NIGHT CRY

FALL 1985

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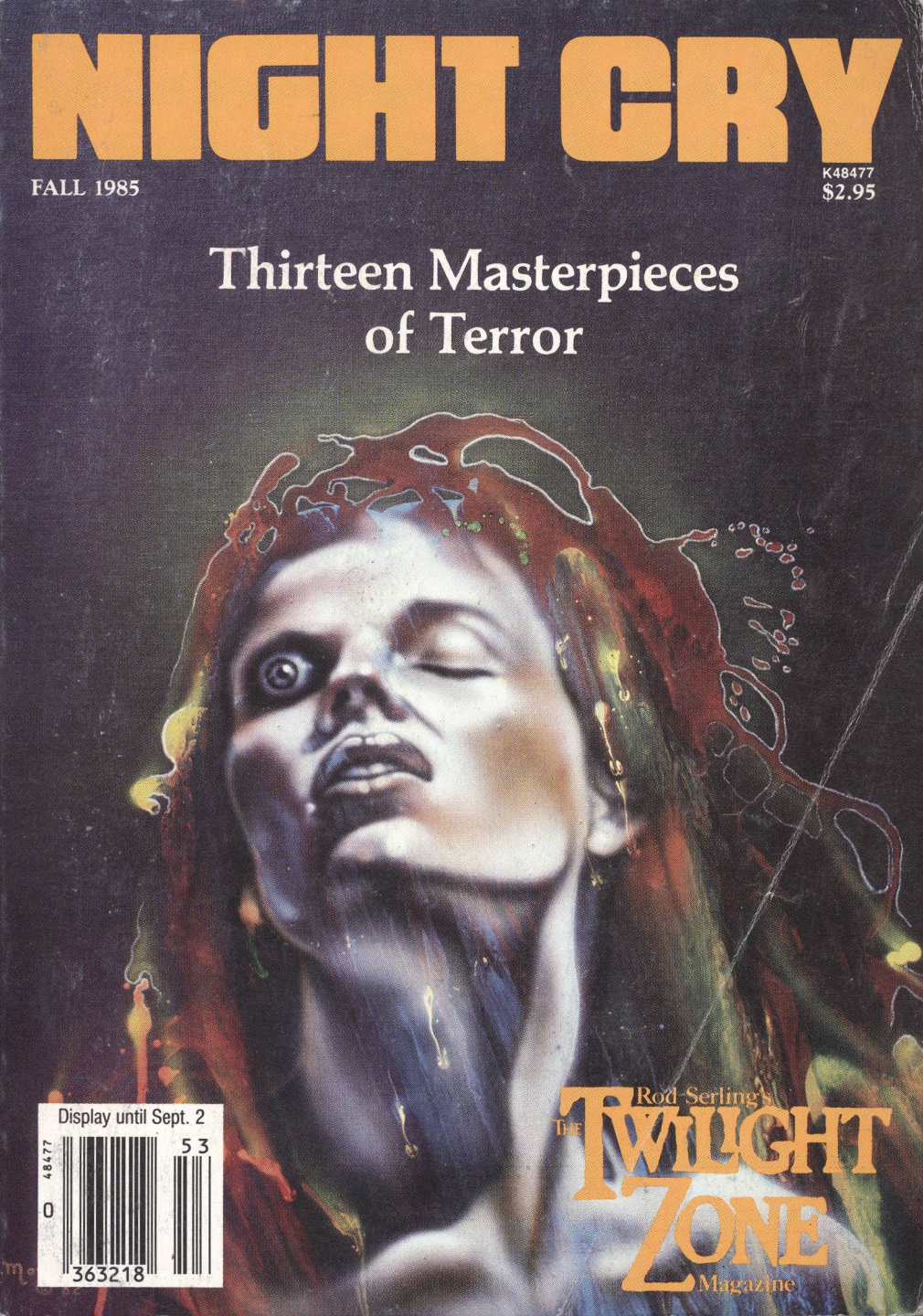
Thirteen Masterpieces of Terror



Rod Serling's
THE TWILIGHT ZONE
Magazine

ATTENTION, WRITERS!

Announcing
The Fifth Annual Short Story Contest
Sponsored by

Rod Serling's
THE TWILIGHT ZONE
Magazine

In memory of Rod Serling,
whose professional career was launched
when he became a prizewinner in a nationwide writing contest.

This year, as in past years, we are seeking stories about an intrusion of the supernatural or unearthly into a well-drawn contemporary American setting. As always, the contest is limited to previously unpublished writers. Maximum story length: four thousand words.

First Prize: **$500**
Second Prize: **$300** *Third Prize:* **$200**

Winning stories will be published in
TZ's Fifth Anniversary Issue, April 1986

Rules

1. All entries must be original works of fiction, four thousand words or less. There is no minimum length.
2. The contest is open only to those who have never had fiction published professionally; all those who have received monetary payment for a piece of published fiction of whatever length (but not including poetry and plays) are ineligible.
3. Entries must be typewritten, with the writer's name, address, and telephone number on the first page. *All entries to be considered must include a stamped, self-addressed envelope for return of the manuscript.* Please note that we cannot acknowledge entries on receipt.
4. Writers may submit one entry only.
5. All non-prizewinning entries will nonetheless be considered for publication in the magazine.
6. The contest closes September 1, 1985. Mail entries to: Story Contest, TZ Publications, Inc., 800 Second Avenue, New York, NY 10017.

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Original appearances in Rod Serling's *The Twilight Zone* Magazine: *The Man Who Couldn't Remember* by David Curtis, August 1981; *The Bite* by Elizabeth Morton, March 1982; *The Spook Man* by Al Sarrantonio, November 1982; *Jockeying for Time* by David Shifren, December 1982; *The Lighthouse* by Edgar Allan Poe and Robert Bloch, August 1982; *In the Sunken Museum* by Gregory Frost, May 1981; *Luna* by G.W. Perriwills, July 1981.

The following stories are previously unpublished and appear in this issue of *Night Cry* for the first time anywhere: *Bagman* by William R. Trotter, *Fright Night* by Vincent McHardy, *The Woman's Version* by David J. Schow, *Vastation* by David Morrell, *Children of the Hydra* by Dale Hammell.

TERROR IN THE BACK SEAT

The first horror story I ever read was in a comic book—an old Charlton Comic that my sister Laurie bought at a roadside stop. My parents were driving us all up from Atlanta to Vermont for summer vacation. It was a long drive. The kind of drive where a kid eight years old does almost everything he *can* do without getting up; the sort of drive where kids go stir-crazy.

But even so, there was no way I was going to read that horror comic of Laurie's. I didn't like being scared. Not me.

Uh-uh.

It was hot, and my Dad's car didn't have air conditioning. It was an old Rambler, made back when AC was still strange and expensive. The wind that blew into the back seat from the wide-open front windows was so hot and filthy that it didn't cool us off, just ground dirt into our sweaty skin.

We went beyond being stir-crazy and got kind of demented. But there was still no way I was going to read that horror comic.

I didn't break until the third day.

I've seen comics like that since then. They aren't much. (Clumsy, badly put together, childish, the young editor reassures himself.)

But I'd read so little, seen so little back then that every word, every scratch mark on the newsprint was *real*. That spider crawling across the corner of the panel was crawling on *me*. The old crone staring out from the page like I was a side of beef wanted *me* for dinner. The door to the old dark house banged shut behind *me* three pages after I started reading.

And I never got out. The comic book crystalized the madness of that summer afternoon in me. That's why, I think, I grew up to read horror stories for a living.

I'd like to think this issue of *Night Cry* will do the same for you. Even those of you who've read a lot of stories.

Don't bother trying to back out now. You're on page 5. It's already too late.

—AR

Bagman

by WILLIAM R. TROTTER

Frankie didn't know the old woman's secret. The only thing he knew was, he wanted it!

The Zapruder Frame broke up at one twenty a.m., one week before their first paying gig, on a drizzly night in March—a fact which did not merit even a fanzine footnote in the history of contemporary pop music, but which had a profound effect on the ability of the bass player, Frankie Thatcher, to pay his overdue rent. The door money from the job would have covered most of the shortage, and the group's drummer, "Bonk" Stiles, had agreed to advance Frankie the rest from his share of the take.

Only now there wasn't going to be any take, and Bonk had ended up yelling at Frankie the loudest.

It was a shame, because the band had almost been ready. After weeks of rehearsing and preening, The Zapruder Frame had gotten their chops together and perfected their image: punk, but not troglodyte hard-core; bondage jewelry and spiked wristbands, to be sure, but no purple mohawks or safety pins; the tentative inclusion of a synthesizer in the dance numbers, sandwiched between two extended sets of head-banging thrash; and a grand finale during which the lead guitarist did lewd things to an inflatable doll caprisoned in leather undergarments.

And then, after two hours of beer-lubricated rehearsals, the squabbling had gotten out of hand. It was mostly the old familiar argument over aesthetic direction, made worse by the tensions of going public. Bonk wanted the band to move in a more stylish, Top Forty, techno-pop direction; the lead guitarist was a hard-core punk purist

who had already come close to quitting in fury over the inclusion of a synthesizer; the keyboard player was really more into Philip Glass and seemed more interested in getting laid than in playing; Frankie just wanted to play his bass and make enough money from it to keep a roof over his head.

Matters had disintegrated into a shouting match, and the owner of the loft, who had loaned them the space for rehearsal purposes, came in looking pissed off and ordered all of them to pack their gear and leave—for good. Realization that they had just bickered themselves out of a free rehearsal venue turned truculence into rage: Frankie kicked Bonk with a steel-toed biker's boot, whereupon Bonk unwound the chain belt that held up his pants and took a general swing with it at anybody within range. The loft owner had barricaded himself in the kitchenette and called the police emergency number. Before Frankie could hastily pack his bass and flee down the stairs, Bonk's chain had imprinted a bruise across one shoulder and another on his starboard bank of ribs.

Frankie made it outside and safely around the corner, cursing and using his body to shield the instrument case from the rain, by the time the squad car pulled up outside the rehearsal site. He walked east, toward First Avenue. He had no money for a cab, but at least there would be awnings to walk under.

Next to the breakup of the band, the worst practical result of the argument was simple hunger. Knowing how hard up the musicians were, the long-suffering loft owner had been laying out snacks every night after the rehearsal sessions; nothing fancy, but the cheese and crackers Frankie had been stuffing into his pockets each night, wadded together inside napkins, had been feeding him for the past week. Inside the refrigerator at his apartment reposed a single can of Schaefer beer, an out-of-date chocolate Yodel, and something wrapped in foil that had been on the back of the shelf for so long that Frankie had forgotten what it was; he had also become superstitious about it and refused to throw it away. God, he was getting hungry!

On reaching the next corner, Frankie pulled into the lee of a shuttered kiosk, leaned his bass against the side of the shack, and caught his breath. His side and shoulders ached from the fiery kiss of Bonk's chain—he'd pay for that, the scumbag!—and the cold, greasy, Lower East Side rain tickled his anger-heated forehead with nasty malarial sensations. The street was nearly deserted except for some mildly sinister Puerto Ricans a block down the avenue; they

were sheltering like himself, defined by the shadows against the seamy all-night diner window and by the animated bobbing of their cigarette tips.

A vicious wind rolled down the street and pitched the rain at a steep angle. Frankie ducked into an alley to escape its lash. He lit a cigarette, nerving himself to start out again, hoping that the wind would subside before he'd finished his smoke. Inside the alley, little volleys of wind eddied from behind him, bearing smells of garbage. Suddenly the same wind brought an overpowering smell of fried rice, touched by the subtler odors of pork, steamed broccoli, and—if his memory were not playing tricks—a dark, sweet suggestion of barbecued spare ribs. Frankie's mouth filled with a flood of saliva.

He turned. Halfway down the alley, a door had opened silently, spilling light. A sign identified it as the delivery entrance for "The Jade Garden," a neighborhood Chinese restaurant of mediocre repute and inflated prices. As Frankie watched, the source of the unbearable smells became obvious: a whip-thin waiter, complexion sallow under the light, eyes twitching from side to side as he leaned out distastefully into the rain, was carefully lowering an armful of small boxes onto the top of a garbage can. Fragrant steam drifted up from these containers matching the scent cloud that wafted from another garbage can where he saw the same man had already placed a similar load of leftovers.

His task done, the waiter straightened back into the doorway, out of the drizzle. He seemed to be peering carefully into the shadows at both ends of the alley. Frankie had instinctively dropped his cigarette into a puddle at first sight of the man, and the shadows were deep at the alley's opening, where he stood. The waiter, indeed, did not appear to notice him; after glancing at his watch and once more staring for a long wary moment toward the depths of the alley—impenetrably black and measureless in this light—the man retreated into the restaurant, locking the door behind him.

Frankie stood for a moment, paralyzed by good fortune, no longer feeling the rain, just snorting in great lungfuls of Chinese-food aroma. In a daze, salivating almost to the point of drool, he negotiated the cluttered alley and reached the pool of light below the kitchen door.

Here was God's own plenty: an inexplicably precise arrangement of waxed cardboard take-out containers packed with the scrapings of a hundred dinner plates. Frankie hesitated, then chose a

carton full of fried rice and what appeared to be scraps of sweet and sour chicken. He dipped his fingers into the mound; it was warm, barely, and softly grainy. He scooped the food to his mouth and plopped it in.

It was just this side of turning cold, and it had picked up a few additives on its journey from plate to garbage (a quick, nasty shock as his fillings crunched against a pocket of cigarette ash), but its flavor went through him like a drug rush. Here was a banquet, laid out as though he'd been expected to come and help himself. Stifling the impulse to just stand there in the rain and gorge, Frankie began rumaging through the miscellaneous trash, looking for a carton large enough to pack everything into. The gas was still on in his apartment—or had been, the last time he'd had any reason to turn on the stove—so all he had to do was carry the stuff back home and warm it up.

He flashed back to an afternoon during the winter when he and Bonk, sauntering through the fringes of the Bowery, had seen a wino emerge from a trash heap, a look of triumph on his grizzled face, clutching a great flapping pair of rubberized fisherman's waders. "Behold," Bonk had cried, "proof positive that if you look hard enough, you can find *anything* in the trash dumps of New York."

Damn right you could! thought Frankie. He located a wet but sturdy carton in back of the garbage cans that seemed to be about the right size. He had just straightened up with it when he looked to his right and saw the bag lady.

She advanced slowly through the rain-drifted night, moving in a deliberate crab-scuttle from the cloacal recesses of the alleyway. It was uncommonly late to see one of these wretched creatures out making her rounds. Not that bag ladies, generically speaking, were rare in this neighborhood. On the contrary: you saw dozens of them every day, ballasted with enormously full sacks, muffled against the chill with so many layers of coats, rags, and scarves that they looked uniformly squat and prehistoric as they shuffled by, muttering obscurely to themselves in a language that always sounded to Frankie like Lithuanian.

In her left hand, the crone toted a typical bulging shopping bag, a faded Bloomingdale's logo peeling from the plastic. Clutched in the talons of her right hand was an altogether different bag. Its outer component was a sturdy network of ropes terminated in reinforced carrying loops—the whole as purposeful-looking as a

macrame hanger. The actual bag within this web bore no store logo at all; it was, in fact, a featureless black, giving off a reflection that seemed vaguely rubbery. Whatever its contents, the bag did not show the usual random wads and bulges; its bottom was roundly full from evenly distributed pressure, as though something globular and heavy reposed therein.

At the sight of that bag, a faint prickle of speculative avarice nibbled at Frankie's brain: this old bitch might actually have found something valuable. Suddenly he grinned: a fierce, self-deprecating, wolverine's leer. Desperate thoughts, man, desperate! Yeah, that's what you have to be to contemplate ripping off a bag lady. Jesus, what was this city doing to him? Probably all she had in that bag was just an old piece of scavanged debris—a Tupperware bowl packed with junk, a broken tin samovar. These old ladies were all crazy as hell. She could be lugging around her dead cat, for that matter.

As she drew closer, he saw her eyes. They were not dulled and rheumy and beaten down, the way most derelicts' eyes seemed to him. They were bright and hard with purpose. Frankie got a good look, because she stopped not three feet from him, a wet-wool smell coming from her, and stared straight into his eyes.

"I've got it," she said, her eyes rolling slightly downward, indicating the bag in her right hand.

As Frankie tried to return the old woman's stare, his resolve drained. He suddenly felt like a small animal whose dinner has been usurped by a powerful predator. Try as he might, he could mouth no word of protest as the woman stepped past him and methodically stripped the steaming cartons from both garbage cans, packing them one after another into the rope-nested bag. The bag's sides bulged as each carton went in, the material seeming to shift and expand greedily to accommodate such bounty. It was not possible, from this angle, for Frankie to see directly into the bag's open maw, but enough light fell into that opening to give back a tantalizing flicker of silver. His first guess now seemed closer to the mark: there was something in there more valuable than chow mein.

When all the leftovers had been stuffed into the bag, the woman straightened, picked up her other bag, and glared at Frankie as though daring him to block her path.

As she came abreast of him, she repeated her earlier words: "I've got it."

One thing she had, for certain, was Frankie's serendipitous

dinner. That single heavenly mouthful of fried rice he'd had time to ingest lay in his stomach far from passively, groaning for company; his whole body was wracked by a sense of unfair loss. A slow fury built within him. He came out of his stupor far enough to mime the unzipping of his fly. "Why don't you get *this*, granny!" he snarled, but she was already moving away, a river-scented veil of mist blowing a silvery curtain across her hunched and shuffling form.

By the time Frankie was able to start home again, the woman was gone from sight. He detoured two extra blocks just so he wouldn't have to pass the PRs down the street.

The next day, he saw the old woman again, on his way back from the pawnbroker's.

Frankie had gone to bed still angry, as well as hungry, and had awakened from a fuzzy, blotto kind of sleep to the sound of loud insistent hammering. At first he thought the pounding came from within the depths of his own hangover, but as consciousness returned he understood it to be coming from the other side of his apartment door.

It was Mr. Ramirez, the landlord.

"Choo geev the rent today, sí?"

Sunlight angled in through the yellowed little window above the brown-stained sink and winked on the man's gold front tooth as he spoke, stabbing Frankie's eyeballs like soft golden needles. He sighed, saw the landlord wince at the scruffiness of his breath.

"I'll have it soon, I promise. I got a line on a job. Gotta check it out this afternoon. Hey, man, just gimme a little more time! Please!"

Ramirez wagged a heavily ringed finger at Frankie. "Choo real late now. Choo got two days, heh? Geev me rent in two days, eet's ho-kay. No rent in two days . . ." he shrugged and gestured in the general direction of the street.

"Yeah. Two days. I understand." Frankie closed the door and leaned against it, while waves of nausea subsided, kicked down by the sudden belt of apprehension. This was getting serious.

At the pawnshop on 8th Street, Frankie found himself in line behind an old man with a Baltic accent who was gesturing at a prominently displayed sign: HIGHEST PRICES PAID FOR GOLD AND SILVER! Expectantly, the man held out a tarnished silver soup tureen which the pawnbroker upended and examined through a

jeweler's eyepiece. Having located the maker's mark, he consulted a reference book and nodded approvingly.

"Id's a famblee hair-loomb!" pleaded the Baltic gentleman.

"This is a very nice piece, sir. Will this sum be satisfactory?"

Frankie gaped as three hundred dollars was counted out and a receipt signed. For one lousy soup bowl? If he'd known about *this*, he would have relieved his mother of some long-forgotten wedding presents before coming to the city.

With a look of relief the elderly gentleman pocketed his cash and strode from the shop. Frankie stepped up to the counter. The pawnbroker's smile changed to a scowl as he reluctantly pulled the bass guitar under the heavy-gauge mesh that separated him from his customers. He turned the instrument over beneath a bright light, a doleful expression on his face.

"Just look at the finish on that body," said Frankie. "That's really a fine musical instrument. Worth a lot of money."

"It's a cheap piece of shit. I got two more like it in the back right now. I won't be able to do a thing with 'em, either, until some dumb kid comes in here from the suburbs this summer, looking for a bargain."

Frankie winced. "How much can you give me, man? Guitar means a lot to me. My mother gave it to me for graduation."

"Really? Next time you write to her, tell her you hocked it for fifty bucks."

Minutes later, Frankie was outside, the thin wad of bills burning in his pocket. It was nowhere near enough to pay the rent, but maybe it would buy some extra time from Ramirez. Of course, if he was able to pursuade the landlord to take a token payment, he need not part with all fifty dollars. Forty ought to do it. That left five for a few days' worth of junk food and enough left over for some beer and cigarettes—just enough to see him through this crisis.

He was about to duck into a grocery store, money in hand, when he saw the old woman again, her back to him, waddling through the crowd. Frankie turned, on impulse, and followed her for two blocks. Just before reaching a pricey restaurant called the Mandarin Pavilion, the bag lady turned into an alley. Frankie felt an unpleasant lurch of deja-vu. He followed to the mouth of the alley and peered around the corner.

The old woman was standing before the kitchen door; she simply waited, without knocking. Frankie glanced at the front of

the restaurant. It was almost two o'clock, and the last of the late-lunch crowd was filing out, all of them looking extremely well-fed. The memory of the Chinese meal he'd almost eaten came back to Frankie, and the hunger he had been suppressing all morning thundered into the forefront of his awareness.

He turned back to the alley in time to see the kitchen door open. A tall Chinese with straight-combed varnished hair solemnly handed a bulging take-out sack to the woman. She put down her Bloomingdale's bag and accepted the food, wordlessly, with her free hand. Then she opened the neck of the other bag and lowered the food inside. Frankie could no more than glimpse the opening from where he stood, but once again his eyes detected the shine of what must have been sunlight on polished metal—a quick, enticing wink of silver. Then the woman straightened, picked up her other bag, and Frankie lost sight of the one in her right hand.

The Chinese, who had watched impassively as the food disappeared, solemnly bowed to the old woman and quietly closed the door. As she turned, her eyes bored into Frankie's. She seemed to have known all along that he'd been behind her, watching. She came toward him, unhesitant, unafraid.

In daylight, the bulging shape of the bag in her right hand drew Frankie's attention even more than it had the night before. Tha tautness of the bag's rubbery skin was suggestive of a load of sand. An image of gold dust came into his mind and would not leave, despite the ludicrousness of the idea. And then his perception of it shifted, until the contents did not seem granular at all, but rather suggested the curves of something massy and heavy . . . such as a big silver bowl. If Frankie had just one such pawnable object, his future would be much brighter than it now appeared. His hand hungered for the weight of that bag, and he tensed as the old woman shuffled toward him. But that was all he could do; once again, he was curiously without the will to move. She came abreast of him and whispered in a voice too low for any other passerby to hear: "I've got it."

When she was gone, Frankie shook himself, then strode decisively up to the restaurant door and hammered on it with his fist. After a long enough time to make his hand sore, the door slowly opened and the same Chinese appeared in a swirl of deliciously scented kitchen steam.

"That old lady!" Frankie blurted out. "Why did you give her food?"

The eyes that regarded him were black lacquered beads.

"What you want?"

"I want to know why you gave food to that woman! I saw her get food at another Chinese restaurant last night!" Frankie heard the hysterical edge creeping into his voice; he tried to modulate his speech into a more reasonable tone. "I mean, ah, it's not very logical, is it? Why should the Jade Garden give her food last night, and you give her food today? I'm ... just curious, that's all. Is she a relative of yours?"

"I give her food, yes. My brother Chou owns Jade Garden, he give her food, too. My cousin Wing, over on Rexington Avanew, he also give food. Maybe others, too, I don't know how many. She bring luck. Maybe good, maybe bad."

"But why? She's just another old baglady!"

"She special lady. Vely old. We feed, customers come. We no feed ..." Shrug.

"This neighborhood is crawling with old people—you give food to all of them?"

"You not understand. She special. Vely, vely old."

"So *what!*" screeched Frankie.

"You not understand. You go away now, or I caw the cops."

The door slammed in Frankie's face.

After Frankie had stashed his two six-packs in the apartment's lukewarm refrigerator, he drank two cans quickly, just to relax, ran a brush through the spiky tufts of his razor-shorn hair, made sure his teeth were brushed, then went downstairs and knocked on Ramirez's door.

He waved the crumpled bills at the round, brown face that answered.

"Here, I got part of the rent for you. Can you give me until next week to get the rest? I got this job coming up, downtown at one of the clubs, and—"

But Ramirez wasn't listening, he was counting. Then he was handing the money back and shaking his head.

"Only forty dollar here. Not enough, not enough. Choo geev rent by end of tomorrow. Last chance." The door closed; the bolts slid home with cold finality.

Frankie kicked a hole in the bedroom plaster halfway through his next beer. Four beers after that, as he lay chain-smoking in the dark, listening to the crowd noises from the street below—the

high querulous singsong of Spanish, the low muttering growl of Balkan glottalstops, the rusty-nail bleat of the Manhattan native—a boozy flash of inspiration tramped into his brain.

The last time he had played a paying gig, two months ago, a chick with bleached hair, enormous day-glow bangles in her ears, and a thick New Jersey accent had slipped away from her date long enough to smoke a cigarette with Frankie backstage, tell him how much she'd liked his playing, and hand him a napkin with an address blotted on it. He tore up three drawers looking for that particular scrap of flotsam, but finally he found it. He could no longer make out the girl's last name—it had been written with marker ink on a wet napkin and now, dried, looked like some kind of miniature Japanese landscape painting—but the address had survived. Tracking her down this long after their brief initial meeting, much less trying to wrangle an invitation to live with her, was surely a long shot, but what the hell? All chicks had a soft spot in their hearts for down and out musicians. So he told himself, at any rate, as he stuffed another can of beer into the side pocket of his leather jacket and set off.

It took him almost an hour to walk across town and locate the address. The chick did remember him, once he had reminded her of the occasion and waved the yellowed napkin under her nose, but she was far from delighted to see him. When the door opened farther and revealed a large hirsute man glowering at him, the cause of her cool reception became apparent. Breaking off the conversation in midword, Frankie retreated back to the street, cursing and kicking at garbage cans.

By the time he had reached his own neighborhood, the cold spring drizzle had started again, accompanied by a bone-raw wind that bread-sliced the city from the East River. He bent miserably into the draft, shaking with rage and frustration. He was soaked through, his teeth chattering, by the time he regained the familiar blocks leading to his apartment. Unable yet to face the climb back up the stairs, he ducked into a phone booth near the entrance to the Jade Garden and closed the door against the wind. While his breath fogged the inner glass, he drained his beer, smoked a cigarette, and tried to work up his courage to make the one final move left to him.

His parents had moved since he had come to the city. On his last call home, back in October, just before the argument with his father which had terminated the conversation, he had jotted

down their new phone number. Faded almost to nothingness in the deepest corner of his wallet was the matchbook cover he had made use of on that occasion. Holding the cardboard square as though it were bathed in lethal germs, he took a deep breath and lifted the receiver.

His finger was poised above the last digit when he saw the bag lady come down the block. He hung up the receiver and stepped outside into the raw air.

From beneath her turban of scarves, the woman's eyes gathered the rain-glossed light of the street and poured it back at Frankie. Her right hand came up, extending the bag toward him ever so slightly.

"I've got it," she said.

"Yeah, and you got some kinda scam for getting fed, too, don't you, granny? Seems to me like you got more than you can use."

She brushed past him and entered the alley next to the Jade Garden. They were alone on the rain-swept street; the front of the alley opened like a throat into the night. Frankie's nose told him that the food deposit had already been made. Anger drowned appetite—why should this old hag get more food than she could possibly eat while he, an impoverished artist, subsisted on nacho corn chips and cheap beer?

Paying him no heed, the woman put down her Bloomingdale's bag and bent over to inspect the steaming containers of food. Frankie unwrapped the chainbelt from his parachute pants and doubled it in his fist. Swinging it like a medieval mace, he advanced upon the old woman and spun her around.

"Just what *have* you got, you filty old witch? Let's just see what's in that goddamn bag!"

Holding the chain menacingly above his head, Frankie peered at the neck of the bag. He had not been mistaken: silver gleamed within.

"You got something silver in there! What do you need silver for, old woman? What you need is food, and God knows how but you get all of that you can use. Here!" He picked up a take-out box topped with a toothsome and barely nibbled leg of Peking duck. "Here! Take it all! I won't fight you for it! But I will trade you for it! I'll leave you alone to take all your food, in exchange for that silver bowl you're carrying! That's a fair trade, isn't it? Isn't it, old woman?"

Frankie let the cold heavy links of the chain brush against

the woman's leathery cheek. She showed no fear. Calmly, with a look of purpose that also contained a curious hint of relief, she extended the bag from her right hand and placed its carrying loop over Frankie's forearm. For the first time, Frankie noticed that the old lady's right hand was maimed; two fingers of her dirty knit glove flopped emptily.

The bag seemed tremendously heavy, pulling at Frankie's arm. The old woman bowed to him slightly, mockingly, lifted her other bag, clutched it to her with both hands, and moved around him toward the open street.

"Now *you've* got it," she said as she stepped into the blowing rain.

Frankie put the bag down and knelt expectantly. He opened the neck of the bag. Its substance felt soft and faintly slick, like the material of the latex skirts some of the kinkier fans wore in the bars.

He reached deep into the bag and his fingers encountered, as he had hoped, the chill curved metallic surface of what was surely a massive silver bowl. The bowl was not smooth, however, but had an intricately textured surface, one of regular overlapping design, smooth in one direction and sharply edged in another. Almost like . . . scales.

Sensing sudden peripheral movement, Frankie looked up, his hand still thrust into the bag. The old woman had stepped back into the alley. Smiling with what was left of her teeth, she leaned toward him and said, in a whisper just barely audible above the hiss of the traffic:

"By the way, it prefers Chinese food. And it's always hungry."

Beneath his fingertips, the metal surface moved. He tried to yank his hand from the bag, but the gnawing had already started.

But wait, reader! All is not yet lost for our desperate young hero! Turn to page 194 for our tale's exciting conclusion.

Fred was an exterminator. Poison was his profession. But then, one day, he glanced into the pit—and became . . .

The Man Who Couldn't Remember

by DAVID CURTIS

Eight o'clock in the morning, and the Bank of Huntington sign already said eighty-five. Fred Kingston eased forward, his shirt clinging to the back of the seat. "Another hot motherfucker," he said to Johnny. "Want to stop and get some breakfast?"

Johnny, slumped down with his knees on the dashboard, tilted back his straw hat with the paisley band, and opened a bloodshot eye. "What if Bill catches us?"

"What if he does? He wouldn't fire us. He has a hard enough time finding somebody to do this shit as it is."

"Whatever you say. I'll just tell 'im you're drivin'. Wasn't *my* idea." Johnny sat up and grinned. "Must admit, a little food would probably help this hangover."

The first job was about ten miles out of town: an old clapboard farmhouse badly in need of paint, sitting on the edge of the woods, a vacant field beside it. Fred went up and knocked on the door. There was no answer. The air was sultry; the only sounds to be heard were the buzz of insects, the ticking of the truck engine as it cooled, and the occasional call of a distant bird.

As with most old farmhouses, the crawl-space under this one was low, less than a foot in some spots. Being the smaller of the two men, Johnny volunteered to go under. Fred fed the hose to him as he wriggled his way along the ground. Then he climbed onto the back of the pickup to start the pump. The back of the truck was never cleaned, and the sticky poison in the hundred-

gallon tank often slopped over, so that you couldn't touch anything back there without getting some of the white fluid on you. The sickly sweet odor of the chlordane permeated everything, and Fred knew he would carry the smell home with him at the end of the day. He yanked on the start cord and the engine roared to life. After it had warmed up a moment, he engaged the pump and leaped to the ground.

Walking over, he looked under the house to make sure Johnny was doing okay, fed him a little more hose, then straightened up and sat back to relax. After he had sat there awhile, a dog stuck its head around the corner of the house. Fred just stared back at it. Slowly it approached him and let him scratch behind its ears. Fred thought of his own dog back home, and of Alice. Right now she would probably be working in the garden, pulling weeds or picking peas. He wished he could be there with her; he knew how lonely she got sometimes, being there alone all day.

There was a yell from under the house, and Fred got down on his stomach to see what was happening. "Pull some of this hose out," said Johnny, his voice muffled by the paper filter he wore over his mouth. Fred began dragging the hose out and Johnny followed, backing out on his stomach and spraying as he went. Finally Johnny released the trigger and dropped the hose, emerging to squint in the bright sunlight.

"Damn, got some of that shit in my eye," he said, as he tore off the rubber gloves and paper mask, using the sleeve of his muddy coveralls to wipe at the irritation. "Burns!"

The next house was just around the bend, another old farmhouse. An elderly man in stained pants came out on the porch as Fred pulled into the driveway and shut off the engine. "You boys here to spray for termites?" He spat a brown steam of tobacco juice over the edge of the porch. "Been lookin' for ya since May."

"We're kinda behind," said Johnny, getting out of the pickup. Fred got out and pulled on his coveralls, dragged the hose over to where the old man was pulling a rusty piece of corrugated sheet metal away from the side of the house.

"Not much room under there," said the farmer.

"It's not as bad as the last one," said Fred. He pulled a dirty paper filter out of his pocket, fitting it over his nose and mouth. The pieces of sheet metal ran all the way around the bottom of the house, held in place by metal stakes and rocks, and when he bent down to look underneath he couldn't see anything beyond

the first few feet. Fred pulled the mask down to his chin and turned to yell at Johnny, who was just climbing into the back of the pick-up. "Hey, bring that flashlight, will ya? It's dark under here."

"All right, just a minute." Johnny yanked on the starter a couple of times until the engine caught, then jumped down and fished around under the seat for the flashlight. Finally he found it and brought it over.

"Thanks," Fred pulled the mask back over his mouth and began to wriggle under the house, flashlight in one hand, spray gun in the other. Rocks dug into his elbows and knees. He turned on the flash and swept it around in a half-circle. In most places there was a foot to a foot and half of clearance, except for one corner where the dirt sloped up until it almost touched the bottom of the house. There was nothing else to see but the rocks piled here and there that supported the house, the bottom of the house itself, more rocks sticking up out of the dirt, and a few pale, scraggly mushrooms.

Fred worked himself into the high corner as well as he could and began to spray. The poison shot out in a fifteen-foot stream that gleamed in the beam of the flashlight. Where it hit the joists and sheet metal it broke up into a fine mist that soon permeated the air.

The mask did little to keep the chlordane out. Fred had taken the masks from the insulation truck back at the shop. The label on the box had read, *"For dust and fine particles—not to be used for sprays and poisonous gases."* Still, it was better than nothing, Fred thought.

He swept the perimeter and the underpinnings, anywhere the termites might climb up onto the wood of the house. Slowly he worked his way back to the square of daylight behind him. Once he banged his head on a joist and cursed softly to himself. In about ten minutes he had worked his way once more to the hole. As he backed out, he sprayed around the entrance. Johnny took the gun and began to spray the outside of the house.

Fred pulled down the mask and breathed sweet clean air. The old man, who had been standing near the entrance to the crawl-space while Fred was under the house, gave him a skeptical look. "You cain't be done already."

"Sure am. It doesn't take very long."

"But you was under there less than ten minutes!"

"Look, the boss expects us to do fifteen houses a day. What

with all the driving we got to do, that doesn't leave much time for each house. I sprayed everything that needed spraying. You want to pay me now, or have them send you a bill?"

"How much is it?"

"Twelve-fifty."

"Twelve-fifty! Was only ten last year."

"I'm sorry, I was supposed to tell you it went up before we did the house, but I forgot. Everything's going up, you know."

"I ain't agonna pay it!"

"Too late now." He pointed to Johnny, who was already dragging the hose back to the truck. "They'll send you a bill. You'll just have to have it out with the boss."

"I will," said the old man, spitting out tobacco juice. "I will."

By afternoon they had worked their way to the outskirts of McKenzie. Here the houses were newer, identical brick bungalows crowded together. The crawl-spaces were higher and better ventilated, and Fred didn't feel obligated to stick around when it was Johnny's turn to go under. Instead he lounged in the shade of a small tree, trying to escape the oppressive sun.

A man came out of the house next door and crossed the driveway toward Fred. "If I were you I'd quit before it's too late," said the man, sitting down next to Fred.

"Quit?" said Fred. He looked at the man closely for the first time. He was middle-aged, with dark hair, dark eyes, and close-set features that seemed somehow blank, as if untouched by thought or emotion.

The man waved a hand vaguely. "Your job. It's dangerous, you know. I used to do that stuff, until it gave me brain damage. Now I can't do anything. Permanent loss of short-term memory, that's what the doctor called it. After you leave I won't even remember you. Every time my wife goes out she has to leave a note so I'll know where she is and when she'll be back. If it wasn't for her, they'd probably have to put me away somewhere."

A chill went through Fred. "What'd you spray with? Chlordane?"

"Chlordane, dieldrin, it's all the same. We used 'em all. Do you wear a respirator?"

Fred shook his head. "Don't have any. All we have is these." He got up, walked over to the truck, and pulled one of the paper masks from the dashboard; he held it for the man to see.

The man remained seated, his expression unchanged. "Inspector could shut you down for that."

"Inspector? I've never seen one."

"We used to get one coming around every month or two."

Fred shrugged. "I don't know."

"Me and a buddy used to have our own business, in the evenings and weekends, when we weren't working at Emerson. We had respirators, but we never wore 'em. Didn't think we needed 'em. Then I started having blackouts. I wouldn't know where I was, how I got there. They used to have to lead me to and from my machine. Finally had to put me in the V.A. hospital down in Jackson. They said it was because of the head injury I got during the war, but that hadn't bothered me in fifteen years, and it was never as bad as after the spraying. Then, when I was in the hospital, I heard about a guy in Mississippi who died under a house. I knew it was the poison."

Fred stared at the man uneasily. "I'd like to quit, but jobs are hard to find around here. I need the money."

"You can always get a job at Emerson, or one of the other factories."

"They won't take me. Can't pass the physicals. I have curvature of the spine. It's nothing serious, but they're afraid I'll get hurt and sue them. If I quit, we won't be able to make payments on our farm. We'll lose it."

"Better than losing your mind or your life."

When Johnny came out from under the house, Fred told him about the man from next door, who was still sitting under the tree, watching them. "Shit," said Johnny, "this stuff won't hurt you. I been doin' this for two years now, and it ain't never bothered me. That guy's just crazy. If all that really happened, then how could he remember any of it?"

"I don't know. He said something about loss of short-term memory. I guess he can still remember things that happened a long time ago." Fred shook his head. "I don't know."

"Look, I'll show you." Johnny took the spray gun and put it in his mouth, sucking on it. Although the pump was already shut down, there was still chlordane in the hose, and as Fred watched, a trickle of the white poison ran out from between Johnny's lips. Johnny took the gun from his mouth and swallowed. "See?"

Fred shook his head. "You're crazy!" Already, though, he was

trying to convince himself that Johnny was right—because if the job was dangerous, and he told Alice, she would insist that he quit. He couldn't do that; if he quit they wouldn't be able to make the payments, and they would lose the farm.

No, it would be best if he didn't say anything to Alice about what had happened today.

During the next few weeks, Fred thought a lot about the man he had met in McKenzie. It bothered him, but as the days slipped away uneventfully, his anxiety gradually faded. Things were going all right; the farm was slowly being paid off. Why worry about something that would probably never happen?

On a cool, clear afternoon in late September, Fred pulled the pickup into the driveway of a dilapidated house that lay about a mile east of the Jackson Highway. The house was in a hollow not far from the Big Sandy River, and the ground around it was swampy, the trees covered with kudzu. The kudzu had already taken over most of the yard, covering the fences and outbuildings, creeping up the south side of the house. The place smelled of mold and decay.

"Looks deserted," said Johnny, squinting out from under the brim of his hat. The porch sagged; the windows were broken or boarded up, the weathered paint peeling. The only signs of life were the starlings roosting on the chimney.

"Yeah. Well, it's on the list. Guess we better do it."

"Go ahead. I'll wait right here. This hangover's killin' me."

Fred shrugged, got out, and donned the coveralls, sticking a mask and the flashlight in his pocket. He looked at the house. It appeared to be sitting right on the ground. Swearing softly to himself, he grabbed the shovel from the back of the truck.

He walked all the way around, but the biggest gap he could find between house and ground was less than six inches. It took ten minutes for him to dig out a hole big enough for him to get under.

"Jeez," he said to Johnny when he got back to the truck, "bet this place is crawling with termites." The straw hat tilted almost imperceptibly in agreement.

Fred threw the shovel into the back of the truck with a loud crash and yanked the pump motor to life, but Johnny never stirred. Well, thought Fred, that's okay, see if I help him any at the next place. He grabbed the spray gun and walked back to the house,

the hose snaking out of the back of the truck behind him.

Underneath the house it was damp and musty, but once Fred had gotten through the hole there was a surprising amount of overhead. He played the flashlight around. There were small pale mushrooms everywhere, and the joists were riddled with termite tunnels. It had been a long time since anyone had sprayed this place. The ground sloped down toward the center of the house, and Fred moved in that direction, hoping there would be enough clearance to sit up and spray.

As he got closer he saw that a pit about six feet across lay at the center of the house. As he neared the edge he could hear a noise coming from the pit, a wet smacking sound that came at regular intervals. It sent shivers through him, awakening some instinctual, unreasoning fear. He hesitated, afraid to draw still closer; the pit was now less than a yard away. Finally, deciding he was being ridiculous, he pushed himself forward those last few feet.

What he saw when he shone the flashlight into it almost made him retch. The pit was almost as deep as it was wide, with more than a dozen tunnels, each about a foot in diameter, opening into it. Moving in and out of the tunnels were pale grublike creatures about a foot in length. The focus of their activity was a great white gelatious mass at the center of the pit, a bloated, unmoving monstrosity—the queen. This was the source of the smacking sound, the noise being produced by the emission of eggs from an orifice at one end of its body. As each egg emerged, a waiting grub grasped it with pincers and slowly oozed away down one of the tunnels.

