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NIGHT CRY™

SUMMER 1986

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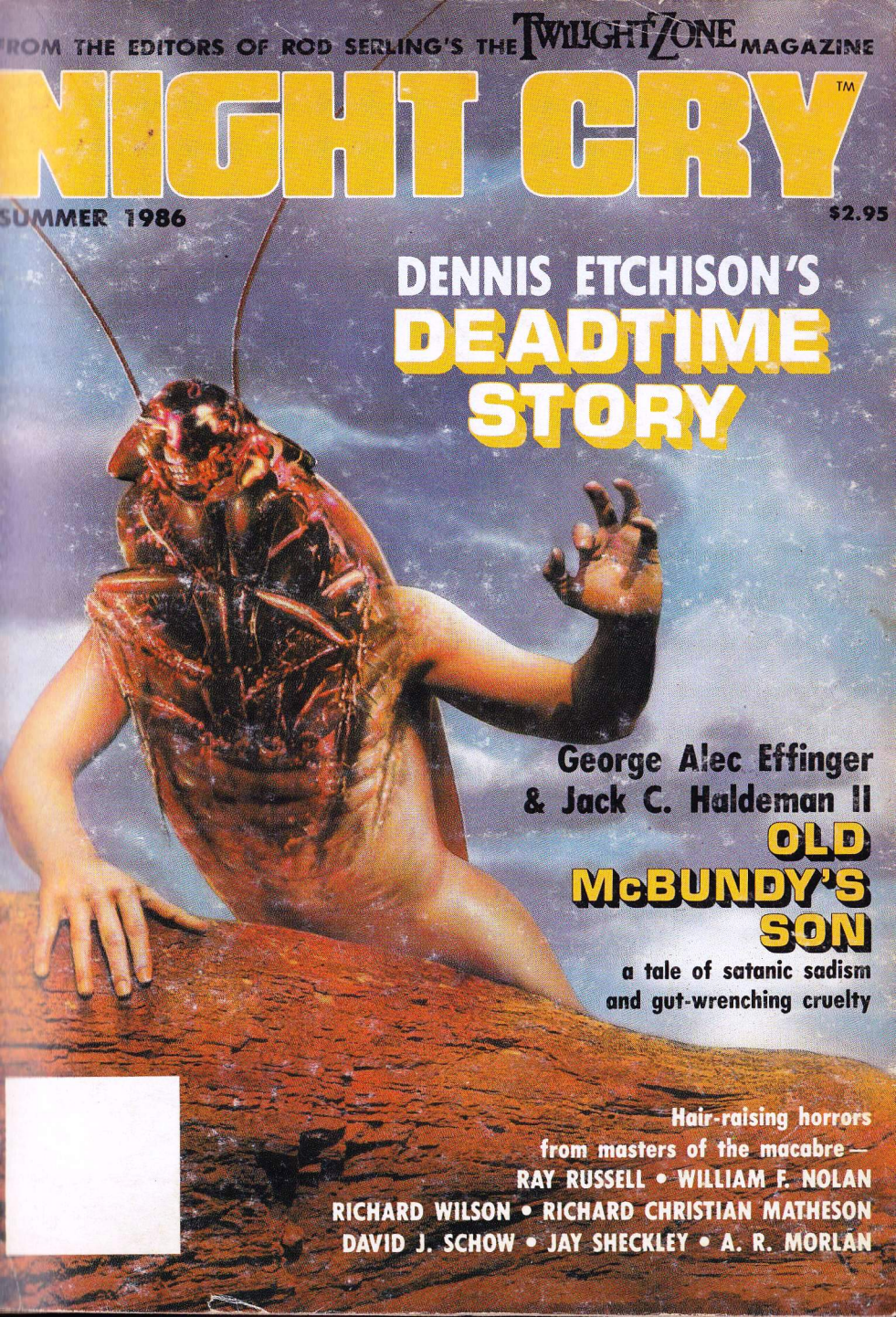

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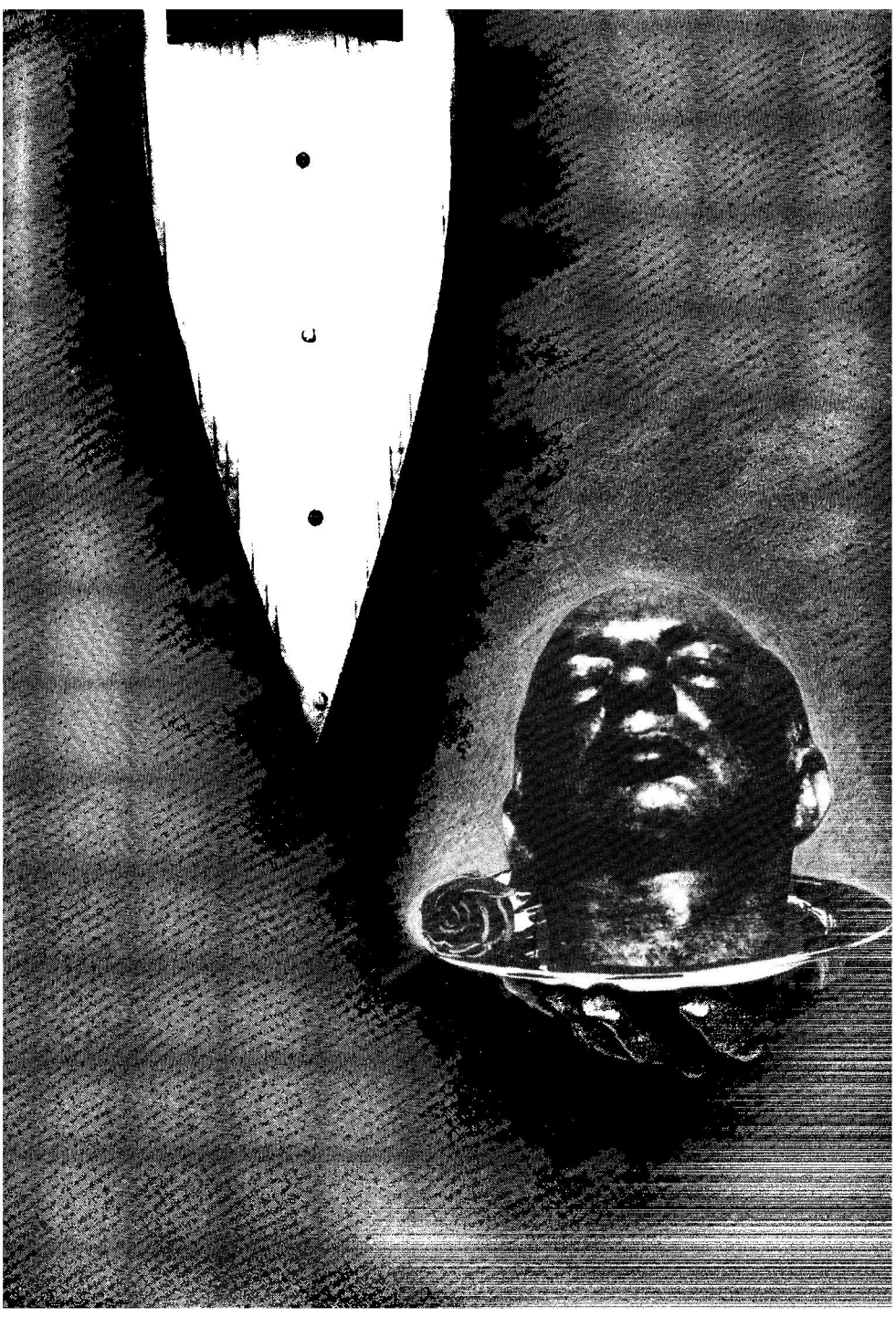

NIGHT CRY

THE MAGAZINE OF TERROR

Vol. 1, No. 6
Summer 1986

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With the exception of "The Judge's House" by Bram Stoker, all stories in this issue of Night Cry are new and appear in these pages for the first time anywhere.

In the Funeral Parlor

"... the great appeal of horror fiction through the ages is that it serves as a rehearsal for our own deaths."

—Stephen King
from the introduction
to *Night Shift*

Imagine for a moment that you sit in the anteroom of a funeral home; before you on the dais lies the body of someone very dear to you.

Close to the surface you find yourself appalled. The animal inside you sees the body almost as though it were a ghoul's answer to Thanksgiving dinner—gussied up with perfume and formaldehyde instead of gravy and dressing. And it seems wrong to you that living people should breathe air so ripe with the smells of arrested putrefaction. That animal side of you has a horrible impulse to stand up and shout, or run ... or perhaps even walk over to the dais and begin to probe the body with its fingers; it has an engagingly morbid streak.

A little deeper down is your love for the woman in the coffin. She was a dear, and she was very proud of you. You hadn't seen her often since you were a child, but when you did see her you always found yourself admiring her; she was a sharp-eyed, keen-witted soul. It *has* been years since you spent more than a few hours with her, but your grief (and you are mourning, very quietly—not at all like Aunt Hope, who's crying and blowing her

nose in a way that almost seems an affectation) you'd like to think your grief has something deeper to it than the self-pity of those who seem more moved by that echo from the future of their own demise. You'd like to think that what's making you sad is the loss of the possibility of those few hours you *could* spend with the dead woman, and that you mourn the loss of all the possibilities those hours might present. Perhaps also that you miss her. But you aren't sure of that. You aren't sure of it at all. It may well be only yourself that you're mourning.

So you sit in the funeral parlor for hours, waiting for the room to clear, for all of the others to leave; you feel a need to do your grieving privately. The wait goes badly on you. The need to grieve and the need to get out of the place keep twisting around each other, and their fighting wrecks havoc on the inside of your already-ulcerous gut. By the time the crowd has cleared, something inside you isn't quite right any more. Certainly it's something you'll recover from, but for the moment your mind has come more than a bit unhinged. You get up from your seat in the parlor . . .

. . . and you begin to explore the mortuary. After only a moment or two you discover, much to your surprise, that *this* mortuary is far more than a house for the interment of the dead.

In fact, you learn, it's a veritable cornucopia of vile delights: the contents of this issue of *Night Cry*.

Over there by the front door, like some ghoulish stand-in for a wooden Indian, is William F. Nolan's "The Halloween Man."

On a coffee table not far from the woman's body someone has left a pair of nostalgic mementos: Paul Di Filippo's "Yellowing Bowers" and Robert Frazier's "Three Poems: Revisiting Hollywood." *Things* have been hung on the walls, like souvenirs of some exploration of the unspeakable or trophies from an unholy safari: "The Sleep of Your Life" by Thomas E. Sanders (Nippawanock); the second part of "Brass" by David J. Schow. In an ornate wooden cabinet toward the rear of the funeral home you find the mortician's secret cache of things morbid and enchanting. You find yourself devouring items like "Red" by Richard Christian Matheson, "The Funny Trick They Played on Old McBundy's Son" by George Alec Effinger and Jack C. Haldeman II, "A Table for One" by Richard Wilson, and "Bad Medicine" by John Skerchock.

You're actually enjoying yourself; you hadn't realized that your morbid streak ran quite this wide or deep, and the realization doesn't bother you anywhere near as much as you'd thought it

might. You've even, in fact, heard yourself cackling maniacally.

But then you stumble into a room filled with things that are genuinely dangerous. *Tools* of some sort; devices made for ... *changing* people. A. R. Morlan's "Garbage Day in Ewerton." Warren Ellifritz's "Faced with Blue Eyes, Again."

And suddenly you're not cackling anymore.

Even though you know that you may never be the same if you don't stop reading, you keep going. Because there's something important in that room. Something that ... *bothers* you. Something necessary, something vital that you've always been missing

Never mind me. After all, this is just a magazine. There's nothing to be afraid of.

– AR

NIGHT CRY

800 Second Avenue, New York, NY 10017

22 February 1986

Dear Reader,

We've heard from some of you that you're having a hard time finding *Night Cry* on your local newsstand. Because we've had so many inquiries, we're running this letter in the magazine, where we can talk to all of you at once.

The newsstand is a crowded place these days; most retailers don't really have time to keep track of every magazine on the rack, especially small, digest-sized magazines like *Night Cry*. That's where you come in. There isn't anyone around as aware of our distribution as you are—except for our dedicated regional circulation managers (Brian Orenstein in the east, Bruce Antonangeli in the midwest, Harold Bridge III in the south, and Sam Frode-Hansen in the west), and those people, dedicated as they are, can only be in so many places at one time.

You, on the other hand, are right there where the problem is. If you let the people on your end of the magazine business know that you're looking for *Night Cry*, they'll listen. Talk to the manager of your local newsstand. Talk to your local distributor—the people at the company whose delivery vans actually bring *Night Cry* to you.

Let them know that you like *Night Cry*, and that you'd like to be able to buy the next issue, too. Let them know if you had a hard time finding this issue.

Remember, *Night Cry* isn't available by subscription, so only your newsstand can bring us to you.

Thanks. We'll be waiting for you.

Alan Rodgers
Editor

The Halloween Man

by WILLIAM F. NOLAN

He only comes out before midnight on Halloween, and he runs fast as a lizard. When he catches a kid, he steals the soul and leaves the kid behind.

Oh, Katie believed in him for sure, the Halloween Man. Him with his long skinny-spindley arms and sharp-toothed mouth and eyes sunk deep in skull sockets like softly glowing embers, charcoal red. Him with his long coat of tatters, smelling of tombstones and grave dirt. All spider-hairy he was, the Halloween Man.

"You made him up!" said Jan the first time Katie told her about him. Jan was nine, a year younger than Katie, but she could run faster and jump higher. "He isn't real."

"Is so," said Katie.

"Is not."

"Is."

"*Isn't!*"

Jan slapped Katie. Hard. Hard enough to make her eyes sting.

"You're just mean," Jan declared. "Going around telling lies and scaring people."

"It's true," said Katie, trying not to cry. "He's real and he could be coming here on Halloween night—right to this town. This could be the year he comes here."

The town was Center City, a small farming community in the Missouri heartland, brightened by fire-colored October trees, with a high courthouse clock (Little Ben) to chime the hour, with plowed fields to the east and a sweep of sun-glittered lake to the west.

A neat little jewel of a town by day. By night, when the big oaks and maples bulked dark and the oozy lakewater was tar-black and brooding, Center City could be spooky for a ten-year-old who believed in demons.

Especially on Halloween night.

All month at school, all through October, Katie had been thinking about the Halloween Man, about what Todd Pepper had told her about him. Todd was very mature and very wise. And a lot older, too. Todd was thirteen. He came from a really big city, Indianapolis, and knew a lot of things that only big-city kids know. He was visiting his grandparents for the summer (old Mr. and Mrs. Willard) and Katie met him in the town library late in August when he was looking through a book on demons.

They got to talking, and Katie asked him if he'd ever seen a demon. He had narrow features with squinty eyes and a crooked grin that tucked up the left side of his face.

"Sure, I seen one," said Todd Pepper. "The old Halloween Man, I seen him. Wears a big pissy-smelling hat and carries a bag over one shoulder, like Santa. But he's got no toys in it, nosir. Not in *that* bag!"

"What's he got in it?"

"Souls. That's what he collects. Human souls."

Katie swallowed. "Where ... where does he get them from?"

"From kids. Little kids. On Halloween night."

They were sitting at one of the big wooden library tables, and now he leaned across it, getting his narrow face closer to hers. "That's the only time you'll see him. It's the only night he's got *power*." And he gave her his crooked grin. "He comes slidin' along, in his rotty tattered coat, like a big scarecrow come alive, with those glowy red eyes of his, and the bag all ready. Steppin' along the sidewalk in the dark easy as you please, the old Halloween Man."

"How does he do it?" Katie wanted to know. "How does he get a kid's soul?"

"Puts his big hairy hands on both sides of the kid's head and gives it a terrible shake. Out pops the soul, like a cork out of a bottle. Bingo! And into the sack it goes."

Katie felt hot and excited. And shaky-scared. But she couldn't stop asking questions. "What does he do with all the kids' souls after he's collected them?"

Another crooked grin. "*Eats* 'em," said Todd. "They're his food for the year. Then, come Halloween, he gets hungry again and slinks out to collect a new batch—like a squirrel collecting nuts for the winter."

"And you—you saw him? Really *saw* him?"

"Sure did. The old Halloween Man, he chased me once when I was your age. In Havershim, Texas. Little bitty town, like this one. He *likes* small towns."

"How come?"

"Nowhere for kids to hide in a small town. Everything out in the open. He stays clear of the big cities."

Katie shifted on her chair. She bit her lower lip. "Did he catch you—that time in Texas?"

"Nosir, not me." Todd squinched his eyes. "If he had of, I'd be dead—with my soul in his bag."

"How'd you get away?"

"Outran him. He was pretty quick, ran like a big lizard he did, but I was quicker. Once I got shut of him, I hid out. Till after midnight. That's when he loses his power. After midnight he's just *gone*—like a puff of smoke."

"Well, *I've* never seen him, I know," said Katie softly. "I'd remember if I'd seen him."

"You bet," said Todd Pepper, nodding vigorously. "But then, he isn't always so easy to spot."

"What'da mean?"

"Magical, that old Halloween Man is. Can take over people. Big people, I mean. Just climbs right inside 'em, like steppin' into another room. One step, and he's inside lookin' out."

"Then how can you tell if it's *him*?" Katie asked.

"Can't," said Todd Pepper. "Not till he jumps at you. But if you're lookin' sharp for him, and you *know* he's around, then you can kind of spot him by instinct."

"What's that?"

"It's like an animal's got in the jungle when a hunter is after him. The animal gets an instinct about the hunter and knows when to run. It's that way with the ole Halloween Man—you can sort of sniff him out when you're sharp enough. He can't fool you then. Not if you're really concentrating. Then your instinct takes over."

"Is there a picture of him in that book?"

Todd riffled the pages casually. "Nope. No kid's ever lived

long enough to take a picture of the Halloween Man. But I've described him to you – and unless he climbs inside somebody you'll be able to spot him easy."

"Thanks," said Katie. "I appreciate that." She looked pensive. "But maybe he'll never come to Center City."

"Maybe not." Todd shut the book of demons with a snap. "Then again, you never know. Like I said, he favors small towns. If you want my opinion, I'd say he's overdue in this one."

And that was the only talk she'd had with Todd Pepper. At summer's end he went back to Indianapolis, to school, and Katie was left in Center City with a head full of new thoughts. About the Halloween Man.

And then it was October, with the leaves blowing orange and yellow and red-gold over her shoes when she walked to school, and the lake getting colder and darker off beyond the trees, and the gusting wind tugging at her coat and fingering her hair. Sometimes it rained, a chill October drizzle that gave the streets a wet-cat shine and made the sodden leaves stick to her clothes like dead skin.

Katie had never liked October, but *this* year was the worst, knowing about the Halloween Man, knowing that he could come walking through her town come Halloween night, with his grimy soul-bag over one shoulder and his red-coal eyes penetrating the dark.

Through the whole past week at school that was all Katie could think about and Miss Prentiss, her teacher, finally sent Katie home. With a note to her father that read:

> Katie is not her normal self. She is listless and inattentive in class. She does not respond to lessons, nor will she answer questions related to them. She has not been completing her homework. Since Katie is one of our brightest children, I suggest you have her examined for possible illness.

"Are you sick, sugar?" her father had asked her. Her mother was dead and had been for as long as Katie could remember.

"I don't think so," Katie had replied. "But I feel kind of funny. I'll be all right after Halloween. I want to stay home from school till after Halloween."

Her father had been puzzled by this attitude. She had always loved Halloween. It had been her favorite holiday. Out Trick-or-

Treating soon as it got dark with her best friend Jan. Now Jan never called the house anymore. Katie's father wondered why.

"I don't like her," Katie declared firmly. "She slapped me."

"Hey, that's not nice," said Katie's father. "Why did she do that?"

"She said I lied to her."

"About what?"

"I can't tell you." Katie looked down at her hands.

"Why not, sugar?"

"Cuz."

"Cuz why?"

"Cuz it's something too scary to talk about."

"Are you sure you can't tell your ole Daddy?"

She looked up at him. "Maybe after Halloween. *Then* I'll tell you."

"Okay, it'a deal. Halloween's just a few days off. So I guess I won't have long to wait."

And he smiled, ruffling her hair.

And now it was Halloween day and when it got dark it would be Halloween night.

Katie had a sure feeling that *this* year he'd show up in Center City. Somehow, she knew this would be the year.

That afternoon Katie moved through the town square in a kind of dazed fever. Her father had sent her downtown for some groceries and she had taken a long time getting them. It was so hard to remember what he wanted her to bring home. She had to keep checking the list in her purse. She just couldn't keep her mind on shopping.

Jan was on the street outside when Katie left Mr. Hakin's grocery store. They glared at each other.

"Do you take back what you said?" asked Jan, sullen and pouting. "About that awful, smelly man."

"No, I don't," said Katie. Her lips were tight.

"You lied!"

"I told the *truth*," declared Katie. "But you're just scared to believe it."

"If you try to slap me again I'll kick your shins!"

Jan stepped back. "You're just the *meanest* person I know!"

"Listen, you'd better stay home tonight," warned Katie. "I mean it. If you don't want the Halloween Man to pop your soul

and eat it."

Jan blinked at this but said nothing.

"I figure he'll be out tonight," nodded Katie. "He's *due*."

"You're crazy! I'm going Trick-or-Treating, like always."

"Well, don't say I didn't warn you," Katie told her. "When he grabs you just remember what I said."

"I *hate* you!" Jan cried, and turned away.

Katie started home.

It was later than she thought. Katie had spent so much time shopping she'd lost track of the day. It had just slipped past.

Now it was almost dark.

God!

Almost dark.

The brightness had drained from the sky, and the westering sun was buried in thick-massed clouds. A thin rain was beginning to dampen the streets.

Katie shifted the heavy bag of groceries and began to walk faster. Only two miles and she'd be home. Just twenty blocks.

A rising wind had joined the rain, driving wet leaves against her face, whipping her coat.

Not many kids will be going out tonight, Katie thought. Not in this kind of weather. Which meant lean pickings for the Halloween Man. If he shows up there won't be many souls to bag. Meaning he'll grab any kid he finds on the street. No pick and choose for him.

I'm all right, Katie told herself. I've still got time to make it home before it gets really dark . . .

But the clouds were thickening rapidly, drawing a heavy grey blanket across the sky.

It *was* getting dark.

Katie hurried. An orange fell from the top of the rain-damp sack, plopped to the walk. Katie stopped to pick it up.

And saw him.

Coming along the walk under the blowing trees, tall and skeleton-gaunt, with his rotted coat flapping in tatters around his stick-thin legs, and with his sack slung over one bony shoulder. The red of his deep-sunk eyes burned under a big wide-brimmed slouch hat.

He saw Katie.

The Halloween Man smiled.

She whirled around with an insucked cry, the soggy paper

sack ripping, slipping from her fingers, the groceries tumbling to the sidewalk, cans rolling, split milk cartons spitting white foam across the dark concrete.

Katie ran.

Not looking back, heart triphammering her chest, she flung her body forward in strangled panic.

Where? Where to go? He was between her and home; she'd have to go back into the heart of town, run across the square and try to reach her house by another route.

But could she run that far? Jan was the runner; *she* could do it, she was faster and stronger. Already Katie felt a rising weakness in her legs. Terror was constricting her muscles, numbing her reflexes.

He could run like a lizard. That's what Todd had said, and lizards are fast. She didn't want to look back, didn't want to turn to see him, but she had to know how much distance she'd put between them. *Where was he?*

With a low moan, Katie swung her head around. And suddenly stopped running.

He was gone.

The long wet street stretched empty behind her, char black at its far end—just the wind-lashed trees, the gusting leaves, the blowing curtain of rain silvering the dark pavement. There was no sign of the Halloween Man.

He'd outfoxed her. He'd guessed her intention about doubling back and had cut across the square ahead of her. And he'd done the final demon-clever thing to trap her. He'd climbed inside.

But inside *who?* And *where?*

Concentrate, she told herself. Remember what Todd Pepper said about trusting your instinct. Oh, I'll know him when I see him!

Now Katie was in the middle of the town square. No matter which route she took home she had to pass several stores and shops—and he could be waiting in any doorway, ready to pounce.

She drew a long, shuddering breath, steeling herself for survival. Her head ached; she felt dizzy, but she was prepared to run.

Then, suddenly, horribly, a hand tugged at her shoulder!

Katie flinched like a dog under the whip, looked up in dry-mouthed terror—into the calm, smiling face of Dr. Peter Osgood.

"Your father tells me you've been ill, young lady," he said in his smooth doctor's voice. "Just step into my office and we'll

find out what's wrong."

Step into my parlor said the spider to the fly.

Katie backed away from him. "No . . . No. Nothing's wrong. I'm fine."

"Your face looks flushed. You may have a touch of fever, Katie. Now, I really think we should—"

"Get away from me!" she screamed. "I'm not going anywhere with you. I know who you are—you're *him!*"

And she broke into a pounding run.

Past Mr. Thurtle's candy shop: *Him,* waving from the window at her, with his red eyes shining . . .

Past the drug store: *Him,* standing at the door inside Mr. Joergens, smiling with his sharp shark's teeth. "In a big rush today, Katie?"

Yes, away from *you!* A big rush.

Across the street on the red light. *Him,* in a dirty Ford pickup, jamming on the brakes, poking his head out the window: "Watch where you're running, you little bitch!"

Oh, she knew the Halloween Man.

When Katie reached her house, on Oakvale, she fell to her knees on the cold wooden porch, gasping, eyes full of tears, ears ringing. Her head felt like a balloon about to burst, and she was hot and woozy and sick to her stomach.

But she was safe. She'd made it; he hadn't caught her.

Katie stood up shakily, got the door open and crossed the living room to the big rose sofa, dropped into it with a heavy, exhausted sigh.

Outside, a car pulled to the curb. She could see it through the window. A dark blue Chevy! *Dr. Osgood's car!*

"No!" screamed Katie, running back to the front door and throwing the bolt.

Her father came downstairs, looking confused. "What's wrong, sugar?"

Katie faced him, panting, her back tight against the bolted door. "We can't let him in. He's gonna steal my soul!"

"It's just Dr. Osgood, Kate. I asked him to drop by and see you."

"No, it *isn't,* Daddy. He's not Dr. Osgood. He's *him!*"

"Him?"

"The Halloween Man. He can get into big people's bodies.

And he's inside Dr. Osgood right now."

Her father smiled gently, then moved to unlock the door. "I think you've been watching too many scare movies. You don't have to be afraid of—"

But Katie didn't wait for him to finish. She rushed up the stairs, ran to her room at the end of the hall, hurried inside, and slammed the door.

Panic. There was no lock on her door, no way to keep him out. She ran to the bed, jumping under the covers the way she used to do when she was little and things scared her in the dark.

Below, muted sounds of greeting. Male voices. Daddy talking to *him*.

Then footsteps.

Coming up the stairs.

Katie leaped from the bed in a sudden frenzy, toppled over the tall wooden bookcase near her closet, dragged it over against the door. *It probably won't hold him, but . . .*

A rapping at the door. Rap-rap-rap. Rap-rap-rap.

"Katie!"

"Go way!" she yelled.

"Katie, open the door." It was Daddy's voice.

"No. You've got him with you. I know he's right there with you."

"Go to the window," her father told her. "See for yourself."

She ran across the room, stumbling over spilled books, and looked out. Dr. Osgood was just driving away through the misting rain in his blue Chevy.

Which meant that her *father* could now be—

He pushed the door open.

Katie swung around to face him. "Oh, no!" She was trembling. "It's true! Now *you're* him!"

Katie's father reached out, put a big hand on each side on her face. "Happy Halloween, sugar!" he said.

And gave her head a terrible shake.

Red

by RICHARD CHRISTIAN MATHESON

Maybe it had been a mistake
to ask for a favor like this.
But under the circumstances,
what was a father to do?

He kept walking.

The day was hot and miserable and he wiped his forehead. Up another twenty feet, he could make out more. Thank God. Maybe he'd find it all. He picked up the pace and his breathing got thick. He struggled on, remembering his vow to himself to go through with this, not to stop until he was done. Maybe it had been a mistake to ask this favor. But it was the only way he could think of to work it out. Still, maybe it had been a mistake.

He felt an edge in his stomach as he stopped and leaned down to what was at his feet. He grimaced, lifted it into the large canvas bag he carried, wiped his hands, and moved on. The added weight in the bag promised more, and he somehow felt better. He had found most of what he was looking for in the first mile. Only a half mile more to go, to convince himself; to be sure.

To not go insane.

It was a nightmare for him to realize how far he'd gone this morning with no suspicion, no clue. He held the bag more tightly and walked on. Ahead, the forms who waited got bigger; closer. They stood with arms crossed, people gathered and complaining behind them. They would have to wait.

He saw something a few yards up, swallowed, and walked closer. It was everywhere and he shut his eyes, trying not to see how it must have been. But he saw it all. Heard it in his head. The sounds were horrible and he couldn't make them go away. Nothing would go away, until he had everything, he was certain of that. Then his mind would at least have some chance to find

a place of comfort. To go on.

He bent down and picked up what he could, then walked on, scanning ahead. The sun was beating down and he felt his shirt soaking with sweat under the arms and on his back. He was nearing the forms who waited when he stopped, seeing something halfway between himself and them. It had lost its shape, but he knew what it was and couldn't step any closer. He placed the bag down and slowly sat cross-legged on the baking ground, staring. His body began to shake.

A somber-looking man walked to him and carefully picked up the object, placing it in the canvas bag and cinching the top. He gently coaxed the weeping man to stand and the man nodded through tears. Together, they walked toward the others who were glancing at watches and losing patience.

"But I'm not finished," the man cried. His voice broke and his eyes grew hot and puffy. "Please I'll go crazy just a little longer?"

The somber-looking man hated what was happening. He made the decision. "I'm sorry, sir. Headquarters said I could only give you the half hour you asked for. That's all I can do. It's a very busy road."

The man tried to struggle away but was held more tightly. He began to scream and plead.

Two middle-aged women who were waiting watched uncomfortably.

"Whoever allowed this should be reported," said one, shaking her head critically. "The poor man is ready to have a nervous breakdown. It's cruel."

The other said she'd heard they felt awful for the man, whose little girl had grabbed on to the back bumper of his car when he'd left for work that morning. The girl had gotten caught and he'd never known.

They watched the officer approaching with the crying man who he helped into the hot squad car. Then the officer grabbed the canvas bag, and as it began to drip red onto the blacktop, he gently placed it into the trunk beside the mangled tricycle.

The backed-up traffic began to honk, and traffic was waved on as the man was driven away.

Three Poems: Revisiting Hollywood

by ROBERT FRAZIER

Even archetypes
get older.

CREATURE FROM THE BLACK LAGOON

He's traded in the Rancho Deluxe and set the tux
in mothballs, moved down into Cajun country.
Simple life. Found a merwife, god knows where,
and loves the smell of bayou spray and decay
in the air. Still wears gold chain and treasure
trinkets he's found, must weigh ten pounds,
but he's through with haunting for pleasure;
though he does the Halloween benefit down
at the local VFW hall each fall. Civic call,
you know. Yet he's not turned out the clown.
Just likes evenings with gumbo and starshine,
telling stories to the kids, basking in brine.

THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA

Tracked him down on the El.
He's the pope of the skids
where row after row of winos
line up on cement pews below

to listen to ecumenical tids
and bits on music and living
and how movie moguls are now
shiving the stars as much as you.
Free of all monetary or studio ties,
I found his mask had gone askew,
and no doubt his heart was unwell;
but the fire still stormed in his eyes.

THE WOLF-MAN

On the obligatory house tour, Talbot sights
a fortune amassed from subsidiary rights—
tee shirts and halloween masks—
while pointing out the acquisitions of the
Laurel Canyon land, jacuzzi, rare flasks.
Isn't it great, he says with a motion
of his arthritic hand, without emotion
though. So he sits gingerly in a Victorian
chair; stuffed with human hair,
he says. His laugh turns to a coarse hack.
I notice that his molars are worn back
to stubs, just as I noticed the pair
or four of cuisenarts by the kitchen wall.
With a grimace, he shifts his derriere
again. The "mange," he says, weary then
worldly, as if that says it all.

The Sleep of Your Life

by THOMAS E. SANDERS (NIPPAWANOCK)

An insomniac's dream . . .
at a price that's not to be refused.

Drinking his juice at the Citrus Castle near First and Lafayette, Verlin re-read the filler in the newspaper someone had left on the counter.

> Humans compare their sun to an orange, become gourmets at the sight of *duck à l'orange* on a menu, have no rhyme for that luscious word which turns to sweet juice even as they think it. And, as they eat that fruit and drink that juice to ward off colds and prevent scurvy, their flesh is sweetened in the same way fowl is gentled when baked with citrus, ascorbic acid preparing the human essence for a variety of culinary delights. A limited supply of cevitamic spirits will be available for the holidays if the incidence of insomnia remains constant.

Before he could decide why the newsprint felt like aluminum foil, a soft voice said, "May I have my paper? I forgot it when I went to pay my bill."

Irritated, Verlin relinquished the paper, and the man continued, "I am sorry. Let me get you another."

Verlin watched as the man went to the kiosk on the corner and came back with a *New York Times.*

"You are a regular customer here?" the man asked as he handed the paper to Verlin.

"Every day," Verlin said.

"I would have thought so," the man said. "You have that oh-so-neat, very healthy look . . ."

Verlin, uneasy, looked away. He had seen that same apprais-

ing look on the faces of fat women in butcher shops.

"But you are here so early . . ." the man said.

"Insomnia," Verlin mumbled, vaguely discomfited.

"Ah," the man said softly. "Insomnia. You must drop by this shop one day," and he slipped a small envelope into Verlin's breast pocket. Then, before Verlin could examine it, a woman seated next to him spilled her coffee and he scrambled off his seat to avoid being scalded and stained.

When the counterman had cleaned up the mess, the man was gone. But the exchange had brightened Verlin's day. He wasn't sure he was all that healthy, but he was a neat insomniac. A disordered newspaper, a rumpled bed, a dirty ashtray drove him to frenzy. Waking to an announcer's grating voice, stale odors of cigarette butts and withering orange peel in the ashtray, crumpled newsprint across his face—that was unbearable. So, each night—after organizing his personal concept of luxury, after indulging himself with music, an orange, a cigarette, and the newspaper—he had to get out of bed, refold the newspaper, empty the ashtray into the wastebasket, cover the cigarette butts with the orange peel to mask the tobacco odor, get back into bed, switch off the radio, turn out the light, try to rearrange himself comfortably by pulling the sheets tight before tucking them in, and attempt to recapture the relaxed state that would allow him to sleep.

He never succeeded.

Night after night, year after year, he had lain in the stifling dark, wishing for the ministering mother who had composed the covers, lowered the lights, let him slip relaxed into the graveyard of night, secure in the knowledge she would recall him to the light of life in the morning. He had once considered taking a wife, but what would he do with her the rest of the time? No, he would not sacrifice his waking hours to his sleepless ones.

The Saturday after the Citrus Castle incident, Verlin, walking aimlessly, wandered into an unfamiliar street in a strange part of the city. Turning a corner that seemed to appear in the middle of the block just as he reached it, he found himself in a little arcade of quaint shops. Exotic spices perfumed the air, music alien to his Muzak-programmed ears wove that perfume into strands of melody that touched and caressed his skin like silken scarves blown on a light breeze. And there, between a shop displaying pre-Columbian pottery and a show window filled with flowers green of blossom, lavender of leaf, he saw, beside a modest door,

the simple sign announcing THE SLEEP OF YOUR LIFE.

He grasped the knob, turned it, and entered the shop of his dreams. On every hand—right, left, ahead of him, and strangely (though he didn't think so at the time) behind him—designer-arranged bedrooms invited his gaze, his admiration, his need to possess, to own, to dwell in eternally.

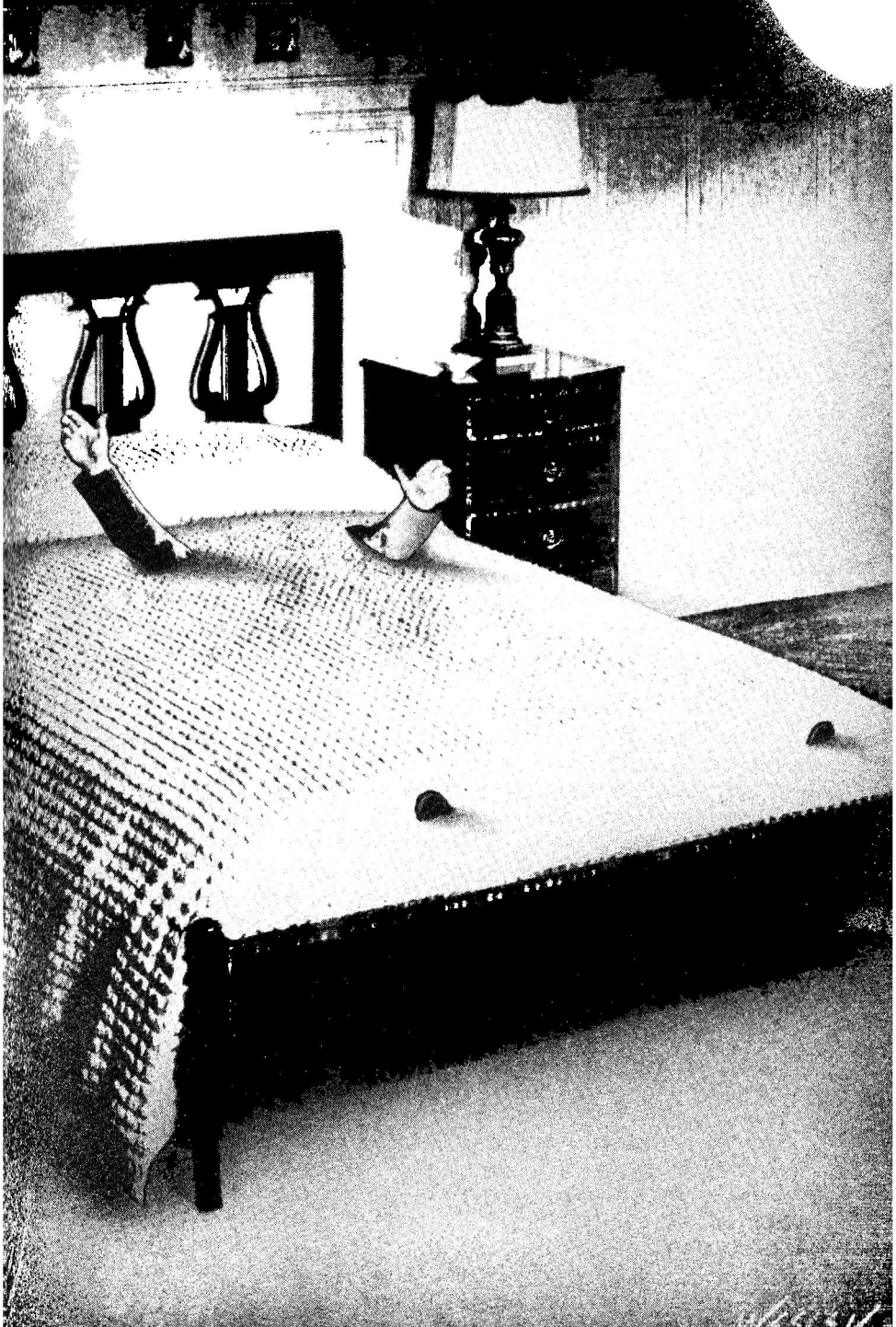
Precious metals, rare woods, paddings of trees of paradise had been crafted into headboards as soft as spider web, as firm as a command. Music as soothing as mulled medoc gentled the air. Sheets hugged mattresses like a mother's embrace. Coverlets straightened themselves while newspapers arranged themselves in just-delivered freshness on nightstands where oranges on porcelain plates peeled themselves into perfect flowerets, loosened their segments, and disappeared one by one as cigarettes materialized in ashtrays of icy crystal. Scented smoke lazed upward on eddies of air spiced with citrus oils gentled by orange blossom fragrance. Pillows fluffed by invisible hands were piled supportively high, then gently removed and arranged in a line of unwrinkled freshness across beds big enough to surround the body with expanses of safety. Lamps dimmed from right-for-reading brightness to softest glow, creating a twilight inviting securest sleep.

Verlin had somehow stumbled into a dream. Any minute an announcer's grating voice would wake him to his own unpleasant room. But a voice as soft as the smoke of cigarettes, the odor of oranges asked, "May I help you, Mr. Verlin?" And it belonged to a salesman in morning trousers and a cutaway coat.

Verlin didn't know what to say. He wanted to be let alone, to browse through the rooms and dream of owning one—any one—of the incredible arrangements.

"Do you have a preference? A period? There is an elegant Louis Quince just beyond that South Seas room...." The salesman's voice trailed away.

Verlin looked toward the indicated grouping, but his eyes caught and held on the South Seas room where a slowly turning ceiling fan drew cigarette smoke up as if by gentle vacuum action. There would be no stale air in that room. Potted orange trees with golden fruit and fragrant blossoms flanked a headboard of white enameled bamboo. Yellow draperies grew forests of cane that seemed to move independently of the material above a carpet thick and green as—not *as* grass—it *was* grass as perfect as the patch of zoysia he had once seen at an orchid show, trimmed to perfec-



tion with beads of dew twinkling in the light exactly like the soft rays of a rising sun. He longed to take off his shoes and socks, to walk across that carpet ...

"Do, Mr. Verlin," the salesman urged. "The grass is self-maintaining. The lighting incorporates sunshine to keep it healthy. A special strain developed for us, its roots draw water from hydroponic tanks below. We could have it installed in your apartment in time for you to enjoy it tonight ..."

"Oh no. It's ..." He caught himself before saying, "more than I could afford if I saved the rest of my life." Instead, he finished lamely, "not really me."

"Perhaps something modern?" The salesman touched Verlin's arm gently and propelled him beyond the room which seemed to be receding into a green glade as they passed.

