across to the gantry to where the rocket rested in the middle of the desert. A lonely wind blew across the desert, and Hugh Bullford said, “Yeah. It’s about time to leave for Venus. Why? Why do we want to go to Venus?”

“I don’t know,” Keller said. “I just don’t know.”

The rocket ship touched down on Venus. Bullford checked the air and said in amazed tones, “Why, it’s good old type Earth air! Perfectly breathable.”

They went out, and it was Keller’s turn for amazement. “Why, it’s just like spring on earth! Everything’s lush and green and beautiful. Why... it’s Paradise!”

They ran out. The fruits were exotic and delicious, the temperature perfect. When night fell, they slept outside.

“I’m going to call it the Garden of Eden,” said Keller enthusiastically.

Bullford stared into the fire. “I don’t like this place, Jimmy. It feels all wrong. There’s something...evil about it.”

“You’re space happy.” Keller scoffed. “Sleep it off.”

The next morning James Keller was dead.

There was a look of horror on his face that Bullford never hoped to see again.

After the burial, Bullford called Earth. He got no reply. The radio was dead. Bullford took it apart and put it together. There was nothing wrong with it, but the fact remained: it didn’t work.

Bullford’s worry doubled itself. He ran outside. The landscape was the same pleasant and happy. But Bullford could see the evil in it.

“You killed him!” he cried. “I know it!”

Suddenly the ground opened up and it slithered toward him. In near panic, he ran back to the ship. But not before he got a piece of soil.

He analyzed the soil and then panic took him. Venus was alive.

Suddenly the space ship tilted and went over. Bullford screamed. But the soil closed over it and almost seemed to lick its lips.

Then it reset itself, waiting for the next victim...

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE FOG

As Pete Jacobs stepped out, the fog immediately swallowed up his house and he could see nothing but the white blanket all around him. It gave him the weird feeling of being the last man in the world.

Suddenly Pete felt dizzy. His stomach did a flip-flop. He felt like a person in a falling elevator. Then it passed and he walked on. The fog began to clear and Pete's eyes opened wide with fright, awe and wonder.

He was in the middle of the city.

But the nearest city was forty miles away!

But what a city! Pete had never seen anything like it.

Graceful buildings with high spires seemed to reach to the sky. People walked along on moving conveyer belts.

The cornerstone on a skyscraper read April, 17, 2007. Pete had walked into the future. But how?

Suddenly Pete was frightened. Horribly, terribly, frightened.

He didn't belong here. He couldn't stay. He ran after the receding fog.

A policeman in a strange uniform called angrily. Strange cars that rode six inches or so off the ground narrowly missed hitting him. But Pete succeeded. He ran back into the fog and soon everything was blanked out.

Then the feeling came again. That weird feeling of falling then the fog began to clear.

It looked like home

Suddenly there was an earsplitting screech. He turned to see a huge prehistoric brontosaurus lumbering toward him. The desire to kill was in his small beady eyes.

Terrified, he ran into the fog again

The next time the fog closes in on you and you hear hurried footsteps running through the whiteness...call out.

That would be Pete Jacobs, trying to find his side of the Fog

Help the poor guy.

NEVER LOOK BEHIND YOU

George Jacobs was closing his office, when an old woman felt free to walk right in. Hardly anyone walked through his door these days. The people hated him. For fifteen years he'd picked the people's pockets clean of money. No one had ever been able to hook him on a charge. But back to our little story. The old woman that came in had an ugly scar on her left cheek. Her clothes were mostly filthy rags and other crude material. Jacobs was counting his money.

"There! Fifty-thousand, nine hundred and seventy-three dollars and sixty-two cents."

Jacobs always liked to be precise.

"Indeed a lot of money," she spoke up. "Too bad you won't be able to spend it." Jacobs turned around.

"Why – who are you?" he asked in half surprise. "What right have you to spy on me?"

The woman didn't answer. She held up her bony hand. There was a flash of fire on his throat – and a scream. Then, with a final gurgle, George Jacobs died.

"I wonder what – or who – could have killed him?" said a young man.

"I'm glad he's gone," said another. That one was lucky.

He didn't look behind him.

IN A HALF-WORLD OF TERROR

King's first published story; he was 18 when this thriller appeared in a 1965 issue of *Comics Review* as 'I Was a Teenage Graverobber'. It was published in *Stories of Suspense* the following year under the present title.

Chapter One

It was like a nightmare. Like some unreal dream that you wake up from the next morning. Only this nightmare was happening. Ahead of me I could see Rankin's flashlight; a large yellow eye in the sultry summer darkness. I tripped over a gravestone and almost went sprawling. Rankin whirled on me with a hissed oath.

"Do you want to wake up the caretaker, you fool?"

I muttered a reply and we crept forward. Finally, Rankin stopped and shone the flashlight's beam on a freshly chiseled gravestone.

On it, it read:

DANIEL WHEATHERBY

1899-1962

He has joined his beloved wife in a better land.

I felt a shovel thrust into my hands and suddenly I was sure that I couldn't go through with it. But I remembered the bursar shaking his head and saying, "I'm afraid we can't give you any more time, Dan. You'll have to leave today. If I could help in any way, I would, believe me..."

I dug into the still soft earth and lifted it over my shoulder. Perhaps fifteen minutes later my shovel came in contact with wood. The two of us quickly excavated the hole until the coffin stood revealed under Rankin's flashlight. We jumped down and heaved the coffin up. Numbed, I watched Rankin swing the spade at the locks and seals. After a few blows it gave and we lifted the lid. The body of Daniel Weatherby looked up at us with glazed eyes. I felt horror gently wash over me. I had always thought that the eyes closed when one died.

"Don't just stand there," Rankin whispered, "it's almost four. We've got to get out of here!"

We wrapped the body in a sheet and lowered the coffin back into the earth. We shoveled rapidly and carefully replaced the sod. The dirt we had missed was scattered. By the time we picked up the white-sheeted

body, the first traces of dawn were beginning to lighten the sky in the east. We went through the hedge that skirted the cemetery and entered the woods that fronted it on the west. Rankin expertly picked his way through it for a quarter of a mile until we came to the car, parked where we had left it on an overgrown and unused wagon track that had once been a road. The body was put into the trunk. Shortly thereafter, we joined the stream of commuters hurrying for the 6.00 train. I looked at my hands as if I had never seen them before. The dirt under my fingernails had been piled up on top of a man's final resting place not twenty-four hours ago. It felt unclean.

Rankin's attention was directed entirely on his driving. I looked at him and realized that he didn't mind the repulsive act that we had just performed. To him it was just another job. We turned off the main road and began to climb the twisting, narrow dirt road. And then we came out into the open and I could see it, the huge rambling Victorian mansion that sat on the summit of the steep grade. Rankin drove around back and wordlessly up to the steep rock face of a bluff that rose another forty feet upward, slightly to the right of the house.

There was a hideous grinding noise and a portion of the hill large enough to carve an entrance for the car slid open. Rankin drove in and killed the engine. We were in a small, cube-like room that served as a hidden garage. Just then, a door at the far end slid open and a tall, rigid man approached us. Steffen Weinbaum's face was much like a skull; his eyes were deep-set and the skin was stretched so tautly over his cheekbones that his flesh was almost transparent.

"Where is it?" His voice was deep, ominous.

Wordlessly, Rankin got out and I followed his lead. Rankin opened the trunk and we pulled the sheet-swaddled figure out.

Weinbaum nodded slowly.

"Good, very good. Bring him into the lab."

Chapter Two

When I was thirteen, my parents were killed in an automobile crash. It left me an orphan and should have landed me in an orphan's home. But my father's will disclosed the fact that he had left me a substantial sum of money and I was self-reliant. The welfare people never came around and I was left in the somewhat bizarre role as the sole tenant of my own house at thirteen. I paid the mortgage out of the bank account and tried to stretch a dollar as far as possible. By the time I was eighteen and was out of school, the money was low, but I wanted to go to college. I sold the house for \$10,000.00 through a real estate buyer. In early

September, the roof fell in. I received a very nice letter from Erwin, Erwin and Bradstreet, attorneys at law. To put it in layman's language, it said that the department store at which my father had been employed had just got around to a general audit of their books. It seemed that there was \$15,000.00 missing and that they had proof that my father had stolen it. The rest of the letter merely stated that if I didn't pay up the \$15,000.00 we'd go to court and they would try to get double the amount. It shook me up and a few questions that should have stood out in my mind just didn't register as a result. Why didn't they uncover the error earlier? Why were they offering to settle out of court? I went down to the office of Erwin, Erwin, & Bradstreet and talked the matter over. To make a long story short, I paid the sum they were asking, I had no more money. The next day I looked up the firm of Erwin, Erwin & Bradstreet in the phone book. It wasn't listed. I went down to their office and found a *For Rent* sign on the door. It was then that I realized that I had been conned like gullible kid which, I reflected miserably, was what I was.

I bluffed my way through the first few months of college but finally they discovered that I hadn't been properly registered. That same day I met Rankin at a bar. It was my first experience in a tavern. I had a forged driver's license and I bought enough whiskey to get drunk. I figured that it would take about two straight whiskeys since I had never had anything but a bottle of beer now and then prior to that night. One felt good, two made my trouble seem rather inconsequential. I was nursing my third when Rankin entered the bar.

He sat on the stool next to me and looked attentively at me.

"You got troubles?" I asked rudely.

Rankin smiled. "Yes, I'm out to find a helper."

"Oh, yeah?" I asked, becoming interested. "You mean you want to hire somebody?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'm your man."

He started to say something and then changed his mind.

"Let's go over to a booth and talk it over, shall we?"

We walked over to a booth and I realized that I was listing slightly.

Rankin pulled the curtain.

"That's better. Now, you want a job?"

I nodded.

"Do you care what it is?"

"No. Just how much does it pay?"

"Five hundred a job."

I lost a little bit of the rosy fog that encased me. Something was wrong here. I didn't like the way he used the word "job".

"Who do I have to kill?" I asked with a humorless smile.

"You don't. But before I can tell you what it is, you'll have to talk with Mister Weinbaum."

"Who's he?"

"A scientist."

More fog evaporated. I got up.

"Uh-uh. No making a human guinea pig out of yours truly. Get yourself another boy."

"Don't be silly," he said, "No harm will come to you."

Against my better judgement, I said, "Okay, let's go."

Chapter Three

Weinbaum approached the subject of my duties after a tour of the house, including the laboratory. He wore a white smock and there was something about him that made me crawl inside. He sat down in the living room and motioned me into a seat. Rankin had disappeared. Weinbaum stared at me with fixed eyes and once again I felt a blast of icy coldness sweep over me.

"I'll put it to you bluntly," he said, "my experiments are too complicated to explain in any detail, but they concern human flesh. Dead human flesh."

I was becoming intensely aware that his eyes burnt with flickering fires. He looked like a spider ready to engulf a fly, and this whole house was his web. The sun was striking fire to the west and deep pools of shadows were spreading across the room, hiding his face, but leaving the glittering eyes as they shifted in the creeping darkness. He was still speaking.

"Often, people bequeath their bodies to scientific institutes for study. Unfortunately, I'm only one man, so I have to resort to other methods."

Horror leapt grinning from the shadows and across my mind there flitted the black picture of two men digging by the light of an uncertain moon. A shovel struck wood the noise chilled my soul.

I rose quickly.

"I think I can find my own way out, Mr. Weinbaum."

He laughed softly. "Did Rankin tell you how much this job pays?"

"I'm not interested."

"Too bad. I was hoping you could see it my way. It wouldn't take a year before you would make enough money to return to college."

I started, and got the uncanny feeling that this man was searching my soul.

"How much do you know about me? How did you find out?"

"I have my ways." He chuckled again. "Will you reconsider?"
I hesitated.

"Shall we put it on a trial basis?" he asked softly. "I'm quite sure that we can both reach a mutual satisfaction."

I got the eerie feeling that I was talking to the devil himself, that somehow I had been tricked into selling my soul.

"Be here at 8.00 sharp, the night after next," he said.

That was how it started.

As Rankin and I laid the sheeted body of Daniel Whetherby on the lab table, lights flashed on behind sheeted oblongs that looked like glass tanks.

"Weinbaum," I had dropped the title, Mister, without thinking, "I think – "

"Did you say something?" he asked, his eyes boring into mine. The laboratory seemed far away. There were only the two of us, sliding through a half-world peopled with horrors beyond the imagination. Rankin entered in a white smock coat and broke the spell by saying, "All ready, professor."

At the door, Rankin stopped me. "Friday, at eight."

A shudder, cold and terrible raced up my spine as I looked back. Weinbaum had produced a scalpel and the body was unsheeted. They looked at me strangely and I hurried out.

I took the car and quickly drove down the narrow dirt road. I didn't look back. The air was fresh and warm with a promise of budding summer. The sky was blue with fluffy white clouds fleeting along in the warm summer breeze. The night before seemed like a nightmare, a vague dream, that, as all nightmares, is unreal and transparent when the bright light of day shines upon it. But as I drove past the wrought iron gates of the Crestwood Cemetery I realized that this was no dream. Four hours ago my shovel had removed the dirt that covered the grave of Daniel Whetherby. For the first time a new thought occurred to me. What was the body of Daniel Whetherby being used for at that moment? I shoved the thought into a deep corner of my mind and let out onto the go-pedal. The car screamed ahead. I put my thoughts into driving, glad to put the terrible thing I had done out of my mind, for a short time, anyway.

Chapter Four

The California countryside blurred by as I tried for the maximum speed. The tires sang on the curve and, as I came out of it, several things happened in rapid succession. I saw a panel truck crazily parked right on

the broken white line, a girl of about eighteen running right toward my car, an older man running after her. I slammed on the brakes and they exploded like bombs. I jockeyed the wheel and the California sky was suddenly under me. Then everything was right-side up and I realized that I had flipped right over and up. For a moment I was dazed, then a scream, shrill and high, piercing, slit my head. I opened the door and sprinted toward the road. The man had the girl and was yanking her toward the panel truck. He was stronger than her and winning, but she was taking an inch of skin for every foot he made.

He saw me.

"You stay out of this, buddy. I'm her legal guardian."

I halted and shook the cobwebs out of my brain. It was exactly what he had been waiting for. He let go with a haymaker that got me on the corner of the chin and knocked me sprawling. He grabbed the girl and practically threw her into the cab. By the time that I was on my feet he was around to the driver's side and peeling out. I took a flying leap and made the roof just as he took off. I was almost thrown off, but I clawed through about five layers of paint to stay on. Then I reached through the open window and got him by the neck. He cursed and grabbed my hand. He yanked, the truck spun crazily off the ledge of a steep embankment. The last thing I remember is the nose of the truck pointing straight down. Then my enemy saved my life by viciously yanking my arm. I tumbled off just as the truck plunged over the cliff. I landed hard, but the rock I landed on was harder. Everything slid away.

Something cool touched my brow as I came to. The first thing I saw was the flashing red light on top of the official looking car parked by the embankment. I sat bolt upright and soft hands pushed me down. Nice hands, the hands of the girl who had landed me into this mess. Then there was a Highway Patrolman over me and an official voice said, "The ambulance is coming. How do you feel?"

"Bruised," I said and sat up again. "But tell the ambulance to go away. I'm all right."

I tried to sound flippant. The last thing I needed after last night's 'job' was the police.

"How about telling me about it?" the policeman said, producing a notebook. Before I answered, I walked over to the embankment.

My stomach flipped over backwards. The panel truck was nose-deep in California dirt and my sparring partner was turning that good California soil into a reddish mud with his own blood. He lay grotesquely sprawled half in, half out of the cab. The photographers were getting their pictures. He was dead. I turned back. The patrolman looked at me as if he expected me to throw up, but, after my new job, my stomach was admirably strong.

"I was driving out of the Belwood district," I said, "I came around that curve..."

I told the rest of the story with the girl's help. Just as I finished the ambulance came to a halt. Despite my protestations and those of my still-unnamed girl friend, we were hustled into the back. Two hours later we had a clean bill of health from the patrolman and the doctors and we were requested to be witnesses at the inquest set for the next week.

I saw my car at the curb. It was a little worse for wear, but the flats had been replaced. There was a witnessed bill on the dash for a wrecker, tires, and clean-up squad! It came to about \$250.00 half of the last night's pay-check.

"You look preoccupied," the girl said.

I turned to her. "Um, yeah. Well, we almost got killed together this morning, how about telling me your name and having lunch together?"

"Okay," she said. "The name's Vicki Pickford. Yours?"

"Danny," I said unemotionally as we pulled away from the curb. I switched the subject rapidly. "What was going on this morning? Did I hear that guy say that he was your legal guardian?"

"Yes" she replied.

I laughed. "The name is Danny Gerad. You'll get that out of the afternoon papers."

She smiled gravely. "All right. He was my guardian. He was also a drunkard and an all-around crumb." Her cheeks flamed red. The smile was gone. "I hated him and I'm glad he's dead."

She gave me a sharp glance and for a moment I saw fear shine wetly in her eyes; then she recovered her self-control. We parked and ate lunch. Forty minutes later I paid the check out of my newly acquired cash and walked back out to the car.

"Where to?" I asked.

"Bonaventure Motel," she said. "That's where I'm staying."

She saw curiosity jump into my eyes and sighed, "All right, I was running away. My Uncle David caught up with me and tried to drag me back to the house. When I told him I wouldn't go, he dragged me out to the truck. We were going around that curve when I wrenched the wheel out of his hands. Then you came along."

She closed up like a clam and I didn't try to get any more out of her. There was something wrong about her story. I didn't press her. I drove her into the parking lot and killed the engine.

"When can I see you again?" I asked. "A movie tomorrow?"

"Sure," she replied.

"I'll pick you up at 7.30," I said and drove out, thoughtfully pondering the events that had befallen me in the last twenty-four hours.

Chapter Five

When I entered the apartment the phone was ringing. I picked it up and Vicki, the accident and the bright workaday world of suburban California faded into the half-world of phantom-people shadows. The voice that whispered coldly out of the receiver was Weinbaum's.

"Troubles?" He spoke softly, but there was an ominous tone in his voice.

"I had an accident," I replied.

"I read about it in the paper..." Weinbaum's voice trailed off.

Silence hung between us for a moment and then I said, "Does this mean you're canning me?"

I hoped that he would say yes; I didn't have the guts to resign.

"No," he said softly, "I just wanted to make sure that you didn't reveal anything about the work you're doing for me."

"Well, I didn't," I told him curtly.

"The night after this," he reminded me, "At eight."

There was a click and then the dial tone. I shivered and hung up the receiver. I had the oddest feeling that I had just broken a connection with the grave.

The next morning at 7.30 sharp, I picked up Vicki at the Bonaventure Motel. She was all decked out in an outfit that made her look stunning. I made a low whistle; she flushed prettily. We didn't talk about the accident. The movie was good and we held hands part of the time, ate popcorn part of the time and kissed once or twice. All in all, a pleasant evening. The second feature was just drawing to the climax when an usher came down the aisle. He was stopping at every row and looked peeved. Finally, he stopped at ours. He swept the flashlight down the row and asked "Mr. Gerad? Daniel Gerad?"

"Yes?" I asked, feeling guilt and fear run through me.

"There's a gentleman on the phone, sir. He says it's a matter of life or death."

Vicki gave me a startled look and I followed the usher hurriedly. That let out the police. I mentally took stock of my only remaining relatives. Aunt Polly, Grandma Phibbs and my great-uncle Charlie. They were all healthy as far as I knew. You could have knocked me over with a feather when I picked up the telephone and heard Rankin's voice.

He spoke rapidly and a raw note of fear was in his voice. "Get out here, right now! We need –"

There were sounds of a scuffle, a muffled scream, then a click and the empty dial tone.

I hung, up and hurried back for Vicki. "Come on," I said.

She followed without questioning me. At first I wanted to drive her back to the motel but the muffled scream made me decide that this was an emergency. I didn't like either Rankin or Weinbaum, but I knew I would have to help them.

We took off.

"What is it?" Vicki asked anxiously as I stamped on the go-pedal and let the car unwind.

"Look," I said, "something tells me that you've got your secrets about your guardian. I've got some of my own. Please, don't ask."

She didn't say another word.

I took possession of the passing lane. The speedometer climbed from seventy-five to eighty-five, kept rising and trembled on the verge of ninety. I pulled into the turnoff on two wheels and the car bounced, clung and exploded up the road. Grim and gaunt against the overcast sky, I could see the house. I pulled the car to a stop and was out in a second.

"Wait here," I cried over my shoulder to Vicki. There was a light on in the laboratory and I flung the door open. It was empty but ransacked. The place was a mess of broken test tubes, smashed apparatus, and, yes, bloodstains that trailed through the half-open door that led to the darkened garage. Then I noticed the green liquid that was flowing over the floor in sticky rivulets. For the first time I noticed that one of the several sheeted tanks had been broken. I walked over to the other three. The lights inside them were off and the sheets that draped them let by no hint of what might have been under them – or, for that matter, what was still under them. I had no time to see. I didn't like the looks of blood, still fresh and uncoagulated, that led out of the front door into the garage. I swung open the door and entered the garage. It was dark and I didn't know where the light switch was. I cursed myself for not bringing the flashlight that was in the glove compartment. I advanced a few steps and realized that there was a cold draft blowing against my face. I advanced toward it. The light from the lab threw a golden shaft of light along the garage floor, but it was next to nothing in the Stygian blackness of the garage. All my childish fears of the dark returned. Once again I entered the realms of terror that only a child can know. I realized that the shadow that leered at me from out of the dark might not be dispelled by bright light.

Suddenly, my right foot went down. I realized that the draft was coming from a stairway I had almost fallen down. For a moment I debated, then turned and hurried back through the lab and out to the car.

Chapter Six

Vicki pounced on me as soon as I opened the door. "Danny, what are you doing here?"

Her tone of voice made me look at her. In the sickly yellow glow of the light her face was terrified.

"I'm working here," I said shortly.

"At first I didn't realize where we were," she said softly. "I was only here once before."

"You've been here?" I exclaimed. "When? Why?"

"One night," she said quietly "I brought Uncle David his lunch. He forgot it."

The name rang a bell. She saw me grasping for it. "My guardian," she said. "Perhaps I'd better tell you the whole story. Probably, you know that people don't get appointed guardians when they drink. Well, Uncle David didn't always do those things. When my mother and father were killed in a train-wreck four years ago, my Uncle David was the kindest person you could imagine. The court appointed him my guardian until I came of age, with my complete support."

For a moment she was quiet, living in memories and the expression that flitted rapidly through her eyes was not pretty. Then she went on.

"Two years ago the company he was working for as a night watchman folded up and my uncle was out of a job. He was out of work for almost half a year. We were getting desperate, with only unemployment checks to feed us and college looming up for me. Then he got a job. It was a good paying one and it brought in fabulous sums. I used to joke with him about the banks he robbed. One night he looked at me and said, 'Not banks.'"

I felt fear and guilt tap me on the shoulder with cold fingers. Vicki went on.

"He started to get mean. He started bringing home whiskey and getting drunk. The times I asked him about his job he evaded me. One night he told me point-blank to mind my own business.

"I watched him decay before my very eyes. Then one night he let a name slip – Weinbaum, Steffen Weinbaum. A couple of weeks later he forgot his midnight lunch. I looked up the name in the telephone book and took it out to him. He flew into the most terrible rage I have ever seen.

"In the weeks that followed he was away more and more at this terrible house. One night, when he came home he beat me. I decided to run away. To me, the Uncle David I knew was dead. He caught me – and you came along." She fell silent.

I was shaken right down to my boots. I had a very good idea what Vicki's uncle did for a living. The time Rankin had signed me up coincided with the time Vicki's guardian would have been cracking up. I almost drove away then, despite the wild shambles the lab was in, despite the secret stairway, despite the blood trail on the floor. But then a faraway, thin scream reached us. I thumbed the glove compartment button, and reached in, fumbled around and got the flashlight.

Vicki's hand went to my arm "No, Danny. Please, don't. I know that there's something terrible going on here. Drive away from it!"

The scream sounded again, this time fainter, and I made up my mind. I grabbed the flashlight. Vicki saw my intention. "All right, I'm coming with you."

"Uh-uh," I said. "You stay here. I've got a feeling that there's something...loose out there. You stay here."

She unwillingly sat back. I shut the door and ran back to the lab. I didn't pause, but went back into the garage. The flashlight illuminated the dark hole where the wall had slid away to reveal the staircase. My blood pounding thickly in my temples, I ventured down into it. I counted the steps, shining the flashlight at the featureless walls, at the impenetrable darkness below.

"Twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three – "

At thirty, the stairway suddenly became a short passage. I started cautiously along it, wishing that I had a revolver, or even a knife to make me feel a little less naked and vulnerable.

Suddenly a scream, terrible and thick with fear soon sounded in the darkness ahead of me. It was the sound of terror, the sound of a man confronted with something out of the deepest pits of horror. I broke into a run. As I ran I realized that the draft was blowing coldly against my face. I reasoned that the tunnel must come out in the outdoors. I stumbled over something. It was Rankin, lying in a pool of his own blood, his eyes staring in glazed horror at the ceiling. The back of his head was bashed in. Ahead of me I heard a pistol shot, a curse, and another scream. I ran on and almost fell on my face as I stumbled over more stairs. I climbed and saw stairs framed vaguely in an opening screened with underbrush above me. I pushed it aside and came upon a startling tableau: a tall figure silhouetted against the sky that could only be Weinbaum, a revolver hanging in his hand, looking down at the shadowed ground. Even the starlight was blotted out as the hanging clouds that had parted briefly, closed together again. He heard me and wheeled quickly, his eyes glazing like red lanterns in the dark.

"Oh, it's you, Gerad."

"Rankin's dead," I told him.

"I know," he said, "you could have prevented it if you had come a little quicker."

"Now just hold on," I said, becoming angry. "I hurried "

I was cut off by a sound that has hounded me through nightmares ever since, a hideous mewing sound, like that of some gigantic rat in pain. I saw calculation, fear, and finally decision flicker across Weinbaum's face in a matter of seconds. I fell back in terror.

"What is it?" I choked.

He casually shone the light down into the pit, for all his affected casualness, I noticed that his eyes were averted by something. The thing mewed again and I felt another spasm of fear. I craned to see what horror lay in that pit, the horror that made even Weinbaum scream in abject terror. And just before I saw, a horrible wall of terror rose and fell from the vague outline of the house. Weinbaum jerked his flashlight from the pit and shone it in my face.

"Who was that? Whom did you bring up here?"

But I had my own flashlight trained as I ran through the passage way, Weinbaum close behind. I had recognized the scream. I had heard it before, when a frightened girl almost ran into my car as she fled her maniac of a guardian.

Vicki!

Chapter Seven

I heard Weinbaum gasp as we entered the lab. The place was swimming in the green, liquid. The other two cases were broken! I didn't pause, but ran past the shattered, empty cases and out the door. Weinbaum did not follow me. The car was empty, the door on the passengers side open. I shone my light over the ground. Here and there were footprints of a girl wearing high heels, a girl who had to be Vicki. The rest of the tracks were blotted out by a monstrous something I hesitate to call it a track. It was more as if something huge had dragged itself into the woods. Its hugeness was testified, too, as I noticed the broken saplings and crushed underbrush. I ran back into the lab where Weinbaum was sitting, face pale and drawn, regarding the three shattered empty tanks. The revolver was on the table and I grabbed it and made for the door.

"Where do you think you're going with that?" he demanded, rising.

"Out to hunt for Vicki," I snarled. "And if she's hurt or – " I didn't finish.

I hurried out into the velvet darkness of the night. Gun in hand, flashlight in the other, I plunged into the woods, following the trail blazed by something that I didn't want to think about. The vital question

that burned in my mind was whether it had Vicki or was still trailing her. If it had her...

My question was answered by a piercing scream not too far away from me. Faster now, I ran and suddenly burst into a clearing. Perhaps it is because I want to forget, or perhaps it is only because the night was dark and beginning to become foggy, but I can only remember how Vicki caught sight of my flashlight, ran to me, buried her head against my shoulder and sobbed. A huge shadow moved toward me, mewing horribly, driving me almost mad with terror. Stumblingly, we fled from the horror in the dark, back toward the comforting lights of the lab, away from the unseen terror that lurked in the dark. My fear-crazed brain was putting two and two together and coming up with five. The three cases had contained three somethings from the darkest pits of a twisted mind. One had broken loose. Rankin and Weinbaum had been after it. It had killed Rankin, but Weinbaum had trapped it in the concealed pit. The second one was floundering in the woods now and I suddenly remembered that whatever-it-was, was huge and that it had a hard time lifting itself along. Then I realized that it had trapped Vicki in a gully. It had started down easy enough! But getting up? I was almost positive that it couldn't. Two were out of commission. But where was the third? My question was answered very suddenly but a scream from the lab.

And...mewing.

Chapter Eight

We ran up to the lab door and threw it open. It was empty. The screams and the terrible mewing sounds came from the garage. I ran through, and ever since have been glad that Vicki stayed in the lab and was spared the sight that had wakened me from a thousand awful nightmares. The lab was darkened and all that I could make out was a huge shadow moving sluggishly. And the screams! Screams of terror, the screams of a man faced with a monster from the pits of hell. It mewed horribly and seemed to pant in delight.

My hand moved around for a light switch. There, I found it! Light flooded the room, illuminating a tableau of horror that was the result of the grave thing I had performed, I and the dead uncle. A huge, white maggot twisted on the garage floor, holding Weinbaum with long suckers, raising him towards its dripping, pink mouth from which horrid mewing sounds came. Veins, red and pulsating, showed under its slimy flesh and millions of squirming tiny maggots – in the blood vessels, in the skin, even forming a huge eye that stared out at me. A huge maggot,

made up of hundreds of millions of maggots, the feasters on the dead flesh that Weinbaum had used so freely. In a half-world of terror I fired the revolver again and again. It mewed and twitched. Weinbaum screamed something as he was dragged inexorably toward the waiting mouth. Incredibly, I made it out over the hideous sound that the creature was making.

"Fire it! In the name of heaven, fire it!"

Then I saw the sticky pools of green liquid which had trickled over the floor from the laboratory. I fumbled for my lighter, got it and frantically thumbed it. Suddenly I remembered that I had forgotten to put a flint in. I reached for matches, got one and fired the others. I threw the pack just as Weinbaum screamed his last. I saw his body through the translucent skin of the creature, still twitching as thousands of maggots leeches onto it. Retching, I threw the now flaring matches into the green ooze. It was flammable, just as I had thought. It burst into bright flames. The creature was twisted into a horrid ball of pulsing, putrid flesh. I turned and stumbled out to where Vicki stood, shaking and whitefaced.

"Come on!" I said, "Let's get out of here! The whole place is going to go up!"

We ran out to the car and drove away rapidly.

Chapter Nine

There isn't too much left to say. I'm sure that you have all read about the fire that swept the residential Belwood District of California, leveling fifteen square miles of woods and residential homes. I couldn't feel too badly about that fire. I realize that hundreds might have been killed by the gigantic maggot-things that Weinbaum and Rankin were breeding. I drove out there after the fire. The whole place was smoldering ruins. There was no discernable remains of the horror that we had battled that final night, and, after some searching, I found a metal cabinet. Inside there were three ledgers. One of them was Weinbaum's diary. It clears up a lot. It revealed that they were experimenting on dead flesh, exposing it to gamma rays. One day they observed a strange thing. The few maggots that had crawled over the flesh were growing, becoming a group. Eventually they grew together, forming three separate large maggots. Perhaps the radioactive bomb had speed up the evolution.

I don't know.

Furthermore, I don't want to know.

In a way, I suppose, I assisted in Rankin's death; the flesh of the body whose grave I had robbed had fed perhaps the very creature that had

killed him. I live with that thought. But I believe that there can be forgiveness. I'm working for it. Or, rather, we're working for it.
Vicki and I. Together.

THE GLASS FLOOR

From *Weird Tales*, Fall, 1990

INTRODUCTION by Stephen King

In the novel *Deliverance*, by James Dickey, there is a scene where a country fellow who lives way up in the back of beyond whangs his hand with a tool while repairing a car. One of the city men who are looking for a couple of guys to drive their cars downriver asks this fellow, Griner by name, if he's hurt himself. Griner looks at his bloody hand, then mutters: "Naw – it ain't as bad as I thought."

That's the way I felt after re-reading "The Glass Floor," the first story for which I was ever paid, after all these years. Darrell Schweitzer, the editor of *Weird Tales* invited me to make changes if I wanted to, but I decided that would probably be a bad idea. Except for two or three word changes and the addition of a paragraph break (which was probably a typographical error in the first place), I've left the tale just as it was. If I really did start making changes, the result would be an entirely new story.

"The Glass Floor" was written, to the best of my recollection, in the summer of 1967, when I was about two months shy of my twentieth birthday. I had been trying for about two years to sell a story to Robert A.W. Lowndes, who edited two horror/fantasy magazines for Health Knowledge (*The Magazine of Horror* and *Startling Mystery Stories*) as well as a vastly more popular digest called *Sexology*. He had rejected several submissions kindly (one of them, marginally better than "The Glass Floor," was finally published in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* under the title "Night of the Tiger"), then accepted this one when I finally got around to submitting it. That first check was for thirty-five dollars. I've cashed many bigger ones since then, but none gave me more satisfaction; someone had finally paid me some real money for something I had found in my head!

The first few pages of the story are clumsy and badly written – clearly the product of an unformed story-teller's mind – but the last bit pays off better than I remembered; there is a genuine frisson in what Mr. Wharton finds waiting for him in the East Room. I suppose that's at least part of the reason I agreed to allow this mostly unremarkable work to be reprinted after all these years. And there is at least a token effort to create characters which are more than paper-doll cutouts; Wharton and Reynard are antagonists, but neither is "the good guy" or "the bad guy." The real villain is behind that plastered-over door. And I also see an odd echo of "The Glass Floor" in a very recent work called "The Library Policeman." That work, a short novel, will be published as part of a collection of short novels called *Four Past Midnight* this fall, and if you read it, I think you'll see what I mean. It was fascinating to see the same image coming around again after all this time.

Mostly I'm allowing the story to be republished to send a message to young writers who are out there right now, trying to be published, and collecting rejection slips from such magazines as *F&SF*, *Midnight Graffiti*, and, of course, *Weird Tales*, which is the granddaddy of them all. The message is simple: you can learn, you can get better, and you can get published.

If that Little spark is there, someone will probably see it sooner or later, gleaming faintly in the dark. And, if you tend the spark nestled in the kindling, it really can grow into a large, blazing fire. It happened to me, and it started here.

I remember getting the idea for the story, and it just came as the ideas come now – casually, with no flourish of trumpets. I was walking down a dirt road to see a friend, and for no reason at all I began to wonder what it would be like to stand in a room whose floor was a mirror. The image was so intriguing that writing the story became a necessity. It wasn't written for money; it was written so I could see better. Of course I did not see it as well as I had hoped; there is still that shortfall between what I hope I will accomplish and what I actually manage. Still, I came away from it with two valuable things: a salable story after five years of rejection slips, and a bit of experience. So here it is, and as that fellow Griner says in Dickey's novel, it ain't really as bad as I thought.

Wharton moved slowly up the wide steps, hat in hand, craning his neck to get a better look at the Victorian monstrosity that his sister had died in. It wasn't a house at all, he reflected, but a mausoleum – a huge, sprawling mausoleum. It seemed to grow out of the top of the hill like an outsized, perverted toadstool, all gambrels and gables and jutting, blank-windowed cupolas. A brass weather-vane surmounted the eighty degree slant of shake-shingled roof, the tarnished effigy of a leering little boy with one hand shading eyes. Wharton was just as glad he could not see.

Then he was on the porch, and the house as a whole was cut off from him. He twisted the old-fashioned bell, and listened to it echo hollowly through the dim recesses within. There was a rose-tinted fanlight over the door, and Wharton could barely make out the date 1770 chiseled into the glass. *Tomb is right*, he thought.

The door suddenly swung open. "Yes, sir?" The housekeeper stared out at him. She was old, hideously old. Her face hung like limp dough on her skull, and the hand on the door above the chain was grotesquely twisted by arthritis.

"I've come to see Anthony Reynard," Wharton said. He fancied he could even smell the sweetish odor of decay emanating from the rumpled silk of the shapeless black dress she wore.

"Mr Reynard isn't seein' anyone. He's mournin'."

"He'll see me," Wharton said. "I'm Charles Wharton. Janine's brother."

"Oh." Her eyes widened a little, and the loose bow of her mouth worked around the empty ridges of her gums. "Just a minute." She disappeared, leaving the door ajar.

Wharton stared into the dim mahogany shadows, making out high-backed easy chairs, horse-hair upholstered divans, tall narrow-shelved bookcases, curlicued, floridly carven wainscoting.

Janine, he thought. *Janine, Janine, Janine. How could you live here? How in hell could you stand it?*

A tall figure materialized suddenly out of the gloom, slope-shouldered, head thrust forward, eyes deeply sunken and downcast.

Anthony Reynard reached out and unhooked the door-chain. "Come in, Mr. Wharton," he said heavily.

Wharton stepped into the vague dimness of the house, looking up curiously at the man who had married his sister. There were rings beneath the hollows of his eyes, blue and bruised-looking. The suit he wore was wrinkled and hung limp on him, as if he had lost a great deal of weight. He looks tired, Wharton thought. Tired and old.

"My sister has already been buried?" Wharton asked.

"Yes." He shut the door slowly, imprisoning Wharton in the decaying gloom of the house. "My deepest sorrow, sir. Wharton. I loved your sister dearly." He made a vague gesture. "I'm sorry."

He seemed about to add more, then shut his mouth with an abrupt snap. When he spoke again, it was obvious he had bypassed whatever had been on his lips. "Would you care to sit down? I'm sure you have questions."

"I do." Somehow it came out more curtly than he had intended.

Reynard sighed and nodded slowly. He led the way deeper into the living room and gestured at a chair. Wharton sank deeply into it, and it seemed to gobble him up rather than give beneath him. Reynard sat next to the fireplace and dug for cigarettes. He offered them wordlessly to Wharton, and he shook his head.

He waited until Reynard lit his cigarette, then asked, "Just how did she die? Your letter didn't say much.

Reynard blew out the match and threw it into the fireplace. It landed on one of the ebony iron fire-dogs, a carven gargoyle that stared at Wharton with toad's eyes.

"She fell," he said. "She was dusting in one of the other rooms, up along the eaves. We were planning to paint, and she said it would have to be well-dusted before we could begin. She had the ladder. It slipped. Her neck was broken." There was a clicking sound in his throat as he swallowed.

"She died – instantly?"

"Yes." He lowered his head and placed a hand against his brow. "I was heartbroken.

The gargoyle leered at him, squat torso and flattened, sooty head. Its mouth was twisted upward in a weird, gleeful grin, and its eyes seemed turned inward at some private joke. Wharton looked away from it with an effort.

"I want to see where it happened."

Reynard stubbed out his cigarette half-smoked. "You can't."

"I'm afraid I must," Wharton said coldly. "After all, she was my..."

"It's not that," Reynard said. "The room has been partitioned off. That should have been done a long time ago."

"If it's just a matter of prising a few boards off a door..."

"You don't understand. The room has been plastered off completely. There's nothing but a wall there."

Wharton felt his gaze being pulled inexorably back to the fire-dog. Damn the thing, what did it have to grin about?

"I can't help it. I want to see the room."

Reynard stood suddenly, towering over him. "Impossible."

Wharton also stood. "I'm beginning to wonder if you don't have something to hide in there," he said quietly.

"Just what are you implying?"

Wharton shook his head a little dazedly. What was he implying? That perhaps Anthony Reynard had murdered his Sister in this Revolutionary War-vintage crypt? That there might be Something more sinister here than shadowy corners and hideous iron fire-dogs?

"I don't know what I'm implying," he said slowly, "except that Janine was shoveled under in a hell of a hurry, and that you're acting damn strange now."

For moment the anger blazed brighter, and then it died away, leaving only hopelessness and dumb sorrow. "Leave me alone," he mumbled. "Please leave me alone, Mr. Wharton."

"I can't. I've got to know..."

The aged housekeeper appeared, her face thrusting from the shadowy cavern of the hall. "Supper's ready, Mr. Reynard."

"Thank you, Louise, but I'm not hungry. Perhaps Mr. Wharton...?"

Wharton shook his head.

"Very well, then. Perhaps we'll have a bite later."

"As you say, sir." She turned to go. "Louise?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Come here a moment."

Louise shuffled slowly back into the room, her loose tongue slopping wetly over her lips for a moment and then disappearing. "Sir?"

"Mr. Wharton seems to have some questions about his sister's death. Would you tell him all you know about it?"

"Yes, sir." Her eyes glittered with alacrity. "She was dustin', she was. Dustin' the East Room. Hot on paintin' it, she was. Mr. Reynard here, I guess he wasn't much interested, because..."

"Just get to the point, Louise," Reynard said impatiently.

"No," Wharton said. "Why wasn't he much interested?"

Louise looked doubtfully from one to the other.

"Go ahead," Reynard said tiredly. "He'll find out in the village if he doesn't up here."

"Yes, sir." Again he saw the glitter, caught the greedy purse of the loose flesh of her mouth as she prepared to impart the precious story. "Mr. Reynard didn't like no one goin' in the East Room. Said it was dangerous."

"Dangerous?"

"The floor," she said. "The floor's glass. It's a mirror. The whole floor's a mirror. "

Wharton turned to Reynard, feeling dark blood suffuse his face. "You mean to tell me you let her go up on a ladder in a room with a glass floor?"

