Table of contents

Haruki Murakami

Stephen King

BIRTHDAY GIRL

She waited on tables as usual that day, her twentieth birthday. She always worked on Fridays, but if things had gone according to plan that particular Friday, she would have had the night off. The other part-time girl had agreed to switch shifts with her as a matter of course: being screamed at by an angry chef while lugging pumpkin gnocchi and seafood fritto misto to customers' tables was no way to spend one's twentieth birthday. But the other girl had aggravated a cold and gone to bed with unstoppable diarrhea and a fever of 104, so she ended up working after all on short notice.

She found herself trying to comfort the sick girl, who had called to apologize. "Don't worry about it," she said. "I wasn't going to do anything special anyway, even if it is my twentieth birthday."

And in fact she was not all that disappointed. One reason was the terrible argument she had had a few days earlier with the boyfriend who was supposed to be with her that night. They had been going together since high school. The argument had started from nothing much but it had taken an unexpected turn for the worse until it became a long and bitter shouting match—one bad enough, she was pretty sure, to have snapped their long-standing ties once and for all. Something inside her had turned rock-hard and died. He had not called her since the blowup, and she was not about to call him.

Her workplace was one of the better-known Italian restaurants in the tony Roppongi district of Tokyo. It had been in business since the late sixties, and while its cuisine was hardly cutting edge, its high reputation was fully justified. It had many repeat customers and they were never disappointed. The dining room had a calm, relaxed atmosphere without a hint of pushiness. Rather than a young crowd, the restaurant drew an older clientele that included some famous stage people and writers.

The two full-time waiters worked six days a week. She and the other part-time waitress were students who took turns working three days each. In addition there was one floor manager and, at the register, a skinny middle-aged woman who supposedly had been there since the restaurant opened—literally sitting in the one place, it seemed, like some gloomy old character from Little Dorrit. She had exactly two functions: to accept payment from the customers and to answer the phone. She spoke only when necessary and always wore the same black dress. There was something cold and hard about her: if you set her afloat on the nighttime sea, she would probably sink any boat that happened to ram her.

The floor manager was perhaps in his late forties. Tall and broad-shouldered, his build suggested that he had been a sportsman in his youth, but excess flesh was now beginning to accumulate on his belly and chin. His short, stiff hair was thinning at the crown, and a special aging bachelor smell clung to him—like

newsprint that had been stored in a drawer with cough drops. She had a bachelor uncle who smelled like that.

The manager always wore a black suit, white shirt, and bow tie—not a clip-on bow tie, but the real thing, tied by hand. It was a point of pride for him that he could tie it perfectly without looking in the mirror. He performed his duties adroitly day after day. They consisted of checking the arrival and departure of guests, keeping abreast of the reservation schedule, knowing the names of regular customers, greeting them with a smile, lending a respectful ear to any complaints that might arise, giving expert advice on wines, and overseeing the work of the waiters and waitresses. It was also his special task to deliver dinner to the room of the restaurant's owner.

"The owner had his own room on the sixth floor of the same building where the restaurant was," she said. "An apartment, or office or something."

Somehow she and I had gotten on to the subject of our twentieth birthdays—what sort of day it had been for each of us. Most people remember the day they turned twenty. Hers had happened more than ten years earlier.

"He never, ever showed his face in the restaurant, though. The only one who saw him was the manager. It was strictly his job to deliver the owner's dinner to him. None of the other employees knew what he looked like."

"So basically, the owner was getting home delivery from his own restaurant."

"Right," she said. "Every night at eight, the manager had to bring dinner to the owner's room. It was the restaurant's busiest time, so having the manager disappear just then was always a problem for us, but there was no way around it because that was the way it had always been done. They'd load the dinner onto one of those carts that hotels use for room service, the manager would push it into the elevator wearing a respectful look on his face, and fifteen minutes later he'd come back empty-handed. Then, an hour later, he'd go up again and bring down the cart with empty plates and glasses. Every day, like clockwork. I thought it was really weird the first time I saw it happen. It was like some kind of religious ritual, you know? But after a while I got used to it, and never gave it a second thought."

The owner always had chicken. The recipe and the vegetable sides were a little different every day, but the main dish was always chicken. A young chef once told her that he had tried sending up the same exact roast chicken every day for a week just to see what would happen, but there was never any complaint. A chef wants to try different ways of preparing things, of course, and each new chef would challenge himself with every technique for chicken that he could think of. They'd make elegant sauces, they'd try chickens from different suppliers, but none of their efforts had any effect: they might just as well have been throwing pebbles into an empty cave. In the end, every one of them gave up and sent the owner some run-of-the-mill chicken dish every day. That's all that was ever asked of them.

Work started as usual on her twentieth birthday, November 17. It had been raining on and off since the afternoon, and pouring since early evening. At five o'clock the manager gathered the employees together to explain the day's specials. Servers were required to memorize them word for word and not use crib sheets: veal Milanese, pasta topped with sardines and cabbage, chestnut mousse. Sometimes the manager would play the role of a customer and test them with questions. Then came the employees' meal: waiters in this restaurant were not going to have growling stomachs as they took their customers' orders!

The restaurant opened its doors at six o'clock, but guests were slow to arrive because of the downpour, and several reservations were simply canceled. Women didn't want their dresses ruined by the rain. The manager walked around tight-lipped, and the waiters killed time polishing the salt and pepper shakers or chatting with the chef about cooking. She surveyed the dining room with its single couple at table and listened to the harpsichord music flowing discreetly from ceiling speakers. A deep smell of late autumn rain worked its way into the restaurant.

It was after seven thirty when the manager started feeling sick. He stumbled over to a chair and sat there for a while pressing his stomach, as if he had just been shot. A greasy sweat clung to his forehead. "I think I'd better go to the hospital," he muttered. For him to be taken ill was a most unusual occurrence: he had never missed a day since he started working in the restaurant over ten years earlier. It was another point of pride for him that he had never been out with illness or injury, but his painful grimace made it clear that he was in very bad shape.

She stepped outside with an umbrella and hailed a cab. One of the waiters held the manager steady and climbed into the car with him to take him to a nearby hospital. Before ducking into the cab, the manager said to her hoarsely, "I want you to take a dinner up to room 604 at eight o'clock. All you have to do is ring the bell, say 'Your dinner is here,' and leave it."

"That's room 604, right?" she said.

“At eight o’clock,” he repeated. “On the dot.” He grimaced again, climbed in, and the taxi took him away.

The rain showed no signs of letting up after the manager had left, and customers arrived at long intervals. No more than one or two tables were occupied at a time, so if the manager and one waiter had to be absent, this was a good time for it to happen. Things could get so busy that it was not unusual even for the full staff to have trouble coping.

When the owner’s meal was ready at eight o’clock, she pushed the room service cart into the elevator and rode up to the sixth floor. It was the standard meal for him: a half bottle of red wine with the cork loosened, a thermal pot of coffee, a chicken entree with steamed vegetables, rolls and butter. The heavy aroma of cooked chicken quickly filled the little elevator. It mingled with the smell of the rain. Water droplets dotted the elevator floor, suggesting that someone with a wet umbrella had recently been aboard.

She pushed the cart down the corridor, bringing it to a stop in front of the door marked “604.” She double-checked her memory: 604. That was it. She cleared her throat and pressed the doorbell.

There was no answer. She stood there for a good twenty seconds. Just as she was thinking of pressing the bell again, the door opened inward and a skinny old man appeared. He was shorter than she was, by some four or five inches. He had on a dark suit and a necktie. Against his white shirt, the tie stood out distinctly, its brownish yellow coloring like withered leaves. He made a very clean impression, his clothes perfectly pressed, his white hair smoothed down: he looked as though he were about to go out for the night to some sort of gathering. The deep wrinkles that creased his brow made her think of ravines in an aerial photograph.

“Your dinner, sir,” she said in a husky voice, then quietly cleared her throat again. Her voice grew husky whenever she was tense.

“Dinner?”

“Yes, sir. The manager suddenly took sick. I had to take his place today. Your meal, sir.”

“Oh, I see,” the old man said, almost as if talking to himself, his hand still perched on the doorknob. “Took sick, eh? You don’t say.”

“His stomach started to hurt him all of a sudden. He went to the hospital. He thinks he might have appendicitis.”

“Oh, that’s not good,” the old man said, running his fingers along the wrinkles of his forehead. “Not good at all.”

She cleared her throat again. “Shall I bring your meal in, sir?” she asked.

“Ah yes, of course,” the old man said. “Yes, of course, if you wish. That’s fine with me.”

If I wish? she thought. What a strange way to put it. What am I supposed to wish?

The old man opened the door the rest of the way, and she wheeled the cart inside. The floor had short gray carpeting with no area for removing shoes. The first room was a large study, as though the apartment was more a workplace than a residence. The window looked out on the nearby Tokyo Tower, its steel skeleton outlined in lights. A large desk stood by the window, and beside the desk was a compact sofa and love seat. The old man pointed to the plastic laminate coffee table in front of the sofa. She arranged his meal on the table: white napkin and silverware, coffeepot and cup, wine and wineglass, bread and butter, and the plate of chicken and vegetables.

“If you would be kind enough to set the dishes in the hall as usual, sir, I’ll come to get them in an hour.”

Her words seemed to snap him out of an appreciative contemplation of his dinner. “Oh yes, of course. I’ll put them in the hall. On the cart. In an hour. If you wish.”

Yes, she replied inwardly, for the moment that is exactly what I wish. “Is there anything else I can do for you, sir?”

“No, I don’t think so,” he said after a moment’s consideration. He was wearing black shoes polished to a high sheen. They were small and chic. He’s a stylish dresser, she thought. And he stands very straight for his age.

“Well, then, sir, I’ll be getting back to work.”

“No, wait just a moment,” he said.

“Sir?”

“Do you think it might be possible for you to give me five minutes of your time, miss? I have something I’d like to say to you.”

He was so polite in his request that it made her blush. “I…think it should be all right,” she said. “I mean, if it really is just five minutes.” He was her employer, after all. He was paying her by the hour. It was not a question of her giving or his taking her time. And this old man did not look like a person who would do anything bad to her.

“By the way, how old are you?” the old man asked, standing by the table with arms folded and looking directly into her eyes.

“I’m twenty now,” she said.

“Twenty now,” he repeated, narrowing his eyes as if peering through some kind of crack. “Twenty now. As of when?”

“Well, I just turned twenty,” she said. After a moment’s hesitation, she added, “Today is my birthday, sir.”

“I see,” he said, rubbing his chin as if this explained a great deal for him. “Today, is it? Today is your twentieth birthday?”

She nodded.

“Your life in this world began exactly twenty years ago today.”

“Yes, sir,” she said, “that is true.”

“I see, I see,” he said. “That’s wonderful. Well, then, happy birthday.”

“Thank you very much,” she said, and then it dawned on her that this was the very first time all day that anyone had wished her a happy birthday. Of course, if her parents had called from Oita, she might find a message from them on her answering machine when she got home from work.

“Well, well, this is certainly a cause for celebration,” he said. “How about a little toast? We can drink this red wine.”

“Thank you, sir, but I couldn’t, I’m working now.”

“Oh, what’s the harm in a little sip? No one’s going to blame you if I say it’s all right. Just a token drink to celebrate.”

The old man slid the cork from the bottle and dribbled a little wine into his glass for her. Then he took an ordinary drinking glass from a glass-doored cabinet and poured some wine for himself.

“Happy birthday,” he said. “May you live a rich and fruitful life, and may there be nothing to cast dark shadows on it.”

They clinked glasses.

May there be nothing to cast dark shadows on it: she silently repeated his remark to herself. Why had he chosen such unusual words for her birthday toast?

“Your twentieth birthday comes only once in a lifetime, miss. It’s an irreplaceable day.”

“Yes, sir, I know,” she said, taking one cautious sip of wine.

“And here, on your special day, you have taken the trouble to deliver my dinner to me like a kindhearted fairy.”

“Just doing my job, sir.”

“But still,” the old man said with a few quick shakes of the head. “But still, lovely young miss.”

The old man sat down in the leather chair by his desk and motioned her to the sofa. She lowered herself gingerly onto the edge of the seat, with the wineglass still in her hand. Knees aligned, she tugged at her skirt, clearing her throat again. She saw raindrops tracing lines down the windowpane. The room was strangely quiet.

“Today just happens to be your twentieth birthday, and on top of that you have brought me this wonderful warm meal,” the old man said as if reconfirming the situation. Then he set his glass on the desktop with a little thump. “This has to be some kind of special convergence, don’t you think?”

Not quite convinced, she managed a nod.

“Which is why,” he said, touching the knot of his withered-leaf-colored necktie, “I feel it is important for me to give you a birthday present. A special birthday calls for a special commemorative gift.”

Flustered, she shook her head and said, “No, please, sir, don’t give it a second thought. All I did was bring your meal the way they ordered me to.”

The old man raised both hands, palms toward her. “No, miss, don’t you give it a second thought. The kind of ‘present’ I have in mind is not something tangible, not something with a price tag. To put it simply”—he placed his hands on the desk and took one long, slow breath—“what I would like to do for a lovely young fairy such as you is to grant a wish you might have, to make your wish come true. Anything. Anything at all that you wish for—assuming that you do have such a wish.”

“A wish?” she asked, her throat dry.

“Something you would like to have happen, miss. If you have a wish—one wish, I’ll make it come true. That is the kind of birthday present I can give you. But you had better think about it very carefully because I can grant you only one.” He raised a finger. “Just one. You can’t change your mind afterward and take it back.”

She was at a loss for words. One wish? Whipped by the wind, raindrops tapped unevenly at the windowpane. As long as she remained silent, the old man looked into her eyes, saying nothing. Time marked its irregular pulse in her ears.

“I have to wish for something, and it will be granted?”

Instead of answering her question, the old man—hands still side by side on the desk—just smiled. He did it in the most natural and amiable way.

“Do you have a wish, miss—or not?” he asked gently.

“This really did happen,” she said, looking straight at me. “I’m not making it up.”

“Of course not,” I said. She was not the sort of person to invent some goofy story out of thin air. “So…did you make a wish?”

She went on looking at me for a while, then released a tiny sigh. “Don’t get me wrong,” she said. “I wasn’t taking him one hundred percent seriously myself. I mean, at twenty you’re not exactly living in a fairy-tale world anymore. If this was his idea of a joke, though, I had to hand it to him for coming up with it on the spot. He was a dapper old fellow with a twinkle in his eye, so I decided to play along with him. It was my twentieth birthday, after all: I figured I ought to have something not-so-ordinary happen to me that day. It wasn’t a question of believing or not believing.”

I nodded without saying anything.

“You can understand how I felt, I’m sure. My twentieth birthday was coming to an end without anything special happening, nobody wishing me a happy birthday, and all I’m doing is carrying tortellini with anchovy sauce to people’s tables.”

I nodded again. “Don’t worry,” I said. “I understand.”

“So I made a wish.”

The old man kept his gaze fixed on her, saying nothing, hands still on the desk. Also on the desk were several thick folders that might have been account books, plus writing implements, a calendar, and a lamp with a green shade. Lying among them, his small hands looked like another set of desktop furnishings. The rain continued to beat against the window, the lights of Tokyo Tower filtering through the shattered drops.

The wrinkles on the old man’s forehead deepened slightly. “That is your wish?”

“Yes,” she said. “That is my wish.”

“A bit unusual for a girl your age,” he said. “I was expecting something different.”

“If it’s no good, I’ll wish for something else,” she said, clearing her throat. “I don’t mind. I’ll think of something else.”

“No, no,” the old man said, raising his hands and waving them like flags. “There’s nothing wrong with it, not at all. It’s just a little surprising, miss. Don’t you have something else? Like, say, you want to be prettier, or smarter, or rich: you’re OK with not wishing for something like that—something an ordinary girl would ask for?”

She took some moments to search for the right words. The old man just waited, saying nothing, his hands at rest together on the desk again.

“Of course I’d like to be prettier or smarter or rich. But I really can’t imagine what would happen to me if any of those things came true. They might be more than I could handle. I still don’t really know what life is all about. I don’t know how it works.”

“I see,” the old man said, intertwining his fingers and separating them again. “I see.”

“So, is my wish OK?”

“Of course,” he said. “Of course. It’s no trouble at all for me.”

The old man suddenly fixed his eyes on a spot in the air. The wrinkles of his forehead deepened: they might have been the wrinkles of his brain itself as it concentrated on his thoughts. He seemed to be staring at something—perhaps all-but-invisible bits of down—floating in the air. He opened his arms wide, lifted himself slightly from his chair, and whipped his palms together with a dry smack. Settling in the chair again, he slowly ran his fingertips along the wrinkles of his brow as if to soften them, and then turned to her with a gentle smile.

“That did it,” he said. “Your wish has been granted.”

“Already?”

“Yes, it was no trouble at all. Your wish has been granted, lovely miss. Happy birthday. You may go back to work now. Don’t worry, I’ll put the cart in the hall.”

She took the elevator down to the restaurant. Empty-handed now, she felt almost disturbingly light, as though she were walking on some kind of mysterious fluff.

“Are you OK? You look spaced out,” the younger waiter said to her.

She gave him an ambiguous smile and shook her head. “Oh, really? No, I’m fine.”

“Tell me about the owner. What’s he like?”

“I dunno, I didn’t get a very good look at him,” she said, cutting the conversation short.

An hour later she went to bring the cart down. It was out in the hall, utensils in place. She lifted the lid to find the chicken and vegetables gone. The wine bottle and coffeepot were empty. The door to room 604 stood there, closed and expressionless. She stared at it for a time, feeling it might open at any moment, but it did not open. She brought the cart down in the elevator and wheeled it in to the dishwasher. The chef looked blankly at the plate: empty as always.

“I never saw the owner again,” she said. “Not once. The manager turned out to have just an ordinary stomachache and went back to delivering the owner’s meal again himself the next day. I quit the job after New Year’s, and I’ve never been back to the place. I don’t know, I just felt it was better not to go near there, kind of like a premonition.”

She toyed with a paper coaster, thinking her own thoughts. “Sometimes I get the feeling that everything that happened to me on my twentieth birthday was some kind of illusion. It’s as though something happened to make me think that things happened that never really happened at all. But I know for sure that they did happen. I can still bring back vivid images of every piece of furniture and every knickknack in room 604. What happened to me in there really happened, and it had an important meaning for me, too.”

The two of us kept silent, drinking our drinks and thinking our separate thoughts.

“Do you mind if I ask you one thing?” I asked. “Or, more precisely, two things.”

“Go right ahead,” she said. “I imagine you’re going to ask me what I wished for that time. That’s the first thing you want to know.”

“But it looks as though you don’t want to talk about that.”

“Does it?”

I nodded.

She put the coaster down and narrowed her eyes as if staring at something in the distance. “You’re not supposed to tell anybody what you wished for, you know.”

“I won’t try to drag it out of you,” I said. “I would like to know whether or not it came true, though. And also—whatever the wish itself might have been—whether or not you later came to regret what it was you chose to wish for. Were you ever sorry you didn’t wish for something else?”

“The answer to the first question is yes and also no. I still have a lot of living left to do, probably. I haven’t seen how things are going to work out to the end.”

“So it was a wish that takes time to come true?”

“You could say that. Time is going to play an important role.”

“Like in cooking certain dishes?”

She nodded.

I thought about that for a moment, but the only thing that came to mind was the image of a gigantic pie cooking slowly in an oven at low heat.

“And the answer to my second question?”

“What was that again?”

“Whether you ever regretted your choice of what to wish for.”

A moment of silence followed. The eyes she turned on me seemed to lack any depth. The desiccated shadow of a smile flickered at the corners of her mouth, suggesting a kind of hushed sense of resignation.

“I’m married now,” she said. “To a CPA three years older than me. And I have two children, a boy and a girl. We have an Irish setter. I drive an Audi, and I play tennis with my girlfriends twice a week. That’s the life I’m living now.”

“Sounds pretty good to me,” I said.

“Even if the Audi’s bumper has two dents?”

“Hey, bumpers are made for denting.”

“That would make a great bumper sticker,” she said. “‘Bumpers are for denting.’”

I looked at her mouth when she said that.

“What I’m trying to tell you is this,” she said more softly, scratching an earlobe. It was a beautifully shaped earlobe. “No matter what they wish for, no matter how far they go, people can never be anything but themselves. That’s all.”

“There’s another good bumper sticker,” I said. “‘No matter how far they go, people can never be anything but themselves.’”

She laughed aloud, with a real show of pleasure, and the shadow was gone.

She rested her elbow on the bar and looked at me. “Tell me,” she said. “What would you have wished for if you had been in my position?”

“On the night of my twentieth birthday, you mean?”

“Uh-huh.”

I took some time to think about that, but I couldn’t come up with a single wish.

“I can’t think of anything,” I confessed. “I’m too far away now from my twentieth birthday.”

“You really can’t think of anything?”

I nodded.

“Not one thing?”

“Not one thing.”

She looked into my eyes again—straight in—and said, “That’s because you’ve already made your wish.”

“But you had better think about it very carefully, my lovely young fairy, because I can grant you only one.” In the darkness somewhere, an old man wearing a withered-leaf-colored tie raises a finger. “Just one. You can’t change your mind afterward and take it back.”

—TRANSLATED BY JAY RUBIN

landscape with flatiron

Junko was watching television when the phone rang a few minutes before midnight. Keisuke sat in the corner of the room wearing headphones, eyes half closed, head swinging back and forth as his long fingers flew over the strings of his electric guitar. He was practicing a fast passage and obviously had no idea the phone was ringing. Junko picked up the receiver.

“Did I wake you?” Miyake asked in his familiar muffled Osaka accent.

“Nah,” Junko said. “We’re still up.”

“I’m at the beach. You should see all this driftwood! We can make a big one this time. Can you come down?”

“Sure,” Junko said. “Let me change clothes. I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

She slipped on a pair of tights and then her jeans. On top she wore a turtleneck sweater, and she stuffed a pack of cigarettes into the pocket of her woolen coat. Purse, matches, key ring. She nudged Keisuke in the back with her foot. He tore off his headphones.

“I’m going for a bonfire on the beach,” she said.

“Miyake again?” Keisuke asked with a scowl. “You gotta be kidding. It’s February, ya know. Twelve o’clock at night! You’re gonna go make a bonfire now?”

“That’s OK, you don’t have to come. I’ll go by myself.”

Keisuke sighed. “Nah, I’ll come. Gimme a minute to change.”

He turned off his amp, and over his pajamas he put on pants, a sweater, and a down jacket which he zipped up to his chin. Junko wrapped a scarf around her neck and put on a knitted hat.

“You guys’re crazy,” Keisuke said as they took the path down to the beach. “What’s so great about bonfires?”

The night was cold, but there was no wind at all. Words left their mouths to hang frozen in midair.

“What’s so great about Pearl Jam?” Junko said. “Just a lot of noise.”

“Pearl Jam has ten million fans all over the world,” Keisuke said.

“Well, bonfires have had fans all over the world for fifty thousand years,” Junko said.

“You’ve got something there,” Keisuke said.

“People will be lighting fires long after Pearl Jam is gone.”

“You’ve got something there, too.” Keisuke pulled his right hand out of his pocket and put his arm around Junko’s shoulders. “The trouble is, I don’t have a damn thing to do with anything fifty thousand years ago—or fifty thousand years from now, either. Nothing. Zip. What’s important is now. Who knows when the world is gonna end? Who can think about the future? The only thing that matters is whether I can get my stomach full right now and get it up right now. Right?”

They climbed the steps to the top of the breakwater. Miyake was down in his usual spot on the beach, collecting driftwood of all shapes and sizes and making a neat pile. One huge log must have taken a major effort to drag to the spot.

The light of the moon transformed the shoreline into a sharpened sword blade. The winter waves were strangely hushed as they washed over the sand. Miyake was the only one on the beach.

“Pretty good, huh?” he said with a puff of white breath.

“Incredible!” Junko said.

“This happens every once in a while. You know, we had that stormy day with the big waves. Lately, I can tell from the sound, like, ‘Today some great firewood’s going to wash up.’ ”

“OK, OK, we know how good you are,” Keisuke said, rubbing his hands together. “Now let’s get warm. It’s so damn cold, it’s enough to shrivel your balls.”

“Hey, take it easy. There’s a right way to do this. First you’ve got to plan it. And when you’ve got it all arranged so it’ll work without a hitch, you light it slow-like. You can’t rush it. ‘The patient beggar earns his keep.’ ”

“Yeah,” Keisuke said. “Like the patient hooker earns her keep.”

Miyake shook his head. “You’re too young to be making such crummy jokes all the time,” he said.

Miyake had done a skillful job of interlacing the bigger logs and smaller scraps until his pile had come to resemble some kind of avant-garde sculpture. Stepping back a few paces, he would examine in detail the form he had constructed, adjust some of the pieces, then circle around to the other side for another look, repeating the process several times. As always. All he had to do was look at the way the pieces of wood were combined to begin having mental images of the subtlest movement of the rising flames, the way a sculptor can imagine the pose of a figure hidden in a lump of stone.

Miyake took his time, but once he had everything arranged to his satisfaction, he nodded as if to say to himself, That’s it: perfect. Next, he bunched up sheets of newspaper that he had brought along, slipped them through the gaps at the bottom of the pile, and lit them with a plastic cigarette lighter. Junko took her cigarettes from her pocket, put one in her mouth, and struck a match. Narrowing her eyes, she stared at Miyake’s hunched back and balding head. This was it: the one heart-stopping moment of the whole procedure. Would the fire catch? Would it erupt in giant flames?

The three stared in silence at the mountain of driftwood. The sheets of newspaper flared up, rose swaying in flames for a moment, then shriveled and went out. After that there was nothing. It didn’t work, thought Junko. The wood must have been wetter than it looked.

She was on the verge of losing hope when a plume of white smoke shot up from the pile. With no wind to disperse it, the smoke became an unbroken thread rising straight toward the sky. The pile must have caught fire somewhere, but still there was no sign of flames.

No one said a word. Even the talkative Keisuke kept his mouth shut tight, hands shoved in coat pockets. Miyake hunkered down on the sand. Junko folded her arms across her chest, cigarette in hand. She would puff on it occasionally, as if suddenly recalling that it was there.

As usual, Junko thought about Jack London's "To Build a Fire." It was the story of a man traveling alone through the snowy Alaskan interior and his attempts to light a fire. He would freeze to death unless he could make it catch. The sun was going down. Junko hadn't read much fiction, but that one short story she had read again and again, ever since her teacher had assigned it as an essay topic during the summer vacation of her first year in high school. The scene of the story would always come vividly to mind as she read. She could feel the man's fear and hope and despair as if they were her own; she could sense the very pounding of his heart as he hovered on the brink of death. Most important of all, though, was the fact that the man was fundamentally longing for death. She knew that for sure. She couldn't explain how she knew, but she knew it from the start. Death was really what he wanted. He knew that it was the right ending for him. And yet he had to go on fighting with all his might. He had to fight against an overwhelming adversary in order to survive. What most shook Junko was this deep-rooted contradiction.

The teacher ridiculed her view. "Death is really what he wanted? That's a new one for me! And strange! Quite 'original,' I'd have to say." He read her conclusion aloud before the class, and everybody laughed.

But Junko knew. All of them were wrong. Otherwise, how could the ending of the story be so quiet and beautiful?

"Uh, Mr. Miyake," Keisuke ventured, "don't you think the fire has gone out?"

"Don't worry, it's caught. It's just getting ready to flare up. See how it's smoking? You know what they say: 'Where there's smoke, there's fire.' "

"Well, you know what else they say: 'Where there's blood, there's a hard-on.' "

"Is that all you ever talk about?"

"No, but how can you be so sure it hasn't gone out?"

“I just know. It’s going to flare up.”

“How did you come to master such an art, Mr. Miyake?”

“I wouldn’t call it an ‘art.’ I learned it when I was a Boy Scout. When you’re a Scout, like it or not, you learn everything there is to know about building a fire.”

“I see,” said Keisuke. “A Boy Scout, huh?”

“That’s not the whole story, of course. I have a kind of talent, too. I don’t mean to brag, but when it comes to making a bonfire I have a special talent that most folks just don’t have.”

“It must give you a lot of pleasure, but I don’t suppose this talent of yours makes you lots of money.”

“True. None at all,” Miyake said with a smile.

As he had predicted, a few small flames began to flicker at the center of the pile, accompanied by a faint crackling sound. Junko let out a long-held breath. Now there was nothing to worry about. They would have their bonfire. Facing the newborn flames, the three began to stretch out their hands. For the next few minutes there was nothing more to be done but to watch in silence as, little by little, the flames gained in strength. Those people of fifty thousand years ago must have felt like this when they held their hands out to the flames, thought Junko.

“I understand you’re from Kobe, Mr. Miyake,” Keisuke said in a cheery voice as if the thought had suddenly popped into his head. “Did you have relatives or something in the Kansai earthquake last month?”

“I’m not sure,” said Miyake. “I don’t have any ties with Kobe anymore. Not for years.”

“Years? Well, you sure haven’t lost your Kansai accent.”

“No? I can’t tell, myself.”

“I do declare, you must be joking,” said Keisuke in exaggerated Kansai tones.

“Cut the shit, Keisuke. The last thing I want to hear is some Ibaragi asshole trying to talk to me in a phony Kansai accent. You eastern farm boys’d be better off tearing around on your motorcycles during the slack season.”

“Whoa, I sure rubbed you the wrong way! You look like a nice quiet guy, but you’ve got one hell of a mouth. And this place is Ibaraki, not ‘Ibaragi.’ All you Kansai types are ready to put us eastern ‘farm boys’ down at the drop of a hat. I give up,” Keisuke said. “But seriously, though, did anybody get hurt? You must have had somebody you know in Kobe. Have you seen the news on TV?”

“Let’s change the subject,” Miyake said. “Whiskey?”

“You bet.”

“Jun?”

“Just a little,” Junko said.

Miyake pulled a thin metal flask from the pocket of his leather jacket and handed it to Keisuke, who twisted off the cap and poured some whiskey into his mouth without touching his lips to the rim. He glugged it down and sucked in a sharp breath.

“That is great!” he said. “This has got to be a twenty-one-year-old single malt! Super stuff ! Aged in oak. You can hear the roar of the sea and the breath of Scottish angels.”

“Give me a break, Keisuke. It’s the cheapest Suntory you can buy.”

Next it was Junko’s turn. She took the flask from Keisuke, poured a little into the cap, and tried a few tiny sips. She grimaced, but chased after that special warm feeling as the liquid moved down from her

throat to her stomach. The core of her body grew a touch warmer. Next, Miyake took one quiet swallow, and Keisuke followed him with another gulp. As the flask moved from hand to hand, the bonfire grew in size and strength—not all at once, but in slow, gradual stages. That was the great thing about Miyake's bonfires. The spread of the flames was soft and gentle, like an expert caress, with nothing rough or hurried about it—their only purpose was to warm people's hearts.

Junko never said much in the presence of the fire. She hardly moved. The flames accepted all things in silence, drank them in, understood, and forgave. A family, a real family, was probably like this, she thought.

Junko came to this town in May of her third year in high school. With her father's seal and passbook, she had taken three hundred thousand yen from the bank, stuffed all the clothes she could into a Boston bag, and run away from home. She transferred from one train to the next at random until she had come all the way from Tokorozawa to this little seaside spot in Ibaraki Prefecture, a town she had never even heard of. At the realtor's across from the station she found a one-room apartment, and the following week took a job at a convenience store on the coast highway. To her mother she wrote: Don't worry about me, and please don't look for me, I'm doing fine.

She was sick to death of school and couldn't stand the sight of her father. She had gotten on well with him when she was little. On weekends and holidays the two of them had gone everywhere together. She felt proud and strong to walk down the street holding his hand. But when her periods started near the end of elementary school, and her pubic hair began to grow, and her chest began to swell, he started to look at her in a strange new way. After she passed five-foot-six in the third year of junior high, he hardly spoke to her at all.

Plus, her grades were nothing to boast about. Near the top of her class when she entered middle school, by graduation time it would have been easier to count her place from the bottom, and she barely made it into high school. Which is not to say that she was stupid: she just couldn't concentrate. She could never finish anything she started. Whenever she tried to concentrate, her head would ache deep inside. It hurt her to breathe, and the rhythm of her heart became irregular. Attending school was absolute torture.

Not long after she settled in this new town, she met Keisuke. He was two years older, and a great surfer. He was tall, dyed his hair brown, and had beautiful straight teeth. He had settled in Ibaraki for its good surf, and formed a rock band with some friends. He was registered at a second-rate private college, but hardly ever went to campus and had zero prospects of graduating. His parents ran an old respected sweetshop in the city of Mito, and he could have carried on the family business as a last resort, but he had no intention of settling down as a sweetshop owner. All he wanted was to ride around with his

friends in his Datsun truck, surf, and play the guitar in their amateur band— an easygoing lifestyle that anyone could see was not going to last forever.

Junko got friendly with Miyake after she moved in with Keisuke. Miyake seemed to be in his mid-forties—a small, slim guy with glasses, a long narrow face, and short hair. He was clean-shaven, but he had such a heavy beard that by sundown each day his face was covered in shadows. He liked to wear a faded dungaree shirt or aloha shirt, which he never tucked into his baggy old chinos, and on his feet he wore white, worn-out sneakers. In winter, he would put on a creased leather jacket and sometimes a baseball cap. Junko had never seen him in any other kind of outfit. Everything he wore, though, was spotlessly clean.

Speakers of the Kansai dialect were all but nonexistent in this place, so people noticed Miyake. “He lives alone in a rented house near here,” one of the girls at work told Junko. “He paints pictures. I don’t think he’s famous or anything, and I’ve never seen his stuff. But he lives OK. He seems to manage. He goes to Tokyo sometimes and comes back late in the day with painting supplies or something. Gee, I don’t know, he’s maybe been here five years or so. You see him on the beach all the time making bonfires. I guess he likes them. I mean, he always has this intense look in his eyes when he’s making one. He doesn’t talk much, and he’s kind of weird, but he’s not a bad guy.”

Miyake would come to the convenience store at least three times a day. In the morning he’d buy milk, bread, and a newspaper. At noon, he’d buy a box lunch, and in the evening he’d buy a cold can of beer and a snack—the same thing, day after day. He and Junko never exchanged more than the barest civilities, but she found herself drawn to him after a while.

When they were alone in the store one morning, she took a chance and asked him about himself. Why did he come in so often, even if he did live close by? Why didn’t he just buy lots of milk and beer and keep it in the refrigerator? Wouldn’t that be more convenient? Of course, it was all the same to the store people, but still . . .

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” he said. “It’d make more sense to stock up, but I can’t.”

“Why not?” Junko asked.

“Well, it’s just, like—I can’t, that’s all.”

“I didn’t mean to pry or anything,” Junko said. “Please don’t let it bother you. It’s just the way I am. I can’t help asking questions when I don’t know something. I don’t mean any harm by it.”

Miyake hesitated a moment, scratching his head. Then, with some difficulty, he said, “Tell you the truth, I don’t have a refrigerator. I don’t like refrigerators.”

Junko smiled. “I don’t like refrigerators myself, but I do have one. Isn’t it kind of inconvenient not having one?”

“Sure it’s inconvenient, but I hate the things, so what can I do? I can’t sleep at night when there’s a refrigerator around.”

What a weird guy, thought Junko. But now she was more interested in him than ever.

Walking on the beach one evening a few days later, Junko saw Miyake tending a bonfire, alone. It was a small fire made of driftwood he had collected. Junko spoke to Miyake, then joined him at the fire. Standing beside him, she was a good couple of inches taller. The two of them traded simple greetings, then said nothing at all as they stared at the fire.

It was the first time that Junko felt a certain “something” as she watched the flames of a bonfire: “something” deep down, a “wad” of feeling, she might have called it, because it was too raw, too heavy, too real to be called an idea. It coursed through her body and vanished, leaving behind a sweet-sad, chest-gripping, strange sort of feeling. For a time after it had gone, she had gooseflesh on her arms.

“Tell me, Mr. Miyake, when you see the shapes that a bonfire makes, do you ever feel kind of strange?”

“How so?”

“I don’t know, it’s like all of a sudden you get very clear about something people don’t usually notice in everyday life. I don’t know how to put it, I’m not smart enough, but watching the fire now, I get this deep, quiet kind of feeling.”

Miyake thought about it a while. “You know, Jun,” he said, “a fire can be any shape it wants to be. It’s free. So it can look like anything at all depending on what’s inside the person looking at it. If you get this deep, quiet kind of feeling when you look at a fire, that’s because it’s showing you the deep, quiet kind of feeling you have inside yourself. You know what I mean?”

“Uh-huh.”

“But it doesn’t happen with just any fire. For something like this to happen, the fire itself has to be free. It won’t happen with a gas stove or a cigarette lighter. It won’t even happen with an ordinary bonfire. For the fire to be free, you’ve got to make it in the right kind of place. Which isn’t easy. Not just anybody can do it.”

“But you can do it, Mr. Miyake?”

“Sometimes I can, sometimes I can’t. Most of the time, I can. If I really put my mind to it, I pretty much can.”

“You like bonfires, don’t you?”

Miyake nodded. “It’s almost a sickness with me. Why do you think I came to live in this navel-lint nothing of a town? It’s because this place gets more driftwood than any other beach I know. That’s the only reason. I came all the way out here to make bonfires. Kind of pointless, huh?”

Whenever she had the chance after that, Junko would join Miyake for his bonfires. He made them all year long except for midsummer, when the beach was full of people far into the night. Sometimes he would make two a week, and sometimes he would go a month without one. His pace was determined by the amount of driftwood that washed ashore. And when the time came for a fire, he would be sure to call Junko. Keisuke had an ugly jealous streak, but Miyake was the one exception. He would rib Junko about her “bonfire buddy.”

The flames finally found their way to the biggest log, and now at last the bonfire was settling in for a long burn. Junko lowered herself to the sandy beach and stared at the flames with her mouth shut tight. Miyake adjusted the progress of the fire with great care, using a long branch to keep the flames from either spreading too quickly or losing strength. From his small pile of spare fuel, he would occasionally pick a length of driftwood and toss it in where it was needed.

Keisuke announced that he had a stomachache: “Must’ve caught a chill. Think I just need a crap.”

“Why don’t you go home and rest?” Junko said.

“Yeah, I really should,” Keisuke said, looking sorry for himself. “How about you?”

“Don’t worry about Jun,” Miyake said. “I’ll see her home. She’ll be fine.”

“OK, then. Thanks.” Keisuke left the beach.

“He’s such an idiot,” Junko said, shaking her head. “He gets carried away and drinks too much.”

“I know what you mean, Jun, but it’s no good being too sensible when you’re young. It just spoils the fun. Keisuke’s got his good points, too.”

“Maybe so, but he doesn’t use his brain for anything.”

“Some things your brain can’t help you with. It’s not easy being young.”

The two fell silent for a while in the presence of the fire, each lost in private thoughts and letting time flow along separate paths.

Then Junko said, “You know, Mr. Miyake, something’s been kind of bothering me. Do you mind if I ask you about it?”

“What kind of something?”

“Something personal.”

Miyake scratched his stubbly cheeks with the flat of his hand. “Well, I don’t know. I guess it’d be OK.”

“I was just wondering if, maybe, you had a wife somewhere.”

Miyake pulled the flask from the pocket of his leather jacket, opened it, and took a long, slow drink. Then he put on the cap, slipped the flask into his pocket, and looked at Junko.

“Where did that come from all of a sudden?”

“It’s not all of a sudden. I kind of got the feeling before, when Keisuke started talking about the earthquake. I saw the look on your face. And you know what you once told me, about how people’s eyes have something honest about them when they’re watching a fire.”

“I did?”

“And do you have kids, too?”

“Yup. Two of ’em.”

“In Kobe, right?”

“That’s where the house is. I suppose they’re still living there.”

“Where in Kobe?”

“The Higashi-Nada section. Up in the hills. Not much damage there.”

Miyake narrowed his eyes, raised his face, and looked out at the dark sea. Then he turned his eyes back to the fire.

“That’s why I can’t blame Keisuke,” he said. “I can’t call him an idiot. I don’t have the right. I’m not using my brain any more than he is. I’m the idiot king. I think you know what I mean.”

“Do you want to tell me more?”

“No,” Miyake said. “I really don’t.”

“OK, I’ll stop then. But I will say this. I think you’re a good person.”

“That’s not the problem,” Miyake said, shaking his head again. He drew a kind of design in the sand with the tip of a branch. “Tell me, Jun, have you ever thought about how you’re going to die?”

Junko pondered this for a while, then shook her head.

“Well, I think about it all the time,” Miyake said.

“How are you going to die?”

“Locked inside a refrigerator,” he said. “You know. It happens all the time. Some kid is playing around inside a refrigerator that somebody’s thrown away, and the door closes, and the kid suffocates. Like that.”

The big log dipped to the side, scattering sparks. Miyake watched it happen but did nothing. The glow of the flames spread strangely unreal shadows across his face.

“I’m in this tight space, in total darkness, and I die little by little. It might not be so bad if I could just suffocate. But it doesn’t work that way. A tiny bit of air manages to get in through some crack, so it takes a really long time. I scream, but nobody can hear me. And nobody notices I’m missing. It’s so cramped in there, I can’t move. I squirm and squirm but the door won’t open.”

Junko said nothing.

“I have the same dream over and over. I wake up in the middle of the night drenched in sweat. I’ve been dreaming about dying slowly in pitch-blackness, but even after I wake up, the dream doesn’t end. This is the scariest part of the dream. I open my eyes, and my throat is absolutely dry. I go to the kitchen and open the refrigerator. Of course, I don’t have a refrigerator, so I ought to realize it’s a dream, but I still don’t notice. I’m thinking there’s something strange going on, but I open the door. Inside, the refrigerator is pitch-dark. The light’s out. I wonder if there’s been a power failure and stick my head inside. Hands shoot out from the darkness and grab me by the neck. Cold hands. Dead people’s hands. They’re incredibly strong and they start dragging me inside. I let out a huge scream, and this time I wake up for real. That’s my dream. It’s always the same. Always. Every little detail. And every time I have it, it’s just as scary as the last.”

Miyake poked the big log with the tip of a branch and pushed it back in place.

“It’s so real, I feel as if I’ve already died hundreds of times.”

