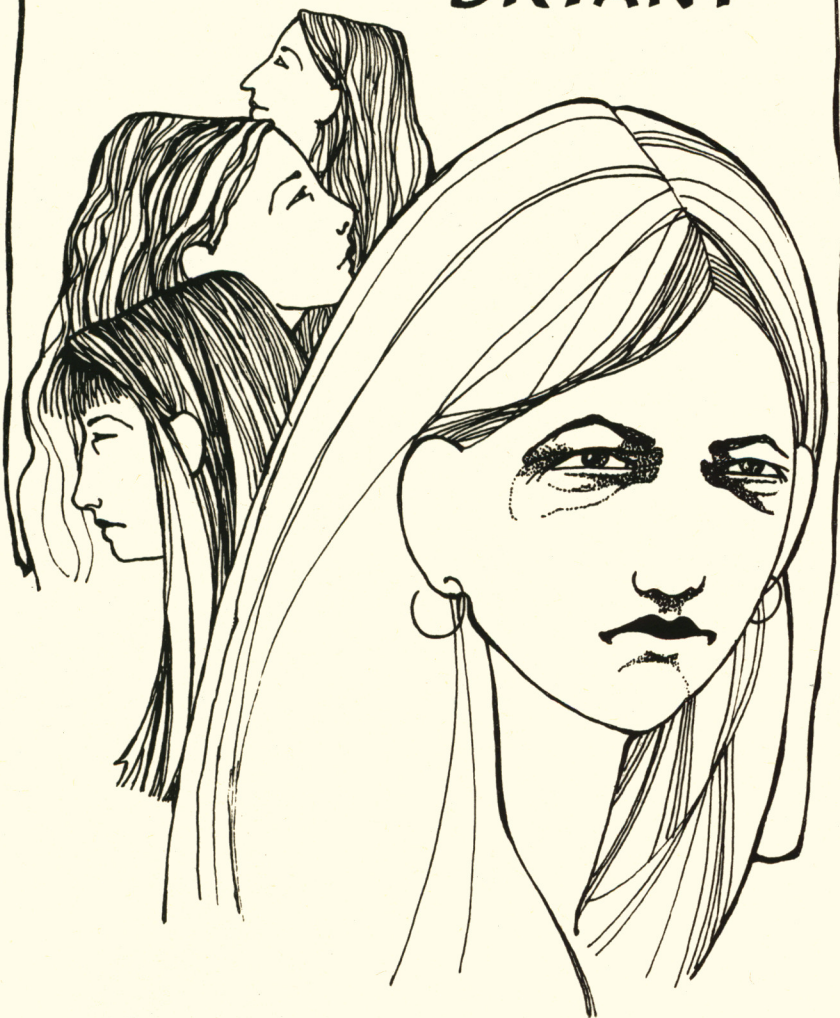


# **DARKER PASSIONS**

**EDWARD  
BRYANT**







# DARKER PASSIONS

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*Stories by*  
**EDWARD BRYANT**

*Introduction by*  
*Dan Simmons*

*Illustrated by*  
*Melissa Sherman*

Roadkill Press  
Arvada, Colorado

## First Edition

### Acknowledgments

#### *Darker Passions*

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#### "Human Remains"

appears for the first time in *Darker Passions*.

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#### "The Loneliest Number"

appeared in *Pulphouse: The Hardback Magazine*,  
volume seven, spring 1990.

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#### "Doing Colfax"

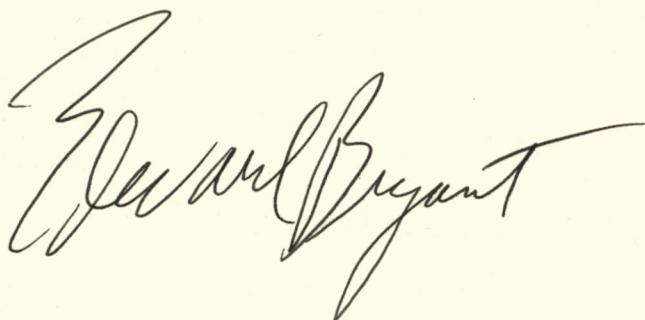
appeared in *Night Visions 4*, edited by  
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This volume is number 275  
of a signed limited edition of  
five hundred copies of which  
one hundred are reserved for private  
distribution and four hundred are for sale.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Gerald Bryant". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial "G" and a long, horizontal flourish extending to the right.





for Valarie Abney  
who sees folks like these every day  
at work





**THIS MAN WILL SCARE YOU . . .**  
**AND HE *SHOULD***  
**(Introduction to Stories by Edward Bryant)**  
by Dan Simmons  
Friday the 13th, November, 1992

**I.**

**In Which We Analyze the Arcane Nature of Introductions**

The question is, of course, why are you reading an introduction rather than going straight to the fiction? You bought the book for the stories, didn't you? Of course you did. Then why read a discursive, digressive bit of irrelevant non-fiction when you can get straight to the good stuff?

The reason may lie in one of three possible answers—  
(1) The introduction comes first and you are hopelessly linear concrete in your response to the world (2) You know that 'introductions' are vestigial remnants of some Victorian literary sensibility, but you grew up, as I did, reading them and can no more kick the habit than you can reform certain other prejudices from a previous age . . . or . . . (3) Being a savvy reader, you know that an introduction might give you some insight into the author which can, in turn, throw some light on the fiction itself.

Assuming that (3) is the only answer that makes sense, we continue with the introduction knowing that only some astounding personal or literary revelation can recoup the time spent reading it.

**II.**

**In Which We Discover That Edward Bryant Is  
The Illegitimate Child of Both Dean Koontz and Stephen King**

It's true. I can prove it.

You may ask how can someone be the illegitimate offspring of *two* fathers. Well, it isn't easy. I suspect that it has something to do with those U.S. Army cloning experiments that ran amuck in a remote east-Wyoming biogenetics lab some years ago. It was a time when we were desperately trying to close the "Literary Gap" with the Soviet Union and my sources tell me that the effort

that resulted in Edward Bryant began with irradiated sperm, waldo-manipulated petri dishes of recombined DNA, and some geneticist wonks who knew good genre literature when they read it. It is a fact that both Koontz and King were seen in east-central Wyoming during that period, and while their spokesmen say on the record only that they were "shooting grouse," there is room for skepticism. Rumor has it that Tama Janowitz carried the Steve-Rogerish literary fetal experiment to term.

I can sense your doubt. Well answer this question then—have you ever met anyone, *anyone* who ever saw Edward Bryant as a boy or young man? Have you ever seen a photograph of Bryant before he had a mustache or beard? You won't. Trust me.

But why Dean Koontz and Stephen King, you ask. Listen.

In the field of horror fiction, Dean Koontz is perhaps the preeminent *gentleman*. I once visited a California bookstore where Dean had dropped in "to sign a few books for local fans" only to sign for *ten straight hours* before hobbling home. When I asked him why he went through such torture, Dean responded that he didn't want to disappoint anyone. What a gentleman. What a *mensch*.

Edward Bryant is a gentleman and a *mensch*. At a recent party I threw to celebrate the unveiling of a commissioned sculpture, Ed Bryant was the only guest (out of almost a hundred people there) to bring flowers and a card for the young sculptor. He instinctively knew that it was *her* day.

For years I have seen Bryant devote time that he did not have, time that had to be stolen from doing his own fiction, to work with young writers in workshops and classes. I've stolen some of his time myself, both for myself and for young students when I was a teacher. Even today, when I have three editors at three major publishing houses to work with me on my fiction, Ed Bryant is the only editorial voice I trust implicitly and completely. And he gives the time and effort. A *mensch*.

The Chinese pictograph for "honor" is far more revealing than our phonetic, content-less word for the concept. The Chinese pictograph shows a man standing next to his word—literally. This would be a good symbol for the meaning behind "gentleman" and "*mensch*." It would be a good symbol for Edward Bryant.



And then there's the Stephen King connection. Steve happens to be one of the funniest people I've ever met. He combines a dry, sharp wit with an absolute daring disregard for taste. Even in his writing, some of the images are the literary equivalent of the kid we all used to know in school who—to get a laugh—would snort milk out his nose at the lunch table.

Sound familiar?

Have you ever *eaten* with Edward Bryant? Have you ever been humiliated at a four-star restaurant when Bryant has twelve people at a table emulating him by sticking spoons on their noses? And don't even *think* about taking the man to a Chinese restaurant; let Bryant within twenty paces of a pair of chopsticks and you'll see and hear the dreaded Ed Bryant Walrusman.

Ha ha.

Anyone who has met Steve King knows that he has . . . ah, how shall we say it? . . . a certain *laissez-faire* attitude toward the rigors of sartorial convention. Hmmmm. Ed Bryant has elevated this to what might be described as the next generation of precisely calculated dishabille. I mean, have you ever *seen* his tie that looks like a slab of lucite with dead flies embedded in it? If Bryant shows up at a formal affair just wearing his t-shirt with the bloody bullet holes under an open Earl's Conoco shirt with a bolo tie held together by a porcelain copulating-cow-clasp, one feels that everyone's guests have been spared. And will anyone forget the Denver WorldCon MC'd by Ed Bryant when he finally surrendered to popular demand for formality? He showed up in a beautiful and precisely formal tuxedo. And rollerskates.

Perhaps you have heard Ed Bryant's jokes. I've never seen so many people laugh so hard and then stop laughing so quickly, as the shock wave of what they have just laughed at echoes back off the walls of their conscious or subconscious and catches up to them. Bryant's humor is like a major California 'quake. If the first trembler doesn't get you, the aftershocks will.