In a flurry of fear and revulsion, Fred turned the spray gun toward the pit and shot a steady steam of poison on the creatures below, concentrating on the queen. Chlordane ran off its body in rivulets, gleaming in the beam of the flashlight. Beads of deadly vapor filled the air, until Fred began to choke on the fumes. Convulsed by a fit of coughing, he dropped the gun.

The poison seemed to have no effect. The great queen continued to pump eggs, the grubs continued to carry them off. Two of the grubs approached a puddle of chlordane that had formed at the bottom of the pit, extruded thin tubular membranes from between their pincers, and dipped them into the milky fluid. In moments the pool the disappeared; the tubes withdrew. One of the grubs crawled over to the queen, and the tube came out again, penetrating the already-bloated body. The other grub began to

move toward Fred.

At the same moment, Fred felt something drop onto his back.

Before he could react, a pair of sharp white pincers were piercing the skin, penetrating his spinal cord. In seconds he was paralyzed.

His head hung over the edge of the pit; the flashlight, grasped in his dead hand, still shone below. With growing horror he watched as the grub climbed slowly up the wall of the pit, approaching him. He could see every detail—the whitish purple gleam of its segmented body, the many short legs on its underside which propelled it forward, the dark red head with its hairlike sensors and cruel pincers . . .

Now it was only inches from his face.

The pincers grasped his head, sinking into the bony ridge around his eye, causing him to cry out in pain. The tube emerged, penetrating the lid above his eye, burning a path through the muscle, enveloping him in darkness.

Now, for Fred, there is only the present. Dimly, far in the past, he can remember a time when things were different; but that time is only a dream now, a life lived by someone else.

Now he sits and watches tv, and before the show is over he has forgotten how it began. Now he finds notes from Alice telling him that she is at work, that there is lunch in the refrigerator, that she will be home at five-thirty. Now he spends most of the day pulling weeds in the garden or sitting in the rocker on the front porch, watching the birds in the trees across the road.

Sometimes at night, with Alice lying asleep beside him, he can hear something under the house, a wet smacking noise that makes him shiver. At these times he seems closest to that other dim life in the past, and seems on the verge of remembering some horrible truth that he knows is important. But like everything in his life now, the thought soon passes into the fog of forgetfulness, and he rolls over and goes back to sleep, remembering nothing.

Fright Night

by VINCENT McHARDY

There was something very strange about Kenny. And strangest of all, he seemed to just want to be friends.

Summer in the light.
Winter in the shade.

Turning his face toward, and then away from, the October sun, Karl felt both seasons in an arc. A warm hand stretched his left cheek back to swimming frog filled lakes, midnight roller skating down Vradenberg Hill, and midweek afternoon football games. A cold hand dragged his right cheek forward to sick beds, exams, and holiday visits to relatives.

Eyes shut, Karl walked. Each step unsure. Each step taking him farther off the foot path and deeper through the tall grass, weeds, and the serpentine roots of tree stumps.

Fallow land . . . Stunted land . . . A fire twelve years ago had changed mixed forest and field into charred tree spines and cracked rocks. Twelve years ago, a week before Karl was born, a fire had almost burned Meaford Mills off the map. A small loss to mapmakers—Meaford appeared on only the most detailed maps—but of some concern to Karl's parents. They'd both fought the fire and helped save the town.

Karl's first breath of air curled with smoke.

On days after it rained Karl liked to come here among the black bubbled tree stumps. Time had allowed nature to recover the ground with a patina of vegetation, but the tree remnants still stood, reaching into the air with grotesque flipper-branches, looking for leaves that would never sprout. On the ground, not quite forgotten, lay the tracings of fallen trees.

After the rain, now that everything was wet and new, Karl breathed deeply and caught the faint, still-lingering scent of charcoal. Remembered, behind closed eyes, the fire burned. Walking on air. Walking on old fire. Karl stretched out his arms . . . took a step . . .

And fell through the ground.

"Help!"

Martin and Lee, who had been up front testing the scrub with their mouse-bashing clubs, looked back. Karl, planted chest-deep in the ground, waved his arms.

"A cave?" said Martin, self-elected leader of the rat pack.

"Get me out of here!"

"Careful," Lee said. "Throw him a rope."

"We don't have a rope."

"Make one. Tie our coats together."

Martin and Lee argued from the safety of the path. Neither one wanted to walk off it.

"Come on! I'm stuck in somebody's fort. Gimme a hand."

Martin and Lee crossed the invisible line that cordoned off the path. Closer, they noticed the ground where Karl sunk was different from the surrounding ground. The shrubs were cut and tossed about. Small rocks were too regularly spaced. Around Karl there seemed to be a definite line, a rectangular edge, marking the ending of the real ground and the beginning of—

"My armpits are pinching. Slide it over!" Karl slapped the ground. Dirt tumbled, revealing plywood underneath.

"Smart," Lee said. He pulled the wood sideways. A scissor V opened in the ground, freeing Karl. He had fallen between two plywood sheets. "Very smart. What a perfect way to protect a fort. Build it underground."

"Yeah. But who's smart?" Martin jumped down into the four-foot-deep hole and pushed up the other side, flipping the plywood and uncovering more of the excavation.

"Look how far it goes back. It must be fifteen by twenty feet! Who could have dug it without being seen?"

"Maybe they dug at night?" Karl said, feeling under his shirt where the ill-fitted wood had cut his ribs.

The three boys looked at each other.

"Maybe not," Karl said.

For the first time they noticed the details of the pit. The walls fell straight and smooth down through clay. The floor was part dirt

and part stone, in-laid with pebbles from the dig. The floor was level. Four sheets of plywood served as a roof: two were gone, two still standing. Scrap-lumber pillars supported it. All in all, a very neat job.

"But who?" Martin said.

Early twilight shadows filled the pit. The rainstorm of two hours ago had cleared the sky of clouds. There would be no slow sunset, no warm friendly afterglow to comfort them home. In a very few minutes the far-off town lights and the wakening stars would be their only help.

"Who cares?" Karl said. Hands on the pit lip, he jump-rolled up and out. "I like forts in the air. Up in trees. Not down there."

"Right," Lee said, joining him. "Think of what trickles down there. You couldn't keep comics or anything dry."

Martin stood in the pit, alone. "Somebody likes it. They went to a lot of trouble."

"Well, it's their trouble," Karl said. "Let's get a shake."

"And some fries," Lee said.

Martin looked under the two remaining sheets. Too dark to see the other end. Pine pillars dissected the gloom like white gaps between black teeth.

"Sure, just a sec," Martin said. "But first, let's make sure whoever built this fort knows this is our territory. And we don't want trespassers. Right?"

"Right," a tired Karl said.

"Right," a worried Lee said.

Martin climbed out, found the buried edge of the third plywood, and pushed. Pine creaked, rocks clacked, dirt shifted, and all fell into the pit. Toad-brown dust puffed up.

"Come on," Karl said. "I'm hungry."

"There's one more. Just—"

A cough.

Faint. Easily missed. A cough.

Martin dropped to his knees, looked under the last plywood and yelled, "Come out!"

Silence.

"It will only be worse for you if you don't."

Nothing moved.

"Let's lift it," Martin said.

"Maybe we should leave?" Lee said.

"Come on. I can't do it myself." Martin dug his nails under the

edge and tugged. "I can push it in if you want."

"Okay. Hold on." Karl went to the opposite side and took hold. "Up a bit, then slide it over."

Martin nodded. The wood bent at the edges, sagged in the middle. Pillars fell as the roof peeled back, revealing more floor and a fourth wall.

"I heard a cough!" Martin said. "You heard it."

"I thought I heard something," said Karl. "You said it was a cough."

"Probably my stomach growling," Lee said, "Let's go."

"I heard a cough!" Martin scanned the pit. "Nobody can change that."

"It's just a dark old wet pit," Karl said. "There's nothing there."

"Look at that!" Martin pointed along the far side of the wall, on Karl's side. A two-by-two-foot square plywood board lay flush with the clay. It was the only such structure in the pit.

"What's that supporting?" Martin asked.

Karl looked over the lip. It wasn't nailed or propped in place with struts. The board met the floor at ninety degrees. The boys concluded that the board could only be standing if it were latched to something on the other side.

"Pull it away, Karl."

"Hell no!"

"What's the matter? Reading too many Mandrake comics?" Martin grinned.

"Get out! Or I'm coming in." Martin picked up a stone and threw it at the door.

A dull, hollow thud filled the pit. Lee and Karl came around to Martin's side to get a better look.

"Hear that? There's a space behind." Martin picked up a rock. "This ought to do it."

"Wait." Karl looked at the size of the rock. "If there *is* somebody in there . . ."

"It's their tough luck!" Martin threw a behind-the-back-overhand strike. Dead center! Wood cracked. The door bent back. The rock clattered on the floor.

A small cry throbbed up. Another. Short, cotton-muffled, and . . . another. Quicker this time and distinctly louder. Then another. A summer storm, a fine drop here, a fatter drop there. You stand transfixed, until you can't count the number of drops falling on the sidewalk . . . until the slit-open sky disgorges . . . until the board is

thunder-pushed open and a two-lung-emptying howl hits you.

Karl ran.

Lee ran.

Martin ran a little bit faster.

They knew the face that looked up at them. Kenny Brooks from class. And they knew the blood that slopped from his eye meant trouble.

The street lights clicked on. Dull blue, half warm, they hummed into another night watch. In front of Sheridan Smoke and Gift Shop, the boys turned their faces to the noise.

"I told you not to," Karl said.

"You could have stopped me."

"What? Throw myself in front of the rock?"

"You could have flicked open the board when I asked you."

"Very smart," Lee said. With his clubbing stick he drew his initial on the cement walk. "To have a secret hiding place just in case somebody found his fort when he was in it."

"Yeah, smart," Karl said. "So smart it'll cost him an eye."

"A small cut," Martin said.

"Don't you wish. His eye was a hose. He could water Dracula's lawn."

"Do you think he saw us?" Martin asked.

Karl nodded. "He saw you."

Martin flicked out his fist and hit Karl on the arm. He jumped up, backed off, and held his hands ready for a return attack.

"The cops," Karl said, "are going to be very interested in your sudden bursts of violence."

Martin relaxed his stance.

"It won't be too bad. We'll come and visit you in reform school." Karl watched a car pull up in the parking lot.

"I'll bring you comics," Lee said. "I hear they've only got the Bible in there to read."

Karl grinned. "They *make* you read the Bible. Sinner!"

"If I go, you go. You both ran. You're guilty!" Martin stuffed his hands in his pockets and rounded his arms, trying to look tough.

"So I panicked. What about it? 'Officer, I was *so* scared . . .'" Lee chuckled.

"No, Martin's right," Karl said. "We shouldn't have run. We should go back. All of us. And apologize."

"It's too late," Lee said. "He'd be gone home by now. Does anyone know where he lives?"

No one did.

And nobody wanted to go there if they did.

Not tonight.

Not after all that blood.

"Not me," Martin said as he sat back down. "He's only been in class for a month a half. I haven't talked to him."

"He's a new kid," Karl said.

"He smells like egg sandwiches," Martin said. "Every day he eats lunch in class. He never goes home. And every day it's egg sandwiches."

"The Chinese eat buried eggs," Lee said. "They stick them in the ground for a hundred days, until they're black. Then they eat 'em."

"I hate egg sandwiches and anyone who smells like them," Martin said.

A moth tumbled out from the grass and stopped to rest on the concrete sidewalk in front of the boys. It shook, gathering the last remnants of heat from the rock. If the moth was lucky it would find a hollow tree, a loose shingle or a garage to over winter in. If not . . .

"I don't like egg sandwiches, either," Karl said. "But we shouldn't have run.

Martin pooled his saliva to the top of his tongue and pushed a fine spray out between his front teeth. The moth jumped, and flew off to find some cold-thickened spider in need of comfort.

The ball bearing fell and crushed the glass fragment against the ground of the schoolyard. Karl picked up the ball bearing and dropped it again. Powder glass clung to steel. Class would start in a few minutes. Another day soon to be strangled and put to rest.

Karl picked up the ball.

"Sleep well?" Martin asked as he snuck up from behind the bike racks. Lee followed behind.

"No. Not well at all." Karl stood up. "I expected a phone call, a knock . . . something."

"If he knows what's good for him, he'll shut up," Martin said.

"He's too scared to talk," Lee said.

"I hope you're right. I don't want to do that again. I mean I don't want you to do that again, *Martin.*"

"It's not my fault. We were looking for mice!"

"Mice don't cough."

"Squeak, cough, what's the diff? I heard—"

"Look!" Lee, who'd been watching the joust, pointed to the hydro field that adjoined the school yard. Even at such a distance they could tell that the figure walking to school was Kenny.

"Man, with an eye like that I'd milk it for a week off school—at least!" Lee said.

Martin shrugged. "Maybe he likes school."

"That I don't believe." Karl dropped the ball-bearing in his pocket.

Much closer now, they saw quite clearly the brown paper bag he always carried his lunch in, the worn corduroy pants, the scuffed leather shoes, the green and blue checked shirt puffing out from under his slightly too small windbreaker. Hand-me-down was the name of his tailor, as if his parents had searched the Salvation Army stores for the drabbest clothes so as to burden him with a homing device for peer abuse. Any other day Martin would have cracked a joke over Kenny's dress. But not today. Today he looked at Kenny's brown eyes.

His clear, perfectly unmarred, brown eyes.

The bell rang. The kids gathered into lines. The three boys lingered at the back.

"You see? Nothing!" Martin said. "How—"

"A mistake," Lee said. "It was dark."

Karl shook his head. "I don't believe it was a mistake."

The line moved. And they marched into a very long morning.

"Are you coming?" Martin said, now out of those oven-hot rooms and grateful to be under an open sky. They had an hour for lunch. It was quite a walk to the fort.

"No," Karl said.

"Come on," Lee urged. "We'll get back in time."

"What do you expect to find?"

"Dried blood. There was a hell of a lot of it last night. We can't miss that. That will prove he was hit."

"Go on. I'm staying. I don't need the exercise."

"Stick in the mud," Martin said.

"See you," Lee said.

Karl watched their retreating backs.

Good, he thought. Now he could do what he had wanted to do all morning. He walked back into the school where Kenny sat

quietly nibbling his sandwiches.

Kenny sat at his desk, watching the escaping children from a second-story window.

Fingers snapped.

He turned and looked.

A hand appeared in the classroom doorway. It waved in acknowledgment and produced a shiny red ball between finger and thumb.

A second hand appeared and with much flourish pointed at the ball.

Kenny clapped.

The hands bunched, bowed at the wrist. Two balls appeared in the top hand.

Kenny clapped.

Top hand produced three balls . . . Four balls! Bottom hand reflexed: open-shut-open-shut shimmy-shake ta-ta!

Kenny clapped throughout.

The two hands clasped in a victory embrace. Karl stepped into view. "It's not a bad trick."

"Wonderful!" Kenny said.

"Too kind. Too kind. It's not in the same league as your trick."

Kenny folded his lunch bag into a small tight square, then unfolded it.

"Your eye," Karl finally said. "Last night. I thought that blood was for real! I've been looking at you all morning and you don't have a scratch. Can you teach me that trick?"

"I thought I recognized you." Kenny smoothed out the bag. "I wasn't sure."

"I'm sorry about last night." Karl sat on the desktop next to Kenny. "We should have stayed. But . . . you really scared us. It's a wonder I ever stopped running."

"I had to protect myself. I was going to be hurt. My parents said I have a right to protect myself."

"We didn't know you were in there. If you only came out in the open, things wouldn't have gotten carried away."

"You think so?"

"Sure. Hell, we were pissing scared! We didn't know *what* was behind that board. It could have been a rabid skunk or fox."

"That changes things." Kenny lifted hands from the bag and placed them on his lap. "I was worried."

"Shake." Karl held out his hand. Kenny looked at it.

"Aw, come on. I promise there's not hand buzzer." Karl turned his hand over. "See."

Kenny lifted his delicate white hand and shook.

"You'd have trouble with the multiplying billiard ball trick," Karl said. "Your hands are too small."

"They're big enough."

"Well, maybe with enough work you might be able to pass with some close magic. But my hands are better." Karl stretched out his oversized hands. "It's easy to hide things behind these hunks of meat. I've an unfair advantage over you. Stick to your flash magic. You've got talent."

"I do it to survive." Kenny bit into his sandwich.

"So do I! It's terrible going to a party and having to talk to people you don't know. Especially girls. I'd rather pull an egg . . . coin out of someone's ear."

"Do you want some?" Kenny offered the sandwich.

"Thanks, but I've got to go home for lunch. I can't spoil my appetite. I tell you what, since it's Friday, why don't you come over tonight? I'll show you the ball trick and you . . . Hey! Why don't you sleep over tonight? Channel 7's got Fright Night on! I watch it every weekend."

"I don't think I can. Mom wouldn't like that."

"How'd you know? Ask her."

"She won't like it."

"Ask!"

"Okay."

"You'll love my place. We got a great rec room downstairs—tv, fireplace, foldout couch-beds, stereo. I got a Lights Out record. You got to hear that!"

Kenny smiled. He hadn't let Karl see him smile before.

"I think I'm going to like school."

"Sure. Us magicians have got to stick together."

"What about your other friends from last night? Are they still angry?"

"Lee's okay. Martin I'll talk to. They can take a joke. I've done them with a lot of pranks. They're pretty tough. What a setup. You really had us going!"

"It's good to laugh," Kenny said.

"Starting tonight we'll have a lot of laughs. The third movie is always a dog. Either a Japanese sci-fi or a Mexican horror. They're

so bad that *TV Guide* lists them as "To Be Announced."

Smiles all around. Karl looked at the clock. It was twelve twenty.

"Got to go." Karl slid off the desk. "I know about moms. Tell your folks everything is fine, I've had sleepovers before. You know Walnut Avenue? It's just off Vradenburg."

"Near the library?" Kenny asked.

"Right on. My house is number twenty-six. Here's our phone number." He wrote on Kenny's lunch bag. "What's yours?"

"We don't have one yet. The phone company is slow. We use a pay phone."

"Oh, well. You don't have to phone as long as it's okay. I've got to go. See you this afternoon, after class."

Karl was out the door and down the stairs before he thought to ask where Kenny lived.

The run home worked up his hunger.

"Are you guys on a diet?" Karl patted his stomach. Martin and Lee looked tired as they trudged back into the schoolyard. Their walk hadn't been a refreshing one.

"Wait till you hear," Martin said.

"You're on a diet!"

"The fort is gone," Martin said. "Buried. Like it was never there."

"It doesn't surprise me."

"I'm telling you true!" Martin insisted.

"No doubt."

"Karl, it's true," Lee said. "It's not only buried, the ground is packed hard! Weeds are growing over it! I can't tell where the fort was."

"Now you see it." Karl flashed a red ball. "Now," he passed a hand, "you don't." The ball vanished. "You've been had."

Martin slapped at Karl's hand. "This isn't a trick. He didn't get this out of the back of a comic book."

A mild frown passed from Karl's face.

"No, he thought that up all by his lonesome. But don't sell comics short." Karl squatted, picked up some dirt, and tossed it about. "You can learn the amazing secets of the East. Learn how to defeat ten men with one finger!" Karl grunted. "Learn the eighty-three death points of the body!" Karl stomped. "Feel my infamous Sleeper Hold . . ."

"Okay, Karl." Lee stopped between them. "So it could be a trick. How'd he do it?"

Karl stood up. "I don't know. I forgot to ask him."

"You talked to that . . . egg creep?" Martin asked.

"He's not a creep. He's a fellow magician. He just hasn't had time to make friends."

"So you're buddies."

"I don't need enemies."

"I'd like to know how he did it," Lee said. "He must have had help. An awful lot of earth was moved. More than he could move in a short time."

"Magicians don't explain their secrets. If they did, there wouldn't be magic."

"I'll find out." Martin smacked his fist in his hand.

"He won't tell. He might tell me . . . purely for professional reasons. But he'll never tell you."

"I have my own ways." Martin cracked his knuckles.

"You'll have to play them through me," Karl said.

The bell rang. The combatants filed into line. The afternoon separated round one from round two.

Karl stiffened. A hand touched the back of his neck.

"Working hard, are we?" asked the always-cheerful voice of Miss Kim, his teacher. Any other time he would have been happy to see her and her miraculously clinging dress, but not at three twenty-five, five minutes before the end of his last Friday class.

"I'm finishing up," Karl said hopefully.

"I've a favor to ask. Could you help me carry some boxes to my car? I've so much test-marking to do this weekend. Just a little time after class."

The politics of school being what they were, Karl never said no to a teacher. But if he said yes, there'd be no stopping Martin.

"Could I do it now?"

"Is school that bad?" Miss Kim straightened up. "Can't you wait five minutes?"

For the sake of politics Karl kept quiet.

"Maybe you can't. Go on. The boxes are by my desk."

Great, Karl thought, stacking boxes by the desk. *I'll finish double quick. I'll stick with Kenny on the way home. Martin will cool down. I bet he'll even get to like him.*

Miss Kim tapped her desk.

"Class, I've got to be going now. Class dismissed. Have a nice weekend."

Martin was the first one out. The halls rang thick with laughter.

As she bent down to pick up a box, Miss Kim said, "They should be grateful to you. I couldn't leave the class alone with five minutes left. It would be a shambles when I came back."

Karl lifted the boxes and hoped there would be something of Kenny left.

They couldn't have gone far, Karl thought, as he turned the corner of the school and looked out into the field. The neat, trim lawn of the school property ended out by the hydro field. The hydro field cut the town in half and let the country seep in. Odd weeds and unknown grass grew up and down the laneway. Town council knew that trying to keep it clean was a losing battle, so they rarely cut or sprayed. An autumn jungle-wall of corded brown twitch grass, dark green spiked leaves, purple-topped thistle, and mournful crickets secured its secrets from outside watchful eyes.

Karl ran. The wall grew less a wall and more a maze. The tattered edge offered entry in every direction. Karl took the rutted bike path that webbed across the field.

He comes to school this way. I know it, Karl thought.

Down the field two sets of hydro towers—rusted iron cathedrals—linked opposite ends of the horizon. To the west, four towers away, were Kenny, Martin, and Lee, arguing. Karl jumped off the path and ran against the armpit-high grass, fighting the uneven ground and illegally dumped garbage.

Oh! Martin was grabbing Kenny's hand and twisting it behind his back. Karl reached the first tower and waved his arms as he passed. "Stop!"

Kenny broke away! *Good! Run, boy! Great!*

Karl reached the second tower.

What's Martin throwing to the ground? Hell! He's running away! He's not going after Kenny.

By the third tower, Karl's run slowed to a jog. Slicing pain jabbed up from his hip.

"Lee! What's the matter?" Lee was looking at the ground, not noticing Karl's call.

"Lee!" Karl entered under the fourth tower, oblivious to the CAUTION 110000 VOLTS LIVE WIRE KEEP OFF sign. "Couldn't you

stop him?"

Lee just pointed. On the ground, among the broken glass, popsicle sticks, and torn tufts of dog hair, in a pool of liquid red-yellow scum, lay four fingers and a thumb.

"You should have seen Lee's face!" Karl said to his mother.

"I can imagine." She ran the mascara along her lower eyelid.

"The best, the very best I've ever seen." Karl sat in the hall in front of his parents' room. He rattled the shoe box beside his leg. The fingers and thumb danced inside. "Kenny had him white!"

"You'll have a lot to talk about." Mother frowned into her mirror, checking to see if she stayed within the lines of her paint-by-the-numbers face. "What time is he coming over?"

"I don't know. Soon, I hope. He has to ask his mom."

"If there are any questions, have her phone the Clarks. The number is by the phone. We'll be playing bridge." She bit down on a tissue and left her fresh lip-prints on the table top beside older discarded lip-printed tissues.

"Tell your father we're going."

Off he went, holding his precious shoe box. Karl found his father on the porch watching the sunset.

"Mom's ready." Karl sat on the steps beside him. "Dad, will you get me fingers like this? I mean, for my birthday?"

"Let me see them again."

Karl opened the box.

"Hmmmmm. They *are* quite a sight. I've never seen them in any shop."

"Neither have I. Boy! Aren't they fantastic?"

"Fantastic, no. Disgusting, yes. Find out where Kenny got them. They can't be too expensive."

"Thanks." Karl closed the lid. "I bet they're something like the sugar glass that stuntmen use in movies. Man, what an effect! I phoned Martin. His parents say he won't come out of his room. I'll never be able to top that."

"Work at it. You'll come up with something."

Out of the dark a thistle-down floated across the lawn. Rising, flying, falling, touching, it bounced slowly along and out of sight.

The house feels different when you're the only one in it, Karl thought. Lying on the couch, he reached for some popcorn. The tv was the sole light in the downstairs rec room. Eleven fifteen.

Twenty minutes to show time. Hell. It would have been fun. Karl crunched popcorn.

He picked up a finger. Up against the blue tv glow he marveled at the detail. It was hollow, but the finger had a nail, knuckle joints, even a textured fingerprint at the tip. A work of art. It might be expensive. Karl placed it back in the box. *Dad promised. He can't back out now.*

Eleven thirty. Five minutes to go. Karl went upstairs to the washroom. Fright Night required an unencumbered mind.

Back down the stairs and entering the room, Karl slowed . . . stopped. The air was damp and heavy with earth smells . . . night soil . . . mucus-trickling worm rot. The wall paneling by the television was pushed out. A freshly dug hole hung on the wall like a black painting. By the couch, dirty and dusty, his hand on the box, stood Kenny.

"Hi! I'm glad you found these." He picked up the fingers in his left hand. Stubby nodelike bumps protruded from his right hand where fingers should have been.

"Oh, I'll be okay. By Monday these should grow back." Kenny turned, brightened. "Popcorn!" He took a handful. "I had some problems getting here. The first time is hard. Sorry to be late. Next time it'll be a cinch."

Air sighed from the tunnel, then the sound of rocks tapping rocks.

"I can't sleep over this week. Maybe next. But Mom said you could sleep over. Come on."

It was eleven thirty-five. The news was over and Fright Night had just begun.

The Bite

by ELIZABETH MORTON

Beware of dogs that bite. But be even warier of the ones that keep their teeth clenched!

To the end I thought of the Doberman. The Doberman would have saved me trouble if I had truly understood the conditions.

My Doberman is named Titus. I bought him for protection a year ago. "Protection" is an important service in this city; faith has gone the way of the trolley. The question might be who will protect us against ourselves, of course, but that is sheerly metaphysical. In any case, the answer is that *we* will protect ourselves and I do what I must.

I have Titus.

Consider the Doberman: his simple willing attempt. When I opened the door at six, Titus did not come to greet me. Instead, he stood in the small bedroom toward the rear, whining. Breezes from an open window scattered some things from my dresser at his feet but he didn't seem to notice. He whined again, "What is it?" I asked. I was alert from the outset. I want to make that clear. I was not naive. One fine-tunes apprehension in this city, becomes suspicious of circumstance. "Tell me, Titus," I said.

He did not move. His legs trembled. "What's wrong, boy?" I asked. Why do we never call our pets *man*? He whimpered, his jaws locked. "Let's open your mouth, boy," I said, getting down on my knees to face him.

He would have none of it so I ran a finger over his muzzle. (Such a stupid act, but I was concerned and what did I know?) Titus had always been quite firm about anyone stroking his head. But he only whined again and dropped to his knees. He started

to drool.

Rabies? Lockjaw? Animals can *give* tetanus, I suppose, but do they *get* it? I've always been slightly in awe of this animal and I regard Titus as a motile, biscuit-chomping weapon—but I am a woman with some feeling. I did not want him to suffer; even a defective weapon should be fixed. "I'll take you to the veterinarian," I said, "if you don't stop this at once."

Titus groaned yet again, that shaking sigh. I should have pointed out earlier in this hasty memoir (but it is coming out, as you may have noticed, under enormous pressure) that there is a veterinarian on the ground floor of this large apartment building: a fool's parade of pets and anxious owners stalks through the lobby during daylight hours. I have used Dr. Stone's services a couple of times because he is so convenient, otherwise I would hardly have invested my time with him. Outside of his routine duties, which he seemed to perform efficiently, he was a lazy and shiftless sort. Used to be. But Stone's proximity made me press Titus once more, "Come on, boy," I said, hoping he would follow reasonably. "We'll find out what your mouth problem is."

To my relief, Titus followed me quietly out of the apartment and into the grey hallway where we waited patiently for the elevator and boarded it, joining a fat man and two blunt-faced adolescents who stared at us all the way down. Titus shivered but held his ground. "That dog is *frozen*," one of the adolescents said. "Frozen *solid*," said the other. We all laughed, except for Titus, myself, and the fat man. On the ground floor, I watched the adolescents skim across the lobby and out the door with an intruder's panache, exchanged a look of disgust with the fat man, then turned left and went up the four stairs to Stone's office. The door was open, even though it was after posted hours. Stone, no less than the rest of us, is greedy: he will not let a concerned (paying) owner go. Androcles was the last member of the profession who took the long view.

The waiting room was empty but not for long; Titus and I stared at copies of *The Pet Dealer* on a long table until Stone emerged in a flurry of yelps from the rear. I do not have the time to characterize him except to say that he does not suffer from age, humility, or compassion. "He can't seem to open his mouth," I said. "Can dogs get lockjaw?"

"You mean that one, right?" Stone said. "So, I'll take a look," He pulled on Titus's collar and they trotted toward the door. "Read

a magazine," Stone said. "I'll be back in a minute."

"I'm in the building," I said. I gave him my name. "Remember? You can call me. My number is in your file. You *have* a file?"

"I'll call you then," Stone said. "If you don't have the patience to wait."

"I don't want to wait," I said. "I'm upstairs; let me know when the examination is done. That way I can have a drink. I work hard too, you know, and I need fortification to come back and deal with *you.*" I got up, started for the door. "Just find out what's wrong with the dog."

"I'll call you," Stone said. "Argue responsibility with yourself." He led Titus through the door, into another swirl of yelping. I left the reception room. The adolescents were not on the elevator but the fat man was. "They didn't come from any floor in *this* building," he said bitterly. "There's no security. Anything can happen in this place. Don't you think anything can happen?" I did not answer. I did not want to take our relationship one step beyond where it was; if strangers do not want to hurt you, they want an involvement. *"Frozen,"* I heard him say as I got out. It did not disturb me.

In my apartment, I made myself a Scotch and water, thinking of life in a city where protection is major service, where dogs are weapons, and weapons are a way of greeting. The phone rang just as I had decided, yet again, that the conditions of my life were tolerable after all. I had a job that I loved and the Scotch, which I endured, and the fear neutralized by Titus. "This is Dr. Stone," the voice said, "what are you doing? This is Dr. Stone, do you hear me?"

"I hear you," I said. I took another swallow of Scotch; it broadened me somewhat. "What do you mean, what am I doing? I'm sitting here by the phone, thinking about lockjaw, which for all I know is contagious. I'm thinking of the city and my life. I'm thinking—"

"Get out of the apartment now,"

"What's that?" I took another swallow. "I don't think it's worth the rent and I keep *looking* but I'm not ready—"

"It's not funny," Stone said. His voice had the tone of the boy saying *that dog is frozen.* "Get out now. Come downstairs to my office."

I put down the glass. Through the haze of Scotch and fatigue I felt a small stab of implication. "What is this?"

"I'll tell you downstairs. I'll meet you in the lobby."

"You tell me now."

"Shut up and get out of there."

"Goodbye," I said.

"You fool," he said rapidly, "I got your dog's mouth open."

"That's what you were supposed to do, *Doctor.*"

"Wait. Listen to me," Stone said urgently. "Get out of that apartment *now.*"

I stared into the mouthpiece, "What?"

"There were two fingers in that dog's mouth."

I put down the phone then, my hand reflexively numb, and heard the sounds inside the bedroom closet.

The door seemed to move slightly and it was only then, looking down, that I saw the thin strip of blood spreading from the closet . . .

I heard the knob within the close turn.

What had the fat man said?

But I knew nothing of the fat man; I had refused to become involved. I dealt only with myself and my biscuit-tracking weapon. And so, even before I saw the face, even before I saw the dull revolver that was held in the hand that had not been ruined, even before all that, in fine and pure constancy, unmoving like Titus, I thought of the Doberman and his simple, willing attempt.

The phone began to ring again.

Oh God oh Stone oh Titus, I am *frozen.*

The Spook Man

by AL SARRANTONIO

His cape was black, his eyes were hooded.
And he was particularly fond of children.

The Spook Man came to town.

Mothers and fathers locked their doors. Dogs hid in the doghouses. Mailmen, ignoring their credo, left mail undelivered and went to bars or home to scolding wives. Schools closed up, locked and bolted their playground gates and sealed their windows. The grasses turned brown; even the weather changed, trading warmth for sudden chill and seeping sunshine for blustery blocks of grey-black clouds. The town tried to hide.

The Spook Man set up on the edge of a baseball field. His rolling home was a brooding many-wheeled thing in All-Souls' colors; those that chanced to look at it said it was as big as a house or as small as a horse-trailer. No two gave the same description. Some said it had a hundred windows, hung with black lace and with flowerpots filled with dead daisies; others described it as sad and shallow, a hobo's retreat. There were gables and then there weren't. A turret and then not. A porch with a jet-black rocking chair that vanished into thin air. A steeple that became nothing. Soon no one looked at it.

The waiting began. Children were locked in cellars, kept in tight bedrooms, told to glue themselves, literally, to television sets. Children were overfed, told to eat and keep their eyes off the windows. Most boarded up their windows, sealed them tight against the dim brown light that suffused everything and tried to leak in. Telephone games became the rule of the day: Susie called Billie called Carl called Maisie. Parents kept a watchful ear to see that games

and tv were all that were talked about. Parents were everywhere children were; there was more parent-love exhibited than ever before, and this made Susie and Billie and Pete and Jerry and all the rest nervous.

The Spook Man waited.

Four houses kept four children locked up especially tight. These were Harry and Brenda and Chubby and Larry—the four who lived, breathed, and ate monsters. When the new werewolf movie came out they were first on line; when the binding wire was snipped from the new eerie comics, they were hovering there with greedy eyes. No plastic creature model escaped them; no fright mask wasn't in their possession. Wax fangs covered their cavities; they walked in shuffling limps; spoke in Igor voices or baying howls.

Harry and Brenda and Chubby and Larry plotted. Each in their own house, with parents floating like balloons nearby, they used their Code.

"I loved the tv I saw last night," Harry told Brenda.

"We'll meet tonight to see the Spook Man," is what he meant.

"I ate a dozen cookies at one sitting yesterday," Chubby told Larry.

"Tonight the Spook Man," is what he said.

"Good books to read," is what Harry told them all.

"Ten-thirty by the playground gate," is what they knew.

As obedient as ever, the four watched television, read books and played games. They smiled like they always did. Then bedtime came, and the light went off, and each in turn climbed carefully out of pried-open windows.

They arrived in concert as a half-moon broke through the low sky. The clouds scudded, making the moon blink, and as it shone again, their eyes turned like pin-magnets on the Spook Man's place.

It was a house. This was no hobo's retreat. It was a house as sure as any of them lived in one. There were windows and a steeple and gables and a porch, and there was that jet-black rocking chair. It was magnificent and frightening. Victorian, Georgian, Tudor. Massive.

Bleak.

"Where are the wheels, how did it get there?" asked Chubby.

"I don't want to be here," said Larry.

"Come on," said Harry and Brenda at the same time.

There was only one door, a dark one of metal, and they crept up to it. The sky overhead played tricks, turned bright and dark and all the colors of a thunderstorm. A thunderstorm threatened, went away, came back. Went away.

They reached the door.

The door opened.

The Spook Man was there.

"Ah," he said, from somewhere beneath his cape. The cape fluttered, twirled, snapped. A face was revealed, quickly hidden. Powder-white, red-tinted, empty, sharp. Behind him a thousand fireflies seemed to hover, blinking Christmas tree colors. There were mirrors back there, and curtains, and strings of hanging beads that tinkled in the swirling bellows breeze. And other things lurking.

"Come into my ghost cellar," the Spook Man whispered to Harry and Brenda and Larry and Chubby. His breath was apple wine, blossoms on a chill wind, October.

"Come in and see what's here," the Spook Man breathed at them. "Come see my ghosts and ghoulies. I have things that bump in the night and all day long. I have men with rubber faces. I have orange and black bats, and a hag with fingernails ten inches long. I have cats galore, with eyes so bright green and teeth so sharp you'll shudder. I have skeletons of white bone marble, bones that clack one against the other like graveside cymbals. There are red crisp Halloween apples with fangmarks in them, dunked for by vampires. The vampires are there too, red and black and hidden in upper corners with the spiders. There is something that looks like jello that oozes when you speak to it; something else so horrible that I've left it unnamed. *You* can name it," he said, pointing one long and insubstantial finger into Chubby's jacket-covered belly. "Or you or you or you," he continued, pointing to them all. He pulled his finger back, making a steeple with all of his fingers and leaning down over it to hover, helicopterlike, above them. "Won't you *please* come in?"

"Sure we will," Harry blustered, pushing in front of the rest. He was brown, crisp haired, and bold, leader of the Four. "That's why we're here, isn't it?"

No one challenged him, but no one moved to follow either.

He mounted the short steps, passing under the Spook Man's cape. "Come on," he said.

They did.

"Excellent!" the Spook Man hissed, rolling his cape over each in

turn like a bullfighter, counting each upon the head as he passed. He tapped Brenda twice, causing her to look at him from beneath her red hair.

"Twice knocks for red locks," the Spook Man said, smiling a grin that put wonderful goosepimply hands round her heart.

The found themselves in a black hallway, and when they looked back for guidance the Spook Man was gone. A black wall cutting off the outside world was in his place.

"He's just trying to scare us," Harry said, some of the bluster gone from his voice.

"D-doing a good job," said Larry, youngest and least true of the quartet.

"Ahh," was Harry's reply, and they proceeded.

They felt along the walls, and the walls were damp and slippery. They were crypt walls. They gave off the smell of underground, as underground they went in a gentle slope.

Suddenly, piling one on the other in the darkness, there was a door with a white face on it.

Larry screamed, and Brenda and Chubby and Harry merely shivered.

The face looked through them with the bottomless holes of its eyes.

And said, "Quiet."

It was a Marley face, a face cut from the cloth of ghosts. It shimmered in and out of vision, now sharp, now wavering, now sharp again. It asked them their business. When they didn't answer, it asked who had sent them.

"The Spook Man," Brenda said in a rush.

"The *Spook* Man," the face intoned.

The door melted away, showing a stairway of glowing green steps leading down into absolute black. There could have been a great and deep hole in the earth on either side of those steps, for all they could see. There were steps, and nothing else.

"Let's," Harry said tentatively, meekly, maybe-we-shouldn'tly, "go."

"No," breathed the other three, but again they followed.

The steps sang like chimes. Soon, as the four of them stepped down, a harplike mix of bells rang out. The tones became deeper as they sank into the darkness, turning by sneaky degrees to the middling screech of a stepped-on cat and then to the deep bellow of a funeral mass organ. The tones grew so low and thundering their

stomachs rumbled. They looked back to see that the lights disappeared as they left them behind, and, to their horror, they found that along with the lights the steps disappeared too.

They found themselves at the bottom, huddled together, four bodies in the dark trying to fit into the space of one.

"I'm *scared,*" Larry said.

"Don't be," Harry countered.

"Why not?" asked Chubby.

"Don't know," Harry admitted.

"Come on," said Brenda this time.

The darkness drifted before them. They sensed something just out of reach, taunting them, debating whether to move back or strike. Things ticked along the floor, brushed at their legs. Chubby felt a clawed thing grab his ankle and release it in the same movement. Dusty things brushed their faces. When they covered their faces, dusty things brushed their hands.

"I'm *scared!*" Larry repeated.

"You're supposed to be," Harry tried, as all around them it grew lighter.

They could see themselves now, their trembling arms and deliciously knocking knees. They could see each other's wild faces. With quick eyes they looked down for the crawling, drifting things, but saw nothing.

A door creaked open in front of them.

"I'm scared! I'm scared!" Larry screamed, turning to flee.

Something held him back. There was a wall a foot behind them moving up on them all the time, compelling them to move on. Larry scratched at it, beginning to cry. Harry and Chubby grabbed him, pulled him through the doorway after them.

A voice sounded, the Spook Man's voice, and Larry quieted immediately.

"Welcome to my cellar," it said.

Blackness descended then. And then a cacaphony of lights. Fangs, radium-bright, flew at them from every corner. Deep and ponderous chains were dragged before them, around them. A cauldron made its appearance, bubbling and roiling green-hot liquid. It stirred itself, and then was stirred in turn by the vilest of witches—warts, cackle, and all. The cauldron evaporated, and then the witch was on her broom, coming straight at them and veering up and over at the last second in a steep angle. Skulls appeared at the four

corners of the room, at headheight, and then skeletons winked into view below them. A skeletal rattle-dance commenced.

Harry and Chubby and Brenda danced with it. All hints of fear had gone, replaced by wild abandon. They danced like wood creatures, aping the gestures of their bony mates. They laughed.

Larry tried to laugh. Instead he made a compromise, painting his mouth with a horrible rictuslike smile that did little to hide his paralysis. He was paralyzed by fear; horrified by the revel of his wild friends. He wanted to be home, under the sheets and under layer on layer of patchwork quilt, listening to nothing but his own even breathing and the silence of his self-made night. He wanted Mother and Father to be out in the living room, further boarding the windows. He wanted Sis to be in the bedroom next door, sleeping safe with her lemon-yellow duck clasped under her sucking thumb. He wanted the tv to be on; the radio to be on; he wanted to play games, Scrabble and Parcheesi and hearts and rummy. He wanted, along with everyone else, the Spook Man to be gone.

Larry's grin grew wider.

The monsters came now.