“When did you start having the dream?”

“Way, way back there. So long ago I can’t remember when,” Miyake said. “I have had periods when it’s left me alone. A year . . . no, two years when I didn’t have it at all. I had the feeling things were going to be OK for me. But no. The dream came back. Just as I was beginning to think, I’m OK now, I’m saved, it started up again. And once it gets going, there’s nothing I can do.”

Miyake shook his head.

“I’m sorry, Jun, I really shouldn’t be telling you these dark stories.”

“Yes you should,” Junko said. She put a cigarette between her lips and struck a match, inhaling a deep lungful of smoke. “Go on.”

The bonfire was nearing its end. The big pile of extra driftwood was gone now. Miyake had thrown it all into the fire. Maybe she was imagining things, but Junko thought the ocean sounded louder.

“There’s this American writer called Jack London,” Miyake began.

“Sure, the guy who wrote about the fire.”

“That’s him. For a long time, he thought he was going to die by drowning in the sea. He was absolutely sure of it. He’d slip and fall into the ocean at night, and nobody would notice, and he’d drown.”

“Did he really drown?”

Miyake shook his head. “Nope. Killed himself with morphine.”

“So his premonition didn’t come true. Or maybe he did something to make sure it wouldn’t come true.”

“On the surface, at least, it looks like that,” Miyake said, pausing for a moment. “But in a sense, he was right. He did drown alone in a dark sea. He became an alcoholic. He soaked his body in his own despair—right to the core—and he died in agony. Premonitions can stand for something else sometimes. And the thing they stand for can be a lot more intense than reality. That’s the scariest thing about having a premonition. Do you see what I mean?”

Junko thought about it for a while. She did not see what he meant.

“I’ve never once thought about how I was going to die,” she said. “I can’t think about it. I don’t even know how I’m going to live.”

Miyake gave a nod. “I know what you mean,” he said. “But there’s such a thing as a way of living that’s guided by the way a person’s going to die.”

“Is that how you’re living?” she asked.

“I’m not sure. It seems that way sometimes.”

Miyake sat down next to Junko. He looked a little more wasted and older than usual. The hair over his ears was uncut and sticking out.

“What kind of pictures have you been painting?” she asked.

“That would be tough to explain.”

“OK, then, what’s the newest thing you’ve painted?”

“I call it Landscape with Flatiron. I finished it three days ago. It’s just a picture of an iron in a room.”

“Why’s that so tough to explain?”

“Because it’s not really an iron.”

She looked up at him. “The iron is not an iron?”

“That’s right.”

“Meaning it stands for something else?”

“Probably.”

“Meaning you can only paint it if you use something else to stand for it?”

Miyake nodded in silence.

Junko looked up to see that there were many more stars in the sky than before. The moon had covered a long distance. Miyake threw the last piece, the long branch he was holding, into the fire. Junko leaned toward him so that their shoulders were just touching. The smoky smell of a hundred fires clung to his jacket. She took in a long, deep breath of it.

“You know something?” she said.

“What?”

“I’m completely empty.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

She closed her eyes and, before she knew it, tears were flowing down her cheeks. With her right hand, she gripped Miyake’s knee as hard as she could through his chinos. Small chills ran through her body. He put his arm around her shoulders and drew her close, but still her tears would not stop.

“There’s really nothing at all in here,” she said much later, her voice hoarse. “I’m cleaned out. Empty.”

“I know what you mean,” he said.

“Really?”

“Yeah. I’m an expert.”

“What can I do?”

“Get a good night’s sleep. That usually fixes it.”

“What I’ve got is not so easy to fix.”

“You may be right, Jun. It may not be that easy.”

Just then a long, steamy hiss announced the evaporation of water trapped in a log. Miyake raised his eyes and, narrowing them, peered at the bonfire for a time.

“So, what should I do?” Junko asked.

“I don’t know. We could die together. What do you say?”

“Sounds good to me.”

“Are you serious?”

“I’m serious.”

His arm still around her shoulders, Miyake kept silent for a while. Junko buried her face in the soft worn-out leather of his jacket.

“Anyhow, let’s wait till the fire burns out,” Miyake said. “We built it, so we ought to keep it company to the end. Once it goes out, and it turns pitch-dark, then we can die.”

“Good,” Junko said. “But how?”

“I’ll think of something.”

“OK.”

Wrapped in the smell of the fire, Junko closed her eyes. Miyake’s arm across her shoulders was rather small for that of a grown man, and strangely bony. I could never live with this man, she thought. I could never get inside his heart. But I might be able to die with him.

She felt herself growing sleepy. It must be the whiskey, she thought. Most of the burning driftwood had turned to ash and crumbled, but the biggest piece still glowed orange, and she could feel its gentle warmth against her skin. It would be a while before it burnt itself out.

“Mind if I take a little nap?” she asked.

“Sure, go ahead.”

“Will you wake me when the fire’s out?”

“Don’t worry. When the fire goes out, you’ll start feeling the cold. You’ll wake up whether you want to or not.”

She repeated the words in her mind: When the fire goes out, you’ll start feeling the cold. You’ll wake up whether you want to or not. Then she curled herself against him and dropped into a fleeting, but deep, sleep.

FIREFLY

Once upon a time—more like fifteen years ago, actually—I lived in a privately run dorm for college students in Tokyo. I was eighteen then, a brand-new college freshman, and didn't know the first thing about the city. I'd never lived on my own, either, and my parents were naturally worried; putting me in a dorm seemed the best solution. Money was a factor, too, and the dorm seemed the cheapest way to go. I'd been dreaming of living in my own apartment, having a great old time, but what can you do? My folks were footing the bill for college—tuition and fees, a monthly allowance—so that was that.

The dorm was situated on a generous piece of land on a rise in Bunkyo Ward, and had a fantastic view. The whole place was surrounded by a tall concrete wall, and right inside the main gate stood a huge zelkova tree. Some 150 years old, maybe more. When you stood at its base and looked up, its huge, leafy branches blotted out the sky. The concrete sidewalk detoured around the tree, then ran straight across the courtyard. On either side of the courtyard there were two concrete dorm buildings three stories tall, lined up side by side. Huge buildings. From the open windows somebody's transistor radio was always blasting out some DJ's voice. The curtains in the room were all the same color, cream being the color that fades least in the sunlight.

The two-story main building fronted the sidewalk. A dining hall and communal bath were on the first floor, an auditorium, guest rooms, and meeting rooms on the second. Next to the main building was a third dorm building, also three stories. The courtyard was spacious, and sprinklers spun around on the lawn, glinting in the sunlight. Rounding it all out was a playing field for soccer and rugby behind the main building, as well as six tennis courts. Who could ask for more?

The only problem with the dorm (not that everybody was convinced it was a problem, though) was who ran it—some mysterious foundation headed up by a right-wing fanatic. One look at the pamphlet the dorm put out made this clear. The dorm was founded on a spirit of "achieving the basic goals of education and cultivating promising talent to serve the country." And a lot of well-heeled businessmen who agreed with that philosophy apparently helped underwrite the dorm. At least that was the official story. What lay beneath the surface was, like many things there, anybody's guess. Rumor had it the whole place was a tax dodge, or some sort of land fraud scheme. Not that this made a bit of difference to the day-to-day life at the dorm. On a practical level, I guess, it didn't matter who ran it—right-wingers, left-wingers, hypocrites, scoundrels. What have you. Whatever the real story was, from the spring of 1967 to the fall of '68, I called this dorm home.

Each day at the dorm began with a solemn flag-raising ceremony. The platform for the flag raising was in the middle of the courtyard, so you could see it all from the dorm windows. Of course they played the national anthem. Just like sports news and marches go together, can't have one without the other.

The role of flag-raiser was played by the head of the east dorm, the one I was in. He was fiftyish, an altogether tough-looking customer. He had bristly hair with a sprinkling of gray, and a long scar on his sunburned neck. It was rumored he was a graduate of the Nakano Military Academy. Next to him was a student who acted as his assistant. The guy was basically an enigma. He had close-cropped hair and always wore a school uniform. Nobody had any idea what his name was or which room he lived in. I'd never run across him in the dining hall or the communal bath. I wasn't even sure he was a student. But since he wore the uniform, what else could he have been? Unlike Academy Man, he was short, chubby, and pasty-looking. Every morning at six the two of them would hoist the rising sun flag up the flagpole.

I don't know how many times I watched this little scene play out. The six a.m. chime would ring and there they were in the courtyard, Uniform Boy carrying a light wooden box, Academy Man a portable Sony tape recorder. Academy Man placed the tape recorder at the base of the platform and Uniform Boy opened the box. Inside was a neatly folded Japanese flag. Uniform Boy handed it to the boss, who then attached it to the rope. Uniform Boy switched on the tape recorder.

"May thy peaceful reign last long…" And the flag glided up the flagpole.

When they got to the part that goes "Until these tiny stones…" the flag was halfway up the pole, and it reached the top when they got to the end of the anthem. The two of them snapped to attention and gazed up at the flag. On sunny days when there was a breeze, it was quite a sight.

The evening ceremony was about the same as in the morning, just done in reverse. The flag glided down the pole and was put away in the wooden box. The flag doesn't wave at night.

Why the flag's got to be put away at night I have no idea. The country still exists at night, right? And plenty of people are hard at work. Doesn't seem fair those people can't have the same flag flying over them. Maybe it's a silly thing to worry about—just the kind of thought a person like me is likely to fret over.

In the dorm freshmen and sophomores lived two to a room, while juniors and seniors lived alone. The kind of two-man room I inhabited was cramped and narrow. On the wall furthest from the door was a window with an aluminum frame. The furniture was spartan, but solidly built—two desks and chairs, a bunk bed, two lockers, and built-in shelves. In most of the rooms the shelves were crammed full of the

usual stuff: transistor radios, blow-dryers, electric coffeepots, instant-coffee jars, sugar, pots for cooking instant noodles, cups and plates. Playboy pinups were taped to the plaster walls, and lined up on the desks were school textbooks, plus the odd popular novel.

With just men living there the rooms were filthy. The bottoms of the trash baskets were lined with moldy orange skins, and the empty tin cans that served as ashtrays contained four-inch-high layers of cigarette butts. Coffee grounds were stuck to the cups, cellophane wrappers from instant-noodle packages and empty beer cans were scattered all over the floor. Whenever the wind blew in, a cloud of dust swirled up from the floor. The rooms stank to high heaven, too, since everyone just stuffed their dirty laundry under their beds. And forget about anyone airing out their bedding, so it all reeked of sweat and BO.

My room, though, was spotless. Not a speck of dirt on the floor, gleaming ashtrays as far as the eye could see. The bedding was aired out once a week, the pencils were lined up neatly in the pencil holders. Instead of a pinup, our room was decked out with a photo of canals in Amsterdam. Why? Simple enough—my roommate was a nut about cleaning. I didn't lift a finger since he did it all—the laundry, too; even my laundry, if you can imagine. Say I'd just finished a beer; the instant I set the empty down on the table he'd whisk it away to the trash can.

My roommate was a geography major.

"I'm studying about m-m-maps," he told me.

"So you're into maps, huh?" I asked.

"That's right. I want to get hired by the National Geography Institute and make m-maps."

To each his own, I figured. Up till then I'd never given a thought to what kind of people want to make maps—and why in the world they would. You have to admit, though, that it's a little weird for someone who wanted to work in the Geography Institute to stutter every time he said the word "map." He stuttered only part of the time, sometimes not at all. But when the word "map" came up, so did the stutters.

"What's your major?" he asked me.

“Drama,” I replied.

“Drama? You mean you put on plays?”

“No, I don’t act in plays. I study the scripts. Racine, Ionesco, Shakespeare, guys like that.”

I’ve heard of Shakespeare but not those others, he said. Actually, I didn’t know much about them myself. I was just parroting the course description.

“Anyhow, you like that kind of thing, right?” he asked.

“Not particularly.”

That threw him for a loop. When he got flustered he stuttered worse than usual. I felt like I’d done something awful.

“Any subject’s fine with me,” I hurriedly explained, trying to calm him down. “Indian philosophy, Oriental history, whatever. I just ended up choosing drama. That’s all.”

“I don’t get it,” he insisted, still upset. “In m-m-my case I like m-m-maps, so I’m learning how to make them. That’s why I came all the way to T-T-Tokyo to go to college and had m-m-my parents foot the bill. But you…I don’t g-get it…”

His explanation made more sense than mine. Not worth the effort, I figured, and gave up trying to explain my side of the story. We drew straws to see who’d get the top and bottom bunks. I got the top.

He was tall, with close-cropped hair and prominent cheekbones. He always wore a white shirt and black trousers. When he went to school he invariably wore the school uniform with black shoes, toting a black briefcase. A perfect right-wing student, by the look of it, and certainly the other guys in the dorm tagged him as such. In reality, the guy had zero interest in politics. He just thought it was too much trouble to pick out clothes to wear. The only things that could pique his interest were changes in the shoreline, newly completed tunnels, things like that. Once he got started on those topics he’d go on, stuttering all the while, for a good hour, even two, until you screamed for mercy or fell asleep.

Every morning he was up at six on the dot, the national anthem his alarm clock. So I guess the flag-raising wasn't a complete waste. He dressed and went to wash up, taking an incredibly long time to finish. Made me wonder sometimes if he wasn't taking each tooth out and brushing them individually. Back in the room he smoothed out his towel, hung it on a hanger, and put his toothbrush and soap back on the shelf. Then he'd switch on the radio and start exercising to the morning exercise program.

I was pretty much a night owl, and a heavy sleeper, so when he started up I was usually dead to the world. When he got to the part where he began to leap up and down, I'd bolt out of bed. Every time he jumped up—and believe me he jumped really high—my head would bounce three inches off the pillow. Try sleeping through that.

"I'm really sorry," I said on the fourth day of this, "but I wonder if you could do your exercises on the roof or something. It wakes me up."

"I can't," he replied. "If I do it there, the people on the third floor will complain. This is the first floor, so there isn't anyone below us."

"Well, how about doing it in the courtyard?"

"No way. I don't have a transistor radio so I wouldn't be able to hear the music. You can't expect me to do my exercises without music."

His radio was the kind you had to plug in. I could have lent him my transistor, but it only picked up FM stations.

"Well, at least could you turn the music down and stop jumping? The whole room shakes. I don't want to complain or anything, but…"

"Jumping?" He seemed surprised. "What do you mean, j-jumping?"

"You know, that part where you bounce up and down."

“What are you talking about?”

I could feel a headache coming on. Go ahead, suit yourself, I thought. But once I’d brought it up I couldn’t very well back down. So I started to sing the melody of the NHK radio exercise program, jumping up and down in time to the music.

“See? This part. Isn’t that part of your routine?”

“Uh—yeah. Guess so. I hadn’t noticed.”

“So—,” I said, “any chance you could skip that part? The rest I can put up with.”

“Sorry,” he said, brushing the suggestion aside. “I can’t leave out one part. I’ve been doing this for ten years. Once I start I do it w-without th-thinking. If I leave out one part I wouldn’t b-be able to d-do any of it.”

“Then how about stopping the whole thing?”

“Who do you think you are, bossing me around like that?”

“Come on! I’m not bossing you around. I just want to sleep till eight. If eight’s out of the question I still would like to wake up like normal people. You make me feel like I’m waking up in the middle of a pie-eating contest or something. You follow me here?”

“Yeah, I follow,” he said.

“So what do you think we should do about it?”

“Hey, I got it! Why don’t we get up and exercise together?”

I gave up and went back to sleep. After that he continued his morning routine, never skipping a single day.

She laughed when I told her about my roommate's morning exercises. I hadn't intended it to be funny, but I ended up laughing myself. Her laughter lasted just an instant, and made me realize it'd been a long time since I'd seen her smile.

It was a Sunday afternoon in May. We'd gotten off the train at Yotsuya Station and were walking along the bank beside the railroad tracks in the direction of Ichigaya. The rain had ended around noon, and a southerly breeze had blown away the low-hanging clouds. The leaves on the cherry trees were sharply etched against the sky, and glinted as they shook in the breeze. The sunlight had an early-summer kind of scent. Most of the people we passed had taken off their coats and sweaters and draped them over their shoulders. A young man on a tennis court, dressed only in a pair of shorts, was swinging his racket back and forth. The metal frame sparkled in the afternoon sun. Only two nuns on a bench were still bundled up in winter clothes. Looking at them made me feel maybe summer wasn't just around the corner after all.

Fifteen minutes of walking was all it took for the sweat to start rolling down my back. I yanked off my thick cotton shirt and stripped down to my T-shirt. She rolled the sleeves of her light gray sweatshirt up above her elbows. The sweatshirt was an old one, faded with countless washings. It looked familiar, like I'd seen it sometime, a long time ago.

"Is it fun living with someone?" she asked.

"Hard to say. I haven't been there that long yet."

She stopped in front of the water fountain, sipped a mouthful of water, and wiped her mouth with a handkerchief she took out of her pants pocket. She retied the laces of her tennis shoes.

"I wonder if it'd suit me," she mused.

"You mean living in a dorm?"

“Yes,” she said.

“I don’t know. It’s more trouble than you’d imagine. Lots of rules. Not to mention radio exercises.”

“I guess so,” she said and was lost in thought for a time. Then looked me straight in the eyes. Her eyes were unnaturally limpid. I’d never noticed. They gave me a kind of strange, transparent feeling, like gazing at the sky.

“But sometimes I feel like I should. I mean…,” she said, gazing into my eyes. She bit her lip and looked down. “I don’t know. Forget it.”

End of conversation. She started walking again.

I hadn’t seen her for half a year. She’d gotten so thin I almost didn’t recognize her. Her plump cheeks had thinned out, as had her neck. Not that she struck me as bony or anything. She looked prettier than ever. I wanted to tell her that, but couldn’t figure out how to go about it. So I gave up.

We hadn’t come to Yotsuya for any particular reason. We just happened to run across each other in a train on the Chuo Line. Neither of us had any plans. Let’s get off, she said, and so we did. Left alone, we didn’t have much to talk about. I don’t know why she suggested getting off the train. From the beginning we weren’t exactly brimming with topics to talk about.

After we got off at the station she headed off without a word. I walked after her, trying my best to keep up. There was always a yard or so between us, and I just kept on walking, staring at her back. Occasionally she’d turn around to say something, and I’d come up with a reply of sorts, though most of the time I couldn’t figure out how to respond. I couldn’t catch everything she said, but that didn’t seem to bother her. She just had her say, then turned around again and walked on in silence.

We turned right at Iidabashi, came out next to the Palace moat, then crossed the intersection at Jimbocho, went up the Ochanomizu slope, and cut across Hongo. Then we followed the railroad tracks to Komagome. Quite a walk. By the time we arrived at Komagome it was already getting dark.

“Where are we?” she suddenly asked.

“Komagome,” I said. “We made a big circle.”

“How did we end up here?”

“You brought us. I just played Follow the Leader.”

We dropped in a soba noodle shop close to the station and had a bite to eat. Neither of us said a word from the beginning to the end of the meal. I was exhausted from the hike and felt like I was about to collapse. She just sat there, lost in thought.

Noodles finished, I turned to her. “You’re really in good shape.”

“Surprised? I did cross-country in junior high. And my dad liked to hike in the mountains so ever since I was little I went hiking on Sundays. Even now my legs are pretty buff.”

“I never would have guessed.”

She laughed.

“I’ll take you home,” I said.

“It’s OK. I can get back by myself. Don’t bother.”

“I don’t mind at all,” I said.

“It’s OK. Really. I’m used to going home alone.”

To tell the truth, I was a little relieved she said that. It took more than an hour by train to her apartment, and it'd be a long ride, the two of us sitting there side by side all that time, barely speaking a word to each other. So she ended up going back alone. I felt bad about it, so I paid for our meal.

Just as we were saying goodbye she turned to me and said, "Uh—I wonder, if it isn't too much to ask—if I could see you again? I know there's no real reason for me to ask…"

"No need for any special reason," I said, a little taken aback.

She blushed a little. She could probably feel how surprised I was.

"I can't really explain it well," she said. She rolled the sleeves of her sweatshirt up to her elbows, then rolled them down again. The electric lights bathed the fine down on her arms in a beautiful gold. "Reason's the wrong word. I should have used another word."

She rested both elbows on the table and closed her eyes, as if searching for the right words. But the words didn't come.

"It's all right with me," I said.

"I don't know…These days I just can't seem to say what I mean," she said. "I just can't. Every time I try to say something, it misses the point. Either that or I end up saying the opposite of what I mean. The more I try to get it right the more mixed up it gets. Sometimes I can't even remember what I was trying to say in the first place. It's like my body's split in two and one of me is chasing the other me around a big pillar. We're running circles around it. The other me has the right words, but I can never catch her."

She put her hands on the table and stared into my eyes.

"Do you know what I'm trying to say?"

"Everybody has that kind of feeling sometimes," I said. "You can't express yourself the way you want to, and it annoys you."

Obviously this wasn't what she wanted to hear.

"No, that isn't what I mean," she said, but stopped there.

"I don't mind seeing you again," I said. "I have a lot of free time, and it'd sure be a lot healthier to go on walks than lie around all day."

We left each other at the station. I said goodbye, she said goodbye.

The first time I met her was in the spring of my sophomore year in high school. We were the same age, and she was attending a well-known Christian school. One of my best friends, who happened to be her boyfriend, introduced us. They'd known each other since grade school and lived just down the road from each other.

Like many couples who have known each other since they were young, they didn't have any particular desire to be alone. They were always visiting each other's homes and having dinner together with one of their families. We went on a lot of double dates together, but I never seemed to get anywhere with girls so we usually ended up a trio. Which was fine by me. We each had our parts to play. I played the guest, he the able host, she his pleasant assistant and leading lady.

My friend made a great host. He might have seemed a bit standoffish at times, but basically he was a kind person who treated everyone fairly. He used to kid the two of us—her and me—with the same old jokes over and over. If one of us fell silent, he'd restart the conversation, trying to draw us out. His antenna instantly picked up the mood we were in, and the right words just flowed out. And add to that another talent: he could make the world's most boring person sound fascinating. Whenever I talked with him I felt that way—like my ho-hum life was one big adventure.

The minute he stepped out of the room, though, she and I clammed right up. We had zero in common, and no idea what to talk about. We just sat there, toying with the ashtray, sipping water, waiting impatiently for him to return. Soon as he was back the conversation picked up where it left off.

I saw her again just once, three months after his funeral. There was something we had to discuss, so we met in a coffee shop. But as soon as that was finished we had nothing to say. I started to say something a couple of times, but the conversation just petered out. She sounded upset, like she was angry with me, but I couldn't figure out why. We said goodbye.

Maybe she was angry because the last person to see him alive was me, not her. I shouldn't say this, I know, but I can't help it. I wish I could have traded places with her, but it can't be helped. Once something happens, that's all she wrote—you can never change things back to the way they were.

On that afternoon in May, after school—school wasn't out yet but we'd skipped out—he and I stopped inside a pool hall and played four games. I won the first one, he took the last three. As we'd agreed, the loser paid for the games.

That night he died in his garage. He stuck a rubber hose in the exhaust pipe of his N360, got inside, sealed up the windows with tape, and started the engine. I have no idea how long it took him to die. When his parents got back from visiting a sick friend he was already dead. The car radio was still on, a receipt from a gas station still stuck under the wiper.

He didn't leave any note or clue to his motives. I was the last person to see him alive, so the police called me in for questioning. He didn't act any different from usual, I told them. Seemed the same as always. People who are going to kill themselves don't usually win three games of pool in a row, do they? The police thought both of us were a little suspect. The kind of student who skips out of high school classes to hang out in a pool hall might very well be the kind to commit suicide, they seemed to imply. There was a short article on his death in the paper and that was that. His parents got rid of the car, and for a few days there were white flowers on his desk at school.

When I graduated from high school and went to Tokyo, there was only one thing I felt I had to do: try not to think too much. I willed myself to forget all of it—the green-felt-covered pool tables, his red car, the white flowers on the desk, the smoke rising from the tall chimney of the crematorium, the chunky paperweight in the police interrogation room. Everything. At first it seemed like I could forget, but something remained inside me. Like the air, and I couldn't grasp it. As time passed, though, the air formed itself into a simple, clear shape. Into words. And the words were these:

Death is not the opposite of life, but a part of it.

Say it aloud and it sounds trivial. Just plain common sense. But at the time it didn't hit me as words; it was more like air filling my body. Death was in everything around me—inside the paperweight, inside the four balls on the pool table. As we live, we breathe death into our lungs, like fine particles of dust.

Up till then I'd always thought death existed apart, in a separate realm. Sure, I knew death is inevitable. But you can just as easily turn that around and say that until the day it comes, death has nothing to do with us. Here's life, on this side—and over there is death. What could be more logical?

After my friend died, though, I couldn't think of death in such a naïve way. Death is not the opposite of life. Death is already inside me. I couldn't shake that thought. The death that took my seventeen-year-old friend on that May evening grabbed me, too, in its clutches.

That much I understood, but I didn't want to think about it too much. Which was not an easy task. I was still just eighteen, too young to find some safe, neutral ground to stand on.

After that I dated her once, maybe twice a month. I guess you could call it dating. Can't think of any better word for it.

She was going to a women's college just outside Tokyo, a small school but with a pretty good reputation. Her apartment was just a ten-minute walk from the college. Along the road to the school was a beautiful reservoir that we sometimes took walks around. She didn't seem to have any friends. Same as before, she was pretty quiet. There wasn't much to talk about, so I didn't say much either. We just looked at each other and kept on walking and walking.

Not that we weren't getting anywhere. Around the end of summer vacation, in a very natural way, she started walking next to me, not in front. On and on we walked, side by side—up and down slopes, over bridges, across streets. We weren't headed anywhere in particular, no particular plans. We'd walk for a while, drop by a coffee shop for a cup, and off we'd go again. Like slides being changed in a projector, only the seasons changed. Fall came, and the courtyard of my dorm was covered with fallen zelkova leaves. Pulling on a sweater I could catch the scent of the new season. I went out and bought myself a new pair of suede shoes.

At the end of autumn when the wind turned icy, she began to walk closer to me, rubbing up against my arm. Through my thick duffel coat I could feel her breath. But that was all. Hands stuck deep in the pockets of my coat, I continued to walk on and on. Our shoes both had rubber soles, our footsteps were silent. Only when we crunched over the trampled-down sycamore leaves did we make a sound. It wasn't my arm she wanted, but someone else's. Not my warmth, but the warmth of another. At least that's how it felt at the time.

The guys at the dorm always kidded me whenever she called, or when I went out to see her on Sunday mornings. They thought I'd made a girlfriend. I couldn't explain the situation to them, and there wasn't any reason to, so I just let things stand as they were. Whenever I came back from a date, invariably someone would ask me whether I'd scored. "Can't complain" was my standard reply.

So passed my eighteenth year. The sun rose and set, the flag went up and down. And on Sundays I went on a date with my dead friend's girlfriend. What the hell do you think you're doing? I asked myself. And what comes next? I hadn't the slightest idea. At school I read Claudel's plays, and Racine's, and Eisenstein. I liked their style, but that was it. I made hardly any friends at school, or at the dorm. I was always reading, so people thought I wanted to be a writer. But I didn't. I didn't want to be anything.

I tried to tell her, many times, about these feelings. She of all people should understand. But I could never explain how I felt. It was just like she said—every time I struggled to find the right words, they slipped from my grasp and sank into the murky depths.

On Saturday evenings I sat in the lobby of the dorm where the phones were, waiting for her to call. Sometimes she wouldn't call for three weeks at a stretch, other times two weeks in a row. So I sat on a chair in the lobby, waiting. On Saturday evenings most of the other students went out, and silence descended on the dorm. Gazing at the particles of light in the still space, I struggled to grasp my own feelings. Everyone is looking for something from someone. That much I was sure of. But what comes next, I had no idea. A hazy wall of air rose up before me, just out of reach.

During the winter I had a part-time job at a small record store in Shinjuku. For Christmas I gave her a Henry Mancini record that had one of her favorites on it, the tune "Dear Heart." I wrapped it in paper with a Christmas tree design, and added a pink ribbon. She gave me a pair of woolen mittens she'd knitted. The part for the thumb was a little too short, but they were warm all the same.

She didn't go home for New Year's, and the two of us had dinner over New Year's at her apartment.

A lot of things happened that winter.

At the end of January my roommate was in bed for two days with a temperature of nearly 104. Thanks to which I had to call off a date with her. I couldn't just go out and leave him; he sounded like he was going to die at any minute. And who else would look after him? I bought some ice, wrapped it in a plastic bag to make an ice pack, wiped his sweat away with a cool wet towel, took his temperature every hour. His fever didn't break for a whole day. The second day, though, he leapt out of bed as though nothing had happened. His temperature was back to normal.

"It's weird," he said. "I've never had a fever before in my life."

"Well, you sure had one this time," I told him. I showed him the two free concert tickets that had gone to waste.

"At least they were free," he said.

It snowed a lot in February.

At the end of February I got into a fight with an older guy at the dorm over something stupid, and punched him. He fell over and hit his head on a concrete wall. Fortunately he was OK, but I was called before the dorm head and given a warning. After that, dorm life was never the same.

I turned nineteen and finally became a sophomore. I failed a couple of courses, though. I managed a couple of Bs, the rest Cs and Ds. She was promoted to sophomore, too, but with a much better record—she passed all her classes. The four seasons came and went.

In June she turned twenty. I had trouble picturing her twenty. We always figured the best thing for us was to shuttle back and forth somewhere between eighteen and nineteen. After eighteen comes

nineteen, after nineteen comes eighteen—that we could understand. But now here she was twenty. And the next winter I'd be twenty, too. Only our dead friend would stay forever as he was—an eternal seventeen.

It rained on her birthday. I bought a cake in Shinjuku and took the train to her place. The train was crowded and bounced around something awful; by the time I reached her apartment the cake was a decaying Roman ruin. But we went ahead and put twenty candles on it and lit them. We closed the curtains and turned off the lights, and suddenly we had a real birthday party on our hands. She opened a bottle of wine and we drank it with the crumbled cake, and had a little something to eat.

"I don't know, but it seems kind of idiotic to be twenty," she said. After dinner we cleared away the dishes and sat on the floor drinking the rest of the wine. While I finished one glass, she helped herself to two.

She'd never talked like she did that night. She told me these long stories about her childhood, her school, her family. Terribly involved stories which started with A, then B would enter the picture, leading on to something about C, going on and on and on. There was no end to it. At first I made all the proper noises to show her I was following along, but soon gave up. I put on a record and when it was over, I lifted up the needle and put on another. After I finished all the records, I put the first one back on. Outside it was still pouring. Time passed slowly as her monologue went on without end.

I didn't worry about it, though, until a while later. Suddenly I realized it was eleven p.m. and she'd been talking nonstop for four hours. If I didn't get a move on, I'd miss the last train home. I didn't know what to do. Should I just let her talk till she dropped? Should I break in and put an end to it? After much hesitation, I decided to interrupt. Four hours should be enough, you'd think.

"Well, I'd better get going," I finally said. "Sorry I stayed so late. I'll see you again real soon, OK?"

I wasn't sure whether my words had gotten through. For a short while she was quiet but soon it was back to the monologue. I gave up and lit a cigarette. At this rate, it looked like I'd better go with Plan B. Let the rest take its course.

Before too long, though, she stopped. With a jolt I realized she was finished. It wasn't that she'd finished wanting to talk: her well of words had just dried up. Scraps of words hung there, suspended in midair. She tried to continue, but nothing came out. Something had been lost. Her lips slightly parted, she looked into my eyes with a vague expression. As if she was trying to make out something through an opaque membrane. I couldn't help feeling guilty.

“I didn’t mean to interrupt you,” I said slowly, weighing each word. “But it’s getting late so I thought I’d better be going…”

It took less than a second for the teardrops to run down her cheeks and splash onto one of the record jackets. After the first drops fell, the floodgates burst. Putting her hands on the floor she leaned forward, weeping so much it seemed like she was retching. I gently put my hand out and touched her shoulder; it shook ever so slightly. Almost without thinking, I drew her near me. Head buried in my chest, she sobbed silently, dampening my shirt with her hot breath and tears. Her ten fingers, in search of something, roamed over my back. Cradling her in my left arm, I stroked the fine strands of her hair with my right. For a long while I waited in this pose for her to stop crying. But she didn’t stop.

That night we slept together. That may have been the best response to the situation, maybe not. I don’t know what else I should have done.

I hadn’t slept with a girl for ages. It was her first time with a man. Stupid me, I asked her why she hadn’t slept with him. Instead of answering, she pulled away from me, turned to face the opposite direction, and gazed at the rain outside. I stared at the ceiling and smoked a cigarette.

In the morning the rain had stopped. She was still facing away from me, asleep. Or maybe she was awake all the time, I couldn’t tell. Once again she was enveloped by the same silence of a year before. I looked at her pale back for a while, then gave up and climbed out of bed.

Record jackets lay scattered over the floor; half a dilapidated cake graced the table. It felt like time had skidded to a stop. On her desktop there was a dictionary and a chart of French verb conjugations. A calendar was taped to the wall in front of the desk, a pure white calendar without a mark or writing of any kind.

I gathered up the clothes that had fallen on the floor beside the bed. The front of my shirt was still cold and damp from her tears. I put my face to it and breathed in the fragrance of her hair.

I tore off a sheet from the memo pad on her desk and left a note. Call me soon, I wrote. I left the room, closing the door.

A week passed without a call. She didn't answer her phone, so I wrote her a long letter. I tried to tell her my feelings as honestly as I knew how. There's a lot going on I don't have a clue about, I wrote; I'll try my damnedest to figure it all out, but you've got to understand these things take time. I have no idea where I'm headed—all I know for sure is I don't want to get hung up thinking too deeply about things. The world's too precarious a place for that. Start me mulling over ideas and I'll end up forcing people to do things they hate. I couldn't stand that. I want to see you again very much, but I don't know if that's the right thing to do…

That's the kind of letter I wrote.

I got a reply in the beginning of July. A short letter.

For the time being I've decided to take a year off from college. I say for the time being, but I doubt I'll go back. Taking a leave of absence is just a formality. Tomorrow I'll be moving out of my apartment. I know this will seem pretty abrupt to you, but I've been thinking it over for a long time. I wanted to ask your advice, many times I almost did, but for some reason I couldn't. I guess I was afraid to talk about it.

Please don't worry about everything that's happened. No matter what happened, or didn't happen, this is where we end up. I know this might hurt you, and I'm sorry if it does. What I want to say is I don't want you to blame yourself, or anyone else, over me. This is really something I have to handle on my own. This past year I've been putting it off, and I know you've suffered because of me. Perhaps that's all behind us now.

There's a nice sanatorium in the mountains near Kyoto, and I've decided to stay there for a while. It's less a hospital than a place where you're free to do what you want. I'll write you again someday and tell you more about it. Right now I just can't seem to get the words down. This is the tenth time I've rewritten this letter. I can't find the words to tell you how thankful I am to you for being with me this past year. Please believe me when I say this. I can't say anything more than that. I'll always treasure the record you gave me.

Someday, somewhere in this precarious world, if we meet again I hope I'll be able to tell you much more than I can right now.

Goodbye.

I must have read her letter over a couple of hundred times at least, and every time I was gripped by a terrible sadness. The same kind of disconcerting sadness I felt when she gazed deep into my eyes. I couldn't shake the feeling. It was like the wind, formless and weightless, and I couldn't wrap it around me. Scenery passed slowly before me. People spoke, but their words didn't reach my ears.

On Saturday nights I still sat in the same chair in the dorm lobby. I knew a phone call wouldn't come, but I had no idea what else to do. I turned on the TV set and pretended to watch baseball. And gazed at the indeterminate space between me and the set. I divided that space into two, and again into two. I did this over and over, until I'd made a space so small it could fit in the palm of my hand.

At ten I turned off the TV, went back to my room, and went to sleep.

At the end of that month my roommate gave me a firefly in an instant-coffee jar. Inside were blades of grass, and a bit of water. He'd punched a few tiny air holes in the lid. It was still light out so the firefly looked more like some black bug you'd find at the beach. I peered in the jar and sure enough, a firefly it was. The firefly tried to climb up the slippery side of the glass jar, only to slip back down each time. It'd been a long time since I'd seen one so close up.

“I found it in the courtyard,” my roommate told me. “A hotel down the street let a bunch of fireflies out as a publicity stunt, and it must have made its way over here.” As he talked, he stuffed clothes and notebooks inside a small suitcase. We were already several weeks into summer vacation. I didn’t want to go back home, and he’d had to go out on some fieldwork, so we were just about the only ones left in the dorm. Fieldwork done, though, he was ready to go home.

“Why don’t you give it to a girl?” he added. “Girls like those things.”

“Thanks, good idea,” I said.

After sundown the dorm was silent. The flag was gone, and lights came on in the windows of the cafeteria. There were just a few students left, so only half the lights were lit. The lights on the right were off, the ones on the left were on. You could catch a faint whiff of dinner. Cream stew.

I took the instant-coffee jar with the firefly and went up to the roof. The place was deserted. A white shirt someone had forgotten to take in was pinned to the clothesline, swaying in the evening breeze like a cast-off skin. I climbed the rusty metal ladder in the corner of the roof to the top of the water tower. The cylindrical water tank was still warm from the heat it had absorbed during the day. I sat down in the cramped space, leaned against the railing, and looked down at the moon before me, just a day or two short of full. On the right, I could see the streets of Shinjuku, on the left, Ikebukuro. The headlights of the cars were a brilliant stream of light flowing from one part of the city to another. Like a cloud hanging over the streets, the city was a mix of sounds, a soft, low hum.

The firefly glowed faintly in the bottom of the jar. But its light was too weak, the color too faint. The way I remembered it, fireflies were supposed to give off a crisp, bright light that cuts through the summer darkness. This firefly might be growing weak, might be dying, I figured. Holding the jar by its mouth, I shook it a couple of times to see. The firefly flew for a second and bumped against the glass. But its light was still dim.

Maybe the problem wasn’t with the light, but with my memory. Maybe fireflies’ light wasn’t that bright after all. Was I just imagining it was? Or maybe, when I was a child, the darkness that surrounded me was deeper. I couldn’t remember. I couldn’t even recall when I had last seen a firefly.

What I could remember was the sound of water running in the night. An old brick sluice gate, with a handle you could turn around to open or close it. A narrow stream, with plants covering the surface. All around was pitch black, and hundreds of fireflies flew above the still water. A powdery clump of yellow light blazed above the stream, and shone in the water.

When was that, anyway? And where was it?

I had no idea.

Everything was mixed up, and confused.

I closed my eyes and took a few deep breaths to calm myself. If I kept my eyes shut tight, at any moment my body would be sucked into the summer darkness. It was the first time I'd climbed the water tower after dark. The sound of the wind was clearer than it had ever been. The wind wasn't blowing hard, yet strangely left a clear-cut trace as it rushed by me. Taking its time, night slowly enveloped the earth. The city lights might shine their brightest, but slowly, ever so slowly, night was winning out.

I opened the lid of the jar, took out the firefly, and put it on the edge of the water tower that stuck out an inch or two. It seemed like the firefly couldn't grasp where it was. After making one bumbling circuit of a bolt, it stretched out one leg on top of a scab of loose paint. It tried to go to the right but, finding a dead end, went back to the left. It slowly clambered on top of the bolt and crouched there for a time, motionless, more dead than alive.

Leaning against the railing, I gazed at the firefly. For a long time the two of us sat there without moving. Only the wind, like a stream, brushed past us. In the dark the countless leaves of the zelkova rustled, rubbing against each other.

I waited forever.

A long time later, the firefly took off. As if remembering something, it suddenly spread its wings and in the next instant floated up over the railing and into the gathering dark. Trying to win back lost time, perhaps, it quickly traced an arc beside the water tower. It stopped for a moment, just long enough for its trail of light to blur, then flew off toward the east.

Long after the firefly disappeared, the traces of its light remained within me. In the thick dark behind my closed eyes that faint light, like some lost wandering spirit, continued to roam.

Again and again I stretched my hand out toward that darkness. But my fingers felt nothing. That tiny glow was always just out of reach.

—TRANSLATED BY PHILIP GABRIEL

ufo in kushiro

Five straight days she spent in front of the television, staring at crumbled banks and hospitals, whole blocks of stores in flames, severed rail lines and expressways. She never said a word. Sunk deep in the cushions of the sofa, her mouth clamped shut, she wouldn't answer when Komura spoke to her. She wouldn't shake her head or nod. Komura could not be sure the sound of his voice was even getting through to her.

Komura's wife came from way up north in Yamagata and, as far as he knew, she had no friends or relatives who could have been hurt in Kobe. Yet she stayed rooted in front of the television from morning to night. In his presence, at least, she ate nothing and drank nothing and never went to the toilet. Aside from an occasional flick of the remote control to change the channel, she hardly moved a muscle.

Komura would make his own toast and coffee, and head off to work. When he came home in the evening, he'd fix himself a snack with whatever he found in the refrigerator and eat alone. She'd still be glaring at the late news when he dropped off to sleep. A stone wall of silence surrounded her. Komura gave up trying to break through.

When he came home from work that Sunday, the sixth day, his wife had disappeared.

Komura was a salesman at one of the oldest hi-fi-equipment specialty stores in Tokyo's Akihabara "Electronics Town." He handled top-of-the-line stuff and earned a sizeable commission whenever he made a sale. Most of his clients were doctors, wealthy independent businessmen, and rich provincials. He had been doing this for eight years and had a decent income right from the start. The economy was healthy, real-estate prices were rising, and Japan was overflowing with money. People's wallets were bursting with ten-thousand-yen bills, and everyone was dying to spend them. The most expensive items were the first to sell out.

Komura was tall and slim and a stylish dresser. He was good with people. In his bachelor days he had dated a lot of women. But after getting married, at twenty-six, he found that his desire for sexual adventures simply—and mysteriously—vanished. He hadn't slept with any woman but his wife during the five years of their marriage. Not that the opportunity had never presented itself—but he had lost all interest in fleeting affairs and one-night stands. He much preferred to come home early, have a relaxed meal with his wife, talk with her for a while on the sofa, then go to bed and make love. This was everything he wanted.