And then there are the bits of newspaper non-fiction that he assails and regales us with, often during his one-man "introductions" before someone's formal reading at a bookstore. Like the clipped article about the British Earl who built the first *trebuchet* (giant catapult-like siege engine) the world has seen for five



hundred years and who enjoys launching grand pianos, dead pigs, and Austin Minis several miles across his estate and who offered to launch Kevin Costner in that simulated Robin Hood movie. Or like the short article about the South Carolina man who ran into an emergency room demanding to know if he could get rabies or AIDS from having sex with a raccoon he thought had been dead during the act. *I mean, what newspaper does Bryant subscribe to?!?*

And all too often it is *me* who is waiting to do the formal reading after such an introduction. It's like going on after Hal Holbrook does "his little Mark Twain thing."

Stephen King. Dean Koontz. Radiation. Petri dishes. Waldoes. Escaped cloned writer.

"Problem solved!" as the former-candidate H. Ross Perot would have said.

### III.

#### **In Which We Actually Talk About the Stories**

Now that we have proved that "Edward Bryant" is a cloned construct, we shall unprove it. All we have to do is read the three stories in this small collection.

No one else could have written them. Period.

You may remember a scene toward the end of the movie "A Clockwork Orange" where they are conditioning poor droog Alex away from the path of the old ultra-violence by forcing him to watch violent films while he was injected with a drug that made him sick. What I remember about that scene are the steel clamps that held Alex's eyelids open wide so that he couldn't even blink. Some white-coated lab assistant sat next to strapped-in and eye-clamped Alex, doling out eyedrops on a regular basis.

You may need those eyedrops and clamps when you read these stories.

I first encountered "Doing Colfax" years ago when I read it for a weekend "mini Milford" workshop. I thought it was brilliant and terrifying then. I still do. I have been reminded of it a thousand times as I sip my morning orange juice and read newspaper articles about what new abomination has occurred overnight.

"The terrifying thing about the Twentieth Century," I once imagined Saul Bellow's aged Mr. Sammler telling me in a dream,

"is the immensity of its atrocities and the paucity of their reverberation."

"The Loneliest Number" may remind you a bit of one of the almost perfect vignettes or stories from Hemingway's *in our time*. "The Loneliest Number" is honed to the same sharpness and has the same habit of letting the detail be revealed in negative space and the deafening silence of the unsaid. But Hemingway would have had to have spent years on the crime beat and lived deeper into the second half of the Twentieth Century to write something like "The Loneliest Number." Edward Bryant has his finger on the pulse of the second half of the Twentieth Century. And it is a sick pulse.

"Human Remains" is Bryant's newest contribution to the film festival that droogie Alex and we need to watch. If I were writing a review of the story, I would be compelled to say that it is incisive bordering on brilliant, that it is as slick and dangerous as a straight razor without a handle, and that it has the courage and *cojones* to be a tad politically incorrect at a time when that sort of thing is quickly and unrelentingly punished.

No, the Koontz-King clone-baby theory doesn't hold up. No clones here. Only a distinctive and powerful voice which we are lucky to be able to tune in, even if it tells us stories that we'd rather not hear.

#### IV.

#### **In Which We End the Digression and Cut to the Chase**

I think that it was a good idea to collect these stories in one small space. But then, I'm part of the minority who believes that it was a good idea for Oppie and the others to take that critical mass of U-238 and slap it together in an equally small space.

Interesting things happen. Fissionable things. Bright, loud, earth-shaking things that we can argue about for years.

So, lacking any other theories or personal revelations about the author's heritage, manners, lifestyle, or moral transgressions, I can only recommend you to his fiction and vice versa. These stories scare the shit out of me.

I wish you an equally pleasant reading experience.





# DOING COLFAX

"You wanna eat?" said Jeffie.

Kin stared out the passenger's window of the big old Chevy at the neon dazzle of Colfax Avenue. "I want to do someone."

"Aw, come on." Jeffie put his free hand on Kin's wrist, let the fingers lie there lightly. "Let's eat. I'm buyin'. Burgers okay?"

Kin started to turn away from the night. "Yeah, burgers are—hold it. Look at that one."

*That one* was what looked to be a teenaged girl standing by a bus bench with her thumb out. Short dark hair, shorter suede skirt, defiant stance. She stared directly into the windshield of the Chevy and smiled.

"I want to do her," said Kin.

"Burgers—" Jeffie protested.

"Her."

Jeffie braked the sedan to a stop. Kin reached back over the seat and unlatched the rear door.

The girl climbed in, set a canvas book-bag down beside her and said, "Hi. Hey, thanks—I don't think the R.T.D. ever stops here. Not ever."

"How far you headin'?" said Kin.

"As far east as you're going. Anywhere on Colfax. I live out in Aurora."

"We're going that far," Kin said.

"That's really great," said the girl. She leaned forward, fore-arms on the seat divider. "You guys got names?"

They told her. Neither asked the girl her name. She told them anyway. Neither Kin nor Jeffie remembered it.

The Chevy cruised along through the night. Jeffie scrupulously obeyed each speed sign. He ran no yellow lights. The girl told them about night school at Auraria. She was going to be a psychiatric social worker, or maybe just a psychologist. She had a part-time job at a Burger King. Jeffie perked up briefly when he heard that. The girl talked and talked, and finally they crossed under I-225. Though there were still plenty of lights, Jeffie sensed that the eastern plains lay close ahead. Nebraska. Kansas. He felt the oppressive freedom of all that space.

"Anywhere along here," said the girl. She started to arrange her canvas bag.

"Naw," said Kin, and then he was over the seat and in back with her.

"What are you—" she started to say. Kin slapped her hard across the jaw and her head fetched up solid against the window on Jeffie's side. The driver's shoulders hunched when he heard that meaty sound.

"She's just out," said Kin. He extracted a length of coarse baling twine from under the seat ahead, let the girl's body slump over his lap, twisted her arms behind her, and bound the wrists tight. He set her upright again, wedged back into the corner between seat and window.

"Jesus, I'm starved," said Jeffie.

Kin said, "You just keep driving." While he waited for her to wake up, he explored the girl's body with his hands. His fingers went up under her skirt and rolled the dark pantyhose down off her hips and legs, and finally off her feet after he pulled her flats loose. "It's her time of the month," he said, grimacing. "Guess nothing's goin' right for her."

The girl screamed. Startled, Kin jerked upright and cracked his head against her chin. He muttered something and slapped her again, but this time not as hard as before. "Listen," he said.

"Hey, listen to me." The girl stared at him and listened. Kin picked something up off the car floor and showed it to her. "Know what this is?"

She shook her head.

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"It's a tennis ball, dummy. I don't want you to scream. And I don't want to hit you again. If you keep on yellin' like that, I'm gonna have to put this in your mouth and keep it in there with some tape. You understand?"

Her eyes widened, but she didn't say anything at all. And she didn't scream. Her eyes looked like they were all wide, dark pupil.

"If I have to do that," said Kin, "then maybe too I'll go on and pinch your nose shut, or maybe tape it altogether. You know what'll happen then?"

She slowly nodded, eyes still fixed on his.

"Okay," said Kin. He started touching her again. The girl struggled against him, but almost silently. Little whimpers came out.

"How you gonna do her?" said Jeffie.

Kin looked thoughtful.

The girl briefly stopped struggling. Her eyes glistened with tears, but she seemed to pull herself together visibly. She said, "*Do me?*"

The two men stared back at her.

"Listen, you bastards. You're going to kill me, say it. Don't talk like I'm not really here." She paused. "I'm here. I'm real."

They didn't say anything.

"You're not going to *do me*—you're going to *kill me*."

Jeffie and Kin stared at each other in the rearview.

After a long pause, Jeffie said again, "How you gonna do her?"

"This way," said Kin. "Best I know how." He used the pantyhose he had tugged off the girl earlier. She struggled silently, as though using all her strength to twist away from him. Somehow she got her chin between the taut loop and her throat. Her eyes never left Kin's.

"Give me the screwdriver out of the jockey box," said Kin hoarsely, trying to hold her body still with one arm, attempting to draw the noose tight with his other hand.

"Phillips or the other one?" said Jeffie, rummaging.

"Don't matter. Just a screwdriver."

"Here you go." Jeffie passed the steel tool over the seat. He winced as either Kin or the girl kicked the backrest. Kin put the screwdriver shaft between the loop of pantyhose and the nape of



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the girl's neck, and began to twist. The nylon stretched, then tautened. The noose crept along the point of the girl's chin, then snapped free, digging into the flesh of her throat.

"That's it," said Kin.

And it was.

The girl's eyes never did close, so Kin finally had to twist her head around so that she looked accusingly out at the neon night.

"We gotta dump her," said Jeffie.

It was like Kin didn't hear him. "I'm hungry now," he said. "I feel good and I'm hungry."

"We got to—"

"I heard you, buddy. We'll do it. But I want a burger. I'm starvin'."

"Guess it'll have to be a drive-up."

"Guess so," Kin agreed.

The old Chevy ghosted through the dark.

"I'm hungry too," Jeffie finally said.

"Yeah," said Kin. "Let's just do some burgers."



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# THE LONELIEST NUMBER

They found him not a quarter mile from the house. The searchers had crisscrossed the area a dozen times. Somehow they'd overlooked the body hidden in the weeds. You'd think someone would have seen . . .

But no one saw. Not until the third day. It was ten in the morning when the detective came to get me. It was the one called Shawcross. He had been one of the good ones, sympathetic and patient when I looked at him blankly and Marianne broke down in tears.

