

FEET IN THE LAKE & OTHER STORIES



BOB LEMAN

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& OTHER STORIES**

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**EDITED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
JIM ROCKHILL**

MIDNIGHT HOUSE

Feesters in the Lake & Other Stories

Bob Leman

Edited and with an introduction by Jim Rockhill

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first appeared in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, May 1980.

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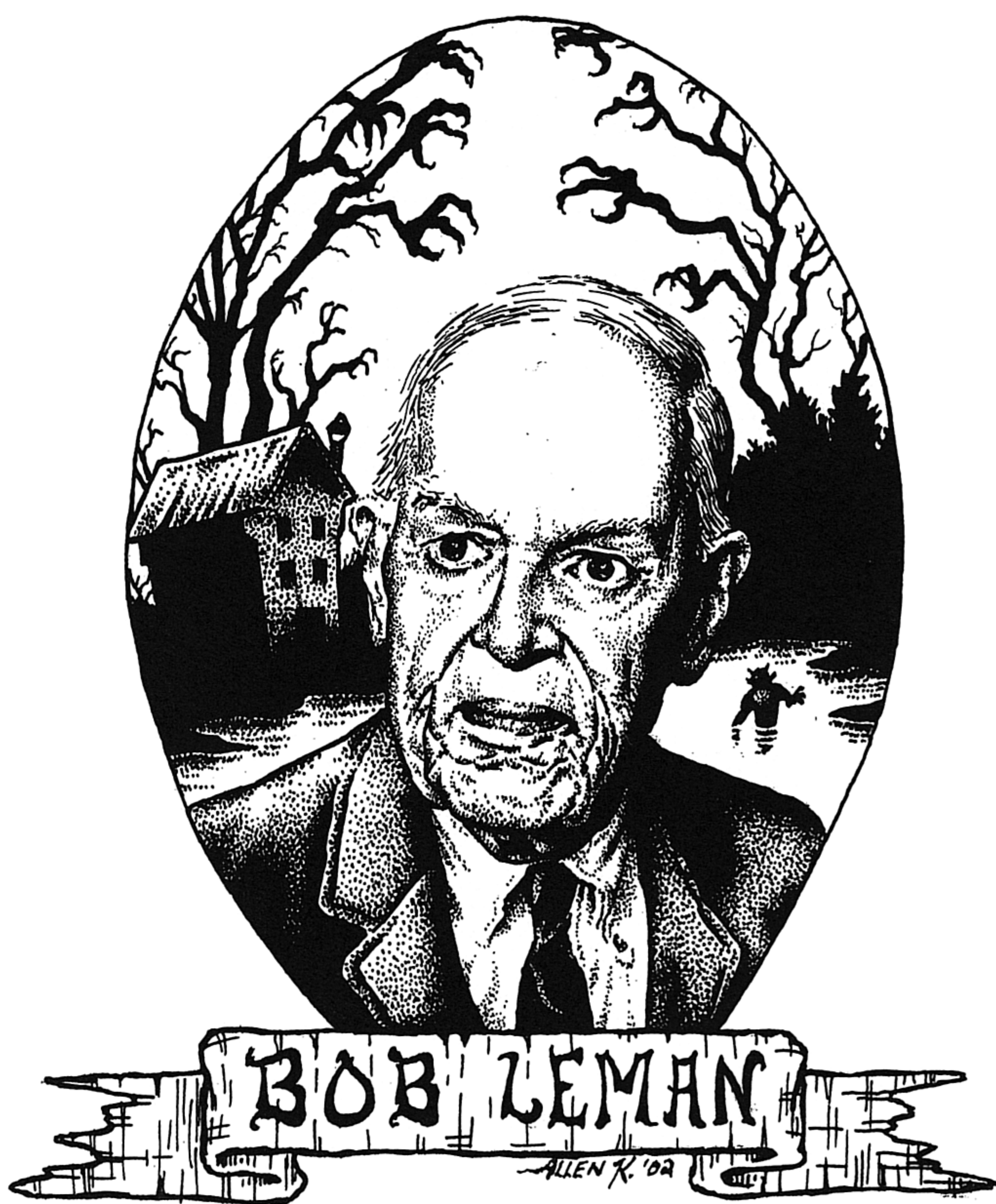
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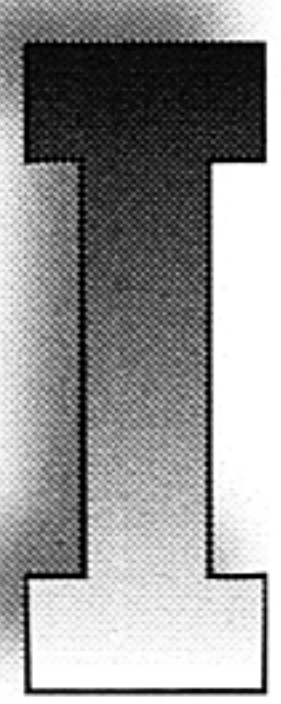




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A WINDOW INTO THE FICTION OF BOB LEMAN



n his infamous dismissal of H. P. Lovecraft, “Tales of the Marvellous and the Ridiculous” (*The New Yorker*, November 24, 1945), Edmund Wilson singles out Prosper Mérimée’s tale, “La Venus d’Ille,” as an exemplar of how such tales should be written:

“(I) was relieved to find it narrated—though it was almost as fantastic as Lovecraft—with the prosaic objectivity of an anecdote of travel.”¹

Wilson has, of course, been overly harsh on Lovecraft, and it is now clear that much of what he wrote was prompted not by Lovecraft’s work, but by his recent perusal of August Derleth’s pseudo-collaborative pastiches. Nonetheless, there is much in what he has written that bears consideration. Mérimée’s is a classical, restrained prose that eschews Lovecraft’s “incessant effort to work up the expectations of the reader by sprinkling his stories with such adjectives as ‘horrible,’ ‘frightful,’ ‘awesome,’ ‘eerie,’ ‘weird,’ ‘forbidden,’ ‘unhallowed,’ ‘unholy,’ ‘blasphemous,’ ‘hellish’ and ‘infernal.’”² “La Venus d’Ille,” the theriomorphic fantasy, “Lokis,” the conte cruel, “Matteo Falcone,” the brutal romance, “Carmen,” and others strike us as all the more horrible for taking place in otherwise mundane settings, among individuals who at first seem otherwise unremarkable, and in language that never calls attention to itself. The intrusion or eruption, when it does occur, arrives with a greater shock than if the reader had been prepared for it ahead of time by paragraphs of foreboding rhetoric. At its best, Lovecraft’s baroque prose has a special grandeur capable of producing an almost suffocating weight of horror, but the terror that strikes in the placid, sunlit street is capable of equal power. Unfortunately, many proponents of one style continue to deny legitimacy to the

¹ From the text reprinted in *Classics and Commercials* (W. H. Allen, 1951), pp. 288-289

² *Classics and Commercials*, p. 288.

other, just as the worst imitators of either style turn misconceptions about what makes either body of work successful into a series of unwitting parodies, the least imaginative of Lovecraft's followers burying their tales under a mountain of references and stilted prose, while large factions of the supposedly quieter school churn out either supernatural soap-operas or cryptic fragments as mysterious as the tongue's quest for a recently extracted tooth.

This divide is due not only to divergent attitudes towards prose and the creation of atmosphere, but to the individual writer's notions concerning how best to craft the horror tale as well. In spite of centuries of sterling examples that prove otherwise, many practitioners and theorists still hold that it is not possible to successfully delineate character and sustain dread in the same work—that one vitiates the other. Even more adamant are those who hold that the creation of cosmic horror and the mundane concerns necessary to produce convincing characters are mutually exclusive. This is, admittedly, a difficult proposition, but not altogether insoluble.

10 One writer who successfully pursues a melding of these two approaches to the tale of horror is Bob Leman, thirteen of whose finely-crafted, slyly imaginative tales appeared in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* between 1967 and 1988, in addition to one tale published in Charles L. Grant's anthology series *Shadows*, and the hitherto unpublished tale included in the present volume. Each tale demonstrates tight plotting, excellent characterization and an exemplary lack of adjectival fog. No effect for effect's sake is allowed, there are no atmospheric set-pieces, and no hysterical ramblings—only recognizably real people responding to situations as real people must respond rather than as puppets created to aid the plot.

Bob Leman was born in Woodford County, Illinois in 1922. Although he would not become fully active in science fiction and fantasy fandom until 1956, he writes,

“I cannot remember a time when I was not greedy for fantasy. When I was nine an aunt gave me the first three Tarzan books, which led to Burroughs's Mars books and Carl H. Claudy's serials in *Boy's Life* and *American Boy*, which were cribbed from H. G. Wells, who was my next and great discovery. There was also Dorothy L. Sayers's marvelous anthology, *Omnibus of Crime*, which was half mystery short stories and half fantasy, and introduced me to most of the English ghost and horror writers pre-1930.

3 In a letter to the present writer, dated October 1, 2001.

At eleven or twelve I discovered the pulps. I read constantly, everything I could lay my hands on.”³

After attending grade school and high school in rural Illinois, Leman entered the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana. When America entered World War II, he found his education interrupted during his Junior year, and spent the next three and a half years serving as an artillery officer in the European Theater.

In 1947, a year after returning home from the war, he graduated from the University of Illinois with a bachelor’s degree in political science, was married, and took a job as a “land man” for the oil industry, acquiring leases and negotiating drilling contracts for the company now called Exxon. Transfers to Oklahoma, Colorado, and Wyoming ended in 1961 when he and his family settled into a suburb of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, a region where he and his wife of fifty-four years continue to live. Four years after this move, he left Exxon to go into the oil business for himself. Now retired, Leman has two daughters, each of whom has blessed him with two grandchildren, and he now awaits the arrival of great-grandchildren.

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Although a continuing member of First Fandom, which restricts its membership to those fans active before 1938, he states he was most active in science fiction and fantasy fandom for roughly a decade, between the years 1956 and 1967, during which time he published a fanzine he first entitled *The American Journal of Oculenteratology*. The journal reappeared under a new title, *The Vinegar Worm*, before he renamed it *Nematode* upon his entry into S.A.P.S., the Spectator Amateur Press Society. Leman returned the name of the journal to *The Vinegar Worm* once he gained entry to the older and more prestigious F.A.P.A., the Fantasy Amateur Press Association, in 1959. This variously titled journal was, to quote its editor,

“completely written by me with no fancy graphics or illustrations—mostly humorous, mostly essays, and sometimes a story. It contained quite a bit of parody and some satire.”⁴

The parodies of “New Wave” science fiction that make up most of the one issue I have read⁵ are both funny and accurate in their deflation of the portentous tone and stylistic pretensions that marred much of the work from this period.

“After the war I made my first moves toward collecting, by searching out all the issues of the magazines that I’d missed during the war, and, after I had done those, it seemed only

⁴ Unless stated otherwise, this and other quoted statements stem from conversations between Bob Leman and myself held on September 25 and October 2, 2001.

⁵ *The Vinegar Worm*, Volume II, No. 11, for FAPA 125, the journal’s penultimate issue.

logical to find and buy for rereading purposes the stack that had been donated to a wartime paper drive while I wasn't there to defend them, and then, of course, it became imperative to locate the copies printed before I found the magazines. One thing led to another.”⁶

Leman states that he has read every issue of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* since its inception as *The Magazine of Fantasy* in October 1949, enjoyed *Weird Tales* and *Thrilling Wonder*, but still believes that the best science fiction remains that published in *Astounding* and *Analog* during the editorship of John W. Campbell, Jr. He qualifies this with a chuckle by quoting Peter Graham's famous quip, “The Golden Age of Science Fiction is 12,” then admitting that, like everyone else, he formed his tastes in his youth.

His canon of great horror writers includes the familiar names of Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, Edgar Allan Poe, Arthur Machen and M. R. James. Leman's attitude toward Lovecraft can best be described as ambivalent. Like many, he had been deeply impressed by Lovecraft's fiction at an early age, but states that when he read him again as an adult, he was shocked to find him “the worst and most tedious writer.” One frustrating result of this ambivalence occurred when he had the opportunity to win a copy of *The Outsider* in a lottery held by one of the booth holders at a convention in 1958. Carrying the winning ticket and given first choice of the items on display, Leman instead opted for another, more prominently displayed prize. His rediscovery of Lovecraft did not occur until years later when, reading *The Dream Quest of Unknown Kadath*, he was

“amazed at how much of what was happening was completely unexpected. A lot of the scenes and images are fixed in my mind forever. It was as if I had found Lovecraft all over again. Every time I thought about *The Outsider*, I wanted to kick myself.”

The dissolution of his science fiction collection coincided with his first attempt to write for publication. Both stemmed from the same source—his disillusion with the direction science fiction was taking in the 1960s.

“I sold my science fiction collection to Bob Madle in 1967 and, unlike many people, have not spent any time since then trying to purchase it back. I had a discussion with a writer at a science fiction convention the year before who had published a lot of work, and thought, if this fellow could write a story and get it published, so could I. I wrote

⁶ In the same letter, dated October 1, 2001.

‘Bait’ to satisfy myself that I could do it if I tried, and its publication seemed to satisfy me until I wrote another a decade later.”

This first tale, “Bait,” appeared in the January 1967 issue of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*.⁷ This seems, at first glance, to be a fairly conventional tale about a traveling salesman attempting to convince his customer that the larger-than-life claims made of his product have a basis in reality. One of the most frustrating phenomena in supernatural fiction is the willingness of people, apparently living in the same world as you and I, to accept anything told them, no matter how outlandish, with barely a moment’s hesitation. Leman deftly bypasses this first by presenting most of this information as a sales pitch interrupted by dialogue, rather than in great chunks of exposition, then begins adding subtle details that make us ask why this customer should accept all of this information with such familiarity. He repeatedly shifts the dynamics between salesman and customer so that such details as the source of his rejuvenating protein, the nature of his book and this customer’s eagerness to accept everything she is told begins to take on increasingly disturbing undertones. Every time the reader thinks he understands what is happening, Leman adds a new element that changes our perception of events.

Even better is Leman’s next tale, “Industrial Complex,” which premiered in the May 1977 issue, little more than a decade after the first tale. It begins in time-honored *Unknown* fashion with a man who believes himself to be insane, and is just as adept as that magazine’s less forgiving tales at suddenly turning a ridiculous situation into a horrible one. Leman succeeds in turning that old joke, “Help! The paranoids are after me!” into a mind-bending odyssey that owes as much to Lovecraft’s “The Shadow out of Time” as it does to any of the tales of Fredric Brown, Henry Kuttner or their fellows. Even when events are at their most extreme, the prose remains clear and precise.

Two years passed before the poignant time-slip tale, “Loob,” appeared in the magazine’s April 1979 issue. This tale is very reminiscent of A. E. Van Vogt’s classic “The Ghost” in positing supernatural phenomena in terms of parallels or disruptions in the time continuum. As is his wont, however, Leman lends further complications and a deeper emotional resonance to the tale by making a mentally deficient and emotionally disturbed man the crux of these disruptions. Just as past and present, dream and reality

⁷ Since thirteen of Mr. Leman’s fifteen tales were first published in this magazine, all dates of publication refer to issues of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, unless stated otherwise.

coexist in the mind of William Faulkner's Benjy Compson, so do they affect the mind of Loob, which holds the potential for unwittingly affecting all of those around him.

Bob Leman is one of the field's least complacent writers. One of the things that makes his work such a delight to read is that in tale after tale, he sets himself new challenges, puts narrative conventions on their heads, and takes obvious delight in making the reader believe he is heading in one direction while setting traps that ensure he will invariably go in another. "Change of Address," which appeared in September 1979, gives the lie to the notion that characterization and the cosmic frisson cannot exist side by side. The plot at first resembles one from the pages of *Unknown* or the novels of Thorne Smith. The opening portrait of bibulous self-pity is, like that in "Skirmish on Bastable Street" of two years later, both funny and pathetic. There is nothing sentimental about it. The remainder of the tale describes the development of an independent human personality in an alien presence that is as charming on an individual level as it is terrifying on a cosmic one. If one can imagine the great ball set on the eve of Waterloo in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* with the fate of worlds at stake, or Dunsany's great dreaming god, Māna-Yood-Sushāi, resting ever more fitfully against a background of frivolity, one might be granted a glimpse of the contradictions that drive this story and makes its final, simple image so chilling.

"Window" is Leman's most famous story, having debuted in March 1980, appeared that next year in two anthologies collecting the year's best science fiction, and in two subsequent volumes devoted to the best stories published in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. The television series *Night Visions* aired a filmed adaptation of the tale in July 2001. I love the way the "Gosh! Wow!" scientifiction mood of this tale changes significantly at the first mention of the word "teeth," then grows progressively darker. One of the author's cleverest and most relentless tales, "Window" deserves its fame.

A conversation with Harlan Ellison, after "Window" became a finalist for the Best Short Story Nebula Award, led to Leman's submission of "How Dobbstown Was Saved" to the mammoth, legendary, still-unpublished anthology, *Last Dangerous Visions* in February 1981. It is a shame that this tale has never seen print prior to its inclusion in the present volume, as it is a delightful romp through every pulp and B-movie cliché imaginable. Furthermore, odd details in the narrative soon make it clear that the narrator is far from reliable or disinterested. The tone teeters between the ironic detachment associated with Jay Ward's *Fractured Fairy Tales*

and the exuberant grotesquerie that characterizes the supernatural tales of Nikolai Gogol. One could label this a “tale of the marvellous and the ridiculous” without any fear of paradox. I would give much to see the illustration Mr. Ellison commissioned for this tale from Tim Kirk.

Discussing the countless pastiches published since Lovecraft’s death, Bob Leman told me, “You cannot copy Lovecraft any more; if you are going to attempt to enter his world, you need to do something new in it.” As if he had not already proven the truth of this statement in earlier tales, Leman makes a number of overtly Lovecraftian themes his own in a series of tales published in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* between October 1980 and March 1988. Some of these are set in and around the somnolent mill-town of Sturkeyville nestled among the northern Appalachians in mythical Goster County, which had been introduced in “Loob”. Like Lovecraft’s Miskatonic River Valley, this is a region with a long history of colonization and development, desertion and decay—a region of the Midwest normal and placid on the surface beneath which seethes all manner of occult activity.

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The opening paragraph to “Feesters in the Lake” (October 1980) deliberately eschews two devices favored by the horror-story writer—an atmospheric build-up to revelation on the final page and the oblique reference to horror given at the beginning that gains coherence throughout the remainder of the narrative. Leman, who realizes that most of his audience has already read either Lovecraft’s “The Shadow over Innsmouth” or one of its many imitations, therefore opens his tale with a description of the monsters and then proceeds to tell us why their story is relevant to the human population of Goster County. As with Theodore Sturgeon’s “A Way of Thinking” and Stephen King’s “The Crate,” the human response to events turns out to be even more horrible than the supernatural one.

“Skirmish in Bastable Street” and “Unlawful Possession” appeared in the June 1981 and September 1983 issues respectively, and mix elements of the fairy tale with the kind of seriocomic approach to the supernatural displayed in Henry Kuttner’s demonic bargain stories of the 1940s and 1950s, such as “Compliments of the Author,” “The Devil We Know” and “By These Presents.” The most fascinating thing about the former tale, aside from its Moebius strip plot, is Leman’s decision to make the protagonists as unattractive a pair of squabbling drunkards as any in fiction. Like the Kuttner tales cited, “Unlawful Possession” also contains more than its share of twists and paradoxes, including the first of Leman’s unusual takes on love and affection.

Ghouls called up from the cellar are just the beginning of the events and complications that arise in “The Tehama” (December 1981), which moves outside Goster County and makes inventive use of Native American legends. The Lovecraft references are more oblique in this tale than in “Feesters in the Lake,” but the themes are not. Before the tale ends, the reader can not help but recall the warning, “Doe not call up Any that you can not put downe” in *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* and those horrors of which even the monsters are afraid in *At the Mountains of Madness* and “The Shadow out of Time.” As with all of the themes he uses, Leman has developed these materials independently, making them his own.

Although “Skirmish in Bastable Street” and “Unlawful Possession” each nod toward Sturkeyville, “The Pilgrimage of Clifford M.” published in May 1984 marks Leman’s first return to Goster County’s evocative back country in four years, and is as much a *tour de force* as any of the other tales set in that vicinity. Ostensibly the revision and recasting of a technical paper, like the tales in Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu’s *In a Glass Darkly*, this fine tale chronicles the life of one member of a species known to folklore as the vampire from its first documented sighting as “Ossie’s Monkey” in the 1880s, through fugitive appearance in books concerning feral children, to its emergence into adult human society. The tale seamlessly melds elements ranging from Edward Lucas White’s “Amina” to Donald A. Wollheim’s “Mimic,” and even the hideously immortal Struldbrugs who appear in Part Three of Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*. Its alternation of the dry, pedantic, clinical tone of the investigator with the increasingly human tones of the creature he is studying is masterful and increasingly poignant.

“Instructions,” which appeared four months later in the same magazine, has no room for such considerations. It is pure, merciless manipulation by an intelligence completely indifferent to anything aside from its own goals. I think Clark Ashton Smith, author of “The Abominations of Yondo” and “The Maze of Maal Dweb,” would have approved of the tale’s amoral logic and the inventive malignity of its landscapes. All texts subsequent to the first magazine appearance, including this one, restore the line with which the author originally intended the tale to end.

Leman again plays against the reader’s expectations in “Olida” (April 1987), set in a degenerate insulated community residing amid the decrepit remains of a village not far from the county seat in Sturkeyville. This is home to the titular hill-country *femme fatale*, descendant of the ancient and decaying Selkirk family, part Lavinia

Whateley and part Asenath Waite, and connected mysteriously to the Very Great. The tale contains an amazing number of echoes from “The Dunwich Horror” and “The Thing on the Doorstep,” but Leman consistently reshapes them to his own ends with surprising results.

When “Come Where My Love Lies Dreaming” first appeared in Charles L. Grant’s anthology *Shadows 10* in 1987, many expected to see a broadened interest in his work and a further outpouring of fiction, but this was not to be. Leman had this and one more Lovecraftian tale in store for his readers before he abruptly gave up fiction. This tale has nothing to do with Lovecraft, being instead the story of a man haunted by love. In true Leman fashion, the very nature of the ghost grows from reassuring to terrifying, its calm, perfect beauty as horrible as the thing that comes after Katharine Ross at the climax of *The Stepford Wives*.

Whereas Steven Mariconda has referred to “The Dreams in the Witch House” as “Lovecraft’s Magnificent Failure,”⁸ I have always found that tale both magnificent and terrifying. It is “The Thing on the Doorstep” that has continued to give me qualms over the years. Its cosmicism is consistently undercut by inadequacies in the protagonists and their characterization so fundamental that the domestic tragedy not only fails to seem inevitable, but also succeeds in largely vitiating the tale’s wider implications. In one last visit to Goster County, Bob Leman’s final tale, “The Time of the Worm” (March 1988) negotiates similar terrain with bleakly brilliant results. The range of influence in this tale of personality displacement is now wider and the extent of control even more extreme. More important is Leman’s keen display of the phenomenon’s human impact. He replaces the self-pity that seems to be so much a part of Edward Pickman Derby’s response to his situation with terror, desperation and even self-sacrifice. Love, a major theme of Leman’s penultimate tale and a disturbing subtext in “Unlawful Possession,” is also demonstrated here in both its natural and twisted forms. It counterpoints events with results that are simultaneously pathetic and utterly pitiless.

Fifteen tales may not seem like a lot of work for a man writing over a period of three decades, but the depth of each work makes up in quality what it may lack in quantity; hence this collection of marvellous tales, ridiculous only when Mr. Leman’s artistry will have it so. One can only regret that Mr. Leman feels he has long since “fall’n into the sere, the yellow leaf” and that “whatever creative spark I had for a while just went away.”

⁸ “Lovecraft’s Cosmic Imagery,” in David Schultz and S. T. Joshi (editors), *An Epicure of the Terrible* (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1991), p. 192.

Years ago, when I first asked Scream/Press and then Arkham House if they would consider a book of Mr. Leman's tales, I could easily envision such a collection squeezed onto a shelf alongside such American masters of weird literature as Edgar Allan Poe, Ambrose Bierce, H. P. Lovecraft, Clark Ashton Smith, Ray Bradbury and Fritz Leiber. More than a decade has passed since those first attempts. The volume is no longer printed on Winnebago Eggshell and bound in Holliston Black Novelex as I had once imagined; nor does it bear the words *Window & Other Apertures* upon its spine in gold. Thanks to Bob Leman, John Pelan and everyone at Midnight House, however, the book does finally exist and is every bit as well-made as that imaginary volume of long ago. It has finally spilled over from our dreams and into your hands where it belongs. These tales have been part of my imagination since they first saw print—you have only to open the book for them to spill into your own.

Jim Rockhill

Dowagiac, Michigan

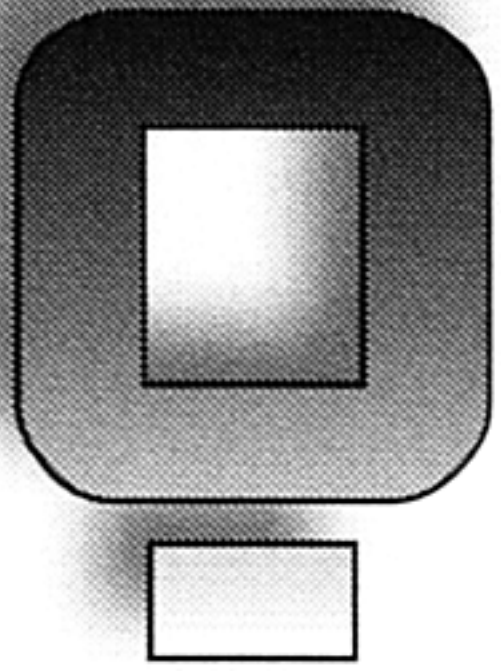
October 2001

TO MY FAMILY

**Peggy, Fran, Nancy,
Amanda, Elizabeth, Andrew,
Alex and Michael**



PREFACE



f the fifteen stories that follow, I would classify seven as stories of supernatural horror (you will find a vampire and two ghouls and a witch and some demons), six as science fiction, one fairy tale and one unclassifiable jape. My own inclination is to lump them together under the category of “Fantasy”, but I ought to explain that I take “fantasy” to be a comprehensive label covering a considerable number of sub-categories. Science fiction falls under the rubric, and so do beasts from the crypt and haunted houses, and so do medieval elves and unicorns and wizards. The taxonomists in the field have given us terms like “Hard SF”, “Soft SF”, “Space Opera”, “High Fantasy”, “Dark Fantasy”, “Heroic Fantasy”, and so forth, and these classifications are no doubt useful (particularly to booksellers), but the task of giving them precise definitions has defeated better heads than mine, and, anyhow, most of us don’t really need them. We know what we like.

Everybody, I suppose, comes to fantasy first through fairy tales in childhood, and later passes on (or not, according to taste) to more advanced matter. Some will discover that science fiction fills a gap in their lives that they had not even known was there, and they read science fiction (often fanatically) to the exclusion of all other forms of fantasy. Others, beguiled by Tolkien or C. S. Lewis, disdain science fiction (let alone supernatural horror) and feast perpetually on high fantasy. Fine. Different writers write different things, and each needs an audience. But at its edges each of these sub-*genres* blends into its neighbor, and right across the spectrum there are stories and novels that do not fit comfortably into a category. When we are reading – it’s a good story or a bad one – and if, after we have finished the

book, we find ourselves in doubt about its proper classification, few lose any sleep over it.

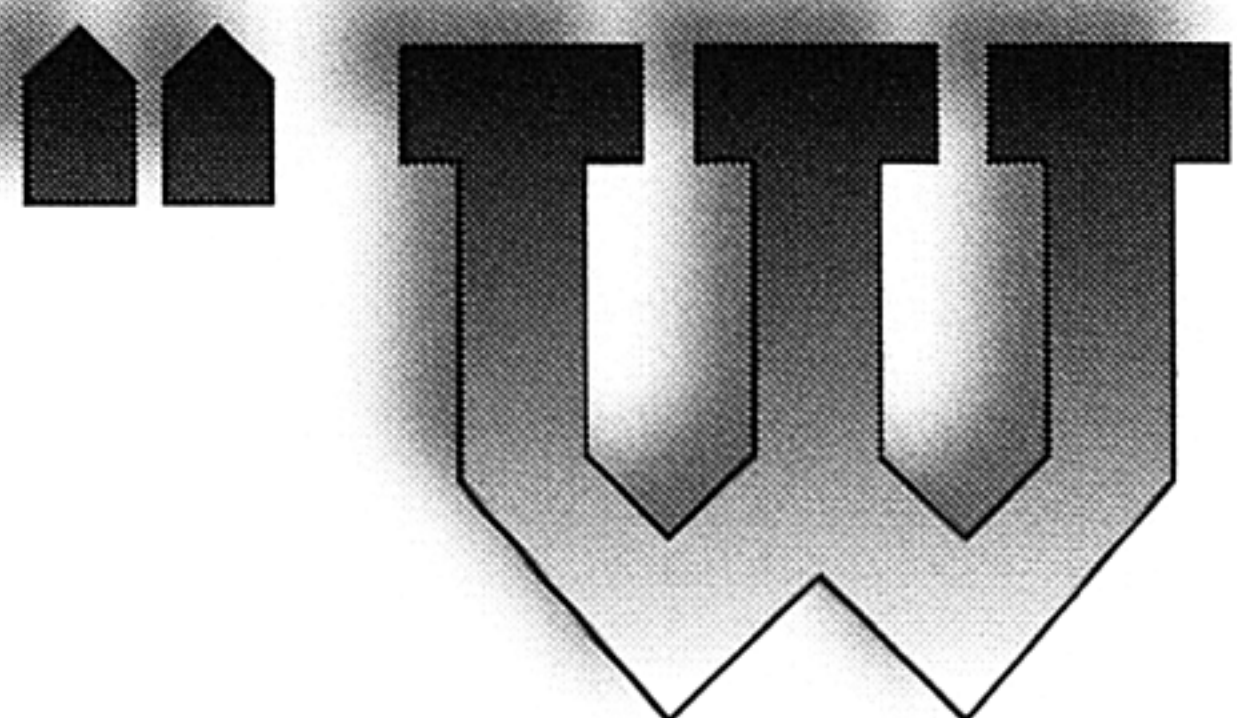
I point this out because fantasy is basic in all of the sub-*genres* I am talking about. The faster-than-light drive and extra-sensory perception are just as fantastic as werewolves and unicorns are, but they are nonetheless accepted without murmur by SF readers. It's all fantasy and the categories are not watertight.

For myself, I have always roamed happily among the *genres* in my reading, with perhaps a bit of a bias in my later years toward dark fantasy and horror. When I wrote a story it might have been SF (but not hard SF) or supernatural horror, or even (am I coining a category?) "Light Supernatural". Because I like to cross category lines in my reading, and always do so in my writing, I have always felt a great affection for *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, which has from the beginning published fiction ranging from adamantine nut-and-bolts SF to the most rarefied fantasy, and thence to the wholly unclassifiable. Whenever I delivered myself of a story, it seemed to me that *F & SF* was the logical home for the newborn. All but two of these stories originally appeared in that magazine in the years of Ed Ferman's editorship. "Come Where My Love Lies Dreaming" appeared in Charles Grant's *Shadows 10* anthology, and this is the first appearance of "How Dobbstown Was Saved".

22

Bob Leman
Bethel Park, Pennsylvania
October, 2001

WINDOW



e don't know what the hell's going on out there," they told Gilson in Washington. "It may be pretty big. The nut in charge tried to keep it under wraps, but the army was furnishing routine security, and the commanding officer tipped us off. A screwball project. Apparently been funded for years without anyone paying much attention. Extrasensory perception, for God's sake. And maybe they've found something. The security colonel thinks so, anyway. Find out about it."

The Nut-in-Charge was a rumpled professor of psychology named Krantz. He and the colonel met Gilson at the airport, and they set off directly for the site in an army sedan. The colonel began talking immediately.

"You've got something mighty queer here, Gilson," he said. "I never saw anything like it, and neither did anybody else. Krantz here is as mystified as anybody. And it's his baby. We're just security. Not that they've needed any, up to now. Not even any need for secrecy, except to keep the public from laughing its head off. The setup we've got here is —"

"Dr. Krantz," Gilson said, "you'd better give me a complete rundown on the situation here. So far, I haven't any information at all."

Krantz was occupied with the lighting of a cigar. He blew a cloud of foul smoke, and through it he said, "We're missing one prefab building, one POBEC computer, some medical machinery, and one, uh, researcher named Culvergast."

"Explain 'missing,'" Gilson said.

"Gone. Disappeared. A building and everything in it. Just not there any more. But we do have something in exchange."

“And what’s that?”

“I think you’d better wait and see for yourself,” Krantz said. “We’ll be there in a few minutes.” They were passing through the farther reaches of the metropolitan area, a series of decayed small towns. The highway wound down the valley beside the river, and the towns lay stretched along it, none of them more than a block or two wide, their side streets rising steeply toward the first ridge. In one of these moribund communities they left the highway and went bouncing up the hillside on a crooked road whose surface changed from cobblestones to slag after the houses had been left behind. Beyond the crest of the ridge the road began to drop as steeply as it had risen, and after a quarter of a mile they turned into a lane whose entrance would have been missed by anyone not watching for it. They were in a forest now; it was second growth, but the logging had been done so long ago that it might almost have been a virgin stand, lofty, silent, and somewhat gloomy on this gray day.

“Pretty,” Gilson said. “How does a project like this come to be way out here, anyhow?”

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“The place was available,” the colonel said. “Has been since World War Two. They set it up for some work on proximity fuses. Shut it down in ’48. Was vacant until the professor took it over.”

“Culvergast is a little bit eccentric,” Krantz said. “He wouldn’t work at the university — too many people, he said. When I heard this place was available, I put in for it, and got it — along with the colonel, here. Culvergast has been happy with the setup, but I guess he bothers the colonel a little.”

“He’s a certifiable loony,” the colonel said, “and his little helpers are worse.”

“Well, what the devil was he doing?” Gilson asked.

Before Krantz could answer, the driver braked at a chain-link gate that stood across the lane. It was fastened with a loop of heavy logging chain and manned by armed soldiers. One of them, machine pistol in hand, peered into the car. “Everything O.K., sir?” he said.

“O.K. with waffles, Sergeant,” the colonel said. It was evidently a password. The noncom unlocked the enormous padlock that secured the chain. “Pretty primitive,” the colonel said as they bumped through the gateway, “but it’ll do until we get proper stuff in. We’ve got men with dogs patrolling the fence.” He looked at Gilson. “We’re just about there. Get a load of this, now.”

It was a house. It stood in the center of the clearing in an island of sunshine, white, gleaming, and incongruous. All around was the dark

loom of the forest under a sunless sky, but somehow sunlight lay on the house, sparkling in its polished windows and making brilliant the colors of massed flowers in carefully tended beds, reflecting from the pristine whiteness of its siding out into the gray, littered clearing with its congeries of derelict buildings.

“You couldn’t have picked a better time,” the colonel said. “Shining there, cloudy here.”

Gilson was not listening. He had climbed from the car and was staring in fascination. “Jesus,” he said. “Like a goddam Victorian postcard.”

Lacy scrollwork foamed over the rambling wooden mansion, running riot at the eaves of the steep roof, climbing elaborately up towers and turrets, embellishing deep oriels and outlining a long, airy veranda. Tall windows showed by their spacing that the rooms were many and large. It seemed to be a new house, or perhaps just newly painted and supremely well-kept. A driveway of fine white gravel led under a high porte-cochère.

“How about that?” the colonel said. “Look like your grandpa’s house?”

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As a matter of fact, it did: like his grandfather’s house enlarged and perfected and seen through a lens of romantic nostalgia, his grandfather’s house groomed and pampered as the old farmhouse never had been. He said, “And you got this in exchange for a prefab, did you?”

“Just like that one,” the colonel said, pointing to one of the seedy buildings. “Of course we could use the prefab.”

“What does that mean?”

“Watch,” the colonel said. He picked up a small rock and tossed it in the direction of the house. The rock rose, topped its arc, and began to fall. Suddenly it was not there.

“Here,” Gilson said. “Let me try that.”

He threw the rock like a baseball, a high, hard one. It disappeared about fifty feet from the house. As he stared at the point of its disappearance, Gilson became aware that the smooth green of the lawn ended exactly below. Where the grass ended, there began the weeds and rocks that made up the floor of the clearing. The line of separation was absolutely straight, running at an angle across the lawn. Near the driveway it turned ninety degrees, and sliced off lawn, driveway and shrubbery with the same precise straightness.

“It’s perfectly square,” Krantz said. “About a hundred feet to a side.

Probably a cube, actually. We know the top's about ninety feet in the air. I'd guess there are about ten feet of it underground."

"It'?" Gilson said. "It'? What's 'it'?"

"Name it and you can have it," Krantz said. "A three-dimensional television receiver a hundred feet to a side, maybe. A cubical crystal ball. Who knows?"

"The rocks we threw. They didn't hit the house. Where did the rocks go?"

"Ah. Where, indeed? Answer that and perhaps you answer all."

Gilson took a deep breath. "All right. I've seen it. Now tell me about it. From the beginning."

Krantz was silent for a moment; then, in a dry lecturer's voice he said, "Five days ago, June thirteenth, at eleven thirty a.m., give or take three minutes, Private Ellis Mulvihill, on duty at the gate, heard what he later described as 'an explosion that was quiet, like.' He entered the enclosure, locked the gate behind him, and ran up here to the clearing. He was staggered — 'shook-up' was his expression — to see, instead of Culvergast's broken-down prefab, that house, there. I gather that he stood gulping and blinking for a time, trying to come to terms with what his eyes told him. Then he ran over there to the guardhouse and called the colonel. Who called me. We came out here and found that a quarter of an acre of land and a building with a man in it had disappeared and been replaced by this, as neat as a peg in a pegboard."

"You think the prefab went where the rocks did," Gilson said. It was a statement.

"Why, we're not even absolutely sure it's gone. What we're seeing can't actually be where we're seeing it. It rains on that house when it's sunny here, and right now you can see the sunlight on it, on a day like this. It's a window."

"A window on what?"

"Well — that looks like a new house, doesn't it? When were they building houses like that?"

"Eighteen seventy or eighty, something like — oh."

"Yes," Krantz said. "I think we're looking at the past."

"Oh, for God's sake," Gilson said.

"I know how you feel. And I may be wrong. But I have to say it looks very much that way. I want you to hear what Reeves says about it. He's been here from the beginning. A graduate student, assisting here. Reeves!"

A very tall, very thin young man unfolded himself from a crouched position over an odd-looking machine that stood near the line between grass and rubble and ambled over to the three men. Reeves was an enthusiast. “Oh, it’s the past, all right,” he said. “Sometime in the eighties. My girl got some books on costume from the library, and the clothes check out for that decade. And the decorations on the horses’ harnesses are a clue, too. I got that from — ”

“Wait a minute,” Gilson said. “*Clothes?* You mean there are people in there?”

“Oh, sure,” Reeves said. “A fine little family. Mamma, poppa, little girl, little boy, old granny or auntie. A dog. Good people.”

“How can you tell that?”

“I’ve been watching them for five days, you know? They’re having — *we’re* having — fine weather there — or then, or whatever you’d say. They’re outside most of the time, we see a lot of them. They’re nice to each other, they *like* each other. Good people. You’ll see.”

“When?”

“Well, they’ll be eating dinner now. They usually come out after dinner. In an hour, maybe.”

“I’ll wait,” Gilson said. “And while we wait, you will please tell me some more.”

Krantz assumed his lecturing voice again. “As to the nature of it, nothing. We have a window, which we believe to open into the past. We can see into it, so we know that light passes through; but it passes in only one direction, as evidenced by the fact that the people over there are wholly unaware of us. Nothing else goes through. You saw what happened to the rocks. We’ve shoved poles through the interface there — there’s no resistance at all — but anything that goes through is gone, God knows where. Whatever you put through stays there. Your pole is cut off clean. Fascinating. But wherever it is, it’s not where the house is. That interface isn’t between us and the past; it’s between us and — someplace else. I think our window here is just an incidental side-effect, a — a twisting of time that resulted from whatever tensions exist along that interface.”

Gilson sighed. “Krantz,” he said, “what am I going to tell the secretary? You’ve lucked into what may be the biggest thing that ever happened, and you’ve kept it bottled up for five days. We wouldn’t know about it now if it weren’t for the colonel’s report. Five days wasted. Who knows how long this thing will last? The whole goddam scientific establishment ought to be here — should have been from day one. This needs the whole works. At this point the place should be

a beehive. And what do I find? You and a graduate student throwing rocks and poking with sticks. And a girlfriend looking up the dates of costumes. It's damn near criminal."

Krantz did not look abashed. "I thought you'd say that," he said. "But look at it this way. Like it or not, this thing wasn't produced by technology or science. It was pure psi. If we can reconstruct Culvergast's work, we may be able to find out what happened; we may be able to repeat the phenomenon. But I don't like what's going to happen after you've called in your experimenters, Gilson. They'll measure and test and conjecture and theorize, and never once will they accept for a moment the real basis of what's happened. The day they arrive, I'll be out. And dammit, Gilson, this is *mine*."

"Not any more," Gilson said. "It's too big."

"It's not as though we weren't doing some hard experiments of our own," Krantz said. "Reeves, tell him about your batting machine."

"Yes, *sir*," Reeves said. "You see, Mr. Gilson, what the professor said wasn't absolutely the whole truth, you know? Sometimes something *can* get through the window. We saw it on the first day. There was a temperature inversion over in the valley, and the stink from the chemical plant had been accumulating for about a week. It broke up that day, and the wind blew the gunk through the notch and right over here. A really rotten stench. We were watching our people over there, and all of a sudden they began to sniff and wrinkle their noses and make disgusted faces. We figured it had to be the chemical stink. We pushed a pole out right away, but the end just disappeared, as usual. The professor suggested that maybe there was a pulse, or something of the sort, in the interface, that it exists only intermittently. We cobbled up a gadget to test the idea. Come and have a look at it."

It was a horizontal flywheel with a paddle attached to its rim, like an extended cleat. As the wheel spun, the paddle swept around a table. There was a hopper hanging above, and at intervals something dropped from the hopper onto the table, where it was immediately banged by the paddle and sent flying. Gilson peered into the hopper and raised an interrogatory eyebrow. "Ice cubes," Reeves said. "Colored orange for visibility. That thing shoots an ice cube at the interface once a second. Somebody is always on duty with a stopwatch. We've established that every fifteen hours and twenty minutes the thing is open for five seconds. Five ice cubes go through and drop on the lawn in there. The rest of the time they just vanish at the interface."

“Ice cubes. Why ice cubes?”

“They melt and disappear. We can’t be littering up the past with artifacts from our day. God knows what the effect might be. Then, too, they’re cheap, and we’re shooting a lot of them.”

“Science,” Gilson said heavily. “I can’t wait to hear what they’re going to say in Washington.”

“Sneer all you like,” Krantz said. “The house is there, the interface is there. We’ve by God turned up some kind of time travel. And Culvergast the screwball did it, not a physicist or an engineer.”

“Now that you bring it up,” Gilson said, “just what *was* your man Culvergast up to?”

“Good question. What he was doing was — well, not to put too fine a point upon it, he was trying to discover spells.”

“Spells?”

“The kind you cast. Magic words. Don’t look disgusted yet. It makes sense, in a way. We were funded to look into telekinesis — the manipulation of matter by the mind. It’s obvious that telekinesis, if it could be applied with precision, would be a marvelous weapon. Culvergast’s hypothesis was that there are in fact people who perform feats of telekinesis, and although they never seem to know or be able to explain how they do it, they nevertheless perform a specific mental action that enables them to tap some source of energy that apparently exists all around us, and to some degree to focus and direct that energy. Culvergast proposed to discover the common factor in their mental processes.

“He ran a lot of putative telekinesists through here, and he reported that he had found a pattern, a sort of mnemonic device functioning at the very bottom of, or below, the verbal level. In one of his people he found it as a set of musical notes, in several as gibberish or various sorts, and in one, he said, as mathematics at the primary arithmetic level. He was feeding all this into the computer, trying to eliminate simple noise and the personal idiosyncrasies of the subjects, trying to lay bare the actual, effective essence. He then proposed to organize this essence into *words*; words that would so shape the mental currents of a speaker of standard American English that they would channel and manipulate the telekinetic power at the will of the speaker. Magic words, you might say. Spells.

“He was evidently further along than I suspected. I think he must have arrived at some words, tried them out, and made an attempt at telekinesis — some small thing, like causing an ashtray to rise

off his desk and float in the air, perhaps. And it worked, but what he got wasn't a dainty little ashtray-lifting force; he had opened the gate wide, and some kind of terrible power came through. It's pure conjecture, of course, but it must have been something like that to have had an effect like *this*."

Gilson had listened in silence. He said, "I won't say you're crazy, because I can see that house and I'm watching what's happening to those ice cubes. How it happened isn't my problem, anyhow. My problem is what I'll recommend to the secretary that we do with it now that we've got it. One thing's sure, Krantz: this isn't going to be your private playpen much longer."

There was a yelp of pure pain from Reeves. "They can't *do* that," he said. "This is ours, it's the professor's. Look at it, look at that house. Do you want a bunch of damn engineers messing around with *that*?"

Gilson could understand how Reeves felt. The house was drenched now with the light of a red sunset; it seemed to glow from within with a deep, rosy blush. But, Gilson reflected, the sunset wasn't really necessary; sentiment and the universal, unacknowledged yearning for a simple, cleaner time would lend rosiness enough. He was quite aware that the surge of longing and nostalgia he felt was nostalgia for something he had never actually experienced, that the way of life the house epitomized for him was in fact his own creation, built from patches of novels and films; nonetheless he found himself hungry for that life, yearning for that time. It was a gentle and secure time, he thought, a time when the pace was unhurried and the air was clean; a time when there was grace and style, when young men in striped blazers and boater hats might pay decorous court to young ladies in long white dresses, whiling away the long drowsy afternoons of summer in peaceable conversations on shady porches. There would be jolly bicycle tours over shade-dappled roads that twisted among the hills to arrive at cool glens where swift little streams ran; there would be long sweet buggy rides behind somnolent patient horses under a great white moon, boy whispering urgently to girl while nightbirds sang. There would be excursions down the broad clean river, boats gentle on the current, floating toward the sound from across the water of a brass band playing at the landing.

Yes, thought Gilson, and there would probably be an old geezer with a trunkful of adjectives around somewhere, carrying on about how much better things had been a hundred years before. If he didn't watch himself he'd be helping Krantz and Reeves try to keep things

hidden. Young Reeves — oddly, for someone his age — seemed to be hopelessly mired in this bogus nostalgia. His description of the family in the house had been simple doting. Oh, it was definitely time that the cold-eyed boys were called in. High time.

“They ought to be coming out any minute, now,” Reeves was saying. “Wait till you see Martha.”

“Martha,” Gilson said.

“The little girl. She’s a doll.”

Gilson looked at him. Reeves reddened and said, “Well, I sort of gave them names. The children. Martha and Pete. And the dog’s Alfie. They kind of look like those names, you know?” Gilson did not answer, and Reeves reddened further. “Well, you can see for yourself. Here they come.”

A fine little family, as Reeves had said. After watching them for half an hour, Gilson was ready to concede that they were indeed most engaging, as perfect in their way as their house. They were just what it took to complete the picture, to make an authentic Victorian genre painting. Mama and Papa were good-looking and still in love, the children were healthy and merry and content with their world. Or so it seemed to him as he watched them in the darkening evening, imagining the comfortable, affectionate conversation of the parents as they sat on the porch swing, almost hearing the squeals of the children and the barking of the dog as they raced about the lawn. It was almost dark now; a mellow light of oil lamps glowed in the windows, and fireflies winked over the lawn. There was an arc of fire as the father tossed his cigar butt over the railing and rose to his feet. Then there followed a pretty little pantomime, as he called for the children, who duly protested, were duly permitted a few more minutes, and then were firmly commanded. They moved reluctantly to the porch and were shooed inside, and the dog, having delayed to give a shrub a final wetting, came scrambling up to join them. The children and the dog entered the house, then the mother and father. The door closed, and there was only the soft light from the windows.

Reeves exhaled a long breath. “Isn’t that something,” he said. “That’s the way to live, you know? If a person could just say to hell with all this crap we live in today and go back there and live like that . . . And Martha, you saw Martha. An angel, right? Man, what I’d give to — ”

Gilson interrupted him: “When does the next batch of ice cubes go through?”

“ — be able to — Uh, yeah. Let’s see. The last penetration was at 3:15, just before you got here. Next one will be at 6:35 in the morning, if the pattern holds. And it has, so far.”

“I want to see that. But right now I’ve got to do some telephoning. Colonel!”

Gilson did not sleep that night, nor, apparently, did Krantz and Reeves. When he arrived at the clearing at five a.m. they were still there, unshaven and red-eyed, drinking coffee from thermos bottles. It was cloudy again, and the clearing was in total darkness except for a pale light from beyond the interface, where a sunny day was on the verge of breaking.

“Anything new?” Gilson asked.

“I think that’s my question,” Krantz said. “What’s going to happen?”

“Just about what you expected, I’m afraid. I think that by evening this place is going to be a real hive. And by tomorrow night you’ll be lucky if you can find a place to stand. I imagine Bannon’s been on the phone since I called him at midnight, rounding up the scientists. And they’ll round up the technicians. Who’ll bring their machines. And the army’s going to beef up the security. How about some of that coffee?”

“Help yourself. You bring bad news, Gilson.”

“Sorry,” Gilson said, “but there it is.”

“Goddam!” Reeves said loudly. “Oh, goddam!” He seemed to be about to burst into tears. “That’ll be the end for me, you know? They won’t even let me in. A damn graduate student? In *psychology*? I won’t get near the place. Oh, damn it to hell!” he glared at Gilson in rage and despair.

The sun had risen, bringing gray light to the clearing and brilliance to the house across the interface. There was no sound but the regular bang of the ice cube machine. The three men stared quietly at the house. Gilson drank his coffee.

“There’s Martha,” Reeves said. “Up there.” A small face had appeared between the curtains of a second-floor window, and bright blue eyes were surveying the morning. “She does that every day,” Reeves said. “Sits there and watches the birds and squirrels until I guess they call her for breakfast.” They stood and watched the little girl, who was looking at something that lay beyond the scope of their window on her world, something that would have been to their rear had the worlds been the same. Gilson almost

found himself turning around to see what it was that she stared at. Reeves apparently had the same impulse. “What’s she looking at, do you think?” he said. “It’s not necessarily forest, like now. I think this was logged out earlier. Maybe a meadow? Cattle or horses on it? Man, what I’d give to be there and see what it is.”

Krantz looked at his watch and said, “We’d better go over there. Just a few minutes, now.”

They moved to where the machine was monotonously batting ice cubes into the interface. A soldier with a stopwatch sat beside it, behind a table bearing a formidable chronometer and a sheaf of charts. He said, “Two minutes, Dr. Krantz.”

Krantz said to Gilson, “Just keep your eye on the ice cubes. You can’t miss it when it happens.” Gilson watched the machine, mildly amused by the rhythm of its homely sounds: *plink* — a cube drops; *whuff* — the paddle sweeps around; *bang* — paddle strikes ice cube. And then a flat trajectory to the interface, where the small orange missile abruptly vanishes. A second later, another. Then another.

“Five seconds,” the soldier called. “Four. Three. Two. One. *Now*.”

His timing was off by a second; the ice cube disappeared like its predecessors. But the next one continued its flight and dropped onto the lawn, where it lay glistening. It was really a fact, then, thought Gilson. Time travel for ice cubes.

Suddenly behind him there was an incomprehensible shout from Krantz and another from Reeves, and then a loud, clear, and anguished, “Reeves, *no!*” from Krantz. Gilson heard a thud of running feet and caught a flash of swift movement at the edge of his vision. He whirled in time to see Reeves’ gangling figure hurtle past, plunge through the interface, and land sprawling on the lawn. Krantz said, violently, “*Fool!*” An ice cube shot through and landed near Reeves. The machine banged again; an ice cube flew out and vanished. The five seconds of accessibility were over.

Reeves raised his head and stared for a moment at the grass on which he lay. He shifted his gaze to the house. He rose slowly to his feet, wearing a bemused expression. A grin came slowly over his face, then, and the men watching from the other side could almost read his thoughts: Well, I’ll be damned. I made it. I’m really here.

Krantz was babbling uncontrollably. “We’re still here, Gilson, we’re still here, we still exist, everything seems the same. Maybe he didn’t change things much, maybe the future is fixed and he didn’t change anything at all. I was afraid of this, of something like this. Ever since you came out here, he’s been — ”

Gilson did not hear him. He was staring with shock and disbelief at the child in the window, trying to comprehend what he saw and did not believe he was seeing. Her behavior was wrong, it was very, very wrong. A man had materialized on her lawn, suddenly, out of thin air, on a sunny morning, and she had evinced no surprise or amazement or fear. Instead she had smiled — instantly, spontaneously, a smile that broadened and broadened until it seemed to split the lower half of her face, a smile that showed too many teeth, a smile fixed and incongruous and terrible below her bright blue eyes. Gilson felt his stomach knot; he realized that he was dreadfully afraid.

The face abruptly disappeared from the window; a few seconds later the front door flew open and the little girl rushed through the doorway, making for Reeves with furious speed, moving in a curious, scuttling run. When she was a few feet away, she leaped at him, with the agility and eye-dazzling quickness of a flea. Reeves' eyes had just begun to take on a puzzled look when the powerful little teeth tore out his throat.

36 She dropped away from him and sprang back. A geyser of bright blood erupted from the ragged hole in his neck. He looked at it in stupefaction for a long moment, then brought up his hands to cover the wound; the blood boiled through his fingers and ran down his forearms. He sank gently to his knees, staring at the little girl with wide astonishment. He rocked, shivered, and pitched forward on his face.

She watched with eyes as cold as a reptile's, the terrible smile still on her face. She was naked, and it seemed to Gilson that there was something wrong with her torso, as well as with her mouth. She turned and appeared to shout toward the house.

In a moment they all came rushing out, mother, father, little boy, and granny, all naked, all undergoing that hideous transformation of the mouth. Without pause or diminution of speed they scuttled to the body, crouched around it, and frenziedly tore off its clothes. Then, squatting on the lawn in the morning sunshine, the fine little family began horribly to feed.

Krantz's babbling had changed its tenor: "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us . . ." The soldier with the stopwatch was noisily sick. Someone emptied a clip of a machine pistol into the interface, and the colonel cursed luridly. When Gilson could no longer bear to watch the grisly feast, he looked away and found himself staring at the dog, which sat happily on the porch, thumping its tail.

"By God, it just can't be!" Krantz burst out. "It would be in the

histories, in the newspapers, if there'd been people like that here. My God, something like that couldn't be forgotten!"

"Oh, don't talk like a fool!" Gilson said angrily. "That's not the past. I don't know what it is, but it's not the past. Can't be. It's — I don't know — someplace else. Some other — dimension? Universe? One of those theories. Alternate worlds, worlds of If, probability worlds, whatever you call 'em. They're in the present time, all right, that filth over there. Culvergast's damn spell holed through to one of those parallels. Got to be something like that. And, my god, what the *hell* was its history to produce *those*? They're not human, Krantz, no way human, whatever they look like. 'Jolly bicycle tours.' How wrong can you be?"

It ended at last. The family lay on the grass with distended bellies, covered with blood and grease, their eyelids heavy in repletion. The two little ones fell asleep. The large male appeared to be deep in thought. After a time he rose, gathered up Reeves' clothes, and examined them carefully. Then he woke the small female and apparently questioned her at some length. She gestured, pointed, and pantomimed Reeves' headlong arrival. He stared thoughtfully at the place where Reeves had materialized, and for a moment it seemed to Gilson that the pitiless eyes were glaring directly into his. He turned, walked slowly and reflectively to the house, and went inside.

It was silent in the clearing except for the thump of the machine. Krantz began to weep, and the colonel to swear in a monotone. The soldiers seemed dazed. And we're all afraid, Gilson thought. Scared to death.

On the lawn they were enacting a grotesque parody of making things tidy after a picnic. The small ones had brought a basket and, under the meticulous supervision of the adult females, went about gathering up the debris of their feeding. One of them tossed a bone to the dog, and the timekeeper vomited again. When the lawn was once again immaculate, they carried off the basket to the rear, and the adults returned to the house. A moment later the male emerged, now dressed in a white linen suit. He carried a book.

"A Bible," said Krantz in amazement. "It's a Bible."

"Not a Bible," Gilson said. "There's no way those — things could have Bibles. Something else. Got to be."

It looked like a Bible; its binding was limp black leather, and when the male began to leaf through it, evidently in search of a particular passage, they could see that the paper was the thin, tough paper Bibles

are printed on. He found his page and began, as it appeared to Gilson, to read aloud in a declamatory manner, mouthing the words.

“What the hell do you suppose he’s up to?” Gilson said. He was still speaking when the window ceased to exist.

House and lawn and white-suited declaimer vanished. Gilson caught a swift glimpse of trees across the clearing, hidden until now by the window, and of a broad pit between him and the trees. Then he was knocked off his feet by a blast of wind, and the air was full of dust and flying trash and the wind’s howl. The wind stopped, as suddenly as it had come, and there was a patter of falling small objects that had momentarily been wind-borne. The site of the house was entirely obscured by an eddying cloud of dust.

The dust settled slowly. Where the window had been there was a great hole in the ground, a perfectly square hole a hundred feet across and perhaps ten feet deep, its bottom as flat as a table. Gilson’s glimpse of it before the wind had rushed in to fill the vacuum had shown the sides to be as smooth and straight as if sliced through cheese with a sharp knife; but now small landslides were occurring all around the perimeter, as topsoil and gravel caved and slid to the bottom, and the edges were becoming ragged and irregular.

Gilson and Krantz slowly rose to their feet. “And that seems to be that,” Gilson said. “It was here and now it’s gone. But where’s the prefab? Where’s Culvergast?”

“God knows,” Krantz said. He was not being irreverent. “But I think he’s gone for good. And at least he’s not where those things are.”

“What are they, do you think?”

“As you said, certainly not human. Less human than a spider or an oyster. But, Gilson, the way they look and dress, that house — ”

“If there’s an infinite number of possible worlds, then every possible sort of world will exist.”

Krantz looked doubtful. “Yes, well, perhaps. We don’t know anything, do we?” He was silent for a moment. “Those things were pretty frightening, Gilson. It didn’t take even a fraction of a second for her to react to Reeves. She knew instantly that he was alien, and she moved instantly to destroy him. And that’s a baby one. I think maybe we can feel safer with the window gone.”

“Amen to that. What do you think happened to it?”

“It’s obvious, isn’t it? They know how to *use* the energies Culvergast was blundering around with. The book — it has to be a book of spells. They must have a science of it — tried-and-true stuff, part

of their received wisdom. That thing used the book like a routine everyday tool. After it got over the excitement of its big feed, it didn't need more than twenty minutes to figure out how Reeves got there, and what to do about it. It just got its book of spells, picked the one it needed (I'd like to see the index of that book) and said the words. Poof! Window gone and Culvergast stranded, God knows where."

"It's possible, I guess. Hell, maybe even likely. You're right, we don't really know a thing about all this."

Krantz suddenly looked frightened. "Gilson, what if — look. If it was that easy for him to cancel out the window, if he has that kind of control of telekinetic power, what's to prevent him from getting a window on *us*? Maybe they're watching us now, the way we were watching them. They know we're here, now. What kind of ideas might they get? Maybe they need meat. Maybe they — my God."

"No," Gilson said. "Impossible. It was pure, blind chance that located the window in that world. Culvergast had no more idea what he was doing than a chimp at a computer console does. If the Possible-Worlds Theory is the explanation of this thing, then the world he hit is one of an infinite number. Even if the things over there do know how to make these windows, the odds are infinite against their finding us. That is to say, it's impossible."

"Yes, yes, of course," Krantz said, gratefully. "Of course. They could try forever and never find us. Even if they wanted to." He thought for a moment. "And I think they do want to. It was pure reflex, their destroying Reeves, as involuntary as a knee jerk, by the look of it. Now that they know we're here, they'll have to try to get at us; if I've sized them up right, it wouldn't be possible for them to do anything else."

Gilson remembered the eyes. "I wouldn't be a bit surprised," he said. "But now we both better —"

"*Dr. Krantz!*" someone screamed. "*Dr. Krantz!*" There was absolute terror in the voice.

The two men spun around. The soldier with the stopwatch was pointing with a trembling hand. As they looked, something white materialized in the air above the rim of the pit and sailed out and downward to land beside a similar object already lying on the ground. Another came; then another, and another. Five in all, scattered over an area perhaps a yard square.

"It's bones!" Krantz said. "Oh, my God, Gilson, it's bones!" His voice shuddered on the edge of hysteria. Gilson said, "Stop it, now. Stop it! Come on" They ran to the spot. The soldier was already

there, squatting, his face made strange by nausea and terror. “That one,” he said, pointing. “That one there. That’s the one they threw to the dog. You can see the teeth marks. Oh, Jesus. It’s the one they threw to the dog.”

They’ve already made a window, then, Gilson thought. They must know a lot about these matters, to have done it so quickly. And they’re watching us now. But why the bones? To warn us off? Or just a test? But if a test, then still why the bones? Why not a pebble — or an ice cube? To gauge our reactions, perhaps. To see what we’ll do.

And what *will* we do? How do we protect ourselves against *this*? If it is in the nature of these creatures to cooperate among themselves, the fine little family will no doubt lose no time in spreading the word over their whole world, so that one of these days we’ll find that a million million of them have leaped simultaneously through such windows all over the earth, suddenly materializing like a cloud of huge, carnivorous locusts, swarming in to feed with that insensate voracity of theirs until they have left the planet a desert of bones. Is there any protection against that?

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Krantz had been thinking along the same track. He said, shakily, “We’re in a spot, Gilson, but we’ve got one little thing on our side. We know when the damn thing opens up, we’ve got it timed exactly. Washington will have to go all out, warn the whole world, do it through the U.N. or something. We know right down to the second when the window can be penetrated. We set up a warning system, every community on earth blows a whistle or rings a bell when it’s time. Bell rings, everybody grabs a weapon and stands ready. If the things haven’t come in five seconds, bell rings again, and everybody goes about his business until time for the next opening. It could work, Gilson, but we’ve got to work fast. In fifteen hours and, uh, a couple of minutes it’ll be open again.”

Fifteen hours and a couple of minutes, Gilson thought, then five seconds of awful vulnerability, and then fifteen hours and twenty minutes of safety before terror arrives again. And so on for — how long? Presumably until the things come, which might be never (who knew how their minds worked?), or until Culvergast’s accident could be duplicated, which, again, might be never. He questioned whether human beings could exist under those conditions without going mad; it was doubtful if the psyche could cohere when its sole foreseeable future was an interminable roller coaster down into long valleys of terror and suspense and thence violently up to brief peaks of relief. Will a mind continue to function when its only alternatives

WINDOW

are ghastly death or unbearable tension endlessly protracted? Is there any way, Gilson asked himself, that the race can live with the knowledge that it has no assured future beyond the next fifteen hours and twenty minutes?

And then he saw, hopelessly and with despair, that it was not fifteen hours and twenty minutes, that it was not even one hour, that it was no time at all. This window was not, it seemed, intermittent. Materializing out of the air was a confusion of bones, and rent clothing, a flurry of contemptuously flung garbage that clattered to the ground and lay there in an untidy heap, noisome and foreboding.

THE TEHAMA

In an old house, late one night, a quantity of brick was suddenly pushed out of a cellar wall from behind, exposing the entrance of a tunnel. Two creatures hopped from the tunnel into the room. They were human in form, in a general way, but their legs as well as their arms terminated in hands with heavy claws, and there was something strongly canine about the heads and faces. Their doggish mouths were full of enormous yellow teeth, as pointed and sharp as needles. They were absolutely hairless, and were covered with yellow mud. Here and there on the squat bodies mudless patches exposed skin as white as chalk.

They could speak. One of them said, "Soon food."

"Long time no food," said the other. They spoke in whines and growls and snuffles.

"How long time?" said the first. They stared at each other with dull curiosity.

"Long time," said the other. "*Long time! Long time!*" They did not possess very many words. He snapped ferocious teeth at the questioner to bring home his point.

The first snuffled agreement. In a dim, vague way, he could feel that it had been a very long time indeed. "Hungry," he said.

They had always been hungry, of course; hunger was their natural state, a perpetual thing. They hungered for flesh, preferably in an advanced state of natural decomposition, but also acceptable bloody and alive. They had been hungry when the medicine man's spell shut off their consciousness (such as it was), and the hunger continued — even though unfelt — during all the centuries they had lain encysted deep in the yellow clay. When consciousness returned, it was first as awareness of hunger.

"Find food," the first one said. They looked about them. They could see very well in the dark. There was an open door on the other side of the room. They went to it and tried to pass through the doorway together. Each of them was almost as wide as the opening, and they became involved in a clumsy slapstick tussle in the doorway, chewing and clawing each other with great ferocity, leaving splotches of yellow blood on the floor.

Once they were through, however, the altercation was instantly forgotten, and they went snuffling companionably down the passageway with their talons clicking on the stone floor. It was a very large house, and the cellars were extensive. The passage turned and twisted, and brought them at last to the foot of an iron spiral staircase, which they climbed, after some confusion and bloodletting over their order of precedence in the necessary single file. At the top of the staircase was a landing with a door. They pushed and pulled at the door, and growled at it, and bit each other out of frustration. At last one of them struck it a vindictive blow; it flew open, its lock shattered.

44 They had reached the kitchen. There was food here, a great deal of it, but they had no way of knowing. It was food that lay cold and odorless behind refrigerator doors, or was sealed in cans, or was boxed dry stuff that would no more have seemed food to them than the door they had just smashed. They stared with dull wonder at the gleam of chrome and the shine of enamel, at a hundred incomprehensible artifacts.

One of them gave a noisy sniff; the other became instantly alert and joined him in testing the air. The first said, "Food." They moved off in the direction of the smell's source. They went through a dining room and down a hallway and into the main living room of the house, where there was indeed food.

It was in the form of two men and a German shepherd dog. The dog was large and fierce, and he had been aware of the intruders long before they became aware of him. Because he was a highly intelligent animal, and supremely well trained, he had obeyed a command to stand fast and be silent; but he quivered like a taut wire under the tension of restraining himself, and his chest trembled with a deep, subvocal growl of the utmost malignity. He was crouching to spring, a powerful engine of destruction caught up in a frenzy of rage and loathing.

When the creatures entered the room, he attacked. A voice shouted, "*Stay!*" but the dog was beyond control; he was suddenly a blur of

movement, a flashing passage of great savage teeth launched at the foremost of the intruders.

The creature did not shift its position, nor did it appear to move hastily when it swung its stubby arm; but the blow was timed with exquisite precision, and in it was enormous strength. The dog's rib cage was instantly shattered and splintered, and his heart pulped; he was dead in midair. Before he could drop to the floor, the second creature hooked him at the neck with its talons and pulled. The talons of the first were sunk deep in the body, and it resisted the pull. The head separated from the body; there was a sudden, copious spout of blood.

With importunate, single-minded greed they tore the dog to pieces and began to feed noisily, cramming huge chunks into their terrible mouths, devouring flesh, bones, hide and offal indiscriminately, crunching and snuffling and slobbering. In less than a minute nothing of the dog remained but his blood soaking into the carpet and a terrible stench in the air.

The two men were standing at the other end of the room. "Oh, my God," one of them said. "Oh, my God. Oh, my God. Oh, my God." Both of them were pale and trembling. They were slender men dressed in clothing of gaudy color and design, but they were twenty years older than their clothing indicated. One of them was quite gray; the other had dyed his hair yellow. The hair of both was arranged with extreme care.

"Oh, my carpet, my carpet!" the gray one cried. "Dennis, look at my carpet!"

"Your *carpet*? — — — your carpet! Look at those things! How are we going to get out of here? Oh, my God, they see us! Oh, my God!"

The dog had been no more than an appetizer for the pair. The two men promised a filling, if not particularly tasty, meal. Snuffling, the creatures moved towards them.

"Gordon, do something!" Dennis cried. "For God's sake, do something!" His voice rose to a thin, terrified piping. "Do something, do something." He had wet his trousers.

"Oh, Jesus," Gordon said. "Yeah. Do something. I've got to — I've got to —"

"The *spell*, Gordon! The spell!"

"Yeah, the spell. I've got to — the *spell*!"

Gordon seemed to make a partial escape from his trance of terror. He snatched up two painted gourds that lay on the table. They were

rattles. He began to shake them in an odd rhythm and to chant in a minor key.

The creatures halted their advance. Their snuffling ceased. They stood without motion. Gordon continued to shake his rattles, and his chanting became louder and more assured. The creatures shivered suddenly and became as rigid as stone. Then, in a ponderous and almost stately manner, they tipped and crashed stiffly to the floor, where they lay like toppled idols.

The men collapsed into chairs and sat trembling for a time. At length Gordon said, "Well, it works. I raised them and I put them down." He thought about it for a moment. "It works. I did it. It really works." He began to laugh. Dennis joined him, tentatively at first, and then with equal abandon. They were caught up in a hysteria of relief from their terror, and it was some time before they could gain control of themselves. Then, as their giggles gradually subsided, they began to stare with mounting horror at the recumbent monsters. At last Dennis said, "We almost got killed."

"And eaten," Gordon said. "Poor old Rex."

"Oh, Jesus," Dennis said. Both looked sick.

"The thing is," Gordon said, "is what do we do now? What do we do with these things?"

"You should have thought about that beforehand. 'Let's try it, let's try it,' you said. Now you've got 'em. My God, look at 'em."

They looked at the comatose creatures with fear and revulsion. Gordon rose and edged toward them, timid and tentative, ready to take flight if they showed signs of life. They remained totally inert, their eyes closed, the feral muzzles slackly agape, revealing bits of dog clinging to the frightful teeth. Gordon reached out with a finger and, after a couple of hesitant withdrawals, poked at them. It had no effect.

"They're out, all right," he said. "Back in suspended animation, or whatever it is. The spell works okay." He thought about that for a moment. "*Both* spells work. Everything's going according to the plan. Right?"

Dennis had cautiously come up to join him. "According to the plan," he said with scorn. "According to the plan.' What's the matter with you? The plan was to invoke something to kill your aunt for you. How the hell are you going to get these — *things* to do that — to do *anything*?"

"I can control them. You saw that," Gordon said defensively.

“Control?” Dennis said. “You can raise them up and put them back to sleep, that’s all. In between you’ve got about as much control as Rex had.”

Gordon winced. “Well, yeah. I suppose that’s right. We’ll have to figure something out. But what do we do right now? These things can’t stay here.”

“We’ll have to hide them,” Dennis said. “They came up from the basement. They must have been buried someplace down there. We’ll find their hole and put them back.”

“And how do you suppose we’ll do that? Look at the size of them. And they’re as hard as a piece of wood. They must weigh five hundred pounds apiece. There’s no way in the world we could carry them down to the basement — or anywhere.”

“All *right*. Leave them there, then. Use them for decoration. Just the thing to complete the decor. Hose off the mud and they’ll be exactly the right color.” The room was, in fact, painted and furnished in subtle gradations of near-white.

“Oh shut up, Dennis,” Gordon said. “I guess there’s no way out of it. I’ll have to call Pokatewa for help.”

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“It’s not according to the plan at all. He knows too much already. We’re going to get caught. I know we’re going to get caught.”

“We haven’t broken any laws yet. And he already knows we’re up to something. Anyhow, who the hell else can help?” He went to the telephone and dialed. After a time he said, “No answer.”

As he hung up, the doorbell rang. The two stared at each other in panic. “What — ?” Gordon said. “Who — ?”

“Oh, my God, they’ve got us!” Dennis said.

“The window,” said Gordon. “You can see the front door from the bay window. See who it is.”

Dennis peered through the curtain and turned with relief on his face. “It’s him,” he said. “The Indian. Smithers.”

“Native American,” Gordon corrected automatically. “And don’t use his paleface name. Call him Pokatewa.”

“Whatever,” Dennis said. He went out of the room, and there was the sound of the opening and closing of a door. He re-entered with a companion, a thickset man dressed in what is sometimes called “Full Cleveland” — maroon polyester trousers, a green blazer of the same material, a black shirt with no tie, and white patent leather shoes and belt. He raised his hand to shoulder height, palm outward, and without apparent irony said, “How.”

“Smithers!” Gordon said. “I mean Pokatewa! Am I glad to see you! I was just trying to call.”

“Well, well, well,” Smithers said. “What have we here?” His eyes had widened for a moment at the sight of the monsters, but he showed no other sign of alarm or amazement. “So these are what you got.”

“They’re what I got,” Gordon said, “and they’re not what I wanted. What on earth am I going to do with them? What are they, anyhow? They killed my dog.”

“Ate him,” Dennis said.

Smithers was examining the teeth and talons. “Why, I think they’re what’s called Ne-dake-ne-kevis,” he said. “At least they’re kind of like what the old man described. Of course he had only tradition for the description. Look at the size of ’em. They look mean.”

Gordon shuddered. “Oh, they are, they are. But *what* are they?”

“The name means ‘Eaters of those whose ghosts have departed,’ ” Smithers said. “What you have here is your basic ghoul. My people never did think very well of them. Where’d they come from?”

“They came up from the basement.”

“Yeah, that figures. I’ve heard that this area through here was put off-limits by the medicine men in the olden times. They thought the white men were crazy to live around here. When you woke ’em, they must have started burrowing and came out in your cellar.”

“Well, they can’t stay here,” Gordon said. “How do we get rid of them?”

“Gordon,” Smithers said, “I think we’d better have a little talk. You want to fix me a drink?”

The sun was rising when Smithers left the house. He descended the broad stone stairway to his car, a huge, unabashed gas-guzzler, and drove off down the long driveway. The land on both sides of the driveway belonged to real estate speculators, now; all that remained of the old Alfred Evans estate was the house Smithers had just left, with two acres of land and a right-of-way from the highway.

The house was a very large and very ugly one, built at the turn of the century by a rich man to flaunt his wealth. The Evans brothers, Alfred and Frank, had been coal barons, rapacious cold men who pulled themselves out of the pit and into opulence in the space of a decade, leaving a debris of broken businesses and broken men at the stages of their climb, and making their name a synonym for merciless greed. They lived austere bachelor lives in the grimy house

where they had been born until long after they became millionaires, when at last both built ostentatious and very similar mansions on adjoining large estates located at a decent remove from the mines. Alfred never married, but Frank had a son, and then a grandson and granddaughter, and, finally, a great-grandson. This was Gordon, who was clearly destined to be without issue and the last of the line. Gordon had inherited the Alfred Evans place when he came of age and had supported himself ever since by selling off the land, piece by piece, until only the house was left.

The other house, the Frank Evans place, was now the property of Gordon's aunt, Helena Slade, old Frank's granddaughter. Smithers parked in front of it and climbed a set of steps very like those he had just descended. He rang the bell. After a long wait, the door opened slightly. Smithers said, briskly, "Morning, Signe. Helena in?"

"You crazy?" the old woman said. "You know what time it is? Helena's in bed. So was I, until you come ringin'. Come back at a decent hour. This is no time to be ringin' people's doorbells."

A distant voice called out, "What is it, Signe?"

"It's Eddie Smithers," the old woman shouted. "Wants to come in. Don't know what time it is, I guess."

"Let him in, Signe," the voice said. "Give him some coffee. I'll be down in a little while."

"All right," the old woman said, and, to Smithers, "Well, come in, Eddie. She's as crazy as you are."

She left him in a morning room, to which she at length brought coffee. He had drunk two cups by the time Helena Slade entered, a trim, white-haired woman wearing twin sweaters and a tweed skirt. She said, "Good morning, Eddie. I'm sure Signe has already called your attention to the time."

"Morning, Helena. Yes, she did. I thought what I have couldn't wait."

"Yes. Well, tell me." She sat and took coffee.

"Gordon's planning to kill you," Smithers said.

The hand raising the cup may have paused for a fraction of a second; otherwise she did not visibly react. She drank and then said, in an ordinary voice, "I wondered when he'd think of it. It's that damned idiotic will."

"He's just about at the end of his rope," Smithers said. "He hasn't got anything left to sell, except his house."

"You ought to know, Eddie. You were broker for every acre he sold, weren't you?"