Verlin realized the floor was moving slowly along on silent machinery. Like an escalator, a moving sidewalk. Before he could marvel further, he was urged off the strip and into a room where panels of muted silver formed a headboard with sliding doors, some open to reveal crystal bowls of navel oranges, tangerines, and kumquats. From a silver-bound crystal box, a cigarette floated to an ashtray and, now glowing red at the tip, settled onto it. Silvery satin sheets rustled as the pearl grey coverlet turned itself back. Verlin reached to touched the sheets. His hand brushed the cigarette, knocking it from the tray. "Oh," he breathed, afraid it would roll onto the bed and burn the coverlet.

"Please do not concern yourself, Mr. Verlin," the salesman said soothingly. "It is of no consequence. See?"

And see, Verlin did. Gently, as if lifted by magic fingers, the cigarette returned to the ashtray. A panel in the table top dissolved, and a small silver sweeper moved out on invisible wheels to tidy up and dissolve back into the panel.

"Marvelous," Verlin breathed.

"Would you like this grouping, then?" the salesman asked in his silvery satin voice.

"Look," Verlin said before he could change his mind. "I'm not buying anything. I don't even know how I got here. I couldn't afford ..."

"But of course you can afford, Mr. Verlin. You can afford any grouping you like. Your invitation clearly states ..."

"Invitation? What invitation?" Verlin realized he was mumbling. Was the salesman mad? Or had he mistaken Verlin for

someone else?

The salesman spoke softly, "Why, this one, Mr. Verlin," and he removed an envelope from Verlin's breast pocket.

Puzzled, Verlin extracted an engraved card from the envelope and read the expensive lettering:

THE SLEEP OF YOUR LIFE
CORDIALLY INVITES
MR. RALPH VERLIN
TO INSPECT
ITS SLUMBER GROUPINGS
444 JOHNSON ARCADE
SATURDAY, MARCH 18
TO SELECT
THE ROOM OF HIS CHOICE
COMPLIMENTS OF
THE SLEEP OF YOUR LIFE

"You mean I . . ." Where had the invitation come from? He did not remember it.

"But, of course, Mr. Verlin. You have only to choose. We will have your selection installed for your enjoyment tonight." The salesman's voice was as soft as the music coming from somewhere in the silver headboard.

"I don't understand. Why . . . why these rooms must cost more than I'll make in my lifetime."

The salesman touched Verlin's sleeve with the tips of his fingers. "Money, Mr. Verlin," he said deprecatingly, "is of no consequence to this company. Think of us as a market research and digest group. You are an ideal subject for us. You have definite needs in a sleep environment. We have a specific need of your unique needs. We are doing you no favor. Oh no. You are doing us an invaluable service by selecting one of our rooms, by testing it, enjoying it, actually becoming a part of it, allowing it to minister to you, to incorporate you into the total environment it is. Of course you may have your pick of the offerings. Now over here . . . " and he urged Verlin from the silver and crystal room as his words began to cause a faint uneasiness in Verlin—as if they somehow contained an incomprehensible promise.

The walkway whispered beneath their feet, moving them past rooms that were a blur of woods and metals, colors and sounds, scents and suggestions of rest and slumber. It stopped at a room

paneled in woods from deep rain forests, woods hand rubbed with citrus oils until lights glowed deep in their grains. One whole wall was a headboard, an elaborate combination of inlaid woods, their grains forming patterns of squares, triangles, crosses that shifted and changed to create new designs. It was like watching a slowly turning kaleidoscope.

"Oh," Verlin breathed in amazement as music changed with the shifting patterns, as nightstands like cubes rose from the floor, a parquet that repeated the shifting wood inlays where it was not covered by carpets Verlin was sure were Aubisons such as he had once seen in a museum. Marble ashtrays and bowls of oranges waited on the stands. Cigarette boxes and gold lighters were arranged in precisely the same positions on both stands with different newspapers: a *New York Times* on the left, a London *Times* on the right. But, as he watched, the papers blurred and changed, their banners becoming the *Denver Post* and the *Tampa Tribune.* He ached to sit on the great bed, to run his palm across the coverlet of desert sand cashmere. Cashmere? It had to be. No other material had that look of wool gentled by rich oils. A sweater he had once . . .

"Let me help you with your shoes, Mr. Verlin," the salesman's voice interrupted. He was kneeling in front of Verlin who, without realizing it, had seated himself on the bed and was running his palm across the coverlet, was luxuriating in a vision of looms responding to hands agile, graceful, and dark, half a world away. "Lie back, Mr. Verlin," the voice sounded again. "Is the mattress all right? Or is it too firm?"

"Just a little," Verlin said as plump pillows moved to caress his shoulders, to lift his head to just the right height. Behind him, a panel sighed. Moving his head slightly, he could see a console with dozens of knobs. One turned just a hair and the mattress relaxed. Just a tad. It was perfect. He sighed, closed his eyes, heard distant tinkling bells. Smelled spring on the earth. Felt the warmth of a sun kissing citrus to gold in some vale in some world he now dreamed though awake. . . . "Ohhh," he moaned. "Ohhh, it's so wonderful. . . ."

"It is yours, Mr. Verlin. We are pleased you approve." The voice brought him awake, moved him off the bed, moved him to his shoes which were tying themselves. "And now—if you will just sign this authorization for delivery. . . ."

A pen was in his hand. A clipboard was in front of him.

He had started to sign, but, with a jerk, he stopped. "Now just a minute. Whoa. Hold on there!" he said, more to himself than to the salesman who suddenly looked like someone in hundreds of paintings and cartoons. "Just what am I doing?" Knowing he was dazed, looking away, down aisles that seemed to shorten as he watched, watching rooms become smoke and dissolve to reform, to become absolute replicas of the room he had chosen, he shook himself – hard. "Just what is going on? What kind of – "

"Not to worry, Mr. Verlin. There is no cause for alarm. There is no obligation whatsoever on your part. You will notice this form is an authorization for delivery only. It states there are no charges, no mortgages of any kind, no hidden liens against you or your person. You need only to sign and the room will be yours. You can sleep in *that* bed in *that* room this very night."

"But how can you afford . . . you're sure . . . ?"

"Oh, quite sure, Mr. Verlin. Let me repeat: *We* will suffer no loss. Your responses will repay us."

"My responses? What responses?" He saw an endless number of questionnaires, of forms to fill out, a lifetime of answering questions.

"Oh, no. Not one form. Not one word. Not one box to be marked." They were back on the aisle, moving through endless rooms – all one room – every room that same room he had chosen. At the door to the shop, the aisle stopped, almost imperceptibly. "Your sleep center will do all the work, Mr. Verlin. It is a marvel of miniaturized computerization. You have only to desire – scarcely to form the wish – and the center supplies whatever is required for the sleep of your life. It is absolutely self-maintaining; it will never need repair, will outlast you yet never show wear. When you enter the room, it is activated by self-adjusting responses to your body chemistry. Music in balance with your nervous system is created by the center. Oranges just the degree of ripeness, of texture, of juiciness you prefer are manufactured in the recesses of the wall that is the headboard so they can be presented at their moment of perfection. Your brand of cigarette is formed, humidified, lit for you, and, after you've enjoyed it, the silent butlers built into the center will cleanse the air and the ashtrays, then re-scent the room with a subtle blend of citrus to delight your senses. Newspapers of your choice are delivered as you desire. You need not even speak the words unless you wish. Just desire, Mr. Verlin, and the center will serve you. It will adjust your pillows,

straighten the sheets under you as soon as the tiniest wrinkle is formed by your movements. It will adjust the lighting for the comfort of your eyes and dim it to the most pleasant shade for your sleeping hours. In the Sleep of Your Life Center, your slightest whim is instantly served. Refinements you would not believe were I to detail them make it a maid, a butler, wife, mistress, or mother as you desire the services of each, any combination, or all—though balancing all five functions at one time taxes the banks of even this center. A delicate entity, Mr. Verlin, but entirely self-sustaining. It cannot malfunction, for it connects into a giant unit that constantly monitors it. You have become part of a concept beyond your understanding. Your only obligation is to enjoy. To surrender youself to the pleasure of the center. To let it understand each nuance of your body, your mind, your spirit. Measuring essence and aura, cosmic consciousness of you, it will serve you tirelessly, taking from you only what it needs to feed its banks—a withdrawal you will not even notice, will be unaware of. So enjoy, Mr. Verlin, enjoy."

The door closed softly behind him. He was alone in the arcade with the uneasy feeling he had been told something he did not understand, would not like if he did. Ahead, he saw the entrance to the street and, without further thought, without conscious intent, headed toward it. Later, on a bus, he looked at his watch. He had set out six hours earlier! The motion of the bus, the warmth—all had probably combined to lull him into a somnolent state—maybe even sleep. He had dreamed the entire day. At his corner, he stepped off the bus with an intolerable sense of loss. And yet, what a glorious fantasy, better than the total of all the dreams of his life.

Outside the door to his apartment, he sighed, prepared for the greater disappointment of walking into his cheerless walk-up, inserted his key, and entered the room he had left at The Sleep of Your Life. Gone were the thrift shop furnishings, the frayed rug, the ugly wallpaper. Gone even the grimy window looking into the airshaft. Gone, gone, gone the environment of his poverty-line life, the trappings of his failures. Gone to be replaced by the mellow woods, cashmere cover, Aubison carpet, marble and gold appointments of the sleep center that was not, after all, the fantasy of a bus ride dream. As he closed the door, pastoral music filled the room. Lights from invisible fixtures adjusted themselves to his eyes. He crossed the room that now seemed so much larger and

looked through the mullioned window onto a vista of gently rolling meadows dotted with groves, of blue skies and clouds from which no rain would ever fall. Yet it was not a photograph or mural wallpaper. Soft breezes touched the leaves of the trees, shadows cast by the clouds moved over the land, and occasional sheep lazed at grazing, their bells tinkling softly.

Verlin turned from the window. Where had the airshaft gone? The grimy brick wall that faced it? The noises of the city? He didn't care! What had the salesman said? "Not to worry, Mr. Verlin. Your only obligation is to enjoy. To surrender yourself to the pleasures of the center."

Verlin surrendered himself. He would fix a sandwich in the pullman kitchen, change into his pajamas, and relax.

But, when he went to the kitchen, it was gone. When he moved to the battered old chest of drawers that had held his clothes it was gone. What had they done with his clothes when they ripped out walls, turned the flat into one magnificent room, and provided for his nights? He still had the days to deal with. He had to eat, to dress, to use the bathroom....

As he looked around, bewildered, the bath became imperative. And, as he thought, one of the paneled walls opened like a cigarette burn in nylon. It simply melted to become a doorway through which gleamed marble and gold fixtures matching Verlin's concept of a king's water closet. He stepped through the doorway and onto a carpet of deep wool or fur of whatever animal is covered with long, silky hairs, as soft as down—and as white. At the commode, he reached for the lid, but it receded before his fingers, withdrew into some unseen recess. And, when he was done, water swirled in the bowl as the lid slid closed. Simultaneously, water, adjusted exactly, flowed from the tap in the lavatory and, after he had washed his hands, ceased to flow. A towel, soft and thirsty, hung from a bar that, after he had dried his hands, seemed to roll the towel inside itself and unroll a fresh one. Yet the bar was no longer than a man's cane. As the salesman had said, "Your only obligation is to enjoy," Verlin did not explore how the bathroom worked. He returned to the sleep center. When he looked back at the door, inlaid woods of the paneling created their patterns on an unbroken expanse of wall.

Crossing to the bed, Verlin sat down and ran his palm over the coverlet. It invited his cheek, but he decided he would eat something, then change into pajamas before surrendering himself

further. On the wall where the kitchen had been, a large chair upholstered to match the coverlet waited, an occasional table of marble and gold beside it. To its left, a panel appeared in the wall and slid back to reveal a glass fronted compartment. Crossing the room, Verlin stopped and waited for the compartment to open. He found surrender increasingly easy. And with surrender came expectation. As the compartment opened, he felt cool air on one side, warm air on the other though no visible partition existed. On the cool side, a sandwich rested on a white plate. Garnished with misted watercress and the kind of plump black olive he liked, the sandwich had to be—yes, it was—thinly sliced Danish ham and Swiss cheese on impeccably fresh white bread. In the warm side of the compartment, a matching cup held steaming coffee creamed exactly as he liked it. A napkin ("Irish linen," he thought smugly) lay folded at the left of the plate.

Plate in one hand, cup in the other, he turned to the table. Before he could stoop to set his meal on its low surface, its legs lengthened as if they had been telescoped. Turning to get the napkin, Verlin found the compartment gone, the napkin beside the sandwich plate. "Not to worry, Mr. Verlin," he said. "Enjoy." As he lowered himself into the depths of the chair, he wished it were a straight one, for he disliked eating in such a relaxed position. Gentle action beneath and around him suggested thought had created change. He sat in a straight chair the right height for the table.

"Very good," he said. "However, I have changed my mind about the coffee. I prefer wine instead." He watched the cup, waiting for it to metamorphose. It did not. He turned to look at the wall. It was working out its patterns. He had changed his mind to test the limits of the center, and, now that he had found it had limits, he really wanted the wine. Even the cheap burgundy he occasionally drank would suffice. As he pictured it, the cup and saucer shimmered and were gone, replaced by a glass of wine. He lifted it, tasted. It was cheap burgundy in the water glass he had pictured. So that was the trick? He pictured a thin goblet with a fine semillon at room temperature. Gone was the glass of burgundy. In its place, the goblet he had pictured. The wine was semillon, he was sure it was fine—finer than any he had ever tasted. Raising the goblet, looking through it to enjoy the subtle color, he realized he had once seen the wine and the goblet in a gourmet magazine misdelivered into his mailbox. In the adver-

tisement, a man was looking through the glass at a distant range of mountains. As Verlin remembered, the mountains appeared. He lowered the glass. No range of mountains. He lifted the glass. Mountains.

Setting the glass on the table, Verlin looked at the sandwich. He wanted neither it nor the wine. If they were products of his imagination – no matter how completely his senses responded – to hell with them! Pushing back his chair, he rose, thinking, "Well, at least I don't have to clean up the mess." And, as he looked behind him, the table and chair were as he had first seen them.

Somehow, the edge had gone off the experience. He wasn't sure why, but instant gratifications lacked something. It was as if he were a baby whose needs were commands. And, when they were met, it hadn't even occurred to him to say, "Thank you." But then, to whom would he say it? He heard again the salesman: "You have become part of a concept beyond your understanding. Your only obligation is to enjoy. To surrender yourself to the pleasures of the center."

Those words were easy to recall, but there had been more. What else had the salesman said? Verlin concentrated until his scalp began to tighten. Then he heard: "To let it understand each nuance of your body, your mind, your spirit. Measuring essence and aura, cosmic consciousness of you, it will serve you tirelessly, taking from you only that information it needs to feed its banks – analysis and memory – a withdrawal you will not even notice, will be unaware of. So enjoy, Mr. Verlin, enjoy."

"All right," Verlin said, "we'll keep trying until we get it right," and he retrieved his meal. Without further thought, he ate the sandwich and the olive and then, because it looked so fresh, so dew covered and tangy, he ate the sprig of watercress. Imagination or no, the food was superb. Then, lifting the wine, he thought, "Real. Make it real." When he looked through the glass, there were no mountains. Across the room, the walls made their inlaid patterns. He was getting the hang of things.

Suddenly Verlin was tired. "And why not?" he said. "You've had a busy day." As he spoke, the coverlet was turning back to reveal – dingy sheets. "Oh, no," Verlin thought, and the sheets became crisp marvels of tan pima cotton, new from the package. "It does not understand nuance," he thought. "No nuance – it works with what it gets. So – give it nuance." The pastoral music played softly in the background. He hadn't been aware of it, but

he was tired of it. The tempo and volume changed. A medley of songs followed, and he groped through his memory until he could see an album cover from his youth: *Jackie Gleason. Music for the Love Hours.* He stopped remembering. He did not want *her* to materialize with her insatiable needs, her power to drain him of all vitality. And he did not know the extent of the center's abilities.

What were they? What about tomorrow? Or Monday? Yes, Monday! Looking around the room—the luxurious, the rich, the incredible room that millionaires could not buy—he saw himself leaving for work, his suit an embarrassment, the subway a sentence to frustration. And his job—that insignificant, menial . . .

He sat on the bed. Lying back, he interlaced his fingers behind his head to cradle it, closed his eyes, and visualized the suite of offices. He saw the door with the president's name which he smeared, erased, and replaced with his own. He saw himself leaving the center that had been his flat. As the door closed behind him, he was wearing a modest blue suit of magnificent tailoring and carrying a briefcase he had admired in a leather shop on Fifth Avenue. A malacca cane and a soft, blue hat completed his ensemble. In front of the building, a long, black car waited. Opening the door, a chauffeur bowed deferentially. Good! That's it. He opened his eyes and stood up. A mirror. He needed a mirror. One appeared on the wall before him. The modest blue suit accentuated his narrow shoulders without making them look padded. The briefcase matched the leather of his shoes. The softly rolled brim of his hat gave his face distinction. He tipped the hat to a rakish angle. His cane gleamed in the sunshine that filled the center. Without further thought, he squared his shoulders and marched jauntily across the room, opened the door with a flourish, and stepped into the hall. Before he could turn toward the stairwell, he sensed the change. Looking down, he could see the tacky trousers, the polished but worn shoes. Opening the door with a jerk born of panic, he leaped back into his flat, expecting it to be the dreary place it had been for so long. It was still the sleep center of his dreams. And he was again clutching a cane, carrying a briefcase and, he knew from the pressure on his forehead, wearing a hat.

Its abilities were unlimited as long as they were not tested outside the flat. He could be monarch of all he surveyed as long as

the room could bring it to him for surveillance. Or was even that true? *Music for the Love Hours* still played softly. Her! As she was that night! But here—on this bed.

He turned, unsure of what to expect. She lay there exactly as he remembered her. Young and blonde, young and vulnerable, young and in love with him. Exactly as he remembered her. And yet not as he remembered her. Young, blonde, vulnerable, in love. All those things. But cheap, unpolished, maybe a diamond in the rough but a diamond flawed by the carbon of poverty, of rural naiveté transported to the city. She extended her arms invitingly. She smiled. And her mouth became an extractor, a drainer of vital juices. Alien to the room, she was somehow a part of it, a malevolent part that terrified him. Groaning, he closed his eyes and wiped the memory from his mind. When he opened them, she was gone. The bed was unrumpled. There was no trace, no evidence that she had been there. What he had seen, he felt, was what he had seen many years before, but, with the inexperience of youth—or the wisdom, he had seen only what he had wanted to see. Now he could see the whole picture, for that was what his mind had retained. The photograph had been edited for viewing at the time, but, in the archives of memory, it was raw, complete footage.

"One more test," Verlin thought. "One more memory." He stood, undecided, looking around the room, seeking some clue. It had to be something important. Something he understood, couldn't edit, remembered exactly as it was.

His first orange. That great golden pome, oil-rich to the touch, plumped to bursting with the sweet juices holding memories of suns in the groves of the West. The orange one long ago Christmas when he was a child and his world was the farm bound by dustbowl fears and despair. He recalled the orange so clearly, the way it gleamed as he pulled it from his stocking. The smell of its skin, the feel of its skin, the joy of its skin as he lifted it, smelled it, and held it with love because it was his.

Verlin felt the weight in his hand. He tightened his fingers around the ball that he knew was that orange. He revelled in the moment of sweet youth recalled. Then he looked down.

There, much smaller than he remembered, not the golden globe plumped to ripeness he had always recalled, was the orange. Small, almost wizened. Still green at the stem. A poor scrubby thing that, as he watched, seemed to draw from his youthful

energy, to lose its folds and wizenings, to become testiculate and full of the juice of his future.

"No!" Verlin screamed and hurled the thing across the room. Before it could splatter against the wall, it popped out of sight. In mid-flight, it was there one minute, gone the next. Only the confusion of its truth remained.

So much for the center's ability. It could supply what he wanted as long as the desires were confined to the room and as long as they were absolutely true to reality. No evasions, no rationalizations, no self-deludings. Had he wanted an evening with Helen of Troy, Verlin knew, he could have both her and the evening. But he'd have to take *her*—warts and all. The most beautiful woman the world has ever known might not be his idea of beauty at all. The face that launched a thousand ships might be, in reality, a pan he would deem unfit to float a boat in the bathtub. So much for extent and ability. So much and so be it.

It had been a long day. He would climb into bed, read his paper, eat his orange, and smoke his cigarette. For the moment, he wanted only to rest. To have the sleep of his life. Tonight he would settle for the fulfillment of simple desires—ones he had lived with for years, ones he understood.

Silk pajamas, medium, baby blue. They lay on the bed. For the first time in his memory, he removed his clothing and, piece by piece, dropped it on the floor. He did not untie his shoes; he slipped them off. He did not fold his socks, shirt, and underwear and slip them into the laundry bag. He did not remove his belt, roll it, and lay it on the bureau. He did not hold his trousers by the cuffs, smooth them, and hang them on a hanger in the closet. To hell with it. Yet, as he was buttoning the top of his pajamas, he noticed his clothes were gone. His compulsively neat thoughts had activated the sleep center and it had disposed of them. Its abilities included performance of the most silent of butlers: the gentleman's gentleman that could unobtrusively dispose of the used and the useless. Verlin shivered uncomfortably and got into bed.

He was delighted with the way the pillows organized themselves behind his head, the smooth ease with which the sheet and coverlet slipped up his legs, paused at his waist, and arranged themselves in a neatly folded line at just the right spot. Without even looking to see if it would be there, he reached for a cigarette, placed it in his mouth, and waited for it to be lit. Inhaling deeply,

he let the smoke drift from his nostrils and blew a perfect smoke ring. Not thinking, merely enjoying the feel of the sheets, the perfection of the bed, he listened to the Gleason music and finished the cigarette. Stamping it out in the ashtray he knew would be under his hand on the nightstand, he tired of the music of the past and thought of *Pictures at an Exhibition.* Softly. Softly. The volume moderated itself. Newspaper. The *Times* appeared in the holder. He opened it and scanned the front page, then reached for an orange. A pale green napkin spread itself over the paper and he placed the orange on it. "Peeled," he thought. "And sectioned." The sections loosened even as the peeling was falling into its flower-cup pattern. Peeling an orange is such a simple task but so impossible to do neatly. As he watched the unseen hands accomplish the job, he marvelled at the way the white lining remained stuck to the peel, the way the segments separated and piled themselves in the peeling without one broken skin, without one drop of escaped juice.

Picking up the napkin by the corners, he moved the orange to the nightstand. "If you want to do something yourself, don't think about it. Just do it."

Twenty minutes later he had finished the paper. Dropping it on the floor, he lay back. The sheets tightened beneath him, the coverlet unwrinkled itself. "One more cigarette and then goodnight," he murmured. "You know," he said, looking around the room, seeing it as if he had lived in it all his life, "I wish you could talk. I'd like to ask you so many questions." Only the music broke the silence.

Smoking the cigarette, he tried to imagine the kind of voice the room would have. At one minute, it was his mother's (How accurate was that memory?) and, at another, a girl's (probably a composite of several voices, for the imagined voice was unfamiliar). Finally, the voice belonged to Thelma Ritter, the movie actress he always remembered as a maid doing things in a bedroom. The bed cradled him, fondled him, moved professionally under him.

As he put out the cigarette, he realized he had not wanted the center to dispose of the remains of the orange earlier. Now he did. The napkin curled around the peeling and disappeared. Lingering odors from the ashtray drifted up, and he thought the ashtray clean. He wondered what happened to the trash. Did the center have a wastebasket somewhere? Did it fold the newspaper

neatly and place it there? Did it dump the burned out remains of cigarettes into the basket and cover them with the orange peel as he did? He hoped so. That was the only way to treat such things. With cavalier disregard, but with a sense of propriety, a regard for the aesthetic niceties. Yes, it certainly should do things that way. He shivered. Something about those thoughts frightened him. So he didn't pursue them.

Snuggling down, Verlin felt his shoulders lower as the pillows rearranged themselves. He thought Muzak music, and unidentifiable melodies played softly as the lights dimmed. "How nice it would be to sleep by moonlight," he thought. At the mullioned window, draperies whispered back. A perfect moon hung in the night sky of the airshaft. Wispy clouds floated by. A nightbird called and, from far away, a train whistle summoned the restless, the lonely, the lost. He didn't want to pursue that thought either.

Verlin moved his fingers across the sheet, turned onto his stomach, and rubbed his cheek against the pillow. Tensions drained from his body; he was as relaxed as chemically treated hair. The center balanced its functions, a balancing he was vaguely aware of as he drifted into sleep. For a moment, he tensed. The music swelled up, light brightened, bed rocked. Like a drowsy child startled awake, then soothed back to sleep, he relaxed again. What had he been thinking? "Not to worry, Mr. Verlin ... to enjoy ... to surrender yourself ... to feed its banks ... a withdrawal you will not even notice so enjoy, Mr. Verlin, enjoy. Enjoy ... enjoy ... enjoy....

Lulled by the moonlight, the music, gentle movements of the bed, Verlin drifted in sleep—in the sleep of his life. He surrendered himself to the pleasures of the center. He let it understand each nuance of his body, his mind, his spirit. And the center worked tirelessly, monitored by the giant unit into which it connected. All night it measured Verlin's essence and aura, cosmic conscious, and then, after taking what it needed to feed its banks, it tidied itself and shut down.

Several days later, the superintendent of the apartment building let a maid into the flat. They assumed Verlin had, like so many other tenants, moved on without taking his clothes, had been killed in some accident, lay unidentified or unidentifiable in the morgue. Perhaps he was in some river. No one really knew him. No one really cared. His belongings would be removed, the

flat would be straightened, some other anonymous person would move in. It had happened many times in this unit. It would happen again.

Had the maid thought she might find something of value in the wastebasket, she would have pawed through the newspapers and other refuse it held. But she knew about trash. She had handled enough. She dumped it into the chute and went on with her work. Had she looked under the newspaper, however, she would have found the burned out remains of Verlin, unceremoniously dumped, lying in the wastebasket under an orange peel.

Yellowing Bowers

by PAUL DI FILIPPO

A tale of Blackwood Beach,
a strange little New England town
where eccentric is the norm
and the supernatural is . . .
only natural.

The twins made the mistake of believing the teacher wasn't looking.

Jason and Medea Hedgecock were inseparable and incorrigible. Inside Miss Empson's sixth-grade classroom at Abial Tripp School, they sat side by side in the back row, dual whirlpools of fidgets, giggles, and provocations. Outside of school, they were often seen running through the twisty streets of Blackwood Beach, giving vent to the most bloodcurdling shrieks. Their father, a teacher of Greek at an out-of-town prep school, was utterly unable to control them. No help in their upbringing was forthcoming from their mother, who spent all her time in the caves along the shoreline, collecting bats.

Now the two were up to something particularly devious. They huddled together over a pattern of scratches incised in Jason's wooden desktop. The pattern seemed to glisten redly, as if traced in blood. The twins whispered a series of cacophonous names *sotto voce*, immense concentration plain on their pug-nosed features.

Every other child in the class saw what they were doing. Each boy and girl ached with a mixture of fright and delicious anticipation. Would they get away with it? Were they going too far? Why didn't Miss Empson stop them?

Miss Empson had her back to the class. She stood at the board, chalking a series of dates on it. Her spiky black hair had a streak of fluorescent pink down the middle. She wore a leather skirt and tiger-print top. It was rumored that Miss Empson, although a native of Blackwood Beach, found her excitement in the strange city of

Boston to the north. The class was amazed that someone in her thirties—who ought to creak as she walked—could reportedly dance till dawn and still teach the next day.

But perhaps she had overdone things last night. She didn't seem to be on her toes today. She had never let the Hedgecocks step so far out of bounds as they were threatening to do right now.

A small cloud had formed over the twins' heads. Their chant increased in urgency, if not volume. All their classmates were perched on the edge of their seats, tension pulling them erect as a blind man pulls the cord that snaps open his collapsible cane. Unwittingly Miss Empson wrote on.

Just as Medea and Jason reached the peak of their spell, and two small clawed hands poked out of the cloud, and the other children drew in one long shuddering collective breath, Miss Empson whirled and uttered a loud shout like Bruce Lee cutting an opponent down to size:

"Aiii-yah!"

From the piece of chalk in her extended hand shot a bolt of dusty white force which smote the twins.

The cloud with its contents disappeared with a small implosion of air.

The class fell back in their seats with relief.

Jason and Medea Hedgecock remained frozen in their conspiratorial attitudes, their skin a marmoreal white. No breathing disturbed their temporary repose.

At least the class assumed it was temporary.

Shad Stillwell wiped a hand across his sweaty brow. Wow, that had been close. He had always told the twins that it didn't pay to mess with Miss Empson. Now maybe they'd reform. Although he doubted it.

Shad checked his watch. (He was very proud of the watch, a twelfth-birthday present from his parents, and found occasion to study it at least once every ten minutes.) Nearly three o'clock. Would Miss Empson go ahead with their history lesson, after all the commotion, or would she relent and let them out early?

Shad got his answer with Miss Empson's next words.

"Perhaps now we can focus on academic matters. We were discussing Colonial America yesterday, and I thought that perhaps we would all relate a little better to that period if we considered the history of our own town.

"In 1636, Roger Williams, fleeing persecution in Massachusetts, founded Providence. Two years later, one of his followers, Augustus Blackwood, whose views were too liberal for Williams, fled in turn. He came south down the coast, accompanied by his own people, and founded Blackwood Beach.

"The names of many of these original settlers are immortalized today in our streets and parks and public buildings. Staghorn, Tripp, Goodnight—"

At the mention of the last name, all the children shivered, as the image of ancient Welcome Goodnight floated to the tops of their minds like marsh gas in a swamp. Tony DiChristofaro made a warding sign, index and little finger extended with middle two clenched by thumb.

"Unfortunately, hardly any of these families survive to this day, a result of the Spotted Plague of the 1750s. A second wave of immigration occurred after the American Revolution, when Blackwood Beach was discovered by freebooters and smugglers, who conducted a flourishing trade in, uh—" Miss Empson turned away for a moment—"lambskin contraceptive devices. Only when, at the urging of Benjamin Franklin, whose libertine nature was well known to his contemporaries, the young Congress legalized these, ahem, devices, did Blackwood Beach fade from notoriety."

At the conclusion of Miss Empson's last sentence, as if she had timed it, the bell rang. Miss Empson said, "That will be all for today, class. Dismissed."

The children rose in an orderly and subdued fashion from their seats and filed from the room.

Except, of course, the twins.

Shad kicked through the fallen leaves which lay in deep drifts along the brick sidewalks of the town. His normal way home after school each day took him in a meandering path along a good percentage of Blackwood Beach's streets. Shad's house stood on Tipstaff Lane, rather high up in the natural crescent-shaped depression that the town occupied. From any of his home's tall slate-roofed turrets, he could gaze down over much of the rest of the town and out to sea. But before going home, he made his daily survey of Blackwood Beach's familiar attractions.

Shad ambled down the short block known as Dyers Street, where the ostentatiously refurbished Starkweather mansion loomed like a clapboard image of its stiff-necked owner. Once past

Rackstraw's Market, he headed uphill along Maiden Street, passing the pit where the Broadbent home had once stood and the round-topped celestial observatory of Professor Scrimshander. After stopping to talk with some friends whom he found patting Ed Stout's three-legged dog, he continued up to the street that ran along the high lip of the halfbowl containing most of the town.

Up on Lower Avenue, he turned right at the neighboring houses of Mister Seuss and Major Flood, then past the perpetually empty lot the kids called "the Burial Grounds"—although who or what resided there, they could not have said.

At last Shad reached the Gully, one of his favorite spots.

The Gully was a deep crevasse through which ran a cold, swift, narrow river that eventually spilled over a cliff to drop in a spectacular fall, meeting the sea below in a frothing pool. Lower Avenue continued over it, carried by a cast iron bridge decorated with leering faces.

Shad left the road by the side of the bridge and scrambled down the bank of the crevasse, dirtying both his jeans and hands. Down at the bottom, among the willows and birches and poplars which filled the Gully, he stopped by the bank of the stream and scooped up a handful of stones, which he shied one at a time into the surging water.

Shad always felt happy and safe in the Gully. Not that he didn't feel that way at home. His parents were good sorts, as parents went. They gave him care and affection and almost anything he asked for. And school was okay, too. (Certain inexplicable feelings about Miss Empson's legs sometimes disturbed him, but he supposed they would disappear in time.) But the Gully was somewhere special. The clean tang of running water in the air, the thick carpet of mold and duff on the ground, the summertime canopy of leaves that shielded one from the outside world—these were vital, important things, good, Shad knew instinctively, for one's soul.

Now it was autumn, however, early November, and hardly any leaves remained, imparting a spectral feeling to the ravine. Birds' nests, formerly concealed, were now visible through the exposed skeletons of the trees, and at night one could pretend that the full moon was a small pearl, close at hand, caught in an aptly positioned crook.

Shad considered one tree in particular. A tall willow overhanging the river, it still possessed a full cape of incredibly sere

leaves that clung somehow to the dessicated branches, rattling with each gust of air. Shad knew that willows, with their deep roots, often kept their leaves longer than other trees. But this tree was unique even among its nearby cousins.

Curious, Shad ambled over to study it.

Almost within the perimeter of the hanging withy branches, Shad halted.

A man was there.

Shad sucked in a sharp breath.

The man was only about as tall as Shad. He stood with his back pressed against the willow's bark, his right hand hidden. He had long hair and beard of that yellowish-white-with-age color. His nose was crooked, his eyes shadowed. He wore a dirty old cardigan with a checked pattern, faded flannel shirt, musty wool pants, and broken-down workshoes.

Some bum, thought Shad. Harmless, he hoped.

The man saw Shad. He lifted an imploring hand toward the boy and moved away from the willow, as if to leave. It was then that Shad noticed the man's right hand was caught inside the tree, as if it had become wedged in a squirrel hole, preventing his escape. Shad felt sympathy for the bum, but also a certain inexplicable reluctance to come to his aid.

Yet despite himself, almost will-lessly, Shad stepped forward, entering the whispery circle of the willow's yellow leaves. Cautiously he raised his hand to touch the man's outstretched fingers.

When his hand met the man's, his watch exploded with stinging force, the man tightened his fingers, and Shad fell backward, yanking the man with him, accompanied by a loud *pop!* as the tree freed its captive. They rolled a few feet together on the moist ground.

In seconds they had untangled themselves and stood. Shad dug out a handkerchief and tightened it around his bleeding wrist. He looked back to the willow to see what, if anything, the man had been searching for inside its trunk.

There was no hole anywhere in the trunk.

"Wow," Shad said nervously, not knowing what else to say. "Guess the battery in my watch was defective. Are you okay, mister?"

The man said nothing, but merely nodded, regarding Shad with eyes black as space. Shad found himself losing his unease.

Despite the bum's odd silence, his unthreatening nature seemed evident in his slack stance and dangling arms.

"Say, what's your name, mister? Mine's Shad." He didn't offer to shake, considering they had, after a fashion, done so already.

The man remained speechless.

Suddenly Shad was reminded of something they had read in class a couple of weeks ago. A poem by Tennyson, it began:

A spirit haunts the year's last hours,
Dwelling amid these yellowing bowers.

Somehow it seemed to fit this stranger. Perhaps, if he wouldn't divulge his real name, he wouldn't mind Shad picking one for him.

"Suppose I call you Mister Bowers?" Shad ventured.

Without actually smiling, the man conveyed approval.

"Okay, then, Mister Bowers. Nice to meet you. But I have to be going now. Maybe if you're still here tomorrow, I'll see you again."

Shad turned and began to walk away. He reached a point about ten feet from Mister Bowers—and suddenly hit an invisible barrier. It felt like falling into cotton candy, or treading ankle-deep in sticky taffy. No effort of his could penetrate it.

Mister Bowers took a step forward. Shad found he could advance a step further.

Oh, Jesus, Shad thought. What had he got himself into?

He turned to the unspeaking, stony-faced man behind him. No help there.

Shad's mother had always said, "Try to make the best of a bad situation."

"How," said Shad, "would you like to come home for supper, Mister Bowers?"

The hand lacked a finger. Where it had been was a blunt pad of scar tissue. It was not a scary hand, but rather one with character. It was thick with calluses, and ingrained in its folds lay white powder like a permanent coat of talcum. The missing finger was the little one. The other four seemed competent enough to cope by themselves, yet there was an ineffable sadness about them, too, as if they indeed missed their brother.

Shad concentrated on his father's hand so that he would not have to look him in the eye. Granted eye contact, his father could always tell when he was lying. Of course, if he was denied eye

contact, he could make a pretty good guess that Shad was lying. But he couldn't be sure.

And considering the enormity of his lies, Shad wanted that little edge.

Sam and Carol Stillwell sat at the table with Shad and Mister Bowers. Supper that night had been meatloaf, mashed potatoes, and lima beans. No one had enjoyed it, except perhaps Mister Bowers—but of this they could not be sure. Shad was too nervous, and his parents too intrigued by their guest, to think of food. And the reason no one was certain of Mister Bowers's enjoyment was that he had not precisely eaten his meal. He had laid his two crabbed hands on either side of the plate. The food had undergone a mysterious process that looked suspiciously like accelerated decay, soon disappearing completely. The plate—part of Carol's good set—had been left a cracked and worn thing, resembling some artifact just excavated from Nineveh.

Now the two elder Stillwells were studying Mister Bowers. Often warned by his parents not to bring home any of the more obviously supernatural denizens of Blackwood Beach, Shad had been forced to lie. Shad knew they would never forgive him for freeing a spirit who, in hindsight, anyone could have seen was plainly bound to a tree. (He was still smarting from the ruckus he'd caused when he'd dragged home a talking cat that had turned out to be Welcome Goodnight's familiar.)

What he had told his parents, this time, was that he had seen a harmless old man soliciting passersby in the square downtown—a patently nonsupernatural beggar who'd displayed one of those little cards that said, I AM A DEAF-MUTE. PLEASE HELP IN ANY WAY YOU CAN. THANK YOU. MISTER BOWERS. This card had subsequently been taken by a sudden gust of wind and lost down a sewer. Shad did not explain that he appeared to be permanently linked to Mister Bowers. Instead, he simply said that he felt obligated to help shelter such a helpless old man, and could he please stay for a couple of nights, please Dad?

Sam Stillwell considered the request. He was basically a simple man. He worked in the limestone quarry outside of town. The quarry had long ago claimed his finger and his heart. Something about mining the detritus of the age of dinosaurs touched the romantic in him. His leisure time was spent fishing. (Only over Carol's protests had their son been christened Shad.)

But Sam Stillwell was also a lifelong resident of Blackwood

Beach. Confronted with this bizarre figure brought home by his son, he sensed that the matter should not be pushed to a head by too-precipitous action. Better let it develop a while longer. Strange forces were still building and massing. Mister Bowers radiated a sense of purpose and resolve, a questing alertness, as if something or someone in Blackwood Beach had drawn him from illimitable distances.

Sam cleared his throat. It wouldn't do to look like too much of a soft touch on this matter, though. "It's a big responsibility to insert yourself into the life of another person, Shad. I want you to realize that, son, before we go any further."

"Oh, I know, Dad, I know," said Shad, as he thought of the invisible ties that bound him to Mister Bowers.

"All right, then. With that in mind, and as long as your mother agrees, I give my provisional permission for your friend to stay as long as he wants."

"It's fine with me," Carol said, a small smile hovering lightly over her lips. Shad thought with relief that his mother never looked so beautiful or his father so noble.

"That's great, Dad. Can he have the room next to mine?"

Shad prayed that if he moved his bed next to the common wall, he could just remain within the sphere that enclosed him and Mister Bowers.

"Sure," Sam said.

Shad rose, and so did Mister Bowers. The chair the old man had been sitting in quietly collapsed into a heap of dust.

Sam and Carol pretended not to notice, to spare Shad further embarrassment.

Shad hurried off, Mister Bowers at his heels.

The next morning, at breakfast (Carol served Mister Bowers on a paper plate, and he sat on a primitive stool hastily cobbled together the previous night out of scrap wood), Sam was too incensed by a certain news item in that day's copy of the Blackwood Beach *Intelligencer* to think any more about their guest.

"Have you read the social column, Carrie?" he demanded of Shad's mother. Shad watched the interplay between his parents with interest. Anything that promised to divert attention from Mister Bowers was welcome.

"No," Carol replied. "Is it that Starkweather woman again?"

"Yes. Listen to this: 'Amanda Starkweather has announced the

formation of the Blackwood Beach Improvement Society. She will be temporarily acting as chairperson, until elections can be held. The first item on their agenda, she told our reporter, will be attempting to convince the Town Council to tear down the old gazebo by the beach and replace it with a modern pavillion.' "

Sam tossed the paper down in disgust. "God damn it!" he yelled.

Amanda Starkweather raised that kind of feeling.

The woman was a newcomer to Blackwood Beach. She had inherited a house on Dyers Street when the last of the Blackwood Starkweathers passed away. Originally she had lived in Boston. A tall, imperious woman, she dressed in severe blouses, plaid skirts, and brown loafers. She was never seen without her capacious Louis Vuitton handbag, which, rumor had it, contained mothballs and cans of aerosol antiseptic used to enforce her rigorous standards of cleanliness. Her two children attended the prep school at which Mister Hedgecock taught.

Her husband was dead—some said of aggravation and spite, others of despair.

"Doesn't she understand the first thing about Blackwood Beach?" Sam demanded. "We're not interested in 'improvement.' We like our town run-down and sleepy. It has more character that way. You mark my words, she's messing with things that are bigger than her, and they'll have their way in the end."

S had never appreciated before how lies tended to multiply and assume a life of their own. Whereas most information was subject to entropy, degrading and losing strength over time, lies seemed immune to such decay, instead spreading and growing in complexity and subtlety.

At school, he had been constrained by pride to formulate an entirely different set of lies from the ones he had told his parents. He couldn't have his friends think he liked dragging some old bum around, or that he had been so foolish as to become bonded to an unhuman spirit.

So instead he told them that Mister Bowers was his father's older demented cousin, and that he was responsible for keeping tabs on him while his parents worked. He had even forged a note to Miss Empson from his mother, asking that Mister Bowers be allowed to sit with him. Miss Empson, with a knowing tolerance, consented.

Now his head spun with a welter of fact and fiction.