Komura's friends and colleagues were puzzled by his marriage. Alongside him with his clean, classic good looks, his wife could not have seemed more ordinary. She was short with thick arms, and she had a dull, even stolid appearance. And it wasn't just physical: there was nothing attractive about her personality either. She rarely spoke and always wore a sullen expression.

Still, though he did not quite understand why, Komura always felt his tension dissipate when he and his wife were together under one roof; it was the only time he could truly relax. He slept well with her, undisturbed by the strange dreams that had troubled him in the past. His erections were hard; his sex life was warm. He no longer had to worry about death or venereal disease or the vastness of the universe.

His wife, on the other hand, disliked Tokyo's crowds and longed for Yamagata. She missed her parents and her two elder sisters, and she would go home to see them whenever she felt the need. Her parents operated a successful inn, which kept them financially comfortable. Her father was crazy about his youngest daughter and happily paid her round-trip fares. Several times, Komura had come home from work to find his wife gone and a note on the kitchen table telling him that she was visiting her parents for a while. He never objected. He just waited for her to come back, and she always did, after a week or ten days, in a good mood.

But the letter his wife left for him when she vanished five days after the earthquake was different: I am never coming back, she had written, then went on to explain, simply but clearly, why she no longer wanted to live with him.

The problem is that you never give me anything, she wrote. Or, to put it more precisely, you have nothing inside you that you can give me. You are good and kind and handsome, but living with you is like living with a chunk of air. It's not entirely your fault, though. There are lots of women who will fall in love with you. But please don't call me. Just get rid of all the stuff I'm leaving behind.

In fact, she hadn't left much of anything behind. Her clothes, her shoes, her umbrella, her coffee mug, her hair dryer: all were gone. She must have packed them in boxes and shipped them out after he left for work that morning. The only things still in the house that could be called "her stuff " were the bike she used for shopping and a few books. The Beatles and Bill Evans CDs that Komura had been collecting since his bachelor days had also vanished.

The next day, he tried calling his wife's parents in Yamagata. His mother-in-law answered the phone and told him that his wife didn't want to talk to him. She sounded somewhat apologetic. She also told him that they would be sending him the necessary forms soon and that he should put his seal on them and send them back right away.

Komura answered that he might not be able to send them “right away.” This was an important matter, and he wanted time to think it over.

“You can think it over all you want, but I know it won’t change anything,” his mother-in-law said.

She was probably right, Komura told himself. No matter how much he thought or waited, things would never be the same. He was sure of that.

Shortly after he had sent the papers back with his seal stamped on them, Komura asked for a week’s paid leave. His boss had a general idea of what had been happening, and February was a slow time of the year, so he let Komura go without a fuss. He seemed on the verge of saying something to Komura, but finally said nothing.

Sasaki, a colleague of Komura’s, came over to him at lunch and said, “I hear you’re taking time off. Are you planning to do something?”

“I don’t know,” Komura said. “What should I do?”

Sasaki was a bachelor, three years younger than Komura. He had a delicate build and short hair, and he wore round, gold-rimmed glasses. A lot of people thought he talked too much and had a rather arrogant air, but he got along well enough with the easygoing Komura.

“What the hell—as long as you’re taking the time off, why not make a nice trip out of it?”

“Not a bad idea,” Komura said.

Wiping his glasses with his handkerchief, Sasaki peered at Komura as if looking for some kind of clue.

“Have you ever been to Hokkaido?” he asked.

“Never.”

“Would you like to go?”

“Why do you ask?”

Sasaki narrowed his eyes and cleared his throat. “To tell you the truth, I’ve got a small package I’d like to send to Kushiro, and I’m hoping you’ll take it there for me. You’d be doing me a big favor, and I’d be glad to pay for a round-trip ticket. I could cover your hotel in Kushiro, too.”

“A small package?”

“Like this,” Sasaki said, shaping a four-inch cube with his hands. “Nothing heavy.”

“Something to do with work?”

Sasaki shook his head. “Not at all,” he said. “Strictly personal. I just don’t want it to get knocked around, which is why I can’t mail it. I’d like you to deliver it by hand, if possible. I really ought to do it myself, but I haven’t got time to fly all the way to Hokkaido.”

“Is it something important?”

His closed lips curling slightly, Sasaki nodded. “It’s nothing fragile, and there are no ‘hazardous materials.’ There’s no need to worry about it. They’re not going to stop you when they X-ray it at the airport. I promise I’m not going to get you in trouble. And it weighs practically nothing. All I’m asking is that you take it along the way you’d take anything else. The only reason I’m not mailing it is I just don’t feel like mailing it.”

Hokkaido in February would be freezing cold, Komura knew, but cold or hot it was all the same to him.

“So who do I give the package to?”

“My sister. My younger sister. She lives up there.”

Komura decided to accept Sasaki's offer. He hadn't thought about how to spend his week off, and making plans now would have been too much trouble. Besides, he had no reason for not wanting to go to Hokkaido. Sasaki called the airline then and there, reserving a ticket to Kushiro. The flight would leave two days later, in the afternoon.

At work the next day, Sasaki handed Komura a box like the ones used for human ashes, only smaller, wrapped in manila paper. Judging from the feel, it was made of wood. As Sasaki had said, it weighed practically nothing. Broad strips of transparent tape went all around the package over the paper. Komura held it in his hands and studied it a few seconds. He gave it a little shake but he couldn't feel or hear anything moving inside.

"My sister will pick you up at the airport. And she'll be arranging a room for you," Sasaki said. "All you have to do is stand outside the gate with the package in your hands where she can see it. Don't worry, the airport's not very big."

Komura left home with the box in his suitcase, wrapped in a thick undershirt. The plane was far more crowded than he had expected. Why were all these people going from Tokyo to Kushiro in the middle of winter? he wondered.

The morning paper was full of earthquake reports. He read it from beginning to end on the plane. The number of dead was rising. Many areas were still without water or electricity, and countless people had lost their homes. Each article reported some new tragedy, but to Komura the details seemed oddly lacking in depth. All sounds reached him as far-off, monotonous echos. The only thing he could give any serious thought to was his wife as she retreated ever farther into the distance.

Mechanically he ran his eyes over the earthquake reports, stopped now and then to think about his wife, then went back to the paper. When he grew tired of this, he closed his eyes and napped. And when he woke, he thought about his wife again. Why had she followed the TV earthquake reports with such intensity, from morning to night, without eating or sleeping? What could she have seen in them?

Two young women wearing overcoats of similar design and color approached Komura at the airport. One was fair-skinned and maybe five feet six, with short hair. The area from her nose to her full upper lip was oddly extended in a way that made Komura think of shorthaired ungulates. Her companion was more like five feet one and would have been quite pretty if her nose hadn't been so small. Her long hair fell straight to her shoulders. Her ears were exposed, and there were two moles on her right earlobe

which were emphasized by the earrings she wore. Both women looked to be in their mid-twenties. They took Komura to a café in the airport.

“I’m Keiko Sasaki,” the taller woman said. “My brother told me how helpful you’ve been to him. This is my friend Shimao.”

“Nice to meet you,” Komura said.

“Hi,” Shimao said.

“My brother tells me your wife recently passed away,” Keiko Sasaki said with a respectful expression.

Komura waited a moment before answering, “No, she didn’t die.”

“I just talked to my brother the day before yesterday. I’m sure he said quite clearly that you’d lost your wife.”

“I did. She divorced me. But as far as I know she’s alive and well.”

“That’s odd. I couldn’t possibly have misheard something so important.” She gave him an injured look. Komura put a small amount of sugar in his coffee and gave it a gentle stir before taking a sip. The liquid was thin, with no taste to speak of, more sign than substance. What the hell am I doing here? he wondered.

“Well, I guess I did mishear it. I can’t imagine how else to explain the mistake,” Keiko Sasaki said, apparently satisfied now. She drew in a deep breath and chewed her lower lip. “Please forgive me. I was very rude.”

“Don’t worry about it. Either way, she’s gone.”

Shimao said nothing while Komura and Keiko spoke, but she smiled and kept her eyes on Komura. She seemed to like him. He could tell from her expression and her subtle body language. A brief silence fell over the three of them.

“Anyway, let me give you the important package I brought,” Komura said. He unzipped his suitcase and pulled the box out of the folds of the thick ski undershirt he had wrapped it in. The thought struck him then: I was supposed to be holding this when I got off the plane. That’s how they were going to recognize me. How did they know who I was?

Keiko Sasaki stretched her hands across the table, her expressionless eyes fixed on the package. After testing its weight, she did as Komura had done and gave it a few shakes by her ear. She flashed him a smile as if to signal that everything was fine, and slipped the box into her oversize shoulder bag.

“I have to make a call,” she said. “Do you mind if I excuse myself for a moment?”

“Not at all,” Komura said. “Feel free.”

Keiko slung the bag over her shoulder and walked off toward a distant phone booth. Komura studied the way she walked. The upper half of her body was still, while everything from the hips down made large, smooth, mechanical movements. He had the strange impression that he was witnessing some moment from the past, shoved with random suddenness into the present.

“Have you been to Hokkaido before?” Shimao asked.

Komura shook his head.

“Yeah, I know. It’s a long way to come.”

Komura nodded, then turned to survey his surroundings. “Funny,” he said, “sitting here like this, it doesn’t feel as if I’ve come all that far.”

“Because you flew. Those planes are too damn fast. Your mind can’t keep up with your body.”

“You may be right.”

“Did you want to make such a long trip?”

“I guess so,” Komura said.

“Because your wife left?”

He nodded.

“No matter how far you travel, you can never get away from yourself,” Shimao said.

Komura was staring at the sugar bowl on the table as she spoke, but then he raised his eyes to hers.

“It’s true,” he said. “No matter how far you travel, you can never get away from yourself. It’s like your shadow. It follows you everywhere.”

Shimao looked hard at Komura. “I’ll bet you loved her, didn’t you?”

Komura dodged the question. “You’re a friend of Keiko Sasaki’s?”

“Right. We do stuff together.”

“What kind of stuff?”

Instead of answering him, Shimao asked, “Are you hungry?”

“I wonder,” Komura said. “I feel kind of hungry and kind of not.”

“Let’s go and eat something warm, the three of us. It’ll help you relax.”

Shimao drove a small four-wheel-drive Subaru. It had to have way over a hundred thousand miles on it, judging from how battered it was. The rear bumper had a huge dent in it. Keiko Sasaki sat next to Shimao, and Komura had the cramped rear seat to himself. There was nothing particularly wrong with Shimao’s driving, but the noise in back was terrible, and the suspension was nearly shot. The automatic transmission slammed into gear whenever it downshifted, and the heater blew hot and cold. Shutting his eyes, Komura felt as if he had been imprisoned in a washing machine.

No snow had been allowed to gather on the streets in Kushiro, but dirty, icy mounds stood at random intervals on both sides of the road. Dense clouds hung low and, although it was not yet sunset, everything was dark and desolate. The wind tore through the city in sharp squeals. There were no pedestrians. Even the traffic lights looked frozen.

“This is one part of Hokkaido that doesn’t get much snow,” Keiko Sasaki explained in a loud voice, glancing back at Komura. “We’re on the coast and the wind is strong, so whatever piles up gets blown away. It’s cold, though, freezing cold. Sometimes it feels like it’s taking your ears off.”

“You hear about drunks who freeze to death sleeping on the street,” Shimao said.

“Do you get bears around here?” Komura asked.

Keiko giggled and turned to Shimao. “Bears, he says.”

Shimao gave the same kind of giggle.

“I don’t know much about Hokkaido,” Komura said by way of explanation.

“I know a good story about bears,” Keiko said. “Right, Shimao?”

“A great story!” Shimao said.

But their talk broke off at that point, and neither of them told the bear story. Komura didn't ask to hear it. Soon they reached their destination, a big noodle shop on the highway. They parked in the lot and went inside. Komura had a beer and a hot bowl of ramen noodles. The place was dirty and empty, and the chairs and tables were rickety, but the ramen was excellent, and when he had finished eating, Komura did, in fact, feel a little more relaxed.

"Tell me, Mr. Komura," Keiko Sasaki said, "do you have something you want to do in Hokkaido? My brother tells me you're going to spend a week here."

Komura thought about it for a moment, but couldn't come up with anything he wanted to do.

"How about a hot spring? Would you like a nice, long soak in a tub? I know a little country place not far from here."

"Not a bad idea," Komura said.

"I'm sure you'd like it. It's really nice. No bears or anything."

The two women looked at each other and laughed again.

"Do you mind if I ask you about your wife?" Keiko said.

"I don't mind."

"When did she leave?"

"Hmm . . . five days after the earthquake, so that's more than two weeks ago now."

"Did it have something to do with the earthquake?"

Komura shook his head. "Probably not. I don't think so."

“Still, I wonder if things like that aren’t connected somehow,” Shimao said with a tilt of the head.

“Yeah,” Keiko said. “It’s just that you can’t see how.”

“Right,” Shimao said. “Stuff like that happens all the time.”

“Stuff like what?” Komura asked.

“Like, say, what happened with somebody I know,” Keiko said.

“You mean Mr. Saeki?” Shimao asked.

“Exactly,” Keiko said. “There’s this guy—Saeki. He lives in Kushiro. He’s about forty. A hairstylist. His wife saw a UFO last year, in the autumn. She was driving on the edge of town all by herself in the middle of the night and she saw a huge UFO land in a field. Whoosh! Like in Close Encounters. A week later, she left home. They weren’t having any domestic problems or anything. She just disappeared and never came back.”

“Into thin air,” Shimao said.

“And it was because of the UFO?” Komura asked.

“I don’t know why,” Keiko said. “She just walked out. No note or anything. She had two kids in elementary school, too. The whole week before she left, all she’d do was tell people about the UFO. You couldn’t get her to stop. She’d go on and on about how big and beautiful it was.”

She paused to let the story sink in.

“My wife left a note,” Komura said. “And we don’t have any kids.”

“So your situation’s a little better than Saeki’s,” Keiko said.

“Yeah. Kids make a big difference,” Shimao said, nodding.

“Shimao’s father left home when she was seven,” Keiko explained with a frown. “Ran off with his wife’s younger sister.”

“All of a sudden. One day,” Shimao said, smiling.

A silence settled over the group.

“Maybe Mr. Saeki’s wife didn’t run away but was captured by aliens from the UFO,” Komura said to smooth things over.

“It’s possible,” Shimao said with a somber expression. “You hear stories like that all the time.”

“You mean like you’re-walking-along-the-street-and-a-bear-eats-you kind of thing?” Keiko asked. The two women laughed again.

The three of them left the noodle shop and went to a nearby love hotel. It was on the edge of town, on a street where love hotels alternated with gravestone dealers. The hotel Shimao had chosen was an odd building, constructed to look like a European castle. A triangular red flag flew on its highest tower.

Keiko got the key at the front desk, and the three of them took the elevator to the room. The windows were tiny, compared with the absurdly big bed. Komura hung his down jacket on a hanger and went into the toilet. During the few minutes he was in there, the two women managed to run a bath, dim the lights, check the heat, turn on the television, examine the delivery menus from local restaurants, test the light switches at the head of the bed, and check the contents of the minibar.

“The owners are friends of mine,” Keiko said. “I had them get their biggest room ready. It is a love hotel, but don’t let that bother you. You’re not bothered, are you?”

“Not at all,” Komura said.

“I thought this would make a lot more sense than sticking you in a cramped little room in some cheap business hotel by the station.”

“You may be right,” Komura said.

“Why don’t you take a bath? I filled the tub.”

Komura did as he was told. The tub was huge. He felt uneasy soaking in it alone. The couples who came to this hotel probably took baths together.

When he emerged from the bathroom, Komura was surprised to find that Keiko Sasaki had left. Shimao was still there, drinking beer and watching TV.

“Keiko went home,” Shimao said. “She wanted me to apologize and tell you that she’ll be back tomorrow morning. Do you mind if I stay here a little while and have a beer?”

“Fine,” Komura said.

“You’re sure it’s no problem? Like, you want to be alone or you can’t relax if somebody else is around or something?”

Komura insisted it was no problem. Drinking a beer and drying his hair with a towel, he watched TV with Shimao. It was a news special on the Kobe earthquake. The usual images appeared again and again: tilted buildings, buckled streets, old women weeping, confusion and aimless anger. When a commercial came on, Shimao used the remote to switch off the TV.

“Let’s talk,” she said, “as long as we’re here.”

“Fine,” Komura said.

“Hmm, what should we talk about?”

“In the car, you and Keiko said something about a bear, remember? You said it was a great story.”

“Oh yeah,” she said, nodding. “The bear story.”

“You want to tell it to me?”

“Sure, why not?”

Shimao got a fresh beer from the minibar and filled both their glasses.

“It’s a little raunchy,” she said. “You don’t mind?”

Komura shook his head.

“I mean, some men don’t like hearing a woman tell certain kinds of stories.”

“I’m not like that.”

“It’s something that actually happened to me, so it’s a little embarrassing.”

“I’d like to hear it if you’re OK with it.”

“I’m OK, if you’re OK.”

“I’m OK,” Komura said.

“Three years ago—back around the time I entered junior college—I was dating this guy. He was a year older than me, a college student. He was the first guy I had sex with. One day the two of us were out hiking—in the mountains way up north.”

She took a sip of beer.

“It was fall, and the hills were full of bears. That’s the time of year when the bears are getting ready to hibernate, so they’re out looking for food and they’re really dangerous. Sometimes they attack people. They did an awful job on one hiker just three days before we went out. So somebody gave us a bell to carry—about the same size as a wind-bell. You’re supposed to shake it when you walk so the bears know there are people around and won’t come out. Bears don’t attack people on purpose. I mean, they’re pretty much vegetarians. They don’t have to attack people. What happens is they suddenly bump into people in their territory and they get surprised or angry and they attack out of reflex. So if you walk along ringing your bell, they’ll avoid you. Get it?”

“I get it.”

“So that’s what we were doing, walking along and ringing the bell. We got to this place where there was nobody else around, and all of a sudden he said he wanted to . . . do it. I kind of liked the idea, too, so I said OK and we went into this bushy place off the trail where nobody could see us, and we spread out a piece of plastic. But I was afraid of the bears. I mean, think how awful it would be to have some bear attack you from behind and kill you when you’re having sex! I would never want to die that way. Would you?”

Komura agreed that he would not want to die that way.

“So there we were, shaking the bell with one hand and having sex. Kept it up from start to finish. Ding-a-ling! Ding-a-ling! ”

“Which one of you shook the bell?”

“We took turns. We’d trade off when our hands got tired. It was so weird, shaking this bell the whole time we were doing it! I think about it sometimes even now, when I’m having sex, and I start laughing.”

Komura gave a little laugh, too.

Shimao clapped her hands. “Oh, that’s wonderful,” she said. “You can laugh after all!”

“Of course I can laugh,” Komura said, but come to think of it, this was the first time he had laughed in quite a while. When was the last time?

“Do you mind if I take a bath, too?” Shimao asked.

“Fine,” he said.

While she was bathing, Komura watched a variety show emceed by some comedian with a loud voice. He didn’t find it the least bit funny, but he couldn’t tell whether that was the show’s fault or his own. He drank a beer and opened a pack of nuts from the minibar. Shimao stayed in the bath for a very long time. Finally, she came out wearing nothing but a towel and sat on the edge of the bed. Dropping the towel, she slid in between the sheets like a cat and lay there looking straight at Komura.

“When was the last time you did it with your wife?” she asked.

“At the end of December, I think.”

“And nothing since?”

“Nothing.”

“Not with anybody?”

Komura closed his eyes and shook his head.

“You know what I think,” Shimao said. “You need to lighten up and learn to enjoy life a little more. I mean, think about it: tomorrow there could be an earthquake; you could be kidnapped by aliens; you could be eaten by a bear. Nobody knows what’s going to happen.”

“Nobody knows what’s going to happen,” Komura echoed.

“Ding-a-ling,” Shimao said.

After several failed attempts to have sex with Shimao, Komura gave up. This had never happened to him before.

“You must have been thinking about your wife,” Shimao said.

“Yup,” Komura said, but in fact what he had been thinking about was the earthquake. Images of it had come to him one after another, as if in a slide show, flashing on the screen and fading away. Highways, flames, smoke, piles of rubble, cracks in streets. He couldn’t break the chain of silent images.

Shimao pressed her ear against his naked chest.

“These things happen,” she said.

“Uh-huh.”

“You shouldn’t let it bother you.”

“I’ll try not to,” Komura said.

“Men always let it bother them, though.”

Komura said nothing.

Shimao played with his nipple.

“You said your wife left a note, didn’t you?”

“I did.”

“What did it say?”

“That living with me was like living with a chunk of air.”

“A chunk of air?” Shimao tilted her head back to look up at Komura. “What does that mean?”

“That there’s nothing inside me, I guess.”

“Is it true?”

“Could be,” Komura said. “I’m not sure, though. I may have nothing inside me, but what would something be?”

“Yeah, really, come to think of it. What would something be? My mother was crazy about salmon skin. She always used to wish there were a kind of salmon made of nothing but skin. So there may be some cases when it’s better to have nothing inside. Don’t you think?”

Komura tried to imagine what a salmon made of nothing but skin would be like. But even supposing there were such a thing, wouldn’t the skin itself be the something inside? Komura took a deep breath, raising and then lowering Shimao’s head on his chest.

“I’ll tell you this, though,” Shimao said, “I don’t know whether you’ve got nothing or something inside you, but I think you’re terrific. I’ll bet the world is full of women who would understand you and fall in love with you.”

“It said that, too.”

“What? Your wife’s note?”

“Uh-huh.”

“No kidding,” Shimao said, lowering her head to Komura’s chest again. He felt her earring against his skin like a secret object.

“Come to think of it,” Komura said, “what’s the something inside that box I brought up here?”

“Is it bothering you?”

“It wasn’t bothering me before. But now, I don’t know, it’s starting to.”

“Since when?”

“Just now.”

“All of a sudden?”

“Yeah, once I started thinking about it, all of a sudden.”

“I wonder why it’s started to bother you now, all of a sudden?”

Komura glared at the ceiling for a minute to think. “I wonder.”

They listened to the moaning of the wind. The wind: it came from someplace unknown to Komura, and it blew past to someplace unknown to him.

“I’ll tell you why,” Shimao said in a low voice. “It’s because that box contains the something that was inside you. You didn’t know that when you carried it here and gave it to Keiko with your own hands. Now, you’ll never get it back.”

Komura lifted himself from the mattress and looked down at the woman. Tiny nose, moles on the earlobe. In the room’s deep silence, his heart beat with a loud, dry sound. His bones cracked as he leaned forward. For one split second, Komura realized that he was on the verge of committing an act of overwhelming violence.

“Just kidding,” Shimao said when she saw the look on his face. “I said the first thing that popped into my head. It was a lousy joke. I’m sorry. Try not to let it bother you. I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

Komura forced himself to calm down and, after a glance around the room, sank his head into his pillow again. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. The huge bed stretched out around him like a nocturnal sea. He heard the freezing wind. The fierce pounding of his heart shook his bones.

“Are you starting to feel a little as if you’ve come a long way?” Shimao asked.

“Hmm. Now I feel as if I’ve come a very long way,” Komura answered honestly.

Shimao traced a complicated design on Komura’s chest with her fingertip, as if casting a magic spell.

“But really,” she said, “you’re just at the beginning.”

Haruki Murakami: On seeing the 100% perfect girl one beautiful April morning

One beautiful April morning, on a narrow side street in Tokyo's fashionable Harujuku neighborhood, I walked past the 100% perfect girl.

Tell you the truth, she's not that good-looking. She doesn't stand out in any way. Her clothes are nothing special. The back of her hair is still bent out of shape from sleep. She isn't young, either - must be near thirty, not even close to a "girl," properly speaking. But still, I know from fifty yards away: She's the 100% perfect girl for me. The moment I see her, there's a rumbling in my chest, and my mouth is as dry as a desert.

Maybe you have your own particular favorite type of girl - one with slim ankles, say, or big eyes, or graceful fingers, or you're drawn for no good reason to girls who take their time with every meal. I have my own preferences, of course. Sometimes in a restaurant I'll catch myself staring at the girl at the next table to mine because I like the shape of her nose.

But no one can insist that his 100% perfect girl correspond to some preconceived type. Much as I like noses, I can't recall the shape of hers - or even if she had one. All I can remember for sure is that she was no great beauty. It's weird.

"Yesterday on the street I passed the 100% girl," I tell someone.

"Yeah?" he says. "Good-looking?"

"Not really."

"Your favorite type, then?"

"I don't know. I can't seem to remember anything about her - the shape of her eyes or the size of her breasts."

"Strange."

"Yeah. Strange."

"So anyhow," he says, already bored, "what did you do? Talk to her?

Follow her?"

"Nah. Just passed her on the street."

She's walking east to west, and I west to east. It's a really nice April morning.

Wish I could talk to her. Half an hour would be plenty: just ask her about herself, tell her about myself, and - what I'd really like to do - explain to her the complexities of fate that have led to our passing each other on a side street in Harajuku on a beautiful April morning in 1981. This was something sure to be crammed full of warm secrets, like an antique clock build when peace filled the world.

After talking, we'd have lunch somewhere, maybe see a Woody Allen movie, stop by a hotel bar for cocktails. With any kind of luck, we might end up in bed.

Potentiality knocks on the door of my heart.

Now the distance between us has narrowed to fifteen yards.

How can I approach her? What should I say?

"Good morning, miss. Do you think you could spare half an hour for a little conversation?"

Ridiculous. I'd sound like an insurance salesman.

"Pardon me, but would you happen to know if there is an all-night cleaners in the neighborhood?"

No, this is just as ridiculous. I'm not carrying any laundry, for one thing. Who's going to buy a line like that?

Maybe the simple truth would do. "Good morning. You are the 100% perfect girl for me."

No, she wouldn't believe it. Or even if she did, she might not want to talk to me. Sorry, she could say, I might be the 100% perfect girl for you, but you're not the 100% boy for me. It could happen. And if I found myself in that situation, I'd probably go to pieces. I'd never recover from the shock. I'm thirty-two, and that's what growing older is all about.

We pass in front of a flower shop. A small, warm air mass touches my skin. The asphalt is damp, and I catch the scent of roses. I can't bring myself to speak to her. She wears a white sweater, and in her right hand she holds a crisp white envelope lacking only a stamp. So: She's written somebody a letter, maybe spent the whole night writing, to judge from the sleepy look in her eyes. The envelope could contain every secret she's ever had.

I take a few more strides and turn: She's lost in the crowd.

Now, of course, I know exactly what I should have said to her. It would have been a long speech, though, far too long for me to have delivered it properly. The ideas I come up with are never very practical.

Oh, well. It would have started "Once upon a time" and ended "A sad story, don't you think?"

Once upon a time, there lived a boy and a girl. The boy was eighteen and the girl sixteen. He was not unusually handsome, and she was not especially beautiful. They were just an ordinary lonely boy and an ordinary lonely girl, like all the others. But they believed with their whole hearts that somewhere in the world there lived the 100% perfect boy and the 100% perfect girl for them. Yes, they believed in a miracle. And that miracle actually happened.

One day the two came upon each other on the corner of a street.

"This is amazing," he said. "I've been looking for you all my life. You may not believe this, but you're the 100% perfect girl for me."

"And you," she said to him, "are the 100% perfect boy for me, exactly as I'd pictured you in every detail. It's like a dream."

They sat on a park bench, held hands, and told each other their stories hour after hour. They were not lonely anymore. They had found and been found by their 100% perfect other. What a wonderful thing it is to find and be found by your 100% perfect other. It's a miracle, a cosmic miracle.

As they sat and talked, however, a tiny, tiny sliver of doubt took root in their hearts: Was it really all right for one's dreams to come true so easily?

And so, when there came a momentary lull in their conversation, the boy said to the girl, "Let's test ourselves - just once. If we really are each other's 100% perfect lovers, then sometime, somewhere, we will meet again without fail. And when that happens, and we know that we are the 100% perfect ones, we'll marry then and there. What do you think?"

"Yes," she said, "that is exactly what we should do."

And so they parted, she to the east, and he to the west.

The test they had agreed upon, however, was utterly unnecessary. They should never have undertaken it, because they really and truly were each other's 100% perfect lovers, and it was a miracle that they had ever met. But it was impossible for them to know this, young as they were. The cold, indifferent waves of fate proceeded to toss them unmercifully.

One winter, both the boy and the girl came down with the season's terrible influenza, and after drifting for weeks between life and death they lost all memory of their earlier years. When they awoke, their heads were as empty as the young D. H. Lawrence's piggy bank.

They were two bright, determined young people, however, and through their unremitting efforts they were able to acquire once again the knowledge and feeling that qualified them to return as full-fledged members of society. Heaven be praised, they became truly upstanding citizens who knew how to transfer from one subway line to another, who were fully capable of sending a special-delivery letter at the post office. Indeed, they even experienced love again, sometimes as much as 75% or even 85% love.

Time passed with shocking swiftness, and soon the boy was thirty-two, the girl thirty.

One beautiful April morning, in search of a cup of coffee to start the day, the boy was walking from west to east, while the girl, intending to send a special-delivery letter, was walking from east to west, but along the same narrow street in the Harajuku neighborhood of Tokyo. They passed each other in the very center of the street. The faintest gleam of their lost memories glimmered for the briefest moment in their hearts. Each felt a rumbling in their chest. And they knew:

She is the 100% perfect girl for me.

He is the 100% perfect boy for me.

But the glow of their memories was far too weak, and their thoughts no longer had the clarity of fourteen years earlier. Without a word, they passed each other, disappearing into the crowd. Forever.

A sad story, don't you think?

Yes, that's it, that is what I should have said to her.

Chattery Teeth
by Stephen King

Looking into the display case was like looking through a dirty pane of glass into the middle third of his boyhood, those years from seven to fourteen when he had been fascinated by stuff like this. Hogan leaned closer, forgetting the rising whine of the wind outside and the gritty spick-spack sound of sand hitting the windows. The case was full of fabulous junk, most of it undoubtedly made in Taiwan and Korea, but there was no doubt at all about the pick of the litter. They were the largest Chattery Teeth he'd ever seen. They were also the only ones he'd ever seen with feet -- big orange cartoon shoes with white spats. A real scream.

Hogan looked up at the fat woman behind the counter. She was wearing a tee-shirt that said NEVADA IS GOD'S COUNTRY on top (the words swelling and receding across her enormous breasts) and about an acre of jeans on the bottom. She was selling a pack of cigarettes to a pallid young man whose long blonde hair had been tied back in a ponytail with a sneaker shoelace. The young man, who had the face of an intelligent lab-rat, was paying in small change, counting it laboriously out of a grimy hand.

"Pardon me, ma'am?" Hogan asked.

She looked at him briefly, and then the back door banged open. A skinny man wearing a bandanna over his mouth and nose came in. The wind swirled desert grit around him in a cyclone and rattled the pin-up cutie on the Valvoline calendar thumb-tacked to the wall. The newcomer was pulling a handcart. Three wire-mesh cages were stacked on it. There was a tarantula in the one on top.

In the cages below it were a pair of rattlesnakes. They were coiling rapidly back and forth and shaking their rattles in agitation.

"Shut the damn door, Scooter, was you born in a barn?" the woman behind the counter bawled.

He glanced at her briefly, eyes red and irritated from the blowing sand. "Gimme a chance, woman! Can't you see I got my hands full here? Ain't you got eyes? Christ!" He reached over the dolly and slammed the door. The dancing sand fell dead to the floor and he pulled the dolly toward the storeroom at the back, still muttering.

"That the last of em?" the woman asked.

"All but Wolf." He pronounced it Woof. "I'm gonna stick him in the lean-to back of the gas-pumps."

"You ain't not!" the big woman retorted. "Wolfs our star attraction, in case you forgot. You get him in here. Radio says this is gonna get worse before it gets better. A lot worse."

"Just who do you think you're foolin?" The skinny man (her husband, Hogan supposed) stood looking at her with a kind of weary truculence, his hands on his hips. "Damn thing ain't nothin but a Minnesota coydog, as anyone who took more'n half a look could plainly see."

The wind gusted, moaning along the eaves of Scooter's Grocery & Roadside Zoo, throwing sheaves of dry sand against the windows. It was getting worse, and Hogan could only hope he would be able to drive out of it. He had promised Lita and Jack he'd be home by seven, eight at the latest, and he was a man who liked to keep his promises.

"Just take care of him," the big woman said, and turned irritably back to the rat-faced boy.

"Ma'am?" Hogan said again.

"Just a minute, hold your water," Mrs. Scooter said. She spoke with the air of one who is all but drowning in impatient customers, although Hogan and the rat-faced boy were in fact the only ones present.

"You're a dime short, Sunny Jim," she told the blonde kid after a quick glance at the coins on the counter-top.

The boy regarded her with wide, innocent eyes. "I don't suppose you'd trust me for it?"

"I doubt if the Pope of Rome smokes Merit 100's, but if he did, I wouldn't trust him for it."

The look of wide-eyed innocence disappeared. The rat-faced boy looked at her with an expression of sullen dislike for a moment (this expression looked much more at home on the kid's face, Hogan thought), and then slowly began to investigate his pockets again.

Just forget it and get out of here, Hogan thought. You'll never make it to L.A. by

eight if you don't get moving, windstorm or no windstorm. This is one of those places that have only two speeds -- slow and stop. You got your gas and paid for it, so just count yourself ahead of the game and get back on the road before the storm gets any worse.
He almost followed his left-brain's good advice... and then he looked at the Chattery Teeth in the display case again, the Chattery Teeth standing there on those big orange cartoon shoes. And white spats! They were the real killer. Jack would love them, his right brain told him. And tell the truth, Bill, old buddy; if it turns out Jack doesn't want them, you do. You may see another set of Jumbo Chattery Teeth at some point in your life, any thing's possible, but ones that also walk on big orange feet? Huh-uh. I really doubt it.
It was the right brain he listened to that time... and everything else followed.
The kid with the ponytail was still going through his pockets; the sullen expression on his face deepened each time he came up dry. Hogan was no fan of smoking -- his father, a two-pack-a-day man, had died of lung cancer -- but he had visions of still waiting to be waited on an hour from now. "Hey! Kid!"
The kid looked around and Hogan flipped him a quarter.
"Hey! Thanks, m'man!"
"Think nothing of it."
The kid concluded his transaction with the beefy Mrs. Scooter, put the cigarettes in one pocket, and dropped the remaining fifteen cents in another. He made no offer of the change to Hogan, who hadn't really expected it. Boys and girls like this were legion these days -- they cluttered the highways from coast to coast, blowing along like tumbleweeds. Perhaps they had always been there, but to Hogan the current breed seemed both unpleasant and a little scary, like the rattlers Scooter was now storing in the back room.
The snakes in piss-ant little roadside menageries like this one couldn't kill you; their venom was milked twice a week and sold to clinics that made drugs with it. You could count on that just as you could count on the winos to show up at the local plasma bank every Tuesday and Thursday. But the snakes could still give you one hell of a painful bite if you got too close and then made them mad. That. Hogan thought, was what the current breed of road-kids had in common with them.
Mrs. Scooter came drifting down the counter, the words on her tee-shirt drifting up and down and side to side as she did. "Whatcha need?" she asked.-Her tone was still truculent. The West had a reputation for friendliness, and during the twenty years he had spent selling there Hogan had come to feel the reputation was more often than not deserved, but this woman had all the charm of a Brooklyn shopkeeper who has been stuck up three times in the last two weeks. Hogan supposed that her kind was becoming as much a part of the scene in the New West as the road-kids. Sad but true.
"How much are these?" Hogan asked, pointing through the dirty glass at what the sign identified as JUMBO CHATTERY TEETH -- THEY WALK! The case was filled with novelty items
 -- Chinese finger-pullers, Pepper Gum, Dr. Wacky's Sneezing Powder, cigarette loads (A Laff Riot! according to the package
 -- Hogan guessed they were more likely a great way to get your teeth knocked out), X-ray glasses, plastic vomit (So Realistic!), joy-buzzers.
"I dunno," Mrs. Scooter said. "Where's the box, I wonder?"
The teeth were the only item in the case that wasn't packaged, but they certainly were jumbo, Hogan thought -- super-jumbo, in fact, five times the size of the sets of wind-up teeth which had so amused him as a kid growing up in Maine. Take away the joke feet and they would look like the teeth of some fallen Biblical giant -- the cuspids were big white blocks and the canine teeth looked like tentpegs sunk in the improbably red plastic gums. A key jutted from one gum. The teeth were held together in a clench by a thick rubber band.
Mrs. Scooter blew the dust from the Chattery Teeth, then turned them over, looking on the soles of the orange shoes for a price sticker. She didn't find one. "I don't know," she said crossly, eyeing Hogan as if he might have taken the sticker off himself. "Only Scooter'd buy a piece of trash like this here. Been around since Noah got off the boat. I'll have to ask him."
Hogan was suddenly tired of the woman and of Scooter's Grocery & Roadside Zoo. They were great Chattery Teeth, and Jack would undoubtedly love them, but he had promised -- eight at the latest.
"Never mind," he said. "It was just an -- "

"Them teeth was supposed to go for $15.95, if you c'n believe it," Scooter said from behind them. "They ain't just plastic -- those're metal teeth painted white. They could give you a helluva bite if they worked... but she dropped 'em on the floor two-three years ago when she was dustm the inside of the case and they're busted."

"Oh," Hogan said, disappointed. "That's too bad. I never saw a pair with, you know, feet."

"There are lots of 'em like that now," Scooter said. "They sell 'em at the novelty stores in Vegas and Dry Springs. But I never saw a set as big as those. It was funnier'n hell to watch 'em walk across the floor, snappin like a crocodile. Shame the old lady dropped 'em."

Scooter glanced at her, but his wife was looking out at the blowing sand. There was an expression on her face which Hogan couldn't quite decipher -- was it sadness, or disgust, or both?

Scooter looked back at Hogan. "I could let 'em go for three-fifty, if you wanted 'em. We're gettin rid of the novelties, anyway. Gonna put rental videotapes in that counter." He closed the storeroom door. The bandanna was now pulled down, lying on the dusty front of his shirt. His face was haggard and too thin. Hogan saw what might have been the shadow of serious illness lurking just beneath his desert tan.

"You could do no such a thing, Scooter!" the big woman snapped, and turned toward him... almost turned on him.

"Shutcha head,'' Scooter replied. "You make my fillins ache."

"I told you to get Wolf -- "

"Myra, if you want him back there in the storeroom, go get him yourself." He began to advance on her, and Hogan was surprised -- almost wonder-struck, in fact -- when she gave ground. "Ain't nothm but a Minnesota coydog anyway. Three dollars even, friend, and those Chattery Teeth are yours. Throw in another buck and you can take Myra's Woof, too. If you got five, I'll deed the whole place to you. Ain't worth a dogfart since the turnpike went through, anyway."

The long-haired kid was standing by the door, tearing the top from the pack of cigarettes Hogan had helped buy and watching this small comic opera with an expression of mean amusement. His small gray-green eyes gleamed, flicking back and forth between Scooter and his wife.

"Hell with you," Myra said gruffly, and Hogan realized she was close to tears. "If you won't get my sweet baby, I will." She stalked past him, almost striking him with one boulder-sized breast. Hogan thought it would have knocked the little man flat if it had connected.

"Look," Hogan said, "I think I'll just shove along."

"Aw, hell," Scooter said. "Don't mind Myra. I got cancer and she's got the change, and it ain't my problem she's havin the most trouble livin with. Take the darn teeth. Bet you got a boy might like 'em. Besides, it's probably just a cog knocked a little off-track. I bet a man who was handy could get 'em walkin and chompin again."

He looked around, his expression helpless and musing. Outside, the wind rose to a brief, thin shriek as the kid opened the door and slipped out. He had decided the show was over, apparently. A cloud of fine grit swirled down the middle aisle, between the canned goods and the dog food.

"I was pretty handy myself, at one time," Scooter confided.

Hogan did not reply for a long moment. He could not think of anything -- quite literally not one single thing -- to say. He looked down at the Jumbo Chattery Teeth standing on the scratched and cloudy display case, nearly desperate to break the silence (now that Scooter was standing right in front of him, he could see that the man's eyes were huge and dark, glittering with pain and some heavy dope... Darvon, or perhaps morphine), and he spoke the first words that popped into his head: "Gee, they don't look broken."

He picked the teeth up. They were metal, all right -- too heavy to be anything else -- and when he looked through the slightly parted jaws, he was surprised at the size of the mainspring that ran the thing. He supposed it would take one that size to make the teeth not only chatter but walk, as well. What had Scooter said? They could give you a helluva bite if they worked. Hogan gave the thick rubber band an experimental tweak, then stripped it off. He was still looking at the teeth so he wouldn't have to look into Scooter's dark, pain-haunted eyes. He grasped the key and at last he risked a look up. He was relieved to see that now the thin man was smiling a little.

"Do you mind?" Hogan asked.

"Not me, pilgrim -- let er rip."

Hogan grinned and turned the key. At first it was all right; there was a series of small, ratcheting clicks, and he could see the mainspring winding up. Then, on the third turn, there was a spronk! noise from inside, and the key simply slid bonelessly around in its hole.

"See?"

"Yes," Hogan said. He set the teeth down on the counter. They stood there on their unlikely orange feet and did nothing.

Scooter poked the clenched molars on the lefthand side with the tip of one horny finger. The jaws of the teeth opened. One orange foot rose and took a dreamy half-step forward. Then the teeth stopped moving and the whole rig fell sideways. The Chattery Teeth came to rest on the wind-up key, a slanted, disembodied grin out here in the middle of no-man's-land. After a moment or two, the big teeth came together again with a slow click. That was all.

Hogan, who had never had a premonition in his life, was suddenly filled with a clear certainty that was both eerie and sickening. A year from now, this man will have been eight months in his grave, and if someone exhumed his coffin and pried off the lid, they'd see teeth just like these poking out of his dried-out dead face like an enamel trap.

He glanced up into Scooter's eyes, glittering like dark gems in tarnished settings, and suddenly it was no longer a question of wanting to get out of here; he had to get out of here.

"Well," he said (hoping frantically that Scooter would not stick out his hand to be shaken), "gotta go. Best of luck to you, sir."