Brenda and Harry and Chubby cheered. Here they all were, the models they had built and the comics they had collected come to life. They came in a dancing procession, out of the dark and back into it again. First Frankenstein, green, square, and parading false life, his arms frozen in front; then Dracula—no, *two* Draculas, snarling and circling each other like caged lady tigers, each seeking to snap redly at the other's neck. Mummies followed; then wolfmen howling at artificial moons that blinked on above; then sea creatures of all sorts, dripping seaweed and smelling of salt and rotting fish. Then the invaders from Space, each more tentacled and more colorful than the one preceding, with breathing apparatus and bulging eyes. There were bat-men and bat-women, giant insects galore, a gaggle of hairless beasts slowly diminishing in number as the glutonous blob-creature behind them ate them off one at a time. There were men with pumpkin heads and men with fly heads, men with dogs' heads, men with no heads. Growling rabbits. Mammoth frogs. Titanic rats, some so crazed they were eating themselves. Armless, legless, eyeless things; things that crawled and snapped and clicked; slimy things; things that went *flit* and were gone before they could be identified. Creatures of the night. Creatures of every underground imagination.

Horrid things.

Chubby and Brenda and Harry celebrated each monster's passing. With each new fright their huzzahs grew. Here was every nightmare they had ever dreamed about served up like breakfast, the nastiest breakfast there ever was. The monsters came and went, invoking death and rot and damp earth.

Chubby suddenly stopped cheering.

As if a spell had broken, he looked at the faces of his three friends and found only on Larry's what he wanted to see.

"I don't think this is so much fun anymore," he said in a bare whisper.

Larry looked to him with hope; Harry and Brenda were lost in the procession of evil.

"I think I want to leave," Chubby said a little louder.

"I want to go home," Larry joined in without hesitation.

Harry and Brenda showed no interest in them.

"I don't want to be here!" Larry shouted above the flapping of batwings, the bellowing of the not-alive.

Brenda grabbed him and howled, demonlike, into his face.

Chubby momentarily lost himself again, becoming a wild thing. The three of them danced a witches' ring around Larry, screeching and tearing at their hair. The other monsters were gone. They formed a wider circle, and fairy lights, wisps of pale bright shooting stars, twirled round with them.

The terror burst out of Larry.

"I don't want to be here!" he screamed, "I never meant any of it, never believed any of it! I don't like spiders and toads and snakes—I'm scared of mice! I built monster models, but I built model cars and ships and planes too. I read *Creepy* and *Strange* and *Ghoul* and *Monster* comics but I also read *Archie* and *Superman*. I snuck out to the movies to see Westerns and funny movies, instead of always watching the Wolfman. I threw out the model guillotine you made me build; I like to collect coins and baseball cards and stamps." He was crying now. *"I don't even like the nighttime—I'm afraid of the dark!"*

The wild dance stopped. Chubby stepped over with Larry, hung his head.

"Me," he muttered, "too."

Brenda and Harry stood, unmoved. There was a wild ruby gleam in their eyes; their faces seemed more elongated, their ears sharper edged.

"We want to go home!" Chubby and Larry begged.

A door opened in the darkness.

It was a rectangle cut out of nothing, leading to the outside night. There was the baseball field, there the chainlink fence they had climbed, a few bare trees all bathed in velvet moonlight.

Larry and Chubby ran through the door.

All around Brenda and Harry there was a booming laugh.

The Spook Man appeared.

His face was less indistinct now, yet still indescribable. He seemed less sinister, more of normal height and painted in daytime colors.

"Two is more than I ever hope for," he said almost gently. He made a cape motion at the two fleeing figures outside, now climbing like quick monkeys over the fence and away. "They won't be scared for long. In time it will be almost a pleasant memory for them, a visit to a funhouse."

He turned that elusive face on Brenda and Harry.

"Which is what this is—a funhouse—if you've the right stomach for it." His voice became both echoes and hushed. "Town to town, and hardly ever more than one. Many times none at all." His eyes, piercing, hooded, seemed to be searching for something in their faces, a beacon. "They really don't know me, all the little people in these little towns. They're afraid of me and my little family. But they don't know."

He leaned down over them, a midnight hawk looming over its brood or prey. "Little red and little black," he continued, looking from Brenda to Harry. "Are you ready to join my family? You saw them, all the goblins and fiends and ghosts and demons there are. Once all of them looked just like you, little pink or yellow or ebony people with creature model kits and monster magazines. But something breathed inside them, behind the ghoul costumes and playthings, something locked in the crypts of their human bodies and straining to get out. They loved monsters so much they wanted to *be* monsters. I gave them the chance. I called them—never took them, only called—away from their creature features and werewolf masks and horror novels, and gave them the chance to join their real family. The one that would make their lives complete. Only the true ones stay, of course. Here they breathe with their real lungs and fly with their real wings, cocooning into the beautiful little horrors they want to be."

He leaned even closer, his face becoming the shifting meadow

of monstrous shapes, a nightmare tryptych mirroring the life he offered. "So, little ones," he said, his voice echoing all around them as his cape flowed out to encircle, hold them fast to his world, "are you ready to become my tiny son, my baby daughter? Do you want to see how much you really love monsters?"

"No!"

Harry pushed out at the cape, ducking under its strong black wings and out through the doorway. Soon his feet made the chain-link fence jangle as his sneakers carried him up, over, and gone.

The Spook Man laughed softly. "Hardly ever more than one," he said, half to himself.

He turned slowly back to Brenda.

"And you, little crimson, have *you* made up *your* mind?"

Brenda made no answer.

The Spook Man laughed a booming laugh then, and the doorway to the world zipped shut, and the brothers and sisters of the night came from their caskets and damp niches and dusty tombs to meet their new sibling, the creature of teeth and claws and wild red eyes that danced before them.

The Woman's Version

by DAVID J. SCHOW

Something was moving in the room overhead.
Could it be the dreadful thing
she'd waited for all her life?

The rough thump was distinctly like the sound of a dead body hitting the floor.

In the darkness of her tiny apartment, Leona Koch's eyes snapped open. She had been almost within the succoring black grasp of sleep when the noise had jolted her back to consciousness. Earlier it had been the need to use the bathroom; after that, a cold finger of air on her leg, which had escaped her tucked-in fortress of blankets. Now, as sleep left her behind like the receding caboose lamps of a missed train, her irritation at losing the night was edged with her customary wariness. Dark rooms held dangers, she knew, and some late-night noises might be things other than the creaking of the old building or the coarse young marrieds who lived above her, fighting on the stairwells.

Leona Koch was a devotee of blankets and darkness as psychic armor. Hospital corners with the ends tucked air-tight, and opaque window shades pulled sensibly to the sill to deaden the street lamps outside. And no squirming about in bed, she reminded herself, because if her room made noise so late at night, squirming might attract the attention of whatever malignant thing was out there shopping in the middle of the night.

"They never quit . . ." She had always associated such grumblings with terminal bachelors lacking their requisite pipes and slippers, but tonight she felt entitled. The sound of her own voice was thick and coated; the throat infection that had kept her from

her desk (right row, third down, in Calex Petroleum's accounting wing) for three straight days was still raging. Now her voice sounded like a wasp trying to fly underwater; she'd have to trudge to the bathroom to spit and clear her throat. Hawking into Kleenexes and watching them accumulate in the bedside wastebasket was like keeping the disease near you. She held to the theory that one could consign a sickness, a bit at a time, down the drain to the neverland that waited wherever the pipes and sewers of civilization ended. But she'd have to get up again.

Leona groped for the cord switch and clicked on her night-stand lamp. A pale forty-watter illuminated the cramped bedroom vestibule. Habitually she glanced all around her apartment as soon as the light came on, a quick reconnaissance to insure that nothing had changed in the darkness. It was nominal. No boogeymen.

The next sound from above caused her to sit up in bed a degree quicker than she normally would have. Something more complex than a *thump*; this was the sound of a heavy object hitting the floor and breaking, making residual scattering noises. She felt her headache leaking slowly back, after being damped less than an hour ago.

"They never quit," she muttered again, noting that people who talked to themselves often repeated a line over and over, as though rehearsing it to use on real people out in the real world. "They *never* quit." Her breath was shortened, harsh, and painful to her throat. Her two-and-a-half rooms smelled thickly of steam heat, milky tea, and stale bedding.

Leona sat in bed with the light on, waiting for more, still not daring to move around *too* much, lest the noisemakers cease their activity to eavesdrop on her. She recalled, for the billionth time, how her parents had looked into the dining room and seen her, a modestly pretty four-year-old girl sitting quietly at a table, alone, hands neatly folded, ankles primly crossed, eyes not straying. They had beamed stupidly at each other and left her that way, presumably to hie off to the den and flap their lips about how well-behaved their little girl was. That moment, she thought in retrospect, had set her entire ensuing life, the way cake batter forms to the shape of a pan and then sticks to it. She had never truly gotten over the feeling of being abandoned, and never again would trust blindly in the power of Mommy and Daddy to save her. Ever since that horrible moment when something had moved up against the faceted panes of the dining room window, some-

thing outside, something that wanted to see her, her life had assumed a pattern. At the time, she had done the only thing she could, lacking her protective cloak of blankets—she had stared dead ahead and tried to make herself invisible. And nothing had befallen her. Years later, she would read of Zen and think it an interesting conceit.

A very small noise: an ashtray, perhaps, falling from a table and bouncing on a throw rug.

Something had stalked Leona—oh, she knew what it was, she'd seen it at last, once, long ago, before she learned all the precautions—and now something was making enough timed-release racket above her to rouse her. But she knew this enemy, too, now that she was calmer, more awake, and listening thoughtfully, analyzing each sound.

Mrs. Elvie Rojas, a widow for four of her eight-six years, had been booked into a convalescent home by her eager and hungry heirs two months before. Her apartment, the one just above Leona's, had been claimed by a stringy and unkempt working-class couple. No mystery there. Their history had been etched all over their faces the first time Leona had seen them lugging groceries up the rear stairs: gas station pump jockey meets career waitress for a first date in the back seat of his Chevy. Or maybe someplace romantic, like the women's john at the Exxon station. Their second or third date would be at some abortion clinic, a regular pit-stop for the girl since high school. She stomps out of her parent's split-level to seek connubial bliss with Mr. Grease-Clot '84, and they scan the classified for the cheapest rent just when Elvie Rojas has the bad form to vacate.

Elvie was one of the last older tenants to go. Leona supposed that during the Depression their building had been a modest address; now—after the relentless attrition of years, after being endlessly subdivided with apartments quartered, chopped-up, and rearranged, after being handed down from one grubby foreign landlord to the next—it was thin-walled, greyly delapidated, stuffy and unsafe. To Leona it had become like a dormitory for transients, or a cellblock, considering the nature of the newer tenants.

Over the past eight years the elderly occupants had trickled away, to be replaced by blacks, by Latinos, by wet ends bearing squalling kids. She did not speak to any of them in passing, and soon enough they lit out and were replaced by fresh, more threatening faces. No one came to this building to stay anymore. It had

become a way station with all the charm of a metropolitan bus depot at three in the morning; from here, people either improved their life, moving upward and out, or else receded into oblivion. Leona tried to ignore them. She saved pennies and signed leases, unwilling to dare a step into the less familiar. It probably would not be a matter of choice, in the end. If the increasingly dangerous inhabitants did not compel her to flee, the building itself would eventually cave in and absorb her.

The white trash upstairs had proven more irritating by virtue of their proximity to Leona's pocket of existence. The stink of beer, the clogging odor of pot, the blaring radio impinged on her in a way she could not tune out. Then there were the weekend fights, the yelling in stereo. Sometimes he smacked his little wifey and blacked her eyes before their argument calmed into weeping and the rhythmic grunting of copulating. They were animals, thought Leona; the bitch clinging to the ape, she praying for the intervention of a prince who could kiss her out of her caste, he merely waiting for his boss to die. The young American dream.

They were forever tromping lead-footedly about, knocking things over or blundering their furniture into heart-stopping basso skids across the obverse of Leona's ceiling. This, she presumed, was her reward for not complaining about them—not that it would have brought satisfaction. The latest landlord seemed to be from some unfathomably strange Middle Eastern country. Gnomelike and dull-eyed, he exuded the smell of stale dates and sour sweat. There were brown gaps between each of his teeth, and the tips of his slicked-back hair were perpetually gravid with droplets of an opaque liquid. He only understood English clearly around the first of each month, and had just bumped the rules so that only cash or money orders were acceptable for rent, this edict due to the untrustworthy nature of the newer tenants.

Something in the room above hit the floor with a leaden *whump* that rattled the bulbs in Leona's ceiling light fixture.

"God damn it," she muttered, surprising herself by actually letting that out of her mouth. If only they would go away and leave her to her peace.

She listened. The metronomic noises of fornication had not yet begun. She wondered if Michael Donnelley, at work, thought about her that way—if, when he asked her to coffee not once but twice, he'd had in mind the ultimate goal of making nasty between her legs . . .

And then she thought that that fate might not be so bad, compared to other things. And she remembered bolting to wakefulness just like this, on a different night long ago, when she was still a child. That night had been windblown and howlingly hostile. She had cringed beneath her blankets and squeezed her eyes shut, telling herself over and over that the shape she had seen at the dining room window had *not* figured out where her bedroom was, was *not* peering in at her now, did *not* seek her own special consort. She made herself invisible. Her breathing slowed from panic speed to normal. She regained control. She opened her eyes.

She had seen the moon hanging there, like a slice from a spoiled orange. It threw the shape lingering outside her bedroom window into silhouette, framing its lank, dead hair and mercifully obscuring the rotted leftover of a face, the maggots plugging up its nostrils, the gaps where flesh should be, through which she could see the starlight. Despite the bucking October wind outside, its feculent breath steamed her window as he looked in on her, looked right *at* her as she fought not to twitch, even though she could feel the dead eyes boring through her, even though her stomach was spasming convulsively.

Go away go away go away go—!

Her parents had found her tossing up her dinner of tuna casserole, macaroni, and cheese all over the bathroom floor. They had cleaned her up and gently returned her to bed. They did not notice her nervously eyeing the window, and she knew they could not save her. Her mother had made the curtains from a Sears floral print bedspread. They were diaphanous, allowing too clear a view of the world outside. They might too easily reveal the shadow, should the shape return to peek in.

Later she had cut several cardboard clothes boxes to fit just-so underneath her bed, to crowd out whatever demons waited there patiently for a chance at her bare feet. She talked her parents into buying her a night-light. And she learned the trick of stapling her curtains shut, and of placing things to conveniently block the window.

Now, over thirty-five years later, the old habits stuck. Leona continued to rise from her bed in a peculiar, awkwardly acrobatic fashion she'd taught herself while small, to put her outside the reach of whatever might nestle beneath the bed. She still used a night-light; now it was a plastic thing in the shape of a tiny eighteenth-century gas lamp, and it was in her bathroom. And the curtains

in her apartment were stapled shut. She had discovered it was a maintenance-free way to keep them closed when she had lived for a while in a ground-floor room next to a busy sidewalk. Privacy was the rationale; it made good sense.

She half-sat, pillows pressing into the small of her back, listening while two full minutes ground past on her alarm clock with no further interruptions from above.

Michael Donnelley seemed a nice man. Over an almost ritualistic lunch date he had ticked off the stand-out events of his life for her in the way she might check a used car for defects that would thwart a resale. His seven-year-old son, Chad. His status as a widower. His tough bout with alcoholism after his wife's death from leukemia, and the touchy convalescence at CareUnit after that. Calex's medical insurance had covered his dry-out, and his status as an account executive with the company was secure. "There, Leona," he'd said, forwardly using her first name, "now you know all my dirty little secrets."

It has all sounded acceptable to her until he'd let that lie slip. He was shopping; his conversational confessions were littered with honesty, but it was the honesty of a piece of live bait thrown out when the fish scorns a rubber lure. He was being honest instead of charming. He was telling her that his boy needed a mother, that he wanted a surrogate for his wife, and that neither of them were getting any younger. He was suggesting that he could do her a favor since she had not snared a husband—but he had not *said* any of these things. And that meant that while they were discoursing, pretending to be civilized, he was thinking of her warming the half of his bed left cold by his dead wife. He was imagining her with her nightgown pushed rudely up around her waist and her legs in the air, like the pom-pom princess upstairs looked in the picture Leona's mind formed whenever the cadenced jostling of post-argument rape set the floorboards to creaking above her. She always imagined the grunting.

A shifting, dragging sound came faintly from above. It wandered from the window side of her ceiling toward the short hallway, then stopped. Somebody up there was going to the bathroom. It was not a noise of aggressive misbehavior, but one of aftermath. Perhaps the rodeo upstairs was done for another night.

Michael Donnelley had set off Leona's alarms. She was always alert against attacks on her hard-won independence; her apronstrings had been cut with surgical neatness and cauterized. Her

armor now included her sensible wardrobe, her books, her modest cooking, her malfunctioning television, and the security of routine. She was living the dream of the independent woman and refused to encumber herself. When Donnelley had started talking, all the warning gongs went off. He was sniffing for a "relationship." And now his dishonest entreaties were efficiently rebuffed. She would know when the time was right for a commitment.

Her problem, as she perceived it, was one of lateral drift. Once one has scored the goal of nondependent existence, she thought, what was one to do with it? For her, snuffing out entanglements had been as direct as clicking off a row of switches. She was a mass of raw potential. Nothing held her. She was free and inertia did not matter because a battery full of power could not stagnate . . . could it?

Someday she would have to invest some of her accumulated power in a test, to see how her presence changed her world. But not tonight, not while she was sick, physically unstable, and underslept . . .

When she opened her eyes again the minute hand on the alarm clock had cranked away another hundred and eighty degrees, her bladder was prodding her, and a dripping noise was leaking irritatingly into earshot from the bathroom. Cold air pushed through her old, nearly transparent blue nightgown; she'd dozed off without covering up. The bedstand light was still blazing, and that woke her up faster, with a tiny stab of panic. It was unnatural to sleep with the lights on, like not dressing for bed. It was dropping off to unconsciousness before everything was secure. It was another of her smart rationalizations.

She sighed, swung her legs from beneath the blankets, and unloaded herself from bed with her usual odd choreography. The dripping tap was probably the shower's hot water faucet. Again. "Damn it," she said, thinking of her viscid troll of a landlord.

The supposed improvements worked on the building by this squalid little man were stopgap jobs, fleeting and cosmetic, and Leona's bathroom was an exemplar of his overwhelming inadequacy. Before she had moved in, a half-hearted attempt to tile the bathroom had been made; it was not a success. Inadequately glued tiles periodically disengaged to shatter in the bathtub, scaring the starch out of her every damned time. Chunks of grouting dropped out to crumble underfoot, leaving a maze of trenches where vermin could hide. Occasionally a drowning cockroach would make

a leap for life and land on Leona's leg while she was bathing. After all these years the sink light was still a naked bulb on a pull-chain. The building's horrendous seasonal plumbing problems were evidenced by the bathroom ceiling. It had been replaced about twenty months back with sheets of gypsum board (stamped *Sheetrock Firecode*), the seams spliced with fat slices of duct tape. It promptly sagged, growing moist and grey once weekly from seepage. Her note to broach this topic before remitting another month's rent, she knew, was taped to the bathroom mirror. As she stepped through the tiny hallway, she saw the pinkish glow from the night-light and heard clearly the metronomic dripping sound—*bap bap bap*.

"A slum," she said to herself, rubbing her eyes. She reached for the pullchain she knew to be just above the night light and *bap* moisture impacted with the back of her hand, making her jump. *Bap*. So the roof of this sleaze pit was finally leaking all over everything.

It was only as she pulled the chain that she noticed the plastic panes of the little streetlamp were not their usual soft yellow. They were red. The light came on.

Leona saw a daub of blood on the back of her hand. Microscopic motes of plaster dust danced in it as it trailed languidly toward her wrist. *Bap*. Droplets hung in streaks on the tiny shaving mirror, reflecting themselves. Her note, taped there, was damp and drooping with the red wetness that oozed down the wall in front of her, slowing as it coagulated. The painting porcelain sink was mottled in thickening crimson streaks that converged on the rusty drain. *Bap*.

Right over her head the make-do ceiling looked insanely like a bisected redwood tree—concentric rings of dead brown radiated wetly from a dense maroon bull's eye. As she looked up a fresh drop cut loose from the moist center and *bap* joined the others in the sink. Blood began to steam off the sixty-watt bulb above the mirror.

When she saw her bloodied reflection, her lower lip started trembling. Her heartbeat pulsed painfully in her kidneys, and her stomach felt full of crushed ice. In the mirror, she saw, there was just enough lag-space behind the open door for something or someone to be hiding.

She jerked clumsily around, wetting herself; a warm finger traced down the inside of her right leg and over the bump of her

ankle, to soak the shabby rug. In that moment she had fully expected a skeletal hand to clamp down on her shoulder from behind, in a graveyard salutation accompanied by the spicy reek of dry, cured, dead flesh. A beetle would clamber off the hand to burrow into the warmth of her thin nightclothing. And she would scream and jitter about like a mad victim of St. Vitus.

There was nothing behind the door. Her teeth had bitten away a tissue-fine slice of lip skin . . . and her nails, tucked inside of clenched fists, had left deep purple breves in the soft part of each palm. But none of her own blood had been drawn. *Bap.*

The gruesome pattern on the bathroom ceiling was now giving up droplets more slowly, and Leona realized with a weirdly clinical sense of detachment that the blood was drying. *Good, it'll stop soon and I can go back to bed,* she thought irrationally, denying the reality of what she saw.

Bap. A gelid red drop skidded down the front of her nightgown.

Her mind pitched crazily for control and apparently won, though she had to steady herself against the unstained doorjamb. This was real; who was to say it wasn't? Now her obnoxious neighbors, the sleazy landlord, the decaying deathtrap in which she endured—they all comprised a sitcom scenario much less convincing than the blood dripping from her bathroom ceiling.

Did the grease chimp murder his bimbo? And why should Leona care?

Whistling up the police would take time. They would invade her apartment to dun her with questions and see how shabbily she was living. It was not the image she wished to project. They'd see the curtains stapled shut and scribble things on their pads about how odd she was. Calling the law seemed immediately to be at cross purposes to what Leona wanted to accomplish. But if there had been some kind of mayhem, wasn't it her civic duty to help foster a noiseless neighborhood peace by determining whether the cops needed to be called? And—her mind grasped the notion almost too eagerly—if she discovered something serious enough to warrant calling the cops, would she not have set in motion a series of events that would rid her at last of the losers who had become such a burden to her private existence?

It seemed like logic to Leona, but in her belly it felt like a fiery flash of satori; her precautions, from the stapled drapes on up, for all these years, had *worked.* The bomb-blast of catastrophe

had missed her and hit one floor up. She had lived most of her life as a chicken, afraid, wincing when she tripped over the word *xenophobe* in the dictionary. For all that time she had been waiting for the moment when she could venture outside her cocoon of safety and see what her stored power could do.

What had happened tonight was the most undeniable of portents. The time was now, and there would be no phone calls to the police.

The sickness in her belly rolled over and became a kind of glowing excitement tinged with residual fear. She looked down at the elongated blood-smear between her breasts; it was talismanic, she now saw, to relegate what had happened to the realm of nightmare, would be to deny whatever destiny this sequence of events was intended to lead her toward.

Why was she even *thinking* of going upstairs, she stopped to consider, unless she had just been changed in some chrysalid way?

Carefully she stepped from the bathroom, noticing her constricted quarters seemed uglier now—somehow used up, like an empty womb. This, too, clicked for her; from this place one either moved up in the world, or . . .

In her mind the voices of her parents chastized her: *Yes, quite insane, something about monsters nobody but she can see and things only she could know oh she was such a well-behaved little girl . . .*

Her hands found her robe and belted it about her without looking. She was snug—or secure—when she sprang the double police bolt on the door and peeked out into the real world.

The hallway was unheated, cold. The building knocked and shifted as though she was moving through a belly of a zeppelin-sized dinosaur settling down to die. Her ear picked out the far-away babbling of a television set, and for a fleeting second her ingrained self took hold and forced her to call out, "Is anyone awake . . .?" Strong echoes were the only response. No one down here was aware of what had taken place upstairs. They would all hide in their cubicles, trembling, and rightfully so.

Let them, she thought.

The stairway to the third floor was an architect's nightmare, far too narrow and crammed into a corner of the hallway to service—just barely—the subdivided arrangement of rooms. It was comprised of four steps, a hard left turn, four more steps, another turn, and four more. Heat rose. Here the air was lukewarm, heavy

and unpleasant—the stink of senile old buildings past their dying time. The risers groaned as Leona stepped cautiously upward.

She drifted past a permanently sealed door suffocated in nails and cheap paint. One less way out, she thought. The brass numerals affixed to the next door was obscured by the same clotted, cream-colored paint that deadened every portal in the building to the same scuffed shoe-sole appearance. This was 307; Leona's was 207. Faint smoky light seeped from the crack below.

Thinking of opportunities, she knocked. There was no response, immediate or otherwise, as she found when she waited a few beats and knocked again.

The knob was slack and loose. It was blackened by years of dirty hands and rattled when Leona knocked; it ground out a soft clockwork noise when she twisted it. The front door was unlocked, unbolted, and this was not a revelation. As the knob reached full crank, Leona fancied she heard a papery, rasping sound from within, almost like a dry laugh.

If it was normal, that is, some dreadful bathroom accident, she thought, she could do no worse than possibly distinguish her life with an act of bravery. *Yes, officer, I ripped my gown into bandages and bestowed the kiss of life and I didn't even care if they had bad breath or syphilis.* Let that smug Mr. Michael Donnelley match that bit of courage for his kid!

Warmer air huffed out against her face as the door swung back. A table lamp glowed near the ragged hide-a-bed sofa in the main room. There were cinderblock and milk-crate shelves loaded not with books, but stray papers and worn-looking knick knacks and dirty grey bar ashtrays. The miasma of recently burned hamburger hung offensively in the air. The ceiling seemed far away and unhealthily browned, as though it filtered all the upward-bound air in the building. A child's phonograph collected dust in one corner, surrounded by a scatter of overplayed record albums. A champagne bottle that had held a fistful of pitiful, shrunken flowers was distributed around the floor in broken green chunks.

The curtains were wide open to the night. Leona shook her head. Of course.

She knew the path; this apartment was laid out identically to her own rooms. She had to round a corner formed by the conjunction of the capsule kitchen and the hollow where the undersized closet would be. Inside the bathroom, past the half-shut door, she heard the copper slurp of a lethargically feeding bathtub drain.

The natter of the tv set, a thousand miles away, might have been an aural hallucination.

Nothing waited to grab her behind the bathroom door. Her heart hammered away nonetheless until the doorknob bonked hollowly against the bathroom wall.

The boy hung half out of the tub, tubes and viscera and things never meant to dry in the air strung across the floor. One hand was outstretched, like the clutching claw Leona had imagined behind her earlier, and clamped bloodily onto the toilet seat. His eyes were gone. His tongue was gone. His flesh had been rearranged to suit a temperamental and impatient carver. The tiled floor was awash in a half-inch depth of stinking blood. Like the boy, his wife's corpse was naked, gaffed, and cleaned out like a trout. She was wedged ass-up, face down, into the narrow space between the tub and the toilet. Her skin—her pelt—covered the floor in slices.

"You're the scoffers," Leona said in a gentle, knowing voice "You weren't careful. You didn't look out." Didn't kids learn anything anymore? Their lives had trickled down the same pipes into which Leona had spit her disease.

When she heard the door to 307 click shut—it was unmistakeably the door through which she had just entered—she closed her eyes, anticipating the consummation of a courtship that had lasted for decades. There would be no bovine grunting and thrusting; she would not have to assume an embarrassingly submissive position. The deliciously itchy fireball down deep in her was nothing like what she'd felt when dealing with Michael Donnelley. And when she heard the rasping little laugh again, and smelled the dry cinnamon odor of flesh to which rot was but an ancient memory, she smiled, because the thing that had wanted to get her ever since that scary night in the dining room was getting her tonight.

But it had never wanted to hurt her.

Once again, Leona found herself in a messy, reeking bathroom. This time, however, her parents did not need to drag her out and tuck her in. This time she left under her own power. Love could do that to a person; it gave one unsuspected strength.

Her slippers were soon abraded to dirty rags from nightwalk. The shroudlike tatters of her robe were stiff with caked blood. She found a unique joy in no longer fearing people or things. The flies that lit on her to feed were only an annoyance.

After a time she found her way to a street called Willow Avenue, and the house Michael Donnelley had described so proudly. In a small bedroom tucked into the rear of the house, Donnelley's son, Chad would be up much too late for a seven-year-old, toying with an HO train rig.

No one had ever told *him* what to watch out for, not in this enlightened day and age.

Leona tittered softly to herself, a moist, croaking sound, and cleared a wisp of deadhair away from her remaining eye. Her insides rumbled with a sickly, hungering noise. Inside her, the blind, pink grubs squirmed and continued their frenzied feeding. A daddy long-legs scrambled up one bony arm to its nest, the light membrane of cobweb beneath Leona's chin, where her throat had been.

She took her place at Chad's window. When he turned his child's eyes toward her and began screaming, she felt she had at last found her niche in the world.

Jockeying for Time

by DAVID SHIFREN

He'd stumbled upon the secret every jockey dreams of . . . and it was turning into a nightmare.

See-sawing a moment before slowly tipping up to click against the bracket, the metal rod made Tommy frown. He tapped the slide again and when the bar balanced, read the number. Oh-eight, still one-oh-eight. No good. He had to be oh-five or under.

He stepped off the gym scale and wiped a sweaty sleeve across his face. Picking up the rope, he shook out the kinks, stepped through the middle, and pulled it taut against the backs of his sneakers. Handles up and out, knees bent, he drew the rope overhead and, as it sailed downward, flicked his wrists and jumped—an inch, no more. The rope kissed the floor beneath his feet—*thit.*

Across the room the mesh-covered wall clock read ten after nine. Half a minute's skipping and Tommy found his rhythm.

Thit-thit-thit-thit . . .

He jumped, gazing at nothing in particular—not the clock, not the darkness outside the windows, not the mirrored gym walls reflecting the empty room behind him, the chin-up bar, rowing machine and barbell areas vacant, deserted-looking in that special way a gym gets when no one's on the equipment.

Thit-thit-thit-thit . . .

At thirty-three, Tommy was one of the oldest jocks at the track. But he well remembered the first time he'd laid eyes on a racehorse. He'd been twelve, on an outing that had been his father's idea. That Sunday afternoon he'd been mesmerized. More than just the green grass and open space, more than even the electric anticipation buzzing in the air, there had been something that day appreciable to only a kid who'd always been small for his age, seeing jockeys for the first time. Men hardly bigger than he was, men in

miniature, swaggered and hunkered in brightly colored silks and paper-thin leather boots, laughing, snorting, cursing like much bigger men, and clapping one another's backs. They acted like they owned the track, with everyone else there by personal invitation. Men like his father—sleeves rolled up, racing forms in hand—and others, very unlike his father, in dark suits and sunglasses, smoking cigars—all smiled admiringly, star struck by the diminutive heroes.

Then and there Tommy'd vowed to become a jockey, a rider of racehorses, if he could. The rest of that day had only reinforced his resolve. The gigantic horses seen up close between races, the tiny jocks perched on high, confident astride those broad, muscled backs—these were all Tommy had needed to see to clinch his decision.

If his reasons for continuing to race had changed somewhat over the years, that original thrill had never quite died.

But Tommy hadn't had an easy time of it. Sure, he'd earned a living, but barely. Anyone could stay with a thing that reaped rewards. When it didn't, that was another story. And him, he'd never won a big race, never made a killing. Not that he didn't pray for it—he'd have given anything to. For the money, sure, but also for the recognition, the fame. Thirty-three years old. More than twenty years since he'd seen that first race.

He started—and missed his jump—as from the corner of his eye he saw the gym door open and a head appear; the face smiled, then was gone. New janitor? Tommy dropped the rope and stepped back onto the scale. Weight was so much a part of it. The jockey's perpetual enemy. Some riders got by with a minimum of dieting, but others, like himself, had to watch each calorie. He suddenly realized he hadn't touched a bite of food since the night before. Good! Okay, now what was the verdict? He raised his hand to the bar, but suddenly felt an overwhelming exhaustion; then, just as abruptly, the feeling gave way to a kind of lightness. What was going on? Tommy felt he could have brushed the ceiling, the twenty-foot ceiling, with his fingertips if he'd jumped. He didn't try to, but gripped the front of the scale for support and rested his head. The damnedest feeling!

When it had passed a moment later, he raised his hand to the bar again. He'd skipped meals before, but never with any problem. The notched bar clicked with conviction and he guessed he must have shed a good pound and a half, maybe two. But as he adjusted the slide—no, it made no sense. The dial read ninety-six. Ninety-six pounds? He couldn't have lost twelve pounds in thirty-five minutes,

no matter *how* he'd jumped rope. He stepped to the floor, then back onto the scale. Again, ninety-six. Great. The spring must have sprung, or something.

Tommy stepped down and crossed the lacquered floor to the scale near the showers. He mounted the platform and watched the needle swing lazily around to . . . ninety-six again. He looked around. It made no sense. He hadn't weighed under a hundred since he'd turned sixteen. Had both scales broken simultaneously? A crazy coincidence. And that they should both read—

A cramp hit Tommy in his left calf, and quickly, without stepping off the platform, he dropped to one knee to massage the muscle. They came on so suddenly, leg cramps, this one probably brought on by the rope. If you didn't knead them out immediately, the grapefruit-sized knot of muscle hurt like the devil. As he knelt, a small movement caught his eye. The scale needle above was swinging slowly around to the higher numbers. Ninety-seven . . . Ninety-eight . . . Tommy slowly straightened. Ninety-nine. . . . It finally stopped at one-oh-three.

What in hell! Now the scale was working again! But it had almost seemed—it made no sense— but it had been as if the tensing leg muscle had somehow *caused* the needle to rotate. Muscle tissue was denser than fat, of course, and weighed more. Did that have anything to do with it? With the needle now reading a steady hundred-and-three, Tommy glanced over his shoulder, then looked back at the dial. He concentrated on different muscles in his body, flexing, tightening them in turn, as many as he could think of.

Slowly, but indisputably, the weight shown on the dial increased. One-oh-three and a half, one-oh-four. . . . And now it stopped at what was very likely his actual weight, one-oh-four and a half. Again he looked around, stunned with his discovery. The room was still empty, but there, in the doorway, that janitor again, grinning.

"Hey, wanna see something? You," Tommy called. "C'mere a second." The face disappeared. Tommy jumped from the scale and crossed to the door. "Look at this," he said, yanking on the handle. "Wanna see somethin' cra—"

There was no one in sight.

"Something damned weird at the gym tonight," Tommy said. "You know I'm usually one-oh-six, one-oh-seven?"

Angela didn't look up. Sitting across the table from Tommy, she sawed at a pork chop on her plate and said nothing.

"Well, I been trying to get down for this big one Saturday—"

"Done?" Angela rose suddenly, whisked Tommy's plate to the center of the table, and dropped her own dish atop his untouched, now-cold macaroni.

"Thanks," he said absently. "So I'm there at the gym, and I get on the—"

Angela dropped the dishes noisily into the sink.

"—I climb on the scale—"

"Listen, Tommy, I'm sorry you didn't like the macs," Angie interrupted, "but, see, when I have to reheat things—"

"It was fine, Ange, but listen, about the gym—"

"Oh, the gym, right. Excuse *me!*"

"For chrissake, Ange, I was a little late—"

"An hour-and-a-half isn't 'a little,' Tommy!"

"I got things on my mind! Saturday's a big race! If I can just lose some weight—that's what I'm trying to tell you."

"Listen, Tommy, it's awfully late and I've got work in the morning. Maybe you better go home tonight. . . ."

Standing at the sink with her back to Tommy, Angie spoke over her shoulder. Tommy's eyes darted to the wall clock above her head. Ten-thirty. He could be back at the gym by eleven.

He rose, dropped his napkin on the table and said, "All right, Ange, all right. Maybe it would be best—*if that's what you want*—" He strode hurriedly out of the kitchen and into the hallway, grabbing his jacket from the closet. Angie wasn't following.

"I'll phone you tomorrow," he called. On impulse he added, "We'll go to Little Venice. . . ."

"Thanks for stopping," yelled Angie in a strange tone. But Tommy didn't hear. Already out in the hallway, he was rushing toward the door to the stairs.

"Ballotti, party of two," Tommy said. "I made a reservation."

The tall, olive-skinned maitre d' bowed slightly and led Tommy past linen-covered tables with candles and silver, to a spot in the back. Angie wasn't in sight. Tommy sat. He was ten minutes late, but she wouldn't have left so soon, would she? He'd give her fifteen minutes, then to hell with her! The maitre d' came toward Tommy and stopped at his elbow.

"A telephone call, sir. The other member of your party will be slightly delayed."

Tommy's first reaction was of annoyance. Fifteen minutes could

have been another quarter-hour at the gym. That was a thousand skips of the rope, a few hundred sit-ups. Damn it! But then he began to think of last night, after he'd left Angie's and gone back to the gym. And how things had started to go crazy.

He'd driven fast, changed his clothes, and been on the floor by ten-fifty. As he had figured, the gym was deserted. No one came in that late and he'd had to use his jock's key. After warming up with some calisthenics and running, he'd gone to the scale. That was the real reason he'd come. It had read one-oh-three. He'd worked out hard, and after forty-five minutes, just before midnight, had hopped back onto the platform to find himself two pounds lower. Then he let the exhaustion catch up with him, as he had before. He slumped his head onto his chest, closed his eyes, and relaxed his body as totally as possible. After a moment he felt that same weird sensation. Slowly he opened his eyes to look at the dial. He gasped. Seventy pounds! He stepped off, stepped on again. The same. He hurried to a wall mirror and looked at himself. No change that he could see. He certainly wasn't skeletally emaciated. At the barbell area he found a sixty-pound bar, which he quickly pressed once, twice, three times. He seemed no weaker. Finally he dragged to the scale as many weights as he could manage and placed them, one by one, onto the platform. The readings matched. The scale was right. He got back on by himself and watched the needle sweep smoothly around to seventy-five.

Now he began to experiment, tensing one set of muscles after another. Biceps, pectorals, deltoids, abdomen . . . Sure enough, the needle crept clockwise around the dial.

He could do it, then. He *could!* Could *will* himself lighter and heavier. It was like that phrase he'd heard: "mind over matter." Tommy suddenly realized that over forty hours had passed since he'd eaten anything, yet he didn't feel hungry in the least. The thought of food actually repulsed him. But, more important, he realized the value of his new ability. Why, if he could "think" himself down to a low weight before Saturday's race, just before mounting but after the pre-race weigh-in, he could ride at fifty, maybe forty pounds. His horse would fly with no strain at all! And, being a long shot—his mount, Bottom Dollar, had been running poorly lately—if he bet highly on himself he could rake in a damned good-sized pot besides the winner's take.

Yes, it seemed incredible, this newfound, impossible ability. But how could Tommy know it hadn't happened to other jocks?

Maybe it was the success secret behind the best riders in the business. Surely each would want to keep it quiet, so as to continue racing. Yes, maybe Tommy had finally hit upon the secret that every jockey who stumbled across never breathed a word of.

In any case, there seemed no reason not to cash in on it.

But what if this extraordinary gift was dangerous? To be safe Tommy'd visit the track infirmary right after the race—or rather, he'd go to some out-of-town country doctor next week. Surely he could wait until then.

Tommy snapped from his reverie as Angie appeared suddenly beside the table. He rose to hold her chair and she sat, acting coolly.

"Sorry I'm late," she said.

"No problem." He shot her a smile.

A short, thin, pencil-moustached waiter came almost immediately with menus and asked if they wanted drinks.

"Seven and seven," said Angie. Tommy, thinking of the alcohol's calories, shook his head.

"Listen, Ange," he began, when the waiter had left with their orders, "I know I've been acting funny lately, but there's a reason—"

"Sure," said Angie. "And it's obvious, Tommy. Racing means more to you than anything else. Including me."

"Damn it, now listen—"

"No, Tommy, for a change *you* listen. We've been together two years now and I've always had this idea of us building something together. It's nothing new to you, we've talked about it before. And you've admitted wanting a family as much as I do—"

"Well, I *do*—"

"You say you do. But are you willing to give up anything for it? That's how people prove what's important to them. Tommy, we both know you couldn't support a family on your earnings. . . ."

"But that's why Saturday's race means so much! That isn't just some chicken-feed first prize!"

"And that's what you'll always say: 'Just this race, just that one coming up, this next one's the last. . .'" Angie shook her head. "No, Tommy, that's the part I can't believe. It'll always be 'one more race.'"

The food came then, and Angie fell silent until the waiter had left. She began eating, not looking up to meet Tommy's eyes. Her silver clicked noisily on her plate.

"You're not eating," she said in a neutral tone.

"I'm not really hungry."

"Well then it wasn't a very good idea to come here, was it?"

The bitch! Tommy felt really surprised. He'd never seen her this bitter. He forced himself to cut a piece of steak and fork it into his mouth. Immediately he felt a wave of nausea, a cramp that felt like a fist in his stomach.

Maybe something really *was* wrong? Ought he to rush to a doctor, and to hell with the race?

But no, Saturday meant everything now. He needed the money to begin making things up to Angie. Some nights out, a little wining, a little dining. That would do the trick. The gut pain was only to be expected after his not having eaten in so long. Probably his stomach had shriveled to the size of a prune. He excused himself and made for the men's room.

The clean, brightly lit lavatory was empty, and he locked himself in a stall. His back against the door, he stared at the tile floor and forced three fingers down his throat. He gagged, coughed . . . A minute later he stood at the mirror running cool water over his hands and rinsing his face. He combed back his hair, straightened his tie, and went out.

Seating himself again, Tommy saw that Angie seemed not to have touched a bite more of her meal.

"What's the matter," he said, feigning cheeriness, "no good?"

She looked at him sternly. "*You* must not think so!"

Served him right for trying to fool her! Angie had been around the track long enough to know a standard jock routine.

