

FROM THE EDITORS OF ROD SERLING'S THE TWILIGHT ZONE MAGAZINE

NIGHT CRYTM

WINTER 1986

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MAN

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THE NIGHT
SEASONS

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NIGHT CRY

THE MAGAZINE OF TERROR

Vol. 2, No. 2
Winter 1986

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Introduction: Mysterious Children

The image of . . . *someone* . . . coalesces slowly, almost reluctantly, in front of you. After a moment you can tell, just barely, that it's a child—but then, perhaps it's a spindly, stunted adult. It's hard to say. Your eyes can't seem to focus.

The figure beckons to you. You bring your hands to your eyes, trying to clear them, but it doesn't help at all. In fact, it's even worse than you thought: as you lower your hands you notice them—actually *see* your hands for the first time—and they're in focus. There's nothing wrong with your vision.

But there's something *awfully* wrong with what you're seeing.

Even as you come to that realization, the child comes suddenly and sharply into focus. You take a few deep, slow breaths, and your heartbeat begins to ease back down toward a sensible rhythm.

You do what you can to assess the situation. The child in front of you is dirty and scrawny and dressed in rags. His dingy-grey t-shirt (it was white once, you think, but you aren't sure) is ripped in places and worn through in others and freckled with stains. One of the seams of his Bermuda shorts is split half way up from the cuff to the waistband. His dark-blond hair is long and matted. It's filthy.

You've no idea where you are. Or how you got there. That by itself doesn't distress you as much as it might; these last few years you've gotten used to a similar sort of momentary amnesia, every so often, when you wake up in the morning. But you aren't at home in bed. In fact, you aren't anywhere at all that you recognize. You're standing in a long, white-white corridor. At the far end, behind you, it terminates with a wall. It's an awfully long

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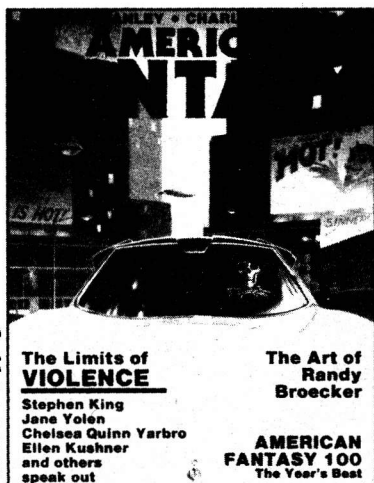
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corridor, so you can't see that end well enough to be certain whether this is just the wall of yet another hallway, one into which this corridor leads the way the base of the letter T leads into its cap, or whether it's just a dead end. Along the walls are doorways, seventeen of them, leading off into places you're more than a little afraid to go. (You're no idea how you know to be afraid of them. But you are, and, for some reason, in spite of your fear you find yourself feeling a powerful compulsion to open the doors and explore what lies behind them.) The near end of the corridor, the one in front of you, ends in a set of bulky steel doors, the kind that don't have handles, but heavy steel bars, each attached to a pair of levers that you can open by pressing down.

The child is still beckoning to you.

He turns away, toward the fire-doors, and begins to walk toward them. You follow him. Perhaps you're a bit less wary than you should be. But he doesn't *seem* dangerous, except for the fact that he looks as though he may have fleas, and there may be a danger (if you stand too incautiously close) of getting a bite or two yourself.

Aside from the filth, though, you *don't* find the child especially threatening. You're relaxed and very nearly at ease as you follow him into the doorway. After all, no matter *how* strange the circumstances are, the poor thing couldn't possibly be more than seven or eight years old. What could you possibly have to fear from him?

The truth is that you really don't want to know.

The truth is that even if you tried as hard as you possibly could, you couldn't possibly imagine how much danger you're in right now.

The child presses down on the handle of the door. It opens just a crack. Brilliant grey-green light shines through; you cover your eyes. The child turns again, takes your free hand, pushes the door all the way open, and pulls you into a place where for a moment light and sound are engrossing, all-consuming.

Then the noise and the brightness fade away, and you can see that you're in far more conventional surroundings.

Relatively speaking, that is.

You're in the editorial offices of *Night Cry*.

The child who brought you here scampers off down the hallway, cackling gleefully. We've had a veritable plague of children like him around here lately. Over there, picking through

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10 INTRODUCTION

a pile of manuscripts, is the mysterious child from Charles Wagner's "Live Birth." By the wastebasket you can see Marc Laidlaw's "Shuck Brother." He's looking awfully thin and more than a little light-headed. Neal from Ramsey Campbell's "Little Man," Chuckie from A. R. Morlan's "Simon Says," and Mimi from Harry Ringle's "Tender Seed" are playing dice behind my desk. We aren't quite certain who the child who brought you is—perhaps he escaped from *The Twilight Zone*; maybe he's someone we'll get to know in the next few months.

The danger you're in, of course, comes from the magazine itself.

Somehow you've become a part of it.

And there's no escaping. If you were to get up and run from the office this instant, you'd still have the magazine with you. You'd still be bringing all of these children home with you.

If you just stop reading you'll be leaving a part of you behind here in our office. Forever.

You don't want to do that.

There's only one way out: to read your way through to the end.

It's a dangerous bit of work. There are seventeen exquisite horrors between here and there. And you've got to come to grips with each and every one of them.

But we're certain you'll survive. You have what it takes, or you wouldn't have picked up this magazine in the first place. (We *think* so, anyway. Your life insurance payments *are* up to date, aren't they?)

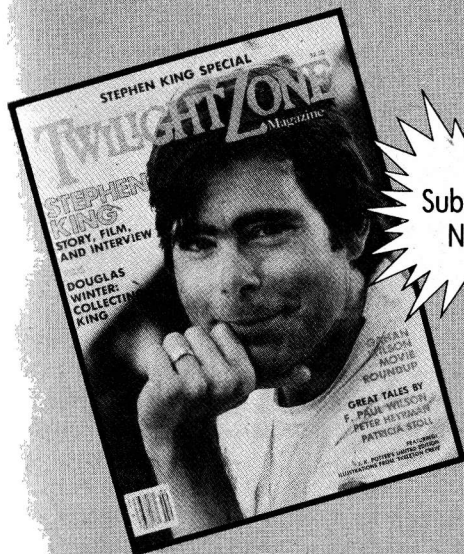
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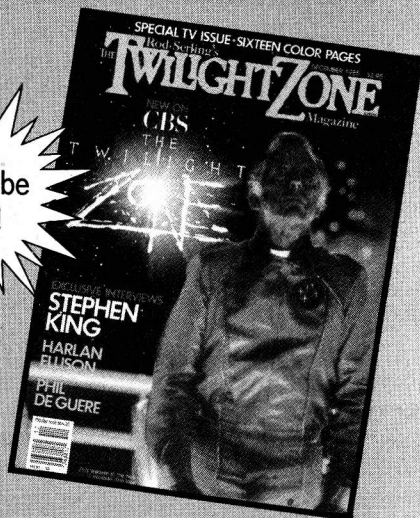
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LITTLE MAN

by RAMSEY CAMPBELL

Neal had a taste
for blood.

Despite all his frustrations, Neal didn't go straight to the murder machine. First he played the pinballs, old friends he could make allowances for: Lady Luck and her costive straining to produce a ball, King Pin with his buzzing spastic flipper, Lucky Fruit who tricked you into thinking that your ball had reached the replay lane, until a kink in the wire rail let it slip out of play. He lost on all of them, and was glad he'd left the murder machine until last; it always calmed him.

It was December. A wind shrill as gulls swept up from the beach, along the stubby Bed & Breakfast terraces, and rattled the windows of The Mint. The fairground was closed for the winter; the rides huddled beneath canvas, enormous doughnuts, giant spiders; the track of the roller coaster might have been the skeleton of a dinosaur which had crawled up from the beach to die. All summer Neal had ridden the dragon of the coaster, which had let him look down on people for once. They'd looked as small as the figures in the murder machine.

He pushed his coin into the rusty slot and gripped the sides of the machine. The miniature street—little more than a strip of plywood on which house-fronts were cartooned—was on a level with his face. As he leaned closer to the glass, the machine rocked forward on its lame front leg. Neither the movement nor his coin brought the performers out of hiding. Sometimes they arrived halfway through the show, like actors who'd sneaked out for a drink.

Here came a woman, juddering out of a hole in the left-hand end of the plywood, painted to resemble the mouth of an alley.



She was daubed like a tin soldier—red cheeks, orange flesh, staring eyes; the buttons of her red coat were blurred dabs of white paint. A metal stalk protruded between her feet and jerked her along a track.

She was halfway down the street when a door popped open and the man with the knife pounced, dragging her inside. The door twitched shut. Beyond the polythene window a light glared red, and the squealing began, something like a siren, something like a mouse. Neal couldn't see what was happening beyond the crimsoned window, even when he pressed his face against the glass.

The light blinked out, the squealing ran down. That was all: no policeman today. No two performances were the same, which was why the machine fascinated him—but when would it repeat the performance he was sure he'd once seen?

He stood back, rubbing the rusty stains from his hands. The sounds of the arcade came flooding back: the giggles of a little girl who was riding a mechanical turtle, the worn-out gunfire of an electronic rifle range, the unsteady tape of rock music, doggedly repeating itself. Again the world was bigger than he was—and it included school.

This year school was worse than ever. Half the masters seemed to delight in humiliating him, pretending they couldn't see him when he was standing up. "Where's that wild guess coming from? Oh, *there* you are." Some were cruel without meaning to be: the English master who'd persuaded him to appear in the end-of-term play, and even Neal's best friend Jim. "Come on, Conan," Jim said. "It's about time you came to the disco."

The disco was beside the promenade. Gulls swooped over the dark beach, their cries sharp as splintered ice, sharp as the creases of Neal's trousers. He wondered why he'd bothered to dress carefully, for the interior of the disco was chaotic with lights and darkness. When the girls approached he wondered why he'd bothered to come at all.

"Brought your little brother?" one shouted at Jim above the bombardment of music.

"Don't be funny, Di. This is my friend Neal. Karen, this is Neal."

"Hello down there," Karen said.

When the girls danced away Neal said, "I'm going." Jim persuaded him to stay and found a partner whose friend let Neal

buy her a Coke, then another, while he put off the moment when they would have to dance. Eventually they did, her lit chin hovering above him like a UFO, and he could tell that she'd taken pity on him. He left as soon as he could, hating himself.

If the Mint hadn't been closed for the night he would have gone straight to the machine. As he stalked home his surroundings looked like shrunken cartoons of themselves, hardly convincing: the locked fairground and Crazy Golf, the terraces that claimed to be full of hotels. Whenever he felt like this he seemed to be viewing the world through glass, a barrier that walled him into himself, and now that he'd reached puberty the barrier was more difficult to break.

It was no wonder. Apart from everything else, each rehearsal increased his dread of the end-of-term play. Why had he let himself be roped in? So that the English master would be on his side? He would pretend to be ill, except that his parents would know he was faking. They had enough to worry about now that two of the families who always stayed in the guest house were going abroad next summer. "You show them," his mother had cried when he'd told her about the play. All he was likely to show the audience, he thought bitterly as he slammed the ball into Lady Luck, was how much of a fool he was.

At least the murder machine distracted him. He couldn't time the performances, since he had no watch, but often the arcade seemed to recede, leaving him alone with the machine, for hours. Sometimes a policeman dragged the man in black into a doorway beneath a sketch of a police station's lamp. He was only pretending to drag him—his hand wasn't even touching the murderer's collar—and Neal imagined that as soon as they vanished beyond the door, the man in black dealt with him.

But what did the man in black do? Once, seconds after the scarlet woman had veered into his room, his door twitched ajar. Neal pressed his forehead against the glass. Murderer and victim were standing absolutely still—the man's eggshell face was turned toward Neal, the lifeless pinprick eyes and the mouth like a cut just starting to bleed—yet Neal had the impression that he'd stopped whatever he'd been doing. As the door snapped shut, he glimpsed red notches deep in the back of the woman's neck and in her left wrist.

That reminded him of something someone had once told him. Had it been his grandfather? What exactly had he said? He was

no longer alive to be asked. Neal found himself trying to remember in class, the masters' voices receding, calling him back with questions he couldn't answer: "Use your little head," one master told him. Even the sarcasm couldn't reach him; the looming memory preoccupied him—until the end of term, until the play.

As soon as he emerged onto the stage, among the heaps of polystyrene and tinsel that were meant to look like snow, his heart sank. "There you are, Imp," said the pantomime magician, who was two years older than Neal. Neal's parents were sitting in the front row—his mother emitting small dismayed cries at any risqué jokes, his father frowning down at his fingernails—and so Neal had to scurry about squeaking and pretend he was enjoying it, while he was thinking: scuttle, scuttle, like a rat. He was sure the audience was laughing at him, not with him.

"You were the best," his mother cried afterward. His father nodded gruffly, not looking at him. Neal was glad to get away from them, but before he reached the dressing room he came face to face with Roger. Roger, who had a patchy moustache which failed to hide his pimples, often bullied Neal. "Hello, Imp," he sneered.

"Sod off."

Roger's pasty face reddened and began to quiver. "Don't you tell me to sod off," he said, grabbing Neal with hands like bunches of raw sausage. Neal kicked him viciously on the shin, leaving him howling, "I'll get you for that after Christmas, you little bastard."

Lashing out had relieved Neal's tension, but not enough. He was ready for the murder machine, too much on edge to dawdle over the pinballs. All along the main street, shops were for sale; the circus posters that patched their windows shivered in the wind from the beach. Even the survivors—gift shops full of plastic and cardboard, fish and chip shops called *The Chef's*, *Maxim's*, *Café de Paris*—were dark. The dusty window of the *Midland Café* was sown with dozens of dead flies.

Neal reached the *Mint* and halted, his fists and feet clenching. A little girl and her parents were at his machine.

Slamming open the glass doors of the *Mint* didn't scare them off. He flounced over to *King Pin* and stood muttering, too impatient to catch the balls with the flippers. No doubt the family thought he was cursing the pinball, not the girl. She seemed to

embody all his frustrations; his resentment was scraping his nerves, resentment harsh as the miserly clicking of the fruit machines, the clicking that grew vicious in his ears, and louder. When she screamed, his first reaction was to smile.

She shrank away from the machine and held up her hands, which were smeared red. Behind her, Neal saw, the murderer's door was wide open. Before he could glimpse what was happening beyond, it snapped shut. If her parents hadn't been there he would have demanded to know what she'd seen, but they were ushering her out. "It's only paint," her mother said, which seemed further to upset the little girl. "Damned disgusting way to run a business," said the father, wondering perhaps where the paint had come from.

Though he hadn't had time to see into the murderer's room, Neal didn't resent the machine; it had got rid of the little girl, after all. The man's blank face with its pinhole eyes seemed friendly, the face of a beloved old toy. When the scarlet woman jerked into view, Neal observed that there were no red grooves in her neck or her wrist. He didn't understand, but he was prepared to wait for understanding.

Soon it was Christmas. His gifts came from The Money Spinner, one of the gift shops—a jigsaw, some pencils that changed color halfway through. His parents could afford only a dwarfish turkey, and his mother stiffened when he helped himself to a second mince pie. *Vacancy* said the sign in their front window, which was how the house felt for the rest of the holidays. Perhaps one day he would live somewhere that didn't make him feel so small.

He went for walks along the coast road. At low tide, sea and sand and clouds were bare elongated strips. Splinters of pale green sky were set into the clouds. The miles of flat narrow road were deserted except for gulls, some of which perched like vultures on the wastebins above the beach. He could almost see a figure in black in the distance, dodging along the road from bin to concrete bin, where litter writhed feebly in the wind. His grandfather had described something like that figure once, but why should Neal think he needed to visualize it clearly? For nights he was unable to sleep until he tired himself out with his efforts. Once, at the start of a dream, the figure jerked toward him, and he would have seen its face if the shrieks of gulls, disturbed by something on the coast road, hadn't wakened him. He was still

trying to grasp it, no longer even wondering why he should, when the spring term began by confronting him with Roger.

Roger was gripping the rusty railings of the schoolyard as if they were spears. "Imp, imp, imp," he sputtered, like an engine trying to start. "I've been waiting for you, Imp. I've got something to give you tonight, behind the sheds."

"Leave him alone," Jim said. "Pick on someone your own size."

In some ways Neal was glad he'd intervened, for if it came to a fight between himself and Roger he knew he had no chance. But Roger sneered, "What are you afraid of, little boy? Afraid you won't be able to grow up?"

"Come on, Conan. Don't let him rile you."

"Just stop calling me that," Neal shouted. Suddenly he hated both of them. He stalked into the school, where Roger could do nothing.

All day Neal's mind and body felt as though they were seething. Every few minutes he had to wipe his hands down the sides of his desk. Yes, he would fight Roger; he'd kick him in the groin, as Jim had told him they did in the films. Suppose he missed? Roger would grab his leg and break it, he'd throw him down and kick his ribs in, stamp on his face—

"Wake up, Imp. Didn't you hear the question?" The master looked bored, unaware of any sarcasm; Neal was the Imp and that was all there was to it. At four o'clock, almost blind with self-disgust, Neal walked away from the school so quickly he might as well have been running.

The streets were cartoons, hardly even two-dimensional. Nothing was real except him and his thoughts. The sounds of The Mint fell away, leaving him alone with his friend. Murderer and victim disappeared into the room. Was there a shadow on the polythene window, a shadow that looked to be slicing and sawing? When the lights in the machine went out Neal lingered, imagining the tiny black-eyed face waiting in the dark, though it didn't seem so tiny once the dark grew as large as his feelings.

He had no idea how long he stood in front of the machine, nor what he was thinking. One thing was sure: that night he didn't think of Roger. He slept soundly, free of dreams. Next morning Jim told him that Roger had been knocked down on the coast road. He'd stepped in front of the car without looking, though he should have seen it coming hundreds of yards away; nobody

could tell what had distracted him. Jim stared, then walked away, as Neal grinned.