Scooter did put his hand out, but not to be shaken. Instead, he snapped the rubber band back around the Chattery Teeth (Hogan had no idea why, since they didn't work), set them on their funny cartoon feet, and pushed them across the scratched surface of the counter. "Thank you kindly," he said. "And take these teeth. No charge."

"Oh... well, thanks, but I couldn't..."

"Sure you can," Scooter said. "Take 'em and give 'em to your boy. He'll get a kick out of 'em standin on the shelf in his room even if they don't work. I know a little about boys. Raised up three of 'em."

"How did you know I had a son?" Hogan asked.

Scooter winked. The gesture was terrifying and pathetic at the same time. "Seen it in your face," he said. "Go on, take 'em."

The wind gusted again, this time hard enough to make the boards of the building moan. The sand hitting the windows sounded like fine snow. Hogan picked the teeth up by the plastic feet, surprised all over again by how heavy they were.

"Here." Scooter produced a paper bag, almost as wrinkled and crumpled about the edges as his own face, from beneath the counter. "Stick 'em in here. That's a real nice sportcoat you got there. If you carry them choppers in the pocket, it'll get pulled out of shape."

He put the bag on the counter as if he understood how little Hogan wanted to touch him.

"Thanks," Hogan said. He put the Chattery Teeth in the bag and rolled down the top. "Jack thanks you, too -- he's my son."

Scooter smiled, revealing a set of teeth just as false (but nowhere near as large) as the ones in the paper bag. "My pleasure, mister. You drive careful until you get out of the blow. You'll be fine once you get in the foothills."

"I know." Hogan cleared his throat. "Thanks again. I hope you... uh... recover soon."

"That'd be nice," Scooter said evenly, "but I don't think it's in the cards, do you?"

"Uh. Well." Hogan realized with dismay that he didn't have the slightest idea how to conclude this encounter. "Take care of yourself."

Scooter nodded. "You too."

Hogan retreated toward the door, opened it, and had to hold on tight as the wind tried to rip it out of his hand and bang the wall. Fine sand scoured his face and he slitted his eyes against it.

He stepped out, closed the door behind him, and pulled the lapel of his real nice sportcoat over his mouth and nose as he crossed the porch, descended the steps, and headed toward the customized Dodge camper-van parked just beyond the gas-pumps. The wind pulled his hair and the sand stung his cheeks. He was going around to the

driver's-side door when someone tugged his arm.
"Mister! Hey, mister!"
He turned. It was the blonde-haired boy with the pale, ratty face. He hunched against the wind and blowing sand, wearing nothing but a tee-shirt and a pair of faded 501 jeans. Behind him, Mrs. Scooter was dragging a mangy beast on a choke-chain toward the back door of the store. Wolf the Minnesota coydog looked like a half-starved German shepherd pup -- and the runt of the litter, at that
"What?" Hogan shouted, knowing very well what.
"Can I have a ride?" the kid shouted back over the wind.
Hogan did not ordinarily pick up hitchhikers -- not since one afternoon five years ago. He had stopped for a young girl on the outskirts of Tonopah. Standing by the side of the road, the girl had resembled one of those sad-eyed waifs in the UNICEF posters, a kid who looked like her mother and her last friend had both died in the same housefire about a week ago. Once she was in the car, however, Hogan had seen the bad skin and mad eyes of the long-time junkie. By then it was too late. She'd stuck a pistol in his face and demanded his wallet. The pistol was old and rusty. Its grip was wrapped in tattered electrician's tape. Hogan had doubted that it was loaded, or that it would fire if it was... but he had a wife and a kid back in L.A., and even if he had been single, was a hundred and forty bucks worth risking your life over? He hadn't thought so even then, when he had just been getting his feet under him in his new line of work and a hundred and forty bucks had seemed a lot more important than it did these days. He gave the girl his wallet. By then her boyfriend had been parked beside the van (in those days it had been a Ford Econoline, nowhere near as nice as the custom Dodge XRT) in a dirty blue Chevy Nova. Hogan asked the girl if she would leave him his driver's license, and the pictures of Lita and Jack. "Fuck you, sugar," she said, and slapped him across the face, hard, with his own wallet before getting out and running to the blue car. Hitchhikers were trouble.
But the storm was getting worse, and the kid didn't even have a jacket. What was he supposed to tell him? Fuck you, sugar, crawl under a rock with the rest of the lizards until the wind drops?
"Okay," Hogan said.
"Thanks, man! Thanks a lot!"
The kid ran toward the passenger door, tried it, found it locked, and just stood there, waiting to be let in, hunching his shoulders up around his ears. The wind billowed out the back of his shirt like a sail, revealing glimpses of his thin, pimple-studded back.
Hogan glanced back at Scooter's Grocery & Roadside Zoo as he went around to the driver's door. Scooter was standing at the window, looking out at him. He raised his hand, solemnly, palm out. Hogan raised his own in return, then slipped his key into the lock and turned it. He opened the door, pushed the unlock button next to the power window switch, and motioned for the kid to get in.
He did, then had to use both hands to pull the door shut again. The wind howled around the van, actually making it rock a little from side to side.
"Wow!" the kid gasped, and rubbed his fingers briskly through his hair (he'd lost the sneaker lace and the hair now lay on his shoulders in lank clots). "Some storm, huh? Big-time!"
"Yeah," Hogan said. There was a console between the two front seats -- the kind of seats the brochures liked to call "captain's chairs" -- and Hogan placed the paper bag in one of the cup-holders. Then he turned the ignition key. The engine started at once with a good-tempered rumble.
The kid twisted around in his seat and looked appreciatively into the back of the van. There was a bed (now folded back into a couch), a small LP gas stove, and several storage compartments where Hogan kept his various sample cases, and a toilet cubicle at the rear.
"Not too tacky, m'man!" the kid said. "All the comforts." He glanced back at Hogan. "Where you headed?"
"Los Angeles."
The kid grinned. "Hey, great! So'm I!" He took out his just-purchased pack of Merits and tapped one loose.
Hogan had put on his headlights and dropped the transmission into drive. Now he shoved the gearshift back into park and turned to the kid. "Let's get a couple of things straight," he said.

The kid gave Hogan his wide-eyed innocent look. "Sure, dude -- no prob."

"First, I don't pick up hitchhikers as a rule. I had a bad experience with one a few years back. It vaccinated me, you might say. I'll take you through the Santa Clara foothills, but that's all. There's a truckstop on the other side -- Sammy's. It's close to the turnpike. That's where we part company. Okay?"

"Okay. Sure. You bet." Still with the wide-eyed look.

"Second, if you really have to smoke, we part company right now. That okay?"

For just a moment Hogan saw the kid's other look (and even on short acquaintance, Hogan was almost willing to bet he only had two): the mean, watchful look. Then he was all wide-eyed innocence again, just a harmless refugee from Wayne's World. He tucked the cigarette behind his ear and showed Hogan his empty hands. As he raised them, Hogan noticed the hand-lettered tattoo on the kid's left bicep: DEF LEPPARD 4-EVER.

"No cigs," the kid said. "I got it."

"Fine. Bill Hogan." He held out his hand.

"Bryan Adams," the kid said, and shook Hogan's hand briefly.

Hogan dropped the transmission into drive again and began to roll slowly toward Route 46. As he did, his eyes dropped briefly to a cassette box lying on the dashboard. It was Reckless, by Bryan Adams.

Sure, he thought. You're Bryan Adams and I'm really Don Henley. We just stopped by Scooter's Grocery & Roadside Zoo to get a little material for our next albums, right, dude?

As he pulled out onto the highway, already straining to see through the blowing dust, he found himself thinking of the girl again, the one outside of Tonopah who had slapped him across the face with his own wallet before fleeing. He was starting to get a very bad feeling about this.

Then a hard gust of wind tried to push him into the eastbound lane, and he concentrated on his driving.

They rode in silence for a while. When Hogan glanced once to his right he saw the kid was lying back with his eyes closed -- maybe asleep, maybe dozing, maybe just pretending because he didn't want to talk. That was okay; Hogan didn't want to talk, either. For one thing, he didn't know what he might have to say to Mr. Bryan Adams from Nowhere, U.S.A. It was a cinch young Mr. Adams wasn't in the market for labels or Universal Product Code readers, which was what Hogan sold. For another, just keeping the van on the road had become something of a challenge.

As Mrs. Scooter had warned, the storm was intensifying. The road was a dim phantom crossed at irregular intervals by tan ribs of sand. These drifts were like speed-bumps, and they forced Hogan to creep along at no' more than twenty-five. He could live with that. At some points, however, the sand had spread more evenly across the road's surface, camouflaging it, and then Hogan had to drop down to fifteen miles an hour, navigating by the dim bounceback of his headlights from the reflector-posts which marched along the side of the road.

Every now and then an approaching car or truck would loom out of the blowing sand like a prehistoric phantom with round blazing eyes. One of these, an old Lincoln Mark IV as big as a cabin cruiser, was driving straight down the center of 46. Hogan hit the horn and squeezed right, feeling the suck of the sand against his tires, feeling his lips peel away from his teeth in a helpless snarl. Just as he became sure the oncomer was going to force him into the ditch, the Lincoln swerved back onto its own side just enough for Hogan to make it by. He thought he heard the metallic click of his bumper kissing off the Mark TV's rear bumper, but given the steady shriek of the wind, that was almost certainly his own imagination. He did catch just a glimpse of the driver -- an old bald-headed man sitting bolt-upright behind the wheel, peering into the blowing sand with a concentrated glare that was almost maniacal. Hogan shook his fist at him, but the old codger did not so much as glance at him. Probably didn't even realize I was there, Hogan thought, let alone how close he came to hitting me.

For a few seconds he was very close to going off the road anyway. He could feel the sand sucking harder at the rightside wheels, felt the van trying to tip. His instinct was to twist the wheel hard to the left. Instead, he fed the van gas and only urged it in that direction, feeling sweat dampen his last good shirt at the armpits. At last the suck on the tires diminished and he began to feel in control of the van again. Hogan blew his breath out in a long sigh.

"Good piece of driving, man."

His attention had been so focused he had forgotten his passenger, and in his surprise he almost twisted the wheel all the way to theIleft, which would have put them in trouble again. He looked around and saw the blonde kid watching him. His gray-green eyes were unsettlingly bright; there was no sign of sleepiness in them.

"It was really just luck," Hogan said. "If there was a place to pull over, I would... but I know this piece of road. It's Sammy's or bust. Once we're in the foothills, it'll get better."

He did not add that it might take them three hours to cover the seventy miles between here and there.

"You're a salesman, right?"

"As rain."

He wished the kid wouldn't talk. He wanted to concentrate on his driving. Up ahead, fog-lights loomed out of the murk like yellow ghosts. An Iroc Z with California plates followed them. The van and the Z crept past each other like old ladies in a nursing-home corridor. In the corner of his eye, Hogan saw the kid take the cigarette from behind his ear and begin to play with it. Bryan Adams indeed. Why had the kid given him a false name? It was like something out of an old Republic movie, the kind of thing you could still see on the late-late show, a black-and-white crime movie where the traveling salesman (probably played by Ray Milland) picks up the tough young con (played by Nick Adams, say) who has just broken out of jail in Gabbs or Deeth or some place like that --

"What do you sell, dude?''

"Labels."

"Labels?"

"That's right. The ones with the Universal Product Code on them. It's a little block with a pre-set number of black bars in it."

The kid surprised Hogan by nodding. "Sure -- they whip 'em over an electric-eye gadget in the supermarket and the price shows up on the cash register like magic, right?"

"Yes. Except it's not magic, and it's not an electric eye. It's a laser reader. I sell those, too. Both the big ones and the portables."

"Far out, dude-mar." The tinge of sarcasm in the kid's voice was faint... but it was there.

"Bryan?"

"Yeah?"

"The name's Bill, not m'man, not dude, and most certainly not dude-mar."

He found himself wishing more and more strongly that he could roll back in time to Scooter's, and just say no when the kid asked him for a ride. The Scooters weren't bad sorts; they would have let the kid stay until the storm blew itself out this evening. Maybe Mrs. Scooter would even have given him five bucks to babysit the tarantula, the rattlers, and Woof, the Amazing Minnesota Coydog. Hogan found himself liking those gray-green eyes less and less. He could feel their weight on his face, like small stones.

"Yeah -- Bill. Bill the Label Dude."

Bill didn't reply. The kid laced his fingers together and bent his hands backward, cracking the knuckles.

"Well, it's like my old mamma used to say -- it may not be much, but it's a living. Right, Label Dude?"

Hogan grunted something noncommittal and concentrated on his driving. The feeling that he had made a mistake had grown to a certainty. When he'd picked up the girl that time, God had let him get away with it. Please, he prayed. One more time, okay, God? Better yet, let me be wrong about this kid -- let it just be paranoia brought on by low barometer, high winds, and the coincidence of a name that can't, after all, be that uncommon.

Here came a huge Mack truck from the other direction, the silver bulldog atop the grille seeming to peer into the flying grit. Hogan squeezed right until he felt the sand piled up along the edge of the road grabbing greedily at his tires again. The long silver box the Mack was pulling blotted out everything on Hogan's left side. It was six inches away -- maybe even less -- and it seemed to pass forever.

When it was finally gone, the blonde kid asked: "You look like you're doin pretty well, Bill -- rig like this must have set you back at least thirty big ones. So why -- "

"It was a lot less than that." Hogan didn't know if "Bryan Adams" could hear the

edgy note in his voice, but he sure could. "I did a lot of the work myself."
"All the same, you sure ain't staggerin around hungry. So why aren't you up above all this shit, flyin' the friendly skies?"
It was a question Hogan sometimes asked himself in the long empty miles between Tempe and Tucson or Las Vegas and Los Angeles, the kind of question you had to ask yourself when you couldn't find anything on the radio but crappy synthopop or threadbare oldies and you'd listened to the last cassette of the current best-seller from Recorded Books, when there was nothing to look at but miles of gullywashes and scrubland, all of it owned by Uncle Sam.
He could say that he got a better feel for his customers and their needs by traveling through the country where they lived and sold their goods, and it was true, but it wasn't the reason. He could say that checking his sample cases, which were much too bulky to fit under an airline seat, was a pain in the ass and waiting for them to show up on the conveyor belt at the other end was always an adventure (he'd once had a packing case filled with five thousand soft-drink labels show up in Hilo, Hawaii, instead of Hillside, Arizona). That was also true, but it also wasn't the reason.
The reason was that in 1982 he had been on board a Western Pride commuter flight which had crashed in the high country seventeen miles north of Reno. Six of the nineteen passengers on board and both crew-members had been killed. Hogan had suffered a broken back. He had spent four months in bed and another ten in a heavy brace his wife Lita called the Iron Maiden. They (whoever they were) said that if you got thrown from a horse, you should get right back on. William I. Hogan said that was bullshit, and with the exception of a white-knuckle, two-Valium flight to attend his father's funeral in New York, he had never been on a plane since.
He came out of these thoughts all at once, realizing two things: he had had the road to himself since the passage of the Mack, and the kid was still looking at him with those unsettling eyes, waiting for him to answer the question.
"I had a bad experience on a commuter flight once," he said. "Since then, I've pretty much stuck to transport where you can coast into the breakdown lane if your engine quits."
"You sure have had a lot of bad experiences, Bill-dude," the kid said. A tone of bogus regret crept into his voice. "And now, so sorry, you're about to have another one." There was a sharp metallic click. Hogan looked over and was not very surprised to see the kid was holding a switchknife with a glittering eight-inch blade.
Oh shit, Hogan thought. Now that it was here, now that it was right in front of him, he didn't feel very scared. Only tired. Oh shit, and only four hundred miles from home. Goddam.
"Pull over, Bill-dude. Nice and slow."
"What do you want?"
"If you really don't know the answer to that one, you're even dumber than you look." A little smile played around the corners of the kid's mouth. The homemade tattoo on the kid's arm rippled as the muscle beneath it twitched. "I want your dough, and I guess I want your rolling whorehouse too, at least for a while. But don't worry -- there's this little truck stop not too far from here. Sammy's. Close to the turnpike. Someone'll give you a ride. The people who don't stop will look at you like you're dog-shit they found on their shoes, of course, and you might have to beg a little, but I'm sure you'll get a ride in the end. Now pull over."
Hogan was a little surprised to find that he felt angry as well, as tired. Had he been angry that other time, when the road-girl, had stolen his wallet? He couldn't honestly remember.
"Don't pull that shit on me," he said, turning to the kid. "I jjjave you a ride when you needed one, and I didn't make you beg for it. If it weren't for me, you'd still be eating sand with your thumb out. So why don't you just put that thing away. We'll -- "
The kid suddenly lashed forward with the knife, and Hogan felt a thread of burning pain across his right hand. The van swerved, then shuddered as it passed over another of those sandy speed-bumps.
"Pull over, I said. You're either walking, Label Dude, or you're lying in the nearest gully with your throat cut and one of your own price-reading gadgets jammed up your ass. And you wanna know something? I'm gonna chain-smoke all the way to Los Angeles, and every time I finish a cigarette I'm gonna butt it out on your fuckin dashboard."

Hogan glanced down at his hand and saw a diagonal line of blood, which stretched from the last knuckle of his pinky to the base of his thumb. And here was the anger again... only now it was really rage, and if the tiredness was still there, it was buried somewhere in the middle of that irrational red eye. He tried to summon a mental picture of Lita and Jack to damp that feeling down before it got the better of him and made him do something crazy, but the images were fuzzy and out of focus. There was a clear image in his mind, but it was the wrong one -- it was the face of the girl outside of Tonopah, the girl with the snarling mouth below the sad poster-child eyes, the girl who had said Fuck you, sugar before slapping him across the face with his own wallet.

He stepped down on the gas-pedal and the van began to move faster. The red needle moved past thirty.

The kid looked surprised, then puzzled, then angry. "What are you doing? I told you to pull over! Do you want your guts in your lap, or what?"

"I don't know," Hogan said. He kept his foot on the gas. Now the needle was trembling just above forty. The van ran across a series of dunelets and shivered like a dog with a fever. "What do you want, kid? How about a broken neck? All it takes is one twist of the wheel. I fastened my seatbelt. I notice you forgot yours."

The kid's gray-green eyes were huge now, glittering with a mixture of fear and fury. You're supposed to pull over, those eyes said. That's the way it's supposed to work when I'm holding a knife on you -- don't you know that?

"You won't wreck us," the kid said, but Hogan thought he was trying to convince himself.

"Why not?" Hogan turned toward the kid again. "After all, I'm pretty sure I'll walk away, and the van's insured. You call the play, asshole. What about that?"

"You -- " the kid began, and then his eyes widened and he lost all interest in Hogan. "Look out!" he screamed.

Hogan snapped his eyes forward and saw four huge white headlamps bearing down on him through the flying wrack outside. It was a tanker truck, probably carrying gasoline or propane. An air-horn beat the air like the cry of a gigantic, enraged goose: WHONK! WHONK! WHONNNK!

The van had drifted while Hogan was trying to deal with the kid; now he was the one halfway across the road. He yanked the wheel hard to the right, knowing it would do no good, knowing it was already too late. But the approaching truck was also moving, squeezing over just as Hogan had tried to squeeze over in order to accommodate the Mark IV. The two vehicles danced past each other though the blowing sand with less than a gasp between them. Hogan felt his rightside wheels bite into the sand again and knew that this time he didn't have a chance in hell of holding the van on the road -- not at forty-plus miles an hour. As the dim shape of the big steel tank (CARTER'S FARM SUPPLIES & ORGANIC FERTILIZER was painted along the side) slid from view, he felt the steering wheel go mushy in his hands, dragging farther to the right. And from the corner of his eye, he saw the kid leaning forward with his knife.

What's the matter with you, are you crazy? He wanted to scream at the kid, but it would have been a stupid question even if he'd had time enough to articulate it. Sure the kid was crazy -- you only had to take a good look into those gray-green eyes to see it. Hogan must have been crazy himself to give the kid a ride in the first place, but none of that mattered now; he had a situation to cope with here, and if he allowed himself the luxury of believing this couldn't be happening to him -- if he allowed himself to think that for even a single second -- he would probably be found tomorrow or the next day with his throat cut and his eyes nibbled out of their sockets by the buzzards. This was really happening; it was a true thing.

The kid tried his level best to plant the blade in Hogan's neck, but the van had begun to tilt by then, running deeper and deeper into the sand-choked gully. Hogan recoiled back from the blade, letting go of the wheel entirely, and thought he had gotten clear until he felt the wet warmth of blood drench the side of his neck. The knife had unzipped his right cheek from jaw to temple. He flailed with his right hand, trying to get the kid's wrist, and then the van's left front wheel struck a rock the size of a pay telephone and the van flipped high and hard, like a stunt vehicle in one of those movies this rootless kid undoubtedly loved. It rolled in midair, all four wheels turning, still doing thirty miles an hour according to the speedometer, and Hogan felt his seatbelt lock painfully across his chest and belly. It was like reliving the plane-crash -- now, as then, he could not get it through

his head that this was really happening.
The kid was thrown upward and forward, still holding onto the knife. His head bounced off the roof as the van's top and bottom swapped places. Hogan saw his left hand waving wildly, and realized with amazement that the kid was still trying to stab him. He was a rattler, all right, Hogan had been right about that, but no one had milked his poison sacs.
Then the van struck the desert hardpan, peeling off the luggage racks, and the kid's head connected with the roof again, much harder this time. The knife was jolted from his hand. The cabinets at the rear of the van sprang open, spraying sample-books and laser label-readers everywhere. Hogan was dimly aware of an inhuman screaming sound -- the long, drawn-out squall of the XRT's roof sliding across the gravelly desert surface on the far side of the gully -- and thought: So this is what it would be like to be inside a tin can when someone was using the opener.
The windshield shattered, blowing inward in a sagging shield clouded by a million zig-zagging cracks. Hogan shut his eyes and threw his hands up to shield his face as the van continued to roll, thumping down on Hogan's side long enough to shatter the driver's-side window and admit a rattle of rocks and dusty earth before staggering upright again. It rocked as if meaning to go over on the kid's side... and then came to rest.
Hogan sat where he was without moving for perhaps five seconds, eyes wide, hands gripping the armrests of his chair, feeling a little like Captain Kirk in the aftermath of a Klingon attack. He was aware there was a lot of dirt and crumbled glass in his lap, and something else as well, but not what the something else was. He was also aware of the wind, blowing more dirt through the van's broken windows.
Then his vision was temporarily blocked by a swiftly moving object. The object was a mottle of white skin, brown dirt, raw knuckles, and red blood. It was a fist, and it struck Hogan squarely in the nose. The agony was immediate and intense, as if someone had fired a flare-gun directly into his brain. For a moment his vision was gone, swallowed in a vast white flash. It had just begun to come back when the kid's hands suddenly clamped around his neck and he could no longer breathe.
The kid, Mr. Bryan Adams from Nowhere, U.S.A., was leaning over the console between the front seats. Blood from perhaps half a dozen different scalp-wounds had flowed over his cheeks and forehead and nose like war paint. His gray-green eyes stared at Hogan with fixed, lunatic fury.
"Look what you did, you fuck!" the kid shouted. "Look what you did to me!"
Hogan tried to pull back, and got half a breath when the kid's hold slipped momentarily, but with his seatbelt still buckled -- and still locked down as well, from the feel -- there was really nowhere he could go. The kid's hands were back almost at once, and this time his thumbs were pressing into his windpipe, pinching it shut.
Hogan tried to bring his own hands up, but the kid's arms, as rigid as prison bars, blocked him. He tried to knock the kid's arms away, but they wouldn't budge. Now he could hear another wind -- a high, roaring wind inside his own head.
"Look what you did, you stupid shit! I'm bleedin!"
The kid's voice, but farther away than it had been.
He's killing me, Hogan thought, and a voice replied: Right -- fuck you, sugar.
That brought the anger back. He groped in his lap for whatever was there besides dirt and glass. It was a paper bag with some bulky object -- Hogan couldn't remember exactly what -- inside it. Hogan closed his hand around it and pistoned his fist upward toward the shelf of the kid's jaw. It connected with a heavy thud. The kid screamed in surprised pain, and his grip on Hogan's throat was suddenly gone as he fell over backward.
Hogan pulled in a deep, convulsive breath and heard a sound like a teakettle howling to be taken off the burner. Is that me, making that sound? My God, is that me?
He dragged in another breath. It was full of flying dust, it hurt his throat and made him cough, but it was heaven all the same. He looked down at his fist and saw the shape of the Chattery Teeth clearly outlined against the brown bag.
And suddenly felt them move.
There was something so shockingly human in this movement that Hogan shrieked and dropped the bag at once; it was as if he had picked up a human jawbone, which had tried to speak to his hand.
The bag hit the kid's back and then tumbled to the van's carpeted floor as "Bryan Adams" pushed himself groggily to his knees. Hogan heard the rubber band snap... and

then the unmistakable click-and-chutter of the teeth themselves, opening and closing.

It's probably just a cog knocked a little off-track, Scooter had said. I bet a man who was handy could get 'em walkin and chompin again.

Or maybe just a good knock would do it, Hogan thought. If I live through this and ever get back that way, I'll have to tell Scooter that all you have to do to fix a pair of malfunctioning Chattery Teeth is roll your van over and then use them to hit a psychotic hitchhiker who's trying to strangle you: so simple even a child could do it.

The teeth clattered and smacked inside the torn brown bag; the sides fluttered, making it look like an amputated lung, which refused to die. The kid crawled away from the bag without even looking at it -- crawled toward the back of the van, shaking his head from side to side, trying to clear it. Blood flew from the clots of his hair in a fine spray.

Hogan found the clasp of his seatbelt and pushed the pop-release. Nothing happened. The square in the center of the buckle did not give even a little and the belt itself was still locked as tight as a cramp, cutting into the middle-aged roll of fat above the waistband of his trousers and pushing a hard diagonal across his chest. He tried rocking back and forth in the seat, hoping that would unlock the belt. The flow of blood from his face increased, and he could feel his cheek flapping back and forth like a strip of dried wallpaper, but that was all. He felt panic struggling to break through amazed shock, and twisted his head over his right shoulder to see what the kid was up to.

It turned out to be no good. He had spotted his knife at the far end of the van, lying atop a litter of instructional manuals and brochures. He grabbed it, flicked his hair away from his face, and peered back over his own shoulder at Hogan. He was grinning, and there was something in that grin that made Hogan's balls simultaneously tighten and shrivel until it felt as if someone had tucked a couple of peach-pits into his Jockey shorts.

Ah, here it is! The kid's grin said. For a minute or two there I was worried -- quite seriously worried -- but everything is going to come out all right after all. Things got a little improvisational there for a while, but now we're back to the script.

"You stuck, Label Dude?" the kid asked over the steady shriek of the wind. "You are, ain't you? Good thing you buckled your belt, right? Good thing for me."

The kid tried to get up, almost made it, and then his knees gave way. An expression of surprise so magnified it would have been comic under other circumstances crossed his face. Then he flicked his blood-greasy hair out of his face again and began to crawl toward Hogan, his left hand wrapped around the imitation-bone handle of the knife. The Def Leppard tattoo ebbed and flowed with each flex of his impoverished bleep, making Hogan think of the way the words on Myra's tee-shirt -- NEVADA IS GOD'S COUNTRY -- had rippled when she moved.

Hogan grasped the seatbelt buckle with both hands and drove his thumbs against the pop-release as enthusiastically as the kid had driven his into Hogan's" windpipe. There was absolutely no response. The belt was frozen. He craned his neck to look at the kid again.

The kid had made it as far as the fold-up bed and then stopped. That expression of large, comic surprise had resurfaced on his face. He was staring straight ahead, which meant he was looking at something on the floor, and Hogan suddenly remembered the teeth. They were still chattering away.

He looked down in time to see the Jumbo Chattery Teeth march from the open end of the torn paper bag on their funny orange shoes. The molars and the canines and the incisors chopped rapidly up and down, producing a sound like ice in a cocktail-shaker. The shoes, dressed up in their tony white spats, almost seemed to bounce along the gray carpet. Hogan found himself thinking of Fred Astaire tap-dancing his way across a stage and back again; Fred Astaire with a cane tucked under his arm and a straw boater tipped saucily forward over one eye.

"Oh shit!" the kid said, half-laughing. "Is that what you were dickerin for back there? Oh, man! I kill you, Label Dude, I'm gonna be doin the world a favor."

The key, Hogan thought. The key on the side of the teeth, the one you use to wind them up... it isn 't turning.

And he suddenly had another of those precognitive flashes; he understood exactly what was going to happen. The kid was going to reach for them.

The teeth abruptly stopped walking and chattering. They simply stood there on the slightly tilted floor of the van, jaws slightly agape. Eyeless, they still seemed to peer quizzically up at the kid.

"Chattery Teeth," Mr. Bryan Adams, from Nowhere, U.S.A., marveled. He reached out and curled his right hand around them, just as Hogan had known he would.

"Bite him!" Hogan shrieked. "Bite his fucking fingers right off!"

The kid's head snapped up, the gray-green eyes wide with startlement. He gaped at Hogan for a moment -- that big expression of totally dumb surprise -- and then he began to laugh. His laughter was high and shrieky, a perfect complement to the wind howling through the van and billowing the curtains like long ghost-hands.

"Bite me! Bite me! Biiiite me!" the kid chanted, as if it were the punchline to the funniest joke he'd ever heard. "Hey, Label Dude! I thought I was the one who bumped my head!"

The kid clamped the handle of the switchblade in his own teeth and stuck the forefinger of his left hand between the Jumbo Chattery Teeth. "Ite eel" he said around the knife. He giggled and wiggled his finger between the oversized jaws. "Ite eel Oh on, ite ee!"

The teeth didn't move. Neither did the orange feet. Hogan's premonition collapsed around him the way dreams do upon waking. The kid wiggled his finger between the Chattery Teeth one more time, began to pull it out... then began screaming at the top of his lungs. "Oh shit! SHIT! Mother FUCKER.'"

For a moment Hogan's heart leaped in his chest, and then he realized that, although the kid was still screaming, what he was really doing was laughing. Laughing at him. The teeth had remained perfectly still the whole time.

The kid lifted the teeth up for a closer look as he grasped his knife again. He shook the long blade at the Chattery Teeth like a teacher shaking his pointer at a naughty student. "You shouldn't bite," he said. "That's very bad behav -- "

One of the orange feet took a sudden step forward on the grimy palm of the kid's hand. The jaws opened at the same time, and before Hogan was fully aware of what was happening, the Chattery Teeth had closed on the kid's nose.

This time Bryan Adams's scream was real -- a thing of agony and ultimate surprise. He flailed at the teeth with his right hand, trying to bat them away, but they were locked on his nose as tightly as Hogan's seatbelt was locked around his middle. Blood and filaments of torn gristle burst out between the canines in red strings. The kid jackknifed backward and for a moment Hogan could see only his flailing body, lashing elbows, and kicking feet. Then he saw the glitter of the knife.

The kid screamed again and bolted into a sitting position. His long hair had fallen over his face in a curtain; the clamped teeth stuck out like the rudder of some strange boat. The kid had somehow managed to insert the blade of his knife between the teeth and what remained of his nose.

"Kill him!" Hogan shouted hoarsely. He had lost his mind; on some level he understood that he must have lost his mind, but for the time being, that didn't matter. "Go on, kill him!"

The kid shrieked -- a long, piercing fire-whistle sound -- and twisted the knife. The blade snapped, but not before it had managed to pry the disembodied jaws at least partway open. The teeth fell off his face and into his lap. Most of the kid's nose fell off with them.

The kid shook his hair back. His gray-green eyes were crossed, trying to look down at the mangled stump in the middle of his face. His mouth was drawn down in a rictus of pain; the tendons in his neck stood out like pulley-wires.

The kid reached for the teeth. The teeth stepped nimbly backward on their orange cartoon feet. They were nodding up and down, marching in place, grinning at the kid, who was now sitting with his ass on his calves. Blood drenched the front of his tee-shirt.

The kid said something then that confirmed Hogan's belief that he, Hogan, had lost his mind; only in a fantasy born of delirium would such words be spoken.

"Give bme bag by dose, you sud-of-a-bidtch!"

The kid reached for the teeth again and this time they ran forward, under his snatching hand, between his spread legs, and there was a meaty chump! sound as they closed on the bulge of faded blue denim just below the place where the zipper of the kid's jeans ended.

Bryan Adams's eyes flew wide open. So did his mouth. His hands rose to the level of his shoulders, springing wide open, and for a moment he looked like some strange Al

Jolson imitator preparing to sing "Mammy." The switchknife flew over his shoulder to the back of the van.

"Jesus! Jesus! Jeeeeeee -- "

The orange feet were pumping rapidly, as if doing a Highland Fling. The pink jaws of the Jumbo Chattery Teeth nodded rapidly up and down, as if saying yes! yes! yes! and then shook back and forth, just as rapidly, as if saying no! no! no!

" -- eeeeeeEEEEEEEE -- ''

As the cloth of the kid's jeans began to rip -- and that was not all that was ripping, by the sound -- Bill Hogan passed out.

He came to twice. The first time must have been only a short while later, because the storm was still howling through and around the van, and the light was about the same. He started to turn around, but a monstrous bolt of pain shot up his neck. Whiplash, of course, and probably not as bad as it could have been... or would be tomorrow, for that matter.

Always supposing he lived until tomorrow.

The kid. I have to look and make sure he's dead.

No, you don't. Of course he's dead. If he wasn't, you would be.

Now he began to hear a new sound from behind him -- the steady chutter-click-chutter of the teeth.

They're coming for me. They've finished with the kid, but they're still hungry, so they're coming for me.

He placed his hands on the seatbelt buckle again, but the pop-release was still hopelessly jammed, and his hands seemed to have no strength, anyway.

The teeth grew steadily closer -- they were right in back of his seat, now, from the sound -- and Hogan's confused mind read a rhyme into their ceaseless chomping: Clickety-dickety-clickety-clack! We are the teeth, and we're coming back! Watch us walk, watch us chew, we ate him, now we 'II eat you!

Hogan closed his eyes.

The clittering sound stopped.

Now there was only the ceaseless whine of the wind and the spick-spack of sand striking the dented side of the XRT van.

Hogan waited. After a long, long time, he heard a single click, followed by the minute sound of tearing fibers. There was a pause, then the click and the tearing sound was repeated.

What's it doing?

The third time the click and the small tearing sound came, he felt the back of his seat moving a little and understood. The teeth were pulling themselves up to where he was. Somehow they were pulling themselves up to him.

Hogan thought of the teeth closing on the bulge below the zipper of the kid's jeans and willed himself to pass out again. Sand flew in through the broken windshield, tickled his cheeks and forehead.

Click... rip. Click... rip. Click... rip.

The last one was very close. Hogan didn't want to look down, but he was unable to help himself. And beyond his right hip, where the seat-cushion met the seat's back, he saw a wide white grin. It moved upward with agonizing slowness, pushing with the as-yet-unseen orange feet as it nipped a small fold of gray seat-cover between its incisors... then the jaws let go and it lurched convulsively upward.

This time what the teeth fastened on was the pocket of Hogan's slacks, and he passed out again.

When he came to the second time, the wind had dropped and it was almost dark; the air had taken on a queer purple shade Hogan could not remember ever having seen in the desert before. The skirls of sand running across the desert floor beyond the sagging ruin of the windshield looked like fleeing ghost-children.

For a moment he could remember nothing at all of what had happened to land him here; the last clear memory he could touch was of looking at his gas-gauge, seeing it was down to an eighth, then looking up and seeing a sign at the side of the road which said:

SCOOTER'S GROCERY & ROADSIDE

• ZOO • GAS • SNAX • COLD BEER •

SEE LIVE RATLLESNAKE's!

He understood that he could hold onto this amnesia for a while, if he wanted to; given a little time, his subconscious might even be able to wall off certain dangerous memories permanently. But it could also be dangerous not to remember. Very

dangerous. Because --
The wind gusted. Sand rattled against the badly dented driver's side of the van. It sounded almost like
(teeth! teeth! teeth!)
The fragile surface of his amnesia shattered, letting everything pour through, and all the heat fell from the surface of Hogan's skin. He uttered a rusty squawk as he remembered the sound
(chump!)
the Chattery Teeth had made as they closed on the kid's balls, and he closed his hands over his own crotch, eyes rolling fearfully in their sockets as he looked for the runaway teeth.
He didn't see them, but the ease with which his shoulders followed the movement of his hands was new. He looked down at his lap and slowly removed his hands from his crotch. His seatbelt was no longer holding him prisoner. It lay on the gray carpet in two pieces. The metal tongue of the pull-up section was still buried inside the buckle, but beyond it there was only ragged red fabric. The belt had not been cut; it had been gnawed through.
He looked up into the rear-view mirror and saw something else: the back doors of the van were standing open, and there was only a vague, man-shaped red outline on the gray carpet where the kid had been. Mr. Bryan Adams, from Nowhere, U.S.A., was gone. So were the Chattery Teeth. They look like hicks from Fargo, North Dakota, standing there in the electric purple light, which had overspread these empty lands west of Las Vegas. They were clamped shut on a thick wad of the kid's long blonde hair.
The Chattery Teeth were backing up.
The Chattery Teeth were dragging Mr. Bryan Adams away to Nowhere, U.S.A.
Hogan turned in the other direction and walked slowly toward the road, holding his nitro head straight and steady on top of his neck. It took him five minutes to negotiate the ditch and another fifteen to flag a ride, but he eventually managed both things. And during that time, he never looked back once.
Hogan got out of the van slowly, like an old man afflicted with a terrible case of arthritis. He found that if he held his head perfectly level, it wasn't too bad... but if he forgot and moved it in any direction, a series of exploding bolts went off in his neck, shoulders, and upper back. Even the thought of allowing his head to roll backward was unbearable.
He walked slowly to the rear of the van, running his hand lightly over the dented, paint-peeled surface, hearing and feeling the glass as it crunched under his feet. He stood at the far end of the driver's side for a long time. He was afraid to turn the corner. He was afraid that, when he did, he would see the kid squatting on his hunkers, holding the knife in his left hand and grinning that empty grin. But he couldn't just stand here, holding his head on top of his strained neck like a big bottle of nitroglycerine, while it got dark around him, so at last Hogan went around.
Nobody. The kid was really gone. Or so it seemed at first.
The wind gusted, blowing Hogan's hair around his bruised face, then dropped away completely. When it did, he heard a harsh scraping noise coming from about twenty yards beyond the van. He looked in that direction and saw the soles of the kid's sneakers just disappearing over the top of a dry-wash. The sneakers were spread in a limp V. They stopped moving for a moment, as if whatever was hauling the kid's body needed a few moments' rest to recoup its strength, and then they began to move again in little jerks.
A picture of terrible, unendurable clarity suddenly rose in Hogan's mind. He saw the Jumbo Chattery Teeth standing on their funny orange feet just over the edge of that wash, standing there in spats so cool they made the coolest of the California Raisins.
Nine months later, on a clear hot summer day in June, Bill Hogan happened by Scooter's Grocery & Roadside Zoo again... except the place had been renamed. MYRA'S PLACE, the sign now said. GAS • COLD BEER • VIDEO'S. Below the words was a picture of a wolf -- or maybe just a Woof -- snarling at the moon. Wolf himself, the Amazing Minnesota Coydog, was lying in a cage in the shade of the porch overhang. His back legs were sprawled extravagantly, and his muzzle was on his paws. He did not get up when Hogan got out of his car to fill the tank. Of the rattlesnakes and the tarantula there was no sign.
"Hi, Woof," he said as he went up the steps. The cage's inmate rolled over onto his

back and allowed his long red tongue to dangle enticingly from the side of his mouth as he stared up at Hogan.
The store looked bigger and cleaner inside. Hogan guessed this was partly because the day outside was not so threatening, but that wasn't all; the windows had been washed, for one thing, and that made a big difference. The board walls had been replaced with pine-panelling that still smelled fresh and sappy. A snackbar with five stools had been added at the back. The novelty case was still there, but the cigarette loads, the joy-buzzers, and Dr. Wacky's Sneezing Powder were gone. The case was filled with videotape boxes. A hand-lettered sign read X-RATED IN BACK ROOM • "B 18 OR B GONE."
The woman at the cash register was standing in profile to Hogan, looking down at a calculator and running numbers on it. For d moment Hogan was sure this was Mr. and Mrs. Scooter's daughter -- the female complement to those three boys Scooter had talked about raising. Then she lifted her head and Hogan saw it was Mrs. Scooter herself. It was hard to believe this could be the woman whose mammoth bosom had almost burst the seams of her NEVADA is GOD'S COUNTRY tee-shirt, but it was. Mrs. Scooter had lost at least fifty pounds and dyed her hair a sleek and shiny walnut-brown. Only the sun-wrinkles around the eyes and mouth were the same.
"Getcha gas?" she asked.
"Yep. Fifteen dollars' worth." He handed her a twenty and she rang it up. "Place looks a lot different from the last time I was in."
"Been a lot of changes since Scooter died, all right," she agreed, and pulled a five out of the register. She started to hand it over, really looked at him for the first time, and hesitated. "Say... ain't you the guy who almost got killed the day we had that storm last year?"
He nodded and stuck out his hand. "Bill Hogan."
She didn't hesitate; simply reached over the counter and gave his hand a single strong pump. The death of her husband seemed to have improved her disposition... or maybe it was just that her change of life was finally over.
"I'm sorry about your husband. He seemed like a good sort."
"Scoot? Yeah, he was a fine fella before he took ill," she agreed. "And what about you? You all recovered?"
Hogan nodded. "I wore a neck-brace for about six weeks -- not for the first time, either -- but I'm okay."
She was looking at the scar, which twisted down his right cheek. "He do that? That kid?"
"Yeah."
"Stuck you pretty bad."
"Yeah."
"I heard he got busted up in the crash, then crawled into the desert to die." She was looking at Hogan shrewdly. "That about right?"
Hogan smiled a little. "Near enough, I guess."
"J.T. -- he's the State Bear around these parts -- said the animals worked him over pretty good. Desert rats are awful impolite that way."
"I don't know anything about that part."
"J.T. said the kid's own mother wouldn't have reckanized him." She put a hand on her reduced bosom and looked at him earnestly. "If I'm lyin, I'm dyin."
Hogan laughed out loud. In the weeks and months since the day of the storm, this was something he found himself doing more often. He had come, it sometimes seemed to him, to a slightly different arrangement with life since that day.
"Lucky he didn't kill you," Mrs. Scooter said. "You had a helluva narrow excape. God musta been with you."
"That's right," Hogan agreed. He looked down at the video case. "I see you took out the novelties."
"Them nasty old things? You bet! That was the first thing I did after -- " Her eyes suddenly widened. "Oh, say! Jeepers! I got sumpin belongs to you! If I was to forget, I reckon Scooter'd come back and haunt me!"
Hogan frowned, puzzled, but the woman was already going behind the counter. She stood on tiptoe and brought something down from a high shelf above the rack of cigarettes. It was, Hogan saw with absolutely no surprise at all, the Jumbo Chattery Teeth. The woman set them down beside the cash register.
Hogan stared at that frozen, insouciant grin with a deep sense of deja vu. There they were, the world's biggest set of Chattery Teeth, standing on their funny orange

shoes beside the Slim Jim display, cool as a mountain breeze, grinning up at him as if to say, Hello, there! Did you forget me? I didn't forget YOU, my friend. Not at all.
"I found 'em on the porch the next day, after the storm blew itself out," Mrs. Scooter said. She laughed. "Just like old Scoot to give you somethin for free, then stick it in a bag with a hole in the bottom. I was gonna throw 'em out, but he said he give 'em to you, and I should stick 'em on a shelf someplace. He said a traveling man who came in once'd most likely come in again... and here you are."
"Yes," Hogan agreed. "Here I am."
He picked up the teeth and slipped his finger between the slightly gaping jaws. He ran the pad of the finger along the molars at the back, and in his mind he heard the kid, Mr. Bryan Adams from Nowhere, U.S.A., chanting Bite me! Bite me! Biiiiite me! Were the back teeth still streaked with the dull rust of the boy's blood? Hogan thought he could see something way back in there, but perhaps it was only a shadow.
"I saved it because Scooter said you had a boy."
Hogan nodded. "I do." And, he thought, the boy still has a father. I'm holding the reason why. The question is, did they walk all the way back here on their little orange feet because this was home... or because they somehow knew what Scooter knew? That sooner or later, a traveling man always comes back to where he's been, the way a murderer is supposed to revisit the scene of his crime?
"Well, if you still want 'em, they're still yours," she said. For a moment she looked solemn... and then she laughed. "Shit, I probably would have throwed 'em out anyway, except I forgot about 'em. Course, they're still broken."
Hogan turned the key jutting out of the gum. It went around twice, making little wind-up clicks, then simply turned uselessly in its socket. Broken. Of course they were. And would be until they decided they didn't want to be broken for a while. And the question wasn't how they had gotten back here, and the question wasn't even why. The question was this: What did they want?
He poked his finger into the white steel grin again and whispered, "Bite me -- do you want to?"
The teeth only stood there on their super-cool orange feet and grinned.
"They ain't talking, seems like," Mrs. Scooter said.
"No," Hogan said, and suddenly he found himself thinking of the kid. Mr. Bryan Adams, from Nowhere, U.S.A. A lot of kids like him now. A lot of grownups, too, blowing along the highways like tumbleweed, always ready to take your wallet, say Fuck you, sugar, and run. You could stop picking up hitchhikers (he had), and you could put a burglar-alarm system in your home (he'd done that, too), but it was still a hard world where planes sometimes fell out of the sky and the crazies were apt to turn up anyplace and there was always room for a little more insurance. He had a wife, after all.
And a son.
It might be nice if Jack had a set of Jumbo Chattery Teeth sitting on his desk. Just in case something happened.
Just in case.
"Thank you for saving them," he said, picking the Chattery Teeth up carefully by the feet. "I think my kid will get a kick out of them even if they are broken."
"Thank Scoot, not me. You want a bag?" She grinned. "I got a plastic one -- no holes, guaranteed."
Hogan shook his head and slipped the Chattery Teeth into his sportcoat pocket. "I'll carry them this way," he said, and grinned right back at her. "Keep them handy."
"Suit yourself." As he started for the door, she called after him: "Stop back again! I make a damn good chicken salad sandwich!"
"I'll bet you do, and I will," Hogan said. He went out, down the steps, and stood for a moment in the hot desert sunshine, smiling. He felt good -- he felt good a lot these days. He had come lo think that was just the way to be.
To his left, Woof the Amazing Minnesota Coydog got to his feet, poked his snout through the crisscross of wire on the side of his cage, and barked. In Hogan's pocket, the Chattery Teeth clicked together once. The sound was soft, but Hogan heard it... and felt them move. He patted his pocket. "Easy, big fella," he said softly.
He walked briskly across the yard, climbed behind the wheel of his new Chevrolet van, and drove away toward Los Angeles. He had promised Lita and Jack he would be home by seven, eight at the latest, and he was a man who liked to keep his promises.