"I'm a businessman," Smithers said. "He wanted to sell, there were buyers, somebody was going to get the commissions. Anyhow, he's broke, now. And of course when you die he gets the money you hold as trustee for him. I think you made a big mistake, there, Helena. You've refused to let him have a nickel — and it was wholly at your discretion how much of the money he was to have as income — so that now he's totally certain that your death is the only way he'll get his hands on the money. And it *is* his, after all. He's serious about this, dead serious. Even if you give him the money now, I'm not sure you'll be safe. He really hates you. You turned him down once too often when he asked for some of his money. But you'd better hand it over right away. Today, say."

"But he could never get away with it. If he — if something happens to me, he's the only one with a motive. And now you know what he's planning."

"If he's caught after he does it, it won't help you a bit, will it? Give him his money."

"Eddie," she said, "I can't."

"Why not?"

"There isn't any."

"Ah," Smithers said. "I see. Slade cleaned you out entirely, then." Helena had married in her youth a charming, remorseless confidence man who was known to have enriched himself greatly out of the Evans fortune before he deserted Helena and fled to the Riviera. "And you've been using Gordon's money ever since. But how the hell could you have spent it all. There must have been at least a million."

"Closer to two. Slade got some, and I went into some unfortunate speculations in trying to make up deficits. It's all gone, Eddie, every cent of it, and nothing to show for it. I'll go to prison, I suppose. Or Gordon will kill me. I knew it would come eventually."

"Helena," Smithers said, "do you think I'm going to let anything like that happen to you? We've been friends for forty years and, for a while there, considerably more than just friends. Don't worry. I'll get you out of it."

"I don't see how," she said. "If Gordon finds out the money's gone, he'll prosecute, and if he doesn't find out, he'll kill me to end the trust. And he's stubborn. I don't think anything will make him drop it. Not ever in his life."

“Right!” Smithers said heartily.

She looked at him. “Oh,” she said. “Yes. Yes, that would do it, if Gordon died, wouldn’t it? But how could we — how would you do that?”

“Why, I think I can turn his own little scheme around so he’ll be the victim, not you. I’m going to give it a shot, anyhow. It’ll be tricky. He’s fooling around with things he doesn’t understand at all. I don’t either, to tell the truth. But I know a lot more than he does.”

“What is it, Eddie? What is it that he’s doing?”

“Some old Indian stuff,” Smithers said. “Witchcraft, I guess you’d say, except that I never heard the word used for the Indian version. He was trying to call up a supernatural creature to kill you.”

Helena laughed. “No, really.”

“Oh, I’m perfectly serious. The fact is, he’s already done it. Called up his creature, that is. He didn’t get quite what he was after, of course.”

She stopped laughing. “You *are* serious.”

“I am indeed. It’s my doing, really.”

“What does that mean?”

“Helena, I’m a Sangimee Indian. Everybody knows that, but nobody ever stops to think about it, because all they see is a one-hundred-percent-go-getter realtor and City Councilman and Rotarian. Sometimes I forget it myself. But I’m Sangimee, and my grandfather taught me Sangimee medicine when I was a boy. You remember his house way out on Donley Street?”

“Yes,” Helena said.

“It was still all woods behind his house then, and starting when I was about five, he began to take me to a secret place he had in there, and he taught me the lore. That’s how it works — the medicine man always teaches it to his grandson, not his son. For better or worse, long before any of the other tribes, the Sangimee joined ’em, and for two hundred and fifty years now we’ve lived just like our neighbors. But during all that time the medicine men passed on the lore to their grandsons, or to boys adopted as grandsons for that purpose. And it’s not just superstition. Sangimee medicine has some very real powers, and the lore recounts a good many things that sound like fairy tales, but are hard, simple truth. I know.

“During the last ten years or so, I’ve seen quite a lot of Gordon, selling off his land for him. You know Gordon. He goes for anything trendy, especially young people’s fads. Goes all out for a while, until

something else takes his attention. Disco dancing, anti-draft, cocaine, anti-nuke — he has his little fling at whatever is 'in.' Most of 'em seem kind of nasty to me, but then I'm a bourgeois flag-waver."

"He calls me a fascist," Helena said.

"Oh, sure. He'd call me one too, except that I'm an Oppressed Minority. I bother him because I don't behave the way his stereotype says I should. When the Indian Rights thing was the big fad with the trendy people, he jumped in with both feet, of course; and while he was still enthusiastic about it, he pestered me a lot for information about what he called Tribal Customs of Native Americans. I let it slip that I was trained as a medicine man, and he zeroed in on that. It fascinated him. I ended up telling him about the Festamatis."

"Festamatis?"

"According to the legend, a malign spirit that lives in a dead tree. It can be invoked by an appropriate spell, and it will do your dirty work for you, at a price. The price is one human life. It's described as a bitterly cold black mist that surrounds its victim and then passes on, leaving a stone-cold corpse. But the life it contracts to take won't do for its fee; there has to be another. In most of the stories you can guess how it came out: the person who invoked the Festamatis was himself killed as the payment. Of course, in some of the tales the Festamatis was outsmarted.

"Gordon wouldn't give me any peace until I taught him the spell. I didn't see any harm in it. I'd tried it myself a few times, and I couldn't make it work. Oh, once I got a bunch of little blind flying balls of fur that were kind of scary, but harmless. These incantations are pretty complex: a mispronounced word, or one pitched wrong, can invalidate the whole thing, or maybe change it to another spell entirely. If I couldn't get the thing right, it was certain Gordon couldn't. So I gave him a set of rattles and taught him the spell and counterspell. I was trying just then to get another point on my commission and wanted to do him a favor.

"He tried it out, he told me, and when nothing happened he wasn't surprised — I don't suppose he ever really believed it — and he put the rattles in a drawer and forgot about it. But recently, when he finally decided that the only way out of his difficulties was to do you in, Helena, he thought about the Festamatis and decided to give it another try.

"About two this morning I woke up suddenly, knowing that somewhere not too far off a spell had just been successful, and that it had to be Gordon's work. I was a little scared, to tell the truth; if

there is such a thing as the Festamatis, and he'd managed to raise it, he might just be pointing it at me. We've had our share of quarrels, in the course of our deals. I got my rattles ready, just in case.

"After a couple of hours I concluded that I was safe, and I thought I'd better investigate. I got dressed and went out to Gordon's. He'd raised something, all right, but not the Festamatis; what he has are two of the ugliest monsters you ever saw, and damned dangerous ones, in the bargain. But I don't think they're supernatural; probably the last of a species that's extinct, except for them. They'd been in some kind of suspended animation since God-knows-when. Gordon's screwed-up spell woke them, and by the greatest of damn-fool luck, the counterspell put them back under. I found Gordon and his little friend scared out of their wits — the things had eaten Gordon's big dog like a pretzel — and the monsters were laid out stiff on that white carpet he's so fond of.

"Gordon and I had a nice little chat. He wanted my help, and I wormed the whole story out of him while Dennis was off changing his jeans. His mind is absolutely made up that you've got to die; when he tried to invoke the Festamatis it was a last desperate effort to get the job done cheap. (He was going to give Dennis to the Festamatis as the payment.) If that failed, then he'd go ahead with a professional contract on your life, but that was going to be extremely expensive, and to raise the money he'd have to sell his house, the last thing in the world he wanted to do.

"So he was looking for a way to use the critters on the carpet to take care of you, since they were conveniently at hand, and, he figured, would come cheaper than the Festamatis, and he'd get to keep Dennis. He wanted me to figure out how to sic the monsters on you. He dropped hints about all the dandy commissions that would fall to me once he came into his money.

"I told him I'd try to figure something out, and that meanwhile he was to do absolutely nothing about the sleeping beauties in his living room, and that he should let absolutely no one at all into his house. I told him I'd let him know what to do sometime today. Then I came over here to advise you to hand over the money without delay. Which you now tell me you can't do."

Helena had sat quietly as he talked. Now she said, "That's pretty strange stuff, Eddie. Is it honest and truly the truth?"

He looked at her soberly. "It's the truth."

"Well," she said. "Well, then. I'll do whatever you say. Imagine, planning to hand poor little Dennis over to that Festis thing. Shameful. Now, how are we going to kill Gordon?"

“Not *we*,” Smithers said. “The Ne-dake-ne-kevis. *They’ll* kill him. And in front of witnesses, just to make sure no suspicion attaches to you — or me. I’ve got the place picked out, and the witnesses.”

“Where, Eddie? Who?”

“Oh, I’ve worked up a slick little scheme. You see, Gordon will have to believe that the witnesses are for *his* benefit, to give him an alibi for the time your death is supposed to be taking place. And because there’s simply no way to schedule matters with any kind of precise timing, it has to be at a place where the witnesses will be on hand at whatever time it takes place. On top of that, it has to be reasonably close to both Gordon’s house and yours. It works out to just one area: somewhere close to that commune on Gore’s Survey. It’s located right, and there are always enough people around to make it certain that someone will see Gordon being killed by, uh, individuals that in no way resemble you or me. But just to be safe, you’d better have some guests in tonight. The descriptions of the killers are going to sound pretty strange to the police, and they might decide that what’s being described came out of something the witnesses smoked or dropped.”

“Very clever,” Helena said, “but what makes you think your ‘individuals’ will be in the right place at the right time?”

“Your local medicine man has a method. I’ve got grandpa’s *freese*. A sort of musical instrument, a very primitive recorder, I guess you’d call it. What comes out of it isn’t exactly music — it only has three notes — but by blowing on it you can control all sorts of creatures. I imagine the Pied Piper legend grew out of something of the kind. I think I can use it to manipulate Gordon’s ghouls, the way the Pied Piper led the rats and the children. Of course, up to now I’ve only used it for a game call. Works fine on geese and wild turkeys.”

Helena rose from her chair, walked to the window, and stared out of it for a time. “Eddie,” she said, “I can hardly believe this. Do you realize what we’re doing? We’re conspiring to murder.”

“Well, I don’t know,” Smithers said. “More like self-defense, really. Or maybe extermination. Gordon’s a pretty nasty article, when you come right down to it. He really believes I’d help him kill you for the sake of a few commissions. But we don’t have to do it.”

“That’s the trouble,” she said. “I’m afraid we do.”

Gordon said much the same thing. He and Smithers were sitting in the dining room drinking tea. He said, “There’s no use talking about it, Smithers. I’m going to do it. Are you going to help me or

not? There's a lot of money at stake, you know. And you're already in pretty deep."

"Oh, sure, Gordon, I'll help you," Smithers said. "I just thought you might have changed your mind. The main thing is, it's got to be done as soon as possible. Those things can't be left in there a minute longer than absolutely necessary."

"Amen!" Gordon said.

"So we'll do it tonight. Okay?"

"Tonight? Well — well, sure. Sure. Uh . . . what are we going to do, exactly?"

"Why, you'll cast the spell to wake them, and I'll Pied-Piper them over to your aunt's house. After they've done the job, I'll pipe them back here again and then back into their tunnel, and you'll put them back to sleep — for the next thousand years, I hope. The important thing is your alibi. You'll need witnesses to your whereabouts for at least a couple of hours, to give you plenty of coverage both before and after the act. That means you'll have to do the wake-up incantation right in front of your witnesses. So here's what you're going to do. You'll go over somewhere close to that commune on Gore's Survey and put on a big Red-Indian act, Hollywood style. Put on some war paint. Build a fire and have Dennis beat a drum. Dance around and whoop and holler. When the communards ask what you're up to, say you're propitiating the Nature Gods, or something. When you cast the spell, it'll just seem to be part of the general carrying on. How does that sound?"

"It sounds okay. Like fun, even. Those people will dig it. Probably try and join in. It's their kind of thing."

"I wouldn't be surprised. Now, the timing. It'll be getting dark by six thirty, and full dark a half hour after that. Have your fire built, and start your act at seven. Cast the spell at seven thirty. And be sure you time it right, because I'm going to be here with your sleeping friends, and I don't want to be caught by surprise when they wake up. Knock off the theatricals by nine sharp, say good-bye to the hippies (don't forget to mention the time) and get back here as fast as you can. And now I'm going home and get some sleep. You'd better do the same. I'll be back to see you off."

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

At a little after six Gordon and Dennis took their departure, Dennis fluttering apprehensively, and Gordon alternating between fits of elation and funk. After the station wagon had disappeared down the

driveway, Smithers entered the living room. The two creatures lay as they had fallen. The blood on the carpet had turned black, and only a trace of the stench remained in the air. Smithers was carrying a canvas gymnasium bag. From it he took a pair of rattles like those he had given Gordon, and a crude small wind instrument. He blew tentatively into the instrument a few times, eliciting a mournful honking, and then put it into his pocket. He took up the rattles. "Okay, pals," he said, "the beauty sleep's over. Time to wake up and go to work."

He moved into the doorway, where there was a clear line of flight behind him, and began to shake the rattles and chant. After a time the leg of one of the creatures jerked, and the other one made a movement of its head. Smithers dropped the rattles and pulled the *freese* from his pocket. As the pair rose ponderously to their feet, he began to pipe.

It was an unpleasant sound, monotonous in pitch and irritating in its lack of identifiable rhythm. For a time the creatures paid no heed, but snuffled and grunted to each other and peered about in slow bewilderment, until the effect of the *freese* at last penetrated the dim minds; then, as one creature, they turned and looked at Smithers.

Sweat appeared on his face, and he held himself ready to bolt, but there was no hesitation in the flow of sound. He blew a long, irregularly interrupted note, a sound not unlike slow Morse code, and glared at the creatures with furious concentration. Suddenly, and in unison, they swung up their right arms in a Roman salute.

Smithers took the *freese* from his mouth and wiped his face. He said, "Well. Okay. Gotcha. Now we'll practice a little." They were standing without motion, frozen in the salute. He put the pipe to his mouth and again blew the note, concentrating his stare upon the creatures as before. They began to move, at first in absolute unison, and then, as Smithers' skill and confidence grew, as individuals. He marched them up and down the room, clumsily in the beginning, with a consequent breakage of a number of Gordon's possessions, but in the end with precision, so that they threaded their way among the furniture with scarcely a collision. Smithers said at last, "Right. We're ready, I guess. Forward, *march!*" He blew again.

In single file they marched out of the room, through the open front door, and down the steps, with Smithers following. They crossed the lawn, passed through a gateway in a low stone wall, and set out through the woods. It was growing dark, but there was still enough

light for the creatures to be seen, and Smithers kept at a distance, moving in the deepest shadows. Once launched into motion, the pair continued to plod without further instruction; Smithers blew the *freese* only to change their direction from time to time.

Gore's Survey was a wasteland, a tract of fifteen or twenty acres that still retained the name of an old three-thousand-acre grant to a pioneer named Gore, who had parceled it out in estates and farms in the middle of the eighteenth century. It had been highly desirable land at the time Gore took it, and during the next two centuries its value increased continuously, so that over the years most of the tracts changed hands many times. Along the way, a great many were divided into smaller farms, and as early as the nineteen thirties some of these were being further subdivided into residential building lots. Any large tracts that remained intact acquired enormous value. The two Evans estates had been in that category.

It was rolling countryside, topographically varying from gentle slopes to moderate hillsides. A good deal of the aboriginal forest remained, mingled with prosperous farms. Clean small streams ran through it; there was an abundance of game. It was green and golden in the summer, and in autumn a carnival of reds and yellows. The winters were cold and white, but they spoke more of fat hibernation than of frozen hunger. Nature was kind, here.

Except to the tract of acreage that still kept the old name; that had been blighted, somehow. Nothing grew there except a flaky dry lichen, and that only in spots. The land lay amid the greenery like a gray sore, an irregular blotch of sterility. From time to time down the years, someone would buy it from the county for a trifling price and spend a few years and a good deal of money on one scheme or another — complex drainage systems, irrigation, sophisticated fertilizers and chemicals — to make it productive. The schemes always failed, and in due course the county would take it for taxes again.

In 1925 one of the hopeful entrepreneurs built a house on the tract, an undistinguished wooden farmhouse which, after its abandonment, sheltered squatters from time to time. Its current occupants were relics of the decade of drugs and violence, aging debris of the storms of the time. They lived in the past, still vaguely convinced that cooking their brains with chemicals and living in squalor revenged them somehow on a world that had passed them by and that found their existence irrelevant to its concerns. Their livelihood came from a regular cash remittance of mysterious origins, which was paid in consideration of their harboring and hiding a fugitive left over from the stormy past, a zealot who had once planted

a bomb in the history stacks of a university library and managed to blow up an elderly night watchman along with the books.

These were Smither's witnesses, not the most credible, perhaps, but in the right place at the right time. They were assembled on the rotting porch of the house as he and his monstrous puppets reached the edge of the woods. The war dance had quite successfully engaged their attention, and they watched with dreamy approval as Gordon capered around a great bonfire to Dennis' erratic thumping on a set of bongo drums.

Smithers blew a honk that froze his charges in place behind a dense thicket, and cautiously approached through the shadows for a clear view. Gordon was speaking to Dennis, who stopped drumming. Gordon took up the rattles. He began the incantation.

"Dead on time," Smithers said. "Get set, fellas." He waited. After a time he said, "Go," and blew. The creatures stumped out of the bushes and moved ponderously toward Gordon's fire.

A fog lay upon Gore's Survey, a fog that had not been there before the incantation began. It coiled and eddied sluggishly along the ground, thickening gradually as the chant proceeded, rising no higher than a man's waist. It ended abruptly at the border of the dead land. Smithers eyed it with apprehension; he kept the *freese* close to his mouth.

Gordon's incantation ended with a truncated, minor-key drone and an elaborate flourish of the rattles. There was a moment of utter stillness. Then something came from under the earth.

The dry, ashen soil shifted, heaved, and split; through the opening rose the figure of a man, an Indian warrior in deerskins. He seemed to be unfolding himself from a doubled-up position, stretching slowly to his full height. As he did so, the sporadic red glare of the bonfire showed his arms to be bound tight to his sides. On his face was an expression of unutterable pain, of an agony beyond any nightmare of agony. He stood for a long moment, his head thrown back, seeming to stare at the black sky. And then, between one flicker of the fire and the next, his face changed: the black gape of his silent scream was erased, the knotted contortion of the facial muscles softened and relaxed; an old suffering had ended, and its marks were wiped away. On the face at that instant of deliverance was an expression of serenity and peace.

But only for that instant; then there was no face, there was no warrior. There was only a fine dust that floated and swirled gently for a moment and was dispersed by the eddies of the mist.

“A Tehama!” Smithers said. “Oh, Jesus, Mary and Joseph.”

Suddenly there were things in the fog, fitfully visible through the slow coilings. They were a host, a swarm: foot-high stick-figures with heads like the skulls of toothed reptiles, deep grinning mouths wide in soundless shrieks of hate. They were in furious motion, making for the fire, the small limbs like flailing black wires.

They reached Dennis first, where he sat frozen with the drums in his lap. They were over him like locusts, razor teeth tearing and ripping, little black talons clawing in a frenzy. In a moment they dropped away. Dennis toppled to the ground, quite dead. There was not a mark on his body.

Smithers’ puppets had almost reached the fire now, plodding along mechanically, not to be stopped or turned except by the pipe that had set them in motion. The swarm boiled and swirled and raced at them, and up and over them, enveloping both as it had enveloped Dennis. The thick bodies continued to plod. Teeth and claws without number tore at them with insensate ferocity; their pace did not vary. The swarm dropped off them; they were dead. And still the bodies marched for a few more steps before they dropped. They were no more marked by the savage rending than Dennis had been.

All of this had taken no more than two minutes, and Smithers had not moved a muscle. Now he broke free of his paralysis. “Run!” he bawled to the group on the porch. “Run! Run!”

They paid no attention. Perhaps in their chemical trances they had often watched even stranger things and perceived this as nothing very different. One or two applauded, and one said, “*Yeah!*” And then the swarm was upon them.

It left them sprawled in death on the decayed planks, and surged into the house and out again, and violently boiled about on the gray earth. The movement was perceptibly slower than it had been in the beginning, and they could be made out individually, the hard thin limbs and small terrible heads, the feral little mouths wide in their soundless shrieks. Smithers was shuddering and sweating copiously in the chilly night air. He put the pipe to his mouth and once again blew.

The movement slowed further as he piped, and little by little the swarm coalesced into a dense pack, a shifting, flickering blanket of predatory small horrors covering several square yards of the dead soil. Smithers turned and entered the forest. They followed.

It was dawn again when Smithers rang Helena’s bell. He said,

“Don’t talk, Signe. Just get me some whiskey and call Helena.” She took one look at him and obeyed without a word.

When Helena entered the room, she found him slumped in a chair, drinking the whiskey. He said, “Well, it’s done. You’re rid of Gordon. And Dennis and the hippies, too. And damn near me.” He had the look of a soldier who has been too long under fire.

She said, “Signe’s making breakfast. Eat something, and then you can tell me about it. Come along.” Smithers carried the bottle with him.

The dining room was airy and sunny, and a canary sang in a cage. Smithers had eaten bacon and eggs and reduced the bottle’s level by several inches. His eyes had lost some of their wildness, and the tension of his face was softening into simple weariness. “Gordon got the spell a little wrong, again,” he said. “It shouldn’t have mattered because I’d already activated the corpse-eaters, and what he was doing—even though he didn’t know it—was just window-dressing. But it worked, and worked wrong, and he set free a Tehama that had been set to restrain a nest of — I guess ‘Biters’ would be the best translation. I’d better explain what those things are.

“The Biters are just about the worst things the legends tell about, little horrors so thoroughly evil that they were loathed by even the wickedest of the spirits. The myth has it that long ago the Great Good Spirit, Gitche-Manito, prevailed in single combat over his opposite, Hake-Manito, and struck him such a blow that Hake-Manito was shattered into a million million pieces. But each of the pieces retained life, and each had only one aim: to kill. To kill anything and everything, animal and vegetable, fish, fowl, and corn.

“Gitche-Manito buried them in various places all over the world. But of course simple burial wouldn’t hold them, and so he put a safeguard at each burial place: a Tehama. The Biters could be confined only if they could kill. So he gave them something to kill. He took the bad medicine men, the ones who had served Hake-Manito, and buried one with each clutch of Biters. Buried them alive, for the Biters to kill. And ever since, they have been killed by the Biters ten thousand times a day, every day, suffering agonizing death endlessly repeated, and yet they cannot die. And for so long as they do not die, the Biters can continue to kill them, and so somewhat slake their thirst for killing, and will remain in restraint.

“But Gordon’s spell released the Tehama; he died at last, was delivered from his long agony. When he died, the Biters were no longer confined to the grave, and they came out. They came out

and killed, did enough killing to take the edge off their appetite, so I could control them, more or less, with the *freese*. I piped them over to Gordon's house and down into the tunnel the ghouls came out of, and bricked up the tunnel. And then I came down with the worst case of the shakes you ever saw. Those things are awful, Helena. You can't imagine how awful.

"I stopped by Gore's Survey on my way back here. It's pretty clear, now, what made it a desert, why nothing ever grew there. That'll be changing. But it doesn't look so good this morning. Enough corpses for a small battlefield. The things from the tunnel aren't there, though; just a couple of wet spots on the ground. They must have totally decomposed, bones and all. Odd chemistry there. Somebody'll be finding the bodies pretty soon now, and calling the sheriff. I wonder what the autopsies'll show. The bodies aren't marked. It seems the Biters don't actually bite. It may be that they don't even have any physical being. But they kill, all right. They do kill."

Smithers gulped the rest of his whiskey and stared out the window. Helena said, "It's all pretty strange, Eddie. And pretty awful. And very hard to believe, to tell the truth. Did it really happen?"

"Oh, it happened. You'll be hearing all about the bodies they'll find at Gore's Survey. I expect they'll end up calling it some kind of dope poisoning . . . There's about fifteen hundred dollars back taxes on that land. I can get it for that plus costs. I think I'd better do it today. It's going to be getting green, now. Going to be good land. Be worth something."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. A million maybe."

"If it's true. If it's not true, it's not worth the back taxes. Nothing ever grew there — ever."

"It will now," Smithers said, confidently.

"Well, then. We both gain something, don't we?"

"I'm a businessman," Smithers said. "If an opportunity comes up, I try to take advantage of it. You should, too. Gordon's house will be yours, now. You'd better sell it as quick as you can. I have a notion the blight will be hitting that area pretty soon."

"All right, I will. I can use the money . . . We're pretty cold-blooded, aren't we?"

"Nothing wrong with taking advantage of something that's already happened. A little hard on the hippies, I admit. Best think of it as a

natural disaster, something that couldn't be helped."

"Yes," Helena said. "That's what I'll do."

In the afternoon Smithers drove his gas-guzzler up the mountain to the end of a derelict road. When it became impossible to drive any further, he left the car and proceeded on foot through the trees to a clearing. He was dressed in old khakis and a leather jacket and moccasins. He gathered wood and built a small fire; when the fire had burnt itself down to bright coals and a tiny column of white smoke was rising vertically from it into the still air, he began softly to chant. From the pocket of his jacket he took a handful of something which he dropped onto the coals.

Dense smoke rose and spread and began to churn and eddy, although there was no wind. In a few minutes the movement ceased, and it hung in a motionless small cloud around the bed of coals. It had thinned enough to permit a certain murky visibility, except for a clot of considerable density across the fire from Smithers. Smithers spoke to the clot: "Is it you, ghost of my grandfather?"

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He heard a reply, or thought he heard one, and he said, "To tell you how things go with me, Grandfather. To tell you that I have contended with the Biters and have prevailed over them." He paused, listening. He said, "A Tehama was released through bungling, and the Biters came forth and killed. When their first frenzy was over, I could control them with the *freese*, and now they are as they were before. They are — I think this will make you laugh, Grandfather — they are in a tunnel under a house. The tunnel was formerly the burial place of two corpse-eaters that are now destroyed."

He listened again and said, "They are safely confined. I have given them a new Tehama. They will feed on him perpetually, and for so long as they do, they cannot escape. The Great Spirit's arrangement has been restored." He paused. "A man called Gordon Evans. A bad man, Grandfather. As bad as any of those medicine men who once served the evil spirit. The religion of this man's fathers preaches a hell. He has something worse, now. The eternal fires he was taught to fear must seem to him today like a cool oasis, a place to be longed for. And what he is suffering now, he must suffer forever. Or so we should hope. His deliverance would free the Biters again, and that must not happen. He released the old Tehama through his efforts to do murder. It is only just that he serves as the new Tehama."

Another pause. He said, "Oh, pretty good, Grandfather. The game laws keep getting worse. I'm only allowed to shoot one deer a year, but I usually poach a couple more. My wife died a few years ago. I have a

grandson, six months old now. I don't know whether I'll teach him the lore or not. I'm not sure it wouldn't be an impediment to him. He's going to be pretty busy with his regular education. I've already entered him for his prep school, and he'll be going to Harvard or Princeton in due course. He'll have a lot of money when I finally join you over there, Grandfather. I want to prepare him to be a rich man . . . Grandfather? Grandfather?"

A faint breeze had come up, and the smoke had dispersed. Smithers scooped dirt over the remains of his fire and trod on it. He returned through the woods to his car, performed the complicated maneuvers necessary to turn it around in the narrow roadway, and drove down the mountain.

The mountain road led to a blacktop, and that to the highway. He pulled off the highway at Gore's Survey and parked for a time, staring reflectively out at the landscape. The dead fields rolled away to the distant tree line as they had always done, lying sterile and gray in the fading light. There was no sign yet of the green future. But it was only the first day.

He drove on and at the Alfred Evans place turned in at the driveway. Nothing had changed here, either, except that around the house the flowers were just beginning to droop.

INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX

Stanley Scott, forty-three. Small-appliance repairman. Married, two children. Works hard, pays his taxes.

Is insane.

Or thinks he is. Thinks he's *going* crazy, anyhow. He believes impossible things. For example:

He knows that Dorothy Barr, of Dorothy's Kard Shoppe next door to his premises in the less desirable end of the shopping center, is keeping a watchful eye on him, is clocking his comings and goings and photographing everybody who enters his shop. In the wall she has installed a listening device that enables her to hear everything that goes on in the Appliance Clinic. She has, he believes, a tap on his phone.

He has told himself sometimes that this is preposterous, that he has been friendly with Dorothy Barr since she opened her shop ten years ago, that this mild and hard-working little widow is perhaps the least likely person in the state to be a spy. But then he will see her peering through her window when he arrives at work in the morning, and he knows her for what she has become. Behind the rimless glasses her eyes are flat and empty, windows into some fathomless sink of evil. Even when she smiles, even when she waves, he can see through the mousy façade to the malice and wickedness behind. He trembles when he sees her eyes.

He knows the word "paranoia," knew it before it became a fad word. He has looked it up in several reference books, reading at first with sick fear, and then with despair and horror. He was insane or going insane, there was no doubt about it. All the symptoms were there.

Except that when Dorothy Barr waved her good morning to him, he had only to look into her eyes to know with absolute certainty

that he was not crazy at all, that Dorothy was in truth something other than what she had always seemed to be. And that, whatever she was, she was watching him with a cold reptilian patience, and making reports on him to persons (persons?) unknown.

Perhaps not altogether unknown, either. It was almost certain that their headquarters — or, more likely, their local operations center — was out at Consolidated Pipe and Tube. He did not know yet what they were up to out there, but it couldn't be doubted that they'd rank above Dorothy. When the mill was completed it would be the largest employer in town. Dorothy Barr was pretty small potatoes compared with that. But it remained an unanswered question whether the construction of the enormous plant was directed solely at him or if he was merely some sort of obstacle in the way of whatever the real purpose of the plant turned out to be.

He had, as it happened, known about the plant before he knew about Dorothy Barr. The smug story in the *Chronicle* two years ago had alerted him:

WALLBORO TO BE SITE OF MILL EMPLOYING 3000

Consolidated Pipe and Tube Corporation has completed negotiations for the purchase of a twenty-acre tract in southern Wall Township, and will immediately commence construction of a \$500,000,000 steel-fabricating plant which is expected to employ between 2,500 and 3,000 workers, it was announced today by G. G. Scranton, President of Consolidated.

There was a picture of Scranton shaking hands with the president of the Chamber of Commerce.

"Stanley!" his wife said. "What's the matter?" His face was contorted and his breathing was loud. He thrust the paper at her, pointing a trembling finger at the headline.

"What about it?" she said. He had no answer. Something — the names, perhaps, or Scranton's face — had loosed a frenzy of fear within him, a flood of unreasoning and total terror. He did not know what he was afraid of, but he knew somehow that something, some horror beyond words, lay somewhere in wait.

"Drink your coffee," his wife said. "Why don't you lie down? Is your stomach upset? Oh, what's the matter?"

"I'll be all right," Stanley finally croaked. "I'd better get to the shop." There was no explanation he could offer.

For many weeks stories about the new industry were on the front page every day, and the coming prosperity was an important topic of conversation in the town. Every mention of it tore at Stanley with awful claws, and by the time it was no longer front-page news, he had lost weight and developed a hunted look. He went mechanically through the motions of his daily routine, moving in a trance of fear. He kept a very tight grip on himself, however; he knew that if he did not, he might crawl into bed and never come out again, or run naked down the street baying like an animal. So strong was his control that after a time he was able to force the terror to retreat into a corner of his mind, where it squatted menacingly, but left him the capacity to function. And to think.

He thought about it endlessly, resentfully contemplating his condition and seeking an escape. He was afraid; paralyzingly afraid. He did not know what he feared and indeed could discover nothing to be afraid of. Yet there had to be something, or he would not be afraid. He had to find out what it was. He had to find out who was doing this to him. And then he had to do something about it.

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Any reference to Consolidated Pipe and Tube caused the squatting fear to swell ominously in its corner; it followed, then, that the enemy was either the company, or the company's Wallboro plant, or a conspiratorial group at the plant, or — very likely — G. G. Scranton himself.

At that point he always found himself unable to carry the train of thought any further; his mind simply took that for a stopping place, and declined to operate. If he persisted he was visited by an unbearable sensation of slow-motion dissolution and disintegration; bits and pieces of his mind seemed to detach themselves and, in an unhurried and stately manner, spiral away into space.

It was thus something of a relief when at last he came face-to-face with one of the enemy. He was never certain whether the confrontation was deliberate and designed to intimidate him, or whether he made the discovery against their wishes, as a consequence of his new-found ability to see through appearances and perceive even cunningly hidden reality.

She came into the shop carrying a toaster and an iron, which she thumped onto the counter. "Can you fix these?" she said. She was a small woman, perhaps in her middle forties, unobtrusively well-dressed and with an air of assurance. She spoke with a slight Southern accent.

“Well, let’s see,” Stanley said. He removed screws, lifted off plates, and examined interiors. He felt somewhat better when he was working. “Don’t think you’ve been in before,” he said.

“No, I haven’t. We’re new here. My neighbor Mrs. Duff told me to bring these to you, said you were the best in town.”

“I’ll have to thank her,” Stanley said. “You’ve bought a house in Rolling Knoll, then.”

“On Prospect Lane, next door to the Duffs. We love it.”

“It’s nice over there. How do you like Wallboro so far?”

“I think we’re going to be very happy here. It’s such a nice *little* city. My husband used to have to travel two hours to and from the office. Now he’ll only be fifteen minutes from the plant.”

Stanley felt a premonitory twinge. “Who’s he with?” he asked.

“Consolidated Pipe and Tube. He’s chief engineer. Of course the office will be downtown until they finish building the plant, but, even so, everything here is so much simpler and easier. Why just this morning — ”

She continued to talk briskly, but Stanley was not listening. The great fear was upon him and he was wholly absorbed by the effort of maintaining some sort of control. When at last he shifted his gaze from the bowels of the iron to her face, she was still rattling along. Stanley heard none of it. He was feeling, somewhere behind his fear or commingled with it, a certain satisfaction: here at last was one of them, a tangible manifestation of the enemy. The knowledge was tonic, nourishing to his manhood. It gave him enough confidence to observe her with wary intensity as she talked.

He could see it then: the flat malign emptiness of the eyes, the cruel droop at the corners of the mouth, the clawing movements of the hands. This was, beyond any doubt, an agent of the conspiracy. She was admirably disguised, to be sure, but obvious enough when you knew what to watch for. And from now on he was going to be watching everyone very carefully, very carefully indeed.

“ — away at college, so at least we don’t have *that* worry,” she was saying. She was very good.

“These shouldn’t be too much trouble,” Stanley said. He didn’t think his voice revealed anything. “May I have your name, please?”

“Biddle,” she said. “Mrs. Jason Biddle.” Stanley wrote the name on two tags. He said, “About two weeks, Mrs. Biddle. You might call and check.”

"I will," she said, and went out. The sweating Stanley sat down.

That evening when his wife said — as she did nearly every evening now — "Stanley, I *wish* you'd tell me what's the matter," he thought he had a sort of answer for her at last. It was a long way from a complete answer, but at least there was now something concrete, in the person of Mrs. Biddle, to talk about. He began to explain it all.

As he talked she said, "But what makes you think — ?" and, "But why should they — ?" and, "But they haven't done anyth — " and, finally, "Oh, Stanley, that's just *crazy*."

Stanley had of course already carefully considered that possibility and had rejected it. But it would be difficult to trace for her the reasoning that established that his head was perfectly sound and the danger real. And in any case, he was no longer sure that she was entirely to be trusted. She would not consciously do anything to harm him, he was reasonably certain of that; but the enemy was infinitely guileful and might find ways to use her without her knowledge.

In the event, that appeared to be what took place. Stanley's doctor called him at work one day, suggesting that Stanley drop in for a visit. Stanley, who was developing a certain guile of his own, agreed. It was quite clear that his only hope lay in maintaining some sort of surveillance of the others, and that could best be done by pretending to be unaware of their probing. He could visualize what had led to the doctor's call: his wife, over coffee cups at the kitchen table, unburdening herself to her mother and sister; Mom and Sis gleefully spreading the word to every gossip-pit in town; and then the swift dissemination of the story until it reached an ear that knew what it meant. Perhaps the ear of G. G. Scranton.

A suggestion would have come trickling back, then, culminating in an urgent recommendation by Mom and Sis (probably over the same cups at the same table) that Dr. Heinz be consulted without delay. And Dr. Heinz, already alerted through other channels, would have called Stanley immediately after he talked to Nora.

The doctor was getting on in years and had never wasted time on a bedside manner. He said, "Stanley, what's this Nora tells me about you thinking spooks are after you?"

Stanley's first act upon entering the office had been to subject the doctor to The Test. The Test was an infallible method of unmasking members of the conspiracy which Stanley had discovered more or less by accident at the time of his encounter with Mrs. Biddle. It consisted in staring fixedly at the suspect for a few moments while

maintaining a certain rigid, complex, and wholly indescribable mental posture. If the subject was indeed one of the enemy, the stigmata became visible to Stanley; it was as if a veneer dissolved, giving him a view of the true creature beneath, a glimpse of the physiognomy of evil. Those who did not change under his piercing scrutiny were uncontaminated.

The doctor did not change; to Stanley's amazement and relief he remained the old Dr. Heinz. Stanley was almost overcome by gratitude and thanksgiving. At last — at long last — there was someone he could talk to, someone with the intelligence to grasp the magnitude of the conspiracy, someone who could be depended upon to offer good, common-sense advice. Someone who might even be enlisted to aid in a possible counterattack.

"Don't joke about it, Doc," he said. "When I tell you, you won't think it's a joking matter."

"Tell me, then, Stanley," the doctor said.

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Stanley tried. After the fiasco of the explanation to his wife he had carefully organized all the facts, constructing a seamless chain of logic that established beyond argument that he was sorely bedeviled and hideously endangered; but now, as he laid the matter before Dr. Heinz, a number of the steps in his reasoning seemed to have fled his memory. He became increasingly aware that Heinz was not finding his exposition wholly persuasive and that his replies to the doctor's questions were beginning to sound somewhat shrill and desperate. "No, but, Doc, listen to what's happening now. They've got Dorothy Barr, Dorothy's Kard Shoppe, you know her. The first one was the Mrs. Biddle, she tipped me off. Then that red-haired cook at the diner. Now it's Dorothy. I spotted it a couple of weeks ago. They're *really* watching me now. And I don't know why. But I'll tell you one thing: I don't think they're even human. They don't even *look* human when you know what to look for. But why are they doing it? I've got to find out what they're doing out at that plant, Doc."

"Why, I think you know what they're doing, Stanley. They're putting up a steel mill. Going to produce seamless pipe. Bringing a lot of money into the county."

"But what about that dome, Doc? I've talked to half a dozen men who work for different contractors out there, and nobody knows what the dome is for. Nothing to do with making pipes, I can tell you that. Full of computers or something. Twenty electricians worked for a month in there, and none of them knows what it was they were wiring. There's something bad going on, Doc. They know I know it,

too; that's why they're watching me this way. Watching and tapping my phone, why, my God, Doc — ”

“All *right*, Stanley,” Heinz said. “Stop it now. Stop. That's better.”

“OK. All right. I'm all right. But I'm really scared, Doc. Scared all the time. Jesus. Those eyes. Always watching, watching — ”

“There's a man I want you to see, Stanley,” Heinz said. “I'm going to make an appointment for you. You need more help here than I'm equipped to give. This really isn't my line.”

“A headshrinker!” shouted Stanley, betrayed and horrified. “You think I'm crazy, too!”

“I think you're in need of some help, like all of us at one time or another. You've got to be relieved of this fear, Stanley, and I think Spector's just the man who can — ”

But Stanley was gone, out the door and into the street, running. The doctor's office had become a trap. Heinz — Heinz! — was one of them. Or, no. No, he probably wasn't. Just by practicing his profession he would be serving their ends. Stanley had given a simple and straightforward recital of the facts, and it had sounded like raving. Stanley knew that very well. The doctor was a conscientious man of medicine; he would be bound to set in motion machinery that in the end would effect Stanley's imprisonment in an asylum, probably an asylum where the keepers belonged to the enemy. A dangerous trap, a close call.

Stanley pounded up to his car, scrambled into it, and drove off with a squeal of tires. He careered recklessly through the town, fleeing his Furies, knowing in his heart that there was no escape. The beast had too many tentacles, all in innocent disguise; any stranger, any acquaintance, any friend might be a limb of the enemy. Even if he fought back he had no hope of destroying that kind of creature. Suppose he eliminated every agent that The Test revealed, what then? How much does an anthill miss an ant — or a hundred ants?

He skidded to a stop in his usual parking place in front of the Appliance Clinic, quite unaware of how he had come to be there. His mind was still furiously busy with the train of thought he had begun as he ran from the doctor's office. Tentacles were what they were. Tentacles a better metaphor than ants. Chop tentacles, not step on ants. A creature with tentacles had a head. Chop off the head.

Chop off the head.

And suddenly there was a great hush, and peace came to Stanley. He sat quite still behind the wheel as a healing calm lapped and

enveloped him, leaching away the tension and the terror and bringing to him a mindless contentment. There was, after all, something he could do. He could end all this. He could and he would. When the head is killed, the tentacles die.

He never knew how long he sat there, but after the first enormous euphoria had subsided, he began to think reasonably again. He was pleased to discover that his mental processes had received great benefit from his terrible ordeal; his mind moved with cool and well-oiled precision toward the goal that he had somehow failed to see until now. For the first time in many months he had a feeling of confidence and assurance. The direction of his life was once more in his own hands.

It was a new Stanley who finally emerged from the car, a man with a purpose, a man determined to conquer his demons at whatever cost. He walked briskly to the hardware store across the mall, made the purchase of a butcher knife of the best quality, and returned to The Appliance Clinic, where he competently applied a whetstone until the knife had a scalpel edge. Then, with the knife in his hand, he went out of his door and into the door of Dorothy's Kard Shoppe. Dorothy rose from the chair at her little desk and said, "Hello, Stanley."

"This has gone far enough," Stanley said. "You're going to answer some questions." He held up the knife.

"Stanley?" she said.

"Don't stall me, Goddammit, I want an answer. Right now! Who's behind all this?"

"Stanley, I — Stanley, what are you talking about?"

"You don't think you were fooling me, do you? I've been on to you for a long time. *Now you give me the name.*" The knife flashed near her eyes.

"Oh, my God. Please, Stanley, what do you want?"

Her voice and her face were utterly terrified, utterly sincere. For a moment a wisp of doubt sullied the purity of Stanley's resolution. Was it possible that he'd made a mistake? Then he looked into her eyes, and saw in them only scorn and derision. He laid the edge against her throat.

"Tell me now. It's Scranton, isn't it? G. G. Scranton."

She opened her mouth, but only a croak emerged; a croak and a drool of spittle leaking down her chin. But he could see that the eyes still jeered at him, and he sliced powerfully.

At moderate speed it was about a twenty-minute drive from the Kard Shoppe to the new factory, and Stanley drove at moderate speed. There was no need now for frantic haste. He knew precisely what had to be done, and he knew precisely how he would do it. He had suspected Scranton almost from the first, but there hadn't been proof. Now he had that. Dorothy had —

He would not think about Dorothy just now.

He would think about what he was going to say to Scranton. Or need he say anything at all? The knife would say it. The knife would make the speech for him: Scranton, you monster, you've kept me in hell, and that's where I'm going to send you. You are an utter horror, beyond anything the mind can conceive, and I am going to dispose of you as you deserve. I will cut your throat. Cut your throat. I will —

The premises of Consolidated Pipe and Tube came into view, two enormous buildings standing parallel to each other, their ends to the road. Between them was the dome, a concrete hemisphere perhaps fifty feet high, its surface irregularly pocked with enigmatic metal-lined depressions. Across the road was the office building. Stanley parked carefully in a slot marked "Visitors."

The front wall of the lobby was an enormous sheet of glass two stories high, its perfection interrupted only by the steel framework of the door. The glass had been tinted against glare, and the light it admitted was of a curious reddish-brown color. There was no one at the reception desk or elsewhere in the great room as Stanley crossed it, a small figure holding a knife that reflected the autumnal light. He entered the corridor on the left and walked unhurriedly to its end, past many closed doors. The end of the corridor was also a door; it opened into an empty reception room for an executive suite. Three doors led from it. Stanley went without hesitation to the center door and entered.

Entered, and came face-to-face with G. G. Scranton.

G. G. Scranton was tall, slim, elegant, gray at the temples, and beautifully tailored. He said, "Here you are, then, Stanley. Have a seat." He turned and walked without haste to the chair behind the broad desk; he sat, leaned back, crossed his legs, laced his fingers across his chest, and said, "Crazy Stanley Scott. I'm a little surprised that you're still at large. You ought to be in a padded cell by now."

Stanley remained in the doorway, the knife in his hand. His single-minded drive toward the immediate dispatch of Scranton had suddenly and inexplicably vanished, and he was afraid again,

and confused. He looked at the knife and then at Scranton. "I killed Dorothy Barr," he said.

"I know you did, Stanley. It wasn't at all necessary, but I don't suppose it matters greatly at this point. Sit down, please."

Stanley sat. Scranton stared across the desk at the knife. Stanley laid it carefully on the floor and said, "You've got to tell me why."

"Yes, I suppose I do. You're entitled to that. Will you have a cigar?" He pushed a polished humidor toward Stanley, who mutely shook his head. Scranton selected a cigar and made a small ceremony of lighting it with a wooden match, while Stanley watched him with a fixed and fascinated stare. As Scranton waved the fire off the match, Stanley blurted, "You're not human, are you?"

"That's very perspicacious of you, Stanley," Scranton said. "No, I'm not."

"What — " Stanley had to swallow. "What are you, then?"

"That's a little hard to answer. If I gave you the name of my kind, it would only be a meaningless word. I am — like you, I am an intelligent being with a protoplasmic body. My proper and original form is quite different from my present appearance, as you've guessed. I have the useful ability to assume whatever shape I like, within limits. And I have the capacity to perform any number of amazing tricks by direct force of mind. I can, for example, sit here at this desk and keep watch on potential hazards by assuming control of the minds of conveniently located innocent bystanders and using their senses to do my spying." He smiled sardonically, and Stanley thought of Dorothy and Mrs. Biddle and the red-haired man at the dinner.

"There is nothing supernatural about me," Scranton said, "although these things might make me seem so to you. I am a member of a race immeasurably older than yours, evolved along considerably different lines, and my abilities are quite natural. As you surmise, I am not a human being, but I am nonetheless, a fellow-creature, warm-blooded and approximately mammalian."

Stanley found that he had passed beyond fear or incredulity; in a light-headed and dissociated way he was possessed by a ravenous curiosity. "From Outer Space?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, from Outer Space. Very far out. And Outer Time, too, one might say. These things tend to become somewhat intermixed when certain modes of transport are employed."

"Why did you — what are you doing here?"

“What am I doing here? What indeed.” Scranton was silent for a moment. Then he said, “This is what I’ve been doing here, Stanley: I have spent the past ten years taking control of Consolidated Pipe and Tube, for the sole and only purpose of providing the facilities and camouflage for building the apparatus housed in that dome out there. Before that, I spent a couple of centuries manipulating the affairs of your race so that the technology necessary to build it would be developed. That involved two major wars and a host of minor ones, and a space race, and a great many dreary years of slipping ideas into the minds of scientists and engineers and politicians. And before that, before it became clear that the construction of the apparatus had become necessary, I simply lived among the savages. I cannot say that I shall miss you.”

“You mean you’re going to leave?”

“I am going to leave. Quite soon.”

“Well, then, in God’s name, tell me,” Stanley said. “Why me? Why were you hounding me? What could I do to you?”

There might have been something like compassion in Scranton’s voice. “I wasn’t hounding you, Stanley,” he said. “I was watching you, yes. I had to do that. But the terror you suffered, your sense of calamity and doom — I was not causing those. At least not directly. You see something quite terrible is about to happen to the human race. The ultimate catastrophe, in fact. To put it bluntly, mankind has reached the end of its road.”

Stanley believed him. The concept was too big to comprehend immediately, too awful for his mind’s quick acceptance; but he knew Scranton was telling the truth. The beginnings of a host of questions and protests boiled up in his mind and failed of utterance. Scranton went on:

“The catastrophe is inevitable, and it is imminent, and it has cast its shadow before it. You have felt the chill of that shadow, Stanley. Your race has latent within it the ability to use its mind as my race does, and it has as well a buried talent that we do not have: the capacity to send perception along a chord of Time’s circle — to see the future. The very enormousness of the calamity that lies just ahead has forced a reaching across that chord; deep within the subconscious mind of every human being on Earth is the sure knowledge of imminent doom. In a few people it is very near to the surface. You are one of them, Stanley, and the only one unfortunate enough to be here in Wallboro, at the place where the end begins. That’s why I watched

you; there was always the possibility that something specific would break through to you, and you would try to frustrate me. At that point I had no intention of being annoyed by petty obstacles. I watched you to protect my plan.”

“Your plan?” said Stanley.

“Oh, come now, Stanley, don’t pretend you’re surprised. You’ve figured out what the apparatus in the dome is for, haven’t you?”

Stanley realized that he had. He went rigid with shock and horror, staring at Scranton with incredulous eyes. The tableau held for a moment, and then Stanley exploded into furious motion, bending, grasping his knife, leaping for Scranton’s throat. In midleap he was seized by an invisible, irresistible force and slammed to the floor. The knife jerked itself from his hand, hovered in the air for a moment, and then moved in a graceful arc to the desk, where it settled gently. The invisible force plucked Stanley off the floor and deposited him without gentleness in his chair.

Scranton said, “That was pointless.”

Stanley made a frantic effort to get at Scranton; he could not move a muscle. He said in a strangled voice, “You can’t do it!” Scranton did not reply. Stanley’s voice went thin, high, and almost out of control. “But why, *why*? To — to kill all the people — ”

“I’m afraid it’s a little more than that,” Scranton said. “The truth is that that gadget out there is not only going to kill humanity, it is going to eliminate life on Earth entirely, right down to the last bacterium and virus. Earth will be entirely dead, Stanley.”

“*Why*?”

“I am hunted and pursued, Stanley, and I dare not leave clues behind me. My presence here has left ineradicable marks, but a lifeless planet will never even be investigated. It’s simple self-protection. One does what he must when he is in jeopardy. Remember Dorothy Barr.”

Stanley had a terrifying thought. “You’ve done this before, haven’t you?”

“Many times, Stanley, many times.” His face went bleak for a moment. “And I daresay I shall do it many times more.”

“No!” Stanley shouted. “No, sir! It won’t happen! You’ll be stopped! Somebody will stop you!”

“I think not, Stanley. The fact is that it’s already been done. Listen.”

Somewhere near at hand an enormous tension was at that moment released, and a mighty surge of energy was generated and almost instantly quenched. There was no sound, there was not even a vibration; but Stanley could sense the ghostly edge of it, and he knew then, with a cold and desolate certainty, that the unthinkable had taken place. Inside him something stopped. His mind made a few frantic lunges, recognized the futility of it, and opted for numbness. He sat and stared with dull eyes through the tall windows behind Scranton. Night had fallen as they talked, and the unchanging sky was full of stars.

“The end,” Scranton said. “The end, without even a whimper. And only you are left. Here in this room we are in the eye of the storm, as it were, and for the moment you have been spared. It leaves you very much alone, Stanley, more alone than ever a man was before. But I’ll be leaving in a moment, and when I do, the room will no longer be protected. You won’t suffer loneliness long.” He opened a drawer of the desk and removed a device of black metal, about the size of the cigar humidor. “My transportation,” he said. “Is there anything more you’d like to say before I go?”

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The dull eyes shifted to look at him. “Yes,” Stanley’s leaden voice said. “Two questions. Will you tell me what you did that you should be hounded for so long and pursued so far? And who are the pursuers?”

Scranton snapped erect. “Did?” he said indignantly. “What it was that I did?” His face twisted. “I did nothing. *Nothing*. You haven’t understood at all. You think I’m a criminal on the run. Well, you’re wrong, quite wrong.” His air of cool detachment had left him; his voice was aggrieved and resentful now, with an undercurrent of feckless anger. “I’m being hideously persecuted. I’m much more of a victim than you and your grubby kind. I’ve been harassed for no reason for longer than you can imagine. And they never relent, never ease the pressure.”

“You say ‘they,’ ” Stanley said. “Who are ‘they’?” It was important to talk. Talking kept reality at bay.

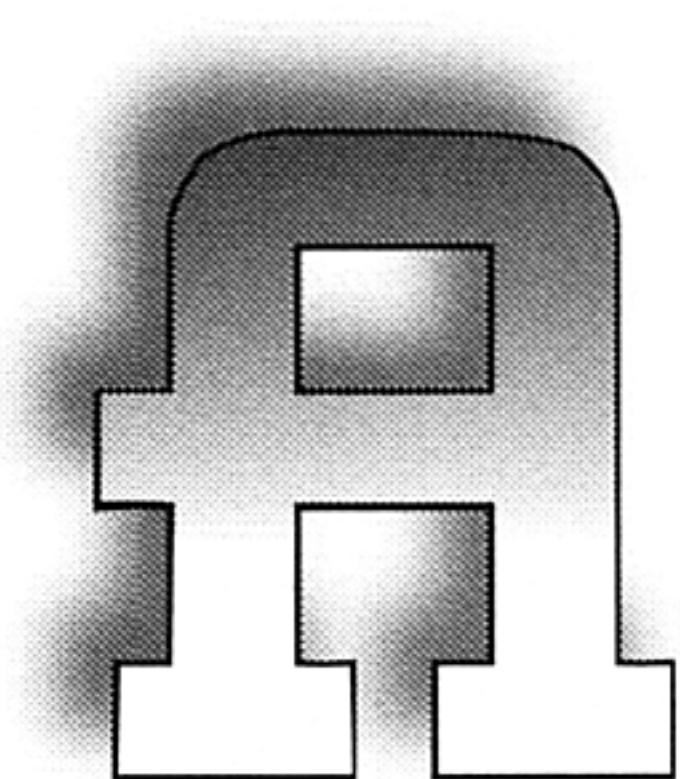
“Enemies,” Scranton said. “Horrible enemies. They never expose themselves, but they’re there, they’re out there somewhere. There’s no way to fight them. That’s why I have to keep running and hiding.” A crafty expression came over his face. “I’m good at that. I know how to cover my tracks. You’ve seen that.” He suddenly became fearful. “But they always get close again. It’s so hard to keep ahead of them. I’m tired.”

“But who?” Stanley said. “Tell me who.”

“I don’t know, you fool, I don’t know. They’re just there, and they hate me, they hate me. They may be watching me now. That’s what they do, you know. They watch me.” He cast an apprehensive glance over his shoulder at the window. “Somewhere they’re watching. Some day they’ll pounce. It’s not fair. It’s not *fair*.”

The mad eyes met Stanley’s in a mute appeal for sympathy and understanding. Outside in the night a breeze had risen and made familiar noises against the windowpane.

THE PILGRIMAGE OF CLIFFORD M.



number of colleagues have suggested that my paper on the case of Clifford M. might well be of interest to the general public if it were recast in language less technical than that of the original. What follows is an attempt to accomplish such a revision. I have expanded the paper in one respect, by giving a brief summary of biological information that did not have to be set out for the original audience, and pruned it in others, chiefly by omitting graphs and tables and conclusions that are of interest only to the specialist.

For an understanding of the case of Clifford M., it is necessary, first of all, to be aware of the natural processes involved in the reproduction of these creatures. There is a widespread belief that vampires create others of their kind by forcing a human being to ingest vampire blood, thus ensuring that after the human has died of the vampire's leeching, he will rise again as a vampire. Such a belief is sheer superstition. Those who die of a vampire's depredations are permanently dead, and, in any case, vampires are mammals — of a sort — and they are born as other mammals are born. With, of course, certain differences.

Vampires bring forth young at intervals of approximately two centuries, and the young are born in litters numbering from eight to twelve. The female has ten breasts, and if the litter numbers more than ten, those pups must perish who lose in the struggle to obtain one of the dugs. If you are at all acquainted with the canonical literature, you will recall that no one has ever seen an adult vampire without clothing. The reason is that since vampires customarily masquerade as human beings, the female vampire's extra breasts (as well as certain oddities of the male genitalia) must be kept hidden. In recent years there have appeared some popular apocrypha in which vampires disport sexually with human beings

in a more or less normal manner. Such connections are of course quite impossible, and writings describing them are pure works of the imagination.

The gestation period of the vampire has not been fixed with accuracy, but it is almost certainly a very long one, possibly as much as a decade. The young are very tiny at birth, weighing, as a rule, no more than half a pound, and they bear little resemblance to the adult creature. They resemble, as a matter of fact, tadpoles with rudimentary limbs, or perhaps fetuses. (There is a theory, with a certain amount of evidence to sustain it, that the remote ancestors of vampires were marsupials.) The most noticeable feature of these vampire pups is their teeth. They are born fully dentate, and at first glance a newborn pup appears to be all mouth. After they are born they wriggle to a teat and attach themselves to it by means of those extraordinary teeth, and there they remain for a period of two years or more, during which time the dam is nourished by human blood carried to her by one of the males, which may or may not be the sire of the litter. This nourishment is fed her by the same method that birds use to feed their young, a procedure that requires a strong stomach to contemplate. It is worth noting that throughout the time she is suckling the young, the female feeds entirely on human blood, although under ordinary circumstances the vampire requires a human victim for only one feeding out of each dozen or so, and can utilize almost any warm-blooded creature for the remainder of its diet.

Newly weaned pups also are fed on pure human blood for a time. The weaning is sudden and summary: the mother simply pries their mouths open and separates them from herself. She does this very carefully, because upon separation from the teat the savage little mouths begin to snap viciously, in a reflex action. An insensible human being is furnished for these occasions, and the mother places the snapping infants, one by one, upon this unconscious victim. The reflex causes the jaws to bite, and when there is flesh for the jaws to close upon, a further reflex causes the pups to begin to suck. For the first time they taste fresh human blood, and they are thenceforth doomed to a periodic need of it.

The pups at this stage of their development still have disproportionately large heads, and mouths that are disproportionately large even for those heads. Their limbs are by now almost fully developed, but their muscular coordination is poor, and they are, except for the powerful jaws and ferocious teeth, almost helpless. At this age they are covered by coarse black hair, which

they will lose by their fifteenth or sixteenth year, except for that on the head. (Male vampires have no facial hair. Stoker gives Dracula a moustache, but this is only one of many errors in Stoker's work.)

Once the pups are weaned, the female begins to join the males in the hunt, and each night the young are left to themselves until, at some time prior to sunup, one or another of the elders returns to bring them nourishment. The pups are not subject to the coma that claims full-grown vampires between daybreak and sunset, but they tend to be lethargic during those hours, and the tendency increases as they grow older. The ability to assume the form of a bat, or of dust motes, appears to be a skill that is not learned until adolescence or later. The age at which adolescence customarily occurs has not at this time been precisely determined.

Our earliest glimpse of Clifford M. comes from a packet of half-literate letters written in the 1880s by a young woman named Dulcie Fimber to her affianced husband. Both of these young people were from Comber County, a mountainous jurisdiction located near the point where Virginia, Tennessee, and Kentucky come together; but the young man had gone off to work in the mines for a year to earn enough money to furnish a cabin for his bride, and Dulcie, who still lived at home with her parents and a sizable clutch of younger brothers and sisters, wrote him weekly.

The references in these letters to "Ossie's monkey" are almost certainly about Clifford M. Ossie Fimber was Dulcie's brother, a boy of fourteen or fifteen at the time of her writing. By filling some gaps in the story sketched in the letters, and by making a few inferences, we can arrive at an account of the circumstances of the discovery of Clifford M. that cannot fail to be very close to the facts.

Young Ossie was a wanderer and an excellent hunter. From the age of eleven it had been his habit to take his rifle and disappear into the steep forest for days at a time, always bringing home substantial quantities of game for the family table. As he grew older, his absences became longer, and the range of his wanderings increased, so that the cave he discovered may have been as far as fifty miles from the parental cabin. He found himself one day being soaked by a prodigious rainstorm, and took shelter under a rock ledge. At the back of it was a low opening into which he poked his head and shoulders and satisfied himself it was a cave. He made note of its location, and on his return trip he undertook to explore his discovery.

It was not a complex or dangerous cavern, at least at the depth to which he penetrated. That was not, however, a great distance, because

when he discovered the creatures he went no farther. He was inching down a slight slope with his resinous chunk of pine redly and smokily lighting his way, when he saw the eyes to his right, close at hand, like a bank of glowing coals. He recoiled and then froze. The eyes did not move. There were eight pairs of them, or nine. He advanced his torch a foot or so. Still no movement. He edged forward until the faces were illuminated, and then froze again, staring.

He was a mountain boy, and a hunter, and there were things he knew by instinct. He was aware at once that these things were some sort of cubs or pups, and where litters of young were found, the mother was likely to be nearby, ready to attack to defend her get. He was very curious about these creatures — he had never seen anything like them — but there was danger here. He began cautiously to move backward, and as he did so, the eight or nine sets of feral teeth that had confronted him in the torchlight all began to snap, making a frightening loud noise in the narrow confines of the cave. Then he saw with horror that they were crawling out of the niche where they had been huddled together, and were moving toward him. They moved in an ill-coordinated and inefficient way, but the small red eyes were pitiless, and the evil pointed teeth snapped with hot rapacity, and the clumsy forward movement betokened, he thought, a mindless determination to devour his flesh.

He backed off hastily, and they followed, wallowing along the rocky floor and emitting little moaning noises of greed. His retreat reached a spot where the passage widened and the ceiling rose sufficiently for him to stand. He stared at them from his full height, and as he did so he was suddenly swept by a powerful wave of disgust and revulsion and rage. He dropped his torch, reversed the rifle, and began to pound at them with the butt, caught up in a frenzy of loathing. He never afterward knew how long he pounded them, but when his frenzy had passed there was no movement on the floor of the cave. He remembered the mother then, and he grabbed his torch and plunged into the passage that led to the outside.

The passage was low and narrow, compelling him to eel along on his belly, and there was no way for him to look back when he became aware that something was dragging at his heel. He could only squirm along at the best speed he could manage, whimpering and expecting great teeth to close upon his hindquarters at any moment.

He burst out of the cave into a blinding glare of noontime sunlight and instantly whirled to look at the mouth of the cave. Nothing emerged. He let out his breath in a great sigh of relief, and as he did so he realized suddenly that the drag at his heel was still there. He

looked down. One of the creatures had locked its teeth in the heel of his boot, and was futilely trying to suck nourishment from the hard leather. It had curled into a ball in the bright sunlight, and its eyes were squeezed shut, but the teeth remained fixed. The thing was about two feet long; it was entirely covered with hair and had four spidery limbs, two of them obviously arms. Shuddering, Ossie kicked off his boot. The creature remained clamped to it, still curled up in its ball.

Ossie now had a problem: it was imperative that he put distance between himself and the cave as quickly as possible, because the mother was likely to turn up at any moment; but there was no possibility at all that he could make the long walk home without his boot, and he did not quite see how he was going to recover it. He had a healthy respect for teeth that could sink themselves to the gum line in the rocklike leather of a bootheel.

He had with him a tough canvas bag for carrying small game, and it occurred to him that the bag might protect his hands while he dragged the thing off his boot. He hastily dumped out the squirrels and rabbits he was carrying home, and began to puzzle out the best method of folding the bag for purposes of grasping the creature.

One of the squirrels had fallen near the boot, and with a movement almost too fast to be seen the teeth released the bootheel and snapped into the squirrel. Then the creature became as still as before. Ossie put on his boot, shoved his game into the bag, and then, moved by impulse, took a stick and lifted the pup, squirrel and all, and dumped it into the bag. If it turned mean, it could easily be clubbed to death through the bag, and if it remained inert, he could study it at his leisure at home. He walked all night, and it is probably as well that he did so, since at sunset the adult vampires must have awakened and discovered their dead children.

There was a cage at the cabin, used from time to time to confine captured raccoons, and Ossie dumped the entire contents of his bag into it and hastily closed and fastened the door. His captive had transferred its bite to one of the rabbits. Two of the squirrels were only bones. From the time of weaning vampires can digest meat, and indeed it constitutes the major part of their diet until adolescence, after which they must subsist entirely on blood, although it need not be human blood at every feeding.

That cage was Clifford M.'s home for a number of years. There is extant a clipping from the weekly paper then published at the county seat, bearing a date full five years after Dulcie first mentioned "Ossie's

monkey.” This newspaper story is headed, “A strange animal at the Fimber farm,” and it describes Ossie’s captive as “evidently some sort of ape or monkey.” It is apparent from this report that Clifford M. was at that time beginning to lose his hairy coat, and that the intimidating baby teeth were being replaced by adult teeth, which are indistinguishable from human dentition to the casual eye. We may conclude from this that he was probably around fifteen years old, and his size at the time, as described in the newspaper (“about as large as a five-year-old child”), confirms this estimate.

Shortly after the appearance of this newspaper story, Clifford M. made his escape, after taking the life of his first human victim. Early one morning Ossie’s father found the lifeless, drained body of his son lying beside the open, empty cage, and at this point we lose sight of Clifford M. for something more than seven years. It is, however, made clear by subsequent events that he was simply a wild animal during those years, ranging through the dark Appalachian forest, living on the meat of small creatures, and from time to time — there is, of course, no way to determine how often — draining a human being of the blood that was necessary for his survival.

In 1906 a book titled *The Wild Boy of Johnson County* was published (New York: Thomas Collier’s Sons), and in 1958 there was a second edition from the same firm, retitled *Harry, an American Feral Child*. This book, by the Reverend Llewellyn Crockett, is an account of the winning over to human behavior of a child who had been, as it was thought, reared either by wild animals, or altogether by himself.

A party of hunters, camping in the woods in the autumn of 1898, captured the wild boy as he was bent over one of the sleeping men for a purpose they were unable to fathom, but that is of course plain to us. They were forced to bind him to ensure their own safety, after which they carried him to Lexington and turned him over to the authorities. The Reverend Mr. Crockett, rector of St. Mark’s in that city, who had been trained as an educator before he took holy orders, saw in the beastly waif an opportunity both to do the Lord’s work and to put into practice his theories of pedagogy. He had no trouble persuading the authorities to turn the boy over to him, and he took him off to the rectory.

According to Crockett’s account, the boy possessed a high native intelligence, and very quickly learned to wear clothes and to talk. Crockett named him Harry, for no reason that he left a record of. The Crocketts were childless, but it does not appear from the book that they ever felt any genuine affection for Harry, and indeed it takes very

little reading between the lines to infer that despite themselves they found the boy's presence to be distasteful. From our vantage point, we can discern the reason, and praise their perception, but it is clear that they flagellated themselves for their unchristian feelings.

The Crocketts guessed his age to be ten or eleven when they took him in, but in fact he was probably twenty-three or twenty-four, which would have made him thirty or so at the time he once more disappeared. At that time these good people believed him to be seventeen or eighteen, and the book repeatedly observes that he appeared to be even younger than that.

But his seven years with the Crocketts did educate him very well, for the time and place. After three years of private tuition at the rectory, Father Crockett entered him at the grade school, which within a couple of months concluded that it had nothing to teach him, and passed him on to the high school, where he unquestionably would have been graduated as valedictorian, if he had not killed Mrs. Crockett and disappeared a month before graduation day. His education in manners, poise, dress, and other worldly matters was no less successful, and it appears that everyone he met found him to be a most admirable, if not (when you came right down to it) very likable, young man. Those who knew where he had come from viewed him as a highly remarkable freak, a judgment that in fact came much closer to the truth, and was, as we shall see, how he saw himself.

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He left behind him in Lexington a brokenhearted old man and the exsanguinated corpse of a good woman who had tried to behave like a mother to him. He took with him his clothes, ninety-seven dollars stolen from the desk in the rectory study, and a conviction that he was different from everybody else in a great many ways.

Because he did not know what he was, you see. His memories (as we know from the journal now in Dr. Burbank's possession) began in the cage at the Fimber farm, and those early memories were the merest flashes. He could not remember that he had once been as hairy as a monkey and had teeth as ugly as a shark's. He thought he was a human being, and believed he was a freak. When puberty came, and his genitals changed, he was obviously and blatantly a freak, and his mental processes began to be those of a predator.

But he did not reach puberty for at least another eleven years. We can be reasonably sure of this because he was graduated from Harvard in 1916, which could not have happened unless he attended classes. After puberty a vampire must lie comatose during the daylight

hours, and university classes are a daytime pursuit; so it must have been at some time after June 1916 that he reached adulthood and became prey to certain imperious needs that quite obviously had no chance of fulfillment, needs that were even stronger than his periodic, altogether irresistible urge to drink human blood. After puberty he recognized himself for a monster, and that was when he undertook to create for himself a way of life that would — he hoped — make it possible to satisfy his needs.

We know nothing of his activities during the five years that followed his flight from Lexington, except that they somehow brought him some money. Our next actual sight of him is in 1910, when he registered as a freshman at Corinthia College, a small sectarian institution in Fowler, Illinois. He registered as Clifford M., which was, as far as we know, his first use of the name he was to use thenceforth. He provided spurious information about his previous life and education, but he had ready cash for the tuition fees, something very rare in the experience of the bursar of Corinthia College, and his credentials went unexamined.

It is apparent that Corinthia was only a means to an end; he left after two years, carrying with him glowing letters of recommendation and a commendable record of his studies; and with these he achieved matriculation at Harvard. He entered as a freshman, remained for the usual four years, and was graduated, cum laude, in 1916.

There is one curious circumstance in his Harvard years: his arrival had been preceded by letters to the ladies of Boston from Mrs. Gaines Sturdevant of Richmond, a lady of the very highest connections, and Clifford M. found in his mailbox as many invitations to the social events of the fall and winter as any freshman at Harvard. We shall never know how he prevailed upon Mrs. Sturdevant to write these letters — or even how he met her — but two of these letters have been discovered. The parts of them that are of interest here are identical, and give a highly romantic, and of course wholly fictitious, account of Clifford M.'s background and family. It appears that these letters were plausible enough to persuade the mothers of Boston debutantes that Clifford M. would be a good catch. Obviously, he never pursued such opportunities.

We must at this point pause to consider just what it was that he was up to. Why Harvard? What was the purpose of the devious entry into Society? What plans had he laid?

Reflection upon these questions, in light of present knowledge of his subsequent actions, leads to the conclusion that he was concerned solely with making acquaintances who could further his

plan to acquire a fortune. Upon graduation he immediately found employment in a prestigious Wall Street brokerage house, a post he could never have achieved without “connections,” and he was immediately taken under the wing of the senior partner, who was pleased to teach him the tricks of the trade. He remained with the firm for two years, and then suddenly resigned, and at that time he began to acquire a reputation in New York as an eccentric. We may assume that he became an adult about then, and was thenceforth comatose during the daylight hours. Thereafter his Wall Street career was managed solely by correspondence, undoubtedly because he was always unconscious during the hours the stock exchange was open.

He achieved a brilliant success, however, and by 1922 he had amassed a truly large fortune by speculation. He then retired, and removed himself to an ugly large house in the anthracite regions of Pennsylvania, which he purchased from the estate of a deceased coal baron. At this time he began the quest that was to occupy him for the next sixty years.

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It is clear that at some point between the Harvard years and his retirement from business he began to suspect his true nature. Records in the files of the Saltzman bookstore in Greenwich Village, very kindly made accessible by Mr. David Saltzman, show that Mr. Saltzman’s father, the then proprietor, corresponded regularly with Clifford M., and that Clifford M. commissioned the elder Mr. Saltzman to scour the book world for volumes relating to vampirism, lycanthropy, and kindred occult matters. Through study of these books Clifford M. was able to arrive at an explanation of his strange impulses and curious history, and at an acceptance of the fact that he was not a human being, but another kind of creature — most probably a vampire.

For a time he kept a journal recounting the measures he was taking and the invariable failure of his efforts. This journal was discovered by, and is now in the possession of, Dr. E. M. Burbank of the Grailing Foundation, and is available for examination by qualified scholars. We discover from the journal that Clifford M. subscribed to every newspaper published in the United States and Canada, and employed a considerable number of people — retired schoolteachers for the most part — to read all of these papers carefully and to clip any matter relating to inexplicable deaths and disappearances under certain circumstances. He placed in charge of the office where these people worked an alert young man named Robertson, to whom he confided that he believed in vampires and

werewolves (he added astrology, theosophy, and vegetarianism for verisimilitude) and that he was seeking proof of their existence. Robertson, knowing the purpose of the search, was able to select from the sea of clippings those items offering hope, and to dispatch private detectives to make a preliminary investigation of the occasional likely occurrence. Robertson also stayed in touch with Saltzman, in a continuing search for books that bore on the matter, and kept a number of graduate students in pocket money by commissioning work in the great libraries.

During the first ten years of the search, there were seven incidents that seemed to Clifford M. to be worthy of investigation, but all of them proved, in the end, to be ordinary murders or suicides or kidnappings. The twenty years following were the years of the Great Depression and the Second World War, with great numbers of people in restless movement in novel patterns, and the incidence of cases requiring his attention increased; but again nothing was found. Robertson had by now contrived a pipeline into the national network by which police departments exchange information, and during the fifties and sixties the number of likely prospects went up to several per year, although the number of successes remained at zero.

Clifford M. was by this time frequently tempted to give up his search, almost persuaded that his conviction that he was a vampire was nothing more than the delusion of a lunatic. The loss of consciousness during the daylight hours might be only a symptom of an illness, he thought, and his strange organs of reproduction nothing more than a mistake of nature, and his terrible need of blood just criminal insanity. But these thoughts would not stand up under scrutiny. He recognized that the other imperative need that he felt, a need fully as powerful as his craving for blood but quite impossible to satisfy, was simple lust; but lust for whom, for what? Not any woman that he had ever met; not any man or child or beast. This most urgent drive was toward a female of his own kind. And he had to find her. Life would sooner or later become altogether unbearable otherwise.

This exposition of Clifford M.'s thoughts is not invention; it is taken from his entry in the Burbank journal for June 3, 1972. This was, as it happens, the last entry save one (dated August 7, 1972). At that point he either gave up the journal or began to keep it in a different form. If he did so, the later entries have not been found.

From various sources we can put together a fairly complete picture of the way Clifford M. was living at this time. We must remember,

first of all, that he lay in a coma each day from sunrise to sunset, so that his life was lived entirely at night. Remember also that his castlelike house stood in an isolated spot several miles from the dingy small town where Robertson maintained his office. The house was not visible from any road, and the only visitor who ever came there was Robertson, who once a week appeared an hour after sunset to make his report.

Robertson was in his seventies by now, and had spent more than fifty years in the employ of Clifford M. He had been very well paid, but no doubt he sometimes had night thoughts about the value of a lifetime spent gathering pointless data for a rich monomaniac. He had become very skilled in separating the wheat from the chaff of the clippings, so that by this time he seldom had anything to show his master on the occasion of his weekly visits; but when he did bring something, Clifford M. invariably found it to be worthy of further investigation.

If our calculations are correct, Clifford M. was, in the mid-1970s, about a century old. He appeared to be in his middle thirties, a handsome, pale man with jet-black hair and eyes, slim and athletic. He wore conservatively cut, expensive clothing that never fit exactly right, because he bought it by mail. He kept two servants, a couple now elderly, peasant immigrants from some Balkan mountainside. This pair had a very good idea of Clifford M.'s true nature, and they catered to his nocturnal habits and bizarre quotidian diet without apparent qualms. They were putting by a good deal of money.

He kept a car, a specially built dependable vehicle capable of high speeds, disguised by the nondescript body of an aging car of medium price. Monthly, or perhaps a little oftener, he would drive off after sunset and return shortly before dawn, having obtained the necessary human blood once more. He was prudent and foresighted in these forays, never taking so much blood from one victim as to cause death, or even symptoms serious enough to send the victim to the doctor. His hunting ground was a circle with a radius of about a hundred miles, centered on his house.

During those years he also made sixty or seventy longer journeys, to various parts of the country (and four times to Canada and once to Mexico) to follow up investigations that had uncovered a possibility of the presence of vampires. These trips required a careful preparation, to ensure that there was a secure place for him to sleep each day, both on the road and at his destination. Robertson acted as advance man for these expeditions, arranging for a day's use of a vacant house at each stage of the journey, and renting a house under a regular lease

agreement at the destination. The Balkan couple would accompany Clifford M. in the car, sleeping in the back seat as he drove through the night, and during the day standing guard as he slept. On none of these complicated safaris did he find what he was seeking.

Until the last one, of course. And that one, as it happened, was only at a distance of a single night's driving, off in the western part of the state in the pleasant small city of Sturkeyville. An examination of the files of the *Herald* newspaper of that city makes it possible to determine almost precisely the events that alerted first Robertson and then Clifford M.: a rising incidence of an inexplicable malady among the inhabitants of the county, and then, after a time, deaths and disappearances. Robertson went ahead, as usual, and found a derelict house to rent; Clifford M. and the servants followed soon after.