"You had better stay here," he said to my wife. "Please." Shawcross turned to me. "It'll be tough, but we need you to make the identification." He made an expression I interpreted as a regretful smile. "I'm sorry, folks. I truly am."

I went with him then. We tramped across a vacant lot that had become as familiar to me as the back yard. I remember how sunny it was. Warm for a Kansas October. Most of the searchers were in shirt sleeves. They were moving toward the far corner of the lot like ants alerted to sugar. When they saw us, they stopped. They looked uncomfortable. Some appeared embarrassed. As we neared, many looked stricken.

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In a clump of brown grass, stiff, dead stalks leavened with the remains of thistles, something lay hidden beneath a blue nylon police windbreaker. It couldn't be the thing I anticipated. It looked too small.

But when Detective Shawcross drew the garment back, I could see the head and the face and the expression. His mouth was open. There was a concavity where he had sucked the SaranWrap deep inside. Later, at the coroner's inquest, testimony was given that the plastic had nearly touched the back of the throat, had almost started the journey down toward the lungs. Timmy's lungs were always very good. He had practiced screaming with them for so many late nights.

I can never forget the sight of his face. The skin seemed purplish blue. His lips were skinned back from the little teeth. The gums were also blue. Have you ever seen a kitten hit by a car? Their fangs are exposed in a horrible rictus. In a way, it's an expression like a final, defiant, snarling gesture at death. But it's still death.

His face was like that, the late-morning sun glittering on the taut plastic. I stared a moment, then put my face into my hands.

"Oh, Christ!" I cried out.

It was my son.

I'm still mixed up about all the questions they asked both before and after we found Timmy. I do know it was harder after we knew he was dead. This was a particularly rough time for Marianne. She took the endlessly repeated interrogations far less well than I.

"When did you first notice he was missing from the nursery?"

"About eleven o'clock, Thursday night."

"But you didn't call us until midnight."

"Maybe it was a little after eleven when we checked his bed. We searched the house. We thought he might somehow have gotten down onto the floor and gone and hid. He loved to play. He'd done it before."

"It took a whole hour to search the house?"

"We must have gotten started after eleven. We told you—"

"Did you see anything out of the ordinary?"



## THE LONELIEST NUMBER

"Nothing."

"No strangers at the door? No bizarre phone calls? No hang-ups? Nothing like that?"

"No, nothing."

"There were no signs of forced entry."

"Well, we didn't have the front door locked."

"Is that normal for the two of you?"

"This is Kansas. We've never had trouble. We always lock up before bed, and we were going to do that after we checked on Timmy, but then we did and he was gone, so—"

"Could you see the door all the time from where you were earlier?"

"Only when we were in the living room. We'd washed dishes in the kitchen. I'd been fixing the hinge on the medicine cabinet in the bathroom. Marianne was sewing; she has a room for that."

"No TV?"

"Wednesday's our night for television. There's just nothing on, on Thursday."

"No messages or calls about your son since the disappearance?"

"Just from friends, our neighbors, just folks who cared about Timmy and knew what we must be feeling."

"And what were you feeling?"

Marianne started to cry. I put my arm around her shoulder. "Officer, don't you have some idea already?"

He looked at me silently for a moment. "Okay, so there was nothing you would interpret as a ransom demand?"

"No, nothing."

"Your son died from asphyxiation. But the coroner found marks that looked like old bruises on his upper thighs . . ."

"A month or so ago, Timmy was climbing in the dining room on one of those straight-back chairs. He slipped and fell and landed on the raised threshold into the kitchen. He hurt his legs."

"He cried," said Marianne. "I heard him from the back porch. I came back in and held him."

"Kids are all the time getting bunged up," I said.

"That's for sure," said Detective Shawcross. "I've got three of my own." His brown eyes were sad, his expression sympathetic.

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Marianne started to cry harder.  
"We don't have any," I said.

I remember what it was like having our son.

He wasn't planned, mind you, just one of those accidents that happens and then you learn to live with the consequences. After the initial shock of the doctor telling Marianne why it was she was no longer bleeding each month, we considered our options.

Obviously there weren't many. We both come from fairly conservative families, though neither of us is nearly so hidebound as most of the rest of the kin.

Marianne didn't want an abortion. I didn't want her to have one. We're not fanatical about it. But what we grant others the right to do, is not necessarily what's correct for us.

Besides, we'd talked about children someday; we just didn't expect that someday to be quite so immediate. I made decent wages at the company, so that wasn't really a problem.

But I did worry what the strain would do to Marianne. Just between us, she's not all that strong a woman. The pregnancy was not an easy one. And Timmy hurt her when he came out. She came to move slower than she did before her child was born.

Timmy, of course, changed the equations of our lives irrevocably. The noise, the lack of sleep, the attention, the incessant demands; all took their toll.

Our son's death, of course, took the greatest toll.

Was it a botched kidnaping? I kept wondering. Or was there someone, identity unknown, who hated us so much that he—or she—did what was done to Timmy?

The thought gave me no rest. It interrupted my sleep with nightmares.

There used to be a time, I dreamed memories. Now days, I just seem to dream dreams. They're hard to remember.

The room is small and so is the window. It is high up on the wall, higher than I can reach. The weak light seeping through comes from the west. The cries outside are tearing me apart.



## THE LONELIEST NUMBER

They are dog sounds, puppy moans. I can hear the whimpering. I want to answer him, go to him, hold him in my arms. Love him. I can't. I cannot see through the window, much less reach through.

Then I realize how much *I* want to be held.

And that's where I always wake up.

I dreamed it more than once.

Not long after the coroner's inquest, we moved from Kansas to Colorado, settling in old north Denver in a small turn-of-the-century house. The neighborhood was quiet, just as we both wished. Our exodus from Kansas had seemed almost like an escape. We packed the car under cover of darkness and left our home forever, on the downhill side of midnight. We had clocked a good many miles west on I-70 before I saw the dim glow of sunrise in the car mirror.

Marianne agreed with me that it would be good to make a clean break. What I hadn't articulated to her was my fear that someone might be watching us, might pursue if our departure were detected. That's why I didn't rent a U-Haul. We left all our furniture behind. It would no doubt be of value to someone deserving.

Marianne wrote a note to her mother and left it in an envelope on the kitchen table. After she had gone to the car, I made a final check of the house. I took the note and crumpled it up in my pocket. It would be stupid leaving a clear roadmap to our whereabouts, if the killer should break in looking for us. I told myself that I could telephone Detective Shawcross once we had found a refuge.

Our original destination was Salt Lake City, but exhaustion forced us to rent a room once we reached Denver. We fell asleep on cold, crisp sheets, listening to steam hiss through the pipes below the floor.

We got up late in the afternoon. It was Sunday and the city was quiet. Marianne and I took a walk and marveled at the clean air, at the spectacular sunset beyond the snow-capped ramparts of the Rockies. It was only after we determined to stay here that we found that the air was not always so pristine.

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So many things in life are like that—not always what they at first seem.

How well I know that now.

I found work in Denver, preparing tax returns for a variety of small firms. My pay wasn't anything like what I'd received in Kansas, but it was enough for us to live on. Marianne devoted herself to fixing up our house, and that kept her occupied and fine for most of each day.

We lived just west of downtown Denver. The railroad yards, the Platte River, and the freeway separated us from the city's core. Up on a line of low bluffs, we watched the inner-city lights at night as though the glittering towers belonged to the Emerald City.

We didn't really make any friends.

But we did dream.

"I'm going to have another child," Marianne said one night at supper.

I suppose I must have stared at her. There *was* a change in her. She had seemed happier for a week now. The depression, the brooding were all less intense. It had never occurred to me that pregnancy might be the cause. Actually it did surprise me that she was expecting. Our marital matters along that line had not been terribly frequent.

"You're sure?" I said.

Marianne smiled and nodded, her long, dark hair swaying. "I'm positive."

"You haven't checked with a doctor?"

"No, but I will." The lines in her face softened a little. "I know it's true, and I know she's a girl."

I smiled too. "And have you given her a name already?"

"Laurie."

"After your sister?"

She nodded. "And our grandmother."

"Won't there be some confusion?"

"Gram's dead. My sister will be." Marianne's voice dropped. "She only has less than a year, the doctors say. She'd want her name to go on."



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"Fine," I said. I'd known Laurie was dying; I hadn't remembered the time left.

"I dreamed that my daughter would grow up to look just like my sister."

"Fine," I said again. "Your sister's beautiful."

"Was," she corrected me. "It's been so hard on her." Tears started to well, slick trails tracing down her cheeks. "I really miss her. I wish her nothing ill, but I know she hurts so badly, and I want to do something for her."

"She'll live to see her namesake." I smiled reassuringly and took her hand. Her fingers were icy cold.

Mournfully, she said, "I hope so."

But unfortunately, Marianne's sister didn't. We called her mother one night, not yet divulging where we were living, and were informed that Laurie had died in a hospice in Topeka the week before.

"I wish you'd called a week ago," said her mother.

"I'm sorry." Both Marianne and her mother began to weep.

"The services were beautiful," said her mother. "Where are you?"

Marianne looked up from staring at the wall and glanced at me. I kept my hand clasped over the mouthpiece of the extension and shook my head.

"We're safe," said Marianne. "We're going to have a baby, and we want her to be safe too."

"Another child?" said her mother. "Where are you?"

"If you knew, someone else might find out."

The line to Kansas whistled, and then crackled with light static. "Detective Shawcross wants to know where you are now."