Let him go: Neal didn't need him. Everyone had better watch out now, even Jim, if that was his attitude. The sarcasm of the masters no longer bothered Neal; the more they taunted him, he felt, the worse it would be for them, though he didn't examine why he thought so. His sense of security lasted until the night he went to see John Travolta in *Carrie*.

The Grand, which stood at the far end of the promenade, hadn't lived up to its name for years. Its ochre frontage looked built of sand, and ready to crumble. Ghosts of pre-war prices clung to the glass of the paybox. The manager stood at the top of the steps to the foyer; the knees and elbows of his dress suit were shiny as his toecaps. "About turn," he said to Neal. "This isn't for kids."

Neal's lips felt stiff and swollen, almost paralyzed. "I was eighteen last month."

"Aye, and I'm John Travolting. Scuttle away now, scuttle away." What made it worse was that he'd just let in two girls who Neal knew were barely fourteen, younger than himself. Worse yet, they were with Roger, who was hobbling boastfully on crutches. Crowing at Neal, the three vanished into the cinema.

Long before he reached the Mint he could see the shadow on the murderer's window, could hear the manager squealing in the tiny room. The shops on the main street were closed and dark, the bare road was the color of ice on a pond; worn patches of light lay beneath the streetlamps. He was too deep in himself to wonder at first why there were new dummies in a shop that had been closed for months.

They weren't dummies, nor were they inside the window. They were four youths, absolutely still and silent except for the leathery creaking of their motorcycle gear. Were they waiting for him to turn his back before they pounced? Sweat stung him like lit matches.

As soon as he'd walked past, his neck and his limbs feeling stiff as china, they began to follow him. They still made no sound except for the creaking of leather. He didn't dare to run, for they could certainly outrun him, but if a single shop had been unlocked he might have dodged aside. Here at last was the Mint, but even that was no refuge. One stopped the door from closing with the metal toecap of his boot, and they crowded in after Neal.

"At least something's open in this frigging town," one said loudly. They must have driven along the coast, expecting the fairground to be open. They quickly grew intolerant of the eccentricities of the pinballs; one kicked Lady Luck as though that would tame her. Neal stood guarding the murder machine, which he didn't want to play while they were there, in case they came to watch.

The tallest of them sauntered over. "Go on, kid, put your money in if you're going to." Neal could say nothing, and the youth shoved him aside. "Let someone else have a go, then."

Neal tried to push him away from the machine. Blood rushed to his head, which felt in danger of bursting. His lips were huge and parched. "It's mine," he spluttered.

"Hey, look at this. He wants a fight." The youth picked Neal up easily, and holding him like a ventriloquist's dummy, talked for him in a shrill mechanical voice. "It's mine! It's mine!"

"That's enough." It was Mr. Old, who ran the Mint. "Put him down and get out, the four of you, or I'll call the police."

"Go on then," the leader said, dropping Neal so as to menace Mr. Old, "call the bloody police."

"That's exactly what I intend to do. You get away while you can, Neal. Run along now, go on!"

Neal could scarcely walk; his limbs were spastic with rage. Her jerked along the street, looking for something to smash. Why couldn't it be the leader of the motorcyclists? When he saw the four emerging from the Mint, without a police car in sight, he fled. That night he lay sleepless for hours, punching the pillow in blind fury, clawing convulsively at the blankets.

In the morning he managed to control his rage, telling himself that tonight he would be alone with the machine. He'd play it until it showed him what he wanted to see, he vowed to himself, what had been troubling him since before Christmas.

Perhaps it was the vow that let him remember at last.

That afternoon one master was discussing local history: how the town had been built as a seaside resort for the Lancashire industrial towns, how it was dying of cheap Spanish holidays. Who could tell him more about the history of the town? Suddenly Neal could, and blurted it out as it came to him. "There was the man who started killing people when he came home from the first world war. He used to cut them up and leave the bits along the coast road. When the police caught him finally he tried to pretend

he just had his hands in his pockets, only they weren't *his* hands."

"No need to sound so pleased about it. I should try to put it out of your mind if I were you," the master said, and called on someone else, leaving Neal feeling guilty and furious because he did. He'd been pleased about remembering, he told himself, and then he wondered if it would make a difference to the machine. Perhaps he would be able to make out what happened in the red-denied room, now that he knew what he was looking for.

No, it would not. That was clear as soon as he came in sight of The Mint and saw the pavement outside, littered with broken glass. Every machine was wrecked. The murder machine was a tangle of metal and plywood and jagged glass, amid which he could see no figures at all. He didn't need to ask who had done all this: he could hear their motorcycles roaring along the beach.

He trudged down to the promenade, with not the least idea of what he meant to do. Again he felt crippled by rage. Above the sea the moon hung, a plate whose pattern looked worn and blurred. At the distant edge of the sea, against the dim glittering of the waves, the motorcycles raced back and forth. "You bastards," Neal screamed.

The riders heard him. Now it was fear that crippled his legs. The cycles roared like animals which knew they had trapped their prey. The cycle with the tallest rider reared up and came for Neal. He watched helplessly as it raced toward him, leaving a track pale as a snail's on the sand. The way the cycle grew as it sped closer seemed unreal as a dream, from which he wouldn't waken until it crashed into him. Even if he ran now, the rider would catch him long before he reached the houses. Nevertheless he tried to run, struggled to move his feet—just one and he'd be running. He was still fighting his paralysis when the rider leapt from the motorcycle.

For a moment Neal thought that he'd flung the cycle aside so as to grab him, then that the cycle had collided with a piece of driftwood lying on the beach, driftwood which had sprung up from the collision. But no, the dark shape wasn't wood, for it bounded over to the fallen rider, its movements stiff and jerky against the glittering of the waves. Confused, Neal thought it might be another of the cyclists—surely it must be a helmet, not the head, that looked pale as the moon—but only until it stooped to the groaning youth. Its movements were more assured now, the sawing of its right hand back and forth. Though the scene

looked like a pantomime performed by dolls beside a toy motorcycle, the screams were appallingly human.

Neal ran from the coast road, afraid to look back. The streets were unreal, aloof from him, isolating him with his panic. The terraces of houses locked him out. Only the moon was menacingly vivid, a pale sketch of a face playing hide and seek with him among the houses.

By the time he reached home he was wheezing. He slammed the rusty gate behind him and stumbled along the few yards of path. He struggled to turn the key in the front door. Whatever had happened on the beach, it was nothing to do with him. He was home now, safe. The white face behind him was only the moon.

But there was a rusty movement, which might have been the gate—and a scraping voice, small but growing. "What shall we do next?" it said.

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Simon Says

by A.R. MORLAN

Sometimes Andy gave Chuckie that ucky-oozy runny nose stoppered up the throat feeling. But Chuckie liked him anyway.

Chuckie trundled back into the living room, gave an exasperated snort and shrilled at Andy, "*I Hid. You dint Seek me,*" before slop-slop-slopping all over in his Big Bird slippers to the easy chair where Andy sat. Without bothering to look up from the textbook which he was reading (*Your American Heritage*) Chuckie's big bother mumbled, "*You said we were playing hide-and-go-seek. I said I was going to finish this home work first. So beat it, Chuck-a-Puck.*"

Chuckie hated being called Chuck-a-Puck, even though it wasn't as bad as Uppie-Chuckie, or Puck-Cherry, or Slime-Face, or . . . being only three and a half, Chuckie couldn't remember *all* the rest of the "or" names, but something told him that they were all equally noxious, as well as something else that Chuckie couldn't quite get a handle on in terms of *words*; but even though *analogies* were beyond him, he did know that Andy's name-calling made him feel inside the way undercooked scrambled eggs—the way Daddy usually made them when Mommy was off visiting Gramma or sick in bed upstairs with the flu—felt sliding down his throat in slurpy, snotty clumps because taking the time to *chew* that runny yellow mess would have only prolonged the agony of having to eat it in the first place because Daddy would be watching him to make *sure* he ate it all up, and if Chuckie dawdled over them, the plateful of oozing yellow eggies would get cold, then—*then* swallowing them would be *exactly* like gulping down nose drippings on a cold day because otherwise he'd have to take off his mittens in order to blow his nose properly (*only pigs rub their noses on their mittens*) and

Mommy had warned him *never* to take off his mittens outdoors in the winter, so Chuckie would end up enduring that icky, slimy taste in the back of his throat, because if he *did* let his nose run Andy would be right there to whisper, "Snot-brains, Snot-brains, lookit them dribble out, Snot-brains . . ." when Mommy and Daddy weren't around to hear it.

Chuckie had that gloopy-mess-going-down-the-hatch feeling now, even though there were no eggs in sight, and the really cold weather was a good month off. Andy made him feel that way a lot, whether he was calling him Chuckie, Uppie-Chuckie, or by his real name, Charles. (Oh, that Andy had a way of making *Charles* sound bad, too . . . He'd make his voice sound like something all rotten and crumbling and probably smelly if you poked it with your finger, sort of a garbage-sucked-down-the-disposal *sinking* "Chhhhaaarlesss—" especially late at night when Andy would pass by Chuckie's room on the way to or from the bathroom; Chuckie would be fast asleep, only to come to abrupt, heart-pounding wakefulness, hearing this raspy, drawn-out voice at his door intone "Chhhhaaarlesss . . ." ending with that slithering hiss and—this was the *worst* part—that short, snorting *laughter* afterward.)

Chuckie plopped down in front of the tv and switched on Nickelodeon, "The Channel for Kids Only!" *Lassie* was on; Chuckie liked the show yet was saddened by it, all at once. He enjoyed the people, but the pretty doggie reminded him of Scooters (Andy untied him, I saw but Andy tole Daddy that Scooters broke free and the lady in the car cried and cried when she saw Scooters under the car) so Chuckie started switching channels. Some of them were blocked out by that dingy that the man from cable place installed ("All the good ones . . . gone," Andy had bitterly complained, "Those shit-brains think I'll go blind if I watch the Playboy Channel and MTV . . . what *dorks*," and then he warned Chuckie that if he "ever told Mommy and Daddy that Andy had called them shit-heads and *dorks* Chuckie would 'really' have something to 'Uppie-Chuckie' about," whatever *that* meant) and the other tv shows were either soaps or exercise programs, so with a prolonged sigh—Andy could have played at least one crummy game with him—Chuckie switched off the tv and wandered off toward the hallway. As he passed Andy and his stack of school books (*Family Guide*, *Emergency Health Care*, *Law and History of the Middle East*, *Cavalcade of Literature*, and some Cliff's Notes) Chuckie pretended that he didn't hear the sepulchral hiss "Chhhhaaarlesss" which wafted

up from the depths of his brother's opened book.

Once he was in the hallway, Chuckie was faced with a choice of rooms to explore. To his left was Mommy's sewing room, a No-No Room because of the Sharp Things in there. Still on the left was the bathroom, further down the hall. Boring. He didn't need to wee-wee just yet. On the right, Daddy's study, not quite a No-No Room, merely a Don't Touch Room. Just wandering around in a Don't Touch Room was okay, he supposed. Wasn't the kitchen mostly a Don't Touch Room, too?

Very quietly, so as not to disturb Andy's studies (long overdue studies, judging from the shouting match Andy and Daddy had last night and which woke Chuckie up with Daddy bellowing that "Three 'effs' wasn't up to snuff" and Andy yelled back that Daddy could "stuff the 'snuff'" and then Daddy shouted "No fifteen-year-old punk is going to get away" "Almost sixteen—" "Oh? How about almost grounded?" "Still almost *sixteen*, old man—" "Oh? Really? Well, *young man*, make that *almost sixteen* and *definitely* grounded!" and at that point Chuckie pulled his blankie up over his head and squished his eyes tight and the next thing it was morning and suddenly Andy wasn't going along on Mommy and Daddy's business trip to Madison anymore and his usual sitter Stacey from the college didn't come and Andy wouldn't play *any* games) Chuckie let himself into the study and shut the door behind him.

It should have been his nap time, but Stacey would usually play games with him to tire him out, and since she didn't come, Chuckie hadn't played his usual Hide-and-Go-Seek, so he wasn't the least bit tired. And Andy wouldn't let him call Sara and Jason from next door, or let him go to their house. "You're my re-sponsi-bility," Andy had snapped at him after lunch, "And I'm not about to look after any more rug-rats." Therefore, Chuckie tried to be extra quiet, tried to be extra good. He stuffed his little hands into the side pockets of his Oskosh B'Gosh bibbies, the hickory-stripe ones Mommy had ordered for him from the Miles Kimball catalog. She had written "From Santa" on the gift tag, but Andy told him that Santa had died from frostbite up in Michigan during his midnight sleigh ride ("—and then his fingers and toes curled up and turned black and dropped off—") so Mommy had had to phone up the Miles Kimball people real fast and place a rush order for Chuckie's gift "*pronto!*" And then she *forged* the old fart's name on your gift tag. Know what they do to *forgers*, Slime Face? They get locked up in *jail*, and hafta live in a little room like the broom closet with a toilet with

no seat and a hard metal bed chained to the wall, with no *sheets*. Know why's there's no sheets? When they get a sheet, they rip it into tiny strips, then tie and braid all the strips into a long, white rope . . . a real *strong* rope. Then they tie a loop in one end, and put the loop over their head, and then they tie the free end of that long white rope to the top of one of the bars of their cell—did I tell you that one wall is all bars, and people can look in while the *felons* take a piss and do their poopers and brush their teeth?—and once the rope is tied good and tight to the bars, they jump down off of the hard bed where they was standin' to tie the rope, and *then* the loop on their throat goes tight, real tight, like this—" all this time Andy had his hand resting on Chuckie's pajamaed thigh as he tucked him into bed, but all of a sudden Andy's big hand was in Chuckie's PJs wrapped around Chuckie's pee-pee, squeezing it hard "—and *then* their eyes go big and bright red, and the tongue pops out like an old soft banana, and then the whole face goes *purple*—" and at that point Chuckie began to squeal, and as the footsteps down the hall began to pound as Daddy ran for Chuckie's room, Andy let go and began to tickle Chuckie's softly protruding pink belly, until Chuckie began to giggle helplessly as Andy said loudly, "How's that, Chuckie? Huh, Chuckles?" stopping only when the footsteps slowed and reversed, then faded away, and *then* he continued, in a low whisper, "and after their faces go purple, the *felons* piss and shit up their pants, just like *babies*, so they stink while they hang there in their cell, and finally they go all soft and squishy like a moldy grapefruit, so the guards have to cut them down and haul them off to the *morgue*, where they get a tag put on their big toe sayin' who they were and what they did only Mommy would get that *forged* tag with Santa's name on it so *everyone* would know that she wrote a dead guy's name on your tag . . . and *that's* what's gonna happen to Mommy—" he spat out the word in a bubble-gum scented spray of spittle, close to Chuckie's face—"if you tell her that I told you how Santa died."

Digging his baby fists deeper into the pockets of his bibbies, Chuckie remembered with satisfied pride how he had torn up the pretty tag with the stocking on it from his package, and thrown the pieces into the kitchen garbage can. No one was gonna stick his Mommy in a room with no sheets or potty seat! Even if Andy turned her in, it wouldn't matter. The tag was gone, or like Andy often said, it was *history*. Chuckie wasn't sure what "*history*" was, but it sounded important. And *big*, like the way Andy was big.

Almost as big as Daddy, and bigger than Mommy already. And of course, much bigger than Chuckie.

Chuckie had to go up on tippy-toes to see level with the flat top of Daddy's desk, but what he saw up there made him climb onto Daddy's green swivel chair to get a better look. Oh *boy*, now he knew why Daddy's room was a Don't Touch Room. Daddy has his *stickers* stored here, not in a nice book like Chuckie had (My *STICKER BOOK* across a background of parachuting Teddy Bears, rain-bows, and stars) but just tossed in an old tumbler with a chipped rim (a Don't Drink Glass). Daddy's stickers looked a little like the ones Chuckie got once in a box of rice cereal, the square ones with the little holes poked around all the edges so you could rip them apart, only Chuckie's stickers said things like I'M WAY OUT, AWESOME, and SUNSATIONAL! over neat pictures of worms and fishies and butterflies. Daddy's stickers said things like USA 22¢ and LOVE under a cartoon brown doggie (Scooters, lying under the car, and the thin red dribbles went down the asphalt into the gutter), and RACHEL CARSON USA around a woman's green face. Not that Chuckie could read all of this, but he did know his ABCs. Chuckie also knew that he took better care of his stickers than Daddy did of *his*. Maybe it was because Daddy didn't have a *My Sticker Book*. Maybe Daddy would be happy if Chuckie put these stickers into the *My Sticker Book*, in a place by themselves. They'd be safe there, safer than in the chipped Don't Drink Glass on his desk. Later on, maybe he and Mommy, or he and Andy (the gunk-down-the-throat feeling quickly came and went) could go halvesies on a sticker book for Daddy.

The folded-up stickers fit nicely in the top pocket of his bibbies. Chuckie was careful when he took them out of the chipped glass, mindful of the small jagged spot on the rim of the container. Didn't want an owie, no Sir! Chuckie then put the chair and glass back just the way they were. No one, not even a mouse, could have heard him as he shut the door of Daddy's study. The hallway looked the same, only now the bathroom door was nearly shut. Chuckie could hear the gush of water being passed into the toilet bowl. Andy and Daddy made lots of noise when they tinkled; Andy said it was because their "things" were bigger, and then would call Chuckie "Teenie-Weenie," which was one of the really bad names, one that made his whole body feel full of gloppy junk. Andy didn't just pee-pee or poop in there, in the bathroom; sometimes he'd close the door all the way until the lock clicked, and do stuff. Funny stuff,

things Chuckie didn't understand. Once, when Chuckie opened the bathroom door after knocking and knocking for ages (Mommy was already using the upstairs bathroom) until he just couldn't hold it any more, and when he walked in Andy didn't have time to pull up or zip up and Chuckie got scared because Andy's pee-pee was big, real big, and stuck straight out and then Chuckie got so scared he wet himself after Andy pushed him out in the hallway and slammed the door shut again.