The day dragged by like molasses through a funnel in Antarctica. The rest of the class eyed him curiously between lessons. At recess, Shad was forced to stand by himself with Mister Bowers, not daring to run and perhaps come up short on the unseen tether. Luckily, Mister Bowers sat complacently at the back of the classroom in the afternoon, next to the immobile figures of the twins, and made no fuss, save for consuming a box of Ticonderoga No. 2 pencils and two jars of paste.

At last the three o'clock bell rang, and Shad was free. He knew just where he was going, too—to Professor Scrimshander's, for some much-needed advice.

Out of the schoolyard, into Rackstraw's for a candy bar, past the statue inscribed C. D. Ward, and down Dyers Street in a shortcut to Maiden, where Scrimshander's observatory-cum-home stood.

On Dyers, Shad paused a moment in front of a large, many-gabled, three storey Victorian house—the Starkweather mansion. Painted in bright San Francisco pastels, it stood out from its decrepit neighbors. A broad green lawn, immaculately raked and trimmed, contrasted starkly with the weedy lots on either side. The glass in the mansion sparkled like an ad for Windex. The whole assemblage was a bastion of order and enforced harmony.

Eating his Three Musketeers, Shad regarded the Starkweather home in the light of his father's tirade. What was she trying to achieve, anyway? Didn't she like the town as it was? If not, then why had she moved here?

Some people just couldn't stand anything or anyone being not what they themselves wanted them to be, he guessed.

As Shad watched, the front door opened. Onto the wide porch that wrapped around the house stepped Amanda Starkweather. Her stiff skirt resisted the light breeze like sheet metal. She folded her arms across her chest and directed a biting gaze toward Shad.

"Don't toss that wrapper on *my* lawn," she called, "you nasty, dirty boy."

Then, from her omnipresent purse, she whipped forth a can of Lysol and sent a cloud of pungent spray billowing across the cut grass.

For a moment, Shad's wounded innocence made him forget

completely about Mister Bowers.

Then he felt the tug of the old man's forward motion.

Mister Bowers had started up the lawn toward Amanda. He labored now at the limit of his leash, straining after the woman as if compelled by something stronger even than fate.

Shad felt Mister Bowers's strength begin to drag him along. The cotton-candy border of their mutual envelope pushed against his back as Mister Bowers steadily advanced. Shad dug his heels into the creviced brick sidewalk, knowing with utter certainty that he could not allow him to touch Mrs. Starkweather.

His efforts were useless. Mister Bowers pulled him forward inch by inch.

Frantically, Shad looked over his shoulder for help. There was no one nearby. Then he saw the street lamp.

Hurling himself backward with all his strength, he toppled, feeling his fingers graze the iron pole. Desperately he scrabbled his grip tighter, till he held it firmly.

Now Mister Bowers must be straining with all his desire. Shad felt as if his arms would part company with his body at the shoulders. Or would the elbows give out first?

From up the lawn came the hurried slam of a door. Suddenly the strain was gone.

Shad stood, shaking. Mister Bowers looked longingly at the empty porch, but made no move toward it.

Rubbing one sore arm, Shad sought to view the whole incident scientifically.

Here was one more datum for Professor Scrimshander.

Blazing galaxies pinwheeled in space, coruscating red, blue, yellow, and white. Gaseous nebulae expanded like octopi, engulfing whole civilizations over millenia. Black holes gulped down hapless cosmic wanderers, stretching them to infinite lengths.

Professor Scrimshander snapped off the monitor like a dissatisfied god. Shad shook his head, the spell exerted by the display broken without warning.

"Those idiots at NASA," the Professor complained. "They never look at anything interesting. I'm afraid I'm going to have to take matters in hand pretty soon."

"You mean," asked Shad, "that you're going to try to direct the Orbital Telescope, instead of just tapping its telemetry?"

"It might come to that," Scrimshander agreed.

The professor rose from his chair. Over six feet tall, he suffered from a stooped back that brought his head down almost six inches, thrust forward in an aggressive way belied by his normally mild demeanor. His large nose cleaved the air before him like some sort of remote probe. Thick eyebrows frequently shot skyward. At home, he wore a distressed lab-coat over a set of red thermal underwear.

Scrimshander was the science teacher at Abial Tripp Elementary. His subject matter was wide-ranging and calculated to entice.

"So," Scrimshander said, nearing Mister Bowers, who sat quietly atop a packing crate labeled ONE (1) DEAN DRIVE—ALL ENDS UP, "this is your problem, my lad? Let's see what sort of information we can get from him."

Scrimshander drew two wires from a metered device and hooked them to Mister Bowers's forehead. The old being made no resistance. Flicking several switches on, Scrimshander watched the machine's dials.

All the needles swung to the far left and wrapped themselves several times around the stop-posts. Smoke began to pour from the cabinet.

Shad watched in dismay. What could it mean?

Scratching his head, Scrimshander proceeded to run several more tests. At last he appeared ready to give an opinion.

"My boy, this creature is composed of sheer entropy."

Shad studied Mister Bowers, sitting in his shabby sweater and shapeless pants. He knew all about entropy, of course. The Professor had had the class read *The Crying of Lot 49* last semester. Everyone had enjoyed it, and they were all dutifully working on *Gravity's Rainbow* now. But could such a potent principle actually be embodied in this almost pathetic figure with its depthless black eyes?

Shad recalled Mister Bowers's way with food and chairs, and thought it just might be true.

"I have," continued Scrimshander, "been anticipating a disturbance of some sort for the past few weeks. My entropy-localizer—" here the professor gave an affectionate pat to a gadget resembling the offspring of a blow-dryer and an electric toothbrush—"has registered immense fluxes and spasms in the transsubstantial etheric plenum lately. I was recently able to narrow the focus to the gully off Lower Avenue. Evidently the precise locus was that strange willow you spoke of. When you released

this fellow from that tree, you crystalized the accumulating disorder that had been seeking entry into our universe. As the catalyst in the reaction, I regret to say, you are joined with him in sympathetic bondage. Just be glad he can apparently control his entropic powers to affect whatever he will."

The explanation, instead of relieving Shad, distressed him further. How could he ever get rid of this thing? Would he be saddled all his life with him? He had an abrupt image of himself grown old, shuffling along with Mister Bowers beside him, an unearthly twin.

"What am I gonna do?" Shad wailed. "I don't want him anymore." An inspiration struck him. "Mrs. Starkweather—he seemed to be attracted to her. Let *her* have him."

Shad got to his feet, as if to rush out. The Professor laid a restraining hand on his shoulder.

"They can never meet, Shad. It's obvious why Bowers is drawn to her. It's the tug of opposites. She is pure order, discipline, negentropy. If they were ever to come face to face . . . the consequences would be unpredictable."

Shad relaxed his taut muscles. So—he was doomed. No normal life was foreseeable.

He wondered why he couldn't have been born someplace prosaic and sane.

Beirut, maybe. Iraq or Iran.

Even Boston.

His mother didn't mind losing that vase. Or the chaise lounge handed down from Mother Stillwell. At least she claimed she didn't. And that hole in the wall between Shad's room and Mister Bowers's—well, as his father said, plaster was cheap.

Shad had told his parents nothing of what Professor Scrimshander had deduced about Mister Bowers, and their patience was obviously wearing a bit thin. Though they didn't want to discourage the boy's natural sympathy for those less fortunate, and though they suspected there was much more to the whole affair than appeared on the surface, both Sam and Carol were beginning to get just a little bit weary of Mister Bowers.

Shad knew this. How the hell did they think *he* felt? At least they were free for eight hours a day. He had to contend with this curse and burden every minute.

Weeks had passed. It was the day before Thanksgiving. Shad

felt as if he'd been bound to Mister Bowers for a year. His concentration at school had fallen precipitously, and with it his grades. Miss Empson appeared sympathetic, but there was nothing she could do. A tentative bolt from her stick of chalk, directed at Mister Bowers after school at Shad's request, had had no effect other than to increase the luminosity of his black, energy-sucking eyes. Shad, having run out of ideas, now contemplated suicide. He envisioned tossing himself off the Lower Avenue Bridge into the Gully, where this whole mess had started. But the vision always ended with him suspended in midair, Mister Bowers back on the bridge, arresting his plunge.

School was out till the Monday after the holiday, and Shad sat at home, watching his mother cook for the communal meal tomorrow. Each Thanksgiving, the residents of Blackwood Beach gathered on the Common in a festive mood and recreated the original meal. Normally Shad looked forward to the event, but not this year.

Besides, how could he attend if Amanda Starkweather was there also? Too dangerous. He'd have to feign sickness.

That night, with the aid of a lit match held near the thermometer, Shad registered a high fever. His mock groans would have won him all the drama awards at school. In the morning he said he felt better, but not good enough to accompany his parents. After some convincing, they left him alone.

Alone save for Bowers, who sat still beside him, though with an aura of repressed energy.

Shad kept his resolve till about one in the afternoon. Then he began to feel sorry for himself. His stomach was rumbling, and the cold plate of food his mother had left looked totally unappetizing. Why should he be forced to eat this lonely meal seasoned with tears? He hadn't done anything wrong. It felt awful to be confined to bed in one's pajamas on such a beautiful day, when one wasn't even sick. And why was he so solicitous of such a mean and stubborn woman as the matron of Dyers Street? Let Amanda Starkweather watch out for her own damn hide!

Dressing quickly, Shad called for Mister Bowers through the hole in the wall. The ancient being shuffled through, and together they set out for the Common.

A fringe of trees surrounded the open plot of land, where the settlers' sheep had once grazed. Hidden behind one wide bole,

Shad peered out.

The inhabitants of Blackwood Beach celebrated Thanksgiving on November twenty-sixth, regardless of whether it was the fourth Thursday of November or not, in keeping with George Washington's original proclamation. Also, they dressed in costume, not of the Pilgrims, but of the first President's contemporaries.

Memories were long in Blackwood Beach.

Tables surrounded by turkey-stuffed Blackwooders occupied the middle of the lawn. A mild autumn sun shone down. Where were his parents? Ah, off to the left there. And Amanda Starkweather? Her loud, nasal, Brahmin voice helped him spot her in the crowd. Clutching her leaden, can-filled bag across her chest like a shield, she was discoursing to a group of people who seemed fascinated by her alien brazenness.

"And once that horrid *shack* by the waterfront is torn down, we'll have the finest seaside pavillion between here and Newport."

To emphasize her point, she withdrew an aerosol insecticide from her purse and unerringly shot dead the last moth of summer.

Shad plotted a course to the turkey that would swing wide of her. He set out across the grass.

As soon as he left the trees, he knew he had made a mistake.

Mister Bowers began to make a beeline for the Starkweather woman. Shad tried to change direction, but it was impossible. And now there was nothing to hold on to.

Shad began to shout. "Help! Help! Everyone watch out! Murder!"

All heads turned toward him. Amanda Starkweather stopped in the middle of her peroration, seeing and knowing her doom. She turned to flee, but was blocked by the line of tables.

Shad threw himself to the ground, dug his fingers into the moist earth. No use. Mister Bowers was unstoppable now.

The sight of the boy being dragged feet first by an invisible force across the lawn caused the crowd to scatter in alarm. For a moment, Amanda Starkweather stood transfixed, as if realizing that it was too late for her. To give her credit, everyone later admitted, she recovered from her paralysis long enough to swat the unstoppable Bowers with her heavy bag of sprays as soon as he came within reach. But although she connected with the might of a Monty-Python matron, the purse merely disintegrated.

In the next second, Mister Bowers closed with her, enfolded her in his arms—

—and the sky was lit with the actinic light of their explosive embrace.

Shad's ears rang and his head swam. He couldn't see a thing, and he seemed to be floating free as a bird. Was he dead? No! It was only that the sticky pull of Bowers was gone. Further evidence of life was the testament of his still-empty belly. He sat up, his vision gradually returning.

The steaming crater stopped half an inch from his feet. It appeared to descend at least halfway to the center of the earth.

His parents reached Shad first. He could see their lips asking if he was okay, but heard no sounds. He didn't care. He was free, free! No more Mister Bowers! Only one important issue remained to be settled.

"Is there any cranberry sauce left?"

The Back Forty

by CHARLES WAGNER

Seventy million years ago,
prehistoric monsters swam the seas
that covered Kansas.
Some days, Chippy could almost see them.

Chippy Scott ran out to play in the warm June sun. Disdaining the front yard, he raced all the way around the house to the back. Grain stood tall and brown in the fields, nearly ready for cutting. All over the county, farmers waited for the sun to do the work of drying and ripening the wheat. The Scott farm was no different. This year their rich soil had brought forth a fine-looking crop and something else . . .

"Stay out of the wheat!" his mother hollered from the kitchen window. "Almost harvest and your daddy's worried about his *yield!*"

"Yessum," he shouted as an afterthought, running through the backyard right up to the wood fence. Beyond stretched the back forty, all of it golden wheat that swayed in the breeze, giving the illusion of rolling waves in a sea. An ocean of light brown, it harkened to the days of prairie grass for hundreds of miles in all directions, or to the days of real seas—primeval waters—over seventy million years ago.

Chippy had learned about that in school—how Coronado and others had described Kansas as an ocean on land, and long before Coronado, how the prehistoric sea had covered Kansas, making a home for all the plesiousaurs, mosoaurs, and other dinosaurs that lived in it.

He had also learned about Pa and his "yield." How when the

yield was low, his folks were more nervous; when it was high, everyone was happy.

Chippy leaned against the fence, peered out over the undulating grain. A few weeks earlier he had walked out into it. The crowns of the stalks had almost reached his head. Now they were stooped over with the weight of seed. He had felt as if he were wading in an ocean, the feeling heightened when he didn't look back to the house. He hadn't been standing on high enough ground to see the far side of the forty acres—just the swaying wheat in three directions.

Occasionally he would imagine that the wheat *was* an ocean and dinosaurs swam just beneath the surface. Dinosaurs were his favorite—he read all the books he could find, drew pictures, made models, even looked for fossils by the banks of the small creek that ran through their property. During the summer months dinosaurs sometimes became his friends. He had no brothers or sister, the nearest farm with children was five miles off, and his father was old and didn't always have leftover energy to take Chippy to see his friends.

Sometimes, summers were the most depressing times of all.

Chippy watched the flowing stalks, a sea of gold under a blue sky with sharp white clouds. Ripples and currents passed before his eyes. Individual strands merged to fluid.

And amid the waves there appeared a fin.

Chippy stared in disbelief. The sable fin slid through the grain, moving against the wind. The wheat hissed with its speed. It turned, skating toward him.

Chippy squeezed the fence rail, felt his head tipping down toward the sea. Giddy, he looked at the spot where he was going to fall—*he was falling over the fence!*

The fin sank.

Chippy pushed against the wood, splinters grating under his palms. He was falling backward, back, back—

A monstrous, tooth-lined mouth in a giant torpedo body broke the surface of the wheat not twenty feet away. It reared skyward, then seemed to sense the absence of its grassy element and turned away.

Chippy, sitting on the ground, lurched back to the fence.

Away, far and drawing farther, the fin swam out of sight, meandering leisurely in its course.

Chippy ran back to the front yard, gulping his breath

frantically.

"You didn't get in that wheat, did you?" His mother's exhortations trailed behind him. Chippy could only shake his head.

No, he hadn't been in the wheat. He would *not* go in the wheat.

In the distance, across the dirt road that served their house, he saw a combine making its appointed rounds in a neighboring field.

The harvest is here, he thought. Soon, his father would cut their wheat. All of it.

Even that in the back forty.

Chippy stared up at the ceiling. It was night. His head was sunk deep in the pillow on his lone twin bed. Huge shadows covered the moonlit walls. In another upstairs room his parents were no doubt sleeping while he pondered.

He rolled on his side and stared out the window near his bed. The blind was up as high as it would go so that he could have the outdoor light. Breezes blew the smell of moist lawn into his room. A far-off storm flashed on the horizon. Another gust brought the aroma of dust from cut fields. A lone combine was out cutting, its lights crossing down and back in long marches between fence rows.

And just past the backyard, plainly in view beyond the windbreak, the back forty sprawled. His room overlooked it. And tonight it scared him.

What was he going to do? He had seen a monster in the wheat—a prehistoric shark. His mother wouldn't believe it if he told her. "Ten years old is too old for such silliness," she would say. But he *had* seen it. The field was *dangerous.* Something was happening . . .

He peered through the screen, watched the ripples of gold beyond the windbreak.

Soon his father would harvest the back forty, much as the combine he had been watching, which had left the field and was now making its way home, over the dirt road and out of sight. How could he warn his father, who sometimes thought him odd? Maybe he could set fire to the field; burn the amber ocean. Surely that would drive away the prehistoric ghosts . . . they couldn't swim in burnt stubble, could they? (But what about the *yield?)* Chippy tried to tell himself that ghosts couldn't hurt anybody. But

the shark had seemed so real, so dark in the midst of day. Surely it could bite. Or at least frighten a man—an older man, like his father—to death.

The field shimmered in the moonlight. All golden yellow, it writhed and pitched in the wind. And against it. It seemed to Chippy that waves rebounded with equal force from the borders and raced back across the field, obeying their own laws instead of those of nature.

Maybe it's a gateway, Chippy thought, from the past to now. Like in the book, *History Trip*, that he had read in school last fall.

Something stirred in the wheat.

Chippy sat up.

A plesiosaur reared up out of the rolling field, its head and long neck lit in outlines of gossamer silver. It keened softly, gliding swanlike through the stand. Chippy could see the fish it held in its mouth.

Maybe it would waddle ashore and take *him* in its mouth, draw him out of his room with its tough jaws and long neck. His parents would never know what had happened to him.

A second head reared out of the wheat. Soaring up, it bellowed at the first monster and stooped to seize the fish.

Chippy watched, detached yet afraid in his stomach. The clamor of the creatures was like truck horns or train whistles heard from far away. Maybe he was watching an old movie, the ghosts of old combatants, still fighting after eons had passed.

The fight ended swiftly. The second beast bit the first in the neck and drove it back under the surface of the wheat. The field rustled and was still.

Chippy lapsed onto his pillow. The shadows on the walls were mute, unflinching.

He didn't know why the creatures had appeared. He didn't know if they were harmful, or if they would go away. He *did* know that he *had* to try to warn his dad, get evidence somehow—just in case.

At supper tonight, his father had said he would take samples from the back forty in the morning.

It was just after dawn of the sleepless night. Chippy watched helplessly as his father drove the combine out of the barn and gunned it toward the open gate to the back forty.

"Just a little swatch," Chippy told himself under his breath,

"just a little swatch is all you need to get a sample to test for moisture. He'll just drive it in, cut for a second, and drive it out. Nothing's going to happen in broad daylight."

The thought of the field shark came back to him, making him wince. It had been *afternoon* when he'd seen it.

His father turned and waved. Chippy raised his hand—and clapped it firmly over his mouth to keep from screaming. Something—some *thing*—had surged in the wheat as his father had looked away—something too huge and horrible to be believed.

Chippy shrieked. "Don't go in the wheat! Come out!"

Chippy ran for the fence, jumped through. At once the feeling was on him. This wasn't wheat. The earth was too soft, even for plowed mud, let alone dry wheat. He was wading past things that splashed out of his way. The wind had changed directions.

"Chippy!" he heard his mother scream from the house. "Watch out for the combine!"

Chippy saw his father's shocked face high up in the cab. The reaper blades were already dipping into the wheat, the stems of which seemed to blur in Chippy's vision. He waved his arms, felt himself sinking from the loss of hand strokes.

"Dad! Get out of the field!"

Off to the right, the enormous heaving closed in. Chippy screamed, but his father's eyes were only watching him.

All hope gone, Chippy thrashed away. He gained the fence and pulled himself into the backyard. His clothes seemed dry, though he had felt the warmth of primeval seas only seconds ago. He raced off for the front yard.

"Chippy!" Now his father shouted—at least he had gotten out of the wheat. He heard footsteps behind him. The combine still idled in the field.

"You stop this foolishness here and now!"

A hand grabbed his arm and jerked him around. His father's face scowled down.

"What's the meaning of this! What'dya go an' do a damn fool thing like that for?!" His father was red with rage.

"I didn't want it to get you! It was gonna get you!"

His father shook him hard. "What?! What was gonna get me?!"

"The monster in the wheat!"

Now his father froze. Stared. "I declare you are a sick boy! You'n your damn fool dinosaurs and invisible friends. There's doctors that'll—" Mr. Scott stopped talking. He dragged Chippy by

the arm toward the backyard. "You're gettin' a spanking," he said, his tone ice cold.

Then his wife screamed.

"The monster! The *Monster!*" Chippy shrieked, breaking his father's slackened grip. He ran off toward the backyard, rounding the corner of the house, his father close behind.

Chippy got to his mother first. She was standing in the middle of the backyard, gaping at the back forty, pointing with her finger. The sound of the combine was gone.

Chippy looked. His father looked, too.

In the middle of the field, many yards from the fence, the combine was sinking rapidly, pulled under by monstrous tentacles just visible in the early morning sun. The reaper blades were last to go. They tipped into the air and slid in, like a paddle wheeler going down by the bow. The gargantuan squid sucked its arms in after it, and was gone. The wheat then blew again with the wind.

"Jesus," Father hissed under his breath. He knelt down by Chippy and held him tight. "I think I owe you an apology," he whispered, "a whole lot of apologies."

They gazed in awe at the now quiet field, then returned to the house.

With Chippy's help, Mr. Scott burned the field to stubble. It lay fallow for a long time.

The Judge's House

by BRAM STOKER

Of *course* there were the wives' tales . . .
but surely such a lonely, deserted old mansion
would give him quiet if nothing else.
Or so Malcolmson thought.

When the time for his examination drew near Malcolm Malcolmson made up his mind to go somewhere to read by himself. He feared the attractions of the seaside, and also he feared completely rural isolation, for of old he knew its charms, and so he determined to find some unpretentious little town where there would be nothing to distract him. He refrained from asking suggestions from any of his friends, for he argued that each would recommend some place of which he had knowledge, and where he had already acquaintances. As Malcolmson wished to avoid friends he had no wish to encumber himself with the attention of friends' friends, and so he determined to look out for a place for himself. He packed a portmanteau with some clothes and all the books he required, and then took ticket for the first name on the local timetable which he did not know.

When at the end of three hours' journey he alighted at Benchurch, he felt satisfied that he had so far obliterated his tracks as to be sure of having a peaceful opportunity of pursuing his studies. He went straight to the one inn which the sleepy little place contained, and put up for the night. Benchurch was a market town, and once in three weeks was crowded to excess, but for the remainder of the twenty-one days it was as attractive as a desert. Malcolmson looked around the day after his arrival to try to find quarters more isolated than even so quiet an inn as The Good Traveler afforded. There was only one place which took his

fancy, and it certainly satisfied his wildest ideas regarding quiet; in fact, quiet was not the proper word to apply to it—desolation was the only term conveying any suitable idea of its isolation. It was an old, rambling, heavy-built house of the Jacobean style, with heavy gables and windows, usually small, and set higher than was customary in such houses, and was surrounded with a high brick wall massively built. Indeed, on examination, it looked more like a fortified house than an ordinary dwelling. But all these things pleased Malcolmson. "Here," he thought, "is the very spot I have been looking for, and if I can get opportunity of using it I shall be happy." His joy was increased when he realized beyond doubt that it was not at present inhabited.

From the post office he got the name of the agent, who was rarely surprised at the application to rent a part of the old house. Mr. Carnford, the local lawyer and agent, was a genial old gentleman, and frankly confessed his delight at anyone being willing to live in the house.

"To tell you the truth," said he, "I should be only too happy, on behalf of the owners, to let anyone have the house rent free for a term of years if only to accustom the people here to see it inhabited. It has been so long empty that some kind of absurd prejudice has grown up about it, and this can be best put down by its occupation—if only," he added with a sly glance at Malcolmson, "by a scholar like yourself, who wants its quiet for a time."

Malcolmson thought it needless to ask the agent about the "absurd prejudice"; he knew he would get more information, if he should require it, on the subject from other quarters. He paid his three months' rent, got a receipt, and the name of an old woman who would probably undertake to "do" for him, and came away with the keys in his pocket. He then went to the landlady of the inn, who was a cheerful and most kindly person, and asked her advice as to such stores and provisions as he would be likely to require. She threw up her hands in amazement when he told her where he was going to settle himself.

"Not in the Judge's House!" she said and grew pale as she spoke. He explained the locality of the house saying that he did not know its name. When he had finished she answered:

"Aye, sure enough—sure enough the very place! It is the Judge's House sure enough." He asked her to tell him about the place, why so called, and what there was against it. She told him

that it was so called locally because it had been many years before—how long she could not say, as she was herself from another part of the country, but she thought it must have been a hundred years or more—the abode of a judge who was held in great terror on account of his harsh sentences and his hostility to prisoners at assizes. As to what there was against the house itself she could not tell. She had often asked, but no one could inform her; but there was a general feeling that there was *something*, and for her own part she would not take all the money in Drinkwater's Bank and stay in the house an hour by herself. Then she apologized to Malcolmson for her disturbing talk.

"It is too bad of me, sir, and you—and a young gentleman, too—if you will pardon me saying it, going to live there all alone. If you were my boy—and you'll excuse me for saying it—you wouldn't sleep there a night, not if I had to go there myself and pull the big alarm bell that's on the roof!" The good creature was so manifestly in earnest, and was so kindly in her intentions, that Malcolmson, although amused, was touched. He told her kindly how much he appreciated her interest in him, and added:

"But, my dear Mrs. Witham, indeed you need not be concerned about me! A man who is reading for the Mathematical Tripos has too much to think of to be disturbed by any of these mysterious 'somethings,' and his work is of too exact and prosaic a kind to allow of his having any corner in his mind for mysteries of any kind. Harmonical Progression, Permutations and Combinations, and Elliptic Functions have sufficient mysteries for me!" Mrs. Witham kindly undertook to see after his commissions, and he went himself to look for the old woman who had been recommended to him. When he returned to the Judge's House with her, after an interval of a couple of hours, he found Mrs. Witham herself waiting with several men and boys carrying parcels, and an upholsterer's man with a bed in a car, for she said though tables and chairs might be all very well a bed that hadn't been aired for mayhap fifty years was not proper for young bones to lie on. She was evidently curious to see the inside of the house; and, though manifestly so afraid of the "somethings" that at the slightest sound she clutched onto Malcolmson whom she never left for a moment, went over the whole place.

After his examination of the house, Malcolmson decided to take up his abode in the great dining room, which was big enough to serve for all his requirements, and Mrs. Witham with the aid of

the charwoman, Mrs. Dempster, proceeded to arrange matters. When the hampers were brought in and unpacked, Malcolmson saw that with much kind forethought she had sent from her own kitchen sufficient provisions to last for a few days. Before going she expressed all sort of kind wishes, and at the door turned and said:

"And perhaps, sir, as the room is big and drafty it might be well to have one of those big screens put round your bed at night—though, truth to tell, I would die myself if I were to be so shut in with all kinds of—of 'things,' that put their heads round the sides, or over the top, and look on me!" The image which she had called up was too much for her nerves, and she fled incontinently.

Mrs. Dempster sniffed in a superior manner as the landlady disappeared, and remarked that for her own part she wasn't afraid of all the bogies in the kingdom.

"I'll tell you what it is, sir," she said, "bogies is all kinds and sorts of things—except bogies! Rats and mice, and beetles; and creaky doors, and loose slates, and broken panes, and stiff drawer handles, that stay out when you pull them and then fall down in the middle of the night. Look at the wainscot of the room! It is old—hundreds of years old! Do you think there's no rats and beetles there! And do you imagine, sir, that you won't see none of them! Rats is bogies, I tell you, and bogies is rats, and don't you get to think anything else!"

"Mrs. Dempster," said Malcolmson gravely, making her a polite bow, "you know more than a Senior Wrangler! And let me say that, as a mark of esteem for your undubitable soundness of head and heart, I shall, when I go, give you possession of this house, and let you stay here by yourself for the last two months of my tenancy, for four weeks will serve my purpose."

"Thank you kindly, sir!" she answered, "but I couldn't sleep away from home a night. I am in Greenhow's Charity, and if I slept a night away from my rooms I should lose all I have got to live on. The rules is very strict; and there's too many watching for a vacancy for me to run any risks in the matter. Only for that, sir, I'd gladly come here and attend on you altogether during your stay."

"My good woman," said Malcolmson hastily, "I have come here on purpose to obtain solitude and believe me that I am grateful to the late Greenhow for having so organized his admirable

charity – whatever it is – that I am perforce denied the opportunity of suffering from such a form of temptation! Saint Anthony himself could not be more rigid on the point!"

The old woman laughed harshly. "Ah, you young gentlemen," she said, "you don't fear for naught; and belike you'll get all the solitude you want, here." She set to work with her cleaning, and by nightfall, when Malcolmson returned from his walk – he always had one of his books to study as he walked – he found the room swept and tidied, a fire burning in the old hearth, the lamp lit, and the table spread for supper with Mrs. Witham's excellent fare. "This is comfort, indeed," he said, as he rubbed his hands.

When he had finished his supper and lifted the tray to the other end of the great oak dining table, he got out his books again, put fresh wood on the fire, trimmed his lamp, and set himself down to a spell of real hard work. He went on without pause till about eleven o'clock, when he knocked off for a bit to fix his fire and lamp, and to make himself a cup of tea. He had always been a tea drinker, and during his college life had sat late at work and had taken tea late. The rest was a great luxury to him, and he enjoyed it with a sense of delicious, voluptuous ease. The renewed fire leaped and sparkled, and threw quaint shadows through the great old room; and as he sipped his hot tea he reveled in the sense of isolation from his kind. Then it was that he began to notice for the first time what a noise the rats were making.

"Surely," he thought, "they cannot have been at it all the time I was reading. Had they been, I must have noticed it!" Presently, when the noise increased, he satisfied himself that it was really new. It was evident that at first the rats had been frightened at the presence of a stranger, and the light of fire and lamp; but that as the time went on they had grown bolder and were now disporting themselves as was their wont.

How busy they were! And hark to the strange noises! Up and down behind the old wainscot, over the ceiling and under the floor they raced, and gnawed, and scratched! Malcolmson smiled to himself as he recalled to mind the saying of Mrs. Dempster, "Bogies is rats, and rats is bogies!" The tea began to have its effect of intellectual and nervous stimulus, he saw with joy another long spell of work to be done before the night was past, and in the sense of security which it gave him, he allowed himself the luxury of a good look around the room. He took his lamp in one hand,

and went all around, wondering that so quaint and beautiful and old a house had been so long neglected. The carving of the oak on the panels of the wainscot was fine, and on and around the door and windows it was beautiful and of rare merit. There were some old pictures on the walls, but they were coated so thick with dust and dirt that he could not distinguish any detail of them, though he held his lamp as high as he could over his head. Here and there as he went round he saw some crack or hole blocked for a moment by the face of a rat with its bright eyes glittering in the light, but in an instant it was gone, and a squeak and a scamper followed. The thing that most struck him, however, was the rope of the great alarm bell on the roof, which hung down in a corner of the room on the right-hand side of the fireplace. He pulled up close to the hearth a great high-backed carved oak chair, and sat down to his last cup of tea. When this was done he made up the fire and went back to his work sitting at the corner of the table, having the fire to his left. For a little while the rats disturbed him somewhat with their perpetual scampering, but he got accustomed to the noise as one does to the ticking of a clock or to the roar of moving water, and he became so immersed in his work that everything in the world, except the problem which he was trying to solve, passed away from him.

He suddenly looked up, his problem was still unsolved, and there was in the air that sense of the hour before the dawn, which is so dread to doubtful life. The noise of the rats had ceased. Indeed it seemed to him that it must have ceased but lately and that it was the sudden cessation which had disturbed him. The fire had fallen low, but it still threw out a deep red glow. As he looked he stared in spite of his *sang froid.*

There on the great high-backed carved oak chair by the right side of the fireplace sat an enormous rat, steadily glaring at him with baleful eyes. He made a motion to it as though to hunt it away, but it did not stir. Then he made the motion of throwing something. Still it did not stir, but showed its great white teeth angrily, and its cruel eyes shone in the maplight with an added vindictiveness.

Malcolmson felt amazed, and seizing the poker from the hearth ran at it to kill it. Before, however, he could strike it, the rat, with a squeak that sounded like the concentration of hate, jumped upon the floor, and, running up the rope of the alarm bell, disappeared in the darkness beyond the range of the green-shaded

lamp. Instantly, strange to say, the noisy scampering of the rats in the wainscot began again.

By this time Malcolmson's mind was quite off the problem, and as a shrill cock-crow outside told him of the approach of the morning, he went to bed and to sleep.

He slept so sound that he was not even waked by Mrs. Dempster coming in to make up his room. It was only when she had tidied up the place and got his breakfast ready and tapped on the screen which closed in his bed that he woke. He was a little tired still after his night's hard work, but a strong cup of tea soon freshened him up and, taking his book, he went out for his morning walk, bringing with him a few sandwiches lest he should not care to return till dinner time. He found a quiet walk between high elms some way outside the town, and here he spent the greater part of the day studying his Laplace. On his return he looked in to see Mrs. Witham and to thank her for her kindness. When she saw him coming through the diamond-paned bay window of her sanctum she came out to meet him and asked him in. She looked at him searchingly and shook her head as she said:

"You must not overdo it, sir. You are paler this morning than you should be. Too late hours and too hard work on the brain isn't good for any man! But tell me, sir, how did you pass the night? Well, I hope? But my heart! Sir, I was glad when Mrs. Dempster told me this morning that you were all right and sleeping sound when she went in."

"Oh, I was all right," he answered, smiling, "the 'somethings' didn't worry me, as yet. Only the rats; and they had a circus, I tell you, all over the place. There was one wicked-looking old devil that sat up on my own chair by the fire, and wouldn't go till I took the poker to him, and then he ran up the rope of the alarm bell and got to somewhere up the wall or the ceiling—I couldn't see where, it was so dark."

"Mercy on us," said Mrs. Witham, "an old devil, and sitting on a chair by the fireside! Take care, sir! Take care! There's many a true word spoken in jest."

"How do you mean? 'Pon my word I don't understand."

"An old devil! The old devil, perhaps. There! Sir, you needn't laugh." For Malcolmson had broken into a hearty peal. "You young folks thinks it easy to laugh at things that makes older ones shudder. Never mind, sir! Never mind! Please God, you'll laugh all the time. It's what I wish you myself!" And the good lady

beamed all over in sympathy with his enjoyment, her fears gone for a moment.

"Oh, forgive me!" said Malcolmson presently. "Don't think me rude; but the idea was too much for me—that the old devil himself was on the chair last night!" And at the thought he laughed again. Then he went home to dinner.

This evening the scampering of the rats began earlier; indeed it had been going on before his arrival, and only ceased while his presence by its freshness disturbed them. After dinner he sat by the fire for a while and had a smoke, and then, having cleared his table, began to work as before. Tonight the rats disturbed him more than they had done on the previous night. How they scampered up and down and under and over! How they squeaked and scratched and gnawed! How they, getting bolder by degrees, came to the mouths of their holes and to the chinks and cracks and crannies in the wainscotting till their eyes shone like tiny lamps as the firelight rose and fell. But to him, now doubtless accustomed to them, their eyes were not wicked; only their playfulness touched him. Sometimes the boldest of them made sallies out on the floor or along the moldings of the wainscot. Now and again as they disturbed him Malcolmson made a sound to frighten them, smiting the table with his hand or giving a fierce, "Hsh, hsh," so that they fled straightaway to their holes.

And so the early part of the night wore on; and despite the noise Malcolmson got more and more immersed in his work.

All at once he stopped, as on the previous night, being overcome by a sudden sense of silence. There was not the faintest sound of gnaw, or scratch, or squeak. The silence was as of the grave. He remembered the odd occurrence of the previous night, and instinctively he looked at the chair close by the fireside. And then a very odd sensation thrilled through him.

There, on the great old high-backed carved oak chair beside the fireplace, sat the same enormous rat, steadily glaring at him with baleful eyes.

Instinctively he took the nearest thing to his hand, a book of logarithms, and flung it at it. The book was badly aimed and the rat did not stir, so again the poker performance of the previous night was repeated; and again the rat, being closely pursued, fled up the rope of the alarm bell. Strangely, too, the departure of this rat was instantly followed by the renewal of the noise made by the general rat community. On this occasion, as on

the previous one, Malcolmson could not see at what part of the room the rat disappeared, for the green shade of his lamp left the upper part of the room in darkness, and the fire had burned low.

On looking at his watch he found it was close on midnight; and, not sorry for the *divertissement,* he made up his fire and made himself his nightly pot of tea. He got through a good spell of work and thought himself entitled to a cigarette, and so he sat on the great oak chair before the fire and enjoyed it. While smoking he began to think that he would like to know where the rat disappeared to, for he had certain ideas for the morrow not entirely disconnected with a rat trap. Accordingly he lit another lamp and placed it so that it would shine well into the right-hand corner of the wall by the fireplace. Then he got all the books he had with him, and placed them handy to throw at the vermin. Finally he lifted the rope of the alarm bell and placed the end of it on the table, fixing the extreme end under the lamp. As he handled it he could not help noticing how pliable it was, especially for so strong a rope, and one not in use. "You could hang a man with it," he thought to himself. When his preparations were made he looked around, and said complacently:

"There now, my friend, I think we shall learn something of you this time!" He began his work again, and though as before somewhat disturbed at first by the noise of the rats, soon lost himself in his propositions and problems.

Again, he was called to his immediate surroundings suddenly. This time it might not have been the sudden silence only which took his attention; there was a slight movement of the rope, and the lamp moved. Without stirring, he looked to see if his pile of books was within range, and then cast his eye along the rope. As he looked he saw the great rat drop from the rope onto the oak armchair and sit there glaring at him. He raised a book in his right hand, and taking careful aim, flung it at the rat. The latter, with a quick movement, sprang aside and dodged the missile. He then took another book, and a third, and flung them one after another at the rat, but each time unsuccessfully. At last, as he stood with a book poised in his hand to throw, the rat squeaked and seemed afraid. This made Malcolmson more than ever eager to strike and the book flew and struck the rat a resounding blow. It gave a terrified squeak, and turning on his pursuer a look of terrible malevolence, ran up the chair back and

made a great jump to the rope of the alarm bell and ran up it like lightning. The lamp rocked under the sudden strain, but it was a heavy one and did not topple over. Malcolmson kept his eyes on the rat, and saw it by the light of the second lamp leap to a molding of the wainscot and disappear through a hole in one of the great pictures which hung on the wall, obscured and invisible through its coating of dirt and dust.

"I shall look up my friend's habitation in the morning," said the student, and he went over to collect his books. "The third picture from the fireplace; I shall not forget." He picked up the books one by one, commenting on them as he lifted them. "*Conic Sections* he does not mind, nor *Cycloidal Oscillations*, nor the *Principia*, nor *Quaternions*, nor *Thermodynamics*. Now for the book that fetched him!" Malcolmson took it up and looked at it. As he did so he started, and a sudden palor overspread his face. He looked round uneasily and shivered slightly, as he murmured to himself:

"The Bible my mother gave me! What an odd coincidence." He sat down to work again, and the rats in the wainscot renewed their gambols. They did not disturb him, however; somehow their presence gave him a sense of companionship. But he could not attend to his work and after striving to master the subject on which he was engaged gave it up in despair, and went to bed as the first streak of dawn stole in through the eastern window.

He slept heavily but uneasily, and dreamed much; and when Mrs. Dempster woke him late in the morning he seemed ill at ease, and for a few minutes did not seem to realize exactly where he was. His first request rather surprised the servant.

"Mrs. Dempster, when I am out today I wish you would get the steps and dust or wash those pictures—especially that one the third from the fireplace—I want to see what they are."

Late in the afternoon Malcolmson worked at his books in the shaded walk, and the cheerfulness of the previous day came back to him as the day wore on, and he found that his reading was progressing well. He had worked out to a satisfactory conclusion all the problems which had as yet baffled him, and it was in a state of jubilation that he paid a visit to Mrs. Witham at The Good Traveler. He found a stranger in the cosy sitting room with the landlady, who was introduced to him as Dr. Thornhill. She was not quite at ease, and this, combined with the doctor's plunging at once into a series of questions, made Malcolmson come to

the conclusion that his presence was not an accident, so without preliminary he said:

"Dr. Thornhill, I shall with pleasure answer you any question you may choose to ask me if you will answer me one question first."

The doctor seemed surprised, but he smiled and answered at once, "Done! What is it?"

"Did Mrs. Witham ask you to come here and see me and advise me?"

Dr. Thornhill for a moment was taken aback, and Mrs. Witham got red and turned away; but the doctor was a frank and ready man, and he answered at once and openly.

"She did: but she didn't intend you to know it. I suppose it was my clumsy haste that made you suspect. She told me that she did not like the idea of your being in that house all by yourself, and that she thought you took too much strong tea. In fact, she wants me to advise you if possible to give up the tea and the very late hours. I was a keen student in my time, so I suppose I may take the liberty of a college man and, without offense, advise you not quite as a stranger."

Malcolmson with a bright smile held out his hand. "Shake, as they say in America," he said. "I must thank you for your kindness and Mrs. Witham too, and your kindness deserves a return on my part. I promise to take no more strong tea—no tea at all till you let me—and I shall go to bed tonight at one o'clock at latest. Will that do?"

"Capital," said the doctor. "Now tell us all that you noticed in the old house," and so Malcolmson then and there told in minute detail all that had happened in the last two nights. He was interrupted every now and then by some exclamation from Mrs. Witham, till finally when he told of the episode of the Bible the landlady's pent-up emotions found vent in a shriek; and it was not till a stiff glass of brandy and water had been administered that she grew composed again. Dr. Thornhill listened with a face of growing gravity, and when the narrative was complete and Mrs. Witham had been restored he asked:

"The rat always went up the rope of the alarm bell?"

"Always."

"I suppose you know," said the doctor after a pause, "what the rope is?"

"No."

"It is," said the doctor slowly, "the very rope which the hangman used for all the victims of the Judge's judicial rancor!" Here he was interrupted by another scream from Mrs. Witham, and steps had to be taken for her recovery. Malcolmson, having looked at his watch and found that it was close to his dinner hour, had gone home before her complete recovery.