"Has he got some news about—about Timmy?" said Marianne.

"I think he just wants to talk."

"We'll call him," said my wife. She hung up the phone and said, "Good-bye, Mom," in a low voice.

I hung up the extension and crossed the room to her. "We're safe here," I said, bending and putting my arm around her shoulders. "Laurie will be safe."

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Then and only then, she smiled.

With Laurie's birth, my fear was reborn.

As the months proceeded, I feared that I would not be a good father.

And I dreaded the manifold evil things that could befall a young girl.

"She's so very, very beautiful," said Marianne to me, a rhetorical statement, really, before turning back to our daughter cradled carefully in her arms. "Aren't you, precious?" She touched an index finger to Laurie's tiny hand. The baby grasped with her stubby pink fingers. She gurgled cheerfully.

"Oh, yes, she is," I said. I bent low over them both. Laurie's focused stare washed over me, disregarding my attention, and returned to her mother's finger.

I stood straight, then headed for the kitchen.

"Where are you going?"

"Trash," I said. "I've got to take it out."

"That's tomorrow night," said Marianne. "Not tonight."

"I'll get a start. There's a lot this week. All those diapers."

In the kitchen, I took the folded sheet and the envelope out of my trouser pocket and unfolded them, creasing the letter backward so it would lie flat. It crackled when I flexed it. The words were still the same as they'd been when I picked the envelope up off the bureau in the nursery:

**YES, SHE IS BEAUTIFUL. YES, SHE IS MINE TOO.**

The block letters were scrawled in soft pencil lead. The envelope was a generic number ten. The letter was written on a sheet from the same pad Marianne had used to write the note to her mother that I had intercepted before we left Kansas. I remembered the soil bank letterhead.

This all meant several things.

The monster we thought we had left hundreds of miles behind was here with us now.



## THE LONELIEST NUMBER

It had violated our home, had crept into our daughter's room, then left after setting down the note.

I froze. What if the creature *hadn't* left? I tore the note into a dozen pieces, then two dozen, dropped them into the trash, shoved a crumpled Safeway sack down over them. I wanted to hide this from Marianne. I didn't think she could bear it.

The thought of the monster still being in our home chilled me. I went back through the living room, wordless as Marianne and Laurie both smiled, and strode to the bedroom. I took the .38 Special and box of shells out of the bed-table drawer, and loaded the weapon. I pulled a sweater over my head, then slipped the pistol into the waistband of my slacks and tugged the bottom of the sweater down to hide it.

"Are you cold?" said Marianne from the doorway. She still had the baby in her arms. "It seems hot to me."

"Chills," I said.

"I hope you're not getting sick."

I shook my head. "I'll be just fine now."

Then I searched the house.

Marianne was distracted with nursing Laurie, cleaning her up, putting her to bed. Just the same, it was not easy, rummaging through every dark place in our home without alerting my wife that something was wrong.

When she finally made a direct query, I said I was searching for a pair of mislaid boots.

"Oh, they're in the hall closet."

"Thank-you," I said. "I feel stupid."

I went to the closet in the front hall. I had not yet searched there. When I swung the door open, I had one hand on the butt of the pistol. There was nothing inside but coats, and the pair of boots. I gingerly sorted through the garments, though I knew full well the killer would have to be very short and chinning himself on the coat bar to evade notice.

"Did you get the boots?" said Marianne when I returned to the nursery.

"I just wanted to make sure they were there. I'll wear them tomorrow."

"Are you all right?" She turned away from our daughter and focused her attention on me. I felt like a flower in the full force of sunshine. "I'm a little worried. You're not yourself."

"I'm fine," I said, leaning forward to kiss her. She pulled away, turning back toward to the crib, but my lips still managed to brush her cheek. How soft, how warm. "Thank you." I smiled with the memory of her touch. "I love you."

Her attention was concentrated all on Laurie. "Mommy loves you, dearest. You're my darling one."

And you're *my* darling, I thought. I'll let nothing ever harm us. That night, I slept with the .38 Special beneath my pillow.

I awoke in the morning with a headache. It wasn't from the gun. I increasingly had found myself pierced with a buzzing ache centered squarely in back of my eyes. Aspirin had once helped. No more.

My wife screamed from the nursery. I knew the direction. I leaped from the bed and ran to her.

Marianne stared down into the crib. Tears streamed from her eyes. "She's gone," she said. "Oh, dear God, she's gone."

"We'll search the house." She turned toward me. "We did that, remember?"

"That was for Timmy," I said.

"It won't do any good." Her voice cracked.

We ransacked the house, but there was no sign of Laurie. Nothing. Nothing at all.

Finally, when we could think of nowhere else to search, nothing else to do, I called the police.

Confluence Park marks the place where Denver began. It is the point at which Cherry Creek meets the South Platte River. A town grew up around this juncture midway through the nineteenth century. The town became a city and then shifted a little to the east. We live a quarter mile to the west. I could see the Platte flowing into Confluence Park from the downhill corner of our block.



## THE LONELIEST NUMBER

I had a terrible feeling as I stared beyond the brick industrial buildings toward the bare trees and low, sluggish water of the park.

I stared until the ache in my skull blurred my vision and I couldn't remember what I had seen.

"What was she wearing?" said the police detective.

"A red sleeper."

"Booties?"

"No, she was sleeping."

"When was she last fed?"

The questions were all very familiar. I knew I had heard them before.

"Did you take her out to a mall or a store, or anywhere else in public lately? Did any stranger admire her or make some sort of comment?"

"I don't remember—I don't think so."

The police detective smiled sympathetically. "I know this is terribly difficult for you, but try to remember. If there's been anyone who's done or said anything out of the ordinary . . ."

"Only my husband." The detective looked at me quizzically. Marianne smiled. "I didn't mean *that* way. He forgot he'd put his boots in the hall close and ransacked the house last night, looking for them."

"I'm more interested in strangers," said the detective gently. She tugged at her lip. I saw Marianne look at me; strangely, I thought.

"No one ever comes here, and we rarely go out."

"It's possible," said the detective, "that somehow she got out of the crib and went right for the door. Kids can be pretty resourceful. They'll surprise you. We'll organize a search."

"The weather's too doggoned cold," said her partner. "If your daughter's out exploring the neighborhood, we want to get her before she picks up a chill." He smiled reassuringly.

Marianne nodded. "Our children aren't well," she said vaguely.

The female detective looked confused. "You've got more than just your daughter?"

EDWARD BRYANT

"We had a son," I said. "He died very young. All we have is Laurie." I said it to the police officers, but my eyes were on Marianne. I could see the tears starting to form.

"We'll get her back," said the man. There was something about his voice. He didn't sound confident.

They never did get her back, not all of her.

There is a narrow beach of lighter sand on the east side of where the Platte joins with Cherry Creek. In warmer weather, I'd seen brown children wading and swimming there. Now the light snow and the cutting wind sweeping off the foothills kept most from clambering down from the bike path and onto the verge of the river.

One of the searchers spotted the bright blue and red design of the Smurfs plastic lunchbox. I was downstream, standing watching from the edge of the Fifteenth Street bridge. I saw the man pluck the box from out of the snow, lift it toward his face, and open the lid.

He carefully put the lunchbox back down into the snow. Then he noisily vomited into the river.

We all rushed to him.

Some of the men tried to keep me from seeing what was in the lunchbox.

That night, the police detectives said there was someone who wanted to talk to us. They led Marianne and me into a room with a stark metal table and four wooden chairs. There were mirrors along one wall.

We were left alone for a few minutes.

Then the door opened and I recognized the man who entered.

"This is a bad business," said Detective Shawcross.

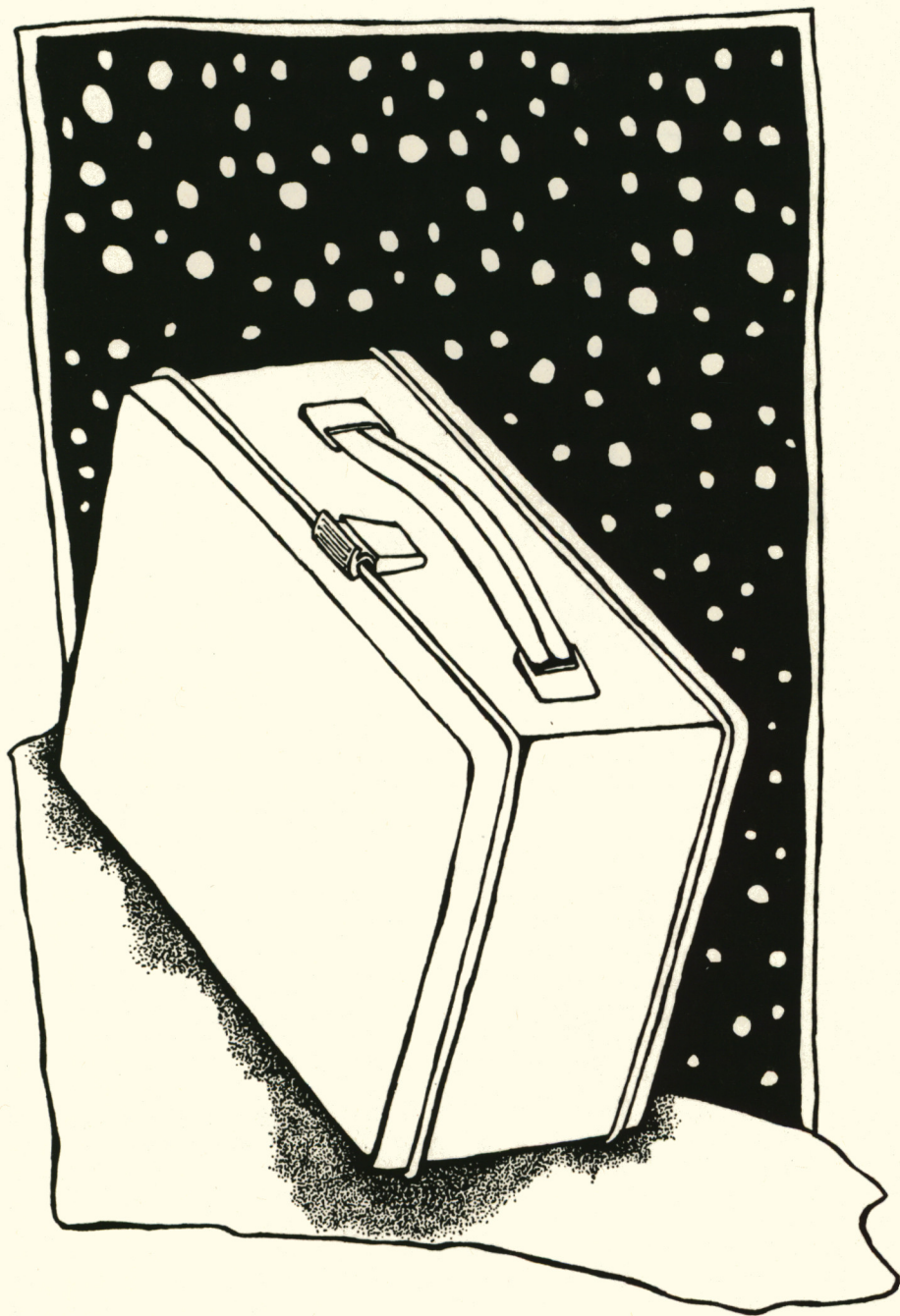
"Hello," I said, remembering my manners. "It's very good to see you."