Maybe Andy was doing *that* in the bathroom right *now*. Chuckie made tracks down the hall to the living room, where he squatted down in front of Andy's books. Big pages of long, long words stared back at him, and Chuckie began to flip the pages of the nearest book (*Law and History of—*), searching for pictures. He found one, but it wasn't bound into the book. The slick magazine stock was white-whorled with the ghosts of sweaty thumb-prints, forming a hazy nimbus around the peachy-pink body of the naked lady pictured there. Frowning to himself, Chuckie was just about to cover up the lady's exposed No-No Places with his pudgy hand when the low rumble started up behind him—

"Ch-chhhhaarless—"

He tried to cry "Andy!" but all that came out was a weak "aaaahnd—"

Andy was smiling, very wide, not seeming to be mad at Chuckie for pawing through his school books. Hunkering down before the toddler, Andy said, in-between snaps of his bubble-gum, "How's 'bout we play a game, just you an' me, huh?" Since there was no one else in the house, something about the unnecessary "just you and me" gave Chuckie that good ole slippery throat feeling, but since Andy wasn't 1) pinching him, 2) squeezing Chuckie's pee-pee, or 3) caught by Chuckie in the act of making his own "thing" get all big and hard, Chuckie relaxed a little, figuring that maybe all Andy wanted to do *was* play a game.

"Kay." Chuckie was about to ask if he or Andy should be "it" when Andy asked, "How 'bout 'Simon Says,' huh?" He worked the gum furiously in his mouth, and bounced up and down on his heels.

Despite his usual innate caution around Andy, Chuckie's eyes lit up. His favorite game! *Andy must like me*, the little boy thought, *Maybe he's not mad 'bout the fight with Daddy no more.*

Andy pushed over the pile of books next to his chair, saying, "Simon Says take these books and pitch 'em in the kitchen trash." Giggling, Chuckie complied, lifting one book at a time (the first aid one was easy, but the *Middle East* tome was a two-armed),

slop-slopping in his Big Bird slippers to the kitchen and the big green trash can, dumping in each book before trotting back to the living room. Once all the books were gone (history!) Andy—who by now had moved over into Daddy's chair—drawled, "Now dump out the coffee grounds over them."

Chuckie started to move, but caught himself before Andy could reach over and administer the usual "Simon Didn't Say!" tap on his knuckles. There was a slight edge to Andy's "Damn, you got me," as he retracted his own hand, before Andy, no, *Simon* gave the order again. Chuckie had to climb up on the step stool to reach the counter, and the Mister Coffee, with its filter paper full of this morning's grounds. Soon moist brown clots of smelly grounds lay over the big words across the covers of the books, seeping into the cloth-covered paper.

Back in the living room, Chuckie stood panting, waiting for Simon to "Say." Leaning back in Daddy's recliner, Andy thumbed on the Magic Vibra-Fingers. Coldly eyeing the tot, Andy whispered, "Simon Says empty all your pockets."

Chuckie was puzzled. This wasn't *fun*. Dutifully, he turned out his side pockets, leaving the white cotton linings sticking out like tiny fingers, and poked around in his flat back pockets. Empty. Just as he raised his hands to check out the big double pocket across his bib top, he remembered Daddy's stickers. Carefully, he fanned his hand inside the pocket, so as not to bring the stickers back out with his now damp palm. All pockets checked, he stood before his brother. Waiting.

Andy sat silent, eyes slitted nearly shut, back pressed against the softly humming Magic Vibra-Fingers. Chuckie knew that only Daddy was allowed to turn on the Magic Vibra-Fingers, but maybe people who were *grounded* could use them too.

Fingering the light dusting of acne on his cheek, Andy murmured, "Undo your bibbie buckles, and let the bib flop down."

Trying to look unconcerned, Chuckie waited for the dread "Simon Says undo—"

"Charles, I said, 'Simon Says undo your bibbies and let the—'"

Chuckie was halfway up the stairs before Andy could worm his way out of the recliner. Running into his room, Chuckie dove under the Care Bears comforter. Now it was nappy time, snore-foo, snore-foo, aw, lookit, Chuckie's beddie-bye—

"Chhhaaarless—"

Chuckie stopped saying "Snore-foo," stopped breathing, simply

lay there in stiff animal terror. Slowly, Andy lifted up the comforter, chanting, "*Peek-a-boo, I see you.*" And descended.

There were no pounding footsteps coming down the hall to stop Andy this time.

After Andy was through, and had the stamps in his own pocket, he marched Chuckie down the stairs, past Daddy's big recliner—the back rippled slightly under the oxblood leatherette, Andy'd forgot to shut off the Fingers—down the hall, to Daddy's desk, where Andy triumphantly dropped Daddy's stickers back in the Don't Touch Glass, then, with his hands clamped tightly on Chuckie's tiny shoulders, marched the little boy—stubby white pocket flaps bobbing with each step—through the hall, living room, and into the kitchen.

"Simon Says sit on this stool and don't move." It hurt down there when he sat, but Chuckie complied, not daring to quiver, not wanting to blubber again.

Chuckie watched as Andy stalked the kitchen, considering, choosing, and assembling many of the Don't Touch kitchen things on the counter in front of Chuckie.

"Know what Dad'll do when he finds out you touched his stamps? Huh, Slime-Face? He's gonna send you to jail, the bad place where *felons* who forge Santa's name on little snot-nosed *brats'* Christmas tags go. And you'll get the cell next to Mom's. Oh *yeah*, only she won't be able to come when you call for her. 'Cause she's gonna be hanging like a kite in the power lines, hanging from the *bars*, her face all purple and black and oozing pus like a big fat zit, and she'll be staring at you with busted-out red eyes, staring at her *baby* boykins while you tinkle, Teenie-Weenie, and soon she'll smell ripe and—"

"NO! She's *not*! Ripped it up! Nobody's gonna take her. I threw it out! It's gone, an—"

"Ohhh . . . Uppie-Chuckie, I found the pieces . . . taped them back together. It's *her* writing on the tag. Her *for-gery*, Chuckles. Just like its *your* finger-prints all over those stamps. Dad's stamps. And the cops . . . they can *see* them. They just love to throw little shits like you into cells, all alone in a smelly grey cell, with no cute little plastic potty chair, just a big bowl. so you'll fall in and get flushed down like—"

"Nonononono . . . NO!"

"Simon Says shaddup."

Chuckie shadduped, but Simon Didn't Say not to shake, not to start to slowly tinkle into his bibbies. Simon hadn't said anything about that.

Andy stood across the wood counter from him, one of Mommy's big sharp Don't Touch kitchen things in his hand, staring down at the can full of wet books and coffee grounds. Gradually, light came into his eyes, and the corners of his mouth jerked up. Just a little.

"Yo, Uppie Chuckie, mebbe I can fix it for you . . . fix it so Daddy won't have to call out the *police* on you, fix it so they won't have to see your *finger*-prints all over the stamps. Interested? Huh?" Leaning over, Andy rubbed the broad flat part of the silver Don't Touch Thing across Chuckie's warm cheek. The metal felt cold, and more wee-wee seeped into his bibbies. Chuckie waited for Simon to Say "talk," but Andy went on:

"I can fix it so Dad won't whip *your* ass for dumping *my* books and throwing Mom's coffee grounds all over 'em like a *bad little boy*—" he ignored Chuckie's frantic head-shaking—"and I can fix it so's the school won't come and make the cops throw you in the slammer for mutilating school property. I learned how to fix it from one of those books you *ruined*, that you *demolished*, that you *trashed*. Wanna get out of it, Teenie-Weenie? Wanna let *me* handle the punishing for Dad, for the *coppers*? Wanna get off easy? Wanna let *Mommy* get off easy, too? I'll even flush that tag. Huh? How 'bout it? Dad punishes mean, and the cops are even *worse*. You wanna let the *old* treatment for thieves? Once you get it," Andy's voice teased seductively, softly, "you'll never have to get punished again . . . Mommy, neither." Taking in Chuckie's wary yet scared look, Andy continued in a contrite, hushed tone, "*Really*, Chuckles, and I'll even say that *I* dumped my books, how 'bout that?" Jerking his head back toward the can full of coffee-soiled books, Andy added, "It's all spelled out in there, in that textbook. No more spankings for stealing, no more yelling, no cell, no seatless toidy. One little . . . thing and then your off the hook. How 'bout it . . . ? Simon Says talk—"

"Pleeese, Andy, don't wanna go jail, don't wan' Mommy go jail, pleee—"

"If you give me a 'pretty please' I'll take care of it right *now*—" and Chuckie (fighting back that cloggy-throat feeling) could hardly get the words out fast enough, "Pritypleeese Andy, *pr*pleee—"

Andy's smile was big, bigger now, smearing across his face.

"Okay. Simon Says put your right hand on the breadboard."

Snuffling, Chuckie started to place his hand on the big blond wood board, until words that Mommy had once yelled rang out in his mind: "Chuckie, I don't *ever* want to see your fingers anywhere *near* this cutting board when I'm doing up a chicken, do-you-understand, young man?" Mommy might be a forger, and maybe even a *felon*, but Chuckie knew that Mommy wouldn't *let* him hurt himself. Really pee-peeing into his bibbies now, Chuckie sat there, hand held up above the bread—no, *cutting board*, staring at Andy's frozen smile, his throat full to bursting with that *gunky* feeling. The big silver Don't Touch Thing (*Cutting Thing*, Chuckie remembered, along with a sudden pinkly bloody image of pale raw chicken parts strewn across that same lightly oiled board) in Andy's hand was poised above Chuckie's tiny wrist. Andy was breathing hard, not even chewing his gum anymore, and his eyes had the same wetly bright look they had had when Chuckie caught Andy doing bad things to his big pee-pee in the bathroom.

"Simon Says put your *hand* on the—"

(Another picture formed in Chuckie's mind, only this time it was his *hand* lying on the board, dribbling pinkish watery chicken blood all over the counter, the drops running down the sides of the cupboards below, and the worst part was that the tiny curled hand wasn't *his* any more . . . it was just an old hand, bloody and cool and slippery with thin skin that moved loosely over the fragile bones, and maybe Andy would pick it up and throw it in the trash with the books, and cover it with stinky brown coffee grounds, so Chuckie couldn't find it—)

"NO!" The word was almost too big for Chuckie's throat and mouth, his whole head ached from the uttering of it. He started to retract his outstretched hand but Andy's left hand darted out across the wide counter, made barest contact with the soft tips of the little boy's fingers, and held on tightly. The pain was almost as bad as when Andy squeezed too hard on Chuckie's pee-pee, but this time, Andy didn't have him pinned down in a bed. As Andy tried to force Chuckie's arm and hand back onto the board, Chuckie planted the soles of his Big Bird slippers hard against the cupboards which formed the base of the big counter, and then—pushing until his little legs felt like they might snap off at the knees—Chuckie flew backward so quickly that Andy was pulled halfway across the counter after him . . . so quickly that Andy's upraised hand, the one with the big silver Don't Touch Cutting Thing

clenched tightly in it, came down hard and fast—right in Andy's left forearm.

Chuckie's backward fall was partially broken by Daddy's kitchen chair, but his side still hurt when he landed on it. Scrambling to his feet, finger-tips still tingling, Chuckie slipped once on the no-wax floor. Behind him, Andy, who was breathing very hard and loud now, great raging breaths that made the snot in his nose bubble in and out, pulled the now reddened Cutting Thing out of his forearm. It made a soft, gooey, sucking noise when Andy finally yanked it out, and the blood that splattered over the white wood and gold-specked Formica counter and even on Chuckie himself wasn't watery and pinkish and pale like chicken blood, but deep and red, redder than catsup or Mommy's nail polish, or the paint of Scooter's old dog house—and Chuckie imagined that his arm would have looked like that, flowing red at the end like a faucet, then a voice deep inside, said, *You spoiled Andy's game. He was gonna help you, and now look—*

Maybe . . . oh *please* (don't let Mommy go to jail and hang there) maybe, Andy wouldn't be mad if they played *another* game, no more Simon Says—

"Hide an' Go Seek! Hide an' Go Seek!" Chuckie cried, before he turned and *ran* nearly falling again in his haste to get out of the kitchen.

As he ran, Chuckie could dimly hear Andy's ragged, sobbing breaths (instead of counting, like he was supposed to, Andy gibbered, "Fuck it, *ohhh fuck it!*"), followed by the dull clatter of the cutting board and the Cutting Thing falling to the floor. Chuckie made it to the living room, pocket flaps bobbing up and down, past the still vibrating recliner, and almost to the stairs before he heard Andy's now raspy "Chhhhaarlesss . . . Simon Says *get back* here!" behind him. Unable to look back, Chuckie screamed, "No — *Hide an' Go Seek,*" then bounded up the stairs, crawling on all fours, scrambling on the carpet, his sore side making his breaths hitch and burn, pulling himself up two and three steps at a time, his bibbies wet and sticky against his hot pumping legs.

Top of the landing. Chuckie heard the sucking drone, "Chhhhaarlesss," again, but it was still *below* him. As he ran along the hallway, Chuckie heard the shuffling footsteps begin. Hunkering down low, he ran into Andy's room (Chuckie wasn't *stupid*: he knew from playing Hide an' Go Seek with Stacey that the Seeker never looked in the *obvious* places . . . like under the baby sitter's long coat

where it hung in the closet. Or in the Seeker's own bedroom ... or so Chuckie hoped).

Andy's big bed was unmade, the thick brown down comforter loosely flipped over on the bottom half of the bed. Chuckie crawled on the bed, and curled up under the comforter. He didn't snore-foo this time; even though Daddy had told Chuckie that *everyone* went "snore-foo" when they slept, Chuckie couldn't *believe* him anymore. Daddy still believed in Santa Claus, too, and Chuckie knew that *he* was dead, so now Chuckie knew that snore-fooing was a *lie* that Daddy told him.

His brother was upstairs. Andy's breath whistled in his nose, a high, quavery slurping sound that made Chuckie wince. Andy had the Don't Touch Thing again; every few seconds he'd slap it against his thigh, a flat swacking noise. In between groans, he said, "Simon Didn't Say to *run away*, Chuck-a-Dead-Duck ... Simon Didn't Say ..." as he patrolled the hallway, waiting for Chuckie's snore-foo. Andy's voice grew indistinct when he walked into a bedroom, growing so soft that Chuckie could barely hear it, then it became loud again when Andy reentered the hallway. As he waited, his nose itching from the stale bed smell, Chuckie dimly wondered where that taped-together Christmas tag was, the one that could send Mommy to jail now that Chuckie spoiled Andy's attempt to fix it for her, so she *wouldn't* have to go to jail. The *forgery* was probably in here, but Chuckie couldn't look for it just yet. Maybe when it was his turn to be the Seeker ...

Once again, Andy sing-song-sobbed "*Si-mon Did-n't Say to run away, Uppie-Chuckie,*" was growing faint, fainter ... abruptly, instinctively, Chuckie rolled out from under the covers, down to the floor, where he scrambled under the bed. Dust kitties nested in his sweaty hair as Chuckie crab-crawled under the bed, over to where he could see part of the hallway through the open doorway. No Andy.

Quietly, *soooo* quietly, Chuckie crept out from under the bed, and kept on crawling out of the room and into the hallway. A drop of blood glistened on the hall carpet, winking at Chuckie under the muted glare of the lights high above him. Past Mommy and Daddy's bedroom, almost within a finger's reach of the first step down, Chuckie heard the junk-down-the-disposal, bottomless howl — "*Chhhhaaarlessss,*" and the sound was so cold, so rotted and crumbly-ugly that Chuckie felt as though he was being sucked down into the icky, slimy depths of the disposal in the kitchen, falling down

and down with no one to pull him out, and his pee-pee jerked in his bibbies from the effort of letting out the last of the panic-hot tinkle inside him. The pound of Andy's footsteps was different too; slow, heavy, and draggy, and he wasn't banging the silver Thing against his legs anymore.

As Chuckie scurried down the steps, his slippered feet slid across the low looped nap of the carpet, and he shot down the stairway like it was that big slide at the park, the high silvery one, only Chuckie wasn't laughing as he bumped down and down helplessly. Near the bottom, he spun around, and high above him he saw Andy, and his scream became so big that his jaw ached open to let all of it come out: Andy had pressed his arm against his chest, and now his white tee shirt had a big blotch of red in the middle, and the red spread up to his neck and down to his belt and there were smears of blood in his hair and on his white face and his eyes were glittery with unshed tears and the white-lipped mouth was taunt and closed, yet that *sound*, the "Chhhhaaarless" noise, was still coming out, and in his free hand, Andy held the Cutting Thing in a white-knuckled grasp. Falling back first to the floor, Chuckie *knew* that Andy wasn't playing Hide-and-Go-Seek at all any more. Oh, Andy was Seeking, but it didn't matter if Chuckie was Hiding or not; all Andy wanted was to finish the game of Simon Says . . . in the kitchen.

The footfalls loomed closer as Chuckie frantically darted around the downstairs. The bathroom? He didn't know how to lock the door. The kitchen—not there! Sewing room? "No-No-Chuckie!" came Mommy's voice. Daddy's—no, that's where his *fingerprints* were! The footsteps were near the bottom now, and the sucking garbage-down-the-sink-hole Voice was loud and reverbating. "Siiii-mon Didiidn't Saaaaay—" when Chuckie remembered the Door. The kitchen (all the *red*, running down the cupboards!) door, the only one whose lock he *could* open. Stacey showed him how, solemnly telling him, "Only open this in case there's a fire or something and I can't open it for you, *okay*, Chuckie?" and making him cross his little chest with jelly-sticky fingers. Fighting the stoppered up throat feeling (Chuckie wondered if Andy with a Cutting Thing in his hand was an "or something") the little boy scurried across the living room. Behind him, he could hear the pound of feet, and the wheezing snuffle. Chuckie could almost *hear* the slow seep of blood entering Andy's shirt, could almost see it crawling, capturing the thin white fabric, painting Andy all bright red.