"The ladder had rubber grips," Reynard began. "That wasn't why..."

"You damned fool," Wharton whispered. "You damned, bloody fool."

"I tell you that wasn't the reason!" Reynard shouted suddenly. "I loved your sister! No one is sorrier than I that she is dead! But I warned her! God knows I warned her about that floor!"

Wharton was dimly aware of Louise staring greedily at them, storing up gossip like a squirrel stores up nuts. "Get her out of here," he said thickly.

"Yes," Reynard said. "Go see to supper."

"Yes, sir." Louise moved reluctantly toward the hall, and the shadows swallowed her.

"Now," Wharton said quietly. "It seems to me that you have some explaining to do, Reynard. This whole thing sounds funny to me. Wasn't there even an inquest?"

"No," Reynard said. He slumped back into his chair suddenly, and he looked blindly into the darkness of the vaulted overhead ceiling. "They know around here about the – East Room."

"And just what is there to know?" Wharton asked tightly

"The East Room is bad luck," Reynard said. "Some people might even say it's cursed."

"Now listen," Wharton said, his ill temper and unalaid grief building up like steam in a teakettle, "I'm not going to be put off, Reynard. Every word that comes out of your mouth makes me more determined to see

that room. Now are you going to agree to it or do I have to go down to that village and ... ?"

"Please." Something in the quiet hopelessness of the word made Wharton look up. Reynard looked directly into his eyes for the first time and they were haunted, haggard eyes. "Please, Mr. Wharton. Take my word that your sister died naturally and go away. I don't want to see you die!" His voice rose to a wail. "I didn't want to see anybody die!"

Wharton felt a quiet chill steal over him. His gaze skipped from the grinning fireplace gargoyle to the dusty, empty-eyed bust of Cicero in the corner to the strange wainscoting carvings. And a voice came from within him: *Go away from here*. A thousand living yet insentient eyes seemed to stare at him from the darkness, and again the voice spoke...

"Go away from here."

Only this time it was Reynard.

"Go away from here," he repeated. "Your sister is beyond caring and beyond revenge. I give you my word..."

"Damn your word!" Wharton said harshly. "I'm going down to the sheriff, Reynard. And if the sheriff won't help me, I'll go to the county commissioner. And if the county commissioner won't help me..."

"Very well." The words were like the faraway tolling of a churchyard bell.

"Come."

Reynard led the way into the hall, down past the kitchen, the empty dining room with the chandelier catching and reflecting the last light of day, past the pantry, toward the blind plaster of the corridor's end.

This is it, he thought, and suddenly there was a strange crawling in the pit of his stomach.

"I..." he began involuntarily.

"What?" Reynard asked, hope glittering in his eyes.

"Nothing."

They stopped at the end of the hall, stopped in the twilight gloom. There seemed to be no electric light. On the floor Wharton could see the still-damp plasterer's trowel Reynard had used to wall up the doorway, and a straggling remnant of Poe's "Black Cat" clanged through his mind: *"I had walled the monster up within the tomb..."*

Reynard handed the trowel to him blindly. "Do whatever you have to do, Wharton. I won't be party to it. I wash my hands of it."

Wharton watched him move off down the hall with misgivings, his hand opening and closing on the handle of the trowel. The faces of the Little-boy weathervane, the fire-dog gargoyle, the wizened housemaid all seemed to mix and mingle before him, all grinning at something he could not understand. *Go away from here...*

With a sudden bitter curse he attacked the wall, hacking into the soft, new plaster until the trowel scraped across the door of the East Room. He dug away plaster until he could reach the doorknob. He twisted, then yanked on it until the veins stood out in his temples .

The plaster cracked, schismed, and finally split. The door swung ponderously open, shedding plaster like a dead skin.

Wharton stared into the shimmering quicksilver pool.

It seemed to glow with a light of its own in the darkness, ethereal and fairy-like. Wharton stepped in, half-expecting to sink into warm, pliant fluid.

But the floor was solid.

His own reflection hung suspended below him, attached only by the feet, seeming to stand on its head in thin air. It made him dizzy just to look at it.

Slowly his gaze shifted around the room. The ladder was still there, stretching up into the glimmering depths of the mirror. The room was high, he saw. High enough for a fall to he winced – to kill.

It was ringed with empty bookcases, all seeming to lean over him on the very threshold of imbalance. They added to the room's strange, distorting effect.

He went over to the ladder and stared down at the feet. They were rubbershod, as Reynard had said, and seemed solid enough. But if the ladder had not slid, how had Janine fallen?

Somehow he found himself staring through the floor again. No, he corrected himself. Not through the floor. At the mirror; into the mirror...

He wasn't standing on the floor at all he fancied. He was poised in thin air halfway between the identical ceiling and floor, held up only by the stupid idea that he was on the floor. That was silly, as anyone could see, for there was the floor, way down there.. . .

Snap out of it! he yelled at himself suddenly. He was on the floor, and that was nothing but a harmless reflection of the ceiling. *It would only be the floor if I was standing on my head, and I'm not; the other me is the one standing on his head...*

He began to feel vertigo, and a sudden lump of nausea rose in his throat. He tried to look away from the glittering quicksilver depths of the mirror, but he couldn't.

The door.. where was the door? He suddenly wanted out very badly.

Wharton turned around clumsily, but there were only crazily-tilted bookcases and the jutting ladder and the horrible chasm beneath his feet.

"Reynard!" He screamed. "I'm falling! "

Reynard came running, the sickness already a gray lesion on his heart. It was done; it had happened again.

He stopped at the door's threshold, Staring in at the Siamese twins staring at each other in the middle of the two-roofed, no-floored room.

"Louise," he croaked around the dry ball of sickness in his throat.

"Bring the pole."

Louise came shuffling out of the darkness and handed the hook-ended pole to Reynard. He slid it out across the shining quicksilver pond and caught the body sprawled on the glass. He dragged it slowly toward the door, and when he could reach it, he pulled it out. He stared down into the contorted face and gently shut the staring eyes.

"I'll want the plaster," he said quietly.

"Yes, sir."

She turned to go, and Reynard stared somberly into the room. Not for the first time he wondered if there was really a mirror there at all. In the room, a small pool of blood showed on the floor and ceiling, seeming to meet in the center, blood which hung there quietly and one could wait forever for it to drip.

SLADE

“In some ways the most exciting of King’s uncollected juvenilia, an engaging explosion of off the wall humor, literary pastiche, and cultural criticism, all masquerading as a Western – the adventures of Slade and his quest for Miss Polly Peachtree of Paduka” (*The Annotated Guide to Stephen King*, p45). ‘Steve’ King wrote this while attending the University of Maine and had it published in the UMO college newspaper *The Maine Campus* June-August 1970 over eight installments during his final semester and in the summer following his graduation.

It was almost dark when Slade rode into Dead Steer Springs. He was tall in the saddle, a grim faced man dressed all in black. Even the handles of his two sinister .45s, which rode low on his hips, were black. Ever since the early 1870s, when the name of Slade had begun to strike fear into the stoutest of Western hearts, there had been many whispered legends about his dress. One story had it that he wore black as a perpetual emblem of mourning for his Illinois sweetheart, Miss Polly Peachtree of Paduka, who passed tragically from this vale of tears when a flaming Montgolfier balloon crashed into the Peachtree barn while Polly was milking the cows. But some said he wore black because Slade was the Grim Reaper's agent in the American Southwest – the devil's handyman. And then there were some who thought he was queerer than a three-dollar bill. No one, however, advanced this last idea to his face.

Now Slade halted his huge black stallion in front of the Brass Cuspidor Saloon and climbed down. He tied his horse and pulled one of his famous Mexican cigars from his breast pocket. He lit it and let the acrid smoke drift out onto the twilight air. From inside the bat-wing doors of the Brass Cuspidor came noises of drunken revelry. A honkytonk piano was beating out "Oh, Them Golden Slippers."

A faint shuffling noise came to Slade's keen ears, and he wheeled around, drawing both of his sinister .45s in a single blur of motion.

"Watch it there, mister!"

Slade shovelled his pistols back into their holsters with a snarl of contempt. It was an old man in a battered Confederate cap, dusty jeans and suspenders. Either the town drunk or the village idiot, Slade surmised. The old man cackled, sending a wave of bad breath over to Slade. "Thought you wuz gonna hole me fer sure, Stranger."

Slade smoked and looked at him.

"Yore Jack Slade, ain'tchee, Pard?" The old man showed his toothless gums in another smile. "Reckon Miss Sandra of the Bar-T hired you, that right? She's been havin' a passel of trouble with Sam Columbine since her daddy died an' left her to run the place."

Slade smoked and looked at him – the old man suddenly rolled his eyes. "Or mebbe yore workin' fer Sam Columbine hisself – that it? I heer he's been hiring a lot of real hardcases to help pry Miss Sandra off'n the Bar-T. Is that – "

"Old man," Slade said, "I hope you run as fast as you talk. Because if you don't, you're gonna be takin' from a plot six feet long an' three wide."

The old sourdough grimaced with sudden fear. "You – you wouldn't –" Slade drew one sinister.⁴⁵

The old geezer started to run in grotesque flying hops. Slade sighted carefully along the barrel of his sinister.⁴⁵ and winged him once for luck. Then he dropped his gun back into its holster, turned and strode into the Brass Cuspidor, pushing the bat-wing doors wide.

Every eye in the place turned to stare at him. Faces went white. The bartender dropped the knife he was using to cut off the foamy beer heads. The fancy dan gambler at the back table dropped three aces out of his sleeve – two of them were clubs. The piano player fell off his stool, scrambled up, and ran out the back door. The bartender's dog, General Custer, whined and crawled under the card table. And standing at the bar, calmly downing a straight shot of whiskey, was John "The Backshooter" Parkinan, one of Sam Columbine's top guns.

A horrified whisper ran through the crowd. "Slade!" "It's Jack Slade!" "It's Slade!"

There was a sudden general rush for the doors. Outside someone ran down the street, screaming.

"Slade's in town! Lock yore doors! Jack Slade is in town an' God help whoever he's after!"

"Parkman!" Slade gritted.

Parkman turned to face Slade. He was chewing a match between his ugly snagged teeth, and one hand hovered over the notched butt of his sinister.⁴¹

"What're you doin' in Dead Steer, Slade?"

"I'm working fer a sweet lady name of Sandra Dawson," Slade said laconically. "How about yoreself, 'Backshooter'?"

"Workin' fer Sam Columbine, an' go to hell if you don't like the sound of it, Pard."

"I don't," Slade growled, and threw away his cigar. The bartender, who was trying to dig a hole in the floor, moaned.

"They say yer fast, Slade."

"Fast enough."

Backshooter grinned evilly. "They also say yore queerer'n a three dollar bill."

"Fill yore hand, you slimy, snaky son of a bitch!" Slade yelled

'The Backshooter' went for his gun, but before he had even touched the handle both of Slade's sinister .45s were out and belching lead. 'Backshooter' was thrown back against the bar, where he crumpled.

Slade re-holstered his guns and walked over to Parkman, his spurs jingling. He looked down at him. Slade was a peace-loving man at heart, and what was more peace-loving than a dead body? The thought filled him with quiet joy and a sad yearning for his childhood sweetheart, Miss Polly Peachtree of Paduka, Illinois.

The bartender hurried around the bar and looked at the earthly remains of John 'The Backshooter' Parkman.

"It ain't possible!" He breathed. "Shot in the heart six times and you could cover all six holes with a twenty-dollar gold piece!"

Slade pulled one of his famous Mexican cigars from his breast pocket and lit up. "Better call the undertaker an' cart him out afore he stinks."

The bartender gave Slade a nervous grin and rushed out through the bat-wings. Slade went behind the bar, poured himself a shot of Digger's Rye (190 proof), and thought about the lonely life of a gun for hire. Every man's hand turned against you, never sure if the deck was loaded, always expecting a bullet in the back or the gall bladder, which was even worse. It was sure hard to do your business with a bullet in the gall bladder. The batwing doors of the Brass Cuspidor were thrown open, and Slade drew both of his sinister.45s with a quick, flowing motion. But it was a girl – a beautiful blonde with a shape which would have made Ponce de Leon forget about the fountain of youth – Hubba-hubba, Slade thought to himself. His lips twisted into a thin, lonely smile as he re-holstered his guns. Such a girl was not for him, he was true – to the memory of Polly Peachtree, his one true love.

"Are you Jack Slade?" The blonde asked, parting her lovely red lips, which were the color of cherry blossoms in the month of May.

"Yes ma'am," Slade said, knocking off his shot of Digger's Rye and pouring another.

"I'm Sandra Dawson," she said, coming over to the bar.

"I figgered," Slade said.

Sandra came forward and looked down at the sprawled body of John "The Backshooter" Parkman with burning eyes. "This is one of the men that murdered my father!" She cried "One of the low, murdering swine that Sam Columbine hired!"

"I reckon," Slade said.

Sandra Dawson's bosom heaved. Slade was keeping an eye on it, just for safety's sake. "Did you dispatch him, Mr. Slade?"

"I shore did, ma'am. And it was my pleasure."

Sandra threw her arms around Slade's neck and kissed him, her full lips burning against his own. "You're the man I've been looking for," she breathed, her heart racing. "Anything I can do to help you, Slade, anything –"

Slade shoved her away and drew deeply on his famous Mexican cigar to regain his composure. "Reckon you took me wrong, ma'am. I'm bein' true to the memory of my one true love, Miss Polly Peachtree of Paduka, Illinois. But anything I can do to help you –"

"You can, you can!" She breathed. "That's why I wrote you. Sam Columbine is trying to take over my ranch, the Bar-T! He murdered my father, and now he's trying to scare me off the land so he can buy it cheap and sell it dear when the Great Southwestern Railroad decides to put a branch line through here! He's hired a lot of hardcases like this one –" she prodded "The Backshooter" with the toe of her shoe – "and he's trying to scare me out!" She looked at Slade pleadingly. "Can you help me?"

"I reckon so," Slade said. "Just don't get yore bowels in an uproar, ma'am."

"Oh, Slade!" she whispered. She was just melting into his arms when the bartender rushed back into the saloon, with the undertaker in tow. By this time the bartender's dog, General Custer, had crawled out from under the card table and was eating John "The Backshooter" Parkman's vest.

"Miss Dawson! Miss Dawson!" The bartender yelled. "Mose Hart, yore top hand, just rode into town! He says the Bar-T bunkhouse is on fire!"

But before Sandra Dawson could reply, Slade was on his way. Before a minute had passed, he was galloping toward the fire at Sandra Dawson's Bar-T ranch.

Slade's huge black stallion, Stokely, carried him rapidly up Winding Bluff Road toward the sinister fire glow on the horizon. As he rode, a grim determination settled over him like warm butter. To find Sam Columbine and put a crimp in his style!

When he arrived at Sandra Dawson's Bar-T ranch the bunkhouse was a red ball of flame. And standing in front of it, laughing evilly, were three of Sam Columbine's gunmen – Sunrise Jackson, Shifty Jack Mulloy, and Doc Logan. Doc Logan himself was rumored to have sent twelve sheep-ranchers to Boot Hill in the bloody Abeliene range war. But at that time Slade had been spending his days in a beautiful daze with his one true love, Miss Polly Peachtree of Paduka, Illinois. She had

since been killed in a dreadful accident, and now Slade was cold steel and hot blood – not to mention his silk underwear with the pretty blue flowers.

He climbed down from his stallion and pulled one of his famous Mexican cigars from his pocket. "What're you boys doin' here?" He asked calmly.

"Havin' a little clambake!" Sunrise Jackson said, dropping one hand to the butt of his sinister.50 caliber horse-pistol "Maw, haw, haw!"

A wounded cowpoke ran out of the red-flickering shadows. "They put fire to the bunkhouse!" He said. "That one – " he pointed at Doc Logan – "said they wuz doin' it on the orders of that murderin' skunk Sam Columbine!"

Doc Logan pulled leather and blew three new holes in the wounded cowpoke, who flopped. "Thought he looked hot from all that fire," Doc told Slade, "so I ventilated him. Haw, haw, haw!"

"You can always tell a low murderin' puckerbelly by the way he laughs," Slade said, dropping his hands over the butts of his sinister.45s.

"Is that right?" Doe said. "How do they laugh?"

"Haw, haw, haw," Slade gritted.

"Pull leather, you Republican skunk!" Shifty Jack Mulloy yelled, and went for his gun, Slade yanked both of his sinister.45s out in a smooth sweep and blasted Shifty Jack before Mulloy's piece had even cleared leather. Sunrise Jackson was already blasting away, and Slade felt a bullet shave by his temple. Slade hit the dirt and let Jackson have it. He took two steps backward and fell over, dead as a turtle with smallpox.

But Doc Logan was running. He vaulted into the saddle of an Indian pony with a shifty eye and slapped its flank. Slade squeezed off two shots at him, but the light was tricky, Logan's pony jumped the shakepole fence and was gone into the darkness – to report back to Sam Columbine, no doubt.

Slade walked over to Sunrise Jackson and rolled him over with his boot. Jackson had a hole right between the eyes. Then he went over to Shifty Jack Mulloy, who was gasping his last.

"You got me, Pard!" Shifty Jack gasped. "I feel worse'n a turtle with smallpox"

"You never shoulda called me a Republican." Slade snarled down at him. He showed Shifty Jack his Gene McCarthy button and then blasted him.

Slade holstered his sinister.45 and threw away the smoldering butt of his famous Mexican cigar. He started toward the darkened ranch-house to make sure that no more of Sam Columbine's men were lurking within. He was almost there when the front door was ripped open and someone ran out.

Slade drew in one lightning movement and blasted away, the gunflashes from the barrels of his sinister.45 lighting the dark with bright flashes. Slade walked over and lit a match. He had bagged Sing-Loo, the Chinese cook.

"Well," Slade said sadly, holstering his gun and feeling a great wave of longing for his one true love, Miss Polly Peachtree of Paduka, "I guess you can't win them all."

He started to reach for another famous Mexican cigar, changed his mind and rolled a joint. After he had begun to see all sorts of interesting blue and green lights in the sky, he climbed back on his sinister black stallion and started towards Dead Steer Springs.

When he got back to the Brass Cuspidor saloon, Mose Hart, the top hand at the Bar-T rushed out, holding a bottle of Digger's Rye in one hand, with which he had been soothing his jangled nerves.

"Slade!" He yelled. "Miss Dawson's been kidnapped by Sam Columbine!"

Slade got down from his huge black stallion, Stokely, and lit up a famous Mexican cigar. He was still brooding over Sing-Loo, the Chinese cook at the Bar-T, who he had drilled by mistake.

"Ain't you going after her?" Hart asked, his eyes rolling wildly. "Sam Columbine may try to rape her – or even rob her! Ain't you gonna get on their trail?"

"Right now," Slade snarled, "I'm gonna check into the Dead Steer Springs Hotel and catch a good night's sleep. Since I got to this damn town I have had to blast three gunslingers and one Chinese cook and I'm mighty tired."

"Yeah," Hart said sympathetically, "It must really make you feel turrible, havin' snuffed out four human lives in the space of six hours."

"That's right," Slade said, tying Stokely to the hitching rack, "And I got blisters on my trigger finger. Do you know where I could get some Solarcaine?"

Hart shook his head, and so Slade started down towards the hotel, his spurs jingling below the heels of his Bonanza cowboy boots (they had elevator lifts inside the heels, Slade was very sensitive about his height). When old men and pregnant ladies saw him coming they took to the other side of the street. One small boy came up and asked for his autograph. Slade, who didn't want to encourage that sort of thing, shot him in the leg and walked on.

At the hotel he asked for a room, and the trembling clerk said the second floor suite was available, and Slade went up. He undressed, then put his boots on again, and climbed into bed. He was asleep in moments.

Around one in the morning, while Slade was dreaming sweetly of his childhood sweetheart Miss Polly Paduka of Peachtree, Illinois, the window was eased up little by little, without even a squeak to alert Slade's keen ears. The shape that crept in was frightful indeed – for if Jack Slade was the most feared gunslinger in the American Southwest, then Hunchback Fred Agnew was the most detested killer. He was a two foot three inch midget with a hump big enough for a camel halfway down his crooked back. In one hand he held a three foot Arabian skinning knife (and although Hunchback Fred had never skinned an Arab with it, he was known to have put it to work changing the faces of three U.S. marshals, two county sheriffs and an old lady from Boston on the way to Arizona to recuperate from Parkinson's disease). In the other hand he held a large box made of woven river reeds.

He slid across the floor in utter silence, holding his Arabian skinning knife ready, should Slade awake. Then he carefully put the box down on the chair by the bed. Grinning fiendishly, he opened the lid and pulled out a twelve-foot python named Sadie Hawkins. Sadie had been Hunchback Fred's bosom companion for the last twelve years, and had saved the terrifying little man from death many times.

"Do your stuff, hon." Fred whispered affectionately. Sadie seemed to almost grin at him as Hunchback Fred kissed her on her dead black mouth. The snake slid onto the bed and began to crawl towards Slade's head. Giggling fiendishly, Hunchback Fred retreated to the corner to watch the fun.

Sadie wiggled in slow S-curves up the side of the bed, and drew back to strike. In that instant, the faint hiss of scales on the sheet came to Slade's ears.

A woman was in bed with him! That was his first thought as he rolled off the bed and onto the floor, grabbing for the sinister derringer that was always strapped to his right calf. Sadie struck at the pillow where his head had been only a second before. Hunchback Fred screamed with disappointment and threw his three-foot Arabian skinning knife, which nicked the corner of one of Slade's earlobes and quivered in the floor.

Slade fired the derringer and Hunchback Fred fell back against the wall, knocking the picture Niagara Falls off the dresser. His sinister career was at an end.

Carefully avoiding the python (which seemed to have gone to sleep on the bed), Slade got dressed. It was time to go out to Sam Columbine's ranch and put an end to that slimy coyote once and for all.

Strapping on the twin gunbelts of his sinister.45s, Slade went downstairs. The desk clerk looked at him even more nervously than before. "D-did I hear a shot?" He asked.

"Don't think so," Slade said, "But you better go up and close the window by the bed. I left it open –"

"Yessir, Mr. Slade. Of course. Of course."

And then Slade was off, grimly determined to find Sam Columbine and put a crimp in his style once and for all.

Slade shoved his way into the Brass Cuspidor where the foreman of Sandra Dawson's Bar-T, Mose Hart, was leaning over the bar with a bottle of Digger's Rye (206 proof) in one hand.

"Okay, you slimy drunkard," Slade gritted, pulling Hart around and yanking the bottle out of his hand. "Where is Sam Columbine's ranch? I'm going to get that rotten liver-eater, he just sent Hunchback Fred Agnew up against me."

"Hunchback Fred?!" Hart gasped, going white as a sheet. "And you're still alive?"

"I filled him full of lead," Slade said grimly. "He should have known that putting a snake in my bed was a no-no."

"Hunchback Fred Agnew," Hart whispered, still awed, "There was talk that he might be the next Vice President of the American Southwest."

Slade let go of a grating laugh that even made the bartenders dog, General Custer, cringe.

"Well I reckon that now he can be Vice President of Hell!" Slade proclaimed. He motioned to the bartender, who was standing at the far end of the bar reading a western novel.

"Bartender! What have you got for mixed drinks?"

The bartender approached cautiously, tucking the dog-eared copy of Blood Brides of Sitting Bull into his back pocket. "Wal, Mr. Slade, we got about the usual – The Geronimo, The Fort Bragg Backbreaker, Popskull Pete, Sourdough Armpit –"

"How about a shot of Digger's Rye (206 proof)?" Mose Hart said with a glassy grin.

"Shut up," Slade growled. He turned to the bartender and drew one of his sinister.45s.

"If you don't produce a drink that I ain't never had before, friend, you're gonna be pushing up daisies before dawn."

The bartender went white, "W-well, we do have drink of my own invention, Mr. Slade. But it's so potent that I done stopped serving them. I got plumb tired of having people pass out on the roulette wheel"

"What's it called?"

"We call it a zombie," the bartender said.

"Well mix me up three of them and make it fast!" Slade commanded.

"Three zombies?" Mose Hart said with popping eyes. "M'God, are you crazy?"

Slade turned to him coldly "Friend, smile when you say that."

Hart smiled and took another drink of Digger's Rye.

"Okay," Slade said, when the three drinks had been placed in front of him. They came in huge beer steins and smelled like the wrath of God. He drained the first one at a single draught, blew out his breath, staggered a little, and lit one of his famous Mexican cigars. Then he turned to Mose.

"Now just where is Sam Columbine's ranch?" He asked.

"Three miles west and across the ford," Mose said. "It's called the Rotten Vulture Ranch"

"That figursh," Slade said, draining his second drink to the ice-cubes. He was beginning to feel a trifle woozy. It probably had something to do with the lateness of the hour, he thought, and began to work on his third drink.

"Say – " Mose Hart said timidly, "I don't really think you're in any shape to go up against Sam Columbine, Slade. He's apt to put a crimp in your style."

"Doan tell me what to do," Slade, swaggering over to pat General Custer. He breathed in the dog's face and General Custer promptly went to sleep. "If there'sh one thing that I can do, it's lick my holder, I mean hold my liquor. Ho get out of my way before I blon you in to."

"The door's out the other way," the bartender said cautiously.

"Coursh it is. You think I doan tinow where I'm goin'?"

Slade staggered across the bar, stepping on General Custer's tail (the dog didn't wake up) and managed to make his way out through the batwing doors where he almost fell off the sidewalk. Just then a steely arm clamped his elbow. Slade looked around blearily.

"I'm Deputy Marshall Hoagy Carmichael," the stranger said, "and I'm taking yuh in – "

"On what charge?" Slade asked.

"Public intoxication. Now let's go."

Slade burped. "Everything happen'sh to me," he groaned. The two of them started off for the Dead Steer Springs jail.

After Slade was sprung from the pokey, Sandra Dawson's top hand, Mose Hart, went his bail. Slade filled both Hart and Deputy Marshall Hoagy Carmichael full of lead (blame it on his terrible hangover). Then, mounting his huge black stallion, Stokely, Slade made it out to the Rotten Vulture Ranch to have it out once an for all with Sam Columbine.

But Columbine was not there. He was off torturing ex border guards, leaving Sandra Dawson under the watch of three trusted henchmen – Big Fran Nixon, "Quick Draw" John Mitchell, and Shifty Ron Ziegfeld.

After a heated shootout, Slade dropped all three of them in their slimy tracks and freed the fair Sandra.

The acrid, choking smell of gunsmoke filled the room where the lovely Sandra Dawson had been held prisoner. As she saw Slade standing tall and victorious, with a sinister.45 in each hand and a Mexican cigar clenched between his teeth, her eyes filled with love and passion.

"Slade!" she cried, jumping to her feet and running to him. "I'm saved! Thank heaven! When Sam Columbine got back from torturing the Mexican border guards, he was going to feed me to his alligators! You came just in time!"

"Damn right," Slade gritted. "I always do. Steve King sees to that."

Her firm, supple, silken fleshed body swooned into his arms, and her lush lips sought Slade's mouth with ripe humid passion. Slade promptly clubbed her over the head with one sinister.45 and threw his Mexican cigar away, a snarl pulling at his lips.

"Watch it," he growled, "my mom told me about girls like you."

And he strode off to find Sam Columbine.

Slade strode out of the bunk-room leaving Sandra Dawson in the smoke-filled chamber to rub the bump on her head where he had clouted her with the barrel of his sinister.45. He mounted his huge black stallion, Stokely, and headed for the border, where Sam Columbine was torturing Mexican customs men with the help of his A No.1 Top Gun – "Pinky" Lee. The only two men in the American Southwest that could ever approach "Pinky" for pure, dad-ratted evil were Hunchback Fred Agnew (who Slade gunned down three weeks ago) and Sam Columbine himself. "Pinky" had gotten his infamous nickname during the Civil War when he rode with Captain Quantrill and his Regulators. While passed out in the kitchen of a fancy bordello in Bleeding Heart, Kansas, a Union officer named Randolph P. Sorghum dropped a homemade bomb down the kitchen chimney. "Pinky" lost all his hair, his eyebrows, and all the fingers on his left hand, except for the forth, and smallest. His hair and eyebrows grew back. His fingers did not. He is, however, still faster than greased lightning and meaner than hell. He had sworn to find Randolph P. Sorghum some day and stake him over the nearest anthill.

But Slade was not worried about Lee, because his heart was pure and his strength was as ten.

In a short time the agonized screams of the Mexican customs officials told him he was nearing the border. He dismounted, tied Stokely to a parking-meter and advanced through the sagebrush as noiselessly as a cat. The night was dark and moonless.

"No More! amigo!" the guard was screaming. "I confess! I confess! I am – who am I?"

"Forgetful bastid, ain't ye?" Pinky said. "Yore Randolph P. Sorghum, the sneakun' low life that blew off 90% 0' my hand durin' the Civil War."

"I admit it! I admit it!"

Slade had crept close enough now to see what was happening. Lee had the customs official tied to a straight-backed chair, with his bare feet on a hassock. Both feet were coated with honey and Lee's trained bear, Whomper, was licking it off with his long tongue.

"I can't stand it!" the guard screamed, "I am thesee whatyoumacallum, Sorghum!"

"Caught you at last!" Lee gloated. He pulled out his sinister Buntline Special and prepared to blow the poor old fellow all the way to Trinidad. Sam Columbine, who was standing far back in the shadows, was ready to bring in the next guard.

Slade stood up suddenly. "Okay, you two skulkin' varmits! Hold it right there!"

Pinky Lee dropped to his chest, fanning the hammer of his sinister Buntline Special. Slade felt bullets race all around him. He fired back twice, but curse it – the hammers of his two sinister .45s only clicked on empty chambers. He had forgotten to load up after downing the three badmen back at the Rotten Vulture.

Lee rolled to cover behind a barrel of taco chips. Columbine was already crouched behind a giant bottle of mayonnaise that had been air-dropped a month before after the worst flood disaster in American Southwest history (why drop mayonnaise after a disaster? None of your damn business).

"Who's that out there?" Lee yelled.

Slade thought quickly. "It's Randolph P. Sorghum," he cried. "The real McCoy, Lee! And this time I'm gunna blow off more than three fingers!"

His crafty challenge had the desired effect. Pinky rushed rashly (or rashly rushed if you preferred) from cover, his sinister Buntline Special blazing. "I'll blow ya apart!" he yelled, "I'll – "

But at that moment Slade carefully put a bullet through his head. Pinky Lee flopped, his evil days done.

"Lee?" Sam Columbine called. "Pinky? You out there?" A craven cowardly note had crept into his voice.

"I just dropped him, Columbine!" Slade yelled. "And now it's just you and me...and I'm comin' to get you!"

Sinister.45s blazing, a Mexican cigar clamped between his teeth, Slade started down the hill after Sam Columbine.

Halfway down the slope, Sam Columbine let loose such a volley of shots that Slade had to duck behind a barrel cactus. He could not get off a clear shot at Columbine because the wily villain had hidden behind a convenient, giant bottle of mayonnaise.

"Slade!" Columbine yelled. "It's time we settled this like men! Holster yore gun and I'll holster mine! Then we'll come out an' draw! The better man will walk away!"

"Okay, you lowdown sidewinder!" Slade yelled back. He holstered his sinister.45s and stepped out from behind the barrel cactus. Columbine stepped out from behind the bottle of mayonnaise. He was a tall man with an olive complexion and an evil grin. His hand hovered over the barrel of the sinister Smith & Wesson pistol that hung on his hip.

"Well, this is it, pard!" Slade sneered. There was a Mexican cigar clamped between his teeth as he started to walk toward Columbine. "Say hello to everyone in hell for me, Columbine!"

"We'll see," Columbine sneered back, but his knees were knocking as he halted, ready for the showdown.

"Okay!" Slade called. "Go fer yore gun!"

"Wait," Someone screamed. "Wait, wait, WAIT!"

They both stared. It was Sandra Dawson! She was running toward them breathless.

"Slade!" she cried. "Slade!"

"Get down!" Slade growled. "Sam Columbine is – "

"I had to tell you, Slade! I couldn't let you go off, maybe to get killed! And you'd never know!"

"Know what?" Slade asked.

"That I'm Polly Peachtree!"

Slade gaped at her. "But you can't be Polly Peachtree! She was my one true love and she was killed by a flaming Montgolfier balloon while milking the cows!"

"I escaped but I had amnesia!" she cried. "It's all just come back to me tonight. Look!" And she pulled off a blond wig she had been wearing. She was indeed the beautiful Polly Peachtree of Paduka, returned from the dead!

"POLLY!!!"

"SLADE!!!"

Slade rushed to her and they embraced, Sam Columbine forgotten. Slade was just about to ask her how things were going when Sam Columbine, evil rat that he was, crept up behind him and shot Slade in the back three times.

"Thank God!" Polly whispered as she and Sam embraced "At last. he's gone and we are free, my darling!"

"Yeah," Sam growled. "How are things going Polly?"

"You don't know how terrible it's been," she sobbed. "Not only was he killing everybody, but he was queerer than a three-dollar bill."

"Well it's over," Sam said.

"Like fun!" Slade said. He sat up and blasted them both. "Good thing I was wearing my bullet proof underwear," he said, lighting a new Mexican cigar. He stared at the cooling bodies of Sam Columbine and Polly Peachtree, and a great wave of sadness swept over him. He threw away his cigar and lit a joint. Then he walked over to where he had tethered Stokely, his black stallion. He wrapped his arms around Stokely's neck and held him close.

"At last, darling," Slade whispered. "We're alone."

After a long while, Slade and Stokely rode off into the sunset in search of new adventures.

THE BLUE AIR COMPRESSOR

A gruesome short story King wrote when he was in college and then revised a decade later for a reprint in *Heavy Metal*. First published in *Onan* in 1971.

The house was tall, with an incredible slope of shingled roof. As he walked up toward it from the shore road, Gerald Nately thought it was almost a country in itself, geography in microcosm. The roof dipped and rose at varying angles above the main building and two strangely-angled wings; a widow's walk skirted a mushroom-shaped cupola which looked toward the sea; the porch, facing the dunes and lusterless September scrubgrass, was longer than a Pullman car and screened in. The high slope of roof made the house seem to beetle its brows and loom above him. A Baptist grandfather of a house.

He went to the porch and after a moment of hesitation, through the screen door to the fanlighted one beyond. There was only a wicker chair, a rusty porch swing, and an old discarded knitting basket to watch him go. Spiders had spun silk in the shadowy upper corners. He knocked.

There was silence, inhabited silence. He was about to knock again when a chair someplace inside wheezed deeply in its throat. It was a tired sound. Silence. Then the slow, dreadfully patient sound of old, overburdened feet finding their way up the hall. Counterpoint of cane: *Whock...whock...whock...* The floorboards creaked and whined. A shadow, huge and unformed in the pearled glass, bloomed on the fanlight. Endless sound of fingers laboriously solving the riddle of chain, bolt, and hasp lock. The door opened. "Hello," the nasal voice said flatly. "You're Mr. Nately. You've rented the cottage. My husband's cottage."

"Yes," Gerald said, his tongue swelling in his throat. "That's right. And you're –"

"Mrs. Leighton," the nasal voice said, pleased with either her quickness or her name, though neither was remarkable. "I'm Mrs. Leighton."

this woman is so goddam fucking big and old she looks like oh jesus christ print dress she must be six-six and fat my god shes fat as a hog can't smell her white hair long white hair her legs those redwood trees she could be a tank she could kill me her voice is out of any context like

a kazoo jesus if i laugh i can't laugh can she be seventy god how does she walk and the cane her hands are bigger than my feet like a goddam tank she could go through oak oak for christ's sake.

"You write." She hadn't offered him in.

"That's about the size of it," he said, and laughed to cover his own sudden shrinking from that metaphor.

"Will you show me some after you get settled?" she asked. Her eyes seemed perpetually luminous and wistful. They were not touched by the age that had run riot in the rest of her

wait get that written down

image: "age had run riot in her with luxuriant fleshiness: she was like a wild sow let loose in a great and dignified house to shit on the carpet, gore at the Welsh dresser and send the crystal goblets and wine-glasses all crash-atumble, to trample the wine colored divans to lunatic puffs of springs and stuffing, to spike the mirrorbright finish of the great hall floor with barbarian hoofprints and flying puddles of urine"

okay shes there its a story i feel her

body, making it sag and billow.

"If you like," he said. "I didn't even see the cottage from the Shore Road, Mrs. Leighton. Could you tell me where – "

"Did you drive in?"

"Yes. I left my car over there." He pointed beyond the dunes, toward the road.

A smile, oddly one-dimensional, touched her lips. "That's why. You can only see a blink from the road: unless you're walking, you miss it." She pointed west at a slight angle away from the dunes and the house. "There. Right over that little hill."

"All right," he said, then stood there smiling. He really had no idea how to terminate the interview.

"Would you like to come in for some coffee? Or a Coca-Cola?"

"Yes," he said instantly.

She seemed a little taken back by his instant agreement. He had, after all, been her husband's friend, not her own. The face loomed above Gerald, moonlike, disconnected, undecided. Then she led him into the elderly, waiting house.

She had tea. He had Coke, Millions of eyes seemed to watch them. He felt like a burglar, stealing around the hidden fiction he could make of her, carrying only his own youthful winsomeness and a psychic flashlight.

* * *

My own name, of course, is Steve King, and you'll pardon my intrusion on your mind – or I hope you will. I could argue that the drawing-aside of the curtain of presumption between reader and author is permissible because I am the writer; i.e., since it's my story I'll do any goddam thing I please with it – but since that leaves the reader out of it completely, that is not valid. Rule One for all writers is that the teller is not worth a tin tinker's fart when compared to the listener. Let us drop the matter, if we may. I am intruding for the same reason that the Pope defecates: we both have to.

You should know that Gerald Natelly was never brought to the dock; his crime was not discovered. He paid all the same. After writing four twisted, monumental, misunderstood novels, he cut his own head off with an ivory-figured guillotine purchased in Kowloon. I invented him first during a moment of eight o'clock boredom in a class taught by Carroll F. Terrell of the University of Maine English faculty. Dr. Terrell was speaking of Edgar A. Poe, and I thought

ivory guillotine Kowloon
twisted woman of shadows, like a pig
some big house

The blue air compressor did not come until later. It is desperately important that the reader be made cognizant of these facts.

He did show her some of his writing. Not the important part, the story he was writing about her, but fragments of poetry, the spine of a novel that had ached in his mind for a year like embedded shrapnel, four essays. She was a perceptive critic, and addicted to marginal notations with her black felt-tip pen. Because she sometimes dropped in when he was gone to the village, he kept the story hidden in the back shed.

September melted into cool October, and the story was completed, mailed to a friend, returned with suggestions (bad ones), rewritten. He felt it was good, but not quite right. Something indefinable was missing. The focus was a shade fuzzy. He began to toy with the idea of giving it to her for criticism, rejected it, toyed with it again. After all, the story was her; he never doubted she could supply the final vector. His attitude concerning her became increasingly unhealthy; he was fascinated by her huge, animalistic bulk, by the slow, tortoise-like way she trekked across the space between the house and the cottage

* * *

image: "mammoth shadow of decay swaying across the shadowless sand, cane held in one twisted hand, feet clad in huge canvas shoes which pump and push at the coarse grains, face like a serving platter, puffy dough arms, breasts like drumlins, a geography in herself, a country of tissue"

by her reedy, vapid voice; but at the same time he loathed her, could not stand her touch. He began to feel like the young man in "The Tell-Tale Heart," by Edgar A. Poe. He felt he could stand at her bedroom door for endless midnights, shining one ray of light on her sleeping eye, ready to pounce and rip the instant it flashed open.

The urge to show her the story itched at him maddeningly. He had decided, by the first day of December, that he would do it. The decision-making did not relieve him, as it is supposed to do in the novels, but it did leave him with a feeling of antiseptic pleasure. It was right that it should be so – an omega that quite dovetailed with the alpha. And it was omega; he was vacating the cottage on the fifth of December. On this day he had just returned from the Stowe Travel Agency in Portland, where he had booked passage for the Far East. He had done this almost on the spur of the moment: the decision to go and the decision to show his manuscript to Mrs. Leighton had come together, almost as if he had been guided by an invisible hand.

In truth, he was guided by an invisible hand-mine.

The day was white with overcast and the promise of snow lurked in its throat. The dunes seemed to foreshadow the winter already, as Gerald crossed them between the slate-roofed house of her dominion and the low stone cottage of his. The sea, sullen and gray, curled on the shingle of beach. Gulls rode the slow swells like buoys.

He crossed the top of the last dune and knew she was there – her cane, with its white bicycle handgrip at the base, stood against the side of the door. Smoke drifted from the toy chimney. Gerald went up the board steps, kicked sand from his high-topped shoes to make her aware of his presence, and then went in.

"Hi, Mrs. Leighton!"

But the tiny living room and the kitchen both stood empty. The ship's clock on the mantle ticked only for itself and for Gerald. Her gigantic fur coat lay draped over the rocker like some animal sail. A small fire had been laid in the fireplace, and it glowed and crackled busily. The teapot was on the gas range in the kitchen, and one teacup stood on the counter, still waiting for water. He peered into the narrow hall which led to the bedroom.

"Mrs. Leighton?"

Hall and bedroom both empty.