"I hope that's true," he answered. "You know how all this appears."

"No," I said, "maybe I don't."

He looked me in the eye. "You've lost two children, three years apart, both in the same terrible way." He shook his head. "You vanished after your son's death."

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EDWARD BRYANT

"We just wanted to get away."

"I know that," said Shawcross. "But why?"

"We thought the killer might return."

The detective looked at me expressionlessly.

"He did," I said. "He came back after those years, and killed Laurie."

Shawcross made a sound like a sigh. "We're going to talk about this. Talk a lot." I thought I saw him shake his head. It was the barest motion.

What it said was, *though I want to, I cannot believe you.*

"Okay, let's go through it again," said the Denver detective whose name was Wells. His partner, the blonde woman named Kelso, regarded us impassively. Shawcross stood behind the two of them. "You bought the Smurfs lunchbox," Wells said to me. "It was on sale at the K-Mart up at Fiftieth and Federal. We found the receipt."

"It was cute," I said. "I thought Laurie would like it. I bought it to keep until she was old enough to use it."

"So how'd it get out to the river?"

I hesitated. "When the killer took Laurie, he must have taken the lunchbox too."

"He?"

"I don't think a woman would do that to a child." I heard a sound. It was Kelso expelling her breath.

"Did your wife help you do it?" said Wells.

I shook my head silently.

"Did Marianne know?" That was Kelso.

"Know what?" I said. "Neither one of us has done anything wrong. Someone killed—"

"Not *someone*," said Wells. "It was you."

I shook my head again, violently this time. "I love Marianne."

"But not your children."

"I loved them too. I was a good father."

"Like your own?" said a new voice. Shawcross. He leaned forward into the pooled light in which I sat.

"My father was troubled," I said. "That's not the point. The



## THE LONELIEST NUMBER

point is that someone killed both my son and my daughter. He did it with cruelty and forethought. He stalked us, murdered Timmy, then waited for Laurie. He was there all along."

"He was there all along," repeated Shawcross. "That's something I believe."

"What you're proposing," said Wells to me, "is something pretty hard to swallow. Do you expect us to believe that a psycho could be that patient? That he'd wait years to get back at you?"

"We need a motive here," said Kelso. "Who in your life, or in your wife's, has ever hated you so much, that they'd plan this kind of terrible revenge?"

"I don't know," I said. "Sometimes you do things to people and don't even realize you did them. But they remember."

"Don't you remember anything that might help?" said Kelso.

"Neither Colorado nor Kansas has a workable death penalty," said Wells disgustedly. "But that's not going to help you when you're tucked away for life. Cons don't like child-killers a whole lot."

I listened to the blonde woman. I tried to remember.

I discovered, when I was in custody, that I dreamed a lot again. It had been a long time since I'd recalled my dreams. Perhaps it was because the small cell reminded me of my room as a child. In both cases, the windows were tiny and on the west side of the building. I didn't receive much natural light. And just as when I was a young boy, I was only grudgingly allowed out of my room. I had a lot of time to stare, and sleep, and awaken to staring again.

My head never stopped hurting.

I dreamed one night of Tiny, the dog I'd had briefly as a boy. Tiny was a small black and white border collie who had wandered into the yard one afternoon as I was getting home from school. I must have been eight. Tiny was shy of being touched, but he was hungry and, I discovered, he desperately needed affection. I brought him some meatloaf from the refrigerator. He wolfed the food down and begged for more.

After the next helping, he let me pet him, but only if I was very gentle.

EDWARD BRYANT

When my father came home, he almost didn't let me keep Tiny. It took some talking, but I convinced him that Tiny could be trained to help me round up the cows.

Grudgingly, Dad said, "All right, so long as you take care of him and he isn't noisy."

My father slapped me when he discovered the missing two slices of meatloaf.

After that, I bought twenty-five-pound sacks of dogfood with the money I'd saved selling rabbit pelts. I'd bring them home on the schoolbus and always almost fell as I wrestled them down the steps.

Tiny ate ferociously, but he never got any bigger. He was more than a pet. He was my only friend. I lavished love on him and I think my father noticed that.

One afternoon I came home from school to find Tiny tied to a short leash staked into the yard. My father came out of the house with his revolver.

"What are you doing?" I cried.

"Tiny is sick," my father said. "He's sick real bad, and there's nothing to be done. You love him?"

I looked at the gun in his hand.

"Tiny's in pain, Boy. This is what I've got to do to release him." He paused. "I wanted you to know. No use in you thinking that I'd done something in secret." He knelt down beside Tiny and raised the pistol. It was a .38 Special, and it looked just like a cannon.

I wanted to run to Tiny, throw my arms around him, protect him, tell him it was all right, he would be fine, it was—

The sound of the flame bursting from the .38 nearly deafened me. I guess the bullet went into Tiny's eye and jerked him hard back against the leash. There was a patch of snow a few feet behind him. I saw a spray of bright red laid across that snow.

My father took Tiny a ways behind the shed and buried him.

I cried myself to sleep that night.

I hadn't noticed Tiny acting sick at all.

Kelso said, "So you're still sticking by your story that somewhere out there, there's a creature so sick, so twisted, that



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he's devised this incredible plan to ensnare you and your wife?"

My attorney didn't want me to answer.

"Yes," I said anyway.

The detective shook her head. "I want to believe you, I really do. It's just that if there really is another killer, he's literally left no trace."

He's supremely clever, I thought. I said nothing. But for just a moment, a door cracked open and the pain hit. I slammed it shut.

"Your friend, Detective Shawcross," said Kelso. "He'll be back for the trial."

"It will be nice to see a familiar face."

I was the only one to stand trial. I was shocked they would suspect Marianne at all. She was adjudged incompetent to face a jury and so was sent off to the State Hospital. The last time I saw her, she wouldn't talk to me. Nor did she meet my eye. I was told I'd be informed of her progress, but I wasn't.

It was not a long trial. I was found guilty. I saw Shawcross, Wells, and Kelso all out there in the room when I stood before the judge and the damning words were read.

I wondered if the killer was here in the courtroom too. I would not put it past him.

Marianne died in the State Hospital. Strangely, it was Shawcross who brought the news. He'd travelled all the way from eastern Kansas, he told me, because he felt involved in this whole thing, and he felt he ought to be the one to tell me.

My wife had attempted suicide with a piece of twenty-weight typing paper. I know it sounds silly and ineffectual, but she did her best, using the paper edge to cut shallow incisions into her wrists and throat. The orderlies found her with a light lacework of blood patterned on her skin.

They took away the paper. She had been going to write a letter to me.

Marianne reopened the cuts with her short nails and rubbed waste from her body into the wounds.

EDWARD BRYANT

The resulting infection should not have killed her, said the doctors, but she died.

I was not allowed to attend her funeral.

I wondered if *he* were there.

Prison has been difficult, just as Detective Wells promised it would be. It has been brutal. Painful. But I am still alive, brooding at times about Marianne, thinking about the dreams I remember with increasing fidelity, wondering whether I shall beat this life sentence and return to the world. Go back through the door.

If I do, I know the task my life is dedicated to. I will reclaim a .38 Special. Perhaps Detective Shawcross will help me. He has always seemed sensitive to the obstacles I face.

I ponder the number two, quite a lot.

Two is such a lonely number.

Two is Marianne and me.

Two is my son and my daughter.

Two is the killer and me.

My father and I.

Two.

But one would be lonelier still.

And that I cannot abide.



# HUMAN REMAINS

Vicky first thought a little girl had lost the doll in the women's room just off the main lobby of the West Denver Inn. It was a Barbie, just like she remembered from years before. The doll was straight and pink and impossibly proportioned. It lay on the dull white tile beneath the tampon machine. Vicky had heard the clatter as she passed on her way to the sink. Perhaps she had brushed it off, somehow, with an unwary elbow.