When Mrs. Witham was herself again she almost assailed the doctor with angry questions as to what he meant by putting such horrible ideas into the poor young man's mind. "He has quite enough there already to upset him," she added. Dr. Thornhill replied:

"My dear madam, I had a distinct purpose in it. I wanted to draw his attention to the bell rope, and to fix it there. It may be that he is in a highly overwrought state, and has been studying too much, although I am bound to say that he seems as sound and healthy a young man, mentally and bodily, as ever I saw—but then the rats—and that suggestion of the devil." The doctor shook his head and went on. "I would have offered to go and stay the first night with him but that I felt sure it would have been a cause of offense. He may get in the night some strange fright or hallucination; and if he does I want him to pull that rope. All alone as he is it will give us warning and we may reach him in time to be of service. I shall be sitting up pretty late tonight and shall keep my ears open. Do not be alarmed if Benchurch gets a surprise before morning."

"Oh, Doctor, what do you mean? What do you mean?"

"I mean this; that possibly—nay, more probably—we shall hear the great alarm bell from the Judge's House tonight," and the Doctor made about as effective an exit as could be thought of.

When Malcolmson arrived home he found that it was a little after his usual time, and Mrs. Dempster had gone away—the rules of Greenhow's Charity were not to be neglected. He was glad to see that the place was bright and tidy with a cheerful fire and a well-trimmed lamp. The evening was colder than might have been expected in April, and a heavy wind was blowing with such rapidly increasing strength that there was every promise of a storm during the night. For a few minutes after his entrance the noise of the rats ceased; but so soon as they became accustomed to his presence they began again. He was glad to hear them, for he felt once more the feeling of companionship in their noise and his mind ran back to the strange fact that they only ceased to

manifest themselves when that other—the great rat with the baleful eyes—came upon the scene. The reading lamp only was lit and its green shade kept the ceiling and the upper part of the room in darkness, so that the cheerful light from the hearth spreading over the floor and shining on the white cloth laid over the end of the table was warm and cheery. Malcolmson sat down to his dinner with a good appetite and a buoyant spirit. After his dinner and cigarette he sat steadily down to work, determined not to let anything disturb him, for he remembered his promise to the doctor, and made up his mind to make the best of the time at his disposal.

For an hour or so he worked all right, and then his thoughts began to wander from his books. The actual circumstances around him, the calls on his physical attention, and his nervous susceptibility were not to be denied. By this time the wind had become a gale, and the gale a storm. The old house, solid though it was, seemed to shake to its foundations, and the storm roared and raged through its many chimneys and its queer old gable, producing strange, unearthly sounds in the empty rooms and corridors. Even the great alarm bell on the roof must have felt the force of the wind, for the rope rose and fell slightly, as though the bell were moved a little from time to time, and the limber rope fell on the oak floor with a hard and hollow sound.

As Malcolmson listened to it he bethought himself of the doctor's words, "It is the rope which the hangman used for the victims of the Judge's judicial rancor," and he went over to the corner of the fireplace and took it in his hand to look at it. There seemed a sort of deadly interest in it, and as he stood there he lost himself for a moment in speculation as to who these victims were, and the grim wish of the Judge to have such a ghastly relic ever under his eyes. As he stood there the swaying of the bell on the roof still lifted the rope now and again; but presently there came a new sensation—a sort of tremor in the rope, as though something was moving along it.

Looking up instinctively Malcolmson saw the great rat coming slowly down toward him, glaring at him steadily. He dropped the rope and started back with a muttered curse, and the rat turning ran up the rope again and disappeared, and at the same instant Malcolmson became conscious that the noise of the rats, which had ceased for a while, began again.

All this set him thinking, and it occurred to him that he had not investigated the lair of the rat or looked at the pictures, as he

had intended. He lit the other lamp without the shade, and, holding it up went and stood opposite the third picture from the fireplace on the right-hand side where he had seen the rat disappear on the previous night.

At the first glance he started back so suddenly that he almost dropped the lamp, and a deadly pallor overspread his face. His knees shook and heavy drops of sweat came on his forehead, and he trembled like an aspen. But he was young and plucky, and pulled himself together, and after the pause of a few seconds stepped forward again, raised the lamp, and examined the picture which had been dusted and washed, and now stood out clearly.

It was of a judge dressed in his robes of scarlet and ermine. His face was strong and merciless, evil, crafty, and vindictive, with a sensual mouth, hooked nose of ruddy color, and shaped like the beak of a bird of prey. The rest of the face was of a cadaverous color. The eyes were of peculiar brilliance and with a terribly malignant expression. As he looked at them, Malcolmson grew cold, for he saw there the very counterpart of the eyes of the great rat. The lamp almost fell from his hand, he saw the rat with its baleful eyes peering out through the hole in the corner of the picture, and noted the sudden cessation of the noise of the other rats. However, he pulled himself together, and went on with his examination of the picture.

The Judge was seated in a great high-backed carved oak chair, on the right-hand side of a great stone fireplace where, in the corner, a rope hung down from the ceiling, its end lying coiled on the floor. With a feeling of something like horror, Malcolmson recognized the scene of the room as it stood, and gazed around him in an awestruck manner as though he expected to find some strange presence behind him. Then he looked over to the corner of the fireplace—and with a loud cry he let the lamp fall from his hand.

There, in the Judge's armchair, with the rope hanging behind, sat the rat with the Judge's baleful eyes, now intensified with a fiendish leer. Save for the howling of the storm without there was silence.

The fallen lamp recalled Malcolmson to himself. Fortunately it was of metal, and so the oil was not spilt. However, the practical need of attending to it settled at once his nervous apprehensions. When he had turned it out, he wiped his brow and thought for a moment.

"This will not do," he said to himself. "If I go on like this I shall become a crazy fool. This must stop! I promised the doctor I would not take tea. Faith, he was pretty right! My nerves must have been getting into a queer state. Funny, I did not notice it. I never felt better in my life. However, it is all right now, and I shall not be such a fool again."

Then he mixed himself a good stiff glass of brandy and water and resolutely sat down to his work.

It was nearly an hour later when he looked up from his book disturbed by the sudden stillness. Without, the wind howled and roared louder than ever, and the rain drove in sheets against the windows, beating like a hill on the glass; but within there was no sound whatever save the echo of the wind as it roared in the great chimney, and now and then a hiss as a few raindrops found their way down the chimney in a lull of the storm. The fire had fallen low and had ceased to flame, though it threw out a red glow. Malcolmson listened attentively, and presently heard a thin, squeaking noise, very faint. It came from the corner of the room where the rope hung down, and he thought it was the creaking of the rope on the floor as the swaying of the bell raised and lowered it. Looking up, however, he saw in the dim light the great rat clinging to the rope and gnawing it. The rope was already nearly gnawed through—he could see the lighter color where the strands were laid bare. As he looked the job was complete, and the severed end of the rope fell clattering on the oaken floor, while for an instant the great rat remained like a knob or tassel at the end of the rope, which now began to sway to and fro. Malcolmson felt for a moment another pang of terror as he thought that now the possibility of calling the outer world to his assistance was cut off, but an intense anger took its place, and seizing the book he was reading he hurled it at the rat. The blow was well aimed, but before the missile could reach him the rat dropped off and struck the floor with a soft thud. Malcolmson instantly rushed over toward him, but it darted away and disappeared in the darkness of the shadows of the room. Malcolmson felt that his work was over for the night, and determined then and there to vary the monotony of the proceedings by a hunt for the rat, and took off the green shade of the lamp so as to insure a wider spreading light. As he did so the gloom of the upper part of the room was relieved, and in the new flood of light, great by comparison with the previous darkness, the pictures on the wall

stood out boldly. From where he stood, Malcolmson saw right opposite to him the third picture on the wall from the fireplace. He rubbed his eyes in surprise, and then a great fear began to come upon him.

In the center of the picture was a great irregular patch of brown canvas, as fresh as when it was stretched on the frame. The background was as before, with chair and chimney corner and rope, but the figure of the Judge had disappeared.

Malcolmson, almost in a chill of horror, turned slowly round, and then he began to shake and tremble like a man in a palsy. His strength seemed to have left him, and he was incapable of action or movement, hardly even of thought. He could only see and hear.

There, on the great high-backed carved oak chair sat the Judge in his robes of scarlet and ermine with his baleful eyes glaring vindictively, and a smile of triumph on the resolute, cruel mouth, as he lifted with his hands a *black cap.* Malcolmson felt as if the blood was running from his heart, as one does in moments of prolonged suspense. There was a singing in his ears. Without, he could hear the roar and howl of the tempest, and through it, swept on the storm, came the striking of midnight by the great chimes in the market place. He stood for a space of time that seemed to him endless still as statue, and with wide-open, horror-struck eyes, breathless. As the clock struck so the smile of triumph on the Judge's face intensified, and at the last stroke of midnight he placed the black cap on his head.

Slowly and deliberately the Judge rose from his chair and picked up the piece of the rope of the alarm bell which lay on the floor, drew it through his hands as if he enjoyed its touch, and then deliberately began to knot one end of it, fashioning it into a noose. This he tightened and tested with his foot, pulling hard at it till he was satisfied and then making a running noose of it, which he held in his hand. Then he began to move along the table on the opposite side to Malcolmson, keeping his eyes on him until he had passed him, when with a quick movement he stood in front of the door. Malcolmson then began to feel that he was trapped, and tried to think of what he should do. There was some fascination in the Judge's eyes, which he never took off him, and he had, perforce, to look. He saw the Judge approach—still keeping between him and the door—and raise the noose and throw it toward him as if to entangle him. With a great effort he

made a quick movement to one side, and saw the rope fall beside him, and heard it strike the oaken floor. Again the Judge raised the noose and tried to ensnare him, ever keeping his baleful eyes fixed on him, and each time by a mighty effort the student just managed to evade it. So this went on for many times, the Judge seeming never discouraged nor discomposed at failure, but playing as a cat does with a mouse. At last in despair, which had reached its climax, Malcolmson cast a quick glance around him. The lamp seemed to have blazed up, and there was a fairly good light in the room. At the many rat holes and in the chinks and crannies of the wainscot he saw the rats' eyes; and this aspect, that was purely physical, gave him a gleam of comfort. He looked around and saw that the rope of the great alarm bell was laden with rats. Every inch of it was covered with them, and more and more were pouring through the small circular hole in the ceiling whence it emerged, so that with their weight the bell was beginning to sway.

Hark! It had swayed till the clapper had touched the bell. The sound was but a tiny one, but the bell was only beginning to sway, and it would increase.

At the sound the Judge, who had been keeping his eyes fixed on Malcolmson, looked up, and a scowl of diabolical anger overspread his face. His eyes fairly glowed like hot coals, and he stamped his foot with a sound that seemed to make the house shake. A dreadful peel of thunder broke overhead as he raised the rope again, while the rats kept running up and down the rope as though working against time. This time, instead of throwing it, he drew close to his victim, and held open the noose as he approached. As he came close there seemed something paralyzing in his very presence, and Malcolmson stood rigid as a corpse. He felt the Judge's icy fingers touch his throat as he adjusted the rope. The noose tightened—tightened. Then the Judge, taking the rigid form of the student in his arms, carried him over and placed him standing in the oak chair, and stepping up beside him, put his hand up and caught the end of the swaying rope of the alarm bell. As he raised his hand the rats fled squeaking, and slipped through the hole in the ceiling. Taking the end of the noose which was round Malcolmson's neck he tied it to the hanging bell rope, and then descending pulled away the chair.

When the alarm bell of the Judge's House began to sound a crowd soon assembled. Lights and torches of various kinds

appeared, and soon a silent crowd was hurrying to the spot. They knocked loudly at the door, but there was no reply. Then they burst in the door, and poured into the great dining room, the doctor at the head.

There at the end of the rope of the great alarm bell hung the body of the student, and on the face of the Judge in the picture was a malignant smile.

BAD MEDICINE

by JOHN SKERCHOCK

Philo the drooling monster
lived in the slums
and frolicked in the sewer pipes. . . .

Philo lived in the sewers beneath the city. Not particularly because he wanted to, but because he was a monster and monsters often chose sewers to live in. Philo liked it there because nobody ever bothered him. But Philo had a problem; he was a *junkie.* Philo was hooked on coke, hash, and heroin, and it wasn't his fault. The slimy little bugger got that way from dining on the human refuse he found in back alleys and gutters where no sane human would willingly venture.

Philo definitely had a problem, and that made him mad, happy, sad, horny, depressed—depending on what drug worked its voodoo on him at the time. Being a junkie certainly didn't make him feel too good—at least most of the time—especially when his mind wasn't dwelling on where he'd find the next piece of juicy flesh to warm his belly, what the sunlight really felt like on his scales, or if the color red smelled as good as it looked.

Monsters don't normally get high. Philo knew this and didn't know what he'd tell a fellow monster, on one of those rare occasions that he happened to meet one (so few of them haunt the sewers anymore since people began flushing alligators down their drains), about being high. Monsters don't normally use their feelings. They interfere with the purpose of being a monster—scaring little children and eating the unsuspecting—so that most monsters ignore feelings and pretend they don't exist, just like people pretend that monsters don't exist. So Philo had a difficult time adjusting to the strange feeling of being high.

Philo wandered the dark dank corridors of the sewer, his claws sliding off the slime-covered walls, his feet splashing in the watery filth that forever flowed through the endless tunnels.

Philo's head throbbed loudly for the millionth time that day. He winced noticeably. The nerves in his fingertips emitted an occasional scream of agony that coincided with the beginning of each headache. His feet, underwater for three quarters of his natural life, began to cry for air, the microscopic pores in the skin under his scales suffocating as the bizarre combination of drugs in Philo's system wreaked deadly havoc. Philo had no doubt about it. His mind, however small it was for a creature of his size, made up. He needed help! Philo had to get to a doctor soon or his insides would explode—starting with his splitting skull and finishing with the inflamed webbing between his toes.

The doctor didn't have the nicest office, but Philo didn't care, since he spent the bulk of his life roaming sewers. It wasn't much of an office at all, and it was far from the ritzy part of town. The office was the back room of a condemned building near one of the back alleys in a condemned neighborhood where Philo usually hunted for food.

Philo had once heard of the place from one of his many dinners. It was known as "Doc's Place," and Philo's dinner on that night had been a recent visitor of Doc's. From what Philo could figure out, Doc worked miracles. The little man said, "Doc's Place will do you right. No bad medicine there." Doc had made Philo's dinner feel so good the poor human never screamed when the claws tore him open. He didn't even whimper. He laughed! He laughed as if a bag of feathers were tickling his stomach. Philo knew what that felt like because he had swallowed a bag of feathers once, by mistake, in his younger days when he was just learning to assert himself as a monster. And Philo laughed too, shortly after he devoured the little man. Eating him made Philo feel like he was floating on a cloud. Philo remembered that the last two meals he had encountered in this part of town had also made him feel good. Admittedly they were mostly skin and bone, but so damned sweet! Philo reasoned that Doc had been responsible for those delicious, euphoric treats. That's when Philo decided to pay Doc a personal visit.

Philo found Doc crouching behind some old boxes under a small wooden table in a corner of the room. Papers and scraps of metal littered the floor. Doc had been leaning over the table concentrating on a glass vial of blue liquid bubbling over the flame of a Bunsen burner. That was before Philo smashed down the

door to get in (Philo had no conception of doorknobs, thinking them simply odd pieces of ornamentation). As Philo entered, Doc looked up in alarm and screamed. Philo saw Doc's bald head turn bone white as he dived for the nearest hiding place.

"N-no, don't hurt me, please," Doc said, trying not to look at the monster. Doc shook like the rails under a speeding train.

Philo smiled, or curved his thin lips in what he thought was a smile. To Doc it looked like Philo was getting ready to have him for lunch.

"Heh-help me feel good. I . . . hurt." Philo's voice hissed like steam.

"Huh?" Doc shook his head.

"Want to feel good. P-please."

Doc climbed slowly to his feet. Unconsciously he brushed dust from his trousers. Upright again, balancing against the table, Doc looked into the yellow, bloodshot eyes of the monster. Monster? Doc saw himself, grey and desperate, selling crank, speed, PCP, Motley's one hundred proof grain, to losers and low-lifes for the fast buck. Long ago he hoped to hit it big competing against the high-class pushers who supplied to lawyers and movie stars. Unfortunately for Doc, reality shattered those fragile dreams like glass when he became hooked himself. Hooked hard, so hard that he couldn't be at all sure that he wasn't tripping now. After all, he was face-to-chin with a huge, scaly monster complete with sharp claws and dripping fangs (and everyone knows there's no such thing), that was asking him for a fix. Doc pinched himself, but that didn't help. He didn't know if the pain he felt was part of the illusion, his subconscious trying to pull him back to reality, or reality making its mark felt.

The old man sighed. What did he have to lose? He could play out the fantasy, if that's what it was, and get it over with. He could ignore it and hope the monster would go away. He could ignore it and, if the monster was real, suffer the consequences. Or, and he thought this best, he could go along with the illusion. After all, if the monster was real (and it was becoming more real with every passing second as the fetid odor of sewage began to overthrow the natural stench of decay that permeated the room) it wouldn't be good politics to argue with the monster, especially when the creature possessed six-inch claws.

"Very well," he said. "How can I help you?"

"S-something. S-something to feel good."

Doc scanned the room. His eyes fell upon the remains of his experiment where it lay spilled over the table and onto the floor. He reached down and picked up a plastic bag filled with white powder. Doc was about to offer it to the creature to sniff but quickly realized that the thing had no nostrils that he could see. Doc then produced a large silver spoon from inside his jacket. He scooped up some of the powder and held it over the dancing flame of the still-lit Bunsen burner. Since gas was very difficult to find in condemned buildings, Doc imported it in small green canisters. He noticed the flame was no longer steady, which meant the gas was almost gone, so he had to hurry.

The powdery mixture soon turned to liquid. When it started to boil Doc removed the spoon from the flame and sucked the liquid up with a syringe, until the syringe was full.

Philo watched with mild curiosity and inflaming pain. He hoped Doc had understood his request (Philo was the first to admit that he wasn't too well versed in human languages), but he was growing impatient. The pain made each second an eternity. Philo began to have doubts about Doc's abilities; maybe he'd make a better meal. Before Philo could make up his mind on whether or not to give Doc any more time, the old man had turned to Philo with the syringe held out and ready. Philo stared, not understanding.

"This might hurt for a minute or two, until the drug takes affect," Doc said cautiously.

Philo grunted.

Doc looked at the monster, wondering where to stick the needle. He studied the blue-green scales and knew they'd repel the sharp point. Finally Doc decided on a favorite spot of his—between the toes. He stooped to inject the needle into the delicate tissue at the base of the webbing between the monster's toes.

Philo stepped back apprehensively, then stood as still as his shaking body would permit while Doc inserted the needle. Philo felt nothing. Nothing, at least, compared to the spasms of pain erupting at various points throughout his body.

"There," said Doc drawing back. "That should do it. I gave you a monst—er—massive dose." He caught himself, not wanting to offend the thing. "You should be feeling fine in no time."

Again Philo attempted to smile. He felt the mild tingling start in his left foot around the area of the injection. The tingling found his veins and quickly followed the myriad path throughout his

huge form. Doc's magic liquid erased the pain. It lightly numbed, sort of tickled as it flowed through him. Philo was soon nodding approval to Doc.

Doc wiped a band of sweat from his forehead. He needed a fix, too. Doc soon had another syringe filled with the magical liquid.

"My turn," he said, and quickly popped the needle into a pale vein in his arm.

The syringe emptied quickly, and soon Doc was feeling very fine. Philo no longer looked like such a monster. He began to glow yellow at the edges and his scales took on the appearance of a blue three-piece suit with matching tie. Doc laughed. Flowers burst around the periphery of his vision.

Philo looked on, not quite understanding, definitely not caring to. He felt good. The pain had fled his body for parts unknown, and it was time to go. Time to return to the sewers. But what if the pain returned? Philo surprised himself with the thought because he seldom thought of anything other than when to eat. His stomach wrenched. Suddenly Philo didn't feel too good. The thought of that horrible pain returning to plague him had ruined his magic feeling.

Just as fast Philo came up with an idea.

"More," he groaned. "Much more. Get rid of pain forever."

Doc, grinning, agreed. Can a monster OD? He had just enough gas left for one super-fix. He filled the spoon to overflowing. Before melting the contents he searched through the pockets of an overcoat that hung from a peg on what was left of the door. He found it, a large hypo, almost twice as large as the one they had been using. Doc only used it for very special clients: those who could afford the trip, and those who didn't care if they came back.

Doc melted the powder for a third time and then a fourth to fill the syringe. A few drops were lost to evaporation in green flashes above the dying flame. The gas was gone, but the needle was ready.

"This will put you away. You won't feel pain again." Doc smiled to himself, wondering how much a museum would pay for the monster's remains.

Again the needle stuck the flesh between Philo's toes. Again Philo felt the tingling, but it was much stronger. It itched. The liquid flew through his veins like water surging from a spring

flood. It burned like fire, cooled like ice. Philo doubled over clutching his gut. It was an involuntary movement, and he fought to control it. But much of what he wanted to do was forbidden him as the drug took its hold. Philo forgot how to breathe, but breathed anyway. He lost his eyesight twice. He ears were out of sync, and his taste buds wouldn't. They just ... wouldn't.

Suddenly the magic hit his brain. Philo could see, brightly. Stars in blue and orange graced his vision, rainbows in shades of pink, rabbits indoors. His monster flesh felt warm all over and smelled of roses. Blossoms shot out from under his scales, popping open to display golden petals.

Doc gaped, numb beyond belief at what he saw. The effect of the drugs on him as well as their effect on the monster played havoc with what little was left of Doc's reason. The scene that raced past his eyes was like that of a nature film where flowers sprout from seeds to blossoms and die all in just a few seconds.

Philo laughed, or attempted to laugh, he couldn't be sure. He knew he felt good, more than good. Fantastic! He somehow knew, too, that he would *never* hurt again. Doc had worked a miracle! The bad medicine had been expelled for good.

In his monster's way, Philo wanted to show his appreciation to the one who had saved him. But not being too familiar with human customs, the only thing Philo could think of was to simply pat Doc gently on the back and leave. However, Philo's perception of a gentle pat and Doc's perception of a gentle pat (adding, too, that both were influenced by the drugs coursing their systems) would have been found by even the most uninformed as being so far apart as to constitute a gap in human-monster relationships. The gentle pat that Philo imparted on Doc before he left the musty old room slammed Doc face down to the floor, face caved-in, and dead.

Philo left the little room for his home in the sewers. He felt great. Tomorrow he'd move to the ritzy part of town and begin to live it up. If he knew how, Philo thought, he'd whistle.

Deadtime Story

by DENNIS ETCHISON

The telephone receiver swirled with a sound like static wind; Shaun's ear felt as though it had been kissed by cold, dead lips. "Did you think we would forget?" it asked him.

From the novel *Darkside*, due out in October from Berkley Books.

His name was Shaun and he worked at the Stop 'N Start Market, the afternoon shift. It was only thirty hours a week but it would be enough to pay his first year at Santa Monica College – as long as he could take living at home, that is. Somehow he managed to schedule all his courses before noon, no mean feat in itself; that left him exactly one hour. He would bolt from his last class at the bell, skipping lunch in order to stop by the campus library, then hoof it down Pico to Twenty-sixth Street, where he had to change clothes and be ready for the counter at one o'clock sharp. Raphe needed all the help he could get ringing up the Twinkies and Monster Slurps and microwave burritos before the rush was over, and as long as Shaun clocked in on time and made sure that what he put in the safe matched the register tape the job was his. He couldn't afford to blow it, even if the pay was only two bits over minimum wage. Where else could he hope to land a job this close to the junior college?

Today the noon crowd was no better or worse than ever, with the usual crush of school kids dodging petty businessmen in the parking lot, littering the tarmac with beef jerky wrappers and half-empty potato chip bags that crunched under the tires of parking cars like sacks of small bones. Inside he recognized a girl from his freshman English class, about to pay for an avocado-and-sprout sandwich and a can of Tab. He ducked into the storeroom and put on his uniform; by the time he came out she was gone. He was relieved not to have to face her in his cap and smock.

"No more calls on Company time," Raphe told him right off.

"Sure, I know that," said Shaun, snapping open a bag big enough to hold the string cheese and six-pack of Olde English 800 on the counter. "I never use the store phone. When do I have time? Hi, Raphe."

"Six ninety-one," Raphe said to the surfer waiting in line. Then, to Shaun, "You better tell your buddies to cool it. This one, he kept ringin' all morning. The District Rep was even here. It was embarrassin'. We got work t' do, kid, you know?"

"I know." *He,* thought Shaun, and got a funny feeling. He tried to ignore it. "Did they say who it was?"

Raphe rang up a carton of menthol lights and a Playgirl for the next customer, a long-necked accountant from across the street. "No message. If there was I couldn't make it out. Bad connection. But he wouldn't give up."

"Well, he'll call back, I guess, if it was important." *Don't,* Shaun thought, *please don't* . . .

"He better not," said the manager. "You tell him it's Company policy. No personal calls."

"You got it."

By two o'clock the line had thinned out. It would be a while before the first afterschool wave came rolling in, piling up bikes and skateboards at the entrance. Raphe doffed his red-white-and-blue cap and started counting down the drawer for a last cash drop before heading out.

For the moment there was no one else in the store. Shaun took a bottle of sparkling apple juice out of the case and one of Mrs. Chippie's oversized cookies from the jar on the counter, adding the exact change to the drawer before Raphe finished with the bills. As he ate, the boy leaned against the newsrack and idly straightened the stacks of stroke magazines and cheap horror novels with metallic cut-out covers. He never bothered to read the books anymore. They were always the same, about possessed children or possessed houses, one or the other, sometimes both. Who had time to worry about stuff like that? He tipped the bottle back and drained it. This was the first break he'd had all day and the apple juice tasted like gold.

"Hey, Raphe?"

"Ninety-three, ninety-four, ninety-five . . ."

"I was wondering."

"Ninety-eight, ninety-nine, a hundred bucks. Yeah?"

"What'd be my chances of getting in some overtime?"

Raphe frowned. "You seen the rubber bands?"

"Next to the *TV Guides*."

"What do you mean, overtime?"

"Well, I was just thinking. I'm finished with my midterms, and Easter's coming up. I could use the extra money."

"I got Craig down for seven-to-midnight. He never misses, you know that. He needs the money, too."

"I know. But what about the late shift? I could do Fridays easy. No classes on Saturday, so I could sleep in. Unless you already have somebody regular."

Raphe paused with the bundle of bills, staring out at the grey pavement and the battered cars rippling past on the other side of the glass, the mix of faceless strangers jerking along the dirty sidewalk. He raised an eyebrow tiredly.

"How old are you now, kid?"

"Sev—" Shaun caught himself in time. "Eighteen. So?"

"So you don't want the late shift," said Raphe. "The kind that come in here then, they belong in a zoo. Take my word for it. Plus there's always holdups. I don't wanna lose you that way, boy. You need the money that bad, get it from your folks."

"Well, see, I can't do that. They don't even want me in school. My old lady's divorced. She thinks I should go to work full-time."

"You got the rest of your life to worry about full time. Take my advice. Don't drop out. You still got a chance." He deposited the wad of bills, reset the time lock on the safe. "You forgot something."

"I did?"

Raphe reached into the drawer, took out a dollar and some change and slid it across the countertop, then made it up from his own pocket.

"What's that for?"

"Don't worry about it. The Company can afford to buy you lunch once in a while. Those guys they give me for the late shift, if you knew what they get paid.... I don't know where they come from. Wetbacks or somethin'." He stopped before he said too much. "Anyway, this time it's on the house."

"Aw, no, man, I can—"

"Don't argue. It's Stop 'N Start policy." Raphe made his way back to the storeroom. "See you tomorrow, kid. And if Greg is

late, I want to know. Got that?"

"Yeah, sure, Raphe. And thanks. I really—"

The phone rang.

Shaun waited for Raphe to pick it up. But the manager was all the way in the back room. What if it was the main office? Raphe would want to know. The boy hesitated, then answered. "Hello?"

"Hello, who is this?"

He fell back into his role. "Stop 'N Start, We Never Sleep. May I help you?"

"Well, I'll be gonged. I finally got a live one." A chuckle. "And I even recognize your voice."

The line swirled away in a static wind, as if the call were coming from a long way off, then reformed. Now the voice on the other end was close again, the tone so intimate that Shaun's ear twitched as though it had been touched by lips he did not know. He held the receiver an inch away from his face. "You do?"

"Sure. Did you think we forgot?"

Shaun felt a grabbing in his spine. He couldn't shake it off.

"Sorry, but I'm really busy right now. If there's nothing I can—"

"We never forget. We don't like to lose track of our own. You had us lookin' in all the wrong places. What did you have to go and do that for? But I wanted to let you know. *It won't be long now.*"

Shaun ducked down and pretended to restock the cigarettes, taking the phone with him. "Listen, I can't talk. I've got a customer." It was true; he heard the blue dinging of the electric eye at the door. "Besides, you have the wrong person. If this is some kind of joke . . ."

"Joke?" A chuckle. "Is that all it means to you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't you? Well, you didn't think it was a joke that night. Or have you forgotten that, too?"

Shaun peered out between the disposable lighters and the display of Hostess Cupcakes and Mickey Banana Dreams. Suddenly he realized that he had not forgotten, after all. That bored night at the Club, looking for something, anything to give the edge back to his life; the ones he had met there, the beers outside, then the game, and the promises—the pact. In the morning it had seemed like a bad dream. He had hoped it would go away. But now he

knew that it would not. He hadn't forgotten. And neither had they. The refrigerated cases were cool and still, with no movement reflected in the misty glass doors. Had someone come in or not?

"What do you want from me?" he said.

"Nothing that you don't want to give. A guy's only as good as his word. And I always keep mine."

As Shaun stood up he almost lost his balance. His temples throbbed, his kidneys ached, like that afternoon in the seventh grade when he had gone out to fight Billy Black at the edge of the park after school. All that day he had tried not to think about it. But when it was finally time there was nowhere to run. He had wobbled then, too, going out to meet it.

"When?" he said into the mouthpiece.

"Hey, I can't tell you that, now, can I? It would spoil everything."

The line broke again, crackling like cellophane peeled off a pack of cigarettes. Then it steadied and cleared, so near that it might have been coming from inside his own skull.

"Where are you?" said Shaun. "At least tell me that much."

"Close, Shaunie. Closer than you think."

Then there was only the chuckling.

The boy slammed down the phone, missed the cradle the first time, fumbled it back into place. He stood. The seals on the cold cases must have been leaking. The air inside the store was suddenly so chilly that he could hardly breathe.

He leaned out into the aisle. "Can I help you? Is anybody— hello? Is anybody there?"

The long, jagged rows of packaged goods fanned out before him. He couldn't see into more than one row at a time.

There was a rumbling.

He turned. In the parking lot outside, a spotted Chevy Malibu circled the store and dipped out into traffic. Raphe's car.

The manager had walked right by while he was on the phone. He hadn't yelled. He hadn't said anything. Shaun saw him now through the window, hunched resignedly behind the wheel, taking his leave as quietly as a father who has been betrayed by one of his own children. Sorry, Raphe, he thought. It won't happen again, you'll see. The next time that white-haired son of a bitch calls I'll tell him to—

Tell him what?

Give me one more chance, thought Shaun. *They've got to.*

Oh God, please. . .!

"Shit," he said to the empty rows, the echoing store, "I really don't fucking *need* this kind of shit right now, you know?"

He stood there stiffly, one hand on the bundle of *Penthouse Variations*, the new April issue with the girl in the mask and leather bondage suit on the cover, and the fingers of his other hand wrapped around the axe handle on the shelf below the counter, waiting to see who would come into the store next.

At a quarter past seven he caught his regular blue bus eastbound on Pico. As he climbed up, the driver pretended not to know him, as usual. Then the driver said, "Hey there, Willy! What you got for me tonight?"

Shaun glanced back at the stepwell and saw a pale man hauling a plastic trash bag onboard. A white hand wriggled out of a dirty coat sleeve, reached into the bag and came up with three oranges.

"Well now, Willy, I don't know. That'll get you to Rimpeau, but if you want your transfer . . ."

The pale hand felt around under the coat and emerged dangling a Lady Timex wristwatch.

"Good! That's right, you did good." The driver took the watch and laid it out on the dashboard, next to a box of Bic pens, a brand-new pair of men's deodorant socks, a Mexican wrestling magazine, an Atra razor with the price tag still attached, and a copy of a book entitled *How to Profit from Armageddon*. "For that, you can ride anywhere you want. Go on an' sit down. Your friends are here already."

Shaun stepped aside. The pale man shuffled to the back and sat between a shopping bag lady and a young man with no eyebrows.

They were all here, the derelicts, the misfits, the outpatients from the VA hospital who had spent the day at the beach and were now returning to voluntary lockup for the night. They were always the first on at Ocean Avenue, filling up the seats in back as the sun turned bloodshot beyond the end of the pier; the Chicana maids and undocumented restaurant workers boarded farther along the route, next to gremmies with skateboards, students on their way to Westwood, pensioners with senior citizen passes, and even the occasional businessman or teacher whose car had broken down one time too many. Until he could afford wheels of

his own Shaun was forced to ride this last daylight run with them; the Whammo Express, he called it. Again he wondered where some of the ones in back went after dark, what they would do to shelter themselves if they ever missed the final buses from the beach before the fog rolled in. Sometimes he could imagine himself burning out and turning into one of them like so many other kids he saw, and at such times he was almost glad to have the job and school to keep him busy. With a shudder he dropped a token in the fare box and tried to locate an aisle seat.

Tonight the charity cases took up more space than usual, occupying at least a third of the vehicle and forcing the paying passengers forward into every available spot. They're multiplying, he thought. Like coathangers. Like the garbage on the streets. Nobody pays any attention, that's why. And nobody will till it's too late and there's no room for anybody else. Then what?

He found a place next to two dwarfs wearing identical polyester leisure suits and too much aftershave lotion. The twins smiled sweetly at him as he wedged in on the edge of the seat. Across the aisle an old soldier stared straight ahead as the light changed and the bus moved out.

Shaun gripped his knees and tried not to think of anything but the patterns of color sweeping by outside. Fuzzy neon signs were coming on everywhere, bright lettering and beckoning doorways and unreadable billboards, swollen tubs of fast food thrust skyward like offerings to unseen gods, and through it all the moving crowds, heads down and faces hidden. The bus passed a group of curiosity-seekers knotted around a dark, elongated shape at the curb. The boy tensed and braced his back against the seat. It could be any one of them, he thought, as the bus slowed at the intersection. *He* could get on at any time, without warning. Would I even notice him before he works his way back to me and—but the bus driver shifted and rolled past the corner without stopping.

The old soldier began mumbling into a CB microphone. Shaun noticed that the cord dangled in the aisle, unattached.

"Passing Thirty-third Street. Green light. Counted fourteen telephone poles. I forget how many more. Do you have that information? Over."

The boy drew inward, squeezing his hands between his legs. At least this part of the trip was short. If he could make it through the next few minutes he'd be halfway home. Next to him the dwarfs whispered and giggled. He shut his eyes.

Something touched him on the shoulder.

Closer than you think, he remembered, and jumped forward to get away.

A hand pressed him back into the seat. Behind him, a voice spoke directly into his ear.

"Which one?"

He freed himself and half-turned. A male human of indeterminable age was leaning over him, breathing hotly.

"Come on, which one do you want?"

Shaun watched a creased and worn slip of paper unfolded by blackened fingernails.

"My name's Logus. What's yours?"

"Excuse me," said Shaun, "but I have to get off at . . ."

"How about 'Anti-Matter: Does It Matter?' Or 'Heat Death of the Universe.' You look like the type of person who can appreciate that one. Are you a scientist, too? You look like a scientist."

". . . The next stop," said Shaun. The dwarfs were watching him. He scanned the interior of the bus. There was nowhere else to sit.

"Got ten of 'em. Take your pick. Each idea is guaranteed to make you a million dollars. I don't have time myself. Too busy. Right now I'm studying the Heisenberg Principle. Do you know what a Klein bottle is?"

The bus lurched over railroad tracks. Shaun looked out and saw a Polynesian bar, weathered tiki heads guarding the front like relics from a lost civilization, and then the illuminated ideographs of Chinese and Japanese restaurants. Farther on, the marquee of a movie theater and the bloated tenpin sign of the Pickwood Bowl, nakedly white and ready to be knocked down. He grasped the back of the seat in front of him and stood.

"Wait," said the voice, "I've got eight more. How about 'White Holes'? That's a good one. You can give me a down payment. I trust you. No checks, though. You'll make a million dollars, I personally guarantee it!"

Even though a shadowy clot of bodies already waited at the next corner, Shaun yanked the cord. The bus braked with a sound like chalk on a blackboard and they started to force their way in. He saw them pressing onboard, eyes averted so that he could not read their faces. Without waiting he swung across the aisle and out the rear exit.

He hoped the connecting bus would not be late tonight. He

didn't have his schedule—with a deadening feeling he realized that he had left his book bag. Where? Back at the library, maybe, or at the store. Or on the bus. He couldn't remember. He pictured the dwarfs' small hands pawing through his personal effects. But there was no time to worry about that now. Where was the #8?

He stood apart from the crowd and looked south down the dark tunnel of Westwood Boulevard for a sign. But the approaching headlights were all too small and too low. One set caught him full in the face, blinding him momentarily as it yawed around the corner, spotlighting him as clearly as a jackrabbit on a mountain road. He stepped back. But the side of the building offered little protection.

He could join the others at the bench, try to blend in.... Who were they? He couldn't be sure. Their faces were concealed behind turned-up collars. One, a drive-thru cook from the Weenie Wigwam, was munching on a barbecued pork rind. The smell of it blew on the wind. Shaun started to gag.

A dumpy, tattered woman waddled over. Shaun turned away, trying to penetrate the approaching headlights.

"Have you read *The Way of the Wach*?" she said, her voice already rising to a harangue. "It'll help you get a new job. Do you need a raise?"

Shaun ignored her.

"Well sir, you'll get it. Here, read this. It'll help you. Yes, it will. There's always room for one more at the cross!"

He refused the book and hurried across the intersection. He didn't need any of it. He didn't even need the bus. He hadn't remembered to ask for a transfer. But it was just as well. He could walk for now. Besides, this way he would be able to make one more stop. If he dared. What other options did he have? It might be the only chance he would have to make things right. If it was not already too late.

It wasn't far.

The gas station on the corner fired a volley of soft bells at him as cars wheeled past the pumps, their lights wavering coronas through a descending mist. At the Apple Pan customers were lined up three deep behind the stools for pie and hot coffee. He smelled the warmth blowing out the open door as he passed, thought of eating but knew he wouldn't be able to hold it down, not now. He cut left at the first side street and pressed north through a residential neighborhood, moving away from the open boulevard

and the traffic.

He crossed Olympic, then the tracks at Santa Monica Boulevard, moving up Glendon so fast that his ankles began to hurt. As he drew closer he felt less protected than ever despite the darkness, with the Mormon Temple to his right as brightly lighted as a movie set, its golden angel with trumpet raised as if to announce his passage. By the time he hit the alley behind the Club he could no longer be sure that he was not being followed.

There were only a few cars behind the building at this hour, making him even more conspicuous as he crunched over gravel to the rear entrance. But at least it wouldn't be crowded inside. They would hear what he had to say. He opened the door beneath the circular sign, the one that was like a clock face with permanently frozen hands, and forced himself to go in.

It was so early that there were only three or four college couples slumming against one wall; otherwise the room was empty except for Big Vivian and a solitary waitress who sat smoking a cigarette. The turntable in the corner was unattended. There was not even a bouncer at the door to collect admission.

The one with white hair wasn't here yet, either.

Vivian was drying soft drink glasses and setting them out behind the bar with anal-retentive determination.

"Any table," she said without looking up. "The music don't start till nine o'clock. You got ID?"

"I'm not here for the music."

"You got to have ID."

"I don't want to stay. I only came by to talk to . . ."

For the first time it occurred to him that he did not know the name of the person he had come here to see. He knew only the image: the hair, the clothes, the voice. The face was unclear in his memory, if he had ever gotten a close look at it. Or had he blocked it out of his mind along with the rest?

"You remember me, don't you?"

"I don't remember nobody," said the owner. "Four dollars."

"I don't want to go down," he said, pointing at the fire door. "I just want to talk to—to him. It's important."

"Still cost you four dollars."

"You don't understand. I have to talk to him. *I have to.*"

The big woman pressed a button. A red light bulb went on. A bald bouncer came out of the hall, picking his teeth.

Shaun hooked his fingers over the bartop and hauled himself closer.

"Look," he said, "this is private. It's a matter of—" *life and death,* he thought, but couldn't say it. "It's between him and me. Are you gonna let me talk to him or not?"

"Who?"

"You know who I mean."

The bouncer started over.

"Ain't nobody here yet." The big woman reamed out another glass with her towel and eyed the boy. She sized him up, then waved the bouncer off. "Go on home, come back later when—"

"I can't. Don't you get it? I have to talk to him first. I—I have to tell him something."

He couldn't give up. He considered rushing the fire door. But the bouncer had moved over, blocking the way. It was too late. It had always been too late.

"Give him a message, then. Can you do that for me?"

The woman stared him down.

"Tell him it's off. The whole thing. Here." He grabbed a cocktail napkin, started to scrawl a note with his felt-tip highlighter, the only pen he could find. But the letters came out faint and the napkin was wet; the ghostly letters bled and ran together. "Tell him Shaun was here. S-H-A-U-N. Say that I changed my mind. Do you understand? *Please?*"

She nodded in a way that might have meant anything. One thing was clear. He had been dismissed. She did not look at him again as she returned to her fragile, spotless glasses.

He left the room exactly as he had found it. Nothing was changed. The couples against the wall were sipping something green and flirting with each others' dates as if there was all the time in the world. Maybe there was, for them. They did not notice him leave. Nobody did. He might not have come in at all.

A fine mist had settled in the lot, coating the stones with slime and turning the trees into giant mushrooms grown up out of the ground while he was inside. At the end of the alley the mist thickened into a fog, masking the traffic that passed on the boulevard as if it did not exist. A distant stoplight blinked its warning at him, winking like a red eye behind spun glass.

Anyone could be out there, waiting. The fogbound street was white as an ice gauntlet, a glacial tunnel where nothing would survive except the most primitive elements. How was he going to

get home now? The bus would never see him standing at the corner, and it only ran to Sunset and Beverly Glen anyway. He would still have to walk up the canyon. Even tonight.