He was about to turn back to the kitchen when the mammoth chuckles began. They were large, helpless shakings of laughter, the kind that stays hidden for years and ages like wine (There is also an Edgar A. Poe story about wine). The chuckles evolved into large bellows of laughter. They came from behind the door to the right of Gerald's bed, the last door in the cottage. From the tool-shed.

my balls are crawling like in grammar school the old bitch shes laughing she found it the old fat she bitch goddam her goddam her goddam her you old whore youre doing that cause im out here you old she bitch whore you piece of shit

He went to the door in one step and pulled it open. She was sitting next to the small space-heater in the shed, her dress pulled up over oak-stump knees to allow her to sit cross-legged, and his manuscript was held, dwarfed, in her bloated hands.

Her laughter roared and racketed around him. Gerald Nately saw bursting colors

in front of his eyes. She was a slug, a maggot, a gigantic crawling thing evolved in the cellar of the shadowy house by the sea. A dark bug that had swaddled itself in grotesque human form.

In the flat light from the one cobwebbed window her face became a hanging graveyard moon, pocked by the sterile craters of her eyes and the ragged earthquake rift of her mouth.

"Don't you laugh," Gerald said stiffly.

"Oh Gerald," she said, laughing all the same. "This is such a bad story. I don't blame you for using a penname. It's – " she wiped tears of laughter from her eyes, "it's abominable!"

He began to walk toward her stiffly.

"You haven't made me big enough, Gerald. That's the trouble. I'm too big for you. Perhaps Poe, or Dostoyevsky, or Melville...but not you, Gerald. Not even under your royal pen-name. Not you. Not you."

She began to laugh again, huge racking explosions of sound.

"Don't you laugh," Gerald said stiffly.

The tool-shed, after the manner of Zola:

Wooden walls, which showed occasional chinks of light, surrounding rabbit-traps hung and slung in corners; a pair of dusty, unstrung snowshoes: a rusty spaceheater showing flickers of yellow flame like cat's eyes; a shovel; hedge clippers; an ancient green hose coiled like a garter-snake; four bald tires stacked like doughnuts; a rusty Winchester

rifle with no bolt; a two handed saw; a dusty work-bench covered with nails, screws, bolts, washers, two hammers, a plane, a broken level, a dismantled carburetor which once sat inside a 1949 Packard convertible; a 4 hp. air-compressor painted electric blue, plugged into an extension cord running back into the house.

"Don't you laugh," Gerald said again, but she continued to rock back and forth, holding her stomach and flapping the manuscript with her wheezing breath like a white bird.

His hand found the rusty Winchester rifle and he pole-axed her with it.

Most horror stories are sexual in nature.

I'm sorry to break in with this information, but feel I must in order to make the way clear for the grisly conclusion of this piece, which is (at least psychologically) a clear metaphor for fears of sexual impotence on his part. Mrs. Leighton's large mouth is symbolic of the vagina; the hose of the compressor is a penis. Her female bulk, huge and overpowering, is a mythic representation of the sexual fear that lives in every male, to a greater or lesser degree: that the woman, with her opening, is a devourer.

In the works of Edgar A. Poe, Stephen King, Gerald Nately, and others who practice this particular literary form, we are apt to find locked rooms, dungeons, empty mansions (all symbols of the womb); scenes of living burial (sexual impotence); the dead returned from the grave (necrophilia); grotesque monsters or human beings (externalized fear of the sexual act itself); torture and/or murder (a viable alternative to the sexual act).

These possibilities are not always valid, but the post-Freud reader and writer must take them into consideration when attempting the genre. Abnormal psychology has become a part of the human experience.

She made thick, unconscious noises in her throat as he whirled around madly, looking for an instrument; her head lolled brokenly on the thick stalk of her neck.

He seized the hose of the air-compressor.

"All right," he said thickly. "All right, now. All Tight."

*bitch fat old bitch youve had yours not big enough is that right well
youll be bigger youll be bigger still*

* * *

He ripped her head back by the hair and rammed the hose into her mouth, into her gullet. She screamed around it, a sound like a cat.

Part of the inspiration for this story came from an old E. C. horror comic book, which I bought in a Lisbon Falls drugstore. In one particular story, a husband and wife murdered each other simultaneously in mutually ironic (and brilliant) fashion. He was very fat; she was very thin. He shoved the hose of an air compressor down her throat and blew her up to dirigible size. On his way downstairs a booby-trap she had rigged fell on him and squashed him to a shadow.

Any author who tells you he has never plagiarized is a liar. A good author begins with bad ideas and improbabilities and fashions them into comments on the human condition. In a horror story, it is imperative that the grotesque be elevated to the status of the abnormal.

The compressor turned on with a whoosh and a chug. The hose flew out of Mrs. Leighton's mouth. Giggling and gibbering, Gerald stuffed it back in. Her feet drummed and thumped on the floor. The flesh of her cheeks and diaphragm began to swell rhythmically. Her eyes bulged, and became glass marbles. Her torso began to expand.

here it is here it is you lousy louse are you big enough yet are you big enough

The compressor wheezed and racketed. Mrs. Leighton swelled like a beachball. Her lungs became straining blowfish.

Fiends! Devils! Dissemble no more! Here! Here! It is the beating of his hideous heart!

She seemed to explode all at once.

Sitting in a boiling hotel room in Bombay, Gerald re-wrote the story he had begun at the cottage on the other side of the world. The original title had been "The Hog." After some deliberation he retitled it "The Blue Air Compressor."

He had resolved it to his own satisfaction. There was a certain lack of motivation concerning the final scene where the fat old woman was murdered, but he did not see that as a fault. In "The Tell-Tale Heart," Edgar A. Poe's finest story, there is no real motivation for the murder of the old man, and that was as it should be. The motive is not the point.

* * *

She got very big just before the end: even her legs swelled up to twice their normal size. At the very end, her tongue popped out of her mouth like a party-favor.

After leaving Bombay, Gerald Nately went on to Hong Kong, then to Kowloon. The ivory guillotine caught his fancy immediately.

As the author, I can see only one correct omega to this story, and that is to tell you how Gerald Nately got rid of the body. He tore up the floor boards of the shed, dismembered Mrs. Leighton, and buried the sections in the sand beneath. When he notified the police that she had been missing for a week, the local constable and a State Policeman came at once. Gerald entertained them quite naturally, even offering them coffee. He heard no beating heart, but then – the interview was conducted in the big house.

On the following day he flew away, toward Bombay, Hong Kong, and Kowloon.

THE CAT FROM HELL

First appeared in *Cavalier Magazine*, 1971. The story was initially supposed to be 500 words and intended to be finished by the readers of *Cavalier*, but King wrote the complete story once he got into the writing mood.

Halston thought the old man in the wheelchair looked sick, terrified, and ready to die. He had experience in seeing such things. Death was Halston's business; he had brought it to eighteen men and six women in his career as an independent hitter. He knew the death look. The house – mansion, actually – was cold and quiet. The only sounds were the low snap of the fire on the big stone hearth and the low whine of the November wind outside.

"I want you to make a kill," the old man said. His voice was quavery and high, peevish. "I understand that is what you do."

"Who did you talk to?" Halston asked.

"With a man named Saul Loggia. He says you know him."

Halston nodded. If Loggia was the go-between, it was all right. And if there was a bug in the room, anything the old man – Drogan – said was entrapment.

"Who do you want hit?"

Drogan pressed a button on the console built into the arm of his wheelchair and it buzzed forward. Closeup, Halston could smell the yellow odors of fear, age, and urine all mixed. They disgusted him, but he made no sign. His face was still and smooth.

"Your victim is right behind you," Drogan said softly.

Halston moved quickly. His reflexes were his life and they were always set on a filed pin. He was off the couch, falling to one knee, turning, hand inside his specially tailored sport coat, gripping the handle of the short-barreled .45 hybrid that hung below his armpit in a spring-loaded holster that laid it in his palm at a touch. A moment later it was out and pointed at...a cat. For a moment Halston and the cat stared at each other. It was a strange moment for Halston, who was an unimaginative man with no superstitions. For that one moment as he knelt on the floor with the gun pointed, he felt that he knew this cat, although if he had ever seen one with such unusual markings he surely would have remembered.

Its face was an even split: half black, half white. The dividing line ran from the top of its flat skull and down its nose to its mouth, straight-

arrow. Its eyes were huge in the gloom, and caught in each nearly circular black pupil was a prism of firelight, like a sullen coal of hate.

And the thought echoed back to Halston: *We know each other, you and I*. Then it passed. He put the gun away and stood up. "I ought to kill you for that, old man. I don't take a joke."

"And I don't make them," Drogan said. "Sit down. Look in here."

He had taken a fat envelope out from beneath the blanket that covered his legs.

Halston sat. The cat, which had been crouched on the back of the sofa, jumped lightly down into his lap. It looked up at Halston for a moment with those huge dark eyes, the pupils surrounded by thin green-gold rings, and then it settled down and began to purr.

Halston looked at Drogan questioningly.

"He's very friendly," Drogan said. "At first. Nice friendly pussy has killed three people in this household. That leaves only me. I am old, I am sick...but I prefer to die in my own time."

"I can't believe this," Halston said. "You hired me to hit a cat?"

"Look in the envelope, please."

Halston did. It was filled with hundreds and fifties, all of them old. "How much is it?"

"Six thousand dollars. There will be another six when you bring me proof that the cat is dead. Mr. Loggia said twelve thousand was your usual fee?"

Halston nodded, his hand automatically stroking the cat in his lap. It was asleep, still purring. Halston liked cats. They were the only animals he did like, as a matter of fact. They got along on their own. God – if there was one – had made them into perfect, aloof killing machines. Cats were the hitters of the animal world, and Halston gave them his respect.

"I need not explain anything, but I will," Drogan said. "Forewarned is forearmed, they say, and I would not want you to go into this lightly. And I seem to need to justify myself. So you'll not think I'm insane."

Halston nodded again. He had already decided to make this peculiar hit, and no further talk was needed. But if Drogan wanted to talk, he would listen. "First of all, you know who I am? Where the money comes from?"

"Drogan Pharmaceuticals."

"Yes. One of the biggest drug companies in the world. And the cornerstone of our financial success has been this." From the pocket of his robe he handed Halston a small, unmarked vial of pills. "Tri-Dormal-phenobarbin, compound G. Prescribed almost exclusively for the terminally ill. It's extremely habit-forming, you see. It's a combination painkiller, tranquilizer, and mild hallucinogen. It is

remarkably helpful in helping the terminally ill face their conditions and adjust to them."

"Do you take it?" Halston asked.

Drogan ignored the question. "It is widely prescribed throughout the world. It's a synthetic, was developed in the fifties at our New Jersey labs. Our testing was confined almost solely to cats, because of the unique quality of the feline nervous system."

"How many did you wipe out?"

Drogan stiffened. "That is an unfair and prejudicial way to put it."

Halston shrugged.

"In the four-year testing period which led to FDA approval of Tri-Dormal-G, about fifteen thousand cats...uh, expired."

Halston whistled. About four thousand cats a year. "And now you think this one's back to get you, huh?"

"I don't feel guilty in the slightest," Drogan said, but that quavering, petulant note was back in his voice. "Fifteen thousand test animals died so that hundreds of thousands of human beings – "

"Never mind that," Halston said. Justifications bored him.

"That cat came here seven months ago. I've never liked cats. Nasty, disease-bearing animals...always out in the fields...crawling around in barns...picking up God knows what germs in their fur...always trying to bring something with its insides falling out into the house for you to look at...it was my sister who wanted to take it in. She found out. She paid." He looked at the cat sleeping on Halston's lap with dead hate.

"You said the cat killed three people."

Drogan began to speak. The cat dozed and purred on Halston's lap under the soft, scratching strokes of Halston's strong and expert killer's fingers. Occasionally a pine knot would explode on the hearth, making it tense like a series of steel springs covered with hide and muscle. Outside the wind whined around the big stone house far out in the Connecticut countryside. There was winter in that wind's throat. The old man's voice droned on and on. Seven months ago there had been four of them here-Drogan, his sister Amanda, who at seventy-four was two years Drogan's elder, her lifelong friend Carolyn Broadmoor ("of the Westchester Broadmoors," Drogan.said), who was badly afflicted with emphysema, and Dick Gage, a hired man who had been with the Drogan family for twenty years. Gage, who was past sixty himself, drove the big Lincoln Mark IV, cooked, served the evening sherry. A day maid came in. The four of them had lived this way for nearly two years, a dull collection of old people and their family retainer. Their only pleasures were The Hollywood Squares and waiting to see who would outlive whom. Then the cat had come.

"It was Gage who saw it first, whining and skulking around the house. He tried to drive it away. He threw sticks and small rocks at it, and hit it several times. But it wouldn't go. It smelled the food, of course. It was little more than a bag of bones. People put them out beside the road to die at the end of the summer season, you know. A terrible, inhumane thing."

"Better to fry their nerves?" Halston asked.

Drogan ignored that and went on. He hated cats. He always had. When the cat refused to be driven away, he had instructed Gage to put out poisoned food. Large, tempting dishes of Calo cat food spiked with Tri-Dormal-G, as a matter of fact. The cat ignored the food. At that point Amanda Drogan had noticed the cat and had insisted they take it in. Drogan had protested vehemently, but Amanda – had gotten her way. She always did, apparently.

"But she found out," Drogan said. "She brought it inside herself, in her arms. It was purring, just as it is now. But it wouldn't come near me. It never has ... yet. She poured it a saucer of milk. 'Oh, look at the poor thing, it's starving,' she cooed. She and Carolyn both cooed over it. Disgusting. It was their way of getting back at me, of course. They knew the way I've felt about felines ever since the Tri-Dormal-G testing program twenty years ago. They enjoyed teasing me, baiting me with it." He looked at Halston grimly. "But they paid."

In mid-May, Gage had gotten up to set breakfast and found Amanda Drogan lying at the foot of the main stairs in a litter of broken crockery and Little Friskies. Her eyes bulged sightlessly up at the ceiling. She had bled a great deal from the mouth and nose. Her back was broken, both legs were broken, and her neck had been literally shattered like glass.

"It slept in her room," Drogan said. "She treated it like a baby ... *'Is oo hungwy, darwing? Does oo need to go out and do poopos!'* Obscene, coming from an old battle-ax like my sister. I think it woke her up, meowing. She got his dish. She used to say that Sam didn't really like his Friskies unless they were wetted down with a little milk. So she was planning to go downstairs. The cat was rubbing against her legs. She was old, not too steady on her feet. Half asleep. They got to the head of the stairs and the cat got in front of her.. tripped her..."

Yes, it could have happened that way, Halston thought. In his mind's eye he saw the old woman falling forward and outward, too shocked to scream, the Friskies spraying out as she tumbled head over heels to the bottom, the bowl smashing. At last she comes to rest at the bottom, the old bones shattered, the eyes glaring, the nose and ears trickling blood. And the purring cat begins to work its way down the stairs, contentedly munching Little Friskies...

"What did the coroner say?" he asked Drogan. "Death by accident, of course. But I knew."

"Why didn't you get rid of the cat then? With Amanda gone?"

Because Carolyn Broadmoor had threatened to leave if he did, apparently. She was hysterical, obsessed with the subject. She was a sick woman, and she was nutty on the subject of spiritualism. A Hartford medium had told her (for a mere twenty dollars) that Amanda's soul had entered Sam's feline body. Sam had been Amanda's, she told Drogan, and if Sam went, she went. Halston, who had become something of an expert at reading between the lines of human lives, suspected that Drogan and the old Broadmoor bird had been lovers long ago, and the old dude was reluctant to let her go over a cat.

"It would have been the same as suicide," Drogan said. "In her mind she was still a wealthy woman, perfectly capable of packing up that cat and going to New York or London or even Monte Carlo with it. In fact she was the last of a great family, living on a pittance as a result of a number of bad investments in the sixties. She lived on the second floor here in a specially controlled, superhumidified room. The woman was seventy, Mr. Halston. She was a heavy smoker until the last two years of her life, and the emphysema was very bad. I wanted her here, and if the cat had to stay..."

Halston nodded and then glanced meaningfully at his watch.

"Near the end of June, she died in the night. The doctor seemed to take it as a matter of course...just came and wrote out the death certificate and that was the end of it. But the cat was in the room. Gage told me."

"We all have to go sometime, man," Halston said.

"Of course. That's what the doctor said. But I knew. I remembered. Cats like to get babies and old people when they're asleep. And steal their breath."

"An old wives' tale."

"Based on fact, like most so-called old wives' tales," Drogan replied.

"Cats like to knead soft things with their paws, you see. A pillow, a thick shag rug...or a blanket. A crib blanket or an old person's blanket. The extra weight on a person who's weak to start with..."

Drogan trailed off, and Halston thought about it. Carolyn Broadmoor asleep in her bedroom, the breath rasping in and out of her damaged lungs, the sound nearly lost in the whisper of special humidifiers and air conditioners. The cat with the queer black-and-white markings leaps silently onto her spinster's bed and stares at her old and wrinkle-grooved face with those lambent, black-and-green eyes. It creeps onto her thin chest and settles its weight there, purring...and the breathing slows... slows...and the cat purrs as the old woman slowly smothers beneath its

weight on her chest. He was not an imaginative man, but Halston shivered a little.

"Drogan," he said, continuing to stroke the purring cat. "Why don't you just have it put away? A vet would give it the gas for twenty dollars."

Drogan said, "The funeral was on the first day of July, I had Carolyn buried in our cemetery plot next to my sister. The way she would have wanted it. On July third I called Gage to this room and handed him a wicker basket...a picnic hamper sort of thing. Do you know what I mean?"

Halston nodded.

"I told him to put the cat in it and take it to a vet in Milford and have it put to sleep. He said, 'Yes, sir,' took the basket, and went out. Very like him. I never saw him alive again. There was an accident on the turnpike. The Lincoln was driven into a bridge abutment at better than sixty miles an hour. Dick Gage was killed instantly. When they found him there were scratches on his face."

Halston was silent as the picture of how it might have been formed in his brain again. No sound in the room but the peaceful crackle of the fire and the peaceful purr of the cat in his lap. He and the cat together before the fire would make a good illustration for that Edgar Guest poem, the one that goes: "*The cat on my lap, the hearth's good fire/...A happy man, should you enquire.*" Dick Gage moving the Lincoln down the turnpike toward Milford, beating the speed limit by maybe five miles an hour. The wicker basket beside him – a picnic hamper sort of thing. The chauffeur is watching traffic, maybe he's passing a big cab-over Jimmy and he doesn't notice the peculiar black-on-one-side, white-on-the-other face that pokes out of one side of the basket. Out of the driver's side. He doesn't notice because he's passing the big trailer truck and that's when the cat jumps onto his face, spitting and clawing, its talons raking into one eye, puncturing it, deflating it, blinding it. Sixty and the hum of the Lincoln's big motor and the other paw is hooked over the bridge of the nose, digging in with exquisite, damning pain – maybe the Lincoln starts to veer right, into the path of the Jimmy, and its airhorn blares ear-shatteringly, but Gage can't hear it because the cat is yowling, the cat is spread-eagled over his face like some huge furry black spider, ears laid back, green eyes glaring like spotlights from hell, back legs jittering and digging into the soft flesh of the old man's neck. The car veers wildly back the other way. The bridge abutment looms. The cat jumps down and the Lincoln, a shiny black torpedo, hits the cement and goes up like a bomb.

Halston swallowed hard and heard a dry click in his throat. "And the cat came back?"

Drogan nodded. "A week later. On the day Dick Gage was buried, as a matter of fact. Just like the old song says. The cat came back."

"It survived a car crash at sixty? Hard to believe."

"They say each one has nine lives. When it comes back...that's when I started to wonder if it might not be a...a..."

"Hellcat?" Halston suggested softly.

"For want of a better word, yes. A sort of demon sent ..."

"To punish you."

"I don't know. But I'm afraid of it. I feed it, or rather, the woman who comes in to do for me feeds it. She doesn't like it either. She says that face is a curse of God. Of course, she's local." The old man tried to smile and failed. "I want you to kill it. I've lived with it for the last four months. It skulks around in the shadows. It looks at me. It seems to be ... waiting. I lock myself in my room every night and still I wonder if I'm going to wake up one early and find it...curled up on my chest...and purring."

The wind whined lonesomely outside and made a strange hooting noise in the stone chimney.

"At last I got in touch with Saul Loggia. He recommended you. He called you a stick, I believe."

"A one-stick. That means I work on my own."

"Yes. He said you'd never been busted, or even suspected. He said you always seem to land on your feet...like a cat."

Halston looked at the old man in the wheelchair. And his long-fingered, muscular hands were lingering above the cat's neck.

"I'll do it now, if you want me to," he said softly. "I'll snap its neck. It won't even know –"

"No!" Drogan cried. He drew in a long, shuddering breath. Color had come up in his sallow cheeks. "Not...not here. Take it away."

Halston smiled humorlessly. He began to stroke the sleeping cat's head and shoulders and back very gently again. "All right," he said. "I accept the contract. Do you want the body?"

"No. Kill it. Bury it." He paused. He hunched forward in the wheelchair like some ancient buzzard. "Bring me the tail," he said. "So I can throw it in the fire and watch it burn."

Halston drove a 1973 Plymouth with a custom Cyclone Spoiler engine. The car was jacked and blocked, and rode with the hood pointing down at the road at a twenty degree angle. He had rebuilt the differential and the rear end himself. The shift was a Pensy, the linkage was Hearst. It sat on huge Bobby Unser Wide Ovals and had a top end of a little past one-sixty. He left the Drogan house at a little past 9:30. A cold rind of crescent moon rode overhead through the tattering November clouds. He rode with all the windows open, because that

yellow stench of age and terror seemed to have settled into his clothes and he didn't like it. The cold was hard and sharp, eventually numbing, but it was good. It was blowing that yellow stench away. He got off the turnpike at Placer's Glen and drove through the silent town, which was guarded by a single yellow blinker at the intersection, at a thoroughly respectable thirty-five. Out of town, moving up S.R. 35, he opened the Plymouth up a little, letting her walk. The tuned Spoiler engine purred like the cat had purred on his lap earlier this evening. Halston grinned at the simile. They moved between frost-white November fields full of skeleton cornstalks at a little over seventy.

The cat was in a double-thickness shopping bag, tied at the top with heavy twine. The bag was in the passenger bucket seat. The cat had been sleepy and purring when Halston put it in, and it had purred through the entire ride. It sensed, perhaps, that Halston liked it and felt at home with it. Like himself, the cat was a one-stick. Strange hit, Halston thought, and was surprised to find that he was taking it seriously as a hit. Maybe the strangest thing about it was that he actually liked the cat, felt a kinship with it. If it had managed to get rid of those three old crocks, more power to it...especially Gage, who had been taking it to Milford for a terminal date with a crew-cut veterinarian who would have been more than happy to bundle it into a ceramic-lined gas chamber the size of a microwave oven. He felt a kinship but no urge to renege on the hit. He would do it the courtesy of killing it quickly and well. He would park off the road beside one of those November-barren fields and take it out of the bag and stroke it and then snap its neck and sever its tail with his pocketknife.

And, he thought, the body I'll bury honorably, saving it from the scavengers. I can't save it from the worms, but I can save it from the maggots.

He was thinking these things as the car moved through the night like a dark blue ghost and that was when the cat walked in front of his eyes, up on the dashboard, tail raised arrogantly, its black-and-white face turned toward him, its mouth seeming to grin at him.

"Sssshhhh – " Halston hissed. He glanced to his right and caught a glimpse of the double-thickness shopping bag, a hole chewed – or clawed – in its side. Looked ahead again...and the cat lifted a paw and batted playfully at him. The paw skidded across Halston's forehead. He jerked away from it and the Plymouth's big tires wailed on the road as it swung erratically from one side of the narrow blacktop to the other. Halston batted at the cat on the dashboard with his fist. It was blocking his field of vision. It spat at him, arching its back, but it didn't move. Halston swung again, and instead of shrinking away, it leaped at him.

Gage, he thought. *Just like Gage* –

He stamped the brake. The cat was on his head, blocking his vision with its furry belly, clawing at him, gouging at him. Halston held the wheel grimly. He struck the cat once, twice, a third time. And suddenly the road was gone, the Plymouth was running down into the ditch, thudding up and down on its shocks. Then, impact, throwing him forward against his seat belt, and the last sound he heard was the cat yowling inhumanly, the voice of a woman in pain or in the throes of sexual climax. He struck it with his closed fists and felt only the springy, yielding flex of its muscles. Then, second impact. And darkness.

The moon was down. It was an hour before dawn. The Plymouth lay in a ravine curdled with groundmist. Tangled in its grille was a snarled length of barbed wire. The hood had come unlatched, and tendrils of steam from the breached radiator drifted out of the opening to mingle with the mist. No feeling in his legs. He looked down and saw that the Plymouth's firewall had caved in with the impact. The back of that big Cyclone Spoiler engine block had smashed into his legs, pinning them. Outside, in the distance, the predatory squawk of an owl dropping onto some small, scurrying animal. Inside, close, the steady purr of the cat. It seemed to be grinning, like Alice's Cheshire had in Wonderland.

As Halston watched it stood up, arched its back, and stretched. In a sudden limber movement like rippled silk, it leaped to his shoulder. Halston tried to lift his hands to push it off. His arms wouldn't move. Spinal shock, he thought. Paralyzed. Maybe temporary. More likely permanent. The cat purred in his ear like thunder.

"Get off me," Halston said. His voice was hoarse and dry. The cat tensed for a moment and then settled back. Suddenly its paw batted Halston's cheek, and the claws were out this time. Hot lines of pain down to his throat. And the warm trickle of blood.

Pain.

Feeling.

He ordered his head to move to the right, and it complied. For a moment his face was buried in smooth, dry fur. Halston snapped at the cat. It made a startled, disgruntled sound in its throat – *yowk!* – and leaped onto the seat. It stared up at him angrily, ears laid back.

"Wasn't supposed to do that, was I?" Halston croaked. The cat opened its mouth and hissed at him. Looking at that strange, schizophrenic face, Halston could understand how Drogan might have thought it was a hellcat. It –

His thoughts broke off as he became aware of a dull, tingling feeling in both hands and forearms. Feeling. Coming back. Pins and needles. The cat leaped at his face, claws out, spitting. Halston shut his eyes and

opened his mouth. He bit at the cat's belly and got nothing but fur. The cat's front claws were clasped on his ears, digging in. The pain was enormous, brightly excruciating. Halston tried to raise his hands. They twitched but would not quite come out of his lap. He bent his head forward and began to shake it back and forth, like a man shaking soap out of his eyes. Hissing and squalling, the cat held on. Halston could feel blood trickling down his cheeks. It was hard to get his breath. The cat's chest was pressed over his nose. It was possible to get some air in by mouth, but not much. What he did get came through fur. His ears felt as if they had been doused with lighter fluid and then set on fire.

He snapped his head back and cried out in agony – he must have sustained a whiplash when the Plymouth hit. But the cat hadn't been expecting the reverse and it flew off. Halston heard it thud down in the back seat. A trickle of blood ran in his eye. He tried again to move his hands, to raise one of them and wipe the blood away. They trembled in his lap, but he was still unable to actually move them. He thought of the .45 special in its holster under his left arm. *If I can get to my piece, kitty, the rest of your nine lives are going in a lump sum.*

More tingles now. Dull throbs of pain from his feet, buried and surely shattered under the engine block, zips and tingles from his legs – it felt exactly the way a limb that you've slept on does when it's starting to wake up. At that moment Halston didn't care about his feet. It was enough to know that his spine wasn't severed, that he wasn't going to finish out his life as a dead lump of body attached to a talking head.

Maybe I had a few lives left myself.

Take care of the cat. That was the first thing. Then get out of the wreck – maybe someone would come along, that would solve both problems at once. Not likely at 4:30 in the morning on a back road like this one, but barely possible. And –

And what was the cat doing back there?

He didn't like having it on his face, but he didn't like having it behind him and out of sight, either. He tried the rearview mirror, but that was useless. The crash had knocked it awry and all it reflected was the grassy ravine he had finished up in.

A sound from behind him, like low, ripping cloth.

Purring.

Hellcat my ass. It's gone to sleep back there.

And even if it hadn't, even if it was somehow planning murder, what could it do? It was a skinny little thing, probably weighed all of four pounds soaking wet. And soon ... soon he would be able to move his hands enough to get his gun. He was sure of it. Halston sat and waited. Feeling continued to flood back into his body in a series of pins-and-needles incursions. Absurdly (or maybe in instinctive reaction to his

close brush with death) he got an erection for a minute or so. Be kind of hard to beat off under present circumstances, he thought. A dawn-line was appearing in the eastern sky. Somewhere a bird sang. Halston tried his hands again and got them to move an eighth of an inch before they fell back.

Not yet. But soon.

A soft thud on the seatback beside him. Halston turned his head and looked into the black-white face, the glowing eyes with their huge dark pupils.

Halston spoke to it.

"I have never blown a hit once I took it on, kitty. This could be a first. I'm getting my hands back. Five minutes, ten at most. You want my advice? Go out the window. They're all open. Go out and take your tail with you."

The cat stared at him.

Halston tried his hands again. They came up, trembling wildly. Half an inch. An inch. He let them fall back limply. They slipped off his lap and thudded to the Plymouth's seat. They glimmered there palely, like large tropical spiders.

The cat was grinning at him.

Did I make a mistake?, he wondered confusedly. He was a creature of hunch, and the feeling that he had made one was suddenly overwhelming. Then the cat's body tensed, and even as it leaped, Halston knew what it was going to do and he opened his mouth to scream.

The cat landed on Halston's crotch, claws out, digging.

At that moment, Halston wished he had been paralyzed. The pain was gigantic, terrible. He had never suspected that there could be such pain in the world. The cat was a spitting coiled spring of fury, clawing at his balls. Halston did scream, his mouth yawning open, and that was when the cat changed direction and leaped at his face, leaped at his mouth. And at that moment Halston knew that it was something more than a cat. It was something possessed of a malign, murderous intent.

He caught one last glimpse of that black-and-white face below the flattened ears, its eyes enormous and filled with lunatic hate. It had gotten rid of the three old people and now it was going to get rid of John Halston.

It rammed into his mouth, a furry projectile. He gagged on it. Its front claws pinwheeled, tattering his tongue like a piece of liver. His stomach recoiled and he vomited. The vomit ran down into his windpipe, clogging it, and he began to choke. In this extremity, his will to survive overcame the last of the impact paralysis. He brought his hands up slowly to grasp the cat.

Oh my God, he thought.

The cat was forcing its way into his mouth, flattening its body, squirming, working itself farther and farther in. He could feel his jaws creaking wider and wider to admit it.

He reached to grab it, yank it out, destroy it...and his hands clasped only the cat's tail.

Somehow it had gotten its entire body into his mouth. Its strange, black-and-white face must be crammed into his very throat. A terrible thick gagging sound came from Halston's throat, which was swelling like a flexible length of garden hose.

His body twitched. His hands fell back into his lap and the fingers drummed senselessly on his thighs. His eyes sheened over, then glazed. They stared out through the Plymouth's windshield blankly at the coming dawn.

Protruding from his open mouth was two inches of bushy tail...half black, half white. It switched lazily back and forth.

It disappeared.

A bird cried somewhere again. Dawn came in breathless silence then, over the frost-rimmed fields of rural Connecticut.

The farmer's name was Will Reuss. He was on his way to Placer's Glen to get the inspection sticker renewed on his farm truck when he saw the late-morning sun twinkle on something in the ravine beside the road. He pulled over and saw the Plymouth lying at a drunken, canted angle in the ditch, barbed wire tangled in its grille like a snarl of steel knitting. He worked his way down and then sucked in his breath sharply.

"Holy moley," he muttered to the bright November day. There was a guy sitting bolt upright behind the wheel, eyes open and glaring emptily into eternity. The Roper organization was never going to include him in its presidential poll again. His face was smeared with blood. He was still wearing his seat belt.

The driver's door had been crimped shut, but Reuss managed to get it open by yanking with both hands. He leaned in and unstrapped the seat belt, planning to check for ID. He was reaching for the coat when he noticed that the dead guy's shirt was rippling, just above the belt buckle. Rippling...and bulging. Splotches of blood began to bloom there like sinister roses.

"What the Christ?" He reached out, grasped the dead man's shirt, and pulled it up.

Will Reuss looked – and screamed.

Above Halston's navel, a ragged hole had been clawed in his flesh. Looking out was the gore-streaked black-and-white face of a cat, its eyes huge and glaring. Reuss staggered back, shrieking, hands clapped

to his face. A score of crows took cawing wing from a nearby field. The cat forced its body out and stretched in obscene languor. Then it leaped out the open window. Reuss caught sight of it moving through the high dead grass and then it was gone.

It seemed to be in a hurry, he later told a reporter from the local paper. As if it had unfinished business.

THE CRATE

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Dexter Stanley was scared. More; he felt as if that central axle that binds us to the state we call sanity were under a greater strain than it had ever been under before. As he pulled up beside Henry Northrup's house on North Campus Avenue that August night, he felt that if he didn't talk to someone, he really, would go crazy.

There was no one to talk to but Henry Northrup. Dex Stanley was the head of the zoology department, and once might have been university president if he had been better at academic politics. His wife had died twenty years before, and they had been childless. What remained of his own family was all west of the Rockies. He was not good at making friends.

Northrup was an exception to that. In some ways, they were two of a kind; both had been disappointed in the mostly meaningless, but always vicious, game of university politics. Three years before, Northrup had made his run at the vacant English department chairmanship. He had lost, and one of the reasons had undoubtedly been his wife, Wilma, an abrasive and unpleasant woman. At the few cocktail parties Dex had attended where English people and zoology people could logically mix, it seemed he could always recall the harsh mule-bray of her voice, telling some new faculty wife to "call me Billie, dear everyone does!"

Dex made his way across the lawn to Northrup's door at a stumbling run. It was Thursday, and Northrup's unpleasant spouse took two classes on Thursday nights.

Consequently, it was Dex and Henry's chess night. The two men had been playing chess together for the last eight years.

Dex rang the bell beside the door of his friend's house; leaned on it. The door opened at last and Northrup was there.

"Dex," he said. I didn't expect you for another – "

Dex pushed in past him. "Wilma," he said. "Is she here?"

"No, she left fifteen minutes ago. I was just making myself some chow. Dex, you look awful."

They had walked under the hall light, and it illuminated the cheesy pallor of Dex's face and seemed to outline wrinkles as deep and dark as fissures in the earth. Dex was sixty-one, but on the hot August night, he looked more like ninety.

"I ought to." Dex wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Well, what is it?"

"I'm afraid I'm going crazy, Henry. Or that I've already gone."

"You want something to eat? Wilma left cold ham."

"I'd rather have a drink. A big one."

"All right."

"Two men dead, Henry," Dex said abruptly. "And I could be blamed. Yes, I can see how I could be blamed. But it wasn't me. It was the crate. And I don't even know what's in there!" He uttered a wild laugh.

"Dead?" Northrup said. "What is this, Dex?"

"A janitor. I don't know his name. And Gereson. A graduate student. He just happened to be there. In the way of...whatever it was."

Henry studied Dex's face for a long moment and then said, "I'll get us both a drink."

He left. Dex wandered into the living room, past the low table where the chess table had already been set up, and stared out the graceful bow window. That thing in his mind, that axle or whatever it was, did not feel so much in danger of snapping now. Thank God for Henry.

Northrup came back with two pony glasses choked with ice. Ice from the fridge's automatic icemaker, Stanley thought randomly. Wilma "just call me Billie, everyone does" Northrup insisted on all the modern conveniences...and when Wilma insisted on a thing, she did so savagely.

Northrup filled both glasses with Cutty Sark. He handed one of them to Stanley, who slopped Scotch over his fingers, stinging a small cut he'd gotten in the lab a couple of days before. He hadn't realized until then that his hands were shaking. He emptied half the glass and the Scotch boomed in his stomach, first hot, then spreading a steady warmth.

"Sit down, man," Northrup said.

Dex sat, and drank again. Now it was a lot better. He looked at Northrup, who was looking levelly back over the rim of his own glass. Dex looked away, out at the bloody orb of moon sitting over the rim of the horizon, over the university, which was supposed to be the seat of rationality, the forebrain of the body politic. How did that jibe with the matter of the crate? With the screams? With the blood?

"Men are dead?" Northrup said at last.

"Are you sure they're dead?"

"Yes. The bodies are gone now. At least, I think they are. Even the bones... the teeth... but the blood... the blood, you know..."

"No, I don't know anything. You've got to start at the beginning."

Stanley took another drink and set his glass down. "Of course I do," he said. "Yes. It begins just where it ends. With the crate. The janitor found the crate..."

Dexter Stanley had come into Amberson Hall, sometimes called the Old Zoology Building, that afternoon at three o'clock. It was a blaringly hot day, and the campus looked listless and dead, in spite of the twirling sprinklers in front of the fraternity houses and the Old Front dorms. The Old Front went back to the turn of the century, but Amberson Hall was much older than that. It was one of the oldest buildings on a university campus that had celebrated its tricentennial two years previous. It was a tall brick building, shackled with ivy that seemed to spring out of the earth like green, clutching hands. Its narrow windows were more like gun slits than real windows, and Amberson seemed to frown at the newer buildings with their glass walls and curvy, unorthodox shapes.

The new zoology building, Cather Hall, had been completed eight months before, and the process of transition would probably go on for another eighteen months. No one was completely sure what would happen to Amberson then. If the bond issue to build the new gym found favor with the voters, it would probably be demolished.

He paused a moment to watch two young men throwing a Frisbee back and forth. A dog ran back and forth between them, glumly chasing the spinning disc. Abruptly the mutt gave up and flopped in the shade of a poplar. A VW with a NO NUKES sticker on the back deck trundled slowly past, heading for the Upper Circle.

Nothing else moved. A week before, the final summer session had ended and the campus lay still and fallow, dead ore on summer's anvil. Dex had a number of files to pick up, part of the seemingly endless process of moving from Amberson to Cather. The old building seemed spectrally empty. His footfalls echoed back dreamily as he walked past closed doors with frosted glass panels, past bulletin boards with their yellowing notices and toward his office at the end of the first-floor corridor. The cloying smell of fresh paint hung in the air.

He was almost to his door, and jingling his keys in his pocket, when the janitor popped out of Room 6, the big lecture hall, startling him.

He grunted, then smiled a little shamefacedly, the way people will when they've gotten a mild zap. "You got me that time," he told the janitor.

The janitor smiled and twiddled the gigantic key ring clipped to his belt.

"Sorry, Perfesser Stanley," he said. "I was hopin' it was you. Charlie said you'd be in this afternoon."

"Charlie Gerson is still here?" Dex frowned. Gerson was a grad student who was doing an involved – and possibly very important – paper on negative environmental factors in long-term animal migration. It was a subject that could have a strong impact on area farming practices and pest control. But Gerson was pulling almost fifty hours a

week in the gigantic (and antiquated) basement lab. The new lab complex in Cather would have been exponentially better suited to his purposes, but the new labs would not be fully equipped for another two to four months...if then.

"Think he went over the Union for a burger," the janitor said. "I told him myself to quit a while and go get something to eat. He's been here since nine this morning. Told him myself. Said he ought to get some food. A man don't live on love alone."

The janitor smiled, a little tentatively, and Dex smiled back. The janitor was right; Gereson was embarked upon a labor of love. Dex had seen too many squadrons of students just grunting along and making grades not to appreciate that...and not to worry about Charlie Gereson's health and well-being from time to time.

"I would have told him, if he hadn't been so busy," the janitor said, and offered his tentative little smile again. "Also, I kinda wanted to show you myself."

"What's that?" Dex asked. He felt a little impatient. It was chess night with Henry; he wanted to get this taken care of and still have time for a leisurely meal at the Hancock House.

"Well, maybe it's nothin," the janitor said. "But... well, this buildin is some old, and we keep turnin things up, don't we?"

Dex knew. It was like moving out of a house that has been lived in for generations. Halley, the bright young assistant professor who had been here for three years now, had found half a dozen antique clips with small brass balls on the ends. She'd had no idea what the clips, which looked a little bit like spring-loaded wishbones, could be. Dex had been able to tell her. Not so many years after the Civil War, those clips had been used to hold the heads of white mice, who were then operated on without anesthetic. Young Halley, with her Berkeley education and her bright spill of Farrah Fawcett-Majors golden hair, had looked quite revolted. "No anti-vivisectionists in those days," Dex had told her jovially. "At least not around here." And Halley had responded with a blank look that probably disguised disgust or maybe even loathing. Dex had put his foot in it again. He had a positive talent for that, it seemed.

They had found sixty boxes of *The American Zoologist* in a crawlspace, and the attic had been a maze of old equipment and mouldering reports. Some of the impedimenta no one – not even Dexter Stanley – could identify. In the closet of the old animal pens at the back of the building, Professor Viney had found a complicated gerbil-run with exquisite glass panels. It had been accepted for display at the Museum of Natural Science in Washington. But the finds had been tapering off this summer, and Dex thought Amberson Hall had given up the last of its secrets.

"What have you found?" he asked the janitor.

"A crate. I found it tucked right under the basement stairs. I didn't open it. It's been nailed shut, anyway."

Stanley couldn't believe that anything very interesting could have escaped notice for long, just by being tucked under the stairs. Tens of thousands of people went up and down them every week during the academic year. Most likely the janitor's crate was full of department records dating back twenty-five years. Or even more prosaic, a box of *National Geographics*.