Something wasn't right. The doll did *not* look at all as she remembered.

Vicky set her black patent-leather purse on the faux marble counter by the sinks, switched the soft leather briefcase to her left hand, and knelt. She saw that the doll was tightly bound with monofilament. Tough, nearly transparent fishing line wound around the doll, binding the ankles, the arms at the waist, the chest, the shoulders, the throat, even around the head, taut across the parted lips. The line wound so tight, plastic bulged slightly around the loops. The bindings actually cut into the doll's unreal skin.

EDWARD BRYANT

She gingerly extended the fingers of her right hand and touched Barbie's shoulder. Cold. *Had* a little girl lost this here? Vicky forced herself to pick up the doll. Had one of the other women out in the restaurant bar left this? She brought the doll close to her face. Was that a glint of something red at the corner of Barbie's lips? The fishing line caught and reflected the harsh overhead light. No, there was no blood. It was only a trick of the light.

Vicky wondered at the obvious strength of the line. If it could do this to the durable synthetics of the doll, what would it do to a caught fish? She had a feeling it would take superhuman—super . . . what *was* the word for fish?—strength to break these bonds.

Caught would be caught.

She saw no knots where the line ends connected. And maybe there was no need to find them. No point. Trapped. Caught for good. Vicky wound her fingers around the Barbie and turned toward the restroom door. Suddenly she wanted to leave the sharp light and the harsh, astringent odor of disinfectant.

She noticed nothing now save the doll's seeming to become warmer. Lose heat, gain heat. Barbie was taking heat from Vicky's grip, her skin, her body, her living, pumping, blood.

As she swung the door inward with her left hand, Vicky thrust the doll into her briefcase. Now she had a secret. It was a long time since she had had a *new* secret.

This weekend, she had a sudden feeling, it was important to keep a secret or two ready and waiting. Something chilling and exciting rippled through her.

When she'd left the table, her companions had been talking about politics local to Colorado, Utah, Oregon, Washington, presidential campaigns, ballot initiatives to alter the whole tone and conduct of capital punishment. Now the other four women were talking about shoes.

Vicky smiled and sat down. Her half-empty supper dishes had been removed. From her side of the table, she could look out the

# HUMAN REMAINS





wide expanse of restaurant window, down across the Platte River valley, off to the east across the glittering October skyline of Denver. Above the lights, a nearly full moon had risen. It was another week until Halloween. Trails of fast-moving lights limned the freeway below.

Dixie, the Oregon blonde Vicky already thought of as the wannabe, was saying, "Listen, tomorrow's Saturday, there's gotta be a *lot* of fall shoe sales at the malls."

Sonya and Kate, the dark-haired sisters from Utah, looked at each other and laughed. Kate said, "Listen, we've got malls in Salt Lake."

"If we want to shop for pumps or ogle Birkenstocks, we'll just crank up the Shoe Channel on cable later tonight in the room." That was Sonya, the elder sister by maybe two years.

Vicky scooted her chair forward and took a sip of coffee. It had cooled to room temperature. Entropy. She remembered the word from a magazine article in her gynecologist's waiting room. "Southwest Plaza has 27 different shoe stores," she said absently.

"You counted?" said Carol Anne. She was conspicuously younger than the other women at the table. Vicky wondered about that but had stopped short of asking directly. "I shop there too, but I never counted all the shoe stores."

Vicky shrugged. "Anyhow, you can't try them on on the Shoe Channel."

"I bet Mrs. Marcos watches," said Dixie. "Is there really a Shoe Channel? We don't get that on cable in Eugene."

The supper crowd was beginning to thin out. Vicky realized that most of the faces were women she had seen, and some she had talked to, earlier in the afternoon, when everyone had arrived at the hotel.

"Okay, I'm not going to argue," said Dixie, smiling. She, Vicky already had noted, laughed a lot. "Tomorrow's another day. How about tonight? Are we all going to go out somewhere? I know you two sisters have got a car. Is there a Chippendale's in Denver? Carol Anne? You look hip and you *live* here."

"Beats me," said Carol Anne. "I'm out west in Golden. That's the suburbs. No stud dancers out there." She seemed to be blushing a little.

## HUMAN REMAINS

Dixie looked at Vicky. Vicky realized she was hugging the soft briefcase with the bound Barbie doll. She could feel its hardness through the leather. "Don't look at me," Vicky said. "I haven't been to a place like that since—" A chill ran through her belly and up her spine. She felt her shoulders twitch involuntarily. *Since the ride.*

A man walked up to the table. Vicky at first thought it was the waiter, and then realized that he was another diner. She recognized him as the guy who had been sitting with a woman, probably his wife, at the next table. He was a florid man, perhaps in his fifties, in a dark gray suit. His blue eyes were small and piercing. He had a gray mustache.

He stared down at them. Vicky thought Dixie was going to say something.

"Listen," said the man, looking quickly from face to face. "I was talking to the manager. He's a friend of mine and he told me what you're all doing. I gotta tell you something. I think you're all a bunch of sick fucks." He turned on his heel and walked away. His wife quickly got up from their table and followed her husband toward the door. She had averted her eyes, Vicky noticed, from the whole exchange.

The five women at the table stared at each other. Sonya turned and looked after the retreating figures of the man and his wife. She looked angry enough to spit, but said nothing. Kate shook her head.

"Yeah," said Dixie, "me too. What a jerk."

Carol Anne looked as if she might cry.

Vicky hugged the doll in the briefcase even tighter, then took a few deep breaths and relaxed her grip. She reached over the tabletop and touched Carol Anne's hand, wanting to comfort her, reassure her.

The waiter picked that moment to return to ask if anyone wanted more coffee.

They tacitly agreed not to keep talking about the business-suited man with the silent wife. The enthusiasm for male dancers had dwindled. Dixie started talking about movies. Sonya men-



tioned that the front desk rented VCRs to guests. "Do any of you have the tape?" she said. "The Dobson tape? \$29.95 before it got discounted at K-Mart?"

"I looked at it once," said Dixie. "All that bullshit about booze and porn."

"I—" Carol Anne started to say something but stopped. She looked to be in her early twenties. Very pretty, Vicky thought. Long brown hair styled back across her shoulders. Maybe like my daughter would have looked if I'd ever had one.

"You were saying?" Dixie said encouragingly.

An alarm sounded in Vicky's brain. Don't push her, she thought. Maybe she really doesn't want to talk.

Carol Anne said, "I watched it, oh, maybe a hundred times." The rest of the women stared.

"Why?" Vicky almost breathed rather than said the words aloud. Obsessed, she thought. And so, *so* young.

The younger woman looked down at her lap. "I thought maybe there would be . . . a clue. Something. Anything." She drifted off into silence.

Vicky knew the others wanted to ask, *what clue*? What are you looking for? No one said anything at all. But lord, they wanted to. *Obsessed*.

And then there was another new presence at the table. It was a young man in a busboy's jacket with brown corduroy trousers. "Bobby" was stitched over his heart. He looked from one face to the next. His eyes, Vicky thought, looked far older than his fresh face.

"Scuse me, ladies," he said, "did one of you forget—"

Vicky's hand was already unconsciously reaching for the black purse. Which wasn't there on the corner of the table where it should have been.

"—your bag?" He raised his hand and there was Vicky's black purse.

"It's mine." She reached and took it from him.

"You left it in the ladies' room," said Bobby. "You gotta watch that around here. This is the city." He caught her eye. His gaze lingered. Boldly.

Vicky touched the leather with her fingertips. This was mildly



## HUMAN REMAINS

disorienting. "Thanks," she said. "I appreciate it. Thank you very much."

"Don't think nothing of it," said Bobby. He made a vague waving gesture with his left hand. "No harm done." He bobbed his head as if embarrassed, caught Vicky's eye again for just a moment, then turned and walked back toward the kitchen.

Vicky stared. Had the young man smiled? She thought she'd seen a fleeting twist of his lips as he turned. Had he just flirted with her? Returning lost items would be a great way to meet women. *Flirt*. She hadn't thought about that word in a long time.

And then she thought of something else. Could lost items be used as bait? But who was fishing?

"Vicky?" Dixie was saying. "Hello, Earth to Vicky? You there, girl?"

Vicky started, realized she was shaking a little, tried to breathe regularly. "I'm here. I guess I was just thinking about how terrible it would have been to lose this," she said, cradling the purse in her hand.

"Cancelling the cards would be a royal pain," said Kate, the younger sister.

"Never mind the cards," said Dixie. "I'd be worried some wacko'd track me down from the driver's license and show up on my doorstep."

"Isn't that a little paranoid?" Kate said.

Her big sister smiled faintly. "Aren't we all probably just a little paranoid?"

As it turned out, no one went anywhere. The five of them stayed until first the restaurant kitchen, then the bar closed. They talked. Lord, how they talked, Vicky thought.

They talked about that fatal, climactic morning in January, those few years before. Sixteen minutes past seven, EDT.

It was like, where were you when President Kennedy was shot? When John Lennon died? When the Challenger exploded. What were you doing at 7:16 in the morning, January 24, 1989? Listening to a radio. Watching television. Praying his appeals would be turned down.

EDWARD BRYANT

"I slept through it," said Dixie. "I'd been watching on CNN most of the night. I went to sleep. I couldn't help it."