He could call somebody.

But who? Who did he know with a car who would come out and get him on a night like this? He gave up on that line of thought. If he had any real friends he would never have gone near the Club the first time.

His mother? No way. She would be dead drunk in front of the tv, as usual. And God only knew where his father was.

What do people in the movies do at a time like this? he wondered.

They they take a cab.

Yes!

He opened his wallet and rifled it for his emergency ten dollar bill. *Be there,* he thought. But it wasn't. He had had to spend it on a book for class yesterday. And he didn't get paid again until Friday.

Now I really am up shit creek, he thought. I am totally, royally screwed.

He felt deep down in his pockets. A couple of dollars worth of change, some bus tokens. How far would that get him? Not far enough. Unless—

There might be a way.

It wasn't much, but it was the only way he could think of. He had never done anything like it before. But it was worth a try.

He couldn't see but he made himself keep going through the fog until he hit the car wash a block down. He didn't look to his right or left but kept walking, watching his tennis shoes and the suction-cup prints they made on the cement. He practically bumped into the phone booth. It was where he remembered it. He rattled the door shut and started leafing through the directory.

The yellow pages were soggy and smelled like laundry that has been left in the washing machine too long. Half of the page he was looking for had been ripped out. The only listing he could read was for the Beverly Hills Cab Company.

He kept slugging in cold coins and dialing until he got through.

It took the cab thirty-five minutes to find him there behind the booth, out of sight of the other cars that whispered past like U-boats on patrol. He only showed himself when he saw the

yellow beacon on top. As soon as he got in he locked the door, then told the driver to take him up North Beverly Glen.

The cabby didn't try to fake conversation, which made it easier. Shaun wasn't sure what his own voice would sound like now; it was hard enough to get out the name of the street without stuttering. Judging by the unpronounceable name on the operator's permit, the driver probably did not know more than enough English to get by, anyway.

For the moment the boy was relieved. It seemed so much safer this way, with the windows rolled up and the heater on, the milky colors of a fogged-in Westwood slipping by on the other side of the glass like a faded mural from a circus sideshow. The driver lowered the volume on his squawk box and didn't ask any questions, whipping around corners as if shortcutting a maze he knew by heart. Shaun couldn't get a clear shot of his face in the mirror, but he didn't care. He only wanted to be home.

Not until they had turned up the Glen and were swinging past the market, tires howling, did he remember what he had to do.

"You tell me where, yes?" said the driver.

"Uh, yeah," said Shaun.

He counted the curves as they pressed higher into the canyon, the few weak streetlights streaking past like melting stars, the untrimmed branches of wild oaks and elms clawing at the car doors. He let the driver pass Chrysanthemum Lane, ready to speak up only when the Café Four Oaks came into view. The signals at Beverly Glen Place would be set on rest-in-red so he knew they had to come to a stop.

"Take a left here," Shaun told him.

"Here?" The turn forked away in three directions, each as dark as a mine shaft.

"Here. See the sign? My house is—is over on Scenario Lane. The one with the porchlight." It was the neighborhood rec center, a converted private residence, but the driver wouldn't know the difference. "Yeah, that one."

The meter totaled as much as Shaun made in three hours at the Stop 'N Start. He got out right away and went into a routine with the wallet. He held the billfold open in front of his face and pretended to count.

"Wow," he said, "I thought I had more than that."

The driver cleared his throat.

"Look, I'll go in the house and get the rest of the money.

It's in my other pants. I'll be right back, okay?"

The CB speaker came on again with muffled directions to a long-distance fare. The driver checked his watch. Then he leaned his head out and took a good look at Shaun.

"Can't wait very much long. Right?"

"Right." Shaun flashed a phony smile that still had enough of the old high school charm left to do the trick.

Nod, stuff the wallet in your back pocket and start walking like you know where you're going, he told himself. He felt the headlights on his back as he took out his keys and disappeared around the side of the small house. Immediately he cut across the lot and through the next yard. Presently the sound of the idling taxi was only one more cricket in the night.

He didn't like stiffing the guy, but what else could he do? He would worry about it later, inside. He could mail him the money. Yeah, sure, address it to the cab company with the driver's name, if he could remember it. A weird name, not from anywhere around here, African or Asian or something like that. They would know who he meant.

After a while the cabby started in with his honking, then packed it in when somebody opened a bedroom window and made an impossible anatomical suggestion. A minute later Shaun heard the car gun through a J-turn and roar back down the canyon, radials screaming.

His heart finally began to slow down.

He came out onto the lane and backtracked to the signal. All he had to do now was make a right onto Beverly Glen and walk about two hundred feet and he'd be home. He smiled, relaxing. The paranoia he had felt earlier dissipated with his breath on the air as he smelled the night-blooming jasmine, felt the familiar cracks in the sidewalk under his rubber soles, the same sidewalk he had run up and down so many times as a kid, the sidewalk that never failed to lead him to his house and his room and all the things that kept him safe.

He came to the sign at the corner, the one with the cartoon of a burglar inside a circle with a diagonal line across it and the words WARNING: THIS AREA PATROLLED BY NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH. That made him feel a little bit better. Even the traffic light showed him a reassuring yellow glow. Suddenly he wanted to run the rest of the way, through the café lot and around the last curve, no longer motivated by fear but eager to be home so that he could

put everything that had happened behind him.

He started down Beverly Glen Boulevard, silent and empty of traffic, the foggy tops of the peach trees and Chinese plums blurry as Christmas firs draped with angel hair.

And stopped.

There, in the restaurant patio, next to the Four Oaks sign, was a tall figure.

"Huh," he said to himself, remembering that it was nothing more than the stunted remnant of the massive oak that gave the café its name. It had spooked him more than once as a child. But not anymore.

Just the same he walked rather than ran, stepping lightly so as not to make too much noise, reminding himself all the way how foolish he was being. He tried to see it for what it was. A game, nothing more serious than those Halloween ghost stories he used to tease himself with, the shiver that was only fun when it got out of control. But there was no time for any of that from now on. There was nothing in the dark that didn't show. He knew that, he knew it was true.

He tightrope-walked the curb, whistling in the dark, a few bars of "Missing You." He had almost made it to the fence when he heard the song completed for him by a whistling that was not his own.

It was an echo, yes, that was it, the way sounds bounced off the hill behind the reservoir, especially with the canyon so quiet right now, and the fog—

No way.

The tree was still there in the patio. It hadn't moved.

"Hi, Shaunie!"

"Who's there?" he said, backing off the curb.

"It's only me," said the voice. And giggled.

He looked back as the tree changed shape through the fog, crossing the patio, coming this way.

He needed to get past the fence. Then there would only be another hundred feet to go. He could make it in seconds.

"Shaunie," said the voice again. It was small, girlish. It was coming from the other side.

"Melissa? Is that you?"

Yes, he knew that voice. It was the little girl from next door. She wouldn't leave him alone. She and her friends. The tree was in the patio, after all.

"God damn it, Melissa, where are you? Get out here where I can see you!"

"We can't come out, Shaun. We're in our nighties." More giggling. "We're having a slumber party. Do you want to come?"

"Stacey? Jennifer?" He tried to remember the rest of their names. "Go back to bed, all of you. Stop bugging people. Don't you have anything better to do?"

"No."

A head appeared at the top of the fence, freckled and supported by folded elbows.

"Stacey has something to tell you. *Don't* you, Stace?" Melissa was jerked from below, as if by an angry dog. "Cut it out, you guys! What are you, a bunch of queers? Sorry, Shaun, but some people around here are very immature. Anyway, Stacey? she likes you."

"I do not!" said a horrified voice.

"Never mind her. She lies like a rug." Melissa's face seemed to hover disembodied, angelic in the floating mist. "Anyway, we're going in the hot tub later. Do you want to come o-ver?"

"Why don't you pick on somebody your own size?" he told her.

"I'm thirteen."

"You're eleven."

"Well, I'm almost twelve. I got a new bathing suit, a two-piece. Don't you want to see it?"

"Good night, little girl. Your mother's calling you."

"Fuck you, Shaun!"

"You wish. Now go back to bed where you belong, like a good kid."

He walked away.

"Melissa's the one who likes you!" a voice called after him. "She says you're cute! She wants to—"

"I do not!"

He heard them squabbling like cats. Kids, he thought. That Melissa ... maybe in three or four more years. But not now. No way.

He rounded the last stretch, saw the lot full of weeds, his mailbox leaning precariously by the driveway, the relentless growth of bamboo blocking any view of the house from the street. The growth was so dense that it formed a solid barrier; no one passing by would have any idea that a house was there unless

they knew where he lived. That was the way his mother wanted it. And tonight he didn't mind.

As he crossed the driveway, dry leaves broke underfoot. He kicked to shake them off.

But there were no leaves in his driveway.

He hesitated at the bottom of the stone steps, listening. The fog blew, moving patches of light and darkness across the glen, the vacant lot, the hillside behind the bamboo, just as it had back in the patio. He was being followed, all right—by smoke ghosts. Nothing more than that. The sound of leaves? That would be the raccoons coming down to forage under cover of nightfall. He heard them all the time. He had always heard them. So what?

The fog drifted, leaving a patch of white so clear against the dark that it looked like a human figure at the top of the steps. He waited for the shape to blow on.

It did not.

"Mom? What are you doing out here? You'll catch cold. What's the matter? I'm all right. Sorry I'm late. Mom?"

No answer.

It was the kids again, then. One of them. It had to be Melissa. He could tell by the long lines of the nightgown, solid white in the darkness.

"All right, who told you you could come over here? I'm tired. I don't have time for your games. Didn't anyone ever tell you about private property? If you don't go home right now I'll— Melissa? Do you hear me?"

"Shaunie?"

The voice was not high-pitched this time. Not at all.

A car sped around the bend, its tires making a tearing sound. Headlights swept the driveway and the wall of bamboo with twin high-beams, cushioned by the fog but bright enough to outline something at the top of the steps. Then the car was gone. But not before Shaun had time to see what was there, what was really there.

A tall figure dressed in white, arms outstretched.

As Shaun gaped, unable to move, the figure raised a forefinger and made a cutting motion across its throat.

Then it smiled, eyes flashing with a light of their own that shone coldly down the steps and over the boy's startled but unsurprised face, freezing him where he stood.

Later, when the moon was high, the fog continued to hang over Beverly Glen like a shroud.

It remained especially thick in one backyard where, behind a fence, new vapor was rising in a circular cloud.

The little girls had come out to play.

Just now a hand, a very small hand, was reaching out of the misty streamers, feeling for the valve that would release more steaming water into the hot tub from the column of pressure that the girls believed ran all the way to the center of the earth. But the valve would not budge; it was so corroded with mineral deposits that it required more strength to turn than Melissa had in both of her hands.

"Leave it go, Melissa."

"It's not hot enough."

"It *is*. It's a hundred-and-five-degrees, that's what the dial says. Me*lis*sa!"

Melissa's hand disappeared as she drifted backward through the warm current. It was almost cool at the surface and yet too hot deep down, though tonight not one of the girls had yet dared to touch bottom. They had changed into their bathing suits and slipped in as quietly as possible, staying close to the edge.

And now the vapor parted as Melissa moved through it, allowing a brief glimpse of the lightly rippled surface. A bubble formed and floated out of sight; they heard it pop in the darkness. Then the steam closed over and there were only the sounds: distant traffic and the clicking of squirrels in the trees, a deep gurgling and, if you listened very closely, a steady hissing that seemed to be near and far away at the same time.

"Is he coming, do you think?" (The voice of Dawn, the ten-year-old.)

"Is who?"

"You know. Shaun."

Melissa sighed, or was it only the hissing? "Whose toe is that? Stay on your own side, will you?"

An acorn fell and struck the ground nearby as the mist drifted unexpectedly, revealing the face of the moon and their thin arms floating on the water. Here a kneecap that was round and white as a cup of snow broke the surface, bobbed and resubmerged; there strings of wet hair flowed out at the waterline around a skinny neck and open mouth.

"He is, I think. I feel like somebody's already watching us."

"Shh," said Melissa, "you want my mom to hear? We're supposed to be asleep, remember? If she finds out we won't ever get another sleep-over." Her hand made a nervous figure-eight in the water.

"I don't care if he comes or not," said Stacey. She arched and floated, paddling in a slow semicircle. "He thinks he's so big."

"I know you do," said Melissa.

"Stacey doesn't mean that," said Jennifer. "She's just having one of her moods."

"Yeah, her stuck-up mood," said Dawn.

"Her mood of getting a period," said Melissa.

They tried to stifle the giggles. A stream of noisy bubbles blew from their mouths.

Melissa said, "Who got out?"

There was the sound of bare feet slapping on the deck.

"Shh! Did you hear that? If my mom—"

The slapping came closer.

The four girls dunked underwater.

After a few seconds a head ventured up, wet hair clinging. The slapping had stopped.

One by one the others came up for air. Melissa pinched her nose to clear it, still holding her body in to the chin as if hiding under a bedsheet. She looked around as the circles of hair on the water drew upward like flowers closing. She listened, then laughed.

"My gosh," she said, "it's only my baby sister!"

"How did she get out?"

"She's lonesome for me. Aren't you, baby?"

"She's afraid the Lost Ones are gonna get her!"

"There's no such thing," Melissa said. She caught the pudgy two-year-old and swung her over the lip of the hot tub.

"Well hi, baby," said Jennifer in that special singsong voice small girls reserve for dolls and smaller children. She and Dawn and Stacey coasted over to Melissa's side. "Where did she come from? She's getting so big!"

"She's so pretty," said Michelle.

"Have you been bad, Farrah?" asked Dawn. "Have you?"

Baby Farrah started to whimper.

Melissa lifted and coddled her. "I think my sister came out for a swimming lesson."

"Can I hold her? Please?"

"Maybe we'll let you and maybe we won't. Isn't that right, baby? If nobody pokes us with their toes."

"I never touched anybody," said Dawn.

"Me neither," said Jennifer.

"Well, don't look at me, you guys," said Stacey.

"Sure, I really believe that." Melissa shivered and lifted her sister all the way in. With a practiced move she skinned the training panties from her sister's legs. The elastic snapped, shooting away into darkness. "I'll dry you off after and Mom'll never know. Okay?" Cradling the baby, she moved to the center. She dunked several times. Her teeth chattered. "I said s-s-stop kicking me, Stacey!"

"I'm *not*."

Melissa drifted to Stacey's side and reached around the baby's body for the valve.

"But it's hot enough al—"

"Is not," said Melissa. "Anyway, it's my tub. I have to make it hot enough for my sister. Then I'll turn on the Jacuzzi. Help me, somebody, will you?"

Stacey added her hands to the wheel. They buoyed together, tugging until it began to move. Then Melissa found the whirlpool switch.

A hiss of tiny bubbles clouded the water.

From across the yard, the sound of the back door opening.

"Quiet," said Melissa, "it's my mom!"

They waited for the door to slam.

Melissa waved in the thickening steam, motioning everyone down. Three heads plopped out of sight. She kissed her sister, took her deepest breath and ducked with the others, holding the baby's face above water.

"MELISSA?"

The spring on the screen door tightened, creaking open another notch.

Melissa struggled to keep her sister's face clear. The baby slipped through her wet hands, surfaced with a splash and began to choke. Melissa pushed her higher, her hands showing above the water.

"FAR-RAH," called the mother.

The cloud of bubbles increased as the jets swelled the pool. A mound of aeration foamed at the center.

The baby slid lower. Melissa's hands gripped tighter.

The water gushed and hissed. Steam snaked into the air. The screen door creaked, creaked again as if ticking the seconds.

At last Melissa came up gasping, hugging her sister against her, flinging water from her hair.

One by one the other heads came up.

"All right, who did that?"

"Shh, Melissa! Your mother—"

"I don't care! It's too late, anyway. Who's doing that? If you don't stop pushing me, Stacey, I'm never going to invite you—"

"But I didn't, Melissa. Somebody's touching me, too."

The hissing grew louder. The water churned in the middle of the tub. There was a leaf, bouncing on the surface. It skimmed the waves like a silvered insect. And then—

There.

A shape.

A white mound came floating up from the bottom, oily bubbles rolling off it. It was solid, still fresh, moon-bleached, smoking. And, though it could not have been thrown into the pool more than a couple of hours earlier, it was now utterly and quite indisputably dead.

"Oh my God," said Melissa, "it—it's Shaun! *He's already here . . .!*"

And then the baby was crying at the top of her lungs and the others were screaming and the back door slammed and more feet came running and it was, it really was too late, after all.

Faced with Blue Eyes, Again

by WARREN ELLIFRITZ

Maggots. Flies. Screwworms. Feasting
on the rotted corpse
of a three-month-old baby.
The bag lady covers it with newspaper,
moves on to the next garbage can.

Ugly.

Thousands of insects feasting on the rotted corpse of a three-month-old baby. Maggots. Flies. Screwworms. She looks at it and studies. Death from a blow to the head. Her friend from the Outer Planes finds it disgusting. No, she says to her only companions, her friends within her head; it is natural.

She covers it with newspaper, moves on to the next trashcan. Empty containers of soup, dogfood. She thinks, *No one here owns a dog.* The cans are licked clean. An empty box of Tide sits nearby. *Go ahead, starve; but God forbid your clothes are dirty.*

She pulls out a broken coffee mug. She sees imbedded lipstick on the rim. Overused in this cheap building. She knows the profession of the owner, knows her rates by the shape of the lips. Pressed from abuse—twenty dollars a fuck, ten a blowjob. She thinks of an old joke: it's a living. Her friend from the Parallel Universe laughs.

The trashmen come. They push her out of the way, ignore her. She keeps the mug. "You will die," she tells one of the trashmen. It is a fact. "Beat it, lady," he replies. Later, he will tell his wife. It will bother him for a week, but he will forget. Then he will die, but not for another eight years. It is a fact.

She moves on. The trash continues. Her life continues.

It is the next spring. Another winter is gone. She keeps no count; numbers are often bothersome and useless. The broken mug has been replaced over and again in the past year. She has a new one. A clean white coffee cup, enamel. Thrown out by mistake. It has made her smile.

She walks down an alley, knows the stretch; knows the building, knows the people by their garbage. But this one stands out. It has a history. A can. Hidden to the world, ominous to her. She sees it; she senses: it is that time of the year. Her friend from the Outer Planes agrees.

Slowly she opens the lid. There is the smell of death. Unnoticed by the trashmen, whose lives are surrounded by the scent of the unwanted. Her brittle, experienced fingers tear open a plastic bag.

She is not appalled. Her friend from the Outer Planes is revolted.

The baby looks barely three months into life. Now it lays in silence, its beauty shattered by a crack in its skull. It is fresh; the insects have not moved in. Numbers are often useless, but she has common sense. This is the third child, the third life to be stolen from birth, the third spring she has seen death in the can. She realizes she must do something.

She acts.

She covers the body with newspaper, moves on to the next can. Cleaned out containers of precious pork and beans. Empty bottles of beer; she collects them, four of them. A nickel a piece deposit. Howard will be pleased, she thinks. Howard runs the deli. Later that day he will shoo her away, as he does every day.

It is cold. Another winter blows its fury. She is cold, but she thinks of roses and hyacinths. Warmth. She does not anticipate spring. It is only for the day that she worries. Tomorrow will come. What is time?

She finds half of a roast beef sandwich. Her taste buds react happily. She savors the temporary flavor. A rare treat. She is tired of the daily soup. She chases it with water from her canteen. The water is stagnant, icy cold; but the canteen stores plenty. She has given up her mugs for convenience. She is still only human.

She rewraps her blanket around herself. It is old, worn. From deep in the files of her sharpened mind comes a message. Spring is soon. Now it is time.

She goes to the building. Next door is the alley; she does not sense death. She enters the building.

It is a terrible place. A firetrap run by monstrous slumlords. The walls are tattered paint. The hallway is dark. Lifeless lightbulbs lie useless in their sockets. She goes up the steps to the second floor. A cockroach scrambles up the wall next to her face. She stops, watches it, moves on.

A keen eye and good second sight lead her to the right room. She knows. Her friend from the Parallel Universe agrees. From inside the room, there is the sound of an infant crying.

She knocks.

There is a scattering of noise: panic. "What is it?" a woman's frail voice hollers. Then to the wailing baby the frail woman says, "Shut up! Shut up!"

She knocks again.

"You have a baby," she tells the woman matter-of-factly.

"Go away," the woman replies, angered.

"You have a baby," she tells the woman once again.

There is silence. Quiet footsteps. A bolt unlocks, then another. A chain rattles. The door opens.

"You not police!" the woman yells, surprised, then quickly pushes the door shut . . .

. . . but before it closes, she puts her water canteen between the door and the wall. She is swift. The door smacks it, lodges partially open.

"I must come in!" she tells the woman.

The frail woman gives in. The door opens fully. The woman is short, thin; greasy black hair falls to her waist like flowing oil. The apartment is a mess, but she doesn't judge the woman on that; trash is her life. She enters. In the corner of the room there is a beaten old crib. In it lies a baby, healthy and beautiful. The baby sees her, smiles peacefully and wonderfully. His eyes are blue.

"How much do you want?" the frail woman asks scathingly.

She replies, "I only want to know: why do you take life?"

The frail woman suddenly screams. "It not mine! No father! I swear it not mine!" And in a flash the woman is over the crib. "I don't want *it!* Make it stop happening to me! I don't want *it!*" And there is something about the way she says "it" as she brings the rusted lug wrench down onto the baby's head that does not sound of hatred, or of disgust, but rather it sounds of pure panic,

as if she fully understands what she is doing and what it means, but she simply cannot bear the thought of being the mother to this child.

The frail woman drops the wrench, huddles in the corner of the room and cries.

She looks at the woman, then back at the dead, bloodied baby. A message was flashed, but she has not yet interpreted it. She leaves the room, closes the door behind her. There is nothing she can do. She realizes, as her sense of time span gathers a new and broader momentum as if its restricting barriers had burst, that this will happen again. Perhaps next year she will try earlier, eventually pinpoint the day in the early winter that the frail woman gives birth and be there. She turns to her friends from the other worlds for agreement; but there is no response. The voices have gone. She realizes suddenly that she is alone, that the future is the *only* thing she has. And the days seem to stretch out before her with more meaning, tomorrow and the next day bring more of a challenge. A bright fresh feeling has spread over her. Something in the baby's eyes as he glanced at her standing in the doorway, before his death. A message: he understands, and he is patient.

She lets the thought slide. She opens her canteen, puts it to her lips, drinks. In her parched, ready throat she tastes the unmistakable tang of sweet wine....

STUD

by RAY RUSSELL

Some days, a GUY just can't win for losing.

Lew Morley, having located his vehicle in the company parking maze, got into it, buckled his belt, and locked his doors, confident that he had satisfied the machine's high safety standards. Then he touched the ignition key and *jumped*—for he had received a mild electric shock. "What did I do *now?*" he wondered silently.

As if in reply, the DAD spoke in deep accents: "Sunglasses, son."

"Oh, yeah, right," Lew muttered. It was a bright day, and the CAR's computer had picked up on that, just as its sensors had known he wasn't wearing his shades, so the Driver Admonition Device, after giving him a gently punitive shock, had pointed out the oversight in paternal tones, and the City-Adjusted Runabout had refused to start until he had corrected the discrepancy. Now, sunglasses on, Lew successfully started the CAR and was soon out of the parking facility and on the road.

Less than ten minutes later, he sneaked a peek at the gauge, and discovered he was almost out of GAS. Luckily, there was a station ahead, so he pulled up to the pumps and told the attendant to "Fill 'er up." It was an extravagant gesture, what with Government Approved Seawater going for twenty dollars a gallon, but Lew felt like splurging. Even so, twenty bucks! Just for desalinated seawater! So *what* if it was rich in deuterium, the heavy-hydrogen fuel used by the new fusion engines: did it have to cost an arm and a leg? Sometimes, Lew felt like selling his CAR and taking a CAB to work. It was a lot cheaper, but he hated being jostled by crowds, and he was never able to get a seat on those Completely Automated Buses.

The more he thought about it, the angrier he grew. By the

time he paid the exorbitant GAS charge and got back on the road, he was red-faced, slit-eyed and growling to himself. Sure enough, a siren began to wail, and a glance in the mirror told him a cycle COP was waving him over. Lew obediently pulled over and cut the engine.

The COP climbed off his bike and sauntered up to Lew. He was young, friendly, and polite, handsome in his blue uniform and polished boots. "Hi, there," he said with a smile.

"Hi," said Lew, weakly returning the smile. "Not speeding, was I?"

"No, no," replied the COP. "But you sure are mad at someone, aren't you?"

"Who, me?"

"Oh, come on, sir. The CAR doesn't make mistakes. Its chemo-sensors sniffed it. Increased adrenalin production, among other things. It flashed its danger lights at me as you went by. Standard equipment on these new models. You *do* realize, don't you, that you're experiencing a high degree of hostility? Could lead to reckless driving, make you a hazard to yourself and a lot of other innocent people."

"I guess you're right," Lew admitted.

"Want to talk about it? I'm certified, you know." That he was: his shoulder patch bore the proud word COP, in gold. He was a Certified Outdoor Psychiatrist, all right.

Lew said, "Oh, it's just the usual, Doc. Monday morning hassle at the job, then the CAR gave me a hard time, and the damn prices at the GAS pumps . . ."

The COP nodded sympathetically. "Tell you what. I'm not going to write you out a ticket. You just sit here a few minutes, calm down, get your adrenalin back to normal, have a little snort to help you unwind. Do you have some RUM in your GLOVE compartment?"

"Are you kidding?" It was a punishable offense *not* to have any, and Lew was no fool, he didn't want to land in the SLAMS. From what he'd heard, those rehabilitation facilities run by the State-Legislated Anarchist-Management Service were no picnic.

"Are you going straight HOME?" asked the COP.

"I guess so," Lew said indecisively.

"Why don't you drop off first for a quickie?" the COP advised, with a macho wink. "You do have a GIRL, don't you?"

"Of course! What do you think I am, a FAG?"

"No offense," said the COP. "A fellow doesn't have to be a Federally Authorized Gay not to have a cute little Government Inspected Regulation Ladylove stashed away somewhere."

"Well," said Lew, "maybe I will drop in on Cheryl for a while, at that."

"Atta boy!" said the COP, and roared away on his cycle.

Lew reached into the Government Licensed Overall Variable Emergency compartment and pulled out a bottle of dark liquid labelled "RUM." He took a long swig. Ah, he felt better already. He sat there at the roadside a few more minutes, watching the others CARs whiz by. He took a second jolt of the Regulated Unwinder Medication. Then, hoping his adrenalin count had dropped low enough, he returned the non-alcoholic tranquilizer to the GLOVE compartment, started the CAR and pulled smoothly onto the road.

Should he pay a call on Cheryl? She was a wonderful GIRL, great in the Standard Accepted Copulation Kip, but somehow he felt he should go directly HOME. Edna was waiting for him. She was a good woman, and she worked hard making their Householder-Owned Marital Establishment cozy. He could see Cheryl over the weekend.

"Edna?" he called as he let himself into their comfy little HOME. "I'm back. Honey? You here?" She wasn't in the kitchen. She wasn't in the living room.

She was upstairs—in bed with a good-looking young man of familiar appearance. *"You!"* exclaimed Lew.

"Well," said his wife's lover, "I thought you'd be seeing your GIRL. And I'm not only a COP. I also happen to be a Standard-Technique Utility Date."

"Oh, that's all right, then," said Lew.

BRASS

by DAVID J. SCHOW

"Welcome to Darkmoon,"
he said, "browse away."
Above his head someone had mounted
the screaming head of a mummified goat.

Part two of a two-part novella.

Grant fell asleep, and for a few hours found peace. Then the granddaddy of all nightmares smashed into his mind head-on, like a freight train vaporizing a prairie dog transfixed by the high beams. There was nothing he could do.

He had nobody's recommendation to use as a quality filter, and did not consult the yellow pages. He merely cut out of traffic, slewing into a curbspace bordering the first shop he saw. Paint peeled in sharp strips from the billboard overhead. It was lit at night by two senile floods hanging from top on ugly pipe armatures wired into place against the weather and orange with rust.

To Grant, it was an indication the place had been in business awhile.

DARKMOON OCCULT SUPPLIES
TOOLS * LITERATURE * INCUNABULA

The logo was subdued as far as Grant's non-knowledge of such things went—surrounded by a fresco of the usual stars and planetoids in half-eclipse, with elliptical Saturnian rings, fretted with (beams? rays?) lines radiating (force? light?) outward.

Beams of force. Grant felt suddenly idiotic again, and almost gunned the Pinto away from the witchcraft shoppe in embarrass-

ment. On cue, the memory of the dream stopped him, causing his backbone to squirm coldly even in the thick urban heat of summer. His teeth set themselves; his jaw muscles urged a baby headache enthusiastically onward. The Pinto idled dutifully. He smelled, or imagined, the stink of petrochemical fumes making his headache worse. Almost like an omen of inevitability, the car stalled out then, committing him.

He grabbed the fat candle in its paper wrapping from the passenger bucket, along with the graphite-smeared pages of pencil rubbings, and did it.

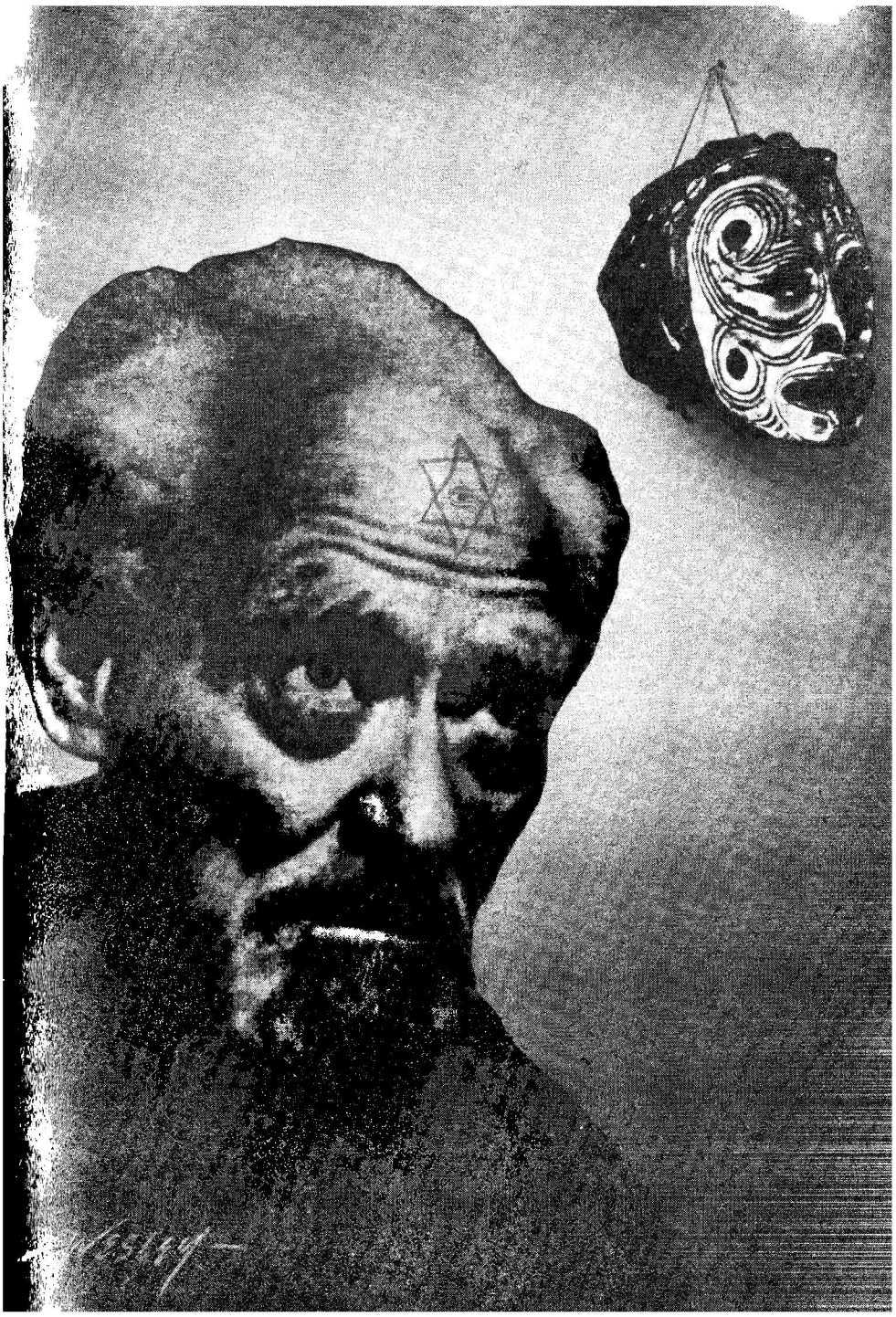
He jolted awake, or dreamed he did, staring into the mirror again. The past played back. "Monty" Mantell, sweating, furtive, rushed up to his Etruscan marble fireplace, mouthing words Grant could not understand beyond identifying their pattern of repetition. He shot them out anxiously, below his breath, in the desperate cadence of the slightly mad, fumbling for a butane cigarette lighter, grabbing the black candle on the mantle. The fat wick touched the fire and sputtered as though wet, at last catching. Sweatdrops of relief broke freely and Grant's father almost smiled, still muttering the incomprehensible litany. His free hand ditched the lighter and went for his coat pocket, digging, still furtively, for something small within. He appeared more normal, more in control now, the image of resourcefulness Grant usually ascribed to his father.

The black candle slipped from his grasp and bounced onto the carpet. He grabbed wildly to intercept and missed; the wick was still improbably alight. He forgot whatever was in his pocket and tried to retrieve the candle. He bent, then fell as the hematoma in his brain burst.

Perhaps he could still see, Grant thought with a shudder. Perhaps his father's wide, unfocused eyes noted, as they fogged over in death, the candle, crisping a brown oval into the new shag carpeting five inches away from his outstretched hand. His final breath eased out in no hurry. The wick extinguished itself. A grey web of smoke undulated toward the ceiling.

The inside of Darkmoon Occult Supplies' front door was festooned with tiny brass bells. Grant's eyes quickly dealt with the chaotic junkyard of merchandise and decoration and zeroed in on the store's only occupant.

"Hey man," said the apparent proprietor, a man with a long ponytail of black hair topped by a French beret. Black leather



vest over a neon-red T-shirt overwhelmed by a black image of a bare-chested, love-beaded Jim Morrison, with the Doors' logo in blocky letters. Black mustache, waxed at the tips. Black goatee. He cupped his hand over the phone receiver crooked into his shoulder and said, "Welcome to Darkmoon. Browse away; I'll catch up with you in a second—"

Grant nodded as a tirade from the phone drew the man back. "No, no, no," he interposed. "You're not listening. Cardamom for love spells you can buy at Lucky's. The supermarket. It's the same as—no, just buy Spice Islands; it's the same stuff. Look, Mrs. Fetters—"

Grant drifted, tuning out the chatter. Darkmoon's ceiling was a good thirty feet from the floor. Stout beams of oily wood were hung with stuffed birds and odd mobiles that revolved sluggishly in the eddies of heat. The entire west wall was absorbed by floor-to-ceiling bookshelves of stained pine, subdivided into categorizations like *Numerology, Astrology, Wicca, Satanism, Voodoo* ... Grant saw a label that said BLANK BOOKS OF ART. The library was split between the old of crusted leather bindings and the new of glossy trade paperbacks. The goateed clerk's voice droned patiently; he had changed topics from cardamom to arrowroot.

A grey anatomy skeleton guarded the corner of the first display case. Within were hundreds of orderly ranks and files of philtres and potions—spellcasting ingredients in cork-stoppered vials of blown glass, like tiny test-tubes; larger, hermetically sealed jars of dull-colored powders. A plastic bag of "dream bones." Joss sticks of consecration incense and bottles of brown oil. The shelves to Grant's right were laden with lanterns, candles, silver knives, small braziers, tools whose purpose was a mystery. Tarot decks carefully wrapped in silk. Beyond the shelves, a rack of tabards—black, white, brown, some silk—and cowled monks' robes with braid. A card near his nose read CHALICE—THURIBLE—ATHAMÉ/SET (READY TO USE): $65.95. There was a "chic shelf" of pop power objects: Ankhs, pyramid necklaces, icons so commercial they were the most familiar items to Grant. A strip of embossed tape on the shelf informed him that jewelry could be inscribed with his Witchcraft Name free of charge with a twenty-five dollar purchase.

Nearer the counter was a thick wooden shelf bearing tarantulas and scorpions encased in lucite, and a dead snake in a rubber lipped bell jar of formaldehyde. Other floating dead things inspected him from their glass coffins. There was a small fireplace

hewn from a block of dirty grey stone. Below the mantle, etched as though worn in by centuries of rain, was the word INRUS. A ratty stuffed goat's head glared with golden eyes from its strategic roost above. It was a ram, Grant saw. Its cornucopian horns had been gilded. Its dead teeth looked plastic; behind them the tongue resembled a piece of stale luncheon meat, petrified.

Across the counter, powerful corporate mojo for Visa, Mastercard, and American Express asserted themselves. Everything surrounding him was priced with those nasty disintegrating pricetags he hated—even the ram's head had one, curling away from the patch of hair it had obviously occupied for years. The cooling fan of the register hummed; the blue digital display glowed. Grant thought abruptly of how the ultrasimplified logos of the Fortune 500, the top corporations in the country, were really modernized mutations of the hex sign Mrs. Saks had sworn by. IBM, Exxon, Randcorp, all used as mastheads a letter or a geometric line design that had undergone decades of refinement and simplification, like a distilling process. Using charge plates in a witchcraft shoppe exemplified the head-on crash of ancient superstition into modern technology—he considered the combination of sorcery and computers, and guessed the slant must have been tried a thousand times by now.

The logo for Calex Corporation was a c inside a C, two letters linked by orthographic projection; two looking like one. Very snazzy industrial fashion. Design of and decision on the logo had encompassed an expenditure (carefully itemized and, of course, wholly deductible) in the neighborhood of twenty-five thousand dollars. How valuable might protection and image be if they boiled away to the same thing?

His imagination jumped ahead to an image of the governing board of Calex chanting the Lord's Prayer backward; all those constipated execs prancing around in the buff and impaling a stray cat on a spike for sacrifice . . . it was beautifully obscene.

". . . but that was Mrs. Fetters making her daily call."

"I'm sorry?" Grant had not even noticed the counterman hanging up. He thought: *You did it again, stupid.* He had blanked out, gone away and not noticed.

"Mrs. Fetters." The man in the black vest spread his hands on the fingerprinty glass of the counter. "She has a standing account here; calls in with a daily order. Has these spellbooks that require real hard-to-get items, you know what I mean? Like clove

oil, cinnamon, A-1 sauce . . . and every day I tell the old broad that in this century we have supermarkets. I'm broadcasting but she's not receiving." He shrugged. A button pinned to the lapel of his vest read SO MOTE IT BE, GODDAMMIT.

Grant dropped a tiny Indian tetraskelion on a leather thong back into a display box between them. "But you oblige her."

"She spends a couple thou a year here, my friend. A veritable patron, in the old, renowned sense of the word."

The thought occurred; burst out: "You don't have a customer named Mrs. Saks, do you?"

His eyes narrowed. "You a PI? Hey, I got all the entrapment flubs I need this year, ace." The humor drained from his face, leaving it swarthy.

"No, no," Grant said, trying to restore order. "Just a vagrant thought. I knew—"

"Never heard of her," he said, relaxing.

"Oh." His attention returned to the package, the papers he had brought. "I was wondering if you could tell me about these."

The clerk took the candle first, hefting it in his hand, not opening it. "Yeah, I said to myself when you came in, 'this guy ain't no practitioner,' you know what I mean? Now, I don't care one way or the other, I mean, we exist but to serve." He stepped back for gesturing room. "But it's been my experience, limited though it may be in this game, that, ahh—guys like you who wander into places like this, your newspaper reporters, your snoops, and PIs, your tourists, usually wander out shaking their heads, like *I'm* the one who's crazy. Without purchasing anything. This ain't a library, John Henry. You planning on wasting my time, or you got a legit interest?" He placed the wrapped candle back onto the counter, pointedly, and waited with folded arms.

"Legit enough to even allow for a consultation fee," Grant said, without grinning.

"You've just entered the realm of the occult," the clerk said, smiling wide and toothy, looking like Rasputin in a beret. "I am Jade Wing, your humble guide." A stage bow.

And the meter is now running, Grant thought, amused.

"And this thing," he said, unfurling the candle like a toilet-paper streamer from the windings of sack. "This guy is . . . ahhuummm . . . tallow candle. Made out of sheep fat. What'd you do, leave it sitting on your dashboard in the heat? Dumb." He flipped it in the air; caught it. It glistened with beads of oil

prompted by the temperature.

Grant remembered now; he had not shown Jennifer the candle. He'd left it in the car. Gradually the sweltering heat molded one side of it to the juncture of seat and backrest; now the thick, greasy cylinder had a crude corner.

"You're gonna ask me what's it for," Jade Wing said from behind a pointed finger. "Basic spellcasting ordnance. Like I said, sheep fat. You can't buy it at the Mayfair Supermarket with the chip dips and bargain liquor."

"Or cardamom," Grant said.

"Yeah, right! I mean, you may have noticed, but they don't *make* that many black candles. Gotta get 'em at an occult dimestore like this one, or maybe make 'em yourself." He stroked his goatee. "Presuming you have a fat sheep." He joggled his eyebrows and winked. "The M-16 of witchcraft. Use it for almost anything."

"You're beginning to sound less like a 'practitioner' yourself."

"Oh, hey—this is a pickup. I mean, don't kid yourself, I'm a knowledgeable employee. I did the groundwork. But this place *isn't* mine. I can tell you've never met Annabella. Miz Darkmoon. A very strange lady. Wears her hair in a huge Victorian bun; long dresses, like Morticia on *The Addams Family*. Too much eye makeup by half. Long fingernails. I *mean*—" he set his fluid, expressive face into neutral, as though posing for a sculptor "—do I look to you like some kinda *warlock?*" He shook his head at the density of the uninitiated. "Man, I look like Joe Suburban next to the regulars."