"I hardly think – "

"It's a real crate," the janitor broke in earnestly. "I mean, my father was a carpenter, and this crate is built tile way he was buildin 'em back in the twenties. And he learned from his father."

"I really doubt if – "

"Also, it's got about four inches of dust on it. I wiped some off and there's a date. Eighteen thirty-four."

That changed things. Stanley looked at his watch and decided he could spare half all hour.

In spite of the humid August heat outside, the smooth tile-faced throat of the stairway was almost cold. Above them, yellow frosted globes cast a dim and thoughtful light. The stair levels had once been red, but in the centers they shaded to a dead black where the feet of years had worn away layer after layer of resurfacing. The silence was smooth and nearly perfect.

The janitor reached the bottom first and pointed under the staircase. "Under here," he said.

Dex joined him in staring into a shadowy, triangular cavity under the wide staircase. He felt a small tremor of disgust as he saw where the janitor had brushed away a gossamer veil of cobwebs. He supposed it was possible that the man had found something a little older than postwar records under there, now that he actually looked at the space. But 1834?

"Just a second," the janitor said, and left momentarily. Left alone, Dex hunkered down and peered in. He could make out nothing but a deeper patch of shadow in there. Then the janitor returned with a hefty four-cell flashlight. "This'll show it up."

"What were you doing under there anyway?" Dex asked.

The janitor grinned. "I was only standin here tryin to decide if I should buff that second-floor hallway first or wash the lab windows. I couldn't make up my mind, so I flipped a quarter. Only I dropped it and it rolled under there." He pointed to the shadowy, triangular cave. "I prob'ly would have let it go, except that was my only quarter for the Coke machine. So I got my flash and knocked down the cobwebs, and when I

crawled under to get it, I saw that crate. Here, have a look."

The janitor shone his light into the hole. Motes of disturbed dust preened and swayed lazily in the beam. The light struck the far wall in a spotlight circle, rose to the zigzag undersides of the stairs briefly, picking out an ancient cobweb in which long-dead bugs hung mummified, and then the light dropped and centered on a crate about five feet long and two-and-a-half wide. It was perhaps three feet deep. As the janitor had said, it was no knocked-together affair made out of scrap-boards. It was neatly constructed of a smooth, dark heavy wood. *A coffin*, Dexter thought uneasily. *It looks like a child's coffin.*

The dark color of the wood showed only a fan-shaped swipe on the side. The rest of the crate was the uniform dull gray of dust. Something was written on the side-stenciled there.

Dex squinted but couldn't read it. He fumbled his glasses out of his breast pocket and still couldn't. Part of what had been stenciled on was obscured by the dust – not four inches of it, by any means, but an extraordinarily thick coating, all the same.

Not wanting to crawl and dirty his pants, Dex duck-walked under the stairway, stifling a sudden and amazingly strong feeling of claustrophobia. The spit dried in his mouth and was replaced by a dry, woolly taste, like an old mitten. He thought of the generations of students trooping up and down these stairs, all male until 1888, then in coeducational platoons, carrying their books and papers and anatomical drawings, their bright faces and clear eyes, each of them convinced that a useful and exciting future lay ahead...and here, below their feet, the spider spun his eternal snare for the fly and the trundling beetle, and here this crate sat impassively, gathering dust, waiting...

A tendril of spidersilk brushed across his forehead and he swept it away with a small cry of loathing and an uncharacteristic inner cringe.

"Not very nice under there, is it?" the janitor asked sympathetically, holding his light centered on the crate. "God, I hate tight places."

Dex didn't reply. He had reached the crate. He looked at the letters that were stenciled there and then brushed the dust away from them. It rose in a cloud, intensifying that mitten taste, making him cough dryly. The dust hung in the beam of the janitor's light like old magic, and Dex Stanley read what some long-dead chief of lading had stenciled on this crate.

SHIP TO HORLICKS UNIVERSITY, the top line read. VIA JULIA CARPENTER, read the middle line. The third line read simply: ARCTIC EXPEDITION.

Below that, someone had written in heavy black charcoal strokes: JUNE 19, 1834.

That was the one line the janitor's hand-swipe had completely cleared.

ARCTIC EXPEDITION, Dex read again. His heart began to thump. "So what do you think?" the janitor's voice floated in.

Dex grabbed one end and lifted it. Heavy. As he let it settle back with a mild thud, something shifted inside – he did not hear it but felt it through the palms of his hands, as if whatever it was had moved of its own volition. Stupid, of course. It had been an almost liquid feel, as if something not quite jelled had moved sluggishly.

ARCTIC EXPEDITION.

Dex felt the excitement of an antiques collector happening upon a neglected armoire with a twenty-five dollar price tag in the back room of some hick-town junk shop...an armoire that just might be a Chippendale. "Help me get it out," he called to the janitor.

Working bent over to keep from slamming their heads on the underside of the stairway, sliding the crate along, they got it out and then picked it up by the bottom. Dex had gotten his pants dirty after all, and there were cobwebs in his hair.

As they carried it into the old-fashioned, train-terminal-sized lab, Dex felt that sensation of shift inside the crate again, and he could see by the expression on the janitor's face that he had felt it as well. They set it on one of the formica-topped lab tables. The next one over was littered with Charlie Gereson's stuff – notebooks, graph paper, contour maps, a Texas Instruments calculator.

The janitor stood back, wiping his hands on his double-pocket gray shirt, breathing hard. "Some heavy mother," he said. "That bastard must weigh two hunnert pounds. You okay, Perfesser Stanley?"

Dex barely heard him. He was looking at the end of the box, where there was yet another series of stencils: PAELLA/SANTIAGO/SAN FRANCISCO/CHICAGO/NEWYORK/HORLICKS

"Perfesser – "

"Paella," Dex muttered, and then said it again, slightly louder. He was seized with an unbelieving kind of excitement that was held in check only by the thought that it might be some sort of hoax. "Paella!"

"Paella, Dex?" Henry Northrup asked. The moon had risen in the sky, turning silver.

"Paella is a very small island south of Tierra del Fuego," Dex said. "Perhaps the smallest island ever inhabited by the race of man. A number of Easter Island-type monoliths were found there just after World War II. Not very interesting compared to their bigger brothers, but every bit as mysterious. The natives of Paella and Tierra del Fuego were Stone-Age people. Christian missionaries killed them with kindness."

"I beg your pardon?"

"It's extremely cold down there. Summer temperatures rarely range

above the mid-forties. The missionaries gave them blankets, partly so they would be warm, mostly to cover their sinful nakedness. The blankets were crawling with fleas, and the natives of both islands were wiped out by European diseases for which they had developed no immunities. Mostly by smallpox."

Dex drank. The Scotch had lent his cheeks some color, but it was hectic and flaring – double spots of flush that sat above his cheekbones like rouge.

"But Tierra del Fuego – and this Paella – that's not the Arctic, Dex. It's the Antarctic."

"It wasn't in 1834," Dex said, setting his glass down, careful in spite of his distraction to put it on the coaster Henry had provided. If Wilma found a ring on one of her end tables, his friend would have hell to pay. "The terms subarctic, Antarctic and Antarctica weren't invented yet. In those days there was only the north arctic and the south arctic."

"Okay."

"Hell, I made the same kind of mistake. I couldn't figure out why Frisco was on the itinerary as a port of call. Then I realized I was figuring on the Panama Canal, which wasn't built for another eighty years or so.

"An Arctic expedition? In 1834?" Henry asked doubtfully.

"I haven't had a chance to check the records yet," Dex said, picking up his drink again. "But I know from my history that there were 'Arctic expeditions' as early as Francis Drake. None of them made it, that was all. They were convinced they'd find gold, silver, jewels, lost civilizations, God knows what else. The Smithsonian Institution outfitted an attempted exploration of the North Pole in, I think it was 1881 or '82. They all died. A bunch of men from the Explorers' Club in London tried for the South Pole in the 1850's. Their ship was sunk by icebergs, but three or four of them survived. They stayed alive by sucking dew out of their clothes and eating the kelp that caught on their boat, until they were picked up. They lost their teeth. And they claimed to have seen sea monsters."

"What happened, Dex?" Henry asked softly.

Stanley looked up. "We opened the crate," he said dully. "God help us, Henry, we opened the crate."

He paused for a long time, it seemed, before beginning to speak again.

"Paella?" the janitor asked. "What's that?"

"An island off the tip of South America," Dex said. "Never mind. Let's get this open." He opened one of the lab drawers and began to rummage through it, looking for something to pry with."

"Never mind that stuff," the janitor said. He looked excited himself now. "I got a hammer and chisel in my closet upstairs. I'll get 'em. Just

hang on."

He left. The crate sat on the table's formica top, squat and mute. *It sits squat and mute*, Dex thought, and shivered a little. Where had that thought come from? Some story? The words had a cadenced yet unpleasant sound. He dismissed them. He was good at dismissing the extraneous. He was a scientist.

He looked around the lab just to get his eyes off the crate. Except for Charlie's table, it was unnaturally neat and quiet – like the rest of the university. White-tiled, subway-station walls gleamed freshly under the overhead globes; the globes themselves seemed to be double – caught and submerged in the polished formica surfaces, like eerie lamps shining from deep quarry water. A huge, old-fashioned slate blackboard dominated the wall opposite the sinks. And cupboards, cupboards everywhere. It was easy enough – too easy, perhaps – to see the antique, sepia-toned ghosts of all those old zoology students, wearing their white coats with the green cuffs, their hairs marcelled or pomaded, doing their dissections and writing their reports...

Footfalls clattered on the stairs and Dex shivered, thinking again of the crate sitting there – yes, squat and mute – under the stairs for so many years, long after the men who had pushed it under there had died and gone back to dust.

Paella, he thought, and then the janitor came back in with a hammer and chisel.

"Let me do this for you, perfesser?" he asked, and Dex was about to refuse when he saw the pleading, hopeful look in the man's eyes.

"Of course," he said. After all, it was this man's find.

"Prob'ly nothin in here but a bunch of rocks and plants so old they'll turn to dust when you touch 'em. But it's funny; I'm pretty hot for it."

Dex smiled noncommittally. He had no idea what was in the crate, but he doubted if it was just plant and rock specimens. There was that slightly liquid shifting sensation when they had moved it.

"Here goes," the janitor said, and began to pound the chisel under the board with swift blows of the hammer. The board hiked up a bit, revealing a double row of nails that reminded Dex absurdly of teeth. The janitor levered the handle of his chisel down and the board pulled loose, the nails shrieking out of the wood. He did the same thing at the other end, and the board came free, clattering to the floor. Dex set it aside, noticing that even the nails looked different, somehow – thicker, squarer at the tip, and without that blue-steel sheen that is the mark of a sophisticated alloying process.

The janitor was peering into the crate through the long, narrow strip he had uncovered. "Can't see nothin," he said. "Where'd I leave my light?"

"Never mind," Dex said. "Go on and open it."

"Okay." He took off a second board, then a third. Six or seven had been nailed across the top of the box. He began on the fourth, reaching across the space he had already uncovered to place his chisel under the board, when the crate began to whistle.

It was a sound very much like the sound a teakettle makes when it has reached a rolling boil, Dex told Henry Northrup; no cheerful whistle this, but something like an ugly, hysterical shriek by a tantrumy child. And this suddenly dropped and thickened into a low, hoarse growling sound. It was not loud, but it had a primitive, savage sound that stood Dex Stanley's hair up on the slant. The janitor stared around at him, his eyes widening... and then his arm was seized.

Dex did not see what grabbed it; his eyes had gone instinctively to the man's face.

The janitor screamed, and the sound drove a stiletto of panic into Dex's chest. The thought that came unbidden was: *This is the first time in my life that I've heard a grown man scream – what a sheltered life I've led!*

The janitor, a fairly big guy who weighed maybe two hundred pounds, was suddenly yanked powerfully to one side. Toward the crate. "Help me!" He screamed. "Oh help doc it's got me it's biting me it's biting meeeee – "

Dex told himself to run forward and grab the janitor's free arm, but his feet might as well have been bonded to the floor. The janitor had been pulled into the crate up to his shoulder. That crazed snarling went on and on. The crate slid backwards along the table for a foot or so and then came firmly to rest against a bolted instrument mount. It began to rock back and forth. The janitor screamed and gave a tremendous lunge away from the crate. The end of the box came up off the table and then smacked back down. Part of his arm came out of the crate, and Dex saw to his horror that the gray sleeve of his shirt was chewed and tattered and soaked with blood. Smiling crescent bites were punched into what he could see of the man's skin through the shredded flaps of cloth.

Then something that must have been incredibly strong yanked him back down. The thing in the crate began to snarl and gobble. Every now and then there would be a breathless whistling sound in between.

At last Dex broke free of his paralyzation and lunged creakily forward. He grabbed the janitor's free arm. He yanked...with no result at all. It was like trying to pull a man who has been handcuffed to the bumper of a trailer truck.

The janitor screamed again – a long, ululating sound that rolled back and forth between the lab's sparkling, white-tiled walls. Dex could see the gold glimmer of the fillings at the back of the man's mouth. He

could see the yellow ghost of nicotine on his tongue.

The janitor's head slammed down against the edge of the board he had been about to remove when the thing had grabbed him. And this time Dex did see something, although it happened with such mortal, savage speed that later he was unable to describe it adequately to Henry. Something as dry and brown and scaly as a desert reptile came out of the crate – something with huge claws. It tore at the janitor's straining, knotted throat and severed his jugular vein. Blood began to pump across the table, pooling on the formica and jetting onto the white-tiled floor. For a moment, a mist of blood seemed to hang in the air. Dex dropped the janitor's arm and blundered backward, hands clapped flat to his cheeks, eyes bulging.

The janitor's eyes rolled wildly at the ceiling. His mouth dropped open and then snapped closed. The click of his teeth was audible even below that hungry growling. His feet, clad in heavy black work shoes, did a short and jittery tap dance on the floor.

Then he seemed to lose interest. His eyes grew almost benign as they looked raptly at the overhead light globe, which was also blood-spattered. His feet splayed out in a loose V. His shirt pulled out of his pants, displaying his white and bulging belly.

"He's dead," Dex whispered. "Oh, Jesus."

The pump of the janitor's heart faltered and lost its rhythm. Now the blood that flowed from the deep, irregular gash in his neck lost its urgency and merely flowed down at the command of indifferent gravity. The crate was stained and splashed with blood. The snarling seemed to go on endlessly. The crate rocked back and forth a bit, but it was too well-braced against the instrument mount to go very far. The body of the janitor lolled grotesquely, still grasped firmly by whatever was in there. The small of his back was pressed against the lip of the lab table. His free hand dangled, sparse hair curling on the fingers between the first and second knuckles. His big key ring glimmered chrome in the light.

And now his body began to rock slowly this way and that. His shoes dragged back and forth, not tap dancing now but waltzing obscenely. And then they did not drag. They dangled an inch off the floor...then two inches...then half a foot above the floor. Dex realized that the janitor was being dragged into the crate. The nape of his neck came to rest against the board fronting the far side of the hole in the top of the crate. He looked like a man resting in some weird Zen position of contemplation. His dead eyes sparkled. And Dex heard, below the savage growling noises, a smacking, rending sound. And the crunch of a bone.

Dex ran.

He blundered his way across the lab and out the door and up the stairs. Halfway up, he fell down, clawed at the risers, got to his feet, and ran again. He gained the first floor hallway and sprinted down it, past the closed doors with their frosted-glass panels, past the bulletin boards. He was chased by his own footfalls. In his ears he could hear that damned whistling.

He ran right into Charlie Gereson's arms and almost knocked him over, and he spilled the milk shake Charlie had been drinking all over both of them.

"Holy hell, what's wrong?" Charlie asked, comic in his extreme surprise. He was short and compact, wearing cotton chinos and a white tee shirt. Thick spectacles sat grimly on his nose, meaning business, proclaiming that they were there for a long haul.

"Charlie," Dex said, panting harshly. "My boy...the janitor...the crate... it whistles... it whistles when it's hungry and it whistles again when it's full...my boy...we have to...campus security...we....we..."

"Slow down, Professor Stanley," Charlie said. He looked concerned and a little frightened. You don't expect to be seized by the senior professor in your department when you had nothing more aggressive in mind yourself than charting the continued outmigration of sandflies. "Slow down, I don't know what you're talking about."

Stanley, hardly aware of what he was saying, poured out a garbled version of what had happened to the janitor. Charlie Gereson looked more and more confused and doubtful. As upset as he was, Dex began to realize that Charlie didn't believe a word of it. He thought, with a new kind of horror, that soon Charlie would ask him if he had been working too hard, and that when he did, Stanley would burst into mad cackles of laughter.

But what Charlie said was, "That's pretty far out, Professor Stanley."

"It's true. We've got to get campus security over here. We – "

"No, that's no good. One of them would stick his hand in there, first thing." He saw Dex's stricken look and went on. "If I'm having trouble swallowing this, what are they going to think?"

"I don't know," Dex said. "I...I never thought..."

"They'd think you just came off a helluva toot and were seeing Tasmanian devils instead of pink elephants," Charlie Gereson said cheerfully, and pushed his glasses up on his pug nose. "Besides, from what you say, the responsibility has belonged with zoology all along... like for a hundred and forty years."

"But..." He swallowed, and there was a click in his throat as he prepared to voice his worst fear. "But it may be out."

"I doubt that," Charlie said, but didn't elaborate. And in that, Dex saw two things: that Charlie didn't believe a word he had said, and that

nothing he could say would dissuade Charlie from going back down there.

Henry Northrup glanced at his watch. They had been sitting in the study for a little over an hour; Wilma wouldn't be back for another two. Plenty of time. Unlike Charlie Gerson, he had passed no judgment at all on the factual basis of Dex's story. But he had known Dex for a longer time than young Gerson had, and he didn't believe his friend exhibited the signs of a man who has suddenly developed a psychosis. What he exhibited was a kind of bug-eyed fear, no more or less than you'd expect to see a man who has had an extremely close call with...well, just an extremely close call.

"He went down, Dex?"

"Yes. He did."

"You went with him?"

"Yes."

Henry shifted position a little. "I can understand why he didn't want to get campus security until he had checked the situation himself. But Dex, you knew you were telling the flat-out truth, even if he didn't. Why didn't you call?"

"You believe me?" Dex asked. His voice trembled. "You believe me, don't you, Henry?"

Henry considered briefly. The story was mad, no question about that. The implication that there could be something in that box big enough and lively enough to kill a man after some one hundred and forty years was mad. He didn't believe it. But this was Dex...and he didn't disbelieve it either.

"Yes," he said.

"Thank God for that," Dex said. He groped for his drink. "Thank God for that, Henry."

"It doesn't answer the question, though. Why didn't you call the campus cops?"

"I thought...as much as I did think... that it might not want to come out of the crate, into the bright light. It must have lived in the dark for so long...so very long...and...grotesque as this sounds...I thought it might be pot-bound, or something. I thought...well, he'll see it...he'll see the rate...the janitor's body...he'll see the blood...and then we'd call security. You see?" Stanley's eyes pleaded with him to see, and Henry did. He thought that, considering the fact that it had been a snap judgment in a pressure situation, that Dex had thought quite clearly. The blood. When the young graduate student saw the blood, he would have been happy to call in the cops.

"But it didn't work out that way."

"No." Dex ran a hand through his thinning hair.

"Why not?"

"Because when we got down there, the body was gone."

"It was gone?"

"That's right. And the crate was gone, too."

When Charlie Gereson saw the blood, his round and good-natured face went very pale. His eyes, already magnified by his thick spectacles, grew even huger. Blood was puddled on the lab table. It had run down one of the table legs. It was pooled on the floor, and beads of it clung to the light globe and to the white tile wall. Yes, there was plenty of blood. But no janitor. No crate.

Dex Stanley's jaw dropped. "What the fuck!" Charlie whispered. Dex saw something then, perhaps the only thing that allowed him to keep his sanity. Already he could feel that central axle trying to pull free. He grabbed Charlie's shoulder and said, "Look at the blood on the table!"

"I've seen enough," Charlie said.

His Adam's apple rose and fell like an express elevator as he struggled to keep his lunch down.

"For God's sake, get hold of yourself," Dex said harshly. "You're a zoology major. You've seen blood before."

It was the voice of authority, for that moment anyway. Charlie did get a hold of himself, and they walked a little closer. The random pools of blood on the table were not as random as they had first appeared. Each had been neatly straight-edged on one side.

"The crate sat there," Dex said. He felt a little better. The fact that the crate really had been there steadied him a good deal. "And look there." He pointed at the floor. Here the blood had been smeared into a wide, thin trail.

It swept toward where the two of them stood, a few paces inside the double doors. It faded and faded, petering out altogether about halfway between the lab table and the doors. It was crystal clear to Dex Stanley, and the nervous sweat on his skin went cold and clammy.

It had gotten out.

It had gotten out and pushed the crate off the table. And then it had pushed the crate...where? Under the stairs, of course. Back under the stairs. Where it had been safe for so long.

"Where's the...the..." Charlie couldn't finish.

"Under the stairs," Dex said numbly. "It's gone back to where it came from."

"No. The..." He jerked it out finally. "The body."

"I don't know," Dex said. But he thought he did know. His mind would simply not admit the truth.

Charlie turned abruptly and walked back through the doors. "Where are you going?" Dex called shrilly, and ran after him. Charlie stopped

opposite the stairs. The triangular black hole beneath them gaped. The janitor's big four-cell flashlight still sat on the floor. And beside it was a bloody scrap of gray cloth, and one of the pens that had been clipped to the man's breast pocket.

"Don't go under there, Charlie! Don't." His heartbeat whammed savagely in his ears, frightening him even more.

"No," Charlie said. "But the body..."

Charlie hunkered down, grabbed the flashlight, and shone it under the stairs.

And the crate was there, shoved up against the far wall, just as it had been before, squat and mute. Except that now it was free of dust and three boards had been pried off the top.

The light moved and centered on one of the janitor's big, sensible work shoes. Charlie drew breath in a low, harsh gasp. The thick leather of the shoe had been savagely gnawed and chewed. The laces hung, broken, from the eyelets. "It looks like somebody put it through a hay baler," he said hoarsely.

"Now do you believe me?" Dex asked.

Charlie didn't answer. Holding onto the stairs lightly with one hand, he leaned under the overhang – presumably to get the shoe. Later, sitting in Henry's study, Dex said he could think of only one reason why Charlie would have done that – to measure and perhaps categorize the bite of the thing in the crate. He was, after all, a zoologist, and a damned good one.

"*Don't!*" Dex screamed, and grabbed the back of Charlie's shirt. Suddenly there were two green gold eyes glaring over the top of the crate. They were almost exactly the color of owls' eyes, but smaller. There was a harsh, chattering growl of anger. Charlie recoiled, startled, and slammed the back of his head on the underside of the stairs. A shadow moved from the crate toward him at projectile speed. Charlie howled. Dex heard the dry purr of his shirt as it ripped open, the click as Charlie's glasses struck the floor and spun away. Once more Charlie tried to back away. The thing began to snarl – then the snarls suddenly stopped. And Charlie Gereson began to scream in agony.

Dex pulled on the back of his white tee shirt with all his might. For a moment Charlie came backwards and he caught a glimpse of a furry, writhing shape spread-eagled on the young man's chest, a shape that appeared to have not four but six legs and the flat bullet head of a young lynx. The front of Charlie Gereson's shirt had been so quickly and completely tattered that it now looked like so many crepe streamers hung around his neck.

Then the thing raised its head and those small green gold eyes stared balefully into Dex's own. He had never seen or dreamed such savagery.

His strength failed.

His grip on the back of Charlie's shirt loosened momentarily.

A moment was all it took. Charlie Gerson's body was snapped under the stairs with grotesque, cartoonish speed. Silence for a moment. Then the growling, smacking sounds began again.

Charlie screamed once more, a long sound of terror and pain that was abruptly cut off...as if something had been clapped over his mouth.

Or stuffed into it.

Dex fell silent. The moon was high in the sky. Half of his third drink – an almost unheard-of phenomenon – was gone, and he felt the reaction setting in as sleepiness and extreme lassitude.

"What did you do then?" Henry asked. What he hadn't done, he knew, was to go to campus security; they wouldn't have listened to such a story and then released him so he could go and tell it again to his friend Henry.

"I just walked around, in utter shock, I suppose. I ran up the stairs again, just as I had after...after it took the janitor, only this time there was no Charlie Gerson to run into. I walked...miles, I suppose. I think I was mad. I kept thinking about Ryder's Quarry. You know that place?"

"Yes," Henry said.

"I kept thinking that would be deep enough. If...if there would be a way to get that crate out there. I kept...kept thinking..." He put his hands to his face. "I don't know. I don't know anymore. I think I'm going crazy."

"If the story you just told is true, I can understand that," Henry said quietly.

He stood up suddenly. "Come on. I'm taking you home."

"Home?" Dex looked at this friend vacantly. "But – "

"I'll leave a note for Wilma telling her where we've gone and then we'll call...who do you suggest, Dex? Campus security or the state police?"

"You believe me, don't you? You believe me? Just say you do."

"Yes, I believe you," Henry said, and it was the truth. "I don't know what that thing could be or where it came from, but I believe you." Dex Stanley began to weep.

"Finish your drink while I write my wife," Henry said, apparently not noticing the tears. He even grinned a little. "And for Christ's sake, let's get out of here before she gets back."

Dex clutched at Henry's sleeve. "But we won't go anywhere near Amberson Hall, will we? Promise me, Henry! We'll stay away from there, won't we?"

"Does a bear shit in the woods?" Henry Northrup asked. It was a three-mile drive to Dex's house on the outskirts of town, and before they

got there, he was half-asleep in the passenger seat.

"The state cops, I think," Henry said. His words seemed to come from a great distance. "I think Charlie Gerson's assessment of the campus cops was pretty accurate. The first one there would happily stick his arm into that box."

"Yes. All right." Through the drifting, lassitudinous aftermath of shock, Dex felt a dim but great gratitude that his friend had taken over with such efficiency. Yet a deeper part of him believed that Henry could not have done it if he had seen the things he had seen. "Just...the importance of caution ..."

"I'll see to that," Henry said grimly, and that was when Dex fell asleep.

He awoke the next morning with August sunshine making crisp patterns on the sheets of his bed. *Just a dream*, he thought with indescribable relief. *All some crazy dream.*

But there was a taste of Scotch in his mouth--Scotch and something else. He sat up, and a lance of pain bolted through his head. Not the sort of pain you got from a hangover, though; not even if you were the type to get a hangover from three Scotches, and he wasn't.

He sat up, and there was Henry, sitting across the room. His first thought was that Henry needed a shave. His second was that there was something in Henry's eyes that he had never seen before – something like chips of ice. A ridiculous thought came to Dex; it passed through his mind and was gone. *Sniper's eyes.*

Henry Northrup, whose specialty is the earlier English poets, has got sniper's eyes.

"How are you feeling, Dex?"

"A slight headache," Dex said. "Henry...the police...what happened?"

"The police aren't coming," Northrup said calmly. "As for your head, I'm very sorry. I put one of Wilma's sleeping powders in your third drink. Be assured that it will pass."

"Henry, what are you saying?"

Henry took a sheet of notepaper from his breast pocket. "This is the note I left my wife. It will explain a lot, I think. I got it back after everything was over. I took a chance that she'd leave it on the table, and I got away with it."

"I don't know what you're – "

He took the note from Henry's fingers and read it, eyes widening.

Dear Billie,

I've just had a call from Dex Stanley. He's hysterical. Seems to have committed some sort of indiscretion with one of his female grad students. He's at Amberson Hall. So is the girl. For God's sake, come quickly. I'm not sure exactly what the situation is, but a woman's

presence may be imperative, and under the circumstances, a nurse from the infirmary just won't do. I know you don't like Dex much, but a scandal like this could ruin his career. Please come.

Henry.

"What in God's name have you done?" Dex asked hoarsely.

Henry plucked the note from Dex's nerveless fingers, produced his Zippo, and set flame to the corner. When it was burning well, he dropped the charring sheet of paper into an ashtray on the windowsill.

"I've killed Wilma," he said in the same calm voice. "Ding-dong, the wicked bitch is dead." Dex tried to speak and could not. That central axle was trying to tear loose again. The abyss of utter insanity was below. "I've killed my wife, and now I've put myself into your hands."

Now Dex did find his voice. It had a sound that was rusty yet shrill. "The crate," he said. "What have you done with the crate?"

"That's the beauty of it," Henry said. "You put the final piece in the jigsaw yourself. The crate is at the bottom of Ryder's Quarry."

Dex groped at that while he looked into Henry's eyes. The eyes of his friend. Sniper's eyes. *You can't knock off your own queen, that's not in anyone's rules of chess*, he thought, and restrained an urge to roar out gales of rancid laughter. The quarry, he had said. Ryder's Quarry. It was over four hundred feet deep, some said. It was perhaps twelve miles east of the university. Over the thirty years that Dex had been here, a dozen people had drowned there, and three years ago the town had posted the place.

"I put you to bed," Henry said. "Had to carry you into your room. You were out like a light. Scotch, sleeping powder, shock. But you were breathing normally and well. Strong heart action. I checked those things. Whatever else you believe, never think I had any intention of hurting you, Dex.

"It was fifteen minutes before Wilma's last class ended, and it would take her another fifteen minutes to drive home and another fifteen minutes to get over to Amberson Hall. That gave me forty-five minutes. I got over to Amberson in ten. It was unlocked. That was enough to settle any doubts I had left."

"What do you mean?"

"The key ring on the janitor's belt. It went with the janitor."

Dex shuddered.

"If the door had been locked – forgive me, Dex, but if you're going to play for keeps, you ought to cover every base – there was still time enough to get back home ahead of Wilma and burn that note.

"I went downstairs – and I kept as close to the wall going down those stairs as I could, believe me..."

Henry stepped into the lab and glanced around. It was just as Dex had

left it.

He slicked his tongue over his dry lips and then wiped his face with his hand.

His heart was thudding in his chest. *Get hold of yourself, man. One thing at a time. Don't look ahead.*

The boards the janitor had pried off the crate were still stacked on the lab table. One table over was the scatter of Charlie Gereson's lab notes, never to be completed now. Henry took it all in, and then pulled his own flashlight – the one he always kept in the glovebox of his car for emergencies – from his back pocket. If this didn't qualify as an emergency, nothing did.

He snapped it on and crossed the lab and went out the door. The light bobbed uneasily in the dark for a moment, and then he trained it on the floor. He didn't want to step on anything he shouldn't. Moving slowly and cautiously, Henry moved around to the side of the stairs and shone the light underneath. His breath paused, and then resumed again, more slowly. Suddenly the tension and fear were gone, and he only felt cold. The crate was under there, just as Dex had said it was. And the janitor's ballpoint pen. And his shoes. And Charlie Gereson's glasses.

Henry moved the light from one of these artifacts to the next slowly, spotlighting each. Then he glanced at his watch, snapped the flashlight off and jammed it back in his pocket. He had half an hour. There was no time to waste.

In the janitor's closet upstairs he found buckets, heavy-duty cleaner, rags...and gloves. No prints. He went back downstairs like the sorcerer's apprentice, a heavy plastic bucket full of hot water and foaming cleaner in each hand, rags draped over his shoulder. His footfalls clacked hollowly in the stillness. He thought of Dex saying, *It sits squat and mute.* And still he was cold.

He began to clean up.

"She came," Henry said. "Oh yes, she came. And she was...excited and happy."

"What?" Dex said.

"Excited," he repeated. "She was whining and carping the way she always did in that high, unpleasant voice, but that was just habit, I think. All those years, Dex, the only part of me she wasn't able to completely control, the only part she could never get completely under her thumb, was my friendship with you. Our two drinks while she was at class. Our chess. Our...companionship."

Dex nodded. Yes, companionship was the right word. A little light in the darkness of loneliness. It hadn't just been the chess or the drinks; it had been Henry's face over the board, Henry's voice recounting how things were in his department, a bit of harmless gossip, a laugh over

something.

"So she was whining and bitching in her best 'just call me Billie' style, but I think it was just habit. She was excited and happy, Dex. Because she was finally going to be able to get control over the last...little...bit." He looked at Dex calmly. "I knew she'd come, you see. I knew she'd want to see what kind of mess you gotten yourself into, Dex."

"They're downstairs," Henry told Wilma. Wilma was wearing a bright yellow sleeveless blouse and green pants that were too tight for her. "Right downstairs." And he uttered a sudden, loud laugh.

Wilma's head whipped around and her narrow face darkened with suspicion. "What are you laughing about?" She asked in her loud, buzzing voice. "Your best friend gets in a scrape with a girl and you're laughing?"

No, he shouldn't be laughing. But he couldn't help it. It was sitting under the stairs, sitting there squat and mute, just try telling that thing in the crate to call you Billie, Wilma – and another loud laugh escaped him and went rolling down the dim first-floor hall like a depth charge.

"Well, there is a funny side to it," he said, hardly aware of what he was saying. "Wait'll you see. You'll think – "

Her eyes, always questing, never still, dropped to his front pocket, where he had stuffed the rubber gloves.

"What are those? Are those gloves?"

Henry began to spew words. At the same time he put his arm around Wilma's bony shoulders and led her toward the stairs. "Well, he's passed out, you know. He smells like a distillery. Can't guess how much he drank. Threw up all over everything. I've been cleaning up. Hell of an awful mess, Billie. I persuaded the girl to stay a bit. You'll help me, won't you? This is Dex, after all."

"I don't know," she said, as they began to descend the stairs to the basement lab. Her eyes snapped with dark glee. "I'll have to see what the situation is. You don't know anything, that's obvious. You're hysterical. Exactly what I would have expected."

"That's right," Henry said. They had reached the bottom of the stairs. "Right around here. Just step right around here."

"But the lab's that way – "

"Yes...but the girl..." And he began to laugh again in great, loonlike bursts.

"Henry, what is wrong with you?" And now that acidic contempt was mixed with something else – something that might have been fear.

That made Henry laugh harder. His laughter echoed and rebounded, filling the dark basement with a sound like laughing banshees or demons approving a particularly good jest. "The girl, Billie," Henry said between bursts of helpless laughter. "That's what's so funny, the girl, the

girl has crawled under the stairs and won't come out, that what's so funny, ah-heh-heh-hahahahaa – "

And now the dark kerosene of joy lit in her eyes; her lips curled up like charring paper in what the denizens of hell might call a smile. And Wilma whispered, "What did he do to her?"

"You can get her out," Henry babbled, leading her to the dark, triangular, gaping maw. "I'm sure you can get her out, no trouble, no problem." He suddenly grabbed Wilma at the nape of the neck and the waist, forcing her down even as he pushed her into the space under the stairs.

"What are you *doing*?" she screamed querulously. "What are you doing, Henry?"

"What I should have done a long time ago," Henry said, laughing. "Get under there, Wilma. Just tell it to call you Billie, you bitch."

She tried to turn, tried to fight him. One hand clawed for his wrist – he saw her spade-shaped nails slice down, but they clawed only air. "Stop it, Henry!" She cried. "Stop it right now! Stop this foolishness! I – I'll scream!"

"Scream all you want!" he bellowed, still laughing. He raised one foot, planted it in the center of her narrow and joyless backside, and pushed. "I'll help you, Wilma! Come on out! Wake up, whatever you are! Wake up! Here's your dinner! Poison meat! Wake up! Wake up!"

Wilma screamed piercingly, an inarticulate sound that was still more rage than fear.

And then Henry heard it.

First a low whistle, the sound a man might make while working alone without even being aware of it. Then it rose in pitch, sliding up the scale to an earsplitting whine that was barely audible. Then it suddenly descended again and became a growl...and then a hoarse yammering. It was an utterly savage sound.

All his married life Henry Northrup had gone in fear of his wife, but the thing in the crate made Wilma sound like a child doing a kindergarten tantrum. Henry had time to think: *Holy God, maybe it really is a Tasmanian devil...it's some kind of devil, anyway.*

Wilma began to scream again, but this time it was a sweeter tune--at least to the ear of Henry Northrup. It was a sound of utter terror. Her yellow blouse flashed in the dark under the stairs, a vague beacon. She lunged at the opening and Henry pushed her back, using all his strength.

"Henry!" She howled. "Henreeeee!"

She came again, head first this time, like a charging bull. Henry caught her head in both hands, feeling the tight, wiry cap of her curls squash under his palms. He pushed. And then, over Wilma's shoulder, he saw something that might have been the gold-glinting eyes of a small

owl. Eyes that were infinitely cold and hateful. The yammering became louder, reaching a crescendo. And when it struck at Wilma, the vibration running through her body was enough to knock him backwards.

He caught one glimpse of her face, her bulging eyes, and then she was dragged back into the darkness. She screamed once more. Only once.

"Just tell it to call you Billie," he whispered.

Henry Northrup drew a great, shuddering breath.

"It went on...for quite a while," he said. After a long time, maybe twenty minutes, the growling and the...the sounds of its feeding...that stopped, too. And it started to whistle. Just like you said, Dex. As if it were a happy teakettle or something. It whistled for maybe five minutes, and then it stopped. I shone my light underneath again. The crate had been pulled out a little way. There was...fresh blood. And Wilma's purse had spilled everywhere. But it got both of her shoes. That was something, wasn't it?"

Dex didn't answer. The room basked in sunshine. Outside, a bird sang.

"I finished cleaning the lab," Henry resumed at last. "It took me another forty minutes, and I almost missed a drop of blood that was on the light globe...saw it just as I was going out. But when I was done, the place was as neat as a pin. Then I went out to my car and drove across campus to the English department. It was getting late, but I didn't feel a bit tired. In fact, Dex, I don't think I ever felt more clear-headed in my life. There was a crate in the basement of the English department. I flashed on that very early in your story. Associating one monster with another, I suppose."

"What do you mean?"

"Last year when Badlinger was in England – you remember Badlinger, don't you?"

Dex nodded. Badlinger was the man who had beaten Henry out for the English department chair... partly because Badlinger's wife was bright, vivacious and sociable, while Henry's wife was a shrew. Had been a shrew.

"He was in England on sabbatical," Henry said. "Had all their things crated and shipped back. One of them was a giant stuffed animal. Nessie, they call it. For his kids. That bastard bought it for his kids. I always wanted children, you know. Wilma didn't. She said kids get in the way.

"Anyway, it came back in this gigantic wooden crate, and Badlinger dragged it down to the English department basement because there was no room in the garage at home, he said, but he didn't want to throw it out because it might come in handy someday. Meantime, our janitors were using it as a gigantic sort of wastebasket. When it was full of trash,

they'd dump it into the back of the truck on trash day and then fill it up again.

"I think it was the crate Badlinger's damned stuffed monster came back from England in that put the idea in my head. I began to see how your Tasmanian devil could be gotten rid of. And that started me thinking about something else I wanted to be rid of. That I wanted so badly to be rid of.

"I had my keys, of course. I let myself in and went downstairs. The crate was there. It was a big, unwieldy thing, but the janitors' dolly was down there as well. I dumped out the little bit of trash that was in it and got the crate onto the dolly by standing it on end. I pulled it upstairs and wheeled it straight across the mall and back to Amberson."

"You didn't take your car?"

"No, I left my car in my space in the English department parking lot. I couldn't have gotten the crate in there, anyway."

For Dex, new light began to break. Henry would have been driving his MG, of course – an elderly sportscar that Wilma had always called Henry's toy. And if Henry had the MG, then Wilma would have had the Scout – a jeep with a fold-down back seat. Plenty of storage space, as the ads said.

"I didn't meet anyone," Henry said. "At this time of year – and at no other – the campus is quite deserted. The whole thing was almost hellishly perfect. I didn't see so much as a pair of headlights. I got back to Amberson Hall and took Badlinger's crate downstairs. I left it sitting on the dolly with the open end facing under the stairs. Then I went back upstairs to the janitors' closet and got that long pole they use to open and close the windows. They only have those poles in the old buildings now. I went back down and got ready to hook the crate – your Paella crate – out from under the stairs. Then I had a bad moment. I realized the top of Badlinger's crate was gone, you see. I'd noticed it before, but now I realized it. In my guts."

"What did you do?"

"Decided to take the chance," Henry said. "I took the window pole and pulled the crate out. I eased it out, as if it were full of eggs. No...as if it were full of Mason jars with nitroglycerine in them."

Dex sat up, staring at Henry. "What...what..."

Henry looked back somberly. "It was my first good look at it, remember. It was horrible." He paused deliberately and then said it again: "It was horrible, Dex. It was splattered with blood, some of it seemingly grimed right into tile wood. It made me think of...do you remember those joke boxes they used to sell? You'd push a little lever and tile box would grind and shake, and then a pale green hand would come out of the top and push the lever back and snap inside again. It

made me think of that.

"I pulled it out – oh, so carefully – and I said I wouldn't look down inside, no matter what. But I did, of course. And I saw..." His voice dropped helplessly, seeming to lose all strength. "I saw Wilma's face, Dex. Her face."

"Henry, don't – "

"I saw her eyes, looking up at me from that box. Her glazed eyes. I saw something else, too. Something white. A bone, I think. And a black something. Furry. Curled up. Whistling, too. A very low whistle. I think it was sleeping.

"I hooked it out as far as I could, and then I just stood there looking at it, realizing that I couldn't drive knowing that thing could come out at any time...come out and land on the back of my neck. So I started to look around for something – anything – to cover the top of Badlinger's crate.

"I went into the animal husbandry room, and there were a couple of cages big enough to hold the Paella crate, but I couldn't find the goddamned keys. So I went upstairs and I still couldn't find anything. I don't know how long I hunted, but there was this continual feeling of time... slipping away. I was getting a little crazy. Then I happened to poke into that big lecture room at the far end of the hall – "

"Room 6?"