CHILDREN OF THE CORN

Burt turned the radio on too loud and didn't turn it down because they were on the verge of another argument and he didn't want it to happen. He was desperate for it not to happen.

Vicky said something. 'What?' he shouted.

'Turn it down! Do you want to break my eardrums?'

He bit down hard on what might have come through his mouth and turned it down.

Vicky was fanning herself with her scarf even though the T-Bird was air-conditioned. 'Where are we, anyway?'

-'Nebraska.'

She gave him a cold, neutral look. 'Yes, Burt. I know we're in Nebraska, Burt. But where the hell *are* we?'

'You've got the road atlas. Look it up. Or can't you read?'

'Such wit. This is why we got off the turnpike. So we could look at three hundred miles of corn. And enjoy the wit and wisdom of Burt Robeson.'

He was gripping the steering wheel so hard his knuckles were white. He decided he was holding it that tightly because if he loosened up, why, one of those hands might just fly off and hit the ex-Prom Queen beside him right in the chops. We 're saving our marriage, he told himself. Yes. We're doing it the same way us grunts went about saving villages in the war.

'Vicky,' he said carefully. 'I have driven fifteen hundred miles on turnpikes since we left Boston. I did all that driving myself because you refused to drive. Then -'

'I did not refuse!' Vicky said hotly. 'Just because I get migraines when I drive for a long time -'Then when I asked you if you'd navigate for me on some of the secondary roads, you said sure, Burt. Those were your exact words. Sure, Burt. Then -'Sometimes I wonder how I ever wound up married to you.'

'By saying two little words.'

She stared at him for a moment, white-lipped, and then picked up the road atlas. She turned the pages savagely.

It *had* been a mistake leaving the turnpike, Burt thought morosely. It was a shame, too, because up until then they had been doing pretty well, treating each other almost like human beings. It had sometimes seemed that this trip to the coast, ostensibly to see Vicky's brother and his wife but actually a last-ditch attempt to patch up their own marriage, was going to work.

But since they left the pike, it had been bad again. How bad? Well, terrible, actually.

'We left the turnpike at Hamburg, right?'

'Right.'

'There's nothing more until Gatlin,' she said. 'Twenty miles. Wide place in the road. Do you suppose we could stop there and get something to eat? Or does your almighty schedule say we have to go until two o'clock like we did yesterday?'

He took his eyes off the road to look at her. 'I've about had it, Vicky. As far as I'm concerned, we can turn right here and go home and see that lawyer you wanted to talk to. Because this isn't working at -'

She had faced forward again, her expression stonily set. It suddenly turned to surprise and fear. *'Burt look out you're going to -'*

He turned his attention back to the road just in time to see something vanish under the T-Bird's bumper. A moment later, while he was only beginning to switch from gas to brake, he felt something thump sickeningly under the front and then the back wheels. They were thrown forward as the car braked along the centre line, decelerating from fifty to zero along black skidmarks.

'A dog,' he said. 'Tell me it was a dog, Vicky.'

Her face was a pallid, cottage-cheese colour. 'A boy. A little boy. He just ran out of the corn and. . . congratulations, tiger.'

She fumbled the car door open, leaned out, threw up.

Burt sat straight behind the T-Bird's wheel, hands still gripping it loosely. He was aware of nothing for a long time but the rich, dark smell of fertilizer.

Then he saw that Vicky was gone and when he looked in the outside mirror he saw her stumbling clumsily back towards a heaped bundle that looked like a pile of rags. She was ordinarily a graceful woman but now her grace was gone, robbed.

It's manslaughter. That's what they call it. I took my eyes off the road.

He turned the ignition off and got out. The wind rustled softly through the growing man-high corn, making a weird sound like respiration. Vicky was standing over the bundle of rags now, and he could hear her sobbing.

He was halfway between the car and where she stood and something caught his eye on the left, a gaudy splash of red amid all the green, as bright as barn paint.

He stopped, looking directly into the corn. He found himself thinking (anything to untrack from those rags that were not rags) that it must have been a fantastically good growing season for corn. It grew close together, almost ready to bear. You could plunge into those neat, shaded rows and spend a day trying to find your way out again. But the neatness was broken here. Several tall cornstalks had been broken and leaned askew. And what was that further back in the shadows?

'Burt!' Vicky screamed at him. 'Don't you want to come see? So you can tell all your poker buddies what you bagged in Nebraska? Don't you -' But the rest was lost in fresh sobs. Her shadow was puddled starkly around her feet. It was almost noon.

Shade closed over him as he entered the corn. The red barn paint was blood. There was a low, somnolent buzz as flies lit, tasted, and buzzed off again . . . maybe to tell others. There was more blood on the leaves further in. Surely it couldn't have splattered this far? And then he was standing over the object he had seen from the road. He picked it up.

The neatness of the rows was disturbed here. Several stalks were canted drunkenly, two of them had been broken clean off. The earth had been gouged. There was blood. The corn rustled. With a little shiver, he walked back to the road.

Vicky was having hysterics, screaming unintelligible words at him, crying, laughing. Who would have thought it could end in such a melodramatic way? He looked at her and saw he wasn't having an identity crisis or a difficult life transition or any of those trendy things. He hated her. He gave her a hard slap across the face.

She stopped short and put a hand against the reddening impression of his fingers. 'You'll go to jail, Burt,' she said solemnly.

'I don't think so,' he said, and put the suitcase he had found in the corn at her feet.

'What -?'

'I don't know. I guess it belonged to him.' He pointed to the sprawled, face-down body that lay in the road. No more than thirteen, from the look of him.

The suitcase was old. The brown leather was battered and scuffed. Two hanks of clothesline had been wrapped around it and tied in large, clownish grannies. Vicky bent to undo one of them, saw, the blood greased into the knot, and withdrew.

Burt knelt and turned the body over gently.

'I don't want to look,' Vicky said, staring down helplessly anyway. And when the staring, sightless face flopped up to regard them, she screamed again. The boy's face was dirty, his expression a grimace of terror. His throat had been cut.

Burt got up and put his arms around Vicky as she began to sway. 'Don't faint,' he said very quietly. 'Do you hear me, Vicky? Don't faint.'

He repeated it over and over and at last she began to recover and held him tight. They might have been dancing, there on the noon-struck road with the boy's corpse at their feet.

'Vicky?'

'What?' Muffled against his shirt.

'Go back to the car and put the keys in your pocket. Get the blanket out of the back seat, and my rifle. Bring them here.'

'The rifle?'

'Someone cut his throat. Maybe whoever is watching us.' Her head jerked up and her wide eyes considered the corn. It marched away as far as the eye could see, undulating up and down small dips and rises of land.

'I imagine he's gone. But why take chances? Go on. Do it.'

She walked stiltedly back to the car, her shadow following, a dark mascot who stuck close at this hour of the day. When she leaned into the back seat, Burt squatted beside the boy. White male, no distinguishing marks. Run over, yes, but the T-Bird hadn't cut the kid's throat. It had been cut raggedly and inefficiently - no army sergeant had shown the killer the finer points of hand-to-hand assassination -but the final effect had been deadly. He had either run or been pushed through the last thirty feet of corn, dead or mortally wounded. And Burt Robeson had run him down. If the boy had still been alive when the car hit him, his life had been cut short by thirty seconds at most.

Vicky tapped him on the shoulder and he jumped.

She was standing with the brown army blanket over her left arm, the cased pump shotgun in her right hand, her face averted. He took the blanket and spread it on the road. He rolled the body on to it. Vicky uttered a desperate little moan.

'You okay?' He looked up at her. 'Vicky?'

'Okay,' she said in a strangled voice.

He flipped the sides of the blanket over the body and scooped it up, hating the thick, dead weight of it. It tried to make a U in his arms and slither through his grasp. He clutched it tighter and they walked back to the T-Bird.

'Open the trunk,' he grunted.

The trunk was full of travel stuff, suitcases and souvenirs. Vicky shifted most of it into the back seat and Burt slipped the body into the made space and slammed the trunk lid down. A sigh of relief escaped him.

Vicky was standing by the driver's side door, still holding the cased rifle.

'Just put it in the back and get in.'

He looked at his watch and saw only fifteen minutes had passed. It seemed like hours.

'What about the suitcase?' she asked.

He trotted back down the road to where it stood on the white line, like the focal point in an Impressionist painting. He picked it up by its tattered handle and paused for a moment. He had a strong sensation of being watched. It was a feeling he had read about in books, mostly cheap fiction, and he had always doubted its reality. Now he didn't. It was as if there were people in the corn, maybe a lot of them, coldly estimating whether the woman could get the gun out of the case and use it before they could grab him, drag him into the shady rows, cut his throat -Heart beating thickly, he ran back to the car, pulled the keys out of the trunk lock, and got in.

Vicky was crying again. Burt got them moving, and before a minute had passed, he could no longer pick out the spot where it had happened in the rear-view mirror.

'What did you say the next town was?' he asked.

'Oh.' She bent over the road atlas again. 'Gatlin. We should be there in ten minutes.'

'Does it look big enough to have a police station?'

'No. It's just a dot.'

'Maybe there's a constable.'

They drove in silence for a while. They passed a silo on the left. Nothing else but corn. Nothing passed them going the other way, not even a farm truck.

'Have we passed anything since we got off the turnpike, Vicky?'

She thought about it. 'A car and a tractor. At that intersection.'

'No, since we got on this road, Route 17.'

'No.I don't think we have.' Earlier this might have been the preface to some cutting remark. Now she only stared out of her half of the windshield at the unrolling road and the endless dotted line.

'Vicky? Could you open the suitcase?'

'Do you think it might matter?'

'Don't know. It might.'

While she picked at the knots (her face was set in a peculiar way - expressionless but tight-mouthed - that Burt remembered his mother wearing when she pulled the innards out of the Sunday chicken), Burt turned on the radio again.

The pop station they had been listening to was almost obliterated in static and Burt switched, running the red marker slowly down the dial. Farm reports. Buck Owens. Tammy Wynette. All distant, nearly distorted into babble. Then, near the end of the dial, one single word blared out of the speaker, so loud and clear that the lips which uttered it might have been directly beneath the grill of the dashboard speaker.

'ATONEMENT!' this voice bellowed.

Burt made a surprised grunting sound. Vicky jumped.

'ONLY BY THE BLOOD OF THE LAMB ARE WE SAVED' the voice roared, and Burt hurriedly turned the sound down. This station was close, all right. So close that yes, there it was. Poking out of the corn at the horizon, a spidery red tripod against the blue. The radio tower.

'Atonement is the word, brothers 'n' sisters,' the voice told them, dropping to a more conversational pitch. In the background, off-mike, voices murmured amen. 'There's some that thinks it's okay to get out in the world, as if you could work and walk in the world without being smirched by the world. Now is that what the word of God teaches us?'

Off-mike but still loud: 'No!'

'HOLY JESUS!' the evangelist shouted, and now the words came in a powerful, pumping cadence, almost as compelling as a driving rock-and-roll beat: 'When they gonna know that way is death? When they gonna know that the wages of the world are paid on the other side? Huh? Huh? The Lord has said there's many mansions in His house. But there's no room for the fornicator. No room for the coveter. No room for the defiler of the corn. No room for the hommasexshul. No room -Vicky snapped it off. 'That drivel makes me sick.'

'What did he say?' Burt asked her. 'What did he say about corn?'

'I didn't hear it.' She was picking at the second clothesline knot.

'He said something about corn. I know he did.'

'I got it!' Vicky said, and the suitcase fell open in her lap. They were passing a sign that said: GATLIN 5 MI. DRIVE CAREFULLY PROTECT OUR CHILDREN. The sign had been put up by the Elks. There were .22 bullet holes in it.

'Socks,' Vicky said. 'Two pairs of pants. . . a shirt. . . a belt. . . a string tie with a -' She held it up, showing him the peeling gilt neck clasp. 'Who's that?'

Burt glanced at it. 'Hopalong Cassidy, I think.'

'Oh.' She put it back. She was crying again.

After a moment, Burt said: 'Did anything strike you funny about that radio sermon?'

'No.I heard enough of that stuff as a kid to last me for ever. I told you about it.'

'Didn't you think he sounded kind of young? That preacher?'

She uttered a mirthless laugh. 'A teenager, maybe, so what? That's what's so monstrous about that whole trip. They like to get hold of them when their minds are still rubber. They know how to put all the emotional checks and balances in. You should have been at some of the tent meetings my mother and father dragged me to. . . some of the ones I was "saved" at.

'Let's see. There was Baby Hortense, the Singing Marvel. She was eight. She'd come on and sing "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms" while her daddy passed the plate, telling everybody to "dig deep, now, let's not let this little child of God down." Then there was Norman Staunton. He used to preach hellfire and brimstone in this Little Lord Fauntleroy suit with short pants. He was only seven.'

She nodded at his look of unbelief.

'They weren't the only two, either. There were plenty of them on the circuit. They were good *draws.'* She spat the word. 'Ruby Stampnell. She was a ten-year-old faith healer. The Grace Sisters. They used to come out with little tin4oil haloes over their heads and - *oh!'*

'What is it?' He jerked around to look at her, and what she was holding in her hands. Vicky was staring at it raptly. Her slowly seining hands had snagged it on the bottom of the suitcase and had brought it up as she talked. Burt pulled over to take a better look. She gave it t6 him wordlessly.

It was a crucifix that had been made from twists of corn husk, once green, now dry. Attached to this by woven cornsilk was a dwarf corncob. Most of the kernels had been carefully removed, probably dug out one at a time with a pocket-knife. Those kernels remaining formed a crude cruciform figure in yellowish bas-relief. Corn-kernel eyes, each slit longways to suggest pupils. Outstretched kernel arms, the legs together, terminating in a rough indication of

bare feet. Above, four letters also raised from the bonewhite cob: I N R I.

'That's a fantastic piece of workmanship,' he said.

'It's hideous,' she said in a flat, strained voice. 'Throw it out.'

'Vicky, the police might want to see it.'

'Why?'

'Well, I don't know why. Maybe -, 'Throw it out. Will you please do that for me? I don't want it in the car.'

'I'll put it in back. And as soon as we see the cops, we'll get rid of it one way or the other. I promise. Okay?'

'Oh, do whatever you want with it!' she shouted at him. 'You will anyway!'

Troubled, he threw the thing in back, where it landed on a pile of clothes. Its corn-kernel eyes stared raptly at the T-Bird's dome light.

He pulled out again, gravel splurting from beneath the tyres.

'We'll give the body and everything that was in the suitcase to the cops,' he promised. 'Then we'll be shut of it.'

Vicky didn't answer. She was looking at her hands. A mile further on, the endless cornfields drew away from the road, showing farmhouses and outbuildings. In one yard they saw dirty chickens pecking listlessly at the soil. There were faded cola and chewing-gum ads on the roofs of barns. They passed a tall billboard that said: ONLY JESUS SAVEs. They passed a cafe with a Conoco gas island, but Burt decided to go on into the centre of town, if there was one. If not, they could come back to the cafe. It only occurred to him after they had passed it that the parking lot had been empty except for a dirty old pickup that had looked like it was sitting on two flat tyres.

Vicky suddenly began to laugh, a high, giggling sound that struck Burt as being dangerously close to hysteria.

'What's so funny?'

'The signs,' she said, gasping and hiccupping. 'Haven't you been reading them? When they called this the Bible Belt, they sure weren't kidding. Oh Lordy, there's another bunch.' Another burst of hysterical laughter escaped her, and she clapped both hands over her mouth.

Each sign had only one word. They were leaning on whitewashed sticks that had been implanted in the sandy shoulder, long ago by the looks; the whitewash was flaked and faded. They were coming up at eighty-foot intervals and Burt read:

A...CLOUD...BY...DAY ...A...PILLAR...OF FIRE.. BY. . NIGHT

'They only forgot one thing,' Vicky said, still giggling helplessly.

'What?' Burt asked, frowning.

'Burma Shave.' She held a knuckled fist against her open mouth to keep in the laughter, but her semi-hysterical giggles flowed around it like effervescent ginger-ale bubbles.

'Vicky, are you all right?'

'I will be. Just as soon as we're a thousand miles away from here, in sunny sinful California with the Rockies between us and Nebraska.'

Another group of signs came up and they read them silently.

TAKE. . . THIS. . . AND. . . EAT. . . SAITH. . . THE. LORD... GOD

Now why, Burt thought, should I immediately associate that indefinite pronoun with corn? Isn't that what they say when they give you communion? It had been so long since he had been to church that he really couldn't remember. He wouldn't be surprised if they used cornbread for holy wafer around these parts. He opened his mouth to tell Vicky that, and then thought better of it.

They breasted a gentle rise and there was Gatlin below them, all three blocks of it, looking like a set from a movie about the Depression.

'There'll be a constable,' Burt said, and wondered why

the sight of that hick one-timetable town dozing in the sun should have brought a lump of dread into his throat.

They passed a speed sign proclaiming that no more than thirty was now in order, and another sign, rust-flecked, which said: YOU ARE NOW ENTERNG GATLIN, NICEST LITTLE TOWN IN NEBRASKA - OR ANYWHERE ELSE! POP. 4531.

Dusty elms stood on both sides of the road, most of them diseased. They passed the Gatlin Lumberyard and a 76 gas station, where the price signs swung slowly in a hot noon breeze: REG 35.9 HI-TEST 38.9, and another which said: HI TRUCKERS DIESEL FUEL AROUND BACK.

They crossed Elm Street, then Birch Street, and came up on the town square. The houses lining the streets were plain wood with screened porches. Angular and functional. The lawns were yellow and dispirited. Up ahead a mongrel dog walked slowly out into the middle of Maple Street, stood looking at them for a moment, then lay down in the road with its nose on its paws.

'Stop,' Vicky said. 'Stop right here.

Burt pulled obediently to the curb.

'Turn around. Let's take the body to Grand Island. That's not too far, is it? Let's do that.'

'Vicky, what's wrong?'

'What do you mean, what's wrong?' she asked, her voice rising thinly. 'This town is empty, Burt. There's nobody here but us. Can't you feel that?'

He had felt something, and still felt it. But -'It just seems that way,' he said. 'But it sure is a one-hydrant town. Probably all up in the square, having a bake sale or a bingo game.'

'There's no one here.' She said the words with a queer, strained emphasis. 'Didn't you see that 76 station back there?'

'Sure, by the lumberyard, so what?' His mind was elsewhere, listening to the dull buzz of a cicada burrowing into one of the nearby elms. He could smell corn, dusty roses, and fertilizer - of course. For the first time they were off the turnpike and in a town. A town in a state he had never been in before (although he had flown over it from time to time in United Airlines 747s) and somehow it felt all wrong but all right. Somewhere up ahead there would be a drugstore with a soda fountain, a movie house named the Bijou, a school named after JFK.

'Burt, the prices said thirty-five-nine for regular and thirty-eight-nine for high octane. Now how long has it been since anyone in this country paid those prices?'

'At least four years,' he admitted. 'But, Vicky -'

'We're right in town, Burt, and there's not a car! *Not one car!*

'Grand Island is seventy miles away. It would look funny if we took him there.'

'I don't care.'

'Look, let's just drive up to the courthouse and -, *'No!'*

There, damn it, there. Why our marriage is falling apart, in a nutshell. No I won't. No sir. And furthermore, I'll hold my breath till I turn blue if you don't let me have my way.

'Vicky,' he said.

'I want to get out of here, Burt.'

'Vicky, listen to me.'

'Turn around. Let's go.'

'Vicky, will you stop a minute?'

'I'll stop when we're driving the other way. Now let's go.'

'We have a dead child in the trunk of our car!' he roared at her, and took a distinct pleasure at the way she flinched, the way her face crumbled. In a slightly lower voice he went on:

'His throat was cut and he was shoved out into the road and Iran him over. Now I'm going to drive up to the courthouse or whatever

they have here, and I'm going to report it. If you want to start walking towards the pike, go to it. I'll pick you up. But don't you tell me to turn around and drive seventy miles to Grand Island like we had nothing in the trunk but a bag of garbage. He happens to be some mother's son, and I'm going to report it before whoever killed him gets over the hills and far away.'

'You bastard,' she said, crying. 'What am I doing with you?'

'I don't know,' he said. 'I don't know any more. But the situation can be remedied, Vicky.'

He pulled away from the curb. The dog lifted its head at the brief squeal of the tyres and then lowered it to its paws again.

They drove the remaining block to the square. At the corner of Main and Pleasant, Main Street split in two. There actually was a town square, a grassy park with a bandstand in the middle. On the other end, where Main Street became one again, there were two official-looking buildings. Burt could make out the lettering on one: GATLIN

MUNICIPAL CENTER.

'That's it,' he said. Vicky said nothing.

Halfway up the square, Burt pulled over again. They were beside a lunch room, the Gatlin Bar and Grill.

'Where are you going?' Vicky asked with alarm as he opened his door.

'To find out where everyone is. Sign in the window there says "Open".'

'You're not going to leave me here alone.'

'So come. Who's stopping you?'

She unlocked her door and stepped out as he crossed in front of the car. He saw how pale her face was and felt an instant of pity. Hopeless pity.

'Do you hear it?' she asked as he joined her.

'Hear what?'

'The nothing. No cars. No people. No tractors. Nothing.' And then, from a block over, they heard the high and joyous laughter of children.

'I hear kids,' he said. 'Don't you?'

She looked at him, troubled.

He opened the lunchroom door and stepped into dry, antiseptic heat. The floor was dusty. The sheen on the chrome was dull. The wooden blades of the ceiling fans stood still. Empty tables. Empty counter stools. But the mirror behind the counter had been shattered and there was something else. . . in a moment he had it. All the beer taps had been broken off. They lay along the counter like bizarre party favours.

Vicky's voice was gay and near to breaking. 'Sure. Ask anybody. Pardon me, sir, but could you tell me -'

'Oh, shut up.' But his voice was dull and without force. They were standing in a bar of dusty sunlight that fell through the lunchroom's big plate-glass window and again he had that feeling of being watched and he thought of the boy they had in their trunk, and of the high laughter of children. A phrase came to him for no reason, a legal-sounding phrase, and it began to repeat mystically in his mind: *Sight unseen. Sight unseen. Sight unseen.*

His eyes travelled over the age-yellowed cards thumb-tacked up behind the counter: CHEESEBURG 35c WORLD'S BEST JOE 10c STRAWBERRY RHUBARB PIE 25c TODAY'S SPECIAL HAM & RED EYE GRAVY W/MASHED POT 80c.

How long since he had seen lunchroom prices like that?

Vicky had the answer. 'Look at this,' she said shrilly. She was pointing at the calendar on the wall. 'They've been at that bean supper for twelve years, I guess.' She uttered a grinding laugh.

He walked over. The picture showed two boys swimming in a pond while a cute little dog carried off their clothes. Below the picture was the legend: COMPLIMENTS OF GATLIN LUMBER & HARDWARE. *You Breakum, We Fixum.* The month on view was August 1964.

'I don't understand,' he faltered, 'but I'm sure -,

'You're sure!' she cried hysterically. 'Sure, you're sure! That's part of your trouble, Burt, you've spent your whole life being *sure!'*

He turned back to the door and she came after him.

'Where are you going?'

'To the Municipal Center.'

'Burt, why do you have to be so stubborn? You know something's wrong here. Can't you just admit it?'

'I'm not being stubborn. I just want to get shut of what's in that trunk.'

They stepped out on to the sidewalk, and Burt was struck afresh with the town's silence, and with the smell of fertilizer. Somehow you never thought of that smell when you buttered an ear and salted it and bit in. Compliments of sun, rain, all sorts of man-made phosphates, and a good healthy dose of cow shit. But somehow this smell was different from the one he had grown up with in rural upstate New York. You could say whatever you wanted to about organic fertilizer, but there was something almost fragrant about it when the spreader was laying it down in the fields. Not one of your great perfumes, God no, but when the late-afternoon spring breeze would pick up and waft it over the freshly turned fields, it *was* a smell with good associations. It meant winter was over for good. It meant that school doors were going to bang closed in six weeks or so and spill everyone out into summer. It was a smell tied irrevocably in his mind with other aromas that *were* perfume: timothy grass, clover, fresh earth, hollyhocks, dogwood.

But they must do something different out here, he thought. The smell was close but not the same. There was a sickish-sweet undertone. Almost a death smell. As a medical orderly in Vietnam, he had become well versed in that smell.

Vicky was sitting quietly in the car, holding the corn crucifix in her lap and staring at it in a rapt way Burt didn't like.

'Put that thing down,' he said.

'No,' she said without looking up. 'You play your games and I'll play mine.'

He put the car in gear and drove up to the corner. A dead stoplight hung overhead, swinging in a faint breeze. To the left was a neat white church. The grass was cut. Neatly kept flowers grew beside the flagged path up to the door. Burt pulled over.

'What are you doing?'

'I'm going to go in and take a look' Burt said. 'It's the only place in town that looks as if there isn't ten years' dust On it. And look at the sermon board.'

She looked. Neatly pegged white letters under glass read: THE POWER AND GRACE OF HE WHO WALKS BEHIND THE ROWS. The date was 27 July 1976 - the Sunday before.

'He Who Walks Behind the Rows,' Burt said, turning off the ignition. 'One of the nine thousand names of God only used in Nebraska, I guess. Coming?'

She didn't smile. 'I'm not going in with you.'

'Fine. Whatever you want.'

'I haven't been in a church since I left home and I don't want to be in *this* church and I don't want to be in *this town,* Burt. I'm scared

Out of my mind, can't we just *go?'*

'I'll only be a minute.'

'I've got my keys, Burt. If you're not back in five minutes, I'll just drive away and leave you here.'

'Now just wait a minute, lady.'

'That's what I'm going to do. Unless you want to assault me like a common mugger and take my keys. I suppose you could do that.'

'But you don't think I will.'

'No.'

Her purse Was on the seat between them. He snatched it up. She screamed and grabbed for the shoulder strap. He pulled it out of her reach. Not bothering to dig, he simply turned the bag upside down and let everything fall out. Her key-ring glittered amid tissues, cosmetics, change, old shopping lists. She lunged for it but he beat her again and put the keys in his own pocket.

'You didn't have to do that,' she said, crying. 'Give them tome.'

'No,' he said, and gave her a hard, meaningless grin. 'No way.'

'Please, Burt! I'm scared!' She held her hand out, pleading now.

'You'd wait two minutes and decide that was long enough.'

'I wouldn't -'

'And then you'd drive off laughing and saying to yourself, "That'll teach Burt to cross me when I want something." Hasn't that pretty much been your motto during our married life? That'll teach Burt to cross me?'

He got out of the car.

'Please, Burt?' she screamed, sliding across the seat. 'Listen. . .I know. . . we'll drive out of town and call from a phone booth, okay? I've got all kinds of change. I just. we can . . . *don't leave me alone, Burt, don't leave me out here alone!'*

He slammed the door on her cry and then leaned against the side of the T-Bird for a moment, thumbs against his closed eyes. She was pounding on the driver's side window and calling his name. She was going to make a wonderful impression when he finally found someone in authority to take charge of the kid's body. Oh yes.

He turned and walked up the flagstone path to the church doors. Two or three minutes, just a look around, and he would be back out. Probably the door wasn't even unlocked.

But it pushed in easily on silent, well-oiled hinges (reverently oiled, he thought, and that seemed funny for no really good reason) and he stepped into a vestibule so cool it was almost chilly. It took his eyes a moment to adjust to the dimness.

The first thing he noticed was a pile of wooden letters in the far corner, dusty and jumbled indifferently together. He went to them, curious. They looked as old and forgotten a~ the calendar in the bar and grill, unlike the rest of the vestibule, which was dust-free and tidy. The letters were about two feet high, obviously part of a set. He spread them out on the carpet - there were eighteen of them - and shifted them around like anagrams. HURT BITE CRAG CHAP CS. Nope. CRAP TARGET CHIBS HUC. That wasn't much good either. Except for the CH in CHIBS. He quickly assembled the word CHURCH and was left looking at RAP TAGET CIBS. Foolish. He was squatting here playing idiot games with a bunch of letters while Vicky was going nuts out in the car. He started to get up, and then saw it. He formed BAPTIST, leaving RAG EC - and by changing two letters he had GRACE. GRACE BAPTIST CHURCH. The letters must have been out front. They had taken them down and had thrown them indifferently in the corner, and the church had been painted since then so that you couldn't even see where the letters had been.

Why?

It wasn't the Grace Baptist Church any more, that was why. So what kind of church was it? For some reason that question caused a trickle of fear and he stood up quickly, dusting his fingers. So they had taken down a bunch of letters, so what? Maybe they had changed the place into Flip Wilson's Church of What's Happening Now.

But what had happened then?

He shook it off impatiently and went through the inner doors. Now he was standing at the back of the church itself, and as he looked towards the nave, he felt fear close around his heart and squeeze tightly. His breath drew in, loud in the pregnant silence of this place.

The space behind the pulpit was dominated by a gigantic portrait of Christ, and Burt thought: If nothing else in this town gave Vicky the screaming meemies, this would.

The Christ was grinning, vulpine. His eyes were wide and staring, reminding Burt uneasily of Lon Chaney in *The Phantom of the Opera.* In each of the wide black pupils someone (a sinner, presumably) was drowning in a lake of fire. But the oddest thing was that this Christ had green hair hair which on closer examination revealed itself to be a twining mass of early-summer corn. The picture was crudely done but effective. It looked like a comic-strip mural done by a gifted child - an Old Testament Christ, or a pagan Christ that might slaughter his sheep for sacrifice instead of leading them.

At the foot of the left-hand ranks of pews was a pipe Organ, and Burt could not at first tell what was wrong with it. He walked down the left-hand aisle and saw with slowly dawning horror that the keys had been ripped up, the stops had been pulled out . . and the pipes themselves filled with dry cornhusks. Over the organ was a carefully lettered plaque which read: MAKE NO MUSIC EXCEPT WITH HUMAN TONGUE SAITH THE LORD GOD.

Vicky was right. Something was terribly wrong here. He debated going back to Vicky without exploring any further, just getting into the car and leaving town as quickly as possible, never mind the Municipal Building. But it grated on him. Tell the truth, he thought. You want to give her Ban 5000 a workout before going back and admitting she was right to start with.

He would go back in a minute or so.

He walked towards the pulpit, thinking: People must go through Gatlin all the time. There must be people in the neighbouring towns who have friends and relatives here. The Nebraska SP must cruise through from time to time. And what about the power company? The stoplight had been dead. Surely they'd know if the power had been off for twelve long years. Conclusion: What seemed to have happened in Gatlin was impossible.

Still, he had the creeps.

He climbed the four carpeted steps to the pulpit and looked out over the deserted pews, glimmering in the half-shadows. He seemed to feel the weight of those eldritch and decidedly unchristian eyes boring into his back.

There was a large Bible on the lectern, opened to the thirty-eighth chapter of Job. Burt glanced down at it and read: 'Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind, and said, Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge? . . . Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? declare, if thou hast understanding.' The lord. He Who Walks Behind the Rows. Declare if thou hast understanding. And please pass the corn.

He fluttered the pages of the Bible, and they made a dry whispering sound in the quiet - the sound that ghosts might make if there really were such things. And in a place like this you could almost believe it. Sections of the Bible had been chopped out. Mostly from the New Testament, he saw. Someone had decided to take on the job of amending Good King James with a pair of scissors.

But the Old Testament was intact.

He was about to leave the pulpit when he saw another book on a lower shelf and took it out, thinking it might be a church record of weddings and confirmations and burials.

He grimaced at the words stamped on the cover, done inexpertly in gold leaf: THUS LET THE INIQUITOUS BE CUT DOWN SO THAT THE GROUND MAY BE FERTILE AGAIN SAITH THE LORD GOD OF HOSTS.

There seemed to be one train of thought around here, and Burt didn't care much for the track it seemed to ride on.

He opened the book to the first wide, lined sheet. A child had done the lettering, he saw immediately. In places an ink eraser had been carefully used, and while there were no misspellings, the letters were large and childishly made, drawn rather than written. The first

column read:

Amos Deigan (Richard), b. Sept. 4, 1945 Sept. 4, 1964

Isaac Renfrew (William), b. Sept.19, 1945 Sept.19, 1964

Zepeniah Kirk (George), b. Oct.14, 1945 Oct.14, 1964

Mary Wells (Roberta), b. Nov.12, 1945 Nov.12, 1964

Yemen Hollis (Edward), b. Jan. 5, 1946 Jan. 5, 1965

Frowning, Burt continued to turn through the pages. Three-quarters of the way through, the double columns ended abruptly:

Rachel Stigman (Donna), b. June21, 1957 June 21, 1976

Moses Richardson (Henry), b. July 29, 1957

Malachi Boardman (Craig), b. August 15, *1957*

The last entry in the book was for Ruth Clawson (Sandra), b. April 30, 1961. Burt looked at the shelf where he had found this book and came up with two more. The first had the same INIQUITOUS BE CUT DOWN logo, and it continued the same record, the single column tracing birth dates and names. In early September of 1964 he found Job Gilman (Clayton), b. September 6, and the next entry was Eve Tobin, b. June 16, 1965. No second name in parentheses.

The third book was blank.

Standing behind the pulpit, Burt thought about it.

Something had happened in 1964. Something to do with religion, and corn. . . and children.

Dear God we beg thy blessing on the crop. For Jesus' sake, amen.

And the knife raised high to sacrifice the lamb - but had it been a lamb? Perhaps a religious mania had swept them. Alone, all alone, cut off from the outside world by hundreds of square miles of the rustling secret corn. Alone under seyenty million acres of blue sky. Alone under the watchful eye of God, now a strange green God, a God of corn, grown old and strange and hungry. He Who Walks Behind the Rows.

Burt felt a chill creep into his flesh.

Vicky, let me tell you a story. It's about Amos Deigan, who was born Richard Deigan On 4 September 1945. He took the name Amos in 1964, fine Old Testament name, Amos, one of the minor prophets. Well, Vicky, what happened - don't laugh - is that Dick Deigan and his friends - Billy Renfrew, George Kirk, Roberta Wells, and Eddie Hollis among others - they got religion and they killed off their parents. All of them. Isn't that a scream? Shot them in their beds, knifed them in their bathtubs, poisoned their suppers, hung them, or disembowelled them, for all I know.

Why? The corn. Maybe it was dying. Maybe they got the idea somehow that it was dying because there was too much sinning. Not enough sacrifice. They would have done it in the corn, in the rows.

And somehow, Vicky, I'm quite sure of this, somehow they decided that nineteen was as old as any of them could live. Richard 'Amos' Deigan, the hero of our little story, had his nineteenth birthday on 4 September 1964 - the date in the book. I think maybe they killed him. Sacrificed him in the corn. Isn't that a silly story?

But let's look at Rachel Stigman, who was Donna Stigman until 1964. She turned nineteen on 21 June, just about a month ago. Moses Richardson was born on 29 July - just three days from today he'll be nineteen. Any idea what's going to happen to ole Mose on the twenty-ninth?

I can guess.

Burt licked his lips, which felt dry.

One other thing, Vicky. Look at this. We have Job Gilman (Clayton) born on 6 September 1964. No other births until 16 June 1965. A gap of ten months. Know what I think? They killed all the parents, even the pregnant ones, that's what I think. And one of *them* got pregnant in October of 1964 and gave birth to Eve. Some sixteen- or seventeen-year-old girl. *Eve. The first woman.*

He thumbed back through the book feverishly and found the Eve Tobin entry. Below it: 'Adam Greenlaw, b. July 11, 1965'.

They'd be just eleven now, he thought and his flesh began to crawl. And maybe they're out there. Someplace.

But how could such a thing be kept secret? How could it goon?

How unless the God in question approved?

'Oh Jesus,' Burt said into the silence, and that was when the T-Bird's horn began to- blare into the afternoon, one long continuous blast.

Burt jumped from the pulpit and ran down the centre aisle. He threw open the outer vestibule door, letting in hot sunshine, dazzling. Vicky was bold upright behind the

steering wheel, both hands plastered on the horn ring, her head swivelling wildly. From all around the children were coming. Some of them were laughing gaily. They held knives, hatchets, pipes, rocks, hammers. One girl, maybe eight, with beautiful long blonde hair, held a jackhandle. Rural weapons. Not a gun among them. Burt felt a wild urge to scream out: *Which of you* is *Adam and Eve? Who are the mothers? Who are the daughters? Fathers? Sons?*

Declare, if thou hast understanding.

They came from the side streets, from the town green, through the gate in the chain-link fence around the school playground a block further east. Some of them glanced indifferently at Burt, standing frozen on the church steps, and some nudged each other and pointed and smiled the sweet smiles of children.

The girls were dressed in long brown wool and faded sun-bonnets. The boys, like Quaker parsons, were all in black and wore round-crowned flat-brimmed hats. They streamed across the town square towards the car, across lawns, a few came across the front yard of what had been the Grace Baptist Church until 1964. One or two of them almost close enough to touch.

'The shotgun!' Burt yelled. 'Vicky, get the shotgun!'

But she was frozen in her panic, he could see that from the steps. He doubted if she could even hear him through the closed windows.

They converged on the Thunderbird. The axes and hatchets and chunks of pipe began to rise and fall. My God, am I seeing this? he thought frozenly. An arrow of chrome fell off the side of the car. The hood ornament went flying. Knives crawled spirals through the sidewalls of the tyres and the car settled. The horn blared on and on. The windshield and side windows -went opaque and cracked under the onslaught. . . and then the safety glass sprayed inwards and he could see again. Vicky was crouched back, only one hand on the horn ring now, the other thrown up to protect her face. Eager young hands reached in, fumbling for the lock/unlock button. She beat them away wildly. The horn became intermittent and then stopped altogether.