The no-wax floor sported an irregular red stripe near the counter, and Chuckie saw a half-print from Andy's tennis shoe, a half-moon of zig-zag lines—

"Si . . . si . . . simon says st . . . stoppp—"

—which he jumped over, landing on a clear patch of floor, only Andy didn't see the slick of wetness and slipped on it just as Chuckie reached the door, but his small fingers were sweat-slippery and the knob twisted uselessly under his grip, the big golden knob that was bigger than his fist, the knob with the little button in the middle—the *one that Stacey pushed in to release the lock!* Behind him, the force of Andy's fall had opened up what had started to clot inside his arm, and the spurting started again, but Chuckie didn't wait around to watch the blood jet out; he pushed the button in with his thumb and *then* the big knob turned easily under his baby grip.

Andy's breaths—thin, reedy—sounded in Chuckie's ears as he pulled open the inner door, only to be confronted with the screen door. The latch handle nipped his tender fingers as he fumbled with the mechanism, but Mommy wasn't there to kiss them and make them feel better, and Andy was getting to his feet, so Chuckie braved the pain and let the screen door *thwack* shut behind him.

The air was chilly, making his wet legs cold, and his side ache anew. Panting, Chuckie ran down the bricked-in path to the front of the house, rounding the corner just as Andy's red and gushing figure appeared on the back stoop. Leaving the path for the driveway, Chuckie headed toward Sara and Jason's house, but their mommy's big green car was gone, and since they didn't have a regular babysitter, Sara and Jason must have gone with their mommy. The rough gravel of the driveway hurt his tender feet, poking sharply through his thin slipper soles (the Big Bird heads bobbed crazily on each foot), and the cold air cramped his lungs, yet Chuckie continued to run, his legs pumping harder as he heard the splatter of gravel displaced by Andy's bigger feet, the stray pieces hitting the backs of his calves, digging into the hickory-stripe denim. Chuckie raced down the graveled drive right up to the end, and onto the flat hardness of the sidewalk, the rounded curb (once he felt a brush of hot fingertips down the middle of his back, between the bibbie straps, and Chuckie forced himself to go fast, *faster!*) and beyond, into the street, the Don't Go Alone Place, the Look Both Ways *street*, where Scooters had run to when Andy let him go, left him to run off and get hit by the lady in the car—

— the sobbing rasp of Andy's breath behind Chuckie was drowned out by the steadily growing sound of tires gobbling up the smooth pavement, a rubbery sliding sound like Chuckie's toy truck rolling on the kitchen (blood!) floor, growing louder by the second, and Chuckie almost wound up standing there still and confused, like Scooters had been, but—unlike Scooters, Chuckie had a Mommy who would be going to *jail*, to a *cell* unless he could make Andy play another game of Hide-and-Go-Seek with him, and let Chuckie Seek this time, so he could find that *forged* tag and—

—Chuckie ran to the other side of the street, not looking back, even when he heard the brakes of the car screech uselessly, or heard the people inside the car scream ... or heard the dull squishing *thump* of Andy hitting the rushing hugeness of the car. The silver Cutting Thing clanked harmlessly on the hood of the car—a second later.

When he heard that, and *only* after he was sure that the Don't-Touch Thing was out of Andy's hands, did Chuckie turn around.

The people—two girls and a boy, all of them much older than Chuckie—were out of the car, next to Andy. The boy in the black-and-gold jacket with the big EHS on it was uppie-chucking all over the yellow center lines, inches from Andy's head. The vomit steamed in the brisk air. The girls were hugging each other, sobbing and gibbering, not wanting to look, but looking regardless. At Andy. Chuckie padded, Big Bird heads wobbling, over to his brother, and looked at him too.

Andy didn't look *too* different; redder and more twisted, but not much worse than before. His eyes were still open, only the blue part was rolled up high and there was lots more white showing. Scooters had looked worse, Chuckie decided, and while he was tempted to ask, *is this how Scooters felt?* all he said was, "Who's gonna play with me *now*?" Andy didn't answer him, didn't say "Chhhhaaarless," didn't do anything but leak redly on the pavement. Chuckie remembered that Daddy had to lift Scooters up off the road, that Scooters didn't get up. Chuckie didn't think that he could pick Andy up, but maybe the three kids could, after they stopped crying and uppie-chucking. He didn't think that Andy was going to get up by himself. Chuckie decided that he had better wait until Andy was brought back to the house, maybe when Andy was better he could Hide and Chuckie could Seek him, only Chuckie would Seek for the *forged* tag first, and flush it down the potty before the police came to the house to take Chuckie away for stealing.

the stickers. They would take *him*, because Andy was going to tell Daddy what he did, tell Daddy because Chuckie wouldn't let him fix it for *good*, like it said to do in the book under the coffee grounds in the garbage, but (Chuckie swallowed down a clog in his throat) he didn't care if he went to jail. He didn't care if people watched while he pee-peed, didn't care if he didn't have a nice Care Bear comforter at night. Once Andy was home again, Chuckie would Seek the *forged* tag, so Mommy wouldn't have to go to jail with him, to wind up hanging from the bars in that little room with the hard bed and no seat on the potty. Or have the Christmas tag tied on her toe in the morgue.

Chuckie's Mommy was a *forger* and a *felon*, but he still loved her.

Shuck Brother

by MARC LAIDLAW

The poison was everywhere—
in the vegetables from the garden,
in the meat on the dinner table....
in the pores of their own skin.

Mama had been good all day, but at suppertime she went mad again and spoiled everything. It was the chicken that did it this time, the good chicken Pop had killed that afternoon by stepping on its head with his boot heel and yanking up on the talons, everything happening in slow-motion under the August sun, as if the whole world wanted Jory to see exactly how it was done: the sound of the spine pulling apart, and the taffy-stretched squawk, the slow drizzle of blood on the green grass where the dead cock flapped and twitched among the hens while their heads gawked and eyes and beaks gaped as wide as they would go in the bottom of the bucket that Pop gave Jory to dump in the crick. They hadn't gone out to kill the rooster, but it'd given Pop a few good scratches when he went in the coop for a couple-three hens, and Pop had just gone crazy himself right then and swore like hell, grabbed that cock and stepped down ...

"I can taste it," Mama said. "It's in the flesh now, Henry. It's got in their feed."

Pop put down his fork, slowly, while Jory crumpled the napkin in his lap and wished he couldn't remember so well what Pop'd looked like when that cock had upset him, because it was kind of the same look he had now. The cock hadn't intended to spur him, Jory was sure of that; it had only been a dumb creature.

And likewise, Mama didn't mean any harm; she couldn't help herself, she was always tasting the badness. But it made Pop angrier each time, and Jory more worried, and baby Tad—who didn't know what any of it was about—closer to tears than usual.

"Now look," Pop said, in his levellest tone of voice, "you don't start that again. I don't want to hear it."

Tad was looking between the two of them while he tore at a drumstick. Jory saw Mama catch him looking, then she reached out suddenly and took the leg from his fingers.

"I don't want you eating this now, you hear?"

"What the hell do you think you're doing? The boy's got to eat."

When Tad got over looking stupid, he shut his eyes and started crying.

Pop pushed back his chair and stood up, and Mama raised the drumstick as if it were a club. He came around the table, put his hand on the back of Tad's highchair, and then stood there scowling at Mama. She met his look with one of her own, a fiercer one, Jory thought, and he wished again he could stop thinking about the way that rooster had looked, the craze in its dumb eyes, and finally the lack of anything in them, when they were just staring out of the muddy water in the crick.

Mama moved first, but not to give in. She did her second crazy thing: threw the drumstick over Jory's head, bang into the closed cupboard. Pop grabbed her wrist and Tad screamed, and then she was crying, "You know it's true, Henry, God damn you for lying! Unless you've taken in so much of it up there spraying that you can't taste it no more—"

"Hasn't no more flavor than rain," he said. "You listen—"

"Rain never made the greens in the truck garden taste like this." She shoved at the ladle in the salad bowl, spilling lettuce and tomato wedges onto the red-and-white checkered table cloth.

"Like nothing."

"Bitter as tin, you mean. It's got in the tomatoes, the squash, the potatoes—living things suck it right up, even though it's dead. And that's what we're going to be, Henry. You, me, your children. All of us like that stunted corn we shucked last week. They're gonna have to come throw us all away someday soon."

He threw down her arm. Tad reached for a tomato wedge but she slapped his hand away. "No you don't."

Tad sniffed.

"Look at your brother," she said. "You don't see him eating."



Jory knows better, don't you, Jory?"

"Let the boy eat," Pop said.

"I know," Mama said, suddenly brightening in such a wrong way that he knew she was going to do another crazy thing. She started to get up. "We'll go out. Jory, get you and your brother's coats. We'll take a drive into town and have us a nice hamburger at McDonald's, then we'll have some watermelon on the roadside."

"Sit down," Pop told her. Jory hadn't moved. "What do you think, they don't spray melons in this county?"

"Some fine buttered corn," she said, not hearing him, no longer looking at anything. She stumbled a little but caught herself on the corner of the table.

"Sit down!" he yelled. "We've got a good supper laid out here from our own ranch, and we're going to eat it among us, with no wasting money we can't spare in town."

"And after that," she said, almost whispering, "while there's still light, we'll go take a look at the Rockefellers' cattle ..."

With a little choke and rattle of breath, she fell. Jory winced, hunching his shoulders when her head struck the edge of the table. Tad stared down from his high chair, but Jory couldn't see her. He wished Pop would help her; he wished they would be good to each other, so that he could remember what it had been like before last summer, and the coming of the bugs, and the new sprays meant to take care of them.

Finally Pop bent and saw to her, lifted her in his arms and carried her like a doll out of the kitchen. Jory helped Tad down from the high chair, wiped his brother's face with a rag, then went through the back-porch into the yard, no longer hungry.

He could see his parents' bedroom window, the shades drawn halfway, but his eyes got no farther than the sill. It was covered with dead bugs: flies and spiders, cicadas, grasshoppers, a few wicked-looking mayflies.

He had planned to climb up in the old apple tree where he usually went to think and be alone, but something happened before he got very far. In the crotch of the tree, where three thick branches split out from the gnarly trunk, he put his hand in something that crunched like cellophane and clung to his fingers. It was dry as paper, bluish-grey in color, and it had big bug eyes. It looked like the husk of a housefly, split open down the back, except that it was as big as his foot.

Backing out of the tree, he wondered where it had come from.

He didn't need an answer, though. There had been a buzzing in the eaves last night, as if a hornets' nest were flying around by itself. A fly that big might have made the sound.

Mama would blame it on the poison. The vegetables, she said, were shrinking—like the dwarf corn they'd picked recently—but the bugs were getting bigger every year. Each time Pop came home from the county office with another cannister of the latest spray and a leaflet marked with the skull and crossbones, she talked crazier and crazier about stuff like that. Pop's truck was right now parked out front with a couple of the silver tanks in the bed. New poison, stronger, for stronger bugs. He'd be up in the plane spraying it tomorrow.

Jory heard the screen door slam, and Tad came around the side of the house, heading toward the truck garden. Jory yelled at him but Tad didn't seem to hear. Mama was worried that he might be a little deaf. She blamed that on the poison, as well as the fact that he was growing so fast; four years younger than Jory, he was already almost as big, but then Jory was small for his age. "It's like that with boys," Pop had said. "First one's always the runt, brainy type, like Jory here; and the second one shoots up and fills out to make up for the both of them."

Jory caught Tad by the shoulder at the edge of the truck garden. Evening was on them, and the first of the fireflies came flitting over the fields.

"Where you going, Tad? You're not supposed to leave the house this close to dark. Mama will get mad."

Tad pointed at a dwarf huge tomato that looked purple and nasty as a deadly nightshade berry in the dimming light. Sitting on it was a big winged bug, a lightning bug the size of a praying mantis, and Jory could tell that it was feeding. There was already a dark gnawed place in the fruit. Did lightning bugs eat vegetables? They'd never been a problem before.

Jory reached out to flick it off the tomato, but as he did it stuck up its tail and glared in such a way that he instantly felt a little dizzy, sick to his stomach. It was the way the flickering strip lights in the town library made him feel. It wasn't a greenish-white lightning bug light, either: it had some of the same purplish tint as the tomato. It only stopped glowing when he pulled his hand away.

Tad was laughing.

"Tad," Jory said, "did you see that? That's no regular lightning

bug."

Suddenly the younger boy reached for the bug. Jory panicked, but there was no flash this time. The lightning bug lifted from the plant, circled twice, and settled on his brother's hand. Tad held the bug up to his eyes until he went cross-eyed looking at it. The light in its tail throbbed, but it stayed dim.

"Da-da-da-da," Tad sang. "Da-da-da-da-da."

That was when Jory felt scared for the first time. It was not the way Tad sang, because babies always did that, and Tad was a regular songbird; it was the way the firefly's tail light went on and off exactly in time with his singing. Silently, it went da-da-da-da.

"Stop it!" Jory said, and he struck Tad's hand. The bug flew off a few feet, circled around, and came back toward them. Jory screamed and batted at it, keeping it away from his brother, as if it were a hornet and not a harmless little lightning bug. "Leave us alone!"

"Hey, boys!"

Jory spun around, his hand on Tad's shoulder, and saw Pop leaning out the back-porch door.

"Get in here and clean this kitchen," Pop said. "Your Mama ain't feeling up to it tonight."

"Okay, Pop."

Holding on to Tad, Jory ran back to the house. He thought he could see the lightning bug flicker once more, but it had taken off. His stomach didn't calm down until he was in the bright kitchen, but even then he was nervous about looking out the window. He went about his chores slowly, carefully, while Tad sat in front of the tv in the other room. All the time he was thinking that the bug had been acting strange. Maybe the county was right about the sprays. If bugs could do stuff like that—blink on and off in time to singing, and eat tomatoes so hungrily—maybe they should be killed before they could get any stranger. That might be why Pop seemed so anxious to be up and spraying early the next morning. Maybe he'd seen the bugs doing funny things, too.

Mama was seated in front of the tv with Tad when Jory finished in the kitchen. She looked better, laughing at the comedies, but Tad wasn't really looking at the tv. He didn't seem to be looking at anything.

Jory went out front, and found Pop hauling the canisters out

of the truck.

"Don't know if this spray is gonna be strong enough," he said. "County man was trying to sell me a poison one-stronger. Now I'm thinking I should have taken him up on it."

"Pop, what kind of bugs are you spraying for?"

"The bad kind, Jory."

"Is there any other kind?"

"Sure, some bugs eat other bugs and protect the crops. Some bugs like mayflies don't even have mouths. This year we're seeing a new strain, some kind of firefly that came up from the Gulf."

"I think I've seen it, Pop. It's really bright. Tad was—"

He stopped, wondering what he was seeing. Pop wasn't listening to him. A kind of glow was coming from the woods, through the buckeye hedge, and out of the air wherever he looked.

Fireflies. They were swarming over the sky, rushing over the house from the fields, bright as flying lightbulbs. Jory had to shade his eyes. It wasn't until they lit in the trees that he could calm down enough to really look at them, and by then Pop was running toward the house.

Standing by the truck, Jory stared out at the woods.

The trees were dark now, all the lights extinguished. He waited.

In an instant the whole farm came alight. The purplish glow coursed through the trees, through the hedges and the deep woods, trails of fire following the tangles of branch and leaf. He was reminded of a model of the human nervous system he'd seen in a library book; it had shown trails of light, just like this, but in different colors. The trees above the buckeyes looked like big brains.

He felt like his feet were trapped in thick mud and he couldn't run. The lightning bugs began to blink on and off in unison, the whole forest and all the hedges blazing like a wild neon sign, then going dark so that he was blinded, dazzled.

Pop struck him from his daze. "Get in the house." He was already throwing the cannisters back in the truck. "I'm gonna spray."

"Tonight?"

"Get in, I said. Seal the windows as fast as you can. I might have to spray over the house."

"The house?"

"Get in there!"

Jory ran.

Inside, the tv was off. Tad was crying and Mama sat holding him, staring at the drawn blinds that kept getting dark and bright,

dark and bright. Jory crawled up beside them on the sofa.

"It's all right, Mama," he said, "they're just lightning bugs. Lightning bugs don't hurt anything."

But she was whispering prayers, stroking Tad's hair, and Tad was whimpering: "Da-da-da-da."

Jory felt his skin crinkle.

"Da-da-da-da."

He looked at the window.

"Da—"

The shades lit up.

"Da—"

They darkened.

"Da—"

They lit up again.

Oh, please, Jory thought. Please, God, let it be all right. Don't let this happen. Don't let anything happen to my brother or my Mama or Pop or me. Make those bugs go away.

But all that happened was that he heard the truck tearing away. Everything else went on as before.

It was a little while before he remembered what Pop had said about sealing the house. Hoping he still had enough time, he ran around checking the doors and windows. When he was at the back door, he heard the plane starting at the far side of the field. He slammed the door and hoped he had done enough.

"Jory?" It was Mama calling him. He ran into the living room.

"Yes, ma'am?"

She looked sick. "Jory, where is your father?"

Hadn't he told her?

"He went out, Mama," he said in a small voice.

"Has he gone into town?"

"I don't think so. I think he plans to spray the crops tonight."

"Don't be foolish, Jory. How could he do that at night? There's no moon tonight."

"I guess I'm wrong," Jory said.

"I guess you are. You take care of your brother for a minute. I'm going to take a peek outside and see where he's gone. You think he's in the barn?"