"Yes, I think so. They had been painting the walls. There was a big canvas dropcloth on the floor to catch the splatters. I took it, and then I went back downstairs, and I pushed the Paella crate into Badlinger's crate. Carefully!...you wouldn't believe how carefully I did it, Dex."

When the smaller crate was nested inside the larger, Henry uncinched the straps on the English department dolly and grabbed the end of the dropcloth. It rustled stiffly in the stillness of Amberson Hall's basement. His breathing rustled stiffly as well. And there was that low whistle. He kept waiting for it to pause, to change. It didn't. He had sweated his shirt through; it was plastered to his chest and back.

Moving carefully, refusing to hurry, he wrapped the dropcloth around Badlinger's crate three times, then four, then five. In the dim light shining through from the lab, Badlinger's crate now looked mummified. Holding the seam with one splayed hand, he wrapped first one strap around it, then the other. He cinched them tight and then stood back a moment. He glanced at his watch. It was just past one o'clock. A pulse beat rhythmically at his throat.

Moving forward again, wishing absurdly for a cigarette (he had given them up sixteen years before), he grabbed the dolly, tilted it back, and began pulling it slowly up the stairs.

Outside, the moon watched coldly as he lifted the entire load, dolly

and all, into the back of what he had come to think of as Wilma's Jeep – although Wilma had not earned a dime since the day he had married her. It was the biggest lift he had done since he had worked with a moving company in Westbrook as an undergraduate. At the highest point of the lift, a lance of pain seemed to dig into his lower back. And still he slipped it into the back of the Scout as gently as a sleeping baby.

He tried to close the back, but it wouldn't go up; the handle of the dolly stuck out four inches too far. He drove with the tailgate down, and at every bump and pothole, his heart seemed to stutter. His ears felt for the whistle, waiting for it to escalate into a shrill scream and then descend to a guttural howl of fury waiting for the hoarse rip of canvas as teeth and claws pulled their way through it.

And overhead the moon, a mystic silver disc, rode the sky.

"I drove out to Ryder's Quarry," Henry went on. "There was a chain across the head of the road, but I geared the Scout down and got around. I backed right up to the edge of the water. The moon was still up and I could see its reflection way down in the blackness, like a drowned silver dollar. I went around, but it was a long time before I could bring myself to grab the thing. In a very real way, Dex, it was three bodies...the remains of three human beings. And I started wondering...where did they go? I saw Wilma's face, but it looked...God help me, it looked all flat, like a Halloween mask. How much of them did it eat, Dex? How much could it eat? And I started to understand what you meant about that central axle pulling loose.

"It was still whistling. I could hear it, muffled and faint, through that canvas dropcloth. Then I grabbed it and I heaved...I really believe it was do it then or do it never. It came sliding out...and I think maybe it suspected, Dex...because, as the dolly started to tilt down toward the water it started to growl and yammer again ... and the canvas started to ripple and bulge...and I yanked it again. I gave it all I had...so much that I almost fell into the damned quarry myself. And it went in. There was a splash...and then it was gone. Except for a few ripples, it was gone. And then the ripples were gone, too."

He fell silent, looking at his hands.

"And you came here," Dex said.

"First I went back to Amberson Hall. Cleaned under the stairs. Picked up all of Wilma's things and put them in her purse again. Picked up the janitor's shoe and his pen and your grad student's glasses. Wilma's purse is still on the seat. I parked the car in our – in my – driveway. On the way there I threw the rest of the stuff in the river."

"And then did what? Walked here?"

"Yes."

"Henry, what if I'd waked up before you got here? Called the police?"

Henry Northrup said simply: "You didn't."

They stared at each other, Dex from his bed, Henry from the chair by the window.

Speaking in tones so soft as to be nearly inaudible, Henry said, "The question is, what happens now? Three people are going to be reported missing soon. There is no one element to connect all three. There are no signs of foul play; I saw to that. Badlinger's crate, the dolly, the painters' dropcloth – those things will be reported missing too, presumably. There will be a search. But the weight of the dolly will carry the crate to the bottom of the quarry, and...there are really no bodies, are there, Dex?"

"No," Dexter Stanley said. "No, I suppose there aren't."

"But what are you going to do, Dex? What are you going to say?"

"Oh, I could tell a tale," Dex said. "And if I told it, I suspect I'd end up in the state mental hospital. Perhaps accused of murdering the janitor and Gereson, if not your wife. No matter how good your cleanup was, a state police forensic unit could find traces of blood on the floor and walls of that laboratory. I believe I'll keep my mouth shut."

"Thank you," Henry said. "Thank you, Dex."

Dex thought of that elusive thing Henry had mentioned companionship. A little light in the darkness. He thought of playing chess perhaps twice a week instead of once. Perhaps even three times a week... and if the game was not finished by ten, perhaps playing until midnight if neither of them had any early morning classes, instead of having to put the board away (and, as likely as not, Wilma would just "accidentally" knock over the pieces "while dusting," so that the game would have to be started all over again the following Thursday evening). He thought of his friend, at last free of that other species of Tasmanian devil that killed more slowly but just as surely – by heart attack, by stroke, by ulcer, by high blood pressure, yammering and whistling in the ear all the while.

Last of all, he thought of the janitor, casually flicking his quarter, and of the quarter coming down and rolling under the stairs, where a very old horror sat squat and mute, covered with dust and cobwebs, waiting... biding its time...

What had Henry said? The whole thing was almost hellishly perfect.

"No need to thank me, Henry," he said.

Henry stood up. "If you got dressed," he said, "you could run me down to the campus. I could get my MG and go back home and report Wilma missing."

Dex thought about it. Henry was inviting him to cross a nearly invisible line, it seemed, from bystander to accomplice. Did he want to cross that line?

At last he swung his legs out of bed. "All right, Henry."

"Thank you, Dexter."

Dex smiled slowly. "That's all right," he said. "After all, what are friends for?"

SQUAD D

An 11 page, 2,500 word story written for a proposed last volume of Harlan Ellison's *Dangerous Visions* anthologies. Ellison felt that the story was not quite ready to be published in the current form. King did not feel that was the case.

Billy Clewson died all at once, with nine of the ten other members of D Squad on April 8, 1974. It took his mother two years, but she got started right away on the afternoon the telegram announcing her son's death came, in fact. Dale Clewson simply sat on the bench in the front hall for five minutes, the sheet of yellow flimsy paper dangling from his fingers, not sure if he was going to faint or puke or scream or what. When he was able to get up, he went into the living room. He was in time to observe Andrea down the last swallow of the first drink and pour the post-Billy era's second drink. A good many more drinks followed – it was really amazing, how many drinks that small and seemingly frail woman had been able to pack into a two-year period. The written cause – that which appeared on her death certificate – was liver dysfunction and renal failure. Both Dale and the family doctor knew that was formalistic icing on an extremely alcoholic cake – Caruba rum, perhaps. But only Dale knew there was a third level. The Viet Cong had killed their son in a place called Ky Doe, and Billy's death had killed his mother.

It was three years – three years almost to the day – after Billy's death on the bridge that Dale Clewson began to believe that he must be going mad.

Nine, he thought. *There were nine. There were always nine. Until now.*

Were there? his mind replied to itself. *Are you sure? Maybe you really counted –*

The lieutenant's letter said there were nine, and Bortman's letter said there were nine.

So just how can you be so sure? Maybe you just assumed.

But he hadn't just assumed, and he could be sure because he knew how many ninewas, and there had been nine boys in the D Squad photograph which had come in the mail, along with Lieutenant Anderson's letter.

You could be wrong, his mind insisted with an assurance that was slightly hysterical. *You've been through a lot these last couple of years, what with losing first Billy and then Andrea. You could be wrong.*

It was really surprising, he thought, to what insane lengths the human mind would go to protect its own sanity.

He put his finger down on the new figure – a boy of Billy's age, but with blonde crewcut hair, looking no more than sixteen, surely too young to be on the killing ground. He was sitting cross-legged in front of Gibson, who had, according to Billy's letters, played the guitar, and Kimberley, who told lots of dirty Jokes. The boy with the blonde hair was squinting slightly into the sun – so were several of the others, but they had always been there before. The new boy's fatigue shirt was open, his dog tags lying against his hairless chest.

Dale went into the kitchen, sorted through what he and Andrea had always called "the jumble drawers," and came up with an old, scratched magnifying glass. He took it and the picture over the living room window, tilted the picture so there was no glare, and held the glass over the new boy's dog-tags. He couldn't read them. Thought, in fact, that the tags were both turned over and lying face down against the skin.

And yet, a suspicion had dawned in his mind – it ticked there like the clock on the mantle. He had been about to wind that clock when he had noticed the change in the picture. Now he put the picture back in its accustomed place, between a photograph of Andrea and Billy's graduation picture, found the key to the clock. And wound it.

Lieutenant's Anderson's letter had been simple enough. Now Dale found it in his study desk and read it again. Typed lines on Army stationary. The prescribed follow-up to the telegram, Dale had supposed. First: Telegram. Second: Letter of Condolence from Lieutenant. Third: Coffin, One Boy Enclosed. He had noticed then and noticed again now that the typewriter Anderson used had a Flying "o".

Clewson kept coming out Clews^on.

Andrea had wanted to tear the letter up. Dale insisted that they keep it. Now he was glad.

Billy's squad and two others had been involved in a flank sweep of a jungle quadrant of which Ky Doe was the only village. Enemy contact had been anticipated, Anderson's letter said, but there hadn't been any. The Cong which had been reliably reported to be in the area had simply melted away into the jungle – it was a trick with which the American soldiers had become very familiar over the previous ten years or so. Dale could imagine them heading back to their base at Homan, happy, relieved.

Squads A and C had waded across the Ky River, which was almost dry. Squad D used the bridge. Halfway across, it blew up. Perhaps it had been detonated from downstream. More likely, someone – perhaps even Billy himself – had stepped on the wrong board. All nine of them had

been killed. Not a single survivor.

God – if there really is such a being – is usually kinder than that, Dale thought. He put Lieutenant Anderson's letter back and took out Josh Bortman's letter. It had been written on blue-lined paper from what looked like a child's tablet. Bortman's handwriting was nearly illegible, the scrawl made worse by the writing implement – a soft-lead pencil. Obviously blunt to start with, it must have been no more than a nub by the time Bortman signed his name at the bottom. In several places Bortman had borne down hard enough with his instrument to tear the paper.

It had been Bortman, the tenth man, who sent Dale and Andrea the squad picture, already framed, the glass over the photo miraculously unbroken in its long trip from Homan to Saigon to San Francisco and finally to Binghamton, New York.

Bortman's letter was anguished. He called the other nine "the best friends I ever had in my life, I loved them all like they was my brothers."

Dale held the blue-lined paper in his hand and looked blankly through his study door and toward the sound of the ticking clock on the mantelpieces. When the letter came, in early May of 1974, he had been too full of his own anguish to really consider Bortman's. Now he supposed he could understand it – a little, anyway. Bortman had been feeling a deep and inarticulate guilt. Nine letters from his hospital bed on the Homan base, all in that pained scrawl, all probably written with that same soft-lead pencil. The expense of having nine enlargements of the Squad D photograph made, and framed, and mailed off. *Rites Of atonement with a soft-lead pencil*, Dale thought, folding the letter again and putting it back in the drawer with Anderson's. As if he had killed them by taking their picture. That's really what was between the lines, wasn't it? "Please don't hate me, Mr. Clewson, please don't think I killed your son and the other's by – "

In the other room the mantelpiece clock softly began to chime the hour of five.

Dale went back into the living room, and took the picture down again.

What you're talking about is madness.

Looked at the boy with the short blonde hair again.

I loved them all like they was my brothers.

Turned the picture over.

Please don't think I killed your son – all of your sons – by taking their picture. Please don't hate me because I was in the Homan base hospital with bleeding haemorrhoids instead of on the Ky Doe bridge with the best friends I ever had in my life. Please don't hate me, because I finally caught up, it took me ten years of trying, but I finally caught up.

Written on the back, in the same soft-lead pencil, was this notation:

Jack Bradley Omaha, Neb.

Billy Clewson Binghamton, NY.

Rider Dotson Oneonta, NY

Charlie Gibson Payson, ND

Bobby Kale Henderson, IA

Jack Kimberley Truth or Consequences. NM

Andy Moulton Faraday, LA Staff Sgt. I

Jimmy Oliphant Beson, Del.

Ashley St. Thomas Anderson, Ind.

*Josh Bortman Castle Rock, Me.

He had put his own name last, Dale saw – he had seen all of this before, or course, and had noticed it...but had never really noticed it until now, perhaps. He had put his name last, out of alphabetical order, and with an asterisk.

The asterisk means "still alive." The asterisk means "don't hate me."

Ah, but what you're thinking is madness, and you damned well know it.

Nevertheless, he went to the telephone, dialed 0, and ascertained that the area code for Maine was 207. He dialed Maine directory assistance, and ascertained that there was a single Bortman family in Castle Rock. He thanked the operator, wrote the number down, and looked at the telephone.

You don't really intend to call those people, do you?

No answer – only the sound of the ticking clock. He had put the picture on the sofa and now he looked at it – looked first at his own son, his hair pulled back behind his head, a bravo little moustache trying to grow on his upper lip, frozen forever at the age of twenty-one, and then at the new boy in that old picture, the boy with the short blond hair, the boy whose dog-tags were twisted so they lay face-down and unreadable against his chest. He thought of the way Josh Bortman had carefully segregated himself from the others, thought of the asterisk, and suddenly his eyes filled with warm tears.

I never hated you, son, he thought. Nor did Andrea, for all her grief. Maybe I should have picked up a pen and dropped you a note saying so, but honest to Christ, the thought never crossed my mind.

He picked up the phone now and dialed the Bortman number in Castle Rock, Maine.

Busy.

He hung up and sat for five minutes, looking out at the street where Billy had learned to ride first a trike, then a bike with trainer wheels, then a two-wheeler. At eighteen he had brought home the final improvement – a Yamaha 500. For just a moment he could see Billy

with paralysing clarity, as if he might walk through the door and sit down.

He dialed the Bortman number again. This time it rang. The voice on the other end managed to convey an unmistakable impression of wariness in just two syllables. "Hello?" At that same moment, Dale's eyes fell on the dial of his wristwatch and read the date – not for the first time that day, but it was the first time it really sunk in. It was April 9th. Billy and the others had died eleven years ago yesterday. They –

"Hello?" the voice repeated sharply. "Answer me, or I'm hanging up! Which one are you?"

Which one are you? He stood in the ticking living room, cold, listening to words croak out of his mouth.

"My name is Dale Clewson, Mr. Bortman. My son – "

"Clewson. Billy Clewson's father." Now the voice was flat, inflectionless.

"Yes, that's – "

"So you say."

Dale could find no reply. For the first time in his life, he really was tongue-tied.

"And has your picture of Squad D changed, too?"

"Yes." It came out in a strangled little gasp.

Bortman's voice remained inflectionless, but it was nonetheless filled with savagery. "You listen to me, and tell the others. There's going to be tracer equipment on my phone by this afternoon. If it's some kind of joke, you fellows are going to be laughing all the way to jail, I can assure you."

"Mr. Bortman – "

"Shut up! First someone calling himself Peter Moulton calls, supposedly from Louisiana, and tells my wife that our boy has suddenly showed up in a picture Josh sent them of Squad D. She's still having hysterics over that when a woman purporting to be Bobby Kale's mother calls with the same insane story. Next, Oliphant! Five minutes ago, Rider Dotson's brother! He says. Now you."

"But Mr. Bortman – "

"My wife is upstairs sedated, and if all of this is a case or 'Have you got Prince Albert in a can,' I swear to God – "

"You know it isn't a joke," Dale whispered. His fingers felt cold and numb – ice cream fingers. He looked across the room at the photograph. At the blonde boy.

Smiling, squinting into the camera.

Silence from the other end.

"You know it isn't a joke, so what happened?"

"My son killed himself yesterday evening," Bortman said evenly. "If

you didn't know It."

"I didn't. I swear."

Bortman signed. "And you really are calling from long distance, aren't you?"

"From Binghamton, New York."

"Yes. You can tell the difference – local from long distance, I mean. Long distance has a sound...a...a hum..."

Dale realized, belatedly, that expression had finally crept into that voice.

Bortman was crying.

"He was depressed off and on, ever since he got back from Nam, in late 1974," Bortman said. "it always got worse in the spring, it always peaked around the 8th of April when the other boys ... and your son..."

"Yes," Dale said.

"This year, it just didn't...didn't peak."

There was a muffled honk – Bortman using his handkerchief.

"He hung himself in the garage, Mr. Clewson."

"Christ Jesus," Dale muttered. He shut his eyes very tightly, trying to ward off the image. He got one which was arguably even worse – that smiling face, the open fatigue shirt, the twisted dog-tags. "I'm sorry."

"He didn't want people to know why he wasn't with the others that day, but of course the story got out." A long, meditative pause from Bortman's end. "Stories like that always do."

"Yes. I suppose they do."

"Joshua didn't have many friends when he was growing up, Mr. Clewson. I don't think he had any real friends until he got to Nam. He loved your son, and the others."

Now it's him. comforting me.

"I'm sorry for your loss" Dale said. "And sorry to have bothered you at a time like this. But you'll understand...I had to."

"Yes. Is he smiling, Mr. Clewson? The others...they said he was smiling."

Dale looked toward the picture beside the ticking clock. "He's smiling."

"Of course he is. Josh finally caught up with them."

Dale looked out the window toward the sidewalk where Billy had once ridden a bike with training wheels. He supposed he should say something, but he couldn't seem to think of a thing. His stomach hurt. His bones were cold.

"I ought to go, Mr. Clewson. In case my wife wakes up." He paused. "I think I'll take the phone off the hook."

"That might not be a bad idea."

"Goodbye, Mr. Clewson."

"Goodbye. Once again, my sympathies."

"And mine, too."

Click.

Dale crossed the room and picked up the photograph of Squad D. He looked at the smiling blonde boy, who was sitting cross-legged in front of Kimberley and Gibson, sitting casually and comfortably on the ground as if he had never had a haemorrhoid in his life, as if he had never stood atop a stepladder in a shadowy garage and slipped a noose around his neck.

Josh finally caught up with them.

He stood looking fixedly at the photograph for a long time before realizing that the depth of silence in the room had deepened. The clock had stopped.

THE KING FAMILY & THE WICKED WITCH

Illustrated by King's children
Flint Magazine, Kansas (1978)

EDITOR'S NOTE:

Stephen King and I went to college together. No, we were not the best of friends, but we did share a few brews together at University Motor Inn. We did work for the school newspaper at the same time. No, Steve and I are not best friends. But I sure am glad he made it. He worked hard and believed in himself. After eight million book sales, it's hard to remember him as a typically broke student. We all knew he'd make it through.

Last January I wrote of a visit with Steve over the holiday vacation. We talked about his books, *Carrie*, *Salems Lot*, *The Shining*, and the soon to be released *The Stand*. We talked about how Stanley Kubrick wanted to do the film version of his new book. We didn't talk about the past much though. We talked of the future, his kids, *Flint* ...

He gave me a copy of a story he had written for his children. We almost ran it then, but there was much concern on the staff as to how it would be received by our readers. We didn't run it. Well, we've debated long enough. It's too cute for you not to read it. We made the final decision after spending in evening watching TV last week. There were at least 57 more offensive things said, not to mention all the murders, rapes, and wars...we decided to let you be the judge. If some of you parents might be offended by the word 'fart', you'd better not read it – but don't stop your kids, they'll love it!

On the Secret Road in the town of Bridgton, there lived a wicked witch. Her name was Witch Hazel.

How wicked was Witch Hazel? Well, once she had changed a Prince from the Kingdom of New Hampshire into a woodchuck. She turned a little kid's favorite kitty into whipped cream. And she liked to turn mummies' baby carriages into big piles of horse-turds while the mummies and their babies were shopping.

She was a mean old witch.

The King family lived by Long Lake in Bridgton, Maine. They were nice people.

There was a Daddy who wrote books. There was a Mommy who wrote poems and cooked food. There was a girl named Naomi who was

six years old. She went to school. She was tall and straight and brown. There was a boy named Joe who was four years old. He went to school too, although he only went two days a week. He was short and blonde with hazel eyes.

And Witch Hazel hated the Kings more than anyone else in Bridgton. Witch Hazel especially hated the Kings because they were the happiest family in Bridgton. She would peer out at their bright red Cadillac when it passed her dirty, falling down haunted house with mean hateful eyes. Witch Hazel hated bright colors.

She would see the Mommy reading Joe a story on the bench outside the drug store and her bony fingers would itch to cast a spell. She would see the Daddy talking to Naomi on their way home from school in the red Cadillac or the blue truck, and she would want to reach out her awful arms and catch them and pop into her witches cauldron.

And finally, she cast her spell.

One day Witch Hazel put on a nice dress. She went to the Bridgton Beauty Parlor and had her hair permed. She put on a pair of Rockers from Fayva (an East Coast shoe store chain). She looked almost pretty. She bought some of Daddy's books at the Bridgton Pharmacy. Then she drove out to the Kings' house and pretended she wanted Daddy to sign his books. She drove in a car. She could have ridden her broom, but she didn't want the Kings to know she was a witch.

And in her handbag were four magic cookies. Four evil magic cookies.

Four cookies! Four cookies full of black magic!

The banana cookie, the milk bottle cookie, and worst of all, two crying cookies. Don't let her in, Kings! Oh please don't let her in! But she looked so nice...and she was smiling...and she had Daddy's books soooo....they let her in. Daddy signed her book, Mommy offered her tea. Naomi asked if she would like to see her room. Joe asked if she would like to see him write his name. Witch Hazel smiled and smiled. It almost broke her face to smile.

"You have been so nice to me that I would like to be nice to you." said Witch Hazel. "I have baked four cookies. A cookie for each King."

"Cookies!" shouted Naomi. "Hooray!"

"Cookies!" shouted Joe. "Cookies!"

"That was awfully nice," said Mommy. "You shouldn't have."

"But we're glad you did," said Daddy.

They took the cookies. Witch Hazel smiled. And when she was in her car she shrieked and cackled with laughter. She laughed so hard that her cat Basta hissed and shrank away from her. Witch Hazel was happy when her wicked plan succeeded.

"I will like this banana cookie," Daddy said. He ate it and what a terrible thing happened. His nose turned into a banana and when he went down to his office to work on his book much later that terrible day the only word he could write was banana.

It was Witch Hazel's wicked magic Banana Cookie.

Poor Daddy!

"I will like this milk-bottle cookie," Mommy said. "What a funny name for a cookie." She ate it and the evil cookie turned her hands into milk-bottles. What an awful thing. Could she fix the food with Milk-bottles for hands? Could she type? No! She could not even pick her nose.

Poor Mommy!

"We will like these crying cookies," Naomi and Joe said. What a funny name for a cookie." They each ate one and they began to cry! They cried and cried and could not stop! The tears streamed out of their eyes. There were puddles on the rug. Their clothes got all wet. They couldn't eat good meals because they were crying. They even cried in their sleep.

It was all because of Witch Hazel's evil crying cookies.

The Kings were not the happiest family in Bridgton anymore. Now they were the saddest family in Bridgton. Mommy didn't want to go shopping because everybody laughed at her milk-bottle hands. Daddy couldn't write books because all the words came out banana and it was hard to see the typewriter anyway because his nose was a banana. And Joe and Naomi just cried and cried and cried. Witch Hazel was as happy as a wicked witch ever gets. It was her greatest spell.

One day, about a month after the horrible day of the four cookies Mommy was walking in the woods. It was about the only thing she liked to do with her milk-bottle hands. And in the woods she found a woodchuck caught in a trap.

Poor thing! It was almost dead from fright and pain. There was blood all over the trap.

"Poor old thing," Mommy said. "I'll get you out of that nasty trap." But could she open the trap with milk bottles for hands? No.

So she ran for Daddy and Naomi and Joe. Fifteen minutes later all four Kings were standing around the poor bloody woodchuck in the trap. The Kings were not bloody, but what a strange, sad sight they were! Daddy had a banana in the middle of his face. Mommy had milk-bottle hands. And the two children could not stop crying.

"I think we can get him out," Daddy said.

"Yes," Mummy said. "I think we can get him out if we all work together. And I will start. I will give the poor thing a drink of milk from my hands." And she gave him a drink. She felt a little better. Naomi and

Joe were trying to open the jaws of the cruel trap while the woodchuck looked at them hopefully. But the trap would not open. It was an old trap, and its hinges and mean sharp teeth were clogged with rust.

"It will not open," Naomi said and cried harder than ever. "No, it will not open at all!"

"I can't open it," Joe said and cried his eyes out. The tears streamed out of his eyes and down his cheeks. "I can't open it either."

And Daddy said "I know what to do. I think."

Daddy bent over the hinge of the trap with his funny banana nose. He squeezed the end of it with both hands. Ouch! It hurt! But out came six drops of banana oil. They fell onto the rusty hinge of the trap, one drop at a time.

"Now try," said Daddy.

This time the trap opened easily.

"Hooray!" shouted Naomi.

"He's out! He's out!" shouted Joe.

"We have all worked together," said Mommy. "I gave the woodchuck milk. Daddy oiled the trap with his banana nose. And Naomi and Joe opened the trap to let him out."

And then they all felt a little better, for the first time since Witch Hazel cast her wicked spell.

And have you guessed yet? Oh, I bet you have. The woodchuck was really not a woodchuck at all. He was the Prince of the Kingdom of New Hampshire who had also fallen under the spell of Wicked Witch Hazel. When the trap was opened the spell was broken, and instead of a woodchuck, a radiant Prince in a Brooks Brothers suit stood before the King family.

"You have been kind to me even, in your own sadness," said the Prince, "and that is the most difficult thing of all. And so through the power vested in me, the spell of the wicked witch is broken and you are free!"

Oh, happy day.

Daddy's banana nose disappeared and was replaced with his own nose, which was not too handsome but certainly better than a slightly squeezed banana. Mommy's milk-bottles were replaced with her own pink hands.

Best of all, Naomi and Joe stopped crying. They began to smile, then they began to laugh! Then the Prince of New Hampshire began to laugh. Then Daddy and Mommy began to laugh. The Prince danced with Mommy and Naomi and carried Joe on his shoulders. He shook hands with Daddy and said he had admired Daddy's books before he had been turned into a woodchuck.

All five of them went back to the nice house by the lake, and Mommy made tea for everyone. They all sat at the table and drank their tea.

"We ought to do something about that witch," Mommy said. "So she can't do something wicked to someone else."

"I think that is true," said the Prince. "And it so happens that I know one spell myself. It will get rid of her."

He whispered to Daddy. He whispered to Mommy. He whispered to Naomi and Joe, and they nodded and giggled and laughed.

That very afternoon they drove up to Witch Hazel's haunted house on the Secret Road. Basta, the cat, looked at them with his big yellow eyes, hissed, and ran away.

They did not drive up in the Kings' pretty red Cadillac, or in the Prince's Mist Grey Mercedes 390SL. They drove up in an old, old car that wheezed and blew oil.

They were wearing old clothes with fleas jumping out of them.

They wanted to look poor to fool Witch Hazel.

They went up and the Prince knocked on the door.

Witch Hazel ripped the door open. She was wearing a tall black hat. There was a wart on the end of her nose. She smelled of frog's blood and owls' hearts and ant's eyeballs, because she had been whipping up horrible brew to make more black magic cookies.

"What do you want?" she rasped at them. She didn't recognize them in their old clothes. "Get out. I'm busy!"

"We are a poor family on our way to California to pick oranges," the Prince said.

"What has that to do with me?" The witch shrieked. "I ought to turn you into oranges for disturbing me! Now good day!"

She tried to close the door but the Prince put his foot in it. Naomi and Joe shoved it back open.

"We have something to sell you," Daddy said. "It is the wickedest cookie in the world. If you eat it, it will make you the wickedest witch in the world, even wickeder than Witch Indira in India. We will sell it to you for one thousand dollars."

"I don't buy what I can steal!" Witch Hazel shrieked. She snatched the cookie and gobbled it down. "Now I will be the wickedest witch in the whole world!" And she cackled so loudly that the shutters fell off her house.

But the Prince wasn't sorry. He was glad. And Mommy wasn't sorry, because she had baked the cookie. And Daddy wasn't sorry, because he had gone to New Hampshire to get the 300 year-old baked beans that went into the cookie.

Naomi and Joe? They just laughed and laughed, because they knew that it wasn't a Wicked Cookie that Witch Hazel had just eaten.

It was a Farting Cookie.

Witch Hazel felt something funny.

She felt it building in her tummy and her behind. It felt like a of gas. It felt like an explosion looking for a place to happen.

"What have you done to me!" she shrieked. "Who are you?"

"I am the Prince of New Hampshire," the Prince cried, raising his face so she could see it clearly for the first time.

"And we are the Kings," Daddy said. "Shame on you for turning my wife's hands into milk bottles! Double shame on you for turning my nose into a banana. Triple shame on you for making my Naomi and my Joe cry all day and all night. But we've fixed you now, Wicked Witch Hazel!"

"You won't be casting anymore spells," said Naomi. "Because you are going to the moon!"

"I'm not going to the moon!" Witch Hazel screeched so loudly that the chimney fell on the lawn. "I'm going to turn you all into cheap antiques that not even tourists will buy!"

"No you're not," said Joe, "because you ate the magic cookie. You ate the magic farting cookie."

The wicked witch foamed and frothed. She tried to cast her spell. But it was too late: the Farting Cookie had done its work. She felt a big fart coming on. She squeezed her butt to keep it in until she could cast her spell, but it was too late.

WHONK! went the fart. It blew all the fur off her cat, Basta. It blew in the windows. And Witch Hazel went up in the air like a rocket.

"Get me down!" Witch Hazel screamed. Witch Hazel came down all right. She came down on her fanny. And when she came down, she let another fart.

DRRRRRRAPPP! went the fart. It was so windy it knocked down the witch's home and the Bridgton Trading Post. You could see Dom Cardozl sitting on the toilet where he had been pooping. It was all that was left of the Trading Post except for one bureau that had been made in Grand Rapids

The witch went flying up into the sky. She flew up and up until she was as small as a speck of coal dust.

"Get me down," Witch Hazel called, sounding very small and far away.

"You'll come down all right," Naomi said.

Down came Witch Hazel.

"Yeeaaaahhhh!" she screamed falling out of the sky.

Just before she could hit the ground and be crushed (as maybe she deserved), she cut another fart, the biggest one of all. The smell was

like two million egg salad sandwiches. And the sound was KA-HIONK!!!

Up she went again.

"Goodbye, Witch Hazel," yelled Mommy waving. "Enjoy the moon."

"Hope you stay a long time," called Joe.

Up and up went Witch Hazel until she was out of sight. During the news that night the Kings and the Prince of New Hampshire heard Barbara Walters report that a UFW had been seen by a 747 airplane over Bridgton, Maine – an unidentified flying witch.

And that was the end of wicked Witch Hazel. She is on the moon now, and probably still farting.

And the Kings are the happiest family in Bridgton again. They often exchange visits with the Prince of New Hampshire, who is now King. Daddy writes books and never uses the word banana. Mommy uses her hands more than ever. And Joe and Naomi King hardly ever cry.

As for Witch Hazel, she was never seen again, and considering those terrible farts she was letting when she left, that is probably a good thing!

THE NIGHT OF THE TIGER

From *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, 1978

I first saw Mr. Legere when the circus swung through Steubenville, but I'd only been with the show for two weeks; he might have been making his irregular visits indefinitely. No one much wanted to talk about Mr. Legere, not even that last night when it seemed that the world was coming to an end – the night that Mr. Indrasil disappeared.

But if I'm going to tell it to you from the beginning, I should start by saying that I'm Eddie Johnston, and I was born and raised in Sauk City. Went to school there, had my first girl there, and worked in Mr. Lillie's five-and-dime there for a while after I graduated from high school. That was a few years back...more than I like to count, sometimes. Not that Sauk City's such a bad place; hot, lazy summer nights sitting on the front porch is all right for some folks, but it just seemed to itch me, like sitting in the same chair too long. So I quit the five-and-dime and joined Farnum & Williams' All-American 3-Ring Circus and Side Show. I did it in a moment of giddiness when the calliope music kind of fogged my judgment, I guess.

So I became a roustabout, helping put up tents and take them down, spreading sawdust, cleaning cages, and sometimes selling cotton candy when the regular salesman had to go away and bark for Chips Bailey, who had malaria and sometimes had to go someplace far away, and holler. Mostly things that kids do for free passes – things I used to do when I was a kid.

But times change. They don't seem to come around like they used to. We swung through Illinois and Indiana that hot summer, and the crowds were good and everyone was happy. Everyone except Mr. Indrasil. Mr. Indrasil was never happy. He was the lion tamer, and he looked like old pictures I've seen of Rudolph Valentino. He was tall, with handsome, arrogant features and a shock of wild black hair. And strange, mad eyes – the maddest eyes I've ever seen. He was silent most of the time; two syllables from Mr. Indrasil was a sermon. All the circus people kept a mental as well as a physical distance, because his rages were legend. There was a whispered story about coffee spilled on his hands after a particularly difficult performance and a murder that was almost done to a young roustabout before Mr. Indrasil could be hauled off him. I don't know about that. I do know that I grew to fear him worse than I had cold-eyed Mr. Edmont, my high school principal, Mr. Lillie, or even my

father, who was capable of cold dressing-downs that would leave the recipient quivering with shame and dismay.

When I cleaned the big cats' cages, they were always spotless. The memory of the few times I had the vituperative wrath of Mr. Indrasil called down on me still have the power to turn my knees watery in retrospect.

Mostly it was his eyes – large and dark and totally blank. The eyes, and the feeling that a man capable of controlling seven watchful cats in a small cage must be part savage himself. And the only two things he was afraid of were Mr. Legere and the circus's one tiger, a huge beast called Green Terror.

As I said, I first saw Mr. Legere in Steubenville, and he was staring into Green Terror's cage as if the tiger knew all the secrets of life and death.

He was lean, dark, quiet. His deep, recessed eyes held an expression of pain and brooding violence in their green-flecked depths, and his hands were always crossed behind his back as he stared moodily in at the tiger.

Green Terror was a beast to be stared at. He was a huge, beautiful specimen with a flawless striped coat, emerald eyes, and heavy fangs like ivory spikes. His roars usually filled the circus grounds – fierce, angry, and utterly savage. He seemed to scream defiance and frustration at the whole world.

Chips Bailey, who had been with Farnum & Williams since Lord knew when, told me that Mr. Indrasil used to use Green Terror in his act, until one night when the tiger leaped suddenly from its perch and almost ripped his head from his shoulders before he could get out of the cage. I noticed that Mr. Indrasil always wore, his hair long down the back of his neck.

I can still remember the tableau that day in Steubenville. It was hot, sweatingly hot, and we had a shirtsleeve crowd. That was why Mr. Legere and Mr. Indrasil stood out. Mr. Legere, standing silently by the tiger cage, was fully dressed in a suit and vest, his face unmarked by perspiration. And Mr. Indrasil, clad in one of his beautiful silk shirts and white whipcord breeches, was staring at them both, his face dead-white, his eyes bulging in lunatic anger, hate, and fear. He was carrying a currycomb and brush, and his hands were trembling as they clenched on them spasmodically.

Suddenly he saw me, and his anger found vent. "You!" He shouted. "Johnston!"

"Yes sir?" I felt a crawling in the pit of my stomach. I knew I was about to have the wrath of Indrasil vented on me, and the thought turned me weak with fear. I like to think I'm as brave as the next, and if

it had been anyone else, I think I would have been fully determined to stand up for myself. But it wasn't anyone else. It was Mr. Indrasil, and his eyes were mad.

"These cages, Johnston. Are they supposed to be clean?" He pointed a finger, and I followed it. I saw four errant wisps of straw and an incriminating puddle of hose water in the far corner of one.

"Y-yes, sir," I said, and what was intended to be firmness became palsied bravado.

Silence, like the electric pause before a downpour. People were beginning to look, and I was dimly aware that Mr. Legere was staring at us with his bottomless eyes.

"Yes, sir?" Mr. Indrasil thundered suddenly. "Yes, sir? *Yes, sir?* Don't insult my intelligence, boy! Don't you think I can see? Smell? Did you use the disinfectant?"

"I used disinfectant, yes – "

"*Don't answer me back!*" he screeched, and then the sudden drop in his voice made my skin crawl. "Don't you dare answer me back." Everyone was staring now. I wanted to retch, to die. "Now you get the hell into that tool shed, and you get that disinfectant and swab out those cages," he whispered, measuring every word. One hand suddenly shot out, grasping my shoulder. "And don't you ever, ever, speak back to me again."

I don't know where the words came from, but they were suddenly there, spilling off my lips. "I didn't speak back to you, Mr. Indrasil, and I don't like you saying I did. I – resent it. Now let me go."

His face went suddenly red, then white, then almost saffron with rage. His eyes were blazing doorways to hell.

Right then I thought I was going to die.

He made an inarticulate gagging sound, and the grip on my shoulder became excruciating. His right hand went up...up...up, and then descended with unbelievable speed. If that hand had connected with my face, it would have knocked me senseless at best. At worst, it would have broken my neck.

It did not connect.

Another hand materialized magically out of space, right in front of me. The two straining limbs came together with a flat smacking sound. It was Mr. Legere.

"Leave the boy alone," he said emotionlessly.

Mr. Indrasil stared at him for a long second, and I think there was nothing so unpleasant in the whole business as watching the fear of Mr. Legere and the mad lust to hurt (or to kill!) mix in those terrible eyes. Then he turned and stalked away.

I turned to look at Mr. Legere. "Thank you," I said.

"Don't thank me." And it wasn't a "don't thank me," but a "don't thank me." Not a gesture of modesty but a literal command. In a sudden flash of intuition empathy if you will I understood exactly what he meant by that comment. I was a pawn in what must have been a long combat between the two of them. I had been captured by Mr. Legere rather than Mr. Indrasil. He had stopped the lion tamer not because he felt for me, but because it gained him an advantage, however slight, in their private war.

"What's your name?" I asked, not at all offended by what I had inferred. He had, after all, been honest with me.

"Legere," he said briefly. He turned to go.

"Are you with a circus?" I asked, not wanting to let him go so easily. "You seemed to know – him."

A faint smile touched his thin lips, and warmth kindled in his eyes for a moment. "No. You might call me a – policeman." And before I could reply, he had disappeared into the surging throng passing by.

The next day we picked up stakes and moved on.

I saw Mr. Legere again in Danville and, two weeks later, in Chicago. In the time between I tried to avoid Mr. Indrasil as much as possible and kept the cat cages spotlessly clean. On the day before we pulled out for St. Louis, I asked Chips Bailey and Sally O'Hara, the red-headed wire walker, if Mr. Legere and Mr. Indrasil knew each other. I was pretty sure they did, because Mr. Legere was hardly following the circus to eat our fabulous lime ice.

Sally and Chips looked at each other over their coffee cups. "No one knows much about what's between those, two," she said. "But it's been going on for a long time maybe twenty years. Ever since Mr. Indrasil came over from Ringling Brothers, and maybe before that."

Chips nodded. "This Legere guy picks up the circus almost every year when we swing through the Midwest and stays with us until we catch the train for Florida in Little Rock. Makes old Leopard Man touchy as one of his cats."

"He told me he was a police-man," I said. "What do you suppose he looks for around here? You don't suppose Mr. Indrasil – ?"

Chips and Sally looked at each other strangely, and both just about broke their backs getting up. "Got to see those weights and counter weights get stored right," Sally said, and Chips muttered something not too convincing about checking on the rear axle of his U-Haul.

And that's about the way any conversation concerning Mt. Indrasil or Mr. Legere usually broke up – hurriedly, with many hard-forced excuses.

We said farewell to Illinois and comfort at the same time. A killing hot spell came on, seemingly at the very instant we crossed the border, and

it stayed with us for the next month and a half, as we moved slowly across Missouri and into Kansas. Everyone grew short of temper, including the animals. And that, of course, included the cats, which were Mr. Indrasil's responsibility. He rode the roustabouts unmercifully, and myself in particular. I grinned and tried to bear it, even though I had my own case of prickly heat. You just don't argue with a crazy man, and I'd pretty well decided that was what Mr. Indrasil was.

No one was getting any sleep, and that is the curse of all circus performers. Loss of sleep slows up reflexes, and slow reflexes make for danger. In Independence Sally O'Hara fell seventy-five feet into the nylon netting and fractured her shoulder. Andrea Solienni, our bareback rider, fell off one of her horses during rehearsal and was knocked unconscious by a flying hoof. Chips Bailey suffered silently with the fever that was always with him, his face a waxen mask, with cold perspiration clustered at each temple.

And in many ways, Mr. Indrasil had the roughest row to hoe of all.

The cats were nervous and short-tempered, and every time he stepped into the Demon Cat Cage, as it was billed, he took his life in his hands. He was feeding the lions ordinate amounts of raw meat right before he went on, something that lion tamers rarely do, contrary to popular belief. His face grew drawn and haggard, and his eyes were wild.

Mr. Legere was almost always there, by Green Terror's cage, watching him. And that, of course, added to Mr. Indrasil's load. The circus began eyeing the silk-shirted figure nervously as he passed, and I knew they were all thinking the same thing I was: *He's going to crack wide open, and when he does –*

When he did, God alone knew what would happen.