The beaten and dented driver's side door was hauled open. They were trying to drag her out but her hands were wrapped around the steering wheel. Then one of them leaned in, knife in hand, and -His paralysis broke and he plunged down the steps, almost falling, and ran down the flagstone walk, towards them. One of them, a boy about sixteen with long long red hair spilling out from beneath his hat, turned towards him, almost casually, and something flicked through the air. Burt's left arm jerked backwards, and for a moment he had the absurd thought that the had been punched at long distance, Then the pain came, so sharp and sudden that the world went grey.

He examined his arm with a stupid sort of wonder. A buck and half Pensy jack-knife was growing out of it like a strange tumour. The sleeve of his J. C. Penney sports shirt was turning red. He looked at it for what seemed like for ever, trying to understand how he could have grown a jack-knife. . . was it possible?

When he looked up, the boy with red hair was almost on top of him. He was grinning, confident.

'Hey, you bastard,' Burt said. His voice was creaking, shocked.

'Remand your soul to God, for you will stand before His throne momentarily,' the boy with the red hair said, and clawed for Burt's eyes.

Burt stepped back, pulled the Pensy out of his arm, and stuck it into the red-haired boy's throat. The gush of blood was immediate, gigantic. Burt was splashed with it. The red-haired boy began to gobble and walk in a large circle. He clawed at the knife, trying to pull it free, and was unable. Burt watched him, jaw hanging agape. None of this was happening. It was a dream. The red-haired boy gobbled and walked. Now his sound was the only one in the hot early afternoon. The others watched, stunned.

This part of it wasn't in the script, Burt thought numbly. Vicky and I, we were in the script. And the boy in the corn, who was trying to run away. But not one of their own. He stared at them savagely, wanting to scream, *How do you like it?*

The red-haired boy gave one last weak gobble, and sank to his knees. He stared up at Burt for a moment, and then his hands dropped away from the shaft of the knife, and he fell forward.

A soft sighing sound from the children gathered around the Thunderbird. They stared at Burt. Burt stared back at them, fascinated . . . and that was when he noticed that Vicky was gone.

'Where is she?' he asked. 'Where did you take her?'

One of the boys raised a blood-streaked hunting knife towards his throat and made a sawing motion there. He grinned. That was the only answer.

From somewhere in back, an older boy's voice, soft: 'Get him.'

The boys began to walk towards him. Burt backed up. They began to walk faster. Burt backed up faster. The shotgun, the god-damned shotgun! Out of reach. The sun cut their shadows darkly on the green church lawn. . . and then he was on the sidewalk. He turned and ran.

'Kill him!' someone roared, and they came after him.

He ran, but not quite blindly. He skirted the Municipal Building - no help there, they would corner him like a rat -and ran on up Main Street, which opened out and became the highway again two blocks further up. He and Vicky would have been on that road now and away, if he had only listened.

His loafers slapped against the sidewalk. Ahead of him he could see a few more business buildings, including the Gatlin Ice Cream Shoppe and - sure enough - the Bijou Theatre. The dust-clotted marquee letters read NOW HOWING L MITED EN AGEMEN ELI A TH TAYLOR CLEOPA RA. Beyond the next cross street was a gas station that marked the edge of town. And beyond that the corn, closing back in to the sides of the road. A green tide of corn.

Burt ran. He was already out of breath and the knife wound in his upper arm was beginning to hurt. And he was leaving a trail of blood. As he ran he yanked his handkerchief from his back pocket and stuck it inside his shirt.

He ran. His loafers pounded the cracked cement of the sidewalk, his breath rasped in his throat with more and more heat. His arm began to throb in earnest. Some mordant part of his brain tried to ask if he thought he could run all the way to the next town, if he could run twenty miles of two-lane blacktop.

He ran. Behind him he could hear them, fifteen years younger and faster than he was, gaining. Their feet slapped on the pavement. They whooped and shouted back and forth to each other. They're having more fun than a five-alarm fire, Burt thought disjointedly. They'll talk about it for years.

Burt ran.

He ran past the gas station marking the edge of town. His breath gasped and roared in his chest. The sidewalk ran out under his feet. And now there was only one thing to do, only one chance to beat them and escape with his life. The houses were gone, the town was gone. The corn had surged in a soft green wave back to the edges of the road. The green, swordlike leaves rustled softly. It would be deep in there, deep and cool, shady in the rows of man-high corn.

He ran past a sign that said: YOU ARE NOW LEAVING GATLIN, NICEST LITTLE TOWN IN NEBRASKA - OR ANYWHERE ELSE! DROP IN ANYTIME!

I'll be sure to do that, Burt thought dimly.

He ran past the sign like a sprinter closing on the tape and then swerved left, crossing the road, and kicked his loafers away. Then he was in the corn and it closed behind him and over him like the waves of a green sea, taking him in. Hiding him. He felt a sudden and wholly unexpected relief sweep him, and at the same moment he got his second wind. His lungs, which had been shallowing up, seemed to unlock and give him more breath.

He ran straight down the first row he had entered, head ducked, his broad shoulders swiping the leaves and making them tremble. Twenty yards in' he turned right, parallel to the road again, and ran on, keeping low so they wouldn't see his dark head of hair bobbing amid the yellow corn tassels. He doubled back towards the road for a few moments, crossed more rows, and then put his back to the road and hopped randomly from row to row, always delving deeper and deeper into the corn.

At last, he collapsed on to his knees and put his forehead against the ground. He could only hear his own taxed breathing, and the thought that played over and over in his mind was: *Thank God I gave up smoking, thank God I gave up smoking, thank God* -Then he could hear them, yelling back and forth to each other, in some cases bumping into each other ('Hey, this is my row!'), and the sound heartened him. They were well away to his left and they sounded very poorly organized.

He took his handkerchief out of his shirt, folded it, and stuck it back in after looking at the wound. The bleeding seemed to have stopped in spite of the workout he had given it.

He rested a moment longer, and was suddenly aware that he felt *good,* physically better than he had in years excepting the throb of his arm. He felt well exercised, and suddenly grappling with a clearcut (no matter how insane) problem after two years of trying to cope with the incubotic gremlins that were sucking his marriage dry.

It wasn't right that he should feel this way, he told himself. He was in deadly peril of his life, and his wife had been carried off. She might be dead now. He tried to summon up Vicky's face and dispel some of the odd good feeling by doing so, but her face wouldn't come. What came was the red-haired boy with the knife in his throat.

He became aware of the corn fragrance in his nose now, all around him. The wind through the tops of the plants made a sound like voices. Soothing. Whatever had been done in the name of this corn, it was now his protector.

But they were getting closer.

Running hunched over, he hurried up the row he was in, crossed over, doubled back, and crossed over more rows. He tried to keep the voices always on his left, but as the afternoon progressed, that became harder to do. The voices had grown faint, and often the rustling sound of the corn obscured them altogether. He would run, listen, run again. The earth was hard-packed, and his stockinged feet left little or no trace.

When he stopped much later the sun was hanging over the fields to his right, red and inflamed, and when he looked at his watch he saw that it was quarter past seven. The sun had stained the corntops a reddish gold, but here the shadows were dark and deep. He cocked his head, listening. With the coming of sunset the wind had died entirely and the corn stood still, exhaling its aroma of growth into the warm air. If they were still in the corn they were either far away or just hunkered down and listening. But Burt didn't think a bunch of kids, even crazy ones, could be quiet for that long. He suspected they had done the most kidlike thing, regardless of the consequences for them; they had given up and gone home.

He turned towards the setting sun, which had sunk between the raftered clouds on the horizon, and began to walk. If he cut on a diagonal through the rows, always keeping the setting sun ahead of him, he would be bound to strike Route 17 sooner or later.

The ache in his arm had settled into a dull throb that was nearly pleasant, and the good feeling was still with him. He decided that as long as he was here, he would let the good feeling exist in him without guilt. The guilt would return when he had to face the authorities and account for what had happened in Gatlin. But that could wait.

He pressed through the corn, thinking he had never felt so keenly aware. Fifteen minutes later the sun was only a hemisphere poking over the horizon and he stopped again, his new awareness clicking into a pattern he didn't like. It was vaguely. . . well, vaguely frightening.

He cocked his head. The corn was rustling.

Burt had been aware of that for some time, but he had just put it together with something else. The wind was still. How could that be?

He looked around warily, half expecting to see the smiling boys in their Quaker coats creeping out of the corn, their knives clutched in their hands. Nothing of the sort. There was still that rustling noise. Off to the left.

He began to walk in that direction, not having to bull through the corn any more. The row was taking him in the direction he wanted to go, naturally. The row ended up ahead. Ended? No, emptied out into some sort of clearing. The rustling was there.

He stopped, suddenly afraid.

The scent of the corn was strong enough to be cloying. The rows held on to the sun's heat and he became aware that he was plastered with sweat and chaff and thin spider strands of cornsilk. The bugs ought to be crawling all over him. . . but they weren't.

He stood still, staring towards that place where the corn opened out on to what looked like a large circle of bare earth.

There were no minges or mosquitoes in here, no black-flies or chiggers - what he and Vicky had called 'drive-in bugs' when they had been courting, he thought with sudden and unexpectedly sad nostalgia. And he hadn't seen a single crow. How was that for weird, a cornpatch with no crows?

In the last of the daylight he swept his eyes closely over the row of corn to his left. And saw that every leaf and stalk was perfect, which was just not possible. No yellow blight. No tattered leaves, no caterpillar eggs, no burrows, no -His eyes widened.

My God, there aren't any weeds!

Not a single one. Every foot and a half the corn plants rose from the earth. There was no witchgrass, jimson, pikeweed, whore's hair, or poke salad. Nothing.

Burt stared up, eyes wide. The light in the west was fading. The raftered clouds had drawn back together. Below them the golden light had faded to pink and ochre. It would be dark soon enough.

It was time to go down to the clearing in the corn and see what was there - hadn't that been the plan all along? All the time he had thought he was cutting back to the highway, hadn't he been being led to this place?

Dread in his belly, he went on down to the row and stood at the edge of the clearing. There was enough light for him to see what was here. He couldn't scream. There didn't seem to be enough air left in his lungs. He tottered in on legs like slats of splintery wood. His eyes bulged from his sweaty face.

'Vicky,' he whispered. 'Oh, Vicky, my God -'

She had been mounted on a crossbar like a hideous trophy, her arms held at the wrists and her legs at the ankles with twists of common barbed wire, seventy cents a yard at any hardware store in Nebraska. Her eyes had been ripped out. The sockets were filled with the moonflax of cornsilk. Her jaws were wrenched open in a silent scream, her mouth filled with cornhusks.

On her left was a skeleton in a mouldering surplice. The nude jawbone grinned. The eye sockets seemed to stare at Burt jocularly, as if the one-time minister of the Grace Baptist Church was saying: *It's not so bad, being sacrificed by pagan devil-children in the corn is not so bad, having your eyes ripped out of your skull according to the Laws of Moses is not so bad* -To the left of the skeleton in the surplice was a second skeleton, this one dressed in a rotting blue uniform. A hat hung over the skull, shading the eyes, and on the peak of the cap was a greenish-tinged badge reading *police chief.*

That was when Burt heard it coming: not the children but something much larger, moving through the corn and towards the clearing. Not the children, no. The children wouldn't venture into the corn at night. This was the holy place, the place of He Who Walks Behind the Rows.

Jerkily Burt turned to flee. The row he had entered the clearing by was gone. Closed up. All the rows had closed up. It was coming closer now and he could hear it, pushing through the corn. He could hear it breathing. An ecstasy of superstitious terror seized him. It was coming. The corn on the far side of the clearing had suddenly darkened, as if a gigantic shadow had blotted it out.

Coming.

He Who Walks Behind the Rows.

It began to come into the clearing. Burt saw something huge, bulking up to the sky . . . something green with terrible red eyes the size of footballs.

Something that smelled like dried cornhusks years in some dark barn.

He began to scream. But he did not scream long.

Some time later, a bloated orange harvest moon came up.

The children of the corn stood in the clearing at midday, looking at the two crucified skeletons and the two bodies

the bodies were not skeletons yet, but they would be. In time. And here, in the heartlands of Nebraska, in the corn, there was nothing but time.

'Behold, a dream came to me in the night, and the Lord did shew all this to me.'

They all turned to look at Isaac with dread and wonder, even Malachi. Isaac was only nine, but he had been the Seer since the corn had taken David a year ago. David had been nineteen and he had walked into the corn on his birthday, just as dusk had come drifting down the summer rows.

Now, small face grave under his round-crowned hat, Isaac continued:

'And in my dream the Lord was a shadow that walked behind the rows, and he spoke to me in the words he used to our older brothers years ago. He is much displeased with this sacrifice.'

They made a sighing, sobbing noise and looked at the surrounding walls of green.

'And the Lord did say: Have I not given you a place of killing, that you might make sacrifice there? And have I not shewn you favour? But this man has made a blasphemy within me, and I have completed this sacrifice myself. Like the Blue Man and the false minister who escaped many years ago.'

'The Blue Man . . . the false minister,' they whispered, and looked at each other uneasily.

'SO now is the Age of Favour lowered from nineteen plantings and harvestings to eighteen,' Isaac went on relentlessly. 'Yet be fruitful and multiply as the corn multiplies, that my favour may be shewn you, and be upon you.'

Isaac ceased.

The eyes turned to Malachi and Joseph, the only two among this party who were eighteen. There were others back in town, perhaps twenty in all.

They waited to hear what Malachi would say, Malachi who had led the hunt for Japheth, who evermore would be known as Ahaz, cursed of God. Malachi had cut the throat of Ahaz and had thrown his body out of the corn so the foul body would not pollute it or blight it.

'I obey the word of God,' Malachi whispered.

The corn seemed to sigh its approval.

In the weeks to come the girls would make many corncob crucifixes to ward off further evil.

And that night all of those now above the Age of Favour walked silently into the corn and went to the clearing, to gain the continued favour of He Who Walks Behind the Rows.

'Goodbye, Malachi,' Ruth called. She waved disconsolately. Her belly was big with Malachi's child and tears coursed silently down her cheeks. Malachi did not turn. His back was straight. The corn swallowed him.

Ruth turned away, still crying. She had conceived a secret hatred for the corn and sometimes dreamed of walking into it with a torch in

113

each hand when dry September came and the stalks were dead and explosively combustible. But she also feared it. Out there, in the night, something walked, and it saw everything . . even the secrets kept in human hearts.

Dusk deepened into night. Around Gatlin the corn rustled and whispered secretly. It was well pleased.

The Cat from Hell

By STEPHEN KING

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 poopoos!' Obscene, coming from an old baffle-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.

"Ssssshhhh-" 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 MAN IN THE BLACK SUIT

I am no w a very old man and this is something that happened to me when I was very young--only nine years old. It was 1914, the summer after my brother, Dan, died in the west field and not long before America got into the First World War. I've never told anyone about what happened at the fork in the stream that day, and I never will. I've decided to write it down, though, in this book, which I will leave on the table beside my bed. I can't write long, because my hands shake so these days and I have next to no strength, but I don't think it will take long.

Later, someone may find what I have written. That seems likely to me, as it is pretty much human nature to look in a book marked "Diary" after its owner has passed along. So, yes--my works will probably be read. A better question is whether anyone will believe them. Almost certainly not, but that doesn't matter. It's not belief I'm interested in but freedom. Writing can give that, I've found. For twenty years I wrote a column called "Long Ago and Far Away" for the Castle Rock Call, and I know that sometimes it works that way--what you write down sometimes leaves you forever, like old photographs left in the bright sun, fading to nothing but white.

I pray for that sort of release.

A man in his eighties should be well past the terrors of childhood, but as my infirmities slowly creep up on me, like waves licking closer and closer to some indifferently built castle of sand, that terrible face grows clearer and clearer in my mind's eye. It glows like a dark star in the constellations of my childhood. What I might have done yesterday, who I might have seen here in my room at the nursing home, what I might have said to them or they to my--those things are gone, but the face of the man in the black suit grows ever clearer, ever closer, and I remember every word he said. I don't want to think of him but I can't help it, and sometimes at night my old heart beats so hard and so fast I think it will tear itself right clear of my chest. So I uncap my fountain pen and force my trembling old hank to write this pointless anecdote in the diary one of my great-grandchildren--I can't remember her name for sure, at least not right now, But I know it starts with an "S"--gave to me last Christmas, and which I have never written in until now. Now I will write in it. I will write the story of how I met the man in the black suit on the bank of Castle Stream one afternoon in the summer of 1914.

The town of Motton was a different world in those days--more different than I could ever tell you. That was a world without airplanes droning overhead, a world almost without cars and trucks, a world where the skies were not cut into lanes and slices by overhead power lines. There was not a single paved road in the whole town, and the business district consisted of nothing but Corson's General Store, Thut's Livery & Hardware, the Methodist church at Christ's Corner, the school, the town hall, and half a mile down from there, Harry's Restaurant, which my mother called, with unfailing disdain, "the liquor house."

Mostly, though, the difference was in how people lived--how apart they were. I'm not sure people born after the middle of the century could quite credit that, although they might say they could, to be polite to old folks like me. There were no phones in western Maine back then, for one thing. The first on wouldn't be installed for another five years, and by the time there was a phone in our house, I was nineteen and going to college at the University of Maine in Orono.

But that is only the roof of the thing. There was no doctor closer than Casco, and there were no more than a dozen houses in what you would call town. There were no neighborhoods (I'm not even sure we knew the work, although we had a verb--"neighboring"--that described church functions and barn dances), and open fields were the exception rather than the rule. Out of town the houses were farms that stood far apart from each other, and from December until the middle of March we mostly hunkered down in the little pockets of stove warmth we called families. We hunkered and listened to the wind in the chimney and hoped no one would get sick or break a leg or get a headful of bad ideas, like the farmer over in Castle Rock who had chopped up his wife and kids three winters before and then said in court that the ghosts made him do it. In those days before the Great War, most of Motton was woods and bog--dark long places full of moose and mosquitoes, snakes and secrets. In those days there were ghosts everywhere.

This thing I'm telling about happened on a Saturday. My father gave me a whole list of chores to do, including some that would have been Dan's, if he'd still been alive. He was my only brother, and he'd died of a bee sting. A year had gone by, and still my mother wouldn't hear that. She said it was something else, had to have been, that no one ever died of being stung be a bee. When Mama Sweet, the oldest lady in the Methodist Ladies' Aid, tried to tell her--at the church supper the previous winter, this was--that the same thing had happened to her favorite uncle back in '73, my mother clapped her hanks over her ears, got up, and walked out of the church basement. She'd never been back since, and nothing my father could say to her would change her mind. She claimed she was done with church, and that if she ever had to see Helen Robichaud again (that was Mama Sweet's real name) she would slap her eyes out. She wouldn't be able to help herself, she said.

That day Dad wanted me to lug wood for the cookstove, weed the beans and the cukes, pitch hay out of the loft, get two jugs of water to put in the cold pantry, and scrape as much old paint off the cellar bulkhead as I could. Then, he said, I could go fishing, if I didn't mind going by myself--he had to go over and see Bill Eversham about some cows. I said I sure didn't mind going by myself, and my dad smiled as if that didn't surprise him so very much. He'd given me a bamboo pole the week before--not because it was my birthday or anything but just because he liked to give me things sometimes--and I was wild to try it in Castle Stream, which was by far the troutiest brook I'd ever fished.

"But don't you go too far in the woods," he told me. "Not beyond were the water splits."

No, sir."

"Promise me."

"Yessir, I promise."

"Now promise your mother."

We were standing on the back stoop; I had been bound for the springhouse with the water jugs when my dad stopped me. Now he turned me around to face my mother, who was standing at the marble counter in a flood of strong morning sunshine falling through the double windows over the sink. There was a curl of hair lying across the side of her forehead and touching her eyebrow--you see how well I remember it all? The bright light turned that little curl to filaments of gold and that instant I saw her as a woman, saw her as my father must have seen her. She was wearing a housedress with little red roses all over it, I remember, and she was kneading bread. Candy Bill, out little black Scottie dog, was standing alertly beside her feet, looking up, waiting for anything that might drop. My mother was looking at me.

"I promise," I said.

She smiled, but it was the worried kind of smile she always seemed to make since my father brought Dan back from the west field in his arms. My father had come sobbing and barechested. He had taken off his shirt and draped it over Dan's face, which had swelled and turned color. My boy! he had been crying. Oh, look at my boy! Jesus, look at my boy! I remember that as if it were yesterday. It was the only time I ever heard my dad take the Saviour's name in vain.

"What do you promise, Gary?" she asked.

"Promise not to go no further than where the stream forks, Ma'am."

"Any further."

"Any."

She gave me a patient look, saying nothing as her hands went on working in the dough, which now had a smooth, silky look.

"I promise not to go any further than where the stream forks, Ma'am"

"Thank you, Gary," she said. "And try to remember that grammar is for the world as well as for school."

"Yes, Ma'am."

Candy Bill followed me as I did my chores, and sat between my feet as I bolted my lunch, looking up at me with the same attentiveness he had shown my mother while she was kneading her bread, but when I got my new bamboo pole and my old, splintery creel and started out of the dooryard, he stopped and only stood in the dust by an old roll of snow fence, watching. I called him but he wouldn't come. He yapped a time or two, as if telling me to come back, but that was all.

"Stay, then," I said, trying to sound as if I didn't care. I did, though, at least a little. Candy Bill always went fishing with me.

My mother came to the door and looked out at me with her left hand held up to shade her eyes. I can see her that way still, and it's like looking at a photograph of someone who later became unhappy, or died suddenly. "You mind your dad now, Gary!"

"Yes Ma'am, I will."

She waved. I waved too. Then I turned my back on her and walked away.

The sun beat down on my neck, hard and hot, for the first quarter-mile or so, but then I entered the woods, where double shadow fell over the road and it was cool and fir-smelling and you could hear the wind hissing through the deep, needled groves. I walked with my pole on my shoulder the way boys did back then, holding my creel in my other hand like a valise along a road that was really nothing

but a double rut with a grassy strip growing up the center hump, I began to hear the hurried, eager gossip of Castle Stream. I thought of trout with bright speckled backs and pure-white bellies, and my heart went up in my chest.

The stream flowed under a little wooden bridge, and the banks leading down to the water were steep and brushy. I worked my way down carefully, holding on where I could and digging my heels in. I went down out of summer and back into mid-spring, or so it felt. The cool rose gently off the water, and there was a green smell like moss. When I got to the edge of the water I only stood there for a little while, breathing deep of that mossy smell and watching the dragonflies circle and the skitterbugs skate. Then, further down, I saw a trout leap at a butterfly--a good big brookie, maybe fourteen inches long--and remembered I hadn't come here just to sightsee.

I walked along the bank, following the current, and wet my line for the first time, with the bridge still in sight upstream. Something jerked the tip of my pole down once or twice and ate half my worm, but whatever it was was too sly for my nine-year old hands--or maybe just not hungry enough to be careless--so I quit that place.

I stopped at two or three other places before I got to the place where Castle Stream forks, going southwest into Castle Rock and southeast into Kashwakamak Township, and at one of them I caught the biggest trout I have ever caught in my life, a beauty that measured nineteen inches from tip to tail on the little ruler I kept in my creel. That was a monster of a brook, even for those days.

If I had accepted this as gift enough for one day and gone back, I would not be writing now (and this is going to turn out longer that I thought it would, I see that already), but I didn't. Instead I saw to my catch right then and there as my father had shown me--cleaning it, placing it on dry grass at the bottom of the creel, then laying damp grass on top of it--and went on. I did not, at age nine, think that catching a nineteen-inch brook trout was particularly remarkable, although I do remember being amazed that my line had not broken when I, netless as well as artless, had hauled it out and swung it toward me in a clumsy tail-flapping arc.

Ten minutes late, I came to the place where the stream split in those days (it is long gone now; there is a settlement of duplex homes where Castle Stream once went its course, and a district grammar school as well, and if there is a stream it goes in darkness), dividing around a huge gray rock nearly the size of our outhouse. There was a pleasant flat space here, grassy and soft, overlooking what my dad and I called South Branch. I squatted on my heels, dropped my line into the water, and almost immediately snagged a fine rainbow trout. He wasn't the size of my brookie--only a foot or so--but a good fish, just the same. I had it cleaned out before the gills had stopped flexing, stored it in my creel, and dropped my line back into the water.

This time there was no immediate bite, so I leaned back, looking up at the blue stripe of sky I could see along the stream's course. Clouds floated by, west to east, and I tried to think what they looked like. I saw a unicorn, then a rooster, then a dog that looked like Candy Bill. I was looking for the next one when I drowsed off.

Or maybe slept. I don't know for sure. All I know is that a tug on my line so strong it almost pulled the bamboo pole out of my hand was what brought my back into the afternoon. I sat up, clutched the pole, and suddenly became aware that something was sitting on the tip of my nose. I crossed my eyes and saw a bee. My heart seemed to fall dead in my chest, and for a sure horrible second I was sure I was going to wet my pants.

The tug on my line came again, stronger this time, but although I maintained my grip on the end of the pole so it wouldn't be pulled into the stream and perhaps carried away (I think I even had the presence of mind to snub the line with my forefinger), I made no effort to pull in my catch. All my horrified attention was fixed on the fat black-and-yellow thing that was using my nose as a rest stop.

I slowly poked out my lower lip and blew upward. The bee ruffled a little but kept its place. I blew again and it ruffled again--but this time it also seemed to shift impatiently, and I didn't dare blow anymore, for fear it would lose its temper completely and give me a shot. It was too close for me to focus on what it was doing, but it was easy to imagine it ramming its stinger into one of my nostrils and shooting its poison up toward my eyes. And my brain.

A terrible idea came to me: that this was the very bee that had killed my brother. I knew it wasn't true, and not only because honeybees probably didn't live longer than a single year (except maybe for the queens; about them I was not so sure). It couldn't be true, because honeybees died when they stung, and even at nine I knew it. Their stingers were barbed, and when they tried to fly away after doing the deed, they tore themselves apart. Still, the idea stayed. This was a special bee, a devil-bee, and it had come back to finish the other of Albion and Loretta's two boys.

And here is something else: I had been stung my bees before, and although the stings had swelled more than is perhaps usual (I can't really say for sure), I had never died of them. That was only for my brother, a terrible trap that had been laid for him in his very making--a trap that I had somehow escaped. But as I crossed my eyes until it hurt, in an effort to focus on the bee, logic did not exist. It was the bee that existed, only that --the bee that had killed my brother, killed him so cruelly that my father had slipped down the straps of his over-engorged face. Even in the depths of his grief he had done that, because he didn't want his wife to see what had become of her firstborn. Now the bee had returned, and now it would kill me. I would die in convulsion on the bank, flopping just as a brookie flops after you take the hook out of its mouth.

As I sat there trembling on the edge of panic--ready to bolt to my feet and then bolt anywhere--there came a report from behind me. It was as sharp and peremptory as a pistol shot, but I knew it wasn't a pistol shot; it was someone clapping his hands. One single clap. At that moment, the bee tumbled off my nose and fell into my lap. It lay there on my pants with its legs sticking up and its stinger a threatless black thread against the old scuffed brown of the corduroy. It was dead as a doornail, I saw that at once. At the same moment, the pole gave another tug--the hardest yet--and I almost lost it again.

I grabbed it with both hands and gave it a big stupid yank that would have made my father clutch his head with both hands, if he had been there to see. A rainbow trout, a good bit larger than either of the ones I had already caught, rose out of the water in a wet flash, spraying fine drops of water from its tail--it looked like one of those fishing pictures they used to put on the covers of men's magazines like True and Man's Adventure back in the forties and fifties. At that moment hauling in a big one was about the last thing on my mind, however, and when the line snapped and the fish fell back into the stream, I barely noticed. I looked over my shoulder to see who had clapped. A man was standing above me, at the edge of the trees. His face was very long and pale. His black hair was combed tight against his skull and parted with rigorous care on the left side of his narrow head. He was very tall. He was wearing a black three-piece suit, and I knew right away that he was not a human being, because his eyes were the orangey red of flames in a woodstove. I don't mean just the irises, because he had no irises, and no pupils, and certainly no whites. His eyes were completely orange--an orange that shifted and flickered. And it's really too late not to say exactly what I mean, isn't it? He was on fire inside, and his eyes were like the little isinglass portholes you sometimes see in stove doors.

My bladder let go, and the scuffed brown the dead bee was lying on went a darker brown. I was hardly aware of what had happened, and I couldn't take my eyes off the man standing on top of the bank and looking down at me--the man who had apparently walked out of thirty miles of trackless western Maine woods in fine black suit and narrow shoes of gleaming leather. I could see the watch chain looped across his vest glittering in the summer sunshine. There was not so much as a single pine needle on him. And he was smiling at me.

"Why, it's a fisherboy!" he cried in a mellow, pleasing voice. "Imagine that! Are we well met, fisherboy?"

"Hello, sir," I said. The voice that came out of me did not tremble, but it didn't sound like my voice, either. It sounded older. Like Dan's voice, maybe. Or my father's, even. And all I could think was that maybe he would let me go if I pretended not to see what he was. If I pretended I didn't see there were flames glowing and dancing where his eyes should have been.

"I've saved you a nasty sting, perhaps," he said, and then to my horror, he came down to the bank to where I sat with a dead bee in my wet lap and a bamboo fishing pole in my nerveless hands. His slick-soled city shoes should have slipped on the low, grassy weeds dressing the steep bank, but they didn't nor did they leave tracks, I saw. Where his feet had touched--or seemed to touch--there was not a single broken twig, crushed leaf, or trampled shoe-shape.

Even before he reached me, I recognized the aroma baking up from the skin under the suit--the smell of burned matches. The smell of sulfur. The man in the black suit was the Devil. He had walked out of the deep woods between Motton and Kashwakamak, and now he was standing here beside me. From the corner of one eye I could see a hand as pale as the hand of a store-window dummy. The fingers were hideously long.

He hunkered beside me on his hams, his knees popping just as the knees of any normal man might, but when he moved his hands so they dangled between his knees, I saw that each of those long fingers ended in not a fingernail but a long yellow claw.

"You didn't answer my question, fisherboy," he said in his mellow voice. It was, now that I think of it, like the voice of those radio announcers on the big-band shows years later, the ones that would sell Geritol and Serutan and Ovaltine and Dr. Granbow pipes. "Are we well met?"

"Please don't hurt me," I whispered, in a voice so low I could barely hear it. I was more afraid than I could ever write down, more afraid than I want to remember. But I do. I do. it never crossed my mind to hope I was having a dream, although it might have, I suppose, if I had been older. But I was nine, and I knew the truth when it squatted down beside me. I knew a hawk from a handsaw, as my father would have said. The man who had come out of the woods on that Saturday afternoon in midsummer was the Devil, and inside the empty holes of his eyes his brains were burning.

"Oh, do I smell something?" he asked, as if he hadn't heard me, although I knew he had. "Do I smell something ...wet?"

He leaned toward me with his nose stuck out, like someone who means to smell a flower. And I noticed an awful thing; as the shadow of his head travelled over the bank, the grass beneath it turned yellow and died. He lowered his head toward my pants and sniffed. His glaring eyes half closed, as if he had inhaled some sublime aroma and wanted to concentrate on nothing but that.

"Oh, bad!" he cried. "Lovely-bad!" And then he chanted: "Opal! Diamond! Sapphire! Jade! I smell Gary's lemonade!" He threw himself on his back in the little flat place and laughed.

I thought about running, but my legs seemed two counties away from my brain. I wasn't crying. I was too scared to cry. I suddenly knew that I was going to die, and probably painfully, but the worst of it was that that might not be the worst of it. The worst might come later. After I was dead.

He sat up suddenly, the smell of burnt matches fluffing out from his suit and making me feel gaggy in my throat. He looked at me solemnly from his narrow white face and burning eyes, but there was a sense of laughter about him.

"Sad news, fisherboy," he said. "I've come with sad news."

I could only look at him--the black suit, the fine black shoes, the long white fingers that ended not in nails but in talons.

"Your mother is dead."

"No!" I cried. I thought of her making bread, of the curl lying across her forehead and just touching her eyebrow, of her standing there in the strong morning sunlight, and the terror swept over me again, but not for myself this time. Then I thought of how she'd looked when I set off with my fishing pole, standing in the kitchen doorway with her hand shading her eyes, and how she had looked to me in that moment like a photograph of someone you expected to see again but never did. "No, you lie!" I screamed.

He smiled--the sadly patient smile of a man who has often been accused falsely. "I'm afraid not," he said. "It was the same thing that happened to your brother, Gary. It was a bee."

"No, that's not true," I said, and now I did begin to cry. "She's old, she's thirty-five--if a bee sting could kill her the way it did Danny she would have died a long time ago, and you're a lying bastard!"

I had called the Devil a lying bastard. I was aware of this, but the entire front of my mind was taken up by the enormity of what he'd said. My mother dead? He might as well have told me that the moon had fallen on Vermont. But I believed him. On some level I believed him completely, as we always believe, on some level, the worst thing our hearts can imagine.

"I understand your grief, little fisherboy, but that particular argument just doesn't hold water, I'm afraid." He spoke in a tone of bogus comfort that was horrible, maddening, without remorse or pity. "A man can go his whole life without seeing a mockingbird, you know, but does that mean mockingbirds don't exist? Your mother--"

A fish jumped below at us. The man in the black suit frowned, then pointed a finger at it. The trout convulsed in the air, its body bending so strenuously that for a split second it appeared to be snapping at its own tail, and when it fell back into Castle Stream it was floating lifelessly. It struck the big gray rock where the waters divided, spun around twice in the whirlpool eddy that formed there, and then floated away in the direction of Castle Rock. Meanwhile, the terrible stranger turned his burning eyes on my again, his thin lips pulled back from tiny rows of sharp teeth in a cannibal smile.

"Your mother simply went through her entire life without being stung by a bee," he said. "But then--less than an hour ago, actually--one flew in through the kitchen window while she was taking the bread out of the oven and putting it on the counter to cool."

I raised my hands and clapped them over my ears. He pursed his lips as if to whistle and blew at me gently. It was only a little breath, but the stench was foul beyond belief--clogged sewers, outhouses that have never know a single sprinkle of lime, dead chickens after a flood.

My hands fell away from the sides of my face.

"Good," He said. "You need to hear this, Gary; you need to hear this, my little fisherboy. It was your mother who passed that fatal weakness to your brother. You got some of it, but you also got a protection from your father that poor Dan somehow missed." He pursed his lips again, only this time he made a cruelly comic little tsk-tsk sound instead of blowing his nasty breath at me. "So although I don't like to speak ill of the dead, it's almost a case of poetic justice, isn't it?" After all, she killed your brother Dan as surely as if she had put a gun to his head and pulled the trigger."

"No," I whispered. "No, it isn't true."

"I assure you it is," he said. "The bee flew in the window and lit on her neck. She slapped at it before she even knew what she was doing--you were wiser than that, weren't you, Gary?--and the bee stung her. She felt her throat start to close up at once. That's what happens, you know, to people who can't tolerate bee venom. Their throats close and they drown in the open air. That's why Dan's face was so swollen and purple. That's why your father covered it with his shirt."

I stared at him, now incapable of speech. Tears streamed down my cheeks. I didn't want to believe him, and knew from my church schooling that the Devil is the father of lies, but I did believe him just the same.

"She made the most wonderfully awful noises," the man in the black suit said reflectively, "and she scratched her face quite badly, I'm afraid. Her eyes bulged out like a frog's eyes. She wept." He paused, then added: "She wept as she died, isn't that sweet? And here's the most beautiful thing of all. After she was dead, after she's been lying on the floor for fifteen minutes or so with no sound but the stove ticking with that little thread of a bee stinger still poking out of the side of her neck--so small, so small--do you know what Candy Bill did? That little rascal licked away her tears. First on one side, and then on the other."

He looked out at the stream for a moment, his face sad and thoughtful. Then he turned back to me and his expression of bereavement disappeared like a dream. His face was as slack and as avid as the face of a corpse that has died hungry. His eyes blazed. I could see his sharp little teeth between his pale lips.

"I'm starving," he said abruptly. "I'm going to kill you and eat your guys, little fisherboy. What do you think about that?"

No, I tried to say, please no, but no sound came out. He meant to do it, I saw. He really meant to do it.

"I'm just so hungry," he said, both petulant and teasing. "And you won't want to live without your precious mommy, anyhow, take my word for it. Because your father's the sort of man who'll have to have some warm hole to stick it in, believe me, and if you're the only one available, you're the one who'll have to serve. I'll save you all that discomfort and unpleasantness. Also, you'll go to Heaven, think of that. Murdered souls always go to Heaven. So we'll both be serving God this afternoon, Gary. Isn't that nice?"

He reached for me again with his long, pale hands, and without thinking what I was doing, I flipped open the top of my creel, pawed all the way down to the bottom, and brought out the monster brookie I'd caught earlier--the one I should have been satisfied with. I held it out to him blindly, my fingers in the red slit of its belly, from which I had removed its insides as the man in the black suit had threatened to remove mine. The fish's glazed eye stared dreamily at me, the gold ring around the black center reminding me of my mother's wedding ring. And in that moment I saw her lying in her coffin with the sun shining off the wedding band and knew it was true--she had been stung by a bee, she had drowned in the warm, bread-smelling air, and Candy Bill had licked her dying tears from her swollen cheeks.

"Big fish!" the man in the black suit cried in a guttural, greedy voice. "Oh, biiig fiiish!"

He snatched it away from me and crammed it into a mouth that opened wider than any human mouth ever could. Many years later, when I was sixty-five (I know it was sixty-five, because that was the summer I retired from teaching), I went to the aquarium in Boston and finally saw a shark. The mouth of the man in the black suit was like that shark's mouth when it opened, only his gullet was blazing orange, the same color as his eyes, and I felt heat bake out of it and into my face, the way you feel a sudden wave of heat come pushing out of a fireplace when a dry piece of wood catches alight. And I didn't imagine that heat, either--I know I didn't--because just before he slid the head of my nineteen-inch brook trout between his gaping jaws, I saw the scales along the sides of the fish rise up and begin to curl like bits of paper floating over an open incinerator.

He slid the fish in like a man in a travelling show swallowing a sword. He didn't chew, and his blazing eyes bulged out, as if in effort. The fish went in and went in, his throat bulged as it slid down his gullet, and now he began to cry tears of his own--except his tears were blood, scarlet and thick.

I think it was the sight of those bloody tears that gave me my body back. I don't know why that should have been, but I think it was. I bolted to my feet like a Jack released from its box, turned with my bamboo pole still in one hand, and fled up the bank, bending over and tearing tough bunches of weeds out with my free hank in an effort to get up the slope more quickly.

He made a strangled, furious noise--the sound of any man with his mouth too full--and I looked back just as I got to the top. He was coming after me, the back of his suit coat flapping and his thin gold watch chain flashing and winking in the sun. The tail of the fish was still protruding from his mouth and I could smell the rest of it, roasting in the oven of his throat.

He reached for me, groping with his talons, and I fled along the top of the bank. After a hundred yards or so, I found my voice and went to screaming--screaming in fear, of course, but also screaming in grief for my beautiful dead mother.

He was coming after me. I could hear snapping branches and whipping bushes, but I didn't look back again. I lowered my head, slitted my eyes against the bushes and low-hanging branches along the stream's bank, and ran as fast as I could. And at every step I expected to feel his hands descending on my shoulders, pulling me back into a final burning hug.

That didn't happen. Some unknown length of time later--it couldn't have been longer than five or ten minutes, I suppose, but it

seemed like forever--I saw the bridge through layerings of leaves and firs. Still screaming, but breathlessly now, sounding like a teakettle that has almost boiled dry, I reached this second, steeper bank and charged up.

Halfway to the top, I slipped to my knees, looked over my shoulder, and saw the man in the black suit almost at my heels, his white face pulled into a convulsion of fury and greed. His cheeks were splattered with his bloody tears and his shark's mouth hung open like a hinge.

"Fisherboy!" he snarled, and started up the bank after me, grasping at my foot with one long hand. I tore free, turned, and threw my fishing pole at him. He batted it down easily, but it tangled his feet up somehow and he went to his knees. I didn't wait to see any more; I turned and bolted to the top of the slope. I almost slipped at the very top, but managed to grab one of the support struts running beneath the bridge and save myself.

"You can't get away, fisherboy!" he cried from behind me. He sounded furious, but he also sounded as if he were laughing. "It takes more than a mouthful of trout to fill me up!"

"Leave me alone!" I screamed back at him. I grabbed the bridge's railing and threw myself over it in a clumsy somersault, filling my hanks with splinters and bumping my head so hard on the boards when I came down that I saw stars. I rolled over on my belly and began crawling. I lurched to my feet just before I got to the end of the bridge, stumbled once, found my rhythm, and then began to run. I ran as only nine-year-old boys can run, which is like the wind. It felt as if my feet only touched the ground with every third or fourth stride, and, for all I know, that may be true. I ran straight up the right-hank wheel rut in the road, ran until my temples pounded and my eyes pulsed in their sockets, ran until I had a hot stitch in my left side from the bottom of my ribs to my armpit, ran until I could taste blood and something like metal shavings in the back of my throat, When I couldn't run anymore I stumbled to a stop and looked back over my shoulder, puffing and blowing like a wind-broken horse. I was convinced I would see him standing right there behind me in his natty black suit, the watch chain a glittering loop across his vest and not a hair out of place.

But he was gone. The road stretching back toward Castle Stream between the darkly massed pines and spruces was empty. An yet I sensed him somewhere near in those woods, watching me with his grassfire eyes, smelling of burned matches and roasted fish.

I turned and began walking as fast as I could, limping a little--I'd pulled muscles in both legs, and when I got out of bed the next morning I was so sore I could barely walk. I kept looking over my shoulder, needing again and again to verify the road behind my was still empty. It was each time I looked, but those backward glances seemed to increase my fear rather than lessen it. The firs looked darker, massier, and I kept imagining what lay behind the trees that marched beside the road--long, tangled corridors of forest, leg-breaking deadfalls, ravines where anything might live. Until that Saturday in 1914, I had thought that bears were the worst thing the forest could hold.