"How about these?" Grant produced the three pages of white typing bond on which he had done pencil rubbings of the designs on the headboard of the brass bed. "Can you tell me what these symbols mean?"

Jade stared, squinted, stared again, his eyebrows arching into a little peak of intrigue. "Hey wow," he said. "What a mess." He fanned the three pages across the counter, and with a nod of permission from Grant began to sketch the rubbings into bold, black lines with an indelible marker, making small sounds of recognition, *yeah, yeah, and this goes like*

"Bells ringing?"

"Tiny ones, my man. I know some of these, but some I don't. Have to check the shelf; get some references. Just a sec, okay?" He was already moving.

"Sure." Grant was perversely pleased to see that whatever books

Jade needed were obscure enough to be slotted into the very topmost shelves. He dashed up the ladder like a lithe, rakishly dressed lizard.

The bad part of the nightmare had followed the mirror replay of Montgomery Mantell's death.

As if the moment his father's life had winked out was a cue, Grant's eyes snapped open to meet themselves in the mirror. It was not like surfacing from sleep; he felt more like he had just wrestled out from beneath a massive weight that had immobilized him and blotted out his consciousness, some dark fugue he now feared Dr. Byrd had pinpointed with hideous ease. He saw the reflection of his own face, not the vampire demon, but his own normal face. He saw the reflection of the shining brass bed in which he lay. And he saw something else.

The image of his father shaded to transparency; the candle smoke fogged the room. In the mirror, the bed was alive with writhing, naked bodies. Diaphanous hands fisted the bedpost knobs, sweat-sheens dulling the brass. Ghostflesh jerked together soundlessly, coupling in an abstract that rendered numbers and sexes undiscernible, a thrusting frenzy of bestial rut.

Grant lost his breath. He was no longer in the reflection. And Jennifer was not in bed beside him.

They've got her, was his only panicked thought.

His hands grabbed uselessly through the twisted rills of sheet. She was gone.

He damned his brain for making his eyes accuse the mirror so readily. But she was not among the orgiasts. Was the trip-hammer pounding of his heart against his ribcage evidence that he was awake? Was this still the dream, the nightmare?

Mockingly, the faces of the madly fucking troupe seemed familiar. If Grant's presence was real, they did not acknowledge it. The melding bodies boiled together, wrenched apart. The wisps of dead candle smoke began to dissolve them.

Grant focused his eyes painfully. They watered, as if from the stench of a putrefacting corpse. They saw.

Beyond the bed, in the darkest corner of the room, the reflected blackness of his *real* room, behind him, he saw a blocky shape overseeing the tableau. Its massive ursine skull cut just short of the canted reflection of the ceiling. It watched with faceted diamond eyes, eyes that glinted hard blue-silver with the lust to turn the coital ritual into a carnage of feeding.

It was black, unfathomable, definitely *there.*

It shifted its attention from the group to the observer, the non-participant, the silent watcher beyond.

The sound Grant made was primal, scoured clean of civilized distraction. His left hand swept the heavy coffee mug free of the nightstand and hooked it into the face of the mirror. Both disintegrated. A downshower of steely glass splinters exploded toward him with an ear-grating, metallic din. The shattering noise swept him beneath an avalanche of sound; needlelike shrapnel sought him and he shielded his eyes with a forearm and screamed, a long braying sound that chafed his throat and failed to exceed that of the deadly hailstorm of breaking glass.

He uncovered his eyes at last.

He saw himself, peeking out from behind his hands, panting hard now, still alone in bed. Jennifer was not reflected because she was not there at all.

Naked, he scrambled from the bed, stealing yesterday's clothes from the bathroom, hurrying out, and slamming the bedroom door. Max wasn't around, either. Quickly, too nervously, he made sure he had money and keys and retrieved his pencil rubbings of the brass headboard (done while he had polished it, days previously) from the desk-top. He dropped them, then the keys. His movements betrayed his panic now, and he slammed the front door as he fled.

He could not force himself to recheck the bedroom. He knew that if he had, he could have verified that the coffee mug was gone from the nightstand and was nowhere to be found. And the mirror was intact, unbroken, waiting.

The beige business card on Darkmoon's bulletin board resolved into readability: MISS MIRIAM—PROFUNDO CONOCEDOR DE LAS CIENCIAS OCULTAS Y CONSEJERO ESPIRITUAL DE FAMA INTERNATIONALE.

He was back again, confused.

Spanish, stupid, it's a foreign language, remember?

Jade Wing was still mountaineering about amidst the dust of Darkmoon's bookshelves.

Safely locked into his Pinto, Grant had finally discovered Jenny's note—laid blatantly atop the pencil rubbings, totally overlooked in his, er, altered state of consciousness. Signed *love.* A surge of one-hundred-proof idiocy wormed his cheesy grin to a rictus of embarrassment. She had probably kissed him goodbye for the day and he had probably grunted and rolled over.

Her answering machine would do him no good; he'd turned up a Hamburger Hamlet and begun to drink coffee—to help his mind get linear again, until he could no longer sit still, unacting. *Beds That Eat People;* hadn't he caught that at a grindhouse somewhere a year or two back? Awake, in the real world, it was no longer the supernatural histrionics of sleazy horror films that unnerved him, but the reasoned likelihood that he might face-first into his banana-creme pie, with no twinge or mental klaxon of warning—and then he would be alone, with the dream-state.

The eyes had been like mean little chromium ball bearings, he thought. Rather like what Max's eyes had seemed in the mirror earlier. And he *had* heard the sharp crack of the heavy porcelain mug introducing itself to the fragile mirror glass.

Looking at the note signed *love* made him feel more a renewed occupant of the real world. It was like a notarized letter of transit for hazardous terrain, folded now into quarters and stowed safely in his shirt pocket. He had reread it a hundred times. Jenny almost never left written evidence of her passage or feelings. It would take longer to discover whether she was a letter-writer or not.

"Still with us, ace?" Jade Wing was leaning toward him, elbows on the glass, head propped in hands.

Again, Grant refolded the note and pocketed it. "I have some other questions, more general, I think, then—"

Jade held up a hand. Stop sign. "If it's about the notice board, that stuff is Annabella's fault. I can't endorse individual covens. The competition knows automatically, and they toss revenge magic at you for favoritism." He balanced forward on the counter to peek at the Black Forest cuckoo clock mounted near the ram's head. "Hey, noon-and-half. Lunch time!" He squatted, dropping out of sight, and Grant heard him rustling a paper sack around.

"Do you have to leave?"

"No sir," came Jade's voice. "Annabella's out sick with the shingles. Ran right around her waistline; made her walk funny, so she's home trying to magick it away. I'm marooned here till nine tonight. A lot of the regulars don't come in till dusk anyway—I mean, at this moment I got nothing better to do than help you, if you'll be patient. Undivided professional attention is rare to chance across, y'know." He surfaced with a fistfull of fudge cookies, building a little column with them on the countertop next to the books he'd selected, popping them into his mouth whole

and dusting the crumbs on his chinos as he riffled through one text, marked a place, consulted another, munched. Grant wound up bringing him a Diet Pepsi from the 7-Eleven on the north side of Beverly Boulevard.

"What are your other questions?" Jade shouted hollowly as Grant reentered. "Maybe I can put all this into some kind of perspective if I can get a bigger picture."

"You're supposed to be the expert," Grant said as Jade cracked his cold can and drank. "Tell me what all that has to do with, uh, fornicators."

Jade tapped the rubbings. "The reason this looks so confusing is that it's a bunch of different symbols run together, as far as I can tell." He drew a pencil circle around one, to isolate it. "See? There you have a variation of the Greek cross, that thing you were looking at a while ago." He pointed to the display box. "A swastika. A pagan fertility symbol, a solar emblem signifying the female principle in Nature." He circled another. "This little squiggle is the rune for the succubus—female sexual demon—and *this* one is for the incubus."

"Male version of same?"

"And this thing is called the *satyrica signa*—the sign of the satyr. A little penis shape. And here's a set of 'Lilith bars,' a kind of perverted cross. Know your Bible?"

"No."

"Lilith was supposedly Adam's first wife. Supposedly a succubus. But this thing over here is the Zracine Vile—signifying spirits that tease you when they're benign. When they get pissed off, they kill you. The hexagram enclosing the symbol is protective. And most of these symbols are in octets, groups of eight, enclosed by octagons. Eight is the number of regeneration and again, fertility. But over here are some perfectly mundane astrological signs—the barbed M for Scorpio; the 69 for Cancer. In astrology, the eighth house is the house of death." Jade shook his head, appearing honestly perplexed. "Are these from a gravestone, or a wailing wall somewhere I don't know about?"

"They're from the headboard of a bed. The symbols are all along the frame, on all sides, and the footboard."

"Jesus. Carved out of wood?"

"Solid brass."

"Are you *serious?*" He skipped it. "Bright yellow brass or dull gold brass?" He waggled his head. "You *are* serious."

"It's bright yellow."

"Then it's brass with a low copper content. Called 'high brass.' Know anything about brass, ace?"

"It's a bitch to polish."

"Okay." Jade was clearly eager to explain. "Brass is an alloy of copper and zinc. High brass is about seventy percent copper, or less. The more zinc, the tougher—that's called 'cartridge' brass; they make bullets out of it. Into that you put a very small percentage of lead, to improve machinability—high-wear clock parts are made of leaded brass—plus tin and nickel to increase resistance to corrosion and wear. Enough nickel lightens the color more. Are you with me so far?"

"Copper, zinc, lead, tin, nickel," said Grant.

"And iron—mix 'em all together and you get brass. Each metal has protective significance in one form of sorcery or another. Is it a big bed? All one piece?"

"Super kingsize. And completely covered with symbols like those." He felt on the brink again, ready to slam the brakes.

"Looks like what you got is the biggest goddamn protective amulet in history." Jade wiped his lips. "If I was a righteous fornicator, like Aleister Crowley, I'd kill for that bed."

"I'm thinking about selling it," Grant said, to bait him. "Maybe Crowley would be interested?"

"If he was alive. He died in 1947. He was what is lightly referred to as a voluptuary. He sort of stirred the occult together with Rosecrucianism, Eastern religions, a lot of coke, heroin, and sexual gluttony. *He* was an alloy. Believed that orgiasm allowed mystic communication with the forces of magic; that each orgasm he had took him closer to becoming one with the power, understanding, and mastering it. He started his own church, even established an abbey in Sicily. His gospel was 'Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law.' "

"He'd put the bed on the altar?" Grant was almost lost.

"The bed would *be* the altar for somebody like that," said Jade, flustered. "Don't you get it? With a bed like that, you could whistle up sexual demons, imps, incubi, succubi that could do things to you they've never even *dreamed* of down at the Leather Castle. And you wouldn't have to worry about them gobbling you up afterward. Or during. The protected circle inside the bed is like a pentagram—see, succubi, for example, are designed to seduce mortals, and usually wind up frightening them to death. In-

side the arms of the bed you've got nothing to worry about; you can fornicate your little heart out and the forces of darkness can't lay a glove on you."

"What about sex with a normal person?"

"Who can say? It'd make good sex into great sex, great sex into transcendant sex—do what thou wilt, literally."

"Could it cause nightmares, sleeping sickness?" The morning's overdose of coffee was starting to pump acidic bile up his throat.

"Not the bed. But if I was a bully, and couldn't punch you out because you were inside a fence, I'd still try to lob rocks at you over the fence, you get what I mean?"

"Wear me down . . ." Grant said, with no inflection.

"If something was pissed off at you but could only pester you long-distance, it might hit you with dizziness, fainting spells, bad dreams, sudden feelings of danger, vertigo. Everything from fear to pimples. The Navaho Indians call it the ghost sickness. It feeds on the ego." He smoothed his stiff, gleaming mustaches between his fingertips.

"I don't know any demons." *But I might have inherited one or two.*

"You don't have to. They might know you, though. Easy." He pulled a thin volume from the bottom of the stack he'd brought, and let it fall open to a page marked by a mauve ribbon. "Here. You light the candle—it doesn't matter that it's been lit already—and recite this, over and over." He indicated a short paragraph. "Might help if you did it on the bed. Keep saying it for, I don't know, five minutes or so. It's simple. Fewer words than the Equal Rights Amendment. Just make sure the candle doesn't go out, or you have to start over."

Grant felt like fainting. Evil spirits had nothing to do with the feeling that surged up inside of him as Jade rambled.

"Mind you," he said. "Unless you get specific, a lot of this is conjecture. But you seem to be going pale at key moments; I'd wager that you've felt the pull of the old strings, supernaturally speaking, and recently, too. Stop me when I get outrageous." He restacked the books, the rubbings, stuck his pencil and marker back into a cup shaped like a skull. "But of course, you don't *really* believe in any of this shit, do you?" Eyebrows up.

"Certainly not," he said, returning Jade's corner-of-the-mouth smile. "I'll take the book just as a curio."

"Born pitchman, am I not?" he said as he punched it into the

humming register. It peeped and clicked and burped out a skinny receipt designed to read *Blessed Be* just shy of the sawtoothed perforation.

Grant unclipped a fifty and folded it double in his hand, making ready. "Tell me one more thing."

"Business is so brisk I don't have a second to breathe," Jade said, opening his arms to indicate the empty store.

"What do you know about the Spilsbury Murders—cult killing, happened in 1959? Could that have had something to do with witchcraft, or some kind of cult or coven?"

"Never heard of it."

He slid the fifty across. "Keep the change. For consultation rendered."

Jade and Ulysses S. Grant stared each other down for an instant. "Where'ya off to now, ace?" he said, tucking the bill away.

"To talk to a little old lady who *can* tell me about the Spilsbury Murders." He nodded. "Thanks for your time."

"It's your time," he said. "You bought it. No sweat—as soon as you walk out, somebody else'll roll in. That's the way things work around this place."

Before he left, he used Darkmoon's phone to try and warn—no, no, *ask* Jenny not to go back to his apartment alone, to let them meet at her place. He left the message on her machine. Then he made the drive back to Avalon Circle.

Mrs. Saks was already dead.

He later thought that perhaps he had pounded on Jenny's door a bit too hard, rattling it in its secure frame, very possibly stirring a neighbor. Stupidly, he at least startled her into taking her time answering the door, lest the knocker be sixty-one-year-old Mr. Jensen from down the hall, horny and drunk again. He watched darkness swirl around the dot of light in the bullseye of the door peephole.

The raven hair fell to mingle with her deep-burgundy robe. She waved him in without the expected admonishments, sighing heavily, and that made him feel sufficiently dumb. The jump he had just given her was not entirely gone from her eyes yet. She watched him attempt to recover from his fumble by fading around it.

"Where the hell have you been?" Instantly, he regretted the line. *Pro forma* soap opera shorthand for emotional scenes.

Not looking at him, preceding him into her airy and clinically ordered kitchen, she said, "You look like hell yourself." She had given up on touching him in greeting for now; atonement was due. But she despised the ritual, and so added, "Sit, you. We'll go backward and start again, since I don't want either of us to be mad. It's not worth it, not at this time of night, not for us." She tested the weight of her coffeepot to determine how much remained. "And I won't apologize for being out of touch, since I got your tape. You staying?" She favored him now by looking back for a reply.

"Huh?" he stumbled. "Yeah, of course—"

"I just don't want to bother being domestic here unless you're staying. Because you're very late, and I haven't been able to get in touch with you, either."

He strained toward a place to start. With the dream, with the hideous sense the things he heard at Darkmoon had made? With the contrite old woman he had found on guard duty at Mrs. Saks's home?

("Well, if you met her, then you knew she was carrying around too much, just too much, you know. Like a side of pork, poor, dear woman. My heart couldn't stand a job like that, and neither could yours, for long. It would just burst. I bet the doctors'll say her heart just popped *from the overload, like a circuit breaker—")*

"No coffee," he said. "I don't think I need any more stimulation tonight."

Max's nails clicked on the kitchen tiles. A warm, damp, pink-black nose pressed into Grant's free hand; then he sat his head heavily down on Grant's knee and proceeded to dust his pants with white hair.

"No barking at the door allowed," said Jenny. "He has better developed manners than you, apparently." She pointed the coffeepot toward him. "And I'm not whipping up coffee, so stop bitching and start explaining."

He pinched his eyes. That morning seemed years distant. Finally: "Remember what they told you about pimples in high school? It's like a self-renewing cycle of angst—if you worry about getting them, you'll cause them. Talk about a fixed game . . ." He ruffled the dog's head without looking. "Now I'm thinking about crap I don't want to. But I can't help it. Now."

She had pulled things down from the shelves, keeping her

back to him, he thought, because he had sinned earlier. Now he could tell she was making extra work for herself, averting her eyes. All he heard her say was: "You're scared you've got it. That disease you think your father had—"

Suddenly the word *narcolepsy* swelled up to ridiculous zeppelin size in his head, becoming unmanageable for the narrow limits inside which he wanted to confine his explanation. Everything fizzled. "I'm terrified I've got it," he said in a small voice. "I'm scared I've got it, and it's driving me bonkers in some weird chemical way, making me see phantoms, giving me nightmares to feed the superstitions. Another goddamn cycle, like a hungry little cancer, chomping away. Auto-cannibalism of the sanity, to the point where a missing coffee cup sends me into an untethered panic."

"Hang onto this one." She handed over a steaming mug, eyes still direct and dry.

He preferred not to exchange meaningful silences. "It just figures, you know. Now that I've come into all the cash I'll ever need, it so happens I've also got—" he flubbed the word; couldn't force it out "—a disease. And inherited insanity. I can afford the best hospitals. Custom-tailored straitjackets, when the hallucinations get *really* pro."

"Stop." She sat within reach, knees poking from the division of robe.

"Stop thinking about it? That's what they'd say in high school—*don't think about getting zits all over your face or you'll get 'em*—and thinking this thing to death is what will shove me off the proverbial edge. Did I mention that the nightmares I'm having about the mirror are progressive? More information each time; definitely freaky enough to certify me for a private closet. Classic pattern of decay. Did I mention that I've gone in for occult consultation?" A wild laugh squirmed free, and sounded unhealthy. "Did I mention I'm about this far away from actually believing a corpulent little old lady was somehow killed by the forces of darkness this morning? Jesus H. *goddamn* Christ." He let the mug warm his hands. Max, bored with this trifling, checked his dish to see if anything edible had appeared in his absence.

"So wallow if you want," she countered sharply. "But if you're going on that kind of drunk, get your terminology right. Try corybantiasm, I quote, 'a sleepless delirium accompanied by wild and frightening hallucinations.' Not narcolepsy. Try getting a definite prognosis if you really think you're sick. Get a different doctor.

Stay away from your father's camp. And why not just *dump* the fucking mirror—no antique is worth this kind of anguish." *Clunk*—her mug came down like a gavel on the breakfast bar.

"You really have been listening," he said, as though at last recognizing her through a fogbank of vertigo. He raised the cup and tasted chocolate, cinnamon, coffee, cream, all spiked with something that imparted a nice, subtle bite.

She made a futile gesture, as if trying to encompass the improbability of it all. "Suppose your mirror isn't haunted, Grant?"

"Then I guess we're back to the stuff that bothers me a bit deeper."

"No, I mean, what if it's the bed that's evil, and not the mirror?"

"*Now* who's being superstitious?"

She lept to correct: "Assuming just assuming for a moment that there's any profit to be had from that line of logic." She killed time by drinking from her own cup, then noting the other obvious qualifier. "And *not* that I believe it anyway."

She did not seem entirely convincing; somehow that reassured Grant. She hesitated before denying something that should have been incontestable. Let her play with the wolves a while, he thought. "Okay, so—?"

"Think about it, Goodman Mantell. Your problems are all sleep related—the real-or-imagined sickness, the nightmares. Think of what a holding-tank for fear a bed could be, of all the fears beds are a party to. When you were a little kid, how many things about your bed scared you?"

"I had at least two boogeymen in residence underneath," he said, warming to the idea. "There must've been some kid somewhere without one. I wouldn't let my feet hang over the edge; I still don't. But it was a place of security, too—where else can you hide under the covers except in bed?"

"But that security was a result of the fear, the thing you were hiding *from*. I used to think there were monster hermit crabs who wanted to clip my bare toes off with their pincers. And think—when you get older, schedules start to victimize you. You fear being up too late, fear your parents will whack you for reading under the blanket with a flashlight. Then you fear oversleeping—you'll be late for school. Late for work. Then you fear not sleeping enough—*What am I doing to my body?*"

"And then there's my father," Grant said, hating the way the

progression formed a neat, ordered chain. "He resents sleeping at all because it detracts from work-time with Calex. His body starts compensating and he immediately thinks he's sick, and starts worrying over how such a sickness could ball up his high-gear corporate life." He suddenly felt his stomach roll. "Pimples."

"Think of the attendant fears standing in line, ready, when sex becomes an issue in life," she said, pleased now with the wealth of examples. "Fear of the first time. Very powerful; very scary. Some people worry about loss of virginity; more people worry about how they'll perform. Fear of missing an orgasm, or messing one up, or not feeling what you think you're supposed to. A million fears regarding the person who has consented to get into such a ridiculous position with you." After a beat, she added, "Fear of impotence."

"God, do I hate the *sound* of that word," he said. "Another one that feeds on itself. You either best it, or just have to find somebody who doesn't scare you so much . . ."

"And how many people die in bed?"

Now *that*, he thought, was terrific PR for what the inane waterbed ads called "sleep systems." A lot of people died flat-backing it in their own comfy, familiar beds, without any special supernatural assistance. Death and beds. Deathbeds. Could a long enough association between the two lead to some kind of causal relationship? A coffin, to be sure, was just a narrow bed with silk cushions and a lid.

"No bedsores and senility, not for me, not at this rate," he said. Jenny's brewed concoction was beveling the sharp corners in his head pleasantly.

"I can think of better ways to go," she said, inclining her head downward, her eyes darkening, having much the same effect as the drink. "Enough for one more?" She indicated the coffeepot, and the condiments on the countertop.

"Sure, I—" He stopped cold. Something, a thought, had just fallen out of his head like a chunk of rotten insulation. *It's happening again!* He clenched his fists. No, surely it was the mad whipsaw of tension-stress—having made it intact to Jenny's, he relaxed (*let his guard down?*), and had momentarily forgotten what he was going to—

He gave his coffee mug a secret-agent glance of doubt. No, *that* suspicion was even dumber.

He looked up; saw her watching him with a most peculiar

expression. The mug made him remember.

"The mirror," he said, giving over the cup. "Jenny, I've got to go back to the apartment and see if the mirror is unbroken, if the mug is still gone. See if I fantasized this whole thing. I need you to come with me. Remember what you said about being alone with the damned thing? If this was all a hallucination, then I've got my mental stability to fret about. But if it wasn't—I've got palpable proof."

"Of what?" she said, appearing derailed, annoyed. "Either a busted mirror or a missing coffee cup. That's truly substantial, my love."

"To *me*, yeah!" he almost shouted. "I *know* the goddamn thing was shining back at me when I left. I *know* I pitched the cup at it—"

"I'll go, I'll go," she said, grabbing at a cease-fire. She had taken the cup from his hands and returned it, steaming and full. "But in the morning, okay? I'm shagged." Standing before him, she put her hands on his shoulders and pushed her shoulders back. Her backbone popped deliciously; she *ahhed* and the belt of the burgundy robe gave up a few inches. "Really."

He dredged up a reserve of iron. "No, Jenny, don't you get it? I can know one way or the other tonight and I need you . . . well, to notarize what I find out."

She tapped away his iron with her touch, seemingly absorbing it through her fingertips. " 'No,' yourself. If it's such cosmic proof, it can wait till sunrise because I need *you* right now." She guided his hands into the slack of the robe. "Pause a moment to let it sink in, boy."

The solid rise of her chest, between her breasts, seemed to be raging with warmth. He squashed the nutty urge to ask if she was running a fever. An imp on his shoulder urged him not to blow it twice in one night, and capitulation began.

Her hand pushed his to the knotting of belt. "I don't have a stitch on under this thing," she said, her breath carrying her voice to him in soft little clouds. "You might have guessed."

He croaked out a syllable of agreement. The thin belt surrendered faster than an Italian infantryman and she arched into his grasp.

"I don't want you to go right now," she said. "*I* don't want to go. It's night out there, Grant, and now you've got *me* scared of it. Love me instead?"

The attitude of her face was a picture Grant had always imagined on a thousand nights he had spent alone, and he shut up protesting for his own good. He shut up despite the renegade voice inside telling him that manipulation of this sort was something one of the bad guys might pull, one of the enemies, one of *them*. He tried to see clues in the familiar agate-grey eyes. The newly poured coffee began to cool.

Bed was an utter disaster.

"I'm going over there right now," he said. Still groggy with sleep, she said, "No, not yet," and rolled over. He said okay and sneaked his clothing out of the bedroom on tiptoe. As he edged out the door he heard one final syllable: "Don't."

He did not close up the cycle by leaving a note.

Don't.

Sitting now in the shadows of the parking garage below his own apartment, he chuckled. It was a fatal little sound, a noise of self-destruction.

He had become perversely aware of Jenny's digital clock. He watched it tote up elapsed time as he kissed her one more time, caressed her again, and nothing else happened. More lost time. Panic. He felt displaced, goading his own erection as though he was inside a different, uncooperative skin. Coaching had never been needed before. He came up mechanically hard, and lost it before he could even move, before his brain could pester him about the trouble he was experiencing. The second time was worse, pyramiding his frustration.

Jennifer's calm disclaimers only angered him inside. *You're exhausted distracted frightened tired. It's all right. It's all right. It's not necessary. You're just—*

Impotent. The reflex cliché locked smoothly on, extracted blood, and detached. Getting old, ditto.

He thought disgustedly that excuses like age were still decades away. Not only that, but through it all his apartment, his bedroom, was still waiting with open arms and maybe jaws, perhaps getting itchy for action.

He thought of boffing Max on the snout to keep him from thundering through the living room, wagging and rowfing, but instead mutely motioned him out the door. He'd gotten it into his pinpoint doggie brain that there was A RIDE to be had, and would wake up the entire building should Grant refuse him a chance to

stick his head out the car window into the mesmerizing slipstream of moving air. He piled himself into the suicide seat of the Pinto and panted. His breath was awful this morning.

Grant thought of the clock, counting time, and booted his door open. "Okay, dogface, let's go do it."

On the way up, it occurred to him that the culpability for last night's performance might not be entirely his—what if the brass bed was some kind of sexual exciter, as Jade Wing had claimed, the way the mirror seemed to be a paranormal videotape deck, re-running the past?

Past tense operative, he thought. Was, not is. He had broken the mirror yesterday morning. Maybe.

His rioting metabolism was in hard contrast to the mundane view inside his door. He was overcranked, attack-ready, flushed full of fresh adrenaline, and everything looked damnably regular. The rickrack he'd spilled off the desk was still in the same position he'd abandoned it on the floor. Yet something else, a calm resonant mental tone, quietly contradicted the apartment's masque of normalcy.

Perhaps it was the set of air in the room that told him the apartment *had* been entered, and changes unobtrusively worked.

There was no need to cautiously ease the bedroom door open with an extended foot (the sound of its slam the day before rolled back to him now, full volume). He had begun to twist the knob when Max nosed blithely through ahead of him.

In just a few days of ownership, he had become accustomed to the way the big mirror beamed light around the bedroom, formerly the dimmest box in the place. That light was gone now. The scrolled brass frame hung dark, like the pit of an empty eye-socket, or a television with a kicked-in tube. Tiny motes of brass-yellow glinted feebly. The mirror glass was salted all over the bed, the carpet, the nightstand, in glittering splinters, shiny and slim and pointed like the fangs from a burnished mechanical rattlesnake. They broadcast a galaxy of light points across the ceiling, sharp white. It was broken, all right, shattered into a million million polished smithereens. He waded into the densest spill of broken glass, his shoes imbedding needled fragments into the carpet. He bent and retrieved a cup handle snapped open to porous tooth-white on each end, a curve like a skeleton's knuckle joint. Chunkier triangular wedges of the dead coffee mug were plainly mingled with the obliterated mirror's metallic remains.

"Don't walk on the glass, Max," he said, lacking anything else.

His decision was already made. If he was crazy enough to hallucinate the mirror whole, the cup vanished, then one more spurt of lunacy could not curse him any more before calling the medics—or finding himself a razor blade.

"Come on, Max, we gotta visit the car again." The tallow candle and the spellbook from Darkmoon were still in the Pinto. He had left them behind, thinking that to tote them up to the apartment before *seeing* might jinx what he was to discover. He felt sure that deep inside he did not *want* to believe, no. Now it made no difference to go through the motions, complete the dance as a matter of style, neutrally, since sillier things had already been done.

On his way out it occurred to him to case the kitchen.

He knew what he had. Between the dust of the cabinets and the grease of the sink he owned three large dinner plates, two salad plates, two mis-matched short stem wine goblets, a few plastic baseball trading cups from 7-Eleven, a Pyrex bowl for all purposes, some Melmac plates he never used, and four coffee cups—one bowl-shaped Shafford cup with no saucer, and three identical dark brown mugs. The unbroken pair would be in the kitchen.

He looked and found one mug, dirty. He looked twice. He began to search. After inventing unlikely hiding places—in the refrigerator, under the sofa cushions—he stopped and still had exactly one mug accounted for.

Yes, there was a chance Jenny might have busted it and slipped it into the trash and forgotten it. There also seemed to be a chance that she had broken it on purpose, more recently, in the bedroom. She had a key to his apartment; he'd been gone all day yesterday.

Jenny. Jennifer. Preternaturally beautiful and obviously well-off. Why would she have anything to do with him unless—

Mrs. Saks had told him, *You'd best destroy whatever's left.*

The tallow candle was yielding now to the dashboard and windshield, no longer even remotely a cylinder so much as an amorphous mass inside the paper. It smelled like stale bacon. Max chased Grant happily down the stairs, through the garage, up the stairs. He didn't care to use the elevator; what the hell, this time. As he had run out of the living room, the phone began ringing. He ignored it. Let her come.

Her presence always rendered him a bit vertiginous, he thought now, or realized. She disoriented him, made him weak

in the legs, just noticeably—it could as easily be just a manifestation of the way he had always wanted her.

Sure.

"What about you, old pal?" he said to Max. "How real are you?"

Max sneezed explosively, as if to vindicate his actuality. Certainly nothing metaphysical could sneeze or fart with Max's style.

Maybe the dog merely served the purpose of helping to snare him in the first place—let's be thorough now, not reluctant, he thought; let's run this little extrapolation to earth. Dogs were a soft spot of his. The current apartment (like all the others) was too small to keep one, and his list of second-string wants perpetually included a canine buddy. But if Jenny was something other than ... if she was *different* in some way, wouldn't Max sense it, and react as he had to the authentically bad vibes of the mirror? Didn't animals *know?*

Grant camped out on the brass bed with his souveniers until Jennifer's form filled up the bedroom doorway. He heard his door close and imagined the number of paces across the living room, and there she was, having obviously rolled out of bed and into jeans and a loose, billowy workshirt. Her hair was free, mussed from the rush.

"I'm conducting an experiment in pop craziness, the kind we generally ascribe to the loons on Hollywood Boulevard," he said to her silhouette. "And if nothing comes of it, I'm entitled to feel supremely stupid. Should that happen, you may not want to be everything for me anymore. But if something does happen ... God, then I've got a whole additional set of problems, don't I?"

Now she did not talk of doctors, or urge calm or coo reassurance, or protest her innocence with a flood of examples. She had helped him with the chain of conjecture that led here. Motives could be dealt with after the fact. She said what she had said earlier, and now the word chilled him.

"Don't."

Her breath was labored, he noticed. What would've happened if he'd answered the phone instead?

"I can't stop you, can I?" she said.

"I'm afraid not, Jenny. I mean *afraid.* Not knowing scares me witless. I don't know that I've ever loved anything, either—maybe I never spent enough time contemplating it—but I'd apply that word, love, for whatever value it's worth with you. But my brain

can't just disengage, or ignore things. And that means if not today, I'd do this next week, assuming my days weren't numbered." The words came out shakily.

"I understand," she said. "I mean, I know. It's the way you are."

"What the hell else can I do?"

Max, put off by their sloth, sought his place beneath the stereo shelf. Grant abruptly felt like a general abandoned in a trench during a banzai charge, his heart racing because Jenny had not budged from the doorway. She would not come near the bed now. *He gained some engine of protection,* Mrs. Saks's reedy voice said inside his head. *But he was taken anyway.*

"You can let me tell you a story," she said finally, the hurt plainly clogging her speech.

"I'm listening." No concessions. You're committed, boy.

"Once upon a time there were some no-talent Hollywood leeches." There was no sarcasm in her tone. "They got off by claiming to be attendants of Cybele; whether they actually believed in such a nature goddess doesn't matter. It was just a thin license for fucking their brains out at ritual orgies. They managed to attract the attention of some jaded business types, ledger hacks who wanted to cop a feel on the Hollywood action they'd always dreamed about. They wanted to become a part of the big, glittery Movie Machine. They got to take their clothes off and indulge their fantasies in exchange for bankrolling the erstwhile Bad Actor's Club. Eventually, the financial grease allowed the no-talents to slide through into the filmmaking mainstream. The business guys formed a big, bad corporation. And the olympian sexual repretoire began to get eccentric."

Grant wondered if Aleister Crowley had fancied himself a corybant. It helped him not to think of how sharp Jennifer's teeth had seemed, in the dark.

"Blood got spilled," she said. "And imbibed, just as readily. Some worthies got 'accidentally' killed. The group studied and learned how to make their orgies more radical, having passed beyond mere torture and murder. Cybele had nothing to do with the kind of special assistance they eventually formented. Their patron. It whistled up all manner of new sexual diversions. But it was a newly reborn thing, hungry, and not a little bit insane. It was like a nuclear pile; they found that to continue they'd need protection from the benefactor they'd created or it would consume *them.* In due course they contrived a way to keep from getting

gobbled up. A safeguard. Everything was copacetic; the smarmy rumors helped the film careers along. Murdoch Spilsbury became a minor star. His was the orgy mansion, the demon spa. Colette Nichols, Bryan Thorne, J. Davis Stone, Julia Cushing-Jones—all prospered. And the corporation that spawned them broke ground in plastics and petroleum at the right time and became a megamonolith. That part I think you know about."

She had not moved, but now lit a cigarette, cupping the match in her hand, obscuring her face. Grant traced the coal of orange as it punctuated her speech.

Blasphemers. Fornicators.

"The club, however, would not countenance splitters, and when one man wanted to pay accounts and leave, they voted no. Easy. He was a resourceful man, with a facile mind that had elevated him greatly inside the Corporation. He arranged to quite audaciously steal away their hallowed protection, at night, practically from under their muzzles, and without it they were lost. Their pet monster scooped them up on the night of May first, 1959. Walpurgis nacht, coincidentally—a night when witches and demons and so forth are supposed to swarm forth to revel amidst unwary humans. That's pop occult stuff, though, too fairytale. *They* sure didn't believe in it. It was clearly a cult murder; one of Hollywood's first.

"The beast they'd created, however, did not evaporate at *their* passing. There was still the rogue member of the club."

"Say it," Grant said dully. "My father."

"He shut away the protection where it could shield him, and occasionally availed himself of the pleasures the Beast could offer. After a decade, forgetting became easy—he never truly *liked* his ex-cohorts. And soon he got around to the homework they had all neglected. The existence of the Beast was threatened, and subtle combat was engaged. As he looked for ways to vanquish the nuisance he'd helped to call up, the Beast tried beguiling him into giving up his protection."

"He was baited with a beautiful woman," said Grant.

"One he kept to himself. Outsiders shrugged her off as some mystery bimbo; no big deal." He did not have to ask why his mother divorced his father; why the money had flowed in but the contact had been sparse all these years.

"An alternate avenue of attack, a gradual blood clot growing quietly in the brain, finally had the desired effect. Stupid Beast.

With the death of the last believer, it dwindled away to nothing. The bait it had abandoned survived it by flowing naturally toward the only outlet possible—the son." Her cigarette went out.

"The son." *You're of his blood. I can smell it.*

"I'm perfect for you, Grant. I can't help but be—emotionally, sexually. There's nothing malign involved with actually becoming corporeal, being *real* unexpectedly. Accidentally. And there you were, with your simple emotional stresses, the answers to which were so easy for me. There you were. Your existence helped make me a fact. And you looked so *helpless*, I . . ." A trace of her customary humor seeped into her recollection. "The more real I became, the more I fell in love with you. I couldn't help that, either. And I don't want to leave you. The devices, Grant—the mirror somehow recorded everything it witnessed; don't ask me. The bed was the charmed circle. Surely you noticed how sex on it is. But now you're dabbling in something that could erase me. I wasn't lying when I said I was scared."

The quaver in her voice was convincing. Too convincing, Grant thought, hating it. "I saw the Beast in the mirror. It still exists."

"No. That's the past; it was only showing you the past."

"Then why did you sneak back here and break it?"

He heard a sigh come out in the dark. "You seemed so convinced you were seeing things I thought I could solidify your problems into reality. Without the glass the visions would stop, and you'd eventually believe the disappearance of your coffee cup into it was a hallucination. An overwrought mental state I could nurse you out of; magic mirrors, no. For the same reason I tried to get to Mrs. Saks's house ahead of you."

"You killed her?"

"No!" He thought he could feel her frustration. "I knocked; she was inside and started screaming things about the Host of Hosts . . . totally out of it. I left. I could only hope you wouldn't take her too seriously if she told you some embellished riff about the Spilsbury Murders."

"It seems the Beast is still with us, then," he said. "A hematoma, a heart attack, my hallucinations, nightmares, and—"

"Don't you *grasp?!*" She was angered, but perfectly in character as Grant knew her, and exasperated by what seemed his congenital male thickheadedness. "It's not me you have to be afraid of, it's that Dr. Byrd, it's your father's Calex buddies,

they're the ones interested in starting the whole stinking cycle up again! That's why they're so anxious to buy that property out from under you—you haven't heard from them, but you will. Why Byrd wants to poke and prod you. They're holding off now because of death protocol, a grace period between you and your father. If there's one thing they respect, it's protocol. And they'll be the death of you, when they find they can't groom you!"

"What about you?" Again, it sounded too logical to Grant. Diversions, successful ones, always sounded good, were well planned, like battle strategy.

"I don't know. And I don't care about any of them. You have the savvy to steer around the greedy ones, the incompetent ones, the ladder-climbers that started all the bad things. I just want to *leave*. I need to know if you have enough faith in me to throw the junk away, get it clear of *them*. No hocus-pocus, no candles, no visions. Melt the goddamned bed down and sell it as lamp chains. But let's leave it behind."

"Toss away my supposed protection, Jenny? Sounds like something the old Beast would cotton to real fast."

"Oh, God, I know how I must sound!" Her voice cracked with tears, hopelessness.

His thumb was marking the page Jade Wing had recommended in the book. "Let's try an alternate scenario," he said, "just for argument's sake. Devil's advocate time, right. Let's say that the bed, being a huge protective amulet (bless you, Jade Wing, for the jargon at least), is the only thing retarding the Beast's already-diminished power. Grant suspects a relationship between the bed and the Beast he sees in the mirror—bad news. It needs to eighty-six the bed before Grant can investigate. Little Jenny smashes the mirror, strictly to help Grant, but also helping the Beast, since now Grant won't see any more disturbing revelations. Little Jenny visits Mrs. Saks, strictly to help Grant, and she dies before I can grill her about my father. And then little Jenny spins this tale for Grant—when were you planning to let me in on it?—and her closing remark is, 'Grant, get rid of the bed.'" He opened the book, rather idly. "Little Jenny begins to look like the Beast's hole card against oblivion. I think going through with the candle trick might make everybody honest, for good or not-so-good."

"And it might destroy me. If your father had managed to finish, I wouldn't be here."

"But according to your own story, you might've killed my

father on the Beast's behalf, no? But think, Jenny—this might not do anything to you, if you've been absolutely straight with me."

"You're gambling." She did not approve.

"I don't really think so. Just standing there is a fair argument for you being a good guy. And Max, whom I am convinced is a real dog, likes you. If you're not lying, *you* gambled, by breaking the mirror without knowing the consequences—you gambled on saving me the most painless way and my nosiness botched the plan. You weren't *sure* what would happen. Some thing, like the Beast, would be sure, I think. And—also if you're not lying—you went to Mrs. Saks and stood right underneath a protective hex sign. If you were a bad guy and could do that, Mrs. Saks would've died a long time ago. Yeah, I'm gambling now—I'm betting that you've become real enough, strong enough for the bed or the words in here not to matter."

"Assuming you just haven't lost your mind," she said, her tone acknowledging the small hope he'd made implicit.

"If I *am* crazy, you've got a lot of explaining to do for that story about Spilsbury and the Beast," he said, almost smiling. "Let's get this over with."

"Wait," she said, hands coming up. "No I guess not." She shook her head wonderingly, sniffed. "You have to do it, don't you? If I'm lying, I'm a threat, and the only way you'll really know if I'm lying is to . . ." Her extended hands dropped to her sides. "I can't even kiss you, before, just in case." She wiped away tears. "I can't even cry, because it might be a con."

A surge inside him insisted *this* was real. She was real, and her love for him was chewing up her insides. *I can't* not *do this.* His fingers snapped the butane lighter to life, and the wick of the lumpy tallow stump sputtered and caught.

"A moment," she said. Strength tried to slither away and was recaptured. "I'm going down to my car. I'll sit there and wait for you. If you come down and see me sitting there crying that'll be okay, and we can fight later. And I won't say I love you because you know it; I'll just go. Because I don't want to just stand here with you watching if anything *does* happen. That's strange, isn't it? I should know whether something should or shouldn't happen, but I don't." She kept her voice low and level, like a worker newly fired. "Goodbye, then. Lover."

"Not goodbye," he said as she turned to leave, and he reckoned he saw her eyes glint toward him, briefly chromium in the

dim light. "Not ever."

Jennifer was gone. She closed the front door behind her, but only after Max, anticipating another jaunt in the car, perked up and followed her out hopefully. *Damned pointy-eared turncoat.* The gentle way Jenny closed the door was more horrible than a million doors slammed hard against nightmares.

Grant never saw her again.

After the flat, parched echo of his own voice in the bedroom had ceased, he sat there like the village idiot. The sheets needed changing, his nose told him. He'd expected the air in the room to roil, to hear a distant, unearthly howl as he held the tallow in one shaking hand and read the words. There was nothing. The sun did not break the clouds.