The hot spell went on, and temperatures were climbing well into the nineties every day. It seemed as if the rain gods were mocking us. Every town we left would receive the showers of blessing. Every town we entered was hot, parched, sizzling. And one night, on the road between Kansas City and Green Bluff, I saw something that upset me more than anything else.

It was hot – abominably hot. It was no good even trying to sleep. I rolled about on my cot like a man in a fever-delirium, chasing the sandman but never quite catching him. Finally I got up, pulled on my pants, and went outside.

We had pulled off into a small field and drawn into a circle. Myself and two other roustabouts had unloaded the cats so they could catch whatever breeze there might be. The cages were there now, painted dull silver by the swollen Kansas moon, and a tall figure in white whipcord breeches was standing by the biggest of them. Mr. Indrasil.

He was baiting Green Terror with a long, pointed pike. The big cat was padding silently around the cage, trying to avoid the sharp tip.

And the frightening thing was, when the staff did punch into the tiger's flesh, it did not roar in pain and anger as it should have. It maintained an ominous silence, more terrifying to the person who knows cats than the loudest of roars.

It had gotten to Mr. Indrasil, too. "Quiet bastard, aren't you?" He grunted. Powerful arms flexed, and the iron shaft slid forward. Green Terror flinched, and his eyes rolled horribly. But he did not make a sound. "Yowl!" Mr. Indrasil hissed. "Go ahead and yowl, you monster Yowl!" And he drove his spear deep into the tiger's flank.

Then I saw something odd. It seemed that a shadow moved in the darkness under one of the far wagons, and the moonlight seemed to glint on staring eyes – green eyes.

A cool wind passed silently through the clearing, lifting dust and rumpling my hair.

Mr. Indrasil looked up, and there was a queer listening expression on his face. Suddenly he dropped the bar, turned, and strode back to his trailer.

I stared again at the far wagon, but the shadow was gone. Green Terror stood motionlessly at the bars of his cage, staring at Mr. Indrasil's trailer. And the thought came to me that it hated Mr. Indrasil not because he was cruel or vicious, for the tiger respects these qualities in its own animalistic way, but rather because he was a deviate from even the tiger's savage norm. He was a rogue. That's the only way I can put it. Mr. Indrasil was not only a human tiger, but a rogue tiger as well. The thought jelled inside me, disquieting and a little scary. I went back inside, but still I could not sleep.

The heat went on.

Every day we fried, every night we tossed and turned, sweating and sleepless. Everyone was painted red with sunburn, and there were fistfights over trifling affairs. Everyone was reaching the point of explosion.

Mr. Legere remained with us, a silent watcher, emotionless on the surface, but, I sensed, with deep-running currents of – what? Hate? Fear? Vengeance? I could not place it. But he was potentially dangerous, I was sure of that. Perhaps more so than Mr. Indrasil was, if anyone ever lit his particular fuse.

He was at the circus at every performance, always dressed in his nattily creased brown suit, despite the killing temperatures. He stood silently by Green Terror's cage, seeming to commune deeply with the tiger, who was always quiet when he was around.

From Kansas to Oklahoma, with no letup in the temperature. A day without a heat prostration case was a rare day indeed. Crowds were beginning to drop off; who wanted to sit under a stifling canvas tent when there was an air-conditioned movie just around the block?

We were all as jumpy as cats, to coin a particularly applicable phrase. And as we set down stakes in Wildwood Green, Oklahoma, I think we all knew a climax of some sort was close at hand. And most of us knew it would involve Mr. Indrasil. A bizarre occurrence had taken place just prior to our first Wildwood performance. Mr. Indrasil had been in the Demon Cat Cage, putting the ill-tempered lions through their paces. One of them missed its balance on its pedestal, tottered and almost regained it. Then, at that precise moment, Green Terror let out a terrible, ear-splitting roar.

The lion fell, landed heavily, and suddenly launched itself with rifle-bullet accuracy at Mr. Indrasil. With a frightened curse, he heaved his chair at the cat's feet, tangling up the driving legs. He darted out just as the lion smashed against the bars.

As he shakily collected himself preparatory to re-entering the cage, Green Terror let out another roar – but this one monstrously like a huge, disdainful chuckle.

Mr. Indrasil stared at the beast, white-faced, then turned and walked away. He did not come out of his trailer all afternoon.

That afternoon wore on interminably. But as the temperature climbed, we all began looking hopefully toward the west, where huge banks of thunderclouds were forming.

"Rain, maybe," I told Chips, stopping by his barking platform in front of the sideshow.

But he didn't respond to my hopeful grin. "Don't like it," he said. "No wind. Too hot. Hail or tornadoes." His face grew grim. "It ain't no picnic, ridin' out a tornado with a pack of crazy-wild animals all over the place, Eddie. I've thanked God mor'n once when we've gone through the tornado belt that we don't have no elephants.

"Yeah" he added gloomily, "you better hope them clouds stay right on the horizon."

But they didn't. They moved slowly toward us, cyclopean pillars in the sky, purple at the bases and awesome blue-black through the cumulonimbus. All air movement ceased, and the heat lay on us like a woolen winding-shroud. Every now and again, thunder would clear its throat further west.

About four, Mr. Farnum himself, ringmaster and half-owner of the circus, appeared and told us there would be no evening performance; just batten down and find a convenient hole to crawl into in case of trouble. There had been corkscrew funnels spotted in several places

between Wildwood and Oklahoma City, some within forty miles of us. There was only a small crowd when the announcement came, apathetically wandering through the sideshow exhibits or ogling the animals. But Mr. Legere had not been present all day; the only person at Green Terror's cage was a sweaty high-school boy with clutch of books. When Mr. Farnum announced the U.S. Weather Bureau tornado warning that had been issued, he hurried quickly away.

I and the other two roustabouts spent the rest of the-afternoon working our tails off, securing tents, loading animals back into their wagons, and making generally sure that everything was nailed down.

Finally only the cat cages were left, and there was a special arrangement for those. Each cage had a special mesh "breezeway" accorded up against it, which, when extended completely, connected with the Demon Cat Cage. When the smaller cages had to be moved, the felines could be herded into the big cage while they were loaded up. The big cage itself rolled on gigantic casters and could be muscled around to a position where each cat could be let back into its original cage. It sounds complicated, and it was, but it was just the only way.

We did the lions first, then Ebony Velvet, the docile black panther that had set the circus back almost one season's receipts. It was a tricky business coaxing them up and then back through the breezeways, but all of us preferred it to calling Mr. Indrasil to help.

By the time we were ready for Green Terror, twilight had come – a queer, yellow twilight that hung humidly around us. The sky above had taken on a flat, shiny aspect that I had never seen and which I didn't like in the least.

"Better hurry," Mr. Farnum said, as we laboriously trundled the Demon Cat Cage back to where we could hook it to the back of Green Terror's show cage. "Barometer's falling off fast." He shook his head worriedly. "Looks bad, boys. Bad." He hurried on, still shaking his head.

We got Green Terror's breezeway hooked up and opened the back of his cage. "In you go," I said encouragingly.

Green Terror looked at me menacingly and didn't move.

Thunder rumbled again, louder, closer, sharper. The sky had gone jaundice, the ugliest color I have ever seen. Wind-devils began to pick jerkily at our clothes and whirl away the flattened candy wrappers and cotton-candy cones that littered the area.

"Come on, come on," I urged and poked him easily with the blunt-tipped rods we were given to herd them with.

Green Terror roared ear-splittingly, and one paw lashed out with blinding speed. The hardwood pole was jerked from my hands and splintered as if it had been a greenwood twig. The tiger was on his feet now, and there was murder in his eyes.

"Look," I said shakily. "One of you will have to go get Mr. Indrasil, that's all. We can't wait around."

As if to punctuate my words, thunder cracked louder, the clapping of mammoth hands. Kelly Nixon and Mike McGregor flipped for it; I was excluded because of my previous run-in with Mr. Indrasil. Kelly drew the task, threw us a wordless glance that said he would prefer facing the storm and then started off.

He was gone almost ten minutes. The wind was picking up velocity now, and twilight was darkening into a weird six o'clock night. I was scared, and am not afraid to admit it. That rushing, featureless sky, the deserted circus grounds, the sharp, tugging wind-vortices all that makes a memory that will stay with me always, undimmed.

And Green Terror would not budge into his breezeway.

Kelly Nixon came rushing back, his eyes wide. "I pounded on his door for 'most five minutes!" He gasped. "Couldn't raise him!"

We looked at each other, at a loss. Green Terror was a big investment for the circus. He couldn't just be left in the open. I turned bewilderedly, looking for Chips, Mr. Farnum, or anybody who could tell me what to do. But everyone was gone. The tiger was our responsibility. I considered trying to load the cage bodily into the trailer, but I wasn't going to get my fingers in that cage.

"Well, we've just got to go and get him," I said. "The three of us. Come on." And we ran toward Mr. Indrasil's trailer through the gloom of coming night.

We pounded on his door until he must have thought all the demons of hell were after him. Thankfully, it finally jerked open. Mr. Indrasil swayed and stared down at us, his mad eyes rimmed and oversheened with drink. He smelled like a distillery.

"Damn you, leave me alone," he snarled.

"Mr. Indrasil – " I had to shout over the rising whine of the wind. It was like no storm I had ever heard of or read about, out there. It was like the end of the world .

"You," he gritted softly. He reached down and gathered my shirt up in a knot. "I'm going to teach you a lesson you'll never forget." He glared at Kelly and Mike, cowering back in the moving storm shadows. "Get out!"

They ran. I didn't blame them; I've told you – Mr. Indrasil was crazy. And not just ordinary crazy – he was like a crazy animal, like one of his own cats gone bad.

"All right," he muttered, staring down at me, his eyes like hurricane lamps. "No juju to protect you now. No grisgris." His lips twitched in a wild, horrible smile. "He isn't here now, is he? We're two of a kind, him and me. Maybe the only two left. My nemesis – and I'm his." He was

rambling, and I didn't try to stop him. At least his mind was off me. "Turned that cat against me, back in '58. Always had the power more'n me. Fool could make a million – the two of us could make a million if he wasn't so damned high and mighty...what's that?"

It was Green Terror, and he had begun to roar ear-splittingly.

"Haven't you got that damned tiger in?" he screamed, almost falsetto. He shook me like a rag doll.

"He won't go!" I found myself yelling back. "You've got to – "

But he flung me away. I stumbled over the fold-up steps in front of his trailer and crashed into a bone-shaking heap at the bottom. With something between a sob and a curse, Mr. Indrasil strode past me, face mottled with anger and fear.

I got up, drawn after him as if hypnotized. Some intuitive part of me realized I was about to see the last act played out.

Once clear of the shelter of Mr. Indrasil's trailer, the power of the wind was appalling. It screamed like a runaway freight train. I was an ant, a speck, an unprotected molecule before that thundering, cosmic force.

And Mr. Legere was standing by Green Terror's cage.

It was like a tableau from Dante. The near-empty cage-clearing inside the circle of trailers; the two men, facing each other silently, their clothes and hair rippled by the shrieking gale; the boiling sky above; the twisting wheatfields in the background, like damned souls bending to the whip of Lucifer.

"It's time, Jason," Mr. Legere said, his words flayed across the clearing by the wind.

Mr. Indrasil's wildly whipping hair lifted around the livid scar across the back of his neck. His fists clenched, but he said nothing. I could almost feel him gathering his will, his life force, his id. It gathered around him like an unholy nimbus.

And, then, I saw with sudden horror that Mr. Legere was unhooking Green Terror's breezeway – and the back of the cage was open!

I cried out, but the wind ripped my words away.

The great tiger leaped out and almost flowed past Mr. Legere. Mr. Indrasil swayed, but did not run. He bent his head and stared down at the tiger.

And Green Terror stopped.

He swung his huge head back to Mr. Legere, almost turned, and then slowly turned back to Mr. Indrasil again. There was a terrifyingly palpable sensation of directed force in the air, a mesh of conflicting wills centered around the tiger. And the wills were evenly matched. I think, in the end, it was Green Terror's own will – his hate of Mr. Indrasil – that tipped the scales.

The cat began to advance, his eyes hellish, flaring beacons. And something strange began to happen to Mr. Indrasil. He seemed to be folding in on himself, shriveling, accordioning. The silk-shirt lost shape, the dark, whipping hair became a hideous toadstool around his collar.

Mr. Legere called something across to him, and, simultaneously, Green Terror leaped.

I never saw the outcome. The next moment I was slammed flat on my back, and the breath seemed to be sucked from my body. I caught one crazily tilted glimpse of a huge, towering cyclone funnel, and then the darkness descended.

When I awoke, I was in my cot just aft of the granary bins in the all-purpose storage trailer we carried. My body felt as if it had been beaten with padded Indian clubs.

Chips Baily appeared, his face lined and pale. He saw my eyes were open and grinned relievedly. "Didn't know as you were ever gonna wake up. How you feel?"

"Dislocated," I said. "What happened? How'd I get here?"

"We found you piled up against Mr. Indrasil's trailer. The tornado almost carried you away for a souvenir, m'boy."

At the mention of Mr. Indrasil, all the ghastly memories came flooding back. "Where is Mr. Indrasil? And Mr. Legere?"

His eyes went murky, and he started to make some kind of an evasive answer.

"Straight talk," I said, struggling up on one elbow. "I have to know, Chips. I have to."

Something in my face must have decided him. "Okay. But this isn't exactly what we told the cops – in fact we hardly told the cops any of it. No sense havin' people think we're crazy. Anyhow, Indrasil's gone. I didn't even know that Legere guy was around."

"And Green Tiger?"

Chips' eyes were unreadable again. "He and the other tiger fought to death."

"Other tiger? There's no other – "

"Yeah, but they found two of 'em, lying in each other's blood. Hell of a mess. Ripped each other's throats out."

"What – where – "

"Who knows? We just told the cops we had two tigers. Simpler that way." And before I could say another word, he was gone.

And that's the end of my story – except for two little items. The words Mr. Legere shouted just before the tornado hit: "When a man and an animal live in the same shell, Indrasil, the instincts determine the mold!"

The other thing is what keeps me awake nights. Chips told me later, offering it only for what it might be worth. What he told me was that the strange tiger had a long scar on the back of its neck.

BEFORE THE PLAY

First published in *Whispers*, Vol. 5, No. 1-2, August 1982. 'Before the Play' was a prologue cut from the final draft of *The Shining*, detailing events that took place before the Torrance family moved into the Overlook Hotel. King also wrote an unused epilogue titled 'After the Play' which is now lost.

A BEDROOM IN THE WEE HOURS OF THE MORNING

Coming here had been a mistake, and Lottie Kilgallon didn't like to admit her mistakes.

And I won't admit this one, she thought with determination as she stared up at the ceiling that glimmered overhead.

Her husband of 10 days slumbered beside her. Sleeping the sleep of the just was how some might have put it. Others, more honest, might have called it the sleep of the monumentally stupid. He was William Pillsbury of the Westchester Pillsburys, only son and heir of Harold M. Pillsbury, old and comfortable money. Publishing was what they liked to talk about because publishing was a gentleman's profession, but there was also a chain of New England textile mills, a foundry in Ohio, and extensive agricultural holdings in the South – cotton and citrus and fruit. Old money was always better than nouveau riche, but either way they had money falling out of their assholes. If she ever said that aloud to Bill, he would undoubtedly go pale and might even faint dead away No fear, Bill. Profanation of the Pillsbury family shall never cross my lips.

It had been her idea to honeymoon at the Overlook in Colorado, and there had been two reasons for this. First, although it was tremendously expensive (as the best resorts were), it was not a "hep" place to go, and Lottie did not like to go to the hep places. Where did you go on your honeymoon. Lottie? Oh, this perfectly, wonderful resort hotel in Colorado – the Overlook. Lovely place. Quite out of the way but so romantic. And her friends – whose stupidity was exceeded in most cases only by that of William Pillsbury himself – would look at her in dumb – literally! – wonder. Lottie had done it again.

Her second reason had been of more personal importance. She had wanted to honeymoon at the Overlook because Bill wanted to go to Rome. It was imperative to find out certain things as soon as possible. Would she be able to have her own way immediately? And if not, how long would it take to grind him down? He was stupid, and he had followed her around like a dog with its tongue hanging out since her

debutante ball, but would he be as malleable after the ring was slipped on as he had been before?

Lottie smiled a little in the dark despite her lack of sleep and the bad dreams she had had since they arrived here. Arrived here, that was the key phrase. "Here" was not the American Hotel in Rome but the Overlook in Colorado. She was going to be able to manage him just fine, and that was the important thing. She would only make him stay another four days (she had originally planned on three weeks, but the bad dreams had changed that), and then they could go back to New York. After all, that was where the action was in this August of 1929. The stock market was going crazy, the sky was the limit, and Lottie expected to be an heiress to multimillions instead of just one or two million by this time next year. Of course there were some weak sisters who claimed the market was riding for a fall, but no one had ever called Lottie Kilgallon a weak sister.

Lottie Kilgallon. Pillsbury now; at least that's the way I'll have to sign my checks, of course. But inside I'll always be Lottie Kilgallon. Because he's never going to touch me. Not inside where it counts.

The most tiresome thing about this first contest of her marriage was that Bill actually liked the Overlook. He was up even, day at two minutes past the crack of dawn, disturbing what ragged bits of sleep she had managed after the restless nights, staring eagerly out at the sunrise like some sort of disgusting Greek nature boy. He had been hiking two or three times, he had gone on several nature rides with other guests, and bored her almost to the point of screaming with stories about the horse he rode on these jaunts, a bay mare named Tessie. He had tried to get her to go on these outings with him, but Lottie refused. Riding meant slacks, and her posterior was just a trifle too-wide for slacks. The idiot had also suggested that she go hiking with him and some of the others – the caretaker's son doubled as a guide, Bill enthused, and he knew a hundred trails. The amount of game you saw, Bill said, would make you think it was 1829, instead of a hundred years later. Lottie had dumped cold water on this idea too.

"I believe, darling, that all hikes should be one-way, you see."

"One-way?" His wide Anglo-Saxon brow crinkled and crogged into its usual expression of befuddlement. "How can you have a one-way hike, Lottie?"

"By hailing a taxi to take you home when your feet begin to hurt," she replied coldly,

The barb was wasted. He went without her, and came back glowing. The stupid bastard was getting a tan.

She had not even enjoyed their evenings of bridge in the downstairs recreation room, and that was most unlike her. She was something of a

barracuda at bridge, and if it had been ladylike to play for stakes in mixed company, she could have brought a cash dowry to her marriage (not that she would have, of course). Bill was a good bridge partner, too; he had both qualifications: He understood the basic rules and he allowed Lottie to dominate him. She thought it was poetic justice that her new husband spent most of their bridge evenings as the dummy.

Their partners at the Overlook were the Compsons occasionally, the Vereckers more frequently. Dr. Verecker was in his early 70s, a surgeon who had retired after a near-fatal heart attack. His wife smiled a lot, spoke softly, and had eyes like shiny nickels. They played only adequate bridge, but they kept beating Lottie and Bill. On the occasions when the men played against the women, the men ended up trouncing Lottie and Malvina Verecker. When Lottie and Dr. Verecker played Bill and Malvina, she and the doctor usually won, but there was no pleasure in it because Bill was a dullard and Malvina, could not see the game of bridge as anything but a social tool.

Two nights before, after the doctor and his wife had made a bid of four clubs that, they had absolutely no right to make, Lottie had mused the cards in a sudden flash of pique that was very unlike her. She usually kept her feelings under much better control.

"You could have led into my spades on that third trick!" she rattled at Bill. "That would have put a stop to it right there!"

"But dear," said Bill, flustered, "I thought you were thin in spades."

"If I had been thin in spades, I shouldn't have bid two of them, should I? Why I continue to play this game with you I don't know!"

The Vereckers blinked at them in mild surprise. Later that evening Mrs. Verecker, she of the nickel-bright eyes, would tell her husband that she had thought them such a nice couple, so loving, but when she rumbled the cards like that she had looked just like a shrew.

Bill was staring at her with jaws agape.

"I'm very sorry," said Lottie, gathering up the reins of her control and giving them an inward shake. "I'm off my feed a little, I suppose. I haven't been sleeping well."

"That's a pity," said the doctor. "Usually this mountain air – we're almost 12,000 feet above sea level, you know is very conducive to good rest. Less oxygen, you know. The body doesn't –"

"I've had bad dreams," Lottie told him shortly.

And so she had. Not just bad dreams but nightmares. She had never been much of one to dream (which said something disgusting and Freudian about, her psyche, no doubt), even as a child. Oh, yes, there had been some pretty humdrum affairs, mostly the only one she could remember that, came even close to being a nightmare was one in which she had been delivering a Good Citizenship speech at the school

assembly and had looked down to discover she had forgotten to put on her dress. Later someone had told her almost everyone had a dream like that at some point or another.

The dreams she had had at the Overlook were much worse. It was not a case of one dream or two repeating themselves with variations; they were all different. Only the setting of each was similar: In each one she found herself in a different part of the Overlook Hotel. Each dream would begin with an awareness on her part that she was dreaming and that something terrible and frightening was going to happen to her in the course of the dream. There was an inevitability about it that was particularly awful.

In one of them she had been hurrying for the elevator because she was late for dinner, so late that Bill had already gone down before her in a temper.

She rang for the elevator, which came promptly and was empty except for the operator. She thought too late that it was odd; at mealtimes you could barely wedge yourself in. The stupid hotel was only half full, but the elevator had a ridiculously small capacity. Her unease heightened as the elevator descended and continued to descend...for far too long a time. Surely they must have reached the lobby or even the basement by now, and still the operator did not open the doors, and still the sensation of downward motion continued. She tapped him on the shoulder with mixed feelings of indignation and panic, aware too late of how spongy he felt, how strange, like a scarecrow stuffed with rotten straw. And as he turned his head and grinned at her she saw that the elevator was being piloted by a dead man, his face a greenish-white corpselike hue, Ms eyes sunken, his hair under his cap lifeless and sere. The fingers wrapped around the switch were fallen away to bones.

Even as she filled her lungs to shriek, the corpse threw the switch over and uttered, "Your floor, madam," in a husky, empty voice. The door drew open to reveal flames and basalt plateaus and the stench of brimstone. The elevator operator had taken her to hell.

In another dream it was near the end of the afternoon and she was on the playground. The light was curiously golden, although the sky overhead was black with thunderheads. Membranes of shower danced between two of the saw-toothed peaks further west. It was like a Brueghel, a moment of sunshine and low pressure. And she felt something beside her. Moving. Something in the topiary. And she turned to see with frozen horror that it was the topiary: The hedge animals had left their places and were creeping toward her, the lions, the buffalo, even the rabbit that usually looked so comic and friendly. Their horrid hedge features were bent on her as they moved slowly toward the

playground on their hedge paws, green and silent and deadly under the black thunderheads.

In the one she had just awakened from, the hotel had been on fire. She had awakened in their room to find Bill gone and smoke drifting slowly through the apartment. She fled in her nightgown but lost her direction in the narrow halls, which were obscured by smoke. All the numbers seemed to be gone from the doors, and there was no way to tell if you were running toward the stairwell and elevator or away from them. She rounded a corner and saw Bill standing outside the window at the end, motioning her forward. Somehow she had run all the way to the back of the hotel; he was standing out there on the fire escape landing. Now there was heat baking into her back through the thin, filmy stuff of her nightgown. The place must be in flames behind her, she thought. Perhaps it had been the boiler. You had to keep an eye on the boiler, because if you didn't, she would creep on you. Lottie started forward and suddenly something wrapped around her arm like a python, holding her back. It was one of the fire hoses she had seen along the corridor walls, white canvas hose in a bright red frame. It had come alive somehow, and it writhed and coiled around her, now securing a leg, now her other arm. She was held fast and it was getting hotter, hotter. She could hear the angry crackle of the flames now only feet behind her. The wallpaper was peeling and blistering. Bill was gone from the fire-escape landing.

And then she had been –

She had been awake in the big double bed, no smell of smoke, with Bill Pillsbury sleeping the sleep of the justly stupid beside her. She was running sweat, and if it weren't so late she would get up to shower. It was quarter past three in the morning. Dr. Verecker had offered to give her a sleeping medicine, but Lottie had refused. She distrusted any concoction you put in your body to knock out your mind. It was like giving up command of your ship voluntarily, and she had sworn to herself that she would never do that.

But what would she do for the next four days? Well, Verecker played shuffleboard in the mornings with his nicked wife. Perhaps she would look him up and get the prescription after all. Lottie looked up at the white ceiling high above her, glimmering ghostlike, and admitted again that the Overlook had been a very bad mistake. None of the ads for the Overlook in the New Yorker or The American Mercury mentioned that the place's real specialty seemed to be giving people the whims. Four more days, and that was plenty. It had been a mistake, all right, but a mistake she would never admit, or have to admit. In fact, she was sure she could.

You had to keep an eye on the boiler, because if you didn't, she would creep up on you. What did that mean, anyway? Or was it just one of those nonsensical things that sometimes came to you in dreams, so much gibberish? Of course, there was undoubtedly a boiler in the basement or somewhere to heat the place; even summer resorts had to have heat, sometimes, didn't they? If only to supply hot water. But creep? Would a boiler creep?

You had to keep an eye on, the boiler.

It was like one of those crazy riddles:

Why is a mouse when it runs, when is a raven like a writing desk, what is a creeping boiler? Was it, like the hedges, maybe? She'd had a dream where the hedges crept. And the fire hose that had what – what? – slithered?

A chill touched her. It was not good to think much about the dreams in the night, in the dark. You could ... well, you could bother yourself. It was better to think about the things you would be doing when you got back to New York, about how you were going to convince Bill that a baby was a bad idea for a while, until he got firmly settled in the vice presidency his father had awarded him as a wedding present –

She'll creep on you.

– and how you were going to encourage him to bring his work home so he would get used to the idea that she was going to be involved with it, very much involved.

Or did the whole hotel creep? Was that the answer?

I'll make him a good wife, Lottie thought frantically. We'll work at it the same way we always worked at being bridge partners. He knows the rules of the game and he knows enough to let me run him. It will be just like the bridge, just like that, and if we've been off our game up here that, doesn't mean anything, it's just the hotel, the dreams-

An affirming voice: *That's it. The whole place. It...creeps.*

"Oh, shit," Lottie Kilgallon whispered in the dark. It was dismaying for her to realize just how badly her nerves were shot.

As on the other nights, there would be no more sleep for her now. She would lie here in bed until the sun started to come up and then she would get an uneasy hour or so.

Smoking in bed was a bad habit, a terrible habit, but she had begun to leave her cigarettes in an ashtray on the floor by the bed in case of the dreams. Sometimes it calmed her. She reached down to get the ashtray and the thought burst on her like a revelation:

It does creep, the whole place – like it's alive!

And that was when the hand reached out unseen from under the bed and gripped her wrist firmly ... almost lecherously. A fingerlike canvas scratched suggestively against her palm and something was under there,

something had been under there the whole time, and Lottie began to scream. She screamed until her throat was raw and hoarse and her eyes were bulging from her face and Bill was awake and pallid with terror beside her.

When he put on the lamp she leaped from the bed, retreated into the farthest corner of the room and curled up with her thumb in her mouth.

Both Bill and Dr. Verecker tried to find out what was wrong; she told them but she was still sucking her thumb, so it was some time before they realized she was saying, "It crept under the bed. It crept under the bed."

And even though they flipped up the coverlet and Bill actually lifted up the whole bed by its foot off the floor to show her there was nothing under there, not even a litter of dust kitties, she would not come out of the corner. When the sun came up, she did at last come out of the corner. She took her thumb out of her mouth. She stayed away from the bed. She stared at, Bill Pillsbury from her clown-white face.

"We're going back to New York," she said. "This morning."

"Of course," Bill muttered. "Of course, dear."

Bill Pillsbury's father died of a heart attack two weeks after the stock-market crash. Bill and Lottie could not keep the company's head above water. Things went from bad to worse. In the years that followed she thought often of their honeymoon at the Overlook Hotel, and the dreams, and the canvas hand that had crept out from under the bed to squeeze her own. She thought about those things more and more. She committed suicide in a Yonkers motel room in 1949, a woman who was prematurely gray and prematurely lined. It had been 20 years and the hand that had gripped her wrist when she reached down to get her cigarettes had never really let go. She left a one-sentence suicide note written on Holiday Inn stationery.

The note said: "I wish we had gone to Rome."

AND NOW THIS WORD FROM NEW HAMPSHIRE

In that long, hot summer of 1953, the summer Jacky Torrance turned 6, his father came home one night from the hospital and broke Jacky's arm. He almost killed the boy. He was drunk. Jacky was sitting on the front porch reading a Combat Casey comic book when his father came down the street, listing to one side, torpedoed by beer somewhere down the line. As he always did, the boy felt a mixture of love-hate-fear rise in his chest at the sight of the old man, who looked like a giant, malevolent ghost in his hospital whites. Jacky's father was an orderly at the Berlin Community Hospital. He was like God, like Nature-sometimes lovable,

sometimes terrible. You never knew which it would be. Jacky's mother feared and served him. Jacky's brothers hated him. Only Jacky, of all of them, still loved him in spite of the fear and the hate, and sometimes the volatile mixture of emotions made him want to cry out at the sight of his father coming, to simply cry out: "I love you, Daddy! Go away! Hug me! I'll kill you! I'm so afraid of you! I need you!" And his father seemed to sense in his stupid way – he was a stupid man, and selfish – that all of them had gone beyond him but Jacky, the youngest, knew that the only way he could touch the others was to bludgeon them to attention. But with Jacky there was still love, and there had been times when he had cuffed the boy's mouth into running blood and then hugged him with a frightful force, the killing force just, barely held back by some other thing, and Jackie would let himself be hugged deep into the atmosphere of malt and hops that hung around his old man forever, quailing, loving, fearing.

He leaped off the step and ran halfway down the path before something stopped him.

"Daddy?" he said. "Where's the car?"

Torrance came toward him, and Jacky saw how very drunk he was.

"Wrecked it up," he said thickly.

"Oh..." *Careful now. Careful what you say. For your life, be careful.*
"That's too bad."

His father stopped and regarded Jacky from his stupid pig eyes. Jacky held his breath. Somewhere behind his father's brow, under the lawnmowered brush of his crew cut, the scales were turning. The hot, afternoon stood still while Jacky waited, staring up anxiously into his father's face to see if his father would throw a rough bear arm around his shoulder, grinding Jacky's cheek against the rough, cracked leather of the belt that held up his white pants and say, "Walk with me into the house, big boy." in the hard and contemptuous way that was the only way he could even approach love without destroying himself – or if it would be something else.

Tonight it was something else.

The thunderheads appeared on his father's brow. "What do you mean, 'That's too bad'? What kind of shit is that?"

"Just...too bad, Daddy. That's all I meant. it's – "

Torrance's hand swept out at the end of his arm, huge hand, hamhock arm, but speedy, yes, very speedy, and Jacky went down with church bells in his head and a split lip. "Shutup" his father said, giving it a broad A.

Jacky said nothing. Nothing would do any good now. The balance had swung the wrong way.

"You ain't gonna sass me," said Torrance. "You won't sass your daddy. Get up here and take your medicine."

There was something in his face this time, some dark and blazing thing. And Jacky suddenly knew that this time there might be no hug at the end of the blows, and if there was he might, be unconscious and unknowing...maybe even dead.

He ran.

Behind him, his father let out a bellow of rage and chased him, a flapping specter in hospital whites, a juggernaut of doom following his son from the front yard to the back.

Jacky ran for his life. The tree house, he was thinking. *He can't get up there; the ladder nailed to the tree won't hold him. I'll get up there, talk to him; maybe he'll go to sleep – Oh, God, please let him go to sleep –* he was weeping in terror as he ran.

"Come back here, goddammit!" His father was roaring behind him. "Come back here and take your medicine! Take it like a man!"

Jacky flashed past the back steps. His mother, that thin and defeated woman, scrawny in a faded housedress, had come out through the screen door from the kitchen, just as Jacky ran past with his father in pursuit. She opened her mouth as if to speak or cry out, but her hand came up in a fist and stopped whatever she might have said, kept it safely behind her teeth. She was afraid for her son, but more afraid that her husband would turn on her.

"No, you don't! Come back here!"

Jacky reached the large elm in the backyard, the elm where last year his father had smoke-drugged a colony of wasps then burned their nest with gasoline. The boy went up the haphazardly hung nailed-on rungs like greased lightning, and still he was nearly not fast enough. His father's clutching, enraged hand grasped the boy's ankle in a grip like flexed steel, then slipped a little and succeeded only in pulling off Jacky's loafer. Jacky went up the last, three rungs and crouched on the floor of the tree house, 12 feet above the ground, panting and crying on his hands and knees.

His father seemed to go crazy. He danced around the tree like an Indian, Bellowing his rage. He slammed his fists into the tree, making bark fly and bringing lattices of blood to his knuckles. He kicked it. His huge moon face was white with frustration and red with anger.

"Please, Daddy," Jacky moaned. "Whatever I said ... I'm sorry I said it..."

"Come down! You come down out of there take your fucking medicine, you little cur! Right now!"

"I will...I will if you promise not to...to hit me too hard...not hurt me... just spank me but not hurt me..."

"Get out of that tree!" his father screamed.

Jacky looked toward the house but that was hopeless. His mother had retreated somewhere far away, to neutral ground.

"GET OUT RIGHT NOW!"

"Oh, Daddy, I don't dare!" Jacky cried out, and that was the truth. Because now his father might kill him.

There was a period of stalemate. A minute, perhaps, or perhaps two. His father circled the tree, puffing and blowing like a whale.

Jacky turned around and around on his hands and knees, following the movements. They were like parts of a visible clock.

The second or third time he came back to the ladder nailed to the tree, Torrance stopped. He looked speculatively at the ladder. And laid his hands on the rung before his eyes. He began to climb.

"No, Daddy, it won't hold you," Jacky whispered.

But his father came on relentlessly, like fate, like death, like doom. Up and up, closer to the tree house. One rung snapped off under his hands and he almost fell but caught the next one with a grunt and a lunge. Another one of the rungs twisted around from the horizontal to the perpendicular under his weight with a rasping scream of pulling nails, but it did not give way, and then the working, congested face was visible over the edge of the tree-house floor, and for that one moment of his childhood Jack Torrance had his father at bay; if he could have kicked that face with the foot that still wore its loafer, kicked it where the nose terminated between the piggy eyes, he could have driven his father backward off the ladder, perhaps killed him (If he had killed him, would anyone have said anything but Thanks, Jacky"?) But it was love that stopped him, and love that, let him just his face in his hands and give up as first one of his father's pudgy, short-fingered hands appeared on the boards and then the other.

"Now, by God," his father breathed. He stood above his huddled son like a giant.

"Oh, Daddy," Jacky mourned for both of them. And for a moment his father paused, his face sagged into lines of uncertainty, and Jacky felt a thread of hope.

Then the face drew up. Jacky could smell the beer, and his father said, "I'll teach you to sass me," and all hope was gone as the foot swung out, burying itself in Jacky's belly, driving the wind from his belly in a whoosh. as he flew from the tree-house platform and fell to the ground, turning over once and landing on the point of his left elbow, which snapped with a greenstick crack. He didn't even have breath enough to scream. The last thing he saw before he blacked out was his father's face, which seemed to be at the end of a long, dark tunnel. It, seemed to be filling with surprise, the way a vessel may fill with some pale liquid.

He's just starting to know what he did, Jacky thought incoherently. And on the heels of that, a thought with no meaning at all, coherent or otherwise, a thought, that chased him into the blackness as he fell back on the chewed and tattered grass of the back lawn in a faint:

What you see is what you'll be, what YOU see is what you'll be, what you –

The break in his arm was cleanly healed in six months. The nightmares went, on much longer. In a way, they never stopped.

THE OVERLOOK HOTEL, THIRD FLOOR, 1958

The murderers came up the stairs in their stocking feet.

The two men posted outside the door of the Presidential Suite never heard them. They were young, dressed in Ivy League suits with the cut of the jackets a little wider than the fashion of the day decreed. You couldn't wear a .357 Magnum concealed in a shoulder holster and be quite in fashion. They were discussing whether or not the Yankees could take yet another pennant. It was lacking two days of September, and as usual, the pinstripers looked formidable. Just talking about the Yankees made them feel a little better. They were New York boys, on loan from Walt Abruzzi, and they were a long way from home. The man inside was a big wheel in the Organization. That was all they knew all they wanted to know. "You do your job, we all get well," Abruzzi had told them. "What's to know?"

They had heard things, of course. That there was a place in Colorado that was completely neutral ground. A place where even a crazy little West Coast hood like Tony Giorgio could sit down and have a fancy brandy in a balloon glass with the Gray Old Men who saw him as some sort of homicidal stinging insect to be crushed. A place where guys from Boston who had been used to putting each other in the trunks of cars behind bowling alleys in Malden or into garbage cans in Roxbury could get together and play gin and tell jokes about the Polacks. A place where hatchets could be buried or unearthed, pacts made, plans laid. A place where warm people could sometimes cool off.

Well, here they were, and it wasn't so much – in fact, both of them were homesick for New York, which was why they were talking about the Yankees. But they never saw New York or the Yankees again.

Their voices reached down the hall to the stairwell where the murderers stood six risers down, with their stocking-covered heads just below line of sight, if you happened to be looking down the hall from the door of the Presidential Suite. There were three of them on the stairs,

dressed in dark pants and coats, carrying shotguns with the barrels sawed off to six inches. The shotguns were loaded with expanding buckshot.

One of the three motioned and they walked up the stairs to the hall.

The two outside the door never even saw them until the murderers were almost on top of them. One of them was saying animatedly, "Now you take Ford. Who's better in the American League than Whitey Ford? No, I want to ask you that sincerely, because when it comes to the stretch he just The speaker looked up and saw three black shapes with no discernable faces standing not 10 paces away. For a moment he could not believe it. They were just standing there. He shook his head, fully expecting them to go away like the floating black specks you sometimes saw in the darkness. They didn't. Then he knew.

"What's the matter?" his buddy said. The young man who had been speaking about Whitey Ford clawed under his jacket for his gun. One of the murderers placed the butt of his shotgun against a leather pad strapped to his belly beneath his dark turtleneck. And pulled both triggers. The blast in the narrow hallway was deafening. The muzzle flash was like summer lightning, purple in its brilliance. A stink of cordite. The young man was blown backward down the hall in a disintegrating cloud of Ivy League jacket, blood, and hair. His arm looped over backward, spilling the Magnum from his dying fingers, and the pistol thumped harmlessly to the carpet with the safety still on.

The second young man did not even make an effort to go for his gun. He stuck his hands high in the air and wet his pants at the same time.

"I give up, don't shoot me, it's OK –!"

"Say hello to Albert Anastasia when you get down there, punk", one of the murderers said, and placed the butt of his shotgun against his belly.

"I ain't a problem, I ain't a problem!" the young man screamed in a thick Bronx accent, and then the blast of the shotgun lifted him out of his shoes and he slammed back against the silk wallpaper with its delicate raised pattern. He actually stuck for a moment before collapsing to the hall floor.

The three of them walked to the door of the suite. One of them tried the knob. "Locked."

"OK."

The third man, who hadn't shot yet, stood in front of the door, leveled his weapon slightly above the knob, and pulled both triggers. A jagged hole appeared in the door, and light rayed through. The third man reached through the hole and grasped the deadbolt on the other side. There was a pistol shot, then two more.

None of the three flinched.

There was a snap as the deadbolt gave, and then the third man kicked the door open. Standing in the wide sitting room in front of the picture window, which now showed a view only of darkness, was a man of about 35 wearing only jockey shorts. He held a pistol in each hand and as the murderers walked in he began to fire at them, spraying bullets wildly. Slugs peeled splinters from the door frame, dug furrows in the rug, dusted plaster down from the ceiling. He fired five times, and the closest he came to any of his assassins was a bullet that twitched the pants of the second man at the left knee.

They raised their shotguns with almost military precision.

The man in the sitting room screamed, threw both guns on the floor, and ran for the bedroom. The triple blast caught him just outside the door and a wet fan of blood, brains, and bits of flesh splashed across the cherrystriped wallpaper. He fell through the open bedroom doorway, half in and half out. "Watch the door," the first man said, and dropped his smoking shotgun to the rug. He reached into his coat pocket, brought out a bone-handled switchblade, and thumbed the chrome button. He approached the dead man, who was lying in the doorway on his side. He squatted beside the corpse and yanked down the front of the man's jockey shorts.

Down the hall the door to one of the other suites opened and a pallid face peered out. The third man raised his shotgun and the face jerked back in. The door slammed. A bolt rattled frantically.

The first man rejoined them.

"All right," he said. "Down the stairs and out the back door. Let's go."

They were outside and climbing into the parked car three minutes later. They left the Overlook behind them, standing gilded in mountain moonlight, white as bone under high stars. The hotel would stand long after the three of them were as dead as the three they had left behind.

The Overlook was at home with the dead.

MAN WITH A BELLY

(*Cavalier*, Dec. 1978)

John Bracken sat on the park bench and waited to make his hit. The bench was one of the many on the outskirts of James Memorial Park, which borders the south side of Hammond Street. In the daytime the park is overrun by kids, mother wheeling prams, and old men with bags of crumbs for the pigeons. At night it belongs to the junkies and muggers. Respectable citizens, women in particular, avoided Hammond Street after dark. But Norma Correzente was not most women.