A mile or so farther up the road, just beyond the place where it came out of the woods and joined the Geegan Flat Road, I saw my father walking toward me and whistling "The Old Oaken Bucket." He was carrying his own rod, the one with the fancy spinning reel from Monkey Ward. In his other hand he had his creel, the one with the ribbon my mother had woven through the handle back when Dan was still alive. "Dedicated to Jesus" that ribbon said. I had been walking, but when I saw him I started to run again, screaming Dad! Dad! Dad! at the top of my lungs and staggering from side to side on my tired, sprung legs like a drunken sailor. The expression of surprise on his face when he recognized me might have been comical under other circumstances. He dropped his rod and creel into the road without so much as a downward glance at them and ran to me. It was the fastest I ever saw my dad run in his life; when we came together it was a wonder the impact didn't knock us both senseless, and I struck my face on his belt buckle hard enough to start a little nosebleed. I didn't notice that until later, though. Right then I only reached out my arms and clutched him as hard as I could. I held on and rubbed my hot face back and forth against his belly, covering his old blue workshirt with blood and tears and snot.

"Gary, what is it? What Happened? Are you all right?"

"Ma's dead!" I sobbed. "I met a man in the woods and he told me! Ma's dead! She got stung by a bee and it swelled her all up just like what happened to Dan, and she's dead! She's on the kitchen floor and Candy Bill . . . licked the t-t-tears . . . off her . . ."

Face was the last word I had to say, but by then my chest was hitching so bad I couldn't get it out. My own tears were flowing again, and my dad's startled, frightened face had blurred into three overlapping images. I began to howl--not like a little kid who's skinned his knee but like a dog that's seen something bad by moonlight--and my father pressed my head against his hard flat stomach again. I slipped out from under his hand, though, and looked back over my shoulder. I wanted to make sure the man in the black suit wasn't coming. There was no sign of him; the road winding back into the woods was completely empty. I promised myself I would never go back down that road again, not ever, no matter what, and I suppose now that God's greatest blessing to His creatures below is that they can't see the future. It might have broken my mind if I had known I would be going back down that road, and not two hours later. For that moment, though, I was only relieved to see we were still alone. Then I thought of my mother-- my beautiful dead mother--and laid my face back against my father's stomach and bawled some more.

"Gary, listen to me," he said a moment or two later. I went on bawling. He gave me a little longer to do that, then reached down and lifted my chin so he could look down into my face and I could look up into his. "Your mom's fine," he said.

I could only look at him with tears streaming down my cheeks. I didn't believe him.

"I don't know who told you different, or what kind of dirty dog would want to put a scare like that into a little boy, but I swear to God your mother's fine."

"But . . . but he said . . ."

"I don't care what he said. I got back from Eversham's earlier than I expected--he doesn't want to see any cows, it's all just talk--and decided I had time to catch up with you. I got my pole and my creel and your mother made us a couple of jelly fold-overs. Her new bread. Still warm. So she was fine half an hour ago, Gary, and there's nobody knows and different that's come from this direction, I guarantee you. Not in just half an hour's time." He looked over my shoulder. "Who was this man? And where was he? I'm going to find him and thrash him within an inch of his life."

I thought a thousand things in just two seconds--that's what it seemed like, anyway--but the last thing I thought was the most powerful: if my Dad met up with the man in the black suit, I didn't think my Dad would be the one to do the thrashing. Or the walking away.

I kept remembering those long white fingers, and the talons at the ends of them.

"Gary?"

"I don't know that I remember," I said.

"Were you where the stream splits? The big rock?"

I could never lie to my father when he asked a direct question--not to save his life or mine. "Yes, but don't go down there." I seized his arm with both hands and tugged it hard. "Please don't. He was a scary man." Inspiration struck like an illuminating lightning bolt. "I think he had a gun."

He looked at me thoughtfully. "Maybe there wasn't a man," he said, lifting his voice a little on the last word and turning it into something that was almost but not quite a question. "Maybe you fell asleep while you were fishing, son, and had a bad dream. Like the ones you had about Danny last winter."

I had had a lot of bad dreams about Dan last winter, dreams where I would open the door to our closet or to the dark, fruity interior of the cider shed and see him standing there and looking at me out of his purple strangulated face; from many of these dreams I had awakened screaming, and awakened my parents as well. I had fallen asleep on the bank of the stream for a little while, too--dozed off, anyway--but I hadn't dreamed, and I was sure I had awakened just before the man in the black suit clapped the bee dead, sending it tumbling off my nose and into my lap. I hadn't dreamed him the way I had dreamed Dan, I was quite sure of that, although my meeting with him had already attained a dreamlike quality in my mind, as I suppose supernatural occurrences always must. But if my Dad thought that the man had only existed in my own head, that might be better. Better for him.

"It might have been, I guess," I said.

"Well, we ought to go back and find your rod and your creel."

He actually started in that direction, and I had to tug frantically at his arm to stop him again and turn him back toward me.

"Later," I said. "Please, Dad? I want to see Mother. I've got to see her with my own eyes."

He thought that over, then nodded. "Yes, I suppose you do. We'll go home first, and get your rod and creel later."

So we walked back to the farm together, my father with his fish pole propped on his shoulder just like one of my friends, me carrying his creel, both of us eating folded-over slices of my mother's bread smeared with black-currant jam.

"Did you catch anything?" he asked as we came in sight of the barn.

"Yes, sir," I said. "A rainbow. Pretty good-sized." And a brookie that was a lot bigger, I thought but didn't say.

"That's all? Nothing else?"

"After I caught it I fell asleep." This was not really an answer but not really a lie, either.

"Lucky you didn't lose your pole. You didn't, did you, Gary?"

"No, sir," I said, very reluctantly. Lying about that would do no good even if I'd been able to think up a whopper--not if he was set on going back to get my creel anyway, and I could see by his face that he was.

Up ahead, Candy Bill came racing out of the back door, barking his shrill bark and wagging his whole rear end back and forth the way Scotties do when they're excited. I couldn't wait any longer. I broke away from my father and ran to the house, still lugging his creel and still convinced, in my heart of hearts, that I was going to find my mother dead on the kitchen floor with her face swollen and purple, as Dan's had been when my father carried him in from the west filed, crying and calling the name of Jesus.

But she was standing at the counter, just as well and fine as when I had left her, humming a song as she shelled peas into a bowl. She looked around at me, first in surprise and then in fright as she took in my wide eyes and pale cheeks.

"Gary, what is it? What's the matter?"

I didn't answer, only ran to her and covered her with kisses. At some point my father came in and said, "Don't worry, Lo--he's all right. He just had one of his bad dreams, down there by the brook."

"Pray God it's the last of them," she said, and hugged me tighter while Candy Bill danced around our feet, barking his shrill bark.

"You don't have to come with me if you don't want to, Gary," my father said, although he had already made it clear that he thought I should--that I should go back, that I should face my fear, as I suppose folks would say nowadays. That's very well for fearful things that are make-believe, but two hours hadn't done much to change my conviction that the man in the black suit had been real. I wouldn't be able to convince my father of that, though. I don't think there was a nine-year old who ever lived would have been able to convince his father he'd seen the Devil walking out of the woods in a black suit.

"I'll come," I said. I had come out of the house to join him before he left, mustering all my courage to get my feet moving, and now we were standing by the chopping block in the side yard, not far from the woodpile.

"What you got behind your back?" he asked.

I brought it out slowly. I would go with him, and I would hope the man in the black suit with the arrow-straight part down the left side of his head was gone. But if he wasn't, I wanted to be prepared. As prepared as I could be, anyway. I had the family Bible in the hand I had brought out from behind my back. I'd set out just to bring the New Testament, which I had won for memorizing the most psalms in the Thursday-night Youth Fellowship competition (I managed eight, although most of them except the Twenty-third had floated out of my mind in a week's time), but the little red Testament didn't seem like enough when you were maybe going to face the Devil himself, not even when the words of Jesus were marked out in red ink.

My father looked at the old Bible, swollen with family documents and pictures, and I thought he'd tell me to put it back but he didn't. A look of mixed grief and sympathy crossed his face, and he nodded. "All right," he said. "does your mother know you took that?"

"No, sir."

He nodded again. "Then we'll hope she doesn't spot it gone before we get back. Come on. And don't drop it."

Half an hour or so later, the two of us stood on the bank at the place where Castle Stream forked, and at the flat place where I'd had my encounter with the man with the red-orange eyes. I had my bamboo rod in my hand--I'd picked it up below the bridge--and my creel lay down below, on the flat place. Its wicker top was flipped back. We stood looking down, my father and I, for a long time, and neither of us said anything.

Opal! Diamond! Sapphire! Jade! I smell Gary's lemonade! That had been his unpleasant little poem, and once he had recited it, he had thrown himself on his back, laughing like a child who has just discovered he has enough courage to say bathroom words like shit or piss. The flat place down there was as green and lush as any place in Maine that the sun can get to in early July. Except where the

stranger had lain. There the grass was dead and yellow in the shape of a man.

I was holding our lumpy old family Bible straight out in front of me with both thumbs pressing so hard on the cover that they were white. It was the way Mama Sweet's husband, Norville, held a willow fork when he was trying to dowse somebody a well.

"Stay here," my father said at last, and skidded sideways down the bank, digging his shoes into the rich soft soil and holding his arms out for balance. I stood where I was, holding the Bible stiffly out at the ends of my arms, my heart thumping. I don't know if I had a sense of being watched that time or not; I was too scared to have a sense of anything, except for a sense of wanting to be far away from that place and those woods.

My dad bent down, sniffed at where the grass was dead, and grimaced. I knew what he was smelling: something like burnt matches. Then he grabbed my creel and came on back up the bank, hurrying. He snagged one fast look over his shoulder to make sure nothing was coming along behind. Nothing was. When he handed me the creel, the lid was still hanging back on its cunning little leather hinges. I looked inside and saw nothing but two handfuls of grass.

"Thought you said you caught a rainbow," my father said, "but maybe you dreamed that, too."

Something in his voice stung me. "No, sir," I said. "I caught one."

"Well, it sure as hell didn't flop out, not if it was gutted and cleaned. And you wouldn't put a catch into your fisherbox without doing that, would you, Gary? I taught you better than that."

"Yes, sir, you did, but--"

"So if you didn't dream catching it and if it was dead in the box, something must have come along and eaten it," my father said, and then he grabbed another quick glance over his shoulder, eyes wide, as if he had heard something move in the woods. I wasn't exactly surprised to see drops of sweat standing out on his forehead like big clear jewels. "Come on," he said. "Let's get the hell out of here."

I was for that, and we went back along the bank to the bridge, walking quick without speaking. When we got there, my dad dropped to one knee and examined the place where we'd found my rod. There was another patch of dead grass there, and the lady's slipper was all brown and curled in on itself, as if a blast of heat had charred it. I looked in my empty creel again. "He must have gone back and eaten my other fish, too," I said.

My father looked up at me. "Other fish!"

"Yes, sir. I didn't tell you, but I caught a brookie, too. A big one. He was awful hungry, that fella." I wanted to say more and the words trembled just behind my lips, but in the end I didn't.

We climbed up to the bridge and helped each other over the railing. My father took my creel, looked into it, then went to the railing and threw it over. I came up beside him in time to see it splash down and float away like a boat, riding lower and lower in the stream as the water poured in between the wicker weavings.

"It smelled bad," my father said, but he didn't look at me when he said it, and his voice sounded oddly defensive. It was the only time I ever heard him speak just that way.

"Yes, sir."

"We'll tell your mother we couldn't find it. If she asks. If she doesn't ask, we won't tell her anything."

"No, sir, we won't."

And she didn't and we didn't, and that's the way it was.

That day in the woods is eighty years gone, and for many of the years in between I have never even thought of it--not awake, at least. Like any other man or woman who ever live, I can't say about my dreams, not for sure. But now I'm old, and I dream awake, it seems. My infirmities have crept up like waves that will soon take a child's abandoned sand castle, and my memories have also crept up, making me think of some old rhyme that went, in part, "Just leave them alone / And they'll come home / Wagging their tails behind them." I remember meals I ate, games I played, girls I kissed in the school cloakroom when we played post office, boys I chummed with, the first drink I ever took, the firs cigarette I ever smoked (cornshuck behind Dicky Hamner's pig shed, and I threw up). Yet of

all the memories the one of the man in the black suit is the strongest, and glows with its own spectral, haunted light. He was real, he was the Devil, and that day I was either his errand or his luck. I feel more and more strongly that escaping him was my luck--just luck, and not the intercession of the God I have worshipped and sung hymns to all my life.

As I lie here in my nursing-home room, and in the ruined sand castle that is my body, I tell myself that I need not fear the Devil--that I have lived a good, kindly life, and I need not fear the Devil. Sometimes I remind myself that it was I, not my father, who finally coaxed my mother back to church later on that summer. In the dark, however, these thoughts have no power to ease or comfort. In the dark comes a voice that whispers that the nine-year-old fisherboy I was had done nothing for which he might legitimately fear the Devil, either, and yet the Devil came--to him. And in the dark I sometimes hear that voice drop even lower, into ranges that are inhuman. big fish! it whispers in tones of hushed greed, and all the truths of the moral world fall to ruin before its hunger.

The Moving Finger
by Stephen King

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

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

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

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

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

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

Scratch, scratch, scritchy-scratch.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A human finger.

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

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

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

What brought him out of it was the electronic whizzing sound that signaled a Daily Double square. "The category is Space and Aviation," Alex was saying. "You currently have seven hundred dollars, Mildred -- how much do you wish to wager?" Mildred, who did not have game-show-host projection, muttered something inaudible in response.

Howard moved away from the door and back into the living room on legs, which felt like pogo-sticks. He still had the dustpan in one hand. He looked at it for a moment and then let it fall to the carpet. It hit with a dusty little thump.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He stood outside the door, listening.

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

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

He stood outside, listening.

Scratch, scratch. Scritch-scratch.

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

light into the little squib of hall.

You better go turn off the light. You know how VI raises the roof about stuff like that. You don't even have to go in. Just reach through the door and flick it off.

But what if something touched his hand while he was reaching for the light switch? What if another finger touched his finger?

How about that, fellows and girls?

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

Scratch. Scritch. Scratch.

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

Except maybe a little air in the pipes.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"My God, Howard!"

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh -- sorry," he said.

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

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

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

"Roger Clemens, you nitwit," Howard said.

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

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

No screams.

Of course not, because there was no finger.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Tres amusant, cheri. You look as pale as milk. Are you coming down with something?"

No, he thought of saying, I'm not coming down with something -- that's too mild a term for it. I think I might have epilepsy or maybe a brain tumor, Vi -- how's that for coming down with something?

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

"What about it?"

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

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

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

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

"I guess so," he said glumly.

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

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

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

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

"Merry Pranksters, you dope," Howard said.
Vi looked at him admiringly. "You know all the answers, Howard, don't you?"
"I only wish I did," Howard said, and sighed.
Howard didn't care much for beer, but that night he helped himself to three cans of Vi's new find nevertheless. Vi commented on it, said that if she had known he was going to like it that much, she would have stopped by the drugstore and gotten him an IV hookup. Another time-honored Vi-ism. He forced a smile. He was actually hoping the beer would send him off to sleep quickly. He was afraid that, without a little help, he might be awake for quite awhile, thinking about what he had imagined he'd seen in the bathroom sink. But, as Vi had often informed him, beer was full of vitamin P, and around eight-thirty, after she had retired to the bedroom to put on her nightgown, Howard went reluctantly into the bathroom to relieve himself.
First he walked over to the bathroom sink and forced himself to look in.
Nothing.
This was a relief (in the end, a hallucination was still better than an actual finger, he had discovered, despite the possibility of a brain tumor), but he still didn't like looking down the drain. The brass cross-hatch inside that was supposed to catch things like clots of hair or dropped bobby-pins had disappeared years ago, and so there was only a dark hole rimmed by a circle of tarnished steel. It looked like a staring eyesocket.
Howard took the rubber plug and stuck it into the drain.
That was better.
He stepped away from the sink, put up the toilet ring (Vi complained bitterly if he forgot to put it down when he was through, but never seemed to feel any pressing need to put it back up when she was), and addressed the John. He was one of those men who only began to urinate immediately when the need was extreme (and who could not urinate at all in crowded public lavatories -- the thought of all those men standing in line behind him just shut down his circuits), and he did now what he almost always did in the few seconds between the aiming of the instrument and the commencement of target practice: he recited prime numbers in his mind.
He had reached thirteen and was on the verge of flowing when there was a sudden sharp sound from behind him: pwuck! His bladder, recognizing the sound of the rubber plug being forced sharply out of the drain even before his brain did, clamped shut immediately (and rather painfully).
A moment later that sound -- the sound of the nail clipping lightly against the porcelain as the questing finger twisted and turned -- began again. Howard's skin went cold and seemed to shrink until it was too small to cover the flesh beneath. A single drop of urine spilled from him and plinked in the bowl before his penis actually seemed to shrink in his hand, retreating like a turtle seeking the safety of its shell.
Howard walked slowly and not quite steadily over to the washbasin. He looked in. The finger was back. It was a very long finger, but seemed otherwise normal. Howard could see the nail, which was neither bitten nor abnormally long, and the first two knuckles. As he watched, it continued to tap and feel its way around the basin.
Howard bent down and looked under the sink. The pipe, which came out of the floor, was no more than three inches in diameter. It was not big enough for an arm. Besides, it made a severe bend at the place where the sink trap was. So just what was that finger attached to? What could it be attached to?
Howard straightened up again, and for one alarming moment he felt that his head might simply detach itself from his neck and float away. Small black specks flocked across his field of vision.
I'm going to faint! he thought. He grabbed his right earlobe and yanked it once, hard, the way a frightened passenger who has seen trouble up the line might yank the Emergency Stop cord of a railroad car. The dizziness passed... but the finger was still there.
It was not a hallucination. How could it be? He could see a tiny bead of water on the nail, and a tiny thread of whiteness beneath it -- soap, almost surely soap. Vi had washed her hands after using the John.
It could be a hallucination, though. It still could be. Just because you see soap and water on it, does that mean you can't be imagining it? And listen, Howard -- if you're not imagining it, what's it doing in there? How did it get there in the first place? And how come Vi didn't see it?
Call her, then -- call her in! his mind instructed, and in the next microsecond

countermanded its own order. No! Don't do that! Because if you go on seeing it and she doesn't --
Howard shut his eyes tight and for a moment lived in a world where there were only red flashes of light and his own crazy heartbeat.
When he opened them again, the finger was still there.
"What are you?" he whispered through tightly stretched lips. "What are you, and what are you doing here?"
The finger stopped its blind explorations at once. It swivelled -- and then pointed directly at Howard. Howard blundered a step backward, his hands rising to his mouth to stifle a scream. He wanted to tear his eyes away from the wretched, awful thing, wanted to flee the bathroom in a rush (and never mind what Vi might think or say or see)... but for the moment he was paralyzed and unable to tear his gaze away from the pink-white digit, which now resembled nothing so much as an organic periscope. Then it curled at the second knuckle. The end of the finger dipped, touched the porcelain, and resumed its tapping circular explorations once more.
"Howie?" Vi called. "Did you fall in?"
"Be right out!" he called back in an insanely cheery voice.
He flushed away the single drop of pee which had fallen into the toilet, then moved toward the door, giving the sink a wide berth. He did catch sight of himself in the bathroom mirror, however; his eyes were huge, his skin wretchedly pale. He gave each of his cheeks a brisk pinch before leaving the bathroom, which had become, in the space of one short hour, the most horrible and inexplicable place he had ever visited in his life.
When Vi came out into the kitchen to see what was taking him so long, she found Howard looking into the refrigerator.
"What do you want?" she asked.
"A Pepsi. I think I'll go down to Lah's and get one."
"On top of three beers and a bowl of cherry-vanilla ice cream? You'll bust, Howard!"
"No, I won't," he said. But if he wasn't able to offload what his kidneys were holding, he might.
"Are you sure you feel all right?" Vi was looking at him critically, but her tone was gentler now -- tinged with real concern. "Because you look terrible. Really."
"Well," he said reluctantly, "there's been some flu going around the office. I suppose -- "
"I'll go get you the damned soda, if you really need it," she said.
"No you won't," Howard interposed hastily. "You're in your nightgown. Look -- I'll put on my coat."
"When was the last time you had a soup-to-nuts physical, Howard? It's been so long I've forgotten."
"I'll look it up tomorrow," he said vaguely, going into the little foyer where their coats were hung. "It must be in one of the insurance folders."
"Well you better! And if you insist on being crazy and going out, wear my scarf!"
"Okay. Good idea." He pulled on his topcoat and buttoned it facing away from her, so she wouldn't see how his hands were shaking. When he turned around, Vi was just disappearing back into the bathroom. He stood there in fascinated silence for several moments, waiting to hear if she would scream this time, and then the water began to run in the basin. This was followed by the sound of Vi brushing her teeth in her usual manner: con brio.
He stood there a moment longer, and his mind suddenly offered its verdict in four flat, non-nonsense words: I'm losing my grip.
It might be... but that didn't change the fact that if he didn't take a whiz very soon, he was going to have an embarrassing accident. That, at least, was a problem he couls solve, and Howard took a certain comfort in the fact. He opened the door, began to step out, then paused to pull Vi's scarf off the hook.
When are you going to tell her about this latest fascinating development in the life of Howard Mitla? his mind inquired suddenly.
Howard shut the thought out and concentrated on tucking the ends of the scarf into the lapels of his overcoat.
The Mitla apartment was on the fourth floor of a nine-story building on Hawking Street. To the right and half a block down, on the corner of Hawking and Queens Boulevard, was Lah's Twenty-Four-Hour Delicatessen and Convenience Market. Howard turned left and walked to the end of the building. Here was a narrow alleyway, which gave on the airshaft at the rear of the building. Trash-bins lined both sides of the

alley. Between them were littery spaces where homeless people -- some but by no means of them winos -- often made their comfortless newspaper beds. No one seemed to have taken up residence in the alley this evening, for which Howard was profoundly grateful.
He stepped between the first and second bins, unzipped, and urinated copiously. At first the relief was so great that he felt almost blessed in spite of the evening's trials, but as the flow slackened and he began to consider his position "again, anxiety started creeping back in.
His position was, in a word, untenable.
Here he was, pissing against the wall of the building in which he had a warm, safe apartment, looking over his shoulder all the while to see if he was being observed. The arrival of a junkie or a mugger while he was in such a defenseless position would be bad, but he wasn't sure that the arrival of someone he knew -- the Fensters from 2C, for instance, or the Dattlebaums from 3F -- wouldn't be even worse. What could he say? And what might that motormouth Alicia Fenster say to Vi?
He finished, zipped his pants, and walked back to the mouth of the alley. After a prudent look in both directions, he proceeded down to Lah's and bought a can of Pepsi-Cola from the smiling, olive-skinned Mrs. Lah.
"You look pale tonight, Mr. Mit-ra," she said through her constant smile. "Peering all right?"
Oh yes, he thought. I'm fearing just fine, thank you, Mrs. Lah. Never better on that score.
"I think I might have caught a little bug at the sink," he told her. She began to frown through her smile and he realized what he had said. "At the office, I mean."
"Better bunder up walm," she said. The frown line had smoothed out of her almost ethereal forehead. "Radio say cold weather is coming."
"Thank you," he said, and left. On his way back to the apartment, he opened the Pepsi and poured it out on the sidewalk. Considering the fact that his bathroom had apparently become hostile territory, the last thing he needed tonight was any more to drink.
When he let himself in again, he could hear Vi snoring softly in the bedroom. The three beers had sent her off quickly and efficiently. He put the empty soda can on the counter in the kitchen, and then paused outside the bathroom door. After a moment or two, he tilted his head against the wood.
Scratch-scratch. Scritch-scritch-scratch.
"Dirty son of a bitch," he whispered.
He went to bed without brushing his teeth for the first time since his two-week stint at Camp High Pines, when he had been twelve and his mother had forgotten to pack his toothbrush.
And lay in bed beside Vi, wakeful.
He could hear the sound of the finger making its ceaseless exploratory rounds in the bathroom sink, the nail clicking and tap-dancing. He couldn't really hear it, not with both doors closed, and he knew this, but he imagined he heard it, and that was just as bad.
No, it isn't, he told himself. At least you know you're imagining it. With the finger itself you're not sure.
This was but little comfort. He still wasn't able to get to sleep, and he was no closer to solving his problem. He did know he couldn't spend the rest of his life making excuses to go outside and pee in the alley next to the building. He doubted if he could manage that for even forty-eight hours. And what was going to happen the next time he had to take a dump, friends and neighbors? There was a question he'd never seen asked in a round of Final Jeopardy, and he didn't have a clue what the answer might be. Not the alley, though -- he was sure of that much, at least.
Maybe, the voice in his head suggested cautiously, you'll get used to the damned thing.
No. The idea was insane. He had been married to Vi for twenty-one years, and he still found it impossible to go to the bathroom when she was in there with him. Those circuits just overloaded and shut down. She could sit there cheerily on the John, peeing and talking to him about her day at Dr. Stone's while he shaved, but he could not do the same. He just wasn't built that way.
If that finger doesn 't go away on its own, you better be prepared to make some changes in the way you're built, then, the voice told him, because I think you're going to have to make some modifications in the basic structure.

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

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

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

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

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

The drain was empty.

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes," he said, trying his best to make his voice normal. He flushed the toilet. It was clear that Vi would not have known or much cared if he sounded normal or not, and she took very little interest in how he looked. She was suffering from an unplanned hangover.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Not great," he said truthfully.

"You got one, too?"

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

"What?"

"Fever," he said. "Fever's what I meant to say."
"Well, you better stay home." She went to the sink, selected her toothbrush from the holder, and began to brush vigorously.
"Maybe you better, too," he said. He did not want Vi to stay home, however; he wanted her right by Dr. Stone's side while Dr. Stone filled cavities and did root canals, but it would have been unfeeling not to have said something.
She glanced up at him in the mirror. Already a little color was returning to her cheeks, a little sparkle to her eye. Vi also recovered con brio. "The day I call in sick at work because I've got a hangover will be the day I quit drinking altogether," she said. "Besides, the doc's gonna need me. We're pulling a complete set of uppers. Dirty job, but somebody's gotta do it."
She spat directly into the drain and Howard thought, fascinated: The next time it pops up, it'll have toothpaste on it. Jesus!
"You stay home and keep warm and drink plenty of fluids," Vi said. She had adopted her Head Nurse Tone now, the tone which said If you're not taking all this down, be it on your own head. "Catch up on your reading. And, by the bye, show that Mr. Hot Shit Lathrop what he's missing when you don't come in. Make him think twice."
"That's not a bad idea at all," Howard said.
She kissed him on the way by and dropped him a wink. "Your Shrinking Violet knows a few of the answers, too," she said. By the time she left to catch her bus half an hour later, she was singing lustily, her hangover forgotten.
The first thing Howard did following Vi's departure was to haul the step-stool over to the kitchen sink and whiz into the drain again. It was easier with Vi out of the house; he had barely reached twenty-three, the ninth prime number, before getting down to business.
With that problem squared away -- at least for the next few hours -- he walked back into the hall and poked his head through the bathroom door. He saw the finger at once, and that was wrong. It was impossible, because he was way over here, and the basin should have cut off his view. But it didn't and that meant --
"What are you doing, you bastard?" Howard croaked, and the finger, which had been twisting back and forth as if to test the wind, turned toward him. There was toothpaste on it, just as he had known there would be. It bent in his direction... only now it bent in three places, and that was impossible, too, quite impossible, because when you got to the third knuckle of any given finger, you were up to the back of the hand.
It's getting longer, his mind gibbered. I don't know how that can happen, but it is -- if I can see it over the top of the basin from here, it must be at least three inches long... maybe more!
He closed the bathroom door gently and staggered back into the living room. His legs had once again turned into malfunctioning pogo-sticks. His mental ice-breaker was gone, flattened under a great white weight of panic and bewilderment. No iceberg this; it was a whole glacier.
Howard Mitla sat down in his chair and closed his eyes. He had never felt more alone, more disoriented, or more utterly powerless in his entire life. He sat that way for quite some time, and at last his fingers began to relax on the arms of his chair. He had spent most of the previous night wide-awake. Now he simply drifted off to sleep while the lengthening finger in his bathroom drain tapped and circled, circled and tapped.
He dreamed he was a contestant on Jeopardy -- not the new, big-money version but the original daytime show. Instead of computer screens, a stagehand behind the game-board simply pulled up a card when a contestant called for a particular answer. Art Fleming had replaced Alex Trebek, with his slicked-back hair and somehow prissy poor-boy-at-the-party smile. The woman in the middle was still Mildred, and she still had a satellite downlink in her ear, but her hair was teased up into a Jacqueline Kennedy bouffant and a pair of cat's-eye frames had replaced her wire-rimmed glasses.
And everyone was in black and white, him included.
"Okay, Howard," Art said, and pointed at him. His index finger was a grotesque thing, easily a foot long; it stuck out of his loosely curled fist like a pedagogue's pointer. There was dried toothpaste on the nail. "It's your turn to select."
Howard looked at the board and said, "I'd like Pests and Vipers for one hundred, Art."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Yes... but it appears to be growing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He reached for the knob again.

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

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

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

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

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

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

He eased open the bathroom door and slipped inside.

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

Except it wasn't dark. Something was rushing up through that blackness, hurrying up that small-bore, oozy pipe to greet him, to greet its good friend Howard Mitla.

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

The finger blurted up from the drain -- joint after impossible joint of it. It was now smoking, and it smelled like a rubber boot sizzling on a hot barbecue grill.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The finger was coming for him.

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

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

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

through his nylon sock and sizzled his skin. He gave his foot a tremendous yank. For a moment the finger held -- it was very strong -- and then he pulled free. He crawled toward the door with a huge clump of vomit-loaded hair hanging in his eyes. As he crawled he tried to look back over his shoulder, but he could see nothing through his coagulated hair. Now his chest had unlocked and he gave voice to a series of barking, frightful screams.
He could not see the finger, at least temporarily, but he could hear the finger, and now it was coming fast, tictictictictic right behind him. Still trying to look back over his shoulder, he ran into the wall to the left of the bathroom door with his shoulder. The towels fell off the shelf again. He went sprawling and at once the finger was around his other ankle, flexing tight with its charred and burning tip. It began to pull him back toward the sink. It actually began to pull him back. Howard uttered a deep and primitive howl -- a sound such as had never before escaped his polite set of CPA vocal cords -- and flailed at the edge of the door. He caught it with his right hand and gave a huge, panicky yank. His shirttail pulled free all the way around and the seam under his right arm tore loose with a low purring sound, but he managed to get free, losing only the ragged lower half of one sock.
He stumbled to his feet, turned, and saw the finger feeling its way toward him again. The nail at the end was now deeply split and bleeding.
Need a manicure, bud, Howard thought, and uttered an anguished laugh. Then he ran for the kitchen.
Someone was pounding on the door. Hard.
"Mitla! Hey, Mitla! What's going on in there?" Feeney, from down the hall. A big loud Irish drunk. Correction: a big loud nosy Irish drunk.
"Nothing I can't handle, my bog-trotting friend!" Howard shouted as he went into the kitchen. He laughed again and tossed his hair off his forehead. It went, but fell back in exactly the same jellied clump a second later. ' 'Nothing I can't handle, you better believe that! You can take that right to the bank and put it in your NOW account!"
"What did you call me?" Feeney responded. His voice, which had been truculent, now became ominous as well. "Shut up!" Howard yelled. "I'm busy!" "I want the yelling to stop or I'm calling the cops!" ' 'Fuck off!'' Howard screamed at him. Another first. He tossed his hair off his forehead, and clump! Back down it fell.
"I don't have to listen to your shit, you little four-eyes creep!" Howard raked his hands through his vomit-loaded hair and then flung them out in front of him in a curiously Gallic gesture -- Et voila! it seemed to say. Warm juice and shapeless gobbets splattered across Vi's white kitchen cabinets. Howard didn't even notice. The hideous finger had seized each of his ankles once, and they burned as if they were wearing circlets of fire. Howard didn't care about that, either. He seized the box containing the electric hedge-clippers. On the front, a smiling dad with a pipe parked in his gob was trimming the hedge in front of an estate-sized home. "You having a little drug-party in there?" Feeney inquired from the hall.
"You better get out of here, Feeney, or I'll introduce you to a friend of mine!" Howard yelled back. This struck him as incredibly witty. He threw his head back and yodeled at the kitchen ceiling, his hair standing up in strange jags and quills and glistening with stomach juices. He looked like a man who has embarked upon a violent love affair with a tube of Brylcreem.
"Okay, that's it," Feeney said. "That's it. I'm callin the cops."
Howard barely heard him. Dennis Feeney would have to wait; he had bigger fish to fry. He had ripped the electric hedge-clippers from the box, examined them feverishly, saw the battery compartment, and pried it open.
"C-cells," he muttered, laughing. "Good! That's good! No problem there!"
He yanked open one of the drawers to the left of the sink, pulling with such force that the stop broke off and the drawer flew all the way across the kitchen, striking the stove and landing upside down on the linoleum floor with a bang and a clatter. Amid the general rick-rack -- tongs, peelers, graters, paring knives, and garbage-bag ties -- was a small treasure-trove of batteries, mostly C-cells and square nine-volts. Still laughing -- it seemed he could no longer stop laughing -- Howard fell on his knees and grubbed through the litter. He succeeded in cutting the pad of his right palm quite badly on the blade of a paring knife before seizing two of the C-cells, but he felt this no more than he felt the burns he had sustained when he had been backsplashed. Now that Feeney had at last shut his braying Irish donkey's mouth, Howard could hear the tapping again. Not coming from the sink now,

though -- huh-uh, no way. The ragged nail was tapping on the bathroom door... or maybe the hall floor. He had neglected to close the door, he now remembered.
"Who gives a fuck?" Howard asked, and then he screamed: "WHO GIVES A FUCK, I SAID! I'M READY FOR YOU, MY FRIEND! I'M COMING TO KICK ASS AND CHEW BUBBLEGUM, AND I'M ALL OUT OF BUBBLEGUM! YOU'LL WISH YOU'D STAYED DOWN THE DRAIN!"
He slammed the batteries into the compartment set into the handle of the hedge-clippers and tried the power switch. Nothing.
"Bite my crank!" Howard muttered. He pulled one of the batteries out, reversed it, and put it back in. This time the blades buzzed to life when he pushed the switch, snicking back and forth so rapidly they were only a blur.
He started for the kitchen door, then made himself switch the gadget off and go back to the counter. He didn't want to waste time putting the battery cover back in place -- not when he was primed for battle -- but the last bit of sanity still flickering in his mind assured him that he had no choice. If his hand slipped while he was dealing with the thing, the batteries might pop out of the open compartment, and then where would he be? Why, facing the James Gang with an unloaded gun, of course. So he fiddled the battery cover back on, cursing when it wouldn't fit and turning it in the other direction.
"You wait for me, now!" he called back over his shoulder. "I'm coming! We're not done yet!"
At last the battery cover snapped down. Howard strode briskly back through the living room with the hedge-clippers held at port arms. His hair still stood up in punk-rock quills and spikes. His shirt -- now torn out under one arm and burned in several places -- flapped against his round, tidy stomach. His bare feet slapped on the linoleum. The tattered remains of his nylon socks swung and dangled about his ankles.
Feeney yelled through the door, "I called them, birdbrain! You got that? I called the cops, and I hope the ones who show up are all bog-trotting Irishmen, just like me!"
"Blow it out your old tan tailpipe," Howard said, but he was really paying no attention to Feeney. Dennis Feeney was in another universe; this was just his quacking, unimportant voice coming in over the sub-etheric.
Howard stood to one side of the bathroom door, looking like a cop in a TV show... only someone had handed him the wrong prop and he was packing a hedge-clipper instead of a.38. He pressed his thumb firmly on the power button set high on the handle of the hedge-clippers. He took a deep breath... and the voice of sanity, now down to a mere gleam, offered a final thought before packing up for good.
Are you sure you want to trust your life to a pair of electric hedge-clippers you bought on sale?
"1 have no choice," Howard muttered, smiling tightly, and lunged inside.
The finger was still there, still arced out of the sink in that stiff curve that reminded Howard of a New Year's Eve party-favor, the kind that makes a farting, honking sound and then unrolls toward the unsuspecting bystander when you blow on it. It had filched one of Howard's loafers. It was picking the shoe up and slamming it petulantly down on the tiles again and again. From the look of the towels scattered about, Howard guessed the finger had tried to kill several of those before finding the shoe.
A weird joy suddenly suffused Howard -- it felt as if the inside of his aching, woozy head had been filled with green light.
"Here I am, you nitwit!" he yelled. "Come and get me!"
The finger popped out of the shoe, rose in a monstrous ripple of joints (Howard could actually hear some of its many knuckles cracking), and floated rapidly through the air toward him. Howard turned on the hedge-clippers and they buzzed into hungry life. So far, so good.
The burned, blistered tip of the finger wavered in front of his face, the split nail weaving mystically back and forth. Howard lunged for it. The finger feinted to the left and slipped around his left ear. The pain was amazing. Howard simultaneously felt and heard a grisly ripping sound as the finger tried to tear his ear from the side of his head. He sprang forward, seized the finger in his left fist, and sheared through it. The clippers lugged down as the blades hit the bone, the high buzzing of the motor becoming a rough growl, but it had been built to clip through small, tough branches and there was really no problem. No problem at all. This was Round Two, this was Double Jeopardy, where the scores could really change, and Howard Mitla was

racking up a bundle. Blood flew in a fine haze and then the stump pulled back. Howard blundered after it, the last ten inches of the finger hanging from his ear like a coat hanger for a moment before dropping off.
The finger lunged at him. Howard ducked and it went over his head. It was blind, of course. That was his advantage. Grabbing his ear like that had just been a lucky shot. He lunged with the clippers, a gesture which looked almost like a fencing thrust, and sheared off another two feet of the finger. It thumped to the tiles and lay there, twitching.
Now the rest of it was trying to pull back.
"No you don't," Howard panted. "No you don't, not at all!"
He ran for the sink, slipped in a puddle of blood, almost fell, and then caught his balance. The finger was blurring back down the drain, knuckle after knuckle, like a freight-train going into a tunnel. Howard seized it, tried to hold it, and couldn't -- it went sliding through his hand like a greased and burning length of clothesline. He sliced forward again nevertheless, and managed to cut off the last three feet of the thing just above the point where it was whizzing through his fist. He leaned over the sink (holding his breath this time) and stared down into the blackness of the drain. Again he caught just a glimpse of retreating white.
"Come on back anytime!" Howard Mitla shouted. "Come back anytime at all! I'll be right here, waiting for you!"
He turned around, releasing his breath in a gasp. The room still smelled of drain-cleaner. Couldn't have that, not while there was still work to do. There was a wrapped cake of Dial soap behind the hot-water tap. Howard picked it up and threw it at the bathroom window. It broke the glass and bounced off the crisscross of mesh behind it. He remembered putting that mesh in -- remembered how proud of it he had been. He, Howard Mitla, mild-mannered accountant, had been TAKING CARE OF THE OLD HOMESTEAD. Now he knew what TAKING CARE OF THE OLD HOMESTEAD was really all about. Had there been a time when he had been afraid to go into the bathroom because he thought there might be a mouse in the tub, and he would have to beat it to death with a broomhandle? He believed so, but that time -- and that version of Howard Mitla -- seemed long ago now.
He looked slowly around the bathroom. It was a mess. Pools of blood and two chunks of finger lay on the floor. Another leaned askew in the basin. Fine sprays of blood fanned across the walls and stippled the bathroom mirror. The basin was streaked with it.
"All right," Howard sighed. "Clean-up time, boys and girls." He turned the hedge-clippers on again and began to saw the various lengths of finger he had cut off into pieces small enough to flush down the toilet.
The policeman was young and he was Irish -- O'Bannion was his name. By the time he finally arrived at the closed door of the Mitla apartment, several tenants were standing behind him in a little knot. With the exception of Dennis Feeney, who wore an expression of high outrage, they all looked worried.
O'Bannion knocked on the door, then rapped, and finally hammered.
"You better break it down," Mrs. Javier said. "I heard him all the way up on the seventh floor."
"The man's insane," Feeney said. "Probably killed his wife."
"No," said Mrs. Dattlebaum. "I saw her leave this morning, just like always."
"Doesn't mean she didn't come back again, does it?" Mr. Feeney asked truculently, and Mrs. Dattlebaum subsided.
"Mr. Mitter?" O'Bannion called.
"It's Mitla" Mrs. Dattlebaum said. "With an I."
"Oh, crap," O'Bannion said, and hit the door with his shoulder. It burst open and he went inside, closely followed by Mr. Feeney. "You stay here, sir," O'Bannion instructed.
"The hell I will," Feeney said. He was looking into the Kitchen, with its strew of implements on the floor and the splatters of vomit on the kitchen cabinets. His eyes were small and bright and interested. "The guy's my neighbor. And after all, I was the one who made the call."
"I don't care if you made the call on your own private hotline to the Commish," O'Bannion said. "Get the hell out of here or you're going down to the station with this guy Mittle."
"MitIo," Feeney said, and slunk unwillingly toward the door to the hallway, casting glances back at the kitchen as he went.

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

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

A noise from behind him, a little shuffling sound, broke the thought off and he turned quickly, bringing his gun up.

"Mr. Mitla?"

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

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

"Oh my God," he said softly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Weapon?" Howard looked at him vacantly for a moment, and then seemed to understand. "These?" He raised the hedge-clippers, and the muzzle of Officer O'Bannion's gun for the first time came to rest on Howard himself.

"Yes, sir."