"Well—" he began gruffly.

"Tommy, how do you think that makes me feel! We can't even eat a decent dinner out, you're so obsessed! You're not being fair, and I can't take it anymore!"

Should he tell her about the weight ability? It'd straighten things out, make her understand why he had to run this race and was positive he'd win. But quickly Tommy decided no, he couldn't tell her now. First, she'd think he'd gone nutsy on her: "I can make my weight go up or down in minutes just by thinking about it, Ange." Sure. And even when he'd gotten her home, and dragged out the bathroom scale and proved it, he'd have succeeded only in scaring the hell out of her. She'd insist he get to some doctor or hospital emergency room. No, he couldn't tell her now. It would have to wait until later.

He found Angie looking at him. "You can't put people on hold

like this, Tommy! We are not here solely for your personal convenience." She was up, then, dropping the napkin across her plate and turning to leave. "I'm sorry, but it's true. You can't expect people to wait until *you've* got time." She strode hurriedly, resolutely out, leaving people at nearby tables staring into their plates.

Tommy'd half-risen too, but the impulse to run after her was checked by another feeling, almost of relief. Okay, he thought, let her go. The race was almost here, and at least now he could concentrate on the weight business. When he was standing in the winner's circle, silver cup in hand, then, starting right then, he could begin making it up to her.

Tommy barked "Check!" at the waiter, and when the bill was settled, he headed for the door. His biggest regret was that the gym closed early tonight.

He was almost at the door, when, as he passed the bar, a heavy hand thumped down on his shoulder.

"Tommy Ballotti!" The rumbling voice sounded very near the top of Tommy's head. He turned, annoyed. The big man at his elbow, in a suit too small but expensive, grinned at him, red-eyed. "Tommy Ballotti, right?"

"No, you got the wrong—"

"Stop kiddin' me, I know you! You're the best jock at Sunnyvale. I been followin' you for years. Come on, you gotta let me buy you a drink. I'm a couple ahead a' you, but that's okay."

"I'm just on my way—"

"Come on—one drink! I wanna be able to say I bought a drink for Tommy Ballotti."

Never troubled by fans before, Tommy couldn't help feeling slightly thrilled over being recognized. And just wait until Saturday: he'd give this character something to really remember him by! Though in no mood to spend the night at a bar, Tommy decided that obliging the fellow would be the quickest way out. He submitted to the heavy paw on his shoulder and allowed it to steer him to the bartop.

"Attaboy!" laughed the man, "There's the guy!"

Tommy rolled his eyes at the smiling bartender and said, "Shot of sour mash."

"Same here!" roared the big man. As the bartender got busy, the fellow turned to Tommy and said somewhat peevishly, "Listen, Ballotti, ya shouldn't raise such a squawk when somebody wants to buy ya a drink. Whaddya, got no time for your public?" The man

leaned his face close. "I mean, a celebrity ain't no celebrity without his public, remember."

Tommy scowled. What was this, sermon night? Damn, if it didn't serve him right for stopping at all!

"Yeah," the man went on, slightly slurring his words. "I'd figure you could spare a fan a couple minutes."

The boxing-glove-sized hand still lay on Tommy's shoulder as the bartender slammed both drinks onto the bar. The big man grabbed both, then handed one to Tommy, announcing loudly, "But I'll still drink to a win—'To a winning run by Tommy Ballotti!'" Tommy raised the glass to his mouth and upended it. He slapped the empty shot glass and said, "All right, pal, thanks a lot."

He was turning to go when the other suddenly aimed a huge finger at Tommy's chest.

"Hey, Ballotti, what you got there?! Whassat—"

Tommy paused to look down, and saw, incredibly, a dark, wet stain spreading across the front of his shirt.

The big man exploded with laughter. "I heard a' not bein' able to hold your liquor, but jeez!" He looked up and down the bar. "He musta thought he was even shorter than he is—thought his mouth was down there!" He pointed at Tommy's collarbone. "Hey, jockey, wha'ssamatter, you missed your mouth?"

Tommy spun away and went out quickly, the drunk's laughter following him into the street.

In his apartment, throwing the wet shirt into the sink, Tommy dried himself with a towel. What had happened? Of course he hadn't missed his mouth. He'd poured the drink directly toward the back of his throat.

Nevertheless, a moment later the front of his shirt had been drenched. And the smell had been of sour mash.

He went into the bathroom and filled a glass with water. Looking at himself in the mirror a moment, he slowly drained the tumbler. Then he waited. A moment went by and then, before his disbelieving eyes, water droplets began to appear here, there, there . . . Within fifteen seconds his entire torso glistened wetly. He looked as if he'd just stepped from the shower.

Horrified, Tommy understood what had happened: the water had seeped through his skin! He felt panicky as he watched the drops roll down his belly.

What was *happening* to him?

He jumped onto the scale, found his weight to be one-oh-four. He took a breath, closed his eyes, and let his body go lax. Doing what he'd done in the gym, he recognized that familiar feeling of total relaxedness. He blinked his eyes open and stared down at the dial. Eighty-one.

Good! He was still in control!

Again he closed his eyes, and when he opened them next, after half-a-minute, the scale read sixty-four. Sixty-four pounds! Yet he looked and felt no different. He concentrated on tightening the muscles and watched the dial slowly rotate. Clearly shedding weight was easier than gaining it back. By the time he had reached just seventy-two, he was red-faced, his body trembling from the effort.

What a field day it would be for the doctors when they got their hands on him! But of course that would be after the race. Hell, then he could go to the Mayo clinic, if he wanted: he'd be able to afford it.

The phone rang.

Tommy picked up in the kitchen.

"Hey Tommy, kid, what shakes?"

"Oh, hey, Mike, how are you?"

"I'm fine, fine, but Mamma here, she's mad at you. She says you never phone her. She thought you disappeared into thin air."

Tommy smirked. "No, but I *am* involved in some things here. You know how things go."

"No, but I wish I did. All we got goin' here is a party for cousin Mary. Any chance you can get in this weekend?"

Tommy shook his head. "Impossible, Mike. Sorry."

"Yeah, well, it's short notice, I know. You won't be missing much." His brother adopted a conspiratorial tone. "Say, Tommy, you got any big tips yet, so I can make some money?"

Tommy smiled wryly. "As a matter of fact, Mike-o, I got a good tip. Anything put on me to win is a sure thing."

"No-o-o! Are you serious? Really?"

"You heard it."

"Jeez, Tommy, okay. Great! Thanks! I always knew you guys had things rigged up."

"You're completely off the track, Mike. But I'll explain when I see you."

"Tommy, Mamma wants to speak to you. She says she's angry you haven't—Hey, Mamma! Jee-sus! Don't grab—"

There was the sound of grappling for the receiver, then Tommy's mother's voice shrieked from the earpiece. During long distance calls she always shouted.

"Tommy! What's the matter, you never call! And what's this you're not coming home for your cousin's party!"

"I can't, Mamma, I got a big race. Maybe if I knew a few weeks ago—"

"That's no excuse! Family always comes first, you should know that! Now you phone when you get to the airport, we come pick you up."

Tommy was shaking his head. "Can't do it, Ma. But next weekend—"

"Tommy, I'm no young woman. 'Next weekend' isn't for me. You think Papa and I, we going to live forever? I wish! But I don't count on it. So you come for a visit, and you don't make your parents wait."

Tommy again began to speak but his mother cut him off, ending with, "—and Mike will pick you up at the airport. You call as soon as the plane lands." There was a click, and the drone of a dial tone. Tommy returned the receiver to the hook.

Great, now he had his parents teed off at him, too! Didn't it figure? Just when something really important came along, he suddenly found himself with all this crap to put up with. If only he could put them into some kind of suspended animation. Freeze 'em, like a leg of lamb! Well, he'd make it up to them after the race. And to himself, for skipping the doctor just now. Right after the race, after the race . . .

Standing at the kitchen counter, Tommy started when his cat, Ziti, purred at very close proximity. The jockey looked down to see the pet licking his hand with its tiny, sandpaper tongue. Funny, why hadn't he felt it?

Saturday morning Tommy was up at dawn. He jumped from the bed as if wired with electricity. Nervous, excited, eager, but confident, he knew the race was his.

He flicked on the bathroom light to stand barefoot on the cold tile beside the scale. Closing his eyes and concentrating on essentially nothing, on blankness and void and letting his muscles hang loose, he smiled to think he'd gotten even better at achieving his incredible state. He felt hardly surprised when, stepping onto the scale at last, he saw the dial register just fifty-two pounds. Fifty-two! His mount

would run as if riderless, as if its saddle were empty!

Tommy breathed deeply and started to tense his muscles, those in his arms, back, neck. As the dial crept snail-slowly back up, he thought, No question about it, losing the weight came much easier than gaining it back. In just a minute or two he found himself exhausted. Much less taxing to let it all fade, slip away.

Like dying, Tommy suddenly imagined.

The scale was up to eighty-four. But the clock said it was time to leave. He'd have to work on getting his weight up to the acceptable minimum on his way to the track. He had to be okay for that final pre-race weigh-in, when jocks running too light were given lead bars for their saddle packs. But immediately after that, Tommy'd turn on the juice, get down to forty, thirty, maybe twenty-five pounds. Who knew the limit? Then after he'd run and won, came the hard part: gaining enough weight so that the *post*-run weigh-in wouldn't give away the whole thing. Well, he'd sweat and strain, bust a gut if he had to, but he'd get his weight up again in those three or four minutes. Though the horse's sweat and the mud-spatterings—inevitable on even a relatively dry track—would add some weight, he'd need to get up to ninety-eight, or, better, a hundred. It would take a hell of an effort, as gaining the weight back always did. But having made the necessary telephone calls, he could practically smell the money that would soon be his.

In the locker room Tommy kept to one side of everyone else and stalled for time. The other jocks were gone by the time he bent to tie the laces of his paper-weight boots.

Well, now wasn't this going to be fantastic! At last, to win the big one! The fame and the money would change his entire life. He could—

A loud *pinging* sound as he straightened up caught Tommy's attention. His ring, the heavy signet ring he wore, lay on the floor. Funny, it'd never slipped off before. He bent down and slid it back on his finger. Closing the locker, he began fastening the snaps on his shirt. But why was he having so much difficulty? The metal tabs seemed to be slipping through his fingers. Probably nerves were to blame; he was all but trembling with anticipation. But again: that loud *pinging* sound, and the ring lay at his feet. He bent, picked it up, and, putting it on again, watched closely—as the ring slipped not *off* his finger, but *through* it—as if he were no more substantial than a shadow!

Tommy felt his heart in his throat.

Was that what was happening? He was becoming—*immaterial!* As insubstantial as a ghost . . .

He felt on the verge of panic, ready to rush straight to the track infirmary to spill everything. Anything, just so they saved him! The doctor and first aid crew would be at center post now and he could go right up, tell them in a calm voice it was an emer—

"Wintergate Race about to begin." The announcer's voice came rasping from the speaker overhead, and Tommy froze like a wild animal caught in a spotlight. *"Jockeys, lead your mounts forward."*

Then, suddenly, Tommy knew he couldn't let himself think. He couldn't afford to, with twenty years and a golden pot at the end of the rainbow at stake.

He grabbed his crop and helmet and ran out to where his valet would be waiting with the saddle.

"Jeez, I must be getting strong!" said John. "Lifting you just then," he smiled up at Tommy, astride the horse, "I swear, you felt like a sack of feathers!"

Tommy clicked his tongue and the animal took its place.

From the moment the metal gate snapped open, and Bottom Dollar bolted forward as if unemcumbered by anything on its back, Tommy knew he was going to show the crowd something like it had never seen. He dug his heels into the animal's ribs, and, as his lead opened one, two, three lengths, the thundering of the others receded to the background. "Ballotti! Ballotti!" blared the loudspeakers, and as Tommy glimpsed the swirl of colors in the stands, he realized that the crowd was on its feet.

And suddenly it wasn't *enough* to have just the race. *Every* race had a winner. This was more than a chance to rake in big bucks on a horse, this was Tommy's shot at fame! He could carve himself a niche in people's memories *now*.

Tommy hunched further forward on the horse's neck and willed himself lighter, lighter still. Ten pounds? Five? He didn't know what he weighed. But the horse's hooves crashed in his ears. A track record, he could set a track—no, a *world* record! Why not?!

The wind ripped at his hands and face, whipped the silks against his skin and tugged like an invisible hand begging him to slow. But Tommy squinted ahead at the line, just ten lengths up the track. Then it stopped—the wind; he couldn't feel it. Just five lengths! He

had it, a new rec—

Ten thousand witnesses and no one would wager a guess. Twenty thousand staring eyes and all anyone knows is that the moment Ballotti's about to explode across the finish line, he falls—or at least, his silks come streaming down the back of his animal. The slender crop falls, bounces crazily in the dirt, as if trying to catch up with the riderless horse. The other riders yank their reins sideways, trying desperately to avoid their fallen comrade, but their animals' hooves trample the clothes anyway. And when the dust settles, that's all that remains: Ballotti's colors, lying in the dirt.

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Profile: Henry James

by DAVID MORRELL

The author of *First Blood* pays tribute to the creator of a quieter kind of terror.

One winter evening in 1895, Henry James visited his friend the Archbishop of Canterbury. They sat "round the hall-fire of a grave old country-house," discussing "apparitions and night-fears," complaining that "the good, the really effective and heart-shaking ghost stories" had all been told. The Archbishop happened to recall a terrible incident told to him years before, involving "a couple of small children in an out-of-the-way place, to whom the spirits of certain 'bad' servants, dead in the employ of the house, were believed to have appeared with the design of 'getting hold' of them." Impressed, James recorded the incident in his notebook. Two years later, when a magazine asked him to write a ghost story for its Christmas issue, he thought "at once of the vividest little note for sinister romance" he'd ever jotted down. To "the haunted children and the prowling servile spirits," he added the children's governess, and in two months composed "The Turn of the Screw" (1898). Though he frequently disparaged it as a pot-boiler, it became his most well-received story since the nonghostly "Daisy Miller" almost twenty years earlier, and today ranks among the most famous of all supernatural tales.

Apart from its compelling plot, the story's fame results from an intense critical controversy. For the story to work, James felt that it had to be told by an outside observer, someone other than the children. As a result, he wrote it in the first person, from the viewpoint of the governess who describes her frantic efforts to save the children from the ghosts. But are the ghosts real, or

does she imagine them? Since James referred to "The Turn of the Screw" as a "trap for the unwary," a piece "of cold artistic calculation, an *amusette* to catch those not easily caught," some readers —such as Edmund Wilson in "The Ambiguity of Henry James"— have concluded that the story contains a trick. Read one way, the ghosts seem convincing. Read another way, they seem the products of mental illness. According to this second theory, the governess—having come from a repressed small-town background—is ill-equipped for the pressures of her first job. Her employer, a handsome widower, has told her to raise the children at his country estate and not to bother him in the city. The governess, however, is so infatuated with the father that she unconsciously imagines a problem so severe that it would justify her getting in touch with him. Her visions of a male and a female ghost (who when alive were lovers, as she wishes to be with the father) became so intense that she fears the ghosts intend to possess the children (a male and a female, after all) and continue their love affair. In the final scene, she thinks she sees the male ghost at a window and hugs the boy to save him.

> I caught him, yes, I held him—it may be imagined with what a passion; but at the end of a minute, I began to feel what it truly was that I held. We were alone with the quiet day, and his little heart, dispossessed, had stopped.

With that, the story abruptly ends. But what exactly has happened? Was there a ghost or wasn't there? Did the *ghost* scare the boy to death, or was it just the governess herself? Or, perhaps did the deluded woman, motivated by sexual hysteria (note the word "passion" in her closing lines), strangle the boy? Since we have only the first-person report of the governess, we don't know which interpretation is correct. With evidence both for and against the reality of the ghosts, the debate continues, occupying many long nights and seemingly thousands of pages of journal articles and dissertations. Because of it, "The Turn of the Screw" might more safely be called a horror story than a ghost story. Either way, it chills.

Despite strong interest in "The Turn of the Screw," readers by and large seem unaware that James wrote seventeen other tales of what he termed "the grotesque." Collected by his biographer Leon Edel in *The Ghostly Tales of Henry James*, they dramatize such eerie topics as necrophilia, clairvoyance, family curses, *dop-*

plegängers, haunted houses, teleportation, and revenge from the grave. Edel's collection does not include James's unfinished time-travel novel, *The Sense of the Past,* in which a mysterious mansion transports a young historian eighty years into the past, where he becomes trapped and haunts people living in the present. Nor does Edel's collection include several nonsupernatural works that might nonetheless be placed in the horror category, given their themes of "emotional cannibalism" and "vampirism"—*The Wings of the Dove,* for example, in which a man makes love to a dying woman in order to inherit her money.

His strict supernatural tales represent only a small part of his work. In his long career, he wrote twenty novels, one hundred twelve short stories, dozens of essays, and countless reviews. (A well-known Max Beerbohm cartoon shows James chained to his writing desk). For convenience, critics divide James's fiction into three obvious stages, early, middle, and late, his themes and style becoming more complex with each subsequent stage. The early work includes such relatively easy-to-understand fiction as *The American* (1877), "Daisy Miller" (1879), and *Washington Square* (1881). The middle group contains more difficult works, *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) and "The Aspern Papers" (1888), for example. But the middle phase ends in 1895. After a disastrous five-year attempt to be a playwright (a nervous breakdown resulted), James renewed his commitment to fiction, producing such late books as *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), *The Ambassadors* (1903), and *The Golden Bowl* (1904), among the most supersubtle (as he once referred to himself) in the English language. Because of chronic pain in his writing hand, James dictated these last books to a typist, a method of composition that may account for their long, indirect, somewhat rambling sentences. Readers disagree about which group of James's fiction they prefer. On occasion, his expansive late books seem more abstract and ambiguous than necessary. But these three phases—early, middle, and late, implying different levels of complexity—help to place his tales of the supernatural.

Only four were written in the early years. Simple, even blatant, they depend on plot alone, not always succeeding. The last sentence of "The Romance of Certain Old Clothes" (1868) typifies their method: "Her lips were parted in entreaty, in dismay, in agony; and on her blanched brow and cheeks there glowed the marks of ten hideous wounds from two vengeful ghostly hands." Of this group, "The Last of the Valerii" (1874) works best. The plot depicts

an Italian nobleman who becomes obsessed with an ancient statue unearthed on his estate. The statue, a goddess, seduces the nobleman from his wife. He lies in prayer before it. He constructs an altar. One evening, the nobleman's jealous wife discovers horrible stains of blood on the altar. This intriguing premise doesn't reach a satisfactory conclusion, however, for the nobleman's wife breaks the statue's spell merely by having it reburied.

Fortunately, the bulk of James's ghostly fiction was written during his middle and late phases, when his work was most thoughtful and carefully crafted. Several of them are exceptional, well worth the attention of anyone who likes "The Turn of the Screw." In "The Friends of the Friends" (1896)—this writer's favorite, reprinted following these remarks—a woman cancels her impending marriage because she believes her fiancé to be in love with a ghost. (Since you're going to read it, the less said here, the better.) In "The Real Right Thing" (1899), a biographer is hired to write a book about a well-known dead author. But as he works in the dead man's study, analyzing the dead man's papers, he senses the presence of the dead man in the room with him. At first he thinks that the ghost approves. Then he remembers the hatred the dead man had always expressed for biographers. Feeling the ghost's malign intentions, the biographer flees the room, abandoning the project.* In "The Jolly Corner" (1908), a man returns to America after having lived most of his life in Europe. He questions whether his decision to leave America was justified. One night, while wandering through his boyhood home, he senses an evil presence hunting him. As he tries to escape, he discovers his *doppelgänger*, his alter-ego, the spirit of the person he would have been if he'd stayed in America. In these stories, as in "The Turn of the Screw," the horror perhaps exists only in the mind of the observer, not in actuality. But at other times, the horror is real. In "Owen Wingrave" (1892), a young man rejects the military career for which he is being trained. Accused of being a coward, he proves his bravery by confronting the ghost that haunts his family's estate. The effort kills him, but it demonstrates his valor. In death, "he looked like a young soldier on a battlefield."

If not for a similar ghostly encounter, James himself might have become a writer. It happened in 1844, one year after James was born. His father, Henry James, Sr.—a religious author-lecturer

*In his own tale, "Vastation," which appears on page 118, Morrell gives this Jamesian theme a very special twist.—Ed.

haunted by fears of a vengeful Calvinistic God—was sitting alone before a kitchen fire, digesting his dinner, when he sensed an invisible presence lurking in the shadows, "raying out from his fetid personality influences fatal to life." James's father was seized by "a perfect insane and abject terror" that left him a wreck, beat upon "by an ever-growing tempest of doubt, anxiety, and despair." Eventually he described his fearful experience to a female acquaintance, who explained that he had undergone what the mystical philosopher, Emmanuel Swedenborg, called a *vastation.* Unfamiliar with the term or with Swedenborg's theories, James Sr. quickly purchased several of his books and found an optimistic all-loving solution to his religious turmoil. Thereafter with renewed energy he educated his children according to a permissive, freely structured, Swedenborg-inspired method that involved multiple visits to Europe, an exposure to great art and civilization, and a determination that his children would have open minds and expansive sensibilities.

As a child on one of those trips to Europe, Henry James went to see the artworks at the Louvre in Paris and discovered "not only beauty and art and supreme design, but history and fame and power, the world, in fine, raised to the richest and noblest expression." The experience so affected him that, at twelve, he had a significant nightmare. Someone was trying to break down his bedroom door. Determined to confront the intruder, James yanked it open. "The figure retreated in terror . . . a diminished spot in the long perspective, the tremendous glorious hall." In the dream, "while a great storm of thunder and lightning played through the deep embrasures of high windows," James recognized a gallery in the Louvre. The significance of the dream seems to be that, for James, the beauty of art (as represented by the Louvre) made him feel confident, victorious over fear. He briefly considered a career as a painter, at last chose to be a writer, but painting would always be his favorite metaphor for creating fiction. Not only did his father's *vastation*-produced theories of education prompt James to commit himself to an artistic life, but, furthermore, those many youthful trips to Europe led James to settle there as an adult, first in Paris (where he met Flaubert, Turgenev, and Zola), then in London (where in time he became known as "the Master"). To a degree, then, one can argue that both his career and his obsessive American-in-Europe theme were the consequence of a shadow in a corner.

James's brother William, the great psychologist-philosopher who developed pragmatism, once had a *vastation* like his father's, a

frightful imaginary figure lurking in the twilight of a dressing room. His efforts to explain such periodic attacks of inexplicable panic eventually led him to write *The Varieties of Religious Experience.* Interested in life-after-death, he investigated seances, mediums, and spiritualism, eventually founding the American Society for Psychical Research.

Henry knew about his brother's interest in spiritualism, but Henry himself had no similar interest, except as he used the subject in his work. He did enjoy reading supernatural stories, however, and like any good professional writer, he was familiar with whatever genre he attempted. He knew the works of Poe and Hawthorne, Wilkie Collins and Sheridan LeFanu, as well as the ghostly tales of Balzac and Dickens. In his own such tales, he wanted to get away from the Radcliffe-Walpole tradition of haunted castles and clanking chains. "A good ghost-story," he said, "to be half as terrible as a good murder-story, must be connected at a hundred points with the common objects of life." Again, "the extraordinary is most extraordinary in that it happens to you and me." In this respect, he anticipates modern horror stories in which ordinary persons find themselves in hideously extraordinary situations. With his innovative development of the unreliable first-person narrator (as in "The Turn of the Screw"), he was also one of the fathers of psychological horror.

A true professional, James spent his last lucid days trying to write. After the stroke that would lead to his death in 1916 at the age of seventy-two, he showed no concern for an afterlife. Instead he joked that the stroke had occurred "in the most approved fashion." Looking death in the face, he said: "So it has come at last—the Distinguished Thing," and later he referred to death as "the beast in the jungle, and it's sprung." Mostly, this man of supreme intellect was disturbed by his confused thoughts and his inability to maintain his writing schedule. In one of his finest supernatural stories, "The Great Good Place" (1900), he described a wondrous mystical location where a weary author escapes from the burdens of the world: a peaceful cloister of slow sweet bells, deep baths, and quiet footsteps. "I shan't mind death if it's like this," a character says. With luck, James got there.

The Friends of the Friends

by HENRY JAMES

She was sure they were destined to meet.
She suspected they were destined to be lovers.
But their real destiny was stranger
than anyone could have guessed.

On December 21, 1985, James wrote in his notebook, "The idea for a scrap of a tale, on a scrap of a fantasy, of two persons who have constantly heard of each other, constantly been near each other, constantly *missed* each other. They have never met—though repeatedly told that they ought to know each other . . . They must be, I suppose, a man and a woman." To this idea, James added a ghostly plot device and composed "The Friends of the Friends." Published in 1896, the story anticipates "The Turn of the Screw" (published two years later) in several interesting ways. Both ghost stories are introduced by a first-person narrator who has nothing to do with the action except to explain the existence of the diary we're about to read. This introductory narrator then disappears, and another narrator—the main character—takes over. In "The Friends of the Friends" and "The Turn of the Screw," the principal narrator is female. Through her eyes (or more correctly, through her journal), we see her gradual suspicion that supernatural forces are affecting her life. Her emotional alarm leads her to desperate measures. But is the ghost real? In order to understand the story, the reader has to decide whether the jealous narrator is trustworthy or unreliable. Perhaps "The Friends of the Friends" deals less with supernatural horror and more with the natural horror (equally repulsive) of the human mind. —D.M.

I find, as you prophesied, much that's interesting, but little that helps the delicate question—the possibility of publication. Her diaries are less systematic that I hoped; she only had a blessed habit of noting and narrating. She summarised, she saved; she

appeared seldom indeed to have let a good story pass without catching it on the wing. I allude of course not so much to things she hears as to things she saw and felt. She writes sometimes of herself, sometimes of others, sometimes of the combination. It's under this last rubric that she's usually most vivid. But it's not, you'll understand, when she's most vivid that she's always most publishable. To tell the truth she's fearfully indiscreet, or has at least all the material for making *me* so. Take as an instance the fragment I send you after dividing it for your convenience into several small chapters. It's the contents of a thin blank-book which I've had copied out and which has the merit of being nearly enough a rounded thing, an intelligible whole. These pages evidently date from years ago. I've read with the liveliest wonder the statement they so circumstantially make and done my best to swallow the prodigy they leave to be inferred. These things would be striking, wouldn't they? to any reader; but can you imagine for a moment my placing such a document before the world, even though, as if she herself had desired the world should have the benefit of it, she has given her friends neither name nor initials? Have you any sort of clue to their identity? I leave her the floor.

I

I know perfectly of course that I brought it upon myself; but that doesn't make it any better. I was the first to speak of her to him—he had never even heard her mentioned. Even if I had happened not to speak, someone else would have made up for it: I tried afterward to find comfort in that reflection. But the comfort of reflections is thin: the only comfort that counts in life is not to have been a fool. That's a beatitude I shall doubtless never enjoy. "Why you ought to meet her and talk it over," is what I immediately said. "Birds of a feather flock together." I told him who she was and that they were birds of a feather because if he had had in youth a strange adventure she had had about the same time just such another. It was well known to her friends—an incident she was constantly called on to describe. She was charming clever pretty unhappy; but it was nonetheless the thing to which she had originally owed her reputation.

Being at the age of eighteen somewhere abroad with an aunt, she had had a vision of one of her parents at the moment of death. The parent was in England hundreds of miles away and so far as she knew neither dying nor dead. It was by day, in the museum

of some great foreign town. She had passed alone, in advance of her companions, into a small room containing some famous work of art and occupied at the moment by two other persons. One of these was an old custodian; the second, before observing him, she took for a stranger, a tourist. She was merely conscious that he was bareheaded and seated on a bench. The instant her eyes rested on him, however, she beheld to her amazement her father, who, as if he had long waited for her, looked at her in singular distress and an impatience that was akin to reproach. She rushed to him with a bewildered cry, "Papa, what *is* it?" but this was followed by an exhibition of still livelier feeling when on her movement he simply vanished, leaving the custodian and her relations, who were by that time at her heels, to gather round her in dismay. These persons, the official, the aunt, the cousins, were therefore in a manner witnesses of the fact—the fact at least of the impression made on her; and there was the further testimony of a doctor who was attending one of the party and to whom it was immediately afterward communicated. He gave her a remedy for hysterics, but said to the aunt privately: "Wait and see if something doesn't happen at home." Something *had* happened—the poor father, suddenly and violently seized, had died that morning. The aunt, the mother's sister, received before the day was out a telegram announcing the event and requesting her to prepare her niece for it. Her niece was already prepared, and the girl's sense of this visitation remained of course indelible. We had all, as her friends, had it conveyed to us and had conveyed it creepily to each other. Twelve years had elapsed, and as a woman who had made an unhappy marriage and lived apart from her husband she had become interesting from other sources; but since the name she now bore was a name frequently borne, and since moreover her judicial separation, as things were going, could hardly count as a distinction, it was usual to qualify her as "the one, you know, who saw her father's ghost."

As for him, dear man, he had seen his mother's—so there you are! I had never heard of that till this occasion on which our closer, our pleasanter acquaintance led him, through some turn of the subject of our talk, to mention it and to inspire me in so doing with the impulse to let him know that he had a rival in the field—a person with whom he could compare notes. Later on his story became for him, perhaps because of my unduly repeating it, likewise a convenient worldly label; but it hadn't a year before been the

ground on which he was introduced to me. He had other merits, just as she, poor thing, had others. I can honestly say that I was quite aware of them from the first—I discovered them sooner than he discovered mine. I remember how it struck me even at the time that his sense of mine was quickened by my having been able to match, though not indeed straight from my own experience, his curious anecdote. It dated, this anecdote, as hers did, from some dozen years before—a year in which, at Oxford, he had for some reason of his own been staying on into the "Long." He had been in the August afternoon on the river. Coming back into his room while it was still distinct daylight he found his mother standing there as if her eyes had been fixed on the door. He had had a letter from her that morning out of Wales, where she was staying with her father. At the sight of him she smiled with extraordinary radiance and extended her arms to him, and then as he sprang forward and joyfully opened his own she vanished from the place. He wrote to her that night, telling her what had happened; the letter had been carefully preserved. The next morning he heard of her death. He was through this chance of our talk extremely struck with the little prodigy I was able to produce for him. He had never encountered another case. Certainly they ought to meet, my friend and he; certainly they would have something in common. I would arrange this, wouldn't I?—if *she* didn't mind; for himself he didn't mind in the least. I had promised to speak to her of the matter as soon as possible, and within the week I was able to do so. She "minded" as little as he; she was perfectly willing to see him. And yet no meeting was to occur—as meetings are commonly understood.

II

That's just half my tale—the extraordinary way it was hindered. This was the fault of a series of accidents; but the accidents, persisting for years, became, to me and to others, a subject of mirth with either party. They were droll enough at first, then they grew rather a bore. The odd thing was that both parties were amenable: it wasn't a case of their being indifferent, much less of their being indisposed. It was one of the caprices of chance, aided I suppose by some rather settled opposition of their interests and habits. His were centered in his office, his eternal inspectorship, which left him small leisure, constantly calling him away and making him break engagements. He liked society, but he found it everywhere

and took it at a run. I never knew at a given moment where he was, and there were times when for months together I never saw him. She was on her side practically suburban: she lived at Richmond and never went "out." She was a woman of distinction, but not of fashion, and felt, as people said, her situation. Decidedly proud and rather whimsical, she lived her life as she had planned it. There were things one could do with her, but one couldn't make her come to one's parties. One went indeed a little more than seemed quite convenient to hers, which consisted of her cousin, a cup of tea, and the view. The tea was good; but the view as familiar, though perhaps not, like the cousin—a disagreeable old maid who had been of the group at the museum and with whom she now lived—offensively so. This connection with an inferior relative, which had partly an economic motive—she proclaimed her companion a marvelous manager—was one of the little perversities we had to forgive her. Another was her estimate of the proprieties created by her rupture with her husband. That was extreme—many persons called it even morbid. She made no advances; she cultivated scruples; she suspected, or I should perhaps rather say she remembered, slights: she was one of the few women I've known whom that particular predicament had rendered modest rather than bold. Dear thing, she had some delicacy! Especially marked were the limits she had set to possible attentions from men: it was always her thought that her husband only waited to pounce on her. She discouraged if she didn't forbid the visits of male persons not senile: she said she could never be too careful.

When I first mentioned to her that I had a friend whom fate had distinguished in the same weird way as herself I put her quite at liberty to say "Oh bring him out to see me!" I should probably have been able to bring him, and a situation perfectly innocent or at any rate comparatively simple would have been created. But she uttered no such word; she only said: "I must meet him certainly; yes, I shall look out for him!" That caused the first delay, and meanwhile various things happened. One of them was that as time went on she made, charming as she was, more and more friends, and that it regularly befell that these friends were sufficiently also friends of his to bring him up in conversation. It was odd that without belonging, as it were, to the same world or, according to the horrid term, the same set, my baffled pair should have happened in so many cases to fall in with the same people and make them join in the droll chorus. She had friends who didn't

know each other but who inevitably and punctually recommended *him*. She had also the sort of originality, the intrinsic interest, that led her to be kept by each of us as a private resource, cultivated jealously, more or less in secret, as a person whom one didn't meet in society, whom it was not for everyone—whom it was not for the vulgar—to approach, and with whom therefore acquaintance was particularly difficult and particularly precious. We saw her separately, with appointments and conditions, and found it made on the whole for harmony not to tell each other. Somebody had always had a note from her still later than somebody else. There was some silly woman who for a long time, among the unprivileged, owed to three simple visits to Richmond a reputation for being intimate with "lots of awfully clever out-of-the-way people."

Everyone has had friends it has seemed a happy thought to bring together, and everyone remembers that his happiest thoughts have not been his greatest successes; but I doubt if there was ever a case in which the failure was in such direct proportion to the quantity of influence set in motion. It's really perhaps here the quantity of influence that was most remarkable. The lady and my gentleman each pronounced it to me and others quite a subject for a roaring faces. The reason first given had with time dropped out of sight and fifty better ones flourished on top of it. They were so awfully alike: they had the same ideas and tricks and tastes, the same prejudices and superstitions and heresies; they said the same things and sometimes did them; they liked and disliked the same persons and places, the same books, authors, and styles; there were touches of resemblance even in their looks and features. It established much of a propriety that they were in common parlance equally "nice" and almost equally handsome. But the great sameness, for wonder and chatter, was their rare perversity in regard to being photographed. They were the only persons ever heard of who had never been "taken" and who had a passionate objection to it. They just *wouldn't* be—no, not for anything anyone could say. I had loudly complained of this; him in particular I had so vainly desired to be able to show on my drawing-room chimney piece in a Bond Street frame. It was at any rate the very liveliest of all the reasons why they ought to know each other—all the lively reasons reduced to naught by the strange law that had made them bang so many doors in each other's face, made them the buckets in the well, the two ends of the see-saw, the two parties in the State, so that when one was up the other was down,

when one was out the other was in; neither by any possibility entering a house till the other had left it or leaving it all unawares till the other was at hand. They only arrived when they had been given up, which was precisely also when they departed. They were in a word alternate and incompatible; they missed each other with an inveteracy that could be explained only by its being preconcerted. It was however so far from preconcerted that it had ended —literally after several years—by disappointing and annoying them. I don't think their curiosity was lively till it had been proved utterly vain. A great deal was of course done to help them, but it merely laid wires for them to trip. To give examples I should have to have taken notes; but I happen to remember that neither had ever been able to dine on the right occasion. The right occasion for each was the occasion that would be wrong for the other. On the wrong one they were most punctual, and there were never any but wrong ones. The very elements conspired and the constitution of man reenforced them. A cold, a headache, a bereavement, a storm, a fog, an earthquake, a cataclysm, infallibly intervened. The whole business was beyond a joke.

Yet as a joke it had still to be taken, though one couldn't help feeling that the joke had made the situation serious, had produced on the part of each a consciousness, an awkwardness, a positive dread of the last accident of all, the only one with any freshness left, the accident that *would* bring them together. The final effect of its predecessors had been to kindle this instinct. They were quite ashamed—perhaps even a little of each other. So much preparation, so much frustration: what indeed could be good enough for it all to lead up to? A mere meeting would be mere flatness. Did I see them at the end of years, they often asked, just stupidly confronted? If they were bored by the joke they might be worse bored by something else. They made exactly the same reflections, and each in some manner was sure the hear of the other's. I really think it was this peculiar diffidence that finally controlled the situation. I mean that if they had failed for the first year or two because they couldn't help it, they kept up the habit because they had—what shall I call it?—grown nervous. It really took some lurking volition to account for anything both so regular and so ridiculous.

III

When to crown our long acquaintaince I accepted his renewed offer of marriage it was humorously said, I know, that I had made

the gift of his photograph a condition. This was so far true that I had refused to give him mine without it. At any rate I had him at last, in his high distinction, on the chimney piece, where the day she called to congratulate me she came nearer than she had ever done to seeing him. He had in being taken set her an example that I invited her to follow; he had sacrificed his perversity—wouldn't she sacrifice hers? She too must give me something on my engagement—wouldn't she give me the companion piece? She laughed and shook her head; she had headshakes whose impulse seemed to come from as far away as the breeeze that stirs a flower. The companion piece to the portrait of my future husband was the portrait of his future wife. She had taken her stand—she could depart from it as little as she could explain it. It was a prejudice, an *entetement*, a vow—she would live and die unphotographed. Now too she was alone in that state: this was what she liked; it made her so much more original. She rejoiced in the fall of her late associate and looked a long time at his picture, about which she made no memorable remark, though she even turned it over to see the back. About our engagement she was charming—full of cordiality and sympathy. "You've known him even longer than I've *not*," she said, "and that seems a very long time." She understood how we had jogged together over hill and dale and how inevitable it was the we should now rest together. I'm definite about all this because what followed is so strange that it's a kind of relief to me to mark the point up to which our relations were as natural as ever. It was I myself who in a sudden madness altered and destroyed them. I see now that she gave me no pretext and that I only found one in the way she looked at the fine face in the Bond Street frame. How then would I have had her look at it? What I had wanted from the first was to make her care for him. Well, that was what I still wanted—up to the moment of her having promised me she would on this occasion really aid me to break the silly spell that had kept them asunder. I had arranged with him to do his part if she would as triumphantly do hers. I was on a different footing now—I was on a footing to answer for him. I would positively engage that at five on the following Saturday he should be on that spot. He was out of town on pressing business, but, pledged to keep his promise to the letter, would return on purpose and in abundant time. "Are you perfectly sure?" I remember she asked, looking grave and considering: I thought she had turned a little pale. She was tired, she was indisposed: it was

a pity he was to see her after all at so poor a moment. If he only *could* have seen her five years before! However, I replied that this time I was sure and that success therefore depended simply on herself. At five o'clock on the Saturday she would find him in a particular chair I pointed out, the one in which he usually sat and in which—though this I didn't mention—he had been sitting when, the week before, he put the question of our future to me in the way that had brought me round. She looked at it in silence, just as she had looked at the photograph, while I repeated for the twentieth time that it was too preposterous one shouldn't somehow succeed in introducing to one's dearest friend one's second self. "*Am* I your dearest friend?" she asked with a smile that for a moment brought back her beauty. I replied by pressing her to my bosom; after which she said: "Well, I'll come. I'm extraordinarily afraid, but you may count on me."

When she had left me I began to wonder what she was afraid of, for she had spoken as if she fully meant it. The next day, late in the afternoon, I had three lines from her; she found on getting home the announcement of her husband's death. She hadn't seen him for seven years, but she wished me to know it in this way before I should hear of it in another. It made however in her life, strange and sad to say, so little difference that she would scrupulously keep her appointment. I rejoiced for her—I supposed it would make at least the difference of her having more money; but even in this diversion, far from forgetting she had said she was afraid, I seemed to catch sight of a reason for her being so. Her fear, as the evening went on, became contagious, and the contagion took in my breast the form of a sudden panic. It wasn't jealousy—it just was the dread of jealousy. I called myself a fool for not having been quiet till we were man and wife. After that I should somehow feel secure. It was only a question of waiting another month—a trifle surely for people who had waited so long. It had been plain enough she was nervous, and now that she was free her nervousness wouldn't be less. What was it therefore but a sharp foreboding? She had been hitherto the victim of interference, but it was quite possible she would henceforth be the source of it. The victim in that case would be my simple self. What had the interference been but the finger of Providence pointing out of danger? The danger was of course for poor *me*. It had been kept at bay by a series of accidents unexampled in their frequency; but the reign of accident was not visibly at an end. I had an intimate

conviction that both parties would keep the tryst. It was more and more impressed on me that they were approaching, converging. They were like the seekers for the hidden object in the game of blindfold; they had one and the other begun to "burn." We had talked about breaking the spell; well, it would be effectually broken—unless indeed it should merely take another form and overdo their encounters as it had overdone their escapes. This was something I couldn't sit still for thinking of; it kept me awake—at midnight I was full of unrest. At least I felt there was only one way of laying the ghost. If the reign of accident was over I must just take up the succession. I sat down and wrote a hurried note which would meet him on his return and which as the servants had gone to bed I sallied forth bareheaded into the empty gusty street to drop into the nearest pillar-box. It was to tell him that I shouldn't be able to be at home in the afternoon as I had hoped and that he must postpone his visit till dinner time. This was an implication that he would find me alone.