He heard her approach on the stroke of eleven, as always. He had been there since quarter of. The beat-cop wasn't due until 11:20, and everything was on top.

He was calm, as he always was before a hit. He was a cold and efficient workman, and that was why Vittorio had hired him. Bracken was not a button-man in the Family sense; he was an independent, a journeyman. His family resided completely within his wallet. This was why he had been hired. There was a pause in the footfalls as she paused at the intersection of Hammond and Pardis Avenue. Then she crossed, probably thinking of nothing but covering the last block, going up to her penthouse suite, and pouring a large Scotch and water.

Bracken got ready, thinking it was a strange contract. Norma Correzente, formerly Norma White of the Boston Whites, was the wife of Vito Correzente. The marriage had been headline material – rich society bitch weds notorious Vito ("I'm just a businessman"). The Wop. It was not a novelty to the clan; aging Don marries a young woman of blood. Murder by contract was not new, either. The Sicilians could put in for a patent on that if it ever became legal.

But Bracken had not been hired to kill. He tensed, ready for her.

The phone call had been long-distance; he could tell by the clickings on the line.

"Mr. Bracken?"

"Yes."

"I have word from Mr. Sills that you are available for work."

"I could be," Bracken answered. Benny Sills was one of several contact men who passed information from one end of a potential contract to the other, a kind of booking agent. He ran a hock-shop in a large eastern city where he also bankrolled independent smash-and-grab teams of proven reputation and sold heavy-caliber weapons to dubious political groups. "My name is Benito Torreos. Do you know it?"

"Yes." Torreos was the right-hand man – *consigliare* was the word, Bracken thought – of Vito Correzente.

"Good. There is a letter for you in your hotel box, Mr. Bracken. It contains a round-trip plane ticket and a check for a thousand dollars. If you are indeed available, please take both. If not, the money is yours for calling the airport and canceling the reservation."

"I'm available."

"Good," Torreos repeated. "My employer is anxious to speak to you at nine tomorrow evening, if convenient. The address is 400 Meegan Boulevard."

"I'll be there."

"Goodbye. Mr. Bracken." The phone clicked.

Bracken went downstairs to get his mail.

Men who remain active and take care of themselves all their lives can remain incredibly fit even into their late years, but...there comes a time when the clock begins to run down. Tissues fail in spite of walks, workouts, massages. The cheeks dewlap. The eyelids crenellate into wrinkled accordions. Vito Correzente had begun to enter that stage of hit life. He looked to be a well preserved seventy. Bracken put him at seventy-eight. His handshake was firm, but palsy lurked beneath, biding its time.

400 Meegan was the Graymoor Arms, and the top floor had been two \$1,000-a-month suites which Correzente had convened into a single monolith, strewn with grotesque knickknacks and Byzantine antiques. Bracken thought he could smell just a whiff of pasta and oregano.

Benny the Bull admitted him, looking like an overweight pug who had found his way into his manager's wardrobe by mistake, and he stood watchfully at the door of the sunken living room until Correzente waved him away with one driftwood hand. The door closed decorously, and Don Vittorio offered Bracken a cigar.

"No thank you."

Correzente nodded and lit one for himself. He was dressed in black pants and a white turtleneck; his hair, thick and rich and the color of iron, was brushed back elegantly. A large ruby glittered on his fourth finger.

"I want you to make a hit," he said. "I pay you t'irty t'ousan' before and twenty t'ousan' after."

"That's an agreeable price." He thought: *too agreeable*. "You doan have to make no bones."

"No bones? You said a hit. A hit means I have to make bones."

Correzente smiled a wintery smile. For a moment he looked even older than seventy-eight. He looked older than all the ages. His accent

was faint, mellow, agreeable, a mere rounding of the hard English plosive and glottal stops.

"It's my wife. I want you to rape her."

Bracken waited.

"I want you to hurt her." He smiled. One gold tooth glittered mellowly in the indirect lighting.

The story was simple, and yet there was a beautiful circularity to it which Bracken appreciated. Correzente had married Norma White because he had an itch. She had accepted his suit for the same reason. But while his itch was for her body, her bloodline, and the heat of her youth, hers was a much colder thing: money. A seamy compulsion often forces a seamy liaison, and Norma White was a compulsive gambler.

Doll Vittorio was being laughed at. It could not be borne. The matter could have been remedied simply and suddenly if he had been cuckolded by some young tony in tight pants, but to be cuckolded by his own wealth was more complex and contained a bitter irony which perhaps only a Sicilian could fully grasp. Her white Protestant family had cut her off, and so she had joined the family of Vito The Wop.

He had been one of the masters coping easily with the changes from bootleg to gambling and vice to full white-collar organization, never afraid to invest where it seemed that investiture would bring a profit, never afraid to show the iron fist inside the glove. He was a man with a belly, in the Sicilian argot.

Until now.

He had struck upon the solution because it was fitting. It was pure, object lesson, and vengeance all in one. He had chosen Bracken because he was an independent and unlike many hit men, he was neither homosexual nor impotent.

Bracken took the job.

It took him two weeks to prepare. During the first, he shadowed her for brief, unconnected periods of time, watching her go to the beauty parlor, buy dresses, play golf. She was a fine, aristocratic-looking woman with dark hair, a self-confident way of moving, and sleek body lines. He took a gestalt of her personality from the way she drove (fast, cutting in and out of traffic, jumping lights), the way she spoke (clear enunciation, Back Bay accent brooking no nonsense or waste of time), her manner of dress, a hundred other personal characteristics. When he felt that he had her fairly well ticketed, he dropped her daytime activities and concentrated on her nights, which were nearly as regular as clockwork.

She left the Graymoor at seven and walked (he had never seen her take a taxi or bus) the four blocks to Jarvis's, the most opulent gambling den in the city. She always went as if dressed for a lover. She left

Jarvis's promptly at ten-forty-five and walked back home. She left checks of varying amounts behind her. The pitman whom Bracken bribed said that an average week at the tables was costing Vito Correzente from eight to ten thousand dollars.

Bracken began to think that he had been bought cheaply at that. He admired Norma Correzente in a personal yet detached way. She had found her horse and was riding him. She was not cheating or sneaking. She was an aggressive woman who was taking what she needed. There were no lies involved. Admiration aside, he prepared to do his job. He reflected that it would be the first contract in his career where the weapon would need no getting rid of.

Now, on the bench, he felt a sudden surge of adrenaline that made his muscles tighten almost painfully. Then they relaxed and all his concentration focused in white light on the job ahead.

Her shadow trailed behind her, elongating as she left the last streetlight behind and approached the next.

She glanced at him, not in a fearful way, but with a quick appraisal that dismissed him as a pointless loiterer. When she was directly opposite him, he spoke once, sharply: "Norma."

It had the desired effect. It put her off balance. She did not reach immediately for her purse, where she carried a caliber pistol of Swedish make.

He came off the bench in an explosion. One moment he slouched, a sleepy head lost in a heroin haze. The next he had hooked a hard arm around her throat, choking the yell (not a scream; not her) in her throat. He pulled her off the sidewalk. Her purse dropped and he kicked it into darkness. A pencil, a notebook, the pistol, and a few Kleenex spilled from it. She tried to knee his crotch and he turned his thigh muscle into it. One hand raked his cheek. He had bent the other back and away.

Bushes. The night breeze made faint nets of shadow through them. He tripped her and she went down behind them, sprawled in the grass and gum wrappers.

When he came down on top she met him with a fist. The birthstone ring she wore gouged the bridge of his nose, bringing blood.

He yanked her skin up. The inner lining ripped. No girdle. Thank God. She brought her heel down on the muscle of his calf and he let out a grunt. A rabbit punch caught him. He drove his fist into the softness of her belly and she wheezed her breath out. Her mouth opened, not to cry out but to find air, and her shadowed face was an unreal map of eye and lip and plane of cheek. He tore at her underpants, missed his grip, tore at them again. They stretched but didn't give.

Fists, feet. She was hammering at him, not trying to yell anymore, saving her breath. He tried to get her chin with his left and she slipped

the punch. Her dark hair was a fan on the grass. She bit his neck like a dog, going for the big vein there. He brought his knee up and her intake of breath became a small shriek.

He grabbed her pants again and this time there was a pop as the waistband let go. She almost scratched her way out from under and he drove the top of his head into the shelf of her chin. There was an ivory click as her teeth came together. Her body went slack and he jackknifed atop her, breathing in great lurches .

She was shamming. Both hands came down in a clap, catching his ears squarely between them. Red pain exploded in his head, and for the first time, he felt the strain of emotion while doing a job. He butted her savagely, and again...

This time she was not playing possum. Blood trickled slowly from one white nostril. He raped her.

He had thought her unconscious, but when he finished he saw her looking up at him in the dark. One of her eyes was rapidly puffing shut. Her clothes were tattered. Not that he had come out so well; his entire body felt raw and frayed.

"I am told to tell you that this is how your husband pays a debt to his honor. I am told to tell you that he is a man with a belly. I am told to tell you that all debts are paid and there is honor again."

He spoke expressionlessly. His contract was fulfilled. He got up on one knee, warily, then gained his feet. The cop would be by in seven minutes. It was time to be gone. Her one open eye glittered up at him in the dark, a pirate's gem.

She said one word: "Wait."

Her second apartment, the one not even Benny Torreos knew about, was a walk-down nine blocks away. Bracken had given her his coat to hide her torn dress. They had only one exchange of conversation during the walk.

"I will give you twice what my husband paid you if you will do a job for me. "

"No. You don't have the money, and I have never crossed an employer. It's bad for business."

"I have the money. Not from him. From my family. And I don't want you to kill him."

Bracken said sardonically: "Rape is out. "

She found her apartment key after a hunt through her jumbled purse and let him in. The living room was done in varying, tasteful shades of green, a low-slung, modern decor that avoided the livid tastelessness of many trusting places. The only clashing, aggressive note was an impressionistic painting of a huge, canted roulette wheel which was hung over the lime-colored couch. It was done in hectic shades of red.

She crossed beneath it, reached into the next room, and turned on the light. There was a round bed with the covers turned back. When he walked through he saw that there were a number of mirrors,

She dropped his coat and stood in the ragged remnants of her dress. One rose-tinted nipple, dumbly erotic, peeped through shattered chiffon.

"Now, she said calmly, "we'll do it in a civilized way."

After, in the time of talking, she poured out her virulence toward the man she had married. There was a restful rise and fall to the cadence of her curses, and Bracken listened contentedly enough, poised on the dark knife-edge of sleep.

He was a wop, a stinking spic, a lover of sheep, a crude bludgeoner who went to chic restaurants and ate pie with his fingers; a grabber and a twister, a black-and-bluer of flesh; a lover of junk shop gimcracks; an aficionado of Norman Rockwell; a pederast; a man who would not treat her as a diadem but rather as a brace for his sagging manhood; not as a proud woman but as a dirty backstain joke to bolster the admiration of his pasta-eating, sweaty associates.

"A man with a belly," she whispered into the darkness just before Bracken dropped off, "I am his belly. I am his guts. I am his honor." It occurred to him, as his mind fled to sleep, that the conflict of their honor had formed a bridge of hate between them that he now walked on, across oceans of darkness.

While they sat in the breakfast nook the following morning, eating doughnuts and watching legs pass in the tiny window above, she made her proposition: "Make me pregnant. I will pay you to do this."

Bracken put down his doughnut and looked at her.

She smiled and brushed her hair back. "He wants a child. Could he make one?" She shrugged. "Perhaps lasagna is good for potency. I, however, take pills. He knows I take them."

Bracken sipped his coffee. "Stud service?"

Norma laughed, a tinkly sound. "I suppose. I go to him today. No makeup. Black eye. Scratched face. Tears. How I wish to be a good wife." The, black charring note of score began to creep in. "How I want to learn the recipe for his favorite greasy noodles. How I want to give him a son."

Her face had become alive, lovely. "He will be prideful and forgiving...in short, blind. I'll get what I want, which is freedom of the tables. And he will get what he wants: which is an heir. Perhaps not." She was lying, and when she looked into his eyes she saw his knowledge and smiled with slow, shy guile. "And perhaps, at the right time, I will kill him with the truth. You won't tell him?"

"Would it kill him?" Bracken leaned forward with mild professional interest.

"If someone cut open your belly, would it kill you?"

"It would cost one hundred thousand dollars", Bracken said. "Forty before conception and sixty after. Have you got that kind of money?"

"Yes."

He nodded. "All right." He paused. "It's a funny hit, you know that? A funny hit."

She laughed.

He returned to the Graymoor that afternoon and collected the rest of his money. Correzente was smiling and robust.

Bracken was thanked profusely. More business would be thrown his way.

Bracken nodded, and Correzente leaned toward him in a fatherly way.

"Can you keep your mouth shut about all this?"

"I always keep my mouth shut." Bracken said, and left.

Benny the Bull gave him a handshake and an envelope containing a plane ticket to Cleveland. Once there, Bracken bought a used car and drove back. He took up residence in Norma Correzente's second apartment. She brought him a carton of paperback novels. He read them and watched old movies on TV. He did not go out even when it would have been safe to go out. They made love regularly. It was like being in a very plush jail. Ten weeks after the contract with Dan Vittorio had been fulfilled, she killed the rabbit.

Bracken left town again.

He was in Palm Springs, and the phone connection was very bad.

"Mr. Bracken?"

"Yes. Talk louder, please." Bracken was dressed in sweaty tennis whites; the girl on the bed wore only her skin. A tennis racket dangled from one hand. She swished at the air with it idly watching Bracken with the nearly expressionless eyes of experienced desire.

"This is Benito Torreos, Mr. Bracken."

"Yes."

"You did a job for my Don seven months ago. You remember?"

"Yes." New sweat began to crawl down his back.

"He wants to see you. He's dying."

Bracken thought carefully, knowing his life almost certainly depended on his next words. He did not see what he had done as a double-cross: he had fulfilled two separate and exclusive contracts, and had been able to vacation from then until now on his earnings. But the old man would see it as a cross, a stain on his pride and good faith. He was a man with a belly.

"Why does he want to see me?"

"To ask a question."

The connection was very bad, and Bracken knew that to simply replace the instrument in its cradle would likely mean death. The family has a long arm. It was either to go Vito or run, and the connection was very bad.

"How is Mrs. Correzente?" he asked politely.

"Dead," Benny Torreos said flatly. "She died last month, in childbirth."

The bedroom was gothic shades of white on white – rug, walls, ceiling, curtains, even the sky beyond the windows. A steady drizzle was falling outside the Graymoor. Don Vito, shrunken to the size of a jockey twisted from the back of his horse, lay immured in his deathbed, which was also white.

He lifted one hand to Bracken. It shook briefly in the air, then dropped to the snowy coverlet again. There was a soft click as Torreos left them, closing the door to rejoin the relatives in the front room. The women out there were dressed in black, and shawled. Even the business suits of their men seemed old fashioned, as if death had dragged Sicily back into the fabric of the clothes and of the wearers by force.

Bracken went to the bed. The old man's face had fallen away to a skull. There was a sour smell that seemed to come from the folds of his flesh. His mouth had been twisted down cruelly on the left side, and the left hand was claw-fingered and frozen.

"Bracken," Correzente said. His voice was blurred and cottony. The operative side of his face lifted in a grotesque smile while the other side remained impassive. "I must tell you. I..."

"Benny said you had a question."

"Yes." The word came out yeth. "But I must...tell you."

"Tell me what?"

"They told me you did a good job. You do. You have killed my wife and me."

"I did my job."

"Pride", the old man said, and smiled apologetically. "Pride ..." He seemed to gather himself. "She promised to be a good wife, a dutiful wife. She said she had been taking pills but these pills were no more. She said she would bear me a son.

"We made love together. But I am old. She asked if it was too much for me." The skull smile again. "Should I tell my chastened wife that I am no more a man? No, I say no too much..."

"We make love more. And I, I have a stroke. A little blood vessel up here" – he tapped his head gravely – "goes pop, like a balloon. The doctor comes and says, No more, Vito. You will kill yourself. And I

say, yes, more. Until I have put a child in her.

"Pride ...

. "Then the doctor say, You have done this. You have made a baby at seventy-eight. He say, I would give you a cigar, Vito, but you must smoke no more cigars. "

Bracken shifted his legs. The whiteness of the room was oppressive, creeping.

"I am overjoyed. I am a man, much man. I have a belly. The house is filled with my family. We have, oh, the word is for much food – "

"Banquet," Bracken said.

"Yes. And I sit at the head of the table, then rise. My wife, she rises. I toast her with wine and tell them. I say, I have given my belly to my wife!" "I am the happiness of the world. I am beyond laughings and dirty jokes. I give her money for the wheels and tables. I give her what she wants. Then one night, we argue. Much hard words pass. And then ...I have this. Pain. One eye goes blind. She saw it and screamed. She runs for the telephone in the living room with her belly before her. I try to call but am down a dark hole. When I wake up, they tell me she has fallen on the steps going down to the living room. They tell me she is in the hospital. Then they tell me..." The hand rose again. "Fut." Don Vito said. The dreadful smile came and went.

Correzente was visibly tired now. His eyes closed, then opened slowly, as if weighted.

"You see?" he whispered. "The irony?"

"Benny said you had a question," Bracken said.

The dead face looked up at him steadily. "The baby lives," he said. "They tell me this. In a glass house."

"Incubator."

"They say the baby has pretty blue eyes."

Bracken said nothing.

"You made one of Norma's eyes black. But they were brown. And there is no blue-eyed Sicilian."

"Benny said you had a question," Bracken said.

"I have ask my question. My doctor say, it's genes. I do not know genes. I only know what a dying man lies in bed and thinks. How she was prideful and how she could wait."

Bracken looked down at him, his mind a thousand miles away. He thought of the blonde, how she served, the brown flesh of her legs below the blinding white of her skirt, the flickering glimpse of her panties, the fan of her hair on the pillow, her trained tennis muscles.

"How stupid you are," he said to the old man, softly. He leaned forward, breathing in the scent of Correzente's doom. "Death has made

you senile. I have my own belly. Do you think I would take my own leavings?"

A line of spittle was making a slow trek down from the corner of the old man's mouth to his chin.

"The baby's eyes will go brown. Too bad you won't see it. Goodbye, stupid old man." He got up. The room was white and full of death. He left and went back to Palm Springs.

SKYBAR

by Brian Hartz and Stephen King

The following story was written from a contest with Doubleday books to promote the 1982 *Do it Yourself Bestseller* book edited by Tom Silberkleit and Jerry Biederman. There were many authors featured in the book, including Belva Plain and Isaac Asimov. Each writer provided the beginning and ending to a story. It was up to the reader to provide the middle, hence the name *Do It Yourself Bestseller*. As part of the promotion, Doubleday books held a national contest to see who could write the best middle portion. Each winner was chosen by the individual writer – in this case, Stephen King. Brian Hartz was 18 at the time it was written.

There were twelve of us when we went in that night, but only two of us came out – my friend Kirby and me. And Kirby was insane. All of the things I'm going to tell you about happened twelve years ago. I was eleven then, in the sixth grade. Kirby was ten and in the fifth. In those days, before gas shot up to \$1.40 a gallon or more (as I recall the best deal in town was at Dewey's Sunoco, where you could get hi-test for 31.9 cents, plus double S&H Green stamps), Skybar Amusement Park was still a growing concern; its great double Ferris wheel turned endlessly against a summer sky, and you could hear the great, grinding mechanical laugh of the fun-house clown even at my house, five miles inland, when the wind was right. Yeah, Skybar was the place to go, all right – you could blast away with the .22 of your choice at Pop Dupree's Dead Eye Shootin' Gallery, you could ride the Whip until you puked, wander into the Mirror Labyrinth, or look at the Adults Only freak tent and wonder what was in there...you especially wondered when the people came out, white-faced, some of the women crying, or hysterical. Brant Callahan said it was all just a fake, whatever it was, but sometimes I saw the doubt even in Brant's tough gray eyes.

Then, of course, the murders started, and eventually Skybar was shut down. The double Ferris stood frozen against the sky, and the only sound the mechanical clown's mouth produced was the lunatic hooting of the sea breeze. We went in, the twelve of us, and...but I'm getting ahead of myself. It began just after school let out that June; it began when Randy Stayner, a seventh-grader from the junior high school, was thrown from the highest point of the SkyCoaster. I was there that day – Kirby was with me, in fact – and we both heard his scream as he came down.

It was one of the strangest ways for a person to die – the shadowed Ferris wheel turned in the sunlight, the bumper cars honked and sparked the roof and walls of Spunky's Dodge 'Em, the carousel spun wildly to the rise and fall of horses and lions, and the steady beat of its repeating tune echoed throughout the park. A man balancing his screaming son in one hand, ice cream cones in the other, little kids with cotton candy racing to see who's first to get on Sandee's Spinning Sombrero, and in the midst of all the peaceful confusion, Randy Stayner performing a one-time solo swan dive 100 feet into the solid steel tracks of the SkyCoaster.

For a while, I wasn't all too sure the people around me weren't thinking it was just an act – a Saturday afternoon performance by a skilled diver. When blood and bone hit, however, it was clear the act was over. And then, as if to clear the whole thing up with a final attempt to achieve his original goal, he rolled lazily over the bottom rails of the SkyCoaster into the brown murky water of Skybar Pond, swirls of red and grey following him. The SkyCoaster was shut down the day of Randy's dive, and despite weeks of dragging the pond's bottom, his body was never found. Authorities concluded that his remains had drifted under a sandbar or some unmarked passageway, and all search ceased after four weeks.

Skybar lost a lot of customers after that. Most people were afraid to go there, and other businesses in the town began to boom because of it. In fact, Starboard Cinema, which showed horror movies to an audience of four or five during the parks better days now showed repeats of "I was a Teen Age Werewolf" to sell-out crowds. More and more, people drifted away from Skybar until it was shut down for good.

It was during those last few weeks that the worst accidents started happening. A morning worker, reaching under a car on the Whip for a paper cup, caught his arm on the supporting bar between two clamps just as a faulty circuit started the machine. He was crushed between two cars. Another worker was fixing a bottom rail on the Ferris wheel when a 500 pound car dropped off the top and smeared him onto the asphalt below. These and several other rides were shut down, and when the only thing left open was Pop Dupree's .22 gallery and the Adults Only freak tent, the spark ran out of Skybar's amusement, and it was forced to shut down after its third year in operation.

It had only been closed for two months when Brant Callahan came up with his plan that night. We were in a group of five camping in back of John Wilkenson's dad's workshop, in a single five-man Sportsman pup tent illuminated by four flashlights shining on back issues of *Famous Detective Stories*, when he stood up (or rather scuffled on his knees, due

to the height of the tent) and proposed we all do something to separate the pussies from the men. I tossed aside my *Mystery of the Haunted Hearse*, leaned in the glow of Dewey Howardson's light, and squinted halfway at the hulking shadow crouching by the double-flap zipper door. No one else appeared to pay any attention to him.

"Come on, lard-asses!" he shouted. "Are ya all just going to sit around playing Dick-fucking-Tracy all night?"

Kirby slapped at the bugs attacking his glowing arm and looked from Brant, to me, to the rest of the guys still gazing with mild interest at their Alfred Hitchcock tales of suspense, unaware of any other activities going on in their presence. I gazed at my watch. It was 11:30.

"What the hell are you raving about, Brant?" His face came to life now that he was being noticed, and he looked at me with great excitement, like some dumb little kid who was about to tell some terrible secret and was getting the great flood of details together to form a top-confidential plan.

"The SkyCoaster."

Dewey looked over the top of his magazine and shot Brant a look of mild interest.

"Skybar's SkyCoaster?"

"Course, ya damn idiot. What other roller coaster ya gonna find in Starboard? Now the way I figger it, we could make it over the barbed wire and inside to the SkyCoaster easy enough."

"What the fuck for?" I asked. Brant was always pulling stunts like this, and it was no telling what the crazy bastard was up to this time. I remember one year when we were out smashing coins on the BY&W tracks by Harrow's Point; Brant got tired of watching trains run over his pennies and dimes and dared us to take on a real challenge. Whenever Brant came up with a real challenge, you could almost always count on calling up the You Asked For It or Ripleys Believe It or Not crews for live coverage. Not that the challenge was anything like that man from Brazil who swallowed strips of razor blades, or that fat lady from Ohio who balanced fire sticks on her forehead – Brant's dares were far more challenging than those. And, as young volunteers from his reluctant audience, we were obligated to take part in them or kiss our reputation for bravery goodbye. Brant reached into his pants pocket that day and pulled out a small cardboard box wrapped tightly with a red rubber band. Unwrapping it, he revealed four or five shiny copper bullets, the kind I used to see on reruns of *Mannix* when Mike Connors would stop blasting away at crime rings long enough to load up his revolver again. They were different from T.V., though. On the tube they appeared to be no more than tiny pieces of dull plastic jammed into a Whamco Cap Pistol.

In front of me then, they sat mystically in Brant's hand, the shells glittering bright rays of light in the late afternoon sun, the tip of greyish lead heavily refusing to reflect any light at all. Then Brant clapped them all together in a fist and headed up the bank toward the tracks. I started after him, half expecting him to wheel out a gun for them at any minute, hoping he was just going to relieve himself rather than starting to open fire on something, or trying some other dangerous stunt. It was dangerous, as it turned out, but I didn't say anything. I just stood there by the rails, taking a plug off the chewing tobacco Dewey brought along, my mind watching from some faraway place as he set them up single file on the left rail.

"The train wheels should set 'em off the second they hit," he smiled smugly, eagerly forming his plan. "All we have to do is stand here by the rails until they do. How's that for a challenge, huh? Oh, and the first one to jump is pussy of the year.

I didn't say anything. but I thought a lot about it. About how stupid it was, how dangerous it was, and how weird a person's brain had to be to think things like that up. I thought about how I should bug out right then, just yell "Screw you, Brant!" and take off for home. But that would have made me green. And if it was one thing we all had to show each other back then, it was that we were no cowards.

So there we were, Brant, John, Dewey, me, and Kirby, although Kirby wouldn't set foot near the tracks, bullets or no bullets, with a train coming (he began to conveniently get sick on the tobacco and had to lie down). We lined up next to the rails, determination in our eyes as the bullets gleamed in front of us. John was the first one to hear the train, and as we stepped closer to Brant's orders, I could hear him softly muttering a short prayer over and over to himself. Dewey stood on the far right side of me, the last person in our Fearless Freddy Fan Club.

Then the first heavy rumbling of the cars came, John reeled as it got louder, and I thought surely he was going to collapse over the tracks, but he didn't, and we all stood still as the train came on. The churning squeak of the wheels hit our ears, and I stared blankly at the bullets in front of us, thinking how small they seemed under the wheels of the 4:40. But the more I looked, the larger they began to appear, until it seemed they were almost the size of cannonballs. I shut my eyes and prayed with John. In the distance. the whistle rang out a terrifyingly loud *Hooooo-HOO Hoooo*, and I was sure it was on top of us, sure that I would feel the cracks of lead pounding in my ears any second, feel the hot metal in my legs. Then the steady thud-thud-thud of its wheels grinding closer bit into my ears, and I screamed, turned, and fell down the slope to where the black gravel ended and the high meadowy grass began. I ran and didn't stop or look back until I was what felt like at

least a mile away, and then collapsed in the stickery high grass, my hands and knees filling with sharp pain.

Behind me, five or six bullets roared into the air consecutively, and I wondered vaguely how Mike Connors could stand such a loud sound every time he squeezed the trigger. My ears filled up with a steady *EEEEEEEEEEEE*, and I lay back in the grass, my hair full of stickers, my pride full of shame. Then Kirby was in front of me, telling me I was all right. I sat up in the grass, and down the rim about ten or fifteen feet from me, Brant, Dewey, and John sat puffing loudly, laughing, out of breath. The air filled with smoke and I collapsed again into the high sea of shrub and stickers, feeling fine. Brant admitted time after time that we were all brave for going along with him that day, but he never brought up the fact that we all had run away, he and Dewey in the lead. Somewhere in my mind, the fact appeared to me that somewhere in Brant, his ego ended and his brains began. That's why I listened along with the others, and why we all wound up going with him that night when he began scheming up another mastermind stunt.

"First we make it over the fence. When we do, we head for the SkyCoaster. Here's the trick: we'll all meet in the station and start up the tracks - not the wooden beams - the tracks, and, in single file, climb to the King drop, then back down."

"You're fuckin nuts, Brant."

"Maybe. But at least I'm not fuckin' pussy."

"Who's pussy?" I asked, pulling my Converse All-Star tennis shoes on.

"You in?" asked Kirby, his lower jaw shaking. It was almost like that shaking jaw and those glassy, scared deer eyes of his were trying to pull me back, to help me forget about the dare and get back to reading another chapter in *Amazing Detective Stories* - as if that once shaking jaw were a sonar, bouncing off waves of detection and coming up with the same reading: *Dangerous Barrier Ahead*.

"Don't be ridiculous, Kirb. 'Course I'm goin'" I shot a glance at John and Dewey, who both gave me nods of bravery and confidence, mixed highly with regrets of Brant's ever being with us that night. We left the flashlights on in the tent in case John's dad peeked out the back windows of his house to check on us. It turned out he never did. Skybar can be pretty damn dark at night with no lights on. Few people know that like I do since most have only seen it in the daytime with sunlight bouncing off of the metal roofs of Pop Dupree's and the Adults Only freak tent or at night with the magical lights blazing lazily around on the Ferris wheel and bulbs flashing crazily in single file, creating a racing form of neon display up and down the hills of the 100 foot high SkyCoaster.

There were no lights that night, however. No lights, no moon, no light clouds, zilchamundo. Brant had stopped on the way to pick up a couple of his friends from the White Dragons. The Dragons were a street gang that held a high position in the field of respect with all wise kids back then, and luckily they brought spare flashlights, matches for their cigarettes, and 5-inch steel Randell switchblades (in case some maniacal drunk or thug was claiming the park space as a home base for his operations).

Both of the White Dragon members appeared to be gods in the eyes of all of us that evening – their hair slicked back to their scalps James Dean style, black leather jackets with pale, fire breathing dragons on them, a general air of confidence and security beaming off them as if they were more protective beacons for us than general good company joining us in the daredevil fun. Five more members of the Dragons were to meet us after a field party they were having up on Grange's Point. Brant hadn't let us in on that fact at first, but when I found out they were supposed to meet us at the front gate at 12:30. more confidence rose in me, and it began to feel more like we were heading toward a late game of craps or penny ante poker instead of a 100 foot climb on slick poles. What we didn't know was that they were practically carrying the party with them, each with a bottle of Jack Daniel's Black label, or Southern Comfort, or Everclear, and each was singing in raketly unison the agonizing 75th stanza to "99 Bottles of Beer."

Excitement heaved up my chest to my throat as we approached the outer gate, and I can still remember how mystic and strange the park looked in the dark night air. The chain fence stretched onward in both directions to what seemed infinity, sealing us out from its unknown hidden powers, and I recall that it almost seemed that it was shielding Skybar inside, preventing it from wielding its wrath on the innocent people living outside its domain. Once you crossed the barrier, however, there was no turning back. Here was where the two worlds divided, and the choice was made – pussy or man. Everybody was anxious to get inside the park's gates to prove where he stood. With the gang you felt cold and nervous while awaiting the wrath of whatever might be lurking inside – but outside, the chances of surviving any lurking danger alone made you even more nervous – jittery enough to crawl up into a ball and piss your pants at every crack of a twig.

So, you see, it's not that we all wanted to go inside. But even if we were scared to death of climbing the cold rails of the SkyCoaster, staying alone while the rest of the bunch climbed over and ventured inside was even worse than the original dare itself. Surprisingly enough, Kirby was the first one up the fence to lay his jacket across the barbed wire and hop to the soft asphalt of Skybar on the other side. The rest of

us followed, thud, sputt, thud sounding through the night air as we each dropped to the ground on the other side. We were in now. Eddie Frachers, the shorter of the two White Dragons, lit up a smoke, flicked on the flashlight, and led the way with Brant. The station was empty when we got to the steel rails of the coaster, and climbing the steps to the gate station was an unusual experience in itself since there was no waiting in line for an hour while an old man standing in front of you blew cigarette fumes in your face in the riding hot sun as your stomach turned putrid, your facial skin pale. Now it was home free between the coaster and us, free space all the way.

Hurry hurry step right up!

The metal floor thundered hundreds of beats under our feet as we made our way across the vacant station to the terminal gates, and I looked several times over my shoulder as we walked the deserted leading board, my senses ready for anything that might decide to go more than "bump" in the night. I was the first one to hear it, in fact, and my body grew limp, my bowels limp with it when I heard the direction it was coming from – the coaster cars. They all sat in front of us, grey and orange from rust and age, their silent features corrupting the night with an evil air, and I recall standing there as the others began to hear it too, my hands shaking, legs drooping, mouth hanging open stupidly as I attempted to say something – I don't know what – and nothing would come out.

I don't know how long we all stood there, waiting for something, anything to happen. The cars seemed mystic in their own way as they stood their ground and refused to let us any nearer by chanting some evil spell among themselves to keep us back. A spell is one thing, but if you've ever thought you heard a car (or possibly some dangerous lunatic hiding behind a car) singing something, you'd understand how we all felt that night. Even Brant and the two White Dragons appeared motionless in the soft glow from the flashlight, but somehow Eddie brought the flashlight up to meet whatever was occupying the first car.

"Hey! Turn it off damnit!"

A surge of relief at its at least being human swelled up in me, but I still stood there, motionless and quivering, even as Eddie and the rest of the bunch, even Kirby, started toward the coaster. I must have still been in a daze, because I found myself wanting to stop them, to pull them back to me, to end it all, turn around and get the hell back over the fence. But I still stood there as fog rolled around my eyes and my sight blurred, leaving only my ears to tell me the horrible fate of our party.

"What the hell are you..." ".are you sure that it's them..." "What are they doing here like this..." A long, ear-piercing scream followed, the kind women usually scream in those horror movies at Starboard Cinema

when the vampire wraps his cape around his victim and starts sucking the living blood out of her. It rose to almost unbelievable splitting levels then faded away with suppressed laughter followed by "59 bottles of beer on the wall, 59 bottles of beer..."

A hand touched my shoulder and I reeled to find Kirby at my feet, telling me that the other guys had gone ahead without me and I'd better hurry up. I ran and caught up with them by the main track, where they had already begun the climb. Brant was first, then the White Dragons, and then Dewey and John, clinging tightly to the steel tracks behind them. I ran the 20 feet to the final, highest 100 foot drop, and started up after them. The cold steel rails clapped clammy into my skin as I started shinnying up, looking to where Brant and the Dragons were perched high above. I couldn't weigh the amount of energy I had left to figure how I was gonna climb 100 fucking feet barehanded. It's kind of like that joke about the little ant crawling up the elephant's hind leg with rape on its mind. I probably wouldn't make it, but I had high hopes.

Kirby never touched the rails. I couldn't blame him after the train event, maybe something happened to him when he was younger, or something. Kirby told me a lot of things best left confidential, but he never told me anything about it either. He may not have wanted to climb, but to me he was no pussy. A lot of songs go through your mind when you're 45 feet off the ground climbing rail by rail on a ladder without rungs. One hundred feet of sheer pole climbing with occasional crosspieces to hang on to isn't much, and you begin to wonder, What if Dewey slips and falls into me? What if I lose my grip and sail to the bottom? How will I get down once I'm up there? Can drunk Dragons fly? And then you look at the bottom, and all of your fears are summed up in one phrase:

Don't look down.

Hand over hand, pull over pull, I made my way upward, trusting that the pace of those above me wasn't too slow. I never really looked up to where Brant and his friends were while I was climbing. Even to this day I remember the blackness of the night sky mixing well with my own blackout as I shut my eyes tightly to the things around me. I was climbing to the top, and I just couldn't stop. Hand over hand. That's when the screaming started, loud and forceful, over and over, with an occasional splashing behind it as if someone below were enjoying a late night swim and horseplay in the murky pond. Ignoring my own rule, I shot a glance down.

God, how weird it looked. If you've ever been on a roller coaster right as it goes down the steepest slope, you can understand the feeling; the depth, the rails shooting together as they plummet below right as you drop over the top. Imagine yourself frozen in that position. Below, the

rails meet and your stomach assumes a new position in your throat. And standing on those gleaming rails, still holding Eddie's flashlight and stained with the dark was Kirby, gazing back up at me, a look of confusion, horror and what to do next? written across his face. He scared the hell out of me the way he just stood there, arms at his side, staring at me but saying nothing.

"What the hell's the matter with you?" I shouted down with extra force. No answer. "Kirby, what's wrong?" By then I knew damn well what was wrong. The tracks had begun to drum under my hands, and the frame of the SkyCoaster itself had begun to sway rhythmically from side to side. Then the awful sound of the roar of a coaster car spinning around some distant bend, fading out, then coming back in, fading out again – and coming back with thunderous racket that sent my stomach and my heart both jumping on top of my tonsils.

Then Brant screamed. It was like the scream of a woman's that I described earlier, but louder, blending in with the steady clack-clack-clack of a chain-dragged coaster car on an electrified track. I didn't ask any questions, but simply locked both hands together, swung both feet together and slid down the rail to the bottom.

If you've ever been on a roller car as it plummets the final hill – the Granddaddy drop – you'll probably know the feeling of fear that builds up in you. There's always a chance that you may fly from the car to the steel tracks below as the force presses your spine against the back cover and shakes you with head-splitting strength to the bottom. There was no car for me to ride in that night – no seat, no belt, no safety bar to pull against my slumped torso. And as I sailed to the bottom, my mind made a different rule that I was forced to follow – *Don't look*.

The wind stopped suddenly in my hair, and I realized that I was down on the bottom rails of the coaster, hanging dreadfully close to the murky waters of Skybar Pond. And as I hung there momentarily I could picture Randy Stayner waiting below, a mossy green hand beginning to emerge to the surface, and as I imagined this, I also visualized others like him in a sea of arms, reaching for my dangling shirt tail as I hung there, all of them coming up to the surface to get me, or desperately reaching out as they were dragged down. A splurge of violent bubbling water popped to the surface, jolting me back to Skybar and, getting to my feet, I pulled myself to the shore and somehow managed to pull Kirby with me. He was still standing in a daze, eyes fixed on the tracks where the coaster car was falling toward us. And as we ran through the depot station past the empty coaster cars, I could hear the steady thud-thud-thud of the one car advancing on us. I shot a glance over my shoulder as we both ran on, my feet and eyes growing with every step. Then I let go of Kirby. I can't clearly remember when, but I remember all that ran through my mind

was *Run Like Hell!* I flew up the chain link fence behind Pop Dupree's, cutting my hands severely on the barbed wire. After jumping to the safe ground on the other side, I didn't stop running until I was almost a mile away on Granges Point, where I could still hear the soft screaming laughter of the seabreeze through the Funhouse clown, and could see the vague form of the SkyCoaster winding through the trees. Somewhere behind one of the tents – I can still swear it was the freak tent – a light glowed softly. I sat there, staring at it, wondering if it was Kirby trying to find his way out of the dark. Then I heard the cracking grass of footsteps behind me and whirled to find Kirby standing in front of me. My legs were shaking, and my teeth began to chatter softly, and he walked up to me and put his arm around me.

"It's okay. We made it. We're pretty brave, huh? Right up and right down those rails. We're far away from it now, though. We're not there now"

I stared at him and wondered how the hell he got there. I couldn't recall dragging him with me. I couldn't believe how calm he stood there – how he acted like it was all a scary movie at Starboard Cinema and we were walking home in the dark trying to calm ourselves down. Then he turned me toward the park and started to walk away.

"Coming?"

"Kirb, you're headin' the wrong way."

I turned toward home and started to run again. After a while. Kirby came running up to me, and we didn't stop until we were five miles away from Skybar and on my front porch. I can still see the horror in poor Kirby's eyes as he saw his best friends and the Dragons drop to death before him. Even after seeing that smiling, rotting freak clambering from behind the safety bar of the coaster car that had rolled over Brant and the others, he stuck with me at the bottom and didn't run. The only ones who acted as bravely as Kirby were the drunk Dragons who jumped at the first sight of the coaster car coming toward them. Maybe it was bravery, maybe it was the liquor, but it doesn't matter because the 100 foot dive to the pond was a mistake either way. Brant and the rest may have tried to slide, but they never made it to safety and the authorities still haven't pulled their bodies from the murky pond waters to this day.

And still, in my dreams, I feel Kirby taking my hand and telling me it was okay; we were safe, we were home free. And then I heard the thud-thud-thud of a single SkyCoaster car rolling toward us. I want to tell Kirby not to look – "Don't look, man!" I scream, but the words won't come out. He does look. And as the car rolls up to the deserted station, we see Randy Stayner lolling behind the safety bar, his head driven

almost into his chest. The fun-house clown begins to scream laughter somewhere behind us, and Kirby begins to scream with it. I try to run, but my feet tangle in each other and I fall, sprawling. Behind me I can see Randy's corpse pushing the safety bar back and he begins to stumble toward me, his dead, shredded fingers hooked into seeking claws. I see these things in my dreams, and in the moments before I wake, screaming, in my wife's arms, I know what the grown-ups must have seen that summer in the freak tent that was for Adults Only. I see these things in my dreams, yes, but when I visit Kirby in that place where he still lives, that place where all the windows are cross-hatched with heavy mesh, I see them in his eyes. I take his hand and his hand is cold, but I sit with him and sometimes I think: These things happened to me when I was young.