It is necessary now to turn away for a moment from our scrutiny of Clifford M., and to examine the situation in Sturkeyville at the time of his arrival. There is no need for any sort of conjecture here, for we have the direct testimony of the three chief human participants in the events that followed Clifford M.'s success in his long quest. The three are Blanche Tolliver, Edmond Hodge, and Frank Polder, who are, respectively, a physician, an industrialist, and the principal of East High School. Blanche Tolliver took over her father's practice in 1958, and she practices much as he did; that is, she makes house calls at any hour of the day or night, knows all her patients well, and never presses for the payment of bills. She and Edmond Hodge have been lovers for the past twenty years; they cannot marry because Hodge's wife is still alive in the mental asylum where she has been confined for a quarter of a century. Hodge is one of the heirs to the Hodge Brothers Foundry, the city's chief industry. Frank Polder is his cousin. The three have been friends since childhood.

They became involved in the case of Clifford M. because Blanche, whose practice extends to fairly remote sections of the county, began to believe that a new disease had come to the area, a disease with symptoms identical to those indicating a loss of blood, but which she found in persons without wounds or internal bleeding. It was a little time before she spotted the puncture marks on the throat of one of the sufferers, and a while longer before she found a second set and began to make a connection. After that she looked for, and found, the punctures wherever she found the symptoms, whereupon she canvassed earlier patients, and learned that they, too, had had such marks, which, however, soon healed without a scar.

She and Hodge have for many years had the habit of discussing their work with each other, and Hodge thought her account of the new disease interesting enough to mention it to Polder, who immediately reacted as one would have expected the other two to have done: "Dracula!" he said. They laughed.

But there were more cases, and then a woman died, and shortly thereafter two children; the woman's autopsy showed that she had indeed lost most of her blood. The three of them talked about it over dinner one night, and as they talked Polder's jest began to seem not very funny, after all. Before the evening was over, it was decided that Polder, who had some time to spare just then — it was July, and preparations for the fall term were still moving at a leisurely pace — would spend a week or two interviewing Blanche's patients and seeking unreported incidents.

Two weeks later, they met again. Polder said, "Somebody's doing it, all right, sucking blood. About half of these people have kind of a memory — or a dream — of somebody starting to do it, or approaching to do it. Everything's pretty confused, and they all think it *was* only a dream. But twenty-three people couldn't have such similar dreams, with the same characters in it. We're looking for a man and a woman, or two men and a woman. And get this: they're hillbillies. That's something that turns up in all the stories. Dreamlike and hazy though it is, one memory stayed with them all: a man in dirty bib overalls, a greasy black felt hat, and clodhopper shoes; and with him a partner, either another man dressed the same way, or a woman in a filthy gingham dress wearing sneakers and red ankle socks. The description turned up over and over, and half the people I talked to called them mountain people or hillbillies. I think we ought to call the police now."

"I suppose so," Hodge said, "but it'll be hard to make a case against them, if the victims think they were dreaming, and the wounds have healed up. But they have to be stopped. At least it's kind of a relief to learn that they're just criminal lunatics. It's better than believing in vampires."

"I think I *do* believe in them," Blanche said. "I think these *are* vampires."

"But you heard the descriptions, Blanche."

"And why shouldn't those be descriptions of vampires? Can you tell me what a vampire looks like? Why not a hillbilly? A vampire's protection is his resemblance to human beings, if the stories have any truth in them. And they live to be extremely old. Imagine a vampire

two hundred years ago, living somewhere back up in the mountains. What kind of people would he look like, act like? Mountain people, of course. Does a vampire have to look like Bela Lugosi? Would an Appalachian vampire wear evening clothes?”

The two men thought about that. After a time Polder said, “I think you’re right. The way those people talked about their ‘dreams’ — they had a sense of something extraordinary, something they couldn’t describe, something that was even more terrifying than a bloodthirsty madman. All in their dreams, of course.”

“That’s another thing,” Blanche said, “that feeling they all had that it was a dream. They’d remember, all right, if they were attacked by blood-sucking crazies.”

“All right, then, say it’s true, say they’re vampires,” Hodge said. “What do we do now?”

“Call the police,” Polder said. And almost immediately added, “And they’ll lock us up in the booby hatch.”

“Yes,” Blanche said. “Why don’t we see if we can find them ourselves, catch them in the act, or something?”

“Why not?” Hodge said. “It’s probably dangerous, and we haven’t the least idea how to go about it, and in the end they’ll turn out to be plain murderous maniacs, if they exist at all. Sure, let’s go.”

They began with a map of the county and the dates and locations of Blanche’s cases and the cases of other physicians, who cooperated with her in a rather puzzled way. These data were entered on the map, and Polder undertook a fresh round of interrogation, quizzing families living in the vicinity of dots on the map; he uncovered a dozen cases of people who had never taken the problem to a doctor, but who had nonetheless recovered.

They ended with seventy-eight instances of deprivation of blood, spread over a period of thirteen months. They arbitrarily selected calendar months as a database, and drew lines connecting the dots for all cases that occurred within a given month. They ended with a picture not unlike a topographer’s contour map of a fairly symmetrical mountain peak.

“Circles,” Hodge said. “Concentric, damn near. And the smallest one’s dated a year ago in May. That’s the earliest.”

“That probably means they started fairly close to home, and moved out farther as time passed,” Blanche said.

“It doesn’t make sense,” Hodge said. “I thought those things lived practically forever. Why would they start drinking blood just thirteen months ago? What have they been doing all these years?”

“Maybe they just moved here. I suppose they can move from place to place, just like people.”

“Maybe so. Where’s the center? Where’s home?”

“Dobie’s Store.”

Dobie’s Store is a junction of three mountain roads. A general store and blacksmith shop had flourished there in the days when the roads were too primitive to accommodate automobiles, but today it is only an uninhabited collection of tumbledown buildings. Within a mile or so there are three or four abandoned houses, all but one of which have fallen down, and are nothing more than piles of rotting boards. The remaining house, the old Sharpless place, is a roofless set of stone walls in the middle of a dead apple orchard.

“It’s appropriate,” Blanche said. “What do we do now?”

“Why, we find ’em,” Hodge said. “Find ’em and — ” He stopped.

“That’s it,” Polder said. “If we find them, what will we do?”

They stared at each other. Blanche said, “It seems simple enough to me. If they are . . . what we think they are, we give them the wooden stake treatment.”

“And if they’re not?”

“Then we’re in trouble. I don’t think we’re up to handling three homicidal maniacs.”

“If we spot them in the daylight, we’ll know they’re just loonies, and call the sheriff,” Hodge said. “Now, how are we going to go about flushing them?”

They discussed it until late at night, without agreeing on a plan; and the next evening Clifford M. called on Blanche, who was fascinated by what he had to say. She called her two partners, and before the night was over they had agreed on what was to be done.

Clifford M. was suave, diplomatic, and persuasive; he continued to leave with the trio an impression that here was a rich man of laudable character and high intelligence, who happened to have an eccentric conviction that vampires did in fact exist, and who spent his time and money hunting for them. Since that conviction was rapidly becoming their own, they welcomed his advent and offer of cooperation. He described to them, accurately enough, his clipping bureau and the criteria he had developed for sifting clues out of the raw data, and how this method had led him to Blanche. He hoped that they would permit him to join their search. The discovery and dispatch of these unnatural felons would at last vindicate him and reveal to the whole world that his tenacious belief that these creatures existed was not after all a laughable delusion, but simple truth.

He was pretty much of a night owl, he said, and he had made a lifelong study of vampirism, and he possessed a very fine night telescope. He proposed that he undertake night observation of the area they had so cleverly located, and that the two men, who were avid hunters and represented themselves to be capable outdoorsmen, should arm themselves and make a thorough search of the area during the daylight hours. All agreed that it was a practical scheme.

And now this account must abandon for a space its restriction to matters that are fully documented, and indulge in certain inferences and inventions. All of the undocumented material in what follows is based upon established, verifiable facts, and if what is recounted is not precisely and in every detail an accurate account, it most certainly captures the tenor of these events; they must necessarily have been very close to what is here set down.

For this much, at least, we have sworn testimony: for three days Hodge and Polder, bravely turned out in red caps and jackets, carrying shotguns and wearing sidearms, searched Dobie's Store and the forest round about without success. Each evening after their return to town, they met with Blanche and Clifford M. (no one had yet taken notice that they saw him only after sundown) and reported their failure. Clifford M. would then give an account of his efforts of the previous night — also reporting no luck — and the hunters would retire to a well-earned night's sleep, while Clifford M. was, presumably, back up the mountain, searching with his night glass for vampires.

On the third evening Clifford M. did not appear for the meeting, and the next morning Hodge and Polder went to the house he had rented. Clifford M.'s car was gone, and the house was empty, but taped to the front door was an envelope addressed to "Dr. Tolliver." They immediately took it to Blanche, who read the note to them: "They are under the old Sharpless house, and there are four, not three. Use the stakes."

Another letter to Blanche from Clifford M., delivered to her by Robertson after the whole thing was over, tells what Clifford M. was actually doing on those warm July nights. It gives only a skeleton, however, and this account will somewhat flesh out that skeleton; the reader should, from time to time, supply for himself such formulations as "it may be supposed . . ." and "it is reasonable to assume that . . ."

It is plain that the work done by Tolliver, Hodge and Polder was a great help to Clifford M., and saved him a good deal of time. They

had very competently narrowed the area to be searched, so that he was able to spot his quarry on the first night he went to Dobie's Store. He had parked his car a couple of miles from the road junction and proceeded on foot from that point. He believed that he had the ability to transform himself into a bat, but he did not know how to go about it; he had concluded that the technique of such transformation was something taught to the young by their elders, and he had had no one to teach him. So he walked, padding silently along the dusty road, sniffing as he went. He was not sure that he would recognize fellow vampires when he met them, but he hoped that he had been born with some instinct that would make the identification, and he had an idea that his sense of smell might trigger the operation of the instinct.

That turned out to be correct. When the breeze brought him a whiff of the smell, he knew with perfect certainty that he had found them. What he had not expected was the kind of smell it was: an appalling, monstrous horror of a smell, a stink so abominable that for the first time in his century of life he experienced nausea. It was an odor of rotting flesh and mold and decay, of feces and ancient confined uncleanness, the authentic odor of evil. He was stricken suddenly with apprehension and fear. Was he one of *these*?

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He veered from the road and followed his nose toward the source of the stink. In a little while he saw them, three pale faces floating in the shadow the stone cast in the moonlight. Apparently they recognized him for what he was; they made no move either to flee or attack.

Now it is perhaps succumbing to the pathetic fallacy to ascribe human emotions to a vampire, but it does appear that at this point he felt a certain diffidence and shyness. This changed to fastidious dismay when he approached and saw them clearly. He was quite aware that he was seeing them with eyes conditioned by human ideas and standards, and that he should, in justice, judge them otherwise; but what he saw seemed to fit only too well with their disgusting reek. They were dirty, indescribably dirty, caked with the filth of decades, the ragged rustic clothing stiff with a thousand drooled spillages of blood, the pale skin ingrained with dirt, the hair and clothing spread with crumbs of earth and clots of mud. The thick, horny nails of their hands were long and black.

One of the males spoke. The language was not only incomprehensible to Clifford M., it sounded like no language he had ever heard before. He said, "I don't understand. Do you speak English?"

“Sure. ’Course. Who you? Hah come ya don’t talk — ?” He used another incomprehensible word.

“I was raised by — with — people,” Clifford M. said. “I never heard it before.”

“Where the rest o’ ya?”

“There aren’t any others. I’m alone. That’s why I wanted to find you.”

There was a silence. The scarecrows looked at each other and then at him again. Dim minds were struggling with something new. Finally, the male said, “No others?”

“No,” Clifford M. said.

“We don’t know of no others, neither. We been a-huntin’ a long time fer some. I guess we uns is all they is.”

It was a nasty blow. He realized then how much he had hoped to find a clandestine community of some sort, and . . . what? A female, certainly, and perhaps companionship. But with these things — ?

The male said, “You et yet?”

“Uh, no. Not tonight.”

“Come on, then. Them two’ll go north, we uns south.”

The other two were suddenly gone in a black sweep of great bat wings. Clifford M. said, “I can’t do that. I don’t know how. I’ll wait for you here. I ate last night.”

They came back about an hour before dawn, replete and logy. The male said, “Hole’s just big enough fer us. You got a sleep hole?”

“Yes,” Clifford M. said. “I suppose I’d better go now.”

For the first time the female spoke: “You want a piece ’fore you go?” She had hiked the dress up to her waist.

Here it was, then: the object of his long search. He looked at the filth that covered her, and smelled the smell of her, and the lust of sixty years was suddenly gone, shriveled by a fierce disgust. “No,” he said. “No. Not tonight.”

She spoke to the others in the strange language. One of them grunted, turned away, and passed through the doorless doorway into the blackness between the walls. The other took her quickly and roughly, a swift animal coupling, without speech or tenderness. They rose and disappeared through the doorway without speaking further to Clifford M. He turned and walked slowly back to his car.

The next night he hunted on his own, and fed before midnight. He went back to the roofless house then, and found them sitting

beside the wall, silent and motionless. They would not feed tonight, nor for several nights more. There was time now to talk to them, to learn about them — and about himself. He said, “What are your names?”

There was a silence. After a time the female said, “We got names.”

“Yes,” he said. “What are they?”

Again silence. Then one of the males: “I don’t just remember. No matter.” And the other male: “No matter.”

Clifford M. tried again: “How old are you?”

Silence. Then: “Old.”

“But how old?”

“Don’t rightly know.”

“What’s the first thing you remember?”

A very long silence. At last the female said, “That there baby that the telephone woke up. I had to git out.”

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“They wake up sometimes,” one of the males said.

“Don’t you remember anything earlier? Before there were any telephones, maybe? Do you remember any wars, say, or who was president?”

“Guess not. Don’t rightly understand what you mean.”

He tried another tack: “How long have you been . . . sleeping here?”

“Not long.”

“Where did you come from? Why did you leave? Why did you pick this place?”

They could scarcely handle one question, let alone three. None of them ventured a reply. He said, “Did you ever live in a real house, instead of a hole?” He could visualize them in their daytime coma, squeezed together in a reeking lump at the end of their wet burrow under the wall.

Surprisingly, the female said, “We had a table with a cloth on it an’ shiny dishes an’ real wax candles.”

“Yes,” Clifford M. said. “Go on.”

But the flash of memory was only that. When the silence grew long again, he said, “Where else have you lived?”

“There was that there cave,” a male said.

“Yuh. The cave.” the female said.

“Where was it? Can you remember?”

There was no response. He said, “What was the town? The town closest to the cave?”

“Caseboro,” one of the males said, after the usual pause. “Maybe Caseboro.”

Clifford M. knew the town, a crossroads settlement in the forest he had ranged as a wild boy. He said, “Have you ever had children?”

“Kilt ’em!” the female cried. “They kilt ’em!”

“Yuh,” said a male, “they kilt ’em.”

“Who? When?”

“Well, you know. We was asleep. They pounded them young ’uns to death. We found ’em. Maybe one got away. We couldn’t stay to see. We had to get us a new hole.”

It came to Clifford M. then that not only were these vile creatures his own kind, they were, quite possibly, his parents; and with the realization came a conviction that he himself must become like them, as the slow centuries came and went, and his almost-immortal body at last outlived his mind. It was his fate to become just such an unclean being, diurnally lying comatose in a muddy burrow, awakening only to prey disgustingly upon human beings, and, once fed, to spend the remaining hours of the night in mindless stolid waiting for the rising sun to drive him back to his hole. He said, “I must go now. I will be back tomorrow night.” The others did not reply.

At about ten in the morning, Blanche, Hodge, and Polder arrived at the ruined house, prepared for the destruction of vampires. They had shovels and picks, powerful flashlights, eight sharp hickory stakes, hammers of various sizes, Bibles, crosses, garlic, pistols, and shotguns. This gear had been loaded into Hodge’s van, which he had driven up to the very wall of the ruin. He said, “Well, where do we begin?”

“Inside first,” Blanche said.

“Watch where you’re going,” Polder said. “There may be a cellar we could fall into.”

They went to the gap in the wall. Inside was a pit that had once been the basement of the house. Now it was almost filled with a confusion of rotting timbers from the fallen roof and floor. Through and over the timbers, brambles and great fibrous weeds grew in an insoluble tangle. The sun beat down with a white glare, and through

chance interstices in the tangle of decay it was reflected by a green-scummed surface of water. Flies buzzed.

“Good God,” Polder said, “where do we begin with *that*?”

“The side walls, I should think,” Blanche said. “They’d have to be where there’s no chance of the sun striking them. Let’s see if we can find enough solid footing in this mess to hunt for openings in the walls.”

Five minutes later, Hodge had found it: a two-foot hole hidden by carefully placed timbers and a bush. “Here it is,” he called. “What now?”

“Now we clear away enough of this stuff to give us a place to stand down there,” Blanche said. They fell to work.

After a time Hodge said, “That ought to do it. Hand me a flashlight. Let’s have a look.”

He shone the light into the tunnel, and almost instantly leaped back. “There’s one just inside,” he said. “Only about a yard back.”

“Well, pull it out.”

“I’d just as soon not reach in there,” Hodge said. “Give me the pick. I’ll hook it out. The head’s at this end. I can hook it under the arm. Blanche, hold the light.”

The body slipped out of the tunnel quite easily, and tumbled to the floor of the pit. “Clifford M.!” Blanche said. “It’s Clifford M.!”

“Didn’t you expect it, after his note?” Hodge said. “‘Four, not three’ he wrote. I — ”

It was then that the smell from the unplugged tunnel reached them, and Hodge said no more, because he was vomiting. So was Polder. Blanche had been inured to foul odors by years of medical school and practice, but even so, she turned pale. “My *God*!” Hodge said. “I never smelled anything like that!”

“Vampires,” Blanche said. “Let’s have them out of there and finish the job. The sooner we — my God, look at him!”

Clifford M.’s face and hands were blistering under the sun’s hot glare; blistering with extraordinary speed, almost bubbling, in fact. “Cover him up,” Blanche said. “There’s no need for that. We’ll be, uh, killing him in a little while. No need for that.”

Polder fetched a tarpaulin from the van and covered Clifford M. “Now,” he said, “how do you suggest we get the others?”

“We’ll have to dig,” Hodge said, “unless somebody wants to crawl in after them.”

“Let’s dig,” Polder said.

It was four in the afternoon when they finally uncovered the three, and all the diggers had badly blistered hands. The heat was stifling, and the stench almost insupportable; the tempers of all the diggers were badly frayed. It was Polder’s shovel that first broke through into the enlarged space at the end of the tunnel where the vampires lay tangled together in a muddy ball. At the bottom of the hole they were out of the sun’s direct rays, but the instant they were hauled into the sunlight their skin began to bubble. Hodge said, “Frank, bring the stakes. I’ll get the hammers.”

Without discussion each took a stake and a hammer. They laid the creatures on their backs, side by side, about a yard apart. Blanche went to the female, and the men to the males, and they positioned the points of the stakes. They struck in unison, as if they had rehearsed.

The creatures squalled when the first blows were struck, and the sound was sufficiently nasty and inhuman to wipe away any misgivings or remorse the executioners might have had; they pounded fiercely and eagerly until the stakes had pierced the bodies through. Then they rose to their feet, backed off a couple of yards, and stared at what they had wrought.

It was a marvel of swift decay, following precisely the classical progression set out in the relevant literature: the almost instantaneous bloom of the flesh into wet rottenness, followed in the space of a breath by its drying, withering, and falling off the bones in sere crumbs; and then the bones themselves disintegrating and crumbling and settling into lines of gray dust. In a very few minutes there remained only three sets of noisome rags stretched out on the weeds.

Polder and Hodge scraped the clothing into the hole with the shovels and threw in enough dirt to cover them. Blanche returned to the pit where Clifford M. lay, and stood looking down at the tarpaulin. When Hodge and Polder joined her, she said, “Are we sure about this?”

Hodge pulled off the tarpaulin. The sunlight, masked though it had been by the heavy canvas, had worked great harm to the face: the blistered flesh had dried and hardened, with strips of it being loosened and forced upward by fresh blistering, so that what they were looking at resembled a segment of the trunk of a shag-barked tree. Hodge said, “What do *you* think?”

“I think we’re sure,” she said.

When the stake entered his heart, Clifford M. emitted a screech much like the others, but the swift metamorphosis to dust did not take place. Except to the ruined face and hands, it might have been an ordinary corpse. Polder said, "Did we make a mistake? Is he — was he —?"

"A man?" Blanche said. "No. Look what the sun did to him. The others went to dust because they were very old. But this one must have been younger. Maybe even as young as he looked. But he was one of them, all right. What puzzles me is why he put himself in this position — why he committed suicide, so to speak. And why he dressed up that way. Well, I suppose we can bury him now."

Two days later, the man Robertson brought her the letter. It remains in her possession, and has been examined by the present writer. She has given her permission to quote from it. It is the only piece of confessional writing by a vampire that we know of, and is thus an extraordinarily valuable document. Clifford M. was, of course, far from typical, and one regrets that there is not an equivalent missive from the hand of an ordinary vampire. It would be invaluable.

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Blanche Tolliver read the letter to the two men that same evening. It is not, unfortunately, very enlightening about Clifford M.'s day-to-day (perhaps one should say "night-to-night") life, nor does it give much new information about his history — which, as I hope I have by now made clear, we have had to piece together from other sources, and which still contains a regrettable number of gaps. The value of the letter lies in its revelation of the reasoning that led Clifford M., in all probability the last vampire in the continental United States, to arrange his own death.

"The encounter for which I had searched for so many years," he wrote, "the encounter that would, I believed, give me at last both a certain knowledge of my own nature and the companionship of others of my own kind, has turned out to be final and conclusive proof that I am quite alone, that I am *sui generis*, that — in my mind, at least — I am neither vampire nor man, and thus have no hope of finding, ever, peace or contentment. I was born a creature not human, and inhuman I am; but I was reared as a human, and human I am in my thoughts and attitudes. I exist neither as fish nor fowl, to use a cliché metaphor that has considerable irony in this context, and that might make me either laugh or weep, were I human enough to do either.

"That, you see, (I am going to sound pretentious) is the tragedy of my life. I would like to be human. The picture I had of my own kind,

I now perceive, was, until I actually met some of them, a picture of cultivated humans who possessed — as it happened — certain nocturnal proclivities, and who required a somewhat specialized diet. But I met monsters. And the fact that I found them to be monsters brought home very forcibly my utter isolation. It would be quite impossible for me to live among such creatures; I would rather live with hyenas. Yet they are my own kind, and they are what I am certain I would have become if my life were to continue for as long as theirs have.

“So I have decided that I shall end it here and now. If you are reading this, then the deed has been done, and you have rid the world of some dangerous and disgusting vermin. I refer to my three . . . colleagues. I myself am not at this time dangerous, or, I trust, disgusting, but it would have come, it would have come. Some time in the future my mind would have failed, as theirs have, and my body would have gone on and on, year by year becoming more bestial and loathsome.

“I much prefer for myself the ending I have arranged. I will put on evening clothes (a relic of my college days, when I was still able to visit the tailor for proper fitting) and go out to Dobie’s Store, and — looking every inch the fine gentleman — advise those foul predators, my kinsmen, that I am throwing my lot in with theirs. They will tell me, I imagine, that there is no room for me in their hole, and I shall reply that I shall sleep in the entry tunnel for the nonce. If I have judged you and your associates correctly, Dr. Tolliver, before sunset you will have taken care of my lodging problem for all time to come.

“The evening clothes will perhaps puzzle you. They also puzzle me, rather. I suppose it is a final effort to show that although I am indubitably one of these creatures, yet still I am different — and better. And there is no doubt some sort of wry satisfaction, or even amusement, in knowing that I will be dressed like Count Dracula when I receive the stake. But that analysis is doubtless mistaken. I have never heard of a vampire finding amusement in anything, and a likelier explanation is that my mind is already beginning to fail.

“I cannot be a human being. I will not live as what I am.

“Yours, etc.

“Clifford M.”

CHANGE OF ADDRESS



William Barley, a bookkeeper, had a beautiful daughter who was the apple of his eye, and she ran away to live in a slum with a guitar player. At about the same time, his son announced that he was homosexual, and his wife, caught up in some menopausal flight from reality, began an affair with a wholesale furniture salesman who wore trendy clothes and a hairpiece. Then the owner of the construction company where he worked sold the firm to a competitor, who sent word that he would not require the services of the office staff.

All of this happened within the space of a few months, and Barley underwent an extreme depression of spirit, becoming at last so melancholy that he gave serious thought to taking poison or leaping off a high structure. Very often, as he sat alone in the dingy apartment where he now lived, he found himself wanting very much to cry, but to be unable to do so; this added a glum frustration to his other woes.

He began to dose himself with substantial quantities of Sunburst Apple Wine, which he bought in gallon jugs at the liquor store on the ground floor of the building. The clerk there, a seasoned observer of the neighborhood's winos, had prescribed Sunburst as precisely what Barley needed for what ailed him, and indeed it sometimes helped; but if he became incautious and drank too much, his gloom would deepen dramatically, and he would fall to brooding at length upon the way he had been misused and the futility of his life. At such times he tended to lay elaborate plans for his own destruction, preparing scenarios for suicides of such grandeur and ingenuity that they would compel the whole world to acknowledge how deeply he had been wronged.

One night as he sat hunched in his broken armchair, communing with the jug of Sunburst and pondering the practicability of dressing in a gaudy costume and setting himself afire in a public place, his doorbell rang. He did not immediately recognize the sound for what it was; it was the first time the bell had sounded since he had taken up residence in the apartment. When he at length understood that there was someone at his door, he moved with clumsy alacrity to answer the ring. The locks seemed to have taken on an additional complexity since he had fastened them earlier in the evening, but at last he solved the puzzle and threw open the door.

A young woman of the most extraordinary beauty was standing there, smiling at him with great warmth. It was not what he had expected to see, and he simply stood with his mouth open, staring mutely and exhaling fumes of Sunburst. After a time she said, "I will come inside the room," and did so, her movements richly undulant.

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"Come in," Barley said, belatedly. He had stepped aside to permit her to pass, and now he stared in fascinated appreciation as she made her way into his seedy quarters. It seemed to him that the most arresting characteristics of Rita Hayworth and Betty Grable, concentrated and enhanced in some indefinable way, were combined and amalgamated in her body, so that at the instant she made the first liquid movement he could feel long-quiescent juices begin to percolate briskly through his veins, and he was seized by a prodigious lust, the like of which he had not experienced since the days when his glands were first asserting themselves. "Oh, yes, yes, come in," he said.

He slammed the door shut and lurched toward her, a goatish adolescent pushing fifty. She held up her hand. "I know what you are thinking," she said. "Do not. I have come to help you." Her voice was Jean Arthur and Glynis Johns.

"Oh, yes, help me," said single-minded Barley, bearing down upon her.

She said, imperiously, "*Wait.*" Barley stopped. She said. "I have tried to make an appearance that is agreeable to you. I did not anticipate so strong a feeling. I will make an amendment." Barley did not quite comprehend what she was saying, but he became aware that upon closer scrutiny she was not, perhaps, as overpoweringly desirable as she had at first seemed to be and that he had been on the verge of making a thorough fool of himself. He made a valiant effort to pull himself together. "Come in," he said. "That is, have a seat. What can I do for — what can I help you with?"

“Your understanding is backwards,” she said. “I am here to help *you*, as I have said. You wish to end your life, but you propose to do so in a wasteful manner, in such a way as to destroy your body. Your body will be useful to me, and I have come to help you to terminate your existence without physical damage.” She beamed at him, as one who has conferred a favor and awaits expression of gratitude.

Barley beamed back for a moment, until he realized what she had said. “You *what*?” he cried in horror. “You want to kill me? And use my body? Why, that’s the worst — worst — ”

Words failed him. Pictures of Colin Clive manufacturing Boris Karloff from charnel scraps flashed through his mind. “You must be crazy!” he shouted. “Who are you, anyhow?”

“Be calm,” she said. “Be peaceful. I will carefully explain everything. You should sit down and drink of your Sunburst Apple Wine.” It struck Barley as a sound idea, and he did so.

“Now,” she said, “here is the explanation. I am not real. I am only in your mind.”

“You mean I’ve gone crazy.”

“Oh, no. No, indeed. I will show you. Take hold of my hand.” She extended it and Barley reached out. His fingers passed through hers; he felt nothing but air. He said, “Oh, my God.”

“Do not be afraid,” she said. “I have created this image so that I could speak to you without causing fear. I found in your memory pictures of humans that you have considered to be most agreeable and shaped the image to fit. I would have frightened you very much if I had suddenly begun to speak to you only inside your head. In this way I have broken it gently.”

“I don’t believe it,” Barley said. “I really don’t. It’s either a trick or I’ve gone crazy.”

She vanished. Barley found himself to be quite alone in the room. Her voice, however, continued: “You now see that I speak the truth. I am only a mind, speaking to your mind. You observe that I continue to create the illusion of a voice, but even that is not really necessary. And now, if you have come to believe the truth of what I am saying, I will re-create the image, so that our conversation will be more comfortable for you. Ah. I see. The female figure I used is distracting to your emotions. Well, then. Perhaps this.”

In the other chair sat Mr. Oates, his high-school English teacher, the teacher Barley had liked best of all. “You will believe me now,” he said. It was Oates, all right, horn-rims, tweed jacket, and all.

“Well, I guess maybe it’s not a trick,” Barley said, “but I may be crazy. I’ve been drinking a lot of this stuff. It can do weird things to your brain. You ought to see some of the characters on the street down here.”

“I assure you that you are not insane. I will now tell you how I will help you. You have been laying plans to don unconventional clothing and undergo combustion before an audience, which, you believe, would prove a point and cause various persons to feel remorse. I put it to you that such an act would only make you appear foolish. It would also be excessively painful. The mere fact of your death will be sufficient to awaken the remorse you desire, and I am prepared to make your death painless, and indeed even pleasurable.”

“You’ve been reading my mind!” cried Barley, much alarmed.

“Yes, of course. I have told you so several times. Now, shall we begin?”

“No!” Barley shouted. “No! I’m not ready. That is, I’m not sure — I haven’t made up my mind yet. Keep away from me! Why do you want to do this?”

“Calm yourself, Barley, do not be afraid,” the Oates-figure said. “I can do nothing without your prior consent. I wish to do this because I require a body to use here in your world. It is most difficult to maintain a connection with you by the method I am using now, and it cannot be continued for long. I require a local brain in which to lodge. Since you have decided to abandon yours, I would like to have its use.”

“No! No, you can’t have it! Who are you, anyway? Where do you come from?”

Oates did not reply, but suddenly Barley found himself remembering something that he knew was not in his memory; he remembered a bitter, sterile landscape that stretched endlessly away under an insupportable glare of white light, an angular desolation of planes and edges and points and corners, a landscape hard, crystalline, and unchanging; a place where no line curved and there was nowhere a hint of softness, a soundless place utterly without movement except for an invisible sleet of malevolent radiation. Barley remembered it with warmth and affection.

“That is where I come from,” Oates said, and the spell was broken. Barley wondered how he could have felt, even for a moment, any affection for the hideous scene. He said, somewhat shakily, “But where *is* it?”

"There is no way I can tell you," Oates said. "You do not have the mathematics to grasp the concept. Call it another universe."

"Okay, let it go. I don't believe you, anyhow. Nothing could live in that place."

"Not life as you have it here, wet masses of protoplasm. We are otherwise. We are —" And it became clear to Barley that somewhere inside the jagged and razored crystals of that seared waste there were minds, bodiless intelligences without emotion, passing the slow ages in endless musing upon incomprehensible questions.

"And you're one of those," he said. Oates nodded. Barley said, "Then what the hell do you want here? How did you get here?" He had always found it easy to talk to Oates, and the Sunburst, whatever its taste, served very well to relieve timidity and inhibitions.

"As to how I came here, I must give the same answer I gave before: you could not understand. Your other question is what it is that I want. I will tell you. A — what would be the word? — a member of us, a part of — it — me — has come here. I have come to take that one back."

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"But what do you want with me?"

"I will explain. It is possible for me to enter into communication only with rare people among you, those few who were by chance born with a certain infinitesimal peculiarity of the brain. You are the first among those few to wish to give up his body."

"No way!" Barley said. "I've changed my mind. The truth is, I'm not sure I ever really meant it. You're out of luck here, I'm afraid. But I'll help you all I can," he said, generously. "I can see that you'd find things a little strange around here. What will you do now?"

"I would hope to persuade you to provide assistance."

"No. My mind's made up. But go ahead, give me your pitch. Show me some more pictures." He giggled suddenly. "Dancing girls."

"Be serious, Barley. This is not a game. You are affected by the alcohol. I have now had an idea. I will tell it to you. I propose that you permit me to occupy your brain while you still remain within it. We will be co-tenants, as it were. It is only since entering into communication with you that I have perceived that such a solution is feasible, that it is not necessary that the brain I occupy be lifeless. Will you agree to my occupancy?"

Barley clutched very hard at the arms of the chair; it seemed to be revolving at considerable speed, and he had a feeling that at any moment he was going to be thrown out of it by centrifugal force. He

knew from experience that it was nothing more than the effects of the Sunburst, and he also knew, from the same experience, that if he did not immediately retire to bed he would infallibly find himself on the floor in the morning, whether pitched out by a revolving chair or for other reasons. "Got to get to bed," he said, thickly, "m little drunk. Could use little help."

"I will help you," Oates said kindly.

Barley woke in what had lately come to be his usual morning condition: raging headache, Saharan thirst, queasy stomach, and a fine tremor in every limb — a hangover. Today there was something new, however; he was not alone. He hurriedly turned to the other side of the bed; it was empty. He stared wildly around the room. No one. But he knew someone was there.

A rich bass voice said, with a joviality that Barley found singularly repellent, "Awake at last, I see. We must be up and doing, Barley. Make hay while the sun shines, as it were. The early bird catches the worm, you know."

"What — ?" Barley said. "Where — ?"

"It is I, your co-tenant, Rita Hayworth. Mr. Oates. No need of visual images now, of course. I should tell you that I have been educating myself while you have been asleep, learning some of the facts that you know. This will, I fear, have been my last opportunity to do so, because your subconscious has quite properly been erecting a partition between us. Would you say that my speech — if I may use that term for our mode of communication — has achieved full colloquialness?"

Last night's events, stark, clear, and now no longer cushioned by alcohol, returned to Barley in their entirety. He found that he no longer had the slightest doubt that it was all perfectly real. He said, "You're in my head, then."

"Oh, yes, indeed. At your invitation. I believe this is going to be a very happy association, Barley. What I have been able to glean during this short period of access to your mind has demonstrated that there is an enormous amount that you do not know, that I must learn, but together we will enlighten ourselves. In no time at all I will have accomplished my mission and each of us will have had his existence enriched. And now you are hungry, Barley. You will have a breakfast of bacon and eggs, waffles, pancakes, orange juice, melon, kippers, hash, brioche, marmalade, and perhaps other things as well. I am most eager to experience taste. To have senses is really quite a remarkable thing. Now my immediate plans are — "

“For God’s sake, shut *up*!” Barley shouted, his stomach churning. “Do you have to be so goddam *jolly*? And I’m not hungry, and I’m not going to eat any breakfast. I’m going to have some coffee and aspirin and maybe a jolt from the jug. If you’re going to — ”

He stopped, clamping his mouth. “I don’t have to talk, do I?” he thought.

“No, indeed. The two of us can communicate quite cozily right here inside your skull. By all means take your restoratives. We have much to do.”

Barley had his jolt and his aspirin and drank black coffee, while inside his head the babble continued. At last he said, “I don’t understand this. Last night you showed me where you come from and what you are. And that’s how you talked. Now here you are jabbering away like a teen-age girl. Gushing. Is this how you behave back in your rock?”

“Ah, there you raise an interesting point, Barley. Heretofore I have not ‘behaved.’ The word does not apply. I am now ‘behaving’ for the first time. I will grant, however, that occupying a brain has had effects that surprise me — for example the fact that I feel surprise. Indeed, the truth is that feelings, as I have them now, are perfectly new to me. And to be quite frank, my feelings are of euphoria and elation. This seems to have resulted in a certain garrulity, which is, of course, a human reaction. In a word, Barley, acquiring this physical presence — your brain — has affected the way that I think. And since I am in fact nothing *but* thought, I may say with assurance that I am a changed being.”

“Me too, I guess,” Barley said. “I seem to be taking this too much in stride. I’m accepting it all as fact and not arguing or carrying on. It’s not natural.”

“But logical. Perhaps my presence has increased your capacities in that direction. That is of course of great benefit to you, Barley, and not by any means the last benefit you will receive. We’re going to make a splendid team!”

“Oh, I’m sure of it,” Barley said. He was not even sure that he was being wholly ironic. “One thing, though. Have you got a name?”

“No, no name. Up to now I haven’t been an individual, and hence in no need of a label. But I can see that you will be more comfortable if you have something to call me. What would you say to ‘Fido’? The name has affectionate connotations for you and, as your friend Mr. Oates once explained to you, it means ‘faithful friend,’ which I think may be appropriate.”

That remains to be seen, Barley thought. How could he know without knowing the creature's plans? "Tell me about them," he said.

"About what, Barley?"

"About your — didn't you read my thoughts?"

"No. I received no message of any kind. Your mind is clearly adjusting itself to the dual occupancy of your brain, and very rapidly, too. It seems to be developing that each of us will have a private area in which to think his own thoughts, and that there will be in addition a common ground where we can converse, as we are now. I think it is at least possible that this common ground will in time come to be a sort of joint mind, in which the knowledge and capabilities of both of us will be combined."

Barley had been a reader of pulp magazines in his youth. "Hot dog!" he said. "A superman!"

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"Or at least something superior to the present Willis Barley," Fido said, smugly. "And now we must be up and doing. I have reasoned thus: the one I am in search of could not have done other than what I have done; that is, find a brain in which to lodge. The search is therefore for a human being. Now there are a great many human beings, and at present I have no way of knowing which one it is. But after I have experienced bodily existence for a time, I will examine my own behavior, knowing that my quarry, who of course thinks exactly as I do, will be acting in an identical manner, and under the same impulses. This should infallibly direct me to the proper human."

"Then what?"

"Then I will point out to the recreant the consequences of his absence and direct him to return. It is very important, Barley. You cannot conceive how important."

"Why did he come in the first place?"

"Barley, it is a thing that cannot be explained at our present primitive stage in communication. In time it will no doubt be clear. Let us now go to have experiences. You must be the director in this matter. What shall we do first of all?"

"Good Lord," Barley said. " 'Have experiences.' That's anything from tying your shoe to murdering your grandmother. We have to start with something specific in mind."

"To be sure. My suggestion is that for a time you do anything you would like to do — anything at all. From this I will be able to

determine further procedure by examining my reactions, and you will immediately be benefiting from our partnership. Now, what is it you would like best to do?"

"Why, what I guess I'd like to do for starters," Barley said, with ponderous irony and drawing on his youthful reading, "is to become an habitu  of posh niteries of European *ambience*, small perfect restaurants known only to the *cognoscenti*, and other exclusive haunts of the elite, where I shall appear in the evening clothes of the costliest cut, with an adoring houri who resembles movie stars of the nineteen forties clinging to my arm, and where I will become known as a man of mystery."

"That seems to be a sensible beginning," Fido said. "Let us go."

"I'm afraid there's a little catch," Barley said. "Where's the money going to come from? I'm broke."

"Money. Yes, I see. The first thing to do, then, is to get money. How is that done?"

"Fido, we could talk about that forever."

"I will read your mind about money," Fido said, "if you will permit me entry."

Barley realized that there was a firm barricade preventing Fido from sharing his thoughts, a barricade that he must unconsciously have been erecting ever since Fido had turned up. "Go ahead," he said.

It was not difficult, he discovered, to delimit the area to which he gave Fido access; it required no more conscious effort than the act of walking, say. He found the fact to be of considerable comfort.

Fido completed his research and said, "You are right. We cannot begin until there is plenty of money, and you have almost none. Gambling, I should think, would be the simplest beginning. Let me make an examination of gambling." He did so, and continued: "We will place a wager on a number with your friend at the liquor store. The number that will win today is 112."

Barley did not feel greatly astonished. He said, "You can foresee things, then."

"Time does not control me in the way it controls you. It is a matter of the way in which one thinks. Perhaps you will learn the technique in due course. Meanwhile, let us place our bet."

The next morning Barley collected a considerable wad of grimy currency in return for the dollar he had wagered on number 112. He

and Fido had laid careful plans during an all-day walking tour of the city after Barley had bought the number, and Barley now evinced to the clerk a consuming desire to risk his new wealth on a horse. The clerk, by a fortunate coincidence, happened to know of a betting parlor; and because he liked Barley so much, he was agreeable to conducting him there and making the necessary introductions. He asked for himself only a negligible fraction of any winning; Barley permitted himself to be persuaded.

By midnight the nest egg had increased tenfold, and Barley returned to the apartment with his pockets bulging. "Close to seven thousand," he said to Fido. "Enough for Las Vegas. I guess. I'll buy some clothes tomorrow and make my reservations."

Las Vegas was a week altogether divorced from reality, a week without days or nights, a noisy carnival under bright artificial light forming a flashy background to Barley's grim attendance upon roulette tables. "No card games," Fido had said. "The act of betting will affect the outcome, so that any action taken on a basis of knowing what will happen may in fact insure that it will not happen. We will play roulette or craps, or wager upon sporting events." By the end of the week all of Barley's play was made under the cold eyes of dead-faced men who were quite open about their suspicions. When he appeared at a table, there was always a delay while the wheel and the croupier were changed. It did not matter, of course, and Barley boarded the return plane with the comfortable knowledge that the U. S. mails were carrying to his bank, for deposit to his account, a certified check for almost a hundred thousand dollars.

"We are now ready to begin," Fido said. Barley was stretched comfortably in his seat, drinking the second of the two bottled martinis the stewardess had brought. "We will settle, for the present, in New York. Money will henceforth be no problem: we will open accounts with brokers and speculate in commodities and precious metals and perhaps currencies. Within a comparatively short time we will have adequate capital to do exactly as we wish. As you wish. We will divide your time. Our mornings, for a while, will be spent at the New York Public Library, where I will learn things. The afternoons and evenings will be yours to fill as you see fit, and I will observe my reactions to what you undertake. Do you concur?"

"Absolutely," Barley said.

The reading sessions were very strange. Each morning Barley found himself facing a great stack of books, books that seemed to be on some sort of list that Fido had compiled from a ferociously

concentrated attack upon the catalogues and bibliographies. It appeared that his net was spread to capture the whole of human knowledge: science and engineering, history and geography and philosophy, business, war and politics, languages — Fido absorbed them all. Or so Barley supposed. His part was simply to sit staring at the book, turning the pages as fast as he could. He presumed that Fido was taking in all the print; he himself received nothing. And while this was going on, he and Fido carried on long conversations, without which, Barley was quite certain, he would have gone mad with boredom.

The conversations were mostly questions by Fido and answers by Barley. A good part of the time the questions seemed pointless and trivial to Barley; they skipped disconcertingly from topic to topic, and no line of inquiry seemed to be exhaustively pursued. As time passed, however, he began to catch faint intimations of what Fido was doing: he was, Barley came to think, simultaneously pursuing a whole host of trains of thought, many of which might benefit from information that Barley could furnish. But Barley was unable to answer a host of questions simultaneously; his mind was linear: one question at a time. He answered as well and as fully as he could, but they came in a fusillade: “What temperature do dogs find most agreeable? Do you agree that suffering purifies the character? Are paintings more desirable than statues? What is offensive breath? Describe the sensations of sexual intercourse. List female Christian names that you think to be pleasant. Why are not insects considered to be desirable food? Go back, you turned two pages at once. Do industrial workers more enjoy the study of history or philosophy? What is a prune?” and so on.

Barley did some questioning, too, but with no very satisfactory results. He was enormously curious about Fido’s mission: why it was important that he take back the defector, why the defector had defected, how Fido proposed to take him back, how they traveled to and fro, what would happen if the defector did not choose to cooperate — he had, he thought, as many questions for Fido as Fido had for him. And it appeared that Fido was perfectly willing to give the answers; it was simply that Barley could not understand.

“Come, Barley,” Fido said on one occasion. “Join me on the common ground. We will merge for a moment, and perhaps you will comprehend without words.”

He did. At the moment of fusion it was all instantly clear and anticlimactically simple. He knew what Fido was, and what he was a part of, and the function of the entity of which he was a part. He

saw why the recreant fragment had taken flight to Earth, and why it was necessary — why it was indeed of the most transcendent importance — that it return. It was perfectly plain and childishly obvious. But when the melding ended, Barley found himself much confused. He was aware that he had the answers he sought, but when he tried to think about what he knew, he was unable to do so, and he was almost forced to believe that he did not know it at all. All that remained was an inchoate uneasiness and apprehension.

“It is because you think in words,” Fido said. “You understand all of this now, but words have no application to the concepts and so are of no use to you: there is no way for you to think about it. In time you will learn, just as I am learning through your senses.”

And he was indeed learning. When the morning’s reading ended, and Barley embarked upon leisurely pursuits, Fido remained as avidly curious as during the library hours. He was exploring sensation. “Senses are new to me, Barley,” he said. “I must admit they are quite outside anything we had conceived. I would hope to experience every possible sensation. We must continue to pursue it diligently.”

“Not any more tonight,” Barley said. “We’ve sampled every dish on the menu here, and the sensation you are presently experiencing is called nausea. You may find it instructive, but I hate it. I want to go home.”

“By all means. But Barley, the tastes! The textures! The sparkle of the silver, the weave of the napery! Where shall we dine tomorrow? I think I should like to sample Levantine cuisine. I have read of the spiced raw mutton and — ah. That was a nasty twinge, wasn’t it? I suppose we must, under the circumstances, go home.”

Home was a penthouse of lordly proportions at the top of a preposterously expensive apartment building. The lobby was guarded by electronic devices and muscular men, and there was a small private elevator that opened only to Barley’s key and stopped only at the penthouse; it delivered Barley directly into his living room.

This was a room of suave luxury and elegance, or would be, after it lost its present indefinable air of being in transition. Fido’s thirst for sensation included the pleasures of the eye, and it was offensive, he said, to live in quarters where the furniture and decorations did not form a harmonious whole, did not cohere in esthetic unity. He was therefore engaged in selecting new furniture and paintings, becoming almost testy in urging Barley to discard a chair or rug that had cost an enormous sum only a short time before. “It is all

wrong, Barley,” he would say. “I am surprised that you cannot see it.” And, after the replacement had been made, Barley could see that he had been absolutely right.

But it disturbed him, in a minor way; it seemed to him that it was presumptuous on Fido’s part to make esthetic judgments about things that were, after all, very new to him. Fido disagreed: “We have read what the philosophers say about esthetics, Barley, and we have read the critics and essayists, and we have examined most of the art that is to be seen in this city. We have studied reproductions and pictures of all the important art of your race. It would be surprising if I did not have an esthetic of my own; I have simply built upon the congruence between the reasoning of the philosophers and what your senses have fed me. I am quite capable of rendering a valid judgment upon a painting; surely, then, so small a matter as the furnishings of a room can be left in my hands. Hands. I believe I have made a small joke, there, Barley. Now that is most interesting.”

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A strange sensation rustled through the area of Barley’s mind where conversations with Fido took place. After a while he realized what it was: Fido was chuckling. It went on for quite some time. Fido was, it seemed, enormously amused, whether by the excellence of his humor or the novelty of his having perceived it, Barley could not tell.

“Remarkable,” Fido said. “Remarkable. I have a sense of humor.”

“It wasn’t much of a joke, you know,” Barley said. “As a matter of fact, I’m not sure it was a joke at all.”

“Well, of course, I’m not very sophisticated yet,” Fido said. “Humor is one of the things we haven’t gone into. But there’s plenty of time. I expect that soon I will be making very fine jokes. And, now, let us have some music.”

Music was one of the things that they *had* gone into. An expert had been retained to convert a large room of the penthouse into a chamber for the accurate reproduction of recorded sounds. It boasted a stunning array of mechanical and electronic devices, all governed by a control panel of daunting complexity. Speakers in a variety of shapes and sizes were ranged about the room among a complicated system of baffles and reflectors. In an adjoining room were tens of thousands of records and tapes.

Fido had first heard music in the liquor store at the time of the purchase of the number. A very old radio, which had not been a good one when it was new, had been blaring rock music of the most debased and mindless category at the top of its tinny capacity. Fido had been entranced. “Barley!” he said. “What is that?”

“Music,” Barley said. “Sort of.”

“Music. I must listen to more music.”

He did just that. The music room was the first project after the acquisition of the penthouse, and for a time they listened for eighteen hours a day. Fido’s taste, utterly catholic at first, swiftly became narrow and selective; a minimum of audition had apparently sufficed to exhaust all that was of interest to him in music currently popular, and he quickly turned to the serious music of the Western tradition. And with the best of good taste, too, Barley thought. It had not taken him long to eliminate most of the moderns and scarcely longer to get his fill of the romantics. The music most worthy of concentrated attention, Fido appeared to believe, was classical and baroque, and he tended sensibly to opt most often for Bach and Mozart. The ear was most exquisitely ravished where clarity and reason prevailed and a decent restraint was placed on emotion.

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Now wait a minute, Barley thought. What the hell? *I* don’t know anything about music. Where do I get off making judgments like that?

But he did know something about music, he discovered. He knew a good deal that he hadn’t known before. Up to now he had thought of the coexistence inside his head in an analogy of three rooms, with himself in one, Fido in another, and between them a common room, where they might meet or not, as they wished. He could see now that it was something more than that: there was between them a seepage that went beyond the communication of the common room. His own judgments — made, he would have said, entirely independently of Fido — were informed by a spotty erudition that was entirely new. And he perceived at the back of his consciousness an intimation of the urgency of Fido’s mission, a disquieting conviction that Fido’s failure would result in some calamity of enormous proportions. Fido had never spoken of this; it simply and suddenly became a part of Barley’s knowledge, something somehow leaked from Fido.

He did not think that the leakage worked both ways. He felt confident that he was effectively excluding Fido from his private thoughts. Certainly there was no evidence that Fido’s ideas or attitudes were affected by Barley’s; indeed, in a number of areas Fido’s inclinations ran precisely contrary to Barley’s strongest prejudices. Physical exercise, for example.

The matter arose when Barley was at the tailor’s for a fitting. He had never previously given much thought to clothes or fashions, although occasionally, when he was dressed in his best and caught

an unexpected glimpse of himself in a mirror, he had a moment's uneasy awareness that his clothing was, at best, undistinguished. He knew better than to wear a double-knit leisure suit, perhaps, but at the same time he had never paid enough attention to the cut of clothing to make any real distinction between the various suits a salesman would offer. He tended to dress in suits that were of nondescript color but marked by some odd garishness of design that had resulted from accommodating a jet-set fashion to mass production.

Fido's interest in clothes changed all that; Barley could now qualify as a clotheshorse. Bespoke suits, artfully tailored from materials whose rich softness and suppleness were a revelation to Barley, were now his daily costume. Fido had come to take a keen — almost fanatical — interest in such matters as the length and diameter of sleeves, the drape from armpit to hem of jacket, and the precise amount of tension a button should sustain. And Barley was not ungrateful for the change; sometimes now he had occasion to feel a flicker of admiration for the conspicuously well-tailored man in the chance reflection before he realized that it was himself, Willis Barley, in a suit that had cost as much as ten of the suits he had bought off the rack.

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He was standing in the bay of the tailor's mirror as the tailor tore out basting and inserted pins to effect a slight diminution in the fullness of a trouser leg, and as he stared into the mirror, he could see himself reflected in full-length profile. Fido said peevishly, "That is quite a belly there, Barley. Look how you stick out. The truth is, you are in bad shape. This is the only body we have, you know. I think what you ought to do is start a program of exercise."

"Exercise?" Barley said. "I hate exercise."

"Then I suppose I shall too," said Fido. "I experience what you do, you know. But it will be a new experience. It must be tried. Then, too, you will look much better without the belly."

Which was true. Within a very few weeks a good many excess pounds had disappeared or been redistributed, and a trimmer Barley suddenly found himself taking a certain pride in his body. Each day, two hours were devoted to flab removal and muscle tightening under the stern direction of a slow-witted young man with spectacular biceps. Barley hated every minute of it, but he came almost to admit that it was worth the torture. Fido had no doubts at all. "We feel better, do we not, Barley?" he said. "A spring in the step, a sparkle in the eye. It is a pleasure to be alive. You are ten years younger than when I first came abroad."

And that was true, as well. Barley felt better than he had felt for a long time. But it was only partly in consequence of the improved muscle tone. Fido's insatiable curiosity and bottomless appetite for sensory experience had opened whole worlds to Barley, and it was clear to him that his new sense of well-being stemmed more from an altered view of life than from physical improvement. Now each day had its goal: these foods and vintages to be tasted, those pictures and statues to be viewed, that music to be heard; horses to be ridden, cars to be driven, and, of late, tennis matches to be played.

"And women," Fido said. "I think it is time to do something about women. I have been waiting for you to get on with it, Barley — I feel what you feel, as I point out from time to time — but you have not made a move. Why not?"

The answer was complex and none of Fido's business. He had in truth begun to feel seriously deprived, especially since receiving notification of the final decree in his divorce proceedings, but he remained highly diffident about undertaking the pursuit of women. He did not have to remind himself that it had been twenty-five years since he had been up to that sort of thing and that he had not been conspicuously successful even then. During the years of his marriage it had never crossed his mind to detour from the straight and narrow path, despite the fact that the usual opportunities had come his way from time to time. He assumed that he had been able to accomplish this feat of fidelity because over the years he had achieved a degree of success in sublimating his concupiscence. He had had to; throughout their marriage his wife had remained less than enthusiastic about the bed, and when at last her aging glands modified the chemistry of her body so that she became honestly lustful, the beneficiary was not himself but her swarthy partner in adultery.

Those, however, were bygone matters; it was a new day, and the liberation of the spirit that his changed life had brought him had effected a considerable freshening of his libido. But an old man pursuing young women had always seemed to Barley to be a comical and degraded spectacle, and he wanted no part of it. He said as much to Fido.

"But, of course, Barley," Fido said. "Who is to say that it must be a young woman? Make your selection as the spirit — if that is the word — moves you. It occurs to me that at this juncture you might resort to the services of a professional, which would be simple, without complications, and, in the category you are well able to afford, perfectly hygienic."

In the event, Barley did not choose that course because, once he had made his decision, he was agreeably surprised to discover that what he sought lay all about him. He discovered that the environs of the city were from end to end a silken whisper of soft desire, a susurrus of lovely women who, at the peak of ripe desirability, had come to doubt themselves and to yearn for reassurance. The approach of the fortieth birthday shook them with terror; its arrival cast them into black hells of despondency. In their pleasant houses they stared with unbelieving eyes at themselves and their world. They would look at the gangling lout gorging at the refrigerator, at the precociously nubile sullen girl endlessly gabbling into the telephone, and think: Can it really be that I am the mother of these? Is it really me living like this, with nothing more in life than these — creeps — and this house and dull John in his Brooks Brothers suit? Suddenly I am forty and I am not famous and I do not associate with glamorous people and I have never had an adventure and I am old. I want —

Barley found his first of these at the tennis club. She played as badly as he did, with the graceless doggedness of those who have come too late to the game, and within a very short time they found themselves commiserating with each other over their admitted incapacities and the inexcusable rudeness of the other players who took critical notice of their faults. This compatibility led to a drink, which led to an invitation to dinner, which was accepted. Both knew what the invitation and acceptance meant, and he brought her to bed after giving her a dinner of sublime excellence at a superior restaurant and then gritting his teeth through a couple of hours of head-shattering noise at a discotheque.

It was entirely satisfactory. For a little while they fumbled at each other with almost virginal shyness, but that was a stage that passed swiftly, and then they were at each other with the greed of the starved, and the task was competently carried to completion. And at the moment of climax, as Barley gave himself up to the mountainous wave of relief and mindless sensation, a door whose existence he had not even imagined flicked open for a millisecond, and a revelation came to Willis Barley.

Thinking about it later, after he had begun to tire of Fido's hymns to the glories of sexual gratification, Barley believed that he understood what had happened. Fido had been caught by surprise. The enormous flood of sensation must have engulfed him with such suddenness and power that even that great cool mind was, for a tiny fraction of a second, not wholly in control of itself, and during that instant Barley was vouchsafed his vision of catastrophe.

Something was going to die unless Fido succeeded. Barley did not understand what it was, but he knew with absolute certainty that death would be the inevitable result of failure. And no small death, either; although the thing as a whole was entirely beyond his grasp, Barley had understood great matters for an infinitesimal moment, and he could remember what his emotions had been, if not the details of their cause. He knew he would retain the memory forever: his cringing awe in the presence of something incomprehensibly vast, that had nevertheless been, for a tick of time, within his comprehension; the unspeakable dread of an imminent horror; and a sense that somewhere in wait was a death beyond death and an eternal desolation.

120 Barley was appalled, shaken, and unmanned. There was no question of further dalliance that night, despite the lady's touching importunities and the enthusiastic urging of Fido, who was apparently unaware that he had given Barley access to a hitherto-concealed part of himself. "What is the matter with you, Barley?" he said. "I cannot fathom your attitude. This surely is the ultimate gift visited upon those lucky enough to have senses. I had thought that perhaps the taste of the '60 Niersteiner *Trockenbeerenauslese* was the supreme sensation, or else listening to *Don Giovanni*. I was ignorant, grossly ignorant. Still, how could I have known? Now you say it is finished for tonight, and I am disappointed. I suppose there is nothing to do but wait for the next time, if that is your decision. But it seems to me to be absolutely necessary that you arrange for us to have this experience at least daily."

Barley was able to arrange it. It was, in fact, quite easy, so easy that after a time the chase began to pall. He continued to enjoy his catch with undiminished appetite, but he found that he was bored with the hunt itself. He took to seeking rarer and more exotic game, and thereby, he entered, without quite being aware that he was doing so, the game of Social Climbing. At the beginning he was not even close to the ladder, but he met at his broker's a sprig of a consequential old banking family, and he endeared himself to the young man by sharing with him, on a couple of occasions, Fido's tip-of-the-day. This new friendship resulted in some introductions and invitations, and Barley found himself moving in new circles, where the game of seduction was played under different and — to the outsider — more difficult rules. The whole language was new. He took a keen pleasure in it. The game had come to be almost as important as the prize.

Fido did not agree. "I see no point in this, Barley," he said. "You are wasting a good deal of time. I must tell you that I find these

interminable seductions of yours to be uncommonly boring. My initial suggestion that you hire professionals still seems to me to have been a good one. The sensations would be exactly the same — indeed, probably better — and the wasted time might be more pleasurably devoted to eating and drinking and looking at pictures and listening to music. Even to getting drunk, which is a most pleasant sensation.”

“Speaking of wasted time,” Barley said, “how’s your mission coming?” The revelation of catastrophe nagged at him.

“According to plan, Barley, according to plan. It is not a matter that you need concern yourself about. Your function in our partnership is simply to enjoy yourself, to savor the life of the senses. You can be sure that your activities, whatever they may be, will help me toward my goal. Yes, indeed. Now, Barley, I have been thinking: what would you say to a bottle of the ’47 Lafite Rothschild this evening? I have been remembering the ’50 Margaux, and I would like to make a comparison. The Margaux struck me as being an ideal Bordeaux, but the other seems to be regarded very highly. You’d better lay on a bottle of something less grand for the lady. No use wasting the good stuff. We have only a dozen, and it was sheer luck that we found those. And now it is time, I believe, that we select the menu for dinner.”

Barley had a staff, now: a cook of vaguely Balkan provenance and eclectic skills, who could produce surpassing meals from the kitchens of a dozen countries; a chauffeur-bodyguard, who handled with casual expertise Barley’s great Mercedes and variety of firearms; and a butler-valet-majordomo personage, a competent, dishonest Cockney, who ran the household efficiently and at ludicrous cost, skimming off, Barley calculated, at least twenty percent of the total expenses. Barley did not mind; it was only money, and the man’s efficiency left him entirely free to pursue his own (or, more properly, Fido’s) pleasure.

It was beginning to be apparent that Fido’s pleasure and his own were not always in precise coincidence. Fido was avidly bent upon experiencing repeatedly every possible pleasure of the senses, and while that attitude was no doubt forgivable in one who had spent an eternity without senses, Barley sometimes required a respite. In a modest lowbrow way he needed intellectual diversion, which, for him, meant going to the movies or the theater, or playing a few rubbers of bridge. Fido scorned such things, and Barley could understand. They were not sensual and certainly they could offer Fido no intellectual diversion. “But have at it, Barley,” he said, “if it

is necessary for your contentment. We should be able to spare an hour or so a day.”

Thus Barley for the first time in a long while found himself with an opportunity to think and reflect. He discovered that he remained considerably concerned about the progress of the search, despite Fido’s airy assurances that all was going well. The vision of doomsday had, it seemed, frightened him more thoroughly than he had supposed, and he was plagued by a persistent apprehension. After a time he told Fido about it. Fido said, “Barley, I have told you that you need feel no concern. However, rather than undergo your nagging, I will undertake to explain the matter in words, since it seems you will not grasp it otherwise. Please give me your full attention. Do you remember the picture I showed you of my place of origin?”

“Yes, sure,” Barley said.

122 “That was an analogy. It is of course nothing like that. It is — this is really not a matter for words. I will put it like this: there exists in that other universe, in my universe, a — call it a mind. If we call it a mind, we must call what it does, ‘thinking.’ The universe over there is a consequence — one might almost say a product — of that thinking. Those thoughts are the fabric of reality.

“That thinking entity can in no way be described to you, Barley, even through analogy. It is outside time, to begin with; and by that I mean that it inhabits all of time simultaneously. Which is not the word, but then there is no word. This entity is separate from matter and space and time, and yet it constitutes of itself the entirety of all those things. You find this paradoxical, and so it is, when put into words. There is a further paradox: this entity is perfect, it is an absolute, and in this very perfection lies a flaw. Perfection by definition can have no imperfection; if imperfection exists, then perfection does not exist. Imperfection has come to the entity we are speaking of; an infinitesimally minute and inconsequential imperfection, but an imperfection withal, and the destroyer of perfection. Which is to say, that the entity is destroyed, a universe is doomed.”

“Not destroyed. Not yet,” Barley said, “or you wouldn’t be here.”

“You are right, Barley. Not yet destroyed. But crumbling. Strange things will have happened. As if, in this universe, the immutable laws were to become inconsistent and capricious, so that the sun suddenly became a ball of iron, and light became as viscous as oil, and time ran backward. Or spiral nebulae began to thrash their arms

in tango time. The thoughts of that entity are the physical laws of its universe, and those thoughts are imperfect.”

“The imperfection,” Barley said. “It occurred when a portion of this entity elected to come over here.”

“That is correct, Barley.”

“And you are another portion, sent to bring it back.”

“Yes. We are — analogy again — very small, almost ultimately small fractions of that mind. Even so, the whole is imperfect without us, and reality is dissolving. If we return to our places, perfection will be restored, and the universal laws will again be effective. And that, Barley, is the explanation you desired, as best it can be expressed in words and analogy.”

“But — Good Lord. Good Lord. I didn’t realize — Fido, you’ve got to get on with it, we’ve got to stop this messing around. All that is going on and we’re sitting here jabbering about how much pepper should be in a Périgueux sauce and whether anyone ever approached Bach. Jesus. Suns are turning into ball bearings while we hunt women. What’s the matter with you, anyhow?”

“Barley, I have acquired a number of human traits through this co-tenancy, but impatience is not one of them. Our present policy, if continued, is certain to bring us, in due course, into the desired contact. Until then I see no reason not to enjoy the glorious benefits of the senses. You have a puritan streak, Barley, that I sometimes find to be less than wholly sympathetic.”

Barley ignored that. He said, “You’ve never told me how you expect to recognize him when you’ve found him. As far as I can tell, there aren’t any outward indications that you’re in here with me, and I don’t suppose your quarry’s host will show it any more than I do. And the mind-reading bit won’t work as long as you’re in my brain.”

“Apparently you still have not comprehended my nature, Barley. I and the one I seek are not separate creatures, we are parts of the same whole. Even though we are insulated by these human brains and bodies, we will be known to each other once we are in proximity. I must admit that I am not certain how close to each other we must be, but have no fear; I will recognize him. It is quite possible that I will recognize him at a considerable distance. We shall see. And the search must go on as before.”

“Search” was by no means a precise description of their activity, as Barley saw it. His life continued to be that of a playboy, no more

and no less. And an aging playboy, at that, although one with a more than commonly elevated taste in food and drink, he supposed, and music and women. It was a life that on the face of it had no aim beyond pleasure, although he was beginning to see that the pursuit of pleasure could itself become, in a way, high art.

He was finding himself more and more in the company of people who took that view of it, who firmly believed that elegance and manners lent justification to their single-minded greed for sensation. Barley supposed he was one of them. He was able to join with perfect sincerity in their contempt for the international set that welcomed cosmopolitan swindlers whose paper empires afforded them private jets and mansions with revolving beds for a few years, and illiterate thugs and molls of dubious sex who sometimes surfaced from the grimy world of rock music and kindred popular entertainments. Barley sneered at these like the others, but he was not in his heart wholly persuaded that his friends were in fact superior to the objects of their disdain.

His new comrades were an international set as well, but their activities seldom came to the attention of the press; a considerable effort was made to keep it so. They shunned publicity as the plague. They had in common the possession of enormous wealth, the remnant of a sense of *noblesse oblige*, and (especially the Americans) a moderate feeling of guilt because they had opted for play instead of their responsibilities. Most of them had known each other all their lives, and, more often than not, so had their parents and grandparents. New blood was admitted grudgingly and seldom. Barley's entrée had been effected only through services rendered and pressures he was able to bring to bear through Fido's prescience; he was, and to some degree always would be, an outsider. He had been granted provisional acceptance, however, and that appeared to serve Fido's purpose, which Barley guessed to be a narrowing of the focus of his search.

In due course he received an invitation to Korne. It was a triumph, in a way. Korne stood as a beacon to the Sybarites, the *ne plus ultra* of their world, and to be invited there was to achieve communion with the Olympians. Korne was an island, a club, and a clique; the inmost clique of a society that considered itself in its entirety to be the cream of the cream. Outside that narrow stratum even the name of Korne was almost unknown. Real society was aware of it, because the Korne group came chiefly from their number, but they faintly disapproved, when they thought of it at all. Among mere celebrities,

it was a dream, a place that might or might not exist, for which they incontinently yearned.

It was reached by an inconspicuous yacht that put to sea from an unobtrusive dock in an unimportant Greek port. The island itself was a circle of hills rising steeply from the sea, cupping a few score acres that were wholly hidden from passing ships. Here stood the building of Korne, outwardly nondescript and ordinary, especially when viewed from the air, and inside most marvelously and ingeniously luxurious, the fruit of several generations of pleasure-seeking fertile imaginations with bottomless moneybags at hand.

Each of the thirty-odd members of Korne had a palace that from the outside resembled a hillside village of shabby attached houses; there was an equal number of smaller and similarly camouflaged houses for guests. Barley, on his first evening on the island, left the caressing opulence of the house that was to be his for a month and strolled in the soft dusk across a velvety turf toward the mansion where he was to dine. Fido said, "I must tell you, Barley, that I believe I am approaching the end of my search. I have intimations that my quarry may be here on this island. It has, after all, not taken long to find him, not long at all. Soon now this will all be over. Soon I will never gain inhale the bouquet of an old Medoc or hold a woman's breast or hear the Brandenburg concertos. I will remember these things, in a way, but only the fact that they exist, not how they feel. You understand that I will no longer be 'Fido.' I will not even be 'I.' I will be an undifferentiated part of the whole, as will be the aberrant mote that I seek. The memory of all this will be only another minuscule datum known to the whole. And what is tragic (am I not very human, Barley, to see it as tragedy?) is that I will not regret it. *I will not regret no longer being 'I.'* One might almost call it murder, to destroy an individual that way."

"I'll miss you, Fido," Barley said. "I'll miss you a good deal. It's a shame, really, that it has to be this way. But after all, you know, the end of a universe —"

"Never again the glorious gloom of Rembrandt or the homely comfort of oysters and brown bread. Never again old cognac and thick Havana, or rosy limbs impatient in a bed, or Monteverdi or Hals or cold Eiswein."

"Yes," Barley said. "Well. Let's take it as it comes, Fido. Remember, tonight we see the Goyas."

About three thousand of the most important paintings in the museums of the world are forgeries; the originals hang in the palaces

of Korne. Barley's hostess for tonight had most of the Goyas. And as the walls of Korne were covered with the loot of great museums, so were its cellars crammed with rare and ancient vintages abstracted from *caves* where duplicate bottles containing wine not too much inferior now lay in their stead, covered with duplicate dust. Of the things in the world that are uniquely superior, a great many belong to the masters of Korne.

He was admitted to the mansion by a stately butler whose manner suggested that while he was a most superior person, he was unquestionably far inferior to Barley. Korne's creamy luxury was in no small part a consequence of its hordes of superbly trained, highly intelligent, and (apparently) sincerely concerned servants. The butler led him up a broad flight of marble stairs, and as he followed, Barley became aware of a curious sensation; the leakage from Fido had become perceptible and almost obtrusive. What was being leaked was apprehension, reluctance, and — incredibly — a certain slyness. And even as this extraordinary evidence of emotion came seeping through, Fido continued to talk briskly in praise of the paintings along the wall.

But at the door of the room his babble abruptly ceased, and with it the wave of emotion. A barrier of a kind that had never existed before had snapped into place. Barley suddenly felt abandoned and alone. "Fido!" he said in panic. "Fido!"

"Yes, Barley," Fido said. "What is the matter?"

He was still there, then. Still there, but drawn into himself, guarding against the communication of emotion, secretive and more separate from Barley than at any time since his coming.

The butler passed him into the room. There were to be twenty or so at dinner, Barley saw. They were not, on the whole, beautiful people. By fifty a face has been shaped by the personality within, and most of these were well past the half-century mark. The bodies were carefully preserved, the results of costly regimens of exercise, massage, and baths containing odd substances; but the faces, above the white ties and bare shoulders, had a common taint of selfishness and irresponsibility, of an irritable, dissipated concentration on the self.

All but one. Barley's heart lurched at the sight of her. She was small, with hair the color of wheat; she bloomed like a flower among the sated faces. She stood smiling at a lizardish roué whose obviously wicked intentions roused Barley to instant indignation. With some rudeness he broke away from the hostess's welcoming words and

began a determined advance to the rescue. His eyes met hers. He melted.

There was a sudden thunder in his head. "Barley!" Fido roared. "Barley! Let us leave this room!"

Barley, utterly astonished, came to a halt. He said, "What?"

"Let us leave this room. Quickly, as quickly as possible."

"What for? I want to talk to that woman over there."

A noise almost like static crackled in his mind. "Please, Barley," Fido said. Barley did not remember his having said "please" before, and he was touched. He left the room and the house and stood in the street in the moonlight. "Now, what the hell was that all about?" he asked.

Fido did not reply immediately, but the emotional overflow occurred again, and Barley thought with amazement, "He's going to lie." Fido said, "Barley, my quarry is not here. I see no reason to remain in this place any longer; I think we should move along to a new hunting ground. Paris, perhaps. Or we might take a house in Switzerland. What do you think?"

What Barley thought was that something of the utmost importance had just taken place and that he did not know what it was. It almost certainly had to do with the lovely woman. Fido's explosion had come at the instant her eyes met Barley's. Was it possible that she was —

But then why would Fido have wanted to run out, rather than corner his prey?

"We might go to London for some suits before we move on to Paris," Fido was saying. "While the suits are being made we can spend some time with the wine merchants. Then we will use Paris as a base and tour France, investigating the provincial cuisines and the various *vins du pays*. And the women."

And after Paris, no doubt Rome, Barley thought. Then the Riviera and the Lido, and all the opulent islands, and anywhere else that the senses could be cosseted. While in some ungraspable dimension a vast entity was crumbling and dissolving; a great mind whose thoughts were the laws that created and sustained a universe was dying, and an ultimate madness was harrying that universe down a long road to death and the end of all things.

When Barley was in the sixth grade he had written his name and address on the flyleaf of his geography book, following a form that has passed down from one generation of schoolchildren to the

next since the time of the Concord sages, and perhaps before. The address read:

Willis Barley,
2615 Poplar Street,
Groat's Landing, Indiana,
United States of America,
North America, Western Hemisphere,
Earth, Solar System,
Milky Way, Universe,
The Mind of God.

There was comfort in an address like that, a sense of having one's place in a great, solid scheme of things. The final, the all-encompassing location was simple truth. Barley knew that, now. But the comfort was gone. The eternal edifice no longer stood changeless and immutable and as governance for all time. Perfection can become imperfect; it can be wrecked by a tiny flaw, by an infinitesimal defection. Barley knew that, too.

He would not remonstrate with Fido. Fido was an individual now, and he had, it was clear, made his choice. Anyhow, it was another universe that was doomed. It had nothing to do with Earth, Solar System, nothing at all. His life — his life with Fido — would continue to slide smoothly along the rich, soft path they had chosen, and each day would bring its meed of pleasurable sensation. Who could ask for anything more?

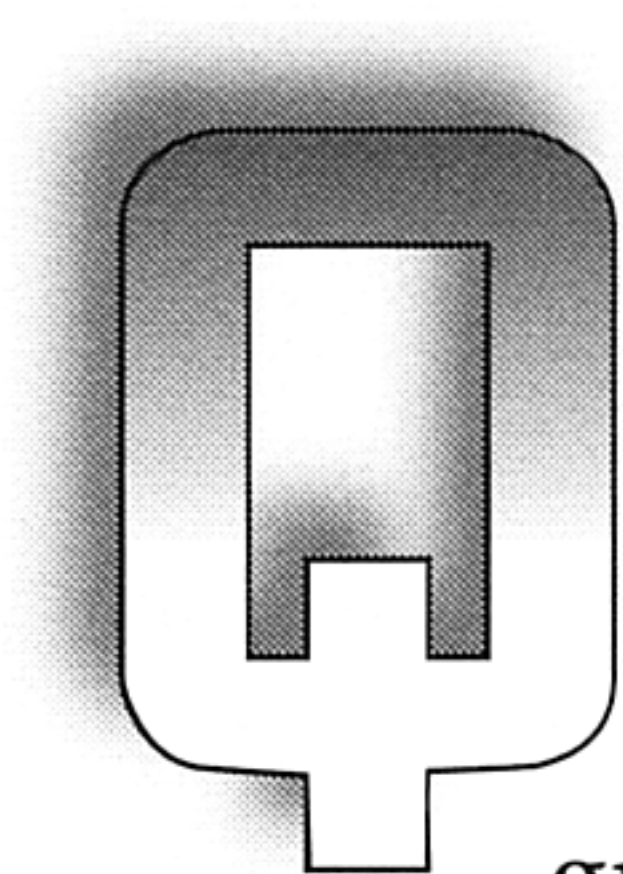
"I wish we had seen the Goyas, Barley," Fido was saying, "but there will be another time for that. We will be back again, never fear. These people know we belong among them. We have much to look forward to, Barley, as we explore all the ingenious pleasures that have been developed by your race in its short, eventful history. But all in due course. Our immediate need is to put this island behind us. Let us repair to the house and instruct the servant to pack and otherwise make ready for our departure. We will drink a bottle of Taittinger while he does so, and take a bit of the Beluga, since we have missed dinner. We have, of course, ample time. The boat leaves at sunup, I believe."

At sunup. Into Barley's mind came a picture of the humid morning and the red sun rising out of the sea. He would be looking at it very carefully, tomorrow. And not just tomorrow, he supposed, but for the rest of his life. He could tell himself that the odds against it were almost infinitely large, but nevertheless he knew now that it could

CHANGE OF ADDRESS

—just *could*—happen, and he saw that he would henceforth, for all of his days, be watching for a beginning: for time to run backward, for light to become as viscous as oil, for the sun to become a cold ball of iron.

SKIRMISH ON BASTABLE STREET



uite recently, in a disreputable bar on Bastable Street in this city, a wino and an elderly couple fought a brisk little skirmish with a supernatural adversary and had the good fortune to prevail. None of the three ever grasped the magnitude of their accomplishment, and indeed they very soon forgot what had actually happened, but they had in truth won a laudable small victory in an ancient war, and the facts of the affair deserve to be recorded.