Jory grabbed her hand as he stood. "You can't go outside, Mama!"

"You're being foolish, child. There's nothing wrong outside, the county man told your father and he assured me, everything is fine.

The county man said so." She was opening the front door, and as it opened the sound of the plane became as loud as the fly that had buzzed outside his window last night. It was coming closer.

"Mama, please don't."

He tugged at her, but she was too strong. She got onto the front porch and stood there looking at the forest, the blinking trees, the sky full of moving fire, and then she said, "What a beautiful evening. I do love the fireflies." She stepped down to the earth.

"Mama!"

The plane was getting closer, and suddenly Jory heard a sound that made him turn back toward the house. All against the rear, along the porch and the kitchen, he heard something like hail or pebbles being thrown against the walls and windows. The storm swept over them, a river of shooting stars pouring toward the forest, and after them—streaking over the roof, over Mama—went the plane, a black bat with glittering mist sifting from its wings.

Two things happened at the same time. The forest light shook and lifted in a single cloud, rising in front of the plane. And Jory's eyes began to sting, his throat to burn, so that he could not see anything more: it looked like the world was dissolving. But he could hear the plane's engine die in mid-air, and seconds later he clearly heard the crashing, crunching, and snapping of branches, as if a hundred trees were being trimmed all at once, until the impossible clippers snarled in the wood and were thrown down with a distant, hopeless scream.

Then his mother began to cough. He walked out into a hot mist and stumbled over her. All he could see of her was a white struggle of blurred arms and legs; her brown dress made her one with the earth, and her hair covered her face. She made no more noise when he knelt beside her, but who was that laughing?

Sniffing, he wiped his eyes and looked back at the house. Tad was standing out on the porch steps, his arms open to the sky, head thrown back, his tongue stuck out to catch the last faint falling of mist as if it were snowflakes.

"Stop it, Tad!" he shouted.

The little boy cocked his head toward the woods, tilting it from side to side like a curious dog, then he ran past Jory down the road.

Jory looked at his mother, but she wasn't moving, and even though he wished he could stay with her, he knew that she would

want him to go after the little one. Feeling torn apart inside, he got to his feet.

He couldn't believe how fast Tad ran. It seemed like it hadn't been that long ago that he was only learning to walk; now Jory felt like the clumsy one. He kept tripping in the ruts of the road.

The woods were glowing as if a campfire burned in their depths. Against that light, Tad's shadow practically flew over the road. Then his baby brother turned aside and headed through the trees.

Jory's lungs burned, and one of his eyes hardly saw at all, but he followed as best he could.

It was harder going between the trees. He lost sight of Tad, and only the light guided him, but when he finally came to the bright place, there was no sign of his brother. The trees were full of clustered purple glare. In the middle of broken trunks and branches, a clearing, the wreckage of the plane lay smoking.

They're only lightning bugs, Jory told himself.

"Pop?" he called.

The light seemed to vibrate to his cry, and that made him want to keep quiet.

He walked through the broken trees until he came to a twisted wing of the plane. He could see the cockpit, and the top of his father's head down inside. He climbed onto the wing, hopeful.

"Pop?" he whispered.

His father's head hung funny. Jory swallowed. Broken neck. He backed down, not wanting to look too long at the wide eyes.

He heard a new sound, like singing, and looked to the edge of the clearing. An arm reached out along the ground from the roots of a toppled tree. The small hand settled to the leaves.

He climbed to the fallen trunk, peered over it, and saw his brother lying naked among the roots and branches, curled on his side. His eyes were wide, and so was his mouth.

"Tad," Jory said. "Whatever happened to your clothes?"

He jumped over the trunk, but his foot snagged on a bit of broken branch and he half fell sideways. Twigs broke as he caught himself, and there was another, softer crackling. He came up thinking that he had barely missed landing on his brother, but he was wrong.

He screamed and stepped back, tearing Tad to shreds as he tried to get out of his body. The husk, still wet, stuck to his shoes.

Jory cried up at the trees where the light looked almost mer-

ciful, except that it lit what lay below.

But in time with his scream, the brilliant forest went black. There were no stars, no moon, nothing to light up the thing that came buzzing and laughing toward him, sounding too big by far to be his baby brother.

THE CABBAGE LEAF

by MONA A. CLEE

Her father hadn't worked in years;
they lived mostly on money her brothers
brought home from doing chores.
And now her uncle's family had driven up
to move in with them.

On Monday the washing machine broke, and the family could find no one to fix it. On Tuesday the radio stopped playing, and on Wednesday the record player followed suit. There ensued a deceptive, comforting lull. The family had almost rallied when, on Sunday, the ancient television set went dead.

Everyone was strangely quiet at breakfast that morning. Melissa watched as her mother, silent and tight-lipped, filled chipped plates with grits and oatmeal and set them on the kitchen table. She saw her father fly upstairs to his study at the earliest possible moment, and her two older brothers slink through the back door the minute their mother's back was turned. Grandpa alone stayed at the table. He poured himself another cup of coffee and sat staring down at the steaming liquid. Melissa guessed he was pulling himself together before facing the long climb upstairs to Grandma—dying Grandma—with her own breakfast tray.

"Ma," said Melissa, breaking the silence, "let's do something fun."

Prudence, her mother, gave a short laugh. "Have you gone out to the vegetable garden yet today?"

Mother knew very well she hadn't. "No," said Melissa.

"Then do it. If you wait until later it'll be too hot."

Melissa looked down at her lap. "I don't want to."

Prudence said nothing, but the thin line of her lips grew even tighter and she scrubbed the breakfast plates as if she wanted to grind them into powder.

"When will they fix the tv, Ma?" asked Melissa.

"When we have the money, dear, whenever that is."

"When, Ma, when?"

Prudence turned, slowly and deliberately, and looked at Melissa. "I don't know."

"I got that tv set back when your father was in college," spoke up Grandpa, his voice full of the false heartiness grownups so often affected. "It was on its last legs anyway; too bad it had to pick right now to kick the bucket."

"There's nothing to do," said Melissa.

Prudence laughed out loud once more, and turned to fix Melissa with a brief, enigmatic stare. Melissa squirmed in her chair. As if sensing her discomfort, Grandpa got to his feet and picked her up. "Come on Missy, stop warting your mother."

He put Melissa down, and she drifted back to her mother's side. "Let's cook something, mama," she said. "Something fun."

"Missy!" Prudence threw down the dishrag she was holding. She wiped her hands on her apron and knelt down to glare at Melissa. "We don't have time to play now. Your Uncle Rodney and Aunt Ginna and all their children are coming to live with us today. Mother has to clean out a room for them. Mother has to cook a meal for them. We don't have time to make things like cookies, or cakes, and even if we did, there isn't any sugar."

"Will Uncle Rodney fix the tv?" Melissa asked, feeling suddenly hopeful.

"Maybe Uncle Rodney will give us the money to fix it, for rent. But then again, maybe he won't. Uncle Rodney doesn't have any more money than we do, or he wouldn't be coming to live with us."

"Then let's tell him to go away," said Melissa.

Prudence straightened up and put her hands on her hips. "Don't be a brat, Melissa," she said in a tired voice. "They're family, and families have to stick together until times get better. You'll understand that someday."

"Pru," said Grandpa, "why don't you read to the child?"

Prudence merely looked at him, her shoulders drooping, and did not reply.

"I'll finish up the dishes and clean out a room for Rodney,"

Grandpa pressed.

"Pa, it wouldn't be good for you. Just let me do it."

"Well, then I'll read to her." Grandpa shuffled into the storage closet once more. Melissa watched him warily. She distrusted the dark closet and its arcane contents, and was not quite sure what Grandpa intended to do.

He emerged from the dark and the dust with a smile. "Bet you've never heard of Dickens, little girl."

"Dickens?" Prudence arched her eyebrows. "You're going to read her that old stuff?"

"I'm going to read it to both of you." Grandpa sat down at the table again with a look of satisfaction on his face. "This is what families used to do, 'way back before even I was born—before television. They'd read aloud to each other. You'll love it. Listen to how Dickens writes—listen to the rhythms, the tones, the cadences. He's magic. He sings to you."

Grandpa settled back into the chair and cleared his throat. A few silent flakes of paint drifted from the wicker back onto the farmhouse floor, like so much quiet snow.

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us—"

"Shut up!" screamed Prudence. She jerked the book from Grandpa's hands and threw it across the room, where it struck and shattered a pane of glass in the dirty south window.

Melissa stared at her. "Ma—?"

"Oh, God," whispered Prudence, "now look what I've done." She sat down at the table and put her face in her hands. She began to cry, and Melissa became quite frightened; whenever Mother cried, it meant something terrible was happening.

Grandpa went to her. "Pru, child, what's wrong? It's just a story."

"Leave me alone," said Prudence.

Grandpa tried to stroke her hair, but she pushed his hand away. "Look at us here," she said, hiccupping, "miles away from anywhere, living in this dirty old farmhouse just because we don't have any money. Seven of us—and by tonight, twelve. I break my back in that garden, my hands are all red and raw from

washing clothes in the sink, and I don't even have a husband who can fix things, let alone make us a living!"

"Milt would get a job if there were any to be had, Pru. You know that. He just can't face the way things are now."

"What are we going to do, Pa?"

Grandpa sighed. "Wait it out, child. My parents used to talk about the first Depression—I'll bet it was a lot like this, even if it wasn't quite as bad, and people lived through it."

Prudence wiped her eyes with the hem of her skirt. "I swear," she said, "if it weren't for the money the boys bring home from doing chores, I don't think we'd eat. The last thing I need is for you to sit there reading me stuff from some old, sad book that makes me want to die."

Grandpa put his hands on her shoulders. "It wasn't the book, Pru. It was you. Things are hard for everybody these days, but you've got more than your share to carry. Try and cheer up."

Prudence was silent for a short while longer; then Melissa heard her take a deep breath. "Well, at least we're not starving," she said, and smiled a little. "We are making it, aren't we? You hear such horrible things on the news these days, about the things people do because times are so bad. But those things aren't happening to us. We're surviving."

"That's the spirit. Why, compared to a lot of folks, we're rich. Think how many people must walk past this farmhouse and say to themselves how lucky we are. Look at us—the garden, the cow, three kids with flesh on their bones. We are lucky, daughter."

Prudence seemed to shiver. "You're right, Pa. That's just why I thank God we've got the dogs. No one would dare come near this house uninvited." She rose and crossed to the sink. "I've got to finish the dishes," she said. "Please put that book away."

Grandpa sighed, and closed the book.

"Melissa?" Even with her back turned, Pru's tone was commanding. "Go out to the garden and get some vegetables."

Melissa frowned; she hated being bossed. "No," she said.

"Hush, hush." Grandpa got up and addressed Pru's back. "How about if I let her go through one of the boxes in the attic? That'll keep her occupied for a while."

"It's only junk up there."

Grandpa smiled. "Not to a child."

He took Melissa upstairs into the attic, where he opened a window to let in fresh air, and uncovered some of the dusty old

boxes stored there. "We'll take one of these downstairs," he said. "Be careful with all the nice things inside, and be sure to put them back carefully."

He picked up a box, and Melissa peered inside. "It's just more books," she said, filled with disappointment.

"Oh, but look. This one on top is all about the stars and the moon and the planets in the sky. It must have been your father's when he was in college. Look, it even has pictures."

"Nice," said Melissa, looking at the book. "When was that? When was daddy in college?"

Grandpa considered. "Oh, it was in the nineteen seventies some time. Seems just like yesterday." He ruffled her hair, and together the two of them returned to the kitchen.

Downstairs, Prudence had finished the dishes, and had readied Grandma's breakfast tray. As Melissa settled onto a chair next to the box of books, Grandpa picked up the tray and headed back through the dining room toward the staircase. "I hope she won't be difficult today," Prudence called after him.

"She was better yesterday," Grandpa's voice floated back.

"Huh," remarked Prudence, to no one in particular, "I don't think so; he's just putting up a front."

Melissa looked at Prudence over the top of a book. "What's a front?" she asked.

"Grandpa is pretending to be cheerful," replied her mother, "so the rest of us will feel better."

Melissa returned to her book. She had already learned to read a little, and she could spell out words and pronounce them, though she often had no idea what they meant. This book was called B-i-o-l-o-g-y, which meant nothing to her; but the pages were full of intriguing photographs and illustrations.

Prudence continued to work, talking to herself frequently. "I'd wax the floor," she said, "but it's so scratched and splintered, it wouldn't do any good. Maybe I should wash the windows in the back bedroom—make things cheerful for Rodney and Ginna. Do you remember Uncle Rodney, Melissa? You met him a year ago when they were going to Texas to look for work. They came through and stayed with us. You liked Uncle Rodney."

Melissa nodded, but said nothing.

"I'm going to clean up the bedroom," said Prudence at length. "You sit here, Missy, and watch for Uncle Rodney. Come get me

at once if you see him. Do you remember his car? It's a beat-up little blue car—it says, 'Toyota' on the front. Can you remember that?"

Again, Melissa nodded.

"God, it'll be nice to have a car around," said Prudence. "Even that old junkheap."

Melissa continued to read. By twelve noon there was no Rodney yet, but Simon and David came back with a clamor that brought Prudence hurrying from the back of the house. David put a ten-dollar bill on the table.

"What did you do for that, Davey?" Prudence asked. Melissa could tell from her tone that their mother was disappointed, but was trying to hide it.

"Knocked down a wasp's nest for Mrs. Regan." David said. "But I got bit, Ma." He held out an arm that was wasp-bitten in four or five places; it was a bright, ugly red color and was starting to swell.

"Oh, no," cried Prudence. "What if you're having a reaction? What if we need a doctor?" She spied Simon standing in the doorway, and yelled for him. "Simon! Run down the road to the Robinson's house and ask to use the phone. Tell the doctor just what Davey's arm looks like and ask if we need to get Davey into town. Hurry!"

There was a noise of feet on steps, and Simon disappeared. Pru bustled about the kitchen getting a cool cloth for Davey's arm. The bustle brought Grandpa downstairs; from the look on his face as he descended, thinking no one was watching him, Melissa could tell Grandma was no better.

"At least the refrigerator's still working," said Prudence, clamping ice on Davey's arm. "Come on, young man, we're putting you to bed."

Several minutes passed, slow minutes, until Prudence returned to the kitchen. "I don't think he's in danger," Grandpa said. "Davey's just sensitive to the little beasts, like me; enough of them didn't bite him for there to be anything to worry about."

Prudence closed her eyes. "Old Mrs. Regan just gave him ten dollars, Pa, for something as dangerous as that. She's so cheap. It wouldn't even have paid for the doctor. We'd have been further behind than when we started. I think I want to die."

"Stop that," Grandpa hissed. "This child is listening."

Melissa buried her eyes in the book.

Prudence hesitated, and then went to the pantry. Melissa heard the sound of two glasses clinking together, and heard liquid sloshing. Then Prudence returned to the table with two chipped glasses full of something bright amber in color.

"I'm going to have a drink," said Prudence. "How about you, Pa?"

"No," he said, his voice suddenly hard. "It never solved anything."

Prudence shrugged. "Then I'll have yours." She downed one of the glasses and then picked up the other; she sat staring at the liquid, turning the glass around and around in her hands.

Melissa slipped off her chair and sidled over to Grandpa. "What are all these pictures about?" she whispered.

He took the book from her and held it up to the light, for his eyes were bad. At that, Melissa quailed inside; she saw Prudence narrow her eyes and lean forward to look at it too.

Prudence's face grew stern. Her eyes sent a single, darting flash of anger at Grandpa, and she snatched it away. "These pictures are not for little children. What are you thinking of, Pa?"

"I didn't know it was in there."

"Why, Ma?" Melissa asked.

"Because I said so."

"But why? Because the people don't have clothes on?"

"That's all, Melissa." She put the book on a high shelf far beyond reach.

"Ma! It was about babies. I want to know about the babies."

Grandpa eyed her in turn. "I didn't know you could read, Missy."

"Daddy taught me."

"Reading!" Prudence laughed. "That's all your father's good for. Come on, I have work for you to do."

"No, Ma. Tell me where I came from. Did it happen like in the book?"

Prudence whirled. "Your father and I found you under a cabbage leaf in the garden," she said. "We brought you inside to be one of the family."

Grandpa snorted. "For Christ's sake, Prudence. It's been over three hundred years since the Puritans landed, and here you are filling up the child's head with this nonsense."

"Shut up!" Prudence cried. Her voice had a familiar, shrill tone to it that made Melissa want to cry. Prudence turned on

Grandpa. "Puritans be damned—they're not the point. I simply cannot deal with this right now. Not today, not tomorrow, not the day after. When times are better I'll read to my child. I'll teach her what she needs to know. Until then, just let me hold onto my sanity, will you?"

She turned fierce eyes on Melissa. "This time you will go into the garden and get some vegetables. You'll go right now, or I'll make you very sorry you didn't."

Melissa backed out the door, grabbing a wicker basket as she went. Once down the steps, she was careful to stay well away from the two big dogs that lolled against the side of the nearby barn. She tiptoed past them, and took off at a run toward the garden.

Melissa reached the edge of the garden, and began her trek toward the wire fence and the road that marked its far boundary. She always began picking vegetables there and worked her way back toward the distant house; the basket didn't seem heavy that way, or the task so unending.

The night had been cold, the morning only pleasantly warm, but now the afternoon sun beat down on her head and shoulders unmercifully. It was oppressively hot and dry. Her eyes watered from the dust her feet stirred up, and her tongue already felt parched and dry in her mouth. There had been no rain for weeks; if it didn't rain soon, the well water would give out and the garden would die.

When she was almost to the back plot, she stopped. Ahead was the fence, and beyond it the little rutted red road that marked the end of their property; there the garden ended too. She thought she saw a figure moving. Suddenly she was afraid; she wished the dogs were with her.