IV

When accordingly at five she presented herself I naturally felt false and base. My act had been a momentary madness, but I had at least, as they say, to live up to it. She remained an hour; he of course never came; and I could only persist in my perfidy. I had thought it best to let her come; singular as this now seems to me I held it diminished my guilt. Yet as she sat there so visibly white and weary, stricken with a sense of everything her husband's death had opened up, I felt a really piercing pang of pity and remorse. If I didn't tell her on the spot what I had done it was because I was too ashamed. I feigned astonishment—I feigned it to the end; I protested that if ever I had had confidence I had had it that day. I blush as I tell my story—I take it as my penance. There was nothing indignant I didn't say about him; I invented suppositions, attenuations, I admitted in stupefaction, as the hand of the clock traveled, that their luck hadn't turned. She smiled at this vision of their "luck," but she looked anxious—she looked unusual: the only thing that kept me up was the fact that, oddly enough, she wore mourning—no great depths of crape, but simple and scrupulous black. She had in her bonnet three small black feathers. She carried a little muff of astrachan. This put me, by the aid of some acute reflection, a little in the right. She had written to me that the sudden event made no difference for her, but

apparently it made as much difference as that. If she was inclined to the usual forms why didn't she observe that of not going the first day or two out to tea? There was someone she wanted so much to see that she couldn't wait till her husband was buried. Such a betrayal of eagerness made me hard and cruel enough to practice my odious deceit, though at the same time, as the hour waxed and waned, I suspected in her something deeper still than disappointment and somewhat less successfully concealed. I mean a strange underlying relief, the soft low emission of the breath that comes when a danger is past. What happened as she spent her barren hour with me was that at last she gave him up. She let him go forever. She made the most graceful joke of it that I've ever seen made of anything; but it was for all that a great date in her life. She spoke with her mild gaiety of all the other vain times, the long game of hide-and-seek, the unprecedented queerness of such a relation. For it *was*, or had been, a relation, wasn't it, hadn't it? That was just the absurd part of it. When she got up to go I said to her that it was more a relation than ever, but that I hadn't the face after what had occurred to propose to her for the present another opportunity. It was plain that the only valid opportunity would be my accomplished marriage. Of course she would be at my wedding? It was even to be hoped that *he* would.

"If *I* am, he won't be!"—I remember the high quaver and the little break of her laugh. I admitted there might be something in that. The thing was therefore to get us safely married first. "That won't help us. Nothing will help us!" she said as she kissed me farewell. "I shall never, never see him!" It was with those words she left me.

I could bear her disappointment as I've called it; but when a couple of hours later I received him at dinner I discovered I couldn't bear his. They way my maneuvre might have affected him hadn't been particularly present to me; but the result of it was the first word of reproach that had ever yet dropped from him. I say "reproach" because that expression is scarcely too strong for the terms in which he conveyed to me his surprise that under the extraordinary circumstances I shouldn't have found some means not to deprive him of such an occasion. I might really have managed either not to be obliged to go out or to let their meeting take place all the same. They would probably have got on, in my drawing room, well enough without me. At this I quite broke down—I

confessed my iniquity and the miserable reason of it. I hadn't put her off and I hadn't gone out, she had been there and, after waiting for him an hour, had departed in the belief that he had been absert by his own fault.

"She must think me a precious brute!" he exclaimed. "Did she say of me"—and I remember that just perceptible catch of breath in his pause—"what she had a right to say?"

"I assure you she said nothing that showed the least feeling. She looked at your photograph, she even turned round the back of it, on which your address happens to be inscribed. Yet it provoked her to no demonstration. She doesn't care so much as all that."

"Then why are you afraid of her?"

"It wasn't of her I was afraid. It was of you."

"Did you think I'd be so sure to fall in love with her? You never alluded to such a possibility before," he went on as I remained silent. "Admirable person as you pronounced her, that wasn't the light in which you showed her to me."

"Do you mean that if it *had* been you'd have managed by this time to catch a glimpse of her? I didn't fear things then," I added. "I hadn't the same reason."

He kissed me at this, and when I remembered that she had done so an hour or two before I felt for an instant as if he were taking from my lips the very pressure of hers. In spite of kisses the incident had shed a certain chill, and I suffered horribly from the sense that he had seen me guilty of a fraud. He had seen it only through my frank avowal, but I was as unhappy as if I had a stain to efface. I couldn't get over the manner of his looking at me when I spoke of her apparent indifference to his not having come. For the first time since I had known him he seemed to have expressed a doubt of my word. Before we parted I told him that I'd undeceive her—start the first thing in the morning for Richmond and there let her know he had been blameless. At this he kissed me again. I'd expiate my sin, I said; I'd humble myself in the dust; I'd confess and ask to be forgiven. At this he kissed me once more.

V

In the train the next day this struck me as a good deal for him to have consented to; but my purpose was firm enough to carry me on. I mounted the long hill to where the view begins,

and then I knocked at her door. I was a triffle mystified by the fact that her blinds were still drawn, reflecting that if in the stress of my compunction I had come early I had certainly yet allowed people time to get up.

"At home, mum? She had left home forever."

I was extraordinarily startled by this announcement of the elderly parlor maid. "She has gone away?"

"She's dead, mum, please." Then as I gasped at the horrible word: "She died last night."

The loud cry that escaped me sounded even in my own ears like some harsh violation of the hour. I felt for the moment as if I had killed her; I turned faint and saw through a vagueness that woman hold out her arms to me. Of what next happened I've no recollection, nor of anything but my friend's poor stupid cousin, in a darkened room, after an interval that I suppose very brief, sobbing at me in a smothered accusatory way. I can't say how long it took me to understand, to believe and then to press back with an immense effort that pang of responsibility which, superstitiously, insanely, had been at first almost all I was conscious of. The doctor, after the fact, had been superlatively wise and clear: he was satisfied of a long-latent weakness of the heart, determined probably years before by the agitations and terrors to which her marriage had introduced her. She had had in those days cruel scenes with her husband, she had been in fear of her life. All emotion, everything in the nature of anxiety and suspense had been after that to be strongly deprecated, as in her marked cultivation of a quiet life she was evidently well aware; but who could say that anyone, especially a "real lady," might be successfully protected from *every* little rub? She had had one a day or two before in the news of her husband's death—since there were shocks of all kinds, not only those of grief and surprise. For that matter she had never dreamed of so near a release: it had looked uncommonly as if he would live as long as herself. Then in the evening, in town, she had manifestly had some misadventure: something must have happened there that it would be imperative to clear up. She had come back very late—it was past eleven o'clock, and on being met in the hall by her cousin, who was extremely anxious, had allowed she was tired and must rest a moment before mounting the stairs. They had passed together into the dining room, her companion proposing a glass of wine and bustling to the sideboard to put it out. This took but a moment, and when

my informant turned round our poor friend had not had time to seat herself. Suddenly, with a small moan that was barely audible, she dropped upon the sofa. She was dead. What unknown "little rub" had dealt her the blow? What concussion, in the name of wonder, *had* awaited her in town? I mentioned immediately the one thinkable ground of disturbance—her having failed to meet at my house, to which by invitation for the purpose she had come at five o'clock, the gentleman I was to be married to, who had been accidentally kept away and with whom she had no acquaintance whatever. This obviously counted for little; but something else might easily have occurred: nothing in the London streets was more possible than an accident, especially an accident in those desperate cabs. What had she done, where had she gone on leaving my house? I had taken for granted she had gone straight home. We both presently remembered that in her excursions to town she sometimes, for convenience, for refreshment, spent an hour or two at the "Gentlewomen," the quiet little ladies' club, and I promised that it would be my first care to make at that establishment an earnest appeal. Then we entered the dim and dreadful chamber where she lay locked up in death and where, asking after a little to be left alone with her, I remained for half an hour. Death had made her, had kept her beautiful; but I felt above all, as I kneeled at her bed, that it had made her, had kept her silent. It had turned the key on something I was concerned to know.

On my return from Richmond and after another duty had been performed I drove to his chambers. It was the first time, but I had often wanted to see them. On the staircase, which, as the house contained twenty sets of rooms, was unrestrictedly public, I met his servant, who went back with me and ushered me. At the sound of my entrance he appeared in the doorway of a further room, and the instant we were alone I produced my news: "She's dead!"

"Dead?" He was tremendously struck, and I noticed he had no need to ask whom, in this abruptness, I mean.

"She died last evening—just after leaving me."

He stared with the strangest expression, his eyes searching mine as for a trap. "Last evening—after leaving you?" He repeated my words in stupefaction. Then he brought out, so that it was in stupefaction I heard, "Impossible! I saw her."

"You 'saw' her?"

"On that spot—where you stand."

This called back to me after an instant, as if to help me to take it in, the great wonder of the warning of his youth. "In the hour of death—I understand: as you so beautifully saw your mother."

"Ah *not* as I saw my mother—not that way, not that way!" He was deeply moved by my news—far more moved, it was plain, than he would have been the day before: it gave me a vivid sense that, as I had then said to myself, there was indeed a relation between them and that he had actually been face to face with her. Such an idea, by its reassertion of his extraordinary privilege, would have suddenly presented him as painfully abnormal hadn't he vehemently insisted on the difference. "I saw her living. I saw her to speak to her. I saw her as I see you now."

It's remarkable that for a moment, though only for a moment, I found relief in the more personal, as it were, but also the more natural, of the two odd facts. The next, as I embraced this image of her having come to him on leaving me and of just what it accounted for in the disposal of her time, I demanded with a shade of harshness of which I was aware: "What on earth did she come for?"

He had now had a minute to think—to recover himself and judge of effect, so that if it was still with excited eyes he spoke he showed a conscious redness and made an inconsequent attempt to smile away the gravity of his words. "She came just to see me. She came—after what had passed at your house—so that we *should*, nevertheless, at last meet. The impulse seemed to me exquisite, and that was the way I took it."

I looked round the room where she had been—where *she* had been and I never had till now. "And was the way you took it the way she expressed it?"

"She only expressed it by being here and by letting me look at her. That was enough!" he cried with an extraordinary laugh.

I wondered more and more. "You mean she didn't speak to you?"

"She said nothing. She only looked at me as I looked at her."

"And you didn't speak either?"

He gave me again his painful smile. "I thought of *you*. The situation was every way delicate. I used the finest tact. But she saw she had pleased me." He even repeated his dissonant laugh.

"She evidently 'pleased' you!" Then I thought a moment. "How long did she stay?"

"How can I say? It seemed twenty minutes, but it was probably a good deal less."

"Twenty minutes of silence!" I began to have my definite view and now in fact quite to clutch at it. "Do you know you're telling me a thing positively monstrous?"

He had been standing with his back to the fire; at this, with a pleading look, he came to me. "I beseech you, dearest, to take it kindly."

I could take it kindly, and I signified as much; but I couldn't somehow, as he rather awkwardly opened his arms, let him draw me to him. So there fell between us for an appreciable time the discomfort of a great silence.

VI

He broke it by presently saying: "There's absolutely no doubt of her death?"

"Unfortunately none. I've just risen from my knees by the bed where they've laid her out."

He fixed his eyes hard on the floor; then he raised them to mine. "How does she look?"

"She looks—at peace."

He turned away again while I watched him, but after a moment he began: "At what hour then—?"

"It must have been near midnight. She dropped as she reached her house—from an affection of the heart which she knew herself and her physician knew her to have, but of which, patiently, bravely, she had never spoken to me."

He listened intently and for a minute was unable to speak. At last he broke out with an accent of which the almost boyish confidence, the really sublime simplicity, rings in my ears as I write: "Wasn't she *wonderful*!" Even at the time I was able to do it justice enough to anwer that I had always told him so; but the next minute, as if after speaking he had caught a glimpse of what he might have made me feel, he went on quickly: "You can easily understand that if she didn't get home till midnight—"

I instantly took him up. "There was plenty of time for you to have seen her? How so," I asked, "when you didn't leave my house till late? I don't remember the very moment—I was preoccupied. But you know that though you said you had lots to do you sat for some time after dinner. She, on her side, was all the evening at the 'Gentlewomen,' I've just come from there—I've

ascertained. She had tea there; she remained a long long time."

"What was she doing all the long long time?"

I saw him eager to challenge at every step my account of the matter; and the more he showed this the more I was moved to emphasize that version, to prefer with apparently perversity an explanation which only deepened the marvel and the mystery, but which, of the two prodigies it had to choose from, my reviving jealousy found easiest to accept. He stood there pleading with a candor that now seems to be beautiful for the privilege of having in spite of supreme defeat known the living woman; while I, with a passion I wonder at today, though it still smolders in a manner in its ashes, could only reply that, through a strange gift shared by her with his mother and on her own side likewise hereditary, the miracle of his youth had been renewed for him, the miracle of hers for her. She had been to him—yes, and by an impulse as charming as he liked; but oh she hadn't been in the body! It was a simple question of evidence. I had had, I maintained, a definite statement of what she had done—most of the time—at the little club. The place was almost empty, but the servants had noticed her. She had sat motionless in a deep chair by the drawing room fire; she had leaned back her head, she had closed her eyes, she had seemed softly to sleep.

"I see. But till what o'clock?"

"There," I was obliged to answer, "the servants fail me a little. The portress in particular is unfortunately a fool, even though she too is supposed to be a Gentlewoman. She was evidently at that period of the evening, without a substitute and against regulations, absent for some little time from the cage in which it's her business to watch the comings and goings. She's muddled, she palpably prevaricates; so I can't positively, from her observation, give you an hour. But it was remarked toward half-past ten that our poor friend was no longer in the club."

I suited him down to the ground. "She came straight here, and from here she went straight to the train."

"She couldn't have run it so close," I declared. "That was a thing she particularly never did."

"There was no need of running it close, my dear—she had plenty of time. Your memory's at fault about my having left you late: I left you, as it happens, unusually early. I'm sorry my stay with you seemed long, for I was back here by ten."

"To put yourself into your slippers," I retorted, "and fall asleep

in your chair. You slept till morning—you saw her in a dream!" He looked at me in silence and with somber eyes—eyes that showed me he had some irritation to repress. Presently I went on: "You had a visit, at an extraordinary hour, but a lady—*soit*: nothing in the world's more probable. But there are ladies and ladies. How in the name of goodness, if she was unannounced and dumb and you had into the bargain never seen the least portrait of her—how could you identify the person we're talking of?"

"Haven't I to absolute satiety heard her described? I'll describe her for you in every particular."

"Don't!" I cried with a promptness that made him laugh once more. I colored at this, but I continued: "Did your servant introduced her?"

"He wasn't here—he's always away when he's wanted. One of the features of this big house is that from the street door the different floors are accessible practically without challenge. My servant makes love to a young person employed in the rooms above these, and he had a long bout of it last evening. When he's out on that job he leaves my outer door, on the staircase, so much ajar as to enable him to slip back without a sound. The door then only requires a push. She pushed it—that simply took a little courage."

"A little? It took tons! And it took all sorts of impossible calculations."

"Well, she had them—she made them. Mind you, I don't deny for a moment," he added, "that it was very very wonderful!"

Something in his tone kept me a time from trusting myself to speak. At last I said: "How did she come to know where you live?"

"By remembering the address on the little label the shop people happily left sticking to the frame I had had made for my photograph."

"And how was she dressed?"

"In mourning, my own dear. No great depths of crepe, but simple and scrupulous black. She had in her bonnet three small black feathers. She carried a little muff of astrachan. She has near the left eye," he continued, "a tiny vertical scar—"

I stopped him short. "The mark of a caress from her husband." Then I added: "How close you must have been to her!" He made no answer to this, and I thought he blushed, observing which I broke straight off. "Well, good-bye."

"You won't stay a little?" He came to me again tenderly, and this time I suffered him. "Her visit had its beauty," he murmured as he held me, "but yours has a greater one."

I let him kiss me, but I remembered, as I had remembered the day before, that the last kiss she had given, as I supposed, in this world had been for the lips he touched. "I'm life, you see," I answered. "What you saw last night was death."

"It was life—it was life!"

He spoke with a soft stubborness—I disengaged myself. We stood looking at each other hard. "You describe the scene—so far as you describe it at all—in terms that are incomprehensible. She was in the room before you knew it?"

"I looked up from my letter writing—at that table under the lamp I had been wholly absorbed in it—and she stood before me."

"Then what did you do?"

"I sprang up with an ejaculation, and she, with a smile, laid her finger, ever so warningly, yet with a sort of delicate dignity, to her lips. I knew it meant silence, but the strange thing was that it seemed immediately to explain and to justify her. We at any rate stood for a time that, as I've told you, I can't calculate, face to face. It was just as you and I stand now."

"Simply staring?"

He shook an impatient head. "Ah! *we're* not staring!"

"Yes, but we're talking."

"Well, *we* were—after a fashion." He lost himself in the memory of it. "It was as friendly as this." I had on my tongue's end to ask if that was saying much for it, but I made the point instead that what they had evidently done was to gaze in mutual admiration. Then I asked if his recognition of her had been immediate. "Not quite," he replied, "for of course I didn't expect her; but it came to me long before she went who she was—who only she could be."

I thought a little. "And how did she at last go?"

"Just as she arrived. The door was open behind her and she passed out."

"Was she rapid—slow?"

"Rather quick. But looking behind her," he smiled to add. "I let her go, for I perfectly knew I was to take it as she wished."

I was conscious of exhaling a long vague sigh. "Well, you must take it now as *I* wish—you must let *me* go."

At this he drew near me again, detaining and persuading me,

declaring with all gallantry that I was a very different matter. I'd have given anything to have been able to ask him if he had touched her, but the words refuse to form themselves: I knew to that last tenth of a tone how horrid and vulgar they'd sound. I said something else—I forget exactly what; it was feebly tortuous and intended, meanly enough, to make him tell me without my putting the question. But he didn't tell me; he only repeated, as from a glimpse of the propriety of soothing and consoling me, the sense of his declaration of some minutes before—the assurance that she was indeed exquisite, and I had always insisted, but that I was his "real" friend and his very own for ever. This led me to reassert, in the spirit of my previous rejoinder, that I had at least the merit of being alive; which in turn drew from him again the flash of contradiction I dreaded. "Oh *she* was alive! She was, she was!"

"She was dead, she was dead!" I asseverated with an energy, a determination it should *be* so, which comes back to me now almost as grotesque. But the sound of the word as it rang out filled me suddenly with horror, and all the natural emotion the meaning of it might have evoked in other conditions gathered and broke in a flood. It rolled over me that here was a great affection quenched and how much I had loved and trusted her. I had a vision at the same time of the lonely beauty of her end. "She's gone—she's lost to us for ever!" I burst into sobs.

"That's exactly what I feel," he exclaimed, speaking with extreme kindness and pressing me to him for comfort. "She's gone; she's lost to us for ever: so what does it matter now?" he bent over me, and when his face had touched mine I scarcely knew if it were wet with my tears of with his own.

VII

It was my theory, my conviction, it became, as I may say, my attitude, that they had still never "met"; and it was just on this ground I felt it generous to ask him to stand with me at her grave. He did so very modestly and tenderly, and I assumed, though he himself clearly cared nothing for the danger, that the solemnity of the occasion, largely made up of persons who had known them both and had a sense of the long joke, would sufficiently deprive his presence of all light association. On the question of what had happened the evening of her death little more passed between us; I had been taken by a horror of the element of evidence. On either hypothesis it was gross and prying. He on his

side lacked producible corroboration—everything, that is, but a statement of his house porter, on his own admission a most casual and intermittent personage—that between the hours of ten o'clock and midnight no less than three ladies in deep black had flitted in and out of the place. This proved far too much; we had neither of us any use for three. He knew I considered I had accounted for every fragment of her time, and we dropped the matter as settled; we abstained from further discussion. What *I* knew however was that he abstained to please me rather than because he yielded to my reasons. He didn't yield—he was only indulgent; he clung to his interpretation because he liked it better. He liked it better, I held, because it had more to say to his vanity. That, in a similar position, wouldn't have been its effect on me, though I had doubtless quite as much; but these are things of individual humor and as to which no person can judge for another. I should have supposed it more gratifying to be the subject of one of those inexplicable occurrences that are chronicled in thrilling books and disputed about at learned meetings; I could conceive, in the part of a being just engulfed in the infinite and still vibrating with human emotion, of nothing more fine and pure, more high and august, than such an impulse of reparation, of admonition, or even of curiosity. *That* was beautiful, if one would, and I should in his place have thought more of myself for being so distinguished and so selected. It was public that he had already, that he had long figured in that light, and what was such a fact in itself but almost a proof? Each of the strange visitations contributed to establish the other. He had a different feeling; but he had also, I hasten to add, an unmistakable desire not to make a stand or, as they say, a fuss about it. I might believe what I liked—the more so that the whole thing was in a manner a mystery of my producing. It was an event of my history, a puzzle of my consciousness, not of his; therefore he would take about it any tone that struck me as convenient. We had both at all events other business on hand; we were pressed with preparations for our marriage.

Mine were assuredly urgent, but I found as the days went on that to believe what I "like" was to believe what I was more and more intimately convinced of. I found also that I didn't like it so much as that came to, or that the pleasure at all events was far from being the cause of my conviction. My obsession, as I may really call it and as I began to perceive, refused to be elbowed away, as I had hoped, by my sense of paramount duties. If I had

a great deal to do I had still more to think of, and the moment came when my occupations were gravely menaced by my thoughts. I see it all now, I feel it, I live it over. It's terribly void of joy, it's full indeed to overflowing of bitterness; and yet I must do myself justice—I couldn't have been other than I was. The same strange impressions, had I to meet them again, would produce the same deep anguish, the same sharp doubts, the same still sharper certainties. Oh it's all easier to remember than to write, but even could I retrace the business hour by hour, could I find terms for the inexpressible, the ugliness and the pain would quickly stay my hand. Let me then note very simply and briefly that a week before our wedding day, three weeks after her death, I knew in all my fibres that I had something very serious to look in the face and that if I was to make this effort I must make it on the spot and before another hour should elapse. My unextinguished jealousy—that was the Medusamask. It hadn't died with her death, it had lividly survived, and it was fed by suspicions unspeakable. They *would* be unspeakable today, that is, if I hadn't felt the sharp need of uttering them at the time. This need took possession of me—to save me, as it seemed, from my fate. When once it had done so I saw—in the urgency of the case, the diminishing hours and shrinking interval—only one issue, that of absolute promptness and frankness. I could at least treat my difficulty as too fine for a subterfuge. Therefore very quietly, but nonetheless abruptly and hideously, I put it before him on a certain evening that we must reconsider our situation and recognize that it had completely altered.

He stared bravely. "How in the world altered?"

"Another person has come between us."

He took but an instant to think. "I won't pretend not to know whom you mean." He smiled in pity for my aberration, but he meant to be kind. "A woman dead and buried!"

"She's buried, but she's not dead. She's dead for the world—she's dead for me. But she's not dead for you."

"You hark back to the different construction we put on her appearance that evening?"

"No," I answered, "I hark back to nothing. I've no need of it. I've more than enough with what's before me."

"And pray, darling, what may that be?"

"You're completely changed."

"By that absurdity?" he laughed.

"Not so much by that one as by other absurdities that have

followed it."

"And what may *they* have been?"

We had faced each other fairly, with eyes that didn't flinch; but his had a dim strange light, and my certitude triumphed in his perceptible paleness. "Do you really pretend," I asked, "not to know what they are?"

"My dear child," he replied, "you describe them too sketchily!"

I considered a moment. "One may well be embarrased to finish the picture! But from that point of view—and from the beginning—what was ever more embarrassing than your idiosyncrasy?"

He invoked his vagueness—a thing he always did beautifully. "My idiosyncrasy?"

"Your notorious, your peculiar power."

He gave a great shrug of impatience, a groan of overdone disdain. "Oh, my peculiar power!"

"Your accessibility to forms of life," I coldly went on, "Your command of impressions, appearances, contacts, closed—for our gain or our loss—to the rest of us. That was originally a part of the deep interest with which you inspired me—one of the reasons I was amused, I was indeed positively proud, to know you. It was a maginficent distinction, it's a magnificent distinction still. But of course I had no prevision then of the way it would operate now; and even had that been the case I should have had none of the extraordinary way of which its action would affect me."

"To what in the name of goodness," he pleadingly enquired, "are you fantastically alluding?" Then as I remained silent, gathering a tone for my charge, "How in the world *does* it operate?" he went on; "and how in the world are you affected?"

"She missed you for five years," I said, "but she never misses you now. You're making it up!"

"Making it up?" He had begun to turn from white to red.

"You see her—you see her: you see her every night!" He gave a loud sound of derision, but I felt it ring false. "She comes to you as she came that evening," I declared, "having tried it she found she liked it!" I was able, with God's help, to speak without blind passion or vulgar violence; but those were the exact words—and far from "sketchy" they then appeared to me—that I uttered. He had turned away in his laughter, clapping his hands at my folly, but in an instant he faced me again with a change of expression that struck me. "Do you dare to deny," I then asked, "that you habitually see her?"

He had taken the line of indulgence, of meeting me halfway and kindly humoring me. At all events he to my astonishment suddenly said: "Well, my dear, what if I do?"

"It's your natural right: it belongs to your constitution and to your wonderful if not perhaps quite enviable fortune. But you'll easily understand that it separates us. I unconditionally release you."

"Release me?"

"You must choose between me and her."

He looked at me hard. "I see." Then he walked away a little, as if grasping what I had said and thinking how he had best treat it. At last he turned on me afresh. "How on earth do you know such an awfully private thing?"

"You mean because you've tried so hard to hide it? It *is* awfully private, and you may believe I shall never betray you. You've done your best, you've acted your part, you've behaved, poor dear! loyally and admirably. Therefore I've watched you in silence, playing my part too; I've noted every drip in your voice, every absence in your eyes, every effort in your indifferent hand: I've waited till I was utterly sure and miserably unhappy. How *can* you hide it when you're abjectly in love with her, when you're sick almost to death with the joy of what she gives you?" I checked his quick protest with a quicker gesture. "You love her as you've *never* loved, and, passion for passion, she gives it straight back! She rules you, she holds you, she has you all! A woman, in such a case as mine, divines and feels and sees; she's not a dull dunce who has to be 'credibly informed.' You come to me mechanically, compunctiously, with the dregs of your tenderness and the remnant of your life. I can renounce you, but I can't share you: the best of you is hers, I know what it is and freely give you up to her forever!"

He made a gallant fight, but it couldn't be patched up; he repeated his denial, he retracted his admission, he ridiculed my charge, of which I freely granted him moreover the indefensible extravagance. I didn't pretend for a moment that we were talking of common things; I didn't pretend for a moment that he and she were common people. Pray, if they *had* been, how should I ever have cared for them? They had enjoyed a rare extension of being and they had caught me up in their flight, only I couldn't breathe in such air and promptly asked to be set down. Everything in the facts was monstrous, and most of all my lucid perception of them;

the only thing allied to nature and truth was my having to act on that perception. I felt after I had spoken in this sense that my assurance was complete; nothing had been wanting to it but the sight of my effect on him. He disguised indeed the effect in a cloud of chaff, a diversion that gained him time and covered his retreat. He challenged my sincerity, my sanity, almost my humanity, and that of course widened our breach and confirmed our rupture. He did everything in short but convince me either that I was wrong or that he was unhappy; we separated and I left him to his inconceivable communion.

He never married, any more than I've done. When six years later, in solitude and silence, I heard of his death, I hailed it as a direct contribution to my theory. It was sudden, it was never properly accounted for, it was surrounded by circumstances in which—for oh I took them to pieces!—I distinctly read an intention, the mark of his own hidden hand. It was the result of a long necessity, of an unquenchable desire. To say exactly what I mean, it was a response to an irresistible call.

VASTATION

by DAVID MORRELL

A brand new spectral tale in the classic Jamesian manner—with a hero who takes the master as his model.

Of late he'd felt—he paused to select the proper words—not quite himself. Indifferent, not to the letters and notebooks, stories and novels: they were his life, after all, his Master's voice. (He smiled at the play with words, knowing James would have appreciated it.) But everything else, the mundane chores, depressed him. Classes he had to prepare and teach, exams to grade, meetings to attend—he felt no identity with them, as if not himself but his alter-ego wandered through the fog of ordinary existence while his true self read before a fireplace, absorbed in the house of James's fiction.

His own house appeared remarkably like Lamb House, James's country home at Rye in Sussex, red-bricked with a high old Georgian doorway and a high brick garden wall, an ancient cobble-stoned lane in front. He had remodeled its interior to match the photographs of James's drawing room and study. He had lined the walls with photographs of James, with sketches and paintings of him. He had purchased James's tea set, and his watch chain, and his dinner jacket, his finest acquisition the diamond ring that James had worn for Sargent's famous drawing of him.

Such devotion drained his bank account, but since, like James, he'd never married, there was no one to object. He didn't miss companionship. He had the Master's work to occupy him, shelves and shelves, the best, the most refined of thought and taste. As well he had his own work, his vast monument to James, begun in nineteen forty-six when, as a student here Oxford, he'd been introduced to James's work. *The Portrait of a Lady.* Fondly he

remembered his first reading of it. And "The Aspern Papers" and *The Spoils of Poynton*. With each book he closed, he'd quickly opened yet another. He had never questioned who would be the subject of his graduation thesis. But its fifty pages hadn't seemed sufficient. He had felt the need to learn much more, to read and re-read, then to publish his discoveries so the world could share his wonder. But three hundred pages hadn't been sufficient either. His first volume stretched to two. His subsequent discoveries soon produced a third, a fourth. The Master's genius seemed bottomless, his insight, his awareness. Now five volumes prompted him to write a sixth. At fifty-two, he hoped for many fruitful years to come when, sitting here at James's writing desk, he would eventually complete the longest, most definitive biography of any writer, so infused with facts, so documented it would stand forever as a testament to James's brilliance.

He'd immersed himself. Though most of James's friends were dead, a few acquaintances in youth had seen the Master in old age. He'd sought them out and stimulated their rememberance. He'd tracked down the children of the now-dead friends who'd known James throughout his life. A hint from one, a clue from another, he connected this new information with fresh revelations from unpublished diaries and letters entrusted to him by—sometimes bullied from—the subjects of his interview.

Like James, he'd put on weight from years of sitting. He'd grown a beard to complete the resemblance. Wearing James's clothes, his watch chain, and his diamond ring, surrounded by his trove of Jamesiana, he felt totally content. He almost felt the Master's spirit.

It seemed natural. James's father had recorded the experience; so had James's brother, William. A *vastation*. James's father had sat alone in a kitchen, digesting before the pale coals of a fire, when he'd sensed an invisible presence in a shadowing corner of the room. The experience had filled him with dread, just as James's brother had been horror-stricken when he encountered a similar presence in the murky confines of a dressing room. When James's father had turned to the philosophy of Emmanel Swedenborg for an explanation, he had learned that this distressing mystical phenomenon was called a *vastation*, an awareness of the spirits hovering unseen around us.

He wasn't surprised, then, when he had his own *vastation*. A week ago, at nine p.m., with the drapes closed and the only light provided by a desk lamp barely dissipating the shadows, he'd

felt it, sensed it. He'd swung alarmed in time to see its afterimage, the vague form of a figure vanishing like a black hole falling inward. He'd gaped. Instead of trembling, he'd gone rigid, dizzy until he'd realized he wasn't breathing. Gulping air in a panic, sweating coldly, he'd stared at the gloomy corner between a bookshelf and the drapes. Was he mistaken, or had the drapes moved as if gently touched? Standing weakly, he'd gone to the corner, shivering as he blamed his imagination. There'd been nothing. But unsettled, he hadn't been able to continue his work that evening.

The next night had been the same. He feared for his sanity, yet swore he saw the figure indistinct, insubstantial, but unmistakeably there. It vanished as soon as he became aware of it. Desperate for an explanation, at last he'd remembered the famous *vastation*. Power of suggestion, he'd told himself. You've been writing about James's relatives. Now you think you've seen what they saw. You've been working too hard.

But the next night was the same, and every night thereafter, the presence hovering daily in the corner. He'd grown accustomed to it. Indeed he'd now decided it wasn't the power of suggestion but an actual *vastation*. As he wrote about James, he felt more in tune with him, privileged, on a higher level of awareness as if visited by James himself. His fear became contentment.

But tonight contentment turned to dread. As he worked at James's desk, he felt the figure appear behind him, looming stronger, darker. He refused to look, determined not to break the spell. He stared at the letter he'd been analyzing—from James to one of his boyfriends, unambiguous evidence of James's homosexuality. *That I might kiss your lips....*

At once he felt the shadow move from its corner, drifting forward, inching closer. As he tensed, he felt it rise behind him, leaning nearer, stooping over him to read the letter ... *hold your body, smother it with affection.* Suddenly he cringed. He felt the shadow's brooding rage, its frantic anger. Was it possible that what he thought was encouragement had all along been disapproval? Years ago, at the start of his life-long tribute to the Master, he'd been aware of James's hatred toward biographers. Before he died, James had burned his private papers. In "The Real Right Thing," a writer's ghost had scared away a biographer. But nothing in the Master's life could possibly be wrong. James represented the ultimate in sensitivity and taste.

... to press my love ...

He felt the shadow's wrath.

"You're wrong!" he told the shadow, struggling not to turn. "These days it doesn't matter! No one cares! I'm gay as well! Why, there's a young man in my class you would have—"

Desperate to defend his monument to James, he swung to face....

He burned the letter, dropping the ashes in a cigarette tray. Rifling through the other letters, he discovered one addressed to him from William. It began "Dear Harry." That annoyed him. I've never addressed William as "Bill," he thought, so why should William call me "Harry"? Henry's my name. He burned that letter as well, then picked up his pen and opened his notebook.

Possible story, he wrote. *Slim, to the point. A variation on "The Real Right Thing." Somewhat ghostly. Ironic revenge. A biographer becomes so obsessed with his subject (buys the man's clothes, his furniture, etc.) that he becomes his subject. I envision the opening sentence. "Of late he'd felt—"*

He paused to select the proper words.

"—not quite himself."

The Lighthouse

by EDGAR ALLAN POE and ROBERT BLOCH

Two masters of the macabre, in a posthumous collaboration, tell a tale of isolation, horror, and the human will.

The Lighthouse is probably the last story Edgar Allan Poe wrote, and he died before he could complete it. The manuscript pages were scattered, one going into a private collection where it remained until 1919, the others preserved by the family of Poe's literary executor and printed in an appendix to Professor Woodberry's *Life of Poe* in 1909. Woodberry is responsible for giving the tale its title; Poe himself had left the heading blank.

Even after the story had been rediscovered and its sections printed separately, the complete text was never published as a unit until Professor Thomas O. Mabbott assembled it in 1942. And it was almost a decade later, after reading my Poe pastiche, *The Man Who Collected Poe,* that Professor Mabbott wrote to me about *The Lighthouse.* Did I happen to know this story? If not, would I care to read it? And if I found the tale intriguing, would I perhaps try my hand at completing it?

As a lifelong reader and admirer of Poe, I couldn't resist. And thus it was, more than a century after Poe's death, that I found myself collaborating with him. In order to do so I had to analyze his style and adapt myself to it. Equally important was an analysis of his story content; on the basis of what he'd written I had to anticipate that which he had left unwritten. How did he intend to develop his plot? And what resolution would he have had in mind for the ending?

Trying to write like Poe was presumptuous enough on my part; trying to *think* like Poe was—how can one put it?—unthinkable.

But what fantasy-writer could resist the challenge? The attempt had to be made. How well or how poorly I succeeded is a matter for the reader to decide.

If you like the tale, I'd be happy to hear about it. If you don't like it, write to Poe.

—Robert Bloch

January 1, 1796

This day—my first on the lighthouse—I make this entry in my diary, as agreed on with DeGrät. As regularly as I *can* keep the journal, I will—but there is no telling what may happen to a man all alone as I am—I may get sick or worse . . .

So far well! The cutter had a narrow escape—but why dwell on that, since I am *here,* all safe? My spirits are beginning to revive already, at the mere thought of being—for once in my life at least—thoroughly *alone;* for, of course, Neptune, large as he is, is not to be taken into consideration as "society." Would to heaven I had ever found in "society" one half as much *faith* as in this poor dog; in such case I and "society" might never have parted—even for a year. . . .

What most surprises me is the difficulty DeGrät had in getting me the appointment—and I a noble of the realm! It could not be that the Consistory had any doubt of my ability to manage the light. *One* man has attended it before now—and got on quite as well as the three that are usually put in. The duty is a mere nothing; and the printed instructions are as plain as possible. It would never have done to let Orndoff accompany me. I should never have made any way with my book as long as he was within reach of me, with his intolerable gossip—not to mention that everlasting meerschaum. Besides, I wish to be *alone*. . . .

It is strange that I never observed, until this moment, how dreary a sound that word has— "alone"! I could half fancy there was some peculiarity in the echo of these cylindrical walls—but oh, no!—that is all nonsense. I do believe I am going to get nervous about my insulation. *That* will never do. I have not forgotten DeGrät's prophecy. Now for a scramble to the lantern and a good look around to "see what I can see." . . . To see what I can see indeed!—not very much. The swell is subsiding a little, I think—but the cutter will have a rough passage home, nevertheless. She will hardly get within sight of the Norland before noon tomorrow—and yet it can hardly be more than 190 or 200 miles.

January 2

I have passed this day in a species of ecstasy that I find it impossible to describe. My passion for solitude could scarcely have been more thoroughly gratified. I do not say *satisfied;* for I believe I should never be satiated with such delight as I have experienced today . . .

The wind lulled after daybreak, and by the afternoon the sea had gone down materially. . . Nothing to be seen with the telescope even, but ocean and sky, with an occasional gull.

January 3

A dead calm all day. Toward evening, the sea looked very much like glass. A few seaweeds came in sight; but besides them absolutely *nothing* all day—not even the slightest speck of cloud . . . Occupied myself in exploring the lighthouse. . . . It is a very lofty one—as I find to my cost when I have to ascend its interminable stairs—not quite 160 feet, I should say, from the low-water mark to the top of the lantern. From the bottom *inside* the shaft, however, the distance to the summit is 180 feet at least: thus the floor is twenty feet below the surface of the sea, even at low tide. . . .

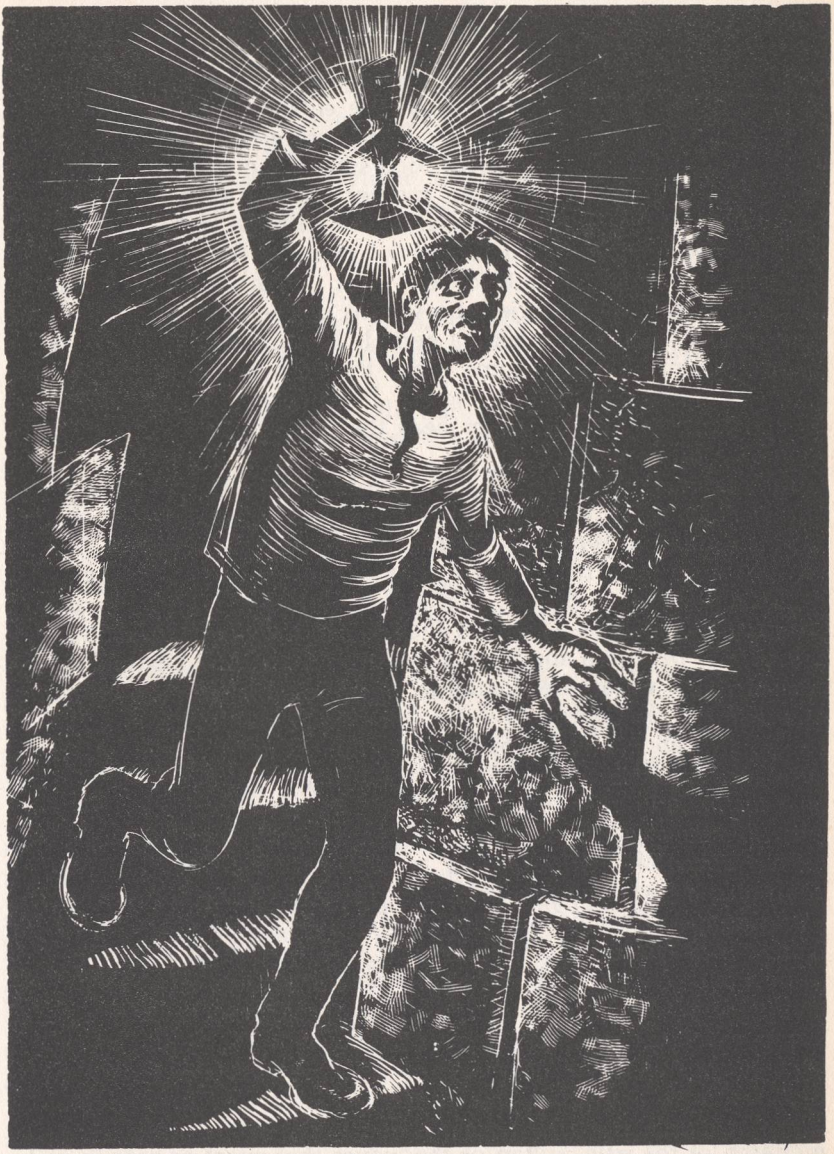
It seems to me that the hollow interior at the bottom should have been filled in with solid masonry. Undoubtedly the whole would have been thus rendered more *safe:* but what am I thinking about? A structure such as this is safe enough under any circumstances. I should feel myself secure in it during the fiercest hurricane that ever raged—and yet I have heard seamen say that, occasionally, with a wind at southwest, the sea has been known to run higher here than anywhere, with the single exception of the western opening of the Straits of Magellan.

No mere sea, though, could accomplish anything with this solid iron-riveted wall—which, at fifty feet from high-water mark, is four feet thick, if one inch. The basis on which the structure rests seems to me to be chalk. . . .

January 4

I am now prepared to resume work on my book, having spent this day in familiarizing myself with a regular routine.

My actual duties will be, I perceive, absurdly simple—the light requires little tending beyond a periodic replenishment of the oil for the six-wick burner. As to my own needs, they are easily satisfied,



and the exertion of an occasional trip down the stairs is all I must anticipate.

At the base of the stairs is the entrance room; beneath that is twenty feet of empty shaft. Above the entrance room, at the next turn of the circular iron staircase, is my storeroom, which contains the casks of fresh water and the food supplies, plus linens and other daily needs. Above that—again another spiral of those interminable stairs!—is the oil room, completely filled with the tanks from which I must feed the wicks. Fortunately, I perceive that I can limit my descent to the storeroom to once a week if I choose, for it is possible for me to carry sufficient provisions in one load to supply both myself and Neptune for such a period. As to the oil supply, I need only to bring up two drums every three days and thus ensure a constant illumination. If I choose, I can place a dozen or more spare drums on the platform near the light and thus provide for several weeks to come.