These facts are not verifiable, for reasons that will become obvious, and it must be admitted that many of them have something of the flavor of the bedtime stories of our childhoods. You are therefore quite at liberty, if you are of a skeptical or cynical turn of mind, to view the following matter as nothing more than a fairy tale. Its beginning is, after all, one of the fairy tale clichés:

Once a poor woodcutter named Garft rescued a demon from the deep hole in which it had become confined by an enchantment, and the demon had no choice but to grant him three wishes as a reward. Garft wished first for a long and happy life, and second for a painless end when at last his time came round. Then he was stumped, and he thought about it for so long that the demon became impatient and displayed its true nature by threatening to eat him there and then.

“I’ll tell you what,” Garft said. “I’ll give the other wish to my son, Garft. How would that be?”

“Done!” said the demon, and disappeared.

Garft’s calling was chopping trees, not thinking, and so it was not until much later that he realized that the demon had left no instructions about how young Garft was to avail himself of his wish. No amount of shouting succeeded in causing the demon to

reappear, and Garft finally concluded that the problem would have to be turned over to a wiser head. Unfortunately, there was no one in the village whom he conceded to be wiser than himself, and he very much doubted that any neighboring village had anyone better to offer.

He mulled over the matter for a considerable time, and the seasons came and went, and then the years. He felt no urgency. Indeed, nothing affected his tranquility and contentment. The demon had granted his wish for a happy life by the elegant expedient of taking away rather more than half of his wits. No matter what misfortune befell him, he remained happy.

Because of this, his son Garft had to assume heavy responsibilities at a very early age. When he was seventeen, there was a winter of famine, and he killed one of the Earl's deer to feed his little brothers and sisters. The deer's hide was found by the Earl's men, and young Garft had to flee, an outlaw.

He fled south and west, living on what small game he could snare, until in late summer, he found himself in a fat and prosperous countryside where the horses were enormous and the people small and dark. It was here that a petty lord elected, on a whim, to impress young Garft into his service instead of hanging him for a poacher, and a guardsman in the lord's service he remained for the rest of his life. He took a wife and had sons, and in the fullness of time he died, without ever having the wish that was his by birthright.

Now it is a fact that commerce between mortal men and supernatural creatures is regulated by a complex and immutable body of law, and that, once a bargain is struck, irresistible forces see to it that the letter of the law is fulfilled. The law holds, *stare decisis*, that the words of a contract mean what the mortal party to the contract understood them to mean. In Garft's language the word for "son" meant not only "son," but any male descendant, however remote. The third wish was there for the taking by any descendant of the woodcutter who bore the name Garft.

But young Garft's sons were named Guillaume and René, and their sons were Olivier and Robert and Jean. Jean's distant descendant Jean went to England with the Conqueror, and fathered a child upon a Saxon girl. She named the boy John, after Jean, his father. There followed many generations of villeins named John, and then one of the Johns rose in the world and acquired a little silver, and his grandson acquired a little land. In due course the Johnsons became a prosperous yeoman family in Devon.

Late in the seventeenth century a ne'er-do-well son of the family ran off to the American colonies and settled in Boston, Massachusetts. His great-grandson Keble Johnson prospered in the rum trade and helped finance the War for Independence. In the nineteenth century another Keble Johnson lost most of the family fortune playing the railroad game with Jay Gould and J. P. Morgan. Just enough money remained to keep up appearances in a somewhat threadbare way and to send the eldest son to Harvard.

The money ran out in 1904, and the sixth Keble Johnson left Harvard at the end of his sophomore year, with no degree, no money, no prospects, and no family: his father's liver had given out at about the same time as the money, and his mother died shortly thereafter. His two years of college secured him a job on the Boston *Transcript*, which he was unable to hold. He became an itinerant newspaperman, drifting westward. He ended his travels in Fowler, Illinois, where he edited *The Bedford County Chronicle*, married a local girl, and produced a son. This son grew up to manage the local creamery and cultivate a vegetable garden; he left absolutely nothing to show for his sixty years of life except his son George.

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George was drafted into the army in 1940, and at the end of the war he brought back to Fowler a bride, a native of the distant northern kingdom where the woodcutter had labored centuries before. When their son was born, she selected for the child a name out of her own racial heritage; she named him Garft. And somewhere, on the boy's Christening day, an ancient record amended itself to show that there was now once more a mortal eligible to claim the outstanding wish.

George Johnson had not amounted to much before he went into the army, and after his return he was, if anything, even less useful. He worked intermittently as an auto mechanic, but most of his time was spent drinking beer at the Moose Club. When Garft was ten, his mother, having had as much as she could take of life in Fowler with George, disappeared. From that time on, Garft was largely on his own.

In high school he excelled in basketball, and upon graduation he was offered room, board, and pocket money to play for a small college in Missouri. After a semester and a half he was fired from the freshman squad, to widespread approbation. He had consistently broken training rules, had missed as many practice sessions as he had attended, and was loathed by every jock in the college. There was no possibility of his staying on as a student, as he had no more bothered to attend classes than basketball practice. He had,

however, developed a circle of acquaintance among a set of hairy undergraduates with leftist political ideas and a fondness for rock music, and after his dismissal from the college he remained in the town, pretending to be a student and sponging. He felt that he was gaining an excellent education in rap sessions and was able to hold his own in conversations about Carlos Castenada and Kurt Vonnegut. He actually read most of one of the Vonnegut novels.

He liked to think that he was part of what the press called “The Ferment On Campus”, and he marched and demonstrated in the spirit of the times. The community was too small for the creation of really satisfactory disorder, however, and he moved on to a larger campus in a large city, living in a confused world he saw through a haze of pills and alcohol. As the sixties wore on to their end, he drifted away from the campus skid row and into the real thing; geographically the distance was not great.

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And so here we have Garft Johnson at the age of thirty-five: a full-fledged bum, a dirty and emaciated scarecrow with bad teeth and shifty eyes, who sleeps on a pile of rags in an abandoned filling station and panhandles for enough wine to keep the shakes at bay. He is wholly untrustworthy and is capable of any nastiness he can find the courage to undertake. He deserves the contempt and scorn of every right-thinking citizen. He is the contingent recipient of absolutely anything at all that he may see fit to wish for.

But contingent recipient only; obviously he cannot be granted a wish until he has made a wish, and the wish cannot be made unless the demon is present. Since calling up a demon requires the performance of a complex ritual, involving a number of intricate and disgusting procedures, the likelihood of his ever realizing his good fortune would appear to be extremely remote. Certain events, however, have been evolving in such a way that they are militating in his behalf.

The realm of the supernatural lies outside of time and separate from space, and nothing about it is in any way comprehensible to the human understanding. It is thus necessary to use analogy in talking about it, rendering discourse among its beings as if it were human speech, and referring to their milieu in mundane terms. Using this method, we will transcribe a colloquy between two such beings. One of them might be called an efficiency expert or an expeditor, and the other could be labeled a middle executive. Call their topic the Obligations Backlog. Their conversation (we will call it a conversation) is taking place in the offices of the Fulfillment

Section of the Contracts Division of the Mortal Relations Department of the Temporal Affairs Branch. Smith and Jones will do for their names.

“This is really appalling,” Jones said. “I can’t imagine what you people have been doing. It is the responsibility of this section to keep an account of our contractual obligations to mortal beings and to devise methods of keeping within the letter of the law without actually giving anything away. My audit shows that for five thousand years or so this office has simply been pushing the tough problems to the back of the drawer. But they all remain as charges on the books, and they’ve had a visible effect on the bottom line. The Chief himself has been asking about it. He was not pleased.”

Smith turned pale, and sweat appeared on his face. “I — we don’t have enough help,” he said. “Every demon in the place has been working his tail off. Look at the time sheets. There’s not a demon that doesn’t log a century of overtime every millennium.”

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“Time sheets indeed,” Jones said. “I’ll tell you what the time sheets show. They show that the contact force has been hanging around headquarters keeping warm most of the time, instead of getting out in the field and taking care of our problems. Laxity, that’s what it is. Inexcusable laxity. Now listen carefully, Smith. This thing has got to be cleared up without delay. If it isn’t, somebody will have a few millennia on the griddle, and I promise you it won’t be me. You have one century to clear your books, and not a day more. Do I make myself clear?”

“But — ” said the hapless Smith. “But — ”

“One century,” Jones said with finality.

There almost immediately ensued a considerable stir in the Fulfillment Section, followed by a phenomenon much resembling a cloud of bats emerging from a cave at nightfall; it was a general exodus of demons on their way to undertake cleanup operations in the material worlds. A few thousand of them had, however, been kept at headquarters for individual admonishment. These were special offenders, demons whose logs showed extraordinary numbers of lapses. One by one they were brought before Smith, were questioned, lectured, and subjected to horrible punishments; they were then sent forth to rectify their errors. It was the kind of work that Smith usually enjoyed, but on this occasion he could take no pleasure in it; the threat that hung over him was too awful.

“Name?” he said to the trembling miscreant on the carpet.

“Robinson, sir,” said the demon.

“Robinson, yes. Here we are. Current assignment, Earth, so - and - so galaxy, so - and - so sector — yes. B. C. 3,000 to A. D. 3,000 — what’s that mean, Robinson?”

“Local years before and after the granting of The Opportunity, sir.”

“Humph. Now, let’s see. What’s this? What’s this? Do you know how many delinquencies you have, Robinson? As the sands of the shore. Disgraceful. Inexcusable. I suppose you know the consequences.”

Robinson did. He groveled and pled, but of course without result; he was subjected on the spot to the most abominable tortures. At their conclusion Smith said, “All right. Now get out there and straighten out your accounts. Otherwise, what you’ll get will make what you just had seem like a delightful diversion. Understood?”

It was understood very well indeed, and Robinson departed without ceremony, disappearing from Smith’s presence and instantly appearing in human form on earth. His delinquencies were, as Smith had pointed out, enormous in number, and he quailed at the thought of the work ahead. He was by nature indolent and slothful, and he remembered well the restful years he had spent in the hole before the officious woodchopper pulled him out. The memory of those years served to remind him that one of the items on his list was the woodchopper’s third wish, and he caused himself to materialize in the city where Garft Johnson lived on skid row.

He popped into material existence on the sidewalk in front of Doyle’s Shamrock Inn. Despite the establishment’s name, the eponymous Doyle had been in his grave for more than forty years, and any Irish *ambience* his bar may have possessed was as dead as Doyle. Now it was the very paradigm of skid-row saloon, shabby and soiled, a place where grimy defeated men (and a few women, who were in every way equal to the men, although they did not think of themselves as liberated) protracted the drinking of a beer or a glass of popskull wine for as long as the bartender would permit, because they had no other warm place to go.

At a table at the back of the room Garft Johnson was sitting with his friend, Billy. “Friend” is perhaps not the precise word to describe their relationship, but Garft and Billy had on a number of occasions combined their dimes and quarters to raise the price of a bottle, and that would do for friendship on Bastable Street. On this day Billy was standing treat. His wife had sent word that she was on her way down to see him, and Billy found himself in need of moral support. He was weak and his wife was strong, and she was

resolutely determined that Billy was going to return to a respectable life, a prospect that filled him with terror.

"I stuck it out for thirty years," he told Garft. "Thirty years of everything her way. Move to town so's we could have plumbing. Then move up here so's I could work in the tire factory. Then nags at me to try and make foreman. Thirty years. I ain't ambitious, Garfty. I would of been happy back there in Goster County, huntin' a mite, fishin' a mite, work once in a while at the canning factory if I needed a little cash money. Hell, I could of got on welfare with no sweat. But that there woman give me no peace, Garfty, no peace at all. So when I got my pension I says, 'I got to get me some peace, Lurlene. Let me take a hundert dollars a month,' I says, 'and you take the rest.' And I come down here, and it's peaceable. Except when she comes down to rescue me."

"Ah, screw her, Billy," Garft said. "Let's have another drink."

"Yeah, sure, Garfty," Billy said. "Hold my seat, I'll get 'em." He took the glasses to the bar for refills. Billy was not an alcoholic. He lived on skid row because he liked it. For thirty years he had hated almost every moment of his life; he disliked respectability, he resented keeping up appearances, he loathed responsibility. Here on Bastable Street, there were none of these. His hundred a month paid for his room and he worked as a casual from time to time for food and wine money. He drank the wine not out of need, but to be companionable. He was happy — or at any rate contented.

"Except for that damn woman," he said. "Keeps comin' down here, ever six months or so, hollers at me to come on home. Why, Lordamercy, Garfty, I can't live in that house no more. She's turned neat in her old age, keeps house like a demon. You drop anything on the floor, she screeches like a sireen. She's a witch, y'know."

"Yeah," Garft said. "They all are."

"No, I mean a real witch, knows spells and words of power. She's a Poecock, and all the women's witches in that tribe. Mother to daughter, ever since fur back."

"You believe that crap, Billy?"

"Can't say I believe it all, but there's something to it, all right. I seen her take off many a wart, and dry up cows, when we still lived up the valley. Them Poecocks been unto themselves on that ridge of theirn for anyhow two hundert years, moonshinin' and marryin' each other. They know some things. She's got a spell on me right now, tryin' to toll me home."

"Aw, come on, Billy," Garft said.

“It’s a fact. It ain’t much of a spell, Lord knows, for I’ve no intent of goin’. But I can feel the pull. Here she is, now.”

Like a dumpy tugboat puffing through garbage-laden waters, Lurlene was advancing toward them, utterly oblivious of the disgruntled winos who muttered darkly in her wake. Wheezing, she sat down at the table. “Lordamercy,” she said. “This street looks worse ever time I see it. Billy, get me a beer.”

“This here’s my friend, Garft,” Billy said.

“Hoddy. Billy, get me that beer, will you?”

Billy went to the bar. Lurlene said to Garft, “He brought you to argue on his side, did he?”

Argument was the last thing Garft wanted. He was at the pleasantest point of the day’s drinking, with his nerves calm and an easeful euphoria settling in. If nothing disturbing occurred, he might maintain this desirable state for several hours; but if strife or discord impinged upon his woolly contentment, he would instantly be plunged into quite another state of mind, a touchy, resentful irritation that was likely at any moment to turn into noisy, impotent rage. This would be followed by a deep depression, which ended only when he had drunk himself unconscious. These latter stages were not pleasant, and he liked to delay them for as long as possible. He by no means wanted an argument.

“Nah, Lurlene,” he said. “I’m on your side. You’re right. Billy don’t belong down here.” Only a few minutes previously he had been telling Billy that it was unreasonable of Lurlene to insist that he go home.

Billy came back with Lurlene’s beer. “How about you drink this before we start, Lurlene,” he said. “Let’s be restful for a little.” They sat and drank in a surprisingly companionable silence.

It was at this point that Robinson entered, creating something of a stir among the winos. He had not chosen wisely in selecting a model for his human appearance and costume. It is well known that demons have certain deficiencies in taste and intelligence, and it must be admitted that he was badly out of touch with twentieth-century Earth, so his error is perhaps understandable; but if his guise had been deliberately calculated to arouse suspicion and distrust in the human heart, it could not have been more successful. He was sharp, he was sleek; he was padded at the shoulders and pinched at the waist, he wore a tight vest and no tie, his shoes were square at the toe and lifted at the heel. Large gems flashed on his fingers, chains clinked on his wrists. The gaudy trendiness of the costume was, however, belied by his grooming: in an era of Pancho Villa mustaches and

fluffy hair sprayed with fixative, he wore a thin black line on his upper lip, and his hair was greased down to a black shine. He carried himself with a sort of furtive jauntiness; he reeked fraudulence as an athlete reeks sweat.

The type was not unknown on Bastable Street, and the winos watched him with a mixture of disdain and fear. There was a faint collective sigh of relief when they saw that his destination was Billy's table, that he had no interest in them. They returned their attention to their glasses.

Robinson pulled a chair up to the table and sat down. "Hi, there, Garft," he said. "Lurlene, Billy."

"Oh, hi," Garft said. Billy said, suspiciously, "You know him, Garft?"

Garft made a vague noise. Robinson said, "He don't know me yet, but I got something for him."

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No one in Doyle's had ever heard the caveat concerning Greeks bearing gifts, but every denizen of Bastable Street knew its meaning instinctively. All three pairs of eyes fixed themselves upon Robinson in deepest suspicion. He said, "Now I got to explain this like in detail. It's the law. I got to make you understand that this is for real. 'Cause it's going to seem like, you know, magic. And it is. Magic. But it's real."

If he had said that fire is hot or water is wet, he would have been unpersuasive. Garft said, "Look, buddy, we don't want any. We got things to talk about here. Private."

Lurlene sniffed at the air. She said, "There's something — I smell something."

"Well, sure," Billy said. "Naturally. You're in Doyle's."

"No, not that. Something wicked. Brimstone. I smell evil."

"Ah, witch stuff," Billy said.

Robinson shot a swift, covert glance at Lurlene. Something very ugly stared out of his eyes for a moment and then was gone. He said to Garft, "Listen, Garft, you got something coming to you. I brought it."

"Let's see it, then."

"Why, it ain't something I can lay on the table. What it is, is a wish."

"Brimstone!" cried Lurlene. "Garft, be careful!"

"What you talking about, Lurlene?" Billy said.

"I smell hellfire. Garft, don't talk to him!"

"Oh, stop it, Lurlene," Billy said, and then, to Robinson, "What you mean, a wish?"

"Just what I said. He gets one wish to come true. I can do that."

"Wow, great!" Garft said. "I wish I had the whole bottle here on the table, instead of doing this one drink at a time."

"That's what I mean," Robinson said. "You got to understand that it's all real when you make your wish, or it don't work. You got to know what you're doing."

"Ah, come on," Garft said. "What's the scam?" He could feel cracks developing in his carapace of well-being, could feel acid drops of irritation dripping in through the cracks.

"No scam," Robinson said. "Your forty-times-great grandfather was granted three wishes, and only took two. You get the other one."

"Yeah, sure. Who the hell are you, anyhow?"

"I know him for sure, Garft," Lurlene said. "An imp of Satan. Lord Jesus, save us!"

"Shut up, old woman!" Robinson said, viciously.

Billy stirred uneasily. "Hey!" he said with weak indignation. "Watch how you talk, there."

Robinson ignored him. He said, "Okay, Garft. Watch right here." He pointed with his finger. In front of Garft on the table there was suddenly a snifter glass of delicate crystal, holding an inch of fluid.

Garft gave a startled twitch. "What — ? How'd you do that?" he said. His voice was strained. His euphoria had wholly evaporated now, and his nerves were tuning themselves up for a bravura performance.

"I'm showing you I can do what I say," Robinson said. "Something you'll appreciate. Go ahead, drink it. You look like you could use it."

Garft shakily lifted the snifter. It contained three ounces of century-old *fine champagne*, a Cognac of such perfection and grandeur that it might have been the Platonic ideal of brandy. It was the distillation into amber droplets of a splendid summer long ago, so great and noble a Cognac that a connoisseur might have wept in gratitude upon inhaling its bouquet. Garft knocked it back in a single greedy swallow.

A second later he made a strangled sound, snatched up Lurlene's beer, and gulped noisily. "Whoo!" he said. "It's booze. I thought it was wine. What the hell *is* that stuff?" He looked suspiciously at Robinson. "You trying to poison me or something?"

Demons are not known for patience. For a moment the sulfurous smell became very strong. Lurlene made signs with her fingers and began to mumble. Robinson said, "You believe now I got the power to do it?"

"It's a good trick. Where was it, up your sleeve?"

"Up my sleeve, you lousy halfwit? Up my sleeve? It's magic, you putrid lump, magic. Can you understand that? You *will* understand that. You'll understand that, all right."

"Hey," said Garft. "I mean, hey, don't go calling no names. Nobody ast you to sit down here." He was by this time fully into stage two, full of resentment at the whole world and ripe for a quarrel. He was considerably intimidated by Robinson, but prepared to be belligerent until the altercation showed signs of graduating to a physical level. "Why don't you just get out of here?" he said. "We had about enough of you. Calling names. Goddam street sharp." 141

Robinson lost his temper entirely. It was not pleasant. Those traits which we hold to be most discreditable in a human being constitute a demon's entire personality, and the essential nastiness is in him never diluted by a decent impulse or a moral qualm. His is no proud and majestic wickedness; there is no Miltonic grandeur in him. It is not he, but his master who directs those enormous engines of evil that periodically afflict mortal beings; it is not he, but Milton's Satan (or something very like him) who inspires the great monsters, the Stalins and Maos and Hitlers. Robinson and his peers are otherwise. Theirs is a soiled and greasy wickedness, a wickedness of sly small speculations and furtive perversions, of gratuitous cruelties to the innocent, of moral cowardice and petulant selfishness, of willful squalor and mindless cynicism.

Such a being in a fit of rage evokes in bystanders approximately equal proportions of fear and disgust. It seemed to the three at the table that the atmosphere had suddenly taken on a dead, iron chill and an appalling fecal stench; a dreary sense of hopelessness and despair washed over them. They became aware that somewhere behind Robinson's ferrety sharpster's face was something toothed and purplish that squirmed and heaved.

Garft's belligerence vanished instantly. "Take it easy, buddy," he said, apprehensively. "Take it easy. No need to get mad. That's just the way I talk, y'know?"

Lurlene was made of sterner stuff. Terror and nausea chased each other across her face, and then there was a firming of her jaw. She took a deep breath and began to chant:

“By *Beevil* and *Ashkob* and *Gnul*:
 Git *back* in yer *hole*, beast.
 Back whur ye *come* from.
 Stay thar till *doomsday*,
 Or *someone* sends *rescue*.”

All parties, including Robinson, gaped at her. Garft recovered first. “Goddammit, Lurlene,” he said, “don’t get his goat any worse!”

Lurlene did not answer. She was staring at Robinson, the hopeful expression she had worn for a moment slowly fading from her face. Robinson smirked. “Whatta you know,” he said. “The old girl thought she knew a spell. Make you feel better, grandma?”

Billy said, nervously, “What in blazes was you doing, Lurlene?”

“What he said. Casting a spell. I didn’t really reckon it would work, but we got to do *something*.”

“Now where’d you of got a spell for a creature like this, anyhow? Course it didn’t work. What the world was it?”

Lurlene looked embarrassed. “Well,” she said, “it’s for mice, really. Or rats or snakes. Maybe as big as groundhogs. Things in holes. It’s all I could think of.”

Robinson let out a bray of laughter. “Yeah, mice are about your speed, grandma. And it wouldn’t even have worked with mice. You got the names all wrong.” His expression became menacing again, and he turned to Garft. “All right, you slob,” he said, “I’ve wasted about enough time here. *Now you make your lousy wish*.”

There was something monstrously offensive in his manner, something that went even beyond the offensiveness of the words. He was a bully, and a rather stupid one, but his power over his present company was an undeniable fact, and there was, behind the bullying, a cold, sneering arrogance. Only someone of saintly disposition could have remained unaffected. There were no saints in Doyle’s.

No saints, and, to be blunt, not even standard human beings. Except perhaps for Billy, every habitué of Doyle’s was in some degree deficient in those qualities that make it possible for the human race to cope with the world. These people had opted out. They had elected not to try any longer, and in making that election

they had outraged some basic part of their natures. Uncountable generations of our ancestors were shaped by the unforgiving iron imperatives of ecology, and our genes know, even when our minds do not, that failure to try is death. Deep in their hearts the people in Doyle's despised themselves, and their self-contempt made them in fact contemptible.

Thus Garft's behavior cannot be called courageous; it was not even the desperate valor of the cornered rat. It was, rather, simple failure to curb an access of spite and malice toward this creature who had had the effrontery to take him at his own evaluation. He was shaken by impotent rage, and for a brief moment his need to strike out at someone or something overrode his pusillanimity. But — all this having been said — he did, in the event, stand up to and prevail over a most repulsive and unquestionably powerful agent of darkness, and for that he deserves praise and thanks.

He pushed back his chair and rose to his feet, this unlikely David, sweating under his layers of ragged sweaters, trembling with equal parts of fear and rage, desperately winnowing his exiguous vocabulary for words that would flay and sear. The words simply were not there. It did not cross his mind that a gentle benediction might have caused Robinson at least a little discomfort, while the trite scatological and sexual imagery that made up his best effort at scathing words was, from Robinson's point of view, mild praise. He squeaked out his obscenities while Robinson grinned and his frustration grew, until at last Robinson said, "Okay, turkey, you've had your fun. Now make your wish. *Now.*"

"My wish?" Garft said in a strangled voice. "My wish? I'll tell you my wish, you creepy little rat. I wish—" He stopped. He had nothing in mind except that he desperately wanted something very bad to happen to Robinson. There was, at that point, a distinct possibility that he might say "I wish you'd go to hell" — or words to that effect. If he had done so, Robinson's mission would have been instantly and neatly completed: the wish would have been granted without actual benefit to Garft, and Robinson would have been back at headquarters to receive whatever plaudits are awarded by the likes of Smith and Jones.

But if that was Robinson's plan, it failed. The word "rat," which Garft had hurled only as a stock term of opprobrium, without thought of its literal meaning, had bred a sluggish activity in his brain, and he remembered Lurlene's abortive exorcism.

"You want my wish, I'll give you my wish, you — you lousy rat," he said. "I wish Lurlene's dumb poem worked, that's what I wish!"

And of course Robinson disappeared.

There was for a little time a bemused silence at the table. At length Lurlene said, "Kind of an ugly fella."

Billy nodded. "Yeah. Sure was. Glad he's gone. You want a drink, Garft?"

"Sure do, Billy. Say, what did that guy want, anyhow?"

The other two looked puzzled. The encounter was rapidly fading from all three memories, as invariably happens after such events.

"Why — I think he said he'd buy a drink," Billy said. "He never did, though. I'll do it." He went to the bar for the drinks, and all was as usual in Doyle's, and with that we reach the end of our fairy tale.

The question will of course be asked: Did they all live happily ever after? There is no answer at this time, because these things happened only recently. One can perhaps predict happiness — or at least reasonable contentment — for Lurlene and Billy. That was their state before they met Robinson, and there is no reason to think that anything may change for them. As for Garft, one would like to hope that some residual memory of his heroism lodged in his subconscious and will serve to spark a renaissance of spirit in him, so that he will take a bath and find a job and perhaps have his teeth seen to. Such a beginning might lead him into the paths of productive respectability, where he would end with a wife and children and a lawn to rake. On the other hand (and this is no doubt more likely), he may simply continue his present life, which does, after all, bring him happiness of a kind. If he had thoughtfully considered his wish, instead of squandering it in a fit of temper, his highest aspiration would have been to spend the rest of his life in the condition we have described as stage one of his drinking day. It is probably safe to say that Garft will live happily for two or three hours of each day, and not so happily the rest of the time.

Last of all Robinson. We know what happened to him. At the instant the wish was uttered he found himself, without any sense of transition, at the bottom of a deep hole in a cold northern land. He did not even make an attempt to get out. He was well aware of where he was, and how he had come to be there, and he was resigned to his imprisonment. He knew that he was going to be there for nine hundred and forty years. At the end of that time a poor woodcutter named Garft was going to find the hole and pull him out, and he would have to grant the woodcutter three wishes as a reward.

OLIDA

I go back to town exactly four times a year, to attend the quarterly director's meetings at the foundry. I have very little to do with my other interests in the county; they have such good managers that there is no need for personal visits on my part. The truth is that I could do the same with the foundry — it is in very capable hands — but there is, I suppose, a trace of sentimentality in my character, and I make these quarterly excursions chiefly for my own pleasure.

After the meeting, Fletcher Hodge said to me, as he always does, "Will you join us for lunch?" and I replied, as I always do, that I would. Fletcher is some sort of relation of mine, as indeed is the whole board except Frank Connors, who is president now, and actually runs things. Lunch would be in the dining room of the Updegraff Hotel, at a big round table that for many years has been an informal meeting place for the men (and, less frequently, the two women) who run the town and the county, and at which, on these occasions, places were saved for the board, even though it meant that some of the regulars had to take their lunches at less exalted tables.

At lunch I sat next to my Aunt Felicia Wagner. She is eighty-five years old now, but still sharp and intimidating. She is the largest stockholder in the foundry, and at her death her shares will go to her son, Richard. We expect this event to result in confusion and discord. My cousin Dick is a strange fellow.

She said, "Where are you staying tonight, Charles?"

"With Jean," I said. I always stay with Jean when I come to town, as Aunt Felicia well knew. Jean is my second cousin, a good-looking woman of about my own age, who, in 1951, married a Binford (the Philadelphia, not the Maryland, Binfords) and has kept him more or less as a pet for the past thirty-five years. Tolly Binford rides well, spends a lot of money on clothes, has never worked a day in his life,

and hasn't an ounce of brains to bless himself with. Jean adores him, and I've always thought him to be one of the finest men I know. They have five children who were delightful when they were small, and have grown up to be worthy and responsible citizens. These days I find that I am not happy about sleeping away from home, but somehow I find myself looking forward to my quarterly nights at the Binfords'.

So I was not overjoyed when Aunt Felicia said, "I wish you'd change your plans, and stay with me instead. I require your advice." That was Aunt Felicia. *Require*. And of course I had no choice. At sixty I cannot help being as obedient to her as I was at ten. I said, "Of course, Aunt Felicia."

"I dine at seven," she said.

After dinner we took our coffee in her pleasant living room, and she produced a bottle of really exceptional cognac. Uncle Whitlow's fabulous cellar, which I am sure is almost intact (she has done no entertaining since she was widowed), will, like the rest of the estate, in due course become Dick's property. It's a pity. Among Dick's other peculiarities, he is a teetotaler. The treasures that lie down there will go to waste.

We had talked of inconsequential things at dinner, but now she got down to business. "Charles," she said, "I want to talk to you about Richard."

"I see," I said. I was not at all surprised. She has been talking to me about poor Dick for a great many years.

"He plans to get married," she said.

I suppose my mouth dropped open. This time, she had surprised me; staggered me, to tell the truth. You have to understand about Dick. He was almost sixty, and I was reasonably certain that he had never in his life had a woman — nor a man, nor anything else, let me hasten to add. Sex appeared to be a matter that simply did not interest him, and had not since his adolescence. I had always vaguely supposed him to be quite sexless, the victim of some unfortunate glandular deficiency, but if that is what it was, it had no physical manifestations that showed. Dick appeared to be a normal male, albeit one who had allowed himself to become somewhat too soft and plump — which is not, after all, an uncommon failing. He was not, in fact, very good looking. He had a pasty complexion, and his pale blue eyes were owlishly magnified by the thick glasses he had to wear. It was a little hard to imagine a woman accepting him.

"Who's the lucky girl?" I said.

Aunt Felicia looked grim. “A Selkirk,” she said.

“A *Selkirk*? Good Lord.”

“Yes,” she said. “I cannot fathom how it came about — how they met at all. He brought her here once, without asking permission, without inquiring whether or not I wished to meet her. I did not receive them. Richard has not spoken to me since. I suppose it was a mistake. But it was so sudden.”

I understood her attitude very well. It was not simply a matter of Dick marrying outside his class; that is not a matter of great moment nowadays, and I don’t think that alone would have bothered Aunt Felicia very much. But a Selkirk was another kettle of fish, an entirely different level of undesirability. It was, in fact, totally unacceptable. The word “Selkirk” was almost a generic label in Goster County, a word signifying a person who was not only entirely worthless, but dishonest, sly, and cruel as well. The actual Selkirks were a degenerate tribe who lived indolent, disorderly lives up in the mountains, in and around a ruinous community called Grill’s Fork. Everyone was aware of them, of course; it was an ordinary fact of life that the Selkirks were up there, and that they were undesirable citizens, and that Grill’s Fork was a place to be avoided by everyone who was not a Selkirk. It had been so for many generations, and no one gave it much thought.

Sometimes there would be an item in the *Chronicle*, routine news, copied from the blotter by the police reporter: “Hobe Selkirk, Grill’s Fork, drunk and disorderly” — or Okie or Lester or Anselm Selkirk, run in for assault with a deadly weapon, or theft, or pill pushing. The young men were the only Selkirks seen in town; they would drive down in decrepit pickup trucks, which they loaded with what was apparently the shopping for several families, and, after securing the loads, would make the rounds of the more disreputable bars, drinking boilermakers and swallowing pills. These revels routinely ended in fights and slicings with switchblade knives and police intervention. The Selkirks were unquestionably not the sort of people to be welcomed into the family.

Aunt Felicia said, “I want you to talk to Richard, Charles. Find out how deeply he feels about this — attachment. Perhaps it’s only to defy me — to declare his independence. Although if that’s what it is, I must say he’s left it a bit late. See if there is any way to dissuade him. He will poison the rest of his life if he goes ahead with this. Please do what you can. Please.” She was more upset than I could recall having seen her before.

“Of course, Aunt Felicia,” I said. “And don’t worry. I don’t see how he can be serious about this.”

“Thank you, Charles. You will stay until it is all settled, won’t you?”

She had me trapped. I said, “Of course, Aunt Felicia.”

Dick had rented a furnished apartment from Zelda Hostetler, the widow of the Protestant undertaker. She had converted the second floor of her big house on Wetzel Avenue into an apartment, and furnished it with the discards and culls of her life-long devotion to redecorating. Dick’s six weeks of residence had left conclusive evidence that he was altogether unable to cope with life without someone to take care of him. The place was a sty. Articles of clothing and magazines and newspapers were scattered over the floor and on all the chairs. Every flat surface was loaded with dirty dishes and coffee cups. The ashtrays were precarious pyramids of butts surrounded by a dusting of ash. I said, “Good Lord, Dick, can’t Zelda find somebody to clean for you?”

He looked surprised. “Oh. Why, yes. I could do that, couldn’t I? I never thought. How about some coffee, Charley?”

I went with him to the kitchen, which was even more disorderly than the front room, and was, moreover, beginning to smell bad. As he clumsily set about making a pot of coffee, I said, “Now then, Dick, what about this plan of yours to get married?”

“I thought that’s why you came,” he said. “Mother sent you, of course. But I want to talk to you about it, Charley. Maybe you’ll understand. I know Mother never will. Let me pour your coffee, and we’ll talk.” He appeared to have lost weight, and there was no elasticity in his skin, so that his formerly round face was sagging into melancholy bloodhound folds. He was very tense and nervous, his eyes shifty behind the thick lenses. There was a fine tremor in his hands; he slopped coffee into the saucers as he carried it into the living room.

“Charley,” he said. “Old Charley. Remember the summers in the old days?”

I did, of course. Dick and I had been best friends as well as cousins in those days. We went to different prep schools, but during the summer we were always together, doing the things boys do. He said, “Remember the motorcycle summer?”

We had low-powered motorcycles the summer we were fifteen, for that one summer only, after which our parents vetoed the machines

as too dangerous. We did not object greatly; we were never enthusiasts, and the wheels were simply transportation. The next year, we had our driver's licenses. Dick said, "I want you to remember our trip to Grill's Fork that summer. Remember everything about it."

Our plan that day had been to ride at random over the most derelict roads we could find, following a general direction away from the river and upward into the mountains. It was a hot, dry summer, and even the smallest tributary roads were negotiable, though deeply rutted and very dusty. They were crooked and winding as well, and we thought it prudent to leave a mark at every forking, for our guidance on the way home. It was an entirely pleasant outing, the sort of thing that made summers a joy in those days.

Our intention had been to start home after eating the lunch we had packed, but somehow we managed to persuade each other that there was just enough time left to see the far side of one more ridge, and on the far side of that one we found Grill's Fork.

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It was about as depressing a hamlet as can be imagined. You must remember that this was 1941, and the nation was only beginning to recover from the Great Depression, so that neglected and run-down buildings were commonplace sights, but I had never before seen an entire village in which every structure, without exception, was so near ruin. There were perhaps two dozen houses scattered on the hillsides abutting the road, all of them the silvery gray of long-unpainted, weathered wood, all of them sagging and awry, each with its blind, boarded-up windows and flattened-out tin cans covering holes in walls or roof. Between the houses, tall weeds flourished. And, half hidden among the weeds, were ancient, rusty farm machines, broken, wheelless wagons, a Model A carcass, an inexplicable pair of giant flywheels, piles of cans and bottles, and — among and under all this — a mulch of desiccated hides and the bleached small bones of squirrels and rabbits and possums, the garbage of people whose diet runs largely to small game.

We halted at the top of the hill, switched off the bikes, and stood in the sudden silence absorbing the sight of this seedy blot on the summer scenery. "You know what this is?" I said.

"It must be Grill's Fork," Dick said. "Home of the infamous Selkirks."

"Well — shall we pay them a visit?"

We walked the bikes down. At the bottom the road ran almost level and almost straight for a couple of hundred yards, and near the middle of the straight stretch, hugging the road, was an elongated

building with a gas pump in front of it. The windowless broad side of it was covered with the only paint visible in the place, an enormous Red Man chewing tobacco sign. "General Store," I said. "Let's get a Coke."

The store had a porch with broken railings across its front, and we went up the two steps and opened the screen door and entered. It took a moment for our eyes to adjust to the dimness; then I spotted the Coca-Cola tank, and at the same time a voice said, "Howdy."

"Hello," we said. The man came out of the gloom at the back of the store. "Help you?" he said. He was a small man, shorter than either of us, wearing faded bib overalls and a soiled starched white shirt. "Couple of Cokes," I said. Dick had already pulled them out of the tank. I handed the storekeeper a dime. "That'll be twenty cents," he said.

150 "What?" I said. "A dime apiece for Cokes?"

"That's the price," he said. I paid him. I suppose I was somewhat intimidated. He was a very ugly little man, with a nose like a blade, a thin-lipped sour mouth crowded with crooked teeth, very pale eyes, and a short, dense mat of red hair. It was, as we soon discovered, the Selkirk face. They were an inbred lot, and every one of them that I ever saw wore some recognizable variation of that face.

"Guess I haven't seen you boys before," he said.

"No, I guess not," I said. "We're from Sturkeyville."

"Figured you was," he said. "What's your names?"

We told him. He said, "Howdy do. I'm Selkirk. Calvin. What you boys doin' up here?"

"Just riding our bikes," Dick said. "Seeing the county. This is the first time we've been here. This is Grill's Fork, isn't it?"

"Grill's Fork," Selkirk said. "You want anything else?"

The screen door slammed, and a girl came in. She was older than we were, eighteen perhaps, and, as I instantly saw, perfectly ripe. She wore a too-tight, too-short gingham dress, and perhaps nothing else; she filled the garment to overflowing, breasts and haunches softly and richly straining the thin cloth. She was barefoot, and dirty.

"Half a pounda baloney, Cal," she said. She looked at us. "Well. Who you fellas?"

We were struck dumb. Fifteen is a troublesome age for a boy, or at least it was in those days. An infusion of hormones is changing the lad's body, filling him with urgent needs that he sees no chance

of satisfying, driving him toward girls who somehow, and as if by magic, have acquired a perfect social ease that no doubt gives way in privacy to superior laughter at the antics of the pimpled gawks who diffidently and clumsily pursue them. We were scared of girls almost as much as we wanted them. And this was an older girl — a woman, really.

She said, “Well, speak up. What’s your names?”

We told her. “I’m Olida,” she said. “Olida Selkirk. We’re all Selkirks here.” She had the face, all right, but sufficiently softened and blunted to make her face almost attractive; and on her the red hair, although it was visibly dirty, was magnificent. But of course we had only passing attention for her face; the toothsome body fascinated us as a snake fascinates a rabbit.

“You boys come up to see how the hillbillies live, that it?” she said.

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We muttered incoherent denials. She said, “Why, come on, I’ll show you around. Not that there’s much of anything you ain’t seen already.”

She picked up her package and went out. We followed, as docile as sheep. In my case, at least, the docility had contradictory causes: first, her blatant sexuality so stirred my untried maleness that, at that moment, her wish was quite literally my command; and second, my ingrained obedience to the orders of female elders, fostered by my mother and aunts and schoolteachers. Olida was at once an object of desire and an adult woman.

She turned to the right, and we scuffed through the dust beside her, one on each side, an arrangement we arrived at only after some embarrassing milling about. I thought I saw her smile at our ineptness, and it rendered me utterly tongue-tied for a time. Not that Dick was much better, but he managed monosyllabic replies as she gave us the tour, which consisted of pointing out houses and giving us the names of the Selkirks who dwelt in them.

At the end of the straight stretch, the road turned and brought us into sight of a house that had been hidden by the hillside. It was a much larger house than any of the others; the central part of it was built of yellowish stone, and there were very extensive clapboard additions. The wooden part was as weathered as the rest of the houses in the place, and appeared to have been built around the middle of the last century. The stone part looked much older. “That’s where I live,” she said. “Come on up.”

Once more we went from brilliant sunshine into a dim interior. She closed the door behind us, and for a moment I could see nothing at all; then, as my eyes adjusted, I was able to make out most of the details of the shadowy room: shuttered windows with rotting draperies, bulky chairs disgorging stuffing, a fireplace with some sort of picture hanging above it and dime-store trinkets on the mantelpiece. There was a small fire burning, even on this hot summer day; and, in a high-backed chair drawn close to the fire, was a small, hunched figure. "My Granny," Olida said, and then, raising her voice: "I brought company, Granny."

The old woman's head lifted, and she peered at us. "Ah," she said in a tremulous old voice. "Aha. Company. We'll want tea, Olida."

"You'll have to drink a cup of tea," Olida whispered, and then, aloud: "I'll go fix it, Granny. You boys sit down."

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We took chairs, and she went out. We sat in silence, waiting for the old woman to speak. After a while she said, "What's your names, boys?" We told her. "And what's your fathers' names?" We told her that. "Ah. Aha. I know *of* your fathers, boys. Well-known names in town there. And here you are in Grill's Fork, come to take tea with Aunt Rhody. That's what everybody calls me except Olida. I'm her granny. Aha."

There was silence again for a time, and then Olida came in with the tea, a very odd-tasting brew, with no milk, sugar, or lemon. Manners required that I drink it, however unpalatable, and I did so, although my gorge rose a bit.

And that was all. I rose from my chair and began to pace, realizing suddenly that my last memory of that day was drinking Aunt Rhody's tea. I suppose I had never before tried to remember the day in its entirety, although the decrepit hamlet and its grubby siren Olida had certainly been recollected from time to time. But, try as I might, whatever happened after I drank the tea would not return to memory.

"This is weird, Dick," I said. "Really strange. You know, I can't remember a thing after we drank that tea."

"I thought you probably couldn't," Dick said. "That day was the start of — that day was the start. I'll have to tell you about it. You won't understand what's going on now if I don't."

I said, "What's really odd is that I don't remember forgetting. You know, why didn't it worry me the next day? I can't remember even thinking about it. I tell you, it's crazy."

“The whole thing is crazy,” Dick said. “Crazier than you think. And, well, the fact is —” He broke off, took a deep breath, and said, in a voice that was shaking, “The fact is, it’s pretty awful, Charley, and I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

The day had turned queer for Dick with the drinking of the tea, just as it had for me, but in a quite different way. “You fell asleep, Charley, right there in the chair. I was going to wake you up, but the old woman said, ‘Oh, let him snooze. You two run along,’ and Olida said, ‘Sure, let him sleep, Dick. You come with me.’”

She took him by the hand and led him out of the room, not through the front door and out into the summer afternoon, but back deeper into the house, through dim rooms full of decayed furniture and disquieting smells, and up an astonishingly handsome wide staircase, and then up a narrow, crooked one, and down a narrow, airless hallway to a door that opened into a dark room. There had been something in Dick’s tea, too, but a different dose from mine. He was perfectly conscious throughout the whole thing, and remembered it all clearly enough afterward, but in retrospect it had the quality of a dream, something impossible clearly remembered. And he was without a will of his own: he would do whatever she told him to do, and could do nothing without her instructions.

From inside the room came a powerful stench and a slow, regular rasp pitched on two levels, the sound of breathing of some huge thing inhaling and exhaling there in the blackness. “It’s my very-great grandpa,” Olida said to Dick, and then, into the room: “I brought Dick Wagner, Grandpa.”

The giant breathing paused, and an enormously deep, slow, phlegmy voice said, “Put him inside the room, Olida.”

“Go in,” she said. “Don’t make a sound.” Dick obeyed.

He stood just inside the door, baffled, trying to see into the darkness and failing. He did not, he said, feel an appropriate degree of fear, not even when the immense, apparently boneless hand, as big as a ham and as soft and cold and inelastic as curds in a cheesecloth, settled on his shoulder. He stood, and the clotted, rumbling voice said, “Yes. All right, Olida,” and she said, “Come,” and he left the room.

She led him out of the house and across a small meadow and up a ladder to the loft of a barn, where sunlight slanted in through gaps in the siding and lay in yellow bars on the hay. She said, “I’m going to show you how, Dickie boy. Do you want to learn?” and unbuttoned her dress.

They were in the loft for a couple of hours, Dick said, and she did indeed teach him how. There were three passages, the first instantly completed on his part, the second more creditable, and the third of quite considerable duration. He was a tired and pleased young man when they descended the ladder.

“We came back to the house then,” Dick said, “and you were still asleep in the chair. The old woman stood up — if you could call it standing up: she was so tiny and bent over that she wasn’t much more than waist-high — and went over to you and said, ‘Charley, you’re not going to remember this. You’re not going to remember it at all. Now wake up.’ And you woke up, and we stared home.”

“She told you you wouldn’t remember, and of course you didn’t. And Olida said something to me as we came back across the meadow, and that was true, too. She said, ‘You’re mine now, Dickie boy. Mine and nobody else’s. You can’t do that with anybody but me.’ It sounded like love talk, but what it was, was a curse. It was exactly true. I can’t do that with anybody but her. To this day.”

That explained a lot. I said, “Jesus, Dick. You mean that was the only time you ever — that that was your only time?”

“Oh, no,” he said. “No. I wish to God it had been. But that’s not how it is at all, in spite of what you — and I suppose, everybody else — think. No, I’ve been active enough. Ever since that day I’ve been up there pretty regularly. And I’m fine with Olida. It’s just that it doesn’t work with anybody else. And of course that’s why I never married.”

“But now you want to,” I said.

He stared at me with his sad dog’s eyes; the tremulous hands picked at the buttons of his blazer. He said. “Oh, come on now, Charley. You know better than that. *She* wants to. And those — things want us to. And right now I don’t see any way out of it.”

“Things? You mean the Selkirks?”

“Sure, the Selkirks,” he said. “Some of them aren’t human at all, Charley, did you know that?”

I let that pass. I said, “Dick, you don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do. If you don’t want to marry her, don’t. Why does she want to get married, all of a sudden, after all these years, anyhow?”

“Well, money, of course. That’s part of it. Mother’s eighty-five, after all. But the main thing is to keep the Very Great alive. I’ve been chosen for that. But it’s not time, yet. They want to set it up so Olida can keep an eye on me all the time. Ever since we went up

there that day, Charley, I've been — well, kind of a slave. In their control. Those drugs of theirs. Like what you drank in the tea, that made you forget. And what I've been drinking pretty regularly since. I tell you, when I think about her, my flesh creeps. But when she wants me up there, I go. I can't help myself. She says that when we're married, we'll live up there. I can build a house if I want to, she says, or move in with her and Aunt Rhody. You remember the house, Charley? It hasn't changed at all. It's just exactly the same as it was that day. Except that they've had to knock out another wall, to accommodate the Very Great."

The Very Great. A slave. Moving to Grill's Fork, for God's sake. Insanity. Dick appeared really to believe it all, but that was a matter to be covered later, by a psychiatrist. Right now the first order of business was to extricate him from the current mess. I said, "Dick, let's go up there right now. You just tell her it's all off. I'll be there for moral support. You could give her some money, I suppose. Cast-off mistress and all that. What do you say?"

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He gave me the dog stare again. "You don't understand, Charley. You don't understand a thing. I tell you I *can't*. Any more than I can fly. I do what she tells me."

"All right, then. I'll go by myself."

"If you want to, Charley. Right now I'll grab any straw. I don't think there's a thing you can do, though."

But I thought there was; there had to be. I simply could not abide the thought of that rat-faced tribe in Aunt Felicia's elegant house after her death, or of a Selkirk sitting at the round table at the Updegraff when they got control of Dick's stock, which I thought they certainly would. As you see, at that time I was thinking of them as Snopeses — an idea that in the event turned out to be very wide of the mark.

Dick said, "If you're going up there, Charley, take somebody with you. They're capable of anything."

"I will," I said. Tolly Binford was the very man. He was in first-class shape for a man of sixty, and while I couldn't quite take seriously the possibility of violence, it would unquestionably be comforting to have Tolly with me, especially if he decided to take a gun, which I rather thought he would.

"I'll go up tomorrow," I told Dick. "I'll see if Tolly can go with me."

I needed information on the Selkirks from a less prejudiced observer than Dick before I set out on my mission, and I stopped

at Frank Polder's house. Frank is principal at East High School, and unofficial county historian. He also is a cousin of some sort.

Frank pulled at his pipe and said, "You'll want to check with the sheriff and the police, Charley. They're probably pretty much up-to-date on the Selkirks. But it happens that I do know something about them. Are you aware that they're the oldest family in the county?"

I certainly had not known that. They are not the kind of people one thinks of as "old family." I said, "How far back do they go, Frank?"

"Well, they were here before the county became a jurisdiction, and quite a while before," he said. "When Forbes took Fort Duquesne and renamed it Fort Pitt in 1758, one of his scouts, a pretty far-ranging fellow, it seems, included the name of Selkirk among the scattering of settlers in the surrounding hundred miles who had survived the depredations of the French and the Indians. That's the earliest documented date we have on them. But a 1775 entry in the Shaftoe diaries describes the Selkirk house (the stone portion of the present house) as appearing to be at least a hundred years old on that date. That would put the Selkirks here before anybody but Indians. The paterfamilias, who gave his name to Shaftoe as Ashmole Selkirk, said he built the house himself, and that was what led Shaftoe to note the apparent age of the house. He thought Selkirk was lying, that the house was too old for him to have built. He also thought that Selkirk's large family was 'marvelous ugly'. Evidently they carried the face even then.

"In 1791 Ashmole Selkirk received a patent to something over two thousand acres 'on the waters of Grill's Fork of Big Scander Creek.' That covers all the land that makes up the settlement of Grill's Fork today. From that time on, the name appears pretty often in the recorder's books. Not to speak of the police records. Apparently the head of the clan is always in direct descent from the original Ashmole Selkirk; at any rate the owner of the big house and most of the land has always been an Ashmole. Is now, as a matter of fact.

"Very odd people, Charley. They carry clannishness to an extreme degree. I checked the marriage register a while back, and with only eight exceptions, every Selkirk marriage has been to another Selkirk. Those young men who come to town to raise hell seem to be very ordinary young thugs — a little meaner than most, I suppose, and certainly uglier than most — but by the time they're in their middle twenties, they stop visits to town altogether. Most curious. Of course, they've been inbreeding up there for three hundred years or more. I

don't know of actual criminal activity beyond fighting with knives down on Front Street, but over the years there've been a number of lost or benighted travelers who had the bejesus scared out of them when they stopped in Grill's Fork to ask for directions or help. I've often wondered whether there were others who never made it to town to tell about it. Why are you interested in the Selkirks at this late date, anyway?"

I said, "Just curious. Dick and I were talking about a trip up there we made back before the war, and I suddenly got to wondering about the Selkirks."

"A lot of people wonder about them, Charley," he said.

Tolly Binford relished the idea of an excursion up to the hamlet, and he was shocked to the bottom of his simple, decent soul when I told him about Dick's enslavement to a mountain trull. He quoted Kipling about the fool that there was. Kipling is the only poetry Tolly knows, bless his heart. "Of course Dick can't be altogether in his right mind," he said, "however much she's used her wiles. A bachelor keeping a mistress is one thing, but marrying a woman like that — "

"You have to remember that they've had this going for a good long time, Tolly. Years and years. It started long before either you or I was married."

That rather tickled Tolly. "Old Dick. Who'd have believed it?" Then, more seriously, he said, "What would you think of my taking a gun along, Charley?"

"Why don't you?" I said.

The next day a whole series of irritating small crises and minor hitches conspired to delay our departure, and the sun was low in the sky by the time we pulled into Grill's Fork. Tolly parked in front of the store, and I got out and surveyed the village. It appeared to me that not a building had been erected since my last visit, almost half a century before, nor had any of the old ones disappeared. There they squatted, quite unchanged, still unpainted, still decrepit and disreputable, still with an air of abandoned buildings occupied by squatters who would best be left undisturbed. Instead of lawns there were fields of weeds, as there had been then, but the junk among the weeds provided a touch of modern times: now it was rusty car bodies and those of pickup trucks, old refrigerators and stoves, and heaps of worn-out tires. The piles of cans and bottles looked the same, though.

The storekeeper could have been the same. Calvin Selkirk that Dick and I had first encountered, but probably wasn't. "Olida?" he said. "Up in the big house. Just around the bend."

I remembered where it was. Tolly and I walked along the road — asphalt now, instead of dust — and came around the cheek of the hill, and there it was, yellow stone and weathered wood, sealed and shuttered and, as it seemed to me, watchful, attentive, and menacing.

Tolly was not bothered by such introspective reservations, and he stepped right along, slashing at the weeds with the stick he always carries in the country, commenting in his loud, cheerful voice on the drainage pattern he thought he discerned. We went in single file, because the path from the road to the house was surrendering to the weeds, and I was glad to have Tolly trampling them ahead of me.

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I knocked on the door and when nothing happened, knocked again. The door opened, and there was Olida. Or no; her daughter or perhaps her granddaughter. And then she spoke and said, "Why, hello, Charley," and of course it was Olida, shockingly unchanged by the relentless years, still the voluptuous slattern of 1941, still vaguely superior and condescending. I said, "Olida?" and then: "Hello, Olida. This is Tolly Binford."

"Oh, I know who he is," she said. "The big golfer and fund-drive chairman. Ha. And you fellas come up to pry Dick loose from my awful clutches. Well, come on in."

The room had not changed either; there was the same undefinable faint unpleasant smell, the same small figure hunched in the chair by the fire. Of course it could not be the same old woman; that one had been ancient in 1941. But when she rose and took a couple of steps toward us, tiny and bent almost double, I would almost have sworn it was she. She said, "Howdy, Charley. Tolly. Sit down, boys."

It had to be the same woman; who else could be old enough to call a pair of sixty-year-olds "boys"? She had been very old the first time I had seen her, and she must by now be coeval with those purported 150-year-olds the Soviets trot out from time to time to demonstrate the salubrity of Leninist governance. But logic suggested that old Selkirk women looked as much like each other as young ones did.

The boys sat down. The crone said, "I know what you come for, and I tell you right off the bat, you're wastin' your time. It's a cruel thing you're tryin' to do, to separate these young lovers, and I'll not stand for it. Happy as two birds, they are, and you two villains sneakin' around tryin' to spoil things for 'em. I'll not have it."

Tolly looked at me and winked, and I came close to grinning myself. The old girl's effrontery was almost engaging. I said, "Well now, Mrs. Selkirk, I think maybe that's something for Olida and Dick to decide, don't you? We've talked to Dick, and now we'd like to talk to Olida about it. Uh — privately, if you don't mind."

"Mind?" she said. "Why should I mind? Olida knows her own mind. You and her go and talk, Charley. Tolly'll stay here and keep me company."

I looked at Olida, and she nodded and rose. I said, "Remember that you're driving, Tolly." It was a none too subtle warning about drinking their damned tea. Tolly said, "Right," and I saw that he understood.

She led me through the door and up the broad stairs to the second floor, and then down an almost pitch-black hallway and into a room where just enough light came through the shutters for me to see her white face in the dimness. She said, "We can talk here, Charley. There's something I've got to say to you."

"Now's the time," I said. "And I've got — *there's somebody in here!*" I had heard a sound out of the shadows, a wheeze or a gasp or a groan.

"Sure," she said. "It's Anse. Don't worry about him. He can't move at all anymore, and his mind's been gone for forty, fifty years. Don't even eat no more. We can talk here."

I was very sure that I did not want to be in the same room as Anse. "Let's go to a different room," I said.

"No use," she said. "There's somebody in every room. Worse'n Anse, most of 'em. And Anse can't understand us, or talk. Nowhere's what I want to tell you, Charley. Dick's wrong about me. All of you have got it all wrong. I truly mean Dick no harm. If he don't want to marry me, why that's all right. We have been lovers for a right long time, and it'd be nice to be married. But not if he don't want it. I guess you know I got a spell on him that I work with the tea, but sometimes it wears off, and he comes back anyhow. He really does love me, you know, Charley. If it wasn't that he's a Wagner and I'm a Selkirk, he'd have married me long ago. But let that go. I honest and truly love him, and I'll help him to have things the way he wants them. None of this was my idea. All of it was the Very Great's orders. I didn't have no choice. But I'm — I'm ready now. Ready to disobey. Just this once. For Dick."

She was speaking very quietly, almost in a whisper, and she sounded sincere and distressed and urgent. I tried to make out the expression

on the face floating there in the shadow.

Out of the darkness, suddenly and shockingly, there came a hoarse, clotted voice: "Shame on you, Olida. I heard that. I reckon you'll be punished for that."

She made an odd sound of surprise and fear. "Anse! But you can't talk anymore. You can't even understand talk."

"Ah. Ah." It was a noise something like laughter. "That's what you all thought. I just ain't had nothin' to say for quite a while. But now I have. Sooner or later somebody'll come in here, and I'll tell. You're in a bad scrape, Olida. I'll tell."

She whispered to me, "I'm done for. They'll fix me good for this. The Very Great thinks up some awful things. Lordy. I'm a goner."

Now to tell the truth, I was at this point considerably shaken. I'm no more timid than the next man, but the darkness and the cryptic jabber and the generally spooky atmosphere of the place were getting under my skin. I said — and I found that I was whispering, too — "Come on, Olida, let's get out of here. If you're afraid of them, we'll take you back to town. You'll be all right. We can finish our talk later. Come on. Let's go."

"All right," she said. "Yes. I'll go. If they let me. Us."

She took my hand and led me out of the room. Behind us the voice said, "One of these days somebody'll come in and I'll tell, Olida."

In the front room, Tolly and the old woman were sitting as we had left them. I said, "Come on, Tolly, we're leaving." He jumped up with alacrity. "O. K.," he said. "I'm ready. Good-bye Mrs. Selkirk."

The crone did not answer him; she spoke to Olida: "Where do you think you're goin', girl?"

"Charley, let's go," Olida said. "Quick." We went out the front door, Tolly following. The old woman's voice screeched after us, "Olida, you come back here. Right now."

I half expected that we'd be interfered with on our way to the car, since it was dark now, and our way through the weeds was slow, but we reached it without incident, barring a few stumbles. Tolly accelerated out of Grill's Fork with a spinning of wheels and a roar.

In the car I said, "Where can you go in town, Olida?"

"I got no place," she said, "except maybe with Dick."

"Well, we'll see if he'll have you," I said.

When Dick opened the door for us, he stared incredulously at Olida for a moment, and then they grabbed each other and kissed

in a famished way. After a little while, Dick raised his head and said, “What happened? Why did you bring her?”

I said, “It seems that she’s on your side now. She was scared to stay up there. Will you put her up?”

“Of course,” he said. He appeared to think I was insane to have asked such a question. “Good,” I said. “And now that we have the two of you here, Tolly and I have a few questions. First off, what’s this ‘Very Great’ that you keep talking about?”

They looked at each other. Dick said, “It’s old Ashmole Selkirk.”

“Ah,” I said. “The head of the clan.”

“Well, yes,” he said, “but not just that. It’s *the* Ashmole Selkirk. The one and only. The original.”

“The one who built the house?”

“The one who built the house.”

“I see. And he’s — how old?”

Dick sighed. “You don’t believe it. And I don’t blame you. But it’s true. Nobody knows how old he is. He was here before the white man came, probably long before. The Indians thought he was a ghost, or a god, or something else supernatural, and of course they were right. Except maybe *unnatural* is a better word. Anyhow, he doesn’t die, and he keeps on growing. But he’s human at the bottom, or at least he’s based on a human being. For a long time he was able to breed children with various women, so he clearly isn’t a different species — or wasn’t, anyway, in the beginning. What he is now is anybody’s guess. But it’s not hard to picture what he looked like when he was still human. Just have a look at any Selkirk face.

“The unnatural gene or whatever it is doesn’t hit every Selkirk in every generation. It seems to be a random thing. Sometimes it just arrests aging for a very long time — like Olida here. More often you get freaks, Selkirks who are normal for twenty or thirty years, and then suddenly begin to eat enormously and start to grow again. They’ll do that for forty or fifty or sixty years, until they weigh a ton and a half, or more. They can’t move at all, of course, and apparently their brains go bad. At some point they stop eating. They’ll have stopped talking some time before. In fact, they’ve stopped everything except just being alive.

“And they stay alive that way for a long, long time, living, I guess on the ton or more of fat or flesh they’ve acquired. They shrink as the years go by, growing smaller and smaller until there’s only a little black thing left, smaller than a cat. The bones must be used

up as nourishment, along with the fat and muscle. At some point the little black thing becomes as hard as a block of wood, and that's how they can tell that it's dead. Then they stick it in the ground under a gravestone that was set out a century or two before, when that particular Selkirk began to change.

"But old Ashmole doesn't shrink, and he doesn't die; he just grows and grows. And eats, every century or so. And what he eats extends his life for — well, I suppose a century. What he eats is a person. It's not mastication and swallowing and digestion, though I imagine his innards don't bear any resemblance to the human digestive apparatus. What he does, he enfolds the poor soul he's having for dinner, and absorbs him into some crease or crack in that mountain of a body of his. It's possible that there's a kind of mental assimilation along with the physical absorption. That may even by the essence of it — absorption of some sort of life-force, along with the physical nourishment.

"And that's the story of the Selkirks, and now you're free to call me crazy. But Olida will bear me out — for what that's worth — and I imagine you've both seen enough up there with your own eyes to persuade you to some degree."

Dick had been in dead earnest throughout this rigmarole, and Olida had nodded agreement as he spoke. The two of them seemed to believe it, at any rate, and there most certainly had been some strange goings-on up there at Grill's Fork that I'd seen myself. All that being said, however, the story was a bit too rich for easy digestion by an elderly skeptic, and, when considered, about as credible as flying saucers or astrology. I seemed to have two loonies on my hands now, instead of one. But the question I finally asked was far from deep or probing, and indeed was only to satisfy a minor puzzle that had nagged at me from time to time since this nonsense began. "Why do you call him the 'Very Great?'" I said.

"Well now, that one's easy," Olida said. "Every one of us is descended from him. He's our great, great, who-knows-how-many-times-great grandpa. So we just call him 'Very Great.'"

I nodded gravely, as though this greatly increased my understanding and said, "It's late, and I need my sleep. Will you two be all right?"

Olida said, "Oh yes," and Dick looked bruised and desperate for a moment, and then Olida took his hand, and he said, "Oh yes, sure. We'll be fine."

I thought about that as Tolly drove us back to Aunt Felicia's house. "Tolly," I said, "did Dick seem to you to be really convinced that they'd be fine?"

“Why no,” Tolly said. “Of course not. She’s got him like a snake gets a rabbit. He’s scared to death, but when she’s there, he’s hypnotized. You never did ask the main question. You know what Dick’s so scared of, don’t you?”

Good old Tolly, getting right to the root of the matter. I said, “Yes, I know, Tolly. He thinks he’s scheduled to be the next meal of the Very Great. And I gather that Olida thinks so, too. I wonder if Binky and Fred would put him up at their place in the islands for a few months, until he gets over this.”

“He wouldn’t go, Charley. Olida is your true designing woman, and she has him fast in her toils.” Tolly tends toward an old-fashioned style of discourse on the rare occasions that he permits his feelings to show.

“You know, Tolly, I’ve been wondering,” I said. “Do you suppose the law would have any objection if we were to go up there and let some light and air into that house?”

“Darn good idea. A little direct action. Why don’t we visit Dutch Hyde tomorrow, and kind of delicately feel him out?”

“Why not, indeed?” I said.

Dutch Hyde is the sheriff, a garrulous man who had held the office for thirty years now. We played baseball together when we were boys. He said, “Well, if you’re asking about criminal activity, you don’t want to see me — the chief of police is your man. He’s the one that snags the young Selkirks when they come to town and bust things up. When there’s a warrant for them, then I go up — or send a deputy, more often — and bring the perpetrator back to the county jail here. Now, the fact is that they mostly behave in a law-abiding way. When we go up there to arrest one of the boys, there’s never a speck of trouble. The perpetrator is always waiting in front of the store, clean clothes on and his clean socks and shaving gear in a little tin suitcase, and he climbs in the car as docile as you please. There’s generally one or two of ’em serving a little time down at the pen.

“Beyond that, I got nothing but suspicions — or anyhow, I haven’t got anything that will stand up enough to get a warrant and stir ’em up a little. But fellas, I know — I *know* — there’s something mighty wrong up there, even if I don’t know what it is. There’s some incest up there, I’m pretty sure of that, but they keep it pretty close amongst themselves, and there’s never been a complaint. And there’s probably a still or two, back in a hollow somewhere, but that’s for the feds. They pay their taxes, and they haven’t got any neighbors close enough to make complaints. But there’s been three unsolved

disappearances in my time in office, and for one reason and another, I think it was the Selkirks who were responsible. But I still haven't got enough to get a warrant to roust 'em. But I'd sure value a chance to search that house."

"We've been in it, Dutch," I said.

He looked astonished. "Well, by God. You're the first outsiders I ever heard of gettin' inside. What was it like?"

"Odd. Very odd. We think there's something wrong, too. We kind of thought we might go up there and nose around a little, just as public-spirited citizens. If we were to find anything, we'd let you know, of course. And we understand that you are opposed to this sort of action, and discourage it."

"Damn right I do," Hyde said. "And I'm going to discourage my Deputy Bevins about going with you."

The trouble was that we'd have to wait until dark. I can't say I was very happy about that, but I took some comfort in the fact that Bevins would be with us. He was a large, athletic young man who would no doubt have been a brawler if he had not been a law officer. I thought he could protect us if anybody could.

Olida wanted to come with us. I did not want her to. For all that she had defied her family and had run away from them, I still had reservations about the sincerity of her change of heart. My aim was to free Dick of the hold she had over him, and clearly the answer to that was up in the big house. If we took Olida with us, she would be in a position to cross us at any time. I didn't like it.

But Tolly took her side. He was, first of all, persuaded that she was sincere; and beyond that, he said, we would not only need advice on the best way to approach and enter the house, but guidance within it after we had entered. I tend to trust Tolly's judgment in matters like that, and although I held out for a while, I finally agreed that she should come along. Thus there were four of us who set out for Grill's Fork that evening.

We were undertaking a wholly illegal — indeed, a vigilante — expedition, but with Olida's company we might — however implausibly — claim that we had entered by invitation. Tolly and Bevins were armed. All four of us carried powerful flashlights from the sheriff's supply room. At about eleven o'clock we arrived at a convenient parking place on the far side of the ridge from the village, and set off on foot in the warm night.

The settlement below was wholly dark; there was not a light to be seen in any building. Olida led us off the road and along a hillside

path that circled the houses and brought us at last to a position above and behind the big house. The moon gave rather more light than was desirable for our purposes, but Olida assured us that every soul in Grill's Fork who could move was by this time sound asleep. We descended as quietly as possible to the shadows behind the barn, and cautiously inched around the building to survey our target.

The house loomed black and — in my edgy view — menacing above us. Olida whispered, "Do you see the cellar door?" I saw it; it was one of those double doors lying sloped above a stairway down to a door in the wall. She said, "That's how we'll go in. I'll scoot over to the house and make sure everything's quiet, and open the door. I'll motion you that it's safe to run across, and I'll duck in after you."

She raced through the weeds as silently as a shadow, and noiselessly raised the halves of the door. She took up a position against the wall of the house and gestured. We approached as quietly as we could, Bevins in the lead, then Tolly, and I in the rear. We crept down the stairs, and Bevins cautiously pushed open the door at the foot. He flashed his light around the room and said, "Empty room. Nobody here." He stepped inside.

I heard Olida say softly, "Are you all inside?"

Tolly and I still stood outside the door, but I said, "Yes. All in."

And then she yelled, a shocking noise in the silence we had so carefully maintained. She yelled, "*How do you like this, you nosy sons of bitches?*" I froze for a moment. Then I stuck my head above ground level and, after a second of puzzlement, made out what she was doing; she was hauling with all her might at a rope that hung out of a hole in the wall. There was an appalling, thunderous, rolling noise, and with it a cloud of dust that billowed out of the room a yard away. Tolly and I turned to flee up the stairs, but in that instant the import of her words sank in, and I pushed him back.

The room was a deadfall, a trap no doubt set long ago by early Selkirks who were quite aware that every man's hand was against them. Olida had set us up. The rope she had pulled tripped the apparatus, and a couple of tons of rock had fallen upon poor Bevins. She had, obviously, intended it for all three of us. I peeked over the side again. She had disappeared. No doubt she thought she'd got us all.

I flashed my light through the doorway; nothing was visible but dust settling upon a roomful of fallen rock. I was shaking pretty violently, and I thought I was going to be sick. Tolly sat on a step with his head in his hands, and I leaned against the wall, trying to get control of my stomach.

After a couple of minutes, Tolly said, "We'll have to find another way in," and his matter-of-fact readiness to get on with the job steadied me considerably. I said, "Yes," and then: "Why don't we just try the front door? Everybody's got to be awake by now."

The front door stood open; no doubt Olida had gone in that way. I examined the room in the glare of my flashlight. Without its shroud of darkness, it looked only soiled and threadbare and grubby now, and not at all sinister. The tiny crone sat in her chair, not moving, not looking at us. We hurried past her and into the next room.

There we had our first look at an old, changed Selkirk. It was another large room, and across it was an arched doorway that I saw led to the great stairway. There was a good deal of furniture in the room, all of it covered with cobwebs and dust; in one corner stood a rotting square piano. In the opposite corner was something large and pale that squirmed and heaved in the beams of light, a great, flaccid heaping of soft white flesh, resembling nothing so much as a ton or two of lard dropped in a gob from a modest height. But lard with a certain amount of muscular tissue remaining within it, enough muscle to permit the sluggish heavings that indicated a foredoomed effort to escape the torturing light. I retched, and I think Tolly did, too.

We ran through the arched door and up the stairway, our feet pounding dust out of the raveled runner that covered it. It gave into a broad hallway with a number of doors on both sides. I said, panting, "Which one's to the attic stairs, d'you think?" Tolly flashed his light around. "That one," he said. He was right. It was a steep, narrow stairway, and the hall at the top was narrow as well, and festooned with the usual cobwebs. "That'll be it," Tolly said. "That door there." He snatched it open, and we both pointed our lights.

The thing filled the room from floor to ceiling and, as far as I could tell, from wall to wall. Tolly and I leaped backward, and simultaneously the wall of white flesh creased and recoiled where the light struck it. We stood frozen.

A voice spoke from somewhere deep in the mass, a powerful basso profundo that would have been theatrically rich but for the clotted, sticky manner of its enunciation. It said, "Pray, gentlemen, extinguish the light. It causes me excessive pain, and serves no purpose here."

"My God," Tolly said. "My God. It talks."

"It?" the voice said. "Please have the goodness, Mr. Binford, to use the masculine pronoun in speaking of me. I am not an animal or an object. The light, if you please."

We pointed the lights at the floor, and the voice said, "Thank you. Now. To what do I owe this intrusion?"

"First time I ever talked to a roomful of lard," Tolly muttered. I think he was trying to buck himself up. He needed it if he was half as scared as I was. I said, shakily, "Do I address Ashmole Selkirk?"

"Your servant, sir," the voice said. "I already know your names, of course. What do you want of me, that you intrude into my house without invitation?"

I took a deep breath, and said, in as steady and assured a voice as I could manage, "I'll tell you what we want. We want you — people to release Dick Wagner. He is not going to marry Olida, and he is not going to be your next meal. He is to be let go at once." It was a very strange feeling, to be shouting at a mountain of inert flesh and to stand in the expectation of a reply. It was, in fact, so strange that I could not quite grasp the reality of it, and it seemed much like a dream. That, I suppose, was the reason I had not incontinently bolted, as any reasonable man would have done at that point.

"Upon my word, sir, you puzzle me," the creature rumbled. "I know of no compulsion upon your Mr. Wagner, except perhaps his affection for my descendant. Your rude incursion has been made entirely on the basis of a false assumption. I now direct you to leave these premises, as quickly as may be."

"Damn you!" I shouted. "Damn you to hell! You've got him drugged, enslaved to Olida. I want him released. *Now*."

"Or what, sir?" it said. "What will you do if I do not comply with these noisy demands?"

"*This*," I said. I pointed my light through the doorway, and, a moment later, so did Tolly.

Again there was a ponderous recoil of the wall of flesh under the battering of the light. It hurt the thing, no doubt about that. I felt a vindictive satisfaction, and then, almost instantly, abject fear. From the creature's side the flesh extended itself into a long, questing, boneless arm, a thing like a thick rope that moved with the swiftness of a whip. It snatched the flashlight from my hand and smashed it against the wall, shattering it. Tolly cried, "Jesus! It can move! Run, Charley!"

We spun around. Tolly's light sent a white beam down the narrow hall, and there, filling it all the way back to the door to the stairs, was a crowd of Selkirks, pale and rat-faced and red-haired, silently waiting. Tolly said, "Good Lord." We moved slowly toward them, simply because there seemed to be nothing else to do. None of them

had weapons, and there was no expression at all on their faces, so we had no idea of their intentions. They looked dangerous, though.

There was a stir at the back of the crowd, and I saw Olida pushing her way through. She made her way to the front and said, "All right, you two. You come with me now. Damned old fools. You could have been killed. The Very Great hasn't been that stirred up for years. You been lucky."

"But isn't that what you want, Olida?" I said. "You already tried to kill us once. And you did kill Bevins." She had rescued us from the crowd, but for what? I was thinking in terms of frying pans and fires.

"Now I got a better idea," she said. She turned and faced the crowd of Selkirks. "All right, you all go back to your houses now. It's all right. I'll take care of it." As silently as they had stolen upon us, they slipped back down the stairs. Olida called back into the room, "You got any orders, Grandpa?" There was no reply from the monster. "Let's go downstairs," she said.

There were no lights of any kind in the house, except for the small fire in the front room where the old woman sat. As we were descending by the light of the flash, I testily said something about the difficulties of so dark a place, to which she replied, "Oh, those of us who still have eyes can see pretty good in the dark. And the changed ones can't stand light at all."

My chief desire at the moment was to get out of that house as quickly as possible, and clearly Tolly felt the same. We did not halt in the front room, but moved briskly right through it, and into the outdoors. Olida demurred, but we paid no attention to her complaints, and she came along after us.

The three of us stood among the weeds in the moonlight, and two of us, at least, thankfully inhaled drafts of the fresh mountain air. I said, "All right, Olida, let's hear your 'better idea.' It had better be pretty good. There's been murder here, and of a deputy sheriff, at that. Maybe you're planning to dope us, or curse us or something, if you've dropped the notion of doing away with us. I tell you, it won't work. Dutch Hyde is itching to do something about you Selkirks, and this looks like the chance he's been looking for. He knows we're up here."

"Why, you got no problem," she said. "At least, not if you go along with what I got in mind."

"And what's that?"

“Well, look,” she said. “You’re right there’s going to be trouble about that deputy. It’s the first mess like this we been in for a long time. What I want to do is get out, me and a few others, and leave the rest of them for good. Move away to where nobody ever heard of the Selkirks and we can start over.”

“Now why should we let you go, Olida? I saw you pull the rope that killed the deputy. You’re going to stand trail. You and probably a lot of the others. Conspiracy to murder, it’ll be. And Tolly and I are witnesses.”

“Yes, you are,” she said. “That’s the problem here. One way or another, I got to shut you up, even though the real guilt’s on the Very Great, not me. So you either give me your word, and let me leave in peace, or I’ll give you to *them*.” She made a sweeping motion with her hand, and we turned. There, spread behind us, were the Selkirks, silent white faces in the moonlight staring at us, their eyes round as owl’s eyes here in the dimness. They exuded menace, it seemed to me, exhaled malice and venom. It was the most frightening sight of this frightening night, and I said, cravenly, “Yes, yes, all right. You have my word. But the sheriff gets the rest. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” she said. “But you won’t report anything until tomorrow. That’ll give us time to get away. Then do what you want.” She turned to the crowd. “It’s all right. They won’t tell anything. We can let them go.”

The crowd parted, and Tolly and I, holding our breath, walked through the corridor they made, and back to the road. We did not talk as we trudged up the hill toward the car. At the crest we turned for a last (we fervently hoped) look at Grill’s Fork.