Max was sitting and scratching next to her empty Camaro. His tail wagged as Grant approached, and continuing wagging—to prompt a car-ride—as he opened the door and found the note with his name at the top and the word *love* used sparingly. The note ended in mid-sentence. The tail stopped wagging, and Max cocked his head sympathetically as Grant sat down in the cockpit of her car and wept the first honest tears he had known in twenty-eight years.

Before he left Los Angeles for good he made a lot of phone calls. He told Toby Wolff, the photographer, that Jennifer had pulled stakes for the gauntlet of modeling agencies in Manhattan, and indeed, this was an impression Grant's own gut-feelings clung to—that she had merely walked out of the garage and out of his life. It was the way many people dealt with death. The lost one was assigned a status of permanent incommunicado, making them unreachable instead of obliterated. He felt certain that some blinking mental tell-tale lamp would have gone dark if she really was dead ... provided that she was ever really alive. She had been alive enough to photograph. And Toby Wolff had chalked up a lot of photographs. They all hurt to look at, even the bad ones.

With the help of some well-paid, off-duty Bekins boys, he managed to haul the bed, mirror frame, broken glass, plus the candle, book, and all other reminders up the Pacific Coast Highway to a secluded lookout called Point Pitt, some three hundred miles north. He felt good when he dumped everything into the ocean and saw how fast it sank into the boiling whitecaps of deep water. But the late Mrs. Saks's admonition nagged him. *Fire cleanses.* Fire, not water. That sort of detail was important to the

folks who kept Darkmoon Occult Supplies in business. He felt better, relieved in a bitter, minor way, and on his way back into LA he dropped off an extra hundred bucks for Jade Wing, without explanation. It seemed like the correct thing to do.

With the help of new lawyers and accountants, he secured Mrs. Saks's property, tore down her house, and dedicated the eventual residential park to his father via a bronze plaque. Calex could not touch it. The plaque stands there to this day.

He drove north again. Max happily rode shotgun. He wondered if the dog sensed, or knew. He wondered if Max had sat thumping his tail and watching while Jenny walked quickly out of the parking garage . . . or phased into thin air like a lap-dissolve in a tv commercial. He wondered about the dog, but not too much, because that was the road to paranoia and lunacy.

He drove north to begin waiting.

He forced himself not to notice when Max's brilliant, clear blue eyes began to darken into a unique shade of agate-grey.

The Accident

by ROCHELLE LYNN HOLT

There's nothing dearer
than a mother's love.

The others said, "It was an accident.
She just fell off the swing
and hit her head on the ground."
But I was watching behind the fence.
I saw my child let go upside down.

Pushing & pulling with the wind
and songs of her own breath,
she bent back to study
the sun or one cloud in sky,
a favorite amusement
we often shared together
as we shaped bear, swan,
or cat on her belly
pushing a piccolo
somewhere out there
in sea of drifting allusion.

There were tears streaming over
our blank, ghostlike faces,
a mixture of bliss and release,
the agony of pleasure

prodding mother inside
like long whip to reach daughter
laughing and screaming
for the ecstasy
of relieving absolute pain.

She heard my whisper, I'm certain.
"Jump," I screamed,
never moving my thin, weak lips.

Like a tightrope walker
without a rope or net,
I saw her drop a shoe first
before daredevil-tumbling
backward to dance on soft air.

We both let go forever
to join the silence
of a more distant game.

It was no accident,
but I will hush my shame forever.
Perhaps my wish fulfilled
led to the thrill
of her secret dream.

What Happened to Harper

by JAY SHECKLEY

April fifteenth, tax day: could there be a better day for suicide?

Gregory Harper climbed out of his office window at eight a.m. and stood on the ledge. He felt satisfied, the way a man does when he has come to a decision. Eighteen stories below him, bright cars and taxis competed. Harper approved.

A mist was lifting off Manhattan; stores, hotels, and other men's offices gleamed in the fresh light. It was April fifteenth, 1982. It was tax day—the day Gregory Harper had chosen to die.

I'm ruined, but I'm still a man of action, Harper told himself. *Ed would be proud.* Edmund Coover had always been his best friend. Harper still felt this way, although he hadn't seen Ed since two years ago—they'd toasted their fortunes at the White Horse Tavern. Harper could still picture it: a horse-faced barmaid stared at Ed; Ed resembled a cologne ad, what with his good grey suit and red school tie. Ed's short curls were amber now, no longer yellow, but his smile had the same full friendliness he'd shown Harper from kindergarten on. Ed had become a retail merchant; Harper now ran a shipping firm. They'd chatted about investment—risk and security—the way they'd argued long ago about the "Best Schools."

"You got to risk to make it," Ed had said. "Go for the top, Greg, at all costs." Ed drained his Irish whiskey and called for more. The barmaid rushed over, smiling. Harper bought the round. This was before his world took sick—before Janie walked out and the prime rate went up; before the dollar soared and

export deals soured.

"My grandpa knew," Ed said. "He sold gemstones in the twenties. Big money. When the economy died, he did too. Shot himself. Why not? Money and success aren't everything. But having them is—That's dignity." Ed looked into Harper's deep-set eyes.

Greg Harper was getting drunk. He felt floaty; amused and detached. Funny how it all turned out. Why, he and Ed had killed scores of beers—those crazy college nights—while chanting T. S. Eliot like they were some mystic Anglophile sect. They were going to be "Artists." Or "perish" trying. Separately, years later, they'd come to another conclusion: their art was to make a fortune. Bucks or bust. Do or die.

Earlier that day, Harper had toured Ed through his new office, introduced the office manager ("This is Mrs. Planter, who will mind things while I take the afternoon off,") and off they'd gone to the White Horse, where a quarter of a century earlier Dylan Thomas, deep in debt, poisoned himself on eighteen whiskeys.

Ed was in town for the day. Next week he would open his Philadelphia store. Raising a glass above a paperback copy of *The Crash of '79*, Ed called a toast: "To be rich, or not to be."

They laughed.

So far, so good. Harper's body had responded perfectly to his mind's commands: open the door, walk through the empty cubicles, raise the window ... For the past four months he'd feared that if anything happened—if the key stuck for an instant, if he saw a cleaning lady—that he wouldn't be able to go through with it. But Harper had done it all—raised the clouded pane, jumped effortlessly onto Mrs. Planter's swivel chair, and stepped out on the ledge.

The air was cold and exciting. Harper had a half hour to enjoy the morning, go over his reasons, and then leap. Wrapping his jacket close around him, he chuckled at this self-protective gesture. Sideways he stepped along carefully, gracefully passing a granite column. He couldn't be seen here on the column's far side.

There was no window behind him, and no one could reach him from the window on the floor above. He sat. The granite chilled him through his linen suitpants. Legs dangling like a child's, he was above it all—responsible for nothing. Down on the street, men scurried from trucks and delivered their goods.

Harper had met Janie at a college mixer. They were both nineteen. Janie was tawny-haired and had eyes the color of a plain brown wrapper. "Her?" Ed had said when Harper pointed her out. Harper could not help or explain his feelings. The colorless girl with nervous hands affected him. "Her?" Ed said when a year later Harper invited him to be Best Man. But that's what you did if you loved somebody in 1963; you got married.

In '78 Janie helped him order the office furniture. Really, she'd planned the whole office. Harper could acknowledge that now. The day the desks arrived (before the chairs), Janie stood across the aisle from him, having a Kool. Her shoulder rested against a blue file cabinet; her legs were crossed lightly at the knee. Above her, the clock read four p.m. And Harper, wanting to speak to her, to touch her, felt paralyzed. She was no longer young; you couldn't call her cute. But the years had given her a patina of elegance and independence through which he could not reach.

From that day on she had finished him off systematically. She had already ripened their sex into an infant—a miniature Janie with tiny eyes and ears which stole all privacy. Janie had coddled this beast into a plaid-skirted schoolgirl, won the last remaining credits for her degree, and accepted a position as buyer for a large department store. Then she moved out.

At first Harper couldn't believe it. She needed a change, sure, but didn't she need him more? Heat waves and rainy seasons formed a year. He waited.

But once, visiting his daughter, he recognized not a thing in Janie's apartment but a lamp—not Janie's clothes, not her bracelets, not the curls in her hair. The child was polite. The look in Janie's eyes was entirely alien.

He put on his coat and Janie said good bye, as if he were some grocer. This time, when the door closed behind him, it sounded permanent.

So Harper went out with girls. Hairdressers, accountants, you name it. He had his failures and successes; he tried girlish ones, plain ones, and stylish flirty types Ed would have wanted. Harper went out with cheerful girls in yellow dresses and skinny sophisticates even more depressive than himself.

But he just didn't care, that's all. Whoever they were, however much he believed he ought to be happy at a café table with this one or that one, he just couldn't work up an interest. He tried long dates (sending them home the next morning) and short

dates (packing the baffled girl off in a cab after drinks). He discovered he liked short dates better than lengthy ones, and that he didn't like dates much at all. He preferred to think about business.

By February of '82, business was lousy. Make that catastrophic. Maybe it was the Reagan administration. Maybe it was the exchange rate or the prime rate or the four rotten loans combined with the wrong stocks bought on margin. He owed taxes, too. Harper realized he could get by until April or so. Then the whole fetid mess would hit the fan and smother him.

Ed always said he'd do anything to help Harper. But when Harper phoned him, a recording told him the line was disconnected. He would have called Ed's mother in Connecticut, but he didn't feel capable of smalltalk. So he sent letters to Philadelphia; three of them. No reply. If Harper hadn't already used up his anxiety, he could have worried about Ed. As it was, Harper told himself Ed had his reasons; he went on with his plans.

April arrived. Crocuses nuzzled out of the dirt to display themselves. On the ledge, Harper wiggled his ankles in free air. Yes, he might have ironed out his finances with a bankruptcy filing and several years of labor. But there was no point. As a businessman he was doomed. Ed would understand.

Greg Harper checked his digital Omega. In ten minutes the office workers would arrive. Below, cars angled themselves into an unworkable traffic knot and began honking. Harper sat back, rummaged in his breastpocket, and ran a forefinger along the edge of his crisply folded Will.

At first he thought he saw a white pigeon falling toward him. He was startled; dizzied to remember he was on a ledge with no place to go. The white thing came closer, squawking.

It was a phone. It was one of those cheap, ugly one-piece phones whose handpiece telescopes open two inches when you answer it and shuts to hang up. They're cheap because nobody likes them; Greene Investors upstairs had four of them, for the same reason that they used fiberboard file cabinets.

The phone descended toward Gregory Harper's head. As it dangled, it revolved, twisting the cord. It rang.

Damn! was Harper's reaction. *My last minutes and I have to hear this phone.* He recalled a long-ago hospital visit—a cousin who got slashed in the belly by some knife-wielder in an arty part

of town. "I was going into surgery," she'd said, "and these two cops came right in the operating room bugging me for more of a description. Jeez, I thought: This is the rest of my life."

The phone was in reach now. To quiet it, he answered. "Well? Is this Greene?" Harper figured it was from the offices above his.

"No, I'm a partner of Edmund Coover's."

"Well! But this is crazy ... Frankly, you *are* disturbing me. I'd appreciate it if you'll say your piece and then go."

"But I've upset you already."

"I said you're *disturbing* me. You *can't* upset me. You have no idea how indifferent I am. Now what have you got to say to me?"

"I've got a newspaper clipping: September twenty-seventh, 1980. Quote: 'The body of Edmund Coover, 38, was pulled from the Delaware River yesterday morning, slightly downriver from the Walt Whitman Bridge.' "

"No!"

" 'This is the fifth such death this year. Coover was owner of Clothes by Coover and of Fashion Front, the last of which went out of business in June. He is survived by his mother Mrs. Evaline Coover of West Hartford, Connecticut. Funeral arrangements are pending.' "

There was a pause.

Harper could be heard breathing through his teeth. "Is that *all?*"

"Uh-huh."

"They've made Ed into a statistic! Didn't they know any more about him than *that?*" I—I'm devastated ..." Speech turned cold in this throat.

Over the phone Harper heard his office manager, Mrs. Planter, making an entrance into Greene's upstairs office. "Get him *in* here!" she cried. "This is awful. What are you *doing*?"

"Mrs. Planter, right? I'm his best friend's partner and I'm trying to help."

"Fred Partner? It is nice to be remembered. We should have moved into that sealed glass tower. How should I know he was this bad off in the head?" There was a silence, then a gasp in recognition. "Jesus K. Reist!" the woman said. "You think he heard that? Because I didn't mean it like that, Fred, I swear."

"Harper?" he said into the phone.

"I'm gonna sue that paper," Gregory Harper said. "What did

they know about him? He saved a kid from drowning once—he was a lot of things besides a shopkeeper. *Huh!* 'Fourth such death this year.' "

"Fifth."

"And his mother his only survivor. What about me? What about his girlfriend? And you, too. We're all his frigging survivors."

"Absolutely right."

"I feel—so sorry." Harper let out a cold laugh. "I feel sorry for myself. Huh. I won't ever see him."

"It's getting late," the phone purred. "You can't do this jumping thing now. How's this: I'll meet you in your office, give you this clipping. We'll get a drink at the White Horse."

Harper didn't say anything. His emotions were now sore where for months he had felt nothing.

"Will you meet me?" the phone said. Harper opened his mouth; no words came. He needed to recover, he thought, that's all. "Meet me?" the phone asked again.

In grief it was a new world. "I'm coming in," Harper said.

He telescoped the receiver shut with a click and let it arc free into space. Harper stood up slow now. Below, a fire truck approached. Eighteen flights below. His knees jerked. For the first time since he stepped out of the window, he was afraid.

Carefully, carefully, he held to the cool granite-faced wall. He hugged a column, swung around it. He wanted to meet this man who had known Ed, wanted to relive Ed's memory more than any newspaper would manage. Oh, there were things Gregory Harper wanted to *do*.

Now, with the morning sun on him, Harper set off from where the column met the wall, making his way with nervous knees to his office window. On the far side of his desk he saw in a row a rapt Mrs. Planter, two uniformed city cops, Joe from maintenance, and the pretty girl from the lobby concession stand. One of the cops was a woman; there were a dozen onlookers all told. Greg Harper reached the window and held to it by his left hand, unsure of joining the tableau.

But a slender amber-haired man came grinning forward from the chorus. "Come on," he said, approaching. "The water's fine." Startled by the gesture, heart beating wildly, Harper drew back toward the column, his shadow following him. Oh it was, yes, it *was* Ed Coover's face poking into the light, and Harper closed

his eyes in a moment of tasty joy—*none of it's true then, none of it.*

But that sunbeam spotlighting his parka, Harper soon saw, shone right through Coover's face. Dust motes gleamed and spiraled where no light should be. And Gregory Harper, a little highstrung that day, was so startled at the sight that he lost his balance. The wraith of Edmund Coover reached for him, but anyway Harper fell, arms outstretched, his friend's face shrinking above.

Then somehow he turned. The curb was rising fast. On the sidewalk, a woman froze in place. She held a grocery bag the color of Janie's hair. *Beautiful,* Harper thought. As is the habit of the living, Harper made a promise then, against all odds. He'd do for someone what Ed had done for him. Next his body hit a parked delivery van. Impact bashed in its thin steel roof. Silence. Then upstairs and down the street the screaming began.

Paramedics are getting so clever these days; Gregory Harper did not die that afternoon, though he did come very close. He became an especially weak quadraplegic and spent May, June, and July in intense "phantom pain" despite generous helpings of Demerol. Mrs. Planter says he spent a lot of time babbling as if to someone named Ed. It wasn't until September after being admitted to a rehab facility that Harper came down with a urinary infection (common in paralytics) which happened to kill him. Never mind.

But one of these days behind closed doors it might be you with the blade and the useless hot water running. It might be you alone with the lobotomizing noose, with the pills which destroy liver and memory, with the horridly disfiguring shotgun and corrosives. Yes, *you,* poor child, set to take your one-in-forty chance of remedy.

Just as you grasp the blade, the noose, the pill bottle, the gun, he comes up behind you, taps you lightly on the shoulder. Who or what is this Gregory Harper, this desparate, withered form which the fluorescent light stumbles through?

Step aside of your shock and terror. Corpse Trainee, meet Former Man. Why not visit—you can't cry out, and Harper has come so *far*: from the howling, aching, loveless mists where he dwells alone with his chattering brittle mind in place of all he had seen and held . . . For whether you march on among the living or quit the flesh and sign up with the dead, there is no paradise, no panacea, no shortage of hells. When you walk into death

or debility, even the half-dozen people you guilelessly made wretched cannot help you. When you walk out on this biochemic bath of color, heat, and sorrow, then all your crazy, crippling dreams—more real now than you—follow along. It is living dreams which throw your stripped soul into convulsions.

Gregory Harper intends to show you what happened to him and to the rest. Your current sad state is but a warm-up act until your instrument of death begins to poorly play. Harper will teach you, my foolish friend.

You think you have nothing to lose.

A Table for One

by RICHARD WILSON

Dinner at *this* restaurant
might not be quite what you expected!

Harry Protagonist, tired and old, waited alone at a table covered by a food-stained cloth. The dishes of the previous diner had been removed but other evidences of the meal remained.

The restaurant was big and seamy. It was virtually deserted now, in late afternoon. The weak light of winter filtered through dirty plate glass. Harry could not imagine why it was popular and why it had been recommended to him. When he was younger he would have complained. Now he said nothing.

Far from him in the vast interior of the restaurant, which had been a supermarket, a few others sat at tables, each alone. There were no women. He sat where the meat counter had been. He couldn't tell whether the other people had remained after a meal, or, like him, were waiting.

To one side were kitchens. Harry couldn't see into them but he heard voices there as of people coming to work. There was a dull clatter of big pots. There were snatches of talk but he couldn't make out words.

Now there was a bustle. Thick curtains were drawn across the windows and dim lights went on. Waiters appeared. Now all the tables were occupied, a man to each.

Harry's soiled tablecloth was whisked away and replaced with one of virgin white. The maître d' bowed and complimented Harry on his appearance. This pleased him because he had grown stout.

He was told a waiter would be with him soon to take his order. The maître d' himself brought a drink, the specialty of the

house. It was tall and red and it warmed him. He was content to sit and think about the meal to come. There was no menu. The maître d' had told him he would be surprised and pleased.

He waited.

Somewhere to his right he heard indistinct sounds. Voices murmured. Was there a struggle? He strained to see but in the dim light nothing was clear. He thought a diner had left his table and wondered why. He resolved to be orderly, not to offend.

A spotlight glowed, then dimmed, then glowed. He saw a trussed, living man raised from the floor. By wires? The body was an arc, face down. It swung like a pendulum.

To his left another man was trussed and raised. The second body began to swing, perpendicular to the first.

They swung faster. There were drum beats and cymbal clashes as they swooped and soared and descended and zoomed. Intermittent colored lights played on them and on the men at the tables. The rhythmic beats sounded through speakers in the ceiling.

At first, in the dimness and the flashing lights, it was hard to see whether the swinging men were dressed or naked, conscious or unconscious.

Then he saw that they were awake. They seemed to smile, as if they enjoyed their rides.

They glowed, then burst into flame.

A most delicious odor filled the air.

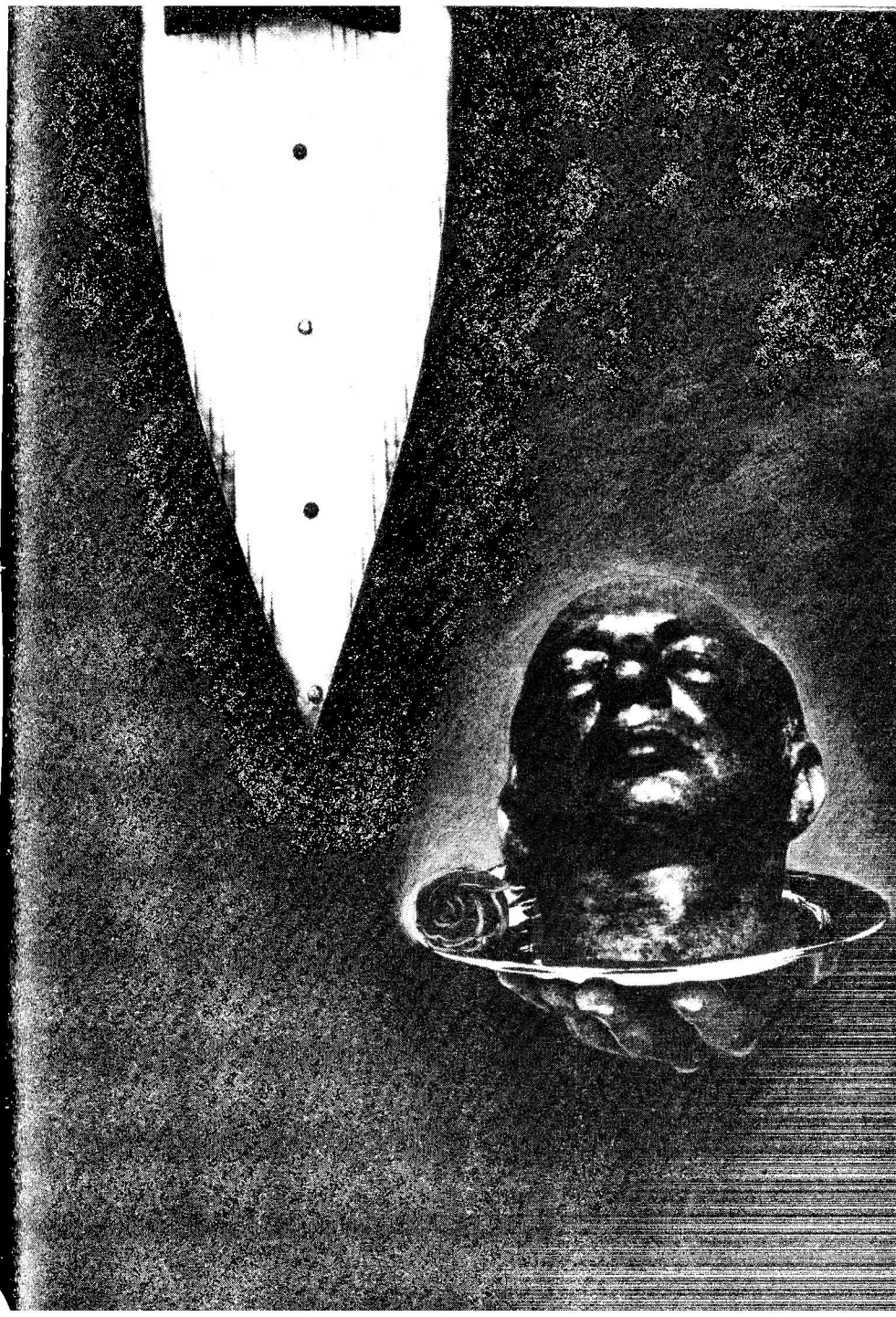
. . . several drumbeats later Harry Protagonist started up from his table, filled with belated horror. He stumbled into a waiter carrying a tray of appetizers, which crashed to the floor. Harry slipped on a piece of glazed fruit and fell. A broken glass cut him on the cheek.

Now he was defective, he thought.

The maître d' hastened to Harry's side. "Oh my dear sir you are hurt," he said.

Harry had always been afraid of maître d's. Not the least of it was that he feared getting their titles wrong. He didn't know whether they should be maître d's or maîtres d'. They were always so aloof and superior and well-dressed and clean. Harry never knew whether to tip them and when he didn't he felt guilty. He felt that they told other maître d's about him.

But this maître d' was different. He said to Harry: "Oh my dear sir you have damaged yourself. We must not let you suffer so."



Harry was grateful for the concern voiced by the maître d', who then said: "Kindly sign this waiver so that we may attend to you. A formality, alas. Here, take my pen. My dear sir! A thousand apologies. You have signed. Good. Now it is possible to tend to your hurts for the greater good of us all."

Harry was pleased with the solicitude. This must be why people came here.

The maître d' clapped his hands and waiters sprang forward. "Staunch the flow! Bind up his wound! Oh sir how we deplore your suffering. Medic! Hurry here! Your comforting benisons are required. A small injection. Just so. You do feel better now sir do you not? Yes. You do like us do you not? We must have your good will. We want you to be our friend. We do not want you to angry up your blood. We want you—nay, we need you. And are you not comfortable? Are you not happier now than even ever before? We are sure you are."

Gently the waiters removed Harry's tie. It had been his favorite tie but now there was blood on it. Harry didn't want it in that condition. They opened his collar.

The maître d', holding the paper Harry had signed, said to him: "Now we have provided for you. No longer are you a mere customer. For you we have provided well and you are, how does one say, a provision, are you not?" The maître d' laughed. "A small jest we have. You do like us do you not? You are comfy are you not? Shall we make you more so?" He clapped his hands again. "Make him more so." He withdrew.

The waiters bowed to Harry and also withdrew. Men in white with tall white hats came. They undressed Harry. Then they trussed him and dressed him, daubing him with a sweet-smelling brown sauce.

They smiled at him approvingly. He smiled back, grateful for their careful attention. Wires were attached to him hand and foot. He was raised from the floor and began to swing, face down, like a pendulum.

The drum beats started again, punctuating the end of each arc described by his body. The cymbals joined in. The men at the tables applauded.

Harry Protagonist was comfortable. He enjoyed the motion and the attention.

He was beginning to feel pleasantly warm.

Seven Graves for Sinbad

by VANN ANSON LISTER

Hungry dogs have desecrated the grave.
A rotting wooden cross juts from the dirt;
bones litter a shallow whole in the soft loam.

The old-timey wino on the North Avenue Bridge seems to know where he is going. His shoulder bag swings against his baggy corduroys in well-rehearsed rhythm. Beneath the wide-lapel jacket he wears at least six shirts, even though it is not cold.

Looking over the railing at the east end of the bridge, he shakes his head and crosses the street to look over the opposite rail. *Odd,* he thinks. *No trails.*

He eases his frail-looking body around the end of the rail into the thick bushes, and hugging the concrete of the bridge he pushes his way down the slope to the river.

Since the city of Milwaukee consumes more beer per capita than any city in the U.S., the old wino is very alone. The Milwaukee Road Railway runs along the west bank of the river, so the bridge is high and wide and long, to allow the trains to come and go beneath, along the river. It is a perfect wino bridge, but this is Beer City, U.S.A., and winos rarely trespass here. Beer drinkers prefer bars or parking lots or alleys or beaches. They never sit under bridges. Bridges are the sole province of the winos of the world.

There is a silent beauty and an art to sitting under bridges that only winos know. The traffic noises and shouting of cabbies and children are muted by the dense foliage and trees along the riverbank. The sounds drift down from another world. Sunlight reflects off the river to dance on the dark belly of the bridge. Between the arched concrete pilings is a bald spot of hard-packed

dirt where nothing ever grows, the sun never shines. Here the wino builds a small fire in an ancient circle of stones in the center of the clearing that must surely have been used in by-gone days to chart the rising of the moon.

An old coffee can of river water boils gently in the circle of stones. Filleted chunks of catfish churn slowly around in a stew of roots and greens. The fishing line, tied to a crooked limb, still dangles in the water. While the stew cooks, the wino wanders out into the thicket to piss. There are no trails. *Not even adventurous children play here,* he realizes. He is thinking he could camp here for weeks, undetected, when he sees a brakeman across the river waving to him, friendly. He watches him walk the train, stooping between boxcars to couple air hoses, climbing steel rungs to release brakes. The brakeman hasn't seen a wino here in Beer City for months. When he clocks out at the yard office he will be inspired to purchase a couple of bottles of wine, for old times' sake.

The wino's name is Sinbad, and he has sailed the seven seas as a merchant seaman. He has a steel plate in his skull where the doctors once peeked into his brain and cut out a black demon that lurked there. He wears a beret to cover the patch of odd-colored skin where no hair will ever grow. The beret is black, to remind him of the demon.

There is a grave where Sinbad is pissing in the bushes. He shakes the last drops away and fumbles with his zipper as he leans through the dense foliage for a closer look. There is a rotting wooden cross with the name Weirdly carved on it, lying fallen on the ground. The grave has been desecrated by some marauding mongrel. The bones of a cat are scattered around a shallow indentation in the soft loam of the forest floor.

Sinbad *reads* the grave. The steel plate in his skull prickles. It is the steel plate, he claims, that gives him this gift; he can know about things just by touching them. He places the scattered bones back in the hole, covers them, and rights the marker, shoving the point deep in the black loam while he *talks* to the ghost of Weirdly, as dappled sunlight plays on the foliage.

Weirdly was a wino; his masters were fond of wine, and often let him drink from their glasses. It is quite appropriate that they buried him here, in wino paradise. They were a young couple, very much in love. They wanted a child, but the girl had prob-

lems, ovarian tumors, the doctors said. So Weirdly became a child to them, an only child; a big blue-eyed lynx-point Siamese, terribly intelligent, as near true sentience as only certain Egyptian cats, a few very old parrots, and perhaps porpoises can be. And terribly pampered . . . until the joyful day the girl announced her proud pregnancy; her impossible, miraculous pregnancy. And Weirdly was no longer pampered. He was all but ignored in the couple's parental bliss. He grew weak and sick and went away and died of loneliness while the couple practiced their Lamaze, Leboyer, and La Leche for natural childbirth. There was no longer room in their lives for a sentient cat. But they wept when a neighbor told them where to find the body, and they carried him in a box across the North Avenue Bridge from their apartment, to bury him on the river bank. They shared a little bottle of wine under the bridge; a toast to the dead, and to the new life in her belly.

The child was a stillborn, and Sinbad finds *that* grave near Weirdly's. Unmarked. The couple had tried to have the child at home, alone, the husband as midwife. They blamed themselves, and their guilt ate them alive.

They had no friends in Milwaukee. The husband's job had brought them here from Houston. They were alone, with no one to share their grief, and they wanted to hide what happened. It was against the law, after all; they could have been charged with murder for not having a doctor present, even though they trained well and studied the books, even though it was not their fault. It was the black demons; tumors.

To hide their shame and guilt they buried the fetus and placenta in a little grave under the bridge, but they hid this grave deeper in the black loam and foliage, and left no marker. They drank a *big* bottle of wine under the bridge to drown their sorrow.

The husband began drinking heavily, coming home late, missing work. He was a standards analyst, brought in by a local foundry to supervise time studies. He hated it. He wanted to finish and get back to Texas, but the work dragged on and on.

One night in a drunken rage he struck his lovely wife, too hard, with a half-empty bottle of wine. Sinbad finds *her* grave in the black loam not far from the child. He *reads* it, and knows she was not sad to die. She could not bear to live with her guilt, and had taunted her husband cruelly, questioning his masculinity in the feeble hope that he would lash out at her, end her misery.

He did, and only Sinbad knows it was a suicide.

Sinbad has crawled deep into the foliage. His hands and knees are damp and black. At his small fire in the clearing under the bridge there is a dark shadow of a man with a brown paper bag in his hand that can only be a liter of wine. Sinbad's bones, old as the sea, creak like a straining mizzenmast as he heads back. The steel plate in his skull stings; tells him the shadowman is not a wayward wino. It is *him*. Sinbad crawls through the dense foliage toward his fate, and cringes suddenly, trembles. He has crawled across another grave. A wino. Stabbed to death when he passed out in a drunken stupor, because he was too near the graves. Stabbed to death by *him*, the shadowman waiting by the fire. Sinbad brushes at the loam and a skull grins up at him through black leaves. *Not just one*, he reads. He glances around through the whispering leaves and sees the skulls of two more winos drinking black loam.

"Howdy," the shadow says.

"Hello." Sinbad recognizes the brakeman as he walks toward the fire, brushing black loam from his baggy knees.

"I seen you from across the river there," the brakeman says, pointing to the tracks across the river.

"Don't see many folks over here. I thought you might like to share a jug or two. I sneak down here a lot. It's quiet. Peaceful." He extends the jug to Sinbad. "Thunderbird? Or Mad Dog?" He pulls a flat bottle from his hip pocket, offering it. "Don't talk much, huh? Hungry?" He pulls a can of sardines from his other hip pocket. Sinbad notices the worn black Buck knife sheath on his belt.

"Well. Just tryin' to be friendly. What was you doin' back in them bushes?"

"Pissing."

"Oh. Nothing personal. Just wondered."

Sinbad accepts the flat bottle of Mogen David 20/20 and sips it carefully. *No. Not poison. That's not his style. The knife on his belt . . . Keep an eye on that knife.*

"Gets real lonely down here sometimes," the brakeman says.

I'll bet, thinks Sinbad. *Terribly lonely.* He drinks long on the Mad Dog, and finally says, "You been a brakeman long?"

"Naw. Couple years. Hey, I'm hungry. Whatcha got boilin'?

Can I join you?" The man sits on the hard packed dirt by the fire. "Looks like fish. Smells good." He drinks from the bottle of Thunderbird. "Guess I'll eat these sardines." He pulls the folding knife from its pouch, opens it, and cuts into the lid of the can with the sharp blade, cutting up and down, up and down, expertly. The tin lid crinkles up and away from the sardines. Sinbad's eyes are riveted on the gleaming blade, up and down, flashing reflections from the shimmering river. When he finishes, the man leans forward and places the knife, open, on a rock by the fire, and eats the sardines with his fingers. There is yellow oil on the stainless blade, dripping slowly onto the rock.

"Nice blade," says Sinbad, reaching for it. "Mind if I see?"

The man starts to object, but the knife is already in Sinbad's quick hand. He *reads* it. He *reads* the crushing shame and guilt, and the horrible loneliness of the shadowman. Their eyes meet, and are locked in a fierce embrace. The man sees understanding in Sinbad's eyes.

"You found them, didn't you?"

Sinbad lays the knife back on the rock and sits crosslegged by the fire, staring into the hollow eyes.

"I'm going to do you a big favor, son."

"Thank you."

Sinbad raises a silver derringer from the baggy folds of his pants and shoots the man in the forehead. The sardine can flies backward to splash in the river, and the man flops sharply back, legs still crossed, to stare unseeing at the reflected sunlight dancing on the belly of the bridge. He is smiling.

Sinbad buries him under the bridge near his wife and son, and hops a boxcar headed south. With a bottle of Thunderbird, and a bottle of Mad Dog, he rides the empty car to warmer places, friendlier bridges.

Garbage Day in Ewerton

by A.R. MORLAN

A bedtime story
for spoiled children.

Spirals of cigarette smoke did a languid death-dance over the shade of the Strawberry Shortcake lamp before dissipating into the stale air which filled Jennifer's bedroom. Whenever Monica happened to glance her daughter's way between paragraphs of *The Adventures of Strawberry Shortcake and Her Friends*, Jennifer would roll her pale blue eyes up toward her reddish bangs and part her lips in a noiseless sigh.

This time, Monica ignored her. Other nights, during other story hours, they would do that old "But the tv said smoking's no *good* for you, Mommy" / "Did I *ask* you to tell me what's good for me?" two-step, but tonight . . . she hadn't *told* Jennifer, that would have spoiled the plan that Jennifer didn't—*couldn't*—know about; but tonight, *tonight*, it just would have seemed wrong to fight with Jennifer. Even if Jennifer's argument—*damn, she's only* six—against smoking was right, hashing over the subject just wasn't proper tonight. Not that she wasn't tempted to do so, no matter what Dave had said about this being *the* night to go through with it, but giving in to her temper, especially under the circumstances, would be an act sure to haunt her even more than she knew she was going to be haunted later. . . .

The next time she looked up from the page she was reading—and dropping stray ashes on—Monica avoided Jennifer's white second-hand Sears canopy bed. Instead, her eyes were drawn to the win-

dow, where, on this hot July night, the combination storm/screen window was opened just a crack. The lowest automatic setting on the window was notched for a four-inch opening, but now only a one-and-a-half inch slit admitted warm air into the room. Dave had propped up the window with a couple of Miller High Life matchbooks. Monica stifled a bitter, ironic laugh over the printing on the matchbooks; they had such a "high life" here in good old Ewerton, Wisconsin, living on one minimum-wage paycheck. If life got any higher ... best not to think about such things on a half-empty stomach. She and Dave had let Jennifer eat the lion's share of the canned ravioli tonight, and now the only thing Monica could do to fight off the hungries was smoke them away.

Looking at the propped-up window, she remembered how Dave had had to use Jennifer's new Garfield ruler, bought especially for Jennifer's first-grade pencil case, to make sure that the opening would be just wide enough when he brought it up to the window later tonight. Staring at the window, she struggled to remember whether or not she had kept the sales slip from the IGA. The ruler still had the price sticker on the back.

Her eyes darted over to the bed when Jennifer rolled over. The suddenness of Jennifer's move, coupled with the fullness of her yellow checked nightie (wryly, Monica remembered that she had bought it in the next largest size, so that Jennifer would get at least a couple of years' wear out of it) left Jennifer tangled tightly between her Care Bear sheets and gingham gown. Dimly, Monica knew that she should wiggle out of the white child-sized Bentwood rocker in which she was jammed and walk the short distance to Jennifer's bed to untangle that mess of tangled fabric, but she continued to sit where she was, mindlessly sticking her generic menthol cigarette into her face at measured intervals, simply watching the little girl struggle. It was so hard to believe that a body so small could move independently; her child resembled one of those baby dolls that flails its arms and legs when you pop in the Duracells and flip the hidden switch. Strange to think of such a being as a thinking, feeling, hurting person ... try as she might, Monica could not remember ever being so tiny (and still so alive) when she was only six years old. Not that she didn't remember her childhood. Why, she could rattle off the names of all her dollies, both store-bought and homemade; Moonbeam from the Dick Tracy comics, her favorite Chatty Cathy, Samantha from *Bewitched*, Betsey Wetsey (who did just that for a week after tak-

ing a bath with Monica), Molly made from men's "Monkey-socks," and the soft Alice in Wonderland Mom made from a mail-order kit. And moments from first grade were also there, dried flies embedded in the soft slush of her mind; how she cried when the little boy next door told her she looked like a pig in her new glasses, her first crush (his hair was dark brown and his name was Mike) and the Valentine's Day party when she kicked up a stink because Joey Carlson gave Valentines to only half the kids in class, plus one for the teacher, and she was one of the kids who didn't get one. All that really important shit.

But she couldn't remember how it *felt*, how it *was*. To be little and alive and taking life in in huge unfamiliar doses while she grew bigger and bigger, and suddenly the world was old and familiar, and she was starting over again with Jennifer. Her Jennifer, when she had been longing for a Jason, or a Jamie.

True, Monica's childhood was still there, a shriveled seed tucked deep in the soft folds of her self, but her present state of adulthood impinged on the purity of those days, those memories. She wished that she could ask Jennifer, "What's it like, huh? Is it scary, or neat, or just ... what? I can't get it back anymore, the way I was, the way you are now. Can you clue me in, before it's gone for you too?" Perhaps, if things were different, she might have actually done just that; a good way to get close to your child, to establish emotional bonds that last a lifetime, all the *Family Circle* and *Woman's Day* kind of parent-child advice-column gibberish that seemed a billion miles away from tonight, and from what she'd have to do later....

Showing Mommy how smart, how self-reliant she was, Jennifer wormed her way out of the tight wrappings then settled down on her belly under the gaily printed pastel sheets. Lately Jennifer had been eager to show Mommy and Daddy how smart she was, how she could open up her own can of spaghetti, how she could break up the dry lumps of Quick in the bottom of her glass all by herself, how she could write her name in a sprawling left-handed scrawl across the discarded envelopes from the many bills her parents got in the mail. Not that she could read the words "Final Notice" or "Please Remit Late Charges" printed on the bills inside, but wasn't that what school was for, to teach her how to read?

This morning, Jennifer had told her Daddy how she was going to go look "for a overtime job" to help out, so Mommy could

"buy real Quick again." Monica had wondered when Jennifer would catch on to her refilling the old Quick can with the generic kind of chocolate drink mix. All Dave could do was say, "Daddy's girl is really gonna make her old man proud," then leave the table quickly, mouth working silently. He had really wanted a girl—Monica suspected him of *wishing* her unborn baby into a girl, especially after she followed the "recipe" in the womens' magazine for conceiving a boy.

Funny, after all his talk about "Daddy's girl" this and "My girl" that, guess who Dave appointed to actually spend tonight with Jennifer, up here in her room? As if Monica wasn't capable of turning a key in an ignition.

Chickenshit Dave couldn't even face up to Jennifer after coming to his decision. Typical, Dave, typical. Touching the end of her spent cigarette to the tip of a fresh one, she mused that maybe it wasn't so easy, what he was getting ready to do outside, but *damn*, all he'd actually done before that was to weather-strip the frame around Jennifer's door and haul up a bundle of newspapers from the basement, so she could fold them into tight strips while Jennifer played outside this afternoon, just in case the weather-stripping wasn't air-tight enough. A bag of neatly folded strips sat outside Jennifer's room.

Dave didn't have to sit in here, choking on the smoke build-up but unable to stop adding to the miasma, reading drivel by the hour to a child who had heard the stories many times before, waiting. If it wasn't for the sheer numbing anticipation and helplessness of it all—it had to be done in darkness, but that darkness was so slow in coming—perhaps she wouldn't be so nervous. Granted, she could have done what she usually did whenever Jennifer raised a stink—like she did during supper when she found out that Daddy would be gone tonight, "working," when she pounded her plastic Mickey Mouse cup on the table, splattering the walls and ceiling with milk—which was to march the offender up to bed; no nighty-night kiss, no story, and no Snoopy night-light in the hallway. But tonight—tonight should be as good as possible. Or at least as bearable as Monica could make it for Jennifer, and for herself.

"Mommy, can I ask you somethin'?" This in the "I'm-buttering-her-up-for-the-kill" voice, usually reserved for when she wanted Santa to bring her the newest gee-gaw seen during the Saturday morning cartoons. By accident, Monica ground out a

new cigarette, swore, then lit up a fresh one. "What?"