Someone was running, hunched over, between the rows of corn that paralleled the fence. Though it was difficult to make the figure out, Melissa thought it was not very big. A child, perhaps Davey's age. As she watched it leap over the wire fence in a single bound and sped down the red dirt road.

She narrowed her eyes, but could barely see for the blazing sun overhead. She thought it was a boy. Had he been stealing, she wondered? She wouldn't tell anyone about it. Even she knew how hard times were.

She set down her basket and looked about. Far down the

road, she thought she heard the sound of hooves receding into the distance, but she could not be sure. She shrugged, and planned how to proceed with her task. She would pick beans, and corn, and peas; she would gather nuts from the pecan trees beyond the road, since they were good to eat and easy to carry as well. She would pick a tomato or two, and a cabbage from the very back row along the road, even though it would be heavy; she wanted to show her mother she was not shirking her duty.

She turned and looked back at the house a moment, and suddenly, somehow, there came an unsettling shift in her perspective. What was it Grandpa had said to Ma?

"Why, compared to a lot of folks, we're rich. Think how many people must walk past this farmhouse and say to themselves how lucky we are."

She shook her head, as if to clear it of confusion, and began picking vegetables. She had all but filled her basket when she reached the row of cabbages and stopped. The air hovered all about her, hot and unmoving, and she noticed a faint cloud of dust over the road. Perhaps it was the same as had been kicked up by the fleeing child, she could not tell. But it made her catch her breath and look about. Around her, the whole landscape seemed to be waiting.

She walked along the row of cabbages, looking for a good one. And then, when she got to the very last plant in the farthest corner, she stopped and drew in a sharp breath—for there, cradled in newspaper, tucked under the cabbage plant, was a baby.

Her eyes widened. For a moment she felt fear, inexplicable fear, as if the rules by which the world worked had suddenly been changed.

Ma had said that she, Melissa, had been found under a cabbage leaf. But that was nonsense; Ma had said it in that tone of voice grownups used when they wanted to shut somebody up.

Melissa bent down and peered at the baby. The newspaper was already dry and crackling at the edges, and the baby's small eyes were closed. But it still breathed. And it was perfectly formed—toenails, fingernails, eyelashes, all were there. Beyond any doubt, it was a real baby.

Was this the way it really happened?

Melissa's mind whirled. The sun was dreadfully hot, and she knew she must run and tell Ma quickly.

She started back to the house. Then, torn, she retraced her steps for the basket of vegetables. She took one last look at the

cabbage plant, to make sure the baby was still there. She almost put the basket down to take the baby back instead. But she remembered her mother's anger, and was afraid to leave the vegetables behind.

The heavy basket slowed her down, yet she pushed herself as hard as she could. If babies really did come into the world this way, someone had to tell the parents, and no one knew about this particular baby except her. It was her responsibility.

The minutes seemed like hours, and the basket grew heavier with every step. Yet she was afraid to put it down and run, afraid of Prudence. She knew her mother's temper had stretched beyond a certain point, a point which meant a whipping at the next infraction.

When she reached the back of the farmhouse she saw a battered blue car there, with a strange man and woman talking to Ma. Three children were curled up in the shade of the old sweet gum tree. Ma's face was bright and smiling—her eyes danced, and she laughed, even as Melissa approached.

"Here's Missy!" she cried. "Hurry, Uncle Rodney's here!"

The strange uncle took Melissa's basket, set it on the ground and swept her high in the air in two immense arms. He set her atop one shoulder; from up there Ma's eyes looked bright, too bright, as she darted to and fro herding everyone toward the strange, waiting car.

Uncle Rodney set her down, and she caught her breath. "Ma," she said.

"Hush, Missy. Uncle Rodney's going to take us for a drive." Ma's voice was filled with an excitement and a hysteria that frightened Melissa.

"Ma, listen to me. There's a real baby under a cabbage plant in the garden."

Ma gave a start. Melissa saw Grandpa turn and give her a look of reproach. "You asked for it, Pru," he said.

"Get in the car," said Prudence. "I'll deal with her."

Grandpa shook his head. Slowly and painfully, he climbed into the back of the old Toyota.

"Uncle Rodney's going to take us all for a drive," said Ma. "We're going downtown, and he's going to buy ice cream for you children and a cold beer for Pa and me, and then we're going to go out to eat. When it's nighttime, we'll come back here and build a nice big fire!"

Her mother's hands closed on her shoulders in a grip that hurt,

and steered her toward the car. "Ma," said Melissa, twisting in her grasp. "I saw a baby in the garden. I did."

David and Simon, standing by the car, yelled at her to hurry. Pa stood there too, looking at his brood with a tired, defeated expression on his face.

"Shouldn't you save the money, Rodney?" he asked in a soft voice. "I mean, if it's all you have? We don't have any savings. Let's don't blow it on this luxury—"

"Be quiet," hissed Ma, looking away from Melissa momentarily. "A person's got to have a little fun. How long has it been, anyway?"

Pa shrugged. Moving as slowly as Grandpa, he too climbed into the blue car.

Ma bent down and shook Melissa. "I want you to shut up," she said in a low voice, "and not be drawing attention to yourself all the time. Babies do not really grow under cabbage leaves, and I think you know that. Don't make trouble, Melissa. Don't try to ruin this treat Uncle Rodney has planned for us. There's no telling if we'll even have enough to eat from now on."

"Ma," Melissa said helplessly, "there really *is* a baby in the garden."

Prudence opened and shut her mouth. She straightened up, took a step back, and looked at Melissa. Their eyes met for a split second, and Melissa knew Ma believed her.

Ma twisted her hands together. "Nonsense," she said. "Get in the car."

"Ma!"

"You're telling stories, Melissa." Ma spoke fast, much too fast. "Even if there was a baby there, what would we do with it? We couldn't feed it. Stop aggravating me."

"But, ma . . ." whispered Melissa, and her voice trailed off.

Grandpa, she thought to herself. She would tell Grandpa.

But Uncle Rodney descended on her again. "See here, big girl, you can sit on my lap and help me drive. Wouldn't you like that?"

The rest of the family scrambled aboard frantically, like animals suddenly let out of a cage.

"Put me down," said Melissa, trying to wriggle out of Uncle Rodney's grasp. But he only settled into the driver's seat and propped her on his lap, putting her hands on the steering wheel.

"You drive, sweetie," he said, "and leave your mother alone."

"Ma!" Melissa screamed, a piercing scream uttered at the top of her voice.

Prudence climbed into the front seat and put her face very close to Melissa's. "Shut up," she said.

The Toyota sped off toward the main road, raising a cloud of red dust behind it. Once, but only once, Melissa looked back at the shabby farmhouse, the two big dogs, the red dirt road with heat mirages rising from it, and the garden where cabbages grew. As the scene receded she felt as if she, too, were dying.

THE NIGHT SEASONS

by J. N. WILLIAMSON

There was something in the air—
something far more evil
than even he could imagine.

Part I of IV

I

Slow's the blood that was quick and stormy,
Smooth and cold is the bridal bed;
I must wait 'til he whistles for me—
Proud young Death would not turn his head.

—Dorothy Parker
The Trifler

1. The Century That Ended Early

What I've never been able to stand is those folks who see something absolutely horrifying with their own eyes and say they "can't believe it." A truly terrible thing has happened, usually, the way it did here in the jail, in this unreal, goddamned heat we've been having. Or it may just be something that nobody's ever had the guts to imagine, or expect.

So folks like that watch a truckful of suicidal fanatics right there on the tube piling ass into a Marine base and blowing away some of our guys, too, and even while the smoke curls up like grey snakes slipping away, people go, "I just can't *believe* it."

What they mean is, they won't. And I'm betting you won't either.

It's like Mom a thousand years ago, watching tv the night those first astronauts hopped around on the face of the moon like little pimples breaking out. I had fallen asleep in my favorite raggedy Snoopy PJs under the card table where my mother had put out cold cuts and Chesty potato chips and onion dip from Kroger's.

But then she woke me up to see it—we spent a lot of time just *watching* things—and to announce to everybody that it was “just a show” staged in Hollywood somewhere. “More pap for the masses nursing at the public tit,” she told us airily, one foot firmly planted in a century that had just ended thirty years early. “Bread and circuses to keep us from knowing what’s *really* going on.” Pop and Grandpa Franklin, even my big sister Karen, teased Mom and reasoned with her, but it didn’t do any good.

My mom invented the idea that conspiracies explained everything spooky or weird that happened. And folks like that, if they don’t positively *have* to believe what they’ve seen, won’t.

That had been Mom’s P.S. to the ambush of ol’ JFK a few years earlier, in Dallas. Only that time she was positive “they” had “gotten him out of the way.” The bottom line, Karen and I decided, was that she simply “couldn’t believe” the youthful Kennedy had had his brains splattered all over the backseat in what was Wacko Heaven, U.S.A., back then. Not even after Jack Ruby blasted Lee Harvey Oswald into nobody-oblivion, right on network tv. Oswald had “had to be silenced,” my mother swore to us, and then fretted they would come for her. Since moms don’t lie and mine died in her sleep with absolutely no warning one winter night when Indy was the quietest place on the face of the earth, it made me wonder. For a long while.

Anyway, I frankly do not see reporters as being a lot more fascinated by apparent facts than Mom was, so I don’t really know how to start explaining *this* living, dying nightmare. From everything I’ve read in the press—yes, I’m a literate drunk, the kind that talks too much—the kind of people I’ve been describing probably won’t consider this much of a tragedy. A bunch of guys locked in cells at the county jail tend not to matter quite as much as gung ho Marines or Presidents. Or even assassins, who generally get the kind of media coverage any politician would risk his graft-hole for. What you and your readers or viewers will undoubtedly forget is that this *isn’t* a prison, it’s a jail. Some of us haven’t been found guilty of a fucking thing. And the really bad-asses are sent to state prison facilities before we can get as tough as they are.

And besides, if I begin by telling you immediately the *exact* kind of horror that just happened here, well, even the bloated bodies and the faces with the growths worse than the Elephant man’s won’t be enough to persuade you.

But if you are not convinced—if you don't get scientists in gas masks to locate the homes of those inmates who were released this past week, TONIGHT, and seize their hellish "good will gifts," and destroy them—then there's no way to calculate how far this thing is going to spread. Remember, I told you how some people just "can't believe" what no one had expected or predicted? I know damned well you think the way I did and expect it to be the Bomb that finally blows us off the map.

But you may be wrong.

I'm not bullshitting and I've never been so ice-cold sober before since I was four years old, and I'm afraid to use the precious time, but I'm going to start by telling you that I got into this death orgy because I have always been able to put away more beer and sit up longer than anyone else I've ever met, and I guess that I've survived it for the same reason. I'll get back to that. God knows it's about time that swilling Bud did something *for* me instead of *to* me; yet there's a lot more to this than my being a drunk. I wish there was a more dignified place to begin; there's also more to Rich Stenvall than being a goddamned alcoholic. For example, there's my second wife, Ronnie, our two kids—plus a lot that was pretty damn good before that mad, malicious heat wave began and made it possible for the germination to begin.

Specifically? It was June 2nd and the temperature along with the season of the year had changed overnight. Now sooner or later that happens in most of what they call the "Contiguous United States." But we'd had drizzling rain and freezing rain and the nip in the air was down somewhere around your privates, and the only sign of spring we had seen was a shivering robin about whom our youngest kid, Markie, had commented (with a straight face; Markie is four and had no other expression under firm control), "He mustn't have no caldender. I think he's not s'posed to be here yet." (Markie has trouble with Gs by the way. It's family history that he took a belt of purple Kool Aid around a year back, wiped off his mouth and proclaimed contentedly, "Rape makes me happy." Ronnie's been watching him real close ever since.)

I'd worn an unbuttoned pajama shirt and pants to bed the night before, the furnace was doing its level best to keep the gas company overjoyed about its annual winter gangbang, and I awakened abruptly with sweat and a bad dream pouring out of me as if I'd fallen asleep in the shower. Which I had done a couple

of times in the past; but nothing stronger than Verner's ginger ale had passed my lips in weeks. At once I saw that Ronnie'd kicked the blankets off the foot of the bed and her nightie was pasted to her body. Lying on her back, a long face had taken form—sort of popeyed considering Ronnie's small nipples staring from the sockets of her flat breasts, tiny-nosed with the navel, while the smile mouth above the long face's curly beard had been shaped by Ronnie's unsought start on a thirty-three-year-old's mother's-tummy. Six years ago, she would have made me horny, but that was half a brewery ago. Beer busting is ball-busting, that's a fact.

So despite the way I was burning to take a whiz and my PJ bottoms were stuck to me, the way I was startled by how *hot* and sticky-humid it already was that early June day—enough to waken Sleeping Bear of Grouchiness, as Ronnie and her girl, Bett, seven, liked to call me—I didn't get up. I merely lay there sensing how putrid everything—or I—was that morning and working to ignore or change it. My eyes went on browsing like someone shopping through the apartment bedroom as if I might see it all anew, freshly, and understand my life. I saw the careless clutter of working clothes to wear today that I'd left atop my dresser, then Ronnie's old high school vanity table with the partly repaired leg, cosmetic bottles and tubes and sweet-smelling heady powder boxes making their staunch collective promise that my second wife would remain forever young. It always amazed me the way those oval boxes and exquisite French-looking little bottles appeared to have gathered up Ronnie's distinctive scent and saved it for her to apply again the next day, for me to inhale and enjoy.

There wasn't a damn thing on her dresser. I bemoaned that old, castrating, guilt-making fact that there wasn't much of anything inside the dresser either, thought how she was entitled to expensive lingerie, and looked so great in it. Beer wasn't the only ball-buster; poverty was, too. Smokes, a Bic lighter that'd come from a two-for-a-dollar sale, an ashtray with the name of some bar beneath the burnt ash; a paperback copy of Koontz's *The Face of Fear*, and back issues of *Science Digest*, *Writer's Digest*, *Hoosier Handyman*, and *Psychology Today* that I'd never finished reading and never would; a 3×5 framed photo of bright-eyed Mom, her eyes seeming to follow me wherever I went, like the eyes in that old painting of Jesus. It'd been taken about a year after she uncovered NASA's ongoing space plot and around two years before the family doctor—the only man she had ever fully

trusted—failed to detect either the bad heart or the Big C.

Blinking, I saw my alarm clock last, a functional white G.E. windup fairly bursting with its quivering passion to raise either the dead or Sleeping Bear of Grouchiness. But it was short of its appointed hour and so, by God, was I.

Fact of the matter is, I felt fucking strange. Off my feed, and worse. While it wasn't caused by drinking, I remembered thinking that where women sometimes got pre-menstrual cramps, alkie suffered from pre-hangover spasms. I'd had nothing whatever to drink, though, and it took me a minute to understand what was wrong with me. I certainly wasn't brimming with omens, with portents or clear prophesy of Creepy Things to Come, but it was strangely similar to that—and then I recognized the signals going off in my head and body like turds filled with little charges of dynamite and neon. Recognized, and knew them well. Because they were the exact same, mean mothers I had never found the guts to come to grips with and, in a way, the same ones that'd already screwed up most of my thirty-five years—all except the bright ribbons and skittering snatches of moments Ronnie and the kids had succeeded in gluing together to make maybe a total of one patched-up year or so of decent human existence.

Collectively, the signals were Rich Stenvall's "dis-ease." But I can't believe I am the only S.O.B. who ever suffered from the ailment. Can't because I won't. Ever since dropping out of college—that was when they started; often settling in when I was striving to listen to some droning prof and my temples began to twitch, and the dis-ease began to follow—I've tried to tell someone else about it, but never did until I met Doc Kinsey in county lockup. It tends to be partly-physical, partly-mental *pulsations*, and I've always believed it isn't actually an urge to get drunked-up again but some kind of early warning system. See, I knew folks would laugh.

Which is partly why I'd lacked the balls to do anything about it. Once when I was still holding down white collar office jobs, I cheered myself up by deciding that the disease is similar to two other phenomena nobody really understands: The need to create, when terrific new ideas are bubbling up from inside you till you think you'll pop if you don't act on them. And it's like the same kind of internal vibes, pulsations and other warnings, that a psychic person gets.

After a while, it makes all your rotten, overworked nerves

try to sing harmony together, but they're off-key and they get louder and louder until you just have to squeeze your whole body into a can or a bottle of beer and fucking ferment. Which is precisely when the dis-ease whispers mockingly to you, down at the stinking bottom of the can or bottle, "Rich, you ignorant sun-bitch, you stupid scumbag, you've blown the big chance *again*." And I know that I could've written a hot Broadway musical or smash bestseller, or painted the new Mona Lisa, or clairvoyantly identified the crazed killer of eighteen goddamn dwarves on the west coast, but I didn't listen. I chickened out again.

And it was true that I didn't, I hadn't, and I did not pay close attention to my own special early warning signals until late the night of that hot, sticky pivotal day: and then it was too late for God knows how many people.

2. Jinx Jonah, the Hoodoo Man

Old Mrs. Silverberg, she went out in front of the apartment building, spread out a blanket, and lay there in the sun from five after nine in the morning until three o'clock in the afternoon, sharp, and I'd seen her around the place for more than two years and she'd never once tried to tan her fleshy, funny little body. What's more, she generally wore clothes even older than her age called for and now she was wearing this skimpy striped bikini. When I tried to point out she was getting too much sun, this fat old lady tells me to get screwed!

Zeb Hannah, who works nights, got into a discussion on the second floor hallway with Mr. Washington, who's on welfare. Hannah is one of those smiley southern guys who always looks twenty-five and can't stand blacks like Earl Washington. So I'm waiting around the corner in 218, where I'd been working on the McCays' air conditioner; and Zeb says he heard on television that it's the hottest day in June since 1939. And Mr. Washington's chin goes up and he says he heard on the radio that it was just the hottest June 2nd since then—only it was 1933, not '39. And Zeb Hannah thinks a minute, then nods. "You're right," he agrees with black Earl Washington, "that is what they said."