Tolly grabbed my arm. “My God. Look!” I had already seen. Flames were leaping from the windows of the big house, big flames, indications of a large and furious fire. Tolly said, “We’ll have to go down there,” and we started down the hill at the fastest pace I was capable of. Tolly could have run faster, but he held himself to my speed.

At the point where the path met the road, there was a sudden, unnerving rattle of the undergrowth, and a figure burst out of the woods and ran toward us, waving its arms and urgently saying something that at last resolved itself into, “Charley! Tolly!”

“*Dick!*” I said. “For God’s sake! What are you doing here? How did you get here? You were supposed to stay in town. Is that your — did you start that fire?”

"I followed you out here," he said. "My car's parked behind yours. Yes, I set that damned place on fire. We'll be rid of those monsters once and for all. Look at it burn. Go! Go! Burn! Burn, you bastards!"

He was pretty wrought up. I said, "Dick, you go on back to the cars and wait. Tolly and I have to go down there and see if we can help. Will you be all right?"

The only reply I got was, "Burn, you sons of bitches." He was still mumbling. "Burn, burn," as he passed out of sight over the crest.

Tolly and I trotted down the road and around the hillside to the burning house. The fire was violent now, and roaring; tall flames were leaping through half a dozen burned-through places in the roof. The Selkirks were standing in clusters among the weeds, standing immobile and in dead silence, the pale faces intermittently flushed with red from the flames. No one was taking action of any sort, nor was there any indication that either persons or chattels had been salvaged from the conflagration.

I thought I recognized the storekeeper in the group nearest me, and I said, "Did anybody get out?"

"Nobody in there but Aunt Rhody and the changed ones. She didn't want to come out, and the rest of 'em can't. Listen to that!"

They sounded like choristers from hell, those doomed old Selkirks, trapped by their bulk and their shape, screaming as they were consumed by the flames, and (I thought) as they bubbled and fried in the awful heat. But there was one scream I did not hear: the bass bellow that I would have expected from old Ashmole. I said to the storekeeper, "The Very Great's still in there, isn't he?"

"Oh yeah," he said. "There's no way he could get out. You seen his room. In the attic of the old part of the house. Reckon he's too proud to scream. *There goes the floor!*"

The flame from the holes in the roof over the attic rooms was sucked downward for a moment, and simultaneously there was an audible thump as the enormous body dropped to the room below; then came a rending sound, and another thump, louder than the first, as it broke through the lower floor and dropped into the front room where the old woman had sat.

Now old Ashmole did make noises, but not screaming. He was still too proud. There was a gigantic thrashing and thumping in the room; the trapped monster was shapelessly flailing in its terminal agony. The empty, burned-out doorway and windows were intermittently occluded as the thing's heavings cast it against the walls; and once, a piece of it the size of a bathtub was extruded through the doorway

and came off and lay there on the stoop, burning and bubbling and pouring out black smoke.

The other trapped creatures had fallen silent; presumably all of them were dead. The whole roof was gone now, and we heard the tearing and crashing down of the remaining floors. The walls of the wooden portion were burning swiftly. In a little while there would be nothing standing but the stone walls of the original house. And still there came from within those walls the thudding of Ashmole's maddened convulsions. Blocks of stone were knocked out of the walls and tumbled to the ground. The old monster seemed to be determined that the last part of the house to perish would be himself.

He stopped moving at last, but he still burned; from the stone shell the greasy smoke continued to billow upward and to stink. One by one, the watching Selkirks were leaving the scene, none of them, as far as I could tell, evincing any shock or sorrow or regret. I said to the storekeeper, "I haven't seen Olida," and he said, "No, they left right when the fire started. You two guys are the friends Dick Wagner sent to get him loose, ain't you?"

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"That's right," I said.

"Well, let me tell you something. He's right lucky he got away from her. It don't matter my telling you now, with her gone, and you already in on a lot of our secrets. He'd of been bad off, if he'd stayed with Olida. The fact is, she's starting in on the change, and she's starting awful late. She's older than you think — a *lot* older than you think. We never had anybody change before that was so old when it happened. Aunt Rhody was the oldest one here that wasn't changed, and she was watchin' Olida careful for a long time, and just lately she told me she finally was sure. She said Olida is going to be a Very Great. She'll be the first since old Ashmole, and o' course the only one now. She's gone off someplace secret now to start her own nest. Don't reckon they'll be Selkirks, though. She'll have to take a new name. She'll have the money to do it, I reckon. Sure as thunder, she took the Very Great's chest along."

"How did she go? I mean, what are they traveling in?"

"Oh, they took three of the cars."

"Three? How many of them went?"

"Why, all sixteen. And Olida."

Good riddance, I thought, damned good riddance. And that went for old Ashmole as well, and the rest of the denizens of that foul house. R.I.P.

I realized suddenly how tired I was. Time to go home, and past time. I looked around for Tolly, and saw him in conversation with a female Selkirk. I called, "Time to go, Tolly. Be dawn in a little while. I don't know about you, but I've got to get to bed." He looked over, called back, "Righto," said good-bye to the Selkirk, and joined me. We set off wearily up the hill, two old-timers about at the end of their strength.

"Who was that you were talking to?" I asked Tolly.

"Never did get her name. Just a Selkirk. She told me something interesting, Charley. Very interesting. About the Selkirks Olida took with her."

"The storekeeper said there were sixteen of them."

"That's right. And do you know who those sixteen are? Her children."

If he was trying to startle me, he had succeeded. "*Children?*" I said. "She has children?"

"She has indeed. And guess who the father is."

"Good God. Good God. *Dick*. Sixteen. Good God. But why — of course. He doesn't know. Tolly, don't you think that's how it is?"

"Of course he doesn't know," Tolly said. "There's not a chance. He'd have let on some way. Dick loves kids. He'd never ignore children of his own, even out of Olida."

"I don't think we should tell him, Tolly."

"No, I suppose not. They're gone now, and I imagine Olida will be pretty clever in finding a hideout. He'd never have a chance to see the kids."

"That's not the reason, Tolly," I said. "The reason is what Olida is, and what those children are." I told him what the storekeeper had told me. "So you see, Tolly, Olida is a monster just like old Ashmole. It just hasn't begun to show yet. Some of those children — maybe all of them — will undergo what the Selkirks call 'the change.' They'll be monsters, too. I don't think that's a good thing for Dick to know."

"All right, not a word," Tolly said. He sighed deeply. "I guess that about wraps it up, eh?"

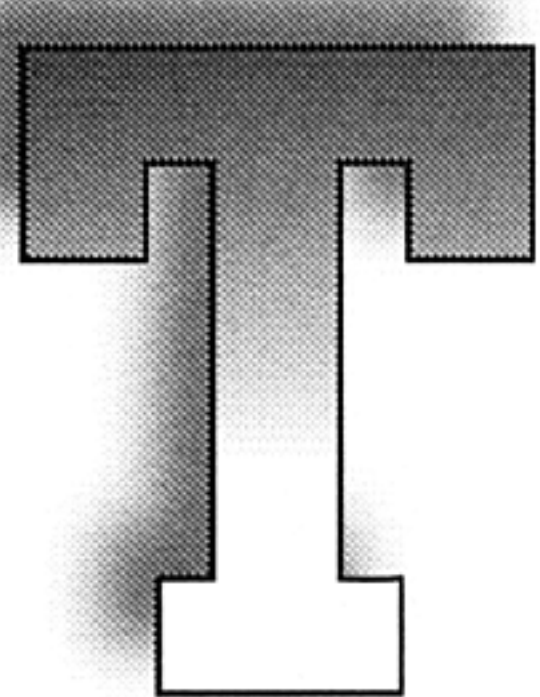
"I guess it does, Tolly," I said. And of course it did, except for the lengthy and no doubt ticklish complications that no later than tomorrow would inevitably arise from Bevin's death. But at least I would be able to report to Aunt Felicia that I had extricated Dick

from the toils of the Selkirks, and that he hoped to be forgiven and to be permitted to move back into his old bedroom.

But there was one thing that I was *not* going to tell her. I was not going to tell her about her sixteen grandchildren. That was something she'd never know, if I had anything to say about it. It was a shock I proposed to spare her, the knowledge that her only descendants were to be speechless blobs living long, long lives in the airless, dark rooms of a decrepit house somewhere. That I would spare her.

And to tell the truth, I wouldn't mind being spared it myself. I would be very content to be without the knowledge that those pallid growths are my first cousins once removed.

HOW DOBBSTOWN WAS SAVED



his is the story of how a mad scientist created a monster that almost destroyed an innocent village one terrible night, and how the people were saved by the heroism and cleverness of a young man of the village who, regrettably, never received the credit due him for his valor and ingenuity, and who is indeed held up to scorn and ridicule by a lot of people who are simply not aware of all the facts.

One night the mad scientist carelessly neglected to turn off a bunsen burner that was heating a mixture he had concocted in the laboratory of his great castle on a crag. Mad science being what it is, he had only the vaguest idea of the components of his mixture; a shipment of supplies had recently reached him, and he had been unable to restrain himself from immediately compounding a brew that contained a pinch or a drop of every one of the exotic chemicals in the shipment. To this he had superadded various arcane substances out of his regular stock. The resultant soup was the most baleful substance imaginable, but if Mr. Beasley (that was the mad scientist's name) had remembered to turn the gas valve off, it may be that it would not have reached its ultimate virulence. But he simply forgot. That was the kind of person he was.

He was young for a mad scientist, not more than thirty-four or thirty-five. He was a stocky man with the powerful, softish appearance of an athlete out of training and beginning to run to fat. He had pale-blue eyes and a heavy jaw, was losing his hair, and his customary tone of voice was a bellow. He resembled nothing so much as a high-school coach, the kind of man who shows no mercy in phys. ed. classes to those who have had the bad luck to be born with poor coordination and are not adept in sports. A coach of this kind is not above remarking upon an unlucky student's acne, and making crude jokes about its cause.

Such a man is of course in need of feminine companionship, but mad scientists do not have wives, and he found it necessary to seek comfort from the young women in the village at the foot of the mountain. It may seem to those of old-fashioned sensibilities that the use of his superior position to compel the submission of rural innocents was discreditable behavior, and indeed it was; but such was the nature of his calling and his character.

It was because of a visit from one of his rustic beauties that he neglected to keep proper watch on the mixture simmering in the laboratory. She had turned up at the castle door that stormy night, vigorously demanding a warm place to dry off and alcoholic refreshment for her inner person. Beasley knew her well, and was happy to comply. In his solicitude to help her off with her wet garments he completely forgot that he had not shut off the bunsen burner, and the mixture continued to bubble away while he occupied himself with the apple-cheeked village lass. He little dreamed what the consequences were to be.

The castle stood high on a windy crag. Far down the steep, forested mountainside was the Boone river, rushing headlong through narrow gorges and down rocky falls as though in blind flight from some fearsome thing on the lofty slopes. Not far from the foot of the mountain it boiled out of a narrow cleft and emerged into a wide valley; here it became suddenly wide and placid, and made a slow, meandering way down the valley's length. Beside these gentle waters, in a verdant coign of the mountain, stood the village of Dobbstown.

It was a picturesque place, unspoiled and typical of rural Iowa, with the green immensity of the great mountains behind it, and before it the flower-dappled carpet of meadow running down to the crystal waters of the river. It was a village of tall, narrow, half-timbered houses built close to crooked, cobbled streets, and under the summer sun on a feast day, when the villagers thronged the streets in their colorful native costumes, no sight could have been more delightful.

The villagers were simple folk who dwelt placidly and uneventfully in their remote and isolated village, living much as their ancestors had lived since time immemorial. Their lives were circumscribed by the slow round of the seasons, by sowing and the harvest, by honest toil and bucolic merriment. They knew nothing of the gaieties and fevers of the fashionable and sophisticated life of the great cities; Des Moines and Cedar Rapids were scarcely more than names to them.

But there was a darker side to village life. Across the river the meadow sloped gradually upward to become small hills, and beyond these lay the gloom and menace of the great forest. The villagers did not venture there, except for the most compelling reasons, but they were always aware of its presence across the river, aware that deep in the wild darkness, where cold mists coiled among the boles of ancient trees, there were fearful things that sometimes came out.

They might come out at any time, but the most dangerous night was All-Hallow's Eve. On that night there were strange movements there in the dark depths. Earth shifted above forgotten graves, old bones stirred. Pallid soft things with hungry mouths peered about with lidless eyes. From under the rot of the forest floor, in low places where stagnant water stood, fleshy fungi grew suddenly, blooming wetly forth beside the black swamp. And out of the earth and out of the trees and out of the waters, there would come sounds in the clammy night: rustlings and squeakings and chitterings; sticky growls and mutterings; thick, slow pantings; sounds of wicked hunger.

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On Halloween the village was afraid; it hid behind locked doors and bolted shutters, and every soul trembled by his fireside, while outside in the night a chill wind moaned in the empty streets. The wind blew past the dark hunch of the houses and across the wet cobbles to arrive at last at the square, where a lantern hung on a pole, the only drop of light in the vast night. The lantern swung in the gusts, creating gaunt shadows that silently came and fled across the cobblestones. In the church, the priest prayed the whole night through.

But in the castle there were no superstitious fears. The mad scientist and the village beauty, relaxed and informally clad, sat at ease on a soft divan before a roaring fire and refreshed themselves with champagne and caviar, while the beautiful music of a Bach waltz came softly from a costly component assemblage. This wing of the castle was opulently luxurious, with every comfort technology could provide; Beasley saw no need to live roughly, even though the demands of his work precluded the modernization of the rest of the castle. Here where he lived were central heating and shiny plumbing and electronic gadgetry. But beyond the great oak door that separated this wing from the rest of the castle there was a different world.

It was the true and veritable world of mad science, the ultimate castle, a structure so vast that its dimensions, like those of a mountain range, defied the mind's effort to grasp them. And it was old; so old that great expanses had succumbed at last to the dead weight of the years and stood in desolate ruin, an endless landscape of roofless,

crumbling walls. These ruins were, however, only the smallest part of the whole, and there remained intact an enormous, confused, interconnected congeries of the stuff of a host of castles: keep upon keep, each one mightier than the last, marching up mountain and down valley; towers beyond number, soaring to heights that daunted the eagle; an infinity of cobbled courtyards where divisions might maneuver; and a thousand grassy quadrangles as large as polo fields.

Here the wicked Beasley pursued his witless and mortally dangerous researches, in a laboratory at the top of a tower a safari's distance from the castle gate. It was a room as big as the nave of a cathedral, lofty, echoing, and shadowy, clogged with the paraphernalia of Beasley's profession. Alchemy and electronics had equal weight here, the skills of the haruspex and the molecular biologist were studied with equal fervor, the grimoire and the periodic table were taken as equally authoritative. In Beasley's notebooks the behavior of subatomic particles was described in dog Latin, and in his alembics bat's blood was distilled with radioactive salts. Such mixing of disciplines, while not generally considered to be generative of knowledge, lies at the very heart of mad science, and in this laboratory it was pursued to the limit of Beasley's erratic capabilities.

The contents, then, of the flask over the bunsen burner were a mixture unlikely to be duplicated — which is, of course, just as well. Eye of newt and crystalline DNA may have been in it, or dried monkey semen and vitamin B, or indeed any substance whatever that had any utility in alchemy or witchcraft or science. It bubbled serenely in its flask on the laboratory bench, while far away in the living quarters Beasley was having his rotten way with Miss Kinsey, who was almost as old as he was, but still so beautiful it would make you choke up, and who sometimes didn't wear a brassiere, forcing young men to lock themselves in the bathroom and have fantasies about her.

The castle harbored armies of living things, as was perhaps inevitable, given its size and antiquity, and strange ecologies thrived within its closed precincts. In a remote quadrangle where no door had opened for numberless years there dwelt a race of goats who had the ability to converse in a primitive way, and who lived on blind fish brought them by a creature whose remote ancestors may have been something like enormous scorpions. The creature took, in barter for the fish, bouquets of a flower that grew in a corner of the quad, accepting them through the elaborate porcelain grid that protected the quad's drainage hole. After receiving its flowers

it would make the long descent to the black labyrinth of waterways where it lived with its kind, its route sometimes through vertical shafts, sometimes down the sides of great slimy cliffs pocked with random openings, sometimes horizontally along perilous ledges to the next point of descent.

These creatures had lived since time immemorial at the very edge of extinction; their existence was dependent upon the flowers, without which they could not breed. It was a precarious foundation, because the flower itself was no longer able to reproduce. The rootbed in the corner of the quad was the only one remaining in the world, and the flowers that grew from the roots were sterile. The plant had once distributed its seeds by explosion; pressure would build up inside the seed pod until the bursting point was reached, and the seeds would be scattered. The seeds would then creep along until tendrils of root sprouting from their undersides anchored them, whereupon, if they had come upon nutritious soil, they would grow. The plant had evolved in the direction of obtaining a more powerful explosion, for the wider distribution of the seeds, and to attain this, the blooms developed an integument that became tougher, generation by generation, until at last it became unbreakable by any force the flower could generate. The motile seeds, confined in the globular seed pod, became violent motes that banged ferociously at the walls, but could never escape.

And so, when the old root died, there would be no more of the flowers, and that would mark the end of the fishing creatures and, in due course, of the goats. But for so long as the root lived, the fishers would bring their pale catch to the goats, and bear the flowers back underground, buzzing green globes on hairy stems. A pair of the creatures would take a flower and go to the breeding place, sinking to the bottom of a vast cistern whose water was a sludge of white algae, and at the cistern's bottom enter a narrow tunnel that corkscrewed upward to terminate in a cavity just large enough for the two of them. One of them would place a rock over the opening, sealing them inside the cavity. Then, clasping each other, they would split the flower, and be riddled through and through by the explosion of seeds. In their bodies the seeds triggered an enzyme that worked instant ruin, reducing the two creatures to a homogeneous thick fluid. After a time, if luck was with them, the fluid would separate into globules, which in due course developed tough rinds. Then other of the creatures would come and bear away the globules in triumph: the pair had bred successfully, and here were the six or eight young they had produced.

But more than half of the attempted breedings were unsuccessful. The initial stage of the metamorphosis would come about satisfactorily, and the breeding pair be reduced to the common fluid; but then the restructuring would fail, for whatever reason, and there would remain in the cavity only a noisome half-ton of rotting protein. This loathsome carrion provided an essential nutriment for another denizen of the castle's underworld: the krip, a monster if ever there was one, and, as you might say, an alter ego of the unspeakable Beasley.

180 It lived in the depths, under the rubble of a primitive keep, which may have been the aboriginal part of the castle. Above the wreckage of the keep lay the accretion of ages of building and destruction, layer upon layer, rising at last to the surface, where the newest construction, itself so old that its granite had eroded into strange shapes, crowned the architectural midden. Under the old keep was its dungeon, an enormous bottle-shaped room hewn out of the living rock, its only opening a circular hole at the top of the bottleneck. The opening was covered by a great slab of basalt, and upon the slab lay the incomprehensible weight of the overburden. This was the lair of the krip.

It had once been a human being. Far in the dark backward and abysm of time a man had been lowered into this hole and left there when besieging hordes at last broke into the keep to slaughter the defenders and pull down the building. He should have died. He lived on because a fault in the rock admitted a small stream of water that made a rivulet across the floor of the dungeon and gathered in a pool in a corner before flowing out of another crack. The fissure that admitted the water was large enough to accommodate small fish that sometimes found their way through a maze of faults and fissures from an underground river, and the captive kept himself alive by devouring these. If he could have seen them, he no doubt would not have eaten them, even in his starving state, but there was of course absolutely no light in his prison.

And so he continued to exist, and the years wore on. One day there was a slippage at a fault, and a stratum of rock made a small movement. A new system of conduits and channels suddenly cracked into existence. A fissure was opened in the fishing creatures' breeding cavity, and the vile fluid of an unsuccessful breeding drained through the crack and flowed from channel to fissure to fault, seeping downward and creeping horizontally along an anfractuous route that brought it at last to the stream that fed the prisoner's pool. And the prisoner, having no choice — he was, in any case, by this time quite mad — the prisoner drank it.

What he drank was a soup of cells entirely alien to human chemistry, churned by enzymes whose purpose it was to metamorphose them into the young of the fishing creatures. In the prisoner's body they were instantly and horribly lethal, and the man died. But the enzymes worked on his flesh, and the cells of the soup were still driven blindly to combine. A new creature came into being, a thing created of unnatural fusions and fissions, whose cells in the end resembled those of neither of the progenitors, nor anything else that ever existed. It kept alive by ingesting the water and fish that came into the dungeon, and feasted from time to time when the fishing creatures' breeding failed. And it grew.

It grew steadily and inexorably over the years and the centuries, and came at last to fill the entire huge dungeon, ton upon ton of flesh that was not really flesh, a flaccid — almost fluid — mass without mind, without instinct, without even reflex except for the pulsing orifice at the bottom of the dungeon that ingested whatever came in through the fissure in the wall. Somewhere inside the mass floated a human skeleton.

It filled the dungeon and continued to grow, creating an enormous pressure on the prison walls and on the slab covering the entrance. A tendril was forced under the slab, and thereafter growth followed that tendril, inching through cracks and interstices in the rubble, filling a cavity when one was encountered, moving onward when the cavity was filled. For no reason except that it happened to be the path of least resistance, its growth was upward. Foot by foot, over the ages, its furthest extension moved toward the surface, until at last a tendril emerged through the cobbled floor of a great vaulted room in the monstrous labyrinth of cellars that underlay the castle. And here, suddenly, with no constraints of space, it grew violently, incontinently, as though it were bent upon filling the lofty room. Small denizens of the cellars sometimes blundered into it and were absorbed almost instantly; this was an ability the krip had developed after a small earth tremor severed the upper portion from the old blind mouth in the dungeon. The krip here in the cellar room could feed itself. And its appetite was insatiable.

In another part of the castle were rats. They were a crafty breed, tough, ferocious, capable of considerable cooperation among themselves, and driven by a powerful urge to conquer and rule. Vast areas of the castle were theirs; but incomparably larger expanses remained to be taken, and it was toward this end that they unceasingly strove. In certain directions their way was blocked by occupiers who were impossible to displace, but great reaches seemed susceptible of subjugation, and these were placed under unending siege.

One of them was the domain of the mad scientist. He had thus far been successful in excluding the rats, but they were tenacious, patient, and ingenious. For generations they had been working to penetrate Beasley's main barricade, a mile-long gallery seamlessly carpeted with a lethal black fungus which, if the slightest pressure were placed upon it, emitted a cloud of corrosive and instantly fatal gas. The rats, by a feat of computation and engineering unusual in their kind, had located a crossbeam under the floor, and, using it for support, had undertaken to gnaw away from beneath a strip of flooring. As the wood from which it took sustenance was gnawed away, the fungus died, and the rats were left at last with a clear path across the gallery. The wall on the other side was thick, but it was wooden, and subject to gnawing. The rats gnawed. They gnawed, and on the morning of Halloween they at last pierced the wall. Through the hole and into Beasley's territory poured a feral river, a malign, chittering undulance of sticky fur and clotted fangs and red angry eyes.

It flowed down a long corridor and through a doorless doorway into a vast ballroom, and there its forward progress was halted, much as a rivulet must pause to fill a pool before it can move on at the further side. When the whole of the floor — there were several acres of it — was a blanket of rats, the van again moved onward, through hall and corridor, down long flights and up others, across catwalks spanning fathomless gulfs, and through numberless forgotten rooms. All through the day it traveled, and at some point in the night it reached Beasley's laboratory.

And there it paused, sensing danger, aware of unseen forces. Scouts dashed forward and made hasty retreats. The volume of the chittering rose. The king rat, a scarred, corpulent ancient, came forward from his rearward position and squeaked authoritatively. A task force of perhaps a hundred rats, grizzled veterans all, detached itself and made a cautious advance.

At the other side of the laboratory was the bench on which Beasley's potion was simmering. The hundred were about halfway there when the smell reached them. They were instantly enslaved. Some property, chemical or magical, in the vapor-borne particles triggered in them a wild hunger, an irresistible desire to reach the source of the smell. They followed their noses in a blind, heedless rush across the room.

They swarmed over the bench, scattering equipment and breaking glass. The fatal beaker rolled off the bench and shattered on the floor, and the rats fell in a frenzy upon its contents, reduced now

by evaporation to a semi-solid state. They fought frantically for access to the lump, squealing and biting and clawing. Those who did not reach it before it was wholly devoured chewed at the smeared faces of their luckier fellows. Within a few minutes every one of the hundred had ingested at least a drop of the mixture, and some had swallowed whole mouthfuls.

It took perhaps thirty seconds for the very strange molecules to reach their brains, whereupon they were seized by what in a human being would be called a homicidal mania. The one who had tasted first lunged at one of his comrades, wholly in the grip of a need to kill. The other, a late partaker, still had his wits about him, and he sensibly fled. The whole group pursued, mad now for blood.

If they had caught and killed the rat who fled, they would immediately have turned upon each other, in a bloodletting that would not have ended until all but one were dead; but for so long as he fled ahead of them, the blood lust of the ninety-and-nine was fixed upon one quarry, and they followed where he ran. He was a rat in his prime, and the single track of his mind was fixed on flight quite as firmly as those of his fellows were fixed on the shedding of his blood, so he led them on a long chase indeed.

It ended miles away and far below, in the giant vaulted cellar room of the krieg. The hurtling mass of rats, pursued and pursuers, came boiling through the arch of a corridor, and disappeared. They had encountered the krieg and been absorbed by it, as easily and silently and with as little apparent awareness as if they had run out of a lighted place into a dark one.

Thus it was that Beasley's unholy potion was absorbed by the krieg. The reaction came instantly. A tremor passed through the enormous mass, and it began to heave and roll in ponderous spasms, as its interior was riddled by a sleet of alien protein molecules. In the wake of the molecules, the cells of the krieg were left altered, metamorphosed into something analogous to nerve tissue. When at last the convulsions ended the krieg was possessed of a network that approximated a crude brain.

And so — a monster. It had always been a monster, of course, but up to now it had been a mere giant blob, menacing no one but the nameless scurrying denizens of the castle's underworld. Now, because of the mad scientist's tampering with things persons were not meant to know, it possessed sentience of a sort, and an awareness that it was hungry, and an urge to go forth and seek nourishment.

It thrust an extension of itself into a corridor, wholly filling the tall, arched passageway. The extension pushed along, sweeping before

it or engulfing everything in its path, not unlike a head of water through a hose. By the time the cellar room was empty of krieb, a mile of corridor was full of it.

The corridor ended in an opening in the mountainside, and the krieb poured through, yard upon yard of it, reverting, as it emerged into the open air, from the elongation necessitated by the constriction of the corridor to its natural condition of shapelessness. It lay menacingly there on the mountainside, a heaving, incondite mass as big as a supermarket, ready now to devastate the countryside. The village below, already in mortal danger from the things in the forest, lay open and vulnerable to its appetite. But it was not destined to attain its goal.

184 Historians have often observed that monsters created by mad scientists invariably accomplish a considerable amount of devastation before they are at last dispatched, but the Dobbstown Monster — the krieb — was an exception: it was destroyed very early in its career, before it could devour even one village. Its destruction was an astonishing and laudable feat, accomplished by a hero who never did receive the honor due him because the unperceptive townspeople did not even realize that they had been in peril, let alone appreciate the valor of their lonely champion.

But of course that is the nature of small towns. Their values are crass and ordinary and they cannot understand or appreciate anyone who thinks about matters more recondite than the trivialities of their quotidian pursuits. They value a second-rate basketball squad more than a debate team that places third in its category in the State Competition, they see nothing wrong when a lout who is good at sports and can joke with girls is more popular than a contemporary who might tend to be somewhat shy, but who in fact knows a great deal more than the athlete does. The truth is that if the monster had destroyed Dobbstown, it would have been no more than the town deserved.

About eight o'clock on the night of Halloween Miles Norris saw Marcia Lippincott leaving the library, where she had been working on a theme for Social Studies. She was going home to dress for a party that was scheduled to begin at nine. Marcia was probably the best-looking girl in the high school, with black hair and blue eyes and a trim figure that in fact had lots of mouth-watering curves when you saw her in a bathing suit or tennis clothes. She asked Miles if he was going to the party. Miles said no, he wasn't. He had not been invited, as a matter of fact, and he thought that Marcia probably knew he

hadn't been. He felt a little bad that she was aligning herself with the ignoramuses who thought that baiting Miles Norris was good sport, but at the same time he was somewhat grateful that she had spoken to him at all. After she left the library Miles went back to his book. At that very moment, high on the mountainside, the krieb was oozing monstrosly from the mouth of the tunnel, and deep in the forest Boschian horrors were preparing for the night's work, swarming from the fetid depths to gather at the forest's edge.

Miles left the library soon after Marcia; at nine the Halloween movies began on channel twenty-two, and he planned to watch all of them, even though he had seen each one many times. He was an expert on horror films, possibly the most knowledgeable in the whole state, but he liked to screen the classics whenever he could, for deeper study of *nuance*. At the high school they gave him scant respect for his learning, but he was used to that, and most of the time he was secretly laughing at them. The truth is that he was in almost every way considerably superior to all of his contemporaries, and sophisticated in ways they were not even aware of. As things turned out, it's a lucky thing he was.

The malign horde of supernatural predators stirred restlessly at the edge of the forest, awaiting orders from their leader to move upon the village. This leader was a fit commander for his army of night monsters, a being of human shape and proportion, but half again human size, dark purple in color, and possessed of horns and a tail. The front of his head, where a face should have been, was a purple bulge like a fused mass of worms. Near him were his aides, one a corpse that had been reanimated after it had reached a late state of decomposition, and the other a creature resembling an enormous ratite bird with a woman's head at the end of its long, sinuous neck.

"They will have protection," the demon said to the corpse. "There will be all kinds of herbs, and crucifixes and holy water, and the spells of their white witch, and the prayers of their priest. We must have an ally, someone to remove those protections and then to invite us to cross this running water and enter the village. See to it."

Thus it was that a bat flew out of the treetops and mounted to a great height and flew toward the village. At the outskirts it descended and alit. It blurred, shifted, altered, and grew, and suddenly a man was standing under the streetlight at Fourth and Elm.

At any rate it looked like a man, a tall old man in immaculate evening dress, who began to walk slowly along the sidewalk, sniffing

and peering about. After a little time he suddenly halted and became immobile, not unlike a dog on point; then he began to run with inhuman speed in the direction he had pointed.

Marcia Lippincott was at that moment two blocks from home, walking briskly down Poplar Street. A block further on, passing old Mrs. Stoa's house, she saw something white flash behind Mrs. Stoa's big forsythias, and she stopped and peered into the bushes, more puzzled than frightened. Suddenly the old man was there, confronting her. Before there was even time to feel alarm, she made the mistake of looking into his eyes.

Ancient powers lay within those eyes, and she was instantly brought under his domination. He whispered a command and she fell into step beside him, her movements puppet-like. They moved off in the direction of the river.

Up in the castle they were quite unaware of the dangerous situation that was developing. Replete now, and comfortably drowsy, the mad scientist and his unfortunate victim whispered to each other at the fireside. At last she said, "Well, enough of this. Time for me to get back to town."

"I'll ride in with you," Beasley said. "I want to check out the party at the Elk's Club. Somebody'll give me a ride home later."

They set off down the mountain in Miss Kinsey's Volkswagen Rabbit. Miss Kinsey was frightened, and drove as fast as she dared; and indeed it was a night to strike terror into the heart of anyone less dense and complacent than Beasley, a night of Stygian blackness, with a mighty wind that howled through the deformed trees along the road, lashing the low branches so that they seemed to be making futile clutches at the car. The car slipped and slewed on the steep, crooked road in its frantic race toward the comparative safety of the village.

As they negotiated one of the dangerous hairpin curves, Miss Kinsey suddenly tramped hard on the brakes, and the car skidded to a stop only a few feet from an obstruction that lay across the road, a gray, glistening mass twice as high as the car, extending into the trees on both sides of the road. It was of course the krip, moving with all possible speed toward the nourishment it sensed down in the village. As the pair in the car stared aghast at the sight the headlights revealed, a pseudopod extended itself from the krip and moved massively but with lightning speed toward the car. Miss Kinsey recovered first from her paralysis; she shrieked and began to scrabble frantically at the door handle. When it opened she leaped

from the car and ran. Beasley was only a second behind her. Even so, they were none too fast; a moment later, the krieb had engulfed the car. The pseudopod continued to extend itself in swift, blind pursuit of the pair.

The pusillanimous Beasley, mad with fear, simply bolted, abandoning Miss Kinsey to the mercies of the krieb. But she was already in full flight, plunging blindly down the mountainside, stumbling and falling, tearing her clothing on thorns and branches, bruising herself on rocks and stumps. Close behind her was the krieb, oozing implacably in pursuit, not gaining on her, perhaps, but certainly not falling behind. She was beginning to reach the end of her strength, running slowly now, whimpering and panting. And suddenly she saw lights ahead, and then she was out of the woods and on a smooth road, and almost in the village.

Miles Norris was first warned of the impending calamity by Judy Ostertag, a homely, bad-tempered girl who was Marcia Lippincott's best friend. As he was walking past Bogart's funeral home he heard a thud of running feet, and before he could turn, Judy's hurtling body almost knocked him off his feet. "Hey!" he said. "Watch it, there, Judy!"

"Help!" she cried. "You've got to help!"

"Help? Help with what?"

"Oh," she said. "It's Miles. Miles, down by the river — Miles, something's happened to — Miles, find somebody who can help."

"I'll help," Miles said.

"No, we've got to get somebody who can really do something. It's awful, and we've got to — oh, there's Wally Bates. Oh, good. He'll do something. Wally, help! You've got to come!"

Miles smiled grimly. How like this foolish girl, to turn for help to Wally Bates, a hollow, noisy, vain, and boastful phoney who played on the basketball team and had an enviable car. Miles correctly suspected that a time of testing was at hand, and that Wally would prove to have feet of clay.

"Down by the river, Wally!" Judy cried. "It's Marcia! She's with an awful old man, and there's a whole mob of — of —" She began to shriek hysterically.

"Well, we'll just see about this," Wally said. "Don't you worry about a thing, Judy. I'll take care of it. You come, too, Miles. Maybe you can help." Miles smiled sardonically. How little they knew!

They set off toward the river. So this is the army I lead into battle

against the forces of the night! Miles thought. An hysterical girl and a muscle-bound oaf who doesn't know Lovecraft from leathercraft. Ah, well, one must do the best he can with the material at hand.

At that moment there was an addition to his band. Out of an alley Miss Kinsey burst suddenly, almost beside herself with terror, her clothing reduced to a few filmy scraps that wholly failed to hide her opulent femininity. "Up on the mountain, Miles!" she gasped. "A monster! It's coming! Beasley did it, fooling around with Forbidden Things! Can you save us, Miles?"

Miles squared his jaw. "We'll fight to the end," he said firmly. "Come now, onward to the river!"

The little band advanced bravely, only to be confronted by a dreadful sight. Swarming toward the town came the horde from the accursed forest, led by the old man in white tie and tails. At his side, moving with a zombie's gait, was Marcia.

"The first thing to do is to rescue Marcia," Miles announced. "Wally, you've been talking big. Why don't you go get her?"

"Well, sure," Wally said, "as soon as we have a plan. I can't just run up and grab her."

"What's the matter, Wally — scared?" Miles flashed.

The bully reddened. "I'll show you who's scared," he grated. He reluctantly started forward, moving more and more slowly as he narrowed the distance between himself and the vampire. Suddenly his nerve broke, and with a cry he turned and ran. The whole group looked at him with the utmost contempt. Miss Kinsey and Judy realized for the first time that he was nothing but a big phoney.

"I'll attend to you later, Wally," Miles said harshly. "Right now I've got to get busy!"

He knew exactly what to do; it was not for nothing that he had steeped himself in the lore of supernatural creatures for so many years. Swiftly and efficiently he fashioned a cross from two pieces of wood, and whipped from his pocket a flask of holy water. Then, bearing the cross before him, he strode out to confront his dreadful adversary.

The vampire knew instantly that he had at last met his match; he began a slow retreat toward the main body of the army of the damned, clutching Marcia in a grip of steel. Miles made a sudden dash forward, and confronted him closely. "All right, Count," he commanded, "release the girl or I douse you with this holy water, which would certainly sear you agonizingly, and might well destroy you utterly. Do as I say!"

With a frustrated and unimaginably wicked snarl, the vampire released Marcia. Miles picked her up in his arms and rushed her back to the group. She was awakening from the vampire's spell. "Oh, Miles," she breathed, "you're brave. So brave."

"Yes, he is," Judy agreed. "Not like that coward." They all looked at the sniveling Wally Bates.

Miss Kinsey suddenly shrieked and pointed. The krip had emerged from the woods on the mountainside, and loomed in monstrous menace over the village. Miles' mind raced furiously. It was much too late to call out the air force, and in any case, a monster of this type could be expected to thrive on bombing, feeding, as it was capable of doing, on the energies of explosions. No, something shrewder and more subtle would have to be tried. But what? On one side the krip, on the other the night-monsters — a vise of horror was closing on Dobbstown, and it seemed that only he, Miles Norris, could save it. He had to think!

The answer came to him in a blinding flash, and he leaped into action. "I'm going to decoy them," he confided in an urgent, low tone. "Here, Marcia, take this cross for your protection, and stay here. I'll draw them off."

Once again he advanced toward the vile horde. The vampire came cautiously forward, accompanied now by the demon and the animate corpse. The demon shouted suddenly, "Take him! Take him now! He's unprotected! He no longer has the cross!"

An evil hiss came from the wicked assemblage, and it began to move, slithering and hopping and crawling at great speed, each creature voicing its hatred in its own inhuman voice.

And Miles turned and ran!

A howl of triumph went up as they swept after him. He ran with incredible swiftness, through the underpass and around the park, and then up the slope of a foothill. The pack was close at his heels, slavering and snapping, baring poisonous teeth and venomous stingers, reaching out with sticky tentacles. Death and damnation pursued where Miles fled.

But there was a plan behind his flight; he was, after all, without fear, and not given to fleeing danger. His cool and subtle mind had conceived a method of saving the day, and this was part of his design. Up the hillside he sped, toward the spot where — as he knew and his pursuers did not — the krip waited. He ran, and they pursued. Little by little they closed the gap. And suddenly he was not there!

His timing had been calculated with fine precision; the pursuers had no chance to turn and flee, or even to halt their charge. There was scarcely time even for a cry of terror to escape them before the mountainous bulk of the krip came down upon them like the breaking of a ponderous gray tidal wave, and they were engulfed.

Miles watched from a vantage point on a hillside. His disappearance had been cleverly accomplished: at the crucial moment he had dived suddenly into the excavation being made for the new sewer, a municipal improvement of which the supernatural creatures were quite unaware. He had sprinted along the dry trench until he was well beyond the krip's reach, and then scrambled out to watch the results of his ingenious strategy.

190 Seldom have human eyes beheld such a spectacle. Forces of incredible power were pitted against each other, the one a blind, mindless appetite the size of a battleship, and the other a teeming swarm of uncanny creatures galvanized by energies from Satan himself. The spawn of the night, engulfed by the krip, were subjected to the virulent corrosiveness of its internal juices, which were something very close to the universal solvent; but these creatures were not wholly of this earth, and many of them were in fact already dead. They fought savagely, there inside the krip. Those that contained venom spewed their poison; those with talons and teeth tore and rent; and those with magical powers hurled such thunderbolts and jets of fire as lay within their capabilities. The earth trembled as the krip thrashed about.

After a time a sort of awful balance was achieved, a tension that could not endure. The powers of science run amok and the powers of Hell were for a moment in dreadful equipoise. And then there was a noise beyond description, and an enormous fireball shot skyward in the night. There remained on the hillside no trace of the krip or the horde, nor any sign of their struggle. The village was saved.

Miles brushed dust off his sleeve as he strolled back to the village. He knew that his heroism would not be long remembered, but one did as duty commanded. He was not being cynical, only realistic, in accepting the fact that people appreciated good looks and easy sociability more than honest worth and valor. But he knew he would receive a reward for this night's work; somehow he had no doubt of that.

A happy, if somewhat bedraggled group awaited him. Even the sheepish and chastened Wally Bates greeted him joyously, even mean Judy Ostertag seemed to be glad to see him. Marcia was starry-eyed.

"Miles, Miles," she cried. "What a splendid thing you've done! For the first time I've seen you as you really are! You're wonderful!"

Miles could see that she was his, if he wanted her. He was of a divided mind; on the one hand he felt that it was only proper that she should receive some sort of chastisement for her haughty behavior toward him over the years, but on the other, he found it hard to postpone the fulfillment of a dream that had, to tell the truth, plagued him ferociously for a long time.

His quandary was resolved by Miss Kinsey. When she spoke, there was an undertone in her voice that Miles could not remember hearing there before, a certain sultry note of rich warmth and promise. "Miles," she said softly, "you've subdued the supernatural creatures and destroyed the monster, but there is still a problem left. What's to be done about Beasley?"

"You are right," Miles replied. "We must discuss this privately. Perhaps at your apartment. Your flight down the mountainside seems to have damaged much of your clothing, which you may wish to replace. Let us go."

As they departed Miles saw that Wally wore a defeated look, Judy an admiring one, and Marcia an expression of the deepest disappointment.

They went to Miss Kinsey's apartment and Miss Kinsey said, "Miles, you have saved my life and I want to show my gratitude. This will always be a secret just between the two of us. I am an older woman and there is a lot I can teach you." And she did. Miles learned some highly sophisticated things that Wally Bates, for example, probably would not even believe, and then they turned to the question of Beasley.

"I believe that he has learned his lesson," Miles said thoughtfully. "From now on he will think twice before he seeks answers he was not meant to learn. And henceforth he must always live with the shame of his own disgraceful behavior, which is in itself a harsh punishment. I shall take no action against him."

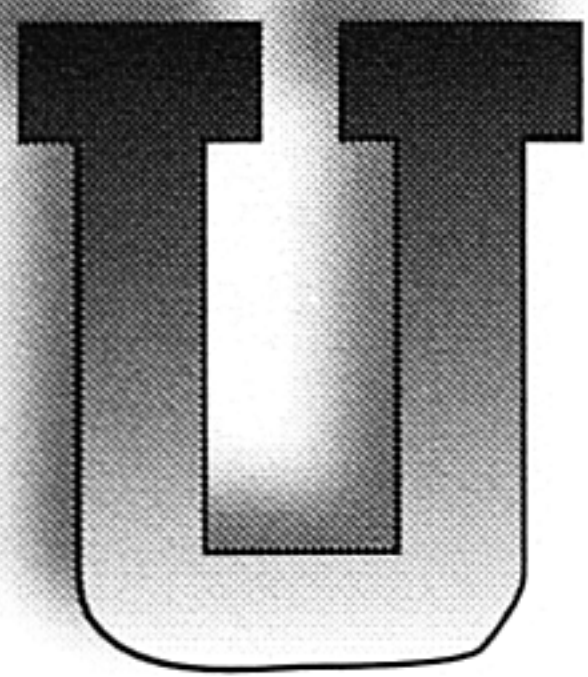
"I hope that you are right, Miles," Miss Kinsey responded. "Your generosity does you credit. But I cannot help feel that Beasley is not to be trusted."

Miles did not reply, but deep inside he knew she was right. Precedent held that mad scientists were to be destroyed, most preferably by their own monsters. Beasley remained undestroyed, and his capacity for mischief-making was undiminished. But even

though the villain still existed, there remained a hero to circumvent his wicked ends, and Miles never doubted for a moment that he would always be able to prevail over Beasley.

He had a strong premonition that Beasley was in touch with — was perhaps already the slave of — spider-creatures whose U.F.O.s had lately been seen in the night skies over Dobbstown. It seemed almost inevitable that the town would soon be in deadly peril once more. And once more it would be saved by Miles Norris, the lonely and unappreciated hero whose only rewards were the temporary discomfiture of his detractors and brief tender expressions of gratitude from Marcia and Miss Kinsey. If the spider-creatures had robots to do their bidding, and one of the robots were to make off with Miss Kinsey, her clothing would probably be pretty well shredded by the time Miles rescued her.

THE TIME OF THE WORM



p in Sturkeyville, eight or ten years ago, there was a man named Harvey Lawson, whose wife was a worm.

That is meant quite literally: she was a reddish brown segmented worm about five feet long, with a chitinous exoskeleton, a myriad of short legs on her underside, and menacing grinding mandibles at the front end. That was her true and permanent form. But during daylight hours — from sunrise to sunset, to be precise — she was able to assume the form of a woman, and it was in this guise that she appeared in public as Lawson's wife. The people of the community fully accepted her in that role, although they viewed her as an excessively eccentric person, and not at all likable.

The existence of such a creature in an American small industrial city is a phenomenon most people will find difficult to credit. There have always been rumors of such things in the steamier latitudes of the Far East, of course, but hardly within the boundaries of these United States. Thus there was no way by which Lawson could have appealed for help to anyone at all without having himself certified as a lunatic. And in any case, he would have been unable to make such an appeal, because the worm kept very firm control of his mind, and would have punished him cruelly if he had even attempted to reveal the fact of her existence.

Before she became his wife, she was his mother. He could not remember his real mother at all, but he thought he could remember the time when she was suddenly not there, and instead there was an imitation mother. He was small enough then to cry readily, and the first time the imitation came into his presence, he began to howl. That was when he first experienced the worm's power; his terror grew, and became total mindless panic, but he could make no sound. There was suddenly a vile presence in his mind, an infinitely disgusting intruder that wrested from him control of his body, so

that his vocal cords were made lax and his mouth clamped shut. His despairing shrieks remained wholly internal. She did not like loud, continuous noises.

The real mother never came back, and the imitation mother remained. At first she did not look like the real mother, or even very much like a real woman, but in time and with practice she came to resemble a human being, and it is probable that to an outsider she seemed to duplicate the real mother exactly. Little Harvey Lawson was never deceived, and he went in abject fear of her from that day onward.

His father was real, but he could not protect his son, any more than he could protect himself. The worm controlled him completely, and most of the time he was something other than the real father. But now and then the grip was loosened a bit and he could be himself for a while, and those were the times Harvey liked to remember; they were the closest thing to happiness in his memory. When he was small, he and his father simply sat and hugged each other until his father's face went slack and doughy and he put his son aside to obey a command from the worm. When he grew older, the two of them would talk for as long a time as she allowed.

"We could run away, Papa."

"I tried that. You can't remember, I suppose. She brought us back. And punished *you*. I — it was awful. I don't dare try anymore."

"But what are we going to do?"

"I don't know. Something. This can't go on. My poor little boy."

When he was fourteen, his father did something at last. He should have known — did know — better. But he was a man driven beyond human limits, and he no longer thought clearly; he forgot one day what he had kept in mind for all the years, that the punishment would fall upon his son if he tried to escape and failed. He forgot it, and took the boy and ran. And died.

They were in the car, on a road beyond the city limits, bound for a vegetable stand in the country where Wylie Lawson bought the root vegetables that were the worm's sustenance. She did not eat when she was in her human form, but in the night, in her burrow, she gnawed ceaselessly at turnips and carrots and beets. Wylie Lawson believed that the vegetable stand was near the boundary of her power; several times he thought he had detected a weakness in her control as he approached the farm. And so, that day, instead of braking at the stand, he rashly pressed the accelerator to the floor.

It must be remembered that this man was tottering on the brink of insanity. He had seen his adored young wife killed and her place taken by an ineptly made simulacrum; he had felt the invasion of his mind by an intruding intelligence that he sensed as a smothering, fetid slime; he had watched with despairing horror his helpless obedience to the worm's commands; he had seen his little son growing up as a tortured puppet like himself, a waif without anything resembling a normal life; and he lived with the awful knowledge that there appeared to be nothing he could do. He lived with that for ten years, and he cracked, finally.

He pressed the accelerator to the floor, and the car leaped ahead, roaring. Young Harvey, half gleeful, half terrified, cried, "Pop? What you doing, Pop?"

"Getting out!" Wylie Lawson shouted. "We're going, Harvey! We're getting away from her!" While he was still speaking, the stinking slime clotted his mind, and his foot stamped on the brake. The car skidded to a halt, and the engine died.

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But there was some basis for his belief that her power was weakened at this distance. By making an enormous effort, he was able to open the door and fall out of the car to the road and to say hoarsely to Harvey, "Get out, get out of the car. We'll run." He rose slowly and painfully to his feet. The worm's power was concentrated on him, and, for the moment, Harvey was almost free. He leaped out of the car and grabbed his father's arm. "Run, Pop," he bawled. The two of them moved with agonizing slowness down the road, away from the town, away from the house where the worm lived

For Wylie Lawson, every step was a major battle, an almost impossible defiance of the cold mind that controlled him. With clenched teeth and knotted fists, he compelled himself to move one dragging foot ahead of the other, to take one more step and another. Until his overburdened heart stopped, and he fell to the road, quite dead, free of the worm at last. They had moved about ten feet from the car.

The worm's mind, in all its ineffable nastiness, switched its influence to Harvey then, and he staggered and almost fell. He straightened, turned, and began to trudge back toward town, his face slack, his eyes blank. He had walked about two miles, when the state police car slowed behind him.

"Your name Lawson, son?" the trooper said.

Harvey did not stop, and did not turn to look at the car. He plodded along steadily, oblivious of the car creeping beside him.

The trooper said, "Come on, son, get in the car. We'll take you home. Your mother will need you." Harvey paid no attention. The trooper driving said, "Shock. He doesn't know what he's doing. You'd better get out and grab him."

The boy fought ferociously when the trooper wrapped his arms around him and lifted him off the ground; he was fourteen and big for his age, and the trooper was winded and bruised by the time he had forced Harvey into the back seat. "What's the matter with you, boy?" the trooper said. "We just want to take you home."

Harvey's blank face changed suddenly, and took on an expression of terror and desperation. He said in a strangled voice, "My mother is — was — help me. Will you help me?"

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"Sure, son," the trooper said. "What can we do?" But the worm was in full control again, and Harvey's face was as blank as before. "Take me home, please," he said in a flat voice.

"Sure, son," the trooper said. They took him home, and that is when Harvey Lawson's decade of unmixed hell began.

He had already known the worm for ten years, of course. She had come when he was a little past four years old; had come and killed his mother and had taken his mother's place and kept it for ten awful years. But wretched as those years had been, his father was the chief puppet then, and the rein on the boy was comparatively light. He had never felt the full weight of her dominance until his father was dead.

He and his father had talked to each other, when it was permitted, about their lonely and hopeless martyrdom. In the latter years, Wylie Lawson's mind was cracking and in his moments of comparative freedom, when he could talk to his son, he came to dwell obsessively upon the circumstances of the worm's arrival, to relive the grim event that began their damnation.

Wylie Lawson and his wife, both fresh from the university, had come to town because Wylie had been hired as a metallurgical engineer at the foundry. His work went well, and after his son was born, he bought a lot and built a house. A happier little family than this would be hard to find. They were good-looking young people, and sociable; they took to the town, and the town took to them. The old families — and especially the Hodges, who owned the foundry — accepted and petted them, and smoothed their path in a good many ways.

But it was a benefaction from the Hodges that opened the gate for the grisly misfortune that befell them. Will Hodge, the eldest

brother and chairman of the board, took an avuncular interest in Wylie Lawson, and furthered Lawson's intention to build a house by selling him, at an extremely low price, a family-owned lot on Wetzel Avenue. The gift was not, however, altogether without calculation. The lot had for many years been unsalable, although it was a fine large one, and lay at an advantageous position in the town's best residential street. There was, as it happened, an amorphous ancient rumor abroad in the town, a vague shared sense that there was something wrong with that land, that it would probably be unlucky to build there.

But Lawson was a newcomer, and since the only people who had a prejudice against the land were those who had been brought up with the superstition, he happily built the house and moved his family in. The evil began about a year later.

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It was an evening that had begun happily, as most evenings did in that house. Dinner had been eaten and small Harvey had been put to bed, and the Lawsons had exchanged the signals they used to promise each other that the best part of the evening was yet to come, after they were in bed. They sat down now to watch their new television set for an hour or two.

Annie Lawson stepped into the kitchen, perhaps for a glass of water, and a moment later, Wylie heard a strange sound, the choked-off beginning of a shriek; it was the last sound he was ever to hear from his wife. He sprang from his chair and leaped into the kitchen.

The worm was there. She had emerged from the doorway to the basement stairs, and had reared up the front three-quarters of her length, so that the baleful, faceted eyes were more than waist-high. Annie Lawson, her face frozen in an expression of terror and her eyes blank, stood facing it. As Wylie burst through the doorway, she collapsed to the floor.

Lawson would have panicked if his wife had not been lying there helpless on the linoleum. As it was, he cast about frantically for a weapon, saw nothing useful, and leaped at the worm barehanded. Instantly something loathsome plunged into his mind, and his leap degenerated into a boneless collapse upon the floor. He lay motionless beside Annie.

When he awoke, the invading presence was still in his mind, but only a wary residual fragment of it, an alert sentinel that conveyed to the worm what he was doing, and, to a considerable degree, what he was thinking. Never for the rest of his life was his mind free of this ugly informer, this parasitic alarm system that brought instant

and terrifying punishment for any transgression of the worm's edicts. From that moment he was enslaved.

He discovered the power of the worm almost immediately after regaining consciousness. He pulled himself to his feet, trying to remember how he had come to be here on the kitchen floor, and then he remembered, and shouted "*Annie!*" and ran from room to room, downstairs and up (little Harvey was sleeping soundly), and into the basement (where he saw, low in the wall of the furnace room, a hole about two feet in diameter), and then back into the kitchen. He made little frightened noises as he ran.

"Police," he said aloud. "Call the police." He picked up the telephone.

It was not something the worm could permit. There is, of course, no way of knowing how much she understood then of human words or institutions, but it was probably very little, and the likelihood is that she simply sensed that Lawson was seeking aid, and that it was his intention to disclose the fact of her existence. Whatever her comprehension, she struck hard at Lawson at the moment of his lifting the telephone, struck so hard that he was once more rendered unconscious.

This time he awoke to find his son standing beside him. The morning sun was shining through the windows. The boy said, "Why are you sleeping on the floor, Papa?" Lawson did not answer, he picked up his son and ran to the door. He jerked it open, darted into the yard, and made for the street. He managed about fifty feet before she stopped him. She had better control of her power now; he did not lose consciousness, but stopped, turned, and returned to the house, his movements stiff and unnatural, his face a lax, drooping mask.

It was in this way that he was introduced to the constraint that ruled the rest of his life. He was never to see his wife again, nor was he ever to see the worm in her own form, but the sentinel was permanently lodged in his mind, and when he failed to comply fully with commands, or attempted to disobey, he was punished. The noisome ooze would make its abrupt shocking incursion, coating and clotting his mind, engendering a frantic disgust and loathing, reducing him to a jerky marionette.

A *modus vivendi* of sorts came into being during the early days. The worm appeared to be profoundly ignorant of human ways and of the way the world works, but she was also enormously efficient in perceiving where danger lay and in devising means of self-

protection. How intelligent she may have been — or even whether her mental processes can be classified in terms of intelligence — must be conjectural; but she was in permanent command of Wylie Lawson's mind, and she was able to read his emotions and to sense his intentions when they had to do with her, so that any attempt on his part even to begin a plan for escape met with instant repression. It would seem that she almost immediately perceived the importance to her own safety of ordinary behavior on Lawson's part, and she saw to it that he went to work each day, telling people that his wife was visiting a friend, and leaving the boy with a baby-sitter.

Sometimes during the worm's invasions of his mind, he had a sense that she was delving particularly into his memories of Annie, absorbing knowledge of his longing for her and his terrible grief, forcing him to picture her in great detail and to relive their life together. Such thoughts caused him unspeakable sorrow and pain; their fruit was the worm's simulacrum.

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He had picked up Harvey at the baby-sitter's house and was in the kitchen heating their frozen dinners, when the door to the basement opened and he turned and with shattering surprise saw Annie standing there. Almost instantly he realized that it was not Annie at all, that it was not even a person, that it was some sort of ghastly imitation of a human being, an artifact created by something that saw with eyes that failed to comprehend the details and relationships that mark individuality of appearance. But he could see that it was intended to be Annie, and as he stared, he could not help comparing the imitation with Annie as she really had been, mentally correcting the features of the simulacrum as he did so; and as he watched, the face shifted and altered to conform to his correction, so that, in a few minutes, a very close likeness stood before him.

A very close likeness, except that it remained blatantly inhuman, an obvious imitation. Lawson was seized by a bottomless terror, and he opened his mouth to howl his fear, pushed at last over the edge. But he made no sound. The worm had seized control of his voice, and commanded silence.

The imitation spoke instead. It said, "How... voice?" in an animal growl, and then the same words in a reedy treble. Wylie Lawson thought, *It's trying to say, "Does this voice sound like Annie's?" Oh my God, what's it going to do?* And the imitation said, in a voice that was now quite human, although nothing like Annie's, "Does this voice sound like Annie's?"

Of course it doesn't, he thought, remembering Annie's voice, and the imitation said again, "Does this voice sound like Annie's?" in a

voice that sounded exactly right, and he thought he would vomit or faint. The imitation said, "Now I will be Annie every day. And every day I will be Annie better." He thought, *I guess it means practice makes perfect*, and Annie's voice said, "Yes. Practice makes perfect."

That day the worm became Wylie Lawson's wife and Harvey's mother, and remained so for ten years, until the day Wylie made his attempt to escape and died on the asphalt. For the first few months, he put about the story that Annie was not well, and wanted no visitors or telephone calls; then the worm began to appear cautiously in public, which at first relieved the anxieties of the friends who had been gravely disturbed by her sudden disappearance, and then puzzled them. They noted that she had changed beyond belief; not in looks — she did not appear to have been ill at all — but in personality. The ready laugh, the mischievous wit, the affectionate concern — indeed everything that made her a lovable person — were gone. The new Annie was cold, distant, absentminded, slow to reply, without humor, a dull fish. There were very few who regretted that she no longer accepted invitations to any evening functions, and to very few held during the day.

Every day, Wylie Lawson went to work at the foundry, and, during the term, Harvey faithfully attended school. Neither of them was able to speak of their servitude, of course, and Wylie's fellow workers and Harvey's schoolmates came to think of them as very strange people. They had no friends; the father's old friends dropped away after repeated rebuffs, and the little boy had never had a friend in his life. They had only each other to cling to in the glossy split-level house that was ruled by the worm.

They shared a bedroom so that they could be together as much as possible, and because Wylie could not bring himself to sleep in the room he had shared with Annie. He moved a cot into Harvey's room, and that is where they talked when they could. There was not a great deal of talk, though; after sunset, when she was in her own form, she constantly rummaged through Wylie's mind as she gnawed roots in her burrow, and looted when she found something of interest. After a time it seemed to him that she must know everything he knew; not only facts, but all of his emotions and desires and fears — every memory, in fact. She certainly knew that concern for his son was the only thing that prevented his suicide. He had considered it often enough, and was sure he could pull it off, a spur-of-the-moment leap out of a high window or in front of a speeding car, accomplished before she could take control of his limbs. But fears for Harvey restrained him.

Hodge Brothers, Inc. took care of its own. When Wylie Lawson suddenly changed from an enthusiastic, industrious, ambitious young man to a time-serving drudge who watched the clock and was confused by anything outside his routine, his superiors were at first concerned and baffled, and then hortative and threatening, and at last resigned. They gave him a desk and a calculator and *in* and *out* baskets and a clerk's work — record keeping and paper shuffling of a mechanical nature, useful but undemanding and not of major consequence. Year by year he became stranger: painfully thin, haggard, jumpy, and deeply depressed. He was unsociable in the extreme, and bitter. Bitter.

When she was in human form, the worm preferred talk to mind reading as a means of communication and commandment. She would not or could not learn to read, and both Wylie and Harvey spent a great deal of time reading to her, and answering as best they could her questions about what they had read. She watched television, and had questions about what she had seen. She was exhaustingly thorough in pursuing matters that interested her, and in time, Wylie came to comprehend that the matters that interested her were things that related in some way to the contrivance of a way of life for herself that would ensure her safety and maintain secrecy about her existence.

In the early days he sometimes tried to question her, to discover her provenance and aims, to learn whether he and Harvey were to be enslaved forever.

Where did you come from?

Come from? Nowhere. From here.

Here? Where? This country? This planet? This house?

This house. Under this house.

How did you get there?

One did not get there. One was there.

Always?

Yes. Perhaps no. Probably.

What are you?

I am [picture of herself in her real form.]

Are there others like you?

[Agitation.] *That is enough. No more questions.*

There are others, then.

Stop. One is the only one. Stop.

And that was all. If he pursued that line, harsh punishment followed. And he had no better results when he pursued another track:

Why are you doing this to us?

One protects herself.

You were protected before you began all this, weren't you? Nobody even knew you were there.

It was necessary. It is a . . . cycle.

What is necessary? That you take the place of a human being?

Yes. Now a human being. And you to protect me.

But for how long? Dear God, how long?

It is a cycle. It is necessary.

He never got beyond that point. He never learned any more than that, never had an explanation of the horror that had been visited upon him; he suffered through the weary, despondent years with no scrap of information to explain the worm and his enslavement to her. He suffered his vile bondage for a decade, and broke at last, and made his abortive run.

One of the troopers escorted Harvey to the door, rang the bell, and said, "Here's your boy, ma'am. Sure sorry about your husband. We've already called Hostetler to pick up the — we've called Hostetler. You can call him about the, uh, arrangements. Uh, good-bye, ma'am." They drove away.

Harvey went into the house, moving as stiffly as a clockwork doll. She closed the door and withdrew her grip on the boy's mind. He collapsed to the floor. After a few minutes he dragged himself to a chair and sat there, panting. The worm said, "Now we will talk. You must at this time take your father's place in protecting my concealment. There is money from insurance to maintain you and me. You will go to school as before, until you graduate. All must appear normal. And you must never so much as attempt to reveal my existence. If you do, I will know, and I will do *this*."

She had by now learned a good deal about the human mind and human feelings. Harvey was wrenched suddenly and horrifyingly into the blackest depths of suicidal depression; he existed for a moment in an emptiness like the space between the stars, a loneliness despairing and hopeless and drenched with regret and sorrow. It was, in fact, his usual state of mind carried to an extreme and almost ultimate pitch. It was much worse than any physical pain could

have been. He knew with absolute certainty that he could not bear to repeat the experience. He said, "I'll do whatever you say." He almost said, "I'll be good, Mama."

And life, such as it was, went on, and the slow years crept by. The emaciated, tense youth, given to strange tics and twitches, attended all of his classes, apparently unmoved by the derision he inspired in his classmates. He attended classes, and went home the instant he was dismissed, and read to the worm or answered her questions until sundown, when she returned to her hole. Then he would force himself to eat something, and do his homework, and go to bed, where he was always long in falling asleep. He would lie there and brood, sodden with rage and despair and self-pity, desperately seeking a way out, almost ready to attempt the suicide that his father had rejected for his sake. And always, in a corner of his mind, he was aware of the sluggish coilings of the worm's sentinel, the unsleeping informer that was almost a part of his own mind by now, an oily throb that, sleeping or awake, was always with him.

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They lived in squalor. Harvey knew nothing about keeping a house, nor did the worm. The place stank. Dust and grime covered every surface. The kitchen was a welter of unclean utensils and molding scraps and the debris of an adolescent's feeding. The lawn was shaggy with weeds, the windows were grimed and smeared almost to the point of opacity, and a leak in the roof was suffered to enlarge itself. Appliances broke down and were not repaired. The carpets were greasy, and litter lay everywhere. Harvey's only baths were showers at school after physical education classes, and in the summer he did not bathe at all. He, too, stank. He knew it, but did not care.

After he was graduated from high school, he did not go to work, nor was there of course any possibility of going away to college. He was a hermit now, venturing out of his rancid dwelling only to shop for his food and the worm's roots. At the age of twenty-three, he was a very strange young man indeed, a seedy, malodorous scarecrow afflicted with a nervous speech impediment, odd muscular spasms, and paralyzing shyness. It was this unattractive specimen who somehow found, captured, and briefly displayed to the town a bride of such surpassing beauty that they believed he must have found her in the world of films and television.

She was, of course, the worm. She had summoned Harvey one day and said, "Now it is time. Your mother shall die, and in a little while you will have a wife. You should now call the" — she probed his mind for the word — "the undertaker. Say that your mother has died, and he is to come for the body and bury it."

Harvey stared at her, astonished. "Died — ? Bury — ? What? You mean *you*? You're going to die?"

"I have the body," the worm said. "I have carried it up. It is in the kitchen. Go and see it."

It was his mother's body. She lay on the kitchen floor on her back, arms at her sides, eyes closed, face and clothing yellowed by dust. Harvey stared, and shouted suddenly, "She's alive!" The body showed no signs of death, let alone the passage of ten years. There was a faint bloom on her cheeks under the dust, and her flesh appeared to be firm and healthy. She looked very young.

"She is dead," the worm said. "She has been dead for ten years. I have preserved the body."

"Why?" Harvey cried. "Why? Why bury her now?"

"Call the undertaker," the worm said. The part of her that lived in Harvey's mind made its familiar move, and Harvey felt the uncoiling and the premonitory tingling. He made the call.

After the funeral he found the worm still in human form, still the hateful false mother. He said (and it was as close to a joke as he had come within his memory), "Are you still here? We buried you this morning."

"It is the last time," the worm said. "I shall now be someone else. You will have a wife."

"A wife? But if all you want is to be here, why wouldn't *that* do? Looking like — like you are now?"

"I will now go back to my hole," the worm said. "I must not be seen like this any more. You will bring my food as always." And two months later she emerged as the television goddess.

This time she had needed no experimentation with the face and voice; she appeared fully formed, lovely, hauntingly soft-voiced. She was a composite of television actresses, and altogether beautiful. And altogether inhuman as well, but that was apparent only after a certain time in her presence, and her appearances outside the house were infrequent and brief.

The change made no difference whatever in Harvey's life. During the two months that she remained in her hole, the greasy coiling at the back of his mind was quite unchanged, and her commands, while somewhat less frequent than before, possessed all the old authority. The new guise meant nothing at all to him. He did not see the young beauty other people saw, any more than he had seen

his mother in the simulacrum. In fact, he seldom looked directly at her; she was there, she was always there, whether he was within eyeshot or not. Her loathsome presence was within him, and her physical form was irrelevant.

There were to be seven more years of it; seven years of a young man being robbed of his life, almost robbed of his humanity. When it ended at last, he had been in the worm's thrall for twenty-three of his twenty-seven years. He had never had a date with a girl, had never spent a night away from the ramshackle house, had never read a book for his own pleasure, had never had a friend. He had almost forgotten how to talk; he seldom saw anybody but the worm. It was a grim travesty of a life, and hopeless.

A day came when the worm said, "I will travel tomorrow. See that the car is ready to go."

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It was not an unprecedented command. From time to time he took her into town to buy an item of clothing, or to the grocery store and the vegetable stand to buy her roots. These excursions, he assumed, were to give an appearance of normality to their lives, to forestall any investigation that might ensue if too many people began to believe that the situation in the Lawson house was too strange to go unexamined. He said, "Pretty bad weather."

"See to the car," the worm said. He went to the garage and started the old car. It had been badly neglected. It made disquieting noises and belched black smoke — but it ran. Harvey sat shivering at the wheel until its noises smoothed and the smoke abated somewhat. He switched off and plodded through the snow back to the house. "*Real* bad weather," he said to the worm. There was no reply.

The next day it was still snowing heavily, and the wind was strong. The temperature, the television weatherman said, was twelve. Harvey said, "The tires are worn out, no tread left. We'll slide. And there's not going to be much visibility in this snow."

"Yes," said the worm. "I will wait to see if the snow stops."

It had not stopped by early afternoon. The worm said, "I can wait no longer. Go and start the car."

Harvey drove cautiously out into the white afternoon. "Where are we going?" he said.

"To the cemetery," the worm said. "To your mother's grave."

Harvey had thought himself to be by this time immune to any feelings other than resentment and rage and hate, but once more she had astonished him. He said, "I was there only once. I'm not sure I know the way."

“You will ask someone,” the worm said.

He discovered that he did remember the route, which was in fact quite simple: straight out Donley Street and on up the crooked road to the cemetery, a distance of five or six miles. The car chattered and hiccuped and skidded at corners. It was bitterly cold. The heater produced only a breath of warm air, and gusts of the biting wind pushed at the car and jetted through pores in the rusty doors and body. Harvey’s hands and feet felt numb against the wheel and pedals, and his teeth chattered. He looked at the worm, wondering if she minded the cold.

It took more than an hour to travel the few miles. Their way was generally downhill, and enough momentum was acquired, even at their slow pace, to see them over the short rises in their path. By the time he pulled up at the gate of the cemetery, the shivering Harvey could feel cold drops of sweat under his arms and on his palms.

The worm got out of the car and stood quite still for a moment; then she set off through the calf-deep snow at a confident and determined pace. Harvey, watching, saw that her path through the snow was perfectly straight, as though she knew exactly where she was going. She disappeared into the swirling snowfall. Harvey got out of the car and swung his arms and stamped his feet, trying to warm himself.

She was gone for almost an hour. She appeared suddenly out of the storm and took her seat on the passenger side. Snow lay on head and shoulders. *Go now. Quickly.* She was thinking at him, not talking. There was something different about the thought she sent, something new that he could not quite put his finger on. Weariness, perhaps. Or something like that. “Why did you come out here?” he said.

It was necessary. It was very important. Be silent. Hurry.

As it had been downhill coming, so was it uphill returning. The smooth tires slipped and whined and sometimes lost traction entirely. Then Harvey would cautiously reverse to a more or less level spot and charge the rise again. It was frustrating work, and hard on the nerves, and Harvey’s permanent muttering rage turned for the moment against the road and the car. He had made two abortive essays at one of the steeper rises and had backed down for a third try, when the worm launched a command:

Hurry. Go to the top this time. It was an imperative and urgent command, shaped to be painful and frightening. Harvey’s rage rose to a red crescendo. “O. K., God damn it! O. K., you stinking worm! Here we go!”

He pushed the accelerator to the floor, and by some miracle the wheels found traction and moved them at a brisk clip toward the summit. At the three-quarters point, they began to slip. It was time to ease off, to gain traction by reducing the power, but Harvey was beyond thinking, and he did not lift his foot. The tires squealed in a rising pitch, and the rear of the car began to swing to the side. Harvey's foot did not move, and the engine's roar did not diminish. Ponderously and implacably the slide continued, until the car sat crosswise in the road.

It was at that point that the worm suddenly saw the danger. She instantly took command of Harvey's body with one of her full-scale, total invasions. His foot jerked off the accelerator and punched the brake. The engine died. The car began to slide slowly backward. The slide gained momentum, and there was a thump, and another, and both rear wheels settled into the ditch. Then there was silence.

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Harvey sat motionless, paralyzed by revulsion and shock. Suddenly he jerked, and jerked again, and began to thrash about violently, venting an eerie howl. She had, in her urgency, loaded his mind with far more power than it was equipped to handle, and the compulsions she sent found their way to his muscles almost at random, so that what might have been a command to start the car was answered by a wildly flailing fist and a change in the pitch of the strange noise he was making. She perceived this, and withdrew entirely for a moment, and Harvey simply sat there, panting and sweating and sore. When she saw that he had regained his senses, she was instantly in his mind again, desperate, importunate: *We must go back to the house right away. It will be sunset in an hour. Get us out of this.*

Harvey went to the rear of the car, examined the position of the wheels in the ditch, and returned to say, "No use. I'll have to go for help."

No. No no no. You must get us out now.

"I tell you, it's no use. You're in my head. You can see it, can't you?"

Go, then. Quick. Quick. He could feel desperation — and perhaps fear. It brought him a twinge of pleasure. "I'll go as fast as I can," he said.

He wanted to go very slowly, to prolong her desperation for as long a time as possible, but she took command and forced him into his best sprint. Three or four inches had fallen since the last passage of the snow-plow, and it was heavy going, especially for a sedentary junk-food glutton. Before he had gone a quarter of a mile, his legs

and lungs were capable of no more. He fell to the road, gasping and sobbing.

The worm raged in his mind, clearly afraid now. *Up! Up! Move! Move!* He began to crawl. Almost immediately she forced him to his feet, and then to a run. He had covered only a few feet before he again collapsed, and was again forced to his feet and into a run. This time he fell almost immediately. His arms and legs did not stop moving, although for a little time the movement was random and purposeless. Then he was on his feet again.

And then he was crawling, and there was something blocking his way. He tried to push it aside, and could not. He blinked and shook his head to clear it, and tried to see what the obstruction was. A post. That was bad. He could not move a post. He looked up and saw that the post was topped by a mailbox. A mailbox. A house then. They might have a tractor. In his mind the worm cried, *Hurry hurry.*

Moaning and whimpering, he reeled through the snow to the farmhouse door, and beat at it with his fist. As the door opened, he collapsed once more, this time deeply unconscious.

He came back to consciousness for a moment in the ambulance. The worm was thinking, *It is too late the sun is setting now I will die unless I find a warm place I cannot in my own form live in the cold now the sun is gone I will* and Harvey slid back into the blessed darkness.

He awoke in the hospital, in a warm room, in a soft bed, beside which stood a pretty nurse. He said, "I — what happened?"

"You passed out last night at Detweiller's farm. Sam phoned for the ambulance."

"What's, uh, what's the matter with me?"

"Nothing, really. You fainted from exposure and exhaustion. And doctor says you're in very run-down condition. You're going to have to eat right, and get some exercise. But there's nothing really the matter with you. Doctor will be here around ten. I expect he'll discharge you." She went out.

Harvey felt well, very well indeed, almost high-spirited. But something was missing, somehow he didn't feel exactly like himself. Of course. Of course he didn't. Himself always felt rotten, and he felt good. Very good. Because —

Because the worm was not in his mind. My God, the worm was gone! The oily tickle, the viscid slow coiling that had been with him since he was four years old, was gone. Gone! She had gone away. Or

— was it possible? — dead. How glorious if she was dead!

He ate the wretched hospital breakfast with keen appetite, checked himself out of the hospital as soon as the doctor gave him leave, and walked to his house. He was astonished by its ruinous condition. He entered and was immediately struck by the filth, stench, and disorder. He caught a glimpse of himself in a mirror, and was chagrined by his disreputable appearance. It did not immediately occur to him that only yesterday all of these things had seemed quite normal. Now he simply luxuriated in his new freedom.

But despite his glee over his liberation, full emotional acceptance of his deliverance was slow in coming, and as he made a tour of inspection of the house he was seeing it as if for the first time, he found himself under a constant tension, a nervous anticipation of the worm's command or punishment. She was gone from his mind, all right, but was she really dead? That was what he had to make sure of.

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He was unaccustomed to thinking out problems; he had never had to do so in his life. It took him some time to arrive at the conclusion that he could be sure only by going back to the car. And that gave rise to a further puzzle, how to get there. In due course he thought of a taxicab, and not too much later the cab deposited him at the place where his car sat canted in the ditch, pushed out of the road by the snowplow or its operator.

The car was empty. The door on the passenger side stood open, and a considerable amount of snow lay on the seat and floor. He walked around the car. No sign of her. On both sides of the road, the snow lay unmarked, but that signified nothing; she could have — probably had — left the car while the snow was still falling. Where would she have gone, then?

A line of trees stood a few hundred yards away, at the bottom of the long slope; it was as good a place to look as any. He plunged down the hillside and began to search among the trees.

The snow here was not as deep as elsewhere, and after a time he spied a drift that was suspiciously symmetrical. He dug into the snow, and his hands encountered something hard. He began to work frantically, furiously brushing the snow off what lay underneath.

It was the worm. Her reddish brown chitin seemed to burn through the covering of snow as he brushed through the last of it. Panic clawed at him, boiling nauseously into his throat, setting his limbs atremble, sapping his strength so that he was almost unable to remain standing. But he did not run; he stood his ground, holding

his breath and staring at her. There was absolutely no movement. Dead, surely. He gritted his teeth, hooked his fingers under her, and lifted suddenly with all his strength.

She was unexpectedly light—indeed, almost weightless—and his pull lifted her clear and flipped her onto her back. He held himself ready to run—a hopeless aim, if she remained her old self—but there was neither movement nor any invasion of his mind. He forced himself to approach, step by hesitant step, until he stood over her, bending down with his face close.

He saw an empty husk, an exoskeleton without contents. Dead! Dead, and eaten by animals, or rotted away, or decomposed by some unknown internal chemistry. Dead!

210 The long years of terror and frustration and resentful rage found expression at last. In a gleeful, mindless frenzy, he kicked the shell, and jumped on it, and beat on it with a club from a dead tree. It was thin and very brittle, perhaps from the cold, and it cracked and crunched and fell into small fragments, reddish brown shards that lay scattered on the snow. Dead!