Winding a wisp of fine red-gold hair around a pudgy forefinger, Jennifer went on in her best nonchalant voice, "I'm not sleepy yet, but I will be if we play annuder—"

"Forget it." Monica had given in to Jennifer earlier that evening, letting the girl play her Strawberry Shortcake video game, a morbid little musical bodyparts romp which showed the nasty Purple Pieman hacking up Strawberry and her pastry-named cohorts into a random field of wiggling body parts that didn't even shed strawberry blood, for Chissakes. The game was bad enough, but when it reminded Jennifer of the fact that there was an opened box of strawberry-filled toaster pastries sitting in the cupboard, Monica had to make a big show of how late it was getting, and how Jennifer needed lots of sleep. Little girls had to sleep a lot in order to be smart in school, Monica told her child, trying to make Jennifer forget about the lone box of food on the bottom shelf of the kitchen cupboard. Dave and Monica's breakfast.

Jennifer asked, "Are you mad 'cause I was winning?" and, after receiving no answer, turned over to stare at the latch-hook Smurfette rug Monica's mom made for Jennifer before Mom died last year, the rug which hung on the opposite wall. Yesterday, turning under the covers would have left Jennifer facing the window. They'd moved the bed, to give better access to the outside. The pale pink carpeting still bore the four deep indentations from the legs of her bed.

Reflexively, Monica took a deep puff on her cigarette, as she imagined going down to the kitchen to surreptitiously lick the splattered milk off of the kitchen walls, standing on the kitchen chair to scrape the semi-dried blotches of chocolate-flavored milk off the ceiling. Tonight she had scraped the bottom of the can, where a few bits of real Quick powder still clung. Maybe the drops would taste better. Any milk would be good, Monica reflected, letting out the minty smoke through dry lips, but by now it probably would be too dried to come off easily. The moment she exhaled, Jennifer began a series of muffled, very pointed coughs. Needless to say, *Her* Daddy didn't smoke. Grinding out the cigarette (happy, kiddo?) Monica threw the children's book down on the messy pile next to her sandled feet, then picked up that week's edition of the Ewerton *Herald.*

Not that she needed to look at it again, really; she and Dave knew its contents much too well by now. Jennifer didn't, but of

course they weren't about to show *her* the article, tell her that somehow, she and Mommy and Daddy had managed to slip through the cracks again, only this time they were going to do something about that fact, sort of take advantage of the situation. Jennifer couldn't have known that the paper somehow forgot to print her parents' names under the "Marriage License" section in "Part 2" (following "The Sports Report") over seven years ago—so it was only a little less than six and a half, they were enaged, weren't they?—and likewise managed to lose that wallet-sized photo from their wedding and not print any story about their union. And Jennifer was much too young to recall that her grand debut in Ewerton was never mentioned in the paper. Sorry, kiddo, nowadays a person can't even count on the old saw about making the papers when he's born, married, and buried. What with adding new stories, correcting galleys, a line or two sometimes falls to the printing room floor. Nothing worth getting hep up about.

And Monica and Dave couldn't be blamed if they missed seeing the article in paper about the final deadline for kindergarten enrollments last year, especially since the editor had to bump it to the classifieds so he could devote more space to that big pot bust out at EHS. Kids didn't learn all that much in kindergarten, did they? Have the kid watch a little extra *Mr. Wizard* and *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* to make up for it.

(Monica made a mental note to call back that woman about the video game machine; it was such a rarity to find someone in Ewerton, let alone this very neighborhood, who was willing to pop for something as frivolous as a video game system these days. Monica reminded herself to tell the woman that Dave had agreed to come down to the figure the woman offered; a buck was a buck.)

And Jennifer had been learning eye-hand coordination with the video games since she was three, so missing out on kindergarten hadn't seemed like such a big deal, only Monica was slightly surprised to overhear a pair of women at the check-out counter in the Red Owl talking about getting letters from the school board encouraging them to send *their* kids to kindergarten this fall . . . Jennifer was getting set for the first grade, and the Ewerton school system hadn't invited her into the fold *last* year. It was then that she remembered Mr. Winston, the former elementary school teacher, who always made his way from house to house every summer when she was a kid, asking every family, "How

many children? Any new babies this year?" Palmer Winston never missed a house, even those in the old people's section of town, with its row after row of declining Victorian homes. Until his wife died, and he started to cut down on the houses he'd stop at, out of both old age and boredom. Old peep's street was the first to go—her great aunt told Monica about that, rueful at the latest missed chance to tell her former classmate Palmer with a solemn face, "Yes, I had a baby. Five of 'em"—then Monica saw Mr. Winston pass her house last year, clipboard in mottled hand, as if he couldn't see the hitching post on the front lawn bearing the three wood-burned plaques reading DAVID, MONICA, and JENNIFER.

At the time she had written it off as forgetfulness on the old man's part. Or maybe—miracle of miracles—he had actually remembered from last year that she and Dave had a little girl, and decided not to bother them about it. Then they hadn't paid attention to the annual notice in the paper about the school census. This year they did.

Last year was Mr. Winston's final year as school census taker; a new science teacher at the junior high took over the job, and Monica's great aunt Vera got the golden opportunity to tell the young man that she had septuplets on her seventieth birthday, a fact she related with glee over the telephone to Monica. That was the capper, even more so than the article in this week's paper about one hundred percent cooperation on the part of Ewerton residents in this year's school census, and how it made the new teacher's job so much more pleasant and easier, all that happy horseshit. If the new census taker went to Roberts Street, where Great Aunt Vera lived, he had had no idea of who in Ewerton had kids and who didn't. "100% cooperation," the paper had said. And the new man hadn't paid any attention to the number of names on the hitching post.

Later, Dave had taken the post down. It did need a new coat of varnish. And they could take it with them when they left town. The manager at the apartment complex in the Twin Cities said to Dave that they could move in next week at the earliest if they didn't mind the smell of new paint. Dave's homemade hitching post would look good in that narrow entry hall leading into the living room, or so he told her. She had stayed home with Jennifer while Dave went apartment-hunting with Larry Kominski, a former classmate of Dave's who had moved to the Twitties after

divorcing his wife last year. Dave told her that Larry's wife was brain-damaged or something; the two men hadn't been in close contact for several years, even though they both lived in Ewerton after graduation. All Monica knew for sure was that Maureen Kominski was out at the nursing home on the other side of town, and that Larry Kominski now worked for Honeywell in Minnesota. Being newly single, he didn't have to worry about getting the highest wages right off. Supporting three cats wasn't as costly as supporting a wife, too. Something about Larry and his unseen wife—ex-wife—Maureen reminded Monica of that nursery rhyme in one of Jennifer's books, the one about Peter, Peter, Pumpkin Eater. Poor Maureen, vegetating in her pumpkin shell out at the nursing home. Still, it wasn't *that* bad, what Larry did. Might have been worse.

Across from Monica, next to the slightly opened door, was Jennifer's toybox, currently covered with her dolls. My Friend Mandy, a "feather-leather" E.T., a Miss Piggy beanbag with snarled hair, plush Smurfs, and Tenderheart Bear stared at Monica with flat, uncomprehending plastic and paint eyes. She was reminded of the highly guilded and jeweled animal and human figures the Egyptians used to seal in their pyramids. The kind those archeologists found in that boy king's tomb; the same ones she and her parents had driven down to Chicago to see a few years back. She had wondered then if they did the same, all the pomp and circumstance, for female royalty who died. Now she wished that she had taken the time to look up the answer to her mental question. Maybe E.T. and Tenderheart Bear would do in a pinch. They'd have to, now.

"Whatchew looking at, Mommy?" Propped up on one elbow, Jennifer watched her mother slowly flip the pages of the *Herald.*

"Nothing. How 'bout if you get some shut-eye, Miss."

Jennifer rolled over onto her back, arms crossed behind her head. "Not tired."

"*Who's* not tired?" Monica reached for a new cigarette.

"*I'm* not tired, Mommy."

Monica chose to ignore the petulant undertone in Jennifer's answer. Jennifer, not taking her eyes off of the ceiling with its dense cover of glow-in-the-dark stars that were just beginning to show a faint pattern of luminescence in the gloom not touched by the light from the twenty-five-watt blub in her bedside lamp, asked, "Whatchew reading?"

"The paper?" Why lie about it? No harm done.

"*This* week's paper? The one with the picture of the kittens?"

"Yeah, Jennifer, the same paper." C'mon, kid, forget about the "Pet of the Week" kittens and fall asleep already.

Turning over to face Monica, Jennifer pleaded, "Read it to me, please Mommy, pretty please?" It usually worked with Dave, that "Pretty please" shit; a phrase enclosed in a pink glass box, next to the BREAK GLASS IN EMERGENCY sign....

Monica read. She read about the school census, the announcement that the Soo Line was pulling out half its runs through Ewerton, the words under the picture of the two tiger-stripe kittens who were scheduled to be put down if no one adopted them before next Wednesday. She read the single item under "Help Wanted," and the sixteen "Looking for Work" classified ads. She read the huge two-color "Going out of Business Sale" advertisement that the Red Owl store had splashed across the innermost two pages of Part 1. She read the Legal section; the DWIs, the forfeitures, the DNR violations, the burglary arrests, the assault charges brought and dropped. Soon, Jennifer was nodding off for real, before Monica even got to the sports.

Monica stopped mouthing the mundane, numbing words when she saw Jennifer's eyelids stop fluttering and close for real. On the street below, a passing car ran over the lid of a garbage can, an echoing, tinny rumble. Three short taps on the horn of their car. Dave. Gingerly, she wormed her way out of the tiny rocker, her bare lower thighs making sucking noises as they parted from the painted seat. Quietly she made her way to the window. Pushing aside the limp pink curtains, she saw Dave fishing the extension hose and cleaning head—the wide, thin one Jennifer used to call "the mustache mouth" when she was tiny—out from under the bushes near the garage. It was dark outside, the dark that comes right before the streetlamps sizzle on in lightening-bug coolness, so Monica could barely see Dave make the final attachments to the car. Having sat down there for the past couple of hours, his eyes were probably used to the dark. Good thing the extension hose and the house were almost the same color. (The better not to see you with, my dear, said the Big Bad....)

Dave had left the ladder standing against the house after cleaning out the rain gutters yesterday. Lots of people in Ewerton left stuff like extension ladders outside overnight, even though the unemployment situation meant that neighborly trust was occa-

sionally violated lately. Anyway, they wouldn't be needing the ladder in the Cities.

Suddenly, she was glad that Dave had insisted on moving Jennifer's bed away from the window. She had argued last night that once it came up to the window nothing would matter anymore, but he was right; knowing it's coming is one thing, but having to *see* it come for you is another.

The sound of the duct tape unrolling made slight *snicking* noises; faint, but damn, Dave should have thought to unroll and cut off the necessary pieces while he was down by the car. Jennifer wasn't *that* deep in sleep yet. The stiff black brushes on the cleaning head scratched at the screen as Dave finished taping the head to the outside frame. They did not make eye contact through the film of curtain. She couldn't hear Dave go down the ladder, but she could picture every slow, backward step in her mind.

Not much time left. Now that the wait was almost over, Monica wished that it was five o'clock again, and that she and Dave were back in the kitchen watching Jennifer eat her chosen meal of Chef-Boy-Ar-Dee Ravioli, dry Cap'n Crunch, and ersatz Quick. They would even give her the last box of toaster pastries, if she wanted them. And Jennifer could splatter the whole house with chocolate milk, if she wanted to. Monica patted the curtains closed, not that it mattered, or made any difference. Gas could permeate cloth, and Jennifer's curtains were pink dotted Swiss, so sheer you could almost see completely through them. In her mind's eye, Monica could picture the sign in front of the apartment Dave and Larry found in the Cities: HUNTINGTON COURT—SINGLES—COUPLES—NO CHILDREN—NO PETS. She was glad Dave had never invited Larry over. He didn't *know*.

Perfunctorily, she bent over Jennifer and made a smacking noise near her left ear. Monica was never much good at bye-byes. She looked at Jennifer, then at the guard toys who watched the scene impartially. Take good care of her, she mouthed silently. Monica could hear the faint, sharp, chitinous click of the car door opening, and she knew that she had only seconds to get out, shut the door, and start stuffing newspapers into the places the weatherstripping didn't block off. Monica took a last look at Jennifer, who suddenly opened moist eyes and asked in a soft voice, "Will I be dead for a long time, Mommy?"

"Just a while, Jenny." Then Monica was on the other side of the shutting door. As her heartbeat slowed to a semi-normal rate,

Monica rested her cheek against the doorjam and stared at the open doorway of the master bedroom across the hall. Two large suitcases stood next to the bed, tightly packed.

Running her fingers along the smooth wood of the frame, Monica thought about what she'd have to do—later. The opening of Jennifer's door, the rushed fumblings in there with the big black plastic bag from under the kitchen sink, thick and dark enough to hide the Care Bear sheets and the lumpy bundled form, made lumpier by the addition of the guard toys. Monica had insisted that they buy bags big enough for the toys, too—a concession Dave made grudgingly.

Hearing the low rumble of the car's engine far, far below, Monica thought, *The gates of the town dump will be locked this late at night, but Dave knows the place where the chain-link fence has more than a few broken links. The* . . . bag *will most likely be covered over soon. Tomorrow is garbage day in this half of Ewerton.*

They'd have time enough to eat that last box of toaster pastries—and throw the box out with all the rest of the trash, the boxes and boxes of it—before going to gas up the car for the trip to the Cities. To the janitorial assistant position at Honeywell that Larry promised to get for Dave. Twenty-five cents over minimum, for starters.

The apartment. One small bedroom.

In her mind's hungry eye she could see the milk, splattered on the kitchen walls, slowly running down. Still semi-moist.

Hearing Jennifer's muffled cough from behind the door, Monica began to reach for the cough drops she usually carried in her shirt pocket; instead she reached down to the bag next to the door.

Then she began stuffing the folded strips of paper into the cracks around the door.

The Funny Trick They Played on Old McBundy's Son

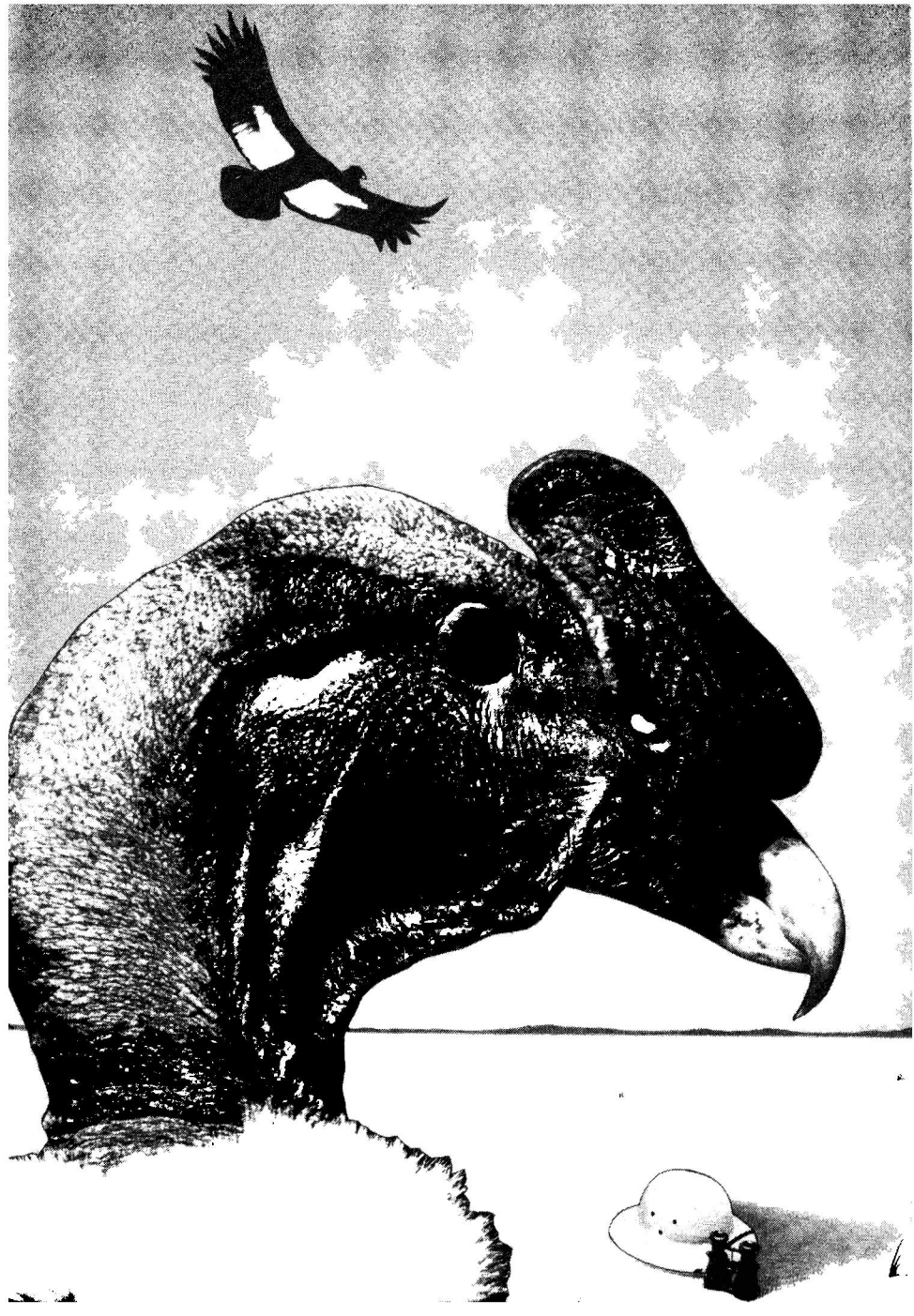
by GEORGE ALEC EFFINGER
and JACK C. HALDEMAN II

Dinner will be served at midnight.
You won't want to miss it.

It had been very bad for several days. Black clouds surged constantly over the ragged mountain peaks; wind drove the cold rain in unending solid curtains against the rocks, the black, twisted trees, and the solitary figure. It was not a day to be out alone, to be hunting. Yet he was always alone; he was always hunting.

The old man was bent over beneath the weight of a wooden cage strapped to his back. He leaned on a wooden stick to make his slow way forward. Slipping slightly on the wet rocks, he groaned and regained his balance with difficulty. The cage was not as heavy as it might have been, because it was empty. That was part of the problem: its constant emptiness. Some other parts of the problem concerned his advancing age and the rapid approach of another winter. Not to mention the hummingbird.

He picked his painful way over the rocky mountainside, cursing the empty cage, muttering about the miserable weather. Rainwater streamed down his gaunt, haggard features, his wind-weathered face. Time and sweat had long ago bleached the colors from his shirt and trousers. His clothing, like his age, hung about him like a tattered grey cloud. He shifted the bolo that hung from



his waist so that the weights would stop clicking against each other, an annoying reminder that he hadn't thrown it in over two weeks. His luck had not been good.

It had been that long, at least, since he had even *seen* a condor. How magnificent the bird had been in its soaring flight, how unobtainable! Yet for all the frustration, it was reassuring just to see another of the great birds. He had been afraid they might all have moved on early this year. If he didn't get one before winter set in—well, who could tell? He was getting old. Winters seemed to be getting harsher every year, and it was getting tougher to ride them out.

Tomorrow he would get an early start, climb the north slope. Maybe the weather would change, maybe his luck would change. The great bird *had* to be there.

The hummingbird was sick and couldn't last much longer. But he didn't even want to think about that.

It had all begun more than four decades before. The chaps of the Pericles Club had enjoyed a grand dinner, had drunk among them enough sparkling wine to flood out some of the smaller undergraduate clubs, and were now savoring brandy and cigars in the Peirce & Trefoyle Room. They had a small problem to discuss, large enough to require a meeting of the third-year men, but too trivial to bother about over the meal itself. It was the matter of McBundy, the son of the university's greatest athlete, the grandson of one of the university's principal benefactors. About one out of ten paths, ways, streets, rooms, and buildings connected with the university was named McBundy Something-or-Other; therefore, it went without saying that young McBundy would be accepted into whichever club he preferred.

He had made it clear, very clear, that his preference was the Pericles Club. Naturally. But this McBundy, unlike his heritage, was a bit of a stick. Rather than mince words, let's come out and say it: McBundy was damn spooney, solid ivory from ear to ear. But if McBundy wanted the Pericles, that was what he would have.

"We have the society to think of," objected Harshire. "No one dictates to the Pericles Club."

Rodgers, the chairman of the Wine and Spirits Committee, exhaled a blue cloud of smoke and looked through it at his fellows. "Quite right," he said solemnly. "But if we don't tap the villain,

why, who knows but his dear old dad might not buy up the club and turn it into a Chinese hand-laundry?"

"But wasn't Sir Colin one of us?" asked Branham, the superb batsman.

"Yes," said Harshire, "so he ought to understand our position."

"And I'm betting that he won't," said Rodgers. "This son of his will get nowhere in life, not without his family's backing, and I'm very sure that Sir Colin has known that for years. So getting the young noddle into Pericles is just a necessary step in setting him up on his own and getting him out of the way." There were mournful murmurs of agreement from the others.

"I wish he'd chosen one of the others," said Branham. "Maybe we could interest him in Pillars or Rose and Raven."

Rodgers shook his head. "He's said it himself, I've heard him. He said he wanted desperately to be in Pericles, just like father. He said he'd sell his soul to get into Pericles."

There was a moment of silence, of thoughtful brandy sipping and cigar smoking. There was a bit of laughter from one corner of the room. Slattery spoke up. "Well," he said, "then that's just what he'll have to do." They put up with Slattery because his father was the wealthiest distiller in Dublin. Sometimes it seemed that the Pericles Club was awash in his old man's whiskey. That overcame all their normal objections to associating with a bloody Irishman.

Rodgers looked up at the ceiling, as if pleading for mercy. "Will you take all night to tell us what you mean?" he asked. "Some of us have duties and responsibilities to the university, you know."

Slattery stepped forward. "Listen. Someone dresses up, you know, all evil and Mephistophelean. Pretends to be Old Nick himself. Tells this McBundy person that he won't be selected by Pericles unless he puts up his soul as a pledge. We all know we'll have to take him, so let's have a bit of fun with him. And if the chap is half the ninny he's supposed to be, then maybe he'll suddenly find some new attraction to Pillars."

They all waited, and when Rodgers laughed, they all laughed. It was a smashing idea. They planned how it would be done; and that, of course, required the opening of bottle after bottle. By midnight they had their fiendish scheme.

The next day, just before dinner time, McBundy Junior was trying to blaze a trail through Cicero, but making very little head-

way against the current of Latin oratory. He sat in a hideous maroon wing chair, his fat face creased in concentration. He did not hear the entrance of the satanic apparition, who seated himself on the low divan. McBundy was not aware of the dry, sardonic laughter.

"Never cared much for your studies, did you, McBundy?" said the tall caped figure.

McBundy looked up, supremely annoyed. "Who are you? What are you doing in my rooms?"

"It never crossed your mind to sell your soul for good marks, did it, lad? But Pericles, ah, that's another matter."

McBundy threw down the Cicero and rose to his feet. "I asked you, sir, what you are doing in my rooms without my invitation?"

The man seemed amused. He had odd, slanting eyes and high, peaked eyebrows. His face was ruddy but gaunt, his cheekbones prominent, his nose sharp. Everything seemed to be points and angles: his long teeth, the sharp chin, the carefully trimmed beard. The stranger arranged his cape unconcernedly, as if he had every right to be where he was. "Are you saying, McBundy, that you didn't invite me?"

"That is precisely what I am saying. And if you don't leave—"

"Hold on, mate," said his guest, "I recall you saying, before witnesses, in fact, 'I'd sell my very soul to be tapped by Pericles.' Sounds like enough of an invitation to me. Never needed more, often settled for less."

McBundy's eyes opened wide, and he staggered back. "Then you—" he gasped.

The devilish figure bowed mockingly.

McBundy sat down again. He began chewing his fingernails, a nervous habit his father loathed in particular. His forehead creased again; McBundy was thinking. After a long moment of tense silence, he said, "You can guarantee that I'll be accepted?"

His visitor sighed and didn't bother to answer.

"And in return? You'll want my soul?"

The caped man shook his head. "I don't need your soul, my son. I don't *need* your bloomin' soul. I have souls stuffed into every nook and cranny in perdition. In return, you will prepare this meal for me, at whatever expense or inconvenience to yourself, for I love waste and extravagance. Such an occasion is worth a thousand listless souls to me." He held forth a sheet of parchment, on which was written the following bill of fare:

RÔTI SANS PAREIL AU DIABLE

(Inspired by A. T. Raimbault, fifth revision, 1912)

The Fowls

1 hummingbird, ruby-throated
1 bec-figue or common garden warbler
1 ortolan
1 lark, boned
1 thrush
1 quail
1 plover, golden
1 lapwing, boned
1 partridge, red-legged
1 woodcock, young
1 teal
1 guinea fowl
1 duck, tame
1 chicken, large
1 pheasant
1 goose, wild
1 turkey
1 bustard
1 condor

The Seasonings

1 large olive with its stone removed and filled with a pâté made from the liver of the goose
onions stuffed with cloves
carrots
small pieces of cooked ham
celery
mignonette
bacon, several strips
salt
pepper
coriander seeds
what spices you will
garlic sufficient to your taste

First, all fowl must be boned and made ready for consumption. Put the bec-figure into the hollow body cavity of the ortolan. Put the ortolan inside the boned lark. Continue until you have put the bustard inside the condor. Then you must take the olive stuffed with pâté and put it inside the boned hummingbird, and then put the hummingbird inside the bec-figue. Now arrange the roast in a pan, surrounding and covering the fowls with the various seasonings however it pleases you. Cover the pan tightly or seal it with pastry dough. Roast in a moderately heated oven for ten hours. Discard the pastry and serve so that each diner may sample each of fowls and a portion of the stuffed olive.

McBundy took it and read it. "Dear Lord," he murmured. "One course only?"

The evil one nodded. "I think you'll find it a sufficient challenge."

"And when it's ready, how shall I summon you up?"

"Don't bother yourself about that. I'll know, and I will come."

McBundy chewed another fingernail. "It's bizarre, you know, this entrée you're demanding. If I can't? What if I simply can't arrange it?"

"You're fortunate that I revised it again so recently. The passenger pigeon was on that list until last year. The recipe's been in the family for years, you know." The demonic visitor shrugged placidly. "As to time, you have no limit. If it takes you the rest of your life, you will prepare the meal."

"But if I can't?"

"If you can't"—there was a brief flicker of hideous pleasure—"then you will burn in the fires of Hell forever!"

McBundy gave a little shriek and fainted dead away. When he awoke he had missed the evening meal, and he was quite alone again. But he clutched the parchment in one fat-fingered hand; and the next day he was congratulated into membership in the Pericles Club. Rodgers, Slattery, and the others were astounded when he accepted.

They heard the old man coming, of course; they always did. It was nearly dark as he approached the shack; yet a great murmurous fluttering of wings greeted him as he set the cage down on the rickety planked porch. He gazed affectionately at them as he entered, and patted Nathan on the shoulder. Nathan was McBundy's assistant and his watchman. Nathan was a trifle lethargic intellectually, but he was intensely loyal to his employer, and that was a quality McBundy had come to value over the long, empty years.

"Bad luck today, master?" asked Nathan. He was heating water for tea.

"It was the weather again."

The rear of the shack was taken up by many cages of various sizes. There was no true wall behind them; it was made of canvas and could be raised or lowered. In good weather McBundy would raise it when he left in the morning; it pleased his little friends, and the dreadful odor was not quite so strong upon his return. Tonight, however, the air was a trifle heavy with avian fragrances.

"Hello, my friends," said McBundy. "Have we put on a little weight today?"

Lighting a lantern, the old man forced himself to peer into the hummingbird's cage. As usual of late, he feared that he would find only a pitiful ball of bright feathers and a cold, shriveled

body. "And you, my littlest one, are you feeling better today?" He tried to keep his voice cheerful, for he could see that here was one sick bird. The poor little thing seldom moved at all these days; mostly it just sat on a dry branch, looking weary of the vanities of life. Occasionally it walked around on the bottom of the cage, making small puddles of hummingbird vomit. Its feathers were falling out; they no longer glowed with their characteristic iridescent sheen. A dull, cold fear swept through McBundy: he would have to get the condor soon.

With a sigh, the old man walked to the table, sat down, and opened a small, simple box. He withdrew the tattered parchment, spread it out carefully before him. After all these years, of course, he had learned the words by heart; indeed, he could close his eyes and visualize every detail of the manuscript. Yet McBundy no longer trusted his memory, any more than he trusted his dwindling stamina. The frailty of his own body distressed him. Death—death was not a threat, unless he failed in his project. He *had* to succeed. There was too much at stake. Ironic, he thought, that in his old age he should have to pay for one moment of youthful folly. Eternity was the prize, and the safety of his immortal soul. He had spent his entire life trying to assemble these ingredients, and he had always been frustrated. So many times, so near to success, he had had to give up and begin all over again. He had no more time for that: his life's work must be finished, and soon. The alternative was too terrible to consider.

Who would have thought the condor would have been so much trouble? In his youth, condors were more numerous; he thought the bustard would be the last one, or maybe the ortolan. Perhaps even the hummingbird itself. Yet all these, each in its own time, had come to hand. It has been so long, he thought, so many years of searching.

His thoughts drifted back to the golden days of his youth, when time was sand sifting through his fingers and his body never tired. In his mind he chased the birds of his past through never-ending, glorious days. Soon he was asleep, his head resting on the table, on the parchment. His body made small, quick movements as McBundy chased the airy birds of his dreams. Behind him, Nathan hummed tunelessly as he poured the tea.

The sky was a faint glow of royal blue when Nathan shook the old man awake. Groaning and complaining, McBundy sat up

in the chair. He patted Nathan on the head and tried to catch at the pieces of a rapidly fading dream. He had been given some important information....

The rain had stopped. The north slope. He would have to hurry.

"Take good care of our friends today, Nathan. I feel the mantle of good fortune is about to wrap me up." The old man fed his birds quickly, shaking his head as he paused by the hummingbird's cage. The small thing had been captured far, far to the south. McBundy was sure he could not make the trip to get another. It was impossible. "Try to hold on a little while longer, my small one," he whispered.

He shouldered the cage and strapped the bolo to his side. In his pockets he stuffed some dried meat; it was likely to be a long day. As he passed through the shabby community of Ihualhica, he saw that the villagers had already assembled, although the last of the night's stars still flickered in the lightening sky. For the people of Ihualhica, it was a day of festivities; for McBundy, it was just another day of desperation.

The trail leading to the north slope was long and winding, often overgrown with scrubby vines that caught and tugged at his feet. The sun was well up in the sky before McBundy actually started to climb. He cursed himself for falling asleep at the table. His body ached, and it was still early.

The climb up the north slope would have been difficult for a man a third his age, but McBundy was a driven man. Gaining a few inches at a time, going up hand over hand most of the while, he climbed steadily higher. Just before noon he topped a razorback ridge and Mt. de la Viuda—the Mountain of the Widow—loomed above him. He paused to chew on some dried meat; while he rested, he loosened the cage from his back and methodically scanned the sky for the great South American condor. Dark clouds moved in from the east. It was growing colder.

McBundy cursed the need to stop and rest; in his youth he had never bothered much about it, or so it seemed to him now. But those days were gone forever, beyond reach, beyond recall. He resigned himself to plodding along as best he could. All that was left was to finish.

Something moved among the boulders near the top of the Viuda. McBundy strained his eyes, trying to make it out. It was a bird, that was certain, and a big one; but was it a condor?

At this distance, he couldn't tell. He hurried to his feet and strapped on the cage, double-checked the bolo.

From this point on, most of the climb was nearly vertical; more than once he thought of discarding the cage. It made climbing difficult, and it would be easy to leave it by the trail where he could bring the bird back after the hunt. Yet as much as he desired to do that, it was impossible. The condor was much too big and powerful a bird to carry alive for very long—they were vultures with ten-foot wingspans, after all, and they were dangerous. If he captured one, he couldn't kill it until he returned to his shack. He who had given McBundy the parchment specified therein that if any bird had been dead more than twelve hours before the preparation of the meal, the flavor would be ruined and the contract immediately void. And payable. McBundy shuddered as he thought of the consequences.

Soon he reached a plateau and got his first good look at the bird. It was black, with a white ruff and a bald, pink head—it was a condor, all right. And then he saw that there were two of them. They must be a mated pair. He circled to stay downwind of the soaring birds, working his way slowly closer.

When he finally got within range of the bolo, he saw that the great birds were circling a nest of sticks. His heart sank. This meant that he would *have* to capture the male. It was bad enough to break up a mated pair; he thought of the little ones still drowsing, warm in their eggs. He couldn't bring himself to harm the breeding female.

Just how did you tell a male from a female condor? In most species of bird, one sex or the other has more brightly colored plumage. McBundy had trouble remembering whether it was the male or the female. At any rate, the condors were both a uniform black. They both had bald heads and necks. What about the white ruff around their throats? No, they both had that. Pelvic girdles? No, that was people; McBundy wasn't even sure that condors *had* pelvic girdles, and if they did, he was too far away to detect any difference. One did, however, have a large fleshy caruncle on its forehead. He recalled knowing something about that, once, long ago. The old man set his sights on that one and moved closer.

It was difficult to choose a spot from which to launch the bolo. As the nest was on a small ledge on the side of a sheer cliff, there were no *good* shots available; some, however, were better than others. A missed shot would mean a long climb back down

to recover the bolo; it would fall to a ledge a few hundred feet below the nest if he threw it straight, or all the way to the bottom of the valley floor if the shot went wide. Either way, it would mean the probable loss of the bird. McBundy hid behind a large boulder and undid the strap that fastened the bolo to his side.

His was not just a common bolo, but a special condor bolo of ancient Indian design, with radial leather cords about three feet long, and moderately heavy, carefully balanced wooden balls at the end of each thong. McBundy had spent hours chewing the leather straps to pliability and carving the balls. Although he had never caught a condor, he knew the bolo from uncountable hours of practice. He hefted it a couple of times, judging the wind direction and velocity. Nothing must fail him now; all variables had to be taken into consideration.

Slowly he raised his head above the boulder. The condors were weaving circles in a regular pattern. On one part of their swing, they passed very near McBundy's hiding place. If he snared the condor, it would fall to the ledge below. If he missed . . . that would be all for today. A failed attack might make the condors leave their nest, leave the valley. The old man thought of the hummingbird sick in its cage, and he shivered in the damp cold. It would have to be the first shot. There would not be a second one.

He found himself moving slowly with the rhythm of their flight, feeling the pattern of their passes by the rock. One condor consistently came nearer than the other, the one he'd decided must be the male.

As the condor wheeled closer to the boulder, McBundy rose and, with a sidearm cast, let loose the bolo. It whistled as it whipped through the air, and in an explosion of feathers and echoing squawks the great bird was caught, one wing pinned to the side of its body. The condor rolled and tumbled down the mountainside, where finally it came to rest, wedged between two rocks on the ledge below.

At last! The old man started scrambling down toward the captured bird and realized that it wasn't going to be so easy. First of all, it was going to be a hard climb down the mountainside. Then there was the matter of the female condor, which at that very moment was making things difficult by swooping down and trying to claw McBundy's eyes out.

Finally, after a long, exhausting descent, he reached the strug-

gling condor. Such a bird! Even in his fantasies of success he had not imagined a bird so large. Now he had to cage it and return. He could not fail now, not at this point. Yet both condors had other ideas. There was a great deal of condor screaming and the beating of condor wings on the narrow ledge. Awkwardly, McBundy unstrapped the cage from his back.

Setting the cage on a rock, the old man tried to roll the half-bound condor inside. Each time, when he nearly had the bird in, its free wing would thrash and beat and block the way, tipping the cage perilously near the cliff's edge.

Desperately, McBundy removed his belt and attempted to tie down the free wing. He had the condor almost stuffed into the cage when its mate, crazed with fury, swooped down, knocking man, cage, and both giant birds over the edge.

The old man was looped in his belt, the belt was tangled in the bolo, and everything was buffeted by the three unfettered wings of the terrified birds. McBundy hung on for dear life as they bounced and careened down the slight slope of the mountain. He hung on tight.

Just as the old man could stand no more, the rolling and bumping ended on the valley floor. With rare good luck, McBundy landed on top of the cage, which splintered into worthless bits. He was unconscious, though, and he was unaware of his fortune.

When the world came painfully back, McBundy learned that he had not one condor but two. One of the condors, the one in the cage that had broken the old man's fall, was kind of a pulpy mess and quite unsuitable. The other simply had a broken neck and would do quite nicely. He would have to hurry, though.

McBundy tied the usable condor on his back; somehow, even with all his weariness and pain, the journey back to the shack was easier and quicker than ever before. Tonight he would celebrate his success. He would have Nathan help him prepare the grand feast, and then he would purchase the dearest thing a man could have: eternal rest for his soul. He wondered if calling up that satanic figure, after so many years, would cause too terrible a strain on McBundy's abused nerves. The old man tried to put such thoughts out of his mind.

It was night when he came into the village. He did not know how long he had hunted the condors, how long he had been unconscious in the valley, how long it had taken him to return home. But from the ravaged look of Ihualica, the people of the

town had been at their own celebrations for many hours. Crude huts of sticks and stone had been caved in. Broken pottery littered the dirt alleys. Men and women, some dressed in bright costumes, others naked and nearly freezing, wandered about the damaged village. McBundy smiled; let them enjoy their carnival, and let him enjoy his own victory. He had a moment's shock when he thought he saw the tall, caped figure waiting in the shadowed doorway of the mayor's house; but it was only a reveler, and as McBundy approached, the man removed his horned and grinning mask and threw it down on the ground.

Nathan seemed to have sensed that something special was about to happen, for as the old man approached, Nathan ran out to meet him. "Oh, master!" he cried. "Such a bird, master!"

McBundy dumped the condor on the table and went straight to the hummingbird. As he had feared for so long, the bird was an unmoving pile of feathers. He poked at it with a hesitant finger. Barely cold. Just in time.

Quickly, with the skill acquired in a lifetime of practice, he went to work. The condor was plucked and dressed and laid at one end of the long table. The hummingbird received the same treatment and went at the other end.

Bonnggg.

The turkey was next. Not to be dismissed for its ordinariness, it received a few kind words, a quickly broken neck. Soon it was cleaned and sitting naked next to the condor.

Bonngggalongg.

And then the bustard, which went between the turkey and the condor. Then followed each in turn, each placed according to size. The bec-figue; the ortolan. Beautiful, beautiful. The lark; the thrush; the quail. Ah, such delicate articulation. The vine leaves for the quail; the boned lapwing. The golden plover—that had been a difficult capture. McBundy's eyes misted as he remembered the adventures. He had a loving word for each bird, and the mound of feathers grew.

Bonngg. Babonngg.

The red-legged partridge; the woodcock. Ah, it was coming along so nicely. He occasionally consulted the parchment, but there was really no need.

Bongg. Bonnnngggggg.

While McBundy prepared the birds, Nathan was in charge of the vegetables and herbs that would season the roast: onions

studded with cloves, carrots, celery, marjoram, bacon, salt and pepper, garlic, coriander....

Bonngg.

The woodcock was rolled in breadcrumbs; the teal; the well-larded guinea fowl. The tame duck; the fat goose. Oh, how his mind just swam in a delirium of joy. The pheasant. The boned chicken and, yes, they were all ready. Nathan had prepared a pâté from the liver of the goose and placed it next to the hummingbird.

Nnggabonngg.

They stretched out in front of McBundy. From the largest to the smallest, from the condor to the hummingbird, they lay in unclad splendor. He had spent his life in the pursuit of this moment, but he didn't regret a day of it. After all, he thought, was not man's proper occupation the saving of his soul? And how much easier he had it than most people. All he had to do was complete this recipe. He smiled at Nathan, rolled up his sleeves, and began stuffing each bird into the next larger bird.

Bonngg.

McBundy began, not with the hummingbird, but with the bec-figue, which went inside the ortolan, which went inside the boned lark, which went inside....

Nathan stoked the fire in the giant oven, the special oven, the one built lovingly of clay to prepare but this one meal. But what a meal! A life's work, a life's culmination. At last, the condor, stuffed and gravid with the other birds, lay in the middle of the table in a huge pan. There was a small cavity where McBundy must place the hummingbird. First he had to stuff an olive with the liver pâté and put the olive inside the hummingbird, and then cram the hummingbird inside the unsuspecting bec-figue. It had to be done correctly, perfectly, for the purpose of this exercise was not the simultaneous roasting of nineteen assorted fowl. No, indeed.

Bonngg. Gabonngg.

After the roasting, carefully carved, each serving would offer the diner a sample of each bird. Most important of all, each slice *must* have a small bit of olive and an even tinier but essential particle of liver pâté. The ultimate indulgence.

McBundy held out his hand. He waited. He waited in vain. He turned to Nathan, who watched him expectantly. "The olive," said the old man.

"Olive, master?" asked Nathan.

McBundy's eyes opened wide with horror. He ran to the cupboard, which, now that its contents had all been removed to the pan on the table, was as barren of groceries as it was of hope. "Did you eat them?" screamed the old man, turning fiercely on the slow-witted Nathan. McBundy hesitated. "Or did *I* eat them? Or did I forget?" He ran to the door: there was a provisioner in the village who had for some time agreed to supply the old man with all sorts of things no one else in Ihualica could possibly desire. McBundy paid a heavy premium for their importation, but he saw now that he had acted wisely. There was only a little time left. He ran from the shack, to rouse the grocer.

Bonnngggg. In the village of Juato, four miles away, the great bell of the Church of San Pedro rang for the twelfth time. The costumed celebrants heard the sound and paused where they were. They pulled off their masks; their faces lost the flushed, excited glow of carnival. Carnival was over. They walked slowly back to their homes.

McBundy found the grocer among them. "You must open your store!" he shouted. "You must sell me more olives! Now! Immediately!"

The grocer shook his head sadly. "I cannot, sir, at the peril of my wretched soul. You have heard the bells. It is midnight. Carnival has ended, it is Ash Wednesday. Lent has begun. The store must be closed. Come back day after tomorrow. . . ."

A great agony seized McBundy. He felt as if iron bands were tightening around his chest. He tried to argue, to reason, to coerce the grocer, but the man would not listen. McBundy tried to force his way inside the shop, but he could not. The pain in his chest grew and spread. He gasped for breath. At last, a weariness rose in him like the flood waters of a great roaring river. He sat down heavily in the street and watched as ghosts and skeletons, princesses and demons all made their gloomy way back to their normal lives.