"Let me tell you something," said Kate. She glanced at Sonya. "My sister and me, we know a woman whose daughter was killed. But she was also against capital punishment. She wrote letters and made a thousand phone calls trying to stop the execution."

Sonya looked off toward the dark space above the bar. "What can you say? She was entitled. She was wrong, but she was entitled." Her voice dropped off. She said something else and Vicky thought it was something like, "Burn him. Burn them all."

There was muted laughter at the table behind them. But none at Vicky's. They talked more about the execution.

"I'll tell you something *really* interesting," said Dixie, "though the rest of you may already know this." She shrugged. "I didn't. I just found out. There was a guard who looked real close at the executioner. The guy with the hand on the switch was all covered up, with a black hood and all, you know, just like in a horror movie? Anyhow, the guard says the guy's eyelashes were incredible. Thick and long, he said. He thought maybe the executioner was a woman."

They all thought about that for a moment. "No reason why she couldn't have been," said Sonya. "Poetic justice."

"How would she get the assignment?" said Carol Anne.

No one had a good answer.

"Maybe it was just a job," said Kate. "They all drew cards, maybe. The officials, I mean. The queen of spades or something meant pull the switch. I would have done it."

"I would have too," said Sonya. "Under the hood, I think I'd have smiled." Her teeth clicked together. "I'd have laughed."

Dixie nodded. Vicky and Carol Anne said nothing.

The already low lights in the bar flickered momentarily and everyone jumped.

They had never met one another before today. Perhaps they would never meet again. But the five of them had, Vicky thought to herself, an incredibly strong bond tying them together. Or more precisely, maybe, they just had something lucky in common.



## HUMAN REMAINS

Sonya and Kate talked about living in Midvale, a little Utah community south of Salt Lake City. In 1974, in October, when Sonya had been 19 and Kate 17, they had been driving home from an Osmonds concert in Salt Lake. One minute the Chevy had been running fine, the next, it was making grinding noises, and the next, it was coasting off on the shoulder on I-15, just past the exit for Taylorsville.

"It was bizarre," said Sonya. "here we were on an Interstate, and it was only about midnight, and nobody would stop. It was like we were invisible."

And that was when the handsome stranger wheeled his Volkswagen off the highway and pulled in behind them. It was too dark to tell what color the VW was, but the teenagers could see his face in the domelight. He offered to give Sonya a ride into Midvale, but suggested Kate stay with the Chevy to keep an eye on things.

"We said no deal," said Kate. "We both would go into Midvale, or none of us would."

The stranger put his fingers around Sonya's wrist as though to drag her into the Volkswagen. Kate held up a tire iron she had picked up from the Chevy's floor. And that was it. The stranger let go, apologized like a gentleman, spun out on the gravel and disappeared into the Utah night.

"He killed a girl from Midvale," said Sonya. "We knew her. We didn't know her well, but after they finally found her bones, we went to the funeral and cried."

Dixie's was a lower-key story, as Vicky had suspected.

"It was 1975," said Dixie. "I was a blonde then, just like now, and I know what you're thinking. Well, he killed two blondes. He wanted brunettes, but he'd settle. He wasn't that predictable."

Vicky was glad she hadn't said anything earlier. She'd known about the blonde victims. She simply, for whatever reason, had been suspicious of Dixie's attitude.

"I was picking up some stuff for my mom at Safeway," Dixie continued. "In Eugene. I remember coming up to my car with a bag of groceries in each arm, thinking about saying a dirty word because I couldn't reach the key in my jeans without either putting a bag down or else risking scattering apples and lima beans across half the lot. Anyhow, just as I got up to the car, there was this



good-looking guy—I mean, he looked way out of place in the Safeway lot—with his arm in a sling. I was concentrating on getting hold of my key, so I didn't pay much attention to what he was saying at first, but like I said, he was pretty cute, so I didn't ignore him completely. He wanted help getting the tire changed on his Volks, he said. Not much help, just having me jump up and down on the spider to loosen the nuts." Dixie grinned. "I thought I'd be a Girl Scout, so I went over a few steps, still with the bags in my arms, and sure enough, there was the VW. It was a metallic brown Beetle, but I couldn't see any flat tire. It was about then I heard my mom's voice telling me about talking to strangers, so I said to him there was a Texaco station with a mechanic just about four blocks down Willamette, and he should get some help there."

"That was it?" said Sonya. "He didn't try to grab you?"

"He was a perfect gentleman," said Dixie drily. "Didn't say another word. Just thanked me, turned around and started walking down the street. I got in my mom's car and left. That was that."

Then they asked Carol Anne for her story, but the young woman demurred. "I'm really tired." They looked at her. "I mean, I don't want to talk about any of this right now," she said. "I guess I'm having a little trouble just listening to what all of you are saying."

"So why are you here?" said Dixie.

"Give her a break," said Vicky quickly. She's just a kid. That's what she didn't say. It would just have triggered more questions. She made a sudden decision to get Carol Anne off the hook. "Anyway, I'm all psyched to play confessional."

"Okay," said Kate.

Dixie glanced at Carol Anne, then looked back to Vicky and nodded. "Then it's your turn."

"I was hitchhiking," said Vicky. "It was April 1975 and the school year was winding down." I just flunked out, she thought, and then wondered why she just didn't admit it. Maybe she did have a little pride left. "I was in Grand Junction, over on the western slope. I had the cash, but decided to catch a ride back to Denver just for the hell of it." For the adventure, she thought. Right. The adventure. Hanging around the club where they'd let her dance topless for tips.

## HUMAN REMAINS

"I waited a while out on the east edge of town. It was morning and there seemed to be a lot more people driving west into the Junction. Finally I got a ride. I think you know who picked me up."

Slow, serious nods from Kate and Sonya. Dixie's mouth twitched. Carol Anne just looked back soberly.

"He was the most charming man I'd ever met," said Vicky. And still is, she thought. "We drove for almost an hour before anything happened." She fell silent.

"So?" Dixie prompted.

"He pulled off on a dirt road. He said there was something wrong with the engine. It sounded like something you'd hear from some highschool jock taking the good girl in class out to lover's lane."

"And?" said Kate.

Vicky took a long breath. "He tried to rape me. He had a knife and some handcuffs. When he tried to force the cuffs on my wrist nearest him, I bit him hard on his hand. I was able to get the door open, and then I was out of there." It wasn't rape, she thought. It was mutual seduction. She'd never seen the knife, though the cuffs were real enough. But her moment of panic had come at the point of orgasm when his strong fingers had tightened around her throat. At that moment, she had . . . flinched. Chickened out, she sometimes told herself in the blackest of moods. At any rate, she had kicked free of the stranger. "I ran into the scrub trees where I knew he couldn't drive a car, and then I hid. After dark, I still waited until the moon rose and set, and then I walked back to the highway. I was lucky. The first car that stopped was a state trooper. I don't think I would have gotten in a car with anyone else that night."

Sonya and Dixie and Kate all nodded. Wisely. Then Dixie started to turn toward Carol Anne again.

Vicky said, "Sorry to break this up, but it's getting late and I'm exhausted. We'll all have the chance to talk tomorrow." She glanced pointedly at Carol Anne. The younger woman got the hint.

"I'm going to call it a night too," she said. "Tomorrow," she said to Dixie. "I promise."

The sisters from Utah decided to stay a while longer and finish



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their soda waters, though the ice was long since melted. Dixie headed for the elevator.

Carol Anne said to Vicky, "I want to get some fresh air before bed. There's a kind of mezzanine outside, up over the parking lot and the valley. You want to come along?"

Vicky hesitated, then nodded.

"What time is it?" said Carol Anne. They passed through the bar exit. The bartender locked the door behind them.

"I don't have a watch on," said Vicky.

"It's two-thirty," said a voice in the dimly lit hallway.

Vicky recoiled, then peered forward. "You," she said. "The guy who brought back my purse. Bobby."

"Bobby Cowell," he said. "At your service, ma'am." There was something in his tone that was not deferential at all. "Always at your service."

"Thanks again, Bobby," Vicky said. She realized Carol Anne had retreated a step.

"Did you count the cash?" said Bobby, stepping closer. He had a musky scent.

"I trust you," said Vicky. And she did. Sometimes she surprised herself.

Bobby must have realized that. He nodded slowly. "If there's anything I can do for you while you're here, anything at all . . ." The man's voice was carefully modulated, sincere.

"Thanks again." Vicky led Carol Anne past Bobby Cowell.

The man faded into the hallway. "I'd like to get to know you," he called low after them.

Vicky walked faster.

"I think he likes you," said Carol Anne.

"He's more your age," said Vicky. But she knew she did not completely mean that with sincerity. "Attractive guy." She had seen his type before. Oh, yes.

Carol Anne laughed. Vicky couldn't recall having heard her laugh aloud. "He looks like a Young Republican." She paused. "And he probably drives a bronze VW." Carol Anne laughed again, but this time the sound was hollow.



## HUMAN REMAINS

The two women stood against the railing overlooking the Platte Valley. Traffic below them on I-25 was minimal. To the south they could see the bright arc lamps of some sort of highway maintenance. Vicky could feel heat radiating from Carol Anne's side.

"You know, I keep wondering about something," said Carol Anne.

"What's that?" Vicky found her eyes attracted to the red aircraft warning lights blinking on the skyscrapers less than a mile away.

"This is really petty and my soul'll probably burn in hell just for thinking it."

"Let's hear it." Vicky's attention snapped back to the woman next to her.

"My dad told me once that he figured maybe a million people went to Woodstock."

"That may be a little exaggerated," said Vicky.