And she stayed dead, although Harvey was frequently devastated by fits of sweaty panic that she would reappear. But as time went on without even a hint that she was anything but irrevocably dead, such visitations became rarer, and at last came only occasionally, in the dead of night, when she appeared in nightmares that frightened him awake. When that occurred, he would rise and walk through the house, taking comfort in its neatness and cleanliness and its state of scrupulous maintenance. He would rap on the concrete plug that filled the hole in the furnace room wall, and examine his own carefully barbered visage in the mirror, and review the new clothes that hung in a systematic rank in the closet. Sometimes he took a shower and shaved. He was restored by this ritual to equanimity; he needed to contemplate the physical evidence of his changed life and new freedom.

His metamorphosis to a normal person was not easy, nor would it ever be complete. The things that had been done to him were too awful and had been of too long duration and had started when he was too young. He would always be strange in many ways. He would never be easy with other people, nor they with him. He would never be able to talk fluently or think rigorously, and he was quite incapable of the sustained concentration that would be necessary to acquire an education. Nevertheless, he made considerable progress toward becoming an ordinary citizen. He found a job, (Hodge Brothers,

still patriarchal, found a timekeeper's slot for him) and tried to read self-help books. He took up bowling and became mildly fanatical about the maintenance of his lawn. He was a devotee of situation comedies on the television. He gamely tried to develop an interest in professional football.

He wanted very much to be normal, to be an average citizen. He wanted to put behind him, and forget utterly, the years of the worm. And while that could never happen, when he began to go to church (and he had never before been inside one), he discovered that even his first tentative gropings toward a faith enabled him to make a small beginning in exorcizing his hideous past.

Another winter came and went. The nightmares were very rare now, and at work he had been given a raise. He was following a diet recommended in a book that had been recommended by its author on a talk show, and this regimen, in conjunction with the exercise entailed in working on his house and lawn, had greatly improved him physically. He was learning to smile occasionally. He had even begun, in a hesitant, tentative way, to pay court to a woman, a coworker at the foundry, a plain, tense, stray soul like himself. He saw her at church every Sunday, as well as at work, and he believed she would make a good wife. He thought of her plainness as a mark in her favor; the worm had prejudiced him against spectacular beauties.

They fell into the habit of lunching together on Sundays after church. They had come to feel somewhat at ease in each other's presence, and the more they talked, the more they found they had to say. Each wanted to know everything about this other, wonderful person.

Their talk turned one day to their parents. "Dead," Harvey said. "Both dead. That's why I live alone."

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said. "Have they been — gone long?"

"Since I was seventeen," Harvey said. The actual facts were too complicated to explain now — and if he even tried to tell her about it, she'd think he was crazy.

"Are they buried around here?" she asked. Harvey nodded. She said, "Do you take care of their graves? Keep the weeds pulled and all?"

It was something that had not occurred to Harvey, one of the gaps in his knowledge of how people lived. "No," he said. "No, I don't. I didn't know I ought to."

"Let's go out there next Sunday," she said. "It's not right to neglect their graves."

“Oh, yes,” Harvey said, and he thought, I love her. She will teach me all the things I ought to know. She will make me normal.

They took with them clippers and trowels, a rake and a hoe, two potted plants, a sickle, and a picnic lunch. Harvey had no idea where the graves lay, but the cemetery was not large, and they found his father’s grave after only a short search. This country graveyard boasted no paid caretaker, and the grave had not had any attention since it was filled twenty years before. It looked disheveled and forgotten, a tangle of dead weeds and live ones.

“Oh dear,” she said. “Well, let’s get to work.”

It took a couple of hours to make the plot look respectable. They returned to the car then, and carried the picnic basket to a grassy place under trees, where they ate in the cool shade. A peaceful silence broken only by a birdsong prevailed there, and Harvey was suddenly washed by a wave of contentment and serenity, a sensation he could not remember ever having had in his life before. He said suddenly, “I love you. I do love you. Marry me. Would you marry me?” And she said, “Why, of course, Harvey,” and they embraced, these two waifs who had, against odds, found in each other someone to love.

There seemed to be a substantial number of things that had to be said without delay, and the sun was midway down the sky before they remembered that there was still work to do. They returned the picnic basket to the car and set off in search of his mother’s grave.

Neither of the Lawsons had had any family in the town, and both had died young; there was no family plot, nor had any arrangement been made to bury them side by side. The graves were at a considerable remove from each other, at opposite corners of the cemetery, the mother’s lying in a section that had been newly opened shortly before her burial. It was to this grave that the worm had come, on a snowy day, to activate the egg in the abdomen of the corpse.

But it was not precisely a corpse; there was a sluggish, glacially slow life there, preserved through all the years by the venom the worm had injected, preserved to furnish nourishment for the tiny, savagely toothed, soft thing that emerged from the egg and began voraciously to eat. And grow.

They went hand in hand from grave to grave in the soft June afternoon, reading headstones. After a time she said, “This is too slow. We’d better separate and each check a different section.”

“Good idea,” he said. Those were the last words anyone ever heard him speak.

She completed her check of the area she had selected, and looked back to see what progress Harvey was making. He was standing perfectly still, staring at a grave. She called, "Harvey? Have you found it?"

He made no reply, no movement. She hurried to him, and as she arrived at his side, she glanced at the headstone. It was indeed the mother's grave. Then she looked at Harvey, and the horror began.

His face was doughy, blank. "Harvey?" she said, and then, panicky, "*Harvey?*"

There was no response, not even when she shouted, not even when she grasped and shook him, not even when she returned in terror to the car and drove into town for help.

They came with an ambulance and carried away the catatonic, this unfortunate man whose mind had been unable to bear the shock of the sudden, infinitely horrible and horribly familiar slow, oily uncoiling within him of an alien mind speaking from the grave. There was no escape, and it could not be borne. His consciousness retreated instantly and swiftly, going back, going deep into himself, diving and dwindling until it was a speck, a mote, deep in the darkest, nethermost recess of his mind. And there it would stay.

And a plain young woman, in effect widowed before she was married, went back to the gray, pointless life she had led before she and Harvey met, bitter now, and resentful about high hopes suddenly destroyed. She mourned Harvey as if he were dead — which, for all intents and purposes, he was — and she accepted as fact that her one opportunity for happiness had fled with Harvey's mind. She became in many ways more eccentric than ever.

One day in the following summer, she went to the cemetery with flowers for the graves of Harvey's parents, wishing (although she would not confront the thought) that Harvey lay there as well, so that she could put flowers on his grave. She laid the father's bouquet on the grave, and crossed among the monuments to the other plot. There she laid down the flowers and stood for a moment with her head bowed.

As she stood alone there in the summer silence, she started suddenly, and then became rigid as stone. Shockingly, without warning, her mind had been invaded by an irresistible power from the grave, and an alien, odious voice said, *Now I will tell you what to do.*

The cycle would continue.

BAIT

It was the last house at the end of the street, a fine old Georgian mansion built on a couple of acres of well-barbered lawn. Even under the lash of a bitter February rain it had an air of warmth and comfort. The light from its windows came softly to me through the leaden dusk as I trudged up the driveway. Water was squishing in my shoes.

The knocker was a great brass eagle which held the clapper in its beak. I gave it a genteel thump. I'd had to push myself to make this last call. My clothes were sodden and my feet were as tired as they were wet. I was very cold. But I had a schedule, and nothing was going to make me deviate from it. Street by street, house by house, I was covering the city. If I let myself fall behind schedule just once, I could only fall further and further behind. Thank God, though, this was the last of the day.

I heard the knob turn, and I fixed the selling smile on my face. The door opened about eight inches. A woman's voice said, "Yes?"

"Good afternoon," I said. "I'd like to talk to you for a few minutes about the length of your life."

The door opened a little wider. "What are you selling, young man?"

"Long life, ma'am," I said. "Long life."

I could see her plainly now. She was a most distinguished old lady, a real *grande dame*. Her snowy hair was meticulously arranged in a vaguely old-fashioned way, and at her throat she wore an intricate cameo on a gold chain. Her face was lined and rather stern, her manner and voice poised and cultivated. I was acutely aware of my wet, seedy clothes and the five o'clock shadow on my face.

She peered at me. "Long life? No, what is it you're selling?"

A gust of wind drove a slant of freezing rain against my back and

in through the open doorway. She said, "Well, you'd better come in before we both freeze." I sloshed into the entrance hall, and she closed the door.

She looked me over in an unobtrusive way as I stood and dripped on her carpet. She had seen my satchel first thing, of course, and now she said, looking at it, "Health foods?"

"I'm not selling health foods, Mrs. — uh — "

"Moswell," she supplied.

"I'm not selling health foods, Mrs. Moswell, but what I have to say does concern food. If you will give me just a few moments of your time, I'll show you something that may change your whole life."

"Books, then."

She was ruining my whole pitch. I *was* selling books, of course, but it was too early to mention it. It's always better to have their interest running high before showing the book. There are more people than you'd think who shy away at the sight of a book.

"Mrs. Moswell," I said, "what I'm going to tell you may seem incredible at first, but I hope you'll hear me out. I'm very serious when I say that this could be the most important day of your life."

She smiled faintly. "No doubt, no doubt," she said. She glanced at her watch. "May I ask your name, young man?"

"Smeed, Mrs. Moswell. Ripley Smeed."

"Mr. Smeed, if you'll just hang your coat over there, I'll be glad to hear why this is such an important day."

I followed her into the living room. I felt as out of place as a horse in a library. It was a long, low room, richly carpeted, hung with dark paintings of bearded and side-whiskered Victorian gentlemen. At the opposite end logs blazed in a marble fireplace. Lamps shed soft light on gleaming furniture. It was a beautiful room, almost impossibly rich and warm in comparison with the vile evening outside.

She seated me near the fireplace. The warmth reached out and embraced me as I settled into the great soft chair. There was a tea tray on a low table. Mrs. Moswell said, "Will you have a cup of tea? I was just about to take mine."

"Thank you," I said. "I'd like one very much." I hoped I hadn't sounded too surprised. To be offered tea in a porcelain cup from a silver service is not a common experience for book peddlers.

"Milk or lemon?" she asked.

"M-milk please," I said. My teeth were chattering slightly as the

fire began to soak the cold out of my bones. She gave me a close look and said, “or, no. You’re cold. You’d better have some of this in your tea.” She took a decanter from a painted cabinet and poured a tot into my cup. It was a heavy, dark rum, smooth as rain water, and in the hot tea it sent soft explosions of warmth all the way to my fingertips.

She sat with patrician erectness, her teacup delicately balanced. “Now, Mr. Smeed,” she said. “Tell me what you have to sell.”

“Mrs. Moswell,” I said earnestly, leaning forward, “people don’t have to grow old. There is absolutely no reason for anyone to suffer the incapacities and discomforts of old age. The hardened artery, the weak kidney, the tired heart — these need not be. Arthritis comes to the bone, dyspepsia to the stomach, sluggishness to the liver, all unnecessarily. The young have the raven hair, the clear eye, the fresh skin, while the old are gray and rheumy and wrinkled. This need not be so. Old age has been conquered!”

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She gave me a quizzical, half-smiling look. “I’m afraid, Mr. Smeed, that you’ve come to me a little too late. I already have most of those afflictions,” she said.

“Ah, but with this method they can be made right — damaged organs made whole, tired ones brisk.”

“Mr. Smeed, that’s ridiculous.”

“No, ma’am, it isn’t at all. Aging, you see, occurs in the individual cells of the body, not in the organism as a whole. When the cells age — and when, in their reproduction by fission, the resultant pair of cells is less viable than the original cell — then deterioration of the parts and organs of the body takes place. We call this aging.

“Now a method has been found to refresh and rejuvenate the cells of the body. It is an exceedingly easy and convenient method, and can be followed by anyone. When the individual cells remain vigorous, then aging cannot take place. And I am here today, Mrs. Moswell, to make this method available to you.”

I was well into my spiel now, rattling along at a great rate, putting real feeling into the invented sales talk. The rum had oiled my tongue very satisfactorily. My cup was empty, and without asking me if I wanted it, Mrs. Moswell poured again and added rum. She said, “And what is your method, Mr. Smeed?”

“Diet, Mrs. Moswell,” I said oracularly. “Or rather, an addition to the diet.” I sipped tea-and-rum. “It has been learned that certain common substances, taken as a supplement to one’s ordinary diet,

will arrest — and, indeed, reverse — the phenomenon known as aging. You will understand that I am not speaking of so-called ‘health foods’ — desiccated liver, brewer’s yeast and the like — but rather of ordinary substances found in every household. These substances, taken in proper quantities, combine with the protein molecules in ordinary foodstuffs to form something called *provin*. Provin rejuvenates the cells of the body. In effect, it makes you young again.

“Now this book, Mrs. Moswell, is actually a cookbook, a recipe book.” I handed it to her. “Let me show you how simple it all is. On page twenty-two is a recipe for an omelette. Will you read it please?” The book isn’t much to look at. The binding is pretty sleazy, the paper is just this side of pulp, and the printing is obviously cheap. But even so, it had taken all my money to have three thousand copies printed and bound.

Mrs. Moswell looked up from the book. She raised her brows and said, “Iodine? Cream of tartar? In an omelette?”

I ventured another swallow from my cup. “You will notice, Mrs. Moswell, that the amounts used are very tiny indeed. The recipes call for the additions only in homeopathic doses. You will find, for example, that this omelette recipe notes that sufficient iodine will be added if iodized salt is used as a seasoning. Nonetheless, these exiguous helpings of iodine and cream of tartar will, in the egg mixture, and at the temperature necessary to cook an omelette, cause a minute quantity of *provin* to be formed. It will be a quantity sufficient to activate the cells of the body for about a month. If every month you eat a dish prepared from one of these recipes, permanent youth is yours.”

“Now, really, Mr. Smeed, you can’t be serious.”

“Mrs. Moswell, will you please look at this?”

I handed her the birth certificate. It was frayed and dirty from much handling, but it legibly certified that Ripley Smeed had been born in Bagby County, Nebraska, on August 14, 1898. I said, “It’s *my* birth certificate, Mrs. Moswell.”

“But that would make you — mmm — sixty-eight years old.”

“That’s right.”

She laughed, genuinely amused, and I found myself liking her very much. She said, “*Twenty*-eight would be about right, I think.” She was shrewd, that much was certain. I’d have to proceed carefully with her.

I said urgently, “Mrs. Moswell, please believe me. What I am telling you is absolutely true. I am sixty-eight years old. Provin has made me young. It can make *you* young!” I hoped I wasn’t overdoing the emotion. I was aware of being a little drunk. “Four years ago, Mrs. Moswell,” I said, “you wouldn’t have doubted my age. I was sixty-four and looked every day of it. My arteries were hard and my heart wheezed like a leaky kettle. I had only six of my own teeth left and there was nothing but skin on top of my head. Just four years ago.

“That was when I began to add a touch of cream of tartar and a hint of iodine to my omelettes, a droplet of soya sauce and a squirt of a certain brand of hair tonic to my meat loaf. And for each year I have been on the diet, my apparent age has decreased by a decade. I look and feel like a man of thirty. And anyone can do the same thing. *You* can, Mrs. Moswell.”

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She didn’t quite laugh. “And how did you happen to discover this miraculous substance, Mr. Smeed?”

“Well, you see we knew in advance of the existence of provin, and we worked by trial and error — worked for a long time — to see if it could be ‘manufactured’ by us.”

She refilled my cup before speaking again. She reminded me of Miss Beiderbeck, my ninth-grade English teacher. She said, “You say ‘we,’ Mr. Smeed. Do you have associates?”

Easy now, I told myself. *Tread carefully here. This has to be done just right.* Aloud I said, “Just my wife. Actually she’s the one who made the tests, who learned how to get provin into our food. My only contribution has been to spread the word as well as I can — and I haven’t done too well at it. Publicity is expensive. What I’m hoping for is to prove my claim to someone with enough money to finance a program to give this information to the whole world.”

“No doubt. But just how did your wife happen to know about this ‘provin,’ Mr. Smeed, so that she was moved to make her tests?”

I took a deep breath before I replied. We were near the point where she might decide that I was a dangerous lunatic. I said, “She’d lived all her life on food containing provin. Then suddenly she found herself without it. She knew she would begin to age unless a means of obtaining it could be found, and she began to experiment. It took years. By the time she found it we were married, and I was able to benefit because I ate what she did. You see the results.”

Mrs. Moswell’s expression was hard to read. “She had lived all her life on food containing provin, you say. May I take it then that she has lived a long life?”

“She has.”

“How old is she, Mr. Smeed?”

Now. This was where the balance tipped. “Four hundred and eighteen years old, Mrs. Moswell,” I said.

She drank tea and stared soberly at me. I felt reasonably certain that I had handled her right, that she would feel compelled to question me further, but it was still possible that she would only laugh and ask me to leave. Then she spoke, and I felt shaky with relief. She asked, “But if your wife was brought up on this magic substance, it must have been given her by her parents. That might mean that they’re still alive and even older than she is, mightn’t it?”

“It’s very likely.”

“Where are they, then? Why hasn’t anybody heard about this long-lived family?”

“Mrs. Moswell,” I said firmly, “I’m selling this book for two dollars. By buying a copy and using it you can easily prove or disprove what I’m saying. Why not buy a copy? Then I won’t have to take any more of your time.”

“Oh, no, Mr. Smeed,” she said, just as firmly. “I’m quite interested in hearing about this. Now tell me, where do your wife’s parents live? In some mysterious and inaccessible place? Tibet or Antarctica?”

She was baiting me, much as she might have baited a grandson who evinced an irrational affection for the Beatles. I said, as seriously as possible, “Mrs. Moswell, if you have the time to listen, I’ll be glad to tell you what I know about it. And if it’s hard to believe, keep in mind how little we know about our universe. Remember how many important increases in human knowledge were almost lost because hidebound men and institutions refused to accept new concepts. Imagine how many discoveries are lost, perhaps forever, because the discoverer could not get a hearing. Suppose there had not been a Galileo to prove the theory of Copernicus, or that Copernicus had not left a record of his idea. You asked about my wife’s origins. Please hear me out.

“I want you to visualize the world as it might have been if provin had been a part of man’s existence since the beginning of man. I want you to accept the idea that at some time far in the past provin became a part of the world. It may have dropped upon the earth in a meteorite, or swished through the atmosphere in a comet’s tail, or simply have been a part of the creation. However, it came about, provin is there. It is in every green thing that grows, and in the herbivores who eat

the greenery and in the flesh-eaters who eat them. Fish, flesh, fowl, insect, microbe — all have their trace of provin.

“Where provin exists, life is long. Each creature has developed through the ages in such a way that it need not produce so many young as to feed dangerously off other life. You will find cockroaches doing their scavenging, but they do not flood the world with cockroaches; the sourdocks grow between the corn rows and absorb nourishment from the soil, but there are not so many sourdocks that they starve the corn; the weasel kills the rabbit and sucks the egg, but there are not too many weasels. Nature strikes its balance.

“Now in that world of sparse population there developed, as you might imagine, a society that is wholly rigid and stratified, somewhat like the society of Egypt five thousand years ago, if Egypt had enjoyed what we call ‘progress.’ Of course in the provin world it began much longer ago than five thousand years, and they didn’t have our problems of breeding and food.

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“Society in the provin world is scientifically advanced and totally controlled. It is like a single family, most of whose members are clever and inventive, but all of whom are totally committed to the father’s principles, which are so ancient and fixed that they have become simple, necessary conditions of life. Deviation from the mores of the family is probably an act of insanity, and is most certainly criminal.

“Let us imagine that such a criminal exists in the provin world. And let us suppose that all the knowledge accumulated in ten centuries of the life of a gifted mathematician has been used to create a doorway to a parallel world, but a parallel world without provin. Suppose further that an explorer is sent to the parallel world, and that this explorer is the black sheep, the individualist, and that the parallel world is our earth.

“Do you see, Mrs. Moswell? This explorer from a world that is wholly and rigidly controlled comes to our earth and becomes enamored of our slipshod, easy-going manner, our clogged, teeming populace, and our contumacious and contrary ways. In the mind of this explorer awaken the ideas of freedom and individuality, concepts which have no words in the provin world. And she likes it so well that she decides to stay here.

“She is now, in provin world thinking, an insane criminal. She must be brought back and cured of her aberration. The hunters are sent, and the explorer becomes a quarry. She hides, living in poverty, hunted and frightened, always conscious of pursuit. She evades

them for a great many years, but she is in a world without provin, and without provin she must age and die. She begins her experiments. These are successful eventually, and she has her provin. She can, at long last, settle down to a long and happy life.

“But she has, perhaps unfortunately, acquired a husband. The man is an impractical idealist, convinced that it is his duty to give provin to the world. And he works to spread the word, instead of sensibly settling down to use his limitless span of years to arrange a comfortable life. The poor fool hasn’t been too successful at it, but he’s making an honest effort to give mankind something good that it hasn’t had before.”

The last sentence came out very loud, and seemed to be echoing between the rows of ancestral portraits. Mrs. Moswell had shrunk into her chair, as if frightened by my violence, and her eyes never left me. It was clearly time to wrap it up. I took the book off the coffee table.

She said in a small voice, “Mr. Smeed, I’ll buy one of your books. Did you say twenty dollars?”

Hooked, by God! Now for the gaff. I cleared my throat and said, “Mrs. Moswell, the book is a fake. I’ve been lying to you. There’s no way to get provin here. It has to come from its own world. The book is a sort of confidence game.” That was the speech to finish it. I stood and turned toward the door to make a dignified exit. I spoiled it by stumbling. I don’t usually drink very much.

“Don’t go, Ripley,” she said. “There’s something else I’d like to ask you about. Would you stay a few minutes longer?”

“Of course, Mrs. Moswell.”

“Ripley, you puzzle me. Do you believe in your provin or don’t you? You sounded quite sincere a moment ago.”

“Oh, I believe in it. In fact, I know it exists. I know because I used to be old and now I’m young. But I won’t swindle you by selling you the book. Provin can’t be made here. The only way to get it is to eat food from the provin world. Food concentrates provin. Meat especially. A little slice of beef from one of their animals is worth decades of life.

“But the book is simply a pack of nonsense. Odd additions to your breakfast are not going to increase your lifespan. I dreamed up the book after Mirva began to feed me on provin-world supplies. I’ve always made my living by minor swindling. For thirty years I sold astrology books and health foods and patent medicines, and when I found a real miracle, I based a little confidence game on it, hoping to

make money. It's been a total failure. But provin does exist. Nobody knows that better than Mirva and I do. If I were back in the carnival and had a platform, I'd show you an authentic four-hundred year old woman. But it takes real provin to produce one." Once again I headed, a little unsteadily, for the door.

A strange voice behind me said coldly, "Stop, Mr. Smeed!" I spun around.

Mrs. Moswell was pointing a gun at my belly. She had changed. She still had the Queen Mary dress and hair, but the woman was different. This was not an old lady, but a strong young woman. The lines were gone from the face, and the unsteady movements of old age were replaced by a lithe suppleness. A superb actress was revealing her natural self. Her pose left no doubt that she would use the gun if she saw the need. I tried to say something, but only a strangled noise came out.

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"Smeed," she said in the new, cold voice, "did Mirva really believe she wouldn't be caught and brought home? She never had a chance, of course. I've been hunting her for quite a long time, and I'd have found her in any case, but it's like her to have made it easy for me by selecting a threadbare petty thief to share her life in this anthill. Your greed for a few dollars has led me to her more quickly than I'd hoped — and by accident. She really is crazy, you know. Crazy enough to fit into this crawling dungheap of yours. She must be taken back and made an example of."

The words were from a bad melodrama, but the gun was very real and present. She twitched it, not enough to spoil her aim if she saw a need to shoot, but enough to underline her words as she said, "All right, Smeed, we'll take my car to wherever Mirva is waiting for you. You can drive, can't you?"

I swallowed and said that I could.

"Yes. You will drive carefully, and you will remember that this gun is pointed at you. Let us go."

We went. She sat silently beside me as the big car hissed along the wet streets. I was still stunned, partly because of the rum, but mainly because of the situation in which I found myself. The woman was overpowering. Her cold arrogance, her confident assumption of superiority, and the sheer weight of her personality seemed to have reduced me to a worm. I drove along the quiet streets to our apartment without even attempting to confuse the route or stall for time. I was docile as a lamb, driving carefully, trying to organize my thoughts and never quite succeeding.

We whispered to a stop in front of the apartment house. I methodically switched off, set the brake, and removed the key. The whole thing seemed unreal, hallucinatory. I was almost able to watch myself from the outside.

“Which apartment?” she asked. It was the first time she had spoken since we had left her house.

“Ick,” I said. I hawked and tried again. “Second floor.” It was still a squeak.

I climbed the stairs numbly, lifting my feet and setting them down as though they were made of pottery. She now had the gun pointed at the small of my back.

When we came to the door of the apartment, I couldn’t ring the bell. My finger stopped about three inches away and hung there shaking. She reached around me and pushed the button. I heard the bell, and then I heard Mirva’s footsteps.

I wanted to make some kind of a noise. I couldn’t. And then there was Mirva’s voice, from behind the door: “Who is it?”

My voice came back. “It’s me, dearest youngster.” I waited.

The key turned and the door swung open. Mrs. Moswell’s hand swept back and pushed me helplessly across the hall. Then she charged in through the doorway, while I staggered about, trying to regain my balance. Just as I recovered and plunged toward the door, I heard a crunching blow, and as I burst through, I saw Mrs. Moswell, her head a red ruin, collapse to the floor.

And then Mirva was in my arms, shaking and sobbing, but short of hysteria. The baseball bat was still in her hand. It was red and wet around the trademark.

“It’s a woman,” she said. She made a noise like a hiccup. “I thought they’d send a man. When I heard you give the code I thought it would be a man.” She was shivering.

“Easy,” I said. “Easy, baby. It’s over now. We’ve waited a long time, but it’s all over. We have it. Look. There it is.”

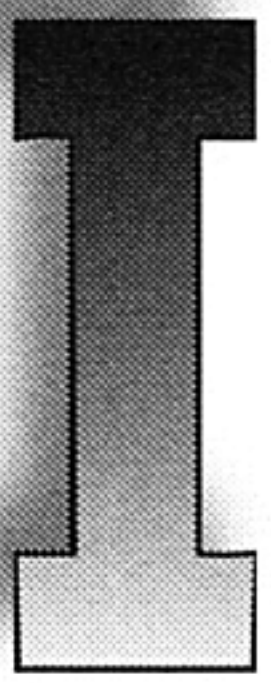
Mirva’s breathing slowed. “There it is,” she repeated. We looked at the body of Mrs. Moswell. We stood there for a long time.

“Well,” she said briskly after a while, “we’d better get busy, hadn’t we? We have quite a lot to do. Why don’t you get rid of the car while I go to work here?”

I brushed a strand of white hair from her cheek and kissed her. I said, jubilantly, “I’ll be back in twenty minutes. Sit down and have a drink while I’m gone. There’s no hurry now.” She smiled.

I left the car in an alley a dozen blocks away and walked home with a springy step. We were in the clear. I hadn't forgotten to pick up the satchel, and the copy of the book I had shown to Mrs. Moswell was safe in my pocket. I pulled it out and hefted it affectionately. The rain slicked its cover, and a streetlight picked out the cheap gilt print of the title: *Eat Your Way to Longer Life*.

LOOB



t may be that none of this happened.

That is badly put. Let me say it another way: none of this *will have happened* at the instant — which I believe must come eventually — the instant that Loob permits my great-grandfather to pass unscathed through the drawing room door.

I believe that one day Loob will permit it. I think he must. Because if he does not, my existence is an impossibility. And I do exist. *Cogito, ergo sum*. Besides which, I have an actual physical presence: yesterday I cut myself when I shaved (there is a decided tremor in my hands), I have a blister on my right foot, these seedy clothes cover a breathing body.

Officially, though, and perhaps in law, I do not exist. Neither the county nor the state has any record of my birth (nor my father's; my grandmother's birth, however, is duly recorded). Lawrenceville and Princeton have no record of my attendance and graduation. Even the United States Army, that indefatigable maker and keeper of records, has no paper that acknowledges my three years of servitude. And it is a melancholy fact that no one in the world seems to know or remember me; not friends from prep school days, not college classmates or fellow officers, not a soul in the old home town. My precise and detailed recollection of my twenty-five years of life is always and everywhere belied by records both public and private, and by every reality of the world around me.

Yet I am real, I am a living, breathing, thinking human being, as solid and sentient as any of the degenerates who surround me here. As I skulk about this decrepit travesty of my native town, I reflect endlessly upon my impossible existence, upon the resemblances and differences between this world and my own, upon an explanation for the situation in which I find myself. And I have found the explanation, and in finding it I find some hope. I can only wait, and watch Loob.

It is true that certain parts of my explanation are, perhaps, in a way, to a certain degree (if you like) conjectural; nonetheless, it hangs together, it hangs together. Up to a certain August day in 1905 this world and my own were identical; my explanation rests, therefore, on simple, unarguable fact. On that day there was a divergence, a forking, and Loob was the cause. It took me some time to figure that out.

To identify Loob as the villain, that is. I was much quicker at the rest of it, at accounting for the existence of this town. It is located where the town of my birth is located, it bears the same name, it has the same history up to a point. It is composed of the same streets and buildings that make up the older part of my own town, horribly run-down here, all in a state of slovenly desuetude, with buildings vacant and boarded up, trash in the deserted streets, insolent weeds growing in and around the ruins of structures that have burned or fallen down. It is a depressed and depressing place, forming a most bleak and demoralizing contrast with the self-confident bustle and gloss of the town I knew.

My own situation is also considerably different. There I am the heir apparent, the young master, indulged in expensive toys — a Ferrari, a string of polo ponies — by a doting grandmother. Here I work as a swamper in a saloon; the Top Hat Bar and Grill, to be exact. It is the only work available to a nameless unperson. (They call me Tom Perkins. I don't know where they got that. Back when I still talked, I used to ask them to use my real name, but the request always generated so much laughter that I gave it up.) At that, I am one of the very few people here who work; most of the town is on welfare, as I might be myself if I could establish the fact that I exist. Ironically, they have volunteered to put me on the welfare rolls under the name of Tom Perkins, an offer which I declined. That also caused a good deal of laughter.

Day after day, as I cleaned the spittoons (three-pound coffee cans, actually) and mopped the foul floor, my mind was occupied by a sustained effort to discover, through the application of the most rigorous logic, a theory to account for my presence in a world where my presence is impossible. (This was after my parole from the state hospital, after I had achieved a measure of resignation to my plight.) The initial stages of my analysis were simple enough: I postulated that any occurrence, anywhere, anytime, is a cause that has a consequent effect. A major occurrence has a major effect and changes history. Now, from the beginning, history has been an infinity of forks in a road, with the road not taken disappearing forever after it is passed,

so that a backward look shows only a single thoroughfare stretching to the rear. But suppose that somehow, from our present position on this thoroughfare, a barricade could be hurled backward, back to one of those forks in the road, compelling events to travel on the alternative route. As time went by, and fork after fork came and went, a retrospective survey of the route taken would not show that the main road was missed long ago. It would not show that we now travel on a detour, a sad, sick, degenerate, abominable detour. But the main road is still there, is still there. I think logic dictates that we must believe it is still there.

The exercise of pure reason had brought me to that point, but there my search for the truth began to appear to be almost hopeless. Reduced to essentials, it had become a search for the villain. Someone had erected the barricade that shunted history into the detour and exiled me from the main road to this wretched byway, and whoever he was, he had to be found and compelled to undo his villainy. But the world is a big place, containing a very considerable number of people, and I had not the least vague clue to his identity. A mad scientist? A military secret project? A lama spinning a prayer wheel in Tibet?

My problem was further complicated by the fact that I am not permitted to leave town. The people at the state hospital have decreed that I must be brought in once a month to be questioned and tested, presumably for reassurance that I can safely continue to be farmed out to the Top Hat Bar and Grill. I gather that before my incarceration I sometimes did violent things. (When I compare my mashed-in face with the way I used to look, I can believe it.) Okie Perkins, Prop. of the Top Hat Bar and Grill, drives me to these monthly vettings, where I steadfastly maintain silence despite the often ingenious subterfuges the headshrinkers use to get me to talk. I have promised myself that I shall speak no word until I am back where I belong. Obviously this vow was a further impediment to my investigation.

But I had some good luck, which served me as well as cold reason and sedulous research could have done. I found Loob. At some point in my despairing prowlings through the town, I became aware of him, and I came gradually to realize that I had found the culprit. It was no blazing revelation, or anything of that sort; but as soon as I began to suspect him I undertook to weigh his qualifications as a suspect against the indisputable facts, and, little by little, it became perfectly plain that it was indeed Loob who had done this unspeakable thing. I matched the history of the town — one history

until 1905, and then two, both of which I had pondered obsessively — with what I knew about Loob, and at last the whole grim story was laid out for me.

I said that finding him was good luck, but it was bad luck as well, because my plan to compel an undoing of the evil has come to nothing; quite clearly there is no way to compel Loob to do anything at all. There is not even any way to talk to him — which I would be eager to do if he could understand. But he cannot talk, and so certain portions of the story must remain forever conjecture. But they fit the facts, the whole thing coheres.

So now I watch him and wait for the day when he will undo what he did. Because there is nothing to do but watch and wait. And (I cannot help it) hope. I stalk him through the town, willing him to go to the house, to sit in the window. That is where he must be to change things back. When he is in the house, I usually lurk somewhere outside, not because I can affect what may happen, but simply out of an unexplainable feeling that I should be there. And then, too, looking at the house can sometimes evoke my real life so strongly that for a moment I forget where I am.

The house, my grandmother's house in the real world. A mansion with many chimneys, enduringly built of the pale-gray local sandstone, still displaying a basic elegance of line and proportion. Its walls remain as stout as the day they were built, and the slates of the roof still turn the rain; but there is no glass in any window, nor a door in any doorway, and the winds sweep through, blowing dust and trash in squalid patterns across the floor. There are no rooms on the first story; the interior walls were torn out years ago and replaced by a number of steel poles to bear the weight of the upper floors. In the cavernous space thus created, a foredoomed machine shop had existed precariously for a few years before it sank into bankruptcy and abandoned its worn-out lathes and drills to the scavengers and vandals. This is where Loob likes to be.

He likes to sit on a box in one of the oriel windows. From there he looks down to the river, across the junk piles and weeds that were once a smooth lawn sloping to the edge of the woods, across the rusty railroad tracks and decaying sheds that stand where great trees grew in the days when the house was in history's mainstream. He sits there for a large part of almost every day, watching an inconstant landscape: seeing sometimes a squirm of rats among frozen weeds, sometimes a small giggling girl frolicking with a patient dog on a summer lawn, sometimes other things. Loob feels no curiosity about these alterations of the view. Most things

in life are incomprehensible to him, and all phenomena are equally unexpected and equally unsurprising. But the little girl engages somewhat more of his attention than do the rats; the pretty lady at the piano is marginally more interesting than a ruined milling machine. Loob is happier (if that is the word for the viscid stirring within him) when he is watching the past.

During all the eighteen years of his life the past has been his milieu as often as the present. He does not distinguish between them. Some things can be touched and some cannot; that is one of the things he knows, and it is his sole perception of the difference between past and present. His questing hand will pass through the piano but be arrested by the milling machine; neither occurrence surprises him. If the piano were suddenly to become palpable and the milling machine insubstantial, he would not remember that it had ever been otherwise.

He answers to "Loob," short for "Loober," which is as close as he can come to pronouncing Luther. His name is another of the things he knows. Boys used to use that fact to bait him.

"Hey, Loob. What's your name, Loob?"

"Loo — ber." Thick, slow, forced out after a struggle.

Laughter. "Make him do it again."

"What's your name, Loob?"

"Loo — ber."

And laughter again. But now he has grown to several inches over six feet and weighs three hundred pounds. They no longer tease him. He has never been known to harm anyone, but his size and appearance have emancipated him from the role of butt. When he walks in the streets now, they say, "Hi, Loob," or even, "Hello, Luther." All of the people here know each other. A stranger may say, "My God, what's that?" and someone will tell him, "Oh, that's Luther Rankin. One of our village idiots. Perfectly harmless."

The speaker will be mistaken; Loob is anything but perfectly harmless. He can do — has done — abominable things, as no one knows better than I. But he has not done them with malice; he has not intended harm. He has never in his life intended anything at all and indeed is incapable of having intentions. The abominations happened simply because Loob is what he is; they came about as suddenly, and with as little premeditation, as the collapse of a river bank in a flood. But it is because of Loob that the house is what it is. That the town is what it is.

For three quarters of a century the town has been dying. At the turn of the century it passed almost overnight from its lusty prime into senescence, but ever since it has clung with a kind of weak tenacity to a spark of life, and now, shrunken and listless, it squats and decays on its mountainside, still housing in decrepit grimy dwellings a few hundred dispirited clients of the welfare system. Trains still make runs along the track that winds down the valley beside the river, but it has been many years since the train has stopped here, and the town's name on the depot has almost weathered away. A new interstate highway carries most of the traffic that formerly used the river road, and the town's last filling station stands boarded up at the corner where Main Street meets the road. There are only two stores left, and one saloon. The school has been abandoned, and all but one of the churches. It is a town without hope and without pride, a place with no reason for existing except to provide shelter of a sort for people who are themselves without hope or pride.

Once long ago it was a prosperous confident town, whose citizens believed it might one day rival Pittsburgh. It was not a wholly impossible vision. The Dappling Iron Works, which had grown prodigiously during the Civil War, leagued itself with the railroads when the war ended, and if Henry Dappling had been another kind of man, he might have pushed himself into the company of Carnegie and Frick and made his town a city like theirs. But he was not driven by ambition, and his factory and his town in the first years of the new century were exactly as he wanted them to be: healthy, bustling, productive — and of manageable size. He was comfortable in his role as First Citizen and Squire, and he approved of a community that was not too large for every citizen to know him and know his position. He liked the town as it was, and he liked his own position within it.

He took a keen pleasure in his daily trip to the plant, the ceremony and style of it. Every morning at eight, his polished buggy passed between the gateposts of the estate and proceeded briskly into town along Dappling Road, Dappling portly and erect in the seat, snugly buttoned into well-tailored sober broadcloth, in firm control of a team of matched chestnuts. There were no doffed hats or tugged forelocks as he passed, but those who shouted good morning to him called him Mr. Dappling.

Dappling Road curved around a hill and sloped downward to meet Main Street; Dappling's house was in fact quite near the town, but hidden from it by the cheek of the hill. At Main Street he turned left, down into the town, past houses that became progressively

larger as he approached the square. The block nearest the square had mansions on both sides of the street, large dark buildings of brick or stone, heavily ginger-breaded, standing at the backs of deep lawns. These were the homes of Dappling's superintendents and the banker and the most prosperous of the merchants. The retail commerce of the town took place around the square, and most of the merchants contrived to be at their doors to greet Dappling as the buggy passed smartly by. He returned to each a sober inclination of the head, a nod calculated precisely to indicate relative social positions. On the lower side of the square was another block of fine houses, and then the row houses of the mill workers down to the wrought-iron gates of the Dappling Iron Works.

In the cobbled courtyard, McVay would be waiting to take the horses, a lean grim mountaineer with a crooked leg. The leg had been crippled in a mill accident, and because McVay had a family, a job as hostler and janitor had been found for him. If he had been killed, his widow would have received a small sum every payday until the oldest boy was old enough to work in the mill. When a mill hand grew too old or too infirm to work, the son or son-in-law who took him in found his pay envelope somewhat augmented each week for so long as the old man lived. No one starved in Dappling's town. No one had any luxuries, either, except for the people in the big houses on Main Street. And Dappling.

The townspeople were content with that arrangement. They were proud, illiterate people who made a point of asking for no more than they felt they had earned, and they were in fact more prosperous and lived more comfortably (if perhaps with a little less freedom) than their cousins who lived in mountain cabins. They were all people indigenous to the mountains, some still owning steep remnants of the land granted to ancestors in recognition of service as soldiers in the Revolution. There were no foreigners in Dappling's mill. He had observed with fastidious disgust the consequences of Pittsburgh's resort to immigrant labor: the swarms of evil-smelling clownish peasants, gabbling in strange tongues and devouring loathsome foods, creating squalid enclaves that reproduced with hideous fidelity the degenerate East European or Mediterranean villages that had spawned them. Dappling would have none of it. Who would be squire where the tenants were the likes of these?

No, he would forego becoming a great man, if becoming a great man entailed such things. In his lifetime, at least, things would not change here. This neat prospering town where dwelt contented respectful citizens; this bustling profitable mill where free Americans

labored; these wooded hills surrounding his elegant great house: these were what he prized; these he would keep. These and his family.

His days were so ordered that there was time for each of them: he would be in his office (he still called it a counting house, a small room darkly furnished in mahogany and green plush) until noon precisely, sitting deliberate and magisterial behind the broad desk, guiding the affairs of his mill with a concentration of attention indistinguishable from love. That part of his life that belonged to the mill was the mill's absolutely. But with the first sound of the noon whistle he was at the door, and before the sound of the whistle had died the chestnuts were in motion, retracing the morning's journey. With the closing of the door, Dappling shut business out of his mind until tomorrow; the rest of the day belonged to the estate and the family.

He always felt a lift in his spirits as the buggy approached the gates of the manor, an emotion identical with the one he felt as he neared the mill in the morning. Twice each day on six days of the week he enjoyed this feeling of pleasurable anticipation. He relished each morning's work, the solid satisfaction of bringing order to confused situations, the pride in his honest profit from his honest product. He relished equally the afternoons: a farmer's lunch, a change into boots and breeches, and then into the outdoors — sometimes afoot and sometimes riding — to verify that all went well with his acres.

There were about twenty thousand of them, forest mostly, lofty virgin stands of oak and walnut steeply rising above valleys where swift cold streams ran. Where the land was reasonably flat, there were wheat and cornfields, and on steeper clearings grew lush pasturage for the fat cattle and blooded horses that won ribbons for Dappling at the fair. He liked to take his big gray gelding on a tour of the fields on a summer afternoon, using not the farm roads but his private bridle paths, cantering through the silent forest on a crooked course that took him from the stable down to the fat fields of the bottomland, thence upward as far as the high mountain meadow, and from there back again to his house in the last hour before sunset. He would emerge from the trees at the top of the home meadow, whose long slope ran from the edge of the woods down to Dappling Road. There he always pulled up to absorb the view for a few minutes: in the foreground the dairy herd making its way in a peaceable file towards the barn for the evening milking; then the road; and then, beyond treetops, his house, solid, permanent, and shapely, on its broad expanse of lawn. The best part of the day was

still to come. If the gelding was not overheated, Dappling would give him his head and, with deliberate theatricality, thunder up to the stable at a dead run. More often than not, Emily would be there waiting for him.

His Emily, his sunshine; the radiance that lighted his life, the small granddaughter whom he loved with an intensity of devotion that sometimes — as he was well aware — made him appear faintly ridiculous. He doted; and was aware that his doting was a cause of laughter, and did not care, this staid industrialist who prized his dignity above most things. He saw in this merry child a recreation of her grandmother, the adored wife who had died young and whose loss inflicted a wound that had remained as raw as the day it was new through all the years until Emily's birth.

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He had remained fond enough of his son Sam and never been so unhinged by grief as to blame the boy because his birth had killed his mother; nonetheless, he had been more a dutiful than a loving father. But if he did not cheer at Sam's triumphs, neither did he chide him for his failures, and they did not quarrel. They did not embrace, either, and Sam no more filled the empty part of Dappling's life than did the mill and the estate. All three were good things, important to him and sources of satisfaction, but it was not until the baby's birth that they fell snugly into place as parts of a life that seemed now to be whole and unflawed. He was able at last to love Sam as a son and to become fond of Sam's wife Olivia, the aristocrat Sam had fetched home to the mountains from a decaying Main Line mansion.

Sam, for his part, not only loved his father, he admired him above all men. He accounted himself very lucky, did plain decent Sam, with the great Henry Dappling his father and the beautiful Olivia his wife. Sam knew his limitations, knew that his father and his wife had quicker, keener minds than his own. At Harvard, where his father had been graduated *cum laude* after an indolent and sociable four years, Sam had had to toil mightily for his Gentleman's Cs, and he was never able to comprehend at all the formidable books that his wife incessantly read. But what he learned he remembered, and Dappling was a patient teacher. Sam had come to be of value in the mill and on the farm, and when the proper time came round (in ten years, Dappling thought, or fifteen), he would be fit to command both. His ways were not his father's ways, but Dappling had gradually come to realize that Sam's pleasant, almost diffident orders were carried out with as much alacrity as his own, and undoubtedly more cheerfully. The men respected and to some degree feared Dappling, but they were fond of Sam. They were beginning to respect him, as well; and

a few, who had failed him in one way or another, had learned that there were times when he, too, was to be feared.

236 They dined early, so that Emily could eat with the family. Each evening as they entered the dining room, Mrs. McVay would pop Emily in through the other door, starched and ruffled, fragrant from her bath, her small face serious with the effort of making a ladylike entrance, her eyes on Dappling. It was a game. If Dappling's expression did not change, she was able to make her way to her chair with suitable gravity; but if he winked, or permitted the corner of his mouth to twitch with an incipient grin, she broke into giggles and ran to him to be picked up and deposited in her chair. She was in fact a beautiful child, with a regularity of feature and a shapeliness of the underlying bone that indicated an inevitable growth into a beautiful woman. She glowed with health; the round cheeks bloomed, the blue eyes sparkled. Merriment bubbled always just beneath the surface of her mood of the moment, so that even when she was irritated or sullen, the bad behavior somehow gave the impression of being no more than a pose. It was not to be doubted that all of her life people would be charmed by her and forgive her almost any offense. She was a delightful small person and seemed so not only to her besotted grandfather but to the whole populace of Dappling's demesne. In the row houses the grannies were already worrying about a suitable husband being found for her, and eminent fiddlers from the mountain cabins often turned up at the door with tenders of music to be played for the Missy. These were not sycophantish people; they felt a very genuine affection for her. Everyone did.

They ate the food of the region, roast beef or fried pork or game, with cornbread and boiled greens. But the plain food was served on delicate china and eaten with monogrammed silver; the napery was heavy linen. Olivia's code of manners had not been relaxed by removal to the west. The Dapplings were gentlefolk, after all, and if they had tended to live coarsely during the years when the house was without a chatelaine, it was only her duty, now that she was mistress, to set things back on the correct path. Dappling was amiable about it, and the adoring Sam, as anxious to please as a puppy, pretended great enthusiasm for her amendments to their style of living. They drew the line at formal dinner wear, but were agreeable to changing from outdoor clothes for dinner, and Olivia settled for that.

The men ate hugely, minding their table manners to set an example for Emily and to please Olivia. The conversation would no doubt have surprised a chance visitor: Dappling's education had been excellent, and he was that rarity among industrialists, a man who loved books.

Olivia, too, was a reader. She had had no more than the education considered appropriate for females of her class and time — genteel reading, manners, a little music — but she had very early displayed, to the utter astonishment of the improvident sportsmen and flighty belles who comprised her family, a formidable intellect, an attribute that the clan found as exotic as the ability to charm snakes, and about as desirable in a lady. Her father had leaped at the chance to marry her off to rich Sam Dappling, who was, although perhaps not out of the very top drawer, a lad much to the old man's liking, a good shot, bold at a jump, well-tailored, and in no way bookish. Indeed, he felt a certain sympathy for Sam, anticipating that the boy might have a difficult time with his blue-stockings daughter. But it had turned out that Dappling's library had afforded her all she could ask in the way of books, and she had found her father-in-law's conversation to be modestly learned and sometimes even witty. It more than compensated for the occasional whiff of the frontier she discerned in the atmosphere around her.

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Sometimes there were guests. Men came from New York and Pittsburgh to talk about iron and steel, or from the capitol to talk politics. At dinner and afterwards until bedtime they talked their business or politics, with Sam utterly absorbed in the conversation and Dappling joining in with a certain detached amusement, while Olivia sat rigid with boredom, mechanically making the proper responses. But there were other visitors, people from Olivia's former world who came for extended visits to rest and restore their failing energies in the mountain air. When there were houseguests in residence, dinners were leisurely affairs, deliberately protracted by Olivia; it was the time of the best conversation, and meals were the chief — almost the only — entertainment there in the country. There might be cards in the late evening, or Olivia would play Chopin or Schubert with passable skill. Sometimes they gathered around the piano and sang; often they sat on the lawn late into the night, the talk incessant under the stridulation of night insects until it was time for bed.

Sam was always glad of bedtime; indeed, he found himself looking forward to it almost from the time he rose in the morning. One of his amusements, when conversation about paintings or cotillions had bored him to the point of numbness, was to picture Olivia as she would be later in their bedroom; he liked to imagine the expressions on the faces around the table if they suddenly found themselves conversing not with the cool hostess who was explicating Darwin, but with the Olivia that only he had ever seen, who came

into being after the bedroom door had closed. Both Sam and Olivia had been at first enormously surprised and then intensely grateful for the depth of her sexuality; but both were quite certain that it was somehow discreditable, and they were in agreement that it should be utterly secret. Their public manner towards each other was almost formal; they lived in the innocent belief that their passion was wholly concealed.

Dappling was much amused by their affectation of coolness, but it was a benign and complacent amusement. They were a happy couple, and their happiness was a cornerstone of Emily's world. Whatever made Emily happy met with Dappling's unqualified approval. It was his intent that her life was to be without sorrow, that her merriment was to continue all of her days. It was to this end that he directed the affairs of his mill, his estate, and his people, so that Emily could never know want, would always have responsible protectors, would always have her path smooth and the way open, no matter what happened to him, no matter what happened to Sam and Olivia. Large sums of money were so placed that she was forever assured of opulence, whatever the vagaries of the economy; banks in Pittsburgh and lawyers in New York were committed by pledge and self-interest to protect her as a jewel; young matrons in the best circles of Eastern Seaboard cities were already anticipating the day when they would sponsor her; and throughout Goster County hard men and their tough women, bound to Dappling by a fealty that was near-feudal, had come to understand that the welfare of this child was to be protected in any and all circumstances, by whatever means were necessary.

Dappling had done what he could, and he did not doubt that it was enough. In any case, he saw his safeguards only as an excess of caution. There was no reason why he should not live until Emily herself was a grandmother, and he proposed to guard her tenderly through all those years. But such speculation about the far future was confined to moments of active planning; in his heart, in his day-to-day thought, she was forever five years old, forever a golden child laughing among flowers in a long golden afternoon. And that would be the reality, in a way.

Or, at any rate, *a* reality; one of the realities perceived by Loob, peering uncomprehendingly down the chasm of the years from his seat in the oriel window. He watched her often at play, skipping blithely with bare feet over sun-warmed grass, as he sat hunched motionless on his box, strange and gross, scoured by a gritty cold wind that he did not seem to feel, staring with lusterless eyes at the

pantomime he watched almost every day without ever remembering that he had seen it before. There had never been pattern or sequence to his perception of the past, and scenes came and went apparently at random, but the child on the lawn was there for him almost every day. He looked through the window and saw her at play, and behind him in the room, if he turned his head to look, the pretty lady was playing the piano while a slim man with a mustache turned the pages of music for her, and through the door another man was entering the room.

It always ended then; abruptly Loob was looking at the desolate present or a different time in the past. No one could have said whether it mattered to him. No expression crossed the broad pallid face, the dull eyes neither brightened nor dimmed. But somewhere in the cloudy corridors of his brain something found that particular scene appealing, and it was endlessly repeated for Loob, child and dog in the sunlight, man and woman at the piano, the other man entering. And some sort of censor existed there, as well, cutting off his view each time at the same point; even Loob could not have borne to see again the scene played to its end.

Or perhaps he could have, and the shift in time had quite another explanation. There was no way of knowing what he felt, or indeed if he had feelings at all. What went on inside his head differed utterly — differed in kind — from the thinking processes of other people. He was not stupid or insane; those words apply to a mind's efficiency in the handling of reality and rational thought, and what happened inside Loob's skull bore no relation to those things. There was a power there that normal brains do not have, and Loob could see things long invisible to everyone else, but he did not — could not — think.

He had been born with a brain that was skewed and misshapen; the conduits that carry the impulses called thought were twisted and awry, in no way resembling the complex, symmetrical network which the genetic blueprint prescribes. They coiled upon themselves in tight nodes, forked where they should have continued singly, came to dead ends where they should have made a juncture, joined fortuitously where no connection should have been made. The energies that passed along them traveled unprecedented routes, and the result was not thought but something new and unique.

In a different age Loob would have been exposed and abandoned to die, and in a different place he would have been locked into an institution and forgotten. Here in this mountain town he was kept alive and, for what it was worth to him, permitted almost total

freedom. The people clung to their immemorial folkways, and it had never been their way to send defective people to institutions. When seventeen-year-old Carolee Rankin came home to bear her bastard and depart again, this time to disappear forever, her mother, as a matter of course, kept the child to raise as one of the moil of children swarming through the ruinous house the welfare people supplied her. Loob shared his grandmother's breast with his uncle, who was a year older than Loob. By his third birthday he was an inch taller than the uncle. It was by then evident, even to the grandmother, who herself lived at a certain remove from reality, that something was amiss inside Loob's head. He walked into furniture and followed with his eyes the movements of invisible people and became frightened at the sight of things that were not there. It could not be doubted that he was in some way cracked.

The grandmother did not regard the fact as a major tragedy; most of the families she knew produced at least one natural in each generation. Loob received neither more nor less than his share of her fitful offerings of affection, and perhaps less than his share of the cuffings. He continued to grow with unnatural speed, almost visibly acquiring inches of height and layers of fat, feeding greedily on enormous quantities of the starchy foods provided by bureaucratic charity. When he was seven the grandmother died.

The day after her death, her mother, the matriarch of the clan, appeared in the town. She began a long wrangle with the young woman from the welfare department, who proposed to put into foster homes all of the children except Loob, who was to go to an asylum. The old woman was wise in all the ways and regulations of the welfare department, and she was unshakably determined that her kin would not be raised by strangers. In the end she prevailed; the government would continue to rent the house, regular checks would continue to issue, and the children, including Loob, would be kept together. But her scheming had gone beyond that: she was able, as a part of the same settlement, to make provision for another of her feckless brood. Her youngest son, a cowboy-togged frequenter of honky-tonks, who had reached his early thirties, without ever having had a job, was given a stipend by the government to move with his wife into the house and make a home for the children. He had no children of his own; his wife, a skinny alcoholic named Dolores, did not like them.

As time passed she came to like them less and less, her new charges in particular. The littlest of them cried or screamed a good deal of the time, and those of school age were frequently the cause of visitations

by the welfare lady, who tended to be quite fierce after hearing school teachers' shocked reports about the clothing and grooming of the children. Dolores was infuriated by these intrusions upon her effort to live as she liked. She had experienced the fulfillment of an old daydream: enough money to keep the refrigerator well-filled with beer, and a rent-free dim room where the days could be passed in a mindless fog of alcohol and rock music. She did not ask for more than this, but having tasted it, she would not settle for less. When reality insisted upon invading her misty paradise, she was at first irritated and then filled with sullen rage. These children, she came to see, were her enemies. She would treat them as they deserved to be treated.

And so they grew, an undernourished gaggle of delinquents, vicious and unpredictable, pale of eyes and hair, each with the chinless face and crooked pointed teeth of the family. One by one, as they reached their middle teens, they left the house, to find dens elsewhere in the town or to run away and vanish utterly. Dolores was left at last with only Loob.

And even he had stumbled into habits that kept him out of her reach most of the time. In his early years it had been otherwise; he had not been able to learn, like the others, to make himself inconspicuous or to hide, nor was he able to read the signs that foretold explosions of her wrath. He had thus been almost always conveniently available to her, a ready victim, a swollen speechless lump too lethargic to evade blows and incapable of argument. In summer he would squat in the dusty backyard, and in winter in a corner of the kitchen, staring at whatever it was that he saw. When he was eleven or twelve he began to follow along behind the uncle who was near his own age, and he remained a faithful shadow until the uncle ran away a year or two later. That was the period when the boys used Loob as a butt.

By the time of the uncle's disappearance Loob seemed to have come to a vague awareness that things were somehow better when he was away from Dolores, that he felt no blows and did not hear the shrill vituperative voice. It came to be his habit to go to the house only to sleep and to eat when he could not find food elsewhere. He became a wanderer through the town and its purlieus, an enormous shambling creature with arms that were disproportionately short and a tongue too large for his mouth who made mysterious detours as he walked and clutched a shapeless bundle of rags that had once been a stuffed toy dog. At some point his wanderings brought him to the window of the old Dappling house. Thereafter he was usually to be found at that place.

Dolores knew where he was, and she had no objection. She had never consciously made a connection between Loob's absence from the house and a rise in her spirits, but her subconscious mind had for many years observed and recorded the fact that acts of cruelty to Loob were likely to have distressing consequences. The appalling depressions of spirit that sometimes engulfed her, dropping her into a black hell of melancholy and terror, were blamed on her boozing, and she ascribed to the same cause the endless succession of accidents that made bandages or splints a standard part of her costume. That Loob was the cause of her afflictions was not an idea that would have occurred to her.

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It did not occur to Loob, either, of course. Loob did not have ideas, any more than he had memories. He lived from moment to moment, and each new moment of his life found him in something very close to a whole new world. The few things he had learned had been absorbed so gradually, over so long a time, that they had merged with, and become indistinguishable from, instinct; no reasoning from cause to effect had ever been the motive of an action of his. He was in fact totally unaware of what he was doing when he made use of his power. It was his wholly by chance, an effect of the same clots in the circuitry of his brain that deprived him of an effective memory and the faculty of reason, and he used it instinctively and without forethought. Afterwards he would have no memory of what he had done, nor any awareness of consequences. There was the matter of the Goster County dogs, for example.

A lean starving dog of enormous size, driven to mindless ferocity by hunger and the pain of a festering paw, one day sprang at Loob's throat. Loob reacted with cobra swiftness, his instincts serving him far better than reason would have. The dog seemed to crumple in midair; a savage predator had leaped, and a cowed and broken creature hit the ground. It fled in howling terror to its nest under a stump and remained there until it died of starvation and fear a week later.

If Loob had failed to react, no harm would have been done him; the dog's attack had actually taken place on a day a century and a half in the past, and Loob had struck at a wraith, an apparition that had no substance in Loob's time. It is probable that it was not attacking Loob at all, but some beast or person actually there; but it may have sensed somehow Loob's uncomprehending observation and blindly attacked the unseen. Either way, they were in different times, Loob and the dog, and neither of them had any physical reality for the other. But Loob's dreadful bolt was not affected by time. Time had

no meaning for Loob or his power. And the dog was smitten.

The dog was a wild animal, an amalgam of large breeds, the possessor of a rich strain of wolf blood. He killed sheep and bred bitches on most of the farms in the county and ventured sometimes into the town itself when the wind brought the scent of a bitch in heat. By the time he was brought low by a farmer's bullet, he had sired feral litters throughout the area, all of which fruitfully interbred. His blood was passed on and enriched by the inbreeding, and his descendants came to be almost a distinct breed, huge rangy dogs with blunt muzzles and smooth black pelts, who stood baleful guard over the farms of the county and patrolled the streets of the town with a forbidding, proprietary air.

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They disappeared when Loob struck the attacker; or, rather, did not disappear: they had never existed. The old progenitor had died of terror in a hole before he could breed their ancestors, and other dogs lived — had always lived — here. Reality had been amended in a small way: a race of dogs did not exist; the bloodlines of the local sheep were imperceptibly different; the phrase, "As mean as a Goster County dog" did not have currency in that end of the state. Most of the people had memories of their pasts that were somewhat different from what they had been; a great many snapshots showed other dogs or no dogs at all. Not much else. Loob's mindless interference with the past had harmed no one, all things considered, and the world was in fact in no worse condition than it would otherwise have been.

But of course that was not the only occasion on which he altered the past, and that other tampering had consequences that scarcely bear thinking about, that were indeed so incomparably dreadful that one has difficulty in restraining himself from committing atrocities upon Loob's person. But that would be self-defeating, that would be something worse than suicide. Loob is not to be interfered with; he must be left to do as he is moved to do.

Loob once had a dog of his own. When he was twelve or thirteen years old, an emaciated stray mongrel had one summer evening peered through a hole in the fence and watched him as he sat in a corner of the yard hunched over his tin basin of pork and potatoes. The dog had sat staring with hopeless longing at the pieces that fell into the dust as Loob crammed the food into his mouth until, unable to restrain itself any longer, it made a frantic and despairing foray into the yard, snatched a loathly ort from under Loob's feet, and scrambled in terror back through the hole. Loob took no notice whatever. The dog, observing this, made a second raid, again without retribution. By the time the basin was empty, the ground was clear

of food, and the dog was sitting beside Loob waiting for the next scrap to fall.

Thereafter they took their meals together, and after a time the dog began to follow Loob wherever he went and to lie down touching Loob when Loob was at rest. Loob appeared not to be aware of the dog at all until the evening when the dog for the first time attempted to follow him into the house and was hastily ejected by Dolores. Loob began an enormous bellowing, a noise so offensive and sustained that one of the older children admitted the animal as soon as Dolores had returned to her room. After that time they were not separated by day or night until a coal truck ran over the dog on Main Street one morning, not only killing it instantly but flattening it to something unrecognizable as a dog.

Loob saw the incident; at any rate his eyes were turned toward it at the moment it happened. But he gave no sign that he recognized what had taken place, and he continued his lurching progress up the street without pausing. That night he did not eat, however, a thing that had not happened before in his lifetime. During all of the next day and the day after that, he took no food. The other children, astonished and frightened, told Dolores, who two days later told the welfare lady. Loob's skin was by then beginning to hang in pale folds, and he staggered even more than usual as he wandered through the town.

"I don't know," the welfare lady said. "Maybe this time he'll have to go to Murdock." Murdock is a state mental hospital. I know it well.

"It was the dog gettin' kilt done it," one of the children said. Maybe if he had another dog —."

"Another dog," the welfare lady said. "Aid to Dependent Dogs." She spoke to Dolores: "Do you have any idea — No. Of course you don't. I'll talk to the doctor. I'm afraid it will have to be Murdock." But she came back later in the day with a toy dog, a stylized stuffed Airdale covered in plush. "Let's try it, anyhow," she said. "You never know."

Loob stared at the toy as emptily as he stared at the rest of the world. After a while the welfare lady said, "Well, I'm not surprised. It was worth trying, though." She turned to go. Loob reached out and took the toy. His face did not change, but he raised the dog and squeezed it to his chest with both hands, and that evening he devoured his usual enormous meal. For the next five years of his life he was never seen without the toy in his hand.

He did not play with it or show it any sign of affection, or indeed seem to be aware that he held it, but even in his sleep his grip did not wholly relax. In time the plastic stuffing hardened and crumbled and sifted out through rips in the seams of the plush, so that at last Loob carried only a filthy rag; but to all appearances the rag had the same value to him that the new toy had had. It may have been that the sticky wad of cloth provided the only continuity in his life, the only thing of permanence in his inconstant world. Or perhaps he was after all capable of some murky analogue of emotion and felt something akin to affection for the ruined toy. It is even possible that he had never perceived it as a representation of a dog, but simply as an object tendered in kindness, and hence not to be relinquished. Whatever the reason, it was unique in the world, a thing that appeared to matter to Loob.

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Dolores took it from him one day, took it and burned it and so created her own beginnings and condemned a town. She took Loob's rag out of simple malice, out of a heartfelt desire to cause him pain; but she never knew whether or not the confiscation had really hurt him, any more than in the past she had been able to tell if he had heard her voice when she railed at him or felt the blows when she struck him. This time, though, she had achieved her purpose.

It was a bad morning for her, a morning when the thrum and jangle of her nerves had begun before she awoke, so that she came to consciousness depressed and apprehensive, with a yellow taste in her mouth and an incipient tremor in her limbs. She was well aware of the cause, which was a lack of alcohol in her system; and she remembered clearly and with despair that before going to sleep she had drunk the last drop in the house, having debated leaving a pick-me-up in the vodka bottle and deciding against it. She had had this experience before, and she knew precisely the course it would take. It was absolutely necessary that she have a bottle within the next hour, or the shaking and nausea would utterly incapacitate her.

The car would not start. She sat behind the wheel and cursed, a stringy woman with bad teeth and lank hair, musty and disheveled and becoming frantic. Without pause in her swearing she left the car and, sweating, returned to the house to use the telephone. The taxicab company told her the town's only taxi would not be available until the afternoon.

She stood clutching the telephone, frozen by panic. She did not see how she could walk the mile to the liquor store, but no matter how desperately she tried, she could think of no alternative. She was quite unable to cope with the problem. Until her brain had

received its wonted portion of alcohol, it scarcely functioned at all, and getting the alcohol to make thinking possible was itself her problem. Frustration squeezed her in a clawed vise and became anger, a red extremity of rage that she thought might burst her head with its intensity.

Through the door to the kitchen she caught sight of Loob, sitting dumbly in his corner staring at nothing. "You bastard!" she shouted. "You goddam crazy dummy, you old goddam crazy dummy! Sit and hold your goddam crazy rag all day, you goddam crazy dummy! Why can't you *do* something?"

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Loob did not move, did not blink. She rushed into the kitchen and struck him on the cheek with her fist. He gave no sign of feeling it. "Goddam you!" she shouted. "Goddam, oh, goddam!" Loob sat and stared emptily. "You bastard," she said, panting now. "Oh, you big dummy bastard." Her eye fell upon the rag. "Oh, you big dummy bastard with your rag."

She snatched suddenly, and the rag was in her hand. Without pausing she pulled a lid off the stove and dropped the rag inside, where coals still glowed. "There, you crazy dummy!" she said. "There's your crazy rag." There was a crackle of flame inside the stove.

Still Loob made no sign. She gave a wordless shriek, a yelp of pure, helpless rage, and struck him again, to no effect whatever. She stood trembling for a moment and then ran from the room and from the house and stood sobbing beside the road. A car came, and she held up her hand. The car stopped and picked her up.

In the kitchen Loob sat without movement for some time. Then his hand opened, lay so for a moment, and clenched again. He repeated the movement two or three times. He rose ponderously, lurched out through the kitchen door, and made his way through the litter of the back yard to a gap in the fence, and thence through a vacant lot to Dappling Road. He proceeded erratically down the road, as he had a thousand times before, and turned in at the derelict slag lane that led down to the old house. When he reached the house he climbed the discolored stone steps, entered, and took his seat in the window. His hand was slowly clenching and unclenching.

Something new had happened — was happening — to him: he was, improbably, in the grip of an emotion. Somewhere in the ruinous labyrinth of his mind there was adumbrated a feeling of loss, of something nameless that was forever gone. There was no way for him to weigh the matter, to reflect upon the strangeness of

this phenomenon; he could only react instinctively: *Danger. Strike.* He struck.

It was toward the end of a long August afternoon in 1905, and Sam Dappling was opening a door, entering the room where Olivia was playing Chopin. A house-guest, a cousin from Philadelphia, stood beside the piano and turned the pages of the music, and two other visitors, another cousin and his wife, listened from seats on a divan. As he crossed the threshold, placid, genial Sam Dappling went mad; the black discharge of Loob's strange ordnance smashed into his brain, instantly exploding a million subtle connections, and in the moment of passing through the doorway Sam Dappling ceased to exist. In his stead was something monstrous, a thing bulging with insensate ferocity, that ran suddenly into the room and tore from the wall the Civil War saber that hung under a portrait of old General Dappling. It whirled with the saber in its hand and without the slightest pause accelerated into frenzied motion, filling the room with a demented fury of destruction and dismemberment; and when the butchery at last was done, it again did not pause, but rushed dripping out of that place of blood and stink and twitching scraps into the outdoors, onto the lawn where a child and a dog played in the sunshine.

It left unspeakable things scattered there on the grass and plunged, howling, into the barn, where it found only a mare and her foal, upon whom it fell in undiminished frenzy. When there was no more movement in the stall, it paused for a fraction of a moment. In the loft pigeons were fluttering; it heard the sound and went swarming up the ladder, in no way slowed by the saber. The pigeons were out of reach, swooping just under the roof, far above. At the end of the loft was another ladder, leading up to the great opening under the ridge pole through which the hay was hauled into the mow. It scuttled up with the agility of a great feral monkey. A startled pigeon flapped in confusion and then flew hastily through the opening, and the thing that had been Sam Dappling leaped for it, wildly cutting with its sword. The pigeon rose gracefully and curved back to alight on the roof. The thing sailed outward and dropped, still slicing and hacking at the air through which it fell. It struck the hard-packed earth and bounced slightly and was still. In the house the screaming had just begun.

For Henry Dappling it never stopped. He lived for the seven years that remained of his life with a never-ending scream in his ears. It was not the screaming from the house that he heard; it was the demented noise that came from Mrs. McVay, who was standing on the lawn

with her face to the sky as he rode the gray out of the woods that evening. He had emerged from the sun-shot cool gloom and silence of the forest into the full evening sunlight and pulled up as usual. He heard it then, a mindless howl of terror and loss and unutterable grief, ripping through the bright clear air with ugly insistence, smirching the evening. He put the gray into a dead run, down the meadow and the drive and over the lawn to where she stood screaming and screaming. He saw what she held in her hands.

248 That was the real end of Henry Dappling's life. His remaining seven years were something worse than death. He would have made a quick end of it almost immediately, except that he did not see how he could die without knowing *why*. Even a vindictive maniac God must have had a reason for so gross an affront to decency, so loathsome and abominable a cruelty as permitting him to see the bulging small blue eyes and yellow curls of what was frozen in Mrs. McVay's clawed hands. The question became almost the sole tenant of his mind, a consuming obsession that was never absent for a second of his years as a mad hermit in his mansion. He did not find his answer, of course, and he died at last with the screaming still in his ears, alone in the great house where mildew and dry rot were crumbling the interior and weeds and branches besieged the walls. Long before his death the house had come to look desolate and abandoned, and it was known as a haunted house while its master still lived within its walls.

He had attended the funeral; indeed, he had taken charge from the very first, from the moment he had pried Mrs. McVay's hands away from their awful burden. He had shouted at her in so loud and peremptory a voice that her hysteria was punctured, and she took hold of herself and obeyed his instructions to gather together the men whom he named and to have the sheriff sent for. He himself told the men what to do, evincing no emotion at the sight of the shambles in the house or the pitiful thing that had been his son lying broken on the ramp of the barn. He went about for the three days, with an expressionless face, speaking, when speech was needful, in a precise cold voice, glassy-hard and without apparent grief or rage. He was watched warily: at any moment full realization might strike him, and he could be expected to do something strange — to become violent and murderous or perhaps lose his mind entirely and gibber and drool.

In fact he did none of those things. After the funeral he took the superintendent of the mill aside. "Pay off everybody," he said. "Yourself, too. Lock it up."

“What?” said the superintendent. “Pay — ? Lock — ? What?”

“Do it,” Dappling said. The superintendent did. The town stopped. The big houses lost their people first, as the men who had run the mill betook themselves to Pittsburgh and Gary. Then some of the row houses emptied; venturesome or ambitious men severed their roots and went to Wheeling or Youngstown, while others, in whom the old highland blood ran strong, satisfied a perennial urge and returned to the cabins. A majority stayed. They stayed and watched the town decay around them, a passive indolent community bereft of leadership and energy, doomed now to a long sleep and then extinction.

It stirred to life, briefly, during the First World War; money and importunities from Washington effected a partial resolution of the chaos into which Dappling’s estate had fallen and the mill was put into operation for a year, although the already archaic equipment was hopelessly inefficient. After the Armistice the ponderous machinery of the law again clanked into operation; the gates were re-locked, the new railroad sidings left to rust. The tedious succession of suit and countersuit, stay and deferral, lien and attachment and injunction was resumed and dragged its dusty way through courtrooms and sheriff’s offices and lawyers’ chambers. If Dappling had died with his family, there would have been no problem; his affairs would have been carried on without even a pause by an existing establishment. But he lived on for seven years, and there was no way to appoint an executor or administrator for a living man. They might have had him certified incompetent, but no one dared. And so no taxes were paid or rents collected; no one voted shares of stock or gave proxies for them; no one guarded or was responsible for property and accounts. Sheriff’s deputies nailed notices to doors; servers of process came and went; various bank accounts stagnated or were looted. Numbers of small suppliers went bankrupt; certain bankers and lawyers prospered greatly.

And all the while the town shrank and rotted and waited for the better times that had to come, and Henry Dappling, grown hairy and filthy and emaciated, crept through the dark haunted rooms of his mansion and endlessly asked his unanswerable question. One day in the seventh summer, McVay, who each week left a supply of food for the hermit at the kitchen door, found the previous week’s provisions still on the step. He called the sheriff, who came with a fat deputy, broke into the shuttered house, and found Dappling’s body. The screaming had stopped at last.

Lawful administration of the estate began at once, but it was too late. Except for the federal cutting of the Gordian Knot for wartime purposes, there had never been a hope of bringing enough order out of the chaos to make the mill a going enterprise again. Vultures and then beetles picked the carcass clean and left the town to its own devices.

It could devise nothing but stagnation. When the Great Depression came, the event would have passed unnoticed by the people had it not been for the fact that money began to arrive from the government. They were at first too proud to accept it, and then they accepted it and were ashamed, and in due course they were not ashamed but came to think of it as rightfully theirs. The relief checks became the way of life of the town, an assurance of a livelihood for even the most indolent and feckless. When times at last improved, there was a leaching away of the brighter and abler young, who went to seek a future elsewhere; and by the time “relief” became “welfare,” no one there worked at all except for a few torpid merchants, whose customers paid with government checks. The town would not die, but it lived — or half-lived — as a parasite.

The citizens know no other life. Loob was born to it, and so was his mother, and his grandmother came to it before her adolescence. These are people who do not know want, but have never known prosperity. They do not know ambition or thrift; neither do they know toil or hunger. Their possessions are cheap and gaudy and soiled, their diet deficient in nourishment and abundant in sugar, their music a commercial debasement of the folk music of their fathers. They drink fiercely and are given to casual incest and sometimes slice each other with knives. Their only dreams are of winning prizes on television giveaway shows. These are the descendants of the stern mountaineers who were Henry Dappling’s people. Down the years each generation has been more misshapen than its predecessor. Loob is their ultimate fruit.

And so a circle is completed. Because Loob is what he is, he shattered the mind of Sam Dappling and so damned the town. Because the town was damned, Loob is what he is.

There is no point of entry into this circle: Loob created the events that created Loob. And since that cannot be, it is necessary to consider the possibility that these things did not happen at all. It may be that someday, as Loob sits in the window, his censor may not operate, he may see the scene through to its end; and now, with the loss of his toy no longer a fresh wound, and indeed probably no longer even a scar, he may let Sam come through the door and enter the room

unchanged. If that should come about, then none of this happened; if Sam comes unscathed across the threshold, the past has once more been changed. Or left unchanged. The entry into the room of a sane Sam Dappling will mean that the horrors of that evening never occurred, that through the years ahead events will take place with Sam and Emily and Olivia alive, with Henry Dappling a fulfilled and happy man. It will mean that at the moment Loob fails to loose his bolt, he will never have existed.

One would perhaps then find in the bay of the window not a pale gross cretin crouched on a box, but an old lady in a Sheraton chair, who contemplates with eyes that are still merry and blue the long slope of lawn outside the window. The old piano is still in the room, its top covered with photographs, among them those of her great-grandchildren. Her great-grandfather's portrait as a general hangs on the wall and under it his saber, unblooded since Bull Run. The woodwork of the room glows with the deep luster of fervent polishings, the metal is bright, the glass sparkles. It is an old room and a happy one, sunny and filled with good things well cared for, an appropriate setting for this patrician lady.

She is waiting for someone, perhaps her grandson, almost certainly her grandson. He will no doubt arrive in the Ferrari, sending up a spray of white gravel when he brakes in front of the house. A manservant will hurry down to get his luggage, but he is already halfway up the steps, a trim athletic young man in flannels and tweed jacket. He has been in the East for a month of polo, but now he is home again, home where he is heir to the town and the big house. The townspeople had smiled and waved as the Ferrari growled up steep Main Street past the busy mill and the gleaming row houses, around the square with its sleek shops and smug shopkeepers, and up to where Dappling Road curled around the hill to the monumental gates of the estate.