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

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

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

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

faucets, that is? I make it seven." Howard paused and then added, "Seven is a prime -- which is to say, a number divisible only by one and itself."
"Would you want to hold out your hands for me, sir?" Officer O'Bannion said, taking his handcuffs from his belt.
"Vi says I know all the answers," Howard said, "but Vi's wrong." He slowly held out his hands.
O'Bannion knelt before him and quickly snapped a cuff on Howard's right wrist.
"Who's Vi?"
"My wife," Howard said. His blank, shining eyes looked directly into Officer O'Bannion's. "She's never had any problem going to the bathroom while someone else is in the room, you know. She could probably go while you were in the room."
Officer O'Bannion began to have a terrible yet weirdly plausible idea: that this strange little man had killed his wife with a pair of hedge-clippers and then somehow dissolved her body with drain-cleaner -- and all because she wouldn't get the hell out of the bathroom while he was trying to drain the dragon.
He snapped the other cuff on.
"Did you kill your wife, Mr. Mitla?"
For a moment Howard looked almost surprised. Then he lapsed back into that queer, plastic state of apathy again. "No," he said. "Vi's at Dr. Stone's. They're pulling a complete set of uppers. Vi says it's a dirty job, but somebody has to do it. Why would I kill Vi?"
Now that he had the cuffs on the guy, O'Bannion felt a little better, a little more in control of the situation. "Well, it looks like you offed someone."
"It was just a finger," Howard said. He was still holding his hands out in front of him. Light twinkled and ran along the chain between the handcuffs like liquid silver. "But there are more fingers than one on a hand. And what about the hand's owner?" Howard's eyes shifted around the bathroom, which had now gone well beyond gloom; it was filling up with shadows again. "I told it to come back anytime," Howard whispered, "but I was hysterical. I have decided I... I am not capable. It grew, you see. It grew when it hit the air."
Something suddenly splashed inside the closed toilet. Howard's eyes shifted in that direction. So did Officer O'Bannion's. The splash came again. It sounded as if a trout had jumped in there.
"No, I most definitely wouldn't use the toilet," Howard said. "I'd hold it, if I were you, Officer. I'd hold it just as long as I possibly could, and then use the alley beside the building."
O'Bannion shivered.
Get hold of yourself, boyo, he told himself sternly. You get hold of yourself, or you'll wind up as nutty as this guy.
He got up to check the toilet.
"Bad idea," Howard said. "A really bad idea."
"What exactly happened in here, Mr. Mitla?" O'Bannion asked. "And what have you stored in the toilet?"
"What happened? It was like... like..." Howard trailed off, and then began to smile. It was a relieved smile... but his eyes kept creeping back to the closed lid of the toilet. "It was like Jeopardy," he said. "In fact, it was like Final Jeopardy. The category is The Inexplicable. The Final Jeopardy answer is, 'Because they can.' Do you know what the Final Jeopardy question is, Officer?"
Fascinated, unable to take his eyes from Howard's, Officer O'Bannion shook his head.
"The Final Jeopardy question," Howard said in a voice that was cracked and roughened from screaming, "is: 'Why do terrible things sometimes happen to the nicest people?' That's the Final Jeopardy question. It's all going to take a lot of thought. But I have plenty of time. As long as I stay away from the... the holes."
The splash came again. It was heavier this time. The vomitous toilet seat bumped sharply up and down. Officer O'Bannion got up, walked over, and bent down. Howard looked at him with some interest.
"Final Jeopardy, Officer," said Howard Mitla. "How much do you wish to wager?"
O'Bannion thought about it for a moment... then grasped the toilet seat and wagered it all.

STRAWBERRY SPRING

Springheel Jack.

I saw those two words in the paper this morning and my God, how they take me back. All that was eight years ago, almost to the day. Once, while it was going on, I saw myself on nationwide TV - the Walter Cronkite Report. Just a hurrying face in the general background behind the reporter, but my folks picked me out right away. They called long-distance. My dad wanted my analysis of the situation; he was all bluff and hearty and man-to-man. My mother just wanted me to come home. But I didn't want to come home. I was enchanted.

Enchanted by that dark and mist-blown strawberry spring, and by the shadow of violent death that walked through it on those nights eight years ago. The shadow of Springheel Jack.

In New England they call it a strawberry spring. No one knows why; it's just a phrase the old-timers use. They say it happens once every eight or ten years. What happened at New Sharon Teachers' College that particular strawberry spring. . . there may be a cycle for that, too, but if anyone has figured it out, they've never said.

At New Sharon, the strawberry spring began on 16 March 1968. The coldest winter in twenty years broke on that day. It rained and you could smell the sea twenty miles west of the beaches. The snow, which had been thirty-five inches deep in places, began to melt and the campus walks ran with slush. The Winter Carnival snow sculptures, which had been kept sharp and clear-cut for two months by the sub-zero temperatures, at last began to sag and slouch. The caricature of Lyndon Johnson in front of the Tep fraternity house cried melted tears. The dove in front of Prashner Hall lost its frozen feathers and its plywood skeleton showed sadly through in places.

And when night came the fog came with it, moving silent and white along the narrow college avenues and thoroughfares. The pines on the wall poked through it like counting fingers and it drifted, slow as cigarette smoke, under the little bridge down by the Civil War cannons. It made things seem out of joint, strange, magical. The unwary traveller would step out of the juke-thumping, brightly lit confusion of the Grinder, expecting the hard clear starriness of winter to clutch him . . . and instead he would suddenly find himself in a silent, muffled world of white drifting fog, the only sound his own footsteps and the soft drip of water from the ancient gutters. You half expected to see Gollum or Frodo and Sam go hurrying past, or to turn and see that the Grinder was gone, vanished, replaced by a foggy panorama of moors and yew trees and perhaps a Druid-circle or a sparkling fairy ring.

The jukebox played 'Love Is Blue' that year. It played 'Hey, Jude' endlessly, endlessly. It played 'Scarborough Fair.

And at ten minutes after eleven on that night a junior named John Dancey on his way back to his dormitory began screaming into the fog, dropping books on and between the sprawled legs of the dead girl lying in a shadowy corner of the Animal Sciences parking lot, her throat cut from ear to ear but her eyes open and almost seeming to sparkle as if she had just successfully pulled off the funniest joke of her young life - Dancey, an education major and a speech minor, screamed and screamed and screamed.

The next day was overcast and sullen, and we went to classes with questions eager in our mouths - who? why? when do you think they'll get him? And always the final thrilled question: Did you know her? Did you know her?

Yes, I had an art class with her.

Yes, one of my room-mate 's friends dated her last term.

Yes, she asked me for a light once in the Grinder. She was at the next table.

Yes, Yes, I

Yes. . . yes. . . oh yes, I

We all knew her. Her name was Gale Cerman (pronounced Kerr-man), and she was an art major. She wore granny glasses and had a good figure. She was well liked but her room-mates had hated her. She had never gone out much even though she was one of the most promiscuous girls on campus. She was ugly but cute. She had been a vivacious girl who talked little and smiled seldom. She had been pregnant and she had had leukemia. She was a lesbian who had been murdered by her boy-friend. It was strawberry spring, and on the morning of 17 March we all knew Gale Cerman.

Half a dozen State Police cars crawled on to the campus, most of them parked in front of Judith Franklin Hall, where the Cerman girl had lived. On my way past there to my ten o clock class I was asked to show my student ID. I was clever. I showed him the one without the fangs.

'Do you carry a knife?' the policeman asked cunningly.

'Is it about Gale Cerman?' I asked, after I told him that the most lethal thing on my person was a rabbit's-foot key chain.

'What makes you ask?' He pounced.

I was five minutes late to class.

It was strawberry spring and no one walked by themselves through the half-academical, half-fantastical campus that night. The fog had come again, smelling of the sea, quiet and deep.

Around nine o'clock my room-mate burst into our room, where I had been busting my brains on a Milton essay since seven. 'They caught him,' he said. 'I heard it over at the Grinder.'

'From who?'

'I don't know. Some guy. Her boy4riend did it. His name is Carl Amalara.'

I settled back, relieved and disappointed. With a name like that it had to be true. A lethal and sordid little crime of passion.

'Okay,' I said. 'That's good.'

He left the room to spread the news down the hall. I reread my Milton essay, couldn't figure out what I had been trying to say, tore it up and started again.

It was in the papers the next day. There was an incongruously neat picture of Amalara - probably a high-school graduation picture - and it showed a rather sad-looking boy with an olive complexion and dark eyes and pockmarks on his nose. The boy had not confessed yet, but the evidence against him was strong. He and Gale Cerman had argued a great deal in the last month or so, and had broken up the week before. Amalara's roomie said he had been 'despondent'. In a footlocker under his bed, police had found a seven-inch hunting knife from L. L. Bean's and a picture of the girl that had apparently been cut up with a pair of shears.

Beside Amalara's picture was one of Gale Cerman. It blurrily showed a dog, a peeling lawn flamingo, and a rather mousy blonde girl wearing spectacles. An uncomfortable smile had turned her lips up and her eyes were squinted. One hand was on the dog's head. It was true then. It had to be true.

The fog came again that night, not on little cat's feet but in an improper silent sprawl. I walked that night. I had a headache and I walked for air, smelling the wet, misty smell of the spring that was slowly wiping away the reluctant snow, leaving lifeless patches of last year's grass bare and uncovered, like the head of a sighing old grandmother.

For me, that was one of the most beautiful nights I can remember. The people I passed under the haloed streetlights were murmuring shadows, and all of them seemed to be lovers, walking with hands and eyes linked. The melting snow dripped and ran, dripped and ran, and from every dark storm drain the sound of the sea drifted up, a dark winter sea now strongly ebbing.

I walked until nearly midnight, until I was thoroughly mildewed, and I passed many shadows, heard many footfalls clicking dreamily off down the winding paths. Who is to say that one of those shadows was not the man or the thing that came to be known as Springheel Jack? Not I, for I passed many shadows but in the fog I saw no faces.

The next morning the clamour in the hall woke me. I blundered out to see who had been drafted, combing my hair with both hands and running the fuzzy caterpillar that had craftily replaced my tongue across the dry roof of my mouth.

'He got another one,' someone said to me, his face pallid with excitement. 'They had to let him go.'

'Who go?'

'Amalara!' someone else said gleefully. 'He was sitting in jail when it happened.

When what happened?' I asked patiently. Sooner or later I would get it. I was sure of that.

'The guy killed somebody else last night. And now they're hunting all over for it.'

'For what?'

The pallid face wavered in front of me again. 'Her head. Whoever killed her took her head with him.'

New Sharon isn't a big school now, and was even smaller then - the kind of institution the public relations people chummily refer to as a 'community college'. And it really was like a small community, at least in those days; between you and your friends, you probably had at least a nodding acquaintance with everybody else and their friends. Gale

Cerman had been the type of girl you just nodded to, thinking vaguely that you had seen her around.

We all knew Ann Bray. She had been the first runner-up in the Miss New England pageant the year before, her talent performance consisting of twirling a flaming baton to the tune of 'Hey, Look Me Over'. She was brainy, too; until the time of her death she had been editor of the school newspaper (a once-weekly rag with a lot of political cartoons and bombastic letters), a member of the student dramatics society, and president of the National Service Sorority, New Sharon Branch. In the hot, fierce bubblings of my freshman youth I had submitted a column idea to the paper and asked for a date - turned down on both counts.

And now she was dead. . . worse than dead.

I walked to my afternoon classes like everyone else, nodding to people I knew and saying hi with a little more force than usual, as if that would make up for the close way I studied their faces. Which was the same way they were studying mine. There was someone dark among us, as dark as the paths which twisted across the mall or wound among the hundred-year-old oaks on the quad in back of the gymnasium. As dark as the hulking Civil War cannons seen through a drifting membrane of fog. We looked into each other's faces and tried to read the darkness behind one of them.

This time the police arrested no one. The blue beetles patrolled the campus ceaselessly on the foggy spring nights of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth, and spotlights stabbed in to dark nooks and crannies with erratic eagerness. The administration imposed a mandatory nine o'clock curfew. A foolhardy couple discovered necking in the landscaped bushes north of the Tate Alumni Building were taken to the New Sharon police station and grilled unmercifully for three hours.

There was a hysterical false alarm on the twentieth when a boy was found unconscious in the same parking lot where the body of Gale Cerman had been found. A gibbering campus cop loaded him into the back of his cruiser and put a map of the county over his face without bothering to hunt for a pulse and started towards the local hospital, siren wailing across the deserted campus like a seminar of banshees.

Halfway there the corpse in the back seat had risen and asked hollowly, 'Where the hell am I?' The cop shrieked and ran off the road. The corpse turned out to be an undergrad named Donald Morris who had been in bed the last two days with a pretty lively case of flu - was it Asian last year? I can't remember. Anyway, he fainted in the parking lot on his way to the Grinder for a bowl of soup and some toast.

The days continued warm and overcast. People clustered in small groups that had a tendency to break up and re-form with surprising speed. Looking at the same set of faces for too long gave you funny ideas about some of them. And the speed with which rumours swept from one end of the campus to the other began to approach the speed of light; a well-liked history professor had been overheard laughing and weeping down by the small bridge; Gale Cerman had left a cryptic two-word message written in her own blood on the blacktop of the Animal Sciences parking lot; both murders were actually political crimes, ritual murders that had been performed by an offshoot of the SDS to protest the war. This was really laughable. The New Sharon SDS had seven members. One fair-sized offshoot would have bankrupted the whole organization. This fact brought an even more sinister embellishment from the campus rightwingers: outside agitators. So during those queer, warm days we all kept our eyes peeled for them.

The press, always fickle, ignored the strong resemblance our murderer bore to Jack the Ripper and dug further back - all the way to 1819. Ann Bray had been found on a soggy path of ground some twelve feet from the nearest sidewalk, and yet there were no footprints, not even her own. An enterprising New Hampshire newsman with a passion for the arcane christened the killer Springheel Jack, after the infamous Dr John Hawkins of Bristol, who did five of his wives to death with odd pharmaceutical knick-knacks. And the name, probably because of that soggy yet unmarked ground, stuck.

On the twenty-first it rained again, and the mall and quadrangle became quagmires. The police announced that they were salting plainclothes detectives, men and women, about, and took half the police cars off duty.

The campus newspaper published a strongly indignant, if slightly incoherent, editorial protesting this. The upshot of it seemed to be

that, with all sorts of cops masquerading as students, it would be impossible to tell a real outside agitator from a false one.

Twilight came and the fog with it, drifting up the tree-lined avenues slowly, almost thoughtfully, blotting out the buildings one by one. It was soft, insubstantial stuff, but somehow implacable and frightening. Springheel Jack was a man, no one seemed to doubt that, but the fog was his accomplice and it was female. . . or so it seemed to me. If was as if our little school was caught between them, squeezed in some crazy lover's embrace, part of a marriage that had been consummated in blood. I sat and smoked and watched the lights come on in the growing darkness and wondered if it was all over. My room-mate came in and shut the door quietly behind him.

'It's going to snow soon,' he said.

I turned around and looked at him. 'Does the radio say that?'

'No,' he said. 'Who needs a weatherman? Have you ever heard of strawberry spring?'

'Maybe,' I said. 'A long time ago. Something grandmothers talk about, isn't it?'

He stood beside me, looking out at the creeping dark.

'Strawberry spring is like Indian summer,' he said, 'only much more rare. You get a good Indian summer in this part of the country once every two or three years. A spell of weather like we've been having is supposed to come only every eight or ten. It's a false spring, a lying spring, like Indian summer is a false summer. My own grandmother used to say strawberry spring means the worst norther of the winter is still on the way - and the longer this lasts, the harder the storm.

'Folk tales,' I said. 'Never believe a word.' I looked at him. But I'm nervous. Are you?'

He smiled benevolently and stole one of my cigarettes from the open pack on the window ledge. 'I suspect everyone but me. and thee,' he said, and then the smile faded a little. 'And sometimes I wonder about thee. Want to go over to the Union and shoot some eight-ball? I'll spot you ten.'

'Trig prelim next week. I'm going to settle down with a magic marker and a hot pile of notes.'

For a long time after he was gone, I could only look out the window. And even after I had opened my book and started in, part of me was still out there, walking in the shadows where something dark was now in charge.

That night Adelle Parkins was killed. Six police cars and seventeen collegiate-looking plain clothes men (eight of them were women imported all the way from Boston) patrolled the campus. But Springheel Jack killed her just the same, going unerringly for one of our own. The false spring, the lying spring, aided and abetted him - he killed her and left her propped behind the wheel of her 1964 Dodge to be found the next morning and they found part of her in the back seat and part of her in the trunk. And written in blood on the windshield - this time fact instead of rumour - were two words: HA! HA!

The campus went slightly mad after that; all of us and none of us had known Adelle Parkins. She was one of those nameless, harried women who worked the break-back shift in the Grinder from six to eleven at night, facing hordes of hamburger-happy students on study break from the library across the way. She must have had it relatively easy those last three foggy nights of her life; the curfew was 'being rigidly observed, and after nine the Grinder's only patrons were hungry cops and happy janitors - the empty buildings had improved their habitual bad temper considerably.

There is little left to tell. The police, as prone to hysteria as any of us and driven against the wall, arrested an innocuous homosexual sociology graduate student named Hanson Gray, who claimed he 'could not remember' where he had spent several of the lethal evenings. They charged him, arraigned him, and let him go to scamper hurriedly back to his native New Hampshire town after the last unspeakable night of strawberry spring when Marsha Curran was slaughtered on the mall.

Why she had been out and alone is forever beyond knowing - she was a fat, sadly pretty thing who lived in an apartment in town with three other girls. She had slipped on campus as silently and as easily as Springheel Jack himself. What brought her? Perhaps her need was as deep and as ungovernable as her killer's, and just as far beyond understanding. Maybe a need for one desperate and passionate romance with the warm night, the warm fog, the smell of the sea, and the cold knife.

That was on the twenty-third. On the twenty-fourth the president of the college announced that spring break would be moved up a week, and we scattered, not joyfully but like frightened sheep before a storm, leaving the campus empty and haunted by the police and one dark spectre.

I had my own car on campus, and I took six people downstate with me, their luggage crammed in helter-skelter. It wasn't a pleasant ride. For all any of us knew, Springheel Jack might have been in the car with us.

That night the thermometer dropped fifteen degrees, and the whole northern New England area was belted by a shrieking norther that began in sleet and ended in a foot of snow. The usual number of old duffers had heart attacks shovelling it away - and then, like magic, it was April. Clean showers and starry nights.

They called it strawberry spring, God knows why, and it's an evil, lying time that only comes once every eight or ten years. Springheel Jack left with the fog, and by early June, campus conversation had turned to a series of draft protests and a sit-in at the building where a well-known napalm manufacturer was holding job interviews. By June, the subject of Springheel Jack was almost unanimously avoided - at least aloud. I suspect there were many who turned it over and over privately, looking for the one crack in the seemless egg of madness that would make sense of it all.

That was the year I graduated, and the next year was the year I married. A good job in a local publishing house. In 1971 we had a child, and now he's almost school age. A fine and questing boy with my eyes and her mouth.

Then, today's paper.

Of course I knew it was here. I knew it yesterday morning when I got up and heard the mysterious sound of snowmelt running down the gutters, and smelled the salt tang of the ocean from our front porch, nine miles from the nearest beach. I knew strawberry spring had come again when I started home from work last night and had to turn on my headlights against the mist that was already beginning to creep out of the fields and hollows, blurring the lines of the buildings and putting fairy haloes around the street lamps.

This morning's paper says a girl was killed on the New Sharon campus near the Civil War cannons. She was killed last night and found in a melting snowbank. She was not she was not all there.

My wife is upset. She wants to know where I was last night. I can't tell her because I don't remember. I remember starting home from work, and I remember putting my headlights on to search my way through the lovely creeping fog, but that's all I remember.

I've been thinking about that foggy night when I had a headache and walked for air and passed all the lovely shadows without shape or substance. And I've been thinking about the trunk of my car - such an ugly word, *trunk* -and wondering why in the world I should be afraid to open it.

I can hear my wife as I write this, in the next room, crying. She thinks I was with another woman last night.

And oh dear God, I think so too.

THE WOMAN IN THE ROOM

The question is: Can he do it?

He doesn't know. He knows that she chews them sometimes, her face wrinkling at the awful orange taste, and a sound comes from her mouth like splintering popsicle sticks. But these are different pills . . . gelatine capsules. The box says DARVON COMPLEX on the outside. He found them in her medicine cabinet and turned them over in his hands, thinking. Something the doctor gave her before she had to go back to the hospital. Something for the ticking nights. The medicine cabinet is full of remedies, neatly lined up like a voodoo doctor's cures. Gris-gris of the Western world. FLEET SUPPOSITOUES. He has never used a suppository in his life and the thought of putting a waxy something in his rectum to soften by body heat makes him feel ill. There is no dignity in putting things up your ass. PHILLIPS MILK OF MAGNESIA. ANACIN ARTHRITIS PAIN FORMULA. PEPTO-BISMOL. More. He can trace the course of her illness through the medicines.

But these pills are different. They are like regular Darvon only in that they are grey gelatine capsules. But they are bigger, what his dead father used to call hosscock pills. The box says Asp. *350* gr, Darvon 100 gr, and could she chew them even if he was to give them to her? *Would* she? The house is still running; the refrigerator runs and shuts off, the furnace kicks in and out, every now and then the Cuckoo bird pokes grumpily out of the clock to announce an hour or a half. He supposes that after she dies it will fall to Kevin and him to break up housekeeping. She's gone, all right. The whole house says so. She is in the Central Maine Hospital, in Lewiston. Room 312. She went when the pain got so bad she could no longer go out to the kitchen to make her own coffee. At times, when he visited, she cried without knowing it.

The elevator creaks going up, and he finds himself examining the blue elevator certificate. The certificate makes it clear that the elevator is safe, creaks or no creaks. She has been here for nearly three weeks now and today they gave her an operation called a 'cortotomy'. He is not sure if that is how it's spelled, but that is how it sounds. The doctor has told her that the 'cortotomy' involves sticking a needle into her neck and then into her brain. The doctor has told her that this is like sticking a pin into an orange and spearing a seed. When the needle has poked into her pain centre, a radio signal will be sent down to the tip of the needle and the pain centre will be blown out. Like unplugging a TV. Then the cancer in her belly will stop being such a nuisance.

The thought of this operation makes him even more uneasy than the thought of suppositories melting warmly in his anus. It makes him think of a book by Michael Crichton called *The Terminal Man,* which deals with putting wires in people's heads. According to Crichton, this can be a very bad scene. You better believe it.

The elevator door opens on the third floor and he steps out. This is the old wing of the hospital, and it smells like the sweet-smelling sawdust they sprinkle over puke at a county fair. He has left the pills in the glove compartment of his car. He has not had anything to drink before this visit.

The walls up here are two-tone: brown on the bottom and white on top. He thinks that the only two-tone combination in the whole world that might be more depressing than brown and white would be pink and black. Hospital corridors like giant Good 'n' Plentys. The thought makes him smile and feel nauseated at the same time.

Two corridors meet in a T in front of the elevator, and there is a drinking fountain where he always stops to put things off a little. There are pieces of hospital equipment here and there, like strange playground toys. A litter with chrome sides and rubber wheels, the sort of thing they use to wheel you up to the 'OR' when they are ready to give you your 'cortotomy'. There is a large circular object whose function is unknown to him. It looks like the wheels you sometimes see in squirrel cages. There is a rolling IV tray with two bottles hung from it, like a Salvador Dali dream of tits. Down one of the two corridors is the nurses' station, and laughter fuelled by coffee drifts out to him.

He gets his drink and then saunters down towards her room. He is scared of what he may find and hopes she will be sleeping. If she is, he will not wake her up.

Above the door of every room there is a small square light. When a patient pushes his call button this light goes on, glowing red. Up and down the hall patients are walking slowly, wearing cheap hospital robes over their hospital underwear. The robes have blue and white pinstripes and round collars. The hospital underwear is called a 'johnny'. The 'johnnies' look all right on the women but decidedly strange on the men because they are like knee-length dresses or slips. The men always seem to wear brown imitation-leather slippers on their feet. The women favour knitted slippers with balls of yarn on them. His mother has a pair of these and calls them 'mules'.

The patients remind him of a horror movie called *The Night of the Living Dead.* They all walk slowly, as if someone had unscrewed the tops of their organs like mayonnaise jars and liquids were sloshing around inside. Some of them use canes. Their slow gait as they promenade up and down the halls is frightening but also dignified. It is the walk of people who are going nowhere slowly, the walk of college students in caps and gowns filing into a convocation hall.

Ectoplasmic music drifts everywhere from transistor radios. Voices babble. He can hear Black Oak Arkansas singing 'Jim Dandy' ('Go Jim Dandy, go Jim Dandy' a falsetto voice screams merrily at the slow hall walkers). He can hear a talk-show host discussing Nixon in tones that have been dipped in acid like smoking quills. He can hear a polka with French lyrics - Lewiston is still a French-speaking town and they love their jigs and reels almost as much as they love to cut each other in the bars on lower Lisbon Street.

He pauses outside his mother's room and for a while there he was freaked enough to come drunk. It made him ashamed to be drunk in front of his mother even though she was too doped and full of Elavil to know. Elavil is a tranquilizer they give to cancer patients so it won't bother them so much that they're dying.

The way he worked it was to buy two six-packs of Black Label beer at Sonny's Market in the afternoon. He would sit with the kids and watch their afternoon programmes on TV. Three beers with 'Sesame Street', two beers during 'Mister Rogers', one beer during 'Electric Company'. Then one with supper.

He took the other five beers in the car. It was a twenty-two-mile drive from Raymond to Lewiston, via Routes 302 and 202, and it was possible to be pretty well in the bag by the time he got to the hospital, with one or two beers left over. He would bring things for his mother and leave them in the car so there would be an excuse to go back and get them and also drink another half beer and keep the high going.

It also gave him an excuse to piss outdoors, and somehow that was the best of the whole miserable business. He always parked in the side lot, which was rutted, frozen November dirt, and the cold night air assured full bladder contraction. Pissing in one of the hospital bathrooms was too much like an apotheosis of the whole hospital experience: the nurse's call button beside the hopper, the chrome handle bolted at a 45-degree angle, the bottle of pink disinfectant over the sink. Bad news. You better believe it.

The urge to drink going home was nil. So left-over beers collected in the icebox at home and when there were six of them, he would never have come if he had known it was going to be this bad. The first thought that crosses his mind is *She's no orange* and the second thought is *She's really dying quick now,* as if she had a train to catch out there in nullity. She is straining in the bed, not moving except for her eyes, but straining inside her body, something is moving in there. Her neck has been smeared orange with stuff that looks like Mercurochrome, and there is a bandage below her left ear where some humming doctor put the radio needle in and blew out 60 per cent of her motor controls along with the pain centre. Her eyes follow him like the eyes of a paint-by-the-numbers Jesus.

- I don't think you better see me tonight, Johnny. I'm not so good. Maybe I'll be better tomorrow.

- What is it?

- It itches. I itch all over. Are my legs together?

He can't see if her legs are together. They are just a raised V under the ribbed hospital sheet. It's very hot in the room. No one is in the other bed right now. He thinks:

Room-mates come and room-mates go, but my mom stays on for ever. Christ!

- They're together, Mom.

- Move them down, can you, Johnny? Then you better go. I've never been in a fix like this before. I can't move anything. My nose itches. Isn't that a pitiful way to be, with your nose itching and not able to scratch it?

He scratches her nose and then takes hold of her calves through the sheet and pulls them down. He can put one hand around both calves with no trouble at all, although his hands are not particularly large. She groans. Tears are running down her cheeks to her ears.

- Momma?

- Can you move my legs down?

-I just did.

- Oh. That's all right, then. I think I'm crying. I don't mean to cry in front of you. I wish I was out of this. I'd do anything to be out of this

- Would you like a smoke?

- Could you get me a drink of water first, Johnny? I'm as dry as an old chip.

- Sure.

He takes her glass with a flexible straw in it out and around the corner to the drinking fountain. A fat man with an elastic bandage on one leg is sailing slowly down the corridor. He isn't wearing one of the pinstriped robes and is holding his 'johnny' closed behind him.

He fills the glass from the fountain and goes back to Room 312 with it. She has stopped crying. Her lips grip the straw in a way that reminds him of camels he has seen in travelogues. Her face is scrawny. His most vivid memory of her in the life he lived as her son is of a time when he was twelve. He and his brother Kevin and this woman had moved to Maine so that she could take care of her parents. Her mother was old and bedridden. High blood pressure had made his grandmother senile, and, to add insult to injury, had struck her blind. Happy eighty-sixth birthday. Here's one to grow on. And she lay in a bed all day long, blind and senile, wearing large diapers and rubber pants, unable to remember what breakfast had been but able to recite all the Presidents right up to Ike. And so the three generations of them had lived together in that house where he had so recently found the pills (although both grandparents are now long since dead) and at twelve he had been lipping off about something at the breakfast table, he doesn't remember what, but something, and his mother had been washing out her mother's pissy diapers and then running them through the wringer of her ancient washing machine, and she had turned around and laid into him with one of them, and the first snap of the wet, heavy diaper had upset his bowl of Special K and sent it spinning wildly across the table like a large blue tiddlywink, and the second blow had stropped his back, not hurting but stunning the smart talk out of his mouth and the woman now lying shrunken in this bed in this room had whopped him again and again, saying: You keep your big mouth *shut,* there's nothing big about you right now but your *mouth* and so you keep it shut until the rest of you grows the same *size,* and each italicized word was accompanied by a strop of his grandmother's wet diaper! - *WHACKO!*- and any other smart things he might have had to say just evaporated. There was not a chance in the world for smart talk. He had discovered on that day and for all time that there is nothing in the world so perfect to set a twelve-year-old's impression of his place in the scheme of things into proper perspective as being beaten across the back with a wet grandmother-diaper. It had taken four years after that day to relearn the art of smarting off.

She chokes on the water a little and it frightens him even though he has been thinking about giving her pills. He asks her again if she would like a cigarette and she says:

- If it's not any trouble. Then you better go. Maybe I'll be better tomorrow.

He shakes a Kool out of one of the packages scattered on the table by her bed and lights it. He holds it between the first and second fingers of his right hand, and she puffs it, her lips stretching to grasp the filter. Her inhale is weak. The smoke drifts from her lips.

- I had to live sixty years so my son could hold my cigarettes for me.

- I don't mind.

She puffs again and holds the filter against her lips so long that he glances away from it to her eyes and sees they are closed.

- Mom?

The eyes open a little, vaguely.

- Johnny?

Right.

- How long have you been here?

- Not long. I think I better go. Let you sleep.

- Hnnnnn.

He snuffs the cigarette in her ashtray and slinks from the room, thinking: I want to talk to that doctor. Goddamn it, I want to talk to the doctor who did that.

Getting into the elevator he thinks that the word 'doctor' becomes a synonym for 'man' after a certain degree of proficiency in the trade has been reached, as if it was an expected, provisioned thing that doctors must be cruel and thus attain a special degree of humanity.

But

'I don't think she can really go on much longer,' he tells his brother later that night. His brother lives in Andover, seventy miles west. He only gets to the hospital once or twice a week.

'But is her pain better?' Kev asks.

'She says she itches.' He has the pills in his sweater pocket. His wife is safely asleep. He takes them out, stolen loot from his mother's empty house, where they all once lived with the grandparents. He turns the box over and over in his hand as he talked, like a rabbit's foot.

'Well then, she's better.' For Kev everything is always better, as if life moved towards some sublime vertex. It is a view the younger brother does not share.

'She's paralyzed.'

'Does it matter at this point?'

'Of course it *matters!'* he bursts out, thinking of her legs under the white ribbed sheet.

'John, she's dying.'

'She's not dead yet.' This in fact is what horrifies him. The conversation will go around in circles from here, the profits accruing to the telephone company, but this is the nub. Not dead yet. Just lying in that room with a hospital tag on her wrist, listening to phantom radios up and down the hail. And she's going to have to come to grips with time, the doctor says. He is a big man with a red, sandy beard. He stands maybe six foot four, and his shoulders are heroic. The doctor led him tactfully out into the hall when she began to nod off.

The doctor continues:

- You see, some motor impairment is almost unavoidable in an operation like the 'cortotomy'. Your mother has some movement in the left hand now. She may reasonably expect to recover her right hand in two to four weeks.

- Will she walk?

The doctor looks at the drilled-cork ceiling of the corridor judiciously. His beard crawls all the way down to the collar of his plaid shirt, and for some ridiculous reason Johnny thinks of Algernon Swinburne; why, he could not say. This man is the opposite of poor Swinburne in every way.

- I should say not. She's lost too much ground.

- She's going to be bedridden for the rest of her life?

- I think that's a fair assumption, yes.

He begins to feel some admiration for this man who he hoped would be safely hateful. Disgust follows the feeling; must he accord admiration for the simple truth?

- How long can she live like that?

- It's hard to say. (That's more like it.) The tumour is blocking one of her kidneys now. The other one is operating fine. When the tumour blocks it, she'll go to sleep.

- A uremic coma?

- Yes, the doctor says, but a little more cautiously. 'Uremia' is a techno-pathological term usually the property of doctors and medical examiners alone. But Johnny knows it because his grandmother died of the same thing, although there was no cancer involved. Her kidneys simply packed it in and she died floating in internal piss up to her rib-cage. She died in bed, at home, at dinnertime. Johnny

was the one who first suspected she was truly dead this time and not just sleeping in the comatose, open-mouthed way that old people have. Two small tears had squeezed out of her eyes. Her old toothless mouth was drawn in, reminding him of a tomato that has been hollowed out, perhaps to hold egg salad, and then left forgotten on the kitchen shelf for a stretch of days. He held a round cosmetic mirror to her mouth for a minute, and when the glass did not fog and hide the image of her tomato mouth, he called for his mother. All of that had seemed as right as this did wrong.

- She says she still had pain. And that she itches.

The doctor taps his head solemnly, like Victor DeGroot in the old psychiatrist cartoons.

- She *imagines* the pain. But it is nonetheless real. Real to her. That is why time is so important.. Your mother can no longer count time in terms of seconds and minutes and hours. She must restructure those units into days and weeks and months.

He realizes what this burly man with the beard is saying, and it boggles him. A bell dings softly. He cannot talk mort to this man. He is a technical man. He talks smoothly of time, as though he has gripped the concept as easily as a fishing rod. Perhaps he has.

- Can you do anything more for her?

- Very little.

But his manner is serene, as if this were right. He is, after all, 'not offering false hope'.

- Can it be worse than a coma?

- Of course it *can.* We can't chart these things with any real degree of accuracy. It's like having a shark loose in your body. She may bloat.

- Bloat?

- Her abdomen may swell and then go down and then swell again. But why dwell on such things now? I believe we can safely say that they would do the job, but suppose they don't? Or suppose they catch me? I don't want to go to court on a mercy-killing charge. Not even if I can beat it. I have no causes to grind. He thinks of newspaper headlines screaming MATUCIDE and grimaces.

Sitting in the parking lot, he turns the box over and over in his hands. DARVON COMPLEX. The question still is: *Can he do it?* Should he? She has said: *I wish I were out of this. I'd do anything to be out of this.* Kevin is talking of fixing her a room at his house so she won't die in the hospital. The hospital wants her out. They gave her some new pills and she went on a raving bummer. That was four days after the 'cortotomy'. They'd like her someplace else because no one has perfected a really foolproof 'cancerectomy' yet. And at this point if they got it all out of her she'd be left with nothing but her legs and her head.

He has been thinking of how time must be for her, like something that has got out of control, like a sewing basket full of threaded spools spilled all over the floor for a big mean tomcat to play with. The days in Room 312. The night in Room 312. They have run a string from the call button and tied it to her left index finger because she can no longer move her hand far enough to press the button if she thinks she needs the bedpan.

It doesn't matter too much anyway because she can't feel the pressure down there; her midsection might as well be a sawdust pile. She moves her bowels in the bed and pees in the bed and only knows when she smells it. She is down to ninety-five pounds from one-fifty and her body's muscles are so unstrung that it's only a loose bag tied to her brain like a child's sack puppet. Would it be any different at Kev's? Can he do murder? He knows it is murder. The worst kind, matricide, as if he were a sentient foetus in an early Ray Bradbury horror story, determined to turn the tables and abort the animal that has given it life. Perhaps it is his fault anyway. He is the only child to have been nurtured inside her, a change-ofAife baby. His brother was adopted when another smiling doctor told her she would never have any children of her own. And of course, the cancer now in her began in the womb like a second child, his own darker twin. His life and her death began in the same place: Should he not do what the other is doing already, so slowly and clumsily?

He has been giving her aspirin on the sly for the pain she *imagines* she has. She has them in a Sucrets box in her hospital-table drawer, along with her get-well cards and her reading glasses that no longer work. They have taken away her dentures because they are afraid she might pull them down her throat and choke on them, so now she simply sucks the aspirin until her tongue is slightly white.

Surely he could give her the pills; three or four would be enough. Fourteen hundred grains of aspirin and four hundred grains of Darvon administered to a woman whose body weight has dropped 33 per cent over five months.

No one knows he has the pills, not Kevin, not his wife. He thinks that maybe they've put someone else in Room 312's other bed and he won't have to worry about it. He can cop out safely. He wonders if that wouldn't be best, really. If there is another woman in the room, his options will be gone and he can regard the fact as a nod from Providence. He thinks

- You're looking better tonight.

- Am I?

- Sure. How do you feel?

- Oh, not so good. Not so good tonight.

- Let's see you move your right hand.

She raises if off the counterpane. It floats splay-fingered in front of her eyes for a moment, then drops. Thump. He smiles and she smiles back. He asks her,

- Did you see the doctor today?

- Yes, he came in. He's good to come every day. Will you give me a little water, John?

He gives her some water from the flexible straw.

- You're good to come as often as you do, John. You're a good son.

She's crying again. The other bed is empty, accusingly so. Every now and then one of the blue and white pinstriped bathrobes sails by them up the hall. The door stands open halfway. He takes the water gently away from her, thinking idiotically: Is this glass half empty or half full?

- How's your left hand?

- Oh, pretty good.

- Let's see.

She raises it. It has always been her smart hand, and perhaps that is why it has recovered as well as it has from the devastating effects of the 'cortotomy'. She clenches it. Flexes it. Snaps the fingers weakly. Then it falls back to the counterpane. Thump. She complains,

- But there's no feeling in it.

- Let me see something.

He goes to the wardrobe, opens it, and reaches behind the coat she came to the hospital in to get at her purse. She keeps it in here because she is paranoid about robbers; she has heard that some of the orderlies are rip-off artists who will lift anything they can get their hands on. She has heard from one of her room-mates who has since gone home that a woman in the new wing lost five hundred dollars which she kept in her shoe. His mother is paranoid about a great many things lately, and has once told him a man sometimes hides under her bed in the late-at-night. Part of it is the combination of drugs they are trying on her. They make the bennies he occasionally dropped in college look like Excedrin. You can have your pick from the locked drug cabinet at the end of the corridor just past the nurses' station: ups and downs, highs and bummers. Death, maybe, merciful death like a sweet black blanket. The wonders of modern science.

He takes the purse back to her bed and opens it.

- Can you take something out of here?

- Oh, Johnny, I don't know .

He says persuasively:

- Try it. For me.

The left hand rises from the counterpane like a crippled helicopter. It cruises. Dives. Comes out of the purse with a single wrinkled Kleenex. He applauds:

- Good! Good!

But she turns her face away.

- Last year I was able to pull two full dish trucks with these hands.

If there's to be a time, it's now. It is very hot in the room but the sweat on his forehead is cold. He thinks: If she doesn't ask for aspirin, I won't. Not tonight. And he knows if it isn't tonight it's never. Okay.

Her eyes flick to the half-open door slyly.

- Can you sneak me a couple of my pills, Johnny? It is how she always asks. She is not supposed to have any pills outside of her regular medication because she has lost so much body weight and she has built up what his druggie friends of his college days would have called 'a heavy thing'. The body's immunity stretches to within a fingernail's breadth of lethal dosage. One more pill and you're over the edge. They say it is what happened to Marilyn Monroe.

- I brought some pills from home.

- Did you?

- They're good for pain.

He holds the box out to her. She can only read very close. She frowns over the large print and then says,

- I had some of that Darvon stuff before. It didn't help me.

- This is stronger.

Her eyes rise from the box to his own. Idly she says,

- Is it?

He can only smile foolishly. He cannot speak. It is like the first time he got laid, it happened in the back of some friend's car and when he came home his mother asked him if he had a good time and he could only smile this same foolish smile.

- Can I chew them?

- I don't know. You could try one.

- All right. Don't let them see.

He opens the box and prises the plastic lid off the bottle. He pulls the cotton out of the neck. Could she do all that with the crippled helicopter of her left hand? Would they believe it? He doesn't know. Maybe they don't either. Maybe they wouldn't even care.

He shakes six of the pills into his hand. He watches her watching him. It is many too many, even she must know that. If she says nothing about it, he will put them all back and offer her a single Arthritis Pain Formula.

A nurse glides by outside and his hand twitches, clicking the grey capsules together, but the nurse doesn't look in to see how the 'cortotomy kid' is doing.

His mother doesn't say anything, only looks at the pills like they were perfectly ordinary pills (if there is such a thing). But on the other hand, she has never liked ceremony; she would not crack a bottle of champagne on her own boat.

- Here you go,

he says in a perfectly natural voice, and pops the first one into her mouth.

She gums it reflectively until the gelatine dissolves, and then she winces.

- Taste bad? I won't.

- No, not too bad.

He gives her another. And another. She chews them with that same reflective look. He gives her a fourth. She smiles at him and he sees with horror that her tongue is yellow. Maybe if he hits her in the belly she will bring them up. But he can't. He could never hit his mother.

- Will you see if my legs are together?

-- Just take these first.

He gives her a fifth. And a sixth. Then he sees if her legs are together. They are. She says,

- I think I'll sleep a little now.

- All right. I'm going to get a drink.

- You've always been a good son, Johnny.

He puts the bottle in the box and tucks the box into her purse, leaving the plastic top on the sheet beside her. He leaves the open purse beside her and thinks: *She asked for her purse. I brought it to her and opened it just before I left. She said she could get what she wanted out of it. She said she'd get the nurse to put it back in the wardrobe.*

He goes out and gets his drink. There is a mirror over the fountain, and he runs out his tongue and looks at it.

When he goes back into the room, she is sleeping with her hands pressed together. The veins in them are big, rambling. He gives her a kiss and her eyes roll behind their lids, but do not open.

Yes.

He feels no different, either good or bad.

He starts out of the room and thinks of something else. He goes back to her side, takes the bottle out of the box, and rubs it all over his shirt. Then he presses the limp fingertips of her sleeping left hand on the bottle. Then he puts it back and goes out of the room quickly, without looking back.

He goes home and waits for the phone to ring and wishes he had given her another kiss. While he waits, he watches TV and drinks a lot of water.