So it is that in my daily existence I can limit my movements to the upper half of the lighthouse; that is to say, the three spirals opening on the topmost three levels. The lowest is my "living room"—and it is here, of course, that Neptune is confined the greater part of the day; here, too, that I plan to write at a desk near the wall slit that affords a view of the sea without. The second-highest level is my bedroom and kitchen combined. Here the weekly rations of food and water are contained in cupboards for that purpose; here, too, is the ingenious stove fed by the selfsame oil that lights the beacon above. The topmost level is the service room giving access to the light itself and to the platform surrounding it. Since the light is fixed, and its reflectors set, there is no need for me ever to ascend to the platform, save when replenishing the oil supply or making a repair or adjustment as per the written instructions—a circumstance which may well never arise during my stay here.

Already I have carried enough oil, water, and provender to the upper levels to last me for an entire month—I need stir from my two rooms only to replenish the wicks.

For the rest, I am free! Utterly free—my time is my own, and in this lofty realm I rule as king. Although Neptune is my only living subject, I can well imagine that I am sovereign o'er all I see—ocean below and stars above. I am master of the sun that rises in rubicund radiance from the sea at dawn, emperor of wind and monarch of the gale, sultan of the waves that sport or roar in roiling torrents about the base of my palace pinnacle. I command the

moon in the heavens, and the very ebb and flow of the tide does homage to my reign.

But enough of fancies—DeGrät warned me to refrain from morbid or from grandiose speculation—now I shall take up in all earnestness the task that lies before me. Yet this night, as I sit before the window in the starlight, the tides sweeping against these lofty walls can only echo my exultation; I am free—and, at last, alone!

January 11

A week has passed since my last entry in this diary, and as I read it over, I can scarce comprehend that it was I who penned those words.

Something has happened—the nature of which lies unfathomed. I have worked, eaten, slept, replenished the wicks twice. My outward existence has been placid. I can ascribe the alteration in my feelings to nought but some inner alchemy; enough to say that a disturbing change has taken place.

Alone! I, who breathed the word as if it were some mystic incantation bestowing peace, have come—I realize it now—to loathe the very sound of the syllables. And the ghastliness of meaning I know full well.

It is a dismaying, it is a dreadful thing, to be alone. Truly alone, as I am, with only Neptune to exist beside me and by his breathing presence remind me that I am not the sole inhabitant of a blind and senseless universe. The sun and stars that wheel overhead in their endless cycle seem to rush across the horizon unheeding—and, of late, unheeded, for I cannot fix my mind upon them with normal constancy. The sea that swirls or ripples below me is nought but a purposeless chaos of utter emptiness.

I thought myself to be a man of singular self-sufficiency, beyond the petty needs of a boring and banal society. How wrong I was!—for I find myself longing for the sight of another face, the sound of another voice, the touch of other hands whether they offer caresses or blows. Anything, anything for reassurement that my dreams are indeed false and that I am *not*, actually, alone.

And yet I *am*. I am, and I will be. The world is two hundred miles away; I will not know it again for an entire year. And it in turn—but no more! I cannot put down my thoughts while in the grip of this morbid mood.

January 13

Two more days—two more centuries!—have passed. Can it be less than two weeks since I was immured in this prison tower? I mount the turret of my dungeon and gaze at the horizon; I am not hemmed in by bars of steel but by columns and pillars and webs of wild and raging water. The sea has changed; grey skies have wrought a wizardry so that I stand surrounded by a tumult that threatens to become a tempest.

I turn away, for I can bear no more, and descend to my room. I seek to write—the book is bravely begun, but of late I can bring myself to do nothing constructive or creative—and in a moment I fling aside my pen and rise to pace, to endlessly pace the narrow, circular confines of my tower of torment.

Wild words, these? And yet I am not alone in my affliction—Neptune, Neptune the loyal, the calm, the placid feels it too.

Perhaps it is but the approach of the storm that agitates him so—for Nature bears closer kinship with the beast. He stays constantly at my side, whining now, and the muffled roaring of the waves without our prison causes him to tremble. There is a chill in the air that our stove cannot dissipate, but it is not cold that oppresses him. . . .

I have just mounted to the platform and gazed out at the spectacle of gathering storm. The waves are fantastically high; they sweep against the lighthouse in titanic tumult. These solid walls of stone shudder rhythmically with each onslaught. The churning sea is grey no longer—the water is black, black as basalt and as heavy. The sky's hue has deepened so that at the moment no horizon is visible. I am surrounded by a billowing blackness thundering against me. . . .

Back below now, as lightning flickers. The storm will break soon, and Neptune howls piteously. I stroke his quivering flanks, but the poor animal shrinks away. It seems that he fears even my presence; can it be that my own features betray an equal agitation? I do not know—I only feel that I am helpless, trapped here and awaiting the mercy of the storm. I cannot write much longer.

And yet I will set down a further statement. I must, if only to prove to myself that reason again prevails. In writing of my venture up to the platform—my viewing of the sea and sky—I omitted to mention the meaning of a single moment. There came upon me, as I gazed down at the black and boiling madness of the waters below, a wild and willful craving to become one with it. But why

should I disguise the naked truth?—I felt an insane impulse to hurl myself into the sea!

It has passed now; passed, I pray, forever. I did not yield to this perverse prompting and I am back here in my quarters, writing calmly once again. Yet the fact remains—the hideous urge to destroy myself came suddenly, and with the force of one of those monstrous waves.

And what—I force myself to realize—was the meaning of my demented desire? It was that I sought escape, escape from loneliness. It was as if by mingling with the sea and the storm I would no longer be *alone.*

But I defy the elements. I defy the powers of the earth and of the heavens. Alone I am, alone I *must* be—and come what may, I shall survive! My laughter rises above all your thunder!

So—ye spirits of the storm—blow, howl, rage, hurl your watery weight against my fortress—I am greater than you in all your powers. But wait! Neptune . . . something has happened to the creature—I must attend him.

January 16

The storm is abated. I am back at my desk now, alone—truly alone. I have locked poor Neptune in the storeroom below; the unfortunate beast seems driven out of his wits by the forces of the storm. When last I wrote he was worked into a frenzy, whining and pawing and wheeling in circles. He was incapable of responding to my commands and I had no choice but to drag him down the stairs by the scruff of his neck and incarcerate him in the storeroom where he could not come to harm. I own that concern for *my* safety was involved—the possibility of being imprisoned in this lighthouse with a mad dog must be avoided.

His howls, throughout the storm, were pitiable indeed, but now he is silent. When last I ventured to gaze into the room I perceived him sleeping, and I trust that rest and calm will restore him to my full companionship as before.

Companionship!

How shall I describe the horrors of the storm I faced *alone?*

In this diary entry I have prefaced a date—*January 16*—but that is merely a guess. The storm has swept away all track of time. Did it last a day, two days, three—as I now surmise—a week, or a century? I do *not* know.

I know only an endless raging of waters that threatened, time

and again, to engulf the very pinnacle of the lighthouse. I know only an eternity of ebony, an aeon of billowing black composed of sea and sky commingled. I only know that there were times when my own voice outroared the storm—but how can I convey the cause of *that?* There was a time, perhaps a full day, perhaps much longer, when I could not bear to rise from my couch but lay with my face buried in the pillows, weeping like a child. But mine were not the pure tears of childhood innocence—call them, rather, the tears of Lucifer upon the realization of his eternal fall from grace. It seemed to me that I was truly the victim of an endless damnation; condemned forever to remain a prisoner in a world of thunderous chaos.

There is no need to write of the fancies and fantasies which assailed me through those unhallowed hours. At times I felt that the lighthouse was giving way and that I would be swept into the sea. At times I knew myself to be a victim of a colossal plot—I cursed DeGrät for sending me, knowingly, to my doom. At times (and these were the worst moments of all), I felt the full force of loneliness, crashing down upon me in waves higher than those wrought by water.

But all has passed, and the sea—and myself—are calm again. A peculiar calmness, this; as I gaze out upon the water there are certain phenomena I was not aware of until this very moment.

Before setting down my observations, let me reassure myself that I am, indeed, *quite* calm; no trace of my former tremors or agitation yet remains. The transient madness induced by the storm has departed and my brain is free of phantasms—indeed, my perceptive faculties seem to be sharpened to an unusual acuity.

It is almost as though I find myself in possession of an additional sense, an ability to analyze and penetrate beyond former limitations superimposed by Nature.

The water on which I gaze is placid once more. The sky is only lightly leaden in hue. But wait—low on the horizon creeps a sudden flame! It is the sun, the Arctic sun in sullen splendor, emerging momentarily from the pall to incarnadine the ocean. Sun and sky, sea and air about me, turn to blood.

Can it be I who but a moment ago wrote of returned, regained sanity? I, who have just shrieked aloud, "Alone!"—and half-rising from my chair, heard the muffled booming echo reverberate through the lonely lighthouse, its sepulchral accent intoning *"Alone!"* in answer? It may be that I am, despite all resolution,

going mad; if so, I pray the end comes soon.

January 18

There will be no end! I have conceived a notion, a theory which my heightened faculties soon will test. I shall embark upon an experiment. . . .

January 26

A week has passed here in my solitary prison. Solitary?—perhaps, but not for long. The experiment is proceeding. I must set down what has occurred.

The sound of the echo set me to thinking. One sends out one's voice and it comes back. One sends out one's thoughts and—can it be that there is a response? Sound, as we know, travels in waves and patterns. The emanations of the brain, perhaps, travel similarly. And they are not confined by physical laws of time, space, or *duration.*

Can one's thoughts produce a reply that *materializes,* just as one's voice produces an echo? An echo is a product of a certain vacuum. A thought . . .

Concentration is the key. I have been concentrating. My supplies are replenished, and Neptune—visited during my venture below—seems rational enough, although he shrinks away when I approach him. I have left him below and spent the past week here. Concentration, I repeat, is the key to my experiment.

Concentration, by its very nature, is a difficult task: I addressed myself to it with no little trepidation. Strive but to remain seated quietly with a mind "empty" of all thought, and one finds in the space of a very few minutes that the errant body is engaged in all manner of distracting movement—foot tapping, finger twisting, facial grimacing.

This I managed to overcome after a matter of many hours—my first three days were virtually exhausted in an effort to rid myself of nervous agitation and assume the inner and outer tranquillity of the Indian fakir. Then came the task of "filling" the empty consciousness—filling it completely with *one* intense and concentrated effort of will.

What echo would I bring forth from nothingness? What companionship would I seek here in my loneliness? What was the sign or symbol I desired? What symbolized to me the whole absent world of life and light?

DeGrät would laugh me to scorn if he but knew the concept that I chose. Yet I, the cynical, the jaded, the decadent, searched my soul, plumbed my longing, and found that which I most desired—a simple sign, a token of all the earth removed: a fresh and growing flower, *a rose!*

Yes, a simple rose is what I have sought—a rose, torn from its living stem, perfumed with the sweet incarnation of life itself. Seated here before the window I have dreamed, I have mused, I have then concentrated with every fiber of my being upon a *rose.*

My mind was filled with redness, not the redness of the sun upon the sea, or the redness of blood, but the rich and radiant redness of the rose. My soul was suffused with the scent of a rose: as I brought my faculties to bear exclusively upon the image, these walls fell away, the walls of my very flesh fell away, and I seemed to merge in the texture, the odor, the color, the actual *essence* of a rose.

Shall I write of this, the seventh day, when seated at the window as the sun emerged from the sea, I felt the commanding of my consciousness? Shall I write of rising, descending the stairs, opening the iron door at the base of the lighthouse and peering out at the billows that swirled at my very feet? Shall I write of stooping, of grasping, of holding?

Shall I write that I have indeed descended those iron stairs and returned here with my wave-borne trophy—*that this very day, from waters two hundred miles distant from any shore, I have reached down and plucked a fresh rose?*

January 28

It has not withered! I keep it before me constantly in a vase on this table, and it is a priceless ruby plucked from dreams. It is real—as real as the howls of poor Neptune, who senses that something odd is afoot. His frantic barking does not disturb me; nothing disturbs me, for I am master of a power greater than earth or space or time. And I shall use this power, now, to bring me the final boon. Here in my tower I have become quite a philosopher: I have learned my lesson well and realize that I do not desire wealth, or fame, or the trinkets of society. My need is simply this—Companionship. And now, with the power that is mine to control, I shall have it!

Soon, quite soon, I shall no longer be alone!

January 30

The storm has returned, but I pay it no heed; nor do I mark the howlings of Neptune, although the beast is now literally dashing himself against the door of the storeroom. One might fancy that his efforts are responsible for the shuddering of the very lighthouse itself, but no; it is the fury of the northern gale. I pay it no heed, as I say, but I fully realize that this storm surpasses in extent and intensity anything I could imagine as witness to its predecessor.

Yet it is unimportant; even though the light above me flickers and threatens to be extinguished by the sheer velocity of wind that seeps through these stout walls; even though the ocean sweeps against the foundations with a force that makes solid stone seem flimsy as straw; even though the sky is a single black roaring mouth that yawns low upon the horizon to engulf me.

These things I sense but dimly, as I address myself to the appointed task. I pause now only for food and a brief respite—and scribble down these words to mark the progress of resolution toward an inevitable goal.

For the past several days I have bent my faculties to my will, concentrating utterly and to the uttermost upon the summoning of a Companion.

This Companion will be—I confess it!—a woman; a woman far surpassing the limitations of common mortality. For she is, and must be fashioned, of dreams and longing, of desire and delight beyond the bounds of flesh.

She is the woman of whom I have always dreamed, the One I have sought in vain through what I once presumed, in my ignorance, was the world of reality. It seems to me now that I have always known her, that my soul has contained her presence forever. I can visualize her perfectly—I know her hair, each strand more precious than a miser's gold; the riches of her ivory and alabaster brow, the perfection of her face and form are etched forever in my consciousness. DeGrät would scoff that she is but the figment of a dream—but DeGrät did not see the rose.

The rose—I hesitate to speak of it—has gone. It was the rose which I set before me when I first composed myself to this new effort of will. I gazed at it intently until vision faded, senses stilled, and I lost myself in the attempt of conjuring up my vision of a Companion.

Hours later, the sound of rising waters from without aroused me. I gazed about, my eyes sought the reassurance of the rose and

rested only upon a *foulness.* Where the rose had risen proudly in its vase, red crest rampant upon a living stem, I now perceived only a noxious, utterly detestable strand of ichorous decay. No rose this, but only seaweed; rotted, noisome, and putrescent. I flung it away, but for long moments I could not banish a wild presentiment—was it true that I had deceived myself? Was it a weed, and only a weed I plucked from the ocean's breast? Did the force of my thought momentarily invest it with the attributes of a rose? Would anything I called up from the depths—the depths of sea or the depths of consciousness—be *truly* real?

The blessed image of the Companion came to soothe these fevered speculations, and I knew myself saved. There *was* a rose; perhaps my thought had created it and nourished it—only when my entire concentration turned to other things did it depart, or resume another shape. And with my Companion, there will be no need for focusing my faculties elsewhere. She, and she alone, will be the recipient of everything my mind, my heart, my soul possesses. If will, if sentiment, if love are needed to preserve her, these things she shall have in entirety. So there is nothing to fear. Nothing to fear. . . .

Once again now I shall lay my pen aside and return to the great task—the task of "creation," if you will—and I shall not fail. The fear (I admit it!) of loneliness is enough to drive me forward to unimaginable brinks. She, and she alone, can save me, shall save me, *must* save me! I can see her now—the golden glitter of her—and my consciousness calls to her to rise, to appear before me in radiant reality. Somewhere upon these storm-tossed seas she *exists,* I know it—and wherever she may be, my call will come to her and she will respond.

January 31

The command came at midnight. Roused from the depths of the most profound innermost communion by a thunderclap, I rose as though in the grip of somnambulistic compulsion and moved down the spiral stairs.

The lantern I bore trembled in my hand; its light wavered in the wind, and the very iron treads beneath my feet shook with the furious force of the storm. The booming of the waves as they struck the lighthouse walls seemed to place me within the center of a maelstrom of ear-shattering sound, yet over the demoniacal din I could detect the frenzied howls of poor Neptune as I passed the

door behind which he was confined. The door shook with the combined force of the wind and of his still desperate efforts to free himself—but I hastened on my way, descending to the iron door at the base of the lighthouse.

To open it required the use of both hands, and I set the lantern down at one side. To open it, moreover, required the summoning of a resolution I scarcely possessed—for beyond that door was the force and fury of the wildest storm that ever shrieked across these seething seas. A sudden wave might dash me from the doorway, or conversely, enter and inundate the lighthouse itself.

But consciousness prevailed; consciousness drove me forward.

I *knew*, I thrilled to the certainty that *she* was without the iron portal—I unbolted the door with the urgency of one who rushes into the arms of his beloved.

The door swung open—blew open—roared open—and the storm burst upon me; a ravening monster of black-mouthed waves capped with white fangs. The sea and sky surged forward as if to attack, and I stood enveloped in chaos. A flash of lightning revealed the immensity of utter nightmare.

I saw it not, for the same flash illumined the form, the lineaments of *she* whom I sought.

Lightning and lantern were unneeded—her golden glory outshone all as she stood there, pale and trembling, a goddess arisen from the depths of the sea!

Hallucination, vision, apparition? My trembling fingers sought, and found, their answer. Her flesh was real—cold as the icy waters from whence she came, but palpable and permanent. I thought of the storm, of doomed ships and drowning men, of a girl cast upon the waters and struggling toward the succor of the lighthouse beacon. I thought of a thousand explanations, a thousand miracles, a thousand riddles or reasons beyond rationality. Yet only one thing mattered—my Companion was here, and I had but to step forward and take her in my arms.

No word was spoken, nor could one be heard in all that inferno. No word was needed, for she smiled. Pale lips parted as I held out my arms, and she moved closer. Pale lips parted—and I saw the pointed teeth, set in rows like those of a shark. Her eyes, fish-like and staring, swam closer. As I recoiled, her arms came up to cling, and they were cold as the waters beneath, cold as the storm, cold as death.

In one monstrous moment I *knew*, knew with uttermost

certainty, that the power of my will had indeed summoned, the call of my consciousness *had* been answered. But the answer came not from the living, for nothing lived in this storm. I had sent my will out over the waters, but the will penetrates all dimensions, and my answer had come from *below* the waters: *She* was from below, where the drowned dead lie dreaming, and I had awakened her and clothed her with a horrid life. A life that thirsted, and must drink....

I think I shrieked, then, but I heard no sound. Certainly, I did not hear the howls from Neptune as the beast, burst from his prison, bounded the stairs and flung himself upon the creature.

His furry form bore her back and obscured my vision; in an instant she was falling backward, away, into the sea that spawned her. Then, and only then, did I catch a glimpse of the final moment of animation in that which my consciousness had summoned. Lightning seared the sight inexorably upon my soul—the sight of the ultimate blasphemy I had created in my pride. The rose had wilted....

The rose had wilted and become seaweed. And now, the golden one was gone and in its place was the bloated, swollen obscenity of a thing long-drowned and dead, risen from the slime and to that slime returning.

Only a moment, and then the waves overwhelmed it, bore it back into the blackness. Only a moment, and the door was slammed shut. Only a moment, and I raced up the iron stairs, Neptune yammering at my heels. Only a moment, and I reached the safety of this sanctuary.

Safety? There is no safety in the universe for me, no safety in a consciousness that could create such horror. And there is no safety here—the wrath of the waves increases with every moment, the anger of the sea and its creatures rises to an inevitable crescendo.

Mad or sane, it does not matter, for the end is the same in either case. I know now that the lighthouse will shatter and fall. I am already shattered, and must fall with it.

There is time only to gather these notes, strap them securely in a cylinder and attach it to Neptune's collar. It may be that he can swim, or cling to a fragment of debris. It may be that a ship, passing by this toppling beacon, may stay and search the waters for a sign—and thus find and rescue the gallant beast.

That ship shall not find me. I go with the lighthouse and go willingly, down to the dark depths. Perhaps—is it but perverted

poetry?—I shall join my Companion there forever. Perhaps . . .

The lighthouse is trembling. The beacon flickers above my head and I hear the rush of waters in their final onslaught. There is —yes—a wave, bearing down upon me. It is higher than the tower, it blots out the sky itself, everything. . . .

N.B.: Regarding the relative contributions of Edgar Allan Poe and Robert Bloch to the story "The Lighthouse," let me quote from Sam Moskowitz's introduction to the story in the anthology *A Man Called Poe,* where I first came across the tale:

It is naturally intriguing to speculate on what he might have had in mind if he had lived long enough or had actually not stopped at the point where the manuscript breaks. A true devotee of Edgar Allan Poe, Robert Bloch in 1952 decided he would take a whirl at completing the story.

The finished work, under the title of "The Lighthouse," appeared in the January-February 1953 issue of *Fantastic* as a collaboration by Edgar Allan Poe and Robert Bloch. At the time . . . the impact was not great despite the fact that the fragment was known primarily to specialized Poe researchers . . .

So as to play fair with the reader, Edgar Allan Poe's last word is "chalk" under the January 3rd entry. Robert Bloch begins with January 4th.

—TK

Surely this was Hell—or a fever-ridden nightmare. But then he learned the truth: that he was trapped . . .

In the Sunken Museum

by GREGORY FROST

Yet his stories contain no mystery greater than the one surrounding his untimely death. The fact that, upon leaving Richmond, he took with him his host's walking stick rather than his own, and that, though believed to have boarded a train for Philadelphia, he failed to visit the friends he had planned to see there—these suggest that he was ill or feverish. But even a protracted attack of his disabling headaches does not account for his whereabouts during the next five days, before he was at last discovered on the streets of Baltimore, dying in delirium shortly thereafter. Nor is there any solution to the puzzle of the name he cried out at the moment of death—Reynolds, a name with no known referent in his personal history. There can be no doubt that the occurrences which befell Edgar Poe during these missing five days of his life will never be known to us. . . .

Stephen Wyralski
The Gallows Poe

His eyes open slowly to total darkness. The lids are swollen from fatigue and from a feverous illness that threatens to consume him. Behind his left eyeball is a headache he has endured for weeks.

(where is this? it cannot be the train to Philadelphia there is no motion no noise have we stopped? but there is no light like a tomb)

The terror of premature internment has haunted him throughout his life. He feels the tickle of sweat on his mustache, attempts to

brush it away, but his arms are numb as though he had slept on them. Panic spins in his head, shreds his thoughts; he would kick and claw out of this blackness if only he could move his arms and legs, but paralyzed, he is incapable of exploiting the surge of adrenaline. The itch of the sweat on his lip is driving him mad. He finds, then, that he can move his mouth; he pushes out his lower lip, huffs and huffs at the irritant moustache, until the sweat blows away. He discovers that his back is arched and that the dullest of sensations has returned to his feet. He begins to feel again. This comforts him, and he relaxes.

All he knows is that he is lying on his back on a comfortable, somehow-buoyant surface. Yet when the lights come up moments later, a scene appears before him which suggests he is defying gravity, standing on his feet. Vertigo roars in his ears, his stomach pushes toward his throat, and he looks away from the flickering scene with its clustered figures too quickly to assimilate it. He represses the surging knot at his throat with gritted teeth, though his task swells his headache till it bulges against his eye. He lowers his head, sucking in cool breath.

Then he sees that his coat has been removed and his shirt replaced by a thin shirt of some kind of gauzy material. Despite its thinness, he is hot. Both hands are folded across his chest in imitation of death—

(they thought they thought I was dead beaten? robbed? buried would have been buried would have been—calm be calm you're alive yes yes alive)

—clutching a stick, a walking stick. He can see only the bossed knob—a ring of silver around a black circle, in the center of which has been penknifed CARTER.

(carter carter Doctor Carter from Richmond?)

His hands are tingling now, and he can feel his legs to the knees. He watches his left foot move and is comforted by it somewhat. Blinking at sweat, he attempts to confront the bright and seemingly motionless scene again. Squints, raises his head, then wishes he hadn't.

The scene is grotesque, culled from a nightmare. A sickly, malignant-yellow light is cast by hundreds of misshapen candles spitting, hissing animal-fat flames. The candles are high up on dozens of circular chandeliers hung from chains that vanish above, where there is no sign of a ceiling. Wax plops onto robed figures who seem oblivious to it, figures who have remained motionless since

he began to watch. They are gathered close together, facing away from him, intent on some central object. He thinks he hears, above the candles' sibilance, a hiss of a different kind as of something whipping through the air.

He flutters his hands until the tingling dies away, then pushes away from the surface at the back—

(how can I be standing when I know I'm lying down?)

—takes a first hesitant step, like the first step into Hell, moving slowly, delicately forward. Some enormous machine groans, shaking the floor (*the wall?*), and he halts, poised like prey ready to run. He hears squealing, glances down, and sees enormous rats weaving between the legs of the frozen figures. The rats skitter as he draws near.

He stretches on his toes to see over the shoulders of the robes, but they are too tall. He risks reaching out, shoves gently at the two in front of him. They turn away easily, allowing him to slip between them, ignoring him as they ignore the rats. There are three rows of these robed figures. The two at the back close up behind him and he is trapped among them, panicked by rushing claustrophobia, sweat pouring out all over him. He fights through the second row, kicking at the rats that scuttle over his boot. The swishing sound is much louder, and something black and enormous moves steadily in the dimness just ahead.

He glances at a face beside him. It is shadowed by the cowl, a thin face, eaten by disease. The eyes, though narrowed, burn like those of the rats below. He forces his eyes down, sees tiny jewels blink at him from the floor. He cries out and shoves through the last row.

The object of rapt attention is a stone altar. He stands at the foot of it—watching. A single victim is strapped there, head back, neck muscles locked, spasming, rocking desperately from side to side to break the belt across the waist. He wears a coarse parody of the robes around him. His wild eyes follow something in the darkness above. The watcher, too, looks up: a shiny black crescent swings ponderously back and forth, lowering insidiously with each pass over the victim's body.

"No!" the watcher shouts, and the victim raises his head to see who has yelled, and the watcher sees himself strapped there, sees the madness of the certainty of death on his own face, and cries in howling, inhuman terror. He looks frantically about the scene, sees one robed figure to the side, working a lever. He charges

at that figure, who makes no attempt to defend his position. He swats the robed man aside with his stick and pulls the lever back, even as the blade splits the first few threads of the coarse gown the victim wears.

Victim and watcher gibber out of control, weeping the same sounds simultaneously.

The watcher drops to his knees, suddenly overcome by his fever. He vomits, cries out a prayer: "God! I'm not in Hell!"—though that is precisely where he fears he is. He crawls toward his shackled double, certain that he must save that figure in order to save himself, not knowing why that should be or why he believes it, not caring, only crawling. His stomach heaves with every movement. He hears footsteps running as if down a mile of stairs, nearer, louder, like the fist pounding behind his eye. He reaches blindly to unlace the belt, but his heavy arm slides away and he falls face down onto the floor, stretched out beside his twin.

When his eyes open, he is again on his back. His head rests on its cheeck. He can see beside him a thin line of crimson ruffles between black lapels of a coat, the ruffles shadowed strangely from lighting set below. Painstakingly he raises his eyes. The red ruffles lead up to a collar open at the throat, this space filled with a gold cravat. Above the shiny gold is a face that is proud, with a stiff jaw, cleft chin, wide friendly mouth, fleshy nose, dark eyes, dark brows, small ears, high forehead, and receding dark hair. The face is smiling, delighted. The coat smells of ghastly French perfume.

(can the Devil look like this)

"Who are you?" he asks.

"My name is Reynolds, Mr. Poe. I've given you something for your fever—sorry I failed to do that earlier—and a sedative."

Poe's deep-set grey eyes blink in incomprehension. "Sedative?"

"Sleeping draft."

Poe closes his eyes, feeling the sweat oily on the lids. "Ah, that explains it—the dreams," he says softly, "the horrible dreams I have had. My own words came down to haunt me. Never happened before." He glances again at the proud face lighted so sinisterly from below. "Tell me Mr. . . . Reynolds . . . am I in Philadelphia?"

"No, sir. You are in Baltimore."

He raises his head. "But I was on the train for Philadelphia! I had already left Baltimore!"

Sympathy. "Yes, of course. But in your fever, I presume, you

mistakenly caught the train back to Baltimore."

Poe sinks back into the cushion. After a period of deliberation he says: "Then be so good as to take a letter for me and post it to Mother . . . to my dear . . . Muddy." Reynolds's hand has passed over his head, and in his last moments of consciousness Poe follows it, seeing for the first time the hairline of silver in the darkness behind Reynolds's head which can be nothing other than the pendulum itself, and a splinter of terror accompanies him into dreamless sleep.

When Poe awakens, Reynolds is standing in precisely the same position and place. Watchful, imperturbable, so kindly of visage it would be impossible to dislike him, Reynolds exudes trust.

Poe remains doubtful, however, uncertain of the border of reality as he searches in vain for the blade in the blackness above. Nothing is visible there. He refuses to accept the offered assurance in Reynolds's eyes, but says nothing.

(he will think me mad)

He feels cooler, realizes his fever has broken, and that he seems full as if he had feasted while asleep. And amazingly, his incessant headache is gone!

"I—I am recovered."

"Yes."

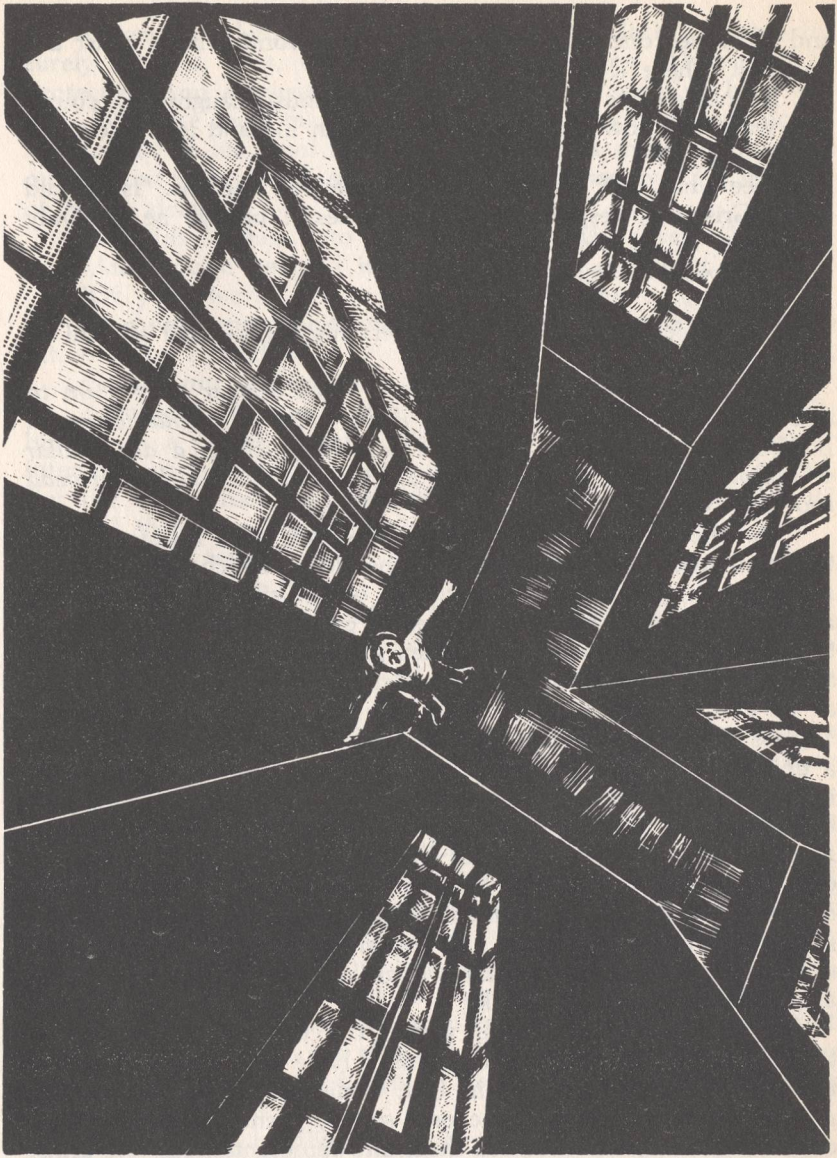
He sits up gingerly, but finds himself feeling vigorous, healthy. "For whatever you have given me, for whatever you've done to aid me, I cannot sufficiently thank you. I am in your debt more than you can know, but I am penniless to repay you. You see, even my coat has been stripped from me, no doubt by villains. My memories are so vague. There are periods when I recall nothing, when I stumble like a madman through the streets, so I am told. Because of my illness. That I have managed to retain this stick of Carter's is miraculous. Again, my thanks upon my rescue, sir."

"Think nothing of it." Reynolds pats him on the shoulder.

"My first thoughts were that I was dead and had been buried. You have no windows."

"Not here, no. But you are hardly dead, Mr. Poe."

"Yes," he agrees. "However, I have been in many countries, sir, including Russia"—a harmless lie, spoken mainly out of habit—"and nowhere have I seen a place as dark and impenetrable as this." He pauses as if thoughtfully, then adds for effect, "With the possible exception of the Antarctic in summer. Nonetheless, you



and I can see one another perfectly. So it comes that I must ask you just where it is that I am."

Reynolds claps his hands, cries "Marvelous!" Laughs. "Of course you want to know. But please, come with me and let me explain while you see."

"See what, Mr. Reynolds?" His expression hardens. "Is my old rival, Griswold, responsible for this? Yes, I believe he is. Only he would be so bold as to—"

"Griswold is dead, Mr. Poe."

He gapes. "What?"

"Please, come with me"—he offers his hand—"and all will be explained."

(I do not care to trust you yet I must appear to if I am to discover the explanation for this place what it is and where in Baltimore there must *be a simple solution such as a deep cellar or moonless night but where then are the windows? Griswold dead too dear God my old enemy)*

He allows Reynolds to help him stand, then follows as the tall man leads. He discovers that the floor, which he could not see while on his back, is the source of the sinister light. A ring around his unusual bed is composed of panels in the shape of stone tiles, but seemingly made of stained glass. Reynolds steps forward and a trail of these colorful gems ignites, extending as far ahead as he can see. He is quite taken with the idea of lamps beneath a glass floor, a twinkling path like stars in the darkness. What a unique effect the light conveys upon their features, which seemingly change color with every stride. On either side of the path the darkness is impenetrable, and reminds him of bottomless chasms. A tiny knot of terror clenches in his stomach, but he turns all of his attention to the trail, concentrating on the sequence of colors, fighting against the frightening conjectures; he wants to understand the truth of this place and concentrates on the more hopeful explanations. The mounting misgivings of his revery are interrupted as Reynolds begins to speak.

"I am a student of your work. You may not have realized there were such people. Nevertheless, I have read every word you have ever written. I have, in fact, dedicated myself to erecting replicas of your work. I have chosen scenes, poems, tales, sometimes combining them, and modeled them into representations." He grins.

"I am speechless. sir. I don't know what to say." That someone would construct a wax museum in his honor is astonishing.

He relaxes, wondering if this accounts for the lack of light—for surely sunlight, heat, would melt the wax figures. They must be protected. And a museum dedicated to him is proof of his rightness. Who else could make such claims? Not Hawthorne or Cooper. A museum of his own! And in Baltimore! "A museum," he says quietly, but with a pride so immense it has erased even his memory of being afraid.

Reynolds latches onto the word. "Yes! A museum!"

"And you've peopled it with your own reproductions—"

"Of your work, yes."

He dwells upon the scene he witnessed earlier, depicting "The Pit and the Pendulum."

(it was not a dream!)

Admittedly it was lifelike, incredibly so. The man, he tells himself, is a genius in wax. Wax also accounts for the apparent intentness of the robed figures and why he was ignored. Of course. But the victim had been himself. And it had moved! Hadn't it? Or had that been an illusion?

(madness fever)

He asks about this.

Reynolds replies, "Of course it seemed lifelike. That is the illusion I strive for, and it was indeed your face. You were the narrator, your voice was the story, so who better to represent you than . . . *you?*"

Poe blanches. The thought of his double turning up as the victim in each exhibit is unsettling. He is unsure as to just how much of that he cares to see.

"Let me show you something," Reynolds says, as amiable as ever. He leads the way more quickly, bobbing with each step on the tiles. The clump of footsteps resounds from unseen walls and ceilings; the echoes sound cavernous. Poe reflects on the areas of Baltimore he knows, tries to place a building of this size. Then he recalls the train ride from Richmond, but that memory is ebbing, as vague as the recollection of a former life. He looks again at Reynolds, wonders who this man can be. He has known a good many of the wealthy, the elite. This place would take money to build. Yet he has never heard of Reynolds. The realization is a discomfiting one.

"Beyond this building—" he begins.

Reynolds, as if finishing his thought, says, "Is a city, yes. There." He grabs Poe's arm and turns him.

Poe gasps into the palms of his hands.

A few feet before him is greenish water glowing like liquid fire, and he seems to stand behind an enormous aquarium partition. The light that kindles the water comes from clustered phosphorescent buildings that squat on the murky ocean bottom; twisted spires thrust between domes; frescoed walls are hidden behind thick vines. The windows in the structure are comparatively dark, but as he watches, a light appears in one of them, then moves on, carried by some unseen hand.

He draws closer, peering.

A fish swims lazily before him. He reaches out his hand to touch the glass. There is no glass! And his hand comes back dripping, smelling of brine. His eyes plead to Reynolds, who pulls him back with a casual reply: "It's done with mirrors, don't you know."

(no I don't know I don't believe)

"You know this place, don't you?"

He looks again at the towers, though without turning his head, without facing it. "'The Drowned City,'" he answers, horror-struck. He flicks water from his fingertips. "I know it as I know myself."

"Well said, sir," his guide answers, shaking his head, marveling at his own creation. Obviously his guest is supposed to do likewise. He recites:

> *Lo! Death has reared himself a throne*
> *In a strange city lying alone*
> *Far down within the dim west*
> *Where the good and the bad and the worst and the best*
> *Have gone to their eternal rest.*

A marvelous verse, sir."

The words attempt to inveigle him; praise has swayed him all of his life. Advocates of his work have never been evil, for how could a villain see Truth so well?

But not this time; not this one.

Poe presents a favorable attitude, makes his voice sound joyous. "You have created a wonderful work here, capturing every detail just as I saw it."

(escape)

"I had hoped you would come to feel that way, especially after the first scene, which was an enormous error on my part. I had no idea how ill you were, that you would see it as a nightmare, and again I sincerely apologize, Mr. Poe."

"Think nothing of it. The honor you do me here is quite enough recompense."

(how in God's name do I get out?)

Reynolds bows. "There is so much more for you to see."

Poe drops the sham of delight. The additional delay suggested is out of the question. It is important he try to make Reynolds aware of that, despite the risk of offending the man. Warily he says, "That is most wonderful." He rubs at his eyelid; the headache, like a hornet, seems to have reclaimed its nest. Ignoring it, he continues, "But, sir, you must understand, I have vital appointments in New York. Already I am days late, no doubt. If you know anything about me, you know how much I want to begin my magazine. And it has come true. I will have *The Stylus* if I carry through with my meetings.

"I could return at some future time, of course. To spend a week here with you. I will advertise your museum for you, let the world hear about you. They will come in droves and your fame might well match mine. But I beg you, sir, to let me go!" He watches attentively for a shift in expression that will reveal the answer, but Reynolds; face still smiles.

"Nonsense," he says. "I can assure you that you have lost no time, that not a solitary day will go by while you are here."

Cold sweat beads on Poe's brow, his mouth is clogged, his tongue thick. Nausea floods into him again as the medicine starts to wear off, but he cannot afford to falter now. "How is that possible? I must be three days late as it is. How can you say that?"

Reynolds opens his mouth as if to reply, but closes it without a word, as if recognizing that the explanation would be impossible. Then he laughs and says: "What are a few days to men like you or me?" He laughs again.

"Then, I am your prisoner until such time as you see fit to release me!" Sweat trickles on his temple. He wipes it away, brushes his hand against his hair. It is matted; he hates being dirty. He shakes his head gently to clear his thoughts.

"No!" Reynolds shouts, aghast. "I would never dream of such a thing. Would a host ask a prisoner to dine with him? Would he be held in a prison designed for his own introspection?"

Poe studies the guileless face.

(yes that is precisely the case when the host is a madman who thinks time outside has stopped for him I'm your prisoner because I understand nothing here your questions are lies and your answers

say nothing only confuse me)

He says, "I would be delighted to dine with you, but my fever and sickness are back." It is hardly a lie.

His host waves it off. "I can give you something for your fever again."

Hesitantly: "Very well. I thank you for that. But I am also tired, and would prefer to rest first."

"Of course." And he leads the way back along the trail of gems hanging motionless in space where no stars sparkle.

This place, he is certain, can only be underground. There is no place in Baltimore so gargantuan that it could hold this museum of unnatural art. He will regain his strength through sleep just as he did before—and then, somehow, escape. Even if it means clawing his way through sheer rock with his bare hands.

He perceives now that the magnanimity his host has shown is that of a lunatic. These tableaux are supremely wrought, but all with that overpowering vision of a lunatic's reality. To Poe they are more horrible than the demented dissection of a cat's eye—an image that has haunted him all his life. He wonders for a second how he might approach this place as a fictional springboard, once he has escaped. He *will* escape; a self-made promise.

Trembling, he lies back on the flat, yielding bier, frightened nearly to tears, but fighting to remain outwardly composed. His host must not catch wind of this plan.

Then Reynolds passes something over Poe's head and he retreats to where the ubiquitous darkness drapes over his troubles.