Grandmother has laid on champagne for the occasion, chilled in a monogrammed silver bucket. She raises her glass in a toast to the happy homecoming, and the happy homecomer responds. We make a pretty picture there in that elegant room, beaming at each other: she slim, erect, and proud, wearing her years with grace; I the golden youth, handsome, cultured, immensely rich, at play for a while before settling down to my responsibilities. This is who I am. I am not the man they call Tom Perkins, the crazy sweeper of a sleazy bar in a decayed simulacrum of my town. This — *this* is the real world, this world with the champagne and the Ferrari, not the shoddy horror where the Perkins creature lives, where I am standing now.

And the real world is so very close. If once, only once, Loob permits Sam to enter the room, Loob never existed, and the town's history followed the main, the real thoroughfare, and I am safely where I belong, and none of this vile scenario ever took place. I think I will not be aware of the transition — indeed, there will not be a transition: all this simply will not have been, and there will nowhere be the faintest memory or even dream of this grim place. I will be sipping my champagne in my grandmother's drawing room, and all will be as it always was.

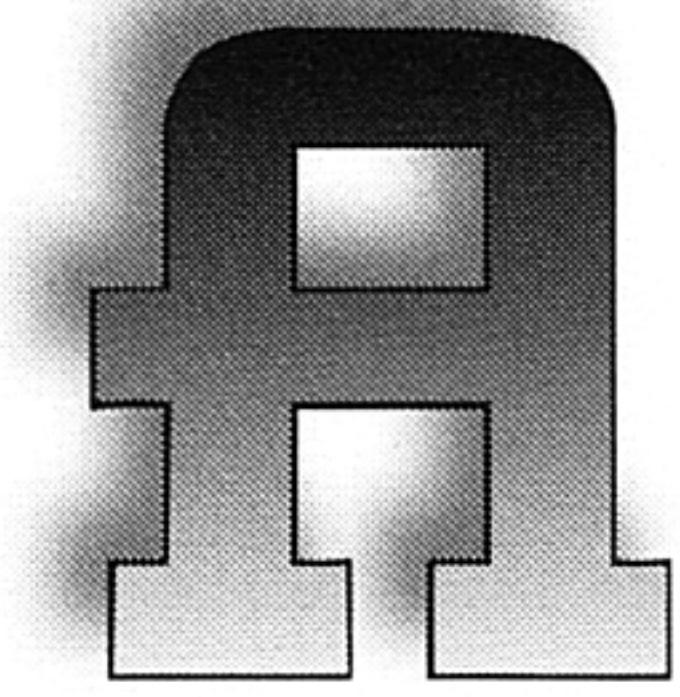
That is what I believe as I stand here among the cold weeds watching Loob in the window, as I wait for the instant that I am real again. And that is going to happen. I have no doubt that it will happen, none at all. None at all. Because I have positive proof that Loob can undo his interference with the past.

The proof is this: they are here, the Goster County dogs. They are here, gravely patrolling the streets of the town and the country round about, alert, watchful, and intimidating, as much a part of the landscape as the ridge above the town. *And they have always been here.* That is the point, that is the proof. Never since about the time of the Mexican War has the town been without these dogs. Think about that. It is quite obvious that a day came when there was a repetition of the circumstances surrounding the destruction of the old ancestor dog, with Loob in the same location when that same segment of the past unreeled itself. This time, though, Loob's vacant stare was directed elsewhere when the dog attacked. There was thus no instinctive reaction to the attacks; the dog lived on to beget his progeny. There is no fact in the universe more certain than the existence of these dogs. One of them is watching me now.

If Loob can do that, he can put right his other, greater, his infinitely tragic interference. And when he does, he and the wretched Tom Perkins will never have been. The world will be back on its true path, the path where there is love and comfort and safety.

It will.

UNLAWFUL POSSESSION



A very wicked woman lived in a village in New England; she was in fact a witch, and was more than three hundred years old. She had contrived, however, by supernatural means, to retain her youth in every respect save that of actual chronology, so that in appearance she remained as rosy and fresh and altogether appetizing as any centerfold to be found at the news-stand. But because she had lived in the town for more than seventy years, and had no wish to excite comment by her youthful appearance, she wore heavy veils on the rare occasions when she went out into the streets, and always walked with the gait of a very old woman.

The necessity for thus disguising her appearance was a great inconvenience to her, but it was an inescapable part of practicing witchcraft in a village. The big city, with its tradition of anonymity and tolerance, would have afforded her a better opportunity to conceal an irregular way of living than did this small agricultural community, but the Devil communicates with his earthly minions by techniques that were instituted in very ancient times, and these embody to this day certain requirements which are necessarily rural. There are, as a matter of fact, no true witches at all in the great cities. The practicing witches of these United States (and there are fewer of them than one might suppose) are to be found only in our small towns and — less frequently — on isolated farmsteads. You have no doubt sometimes seen buttoned-up, sinister-looking houses on decaying small-town streets, and wondered who lived there, and what might go on behind the locked shutters. Most of these houses, as it happens, shelter nothing more sinister than pitiable daft recluses; but one out of fifty or so is the lair of a witch.

The witch called herself Sally Wheeler. It was not her original name, of course, but only the latest in a series of names she had used over

the years as she moved from town to town making fresh beginnings. The time had now arrived for another move and another name. The necessity for disguise was becoming unacceptably burdensome, and it was plain that if some accident were to expose her real person, there could not fail to be a great deal of gossip, and perhaps even widespread publicity, since it was well known in the village that there was no possibility whatever that she could be less than eighty years old.

254 Much poring over the atlas and a considerable amount of correspondence with chambers of commerce brought her at last to a choice, and it remained only to make an inspection in person. She had chosen a town at a considerable remove from New England, a northern Appalachian community of static population and uneventful history called Sturkeyville. On a morning in June she arrived at the county airport, rented a car, and drove to the town. She parked on Main Street and walked briskly to the offices of Watkins Realty, Inc.

She was not in disguise. The veil and musty dress and senile gait had been left in the rest room of the bus station in Boston, and it was an energetic and uncommonly good-looking young woman who presented herself at the realtor's desk. "Mr. Watkins?" she said, "I'm Meg Hathorne." It was the name she had chosen for the next chapter of her life, and it was, as it happened, her true and original name. It seemed safe enough to use after three centuries, and she took some satisfaction in reverting to it, knowing that in the dusty archives of a certain Massachusetts town there were entries against the name that were very nasty indeed.

"Mrs. Hathorne," Watkins said. "Welcome to town. I have a house here that I think will suit you to a T. Seems like just what you want, from your letter." If it appeared to him that her wants were somewhat odd, he gave no indication of it, and indeed one might have supposed, from his manner, that rich young beauties in search of decayed mansions on the outskirts of town were an everyday occurrence in Sturkeyville. "We'll take my car," he said.

She did not like the house at all. It was too new, too small, too close to other houses, and did not have enough trees round about. She complained bitterly. "Is this all you've got, Mr. Watkins?" she said.

"Oh, I've got others," he said. "But I don't think they'll fill your bill as well as this one."

They drove about the purlieus of the town and looked at houses. None suited her. "I'm really disappointed, Mr. Watkins," she said. "I do very much like this town."

They were at that point driving down Donley Street, near the place where the street's name changed to County Road Seven. In the remote years when the town had been growing, its growth had been in other directions, so that the street was at this point already a country lane, leafy and peaceful and sparsely inhabited. A driveway flanked by huge old lilacs caught the witch's eye. "Is there a house back there?" she said.

"Oh, yes, there's a house," Watkins said. "Not for sale, though."

"Let's look at it, anyway."

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They drove up a neglected driveway that wound through a copse of old trees and emerged in front of a ruinous mansion, a dilapidated and weather-stained pile overgrown with dead vines.

The witch evinced total delight at the sight of it. "It's perfect," she said. "I'll take it."

"It's not for sale," Watkins said.

"Of course it is," she said. "Just look at it. They'll sell it. Who owns it?"

"The fact is," Watkins said, "the fact is that, uh, I do. I live here."

"Well," said the witch, "that's all right, then. How much do you want?"

"It's not for sale."

"What would you say to three hundred thousand dollars?"

She was, of course, very rich. To supplement the usual witch's hoard of gold, she had been making prudent investments for more than a century, more often than not with foreknowledge of the market, so that her private holdings were on the order of an oil sheikh's fortune. There was not a house in Sturkeyville that was worth three hundred thousand dollars, least of all this crumbling relic, a fact which she knew as well as she knew that Watkins knew it.

"I can't sell it," Watkins said, miserably. "I can't."

She looked at him. "Mr. Watkins," she said, "I like this house. I like its smell. I want it. I will have it. I'm afraid I'm going to have to use a little coercion. I really didn't want to start off this way. Still, you won't remember, will you?"

It is doubtful that Watkins heard her; he was a tortured man. She said, "Mr. Watkins, have you noticed my ring?" Watkins did not respond. "*Look at my ring, Mr. Watkins,*" she said. It was a gold ring with a green gem, worn on the middle finger of her right hand. Watkins looked at it. She said, "Now, Mr. Watkins, you are going to do as I tell you. Are you not?"

"Yes," Watkins said.

256 So it was that Meg Hathorne came to Sturkeyville. The town was puzzled, of course. They knew she was rich (word had leaked out about the price she had paid Watkins), and it was impossible to find a reason for a rich woman choosing to live in a house like that. Some people suggested that Fred Watkins was nothing less than a super-salesman, who had performed the extraordinary feat of unloading this notorious white elephant on a gullible outsider, but in time it became perfectly clear that Meg Hathorne was never anything but wholly satisfied with her house, and, in any case, most of the townsfolk had known Watkins too long to believe he could be capable of such a prodigy of persuasion. He was, and always had been, a commonplace colorless man, wholly ordinary and quite incapable of extraordinary accomplishments. He had, it was true, become somewhat odd after his wife ran away, but even his eccentricities were characterless and unobtrusive.

His wife, Edna, had been even mousier than he, a drab little mate for the drab little man, and the two of them lived mild timid lives in the rundown big house that was the last remnant of the days when the Watkins family had money. If Fred and Edna were not ecstatically happy, neither were they exceptionally miserable; they were, on the whole, in their drab, mild way, content.

But terrible things had begun to happen. These things were the consequence of nothing less than Edna's possession by a demon. There is no way of knowing how this tragedy came about, or why it was Edna who was chosen, or even exactly when it took place, since subsequent events demonstrated that she had been possessed for a considerable time before Watkins comprehended that she had become someone — or something — else.

He thought at first that she might be losing her mind. She had had an aunt who in mid-life took suddenly to undressing in public places and thereafter required confinement; there could have been something in the blood. He tried to watch her carefully, but most of his work was done in the evenings, and as often as not he did not return home until close to midnight. One night he came in

unexpectedly early and did not find her. He looked in all the rooms of the house, and then went down into the basement. Unidentifiable noises were coming from the cavernous unfinished area that comprised a considerable portion of the cellars, and he went to the low entrance behind the enormous old furnace and entered.

She was at the far end, busy at something, working in the white glare of a gasoline lantern. He knocked against a box, and she whirled and saw him. Instantly she snatched up the lantern and ran to him. By the time she reached him she was weeping hysterically and shrieking something about a rat. He took her up and put her to bed. She would not permit him to leave her, and in the end it was he who first fell asleep, without ever having it made clear exactly what she had been at.

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The next day she simply refused to talk about it. When Watkins made a diffident attempt to press the matter, she turned on him with intemperate rage and venom, displaying a startling fluency of invective. He crept off, astonished and cowed. It was as if a placid plump domestic rabbit had suddenly bared its teeth and begun to emit menacing bass growls.

He did not speak to her again about the incident, but made a serious effort to keep a close watch on her, striving diligently to be as devious and sly as possible. Such behavior was, of course, entirely foreign to his nature, and it may reasonably be supposed that she thought his clumsy subterfuges nothing more than a rather comical minor annoyance. In any case, he was given no opportunity to investigate the cellar room, because after that night she would never leave the house for any reason.

Or so Watkins thought. But one evening at dinner he decided he did not want his coffee, and rather than incur her wrath by leaving it in his cup, he found a chance to pour it into the pot of a rubber plant when her attention was engaged elsewhere. As a consequence he did not on that evening ingest the soporific drug with which she was accustomed to dosing him when she had night business to transact. He went to bed at his usual time, but did not fall asleep. When she entered and spoke to him, he did not answer, for no particular reason except that he did not feel like talking to her.

He heard her footsteps going down the stairs and then out of the house, and, in a little while, the sound of the car backing out of the garage and crunching down the driveway. He rose, dressed, lit the gasoline lantern, and descended to the basement. He went to the corner where the garden tools were kept, and selected a long-handled shovel. With the lantern in one hand and the shovel in the other, he

ducked under the furnace pipes and entered the unfinished room. He went directly to the place where she had been working that night, and examined the floor. She had indeed been digging there. He put down the lantern, took up the shovel, and began to dig. In no time at all he found the first body.

Poor Watkins was quite incapable of coping with such a discovery. The shovel sank into something squashily yielding, and came up dripping unspeakably. He stood frozen for a long moment, trying to comprehend what it was that lay on his shovel, and as he stood so, the stench struck him, a vile belch of corruption that was almost palpable in its intensity. His gorge rose abruptly and violently; at the same instant he realized what it was that he held on the shovel. He screamed and ran. He ran through the opening and slammed full-tilt into the pipes of the furnace. He rebounded, fell to the floor, and scrambled frantically on all fours into the center of the furnace room, to the place where the light was brightest, and crouched under the bright bare bulb, making piteous noises.

He groveled there for some time. By degrees his moaning and retching subsided. He knelt there, trembling, staring at the floor. After a time he rose, squared his shoulders, and re-entered the room.

It was either an act of the most extraordinary courage or of impaired reason. Consider: this ordinary, timid little man, who often turned pale at the sight of bloody scenes on a movie screen, picked up his shovel and returned to that terrifying cavern and began to dig. And kept on digging, despite what his shovel uncovered. He dug, there in that hideous stench, as if each of the horrors he exposed was a valuable treasure that whetted his appetite to find more. Many of the bodies were those of little children, and there is no doubt at all that before he had finished he was somewhat crazy. As he dug he screamed steadily, in a choked and muted voice.

Behind him a sudden harsh fierce voice said, "Leave them alone!" He spun around. It was Edna. Instantly, without conscious thought and without the slightest hesitation, he swung the shovel with all his strength. The edge took her just under her ear; the top half of her head was sheared off.

It was very messy, of course, but far less disquieting than the rest of the contents of the room, and in any case the wretched Watkins was — temporarily at least — far beyond further shock or fear or remorse. He quite calmly set about the work of hiding all traces of both Edna's awful leavings and his own timely act of extermination. He worked coolly and efficiently, a craftsman intent upon doing a

workman-like job. His face was dead and expressionless. Out of it stared eyes that were quite mad.

In a corner he dug a large deep hole. He gathered up all the ghastly offal he had exhumed, and threw it into the hole. He took both the large and small pieces of Edna and pitched them in atop her victims. He went into the furnace room and found the body of her last victim, which she had evidently been dragging in for burial when she saw Watkins's light or heard him at his digging. It was, mercifully, the body of an adult this time, a man in his forties, nastily mutilated. It took its place in the communal hole.

He went to the bedroom and gathered together some of her clothes and toiletries (he was capable of foresight in his cold lunacy) and shoved them into a suitcase. As he was leaving the room he saw a gold crucifix that she had sometimes worn, hanging from its chain over the mirror on her dressing table. He took it with him.

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The suitcase went into the hole after the bodies. He took up his shovel again and began to fill up the hole. When the fill was within a foot of the top, he remembered the crucifix. He tossed it in. When the filling was complete he brought garden tools and raked the floor of the room to a uniform smoothness. He piled upon the grave splintered wood and broken pottery from the general litter, returned the tools to their accustomed places, stripped off his clothes and bundled them for burning, took a long hot shower, and went to bed. Two days later, when he called on the chief of police, his behavior was very close to normal.

"She take anything with her? I mean, pack a bag or anything?" said the chief. His questioning had been perfunctory. His mind seemed to be on something else.

"Why — I don't know. I'll have to look," said cagey Watkins.

The chief heaved a sigh. "Fred," he said, "now Fred, what I'm going to tell you may come as a shock. But somebody's going to have to break the news to you, and it looks like I'm elected. Now Fred, it looks like Edna's run off with a man. Man named Tibbetts, salesman with Acme Manifold, out of Buffalo. Now that's what I think, Fred. You all right, Fred?"

Watkins was goggling mutely, trying to understand. At last he said, "What — ? Who — ?"

"I guess everybody knew it but you, Fred," the chief said. "Lots of talk. Quite a night-life lady. Down at Five Points in one bar or another, two, three nights a week lately. Different men. Last couple of times it was this Tibbetts. Yesterday morning Hazel Kleebs called in from

over at the Starlite Motel, said Tibbetts hadn't slept in his room for two nights. We did a little checking, found out him and Edna's been doing the joints. Fred, they've run off, that's what it looks like. I'm sorry, Fred. But I reckon it's for the best. Edna. Last person in the world. You never know, do you? Feeling better, Fred?"

Thus was Watkins delivered from the threat of prosecution and imprisonment; but — as he clearly saw when he reflected upon the matter — it was no more than a temporary deliverance. There remained, after all, a mass grave in the basement, and one of the murders had indubitably been committed by him. If the grave were discovered, the other atrocities would inevitably be attributed to him as well. He would then be tried and convicted as an inhuman monster, and probably executed. The more he pondered the situation, the more evident it became; there was nothing — *nothing* — as important as hiding the secret of the grave.

All his life Watkins had been the most ordinary of men, the commonest of the commonplace. Now the town began to notice that he was becoming odd, that he was on his way to becoming a notable eccentric. From the day of Edna's disappearance, no one but himself entered the house, and anyone venturing onto the grounds was driven off. He continued to work (if he failed to pay his taxes they would take the house), but the instant the day's work was done he was back at the house, watching. Watching.

He desperately feared burglars and vandals, malefactors who might break in and discover the secret. He wanted the house to be a stronghold, a fortress to hold such lurking predators at bay, but to make it so, to effect such improvements, would entail an incursion of workmen and suppliers, whose presence would be even more dangerous than that of the burglars because they would be tampering with the very fabric of the house. He felt, with every strand of his being, that the house must be untouched. No improvements. No repairs.

And the dilapidation continued, and at last a day came when he somehow found himself selling the house to Meg Hathorne.

The witch was as pleased with her acquisition as a young bride with her first home. She toured it from top to bottom, rejoicing in every one of the faults and defects that rendered it unsalable to an ordinary buyer. There was, in point of fact, no reason why she should have not dwelt in a comfortable new house with whatever shiny gadgetry she fancied; there were no special requirements in the covenant that specified particulars about a witch's habitation.

But among the Devil's servants life follows art as surely as it does among ordinary beings, and the witch's conception of a fitting mode of life had been shaped by all the countless tales about her kind, just as our policemen have come to model their speech and manner after television policemen, and real cowboys ape those in the movies. She would have been uneasy without the conventional trappings, without cobwebs and shadowy corners and strange sounds in the night.

At the front of the house she maintained two rooms for receiving the occasional unavoidable visitor; these rooms were clean, well-lit, and elegantly furnished. The rest of the house, where she lived, was kept more to her liking: a creaking dark warren of webby passages and noisome chambers where the only light came from a carried candle or — in the room that served her as workroom — a single oil lamp that stood on a littered table and shed its drop of yellow light on tattered ancient books, scraps of parchment, crumbs of food, drying bits of viscera of small animals, and scurrying insects. It was in this room that she spent most of her time, sitting and scheming.

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Her devotion to tradition did not extend to her dress, and — had there been anyone to observe — she would have seemed an incongruous figure in her snug jeans and blouse as she sat there in the fetid gloom. She sat in shadow, visible but dim, sitting in perfect immobility. At her feet lay a creature that looked exactly like a cat.

On the far side of the room something pale manifested itself in the darkness, an amorphous area of faint luminosity that seemed to emanate from the wall. The witch watched with interest. The luminosity eddied, darkened along the streams of the eddies, and began gradually to take on a certain tenuous solidity and shape. In due course it resolved itself into the insubstantial and intermittently transparent figure of a woman. As the upper portion coalesced into vague visibility it became apparent that the top half of the head was missing.

"Well!" Meg Hathorne said. "Well, well. A ghost. A ghost, no less. And who might you be?"

There was a pause. Then a voice came, a hoarse, hollow, slow voice, deep but attenuated and substanceless, as of a great bellow conveyed across an enormous distance by faulty equipment. "Edna — Watkins," the voice said. "I — am — Edna — Watkins. Find — my — body. Give — me — proper — burial."

Meg Hathorne stared for a moment, and then burst out laughing. "Oh, come off it," she said. "You're not talking to a civilian now. What's your name, and how did you get trapped like this?"

When the voice came again it was considerably quicker and clearer. “If you know that much, you know I’m not going to tell you my name. Who are you?”

“Oh, I work for the same firm you do,” she said. “I’m in good standing, too, which I imagine is more than you can say. It looks to me as if you’re in real trouble, my friend. It’s a pretty stupid move, you know, getting trapped in a body when it dies. Interesting, though. I never saw a ghost before. Never expected to see one, to tell the truth. I thought you fellows had smartened up and learned how to avoid that kind of thing. What happened?”

“The usual,” the ghost said. “I was caught by surprise. Who’d have expected that little mouse of a man to be so quick with his shovel? I’d crept up behind him and said something I thought might frighten him into a heart attack, and *zip* — there I was in a dead body. What do you want?”

The question meant, “What payment will persuade you to help me?” There was, of course, no possibility that she would lend any aid for reasons of goodwill or shared interests or even to curry favor with their master. In the universe of these creatures an act of disinterested charity was the equivalent of mortal sin in a human context. She said, “Why, nothing that I can think of. Maybe I’ll just keep you around for company. I don’t have much opportunity for conversation about business matters. Can you make interesting conversation?”

“Conversation?” the ghost said. “Yes, we can have conversation. But there is something you will have to do first. The man threw a . . . token into the grave. It is a very strong restraint. Even the effort of coming this far, of holding a form and talking to you here, causes me awful pain. If you will just remove that thing, we will be able to talk all you like.”

The witch grinned. “We’ll have to think about that, won’t we? I know what you’re up to. Right now you’re pretty closely confined to these premises, but if I take away the restraint — what is it, a cross? — it won’t be as painful for you to wander farther afield, and sooner or later you might find someone who’s not too scared to listen to you and get the message about where the body’s buried. And when they rebury it, you’ll be free. Is that about right?”

“Of course,” the ghost said. “That’s always been the way. But you know as well as I do that it almost always takes a long time. Centuries or millennia. But you can hasten things for me. Just tell the authorities you found a body under your house. The rest will be routine. What do you want in exchange?”

"I said I'd have to think about it. Go back, now. Get out!" the witch said. The ghost disappeared.

For some time she sat motionless. Then she rose and viciously kicked the creature that lay at her feet. It squalled in perfect imitation of a hurt and startled cat.

"Oh, shut up!" the witch said. "I need to talk to Ashkob. Can you get him?"

"That hurt," the creature said. "It hurt quite a lot. You know I'm keeping a list, don't you? Someday...Yes. I'll see if I can reach him."

It became as still as a china cat on a mantel. After a time it said, "What is it now, Meg? I've got more important things to do than wipe your nose for you, you know." It was speaking in a different voice, a voice not unlike the one the ghost had first used.

The witch went white with rage at the words. "You like taking chances, don't you, Ashkob?" she said in a furious cold voice. "I advise you to be careful about what you say. Any more disrespect and I'll call you up here in person and hurt you a little. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, mistress." The voice had taken on a grudgingly servile intonation.

"All right," she said. "Now listen to me. There is a colleague of yours here, bound as a ghost in this house. I want you to get me his name."

From the cat-creature's mouth came a coarse, loud laugh. "Somebody got himself trapped, did he? Haw, haw, haw. And now he's a lousy ghost. Worst existence there is. Awful. Not to speak of what'll happen to him when the chief gets hold of him again. Haw, haw, haw."

The witch grinned in spite of herself. The suffering of others was to these creatures the deepest and most satisfying of pleasures, and indeed the creation of such suffering was their profession. Their pleasure was in no way diminished by the fact that the trapped demon was one of their own. The demon Ashkob in fact found extra satisfaction in the circumstance.

Ashkob was a very minor functionary in the underworld; his occupation, that of servant and slave to mortals who had made a pact with his master, placed him very near the bottom of Hell's caste system. It is in such an entity that the demoniac characteristic of envy reaches its fullest flower; with almost the entire working population

of Hell in position above him, he had an almost infinite number of beings to envy. Demons whose work is the possession of human beings are of a considerably higher social rank than Ashkob and his kind, and Ashkob was deeply grateful for the discomfiture of this one. "Hang on, Meg," he said. "I'll be back. Haw, haw, haw."

Time is a concept that does not apply in Hell's plane of reality, and although to Meg Hathorne no more than thirty seconds elapsed before Ashkob spoke again, he had in fact spent the equivalent of forty years in research to obtain the information she wanted, and the trace of good humor caused by the other demon's discomfiture had long since disappeared. "The name's Gnulcibber," he said, "and you'd better watch out how you use it. It's not the kind of information you're supposed to have. You overstep yourself just once and we'll have you down here in a flash." Apparently the idea cheered him a little. "And now that you've got it, what are you going to do with it? That kind is pretty tough, you know. Not like me. One slip and he'll have you." He seemed to find the thought pleasant. "Gobble you up," he said. "Haw, haw, haw."

"I know what I'm doing," the witch said. "That'll be all for you, for the time being. I'll call you if I need you."

The cat-creature relaxed suddenly, and began to wash its face in a very natural manner. Meg Hathorne took up one of the books on the table, searched for and found the pages she required, and began to read aloud in a harsh, clangorous, guttural language. The words, in translation, were: "I call thee by name, *Gnulcibber*; I adjure and command thee to appear now before me in docile mien and behavior, *Gnulcibber*, and to obey me in all things, or suffer the punishment thou knowest I can lay upon thee. Come now, *Gnulcibber*!"

Against the wall, in the spot where it had first appeared, the ghost began to take shape. Meg Hathorne said, "You don't have to do that. Show yourself."

"You are an ignorant woman," the ghost said. "It is a great misfortune that you should have this power over me. I cannot abandon this ghost-form until I am released permanently, unless a much greater power than you commands it. It is a thing you might have been thought to know, since you have this dominance. How did you learn my name?"

"Never mind about that," Meg Hathorne said. "Now listen to me. I am going to command your services for as long as I live in this house, and I would rather not have to concern myself about attention being attracted to the house or to me. I propose an agreement. If you will

covenant not to try to expose the location of the grave for as long as I am in occupancy, I will see to it that you are released when I move on. But understand me, Gnulcibber: if I have any problems with you, I'll fix that grave so it will *never* be found. Now. Do you accept?"

"I don't have much choice, do I?" Gnulcibber said.

"All right," said Meg Hathorne. "Now the first thing I want you to do is to put the fear around the house. Not strong enough to excite any comment, just enough to keep people off the grounds. I don't want any thieves breaking in or bums sleeping under the porch or kids peeking through windows. Just lay it on strong enough so anybody uninvited will think about changing his mind by the time he reaches the boundary."

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"It's done," Gnulcibber said.

There was a sudden susurrations audible through the house, the rustle of a host of tiny feet, a multitude of faint squeals and chitters and buzzings. The fear had struck into the dark and secret places within the walls and floors, and out of them, deserting the house in incontinent flight, came all the little decent vermin who dwelt there, the timid gentle mice and small harmless serpents and cleanly insects. There were others who did not flee because they did not feel the fear, who went about their business as usual: the rats and carrion insects, the spiders and venomous reptiles. These were altogether at home in the house of a witch, and what had terrified the others was comforting to them.

Fred Watkins was not comforted. He was gripped by the fear, twisted and wrung by it, reduced to a lump of pure terror. He was, of course, very close to the center, the source. He was squatting at the base of an old blue spruce tree whose lowest branches, those that grew close to the ground, had been trimmed off long ago, so that the branching now began at a height of four feet or so. The branches that grew at that level were long and drooping, and their extremities brushed the ground, so that around the trunk a low, circular cavern was formed. Anyone hiding there was undetectable even in daylight, and Watkins in his boyhood had spent a considerable part of each summer under the tree, in peaceful retreat from the real world.

Now it was his nighttime observation post. Watching the house had become the center of his life, an obsession that excluded almost every other concern. He had gradually come to a conviction that it was an absolute necessity that he know instantly when the bodies were discovered. Then he would make his escape. He supposed. He had not, in fact, formed any plans. The effort seemed somehow

excessive. It was simpler to have a drink and postpone the planning until another day. And it was, after all, about as much as could be expected of any man, this responsibility for keeping a house under round-the-clock observation (except for a few grudging hours of sleep) while at the same time suffering all the terrors of discovery and disgrace. Who could be blamed for having recourse to the bottle under the circumstances?

Alcohol had come late to Watkins's life, but it came at an opportune time, and he found it to be a welcome friend. He had money now, and no need or desire to work, and he had an obsession grounded in a deep and abiding fear. He was pleased with his discovery that doses of bourbon whiskey dulled and blurred his awareness of the calamity that lay in wait, and he dosed freely. It was, consequently, a partially anesthetized and comparatively reasonable man who crouched under the blue spruce tree and kept fanatical watch that night.

Until the fear struck; then there was no anesthesia, no barrier. There was only abject, sniveling, paralyzing terror. He sucked greedily at the bottle, swallowing until his stomach rebelled. He grimly fought down the nausea and drank again. The whiskey would help. It had to help.

In the house the witch said to the ghost, "All right, back to your hole. I'll call you when I need you."

"I must tell you," the ghost said, "that there is a —"

"Silence!" the witch shouted. "You will speak when you are spoken to, and not before. Go!"

"On you be it, then," the ghost said. "I have spoken." It disappeared.

It did not, however, return to the grave; instead, it manifested itself near Watkins's tree. At the same time, in a small area around the tree, it nullified the pall of fear.

The awful terror was lifted suddenly from Watkins, and the excessive helping of whiskey he had just taken made itself felt, so that he was able to look with a measure of calmness at the thing before him, realizing, even as he did so, that it would ineluctably return to him in nightmares. It was Edna, that was certain. Edna standing mute and pale in the moonlight, Edna with no top to her head, standing — *standing* — with no top to her . . . no top . . . It was too much, even with the whiskey. He opened his mouth to scream.

The jaw of the thing moved. It said, authoritatively, "Remain silent, Watkins."

He choked back the scream. He shook his head violently. After several false starts he said, in a voice that was theatrically calm, "But you're dead, Edna."

"Of course I am," the ghost said. "I'm a ghost."

"Yes, of course," Watkins said. "You're a ghost. That's what you are. A ghost. You're —"

"Stop jabbering," the ghost said. Its jaw moved, but with a sort of mechanical regularity, the movement in no way synchronized with the words it spoke. Watkins clapped his hand over his mouth. It was the only way the babbling could be stopped. And unless it were stopped, it would very quickly degenerate into mindless howling. No question about that.

"Now listen, Watkins," the ghost said. "I'm going to tell you how to get your house back, so you can watch it and make sure the grave isn't discovered. That's what you want, isn't it?"

"Oh, yes," Watkins said. "Oh, yes. Yes."

"All right," the ghost said. "Listen hard. Understand me. Tomorrow night she'll be in a trance all night, talking with other witches. We'll have plenty of time to talk, and we won't have to fear that she'll hear us. Come after sundown. Bring some paper to write on, and a light of some kind. She'll not see it. Do you understand me? Writing material and a light. And no drink. Have you grasped this?"

"Yes, ghost," Watkins said. He lied. But he did remember it all the next day, and he thought about it, and was unable to decide whether it had been real or a hallucination. "You can have your house back," the ghost had said. If it had been real — if he had in fact seen Edna's ghost, and it had said the things he remembered — then there was really no choice. He had to try it.

And so the next evening, not long after sunset, he was back under the tree, with a pad of paper and a ballpoint and a camper's flashlight in a canvas carryall. The bottle was there, too, but unopened. The fear still lay over the premises, and it had been an act of real courage for him to force his way through it to the haven under the tree. There the ghost had thoughtfully allowed the nullification to remain in effect, and Watkins was in dread only to the degree that may be considered natural in a man who believes that he will probably very soon be confronted by a truly horrible apparition.

He was quite right; the ghost manifested itself almost immediately. It spoke in its grating monotone: "Write this down, Watkins. It is a recipe for a love charm."

"A love charm?"

"You will prepare it and anoint yourself with it. It will give you a certain power over the witch."

"Oh, no," Watkins said. "No, sir. No way. You think I'm going to mess around with *her*?"

"Hear me, Watkins. This is what you will do. You will anoint yourself and go openly to her. Her body is young, and your aneling will affect her strongly. She will not, you must understand, lose control of herself, and she will remain very dangerous to you. But she will be off guard, especially since she believes you to be totally harmless. Hit her on the head with a club. Once she is unconscious I will give you further instructions. I will be there."

"Hit — I can't do that. Hit somebody over the head with a club. No."

"You can and you will, if you want your house back," the ghost said. "Now write."

He wrote. He did want his house back. The voice grated on and on, dictating a long list of loathsome ingredients and minutely describing a complex and repulsive method of preparation. At last the ghost said, "All right, Watkins. That is all of it. Prepare it."

Watkins crept from his den and returned home and read what he had written. It was an enormously disgusting business. He concluded that he had to try it.

Thus an evening came when Watkins, neatly dressed, cold-sober, and stinking abominably of the grease he had prepared and smeared upon himself, presented himself at the front door of the house and rang the bell. He waited for a few minutes, and, when the door did not open, turned away with a feeling of great relief. She wasn't at home. He'd have to come back another day.

Behind him the door opened. "Why, it's Mr. Watkins," Meg Hathorne said. "What do you want, Mr. Watkins?" Her voice was not friendly.

Watkins whirled to face her. "I—need—to—talk—to—you," he said.

"Indeed," she said. "What about, I wonder. Well, come in, Mr. Watkins."

Watkins entered. As she closed the door she caught a whiff of his unguent. An expression of interest came into her face. She said, "Now, Mr. Watkins, what do you want?" Her voice had softened considerably.

"I—have—something—to—show—you," said Watkins, reeling off another memorized line.

"Why don't you come back to my study?" she said. "We can talk better there." She led Watkins along the filthy corridor, brushing aside cobwebs in grotesque mimicry of a fussy housewife. As she entered the doorway of her den, Watkins struck.

His club was an eighteen-inch length of baseball bat, and his arm was strengthened by sheer terror; the club met her head with a decisive crunch. She fell instantly, seeming to collapse vertically upon herself, like a dropped empty sack. Watkins stood with the club in his hand, not moving, totally incapable of even attempting to think what his next step should be, and suddenly the ghost, in all its transcendent nastiness, was there beside him.

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"Good, Watkins, good!" it said. "Drag her in here. Lay her out. Put the crucifix on her chest. Quickly, now."

"Crucifix?" Watkins could manage no more than a whisper. "What crucifix?"

"The one I told you to bring."

"You didn't tell me to bring a crucifix."

"You slime, of course I told you to — you are right. I did not. I have already too long been a ghost. I no longer think properly. But we must have a crucifix. The one in the grave. You must get it. Quickly!"

There remained in Watkins no capacity for protest or remonstrance; he obediently hurried through the once-familiar house to the basement and took up the shovel. He dug and probed and groped until his hand encountered the cross. He pulled it out and ascended the stairs and returned to the witch's den.

She lay as she had fallen, a slack, loose heap. Watkins said, "Is she dead?"

"Oh, no," said the ghost. "No. You can be sure you will know it when she is dead. You have been a very long time getting that thing. Luckily you struck hard. Now drag her in. Good. Stretch her out on her back. Lay the crucifix on her."

Watkins did so. The cat-creature was watching with interest.

As the crucifix touched her, the witch's body gave a convulsive twitch, and then lay as motionless as before, but now with a cadaverous rigidity. There was an expectant silence in the room. And then there was a Presence.

A glistening black wall, extending from floor to ceiling and from side wall to side wall, appeared at the end of the room. It

shimmered with an indefinable internal movement. Whiteness appeared suddenly at the corners where it met the ceiling and floor, and the whiteness expanded rapidly until what had been the black wall could be seen as a swiftly contracting circle of blackness, with white all around. Then the whiteness, too, was a circle, and at the top of the white circle a monstrous eyelid shrank into recognizability. The vast pitiless eye filled the entire end of the room, and then no longer filled it because it was shrinking with enormous speed and there were two eyes, and then a face that Watkins could never afterward remember, although neither was he ever able to forget the dread that he felt. There was a whole head in a moment, and a neck and shoulders, and as the figure shrank it flowed and altered, changing in shape and color, discarding indescribable appendages and acquiring scaly excretions that writhed and shifted and became a semblance of clothing, so that by the time it had shrunk to the size of a man, it looked like a man.

A very ordinary man, at that, a grayish man in grayish clothing, who spoke in a grayish voice: "Now, what's the problem here?"

The ghost said, "Your Excellency. I appeal to you. The witch is spoiled, as you can see. Take her, and release me."

The gray man said, "Well, well. So it's you, Gnulcibber. You've let yourself in for a bit of trouble this time, haven't you? And who's this?"

The cat-creature said, "Sir, it's a common mortal. An innocent bystander, as it were. Watkins. Could be of use to you."

The gray man looked at Watkins. "Perhaps so," he said. "We'll see. First I'd better take care of Meg here. Wake up, Meg."

The witch's eyes opened. There was instant comprehension in them. She said, "*You*, Watkins. Don't gloat yet. I'll be seeing you sooner than you think."

"Now, now," the gray man said. "No recriminations. You've had as long as most, Meg, and the time has come to pay the piper. Come along, now."

The witch's clothing was suddenly empty, although it retained her contours for a moment before collapsing. Out of it flashed a swift small black thing, no larger than a mosquito, that emitted a tiny, thin, high wail. The gray man's hand darted out, and his thumb and forefinger plucked the thing from the air and stowed it in what appeared to be a vest pocket. "So much for her," the gray man said. "Now you, Gnulcibber."

“My punishment should not be too harsh, Excellency,” the ghost said. “It is true that I was careless. But I was not the first that it has happened to, nor will I be the last. It is a hazard of the profession.”

A shaft of fire jetted from the gray man’s hand, bathing the ghost in flames. It screamed.

“Don’t play the fool with *me*, Gnulcibber,” the gray man said. “Your chief offense wasn’t getting trapped, as you well know. It was ruining a good tool. Witches aren’t easily come by these days. Do you think I don’t know how you used the mortal there to destroy the witch? You’ll have to pay for that. You’ll pay very dearly. And at the same time, I think I can put you to some use.” He turned to Watkins. “Tell me, Mr. Watkins, what is it that you want in this world?”

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Watkins made several false starts before his voice responded. He said at last, “Are you — ? Are you — ?”

“Oh, no,” the gray man said. “Far from it. I am an assistant to an assistant of his, I suppose you would call it. Not without authority, however. Considerable authority, as a matter of fact. Enough to settle this matter without consulting elsewhere. I ask you again, Watkins: What is it that you want?”

The voice was oily and soothing, and Watkins was sufficiently calmed by its emolient softness to begin to think again, albeit in a somewhat fitful and disorganized way. “No deals,” he said. “No deals with you. I’ve heard about — I know about — ”

“Oh, come now, Watkins,” the gray man said. “I am not suggesting a contract. After what you have just witnessed, I am sure it would be quite useless to do that. No, what I propose is an uncomplicated short-term agreement. You do something for me, and I will do something for you, and that will be the end of it. Simple barter of services.”

“Well — what is it you want me to do?”

“Nothing of much consequence, really, for you, although it will be a ponderable service to me, for which I propose to be more than generous in my return to you. Therefore, Watkins, you should carefully consider what your real heart’s desire may be. What is it really that you want most? Permit your mind to wander freely. I assure you, I have considerable latitude in the favors I can grant.”

Watkins was making a valiant effort to think clearly, but with no marked success. “I don’t — there’s nothing I want, really. I’d just like not to worry, not to feel so scared all the time. I’d like things to be the way they used to be. There’s nothing you could give me.”

“What is it that worries you, that frightens you, Watkins?”

“That’s none of your — ” He remembered whom he was talking to. “The house,” he said. “Somebody else in the house. Somebody finding — finding — ”

“There’s nothing to worry about,” the gray man said. “The house is yours. You can move right back in. Look here.”

He plucked something from the air and handed it to Watkins. “A deed to the house,” he said, “all properly signed and notarized. A forgery, of course, but I promise you that under the circumstances no one will ever know. And something comes with it. She buried her hoard in the basement. There is no way I can give you access to her bank accounts and securities without arousing more interest than you would find comfortable, but there is gold and currency down there to the amount of, say, a million and a half. It will be adequate.”

Watkins had not really heard the last sentences; he was trying to grasp the first, to bring himself to believe that the long nightmare might be ending, that his life might go back again to what it had been before Meg Hathorne took his house. He did not allow his hopes to go beyond that. He said, “It’s mine again? I can live here again? And watch out for it?”

“Oh, yes indeed. You are quite welcome to go back to your hermit’s life here, if that is what you want. It will in fact fit in very well with the service I propose to ask of you. You see, Watkins, what I need is someone to act as master to Gnulcibber here. I have just sentenced him to a few centuries as a ghost, to soften him up for the real punishment that will follow. And while just being a ghost is itself a wretched and painful existence, it can become truly awful if there’s someone about to keep the ghost hopping, to keep him from ever taking his ease in the grave. So, Watkins, you will get your house back, but you will have to take the ghost with it. What do you say?”

Take the ghost with it. Watkins looked at the wraith with revulsion. It seemed, as it stood before the gray man, to be as solid and substantial as Watkins himself, an erect body with no top to its head and its arms hanging limp at its sides. It was clad in a torn, muddy dress that hung askew on its body and hose that flopped loose about its ankles. One foot was shod, the other not. The shod foot twisted at an unnatural angle. When it was motionless, it was simply the simulacrum of a corpse, nothing more; a gruesome and disgusting sight, but bearable. But when it moved, when it spoke, then it was truly horrible; its muddy limbs erratic and stiff, like ineptly operated

machinery; its voice an inhuman harsh croak; its jaw chomping mechanically, like a ventriloquist's dummy. And inside it, Watkins knew, was something immeasurably evil and malign, a thing coldly venomous and bloated with hate and beslimed with unspeakable filth. He said, "No. No. I can't do it. I couldn't — there's no way I could live with that thing in the house."

"It *is* pretty nasty," the gray man said. "It's mostly a matter of appearance, though. Consider me. Now that you have somewhat recovered from your initial panic, do you find my presence disquieting?"

Watkins discovered that he did not; or, at any rate, not to the point of panic. He said, "No, I guess not."

"No. And yet, I assure you, Watkins, that what I really am is, in every single particular, so much worse than this poor clown of a ghost that there is hardly a basis for comparison. Beside me he is a cherub, a lovable puppy dog. I know that you have sensed in this Gnulcibber certain attitudes and capabilities that terrorize you, but you are able to sense them only because he cannot dissemble as well as I. As he terrorizes you, Watkins, so do I terrorize him. And yet you are — up to a point — comfortable with me. To you, I look and behave like an ordinary man; I converse with you reasonably, I emanate no reek of wickedness. And so shall it be with our friend, Gnulcibber. Watch."

He waved his hand. "There, Watkins," he said. "Do you think you could live with *that* in the house?"

Instead of Edna's disfigured corpse, a young woman was standing there, a ripe beauty of classical proportions and aphrodisiac skin tones, who wore nothing but a small smile of tender invitation. She extended her arms toward Watkins.

He tried frantically to order his thoughts. "It — that thing is still Gnulcibber, whatever it looks like. I tell you, it scares me."

"To be sure," the gray man said, "but that is easily taken care of. Watch and listen, Watkins." He spoke to the ghost: "This is your master, for as long as the present phase of your punishment lasts. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Excellency," the ghost said. The voice was soft, pleasant, and seductive.

The gray man continued: "His power over you is absolute. If you displease him in any way, he has only to say a word to punish you most horribly. You can do nothing to harm him, or even to cause

him discomfort or inconvenience. You are incapable of plotting or trickery against him. You will keep your real self buried so deeply that no trace or sense of you will be evident to Watkins or any other mortal with whom you may come in contact. You will retain sufficient power to be of aid and assistance to Watkins, but no more power than that. You may not return to the body in the grave for rest and relief. You will travel as far from these premises as Watkins commands you, and you are forbidden to voice any complaint about the sufferings it will cause you. All these commands I lay upon you. Am I understood?"

"Yes, Excellency," the soft voice said.

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"All right, Watkins," said the gray man, "let's see how you like your new servant. Go ahead. Touch her. That's real flesh, there, not ghost-stuff. What you've got here is real woman, except that there's no soul inside. What's inside is Gnulcibber, but I promise you you'll forget about that in a week or two. Go ahead. Grab a handful."

Watkins touched her, somewhat gingerly, on the upper arm: soft, firm female flesh. She smiled at him, meltingly. He stared at her for a moment, and then turned back to the gray man. "No," he said, "I don't think this is what I want. I guess what I really want is Edna back and the old life without any excitement. Could you — that is, could you —?"

The gray man shook his head. "I'm afraid not. Edna is dead, Watkins, and there is nothing I can do about that. Edna has escaped us entirely. But if she is what you want, you can have a perfect substitute. Look!"

And, instead of the houri, Edna was there: mousy, dowdy, and dear, her face wearing its accustomed apologetic half-smile.

"Edna," Watkins said. "Oh, Edna."

"Fred," she said. "Oh, it's good to be back."

The gray man said, "Now, Watkins. Do we have a bargain?"

The word "bargain" alerted Watkins, and alarmed him. "Bargain?" he said. "Tell me again. What will our bargain be?"

"As I said, a simple exchange of services. I give you your house and this substitute Edna, and an absolute assurance that the secret in the basement will remain a secret for as long as that is your desire. In exchange you will keep the substitute Edna with you and about you busy at household and other tasks. I suggest that you travel, even go abroad. That will provide excellent — oh, excellent — punishment for Gnulcibber. I suppose you will not in the event do that; I realize

that you are somewhat insane in matters relating to this house, and you will probably not be able to bring yourself to leave it for very long. But that will be all right. Simply being Edna for twenty-four hours a day will inflict most grievous punishment upon this oaf."

Watkins said, "But my — well, my soul. I won't bargain that. I'm not making a deal on that. That's final."

"Oh, there's nothing like that involved," the gray man said. "The fact is, it requires a rather elaborate ceremony to effect that sort of contract. What we have here is just a temporary ad hoc matter. We can, of course, arrange an extension, if at some future date you conclude that the various benefits and pleasures you will enjoy under this arrangement should be continued beyond your normal span of years. At that time, if you reached such a conclusion, there must, of course, be a renegotiation, and quite obviously there will be weightier matters under consideration than we have bargained for today. At that time we can discuss the matter of your soul."

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"That time will never come," Watkins said.

"Of course not," the gray man said.

You have no doubt sometimes seen buttoned-up sinister-looking houses on decaying small-town streets, and wondered who lived there, and what might go on behind the locked shutters. Most of these houses, as it happens, shelter nothing more sinister than pitiable daft recluses; but one out of fifty or so is the lair of a witch. In Sturkeyville, on Donley Street, there is such a house. It is difficult to say which of the classifications applies to its owner. Fred Watkins is certainly reclusive enough, and eccentric to a marked degree, and he is probably just what he seems to be, an odd old man who dislikes the society of people. His house has become truly ruinous, but he remains adamant in his refusal to undertake that slightest maintenance of it, despite the fact that he is, as everyone in town knows, very rich.

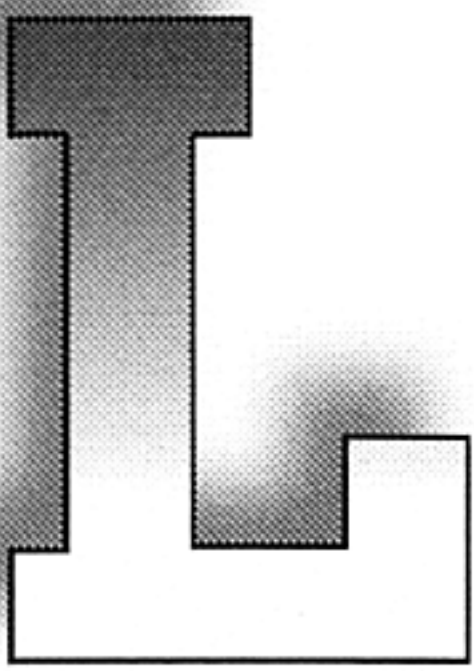
He is also very old, although no one is sure just how old. His contemporaries are all dead now, and there are some unaccountable hiatuses in the vital statistics books in the courthouse. He is unusually well preserved for a man of his years, and this is sometimes commented upon by the few citizens who occasionally catch sight of him.

His wife is seen even less often than he is, but she also is reported to carry her years well. A vague story is sometimes brought up when the Watkinses are discussed, something half-remembered

from conversations of the parents of the parties to the discussion, about how Mrs. Watkins had been a wild one when she was young, and once ran off with a traveling salesman, but he abandoned her or something, and she came home to Watkins.

They are, in any case, quiet, unobtrusive people, and important tax-payers (Watkins, over the years, bought up all the land within a half-mile of his house), and no one would dream of disturbing them, least of all the city fathers. They are peculiar old folks, but they live their peculiar lives very quietly, disturbing no one and making every effort to ensure that no one disturbs them. They are said to be very fond of their cat.

COME WHERE MY LOVE LIES DREAMING



listen.

The House is speaking.

It speaks softly, just below the level of intelligibility, a whisper that might almost be nothing more than a draft of wind blowing through the tall rooms. It speaks invitingly, seductively, lovingly; it says, Come to me, let me protect you. Oh, come, it says. I love you.

But there is no one to hear it. It has been uninhabited for more than fifty years, and it stands alone on a hilltop, miles from any other house. A wall surrounds the property. It is true that the gate is a rusted ruin and stands open, so that anyone passing on the county road might turn in and follow the lane through the trees to the house, but no one ever does. The house stands empty. It stands empty and calls softly for someone to love, and no one comes. Sometimes the drafts of wind make a noise almost like weeping.

There are houses that hate and houses that love. They are old houses, mostly, built in the days of dedicated craftsmen for men who hoped to found dynasties and therefore decreed houses that would give appropriate shelter to the princelings who would follow. Sometimes as these houses were rising, when the circumstances were right, when the workmen were all superior craftsmen and the materials were all of the very best, and when someone — the architect, perhaps, or the owner — had conveyed something of his vision to the workmen, then, very occasionally, these men would find themselves working together with such smooth precision that they seemed more a single creature than a crew, and the obdurate stone and wood and metal with which they worked somehow became docile and amenable to the tools that shaped them, and the house would grow to completion like an organic thing, leaving all these people well satisfied and pleased with themselves. Such a house sometimes has a soul.

This soul is a *tabula rasa*, or perhaps an empty vessel; the people who live in the house will write upon the tablet or fill the vessel, and so will determine what the soul of the house will become. If anger and hate and malignity are the emotions that fill the house, if the thoughts of the inhabitants are malicious and turned to crafty plotting, if the sounds to be heard are blows and shrieks and the sobbing of despair, then this evil will drench the house and soak into its very fabric and substance; its soul will harden and shrivel and become malign. Such a house is a house that hates.

278 But this house is otherwise; this house was once filled with the glee of little children and the heat of young love and the warmth of affectionate domesticity. The sound it had heard most often was laughter, and the dominant emotion in its shaping was love. Its soul had bloomed in that warmth. This is a house that loves.

Loves, but has no person to love; for more than fifty years has had no person to love. In 1942 Ensign Peter Colby went off to war, and his wife Priscilla closed the house for the duration and found an apartment in Norfolk to make a home for him to come to when his ship was in port. When the little ship went down in the North Atlantic she did not return to her house, but neither could she bring herself to sell it. It was to her an enchanted place where she had known three years of unalloyed happiness with her young husband; the memories were too fresh. The house's contents were sold at auction under her instructions but in her absence, and the house was locked up. She never returned.

When she died, the nephew who was her residuary legatee lost no time in offering the house for sale. It did not move quickly. It was a costly property, twenty miles from town, and the house itself was in need of extensive internal refurbishing after the long neglect. The purchaser would have to be someone with plenty of money and a taste for isolation, and such people were few and far between in that end of the state. The nephew listed it with a real estate firm that handled high-priced property on a national scale, and when their advertisements in glossy magazines drew nibbles, they retained Fred Watkins, a local realtor, to show the property.

"There she is," Watkins said. He and the customer were standing at the bottom of a shaggy slope that had once been a lawn, looking up at the house.

"Seems to be in pretty good shape," the customer said. He was a lean man in his early thirties, wearing a tweed jacket and cavalry twills.

"Oh, it's been kept up, Mr. Knapp," Watkins said. "Mrs. Colby saw to that. She didn't want to live here, but she loved the house. I think maybe she always thought she might come back here to live sometime."

"Is that a stable?" Knapp said.

"It was when it was built. Old Joe Potter converted it to a garage sometime in the twenties. Room for eight cars in there."

"I'd want to reconvert. I have horses."

"How about family, Mr. Knapp?"

"A daughter. Katy. She's eight. My — I'm a widower. My mother-in-law lives with us. We have a cook and a stable man, husband and wife. That's it."

"You can't see it from here," Watkins said, "but there's a small house back there for the help. You want to go into the house, now?"

"Yes, I think so. Then check the little house and the stable. The grounds could use some work."

"My goodness, yes. But it's a very handsome house, wouldn't you say?"

It was a large house of the school of Wren, solidly built of gray sandstone. The structure was balanced and symmetrical and indeed elegant, but it had also an air of gravity and decorum, something *bürgerlich* and almost smug. To Webster Knapp it seemed to make a statement: I am a fine house; I was a credit to that decent and successful man, my builder, and I will be a credit to whoever owns me, if he is worthy of me.

"How old is it?" Knapp said. "Who built it?"

"Man named Stubbs," Watkins said. "Cyril Stubbs. Built it in 1845. His father was the canalboat and riverboat man. One of the biggest fortunes in the country at the time. Young Stubbs set himself up here to be landed gentry, but the people around here never quite caught on to what he was up to, and in due course he came to be very well liked. Served a number of terms in the legislature, as a matter of fact. Had nine children, and lived until 1895, died a very old man.

"The house went to his eldest son, Godfrey. Godfrey was a widower with no children. He died in 1903, and left it to a bunch of nieces and nephews. They sold it to Joe Potter, the glass man. Joe died in 1931, and his widow sold it to Wallace Colby. When Colby's son Peter got married, Colby gave him the house. Peter was killed in the war, and of course you already know that his widow kept the

place standing vacant until she died a few months ago. The seller here is her heir."

They had been walking toward the house as they talked, and had reached the front door. Watkins unlocked it, and stood aside for Knapp to enter. The moment he stepped across the threshold, Webster Knapp knew he had come home, come home to stay.

It was not a sensation he had encountered before, this feeling for a house. He had never in all his life really felt that he had a home at all, until his marriage, and then home was wherever Sally was; the house did not matter. His boyhood had been spent in boarding schools and big houses in Virginia and Switzerland and the South of France, where, much of the time, he was the only resident apart from the servants. His parents had divorced when he was small, and both had married and divorced a number of times since. They were careless persons, rich enough to be irresponsible without incurring disaster, not fond of anything remotely intellectual, devoted to unceasing recreational activity: yachting, skiing, polo, gambling; and always drink and love affairs, and sometimes drugs.

The small Webster Knapp was an unhappy boy, his money notwithstanding. The only person he loved, his nanny, moved on to another household when he went away to school at seven, and he never saw her again. He formed few friendships at school; he was bad at games and tended to cry easily, so that he was fair game for the mob cruelties of schoolchildren. His closest associates were misfits like himself, and it generally happened that such boys moved from school to school, just as Webster did; most often budding friendships were aborted early.

He was a loner at the university, joining no clubs, taking part in no extracurricular activities, having no love affairs, forming no friendships. He did the required work, but no more than that, and always without enthusiasm. He kept two horses, and rode daily; it was the one activity at which he excelled. He had long since decided that he liked horses better than people.

After graduation he went to live at his mother's house in Virginia, because the only thing he really wanted to do was to ride and train his horses, and there were stables and grooms at that house. It was hunting country, and the hunt gave him an occasional opportunity to shine; he was really very good on horseback. And the only time that he felt good, felt really alive, was when he was in the saddle.

Then, one day, in a manner that seemed in retrospect to be a ridiculously prosaic preliminary to an event of enormous importance,

Sally Pogue came into his life. He went to dinner at the house of a neighbor, and among the guests he had not met before was Sally. He was smitten, instantly and permanently; even before she said, "How do you do?" he knew that his life, bad as it had been, would hereafter be infinitely worse unless he could capture and keep this merry little person.

His courtship was clumsy and gauche, but it was furiously single-minded, and as abjectly sincere as that of a dog seeking affection; in two weeks she succumbed. She told him later that she probably would have done so on the evening they had met, if he had pressed matters; she had, she admitted, been struck by the same bolt that had felled him.

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Knapp was almost unable to grasp the fact of his good fortune. His gray and featureless life was suddenly painted in brilliant colors, the drone of his daily routine converted to delightful music. The young man who had been unable to love because he had not been loved had found love, and he loved totally and without reserve. He loved the open, freckled face and the compact little body and the alert and well-trained mind. She had, no doubt, certain imperfections — she was, after all, human — but the imperfections were to be treasured as part of her. He was wholly astonished by the great good fortune that had fallen to him, and enormously grateful.

For the first time he was pleased that he had money; she was to have whatever she desired, if money could buy it. In the event, she desired very little. She had money of her own, and she was not given to conspicuous consumption or display. They found a satisfactory farm in Maryland, and her horses joined his in the stable. Her mother "gave" them the Mackinsons, George and Leah, stable man and cook. They furnished their house with gleanings from her mother's attic, their aim being to replace the heterogeneous collection with new pieces as over time they found precisely what pleased them most. But somehow they never got around to replacing most of it, and they lived quite happily among the shabby furnishings, which in fact neither of them had ever examined with a critical eye. The house was comfortable and strewn with a horsey disorder that suited both of them very well. They were too much involved with each other to give much thought to their surroundings.

When Sally became pregnant, Knapp was not quite sure whether he was pleased or not. He had taken for granted that they would in due course have children, but he was by no means certain that he wanted them so soon. He found that he was made uneasy by the idea of sharing Sally's love with someone else, even their baby, and

after the little girl's birth he sometimes felt actual pangs of jealousy. He loved the small Katy, but the mother came first. Sally always came first.

And then she died, was killed, and went away from him and left him forever. He did not handle his bereavement well. His grief was extravagant, excessive, crippling. His mind reeled erratically from grim depths of black depression to spasms of red rage, from hopeless despair to wild resentment. He locked himself in his room because he did not believe in public displays of emotion and could not control his emotions; there in solitude he howled and beat at the walls with his fists and cursed the God he did not believe in.

For a time he thought about avenging her death, about slowly and painfully taking the lives of the four young thugs — two male and two female — who killed her, the creatures who were all able to walk away from the twisted interlocked wreckage of the two cars where Sally lay dead, the four inhuman freaks who, the state trooper said, continued to bob their heads and snap their fingers to the rock music that blared from the unaccountably intact radio of their destroyed old car. "High as kites," the trooper said. "There was half a dozen joints and a couple six-packs in the car. Must of been going eighty, anyhow."

But he saw after a while that revenge would be barren and that life somehow had to go on; he remembered that there was a motherless little girl whose life had to be put back together and set on the right track. He forced his mind to leave the mad seesaw it had ridden for so long, and to think about what must be done. His own future, he thought, lay plain and bleak and arid before him, an endless vista of an empty dry land where old bones parched. He saw no relief of his grinding sense of loss, of his terrible longing for his lost Sally. But he had a duty, and only his sense of that duty kept him alive and sane. Katy came first, now; she must be taken care of.

Sally's mother had come to live with them after the accident, as soon as it became apparent that Knapp was failing to cope with his grief and that someone had to see to the child. She was, fortunately, fond of Knapp, and altogether devoted to Katy, her only grandchild. When Knapp, struggling to regain his equilibrium, proposed moving to a wholly new place, somewhere without reminders of Sally, she agreed to go with them, so that Katy should have some bulwark of normality in her life until Knapp should have recovered.

Thus it was that Webster Knapp found himself with Fred Watkins, entering the old house in Goster County, entering it and feeling

instantly that he had come home at last. He turned to Watkins and said, "I like it. I'll take it."

Watkins was tongue-tied for a moment. This was not how houses were sold, certainly not houses as costly as this one. He said, "But — Well. Good. You've made a wise choice. Uh — do you want to go through it?"

"Oh, yes," Knapp said. "By all means. I'm anxious to see it all. I must say I like it very much."

The rooms were large and well proportioned, the kitchen and plumbing old-fashioned and in need of modernization, and the heating system, which was based on a hand-stoked coal furnace, would have to be replaced. But, all things considered, it could be ready for occupancy in a very short time. "Let's go sign the papers," Knapp said.

When they left the house to go back to town, Knapp's spirits, which had risen while they were inside, fell at once to their usual quiet despair, but he made no connection between the two events. He telephoned his mother-in-law to alert her to the necessity of planning for the move. She said, "What's it like, Webster?"

"Oh, it's great, Liz. Just great. You'll like it. So will Katy."

"How many rooms?"

"Why — I don't know. I didn't count. Enough. Oh, plenty of room. You'll like it."

"Webster, tomorrow you must check the rooms — how many bedrooms, bathrooms, all of them. Count them. Take a tape measure and measure them. Draw a diagram. I'll need some idea where things are to go. Will you do that?"

The next day Knapp got the key from Watkins, bought a tape measure, and drove out to his new house. Once again he felt a small glow of pleasure as he entered, a sense of being sheltered and comforted. What luck, he thought, what a stroke of luck that I found this house. He went about his inventory of rooms somewhat dreamily. He was in an unaccustomed state of mind, experiencing the emptiness that comes with the abatement of great pain, a certain blanking out of thought, so as to keep at bay the apprehension of a return of the pain. When he had finished his measurements he went out to examine the garage and evaluate the possibilities it had for conversion to a stable, but he found it difficult to concentrate. It came to him that, having given the building a once-over, it might be well to step back into the house, and think about it there.

But once he was inside, he did not think about it; he did not, in fact, think about anything. He simply stood inside the door and felt — not at peace; that had been lost with Sally — but better. Better than he had felt for a long time.

Renovation of the house, as is usual with such things, took longer than had been expected; it entailed laying several miles of gas pipeline to fuel the new heating system and a general breaking into walls to install ductwork. It became Knapp's conviction that his presence was necessary for the work to proceed properly, and he succeeded in making a nuisance of himself during all phases of the work. Renovation of the small house proceeded in parallel, so that both were ready for occupancy at about the same time. The grounds and the stable were still unfinished, but work on them would not interfere with occupancy of the houses, and as soon as the school year was over for Katy, Knapp moved his family in.

He was surprised and disappointed that their enthusiasm for the house was considerably less than his own, that they were, in fact, no more than dutiful in commenting upon it; but he supposed that in due course they would come to agree with him. The Mackinsons were much pleased with the little house, and Mrs. Mackinson was delighted with the gleaming technology of the new kitchen, but apart from that she seemed to have reservations about the big house, and Mackinson apparently felt the same, although he was a taciturn man, and it was hard to be sure.

Knapp was somewhat intolerant of their attitudes. The excellence of the house in every respect was, he thought, blatantly obvious, and those who felt otherwise were displaying flaws in themselves, not in the house. He knew the house better than anyone, surely; he had been present every day while the work was going on, and had examined every inch minutely. He believed that there was no place on earth that he would rather be than in his study at the back of the house on the first floor. For no reason that he could think of, Sally seemed somehow less distant and perhaps not wholly lost while he was in that room. And that was important, very important. Although the ferocious edge of his grief and rage had been somewhat blunted by the passage of time, his longing for Sally had not abated in the least, and in his study the pain was tempered somewhat. He spent a great deal of time there.

His mother-in-law worried about him. She saw a man who appeared to have made a partial recovery from a state of mind that was, from a layman's point of view, insane or near insanity;

but still, something was not right about him. He went about with an air that suggested dissociation from his surroundings, with a detachment indicative, she almost believed, of a conviction that she and Katy and horses and all were not necessarily real, that reality lay somewhere else. And her suspicion was that his reality lay in the study where he spent so much of his time. He would sit for hours in the big leather chair, doing nothing whatever, probably not even seeing the landscape outside the window through which he stared, possibly not even thinking. He made no secret of it; the door of the room stood open, and when anyone entered he was aware of it, and he responded when he was spoken to, although with the detached air of someone humoring lesser beings.

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Then he took to closing the door of the study. He had begun to have conversations, and they were the most private of private affairs. The conversations were with Sally. She had come back to him.

Not in body. When she first appeared he had tried to embrace her, and his arms passed through her as through empty air. But she was there, solid enough in appearance if not to the touch, dressed in jodhpurs and boots, the dear freckled face as merry as ever. He knew he had the house to thank for this boon. He knew that the house loved him, and wanted him to be happy, and had recreated Sally from his thoughts and memories. And it was all right. If he could not have her in the flesh, this would do. Would do very well. But it had to be altogether private. No doubt she would be invisible to anyone else, and if he were to be discovered talking to empty air, there might be talk of putting him away somewhere.

But one day Katy ran howling through the house, screaming for her grandmother. Liz took her in her arms and hugged her and tried to soothe her and break the hysteria. When at last the child was able to speak, she said, "It was Mama, Gram. I saw Mama. In the hall. But she wasn't Mama. She was — She was — " She did not know how to explain what had terrified her.

As soon as Katy's panic had been allayed, and she was safely in the kitchen to have hot chocolate with Mrs. Mackinson, Liz marched into Knapp's study. "Webster," she said, "I don't know whether it's you or this house that's causing it, but Katy is a badly disturbed child, and something has to be done about it. Let me tell you what just happened. Katy was hysterical. She thought she saw — well, she thought she saw her mother, she said she saw Sally in the hall."

Knapp leaped up, highly elated. "She did, she did," he said. "She saw Sally. Sally's here. The house brought her back. I thought I was

the only one who could see her, but Katy can, too. It's wonderful. She's becoming more real all the time. Liz, isn't it wonderful?"

"Webster, are you crazy? Wonderful? The child was absolutely terror-stricken. What she thought she saw was horrible, horrible. You should have seen her, heard her. You're infecting her, Webster. I'll say it right out: you're not rational anymore, and Katy is suffering for it. I tell you, something has to be done. She shouldn't be here."

"Liz, Liz," he said. "This is exactly the place for us all. Don't you understand? Sally's here. Katy can have her mother again, and you your daughter. We have our Sally back. And in a house that loves us."

She stared at him, horrified. "Webster," she whispered. "Oh, Webster."

From the kitchen came a shriek, and another and another, as repetitive and with the same strident urgency as an ambulance siren. Knapp sprinted down the hallway and into the room. Mrs. Mackinson was backed into a corner, seemingly trying to back herself through the wall, screaming and screaming. Katy sat frozen at the table, pale as snow, her eyes wild. Knapp gave Mrs. Mackinson a brisk slap. It broke the rhythm of her screaming, and her eyes partially cleared. "Ghost," she said. "Oh, my God. Sally. Mrs. Knapp. Ghost."

Knapp was overjoyed. "She saw her, too! She's real! Thank God. Thank God. She's real."

"You *are* crazy," Liz said, cradling Katy in her arms. "I'm going to leave, Webster, and I'm going to take Katy with me. You can have her back when you've straightened yourself out. And the first thing you ought to do is to get out of the house yourself."

Mrs. Mackinson suddenly regained control of her muscles, and bolted from the room. They could see her from the window, running full tilt toward the little house. Knapp said, "Oh, I don't think you ought to take Katy away, Liz. She needs her mother."

Liz gave him a cold glare. "I'm going to take her," she said, and then, to Katy, who was clinging to her fiercely, "Come along, sweetheart. Let's go up to Gram's room."

In the hall they met the ghost. Liz had not until that moment believed that it existed. Her first thought was, Yes, it is Sally, and then she saw what had so terrified Katy and Mrs. Mackinson: it was a figure so idealized that there was in fact no real resemblance to a human being at all. It was a semblance of Sally modified into a quite inhuman perfection, a thing as disturbing as a window mannequin endowed with movement and pretending to be alive. It said, "Katy.

Mummy. I love you.” It was an idealization of Sally’s voice, eerie in its purity and perfection.

Katy screamed, “*Go away, go away!* Please, please, go away.” The figure turned and disappeared through the door of the study. Clinging tightly to each other’s hands, grandmother and granddaughter ran to the safety of Liz’s room. They collapsed upon the bed, holding each other.

Knapp had remained in the kitchen, and was making himself a pot of coffee. He whistled as he bustled about. The bad days were over at last, he was thinking. The family would be complete again, and they would be happy together in the house that loved them. Liz had not seen Sally yet, that was why she was being so unreasonable. Once she and Sally had talked it over, everything would be settled. It was going to be great, just great.

Mackinson came into the room. Knapp said, “Mack! Sit down. Have some coffee.”

Mackinson said, “We’re quittin’, Mr. Knapp. Leah won’t stay out here anymore at all. She says she’s goin’ to be gone before night, and I can come with her or stay here, whichever, but either way she’s goin’. It seems shameful to quit this way after all the years with the family, but there’s no movin’ her. I’ll be comin’ back with a truck for our things. Tell Miz Liz we’ll write her. It’s disgraceful to leave this way — I come to work for her father when she was just a little girl, knowed her all her life, almost, and Miz Sally too, and now little Katy. But I know better’n to argue with Leah when she’s as set as this. Have *you* seen this ghost, Mr. Knapp?”

“There’s no ghost, Mack. Sally’s back, that’s all. Scared Mrs. Mack, I guess. Don’t know why, nothing scary about her. You know, you oughtn’t to leave this way.”

“Sally’s ba — ? Uh, yeah. Yeah. Well. Well, I’ll be goin’ now, Mr. Knapp.” And he went out.

Too bad, Knapp thought. It would be hard to get along without the Mackinsons. He’d have to see to the horses by himself, now, and Liz would have to do the cooking. And she wasn’t much of a cook. Still, it was no doubt for the best. He was quite sure Sally would think so, too. He’d better tell her about it.

In the hall he met his mother-in-law and his daughter. They were carrying suitcases. Liz said, “I’m taking Katy away, Webster, out of this house. You know as well as I do that she can’t live around that — that *thing*. Even if it’s not real, Katy and I both saw it, or thought we saw it. Can’t you see how horrible it is, Webster? That’s no more

Sally than that doorknob is. There's something wrong with this house. I can't bear to be in it. And it's worse for Katy. Don't you try to stop us, now."

"Oh, I won't, Liz," Knapp said. "I expect you'll be back. Sally and I'll miss you both."

"Oh, Webster," she said. "Poor, poor Webster. Goodbye." Little Katy, pale and tense, was tugging at her hand, and she allowed herself to be led out of the house. After a little while Knapp heard the sound of the departing car.

"Alone at last," Sally said. Knapp turned. She was not there. "Where are you?" he said. He could speak to her now without actually talking aloud.

She said, "I don't think we need the image anymore, do you, Webster?" She too was talking without actual speech.

"No," Knapp said, elated again. "No, of course not. I know you're here. You're all around me, aren't you?"

"Of course I am," she said. "I love you and I'll always be all around you." And he knew it was true.

After that Knapp was very happy. To be well loved is, after all, one of life's deepest and purest pleasures, and Knapp knew he was loved. Love was around him, always. There was no need anymore for the image of Sally; she and the house were part of each other, and the house's love was her love. Knapp knew contentment at last, after all the long suffering. The unbearable tensions of grief and regret were behind him now, and with these relaxations came a certain lethargy, the drowsiness that follows relief. He found that he was content to do nothing at all, to lie in bed all day long, or to slump immobile in his chair while the sun rose and set and rose again.

Leaving the house, even for a short time, was an enervating and distressing experience. In the house, time did not exist, and there was only a drowsy, blissful present; but outside, with the door closed behind him, time's grim claws caught at him, trying to haul him back into the stream, to force him to think of duties and responsibilities, to bring into his mind Katy's pale, frightened face as her grandmother took her away. It was better to stay inside, to luxuriate in easeful contentment, to be wholly separate from time as it passed in the world outside.

He discovered one day that the horses were dead. The man who delivered the groceries said, "My God, Mr. Knapp, what the *hell* is that smell out there? My God, it's awful."

"Smell?" Knapp said. "I don't smell anything. How much is the bill?" The man took his money and departed hastily, intimidated by both Knapp's manner and his gaunt, unshaven, wild appearance. After he had gone, Knapp stepped outside the back door and sniffed. There was indeed a powerful and horrible stench, coming, it seemed, from the stable; when he opened the stable door the smell almost felled him. The horses lay dead and rotting, dead of thirst and hunger, unfed and unwatered for — he had no idea how many days or weeks. He felt an unaccustomed stirring of regret and remorse, and then a wave of astonishment that he could have so neglected his beautiful horses, could have condemned them to such horrible deaths. He was engulfed by emotion, suddenly, washed by sorrow and self-condemnation. My God, my God, he thought, and bolted for the house.

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The bad feelings gradually subsided, once he was inside, and he felt very sleepy. As he was settling into his chair, the house said, "You see, Webster, it's very bad out there. I think you should stay inside from now on, don't you?"

"Oh, yes," Knapp said. "Yes, I think I'd better stay inside."

Time passed in the world outside the house, and inside it Knapp lived in his daze of timeless euphoria. In the early days of his life as a hermit the telephone had rung often and long, each time shattering his precious peace, and after a while he had the service cut off. He rented a very large box at the post office, and simply allowed his mail to accumulate there. He had placed a standing order with a market in town to make weekly delivery of a list of comestibles he had prepared, and each week a load identical with that of the week before arrived, until he could no longer bear the intrusion of the delivery man into his life of peace, and he canceled the order. He had discovered that he was seldom hungry nowadays.

Autumn came, and brought frosts to the world outside, and the trees became violently beautiful; and then it was winter, and the world became white and still and beautiful again. But in the house Webster Knapp did not see these changes, nor would they have meant anything to him if he had seen them. He kept the house dark, now, every curtain drawn tight against the light of the day. He could feel the love more deeply when it was dark and perfectly silent and he sat all alone in the great dark house.

But then he had company. With the coming of the cold, a tribe of field mice moved into the house, and settled down for the winter. Knapp did not mind. They were so small and shy and timid that

their presence did not disturb him, and after a time he even came to like them. He believed that the house loved them, just as it loved him, and if that was the case, they were, in a sense, his brothers and sisters. After a time they lost their fear, and indeed seemed to become fond of him; when he groped his way from one room to another he always heard around him a faint sound of scratching, of a host of tiny nails scrabbling over the polished floors. It was as if the whole tribe felt compelled to stay close to him all the time.

Knapp believed that it had been a long time since he had last eaten — weeks, perhaps — but he felt no hunger, not even when he opened cans or boxes of food for the mice. He was very weak, and he knew that the weakness was a consequence of starvation, but he merely noted the fact; it had no emotional impact upon him. He came to dislike rising from his chair, and no longer fed the mice. They seemed to find adequate nourishment elsewhere, however, and remained lively and inquisitive, often running across his feet, and sometimes up his trouser legs. Knapp thought vaguely that they were nice little fellows.

You're nice, too, the mice said.

"I'd really better get something to eat," Knapp said aloud. He tried to rise from his chair, but was too weak to do so. He gripped the arms of the chair and pulled himself erect. He stood for a moment, took a tottering step, and collapsed to the floor.

Listen.

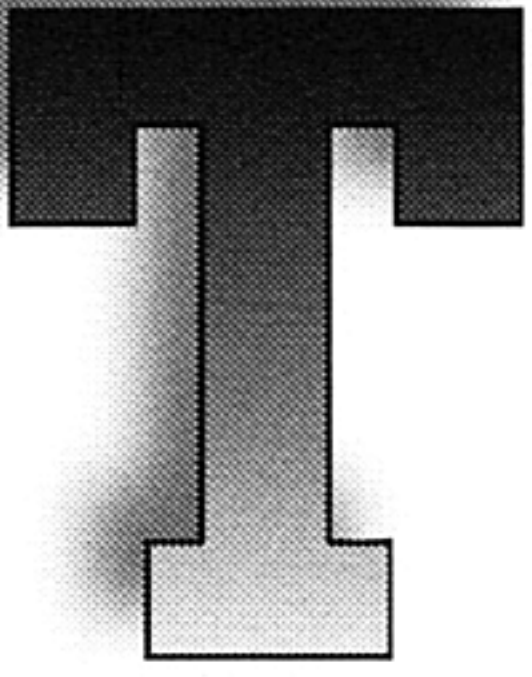
The house is speaking. I love you, it says.