Early that afternoon, out on the sidewalk in front of old Mrs. Silverberg, two dogs get it on. Well, I was thinking about getting the hose because there must have been another six, seven male dogs watching them, stiff-legged and sort-of bouncing up and down in their eagerness to rip off a piece for themselves. But

when the lucky pooch who'd been first gets through, all eight or nine dogs merely trot off down the street, wagging their tails—and Mrs. Silverberg, who wouldn't say come with her mouth full, doesn't bat an eye!

Right around five-thirty, when the working man begins arriving home for the night, I was over in the C building putting new bulbs in the third floor fixtures when Karl Ryder, age twenty-something, gets in this big fight with his wife—right at the door of their apartment! Stephanie—Karl calls her "Stef" usually, but called her something else that evening—is one of those young wives who like to wear next to nothing around their homes. She is also gorgeous. Once, I had some work to do in her apartment during the day—it was winter; probably it had something to do with the Ryder's thermostat—and she had nothing but panties on. But Stef just crosses her arms over her breasts, says, "Oh, it's you, Rich," and lets me right in! And Karl, her young husband, *adores* that girl, sends her studio cards for every occasion from Thinking Of You At Ten-Thirty Today to Thanks For Giving Me Head, brings her flowers on the fucking 4th of July, and like that. So I am positively frozen in place, unable to move, when Karl's been inside his apartment maybe three minutes and he *belts* his precious little adorable right in the eye!

All day long, in short, there were signs that supported my deep-down, crawly impression that something-wrong was building up in town, or going to happen in my life or in my circle of—

But that's where it gets hard to explain, because it's hard to figure out for myself—harder to get a handle on, and cling to.

As you can tell, like most long-time serious drinkers, I am a man with many theories. If I had taken the proper courses in college, and graduated, you might even call me a philosopher. But under the circumstances, the best I can hope is that you will consider me a guy with ideas. With possible explanations, however far out. Theories. Because the truth is that whether I'd gotten drunk that odd very humid night or not, Noble Ellair's goddamned good-will gifts were already distributed, ready to germinate, and all those poor people would have died whether I was in the jail, too, or not.

However, it is just as much God's truth—at least according to my theory—that my dis-ease or early warning system was triggered on the record-setting second day of June to give me a clear but terrible choice: Either to try to respond to it, figure out what

was going on in those prospective trouble-spots in town and communicate with the people, get those who were sensitive to things like me to furnish feedback and perhaps even to move to some higher internal level of understanding, of perception—or get drunked-up, arrested, and obliged to stand by helplessly while folks no better or worse than I died hideously. But society, you see, is not eager to risk making fools of itself, doesn't put out a friendly hand and let strangers—*those we haven't met yet*—confide things they can't even admit to themselves.

We're told that we're a nation under God whether we attend church regularly or not, caring, curious, compassionate, anxious to take chances to find peace or make true progress in the world. We're supposed to welcome new ideas. We're supposed to be *modern!* Crap, that's how we advertise ourselves to ourselves!

But if it's a matter no one has had the guts or the common sense to see, or imagine, we really can't believe it—and we sure as shit don't believe *in* it.

For years, without even hinting about it to anyone but Ronnie, I believed that what was happening of great consequence in my life—what was best, or worst—was sensed somehow by many others, or should be, just as I should know whenever it was truly shitty in the lives of others—a larger and larger number of others. I took people-as-actors-on-a-stage seriously, in Shakespeare's meaning, thought that we really were immersed in life together, and not just isolated feelingless machines with arms and legs. Not quite that highfalutin' eastern notion that all persons were *one*, but that most of us *could* be, with those who were like us in the important ways. And if a beer-guzzling flop felt that way, surely Quality People knew and practiced it, constantly. I mean, it was there to see, everywhere anyone went. You didn't have to read about an earthquake in the headlines or watch the evening news report on Hurricane Flatulent to sense that human beings were hurting—and that, when we were, nature furnished us obvious signs for any fool to see—from rain falling for a record number of days and knee-deep snowdrifts and basically unexplainable changes in temperature to the haunted, hollow looks in the eyes of little kids and their tense mothers. You saw statistics about the suicides during the holidays, or the rise in self-destruction on the part of teenagers—didn't that make it clear? It was, I believed, part of the *same picture*, or should be, and I knew that “my” circle of family/relatives/friends/acquaintances and those I hadn't met yet

was wider, more comprehensive, than—perhaps—the average man's. Hell, everybody knows that a guy drinking slow and steady at the corner bar never met a stranger, right? Whoever plunks himself down on the next stool is his pal, his good, buddy, somebody who may be *communicated* to.

Why you have to get drunk to be able to do that I have never doped out. I suppose it has to do with what I said earlier about advertising.

I would add that maybe what began happening late that night was also meant to be my own last chance to sober up for good except that makes me sound so self-important that it's sick. And it puts one whale of a burden on the Almighty, causing intolerable agony and worse death so that ol' Rich Stenvall can learn his lesson of sobriety. While I can explain a lot of what has occurred, now, I'm afraid any underlying purpose is merely another enigma of nature—which we call God whenever we want to be polite and excuse Him out—and we'll probably never understand it in this life.

All day long, the small, bizarre things went on happening, registering on the part of my gut that has the dis-ease possibly eight, ten minutes later. But each one filled me to the brim with fresh panic and made the sweat turn to ice on my forehead and where my shirt sticks to my back. Whenever I looked outside, I felt like some goddamn primitive man because the weather seemed to be going through countless subtle changes nobody would notice unless he was paying attention. Small sounds of thunder were like muttering, several people softly cursing one another—or us—and seeming to dart from one segment of the sky to another in seconds. Mrs. Reilly, one of the oldest tenants in point of age and residence alike, complained to me that an old Swedish thermometer she'd had for years read 130° Fahrenheit and, when I read it myself, it indicated that the temperture in her apartment was only 30°. Since both of us were sweating profusely, I felt pretty sure the real reading was somewhere in between. An hour later, Mrs. Reilly was hobbling off to St. Aloysious, casting wary glances at the sky. A gay couple named Swanson and Cunningham got me into their apartment to halt an unexplained invasion of ants. They hated killing things, Cunningham told me. Sure enough, they'd been visited by escapees from maybe half-a dozen ant villages—that's what it seemed like—and while I sprayed and stomped, the little black shits ran around in tiny

circles instead of trying to duck out of sight. What genuinely amazed me was the way several of them attacked my foot, clawed their way up on it and tried to bite through the shoe leather.

All this registered on me in a very different way. When I realized that, and felt the pulsations begin inside me, sort of puckering up beneath my skin like teeny space things trying to burst through, I had an idea that I simply couldn't have confided to another living soul.

I sensed there was *latent knowledge* available to me. That I could very probably dredge up arcane insights to fight against an evil that was starting to happen, to gather around me, even if it had begun behind something as broad and awesome as weather itself. Terrible things were beginning and, if I finally gave in and figured it out, I might save lives—

Yet I might also have endangered those who mattered most to me.

By lunchtime, the total picture hadn't become clear at all and I always ate with my family at that time, if I was free. I was also eager to be with the people who had furnished me with my only contentment as an adult because I thought they'd have heard the same rumors that were being whispered all over the complex: That somebody in the governor's office had confirmed a report that Libyan terrorists had "done something" to Indy's weather.

That didn't turn out to be the main topic, that noon hour.

Everything seemed sanguine at my place, on the surface, and since it looked as if it might rain and relieve the man-eating pressure, Ronnie had Sloppy Joes for us out on the tiny private balcony which cost renters at the Beaumont Estates some hefty extra change. Part of my deal as number two complex maintenance man—up from groundskeeper but still under Rudy Loomis—was a gratis apartment. And it was cooler outside, a breeze was picking up, and we figured we'd make it back inside fast if there was a genuine downpour. Markie moved like greased lightning for four, I liked telling him he was "smarter than the average bear—and faster, too." By the time we had used half a roll of paper toweling in catching the greasy brown burgerjuice dripping from the sandwiches, we were sure it would rain. Ron's daughter Bett seemed fascinated with the glowering sky, more so as the clouds grew thickest, ominous, and leering like a lewd old man. Ordinarily, she had little to say to me; at seven, Bett remembered her original daddy in that obliquely favoring fashion

that I viewed the Army ten years after the fact. I remained the outsider who had lured Mama away from Dáddy. The fact that I hadn't met Veronica Chance Walberg when Pete was still beating on Bett's Mom wasn't allowed to play a significant part in her appraisals. She was a damn good kid, but part of her had moved with Pete to Hartford, Connecticut.

"I wish . . ." Bett began. She kept staring at the darkening sky low above the balcony while she unconsciously wound a silken strand of auburn hair round one finger.

"You wish on stars, angel," I told her when she had paused. Then, more gently and aware of Ron's watchful gaze upon me, "What do you wish, Bett?"

She paused to ponder. "Everything's supposed t'be new at spring, right? Well, I wish it'd really be new! I wish it would change everybody," she said wistfully. I imagined a wild glint in her eye. "I wish that you or Mom would get the really neat jobs you want, and Daddy'd write a letter to me, and that Markie'd stay out of my things." She didn't turn her face to me but I flushed anyway after her closing wish: "I wish you'd stop drinking and 'mbarrassing me."

"Elizabeth Ann Walberg," Ronnie said sharply. Not until she waited a moment.

"So do I." Markie, twisting the knife without knowing it. *Maybe* he didn't know. "I wish, too, all but the part 'bout gettin in your things. *You're* the one!"

"That's quite enough, children," Ronnie said, looking firmly from one to the other of them. It kept her from having to look at me.

"It's okay." Disturbed, I poured my fourth glass of the powdered lemonade Ron had made for lunch, and which I'd had the most of. With added sugar. "Bett's right, and you're right too. What *I've* done to this family *is* enough." Pulses in each temple—and one I always forgot I had, in my belly—squirmed. From my lowered lids, I was looking toward where thunder was rising and falling above the neighborhood shopping center like some big black thing breathing.

"If we have to have a storm," Ron murmured, to change the subject, "I wish it'd start." Under the table, her bare knee—she was wearing shorts, first day of the season—grazed mine, stayed. Sympathetically. Then I felt her damp, hot palm fairly burning through the cloth of my work pants. "Did you hear the rumor?"

She'd asked me that *sotto voce*, which of course got both kids staring at us instantly. "The governor's office?" I asked.

"I heard the National Guard was on alert," she replied. I realized then that she'd hadn't looked skyward even once. "It's like the clouds are pregnant and what they're delivering will be enormous. Monstrous."

Bett had understood none of this. "Daddy." She'd jumped up and come round the small table to my side. Her large-lashed M&M eyes were moist; at once seven years old, going on twenty-four, and ageless. They were beautiful nests. "I want to love you."

That meant she might make it if I'd quit drinking. I counted the times she had called me "Daddy" on my index and thumb, and she had never said the other before. I pulled her close, hid my own damp eyes in the hollow of her shoulder while Markie was tugging at my work shirt sleeve and young Bett's skirt, simultaneously.

"It ain't hard, Bett," he explained to her. His grin at us was optimistic. "He's just Daddy."

I swallowed back an automatic, "*Isn't hard*" and made room for ol' Mark in the bend of my other arm, tickling both kids so I didn't have to make noisy crying sounds.

Portents, omens—they don't have to be dark, evil, threatening. Not as long as they're simply entirely unexpected.

"Look," Ronnie said, softly. Too softly. I saw that she was pointing. UP.

We looked and saw that the sky was unexpectedly clearing, and with a swiftness I thought uncanny. Whether my family thought so, too, or not, I wasn't sure then. Distantly, I heard Ron slap a bare thigh and growl something about, "There goes any hope of cooler temperatures." So I told her Earl Washington had heard it was the hottest June 2nd since '33. But meanwhile, I was absorbed by the peculiar notion that the dark clouds weren't scudding across the vast skirt of the sky but scattering. Or fleeing. *From what?* I wondered.

From the skies over Indianapolis, the Beaumont Estates apartment complex, and a secret evil that's being hatched right now, somewhere, I answered myself.

Then Ronnie was sending Bett inside to wash her hands and face and scoot back to school, and Markie was close to her heels, barking like a dog for the hell of it. That was when I saw love in my second wife's eyes. It trailed after them like something

attached to the backs of their heads. And I saw an expression, too, that I might have imagined but did not. It was only briefly there, before she blanked it out, replaced it. But I know apprehension when I see it. It's been in my own mirror often enough, looking back at me from my reflection.

Then tears came into my eyes instead and I listened with a strange intensity to Markie and Bett messing around in the bathroom. I sensed an excitement in the way their young voices became shrill and found it inexplicable, heard it as a razor-blade edge higher than the natural octave of childhood—as if they dared not settle down without the risk of confronting a nasty slice of what I felt and feared, just before it ducked out of their sight. And I watched my pretty Ron clear off our old outdoor table that had been her mom's without saying a word to her, knowing how tense she was, too, and how she suddenly seemed crisp and brittle—like something she'd made in a cookie cutter. And then I wondered, out of the terrible glaring blue skies, if this could be the last time I ever saw any of them, or that they saw me. It must happen to us, one day. Why I thought that I did not know, but that was just the inception of the next stage in my bristling neurotic dis-ease. Because I attempted to devise some special and memorable remark that I might call out to the busy, half-frightened children and my distantly disturbed wife so we'd all remember it for good, for always; and drew a blank. Came up dry, which was, all things considered, a novelty in their lives. (*"Bread and circuses," I had whispered to my casketed mother's pasty and still form. We were all so damned little and hollowed-out-looking when we were dead and, with nothing left to fight or fight with, our loathings and deep-seated dreads and our unique view of our foes had been siphoned away with our life blood. I wanted her bright Jesus eyes to open one more time and scare me with a remark I might forget an hour later. "Do you know what's really going on now, my Mom?"*)

There was more weird the rest of the afternoon. Two children, not one, unrelated, were rushed by parents to the hospital with such improbable injuries that you probably would not believe me if I described them. Three times, tenants had me put out small kitchen fires; I don't get one of them a month, ordinarily. There was a genuine fire in a woods nearby and the fire department got the wrong address, so there was considerable damage. A UFO over the southern part of the city was reported

to Channel 59 by a dozen independent witnesses and, on the same news show, both the anchormen and their backups were ill and a talk show host name Wolfsie had to sit in. The guy running for mayor this time against Hudnut withdrew from the race and two famous actors died out in L.A., making me wonder who the third would be. Yet if anybody besides me thought any of this was bizarre, or meant a thing, they kept it to themselves. By night, it got dark even earlier than it had in April, or May, but the premature sights, scents, and sounds of summer had been aborted. Silence hung over the complex like something dripping wet, dirty, and clinging. I wasn't on call that night—Rudy Loomis was—but, of course, I phoned Ronnie from the work shack to tell her I was.

Because I had to know what was really going on.

I'd decided to take the dis-ease by surprise. To face up to it and do my damndest to heed all the early warning signals. Besides the fact that I did not want to be around them then, my plans seemed impossible with Ronnie's wary, worried gaze and that alert way kids have of sort of *preparing* themselves for a drunk's psychological jump backward across the line of sobriety. I'd seen them girding and guarding themselves, and I got mad sooner or later, used it for an excuse. So I decided to fight the good fight on my own this time.

But when I was unlocking the vacant apartment where Bud also waited for me, in a twelvepack, I was abruptly conscious not only of how I'd "forgotten" I had beer stashed there but of the unexpected behavior of Bett and Markie at lunch. Just as I said, warnings of sweeping change don't have to be horrifying—just different, unpredictable, hard to fathom.

They'd been an emotional inch away from panic and so had Ronnie. They'd been positively pregnant with something trying to get out so that something could get in. If what deeply disturbed my poised and ballsy wife, even at an unconscious level, wanted to get its hooks into me, I wasn't anxious to be alone except for my old pal Bud. *Rich, you scumbag souse*, my dis-ease urged me on, *you'll blow the big chance to be a man all over again if you don't get your guts up!*

So I switched on the single floorlamp with the one-hundred-fifty-watt bulb, all the light I had for my secret place, shaking my head.

The real reason I was there instead of my own apartment was

that I didn't want Jinx Jonah, the Hoodoo Man, to take his failures out on them. Not again tonight when I felt the turning point was at hand.

3. Ambling Circuitously Down the Road of Life

It really shouldn't—should *not*—be imagined that I was afraid I, personally, would hurt Ronnie or the kids if I got smashed again. Like my dad before me, I'm the most harmless and peaceable of drunks. I'm also the most boring. If I don't have to talk and talk, let it all hang out, why, I go to sleep. Standing fucking up, or *close* to it. I can't even tell these days whether I actually passed out or that it's as if I'd taken a powerful sleeping pill and zonked out. I haven't made the picture clear enough that I am the reigning Human Sponge of beer drinkers; I haven't seen anyone of my sex who could put away so many brews and sit up, even drive a car.

Now it sounds as if I am bragging, shooting off my mouth. Worse, I may be, probably am. Guys like the Human Sponge, Jinx Jonah Stenvall, aren't overwhelmed by self-respect or regard and everybody has to have *some* bragging rights. And we think we're deserving of a better break at the same time that we're pretty goddamn sure we'd blow it if it ever came along.

I call myself the Hoodoo Man because I am usually quite impotent to reach for the wellspring of my family's love and, in frustration, I tend to bring them those evil tidings I mentioned. Once in a great while, when my snootful is balanced just so, I believe for a few moments that I'm loving them properly. Then I sober up, and have to read the scorn in their eyes instead of the morning paper—and I'm always left to wonder what in God's name I said or did to them the night before.

And on the 2nd of June, I knew I'd become a true carrier.