His own voice calling for Virginia, his late wife, awakens him. He lies still, seeing her face from the dream, yearns for her. Later he listens for some sound to suggest that Reynolds is returning, has heard him, knows he is awake. There is no sound beyond the tubercular wheeze of his own breath, still racing from the dream.

His vision rises up, through the supposed earth's crust, into the daylight that must be above him—city streets where, even now, people search the alleys and the taverns, expending every effort to find the ragged or the drunken Edgar Allan Poe. They might even have come to Reynolds's mansion while he slept . . .

Mansion, he realizes, is a presumption on his part that on the surface is a façade—a structure with windows and curtains and drawing rooms—the falseness of which no person could detect. The thought of such a house redoubles his notion of captivity, ignoring the fact that the structure lives only in his mind. At the

moment, his mind is the single reality he can trust.

(escape)

He sits up quickly. Somewhere there must be stairs, a way out, if only he can locate them. The problem is where to look.

Carter's malacca stick is leaning against his bed, and he picks it up as he slides down onto his feet, pressure lighting the tiles.

(which way?)

A pathway lights, stretching out to a false horizon, as he steps forward, and vanishes when he moves on in a circle round his bed. A second one lights, then a third. Completing the circle, he has found eight paths that lead away like the dew-beaded threads of a web.

"Mr. Poe."

He falls stricken against the altar. Reynolds stands beside him, holding a small device that looks like some bizarre chamberless pistol. It points loosely at his chest. Yet Reynolds's fixed smile still exudes charm and compassion. Poe is now certain that this is the smile off madness. He grips the cane tighter and raises it defensively.

With heavy disappointment, Reynolds says, "Mr. Poe, you surprise me. This is no weapon." His thumb snaps back the hammer. "It's for your fever. It will alleviate your illness again."

Poe swings the cane against Reynolds's wrist, falls forward from the force behind the blow. The gun flies away into the dark, clatters somewhere. Reynolds's wrist dangles, broken. Still he smiles. Poe scrambles to gather up the cane, stumbles onto a lighted path, taking it blind, hoping that it will somehow lead him from the nightmare.

"Mr. Poe! Mr. Poe!"

(mr. poe)

Running, running, aware that the lighted path is nothing other than his own rainbowed spoor, he turns to the darkness, praying to God there is a floor out there.

Soon he has crossed three paths.

A corridor flares up before him, a long thin hallway with brick walls and a smoking, burning brazier. The solidity of walls, ceiling, and floor comfort him. The cries of pursuit—

(mr. poe!)

—are gone. Only the flutter of the bluish flame is audible. He creeps stealthily into the lighted hallway. The smoke is pungent, and he coughs.

Reaching a bend in the corridor, he discovers, set in the wall

of his left, a large, slender blue-stained glass window. Directly opposite it stands another brazier. Poe watches his shadow shrink as he nears the glass. Cupping his hand around his eyes, he peers through the lead-limned plates.

On the other side is a room, an apartment, with polished wood furnishings, gold ornaments dangling from the ceiling, tapestries, carpet, portraits, flagons, and creatures—parodies of human form, some covered in fur, others in features, a grotesque gamut of faces, animal travesties. He realizes with relief that it is a masquerade. More people enter the chamber every moment, there must be hundreds. "Real people," he hears himself say. They are not wax! It is no dream, no fantasy. They move.

He forces himself to leave the window and continue along the corridor, which turns every ten steps, each turn presenting a different window, a different color, the scheme of tiny lead-limned panels giving view to another chamber. After the second one, the purple one, he knows where they lead, where he is going, and though he wants to pull away, to retreat the way he has come, the situation is as it was with the Drowned City; he is helpless to resist.

The last window is red. The chamber within is black, and every detail is smothered in a hellish glow. There is the black clock rising out of view; there, the people standing in the doorway, afraid to enter this ghastly travesty of a tomb; there, a tall figure wrapped in a shroud, its cadaverous mask mottled with drops of blood, empty of eyes. Suddenly the figure turns toward him; the Red Death stalks him through the glass.

The clock strikes once; a tremor runs across the floor, travels up his legs. Dust sprinkles from the ceiling.

He flees up the corridor as the clock strikes again, into the darkness as the hollow dismal note rings again, followed ineluctably by another, on, on, on, changing pitch subtly until it is the reverberating peal of bells, Bells, *Bells*, clapping at his ears, inescapably near, beating in time with his heart.

A rainbow path flashes as he runs across a stone. He stumbles and falls across the top of a flight of stairs. The bells stop.

Scraping, slow footsteps approach. He huddles beside an oaken banister. Out of the darkness, a figure with lustrous eyes appears, searching, unaware of his presence, the face scarred by more grief than Poe has ever seen. The tissue-thin cheeks are collapsed in against the bones. The thin lips quiver, part.

"Madman!" The figure clasps his hands to his ears against his own voice. He removes them only a few inches, fingers spread. "Now hear it?" he asks. As Poe watches, his own double appears again, this time dressed in his usual black habiliments; the double takes the other's arm with care and leads him through an open doorway. The door swings closed.

A moment later, he hears a somber voice—Roderick Usher's voice, and yet his own!—begin to read from the "Mad Trist." He flees, leaps the last of the stairs, out of Usher's sinking House into black limbo.

Sparks of color dance in his eyes. He coughs up something thick from his lungs, spits it out. His head seems light, cloudy, but so very hot.

Another chamber suddenly appears around him, but this one is more ghoulish than any he has entered before. It is a vault. The walls carry inscriptions on plaques, behind which, he infers, are the corpses that match the names.

He arrives at the end of the vault.

The plaque reads: MADELAINE. Even as he comprehends it he grows aware of faint scraping sounds, slithering, icy, clutching at his backbone. His body shakes like hooked fish and he falls against a wall. The scraping is louder. He envisions fingernails digging in death's darkness; he tilts back his head, eyes bulging, his moustache outlining the scream to come.

The plaque falls, breaks on the floor. Above it, two bricks vanish into the wall. A set of bloodied, shredded fingers curl over the edge of the hole. Light glints from a single milky eyeball.

"Roderick," calls the husky voice of the tomb.

He shrieks, runs, plunging away from it all.

"Reynolds! Please, Reynolds, stop this! This is the desolation of my *soul!*"

His cries unanswered, he goes on.

A vague figure looms from out the darkness. He runs toward it. "Reynolds," he sobs, chokes back the last sob. Stopped. He falls slowly to his knees. A few feet in front of him is a woman. She is tall, wrapped in bandages which, even as he scrambles back, biting his hand to keep from screaming, she begins to unravel: from her mouth; from her hair falling thick and glossy black, below her shoulders. Her large eyes open.

"No!" he cries. "No!" and rolls back, his stomach heaving. His head wants to explode. She walks purposefully after him.

She is Ligeia—but she resembles no one in Poe's life so much as his dead and cherished wife, Virginia. His fever alters any differences in her appearance: she is his wife. The frail shell of his sanity slides like the House into the Tarn.

Running is a reflex of panic now. Figures, rooms, ghosts assail him, but he stops for none of them, responds to none of them. He wants out, only out.

He comes upon a door that is nothing he has ever envisioned—a wide, gleaming door of glass. But there is no handle. He pushes against it; it is immovable. He has no idea how to get through, and he knows, somehow, that he must.

"You mustn't go there," a voice calls.

He recognizes Reynolds moving out of the dimness between paths, and immediately he backs away, raises the stick.

"You could not stand it," his host continues, unmoved.

Poe sees the hand he has broken with the stick, sees that it is no longer broken; his lips draw back from his teeth and he stares sidelong like a rabid wolf.

"Poe, you should not have run. It was wrong." Reynolds's tone is that of a regretful father speaking to his child. "I'm so sorry, so utterly sorry. Others have come here and enjoyed it. But I didn't know you were ill. No one did for certain. There is no one to blame but myself for this." And that kindly smile goes on forever.

But such kindness is lost on Poe; the sympathy conveyed is buried beneath the jarring beat of his headache. Pink foam bubbles in one corner of his mouth. He screams in pain and rage. Reynolds is taller, heavier, but Poe grabs him and hurls him at the door, smashing Reynolds's head into it again and again with frenzied strength. One side of the proud face cracks; a slice of it flips up, falls onto the glowing tiles, and rocks there like a gutted clamshell. Poe continues to batter Reynolds against the door until the wall flexes and shatters.

Only then does he release Reynolds and see the destruction he has caused in that proud face. There is no blood. The wound is razor sharp, a gash in the hollow of the cheek the size of his palm. Within it is a crosswork of woven fiber.

No blood.

Poe squeezes tears of agony and confusion from his eyes. "Mr. Poe," says Reynolds, in a syrupy slow voice.

Poe turns, leaps headlong through the shattered door. As he rolls, dazed, his arm cut by a jagged shard, a ramp is suddenly

illuminated, a glowing maroon ramp that leads upward. Someone calls out from behind him. He runs, crying with joy, sucking in hoarse, ripping breaths, pleading to God to save him. The ramp seems to go on as far as heaven. Up, up, until at last he reaches a plateau and another door. It is solid metal, and hums to life as he touches it. He cowers. It rolls back, buzzing, to let him out.

He is outside before he comprehends the landscape.

Black trees surround him, bent from the weight of swollen cystic leaves, dancing in an acid breeze. No grass, but rotted, eroded grey ground, smelling of centuries of decay.

The sky is red behind brown clouds. The hazy sun hangs like a dead eye. He coughs and closes his hand over his mouth, begins to choke. A think trickle of blood escapes between his fingers.

(Hell it is Hell after all like no Hell ever seen I am doomed by God to live in my own nightmares soon they'll come to take me back to my own mind oh Virginia it is! it is! the Haunted Palace is Hell!)

He sees down an embankment a large valley that has once held water but is now dry. Thick smoke rises from it. He cannot run there.

In the other direction, through tears, he beholds twisted towers, some as high as mountains, their surfaces like the scales of serpents—stiff snakes twined against the bloody sky. Small lumpy shapes move on the ground there, and he shudders at seeing them, knows no safety there either.

He whirls around. The building he has just escaped is a black mound with a small black cupola at the top, glossy, shining, a clean, polished anomaly . . .

He vomits pink foam, leans against one of the spongy trees. The leaves above him spill a thick yellow fluid on his shoulder. He screams and flings himself away, toward the building, then stops, skids, and falls back.

In the doorway Reynolds stands motionless; his dull smile, as though painted on, curves up to the jagged hole in his cheek. Beside him, moving forward, is a short gargoyle figure. Its flesh is grey and leathery, its torso hangs in doughy folds, flopping like a clotted skirt just above the ground. It is the image of the creatures Poe has seen below the towers. The feet are in shadow; the arms are short, reedy, fingers grossly extended. And the face—

(the face!)

—is a lump on its neckless shoulders. The eyes are jelly, the

nose a single vertical vent, the lips purple and crumpled in an uncordial crescent.

Reynolds, he now perceives, is the only one who can release him from this purgatory. He would plead and prostrate himself, he would beg his host to take him home, to take him away, to save him, to explain, just to explain!

But the swollen grey monster moves between them with alarming ease, and Poe dares not step forward. "Reynolds!" he shrieks. "Reynolds!"

His host continues to stare blankly ahead, smiling as before.

The monster moves closer. Poe scrabbles to the crest of the hill. "Reynolds!"

The large purple lips part, and the monster speaks—a raw, bubbling voice not meant for English speech, but conveying a tone of detached annoyance, and somehow, in some vague way, reminiscent of Reynolds's voice.

"He does not hear you, Poe. I've shut him off."

"What?!" His head begins to shake, as from chills.

"He is only a mechanism, voice-activated. Oh, stop it!" One of the hands raises, fingers curled, looking like some kind of hide-covered claw. The creature snarls. "I have brought you all this far forward, gone to incalculable expense and trouble to learn your language, build your monument—for you—all for you—and you refuse to take solace. You have not entertained me at all! You are the only—"

"Reynolds!"

"Poe, *I* am your host. *I* brought you here from out of your sleeping compartment. You saw Reynolds because you could not have stood the sight of me. Could you? Can you?" The creature appears to have expanded.

Poe's mind spins, dazzled, tumbled, and the creature's words are no more distinguishable than the horrendous roar of breakers on rocks. But he fights off the weight of the fever, refuses to be dragged into unconsciousness; he clamps his hands over his ears as if this will shut out the roar. "What are you?" he shouts. "What am I?"

"There is little point in explaining further. You cannot be expected to comprehend the differences in the world eight thousand years have made. You weren't supposed to see it!" The grey face darkens to the color of its lips.

Poe stares back blankly. The stick drops from his hand.

(is this a man? God oh God no! how can these things be? that a city and this museum of abominations and he calls me his entertainment?! no no no no the Bells the Bells hear it! I grabbed the poor beast by the throat—)

His hands in loose fists pound at the sides of his head. He falls to his knees. The cane of Doctor Carter lies before him, tangled in threads of mist.

(—and deliberately cut one of its eyes from the socket oh the bells the bells the bells . . .)

The grey bulk turns. "Reynolds!" it burbles, hawks, and spits out a wad of brown syrup.

Poe's fingers caress the knob of the walking stick. He is not aware of himself rising to his feet.

"Reynolds! Come and collect Mr. Poe."

The stick smashes down upon the back of the lumpy grey head. Again, again, Poe batters out the soft brains, breaks the eyeballs like eye yolks that ooze down the face, caves in the ridge around the single nostril, spatters blood from the lips before Reynolds can rip the frail, dying madman off his dead and bloated host. He takes away Poe's stick with an ungraceful tug.

Poe looks up at the proud, cracked face. "Reynolds?" he says timidly, like a child. His fist is balled around the tail of Reynolds's coat.

"Yes—yes, Mr. Poe. Ple-please come with me." Reynolds's speech has become flat and disjoined. "It's time I sent you back home. I am . . . really very sor-sorry. It's never happened before."

Poe, not listening, looks back at the corpse—

(red on grey pretty colors)

—as Reynolds leads the way into the black mound. Poe tags after, his eyes idiot and childlike.

(the play is the tragedy man and its hero the conqueror worm the conqueror worm the conqueror worm)

They shamble, the manic and the mechanism, down a sparkling trail of gems. The colored specks wink out behind them, until the museum is reinstated in its shroud of gloom.

LUNA

by G.W. PERRIWILLS

The astronaut, like Actaeon, had seen the moon unveiled—and like the hunter in the myth, he would have to face the wrath of the moon goddess.

Edward Kossum did not know he was dreaming. The landscape of his dream was as real as any he'd ever seen. It was deep night. He stood alone in a dense forest. Overhead, branches of oaks, firs, poplars wove a black canopy. Through breaks in the trees he could see remote mountain slopes bathed in the brilliance of a full moon. The chill mountain air stung his nostrils with aromatic forest odors. He breathed deeply, almost gasping, wincing from the painful whiteness of the distant peaks and drawing back into his dark covert as if to quell some undefined fear. Far off, barely pricking the silence, a sound began—the baying of hounds ...

With a start Kossum wrenched free of the dream, his heart pounding. He lay crosswise on the bed as if flung that way, his damp face pressed against the rumpled sheet. Reality came shakily into his focus as he remembered the pad and pencil on his bedside table and Dr. Alton's admonition.

In Dr. Alton's cool presence Kossum felt somehow disheveled and clumsy, as if he had stumbled in by accident. The pychiatrist, dark-eyed and bearded, was slightly theatrical in appearance, in contrast to his highly restrained manner. Slowly he perused the dream record.

"We have a little more to work on this time," he said, looking up at Kossum. He spoke in a precise, emotionless voice that admitted of no interpretation. "The forest dream is basically the same one you reported last time. This time we have more details."

"I never used to dream at all," said Kossum.

"That's not really true. Everyone dreams. The sleep researchers, Dement and the others, have never yet found a subject who doesn't dream. Some people just forget very quickly. By the time they're fully awake, they can't remember a thing."

"I—I hate to dream," said Kossum.

"On the moon flight, do you remember having any dreams?"

"I don't think so," Kossum said, slowly, envisioning the moon, its bright surface looming in the viewport on their approach. A troubling thought, a wisp of dream or false memory, hovered on the periphery of awareness. He saw the nude figure of a lovely woman, her hair drawn back in classic style. Her face, turning toward him, grew cold with anger. But he wasn't sure. "I don't remember any dreams," he said.

"What about earlier in your life?"

"Nothing. Even when I first came to you, I thought I was just having trouble sleeping—you know, night sweats, palpitations, all the rest. I didn't really know what was going on. Now that I do know, I wish I didn't. If I could just take something to blank the dreams out—"

"I don't think that would be wise now. You're getting in touch with a part of yourself that's been suppressed. We can learn a great deal from it."

"But it's the same dream over and over," Kossum said with irritation. "It's happened twice more. I quit writing it down because each time it's the same thing. I'm in the forest at the foot of the mountain, scared as hell. The last time it lasted longer. When I heard the dogs barking I started to run. I ran for miles, and the dogs were gradually gaining. I knew they were after me. The terrain was wild, thickets and gullies and streams almost impassible. When I realized there was no escape, that's when I woke up."

Dr. Alton watched him thoughtfully. "What do the feelings of the dream mean to you?"

"Being helpless, afraid . . . nowhere to hide."

"To be hounded and hunted—that doesn't fit your image of yourself." Dr. Alton's puzzled words hung in the air like a question. After a moment he continued, "You're human like the rest of us, Kossum, even though everyone knows you as the hero, the perfect man. They remember how you handled the thruster malfunction when you were coming off the moon. I've listened to the tapes and read your medical file from NASA. O'Shea was coming apart,

but you were cold as ice."

"We were trained for things like that, simulations of damn near everything."

"Kossum, the odds against success that particular time were overwhelming, but you managed to recover the rendezvous with the command module. Two seconds either way and—" Dr. Alton cut himself off. "But you made it back, and so did O'Shea."

"Put it down to the will to live."

"That alone doesn't gaurantee performance in a crisis. In a real crunch many people have total paralysis of nerve."

Kossum grunted impatiently. He felt embarrassed and irritated.

"My point is, Kossum, underneath that superb functioning you had the same emotions any panic-stricken tyro would have, the same that poor O'Shea felt and couldn't control. You've kept all that pushed out of sight. This may be what you have to deal with now in your dreams."

"I'm not sure," said Kossum wearily. Dr. Alton began to straighten the books on his desk, a signal that it was time for the session to end. Kossum stood up and moved heavily toward the door. He couldn't put his doubts into proper words. It certainly wasn't a reluctance to admit having moments of fear—that wasn't what was torturing him. It was the intensity of the recurring dreams; each time they left him more shaken. More and more it seemed as if they were devouring his life, becoming more real than the actual world. Even now he felt like a sleepwalker as he forced himself to concentrate on Dr. Alton's anonymous voice dismissing him and confirming the next visit. As he left, the room seemed shadowy and indistinct, as if the afternoon had clouded over.

The Friday night crowd jostled noisily at the Fat Cat. At a corner table Kossum sipped his second screwdriver. The murky gloom where he now existed was only deepened by the vodka and Valium. Kossum peered distantly at the figures on the dance floor, feeling no more than a groggy nostalgia; he was hopelessly removed from the good times of these strangers.

At a nearby table the lead guitarist's dark-haired girlfriend chatted with another girl. He listened idly, catching a word now and then. The second girl was a tawny blonde, sun-streaked. *Pure California,* he thought. Her halter top revealed a smooth rosy tan and her smile was slow and rich, her manner relaxed and generous. Through the friendly din of the Fat Cat, Kossum strained to hear

their voices. "Sarah," the brunette called her friend.

When the guitarist finished his set and led his dark girl out to the dance floor, Kossum strolled over.

"Sarah, let me buy you a drink."

Her eyes were brown and calm, looking up first in mild surprise, then in bubbling amusement. "I think I recognize you," she said with a guilty little laugh.

Kossum laughed with her and took the empty chair. "I think I recognize you too, Sarah," he said, and indeed it all seemed very familiar. He had grown accustomed to a stream of willing bodies, the bold ones who pushed themselves into his arms at cocktail parties and kissed him for luck, and the others, the timid knocks at the motel door and the awkward explanations.

The music pounded into Kossum like an alien heartbeat. Under his ribs he felt the warmth of the liquor rising. Sarah's face was welcoming, her lazy smile tender and inviting. He felt her golden body tugging at him like the Earth's gravity drawing home an errant satellite.

The night was gusty and smelled of rain. The rickety outside stairs to Sarah's garage apartment shivered under their footsteps as they climbed up. Back toward Houston, neon reflections stained the low overcast in pale greens and pinks. The world seemed folded in mysterious colored darkness. Kossum tried to shake off a recurring sense of unreality and flight, but some deeper awareness could not be quieted. *Even now I'm running,* he thought to himself, *trying to hide.*

He stood close to Sarah, his hand on her bare midriff as she fished out her key. The lamp she snapped on inside gave a dim amber glow, and she lit candles in colored wells. Overhead the eaves sloped together and the candlelight flickered on zodiac posters tacked to the slanting walls, on fringed magenta cushions and an India print on Sarah's tumbled bed.

Almost as tall as Kossum, she moved easily into his embrace, her body a lithe delight under the thin cottons of her halter and wrap skirt. He tasted her rich winy mouth and breathed the scent of her skin. When she broke away from his kisses, it was only to murmur endearments. "I've thought of you so many times and never knew I'd be with you . . ." Her voice was breathy with excitement.

The halter was tied in back. With one hand Kossum deftly

loosened the knot and drew it away from her body, freeing her breasts. She unsnapped the skirt, letting it slip down, and stood in her light panties.

"Oh, Sarah, lovely . . . lovely . . ."

Her tawny body was warm and tropical, giving back days in the sun. It trembled eagerly at his touch.

"I thought I wouldn't come back to you—" he said, his voice strangled and intense. He knew his words were incongruous, but she accepted them without surprise. He had a wild need to tell her everything, how at that moment she was the haven he sought in desperate flight from the menacing dream. Against the soft edges of Sarah's world of drifting colors, perfume, night wind, another reality hovered in the distance, etched in black and stark white light. He turned away from it, following her glimmering flesh.

For a long time they lay loosely in each other's arms in the murmuring shallows of spent delight. Sarah sighed and lightly stroked his chest.

"Your body is so beautiful . . ." Her voice was soft and sleepy. Her wandering hand traced down his thigh and paused curiously, exploring a strange roughness of his skin. "How did you hurt yourself?" she asked. "Look at those scratches."

Kossum shivered with eerie disorientation. *I don't want to remember,* he thought in panic, but the memory forced itself upon him. *Running, the hounds' exultant baying close behind, dark thickets looming ahead, staggering, falling, thorns ripping at his thighs . . .*

It can't be real, he told himself in desolate wonder. To Sarah he muttered stupidly, "I was in the woods at night, didn't know where I was—"

"Little boy lost in the woods," she said lightly, but her eyes betrayed a deeper concern.

He looked away. Above, on the slanting eaves, the candles cast shifting splashes of color on the zodiac posters. Kossum's gaze traced out the hieratic figures, a crab beneath a crescent moon, a girl with a sheaf of wheat, a centaur with a bow.

"You go in for this astrology stuff?"

"Sure."

"Tell me something about it."

"I'm earth . . . I think you're fire."

"December third. Sagittarius."

"I was right. That's a fire sign—the Archer. And you've aimed

very high."

Kossum concentrated on her voice and the comforting odor of her skin. She spoke in little rushes of words, a kind of music. "Your aura is so strange. I'm sensitive to things like that. It's like you're in some kind of danger or something. Someone is very angry, for something you didn't even mean to do. Maybe I can cast a horoscope for you, help you in some way—"

"Baby, I wish you could."

It was hard to believe the change in Kossum. Dr. Alton kept his usual guarded composure, but he noted Kossum's shambling gait as the man entered the office. His glance quickly took in the stubbled face and the bloodshot eyes that flickered with anxiety.

"What's going on, Kossum?" he asked with a faint touch of camaraderie.

"It's bad. Really bad. I don't know how much more I can stand."

"The dreams?"

"*The dream.* It's every night now. I'm afraid to go to sleep. And the marks, the crazy damned ... aftereffects. Kossum's eyes were almost pleading. There were now marks on on his arms.

Dr. Alton glanced at the folder on his desk. The appearance of hysterical symptoms had definitely changed the nature of the case. Kossum might be close to a real breakdown. Hospitalization? He hesistated. A trace of hero worship made him want Kossum to fight his way back to normal on his own.

"I don't know what's real any longer. Everything I used to believe ... Nothing holds."

"You don't have to doubt your reason because of psychosomatic effects. These things happen all the time—the man with the ulcer, the kid whose wart disappears when he rubs an egg against it and buries the egg. Your symptoms are just more dramatic."

"But you don't know how bad it is," Kossum said. "When I dream now I can hardly wake up or come back from ... from that place. And then its marks are on me. I know the dream isn't real, but they *make* it real."

"Your emotions are real, Kossum. Have you ever heard of the stigmata, the bleeding wounds of the crucifixion that appear on the bodies of mystics? We don't know how the body does these things, but they've been documented many times.

"I want you to try something different, Kossum," said Dr.

Alton, after a pause. "A very simple procedure, based on autosuggestion, has worked in many cases of obsessive dreams. It's a way to extend the control of the waking mind into the dream world. Each night before you go to bed, practice the relaxation exercises I've shown you. After you unwind a little, tell yourself very strongly, *Whatever it is in the dream, pursuing me, I will stand and face it.*"

For the first time in the session, Kossum's haunted eyes showed a spark of interest. "It would be a relief—whatever happens—to know the end of it."

"Try it then. There's a chance the autosuggestion will give you a breakthrough."

He ran. For miles and miles, in the full moon's light and shadow, through the same ragged terrain. Branches whipped his face. The rocky slopes crumbled and slipped underfoot. His muscles knotted with agony, and the chill air seared his heaving lungs like fire. The triumphant din of the dogs was close behind. He fled with the desperation of the hunted animal. He had no name, no history. He was no longer Kossum.

Yet even in headlong flight, some part of his being steeled itself for defiance. Rage filled him, the courage of the cornered. In sudden fierceness he wheeled and faced the yelping pack. They stopped, then surged around him, circling and leaping. The brilliant moonlight glittered on their furious eyes and slavering jaws. Behind them pale, shadowy figures hastened forward. He knew they would not help him. *She* had sent them—the one who welcomed no heroes, who harried him through endless dreams. For an instant he glimpsed her again. Dazzled by her radiant body, he raised his eyes to her face. Implacable. *You have no pity,* he thought in despair.

From the circling pack, a snarling hound sprang, clamping its teeth on his shoulder. He flung it aside, but another was upon him in an instant, then another. They bore him down. As he went to his knees, he felt a slash at his throat and heard youthful voices urging on the dogs. "Theron! Lelaps! Pamphagus!"

In their archaic accents there was no malice. They shouted with the joy of the hunt, their quarry finally brought to earth.

Children of the Hydra

by DALE HAMMELL

Love, that summer, was a burning hunger— and terror a thing with pale tentacles

The rain was pelting down, slanting diagonally through the headlight beams. Smeared by water and a spastic windshield wiper, shapes and colors ran and merged, casting wormy shadows across the driver's haggard face. Michael grimaced, leaned forward, peering past his bunched and aching knuckles as they clutched the wheel. Suddenly the silver Honda bucked.

"Christ almighty!" Following his high beams down the winding country road, he wrestled against a gusty, unpredictable wind. It was summer's end.

Rain thundered against the roof and hood, and bounced up off the slick black pavement, the water congealing in the air, making it difficult to see.

"Look out!" Michael cried.

He floored the brake pedal, the steering wheel wrenching from his grasp as the compact skidded across the road. He flung his arms up to protect his face. He screamed. The car rolled over, bounced, and plunged headfirst into a deep, rain-swollen creek. Michael screamed. Cold, rank water filled the car.

Standing at the road side, the pale child smiled, giggled, and skipped down toward the water's edge . . .

TAPE #4—RASMUSSEN/McFADDEN, M.—August 30
Dr. Rasmussen: Hello, Michael. How are you today, hm?
M: Alive.
Dr: Did you sleep well last night?

M: No, I bloody well didn't. You know I didn't!

Dr: More dreams?

M: God! Again, again—

Dr: Why don't you tell me about it, hm?

M: Why bother? You've heard it all before ... Christ, I'm tired ...

Dr: I bother because we're here to help, Michael, you know that. We know you're under a lot of strain, but, please, bear with us, hm?

M: Can I have some coffee?

Dr: Of course. Now tell me about your dream ...

M: Sure, sure. Why not, eh? I'm not going anywhere. I dreamed about Bart. We were in his bedroom ...

Dr: Yes?

M: It was daytime ... We were alone. It was cool and dim. There wasn't any furniture or anything, just a bed ... It was all distorted, like being underwater, you know? When I looked at the ceiling, it was like looking at the sun from underneath a lake. Like when you're swimming.

Dr: Go on, Michael.

M: Shadows, there were lots of shadows. On the walls ... pooling like secrets beneath Bart's feet. He was naked, standing in the center of the room, swaying like ... like wheat in a—no, no ... like seaweed in the ocean. Yeah, like that. He was—his arms hung at his sides; his legs, all of him ... He looked like he was made of wax. All soft and rounded.

Dr: Did he acknowledge your presence?

M: What? Sorry ... no, no he didn't.

Dr: He didn't speak, or say anything? You don't remember anything he might've said?

M: No, Doc. Swaying ... swaying. He had his back to me. But—but his skin crawled. Ripples of movement beneath his skin. God. You know how a worm moves? Like that. God! How could anything with bones move like that? How?!

Dr: Anything can happen, Michael, when the unconscious exerts itself. All of the natural and physical laws of our world are at its whim. Witness your paralysis, for example.

M: I can't walk. I cannot walk!

Dr: Tell me more about your dream, hm?

M: God damn you.

Dr: For your own good—

M: Yeah, yeah ... Bart, he—he turned toward me. His feet stayed on the floor, but he twisted right aound and faced me. No bones ... No—God! His head was tilted back—"

Dr: What was he looking at?

M: Looking?? His eyes were—They were—Jesus! He didn't have any! His cheeks blended right into his forehead. Oh, God, I think I'm going to be sick ...

Dr: Shall I call an orderly?

M: Look, Doc, I don't want to dream anymore, please. I don't want to sleep I might I don't want to please pleaseplease—!

Dr: It's okay. Take it easy, Michael. Calm down. Come on, breathe deep ... and again ... okay? Better? You're okay, hm?

M: When will I get out of here?

Dr: Soon. You'll walk out of here, Michael, I promise you. I'd like to go a little farther, but we can talk later if you'd rather.

M: Tired ... so tired ... Go on, then.

Dr: In this dream ... in Bart's room ... what happened—?

M: I hear it!

Dr: Michael?

M: Watery sounds, underwater sounds ... I hear the blood rushing in my ears ... It's like swimming underwater. It's cool, full of shadows ... secrets ... Safe, it's safe ... It smells like a pond, like a brackish pond. Slowly moving water ... deep, deep water. Colder, darker, safer than—No! NO! *NO!!*

Dr: Michael, I'm here. I'm here with you. You're safe.

M: Strange, strange sounds. From deep, deep below me. But ... but there aren't *any* basements in Richmond! There aren't any. Just water. Just—inhuman sounds, angry sounds, horrible sounds, hungry sounds ... lonely sounds. Oh, God! God!

Dr: Did Bart speak to you in your dream?

M: Uh-uh ... Wait a second. Yeah, he did. I remember he did say something.

Dr: Can you remember what—

M: They're louder and louder ... It's getting closer, closer! Something big and heavy and ... and old. Horrible. Something coming up from the dark ... Hear it?! I shouldn't be here. I'm an intruder, and it's coming, coming to—to—Jesus! It's—Oh, God!

Dr: It's okay, Michael. It's okay, you're safe. Tell me, what did Bart say, hm? Do you remember?

M: It's there. It's waiting for me. It's—

Dr: Tell me what Bart said, Michael.

M: In the water, it's there . . . waiting . . .

Dr: We'll finish later, Michael. I'll have an orderly help you to your room. All right? Nurse Park will be in to make sure you're comfortable.

M: I . . . I don't want to dream. Can't you give me something to keep me from dreaming, Doc? Please, Doctor?

Dr: Sure, we'll see, hm?

M: Tired . . . tired, you know? Tired . . .

END TAPE #4

Summer's end.

The last day before school . . .

The early morning sun, warm and heavy, gathered mist up from the weed-choked mud flats beyond the gravel dike. The salt tang was pungent. For the boys sprawled lazily in the brown grass, watching ducks and geese and a great blue heron gliding away from them, the reluctant pang of vacation's end mingled with excited apprehension. The air shimmered with phantasms.

"I hate thchool. I hate it," Kevin said, pouting.

"That's for sure." Jan spat out the stem of grass he'd been chewing.

Bart said nothing.

Mike, hunched over his knees, tugged absentmindedly at the laces on his frazzled runners. He was listening but not listening to his friends. He was thinking of someone, of a girl.

"Well, got any ideas?" Jan rolled over onto his back and stretched lazily. "What're we gonna do?"

Kevin ducked a wayward bumblebee.

"Summer's always too short," Mike mumbled. "Barely enough time to get to know—" Instead of finishing his sentence, he swore. Jan and Kevin nodded, not caring, really, what he hadn't had the time to get to know. Bart watched them. He was always watching them. Suddenly he laughed, his strange eyes glinting with inner light.

"What'th up, Bart?" Kevin, always easily swayed, screwed his chubby face into a lopsided grin.

"We gonna have fun, that is what!" Bart jumped up and dusted off his jeans. "Come away!"

"Where?" Mike climbed to his feet. He was taller and heavier than the others, with a long, sanguine face swarthy with early stubble. He was fifteen and held his body awkwardly, as if trying to

hide his imminent adulthood.

"Come away!" Bart called in his imperfect English, striding toward the wide, deep ditch that lay behind the dike. Ahead of them, the rows of houses and streets began: backyards and barbecues, fences, shrubbery, and fruit orchards . . . Ahead of them the sun was burning whitely in the colorless eastern sky.

Mike trailed last, wiping at the sweat on his upper lip. "It's going to be a scorcher," he said to no one in particular.

"What're we gonna do, Bart?" Jan asked, shaking grass from his mop of dark hair.

"First thing, we gonna have jump this ditch, righto!"

"What? It'th too wide!" Kevin protested.

"You're kidding, Bart, right?" said Mike. "It's at least ten feet. And anyway, why—"

"No boys here?" The old taunt. "Come away!" Bart took a running leap and sailed across the ditch, landing easily on the the far bank. He laughed. "Come away, chickenshits!"

Mike landed with a heavy grunt next to Bart. Standing, he grinned. Bart slapped him on the back. Jan followed, but tumbled awkwardly against the bank. He slipped, drenching his foot in the scummy water. "Come on, Kev, it's easy!" Jan prompted.

"We don't have all time, come away!" Bart ordered.

"I—I can't . . . It'th too wide, guyth. I'll meet you round the other thide, okay?"

"Kevin!" At Bart's harsh voice, the boy seemed to wilt. "You gonna jump this ditch now, or we have throw you in!"

"But—but Barrrrt!"

"Now!"

Mike glanced over Bart's head at Jan, who shrugged. They looked like grown men standing on either side of a strange little doll.

"Aw, he can meet us," Jan said.

"Now," Bart repeated, staring unblinkingly at Kevin across the ditch. The boy bit his lower lip, his fatty face white with fear. The fear of Bart was greater. With a whimper, he obediently trotted across the dike toward the stinking mud flats. He ran, jiggling back toward the others and jumped—

Bart giggled as Kevin tumbled helplessly into the ditch up to his waist. He clung desperately to the grassy bank, water and mud and weeds circling round him, clinging to him.

"Oh, I told you!" he squealed. "Now lookit! My mom'll—"

"Oh, quiet your face, baby boy," Bart snapped, sneering with contempt. "Well, don't lay there more, come, come away!"

Grunting, Kevin tried to climb out. Slime and weeds trailed from his barrel chest and thick legs. Bart laughed. Jan sniggered. Mike smirked, but felt sorry for his little friend. He was irritated with Bart's callousness and tired of the game. Thank God school was starting soon . . .

"Hey. Hey . . . hey, help me!" Kevin squealed suddenly. "I'm thtuck . . . Thomething'th got me!" He shrieked painfully. "Hey!"

Bart stood watching, his pale eyes wide, his lips twitching, smiling, grimacing, and smiling again.

"Bart?" Mike prompted.

"Help me!" Kevin bawled. "Guyth!"

"Come on, Jan." Mike and Jan scambled down the bank. They each grabbed one of Kevin's arms and pulled.

Something pulled back.

"Jesus Christ!"

"What the fuck is it?!" Mike shouted. Kevin was blubbering and wailing.

Bart stood watching as if hypnotized.

"Help us, Bart! Bart!" Jan cried. They strained backward, pulling on Kevin's arms. Something large and white hovered beneath the surface of the swirling effluvium, now concealed by clouds of disturbed silt and weeds.

Bart blinked, blinked again. He clambered down the grassy slope. "Stupid baby boy," he said, grabbing Kevin's hand away from Jan. "Pig! Ought to drown you quick, righto!"

The resistance vanished suddenly, and the boys collapsed backward onto the bank. Kevin, blubbering, clutched white-knuckled at the earth.

"What was *that?!*" Mike asked.

"Hey, Bart," Jan began, "you don't gotta be so—"

"Quiet! Babies! Babies!" Bart stomped away from them, turned at the top of the bank, and glared down at them malevolently. His tiny white fists were like clots of wet, knotted cheesecloth. "Go home and dress now, Kevin," he said calmly. "Jan go too. We meet you in playground after time." Jan nodded obediently, helping Kevin to his feet. "Mike, come now with me."

Mike watched his friends disappear through a laurel hedge. "That wasn't very nice, Bart."

"Righto," Bart said.

"Wrong. We don't want to play anymore. We're tired of the game, Bart. We all are."

"No boys here? Babies?" Bart taunted.

"Fuck off," Mike whispered. Bart stepped close, his pale skin glowing like candle wax in the sunlight.

"You wanna be hurt again?" he asked, looking up at Mike.

"Bart—"

Bart's throat convulsed as he prepared to spit. Mike flinched and turned away, his ruddy face darkening with shame and remembrance. Bart spat harmlessly onto the grass, then laughed. "Come away, Mike. We gonna have fun, righto!" He clapped the bigger boy on the back and they moved off.

"Yeah . . . fun . . ." Mike mumbled.

Silence followed them into the maze of streets and alleys.

Richmond, like a great bejeweled brooch-pin stuck between the folds and creases of the surrounding countryside, glimmered with the heat of summer. Ticky-tacky postwar suburbs; mills and smelters; fish-processing plants, blueberry farms, and market gardens; streets, alleys, and ditches . . . all ran together in a hot blur beneath the burning sun.

It was Labor Day.

An election was coming, and the civic leaders who hated the webwork of ditches that ran throughout the municipality would press to have them filled, citing them as unsafe, unsanitary, unsightly, and, in this modern age, unneccessary.

But the kids who loved the ditches would begin counting the days until they froze solid enough to skate on.

They were great places of adventure. There were endless frogs and tadpoles to catch among the cattails, horsetail ferns, skunk cabbages with their bright yellow tonguelike flowers. There were endless snakes sliding through green-scummed waters, endless dragonflies to watch dancing and mating in the summery air, endless muskrats to hurl stones at. The ditches were moats around imaginary castles, or miniature Amazon Rivers to be explored, or a hundred other things, depending on the circumstances and the requirements of imagination.

Kids *loved* the ditches.

There was something pagan about their reverence for the watery, earthy-smelling waterways.

Bart was especially enamored of them, as if his attraction went beyond mere game-playing. Bart. Carefully parting the green scum

with fish-white fingers, forever gazing into the brown-green depths, he was the pivot around which Mike, Jan, and Kevin circled. Bart. The newest "little monster" in the neighborhood . . .

"What do you think it was?" Mike asked, finally breaking the silence.

"What?"

"The thing that had Kevin."

"Nothing."

"But I saw something, Bart. It was kinda white . . . and it looked big. It was hard to see because of all the crap, but—"

"Seen nothing. Forget, then."

"Man, it was weird—" Bart's glare silenced him. They walked on. It was hot.

Mike felt a headache coming on and rubbed his temples tentatively. It was hot.

"Come away swimming, righto?" Bart smiled as they turned down Bridge Street.

Mike shook his head. "I haven't got money for the pool."

Bart laughed. "Pool? Who needs pool?"

"Huh?"

"Come away, Mike!" Bart started to strip.

"You're crazy!" He shook his head. "I'm not going swimming in *there*. No way!"

"No boy here? Baby?" In the harsh sunlight, Bart was a pasty blob, unblemished and hairless. His hair was colorless and lank. Mike scowled at the old taunt and gave Bart the finger. Bart sniggered and peered into the ditch.

"You *are* crazy! You know what gets dumped in there, huh?"

"Dirt not bite. Snakes not care." He poised to dive, smiled mischievously at Mike over his shoulder, and jumped, cleaving the green scum. A muskrat hidden in the reeds by the water's edge splashed into the water like an echo. Bart surfaced, weeds clinging to his head and shoulders. He waved. "Not bad!" he cried. "You missing good fun, righto!"

Mike smiled weakly. He watched an irridescent butterfly dip and soar in the hot air. In a few minutes, Bart swam back and climbed out. Mud streaked his pale body, stained his shorts. "See? No bad done. Good fun." Mike grunted. "Well," he continued, dressing without drying off. "We come over my house, have more good fun." Mike lay back and stared at the blistered sky. There were no clouds. His head pounded; he was hot and sweaty.

"What for?" he asked listlessly, hoping the hammering would subside.

"We have good fun . . . more better than Karen, you see."

"What?"

"You thinking of Karen, righto boy?" Bart laughed.

"How do you know?" Mike clenched his fists.

"Mike in love, I see. But come away my house. Something there better than Karen's boobs—much better. I show. Only we see, no one else has seen."

"What is it?"