I love you, too, says Webster Knapp. He lies on the floor in front of the armchair, curled like a fetus. He has not moved for more than a week. The mice scurry around and over him, sit upon his cheek, nestle close. We love you, the mice say to Webster Knapp. I love you, too, he says to the mice.

The tiny footsteps of the mice cause a minute stir in the dust that is settling upon him. A spider has begun to spin a web anchored at his ear and stretching across his face. There is no sound, there is no light.

There is only love. Love.

INSTRUCTIONS



his is the only notice you will receive.

You will follow the instructions set out below.

1.

Dress warmly and leave your house. Do not tell your family you are leaving. Do not talk to them at all. Do not listen if they talk to you. Dress warmly and leave your house.

2.

Proceed at a brisk clip to the center of town. Do not speak to anyone in the street. Do not — *do not* — become involved in any conversations. Step right along. Do not tarry.

3.

At the center of town, in the little park across from the courthouse, is a building that was not there the last time you were downtown. It will strike you as a very ugly building, and its appearance will make you feel apprehensive. Pay no attention to such feelings. Do not look right or left. Enter the building. It has only one doorway and no visible door. Go right in.

4.

You will find yourself standing in a cold gray mist, with no visibility whatever. This will cause you to feel great fear. Despite the fear, you will follow instructions. Advance six steps.

5.

A portion of your mind will remain free of the constraint that has been placed upon you, and that portion will be observing your actions with amazement, incredulity, and terror, since everything that you are doing is without your advertence, and is, as it were, puppetlike. If you survive the present undertaking, you will remember everything that has happened, but you will never be able to speak of it. You will never be able to talk about anything at all that took place after the instant you looked at the symbol at the top of the first of these sheets. The configurations of this symbol are such that it caused

your mind to be wholly obedient to these instructions. You have no choice. You must do as you are instructed. Under no circumstances will you lose these sheets.

6.

From this point onward you will read only one instruction at a time. Do not read instruction number eight until you have accomplished what was instructed in number seven, and so on. Read each instruction completely before beginning to comply. Instructions from this point onward will carry from time to time comforting words of reassurance and explanation, as a means of preserving sanity in the portion of your mind that remains your own.

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7.

After you have advanced six steps, stand quite still. You will immediately feel an unpleasant sensation. It will, in fact, be agonizing pain. Ignore it. It is felt by all carbon-based life-forms undergoing interdimensional translation. It will do you no permanent harm, except possibly in a minor way to your muscular coordination and control. If you find yourself thereafter to be subject to facial tics or spasmodic jerkings of one limb or another, pay no attention to them. You have much to do. Bend all your efforts toward obeying these instructions. Do not falter.

8.

You are now in Area One. This one will be easy. Look about you. What you see will frighten you greatly. You will not let that fact hinder you. It is just a landscape. It is only the fact that it is totally alien that frightens you. You have never seen or imagined anything remotely like it. Words of reassurance: 26,844 members of your race have been here before you. We know all about Area One. Follow instructions and you will quickly be in Area Two. Perform the following acts: take four slow — very slow — steps forward and immediately sidestep quickly — very quickly — to your right.

9.

The large round hole that suddenly appeared where you were standing before you sidestepped has, literally, no bottom. It is characteristic of Area One that these holes appear. Close your eyes and begin to run as fast as you can straight ahead. By fast is meant *very fast*.

10.

You have been unconscious for some time, as a consequence of running full tilt into a wall that suddenly materialized. It is characteristic of Area One that walls materialize and dematerialize.

If you had not spent an unconscious period, you would not now be reading this instruction. You would have been disassembled by the indigenous energy foci. They did not sense your presence because you were unconscious. It may be that this necessary collision has damaged you to some extent. Since you are reading this, the damage was not incapacitating. The wall is no longer there. Walk forward, or crawl if you must. Pass through the discontinuity portal just ahead. You will perceive it as a shimmer in the atmosphere. The faster you pass through, the less painful it will be.

11.

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You are now in Area Two. There is no need for great haste in moving on to Area Three. You may lie down and rest for several minutes. Perhaps the pain you are almost certainly undergoing will abate somewhat. Area Two is, for your race, the safest of the areas through which you must pass in completing your task. There is at this stage time for you to absorb certain knowledge that will no doubt ease the concerns that trouble the portion of your mind that continues to keep your identity. If that core of ego were to become hopelessly insane, it would affect your comprehension of these instructions, and you would be of no further use to us.

We are observing you as you proceed with your task, but we may not communicate with you except through these instructions. Our observations will enable us to amend the instructions for the one who follows you, just as you have benefited from those who preceded you. Eight hundred sixty-one members of your race have been in Area Two before you. Each was like you, a random *Homo sapiens* sufficiently literate to read the instructions. We have great hope that one of your race will be the individual to attain the end we desire. We have only recently discovered your race. We find you to be docile and moderately intelligent, and physically better suited for this task than many other races. You may have other useful qualities as well that we have not yet discovered. Some life-forms have proven to be quite useless to us. We tested them thoroughly before turning to others. Between our last previous discovery of a useful race and our finding of you, we tested 773 intelligent life-forms. Twelve hundred forty-four individuals of each of these life-forms were given these instructions. Every single one perished in Area One. But you are already in Area Two, comparatively undamaged, and ready at this point to proceed, having had your state of mind improved by learning these facts.

If you are of the egg-producing sex, you will now discover that you have sprouted a thick and vile-smelling fur over large portions

of your skin. If you are of the fertilizing sex, you will find yourself to have scales instead of skin. If you are not yet large enough to produce eggs or sperm, you will find growing from various parts of your surface, horny lumps oozing a sticky fluid. These things happen to your race in Area Two. They will not affect your capacity to carry out your instructions. In each of the areas, as you proceed, phenomena will occur that are undreamed of, and indeed impossible, in your original continuum. As you proceed from area to area, you are in movement outside space and contrary to time as you perceive it; the bases of reality will differ from area to area, and your senses will react to this shifting in often unpredictable and to you always frightening ways. Pay no attention. Follow your instructions as long as you are physically able to do so.

You will by now have observed that as far as you can see in every direction the flat plain is studded with protrusions about as high as the middle joint of your walking limbs (if your are full-grown) and about as thick as your forelimbs. Each of these is topped by a spinning disk. They may be alive, but perhaps not. It does not matter. You will note that some of the disks are of one color and some of another. We cannot give you a name for the colors because our observations of your race have failed to associate the proper words with your sensory perceptions. Walk — or otherwise proceed as best you are able — among these protrusions. Find a group of the same color surrounding one of the other color. Go among them and place your hand on the disk of the center protrusion.

12.

You have now been transported through another portal, and you are in Area Three. Three hundred thirty-seven of your race have been here before you. You are becoming inured to these transitions. The pain may have been less this time. We will now tell you that we lied in Instruction 11. There was in fact danger in Area Two. Because we were unable to specify colors, the chance of you selecting the wrong color was equal to that of selecting the right color. If you had selected wrongly, the consequences would have been unfortunate, but we will not enumerate them, in the interest of preserving your serenity.

Area Three is in a universe with the same physical laws as your own; it possesses galaxies of stars, and some of these stars have planets, just as your own star does. This planet is much like your home planet. It abounds in savage life-forms, most of which eat each other. We tell you this in order that you may be alert and wary. You cannot prevail in combat with these creatures. Flee when you see one. Hide, if you can find a place.

You are standing on the bank of a small stream. You may drink from it if you require water. Keep a sharp lookout. You have a very good chance of surviving if you can hide yourself in time. Here and there you will see holes that have what appear to be tangles of roots at their bottoms. When you encounter a predator, leap into one of these holes, if there is one nearby and you have time. These holes are in fact the mouths of creatures that live underground with only their mouths exposed, and live upon whatever edible things may fall into their mouths. You are inedible to them. After a short period the creature will spit you out. By then the predator may be gone, and you can proceed. Every creature that you see will be a predator. There is no place to hide but in these mouths.

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Walk upstream along the brooklet. Some of the plants are predatory. Try to avoid them. Some of them will bind you with vines and suck your blood; others will paralyze you with a sting, and engulf you for slow digestion. They are, however, by your standards, lethargic and slow moving. Watch for them and dodge out of their way. If you are not badly damaged, you can move much faster than they can. Walk for a distance equal to about four hundred or five hundred times your body length. If you are small, or only partially grown, it may be between five hundred and six hundred times your body length.

Walk upstream along the brooklet, evading predators of every kind, until you come to a structure. This structure resembles a great mound of the nasal mucous of your race. It is about fifty times your height. It apparently has a disgusting smell. It is the nest of one of the indigenes, a creature in some ways resembling the giant reptiles once common on your world, but in other ways resembling some of your insects. It excretes the stuff of which its nest is built. Despite the semiliquid appearance of this nest, it is quite hard. The excretion hardens upon exposure to the atmosphere. Halfway up its side is an opening. Climb up, if you can, and enter. The portal you must pass through is deep inside, and will be reached by simply following the passage. The portal was of course there before the creature built its nest, and indeed has always been there. It was pure chance that led the creature to build its nest at this particular spot. The creature is unaware that the portal is there. None of these portals can be detected by life-forms native to the area of the portal's location unless such life-forms are directed to the portals, as you were when you began this task.

Inside the nest you will find it difficult to breathe. It will not, however, be impossible. The atmosphere will be harmful to your lungs. You must proceed as rapidly as possible, in order to reach the

portal before your lungs cease to function. Hanging from the ceiling of the passage will be objects that will appear to you to be thick, oily ropes swinging about. Exercise care not to be touched by them. If you are, you will be dissolved. Hurry along. If you survive, it will be impossible to miss the portal. Get through it quickly.

13.

You are in Area Four. Do not move. Do not move at all until you have read this instruction.

You are the eighteenth of your kind to reach this area. No other life-form has supplied more than five individuals who have reached it. However, your race has greater difficulties with Area Four than do the others. We cannot tell why.

As soon as you move, your shape will change. It may change to a shape that lacks the capacity for movement. If that should happen, you will of course have to remain here permanently. If, however, your new shape is capable of movement, simply go straight forward, advancing by whatever means of locomotion you can contrive under the difficulties presented by the form you have acquired. Because the geometry of this place constantly undergoes random variation, it is impossible to tell the distance to the portal at any given moment. Simply move forward until you reach it. If the portal is at this time a very great distance off, you may not reach it, as there is no way for you to obtain nourishment here, and, in any case, you may be unable to ingest nourishment in your present form.

Now you may move.

14.

You have passed through the portal and you are in Area Five. You have returned to your original shape, or something very close to it. The other member of your race who reached this point recovered its original shape in almost every particular, with perhaps some slight alteration of the proportions between the various parts of its body. It retained to a considerable degree the power of forward movement and an intermittent capacity for coarse manipulation of objects. No doubt you find yourself as well off, and perhaps better.

In this area the portal is close at hand. You could see it from where you now are, if it were not hidden behind that large machine. We do not know how this machine appears to you, because your perceptions do not extend to all the planes in which it has its existence. The part that falls within the range of your senses apparently is perceived by your race as a terrifying large live thing. That at any rate is our conclusion based upon the behavior of your predecessor.

INSTRUCTIONS

The function of this machine, to describe it in an analogy that you will understand, is to take samples and analyze them. There is no way of knowing what sort of samples it was designed to analyze, except that they were evidently large — probably about the size of your head. The entities who created this machine finished their history and disappeared very long ago, at a time when your native sun was still taking form. The machine continues to operate, but perhaps no longer exactly as it was intended to. In any case, it will not permit you access to the portal until it has taken its sample.

You will have noted that these instructions are now more elaborate and explanatory than they were initially. This has been because it appears from our admittedly incomplete knowledge of the psychology of your race that you may function better if you have some comprehension of what you are doing. In the early stages it did not matter, but now you have advanced very far. While of course you have no choice but to obey the instructions, it may be that these explanations will inspire you to an added effort, or even enthusiasm.

If you are able to pass the machine, you will see the portal plainly, and you will go through it.

Now advance and let the machine take its samples.

15.

You are in Area Six. You are the first being to achieve it. Heretofore the samples taken by the machine have always been vital parts of the life-form furnishing the sample, or even the entire being. Clearly, there remains enough of you to continue to live, and to have made your way from the machine to the portal. You are a durable being, for one of your subdivision.

Advancing along the path from the opposite direction is another life-form. It will resemble nothing you have seen or imagined, but it is, like you, carbon-based, and, like you, has been following a set of instructions, which were much more difficult than yours. When you confront this being, reach out with any part of you that remains capable of reaching, and touch it. It is instructed to do the same to you.

The instructions following this one will be the final instructions. You may read it after you have physically touched the other creature.

Proceed.

16.

The fact that you are reading this means that you have completed the undertaking.

Your race is one of those with the characteristic of curiosity, and you will want to know our reasons for requiring you to make this journey. We will tell you.

298 You have on your native planet an intellectual diversion quite suitable for your minds, called *chess*. We are now playing, with another entity much like ourself, a game with distant analogies to the game of chess raised several powers in complexity. Nothing about this game would be in any way comprehensible to you, of course, and we will make no attempt to explain it. Instead, we will continue the chess analogy and tell you that while there have already been hundreds of millions of moves in this game, it remains very far from over. Millions of our chessmen are in motion upon a board that encompasses all of the past time and any point in or portion of any of the universe that may become useful. You and the being you have just encountered comprise jointly a minute part of one of our chess pieces. The passage through the portals on the part of each of you, and your final coming together, form part of a tiny link in a predicted chain of cause and effect that will, in a very distant future time, lead to a curious mutation in a race whose first ancestor has not yet come into being.

Unless, of course, the move by our opponent that follows this one nullifies ours. We will, in that event, make an appropriate response. You will understand that all the pieces are being moved all the time. The analogy with chess is in fact quite loose.

At some point — it will be at a time that would seem to you to be unthinkably remote — the game will be over. The loser will congratulate the winner. We and it will then invent and agree upon the rules of a new game, and it will commence.

That is what we do. You, with your curiosity, may ask: Why?

The answer is: To pass the time, to alleviate boredom.

Your curiosity is now satisfied, and we are finished with you. You are now free from the restraints imposed by these instructions, and may do as you like. If you wish to try to return to your starting place, you will find all the portals exactly where they were when you were coming here. They are open both ways. The difficulties in each area remain unchanged, but you are quite durable. You might get back.

FEESTERS IN THE LAKE

BONELESS PALE CREATURES WITH ragged mouths full of teeth lived at the bottom of the lake. We called them *feesters*. My Uncle Caleb said we called them that because that was their name. He said they were once a family who had lived in the abandoned big house beside the lake, and long ago something very strange had happened to them, so that now they could live only down there in the darkness, in the cold mud.

Sometimes at night they would come in close to the shore, he said, and rise to the surface and cry. They cried like lost little children who have given up hope, a sound that was infinitely sad and desolate, a piteous sobbing that awakened in the hearts of unwary womenfolk a powerful desire to rescue and comfort. Those who succumbed to the desire were not heard of again. So Uncle Caleb told me when I was eleven.

I half believed him. Telling stories was one of his specialties. In those days I spent my summers in Sturkeyville with my grandparents, and all summer long I was in Uncle Caleb's company as much as he would allow. There were a good many reasons for that, and the most important one was my fear that I was going to miss a story if I strayed from his side. I was always glad I did not miss the one about the feesters.

Uncle Caleb had heard it, he told me, from his father, my Grandpa Scoggins, whose father had actually known Captain Feester and indeed had been his lawyer. The story went like this: Elihu Feester was a ship's master sailing out of Boston in the middle years of the nineteenth century. On one of his voyages, blown off course in the South Pacific, he made a landfall at a populated island that did not appear on the charts, and he and his crew were forced to spend some time there while they repaired their storm-damaged ship. There

was apparently a quarrel of some sort with the natives, and the Americans fled the island, leaving behind a number of dead, both crewmen and natives.

They took with them, however, their doom: a germ or a parasite or perhaps a curse. Before they had completed their trading along the China Coast, Feester found it necessary to execute several of the crew. (This was not reported until much later, by the captain of another China trader.) No one knows what happened during the return voyage. The ship burned to the waterline a few miles outside Boston harbor on June 16, 1851, and only Captain Feester came ashore.

There was a great scandal, and a Board of Inquiry was called. Feester's story never varied: they were hardly out of the China Seas, he said, when the men began to fall sick, and one by one they died. The last leg of the voyage was accomplished with only himself, the second mate, and one able-bodied seaman left alive, and both of these had succumbed during the last days. He had no idea why he should have been spared. He had burned the ship because he was the only one left to do it, and most certainly his vessel had by then become a pest ship and might have infected the whole of Massachusetts. The bodies of the mate and the A. B. were still aboard at the time of the burning. He had nothing to add.

His story was highly circumstantial, a detailed account of high fevers and delirium, of black vomit and dreadful pain, of sores and pustules. He produced the ship's log in evidence. Nonetheless, he was not wholly believed. But because he had been half-owner of the ship, a vocal minority held that his arson had in fact been a praiseworthy and sacrificial act, and in the end he was absolved. It was clear that he would never be given command of another vessel, but that fact did not appear to cause him any concern, and indeed he was heard to say that once he was free to do so, he intended to go where he would never have to look at the sea again. He left Boston the day the board cleared him, and he had been gone for more than a year when the trader captain brought home his account of the killings Feester had committed off China. They talked of re-convening the board, but no one had any idea where Feester might be found.

He was, as it happened, far to the west in the town of Sturkeyville, a somnolent county seat in the northern Appalachians. He was building a house there, a few miles out of town near the shore of Howard's Lake. And by the time the house was completed he had

acquired a wife to live in it, the only daughter of Ezra Stallworth, the banker who had sold him the land.

There was a crazy streak in the Stallworths, Grandpa Scoggins told Uncle Caleb, a stubbornness that went far beyond anything rational, and Agatha Stallworth Feester's stubbornness had as much to do with the final horror as did the germ or parasite or curse or whatever it was that Feester carried. For a long time she persisted in a blind refusal to accept the fact that her children were what they were, and when at last there was no escape from the truth, it was too late.

Uncle Caleb's voice deepened dramatically at that point: "It was *toooo* late." Sepulchral, doom-laden. He enjoyed telling the story. It was plain, even to me, that he'd have preferred to be telling it at midnight in a room with shadowy corners, to a larger audience than one young nephew. But he was a storyteller and I had asked. I was getting the full performance.

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It was impossible for me to tell whether or not he believed any of it. He put the same sincerity into all of his stories, both the demonstrably true and the obviously fictional. It is quite certain that on the day he told me about the feesters he did not yet know the whole story himself; it would be another five years before Grandpa Scoggins explained all the details to him and passed on the responsibility. What Uncle Caleb told me that day was simply the folklore of the town, and although I was too young to perceive it, I suppose there was a good bit of irony in his narration.

I was very fond of my uncle Caleb. He was thirty years old that summer (it was 1934), a bachelor, still making his home with my grandparents in the big house a block north of the square. He practiced law with my grandfather in chambers above Staub's Hardware, across from the courthouse. My grandfather owned the building. He owned a considerable part of the town, to tell the truth.

Uncle Caleb always had time to spare for me, and I appreciated it. I did not realize until a number of years later that he had plenty of time to spare, that he worked very little, if at all. There was no real reason why he should have, of course. He and my mother were the only children of their generation in the Scoggins family, and the deaths of several maiden aunts and great-aunts had settled upon Uncle Caleb all the money he would ever need. He was nominally a partner in the law firm, and I suppose he handled the odd conveyance or probate from time to time, but his chief occupations were those

of a sportsman and man-about-town — if the term was applicable in Sturkeyville. He hunted and fished and rode his horses, and played a great deal of golf at the country club. He belonged to clubs in New York and Philadelphia, and he had kept in close touch with friends from prep school and undergraduate days, so he was often away, leaving the family to learn of his activities from the Society pages of the city papers.

My grandfather viewed Uncle Caleb's way of life with something less than enthusiasm, but the two of them did not, I believe, quarrel about it. I think that that was because Grandpa more or less agreed with Grandma's frequently expressed view that Caleb would in due course settle down like everybody else and that he deserved a little amusement to take his mind off what Dorothy Hodge had done to him.

What Dorothy Hodge had done to him was to marry Holmes Ungelbauer, his oldest and closest friend. She did not exactly jilt Uncle Caleb; there was never an engagement. There was not even an understanding, beyond the understanding the three of them had had since they were children, that some day she would marry either Holmes or Caleb. The three of them had been a close, closed triad almost from the time they were toddlers, musketeers who invariably snubbed any would-be d'Artagnan. They had their private jokes and private slang and private laughter at the efforts of their contemporaries in the town to copy their speech and dress and comportment. My mother always said that they were rotten little snobs during their teen years, but she was watching them from a six-year advantage in age, and I have a notion that in her time she may have been much the same.

I don't think they were snobs, exactly, but it would have been odd if they had not been aware of their position in the town. The Scogginses and Ungelbauers and Hodges were the three main families in Sturkeyville. The Scogginses had land and the bank, the Ungelbauers had coal, and the Hodges had the foundry. Scogginses and Ungelbauers and Hodges served together on the boards of the businesses and on the vestry of the church, and they tended to marry each other. But my grandparents' generation produced only four children: Holmes, Dorothy, my mother, and Uncle Caleb; and my mother astonished the town by marrying a young man from — of all places — Chicago. That left one marriageable daughter and two marriageable sons in The Families, and it was wholly taken for granted that Dorothy would marry one of the two.

In the event, she chose Holmes. I have no idea why. Family lore has it that she made her choice by flipping a coin, because she prized both young men equally. It could be true. It was said that up to the very day she announced her choice she had never given the slightest indication that she preferred Holmes to Caleb.

Uncle Caleb, as might have been expected (and as would have been expected of Holmes, had their positions been reversed) was wholly the good sport. He gave the couple, as a formal gift, an elaborate coffee service from Tiffany's, and, in addition, in recognition of the old comradeship, a facetiously inscribed silver cup. He stood as best man at the wedding, fulfilling his duties efficiently and with aplomb. He was the organizer of the house-warming party that welcomed the honeymooners home from Europe and into their new house on Wetzel Avenue. He became the very model of Old Family Friend.

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But he had been more grievously wounded than anyone realized, and he changed. It was not quick or obvious, but after a time it became evident that some sort of spark had been extinguished or arrested, that he had elected, for a time at least, to become more spectator than participant. Although his demeanor did not alter perceptibly, those around him were aware of a certain detachment, of an ironical and sometimes almost sour amusement at most matters that would, under other circumstances, have been the chief concerns of his life. He declined to take serious things seriously. He pretended to an unchanged attitude, but he was not serious even about the pretense, and after a time he gave up pretending and frankly spent most of his time at play.

Thus he had plenty of time for me. He taught me the rudiments of golf that summer (it was now five years since the marriage), and a good deal about guns, and made of me an excellent rider, for my age. He owned three very fine hunters, and one of them, a bay mare grown placid with age, was temporarily mine. We spent a great many afternoons perfecting my seat and practicing low jumps, and at least once a week we would pack a lunch and spend the day on horseback, exploring the dusty back roads of the county. It was during one of these rides that he told me about the feesters.

We were riding that day up a disused road called Dexter Lane, a narrow strip of soft white dust that climbed crookedly through a forest of pin oak and locust to the three abandoned mountain farms it had once served. The day was hot, and we rode at a peaceful walk, to the agreeable sounds of slow hooves in the dust and birdsong from the branches.

My eye was caught by the entrance to a road that seemed even more sunken in desuetude than Dexter Lane. "Hey, Uncle Caleb," I sang out, "where's that road go?"

"That?" he said. "Why, that's the back road down to Howard's Lake."

"A lake? Can we go down there to eat our lunch? Can we, Uncle Caleb?"

He hesitated, and then said, "Why not?" We turned the horses in at the old road and began the descent. The road fell steeply, zigzagging in sharp switchbacks; I do not believe that a car could have negotiated it even in its best days. Years of erosion had cut a complicated system of foot-deep gullies, which sometimes followed the direction of the road and sometimes cut across it, so that we had to watch very carefully where the horses placed their feet. The trees grew more thickly here; their lowest branches spanned the road not far above our heads, so that we traveled in a twisting green tunnel. A silent tunnel, I suddenly realized: the normal small noises of the forest had unaccountably ceased. The only sound was the soft thud of hooves and the creak of our leather.

We emerged from the trees quite suddenly, into bright noon sunlight. We had come into a steep clearing, and from our position on its upper side we were looking over treetops down to the lake below and the house that stood beside it.

They were black. The lake lay like an irregular slab of polished anthracite, utterly black, utterly without motion, utterly lifeless except for the profusion of coarse hairy weeds that blanketed the hundred yards or so between the edge of the water and the edge of the woods. Across the lake the house rose from the weeds, a building disproportionately narrow and tall, top-heavy, four stories high and two rooms wide. It was built of black stone, great heavy blocks that would perhaps have suited a manor house of ducal dimension, but which, in this gaunt structure, conveyed an unpleasant sense of materials ill-used and weight wholly at variance with size. The weeds grew close all around it; there were no outbuildings. It towered in silent paradox there beside the black dead lake, grotesque and menacing.

"Boy," I said. "Boy. That's pretty spooky, Uncle Caleb. Who lived there?" I said "lived." It was clear that the house had been uninhabited for a long time. It was in excellent condition, though. No vandals had sported here.

“Feester,” Uncle Caleb said. “Captain Elihu Feester. Shall we have our lunch now?”

We moved back into the shade of the outermost trees and tethered the horses, and then, as we ate our sandwiches and apples, Uncle Caleb told me what he knew or had invented about Elihu Feester and the feesters in the lake.

When Uncle Caleb told me a story, I never asked whether it was true or made up. It never occurred to me to ask how he had come to learn of Captain Elihu’s disastrous voyage and all the events preceding his arrival in Sturkeyville, or how he was able to describe in such detail the grisly metamorphoses that were visited upon Feester’s family. Fact or embroidery, it was all part of the story, part of the spell Uncle Caleb wove around me that day. Those poor doomed children came alive for me, they and their crazed mother, immured in the gloom of the locked and shuttered house, creeping with sticky sounds through the airless hot darkness of its hallways, struggling against the lure of the black waters of the lake just beyond the door. They were quite innocent, then, and so was their wretched mother, and even Captain Elihu was guilty of nothing more than theft from simple savages, an act not counted a great crime in those times.

That was what Feester had done, Uncle Caleb said. He had stolen treasure of some sort from the inhabitants of that remote South Sea island. And with the treasure he took, all unknowing, something dreadful: a curse, as the superstitious would have it, or, alternatively, in the opinion of the more enlightened (among whom Uncle Caleb included himself), a microbe or enzyme or something else that would no doubt in due course be susceptible of scientific explanation.

Whatever it was, it turned human beings into something quite inhuman and thoroughly dangerous, and by the time Feester’s travels brought him to Sturkeyville he had experienced things that might well have driven him into lunacy. Perhaps they had, but if so, he concealed it well. He arrived in town with style and élan, riding a spirited horse and bringing with him a heavy wagon driven by a burly man who carried a pistol in his pocket and never strayed more than a few feet from the wagon by day or night. Feester took a room in the hotel and began to explore the countryside, each day taking a different road out of town. Each evening he dined at the hotel and then entered the bar to spend a couple of hours drinking the famous local rye whiskey and conversing with the inquisitive regulars. He was genial enough, but conveyed a minimum of information: his name was Feester; he was retired; he was looking for a quiet place

to settle down and enjoy his retirement; yes, he thought it might be here.

He extracted more information than he dispensed, and by the end of a week he had learned a good deal about the people of the town and the geography of the county. He had also, it transpired, selected a location for his house. One morning he turned up at the bank and spent several hours with Ezra Stallworth; before the day was out, he had duly recorded a deed to the old Phillips place, twelve hundred acres of steep forest land surrounding Howard's Lake. The town observed with interest Stallworth's respectful — indeed, almost obsequious — manner toward Feester and drew the obvious conclusion: Feester was very rich. It was said that he had paid spot cash in gold, counting off the coins from a heap dumped out of a heavy leather grip onto Stallworth's table, and that the pile was hardly diminished by removal of the substantial sum paid for the acreage. The rest of the gold, gossip had it, was left with Stallworth on deposit. It seemed likely. Certainly, from that day on, Stallworth became Feester's sponsor in the town, and, in due course, when Feester began to pay court to Agatha, Stallworth extended every possible encouragement. But then Stallworth would have encouraged Agatha to marry a toad, the town said, if the toad had enough money.

Feester continued to live in the hotel while the house was being built. The burly man left town, and the wagon stood empty behind the livery stable, its contents unloaded one night and hidden, presumably somewhere on the Phillips place. The house grew slowly and expensively beside the lake, much visited by Sunday-afternoon buggy riders who had heard rumors of its surpassing ugliness. It was finished at last, and wagon loads of furniture were moved into it, and on a rainy morning in April Agatha Stallworth, spinster, and Elihu Feester, bachelor, were united in holy matrimony at St. David's Church.

They were not a romantic couple. The bride was pushing thirty and had inherited the craggy Stallworth look, and the groom, two inches shorter and square in build, wore a seafaring beard that seemed to Sturkeyville to be more than a little raffish. But they appeared to be fond enough of each other, and they lost no time in populating the strange house by the lake with children, four little girls born by the time they had been four years married. Feester, in naming them, displayed an unexpected touch of classical learning: he called them Clio, Thalia, Urania, and Polyhymnia, causing a minor scandal by the outlandish names. By the time Polyhymnia was born, Clio had begun to change.

Because it was still there, the old curse or disease. If it was a disease, Feester was only a carrier, not subject to the symptoms but infecting those around him; and if a curse, then one that doomed him to remain free of the horror but compelled to watch as it destroyed first his crew, and now his family. Little Clio's sturdy legs, just coming fully under her control, and much used for running and jumping, became traitors; they bent at odd angles and would not support her weight. Her bones were softening; not just in her legs, but all the bones of her body, becoming not bone but flexible cartilage or baleen. Her small, even teeth fell out and were swiftly replaced by new ones, twice as many as she had had before, crooked, crowded and pointed, changing the shape of her softened jaw. Her skin turned deadly pale, and then a sick frog-belly white. Her legs began to fuse together, and her arms to fuse to her sides.

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That was the beginning. It was to be several years before the change was complete, but it proceeded steadily and inexorably through all those years. Clearly, it moved more slowly in children than in adults; on the ship, as Feester's crew was stricken one by one, it had been only a matter of weeks from the first onset to full, feral metamorphosis, only weeks from the first weakness of the legs to the time when they slipped overboard to assume the life of the sea creatures they had become, or began to try to devour their shipmates and had to be shot.

Each of the children began at an age earlier than her next older sister; the baby Polyhymnia never in all her life had legs that could walk. Perhaps she was never in her life truly human. By the time Clio was six the change was equally advanced in all of them, and almost complete; they continued to grow, but they were now what they would be when they achieved full size. And they were probably already dangerous.

But Agatha never accepted that. Indeed, it remains a question whether she accepted even the fact of the changes that were occurring before her eyes. Her behavior suggests that she had removed herself entirely from reality. She seemed to believe that the pallid cylinders humping wetly across the floors of the dark house (dark because their great lidless eyes could not abide light) were still her four little girls, to be played with and sung to and tucked in at bedtime.

Feester no doubt attempted to reason with her, but there was no possibility that he could say anything capable of penetrating her madness. The more urgent he became, the more she perceived him as a monster, a Saturn bent upon the destruction of his own offspring. But some part of her understood quite well that there was

absolutely no way for her to flee with these children, and she never attempted it; instead she created for herself a state of siege, setting up an ingenious system of barricades and locked doors that made a redoubt of the cellar and several ground-floor rooms. Here she lived in the dark in perpetual terror, lavishing love and tenderness upon the four small horrors that had been her children, crooning children's songs to them in the clammy blackness of a cave-like room in the cellar which had come to be their lair.

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One can imagine a desperate Feester prowling at night through his part of the house, scourged by an absolute conviction that the creatures must be destroyed and simultaneously stretched on the rack of an agonized and hopeless grief for his lost children. He wept sometimes, it may be supposed, or raged incontinently and cursed God for allowing his ship to survive the storm. He temporized and procrastinated. And in the end he waited too long, and it was too late.

"It was *tooo* late," Uncle Caleb said and fell silent. It was a storyteller's trick. He was waiting for me to say, "Why? Why was it too late? What happened?" And of course I said it: "What happened?"

"Well, no one knows, really," he said. "Of course no one ever saw Agatha again. I think we have to conclude that they ate her. And then, it seems, they left the house and went into the lake, down into that black water, down to live in the mud where they were meant to live. *And there they live to this very day.*"

It was very dramatic, and very well done, and despite any theories about the proper setting for the narration of a spooky story, it seemed to me at that moment that I was in just exactly the right place to enjoy the maximum thrill from this one. Looking down at that blind, black house I found myself elaborating and enlarging upon Uncle Caleb's brisk summation of those last events, wondering whether Agatha, in her last desperate seconds, beset by greedy teeth, might have had a flash of bright, hard sanity and realized, in her moment of lucidity before the final darkness took her, that these were not — were not by any means — her children. And it seemed to me quite easy to visualize the flight after the feast: the silent opening of a ground-floor door and the faint gleam of four pale shapes in the darkness moving soundlessly across the weeds to slide without splashing into the black water. And in the house, silence.

We led the horses back up to Dexter Lane and mounted. Uncle Caleb said, "Shall we go on to the end of the road?"

“What’s up there?” I asked.

“Three farms. All abandoned for, oh, forty years. Kraft, MacTavish and Love were the farmers. The Krafts and the MacTavishes are farming over in the valley now, but I don’t know what became of the Loves. Nobody will farm those places any more. They’ve got a reputation for being hard-luck farms. Something to do with the feesters in the lake, I imagine.”

“Aw, come on, Uncle Caleb. There aren’t really any feesters, are there?”

He grinned. “Why, I think you’ll have to make up your own mind about that one, Nick. But I’ll tell you this: there was indeed a man named Elihu Feester, and he built that house and married Agatha Stallworth and had four daughters. And it’s in the archives that Agatha and the four daughters disappeared. Feester reported to the sheriff that Agatha had taken the children and run away. Stallworth backed him up, and the story was accepted, if not necessarily believed in all quarters. As to the curse and monsters in the lake — a good many people in the county believe it.”

“But you don’t, do you, Uncle Caleb?”

He continued to grin. “I always keep an open mind, Nick. ‘There are more things . . .’ — you know the quotation. Who can say?”

By unspoken mutual consent we had turned the horses toward home. Being pointed toward the stables aroused thoughts of oats in their heads, and despite the heat they tended to insist on trotting. Even this unaccustomed liveliness in my old Salome did not wholly take my mind off the feesters, however, and after a while I said, “Well, I know stuff like that’s just in stories. Or movies. Not in Sturkeyville.”

“But you’d like to believe it, is that it?”

“Well, you know. The house and the lake. They’re really spooky, boy. You can believe it when you look at them.”

Uncle Caleb said, “They belong to your grandfather, you know. The house and the lake. They still call it the Phillips place. For some reason it never did get to be called the Feester place.”

“Grandpa? Grandpa owns it?”

“He does. And one of these days I’ll own it.”

“Gosh. Gosh. What’ll you do with it, Uncle Caleb?”

“Why, nothing. Absolutely nothing at all. Except pay the taxes. That was your great-grandfather’s arrangement with Captain Feester.”

“Hey,” I said. “Wait a minute. You never told me that part.”

“So I didn’t,” he said. “I’ll tell you now. A postscript, really.” He paused. “Feester went away not too long after that. Went away, and wasn’t seen or heard of again. He told your great-grandfather that he was accursed, that he would have to go where there were no people, and he needed legal advice before he went. The arrangement he wanted to make was this: he asked your great-grandfather to take the proper legal steps to insure that the house and the lake would stay undisturbed for as long as possible — forever, if that could be done. But there was no such thing as the modern trust in those days, and the law forbade entail. So there appeared to be no way to accomplish what he wanted. The upshot finally was that the two men shook hands on a gentlemen’s agreement: Feester would deed the land to your great-grandfather in exchange for his word that the property would be kept in the Scoggins family in perpetuity, if possible, and that it would be kept forever undisturbed. The idea was that each Scoggins would deed the property to his eldest son as soon as the son was of responsible age and temperament, and that the sons were to be impressed with the importance of preserving things as they were.

“Some money went with the deal. Quite a lot of money, apparently. The Scoggins money dates from then. It seems that Feester’s gold had arrived just in time to save Stallworth’s bank from some sort of fatal default that had resulted from old Ezra’s loony stubbornness, and Feester had taken a controlling interest in the bank in exchange. Your great-grandfather got Feester’s stock in the bank, and Lawyer Scoggins was suddenly in the banking business. He was good at it too, and greedy, and he tended to keep properties he foreclosed. So by the time two or three panics had come and gone he owned a fair percentage of this end of the county. We still have most of it.

“And so in a few years your grandfather will be making a deed to me, and then it’ll be my responsibility to see that everything is preserved intact. And to begin to think about what to do about the next generation.”

He fell silent. I was riding a little in the lead, and I turned to look at him. On his face was an expression I had never seen him wear before, an expression, I now realized, of an emotion very close to despair. I knew, from overheard parental conversations, something about his loss of Dorothy Hodge, and I was able to make the connection between that and the remark about the next generation. I blurted, “You mean you’re *never* going to get married, Uncle Caleb?”

The bleak look intensified for a moment and then disappeared, and he grinned again. "Oh, I wouldn't say that, Nick. Time will tell. But if it should happen that I don't marry, I expect you've figured out that you're next in line. In twenty or thirty years I may well be deeding the place to you."

"I don't want it," I said, instantly and without having to think about it. "I don't want it."

That was during the summer of 1934. What Uncle Caleb had told me was, I have no doubt, all he then knew, or had heard, about the feesters. It was not until five years later that he learned something further, when, on his thirty-fifth birthday, Grandpa Scoggins handed him a deed to the Phillips place and told him the rest of the story. I was sixteen then, still spending my summers in Sturkeyville, and once every summer Uncle Caleb and I made the excursion up Dexter Lane and ate our lunch in the clearing. The house and the lake never changed at all from year to year, and even though I was five years older now, and (I firmly believed) reasonably sophisticated, the place still seemed pretty spooky. I said as much to Uncle Caleb.

"Yes," he said. "I want you to promise me something, Nick. Promise me that you'll never go down there. That you won't even come this far unless I'm with you."

I stared at him. He appeared to be perfectly serious. "You believe it!" I said, incredulously. "You believe there's feesters in there!"

"I didn't say that. I just said I don't want you going down there. I mean it, too."

And he did. His expression left no doubt about it. It was quite obvious that this was a matter he took very seriously. I said, "Well, sure, Uncle Caleb. Sure. I promise."

I was more than a little intimidated. He had never used that tone with me before. I was not wholly surprised, though. Each summer I was finding him a little changed; somewhat more detached, a bit gloomier, a touch more cynical. My mother and grandmother did a lot of worrying about him, although they simultaneously seemed to find a certain melancholy romantic satisfaction in his state of mind: "An old-fashioned broken heart," they said. For myself, I found it totally unsatisfactory; I wanted my old Uncle Caleb back.

Then Holmes Ungelbauer died. He died around Christmastime, suddenly, of pneumonia. He was a wiry polo player of thirty-six, the sort of person of whom it is said that he never had a sick day in his life; the fact of his death was difficult for the town to accept. He left

no children, only his widow, the former Dorothy Hodge.

My grandmother's letters to my mother that winter as usual concerned themselves largely with Uncle Caleb and his state of mind, and we were easily able to infer from what she wrote that despite his undoubted grief over Holmes's death, a faint but perceptible improvement in his spirit was coming about. Within a year he was openly paying court to the widow, and during the summer after the courtship began — my last summer before going into the army — he was a different man altogether; he was, I think, very much like the young man who had lost Dorothy to Holmes ten years before, the young man I did not remember because I had been too young when it happened. He was playful and funny and his ironies had lost their bitter edge. He was a happy man, a man who clearly believed he was going to recover a thing of value that he had given up as forever lost.

He did not get it, of course. He had bad luck, Uncle Caleb. I was in the army by then, and my mother's long, chatty letters, reaching me in Fort Benning and Camp Shelby, and then in a series of forlorn places in Western Europe, kept me up to date (more up to date than I thought really necessary, to tell the truth) on events in Sturkeyville. The villain was a man named Willing, Otis R. Willing. At any rate my mother and grandmother thought of him as a villain. But then Dorothy was someone they had always known, and Willing was a newcomer, and so it was natural of them to assign the guilt (if guilt there was) to him, not to her.

He was vice-president and general superintendent at the foundry, a big, serious engineer from Purdue or perhaps Michigan State, a former Bright Young Man at Big Steel, who had been lured away by a challenge to put the moribund Hodge Brothers Foundry back on its feet. He had burst violently into the musty corridors of the old firm a few years before, an expensive expert with a reputation to uphold and a fierce joy in his work. He began with a merciless pruning of deadwood, ridding the offices of a puttering horde of routine-bound functionaries who had long since cease to do any productive work, but who, by tradition, had every reason to believe they would remain on the payroll until at last their infirmities precluded even token appearances at work. He turned then to the denizens of the executive wing and found that he could not depose them; they were, after all, members of the family. But he bypassed them ruthlessly, so that within a few months they were left as functionless ornaments in their elegant offices, free to practice their putting on the carpet or gather together for futile indignation meetings or otherwise fill pointless

days. Their responsibilities were assumed by men who came with Willing, men like himself, competent, assured, socially graceless, and, by Sturkeyville's standards, without backgrounds. They came with their prairie accents and degrees from unknown colleges and remade the plant; well before the arrival of the fat contracts of the war the foundry was moving steadily toward profitable operations.

An executive position in the foundry carried with it a social position in the town; Willing was immediately and automatically a member of the country club and the hunt (a purely honorary membership; he did not ride at all) and was invited to take his lunches at the round table at the Updegraff Hotel. If he had had a wife she would have been asked into the Hospital Guild and the Bridge Whist Society. But he had no wife, and that lack made it difficult to fit him into social life at the level of his entry. There was, furthermore, a whiff of wickedness about his reputation: Fred Ungelbauer, who sat on boards of directors in Pittsburgh, had brought back rumors of a mistress of long standing, and that, together with his age (he was probably forty), set him somewhat apart from the manageable classification of Eligible Bachelor. But, although it was an awkward situation, it was not a real problem because for the first couple of years he appeared quite literally to have no time for anything but his work. Then he married the widow Ungelbauer, and there was no longer any question about his place in the scheme of things.

They presented the town with a *fait accompli*. One Monday morning Wetzel Avenue awoke to see Willing's car parked in Dorothy's driveway. The street watched avidly until Willing emerged from the house and drove off to the foundry, and then it began to telephone Dorothy. By noon the whole town knew that they had been married on Saturday in a county seat a hundred miles away.

I never learned where Uncle Caleb heard the news, or what his initial reaction was. He was not the sort of man who displayed emotion in public, and he may have managed not to show what he felt. But the shock must have been enormous. He had lost Dorothy again, and not only lost her, but lost her to a man who could never have entered his head as a rival, a man he would have thought of only as hired help, a worthy person, no doubt, but not the sort who had any right even to dream of someone like Dorothy. I think I understood Uncle Caleb's mental processes pretty well, and it seems to me that this action of Dorothy's — this action that he surely at first flatly disbelieved — must have been a humiliation almost beyond bearing. When he lost her to Holmes he lost her to an equal. But Otis R. Willing — ah, that was humiliating.

In November I stepped on a land mine in a vineyard above the Moselle, and by Christmas I was in the hospital in Baltimore, with a right leg that was going to be a permanent problem, but comforted by the knowledge that I would never again have to spend my days and nights in a frozen hole. My parents came, and my mother cried over me for a time, and got over it, and then she cried again when I asked about Uncle Caleb. When she left the room to seek a vase for the flowers she had brought, I put the question to my father.

“He’s in bad shape, Nick,” he said. “Drinking hard. Turning into a hermit. He moved out of grandpa’s house a year ago, and he’s living alone in the country with his horses. He’s fixed up an old farmhouse out by Howard’s Lake, and even your grandparents don’t see him more than once a month. It’s bad.”

It was indeed. Not long after V-J Day I finally got back to Sturkeyville, and on the second day of my visit I borrowed Grandpa’s car and drove up to the end of Dexter Lane, where Uncle Caleb had set himself up in the old Kraft farmhouse. I was appalled. Although he had not in fact changed in appearance very much, nor become dirty and slovenly, as I had half expected, he had undergone a change of character. Or of personality, at least. His old detachment and gentle irony had soured and curdled and become an unnerving blend of pessimism and cynicism. I found myself almost disliking him. We sat in the big room he had created by knocking out all the first-floor walls except those of the kitchen, and I listened to his bitter commentary with sorrow and incredulity. He had reached the point of viewing all accomplishment — including the war just ended — as futile and pointless; all human effort, in his black view, was inspired by sordid and ignoble motives; all human beings were knaves, and women were the worst of the lot. Not that they were entirely wicked and malicious, he said; they were simply empty and thoughtless and without character, and hence easily susceptible of being led by evil men into discreditable behavior. And such men were the basest and lowest of our low race.

I knew he was talking about Willing, and he knew I knew, and soon he began to use the name. He had been drinking pretty steadily, and as his rage and resentment fed upon themselves his speech began to lapse into incoherency. I was a little frightened, and I tried — as I had been trying all afternoon — to change the subject.

“What do you hear from your neighbors down at the lake?” I said.

“Neighbors?”

“The feesters. They’re your neighbors now, aren’t they?”

He gave me a startled, suspicious glare. “The feesters? What do you know about the feesters?”

“Why, I know all about them,” I said. “You told me yourself. Five-foot aquatic maggots with shark’s mouths. Members of the local gentry until The Curse of Hoog, Fish-God of the South Seas, fell upon them. Named for selected Muses. I’ve always wanted to meet a maggot named Polyhymnia.”

His face changed expression several times as I spoke, altering from suspicion to anger, and then to an odd combination of fear and something akin to smugness. “Careful, there, Nick,” he said. “Be careful. Don’t make fun of things you don’t know anything about. You might be sorry.”

“Now what the hell does that mean? ‘Might be sorry.’ You mean the feesters might come and eat me?”

“You might be sorry.”

“Oh, for God’s sake,” I said. I felt sick. He was deadly serious. This was not just drunken maundering, it was lunacy. I shouted at him: “For God’s sake, Uncle Caleb, what are you talking about?”

“Never mind,” he said. “Never mind. Believe what you like. Call it what you like. Just stay away from Howard’s Lake, that’s all.”

And that was all I got out of him. I had to report to my grandparents not only the total failure of my attempt to lure him back to real life, but also my conviction that it was hopeless to try. He had, to put it simply, gone off his head; I saw nothing to do but wait, and hope for some sort of recovery. I was very wise at that time, with a far greater certainty of the answers to hard questions than I possess today, and it was perfectly clear to me that a man who believed in ancient curses and monsters at the bottom of the local lake was, *ipso facto*, insane. But I thought it was only temporary, a consequence of preserving into advanced age (he was over forty) emotions that were seemly only in the young. It had been, to be sure, a bitter experience for him, to lose Dorothy twice; but I myself had loved and lost, and recovered very nicely, and I saw no reason why Uncle Caleb, an older man whose feelings could not possibly be as deep as mine had been, should not show an equal resilience in recovering from his geriatric infatuation.

Then he lost her for the third time. That is how he saw it, at any rate. It might plausibly be argued that in none of the three cases had he lost her, because he had never in fact had her. But when she

was once more widowed, he allowed himself a certain amount of hope again, and when that small hope was extinguished, he went irretrievably over the edge.

It had been a foolish hope, to be sure. Dorothy had rejected him twice and apparently had been entirely contented through all the years with Holmes and Willing. After Willing's murder and the attendant turmoil and publicity, no reasonable person could have expected her to stay in Sturkeyville and take up with Uncle Caleb. But Uncle Caleb was by then very far indeed from a reasonable person.

He was a suspect in the murder. The prime suspect, the only suspect, really, except for the general fear of a vagrant madman. As it happened, Uncle Caleb was investigated and absolved almost immediately, and the crime was generally believed to have been the work of an insane hobo, who had probably caught the next freight train out of town. The case went down on the books as an unsolved murder. And the town went in fear.

Their fear was quite sensible; it had in truth been an atrocious crime. Willing had been working late that night, as was his habit. He was building an entirely new plant for the foundry, south of town in the direction of the lake, and the last weeks before production was to begin were hectic in the extreme. A night watchman saw him leaving the building about eleven o'clock. It was a night of torrential rain, and water had shorted out some of the new wiring, so that there were no lights in the parking lot. Willing's was the only parked car.

The watchman's later testimony was that he had heard what he thought might be a scream, coming faintly through the roar of the rain. He went immediately to the door that gave onto the parking lot, and peered out. He could see nothing. He ran (as fast as he could; he was an old man) to his cubicle for the flashlight he should have been carrying. He threw its beam out into the parking lot. Then he stood frozen in the doorway for a little time, retching and trembling. When he was able to overcome his paralysis, he ran (faster this time) to the telephone.

The sheriff was an experienced lawman who had seen his share of grisly sights, but he admitted afterward that he had been shaken by what had been done to Willing. "Get the tarp, for God's sake," he said to a deputy. "Jesus Christ. I never saw anything like that. That's crazy." He stopped. "Crazy," he said. "Caleb Scoggins, by God. That's Otis Willing, there. Got to be Scoggins. We'll just go out there and

get him. Keebler, you stay here till the meat wagon comes. Stark, you come with me. By God, we'll beat him home."

They slipped and slewed up Dexter Lane through the downpour. "No car's been down this road," the deputy said. "Not a track."

"He went down before the rain started."

"That was early this morning," the deputy said.

"He walked, then. Or rode his horse. Watch what you're doing."

The Kraft house faced the end of the road, and the headlights lit up its front. There was no sign of life. The deputy swept about with the spotlight. "Nobody's used the front door," he said. "Not a track."

"You take the flashlight and go around the house," the sheriff said. "I'll watch the front."

The deputy disappeared into the rain. He was back in a few minutes. "Nobody's been in or out since it started raining. Not a human track. Looks like maybe a dog dragged something through. But no Caleb Scoggins."

The sheriff felt a sense of triumph, as he never failed to mention when he told about it. "I figured I had him, then," he said. "I figured to hide the car in the woods, and then me and Stark would lay low till he got there. I thought he'd probably come back over the hills and wouldn't see the car tracks. And right then, by God, was when the front door opened, and there stood Caleb in his pajamas, blinkin' in the headlights."

So Uncle Caleb was cleared, and the town was left with the mad hobo theory and went in fear at night. Dorothy was not one of the fearful: she left town immediately and never came back, except many years later, to be buried. I suppose there were too many memories of tragedy in the town for her to stay, but her flight also served to save her from the terrors of the next few years. Because there were more murders.

Two of them, both crimes of the most appalling gruesomeness. There was a disappearance as well, which added to the general disquiet, although it appeared to have nothing to do with the murders. But then it was a frightened town in those years, apprehensive of the darkness and suspicious of strangers. The sensational press had a feast, spreading the story of the Sturkeyville Butcher from coast to coast and seizing the opportunity to recount once more the stories of Jack the Ripper and other mass murderers.

And Uncle Caleb bereft now for the third time, disintegrated rapidly, crawling further into the bottle and wholly abandoning

any effort to live a life of normal sociability. News of him came from Mattie Helms, my grandmother's housekeeper and my old friend, who was my only correspondent in the town since my grandfather's death and my grandmother's stroke. Mattie wrote, "Well Nick you would not believe your Uncle Caleb, I think the poor man had left his senses entirely, he does not wash and is very dirty and drunk. It is safe to say that Dorothy Hodge has a lot to answer for but God will judge. Now he has left the Kraft farm, he has moved to the old Feester house by Howard's Lake which is said by the country people to be haunted as I guess you know. It is almost a hundred years since anyone lived there, what it must be like inside I can not imagine. I wish you and your mother would come Nick and see if you can help him."

But I saw no way to help him, and indeed I was beginning to have certain small doubts about wanting to. The suspicions that nagged at me were of course unmentionable; I hardly let myself think about them, let alone discuss them with anyone else. It seemed to me, though, that I could read the same fear between the lines of Mattie's letter, and my mother's near-hysteria when Uncle Caleb's troubles were discussed seemed perhaps a touch excessive even for concern about a beloved brother's disintegration. Mother and Mattie were, of course, no more anxious to put their dread into words than I was, and we all kept our own counsel.

What troubled us was this: we had, reluctantly and unwillingly, been forced to conclude that all three of the murdered men stood in a relationship to Uncle Caleb that might have seemed to him — given the decrepit state of his mentality — to be inimical: first Willing, the contemptible man who had snatched away Dorothy and exposed Uncle Caleb to ridicule; then Gunther Hodge, who had brought Willing to Sturkeyville; and then Stark, the young deputy who had come to arrest him on the rainy night of Willing's death. These were not pleasant thoughts. But the person who had disappeared could in no way, I was grateful to note, be connected to Uncle Caleb: she was Wanda Karsky, a seventeen-year-old miner's daughter with a reputation for wildness, and no one but her parents thought there was much of a mystery about her disappearance. The consensus was that she had run off with a man and would end up on the street of a big city.

But the murders were a continuing occasion for brooding and black speculation. What could not be said aloud festered at the back of my mind, and no matter how much I tried to persuade myself that my conjectures maligned Uncle Caleb most grievously, and that he was,

after all, hurting no one but himself by his lunacy, I remained prey to grim suspicions. And, although not a word was spoken, I think my mother, to some degree, had the same apprehensions.

The result was that for a long time I did not go to Sturkeyville. My mother visited my grandmother from time to time, but not nearly as often as she would have done under other circumstances, and she never saw Uncle Caleb at all. During this time I completed law school and became a minor cog in a very large firm on LaSalle Street. I acquired a wife, and a house in Winnetka, and a son. Then my grandmother died, and I went to Sturkeyville again after all the years.

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Uncle Caleb came to the funeral, an apparition that bore only a remote resemblance to the Uncle Caleb of old. It seemed to me now that he was hopelessly lost. He was emaciated and slovenly in his dress, of course, and afflicted with strange tics; but that was not what was ultimately disquieting. It was his face. His eyes, especially, were strange. He held them open to their utmost, in a round, unblinking stare that seemed to be focused on something other than his surroundings. He held his mouth so that his lips were drawn into thin lines, keeping his teeth always partially exposed. And he was pale, pale beyond belief, with a dead-white, shiny, almost translucent pallor that was faintly disgusting.

“You need more sun, Uncle Caleb,” I said. “You’re looking kind of bleached.”

“Sun,” he said. “I don’t go out in the sun much. Bothers me. Stay inside most of the time. Too bright right now.” It was in fact a dull December day, the sun a watery, weak disc behind a thin cloud cover. “Oh, much too bright,” he said. His eyes were turned toward me, but the focus of his enormous stare seemed to be somewhere to my rear. “I’m living out at the Feester house now, you know, Nick,” he said. “As soon as all this is over, I want you to come out there with me. Will you do that?”

“Sure, Uncle Caleb,” I said. It was exactly what I wanted. I believed that I had puzzled out some of the answers, and I wanted to talk to him, to have the thing out, to satisfy myself that my ugly ideas were only black fictions. I was quite ready, now, to accept my uncle as a harmless lunatic, but the idea of homicidal mania had to be laid to rest.

The coffin was lowered into the grave. The ritual words were said, and everyone hurried to the waiting cars, grief suspended for the moment in the sheer discomfort of the day’s bitter cold. The

undertaker had assigned Uncle Caleb and me to the same car. My wife was not with me; she had given birth to our second son five days before and was snug at home in Winnetka. In the car he said, "You'll have to drive me back to the lake. I don't have a car that will run any more. Hostetler sent one of these things out to get me this morning." Hostetler was the undertaker.

Sturkeyville still favored funeral baked meats, and there was no way to avoid the customary luncheon at the house, an enormous heavy meal catered by the ladies of the Moravian Church. Uncle Caleb was not at table; he had disappeared upstairs, where, it transpired, he had hidden a bottle, perhaps years before. After everyone had eaten too much and departed, and Mattie Helms and my parents and I were sitting over a final cup of coffee, he appeared suddenly in the doorway. "All right, Nick, let's go," he said.

"Oh, Caleb," my mother said. "I *did* want to talk to you. It's been so long."

"Next time, next time. Come on, Nick." He was swaying in the doorway, glaring with that great round stare at some indeterminate point behind us, a scarecrow figure in a wrinkled expensive suit that was now several sizes too large for him. I seemed to have no choice. I said, "O.K., Uncle Caleb. Let's go."

And so at last I found myself entering the Feester house. We drove in by the lower road, which came within a mile of the lake. The driveway in from the road, impassable for half a century, had been cleared and repaired, but it remained crooked and pitted and had to be negotiated slowly. I concentrated on my driving. The driveway ended abruptly, after making a sharp, steep turn around a limestone embankment, and we were suddenly out of the trees and facing the house.

The years had not improved it: it stood there among the frozen weeds with the same suggestion of paradox and seedy menace I had felt looking at it from the hillside long ago. It loomed blackly above us against the gray sky, top-heavy and brutal, a shuttered receptacle of old tragedy. Smoke was coming out of one of the gaunt chimneys, a human touch that compounded the paradox. I shivered and said, "Jesus, Uncle Caleb. How come you live out here?"

"Why, it's mine," he said. "Where else would I live?" He seemed to think that the answer was responsive. "Come on," he said. "It's cold out here."

It was anything but cold in the house, at least in the front ground-floor room where he lived. A great cast-iron stove, its pipe plugged

roughly into the chimney above the mantel of the old fireplace, was pouring out heat in suffocating quantities. We entered into an oppressive unclean atmosphere of human odors long sealed in an overheated room, a staleness of unwashed bedding and a hermit's cooking utensils. It was pitch-black after the front door closed behind us, and Uncle Caleb led me by the arm into the room and struck a match and lighted an oil lamp. The bloom of yellow light illuminated a shadowy confusion of bulky furniture, with all the paraphernalia of his life scattered upon and among it in incondite heaps: groceries, tools, books, bottles and trash, indiscriminately piled together on table and chairs and floor. The bed in the corner was in shadow; I could not tell whether the welter upon it was part of the same rancid accumulation or only bedclothes long unchanged. I felt a little queasy.

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"Have a seat, there, Nick," he said. "I'll stoke up the stove and fix us a drink. I've got some things to tell you. It's time, now." His face seemed to float at the edge of the shadows, the great round eyes staring out of it at something behind me. "That chair there," he said. "Just throw the stuff on the floor." I did as he commanded, but my skin crawled a little when I sat. I refused the drink; nothing could have induced me to put my lips to anything in that room.

"Now, first of all, I've got this for you," he said. He passed me a sheet of paper. I took it with extreme reluctance. I knew very well what it was, but I held it to the light and confirmed it: a warranty deed to the Phillips place.

"Uncle Caleb, I told you twenty years ago I don't want it," I said. "The old promise has been kept long enough. If it was ever made at all. Sell the place, or let the county take it for taxes. This house ought to be torn down."

He paid no attention. "It's your responsibility now, Nick. A sacred trust. Family honor and all. You're bound to keep everything intact. Keep it intact and deed it to one of your sons. And set up a trust in your will to preserve it for as long as the law allows, in case you die before you can make a deed. I want your word. Your oath."

"Just a minute," I said. "Hold on. I said I didn't want it. I meant it. I'm going to put this thing in the stove. I see it hasn't been recorded, so that will be the end of it."

An expression of really appalling viciousness came over the pale face, and his voice went to the edge of a scream: "You will not. You will accept your responsibility. You are responsible now for four lives. You cannot cast that off."

“My God,” I said. “You mean the feesters.”

“Why, yes,” he said, his voice suddenly quite reasonable. “Of course, the feesters. What else do you think this is all about?”

I took a deep breath. “Uncle Caleb,” I said, “let’s drop this bilge about the feesters. They’re a campfire story to scare boy scouts with, and we both know it. But I do believe you’re serious about wanting to keep the place intact and in the family, and I think I’ve figured out why. Shall I tell you?”

He gave me a sly look. “You’re wrong, you know. The feesters are down there, all right. But go ahead. Tell me what you think.”

“Here’s how I’ve pieced it together,” I said. “This isn’t about superstition or curses and slimy things in the lake. It’s about murder and conspiracy and scandal. The murders and conspiracy are a century old, now, but in Sturkeyville the scandal would be as fresh as ever, Sturkeyville being what it is.

“What I think, Uncle Caleb, is that our money — the Scoggins fortune — was founded on blackmail. I think that Elihu Feester murdered his wife and children and was caught or discovered by a couple of pillars of the community — one of them his own father-in-law — who proceeded to strip him of everything he had and then sent him off, a beggar threatened by the hangman.

“What did he have in that wagon of his? More gold coin, maybe, maybe a big box of it. What’ll you bet Great-Grandpa and Ezra Stallworth got that, too? And then Great-Grandpa beat Stallworth out of his share, somehow, and got the bank as well.

“But the bodies were buried somewhere here on the Phillips place. I don’t think they’d have been put in the lake, because sunken bodies have a way of surfacing eventually. The bodies were buried here, and since their discovery would raise the hue and cry for Feester, who could be expected to talk if taken, they took steps to prevent any discovery. Great-Grandpa bought the place and saw to it that it stayed wild and untenanted. He may even have started the story of the curse and the feesters.

“I guess he must have told Grandpa all about it when he deeded the place over, and impressed on him the importance of keeping those bodies hidden. Feester no doubt would have been dead by then, but the discovery of the bodies — or skeletons, I suppose — would have raised a lot of questions. There must be no scandal. No, indeed. The Scoggins were one of the First Families. Think what Sturkeyville would do with a juicy morsel like that.

“And then it was your turn, Uncle Caleb, and you continued everything just as it was before, and now you want me to take over. Well, I won’t. I don’t suppose the events were exactly as I’ve put them together, but it has to be something like that, and I want no part of it. Scandal won’t bother me. I don’t live in Sturkeyville, and everybody’s got a thief somewhere in his ancestry. Anyhow, everybody involved in this thing has been dead for a long, long time. So I’ll say it again: I don’t want title to this place. I won’t take it.”

I was aware that my voice had become very loud and that it shook a little. I leaned forward to peer at him, searching for a clue to the effect of my thunderous pronouncement. And Uncle Caleb tittered.

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I am not sure what I had expected, but it was most certainly not that. He tittered and said, “Nick, you’re crazy,” — which, under the circumstances, struck me as grimly comical. “Do you really believe the reason we’ve got to save this place is just to prevent gossip?” he said. “Who cares about that? I tell you the feesters are alive under the ice down there. They’re alive and they’ve got to be kept a secret. You’ve got to see that.”

He was passionately sincere, poor lunatic. I said, “Why, Uncle Caleb? Why do they have to be kept a secret?”

“Why, because they’re dangerous,” he said. “They kill people. They’ve done some really awful things these last few years. They’ve got to be watched. But if anybody finds out about it, they’ll come down and destroy them.”

“Well, why not?”

“Why not? Why not? Because it would be murder, that’s why not.”

“But they’re murderers themselves, aren’t they? And not even human?”

He answered quickly and glibly: “Oh, they’re not responsible. It’s their nature. You couldn’t call it murder. Anyhow, they’ve only killed people who deserved it. If you look at it right, they actually ought to be thanked.”

“You’re talking about Otis Willing, aren’t you? And Gunther Hodge and Tom Stark?”

“Yes, yes. Nobody could say *they* were any great loss to anybody. Oh, the feesters knew what they were doing. They’re amazing, really. Justice is what they’re interested in.”

I had to pursue it to the end. “And how about Wanda? Wanda Karsky?”

He did not answer immediately. "Well," he said at last, "that one surprised me. The feesters didn't even know her. It's kind of a puzzle. But I'll tell you what I think. I think maybe they've begun to like it, that maybe sometimes they can't help themselves. That's why they've got to be watched. But don't you worry. I'll watch them. And when I'm gone, you'll have to do the watching. You see that now, don't you?" He sounded, suddenly, frightened and vulnerable.

For better or worse, I made a decision at that moment. I cannot say that I take any pride in it or that it shows a proper and responsible regard for the public weal; but my suspicions were still only suspicions, and he was my uncle and had been the light of my boyhood. I told myself that he was physically in very bad shape, that he could hardly have very long to live, and that to harass a dying man for something that was probably only a creation of my own imagination would be unforgivable. And it is quite possible — little as I care to admit it — that the fear of scandal, which I had just been deriding so strenuously, was the critical influence.

At any rate, I elected at that moment to take no action. I said, "All right, Uncle Caleb. I'll keep the deed. And you keep watch on the feesters. You watch them very carefully, very carefully indeed. Because if they ever get loose and harm someone, I promise you it will be the end of them, and a pretty terrible end, too. Do you understand me? Do you grasp what I'm saying?"

"Oh, I do, Nick, I do," he said. "You don't have to worry about it. I'll be all right. From now on they'll stay in their place, down there in the mud where they belong. I'll see to that. And I'm glad you've decided to do your duty and take on the ownership. I knew you would, of course. You've never been one to shirk your responsibilities. I guess that takes care of everything. You can leave, now."

And that was that. We did not even shake hands. I heard the slam of the door and a clash of bolts behind me, and I stood on the step and took great breaths of the cold air, clearing from my lungs the fug of Uncle Caleb's noisome den. Then I drove back to town and told my mother some lies: that Uncle Caleb was living quite comfortably out there at the lake; that he was neither as drunken nor as crazy as we had supposed; that we need have no fear about his future behavior; and that he had sent his love to her. I think she half believed me, because she wanted to.

Back in Chicago the old suspicions continued to nag at me, augmented, I must admit, by stabs of conscience and an uneasy conviction that I had made a tragic error. But the months passed, and then the years, and no dire news came from Sturkeyville. I

decided at last that I had after all been right. Uncle Caleb and his troubles became, with the passage of time, matters that I thought about only occasionally, and then not for long. Those rare occasions came when my mother entertained visitors from Sturkeyville, who would, at her delicate but ruthless insistence, reluctantly tell what they knew about how things were now with Uncle Caleb.

They always brought an account of a deteriorating situation, describing a hermit committed to the absolute extreme of solitude, a man upon whom no one had laid eyes for several years. The house and the lake remained inviolate, carefully avoided by the populace. Twice a year, perhaps, the sheriff would send a deputy to ascertain that the hermit Scoggins was still alive. The deputy would thunder at the door until he heard a voice from inside; having heard it, he would report to the sheriff that the nut still lived, and that would be Uncle Caleb's sole contact with the outside world until the next official visit. It was not a reassuring state of affairs, but no one doubted that it was better than having him locked away.

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Then one day I saw on an inside page of the *Tribune* a story with a Sturkeyville byline that instantly collapsed my rickety defense against facing the truth about Uncle Caleb. Another murder had been committed, an atrocity as bad as the rest. As I read, I realized that I had been expecting it and that I had, without realizing it, already made plans. I knew exactly what I was going to do.

I arrived in the late afternoon. The lake was not frozen, now, and the weeds were green, and yet the house seemed even more forbidding than on the gray, bitter day when I had seen it last. There was absolutely no sign that any human being had ever been here, except for the fact of the house itself. I beat on the door, first with the heel of my fist and then, when that had no result, with a stone. The noise was great.

After a time there was a voice from the other side of the door. "Get out!" it said. "Go away!"

"It's me, Uncle Caleb," I shouted. "Me, Nick."

Silence. I let several minutes pass and then beat again with my stone. The voice said, "Go away."

"I'm not going, Uncle Caleb," I said, "and it's no use your saying 'go away.' I'm not going until you let me in or you come out. I won't go away until you've talked to me."

There was silence again for a time, and then I heard bolts being pulled and the snick of the lock. There was a pause, and he said, "All right, you can come in."

I pushed the door open. I saw no one. The doors to the right and left were both closed. From the darkness at the end of the hall he said, "Close the door."

"For Pete's sake, Uncle Caleb," I said. "Light your lamp, first."

"Close it," he said. I pushed it shut and stood there in total darkness. There was an unclassifiable noise and a creak of floorboards, and then I heard the opening of the door of the room on the left. In a moment his voice came from inside the room. "You can light a match, now." It was a strange voice, thin, flat, and without overtones, not much louder than a whisper.

The flare of the match showed the door standing open. I moved toward it cautiously. As I entered the room I encountered the smell again, so strong that it almost had to be physically breasted. "Lamp on the table," he said. I located and lit it. The wick was almost burnt out; even turned to the top, it was no brighter than the match had been, and I stood in a tiny island of light, surrounded by impenetrable shadow. His voice came out of the darkness: "What do you want, Nick?"

"I want you to do the right thing, Uncle Caleb," I said. "You know what it is. I've brought the pistol."

I heard a strange little sound that could have been either a whimper or a giggle. "Now why should I do a thing like that?" he said.

"You know why. You knew I'd be here. You were expecting me, weren't you?" He made no answer. I said, "We had an understanding. I believed you, God help me. And now there's another corpse up in town. Or part of a corpse. But it's the last one, Uncle Caleb. You can be very sure that it's the last one."

Silence again, and then the eerie voice out of the shadows: "That's got nothing to do with me. It's the feesters, Nick. The feesters."

"Yes, of course," I said. "But tell me, Uncle Caleb: does it seem to you that you know how it happened? Do you have a picture in your mind — something that seems almost like a memory — of what happened in the parking lot? As though maybe you know what the feesters are doing, are thinking?"

I was being the amateur psychiatrist, but I was at least partly right. He said, "Yes. Yes. Of course. I knew they were going to do it as soon as they started to think about it. I wished they'd stop thinking about it, but they wouldn't. And finally they did it. And it was awful. Nick, it was awful."

"Yes," I said. "You know you're going to have to do it, don't you,

Uncle Caleb? You know it's the only thing that will make the feesters stop, don't you?"

There was only silence. I said, "Come out into the light, now, Uncle Caleb. It's time. You know it's time."

I heard it again, then, the noise I had heard in the hall, but still I saw only shadows. And then I looked down.

He was on the floor, wriggling out of the shadows into the small pool of light at my feet, naked, dead-white, moving like a worm on his belly. His arms were held tight against his sides, his legs were squeezed tightly together. He twisted his head to look up at me from the floor, and the wild growth of hair on his head and face, still the same straw color it had always been, looked very dark against his extraordinary pallor. The great round eyes glowed in the faint lamplight like a nocturnal animal's. Within the tangle of facial hair his teeth gleamed in what could have been either a smile or a snarl.

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It was as horrifying a sight as I ever expect to see, both frightening and pitiful; but it was also more than a little ludicrous, and it was that fact that enabled me to hold fast to my resolution and do what had to be done. I said, "Oh, Uncle Caleb." And then: "Here's the gun, Uncle Caleb."

The teeth flashed yellow in the lamplight. "You know I can't use a gun, Nick. I haven't got any hands. Or arms."

"Or legs, I suppose," I said.

"That's right. No arms or legs. But I can get around all right."

"Yes," I said. "I know. You can indeed." I thought about it for a moment. I said, "Do you suppose you could pretend or imagine — just for a minute or so — that you have an arm and a hand? If I left the gun on the floor?"

This time when he spoke the voice had changed; under the toneless quack was a faint ghost of the voice of my Uncle Caleb, and I swallowed. He said, "No. No. I can't take the gun. But you're right. I've thought about it. The feesters have to be stopped. You'll want to be here won't you. To be sure that I do it. I'll do it now. But another way. Open the door for me, Nick. I can't, you know."

I might have asked him how he had opened it to let me in, but scoring debater points was not what I had come for, and in any case I suppose he would have found the question meaningless. I took the lamp and went to the front door and opened it.

There was a moon at the gibbous stage; it threw a pale oblong of light into the hallway. I extinguished the lamp and went down the steps and a little way out into the weeds. I stood there in the warm night watching the door.

In a little while he came out, a whiteness that bulged suddenly across the threshold and then moved in a silent squirm down the steps and away from the house. And then he was gone, a gleam of white humping with quite astonishing speed in the dim light toward the blackness of the lake. As he reached the edge, I called out, "Goodbye, Uncle Caleb."

There was no reply, only a small splash as the white shape disappeared into the water. And then silence. I walked back to the car and drove into town. On the way I stopped and parked at the side of the road for perhaps half an hour while I gave way to an unseemly emotional fit, howling and weeping and pounding on the steering wheel. When it was over I went to the sheriff's office and reported that I had been to the house, where I had discovered the door standing open and Uncle Caleb nowhere to be found. The sheriff said that he was not surprised and that he would investigate.

He was not surprised, and not much interested, either; and in Sturkeyville the name of Scoggins ended that night as an item of routine police business, a dingy and discreditable end for a proud name. The investigation was hasty and perfunctory: an inadequate search of the woods, and an attempt to drag the lake, which proved to be impossible because it was found to be very much deeper than anyone had suspected. A missing-person bulletin was circulated. A watch was kept on the lake for a while, to see if a body would surface, but it never did.

In due course there was a memorial service at St. David's. I sat sedately through it, remembering strange things. Afterward elderly people came to me and talked about the old days, when they and Uncle Caleb were young and the world was bright. Their conventional nostalgia evoked my own memories of enchanted summers on horseback in the hills above Sturkeyville before the shadows closed in upon Uncle Caleb, and an access of regret and grief and guilt seized and shook me. I might reason that what had occurred was no more than the timely suicide of a homicidal maniac, but what I felt was a terrible sense of loss.

I still feel that loss. It is more than a decade, now, since Uncle Caleb died, and I am a man closer to old age than middle, and Sturkeyville

itself has changed almost beyond recognition, but I have noticed of late that my reveries increasingly tend to dwell upon those boyhood summers with Uncle Caleb. There is, of course, a proximate cause: it has now become imperative that I decide what I am going to do about the Phillips place and the lake. It will be my decision, and mine alone; I did, in the end, record Uncle Caleb's deed, and the property is mine in fee simple, the land and the lake. But not the house; I had it pulled down after Uncle Caleb's death, and its stones hauled away. The weeds grow uninterrupted now around the silent lake.

I have already consulted the Corps of Engineers and a contractor; the lake can be drained. It can be drained and the mud on its bottom exposed to the sun to dry and bake and crack. And anything buried there in the mud will dry and bake as well, and die, if it is alive.

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That is the direction in which my mind has been running, the kind of plans I have been making. Sometimes it seems totally irrational, and indeed almost insane; but then I look at what has begun to happen again in Sturkeyville, and I am persuaded that these things must be done.

There have been more of the murders. They are the same in every respect as those of the past, monstrously savage and gruesome, ghastly rendings and mutilations under midnight rainstorms. The theory is that some unbalanced person was pushed over the edge by reading in a true-crime magazine one of the periodic rehashings of the Sturkeyville Butcher murders. It may be true. I hope so. Another maniac seems more acceptable than what I have almost begun to believe.

And so I think I will drain the lake. If nothing else, it will free me of the obsessive imaginings that have plagued me since I first heard of the new murders. I am persistently visited by a terrifying picture, a picture of the lake. I see it from the hillside above, as I first saw it with Uncle Caleb. It is night in this picture, a night of violent summer rain, utterly black except for sudden lightning that sporadically freezes the scene in a momentary white glare. The surface of the lake is churned by rain.

In a flash of lightning I discern four white shapes in the water, making for shore. Moments later, in another flash, I see them squirming and humping through the weeds away from the lake, the foremost almost at the tree line. I can give them names: Clio, Thalia, Urania, Polyhymnia.

Their name is Feester. Their name is Death.

And the next flash shows the lake as before, black, rain-lashed, lifeless, waiting. They will come back after they have done what they are setting out to do, wriggling back into the black water, sinking into the depths, burrowing into the mud, deep into the cold mud.

That is the vision that obsesses me. It is obviously egregious nonsense, the sort of thing that could be accepted only by the most credulous and superstitious, and I devoutly wish I could exorcise it. But it will not go away.

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It will not go away, and indeed it becomes more elaborate. My imagination, fed no doubt by discreditable suppressed guilts and fears, has given the screw at last an unbearable turn, and now, as I lie tensely in bed or sit in my chair gnawing my knuckles, I have begun to imagine that there are not four shapes exposed by the lightning's glare, but five.

And I will not tolerate that. Uncle Caleb, whatever became of his mind, deserves better of me than that. I will drain the lake. I will drain it down to its bottomless mud. And in that mud we will find Uncle Caleb's bones.

I hope very much we will find Uncle Caleb's bones.