THE LEPRECHAUN

Incomplete novel King was writing for his son Owen in 1983, just as he had written *The Eyes of the Dragon* older siblings Joe and Naomi. King had written several pages of the story in longhand in a notebook and then transcribed them. While on a trip to California, he wrote about 30 more pages of the story in the same notebook, which was lost off the back of his motorcycle (somewhere in coastal New Hampshire) on a trip from Boston to Bangor. He mentioned that he could reconstruct what was lost, but had not gotten around to it (as of June, 1983). The only part that still exists today is the 5 typescript pages that had been transcribed. The 5 pages, plus a 3-page cover letter to a senior editor at Viking are now owned by a King collector.

Once upon a time – which is how all the best stories start – a little boy named Owen was playing outside his big red house. He was pretty bored because his big brother and big sister, who could always think of things to do, were in school. His daddy was working, and his mom was sleeping upstairs. She asked him if he would like a nap, but Owen didn't really like naps. He thought they were boring.

He played with his G.I. Joe men for awhile, and then he went around to the back and swung on the swing for awhile. He gave the tetherball a big hit with his fist – *ka-bamp!* – and watched the rope wind up as the ball went around and around the pole. He saw his big sister's softball bat lying in the grass and wished Chris, the big boy who sometimes came to play with him, was there to throw him a few pitches. But Chris was in school too. Owen walked around the house again. He thought he would pick some flowers for his mother. She liked flowers pretty well.

He got around to the front of the house and that was when he saw Springsteen in the grass. Springsteen was his big sister's new cat. Owen liked most cats, but he didn't like Springsteen much. He was big and black, with deep green eyes that seemed to see everything. Every day Owen had to make sure that Springsteen wasn't trying to eat Butler. Butler was Owen's guinea pig. When Springsteen thought no one was around, he would jump up on the shelf where Butler's big glass cage was and stare in through the screen on top with his hungry green eyes. Springsteen would sit there, all crouched down, and hardly move at all. Springsteen's tail would wag back and forth a little, and sometimes one of his ears would flick a bit, but that was all. *I'll get in there pretty soon, you cruddy little guinea pig*, Springsteen seemed to say. *And when I get you, I'll eat you! Better believe it! If guinea pigs say prayers, you better say yours!* Whenever Owen saw Springsteen the cat up on Butler's shelf,

he would make him get down. Sometimes Springsteen put his claws out (although he knew better than to try to put them in Owen) and Owen imagined the black cat saying, *You caught me this time, but so what? Big deal! Someday you won't! And then, yum! yum! dinner is served!* Owen tried to tell people that Springsteen wanted to eat Butler, but nobody believed him.

"Don't worry, Owen," Daddy said, and went off to work on a novel – that's what he did for work.

"Don't worry, Owen," Mommy said, and went off to work on a novel – because that was what she did for work, too.

"Don't worry, Owen" Big Brother said, and went off to watch *The Tomorrow People* on TV.

"You just hate my cat!" Big Sister said, and went off to play *The Entertainer* on the piano.

But no matter what they said, Owen knew he'd better keep a good old eye on Springsteen, because Springsteen certainly did like to kill things. Worse, he liked to play with them before he killed them. Sometimes Owen would open the door in the morning and there would be a dead bird on the doorstep. Then he would look further, and there would be Springsteen crouched on the porch rail, the tip of his tail switching slightly and his big green eyes looking at Owen, as if to say: *Ha! I got another one...and you couldn't stop me, could you?* Then Owen would ask permission to bury the dead bird. Sometimes his mommy or daddy would help him. So when Owen saw Springsteen on the grass of the front lawn, all crouched down with his tail twitching, he thought right away that the cat might be playing with some poor, hurt little animal. Owen forgot about picking flowers for his mom and ran over to see what Springsteen had caught.

At first he thought Springsteen didn't have anything at all. Then the cat leaped, and Owen heard a very tiny scream from the grass. He saw something green and blue Springsteen had was shrieking and trying to get away. And now Owen saw something else – little spots of blood on the grass.

"No!" Owen shouted. "Get away, Springsteen!" The cat flattened his ears back and turned towards the sound of Owen's voice. His big green eyes glared. The green and blue thing between Springsteen's paws squiggled and wiggled and got away. It started to run and Owen saw it was a person, a little tiny man wearing a green hat made out of a leaf. The little man looked back over his shoulder, and Owen saw how scared the little guy was. He was no bigger than the mice Springsteen sometimes killed in their big dark cellar. The little man had a cut down one of his cheeks from one of Springsteen's claws.

Springsteen hissed at Owen and Owen could almost hear him say: "Leave me alone, he's mine and I'm going to have him!"

Then Springsteen jumped for the little man again, just as quick as a cat can jump – and if you have a cat of your own, you'll know that is very fast. The little man in the grass tried to dodge away, but he didn't quite make it, Owen saw the back of the little man's shirt tear open as Springsteen's claws ripped it apart. And, I am sorry to say, he saw more blood and heard the little man cry out in pain. He went tumbling in the grass. His little leaf hat went flying.

Springsteen got ready to jump again.

"No, Springsteen, no!" Owen cried. "Bad cat!"

He grabbed Springsteen. Springsteen hissed again, and his needle-sharp teeth sank into one of Owen's hands. It hurt worse than a doctor's shot. "Ow!" Owen yelled, tears coming to his eyes. But he didn't let go of Springsteen. Now Springsteen started clawing at Owen, but Owen would not let go. He ran all the way to the driveway with Springsteen in his hands. Then he put Springsteen down. "Leave him alone, Springsteen!" Owen said, and, trying to think of the very worst thing he could, he added: "Leave him alone or I'll put you in the oven and bake you like a pizza!"

Springsteen hissed, showing his teeth. His tail switched back and forth – not just the tip now but the whole thing.

"I don't care if you are mad!" Owen yelled at him. He was still crying a little, because his hands hurt as if he had put them in the fire. They were both bleeding, one from Springsteen biting him and one from Springsteen clawing him. "You can't kill people on our lawn even if they are little!"

Springsteen hissed again and backed away. *Okay*, his mean green eyes seemed to say. *Okay for this time. Next time...we'll see!* Then he turned and ran away. Owen hurried back to see if the little man was all right. At first he thought the little man was gone. Then he saw the blood on the grass, and the little leaf hat. The little man was nearby, lying on his side. The reason Owen hadn't been able to see him at first was the little man's shirt was the exact color of the grass. Owen touched him gently with his finger. He was terribly afraid the little man was dead. But when Owen touched him, the little man groaned and sat up.

"Are you all right?" Owen asked.

The fellow in the grass made a face and clapped his hands to his ears. For a moment Owen thought Springsteen must have hurt the little guy's head as well as his back, and then he realized that his voice must sound like thunder to such a small person. The little man in the grass was not much longer than Owen's thumb. This was Owen's first good look at the little fellow he had rescued, and he saw right away why the little man

had been so hard to find again. His green shirt was not just the color of grass; it was grass. Carefully woven blades of green grass. Owen wondered how come they didn't turn brown.

KEYHOLES

An unfinished short story – only one copy of these notes is known to exist in a spiral holographic notebook that was auctioned off.

Conklin's first, snap, judgement was that this man, Michael Briggs, was not the sort of fellow who usually sort psychiatric help. He was dressed in dark corduroy pants, a neat blue shirt, and a sport-coat that matched – sort of – both. His hair was long, almost shoulder-length. His face was sunburned. His large hands were chapped, scabbed in a number of places, and when he reached over the desk to shake, he felt the rasp of rough calluses.

“Hello, Mr Briggs.”

“Hello.” Briggs smiled – a small ill-at-ease smile. His eyes moved about the room and centered on the couch – it was an eye movement Conklin had seen before, but it was no one Conklin associated with people who had been in therapy before – they knew the couch would be there. This Briggs with this work-hardened hands and sunburned face was looking for the profession's most well-known symbol – the one they saw in the movies and the magazine cartoons.

“You're a construction worker?” Conklin asked.

“Yes.” Briggs sat down carefully across the desk.

“You want to talk to me about your son?”

“Yes.”

“Jeremy.”

“Yes.”

A little silence fell. Conklin, used to using silence as a tool, was less uncomfortable with it than Briggs obviously was. Mrs Adrian, his nurse and receptionist, had taken the call five days before, and had said Briggs sounded distraught – a man who had control, she said, but by inches. Conklin's specialty was not child psychology and his schedule was full, but Nancy Adrian's assessment of the man behind the bare facts typed onto the printed form in front of him had intrigued him. Michael Briggs was forty-five, a construction worker who lived in Lovinger, New York, a town forty miles north of New York City. He was a widower. He wanted to consult with Conklin about his son, Jeremy, who was seven. Nancy had promised him a call-back by the end of the day.

“Tell him to try Milton Abrams in Albany,” Conklin had said, sliding the form back across the desk toward her.

“Can I suggest you see him once before you decide that?” Nancy Adrian asked.

Conklin looked at her, then leaned back in his chair and took out his cigarette case. Each morning he filled it with exactly ten Winston 100s – when they were gone, he was done smoking until the next day. It was not as good as quitting; he knew that. It was just a truce he had been able to reach. Now it was the end of the day – no more patients, anyway – and he deserved a cigarette. And Nancy’s reaction to Briggs intrigued him. Such suggestions as this were not unheard of, but they were rare...and the woman’s intuitions were good.

“Why?” he asked, lighting the cigarette.

“Well, I suggested Milton Abrams – he’s close to where this man Briggs is and he likes kids – but Briggs knows him a little – he worked on a construction crew that built a pool addition at Abrams’ country house two years ago. He says he would go to him if you still recommended it after hearing what he has to say, but that he wanted to tell a total stranger first and get an opinion. He said ‘I’d tell a priest if I was Catholic’.”

“Um.”

“He said ‘I just want to know what’s going on with my kid – if it’s me or what.’ He sounded aggressive about it, but he also sounded very, very scared.”

“The boy is – ”

“Seven.”

“Um. And you want me to see him.”

She shrugged, then grinned. She was forty-five, but when she grinned she still looked twenty. “He sounded...concrete. As though he could tell a clear story with no shadows. Phenomena, not ephemera.”

“Quote me all you want – I still won’t raise your salary.”

She wrinkled her nose at him, then grinned. In his way he loved Nancy Adrian – once, over drinks, he had called her the Della Street of psychiatry, and she had almost hit him. But he valued her insights, and here came one now, clear and simple:

“He sounded like a man who thinks there’s something physically wrong with his son. Except he called the office of a New York psychiatrist. An *expensive* New York psychiatrist. And he sounded scared.”

“All right. Enough.” He butted the cigarette – not without regret. “Book him next week – Tuesday or Wednesday – around four.”

And here it was, Wednesday afternoon – not around four but 4:03 on the nose – and here was Mr Briggs sitting opposite him with his work-reddened hands folded in his lap and looking warily at Conklin.

FOR THE BIRDS

From a 1986 anthology by various authors: King had to contribute a one-page story that ended with a pun; his punchline consequently became the title of the compilation.

Okay, this is a science fiction joke.

It seems like in 1995 or so the pollution in the atmosphere of London has started to kill off all the rooks. And the city government is very concerned because the rooks roosting on the cornices and the odd little crannies of the public buildings are a big attraction. The Yanks with their Kodaks, if you get it. So they say, "What are we going to do?"

They get a lot of brochures from places with climates similar to London's so they can raise the rooks until the pollution problem is finally licked. One place with a similar climate, but low pollution count, turns to be Bangor, Maine. So they put an ad in the paper soliciting bird fanciers and talk to a bunch of guys in the trade. Finally, they engage this one guy at the rate of \$50,000 a year to raise rooks. They send an ornithologist over on the concord with two cases of rook eggs packed in these shatterproof cases – they keep the shipping compartment constantly heated and all that stuff. So this guy has a new business – North American Rook Farms, Inc. He goes to work right off incubating new rooks so London will not become a rookless city. The only thing is, the London City Council is really impatient, and every day they send him a telegram that says: "*Bred Any Good RooksLately?*"

THE REPLOIDS

Appeared in *Night Visions* #5, 1988

No one knew exactly how long it had been going on. Not long. Two days, two weeks; it couldn't have been much longer than that, Cheyney reasoned. Not that it mattered. It was just that people got to watch a little more of the show with the added thrill of knowing the show was real. When the United States – the whole world – found out about the Reploids, it was pretty spectacular. Just as well, maybe. These days, unless it's spectacular, a thing can go on damned near forever. It is neither believed nor disbelieved. It is simply part of the weird Godhead mantra that made up the accelerating flow of events and experience as the century neared its end. It's harder to get peoples' attention. It takes machine-guns in a crowded airport or a live grenade rolled up the aisle of a bus load of nuns stopped at a roadblock in some Central American country overgrown with guns and greenery. The Reploids became national – and international – news on the morning of November 30, 1989, after what happened during the first two chaotic minutes of the *Tonight Show* taping in Beautiful Downtown Burbank, California, the night before. The floor manager watched intently as the red sweep secondhand moved upward toward the twelve. The studio audience clockwatched as intently as the floor manager. When the red sweep second-hand crossed the twelve, it would be five o'clock and taping of the umpty-umptyth *Tonight Show* would commence. As the red second-hand passed the eight, the audience stirred and muttered with its own peculiar sort of stage fright. After all, they represented America, didn't they? Yes!

"Let's have it quiet, people, please," the floor manager said pleasantly, and the audience quieted like obedient children. Doc Severinsen's drummer ran off a fast little riff on his snare and then held his sticks easily between thumbs and fingers, wrists loose, watching the floor manager instead of the clock, as the show – people always did. For crew and performers, the floor manager was the clock. When the second-hand passed the ten, the floor manager counted down aloud to four, and then held up three fingers, two fingers, one finger...and then a clenched fist from which one finger pointed dramatically at the audience. An APPLAUSE sign lit up, but the studio audience was primed to whoop it up; it would have made no difference if it had been written in Sanskrit.

So things started off just as they were supposed to start off: dead on time. This was not so surprising; there were crewmembers on the *Tonight Show* who, had they been LAPD officers, could have retired with full benefits. The Doc Severinsen band, one of the best showbands in the world, launched into the familiar theme: Ta-da- da-Da-da ... and the large, rolling voice of Ed McMahon cried enthusiastically: "From Los Angeles, entertainment capital of the world, it's *The Tonight Show*, live, with Johnny Carson! Tonight, Johnny's guests are actress Cybill Shepherd of *Moonlighting*!" Excited applause from the audience. "Magician Doug Henning!" Even louder applause from the audience. "Pee Wee Herman!" A fresh wave of applause, this time including hoots of joy from Pee Wee's rooting section. "From Germany, the Flying Schnauzers, the world's only canine acrobats!" Increased applause, with a mixture of laughter from the audience. "Not to mention Doc Severinsen, the world's only Flying Bandleader, and his canine band!"

The band members not playing horns obediently barked. The audience laughed harder, applauded harder.

In the control room of Studio C, no one was laughing.

A man in a loud sport-coat with a shock of curly black hair was standing in the wings, idly snapping his fingers and looking across the stage at Ed, but that was all.

The director signaled for Number Two Cam's medium shot on Ed for the umpty-umptyeth time, and there was Ed on the ON SCREEN monitors. He barely heard someone mutter, "Where the hell is he?" before Ed's rolling tones announced, also for the umpty-umptyeth time: "And now heeere's JOHNNY!"

Wild applause from the audience.

"Camera Three," the director snapped.

"But there's only that – "

"Camera Three, goddammit!"

Camera Three came up on the ON SCREEN monitor, showing every TV director's private nightmare, a dismally empty stage...and then someone, some stranger, was striding confidently into that empty space, just as if he had every right in the world to be there, filling it with unquestionable presence, charm, and authority. But, whoever he was, he was most definitely not Johnny Carson. Nor was it any of the other familiar faces TV and studio audiences had grown used to during Johnny's absences. This man was taller than Johnny, and instead of the familiar silver hair, there was a luxuriant cap of almost Pan-like black curls. The stranger's hair was so black that in places it seemed to glow almost blue, like Superman's hair in the comic-books. The sport-coat he wore was not quite loud enough to put him in the Pleesda-Meetcha-Is-

This- The-Missus? car salesman category, but Carson would not have touched it with a twelve-foot pole.

The audience applause continued, but it first seemed to grow slightly bewildered, and then clearly began to thin.

"What the fuck's going on?" someone in the control room asked. The director simply watched, mesmerized.

Instead of the familiar swing of the invisible golf-club, punctuated by a drum-riff and high-spirited hoots of approval from the studio audience, this dark-haired, broad-shouldered, loud-jacketed, unknown gentleman began to move his hands up and down, eyes flicking rhythmically from his moving palms to a spot just above his head – he was miming a juggler with a lot of fragile items in the air, and doing it with the easy grace of the long-time showman. It was only something in his face, something as subtle as a shadow, that told you the objects were eggs or something, and would break if dropped. It was, in fact, very like the way Johnny's eyes followed the invisible ball down the invisible fairway, registering one that had been righteously stroked...unless, of course, he chose to vary the act, which he could and did do from time to time, and without even breathing hard.

He made a business of dropping the last egg, or whatever the fragile object was, and his eyes followed it to the floor with exaggerated dismay. Then, for a moment, he froze. Then he glanced toward Cam Three Left...toward Doc and the orchestra, in other words.

After repeated viewings of the videotape, Dave Cheyney came to what seemed to him to be an irrefutable conclusion, although many of his colleagues – including his partner – questioned it.

"He was waiting for a sting," Cheyney said. "Look, you can see it on his face. It's as old as burlesque."

His partner, Pete Jacoby, said, "I thought burlesque was where the girl with the heroin habit took off her clothes while the guy with the heroin habit played the trumpet."

Cheyney gestured at him impatiently. "Think of the lady that used to play the piano in the silent movies, then. Or the one that used to do schmaltz on the organ during the radio soaps."

Jacoby looked at him, wide-eyed. "Did they have those things when you were a kid, daddy?" he asked in a falsetto voice.

"Will you for once be serious?" Cheyney asked him. "Because this is a serious thing we got here, I think."

"What we got here is very simple. We got a nut."

"No," Cheyney said, and hit rewind on the VCR again with one hand while he lit a fresh cigarette with the other. "What we got is a seasoned performer who's mad as hell because the guy on the snare dropped his

cue." He paused thoughtfully and added: "Christ, Johnny does it all the time. And if the guy who was supposed to lay in the sting dropped his cue, I think he'd look the same way. By then it didn't matter. The stranger who wasn't Johnny Carson had time to recover, to look at a flabbergasted Ed McMahon and say, "The moon must be full tonight, Ed – do you think – " And that was when the NBC security guards came out and grabbed him. "Hey! What the fuck do you think you're – "

But by then they had dragged him away.

In the control room of Studio C, there was total silence. The audience monitors picked up the same silence. Camera Four was swung toward the audience, and showed a picture of one hundred and fifty stunned, silent faces. Camera Two, the one medium-close on Ed McMahon, showed a man who looked almost cosmically befuddled.

The director took a package of Winstons from his breast pocket, took one out, put it in his mouth, took it out again and reversed it so the filter was facing away from him, and abruptly bit the cigarette in two. He threw the filtered half in one direction and spat the unfiltered half in another.

"Get up a show from the library with Rickles," he said. "No Joan Rivers. And if I see Totie Fields, someone's going to get fired."

Then he strode away, head down. He shoved a chair with such violence on his way out of the control room that it struck the wall, rebounded, nearly fractured the skull of a white-faced intern from USC, and fell on its side.

One of the PA's told the intern in a low voice, "Don't worry; that's just Fred's way of committing honorable *seppuku*."

The man who was not Johnny Carson was taken, bellowing loudly not about his lawyer but his team of lawyers, to the Burbank Police Station. In Burbank, as in Beverly Hills and Hollywood Heights, there is a wing of the police station which is known simply as "special security functions." This may cover many aspects of the sometimes crazed world of Tinsel-Town law enforcement. The cops don't like it, the cops don't respect it...but they ride with it. You don't shit where you eat. Rule One.

"Special security functions" might be the place to which a coke-snorting movie-star whose last picture grossed seventy million dollars might be conveyed; the place to which the battered wife of an extremely powerful film producer might be taken; it was the place to which the man with the dark crop of curls was taken.

The man who showed up in Johnny Carson's place on the stage of Studio C on the afternoon of November 29th identified himself as Ed Paladin, speaking the name with the air of one who expects everyone who hears it to fall on his or her knees and, perhaps, genuflect. His

California driver's license, Blue Cross-Blue Shield card, Amex and Diners' Club cards, also identified him as Edward Paladin.

His trip from Studio C ended, at least temporarily, in a room in the Burbank PD's "special security" area. The room was panelled with tough plastic that almost did look like mahogany and furnished with a low, round couch and tasteful chairs. There was a cigarette box on the glass-topped coffee table filled with Dunhills, and the magazines included *Fortune* and *Variety* and *Vogue* and *Billboard* and *GQ*. The wall-to-wall carpet wasn't really ankle-deep but looked it, and there was a CableView guide on top of the large- screen TV. There was a bar (now locked), and a very nice neo-Jackson Pollock painting on one of the walls. The walls, however, were of drilled cork, and the mirror above the bar was a little bit too large and a little bit too shiny to be anything but a piece of one-way glass.

The man who called himself Ed Paladin stuck his hands in his just-too-loud sport-coat pockets, looked around disgustedly, and said: "An interrogation room by any other name is still an interrogation room."

Detective 1st Grade Richard Cheyney looked at him calmly for a moment. When he spoke, it was in the soft and polite voice that had earned him the only halfkidding nickname "Detective to the Stars." Part of the reason he spoke this way was because he genuinely liked and respected show people. Part of the reason was because he didn't trust them. Half the time they were lying they didn't know it.

"Could you tell us, please, Mr Paladin, how you got on the set of *The Tonight Show*, and where Johnny Carson is?"

"Who's Johnny Carson?"

Pete Jacoby – who wanted to be Henny Youngman when he grew up, Cheyney often thought – gave Cheyney a momentary dry look every bit as good as a Jack Benny deadpan. Then he looked back at Edward Paladin and said, "Johnny Carson's the guy who used to be Mr Ed. You know, the talking horse? I mean, a lot of people know about Mr Ed, the famous talking horse, but an awful lot of people don't know that he went to Geneva to have a species-change operation and when he came back he was – "

Cheyney often allowed Jacoby his routines (there was really no other word for them, and Cheyney remembered one occasion when Jacoby had gotten a man charged with beating his wife and infant son to death laughing so hard that tears of mirth rather than remorse were rolling down his cheeks as he signed the confession that was going to put the bastard in jail for the rest of his life), but he wasn't going to tonight. He didn't have to see the flame under his ass; he could feel it, and it was being turned up. Pete was maybe a little slow on the uptake about some

things, and maybe that was why he wasn't going to make Detective 1st for another two or three years...if he ever did.

Some ten years ago a really awful thing had happened in a little nothing town called Chowchilla. Two people (they had walked on two legs, anyway, if you could believe the newsfilm) had hijacked a busload of kids, buried them alive, and then had demanded a huge sum of money. Otherwise, they said, those kiddies could just stay where they were and swap baseball trading cards until their air ran out. That one had ended happily, but it could have been a nightmare. And God knew Johnny Carson was no busload of schoolkids, but the case had the same kind of fruitcake appeal: here was that rare event about which both the *Los Angeles Times-Mirror* and *The National Enquirer* would hobnob on their front pages. What Pete didn't understand was that something extremely rare had happened to them: in the world of day-to-day police work, a world where almost everything came in shades of gray, they had suddenly been placed in a situation of stark and simple contrasts: produce within twenty-four hours, thirty-six at the outside, or watch the Feds come in...and kiss your ass goodbye.

Things happened so rapidly that even later he wasn't completely sure, but he believed both of them had been going on the unspoken presumption, even then, that Carson had been kidnapped and this guy was part of it.

"We're going to do it by the numbers, Mr Paladin," Cheyney said, and although he was speaking to the man glaring up at him from one of the chairs (he had refused the sofa at once), his eyes flicked briefly to Pete. They had been partners for nearly twelve years, and a glance was all it took.

No more Comedy Store routines, Pete.

Message received.

"First comes the Miranda Warning," Cheyney said pleasantly. "I am required to inform you that you are in the custody of the Burbank City Police. Although not required to do so immediately, I'll add that a preliminary charge of trespassing – "

"Trespassing!" An angry flush burst over Paladin's face.

" – on property both owned and leased by the National Broadcasting Company has been lodged against you. I am Detective 1st Grade Richard Cheyney. This man with me is my partner, Detective 2nd Grade Peter Jacoby. We'd like to interview you."

"Fucking interrogate me is what you mean."

"I only have one question, as far as interrogation goes," Cheyney said. "Otherwise, I only want to interview you at this time. In other words, I have one question relevant to the charge which has been lodged; the rest deal with other matters."

"Well, what's the fucking question?"

"That wouldn't be going by the numbers," Jacoby said.

Cheyney said: "I am required to tell you that you have the right – "

"To have my lawyer here, you bet," Paladin said. "And I just decided that before I answer a single fucking question, and that includes where I went to lunch today and what I had, he's going to be in here. Albert K. Dellums."

He spoke this name as if it should rock both detectives back on their heels, but Cheyney had never heard of it and could tell by Pete's expression that he hadn't either.

Whatever sort of crazy this Ed Paladin might turn out to be, he was no dullard. He saw the quick glances which passed between the two detectives and read them easily. *You know him?* Cheyney's eyes asked Jacoby's, and Jacoby's replied, *Never heard of him in my life.*

For the first time an expression of perplexity – it was not fear, not yet – crossed Mr Edward Paladin's face.

"Al Dellums," he said, raising his voice like some Americans overseas who seem to believe they can make the waiter understand if they only speak loudly enough and slowly enough. "Al Dellums of Dellums, Carthage, Stoneham, and Taylor. I guess I shouldn't be all that surprised that you haven't heard of him. He's only one of the most important, well-known lawyers in the country." Paladin shot the left cuff of his just-slightly-too-loud sport-coat and glanced at his watch. "If you reach him at home, gentlemen, he'll be pissed. If you have to call his club – and I think this is his club- night – he's going to be pissed like a bear."

Cheyney was not impressed by bluster. If you could sell it at a quarter a pound, he never would have had to turn his hand at another day's work. But even a quick peek had been enough to show him that the watch Paladin was wearing was not just a Rolex but a Rolex Midnight Star. It might be an imitation, of course, but his gut told him it was genuine. Part of it was his clear impression that Paladin wasn't trying to make an impression – he'd wanted to see what time it was, no more or less than that. And if the watch was the McCoy...well, there were cabin-cruisers you could buy for less. What was a man who could afford a Rolex Midnight Star doing mixed up in something weird like this?

Now he was the one who must have been showing perplexity clear enough for Paladin to read it, because the man smiled – a humorless skinning-back of the lips from the capped teeth. "The air-conditioning in here's pretty nice," he said, crossing his legs and flicking the crease absently. "You guys want to enjoy it while you can. It's pretty muggy walking a beat out in Watts, even this time of year."

In a harsh and abrupt tone utterly unlike his bright pitter-patter Comedy Store voice, Jacoby said: "Shut your mouth, jag-off."

Paladin jerked around and stared at him, eyes wide. And again Cheyney would have sworn it had been years since anyone had spoken to this man in that way. Years since anyone would have dared.

"What did you say?"

"I said shut your mouth when Detective Cheyney is talking to you. Give me your lawyer's number. I'll see that he is called. In the meantime, I think you need to take a few seconds to pull your head out of your ass and look around and see exactly where you are and exactly how serious the trouble is that you are in. I think you need to reflect on the fact that, while only one charge has been lodged against you, you could be facing enough to put you in the slam well into the next century...and you could be facing them before the sun comes up tomorrow morning."

Jacoby smiled. It wasn't his howaya-folks-anyone-here-from-Duluth Comedy Store smile, either. Like Paladin's, it was a brief pull of the lips, no more.

"You're right – the air-conditioning in here isn't half bad. Also, the TV works and for a wonder the people on it don't look like they're seasick. The coffee's good – perked, not instant. Now, if you want to make another two or three wisecracks, you can wait for your legal talent in a holding cell on the fifth floor. On Five, the only entertainment consists of kids crying for their mommies and winos puking on their sneakers. I don't know who you think you are and I don't care, because as far as I'm concerned, you're nobody. I never saw you before in my life, never heard of you before in my life, and if you push me enough I'll widen the crack in your ass for you."

"That's enough," Cheyney said quietly.

"I'll retool it so you could drive a Ryder van up there, Mister Paladin – you understand me? Can you grok that?"

Now Paladin's eyes were all but hanging from their sockets on stalks. His mouth was open. Then, without speaking, he removed his wallet from his coat pocket (some kind of lizard-skin, Cheyney thought, two months' salary...maybe three). He found his lawyer's card (the home number was jotted on the back, Cheyney noted it was most definitely not part of the printed matter on the front) and handed it to Jacoby. His fingers now showed the first observable tremor.

"Pete?"

Jacoby looked at him and Cheyney saw it was no act; Paladin had actually succeeded in pissing his easy-going partner off. No mean feat.

"Make the call yourself."

"Okay." Jacoby left.

Cheyney looked at Paladin and was suddenly amazed to find himself feeling sorry for the man. Before he had looked perplexed; now he

looked both stunned and frightened, like a man who wakes from a nightmare only to discover the nightmare is still going on.

"Watch closely," Cheyney said after the door had closed, "and I'll show you one of the mysteries of the West. West LA, that is."

He moved the neo-Pollock and revealed not a safe but a toggle switch. He flicked it, then let the painting slide back into place.

"That's one-way glass," Cheyney said, cocking a thumb at the too-large mirror over the bar.

"I am not terribly surprised to hear that," Paladin said, and Cheyney reflected that, while the man might have some of the shitty egocentric habits of the Veddy Rich and Well-Known in LA, he was also a near-superb actor: only a man as experienced as he was himself could have told how really close Paladin was to the ragged edge of tears.

But not of guilt, that was what was so puzzling, so goddamn-maddening.

Of perplexity.

He felt that absurd sense of sorrow again, absurd because it presupposed the man's innocence: he did not want to be Edward Paladin's nightmare, did not want to be the heavy in a Kafka novel where suddenly nobody knows where they are, or why they are there.

"I can't do anything about the glass," Cheyney said. He came back and sat down across the coffee table from Paladin, "but I've just killed the sound. So it's you talking to me and vice-versa." He took a pack of Kents from his breast pocket, stuck one in the corner of his mouth, then offered the pack to Paladin. "Smoke?"

Paladin picked up the pack, looked it over, and smiled. "Even my old brand. I haven't smoked one since night Yul Brynner died, Mr Cheyney. I don't think I ought to start again now."

Cheyney put the pack back into his pocket. "Can we talk?" he asked.

Paladin rolled his eyes. "Oh my God, it's Joan Raiford."

"Who?"

"Joan Raiford. You know, "I took Elizabeth Taylor to Marine World and when she saw Shamu the Whale she asked me if it came with vegetables?" I repeat, Detective Cheyney: grow up. I have no reason in the world to believe that switch is anything but a dummy. My God, how innocent do you think I am?"

Joan Raiford? Is that what he really said?, Joan Raiford?

"What's the matter?" Paladin asked pleasantly. He crossed his legs the other way. "Did you perhaps think you saw a clear path? Me breaking down, maybe saying I'd tell everything, everything, just don't let 'em fry me, copper?"

With all the force of personality he could muster, Cheyney said: "I believe things are very wrong here, Mr Paladin. You've got them wrong

and I've got them wrong. When your lawyer gets here, maybe we can sort them out and maybe we can't. Most likely we can't. So listen to me, and for God's sake use your brain. I gave you the Miranda Warning. You said you wanted your lawyer present. If there was a tape turning, I've bugged my own case. Your lawyer would have to say just one word – enticement – and you'd walk free, whatever has happened to Carson. And I could go to work as a security guard in one of those flea-bitten little towns down by the border."

"You say that," Paladin said, "but I'm no lawyer.

But... Convince me, his eyes said. Yeah, let's talk about this, let's see if we can't get together, because you're right, something is weird. So...convince me.

"Is your mother alive?" Cheyney asked abruptly.

"What – yes, but what does that have to – "

"You talk to me or I'm going to personally take two CHP motorcycle cops and the three of us are going to rape your mother tomorrow!" Cheyney screamed. "I'm personally going to take her up the ass! Then we're going to cut off her tits and leave them on the front lawn! So you better talk!"

Paladin's face was as white as milk: a white so white it is nearly blue.

"Now are you convinced?" Cheyney asked softly. "I'm not crazy. I'm not going to rape your mother. But with a statement like that on a reel of tape, you could say you were the guy on the grassy knoll in Dallas and the Burbank police wouldn't produce the tape. I want to talk to you, man. What's going on here?"

Paladin shook his head dully and said, "I don't know."

In the room behind the one-way glass, Jacoby joined Lieutenant McEachern, Ed McMahan (still looking stunned), and a cluster of technical people at a bank of high-tech equipment. The LAPD chief of police and the mayor were rumored to be racing each other to Burbank.

"He's talking?" Jacoby asked.

"I think he's going to," McEachern said. His eyes had moved toward Jacoby once, quickly, when he came in. Now they were centered only on the window. The men seated on the other side, Cheyney smoking, relaxed, Paladin tense but trying to control it, looked slightly lowish through the one-way glass. The sound of their voices was clear and undistorted through the overhead speakers – a top-of-the-line Bose in each corner.

Without taking his eyes off the men, McEachern said: "You get his lawyer?"

Jacoby said: "The home number on the card belongs to a cleaning woman named Howlanda Moore."

McEachern flicked him another fast glance.

"Black, from the sound, delta Mississippi at a guess. Kids yelling and fighting in the background. She didn't quite say *I'se gwine whup you if you don't quit!*, but it was close. She's had the number three years. I redialed twice."

"Jesus," McEachern, said. "Try the office number?"

"Yeah," Jacoby replied. "Got a recording. You think ConTel's a good buy, Loot?"

McEachern flicked his gray eyes in Jacoby's direction again.

"The number on the front of the card is that of a fairly large stock brokerage," Jacoby said quietly. "I looked under lawyers in the Yellow Pages. Found no Albert K. Dellums. Closest is an Albert Dillon, no middle initial. No law firm like the one on the card."

"Jesus please us," McEachern said, and then the door banged open and a little man with the face of a monkey barged in. The mayor had apparently won the race to Burbank.

"What's going on here?" he said to McEachern.

"I don't know," McEachern said.

"All right," Paladin said wearily. "Let's talk about it. I feel, Detective Cheyney, like a man who had just spent two hours or so on some disorienting amusement park ride. Or like someone slipped some LSD into my drink. Since we're not on the record, what was your one interrogatory? Let's start with that."

"All right," Cheyney said. "How did you get into the broadcast complex, and how did you get into Studio C?"

"Those are two questions."

"I apologize."

Paladin smiled faintly.

"I got on the property and into the studio," he said, "the same way I've been getting on the property and into the studio for over twenty years. My pass. Plus the fact that I know every security guard in the place. Shit, I've been there longer than most of them."

"May I see that pass?" Cheyney asked. His voice was quiet, but a large pulse beat in his throat.

Paladin looked at him warily for a moment, then pulled out the lizard-skin wallet again. After a moment of rifling, he tossed a perfectly correct NBC Performer's Pass onto the coffee table.

Correct, that was, in every way but one.

Cheyney crushed out his smoke, picked it up, and looked at it. The pass was laminated. In the corner was the NBC peacock, something only long-timers had on their cards. The face in the photo was the face of Edward Paladin. Height and weight were correct. No space for eye-color, hair-color, or age, of course; when you were dealing with ego. *Walk softly, stranger, for here there be tygers.*

The only problem with the pass was that it was salmon pink.

NBC Performer's Passes were bright red.

Cheyney had seen something else while Paladin was looking for his pass. "Could you put a one-dollar bill from your wallet on the coffee table there?" he asked softly.

"Why?"

"I'll show you in a moment," Cheyney said. "A five or a ten would do as well."

Paladin studied him, then opened his wallet again. He took back his pass, replaced it, and carefully took out a one-dollar bill. He turned it so it faced Cheyney. Cheyney took his own wallet (a scuffed old Lord Buxton with its seams unravelling; he should replace it but found it easier to think of than to do) from his jacket pocket, and removed a dollar bill of his own. He put it next to Paladin's, and then turned them both around so Paladin could see them right-side-up-so Paladin could study them.

Which Paladin did, silently, for almost a full minute. His face slowly flushed dark red...and then the color slipped from it a little at a time. He'd probably meant to bellow WHAT THE FUCK IS GOING ON HERE? Cheyney thought later, but what came out was a breathless little gasp: " – what – "

"I don't know," Cheyney said.

On the right was Cheyney's one, gray-green, not brand-new by any means, but new enough so that it did not yet have that rumped, limp, shopworn look of a bill which has changed hands many times. Big number 1's at the top corners, smaller 1's at the bottom corners. FEDERAL RESERVE NOTE in small caps between the top 1's and THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA in larger ones. The letter A in a seal to the left of Washington, along with the assurance that THIS NOTE IS LEGAL TENDER, FOR ALL DEBTS, PUBLIC AND PRIVATE. It was a series 1985 bill, the signature that of James A. Baker III.

Paladin's one was not the same at all.

The 1's in the four corners were the same; THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA was the same; the assurance that the bill could be used to pay all public and private debts was the same.

But Paladin's one was a bright blue.

Instead of FEDERAL RESERVE NOTE it said CURRENCY OF GOVERNMENT. Instead of the letter A was the letter F. But most of all it was the picture of the man on the bill that drew Cheyney's attention, just as the picture of the man on Cheyney's bill drew Paladin's.

Cheyney's gray-green one showed George Washington.

Paladin's blue one showed James Madison.

AN EVENING AT GOD'S

An unpublished one-minute play auctioned off at the Hasty Pudding Theatre on April 23, 1990 to benefit the American Repertory Theater's Institute for Advanced Theater Training .

DARK STAGE. Then a spotlight hits a papier-mache globe, spinning all by itself in the middle of darkness. Little by little, the stage lights COME UP, and we see a bare-stage representation of a living room: an easy chair with a table beside it (there's an open bottle of beer on the table), and a console TV across the room. There's a picnic cooler-full of beer under the table. Also, a great many empties. GOD is feeling pretty good. At stage left, there's a door.

GOD – a big guy with a white beard – is sitting in the chair, alternately reading a book (When Bad Things Happen to Good People) and watching the tube. He has to crane whenever he wants to look at the set, because the floating globe (actually hung on a length of string, I imagine) is in his line of vision. There's a sitcom on TV. Every now and then GOD chuckles along with the laugh-track.

There is a knock at the door.

GOD (*big amplified voice*) Come in! Verily, it is open unto you!

The door opens. In comes ST. PETER, dressed in a snazzy white robe. He's also carrying a briefcase.

GOD Peter! I thought you were on vacation!

ST. PETER Leaving in half an hour, but I thought I'd bring the papers for you to sign. How are you, GOD?

GOD Better. I should know better than to eat those chili peppers. They burn me at both ends. Are those the letters of transmission from hell?

ST. PETER Yes, finally. Thank GOD. Excuse the pun.

He removes some papers from his briefcase. GOD scans them, then holds out his hand impatiently, ST PETER has been looking at the floating globe. He looks back, sees GOD is waiting, and puts a pen in

his out-stretched hand. GOD scribbles his signature. As he does, ST. PETER goes back to gazing at the globe.

ST. PETER So Earth's still there, Huh? After All these years.

GOD hands the papers back and looks up at it. His gaze is rather irritated.

GOD Yes, the housekeeper is the most forgetful bitch in the universe.

An EXPLOSION OF LAUGHTER from the TV. GOD cranes to see. Too late.

GOD Damn, was that Alan Alda?

ST. PETER It may have been, sir – I really couldn't see.

GOD Me, either.

He leans forward and crushes the floating globe to powder.

GOD (*immensely satisfied*) There. Been meaning to do that for a long time. Now I can see the TV...

ST. PETER looks sadly at the crushed remains of the earth.

ST. PETER Umm...I believe that was Alan Alda's world, GOD.

GOD So? (*Chuckles at the TV*) Robin Williams! I love Robin Williams!

ST. PETER I believe both Alda and Williams were on it when you..umm...passed Judgment, sir.

GOD Oh, I've got all the videotapes. No problem. Want a beer?

As ST. PETER takes one, the stage-lights begin to dim. A spotlight come up on the remains on the globe.

ST. PETER I actually sort of liked that one, GOD – Earth, I mean.

GOD It wasn't bad, but there's more where that came from. Now – let's drink to your vacation!

They are just shadows in the dimness now, although it's a little easier to see GOD, because there's a faint nimbus of light around his head. They clink bottles. A roar of laughter from the TV.

GOD Look! It's Richard Pryor! That guy kills me! I suppose he was...

ST. PETER Ummm... yessir.

GOD Shit. *(Pause)* Maybe I better cut Down on my drinking. *(Pause)* Still...It *was* in the way.

Fade to black, except for the spotlight on the ruins of the floating globe.

ST. PETER Yessir.

GOD *(muttering)* My son got back, didn't he?

ST. PETER Yessir, some time ago.

GOD Good. Everything's hunky-dory, then.

THE SPOTLIGHT GOES OUT.

(Author's note: GOD'S VOICE should be as loud as possible.)