"We see, love-boy!"

"Stop that!"

"I gonna tell!"

"You better not." Mike stood with his shoulders hunched and his fists knotted at his sides. Sweat stained his underarms and dripped off his nose, but Bart, now dry, did not perspire.

"Ah, your secret safe. Come away," he said, leading Mike down the street.

They passed Mike's house, hidden for the most part behind a high laurel hedge. He could hear his dad out back cutting the grass, and suppressed a twinge of guilt for not having done it for him. He was elated; he was apprehensive. In-between.

Kids. Adults. In-betweens. Being in-between was the most frustrating, most exciting time. Rapture. Fear. Anticipation. Dread. Fine lines separated these things, lines like the ditches of Richmond. It was as easy to cross from one to the other as it was to cross from the street to a front yard—easier for the in-betweens than for kids or adults. There was no rest for those riding the pendulum, like Mike.

At the far end of a dead-end street, Bart led Mike inside a small, run-down bungalow nestled among a fifth of an acre of neglected blueberry bushes. The house was silent and sparsely furnished, as if recently deserted. It had felt that way all summer.

Grinning, Bart led the way into a room Mike hadn't seen before. "This my—This dad's room," Bart said.

"Yeah, so?"

"Look!"

"Wow! Who is she, Bart?" Mike stood looking up at the painting, Bart at his side. It was a velvet painting.

"Some fun, huh? Glad you come away my house now?"

Mike nodded. His cheeks were hot. "Who is she?" he asked

again, studying the seductive image, storing the details in a nebulous compartment of his consciousness labeled *Fantasies.*

"She my . . . mom."

"What?!"

"Yeah! We like her. My dad he paint it."

"But she's naked!"

"Righto good."

Mike glanced down at the strange little boy. He was staring up at his mother's shadowy face as if in worship.

"Why'd your folks split, Bart?"

"Not baby."

"What? I don't understand."

"After me, not children. My mom . . . dead."

"Oh." After a moment, Mike said, "Sorry. I didn't know."

"Glad you come away my house now?" Bart asked, unaware of Mike's sentiment. Mike looked up at the painting again, the shadowy face surmounted by the loops of hair that were painted with a color barely more discernible than the dark background, but his gaze returned to the explicit detail of the woman's nude torso. His groin felt hot. Sweating, Mike shivered in the room's cool shadows.

"Yes, I'm glad," he started to say. Bart stiffened. "What's wrong?"

"We go away."

"What's that? I hear something." Mike shivered again, his skin crawling uncontrollably. "What *is* that?"

"Nothing. Come away."

"Don't you hear it, Bart?"

"Now! Come now!" Bart tugged at the older boy's wrist. He was trembling as well. Coming up through the floorboards, an unearthly sound arose, wavering, subsiding, rising stronger.

"Jesus Christ, Bart, what—"

"Bad here now, come away!" His fingers were cold and clammy on Mike's wrist. He pulled him from the room and slammed the door.

The awful subterranean noises stopped suddenly.

Mike wrenched free of Bart's oily grasp, but followed him outside into the blazing sunlight. It was near noon. Bart giggled, then grinned.

"You not tell others?"

"Can I see . . . can I see the painting again?" Mike felt his own

fear melting in the heat. He smiled, and the tightness in his chest lessened. But the pounding in his temples only intensified, and he grimaced.

"Come my house again—yes. But not tell Jan, not tell Kevin. This be our secret, righto?"

Mike nodded. "I better get home for lunch. I'll see you later."

"We gonna have good fun later." Bart beamed. Mike felt uneasy, but nodded and slogged away through the heavy sunlight.

TAPE #5—RASMUSSEN/McFADDEN, M.—August 31

Dr: Good morning, Michael. How are you today, hm? Sleep well?

M: You know! Didn't the night nurse tell you? Give you all the lurid details? All the gossip? Well, didn't she?! You said I wouldn't have to dream. You said! You son of a bitch!

Dr: What happened, hm?

M: Why should I tell you?

Dr: Must we go through this every time? I'm only trying to help you, you know that.

M: Sure! All I am is a nut case, a case history for your book on whatever the hell it is you call it, right? Just leave me alone!

Dr: Michael, listen—

M: Listen? Listen! God! The racket! The noise noise noise! Why won't you can't you make it stop! STOP! *STOP!*

Dr: Orderly! Orderly!

M: Noooooooooooooooo—!

Orderly: Okay fella, just take it easy.

Dr: Michael, are you okay? Michael?

M: I'm . . . okay . . . now.

Orderly: Doctor, I—

Dr: You can go. It's all right.

Orderly: Well, you're the boss, but—

Dr: Michael, I think we—

M: I dreamed about a man.

Dr: Not Bart?

M: No, it wasn't Bart. He was older. An older man. It was like before, you know? The shadows, the watery shapes . . . the blood rushing in my ears . . . You know what it's like. Like swimming underwater.

Dr: Go on, Michael.

M: He was naked. He was lying on the bed with a woman. I

couldn't see them very well.

Dr: Was it Bart's father?

M: I don't know. I never met him. Bart hadn't been around very long . . . just since school closed for that summer. I never saw any of his family.

Dr: The woman—was she the one in the painting?

M: Just dim shapes in the shadows . . . her? Yeah, I think it was her. I'm not sure. I . . .

Dr: Yes?

M: For a moment I thought it was Karen.

Dr: Karen?

M: She was . . . we . . . I had a crush on her a long time ago.

Dr: When?

M: Just before that summer.

Dr: It is not unusual for separate memories to be relived within the context of one dream—which would explain Karen's presence in this room you've associated with Bart. This is good news, Michael, really. The fact that you can have a dream which breaks from your usual nightmare shows that—

M: She changed.

Dr: Pardon?

M: That wasn't in your damn night nurse's report, was it? Was it, Doc? That bitch! Did she tell you I wet the bed, too? Did she?!

Dr: How did Karen change, Michael, hm? How?

M: You gonna have a chapter on bed-wetting, too?

Dr: Michael, please.

M: You think this dream is an improvement? For Christ's sake! She . . . she was inhuman! She was a strange thing, like a plant with arms . . . not green, but pale, yeasty . . . soft and round like Bart. God! She had . . . she had too many arms. Oh, God! Eight or nine arms, like tentacles. No bones in them. Curling in the shadows, coiling and wrapping around the man . . . holding him tight . . . squeezing him! She . . . it didn't have a head, just a mouth, a mouth without lips or teeth!

Dr: It's okay, Michael. It was only a dream.

M: They were making love. But the man wouldn't look at her. He was looking up at the painting on the wall. Her arms were like snakes—tentacles. Crushing him! Squeezing the life out of him! He screamed, and I screamed, and I woke up . . . and the nurse came in . . . and . . . I don't want to dream again anymore please! Please!

Dr: Michael, tell me what you think this dream means, hm?

M: How should I know? You tell me, you're the man of symbols—symbols for this, for that, for sex, for potty training . . . you tell me.

Dr: Did you ever have sexual relations with this Karen?

M: Sort of. Why?

Dr: How do you feel about women in general?

M: What the hell are you getting at?

Dr: Are you a virgin, Michael?

M: Oh you fucking crazy— No, I'm not, you goddamn crazy—

Dr: Don't take it so personally, please, hm?

M: Go to hell!

Dr: I'm trying to understand your dreams, that's all. They are as foreign to me as they are to you, and I am only exploring all the possibilities of interpretation available.

M: I'm thirty, for Christ's sake.

Dr: Being a virgin at your age isn't anything to be ashamed of.

M: I'm not ashamed because I'm not virgin, God damn it!

Dr: I'm going to ask you a question—

M: I bet you are!

Dr: But I want you to think about this before you answer. The man in your dream . . . are you sure you didn't know him?

M: What do you mean?

Dr: Could he have been . . . you?

M: Me? Me? But he was older. I was only fifteen.

Dr: The dreams are occurring *now*, Michael. And who's to say they are memories from your childhood?

M: Jesus, that's all I need.

END TAPE #5

Mike walked slowly, drugged with heat, trying to puzzle it out: his friend Bart, the painting of the boy's mother, the strange noises . . . and the unease which had been growing in him all summer, growing steadily since Bart's arrival. He thought about Karen, and what little they had accomplished before she'd been taken away for the summer by her parents. He felt hot, cold. He felt excited. Lonely. Afraid. Aroused. His stomach turned over uneasily, and he swallowed the oily taste of apprehension. The pounding within his skull hurt abominably. It was as if a tiny, concentrated summer thunderstorm were raging inside.

The ditch was full and rank. Frogs chirruped in the mud and water rats splashed away at the boy's passing. He thought of Bart

diving in, and shivered uncontrollably. He remembered slides of ditch water he'd examined under a microscope in Mr. Filmer's science class last spring. All kinds of things swarmed in the primordial slop; tiny, living things that preyed on one another, that swam jerkily with many kicking legs or glided smoothly. A whole world existed in one drop of grainy water.

And somehow, impossibly, Bart was part of it . . . Mike grimaced, partly at his own irrationality, partly because some tiny part of him really believed the impossible.

Mike squinted upward. The day was pale, colored like old lead, darkening as if an eerie stain like blood were trickling down the walls of the sky. The sun was immense, glaring hot. Heat demons hovered in the air. The lawns were turning brown.

Halfway across the wooden footbridge to his house, Mike heard a loud splash behind him. He whirled, startled, his heart beating wildly, and he thought—imagined—he saw something large and white slipping beneath the green-scummed water a hundred yards away. Fearful he was being watched by something hidden in the thick reeds and horsetail ferns, he hurried inside away from the unknown.

The tv was on, the black and white flickering weakly in the sunlit room. Mike's mother served lunch to him and his father, occasionally glancing at the movie—something about giant plants that spit poison—while they ate.

Mike bit at his cuticles.

"Maybe we shouldn't be watching this, if it's making you nervous, Michael," she said. He shifted uncomfortably, toying with his salmon salad. His father looked at him.

"I'm okay, Mom."

"Don't bite your nails, son."

"Yes, Dad." Mike folded his arms across his chest. The tv buzzed, flickering, flickering.

"Everything okay, Mike?"

"Yeah, Dad," he replied, lifting his glass of milk.

"Sure now?"

"Mm-hmm." He blushed. Their attention wandered back to the movie. Mike sat, playing with his lunch, watching the sporadic images, listening to the drone of the sound track, but thinking about Bart. Thinking about ditches. Science class. A creature he couldn't quite remember—a creature with . . . what? With tentacles that stung its equally microscopic prey. But what was it? And why

should he think it had something to do with the stranger in their midst? Surely he was just imagining things ... His headache throbbed.

"Coming home, Dad, I saw the biggest muskrat of my life," he said, trying to get away from his foolishness.

"Yeah? They're too many this year. I'll have to set out some traps."

"Louise has been talking about that *thing* in her ditch again, John." Mike's mother doled out more salad.

"That woman!"

"What thing?" Mike asked, knowing Mrs. Apricot—Louise—lived on the lot next to Bart's, at the dead end of the road.

"Now, John, she's just an old lady, you've got to excuse her for some eccentricities. She's had a rough time these last few months since Walt drowned, and maybe she did see something."

"Mom, *what* thing?"

"Aah, when I see her little green men, then I'll believe her. Not sooner. Pass the salt, please, son."

"You're so skeptical of everything, John, Honestly! What about all those UFO sightings in the Midwest last year? They can't all be fakes."

"Fakes until proven factual, Elizabeth. She probably only saw a ditch rat or a dog or something. Maybe her cider's turned, heh-heh!"

"John, she does not drink! And I don't care what the coroner said about Walt, either, because he was even more a teetotaler—"

"What thing, Dad?"

"Besides," Mike's mother continued, "She said it wasn't brown. It was white. How many white muskrats have *you* seen in your life, John?"

"White? But, Mom—"

"Look, you're getting Mike all upset, dear, talking about Louise's apparitions or aliens or whatever they are. If Louise wants me to come and bait her ditch, or set out traps, I will. But a man walked on the moon for the first time a few weeks back, El. It's 1969, for Pete's sake! I won't have her bogeyman nonsense discussed in front of my boy."

"Yes, John."

"But Dad, the thing *I* saw was—"

"Go on out, son. It's your last day. School tomorrow."

"But—"

"Do as your father says, Michael."

"Yes, ma'am." Mike rose dutifully and went out onto the front porch. He sat staring into space, listening to his folks, their voices distant, murmuring; listening to bees droning in the air, to the faint rumble of planes taking off from the airport on Sea Island, to the blood rushing beneath his temples.

He knew Bart and the others would be waiting for him at the park, but he did not want to go. He felt afraid. And he felt ashamed for feeling afraid of his imagination's fancies.

Mike sighed and looked critically at the tainted sky. He wished it would rain, but the high thin clouds forming over the water held little promise.

The thermometer nailed to the porch post read a hundred and two.

"Jesus," he murmured to himself. He felt achey and sick. His eyes hurt from the glare. The smell of cut grass nauseated him. He wanted to take off his clothes and dive into a pool of ice water or hide in the cool darkness of the root cellar, but resigned himself to the heat.

He plodded toward the park.

TAPE#6 – RASMUSSEN/THIEBALD/McFADDEN, M. – September 1

Dr. R: Michael, this is Dr. Thiebald.

Dr. T: Hello, Mike.

M: Forget it. I'm not talking to him, or to you.

Dr. R: You promised me you would. Why have you changed your mind, Michael, hm?

M: It's none of your damned business, so just forget it.

Dr. T: Don't you trust me, Mike?

M: Get stuffed, both of you.

Dr. R: Michael!

M: Look . . . I've been making all this stuff up. I haven't really dreamt all those things. Just . . . just forget anything I've ever said. It's all a sham. Understand?

Dr. T: But why would you make these things up, Mike?

M: No special reason.

Dr. T: Did Bart exist? Or did you make him up, too?

M: Oh, he was real, as real as me.

Dr. R: If all this has been a sham, as you put it, then we'll have you discharged tomorrow, hm? We're certainly not going to

waste federal money treating a patient with no real need.

M: Don't you understand? Jesus. Look, it's all gotta be . . . gotta be a hoax. It has to be. 'Cause . . . 'cause if it isn't then . . . then—

Dr. T: Then what, Mike?

M: Then it really did happen. It'd be real. Oh, God, but it can't be! It's a nightmare!

Dr. R: Tell us about last night, Michael, hm?

M: God help me, I should have drowned last month. I should have drowned . . .

Dr. T: You wished you had died in your car accident?

M: Yes, yes . . . Yes.

Dr. R: Did you have a dream last night, Michael?

M: You know I did. You know I always do.

Dr. T: Tell me about your dream, Mike.

M: It . . . it was like before, the same room. Somebody was lying on the bed.

Dr. T: Bart?

M: No, it wasn't him . . . or me. It was a woman. A beautiful woman. She was naked.

Dr. R: Did you recognize her?

M: No . . . She was beautiful. She had long, dark hair. I . . . I wanted her. I remember how much I wanted to take her, she was so—, so—

Dr. T: What happened then, Mike?

M: I hadn't noticed before, but she was pregnant . . . Her belly was big, and her breasts— She started having convulsions. Then . . . then she gave birth to her child. Her belly swelled even more and then a piece of it, a bud of pale flesh broke off, drifted up into the water. Jesus! Jesus Christ! Am I mad?! Am I? Oh, God, help me don't just sit there looking at me help me why can't you help me help me help—

Dr. R: Michael? Michael?

M: She changed again. Her arms divided into nine, eight, I don't know . . . and her legs grew together. Her face . . . her face just—Christ!—melted . . . Her beautiful hair fell away. She had no face, just a mouth. A horrible, toothless mouth! Oh, my God! She wants me, she wants me, she wants me!

Dr. R: Michael, would you like a sedative?

Dr. T: Mike, what about her child, the bud of flesh? What—

M: It . . . settled to the floor . . . and grew into another thing with . . . tentacles. It turned toward me . . . It had a face . . . and it

said, *"Have my friend, Mike."* It was Bart's voice. His voice. Hoax. A hoax. It has to be, doesn't it? Doesn't it?! Tell me he played a joke on me, please please tell me he did!

Dr. T: It is your mind that has been playing the joke, Mike. A cruel joke. We understand so little about the mind. It is the most alien frontier man has ever attempted to chart.

Dr. R: Michael, we'll talk again, later. I want you to get some rest okay, hm?

M: I wish I were dead . . .

END TAPE #6

Mike met Bart and the others in the public washroom of the park at Seventh and Blenheim. Swarms of kids roamed the playground or chased each other through the heat over the brown grass. The tennis courts, usually full, were empty of adults. It was too hot for them. The sun hung mercilessly above.

Ducking inside the cement building, Mike found Bart lounging against the wall between the cracked, discolored urinals. Kevin, dressed in clean shorts, was slurping on a purple Mr. Freezie. Jan was drawing a crude picture on the wall.

"You take time to come," Bart said accusingly.

"Yeah, I had to help my dad a bit," Mike lied.

"Busy boy? Got handful . . . work?"

"Knock it off." Mike glared at Bart. Bart smiled sourly.

"A masterpiece," Jan said, laughing. They looked at his drawing and snickered.

"Time for talk."

"About what, Bart?" Kevin asked between slurps.

"About coming grown-up. Grown-ups don't got real fun. No summer like we have." The others nodded. "That gonna happen us, righto."

"Uh-uh, not me," Kevin said. "I'm never gonna grow up." Bart looked at him as if he were an interesting bug found under a damp rock. Jan snickered.

"You can't stop growing up," Mike said morosely, clenching his fists at his sides. Sweat gleamed on the stubble on his upper lip.

"I can try," Kevin persisted.

"Even if you cannot grow, you miss out on good fun—kid fun." Bart grinned mischieviously.

"What fun?"

"Well—" Mike began.

"No! Not ready there," Bart shouted.

"Not ready for what?" Jan asked.

"Gonna find out later time, not here, not now."

"But Barrrrt!" Kevin whined.

"Quiet!" Bart stared Kevin down, then glanced at Mike. "Summer gonna have gone, but we don't gotta have summer end, not ever. We can keep long time."

"But how? and why? Halloween is coming, and then Christmas." Bart stared at Jan, uncomprehending.

"Hall-ween?" he asked.

"Yeah, you know—"

Mike's attention wandered, back a few months to their first encounter with Bart. It had happened in this same washroom . . .

Mike took out the pack of cigarettes he'd stolen and that the three of them had shared over the past week. He lit the last one of two and passed it around. Blue smoke congealed in the cool air. A little kid came in to pee, watching the three older boys warily. They ignored him. Outside, other kids were laughing and shouting. Tag. Hide 'n' seek. Softball. Kites. The chains on the swings screeched. The teeter-totters boinked hollowly on the asphalt. Sounds of tennis balls plopping against racket and court intermingled with the din of early summer. School had been out a week.

"Then the girl took off her bra," Mike was saying, recounting his experience at a sleazy ten-cent adult movie machine in a shuttered storefront on Holly Street. Jan and Kevin listened avidly.

A small, pale boy entered the washroom and stood listening, watching them. Mike ignored him at first, but he did not go away.

"What're you looking at, small-fry?" Mike asked.

"Go on, get outta here," Jan snarled.

The boy did not move.

He watched them with large, pale, shining eyes, a curious smile on his doughy face.

Mike stood over him, tall, swarthy, the cigarette dangling from his lips. He glared down at the strange kid who seemed both younger and infinitely older than himself. He pushed the boy backward. The other two boys sniggered.

"Gonna have friends here," the boy said. His voice was neither a kid's nor an adult's. It had a hollow quality to it; it was shiny, wet.

"You're a squirt, ain'tcha?" Mike pushed him again, but the youngster slapped his hand away.

"Don't make anger," he said.

"Oh-ho! You wanna make something of it, doughboy?" Mike expected the lad's defenses to crumble momentarily; expected him to run away. Mike hoped he *would* run; there was something unsettling about the stranger, and Mike did not want to raise the wrath of any nearby relatives by roughing up their child. "You Italian or something, huh? You sure talk funny."

"Nah, doughboy's not Italian," one of the others said. "He's not dark enough."

"Doughboy!" they called, laughing.

"Don't be do that," the boy said quietly.

Mike hesitated, suddenly uneasy, then grabbed a handful of shirt and raised his free hand, poised to strike. "What was that, kid?"

"I be . . . Bart," he replied, smiling. "We gonna be have fun, righto? Friend?"

"Listen, you little shit! Who the hell do you think you are?" Mike cocked his fist.

"Don't make bad!" Bart's eyes like dim lamps in the gloom mocked the older boy's anger.

Mike swung his fist, his horsey face twisted with rage, indignation, bravado.

Bart spat at him.

"Jesus Christ! Owww, hey . . . what—?!" Mike staggered backwards, pressing his hands to his face. "It hurts!" he cried. Through his watering eyes, Bart's pale form shimmered bonelessly. "What is it?! It stings! It hurts!!" Mike slumped against the wall, clutching his face, whimpering like a baby, shamed, red-faced. Bart giggled. The laughter pulled his face out of shape. He got a handful of water from the sink and, prying Mike's hands away—he was surprisingly strong—splashed it on the older boy's face. The burning diminished slightly. "God, it hurts . . ." Mike whined, wiping at the tears streaming down his cheeks. He felt sick.

"It be gone soon."

The other two boys remained silent, watching. Mike looked up at them, imploring their help, their support. They kept their distance; but they had seen their leader bested.

Bart smiled, "I'm happy we gonna be new friends now," he said . . .

Mike blinked. "Uh, what?" Bart had spoken to him.
"I say, what fun we done have this past time?"

Mike shrugged, disoriented by his waking dream.

"We went thkinnydipping," Kevin giggled. "That wath fun."

"We stole that money," Jan said, smiling broadly.

"Remember when we got that beer? That wath great!"

"What more?" Bart asked, grinning.

"Lots of things," Mike said. "Why?"

"Fishing—"

"Camping in my backyard, remember, guyth?"

"Good fun, huh?" Bart asked.

They nodded. They waited.

"What more fun we gonna have? Gotta ideas?" Bart looked up at them, small and unformed. His skin looked translucent in the dim light. "We can have better fun, fun like we done have before . . . remember?" A sudden chill embraced the boys.

"No," Mike whispered. "Not again, Bart." He turned suddenly pale and suppressed a shudder of revulsion. Kevin's fat face had collapsed; he bit at his lower lip, his eyes hooded with painful memory.

"Yeah," Jan echoed, "Not again . . ."

"I—I think I better go home," Kevin said. But he didn't move. No one moved. They stood transfixed by the horror of their past actions, the high-pitched death screams of the dying animal echoing, haunting, freezing them to the spot, reminding them how long the helpless thing had struggled . . .

Mike, broken out in a cold sweat, shook his head at Bart. The youngster regarded him with an amused expression.

"Blood, blood," Jan chanted, looking inward at the savage he'd unleashed before, under Bart's omnipotent will.

"Thtop! Thtop it, pleathe!"

"We gonna do better fun," Bart said, giggling. "All that fun be nothing. Now we gonna see. Now we gonna see . . ."

"No, no, no," Mike whispered, the pulse pounding in his ears.

TAPE #7—THIEBALD/McFADDEN, M.—September 2

Dr: Mike do you know what a hydra is?

M: Uh-uh.

Dr: For one thing, it was a creature of Greek legends, a gigantic monster with nine heads, the offspring of Typhon and Echidna.

M: Yeah, so?

Dr: It lived in the marshes of Lerna, near a place called Argos—

M: Look, Doc, what's this got to do with me, eh?

Dr: May I continue? I'm not wasting your time, really. The destruction of Hydra was one of the twelve labors of Heracles—

M: Hercules?

Dr: —which he accomplished with the assistance of Iolaus. But as one head was cut off, two grew in its place. They finally burned out the roots with firebrands and at last severed the immortal central head from the body.

M: Big deal. I still don't see—

Dr: You are Heracles, Mike, and I am Iolaus. Understand? We need to work together to discover the root of your paralysis, so we can destroy your Hydra . . . and also cleanse away the nightmares you've been suffering since your accident.

M: What are you suggesting?

Dr: It is clear to me that we must go back to your childhood in order to understand your problems.

M: What?

Dr: There must be a connection between your childhood and the creek your car plunged into. I have a hunch, but it is pretty fantastic.

M: But why does my childhood have anything to do with my paralysis? I don't understand.

Dr: This . . . creature, this monster that has been inhabiting your dreams—it is more than an allegorical Hydra. It *is* a hydra, I'm sure of it. A freshwater animal of the family Hydroida, probably of the class Hydrozoa—

M: Are you saying it actually exists? It's real?

Dr: As real as we are. But much, much smaller than the monstrosity in your nightmares. They are polyps with a cylindrical body and an oral opening surrounded by tentacles. They paralyze their prey before devouring it, and—are you all right?

M: Yeah, yeah, I'm okay. I just remembered something.

Dr: What?

M: They live in fresh water, don't they? Ponds, lakes, ditches . . .

Dr: Yes, you're quite right. But how do you know?

M: From a science class at school. Now I remember . . . I couldn't before. I don't know why, but it seems important.

Dr: The key to all this lies in your childhood.

M: Sure, sure . . .

Dr: I think something happened in your past that you've buried

deep in your memory. Something tragic, perhaps horribly so, that you've refused to face, that you've locked away. When we discover what that was, we may realize how it is related to your car accident. We shall finally be able to kill your mental Hydra, and your paralysis will disappear. Do you believe me?

M: I guess. How do we go from here, then?

Dr: With deep hypnosis. You'll have to sign a consent form.

M: Is it dangerous?

Dr: Standard procedure for treatment of this kind, Mike.

M: When?

Dr: This afternoon? Will that be all right?

M: Sure ... so I'm Hercules, am I? That's a laugh. Hercules didn't have four wheels ...

Dr: You'll do fine, Mike, I'm sure.

END TAPE #7

"Come away!" Bart commanded, running from the washroom. Against their better judgment, the others followed, racing through the playground, overturning garbage bins, scaring little kids, hooting and shouting, throwing their fists into the thick air of summer vacation's last day ...

"What—What're we gonna do?" Kevin panted.

"You see. You all see," Bart said, smiling—the smile of someone who's going to stomp on an insect just to hear it crunch wetly beneath his shoe.

"Come on, tell us!" Jan pleaded, his face glowing with excitement, just like before, when the savage had looked out at the bloody sufferings of the animal ...

"Know that bad woman who lives by my house? One with purple hair? We be gonna have some fun with her," Bart confessed, grinning wickedly.

"Why her?"

"'Cause she be bad."

"But Bart, she's just an old lady—"

"Don't make anger, Mike," Bart threatened. Mike fell silent.

He was afraid. He wanted to go home, and at the same time he could not deny that he was excited about whatever daring thing they were going to do to the old woman. Unable to extricate himself, he ran with the pack, following Bart's will.

"I thought she wath a nithe old lady," said Kevin. "At Halloween, I remember—"

Bart glared at him and he fell silent.

"She be a trouble, always be a bothersnoop. We gonna fix her. Gonna have more good fun this time."

"It's been you, hasn't it," Mike asked. "You've been scaring her, haven't you?"

Bart giggled.

Mike froze, remembering the death of the old woman's husband. He stopped running. Jan and Kevin stopped.

"What have you been doing?" Mike asked.

"Come away!"

"No!"

"No boys here? Babies?"

"Why can't your dad talk to her if she's bothering you? Eh, Bart?"

Bart stepped close to the older boy, eyes shining in the sunlight. He reached up and touched Mike's throat with his soft, cool fingers. They were clammy. Tight. But soft, like water-filled balloons.

"You gonna be trouble, Mike?"

"What about your dad?" Mike persisted, struggling to keep from trembling.

"Hey, guyth, don't fight, huh?"

"Yeah, come on—"

"Don't be trouble now, Mike," Bart warned. Mike tried to pry away Bart's fingers, but could get no purchase on them. He felt sick. Dizzy.

"No, no trouble, Bart," he whispered. The hand withdrew.

Twilight had fallen. The frogs in the ditches were raucous. Passing cars roared distantly, the light from their headlights spearing through the trees, impaling the four boys as they boiled forward, a small storm of trouble.

Bart led them across Mrs. Apricot's little footbridge and around her small bungalow to the back. With gestures, he instructed them to dig a hole in the backyard. They worked quickly, fearfully energetic, Bart smiling maniacally at them in the gloom. Soon they had a four-foot-wide hole dug in the soft peat. It was less than a foot deep. Deep enough.

Mike wiped at the sweat on his forehead with a dirt-covered arm, smearing it across his face. The others were as dirty—except for Bart.

"Mike come away over here now," Bart whispered. "You be here, we be back," he said to Jan and Kevin. They grinned and nodded.

Mike followed Bart across the rickety fence and into the empty garage attached to Bart's dark little house.

"Oh, Jesus!"

"Doesn't this be great? Here." Bart handed Mike a ten-gallon bucket. "Carry two, good." He handed him another. Mike swallowed his revulsion and followed Bart back to the old lady's yard, the contents of the buckets slopping and glugging wetly. They were heavy. Rank.

"What'th that, Bart?"

"Quiet!" Bart hissed. "Be dump this in, righto."

"God, what a reek!" Jan exclaimed.

"Quiet!"

One by one the buckets were emptied into the shallow hole. The ditch water stank of slime and mud. It writhed with snakes, frogs, slugs, and bullheads. A bloated muskrat corpse floated in the scum.

"This is awful, Bart," Mike protested.

"We gonna have good fun here now."

"You can't hurt her, she's only an old lady—"

"She not be have good sleep after this fun."

"Listen to me!"

Bart hissed like a wild animal and Mike flinched backward. Glowing like a pale worm in the deepening darkness, Bart motioned for them to hide in the bushes and shrubs. He crouched down next to Mike and listened to the night's silence, smiling, nodding his head.

"Where are your folks, Bart? How come I've never even seen your dad?" Mike asked. Bart's face loomed close. Mike could smell his breath; he smelled like stagnant water, corruption, decay.

"I be my own self. Don't got one else."

"How? Where'd you come from?"

"We be talk later, Mike. Another later—" Suddenly Bart screamed, a horrible, rattling scream like a dying animal.

Mrs. Apricot's back porch light snapped on, and the door opened. The old lady came out, peering towards the darkness beyond the pale circle of light. "Is somebody there?" she called fearfully, coming down the three wooden steps. Bart screamed again —now he sounded like a cat—and the old lady came forward away

from her house.

"No! No!" Mike jumped up and ran forward. Kevin and Jan scattered back, through the blueberry bushes. Bart cursed and circled round behind the old woman. "Don't come any further, Mrs. Apricot, there's a hole! Don't, you'll hurt yourself—"

Strange sounds began to rise out of the darkness.

"You . . . You're Elizabeth's boy, aren't you?"

"Yes, Ma'am, I—" He saw Bart stealing up on the woman, something silvery in his hand. "Bart, no, don't—!" He hurried toward her, jumping the hole. The old woman shouted something unintelligible, stumbling, as a thick white tentacle shot out of the earth, grabbed Mike around the middle, and dragged him backward into the hole.

He floundered in the living mire, crying, pulling things off him, slipping, trying to climb out, slipping again.

"Help meeeeeee—!" he screamed.

The old lady held out a bony hand. White tentacles loomed in the darkness.

"You be got the wrong one!" Bart shouted, appearing behind the woman like a reaper, spade in hand. He shrieked and swung the garden tool in a glinting arc.

There was a soft crack, like the splitting of a watermelon. The night was rent by a terrible scream. Running away through the darkness, Jan and Kevin heard the scream and ran faster, eyes popping with fear.

A tentacle whipped out, grasped the old woman, and pulled her body into the hole.

Mike surfaced again, choking, spluttering, slime gumming his eyes. Bart dropped the bloody spade and grabbed his friend by the shirt front. He dragged him free, and sat near him, trembling, while Mike groaned and vomited. One of the old lady's slippers lay near at hand. Bart tossed it in the hole.

"Momma?"

Strange sounds . . .

Inhuman sounds.

Hungry, hungry sounds.

A greasy, twining tentacle thick as a man's thigh rose dripping from the hole and coiled around Bart, caressing him, leaving him wet and fouled.

"Don't be angry, Momma, please," Bart said. "He be my friend, Momma. You be have woman good instead . . . Don't be angry."

The tentacle uncoiled and slithered back into the hole, deep beneath the peat that the boys had dug. Bart smiled. "Thank you, Momma . . ."

Bart shoveled the peat sod back into the dark, ragged hole, cleaned off the spade, turned off the back porch light, and closed the bungalow's back door.

He dragged Mike's unconscious body around the house and out to the road. Then he undressed and slipped into the dark ditch.

He did not come out.

TAPE #8—RASMUSSEN/THIEBALD/McFADDEN, M. —September 3

M: Oh my God, the thing! The thing, it's there—!

Dr. R: No, Mike! There is no monster!

Dr. T: It's okay, Mike, it's okay! It's over . . . It happened a long time ago, it's over now. You're okay, Mike. We understand now, it's over—"

Dr. R: Michael, you're safe, you'll be okay now, it's over.

M: She wants me. She still wants me! Oh, God!

Dr. T: No, Mike. There is no Hydra. Nothing! It was Bart, it was Bart, you see? It was your friend. He killed that old woman. There is no monster! Your mind refused to accept what you had seen. There is no creature. There never has been.

M: She . . . It . . . The tentacles . . . M-my dreams—

Dr. R: All nothing more than cruel tricks played by your mind. Bart was the one. There is no creature, can you understand?

M: Not real? All these years . . . not . . . not real?

Dr. T: Remember I was telling you about Heracles and the Hydra? How he overcame his monster? You've overcome your monster, Mike. It was all in your mind. But it's over now . . . It's over now.

M: Oh, God . . .

Dr. T: Mike, do you see the connection? Do you see why your car accident in July had the effect that it did? Do you understand?

M: Yeah, I guess . . .

Dr. R: Michael, do you know whatever happened to Bart, hm?

M: No. My folks took me to the hospital. They kept me in a little while because I'd had a heatstroke. After that, my dad was transferred to another city . . . I never saw Bart again.

Dr. T: Mike, why were you driving back to Richmond in July?

M: I don't know. I felt . . . compelled . . . called. I don't know.

Dr. R: Well, after you've recovered, and are walking again,

you might consider completing your journey. What do you think? I'm sure if you did, it would have a happier ending, hm?

M: Yeah . . .

END TAPE #8

The following September arrived, cool and misty. Michael had been a year recovering from his paralysis. Had been a year exploring and rationalizing his fears.

At last he returned to Richmond. To Bridge Street. He was afraid, but the fear turned to relief. It was not a wide line to cross.

The ditches were gone.

He met a man on the street. A stranger.

"How long have they been filled in?" he asked, indicating the side of the road with his cane.

"Oh, about nine or ten years, I'd say. You used to live around here?"

"A long time ago. The place has really changed."

He found himself standing alone in front of his old house. It looked smaller. He thought how pitifully meager his love life had been since then, and picked a shiny, gold coin out of his memories called Karen, letting the reminiscence dull the pain of loneliness and alienation. He sighed. Mist curled round his ankles. There was no frog song. No dragonflies. No muskrats or snakes.

His jaws clenched apprehensively as he approached Bart's house. It was a different color now, but looked as ill-kept as before. Memories crowded in, blinding him. He didn't see the front door open, didn't see the pale little boy come toward him. A cool, soft hand touched his arm. He looked down. It wasn't Bart, no, but a young boy, sallow and bland, with lank hair and shiny eyes. The boy took his hand and led him inside the house. It was cool and dim, full of shadowy shapes and indistinct lines. On one wall hung a velvet painting.

Mike looked at the bed. She was there—beautiful, naked, with long dark hair, waiting with outstretched arms. He undressed. Full of longing, wanting, he lay beside her, took her in his thin arms. They clung together. And it was sweet. She wrapped her arms around him, embracing him, squeezing him passionately. His seed gushed from his arched body—

At last—Oh, at last—

The woman changed. Her arms divided and divided again and

her face melted into nothingness.

Michael screamed.

Her legs melded together beneath him, and her long, dark hair vanished in the darkness.

Michael screamed.

Her arms coiled around his trembling body and squeezed mercilessly, stinging, him, paralyzing him.

Michael screamed.

Her toothless mouth bent over him, brushing his flesh with horrific kisses, tearing at him, stripping the flesh from his bones.

"God, *nooooooooooo!*"

Mike's eyes blinked open. He covered his face with his hands, shaking with fear, moaning piteously. He'd wet the bed again, he could tell. He could smell it. The nurse would come soon. "Dreams. damned dreams. Oh, sweet Jesus, how much longer?!" He gasped, struggling to move his paralyzed legs. "Oh, God . . ." He lay in the darkness of his room, waiting for the nurse. "Bitch . . ." She must have heard him scream. She had to have heard him. "Bart? Bart, you bastard, you monster, why'd you do this to me? Why?" He lay helpless, shivering as the sweat cooled on his skin, shivering in the gloom. He could hear something dripping; he wondered what he had knocked over. "Damn her, where is she? I'll have her dismissed for negligence. I'll—" Weeping—his mind's eye flashing with images of Karen, and the painting in Bart's house; of Mrs. Apricot, Jan, and Kevin; of wide, swampy ditches, his old house, his old school, the washroom at the park—crying aloud, he reached behind him to stab the call-nurse button. His fingers fumbled in the darkness. "Damn it, where is it? Where—" His fingers searched blindly.

Something was cutting into his neck.

He looked down at his chest.

The dripping sound increased.

It was then he realized he was not in a darkened hospital room. . . .

An instant before the windshield collapsed, he saw a cluster of thick white tentacles reaching for him through the gloom.

Bagman

(continued from page 18)

Nothing in the underground music scene this year had been quite as exciting as the sudden rise to fame—seemingly out of nowhere—of The Zapruder Frame. Their first album, *Sold for the Prevention of Disease Only*, had zoomed to the top of the independent charts in *Boston Rock*, *Flipside*, and *Maximum Rock & Roll*.

The owner of the Cafe Yo-Momma had had the good sense to book the band several weeks before their album became hot; he could not have afforded them now. Already the club was packed—the biggest, best-spending crowd the place had seen since the first Agent Orange gig back in December. All that remained was for the club owner to sign the "Special Protocol" addendum to the contract, which had just been handed to him by the band's manager, Frankie Thatcher, who was widely thought to be the mastermind behind the group's meteoric rise to stardom.

"Hmmm. Ten pounds of pork-fried rice, three dozen spare ribs, egg rolls, won tons, leechee nuts, and a quart of duck sauce . . . Yeah, well, why not? It's better than five gallons of M & M's. I'll have it delivered to the dressing room during your first set." He signed the dotted lines at the bottom of a document embossed with the logo of Frankie's new company, Dragonsbreath Productions.

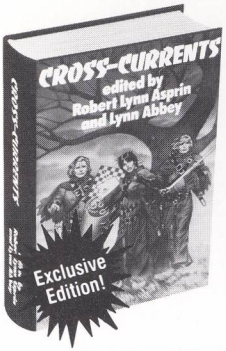
As he had during their previous meetings, the band manager wore a hefty black leather sack attached to his belt by a length of motorcycle chain. He was never seen publicly without it, and in the past few weeks it had become something of a trademark, as funkily irrational as Michael Jackson's sequined glove.

But on their previous meetings, Frankie had worn gloves, too. Now, as he handed the signed papers back across the desk, the club owner noticed that the band manager's right hand was wrapped in bandages and appeared to be missing approximately one and a half fingers.

"Geez, fella, you got a nasty one there! How'd it happen?"

Frankie's eyes were invisible behind his designer sunglasses. The slit of his mouth twisted slightly at the corners, something between a sneer and a smile.

"Ah, you know how it is, man. In the music business, you gotta be quick."



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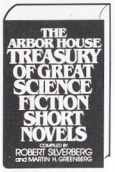

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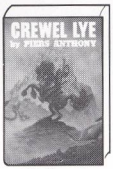

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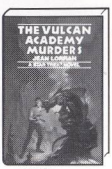

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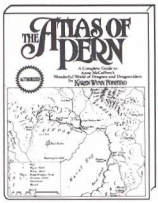

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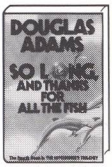

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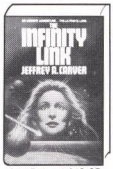

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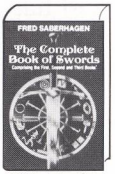

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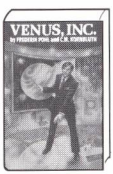

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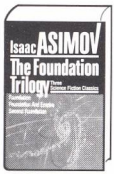

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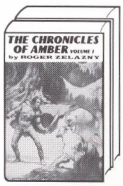

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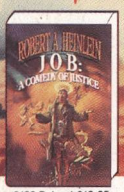

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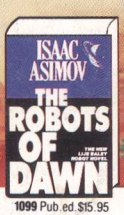

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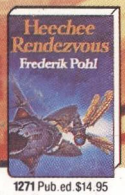

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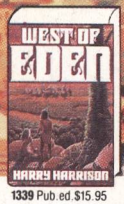

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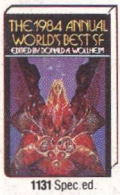

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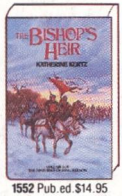

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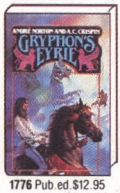

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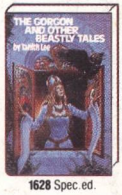

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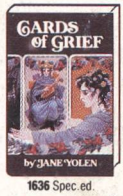

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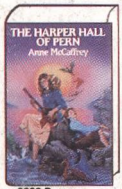

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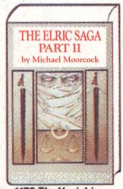

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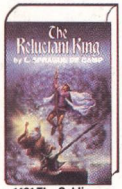

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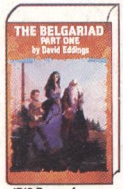

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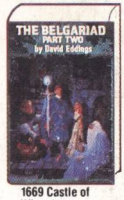

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