"No, I mean, a lot of people were so in love with the idea of having been there, but even if they didn't go, they *said* they did. Maybe they even *thought* they did."

"So are you talking about this event here?" said Vicky. "I think everybody here believes she went through whatever she went through." She suddenly started to feel the fatigue of the night for real. Her head was buzzing.

"I guess—well, okay," said Carol Anne.

"Let me suggest something even more troubling," said Vicky. In the darkness, she saw the pale oval of Carol Anne's face turn toward her. "You know about astronaut syndrome?"

"No," said Carol Anne, sounding puzzled.

"People used to go to the moon," said Vicky. "Men did, anyway. I read an article once, where they interviewed guys who walked on the moon. You know something, it was the biggest, most exciting, most important thing that ever happened to them."

"So?" said Carol Anne, apparently not getting the point.

"So they had to come back to earth. So they had to spend the rest of their lives doing things that were incredibly less exciting and important. Politics and selling insurance and writing books were nothing like walking on the moon."

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Carol Anne was silent for a while. "So everyone here, I mean, all the women who came in for this gathering thing, they walked on the moon?"

"They all lived," said Vicky. "They survived. Nothing as exciting will ever happen to them again."

"What about you?" said Carol Anne. She clapped her hand over her mouth as if suddenly trying to stop the words.

"I fit the pattern," said Vicky, trying to smile and soften the words. "I've gone through a lot of men, a lot of jobs, a husband, more men, more dead-end jobs. Nothing so powerful has ever happened to me again." She thought, it sounds like a religious experience. *And maybe it is.*

Carol Anne issued something that sounded a little like a sigh, a little bit of a sob.

"Now," said Vicky. "What about you? You're too young for the moon. You know it and I know it. We've been talking about *them*. Now there's just me, and just you. And you've heard about me." Well, most of it, she thought.

Carol Anne reached out blindly and took Vicky's hand. She held it tightly. She seemed to be trying to say something. It wasn't working.

"Calm down," said Vicky. "It's all right. She took the younger woman in her arms. "It's all right," she repeated.

"I never knew him," said Carol Anne, her words muffled against Vicky's shoulder. "Not directly. But I think he killed my mother." She started to cry. Vicky rocked her gently, let her work it out.

"We don't know for sure," Carol Anne said finally. "My dad and I, we just don't know. They never found any remains. I was five back in 1975. My mom was really young when she had me. You know something? My birthday is January 24. And for nineteen years I didn't know what the significance was going to be. In 1989 on my birthday, I only got one present. The execution." She smiled mirthlessly. "Before that. 1975. It was earlier in the winter than when you got away from him. We lived in Vail. We found my mom's car in the public parking lot. It was unlocked and the police said later someone had pulled the coil wire. They said there was no sign of violence. She just vanished. We never saw her again."



## HUMAN REMAINS

Carol Anne started again to cry. "She didn't run away, like some people said. He got her. And there are no remains."

After a while, Vicky pulled a clean tissue from her purse. "So why are you here?"

There was a very long silence, after which Carol Anne blew her nose noisily. "I thought maybe something someone might say would give me a clue. About my mother. I've read everything. I've seen all the tapes. Over and over. I just want to know, more than anything else, what happened."

No, thought Vicky, I don't think you do. She knew what would happen when she said it, but she said it anyway. "Your mother's dead, Carol Anne. I'm sorry. I'm very sorry. But you know it."

Carol Anne sobbed for a very long time. She took a fresh tissue from Vicky. "I know it. I know that. I just want to know more. How it happened. Who—"

"It's enough to accept that she's gone," said Vicky. "Maybe someday you'll find out more." She hesitated. "I hope you do."

"I'm 22," said Carol Anne. "My whole life's revolved around this for seventeen years."

"Do you have . . . someone?"

"My father died five years ago. I don't have a boyfriend if that's what you mean." Her voice was mournful. "I guess I don't have much of a life at all."

I'm glad you said it, Vicky thought. "You will," she said aloud. "But you've got to leave all this old baggage. You can't forget it, but you can allow it to fade. Your dues are paid. Believe it." Just say good-bye, she thought. Good night for good, and make it stick. She reached out again for Carol Anne's hand. And then she packed the young woman off to bed. At the door of Carol Anne's room, Vicky said, "I'll see you in the morning. Try to get some sleep."

Carol Anne looked like she was trying to smile bravely. Then she shut the door. Vicky heard the chain lock rattle into place.

Her own room was down a floor and at the opposite end of the wing. The windows overlooked the parking lot. If she craned her



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neck, Vicky could see the downtown office towers with their cycling crimson aircraft beacons.

She didn't turn on the lights when she entered the room. Vicky lay down on the bed still dressed, the purse and briefcase nestled up against her like kittens. She stared up into the darkness as though she could still see stars. The bright, winking stars of western slope Colorado. The star patterns of 1975. She wondered if she went to the window and looked down, whether she would see moonlight glinting off the shell-like curve of a hunched VW. Bobby's VW? There was something about his name that tickled at the edge of her attention, something she couldn't quite remember.

She found her fingers, as though of their own volition, opening the briefcase and taking out the tightly bound Barbie doll. Vicky couldn't see it, but she could feel the taut loops of monofilament cutting into the vinyl dollflesh. She clutched the talisman and smiled invisibly.

Some men, Vicky thought, would only send flowers.

But then, as the darkness seeped through every pore, every orifice of her body, filling her with night and grief, she thought of Carol Anne and began to cry. Vicky had not cried in all too long. Not in seventeen years, to be exact.

Seventeen years without a life. Seventeen years looking.

At least, she thought, Carol Anne is young. She can go away from this weekend and re-create her life. She doesn't have to be empty.

And what about me? Vicky thought, before clamping down savagely on self-pity.

What, indeed. Seventeen years before. It was perhaps the next-to-biggest event of her life. The most important was still to come. Perhaps. It had been on its way since 1975. And had been derailed in January 1989. No, that's not it either, she thought, feeling the long-time confusion. All I want is to walk on the moon again.

Vicky cried herself to sleep.

## HUMAN REMAINS

She knew she was dreaming, but that did not diminish the effects.

She still lay in her bed, but now it was larger than she could envision and softer than she could hope. She lay bound tightly, so tightly she could not move.

But the thing about helplessness was, she no longer had to take responsibility for anything at all. Almost cocooned in monofilament, she could feel the line cut into her skin, deep into her flesh, thin incisions of pain that burned like lasers.

The pain, she realized, was a mercy compared to the years of numbness. The bindings that restrained her body also retained her heat, and now that heat built and built and suffused her from the core of her flesh to the outer layers of skin.

Blood ran from the corner of her mouth, where the line dug so tight, she could not extend her tongue to lick it away. But some ran back inside anyway. Her blood was warm and slick and salty.

She moaned and moved as best she could inside her bonds. It was almost enough.

Vicky awoke confused, staring in disorientation at the bedside clock. She guessed it was still an hour before dawn. She had not slept for long. But she wanted to stretch, and so she did so. Her body felt alive. More, it felt . . . she searched for an apt word . . . hopeful.

Then she turned her head and recoiled back against the pillow. Bobby Cowell stood at the foot of her bed. His left hand swung back and forth slowly. Something metallic glittered. A pass-key. Vicky tried to speak.

He had been watching her sleep.

He had watched her dream.

"There's just something about you," he said softly. He smiled in the dim light, teeth showing white.

There was no conscious planning. She swung her legs off the bed, hearing the briefcase slide to the carpet, then sat up and took a deep breath or two to counter the sudden vertigo. After a few seconds, she got up and hesitated.

She could lunge for the phone. Or the door. She saw no weapon in evidence other than the key.







## HUMAN REMAINS

"I know who you are," said Bobby. "I know everything you want." He stepped back away from the door. She could flee.

"What do *you* want?" Vicky said.

"To take you for a ride. It's still a beautiful night. We'll go up into the mountains."

It was so much like a dream. She didn't remember to bring a coat, but the late, late night didn't seem to be all that cold, so it didn't matter.

At the bottom of the fire-stair well, she waited for him. "I figured you'd come," he said softly, taking her arm.

"I will," said Vicky. Was she still sleeping? All in motion only slightly slower than reality.

They exited the stairwell. "I have my car out in the lot," said Bobby.

Vicky nodded and put her free hand over his fingers on her arm. "I figured that," she said. His fingers were warm. The excitement inside her was cold. She looked up and saw the distant, sinking moon.

They passed the mezzanine and turned toward the steps leading down to the parking lot. Vicky, hesitated a split second, stared back over Bobby's shoulder, hesitated a little longer.

At the other end of the platform, Carol Anne stood, leaned away from the city, staring back at them. Her expression altered mercurially. Vicky didn't think Bobby had seen Carol Anne watching them. Maybe she'd see Carol Anne in the morning. Maybe not.

"Come on," said Vicky, turning back to the steps. And at the beginning of the final descent to the outside world, she thought about the last enigmatic expression on Carol Anne's face. Wistful?

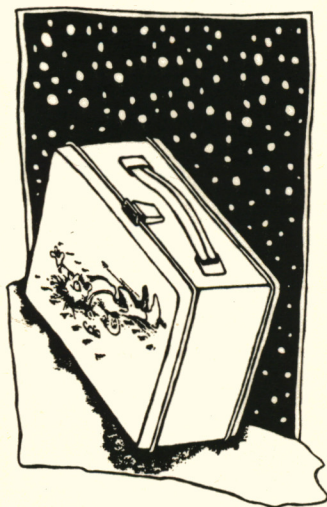
She hoped—wished desperately—it was only that.

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