Years back when I was a kid, I liked reading a cartoon drawn by a controversial one-legged guy named Al Capp. It was famous; Capp called his comic strip "L'il Abner." One of his time-to-time characters was a well-intended creep with a name no one could pronounce, which I can no longer *spell*. A bunch of consonants without vowels like "Mr. Mxtzyplykx" or something. And the way ol' Pigpen from the "Peanuts" cartoon hauls a dark cloud of dirt around with him, Al Capp's little bad luck dude foted bad tidings. The way I do. And worse.

He was a jinx and terrible things happened to people when-

ever he walked by.

And that night of June Two, even before I left the complex and made the awful mistake of driving Under the Influence, I really believed that anybody *I* was near would have terrifying things befall them.

Before you nod knowingly and whistle the dudes in the white coats over, I'll point out that that's just what happened at the jail.

Take an ordinary apartment of middle size, don't put much furniture in it, wait for nightfall and then sit there, the way I did then, propped up against the frigging wall and seated on my thirty-five-year-old-ass, fighting demons I couldn't see and didn't want to—plus (not to come on like an old-fashioned temperance leader or anything) demons I saw hovering over the tops of my Bud twelvepack, practically pointing their goddamn *fingers* at the tabs! But add to that picture what you get from a single source of light, a floor lamp with powerful wattage, and maybe you can begin tuning in *my* picture.

A sun going nova, that's what came to mind, a distant sun so fucking far out in the universe that no man is gonna boldly go anywhere near the sucker. Light tapering off in the corners just in time for tiny chuckling things to scoot along the floorboards, but whether they were products of some long-delayed DTs or just my imagination overworking itself again, I can't tell you. Tenants of the building must have overworked their neurotic sides, too, since it was quiet as a cemetery plot with JUST BURIED scribbled on a sign sticking in the loose dirt. From where I sat on the floor, I could see through the window and up toward the night sky and a trillion or so stars had come out to watch what was —*happening/going on/coming down*. And the only other furniture I saw was my kitchen chair and beat-up old card table in another corner two light years away, my topless typewriter—I left it off because the clasp was broken and it was a pisser to change the ribbon—squatting on the table like some quivering goddamn ancient

mound. This was where I went to do my writing, sometimes completing as many as six- or seven-hundred decent words in and around whispered suggestions from my pal Bud; except that the chair and card table I'd found in the apartment of some Puerto Rican family that had booked, fast, a couple of hours before Rent Day dawned, and the stack of decent typed pages were fits-and-starts on two novels and five short stories that had started to give

me fits.

At least, I thought, *Ronnie thinks I'll do it. Eventually.* And found an open Bud in my right hand. How it got there I'll never tell, but waste not, want not.

My first wife, What's-Her-Face, had watched me go down the Yuppie tubes, never getting a decent raise for her, never earning a promotion, getting fucking *strafed* at office parties. Right before she finally said "Get lost" with a tone of voice that I believed, she told me it was "obvious" that I'd never make it in business, that I should "become a janitor or something closer to your capabilities." Since her advice was all she'd left me after the divorce, and she'd always been smarter than I was anyway, I acted on her suggestion.

Besides, I hadn't trusted myself around people any longer. Dogs and cats weren't much safer. I'd seen what they expected from me in their eyes, and I could not deliver, didn't even *want* to anymore, so when it was all over between me and What's-Her-Face, I remembered what I had really yearned to do since high school: become a wordworker. "Writer" might be too grandiose a term. Well, Ronnie'd already been through the mill. What *she* craved was a husband who'd at least make a sincere effort, who didn't punch people (especially mates), and who might succeed in croaking the words "You're all right" out of his throat from time to time (even if "I love you" might get stuck in his craw). Both of us were rebounding like the shots of some rookie guard out of Texas—or the Ivy League; all Hoosiers are basketball nuts since they can go to prison if they're caught watching another sport—but writers, I figured, kept to themselves a lot and could use up their resentment, wisecracks, and nervous energy to create. My new family wasn't hung up on Accomplishment with a big A, so we dropped willingly out of Yuppieville.

Whereupon Bud and I made sure we fell straight down to Nobodyandnothing Town.

Because Ron was worse than What's-Her-Face, because she believed I *had* talent—and wanted me to do, as often as possible, what frequently brought me delight. That would have been fine except I kept running dry and thinking the bridge over writer's block ran through a beer bottle.

Which was why I'd worked out this deal with Rudy Loomis, my supervisor: we'd keep the fact that this apartment was unoccupied off the manager's books as long as possible, I'd use it now

he'd have a key for those not-so-rare times when he succeeded in talking an unhappy female cave dweller into trying the Loomis brand of sexual charm.

But tonight I wasn't there to write or drink, I remembered as I thoughtfully lifted the empty can toward the corner and popped the top of a new brew. (I'd be the guy who had to clean up the mess tomorrow, so making it as disgusting as possible tonight was a way of insuring that I'd have something hard to do for penance tomorrow.) I was there to face-down my dis-ease, hear the early warning signals, and—do what I could to bail out the people I found in peril or distress. As for the full beer cans I kept discovering in my hand, I'd never really *quite* accepted the fact that beer drinking got you as out-of-control drunk as the hard stuff.

A quick step toward arranging for my own life to be placed right on the line, and watching God knows how many men perish horribly.

What gets me now is that the brews I began chugging all by myself in that brightly-lit, empty apartment got me into my plight and, as I told Doctor Ellair himself, when he wondered why I wasn't susceptible to what the other guys were getting, I must have consumed so damned much beer in my lifetime that my body chemistry resisted the germination, and what happened after that.

Maybe it was ninety minutes after I'd sat on the floor to figure it out that I felt *certain* I was tuned-in to what was happening that night, and why nature had warned anyone who would listen. I believed that my *fingers* knew, that they were ready to accept the crystalline conclusions of my early warning system, and that I'd be able to put it all down on paper. The paper in my dilapidated old typewriter.

It took a while to get to the card table. The can I was carrying, one of the last two or three in the original twelvepack, had gotten 'specially heavy. Dragging the kitchen chair back from the table, I dropped with a thump onto the seat and, carefully resting the Bud can beside the typewriter and inserting a sheet of decent white bond, I cleared my throat and raised my fingers over the keys. Then I cleared my throat again and waggled the fingers. After that, I took a long draught of beer, smiled vaguely at the watching stars beyond the window, and began to write.

The effort required my returning to the remainng cans for a compound of inspiration and sustenance and a more retarded

return to the card table and typewriter.

And that was when I concentrated.

My watch had stopped, there was no clock in the empty apartment, and I realized abruptly that *days* might have passed since I'd let myself in. My beeper hadn't sounded because I wasn't on call, and I didn't actually believe that an entire night had passed, but I knew that I had to make sure Ronnie and the kids were okay.

I took my typed sheet of revelation with me, creasing it carefully and then pinching an edge of it between my teeth while I secured the secret place behind me, and wended a tortured path toward my own apartment.

They were sound asleep, the kids. They were even in their beds—their *own* beds. I grinned crookedly recalling the way Markie had of occasionally getting the yen to sleep in a dresser drawer, or the corner of a closet. With the door open, of course, and a light on in the hallway. I'd often wondered if he were hiding from the things that lurk beneath every growing boy's bed and wondered that in order not to believe that he was hiding because he didn't want me to find him. Bett had the habit of drinking too much Diet Pepsi or Slice before retiring and unfailingly awakening, maybe an hour into her night's sleep, with the result that she wound up sleeping with her half-brother more nights than not. Ron, sometimes, thought that was terrible and tended to make a big deal out of it. I tried to convince her that Markie, at four, was into pandas, Spiderman, that Gremlin what's-it's-name, and occasionally one of Bett's dolls—not the opposite sex.

My own favorite version of the opposite sex was sprawled all over our bed, and there was a time when that irked me, if I came back from my chores late. I came to realize as the nights of our marriage mounted that, in sleep, she was only reaching out for me. That, I didn't mind.

Without the lights on, Ronnie's light-brown hair was dark, tumbled, and newly mysterious. She inclined toward sleeping with her left leg raised high over the thrust-out right one and her nightie rode her sweet ascensions in my increasingly frequent absence. The way it was now, the flat of her thigh was a straight line above the acute slenderness of the childlike calf and I wanted a camera to take photographs nobody else would ever see. I'd like to have climbed in next to her, pretended to be the same guy Ron married; but I had an empty Bud can in one hand and my

typewritten apperception of my early warning system, and its nature, in the other.

Bumping into the wall, exiting (and nearly murmuring "Pardon me"), I was suddenly eager to see what I had written. That is not a quip; much of what I write when I'm drinking comes out once on paper and I never think the same way twice, so it becomes as much a surprise to me as anyone else. In the bathroom, I closed the door as quietly as possible, hurt my shin on the toilet, and fumbled around till I'd switched on the flourescent light above the medicine cabinet.

This is what I'd come up with: "Certain people want so badly to be different in a meaningful way that certain braincells are attuned to a constant quest for ideas which match the changing tides of nature and society alike. And they *are* alike; the ancients were right about natural influences, even if they lacked the knowledge to figure it out precisely. If such people's imaginations are, in reality, barren of true inspiration, all they dare hope is emulation or enhancement of current trends of climate and mankind. The unconscious mind, sensing failure, either opts for the drugged state and oblivion or such heightened perspicacity that truly prophetic insights may arise spontaneously, randomly, and formlessly." Then there was a string of typed marks - - ##### - - and this postscript: "*Something's growing out there and it's EVIL.*"

I stared hard at what I'd written and all I really liked was the word "perspicacity." I perceived that there'd been an instant after finishing the first part of the message when I had blanked out. I couldn't judge whether the first portion actually meant a damned thing, or not—but the last part had, apparently, surfaced from my unconscious mind as if I'd actually *broken through* to the early warning system: Except that I didn't have the foggiest notion what it meant.

For a moment I let my sodden weight fall forward as I leaned on the bathroom basin, avoiding the disappointed, even embarrassed, face that I'd seen in the mirror. If I had gone on looking at it, it might have begun mocking me and it sure as hell would have told me that I looked more than forty, tonight, and counting. Aw, Christ, was *this* what I'd tried for years to make myself reach for, find and then use as my ticket both to a more-responsible life and success as a creative, sensitive, maybe-psychic person? Something said I was still a scumbag flop but I shook it off, gradually lifting my head. "Out there" *did* have meaning, damn it!

It meant, clearly, away from my family, the apartment and complex, and from whatever else I regarded as my usual environment. *Somebody needed me*, I thought—not for the customary things but for major *important* things that would stretch me, bring me *out of myself*—but I had to break the routine, and NOW.

With a drunk's sense of mission, elation, and a constant impression that I'd lost my balance and was about to fall, I lurched down the steps, through the front door of the building, and out to the zillion slanted parking spaces where I kept my '79 Omni. By that time, I was pumped up, high on the chance to do something fine and be *somebody*. My head tilted back, looking up, I felt I'd forced myself head and shoulders among the stars. Even the name of my car seemed appropriate! Behind me on the second floor near the back, my family slept without an idea of what I was doing, which made me feel even more adventurous, liberated. Leaving a note to tell them where I'd gone didn't even occur to me. And now, I haven't even gotten back to them, don't even know if they've been *spared* . . .

The humidity had sweat pouring down my face and there was even one sane moment when I almost hoped the car wouldn't start. Sometimes, it didn't. But this time the Omni fired up and in seconds I was rushing out of the Beaumont Estates, turning right—north—with the crazy notion that I knew exactly where I was headed. Basically, I think that I was trying to leave it in the hands of the destiny behind the queer weather and strange human activity, or up to my early warning system. But I hope it will go down, officially, that I wasn't speeding. My old Omni, while it made a nice, loud pretense of cooperating, was no more capable of breaking land speed records than I was of getting either my beer-buzz or the aging Omni's steering under control.

I'd never liked endangering other people when I got crocked, and I wasn't charged with speeding after I was arrested, maybe twenty minutes later. I was stopped because the car, bragging about its straining thirty-seven MPH, had been wandering all over the road. That was its mechanical anticipation of the way I'd soon be meandering all over the straight line I was challenged to walk. I was so devastated that my breakthrough to confrontation with my dis-ease was ruined that I wasn't thinking sensibly at all. Probably I should not have agreed to the breathalyzer test; I knew tyhat if this strong young uniformed man with the disapproving, soft kisser took me down again, Judge Neblake would throw the

keys away on me.

Riding in the back seat without door handles, I was alone except for the cop at the wheel and strove to feel that I was being chauffeured. It didn't work and my one hope in life was that His Honor might take Wednesdays off, like Doc Lord did whenever Markie or Bett injured something. Our options, desperations, and plans can swing around that quickly. But thinking of our family physician made me also hope that Doc Kinsey had fallen afoul of the law at the same time.

Being booked was so familiar that I pretended not to understand what they wanted or how to relax my fingers for the tips to roll just so. They read me my rights all over again. I surrendered four dollar bills and some change; then it was beddy-bye time. The slight shield of braggadocio I'd pieced together utterly disintegrated as I was methodically led up one flight and down the corridor—a scumbag flop walking the last mile. I could have walked it in my sleep and that was the condition I craved. That, or dying in my cell.

There was no way in heaven or hell that even my early warning system could have predicted how terrifyingly close I'd be coming.

By now, my head was quite clear. I saw from the head of the dimly-lit entrance to the lockup proper—and confirmed it as they led me toward that charming suite known as the “drunk tank”—that there were more men locked away than I'd seen any of my prior visits. That didn't strike me as odd until I recalled that, visit before last, it'd been Thanksgiving two years ago and I'd been the dumb turkey everybody carved. Holidays, like weekends, have a knack for bringing the best out of suicides, psychopaths, and record-setting beer drinkers.

But *this* was Tuesday, and there was no holiday to encourage the dishonest-of-heart toward mid-week malfeasance and misery. The cells I saw as my eyes—if nothing else—accustomed to the gloom appeared crammed. They covered all fourteen varieties of county classifications, “per current charges and criminal history” as the means to distributing us; yet they looked fully occupied. My dis-ease twisted, spasmed. The next thing I noticed made me break my stride, *listen* intently until the weary guard at my back shoved me forward again. I had no chance to check out my observation until the tank was locked and I was squeezing into and over the bodies sprawled every which way on the cell floor, most

most of them reeking of booze, vomit, and regret.

Don't misunderstand me, it's nearly always overcrowded there. Once, I read that on a typical busy evening, some nine hundred men were shoehorned into accommodations originally planned for seven hundred. Doc Kinsey's said it was like staying at an Italian hotel. This was not, however, a busy evening—

Unless what I'd been brooding about throughout June 2nd was right.

Anyone will tell you: *Inmates of a jail don't sleep soundly.* Some have just lost access to the needle; others are surly drunks, coming down. Like anyone else, they aren't used to the sleeping accommodations, and these are insufficient for the animal collectively called humankind. While those same stats I read said that the average time spent by inmates was sixty-two days—before being tried and either acquitted or sent to spend their sentences in state prison facilities—roughly a hundred lucky inmates left the jail daily. That meant, when the joint was crowded like it was tonight, roughly a hundred of us had checked in today.

Unless my day-long preoccupation was nothing more than goddamn pre-binge tension, at least twice-fifty of us should have been rapping, or weeping, hitting on someone, or simply gazing off into circumscribed space.

They weren't. It was the *quietest* place with hundreds of men I had ever seen, and that includes frat houses and an Army barracks or two. It was as if each man was deep in a really dynamite dream, or sharing somebody else's. Or knocked out, or passed out. Or—drugged. I'd never seen such total sleep.

And the *first* of the two facts that gave me the willies was that not one of them snored. Not one.

The second willies-bringer was the tall, almost skeletal figure that I saw hiding—stooped down, motionless, as if holding his breath—halfway down the silent corridor between the facing cells. For a second, among the shadows, maybe because he *was* awake, it was like looking at the living personification of death.

To be continued.

Tomcat

by JAY SHECKLEY

The transubstantiation of Vanilla the Cat.

Eight-year-old Karen tugged on Margo's arm. "What's the matter with Nilly, Mom?"

The white tomcat lay across the packing trunk like a net bag of onions.

"I hope we're in a fast line," Margo said. She squinted to the head of the customs queue, checking out their inspector. That officer was motioning a luggage-laden nun over to the inspection table. He started to open everything.

"But *look*," the child demanded. "Look at Nilly's *eyes*, Mom. Is he hurting?"

Vanilla the Cat, known as Nilly, did look peculiar. The veterinarian had said, "Two of these, massage 'em down the throat, and *snap!* you'll be at Kennedy International without a meow out of him." Which was true, and perhaps even wonderful if you had to be a transcontinental mother and a transcontinental mover and a cat-owner all on the same day.

Couldn't this one thing be managed? her husband Phil had wanted to know. Eager about his stateside transfer, Phil had flown on ahead to Scranton, Pennsylvania, where his mother lived. All Margo had to do was move everyone and everything else there from Switzerland.

"I'd say he's okay," she said, glancing down at the cat's odd glare. Margo reached to pet him, then thought better of it.

Something in the cat's expression mirrored her own sensation: all-too-alert, alarmed, and frustrated. Margo laughed: Nilly looked like he'd just realized he was a cat.

She wasn't far off.

It had started in Switzerland. Nilly's people took him where the air was wrong, took him there in a basket. Then they made him eat something; *that* was all wrong. You don't eat a thing which jumps down your throat. But it had happened.

In pseudo-sleep Nilly's spirit woke from the dream-which-was-life; in medicated trance he was aware of pre-life as a High Being. Nilly remembered:

At first he had been a cool and neutral spirit in the void of space. Our world revolved before him as but one of ten worlds, moving heavy and slow. For eons Nilly gazed along the middle path between the ten planets, looking at no one of them. As eons passed, Nilly swelled with influence and mass, filling with his force the spaces between planets with his force. Nilly was electricity and harmony, Nilly was the cosmic dance, Nilly was *fact*. But he made a mistake.

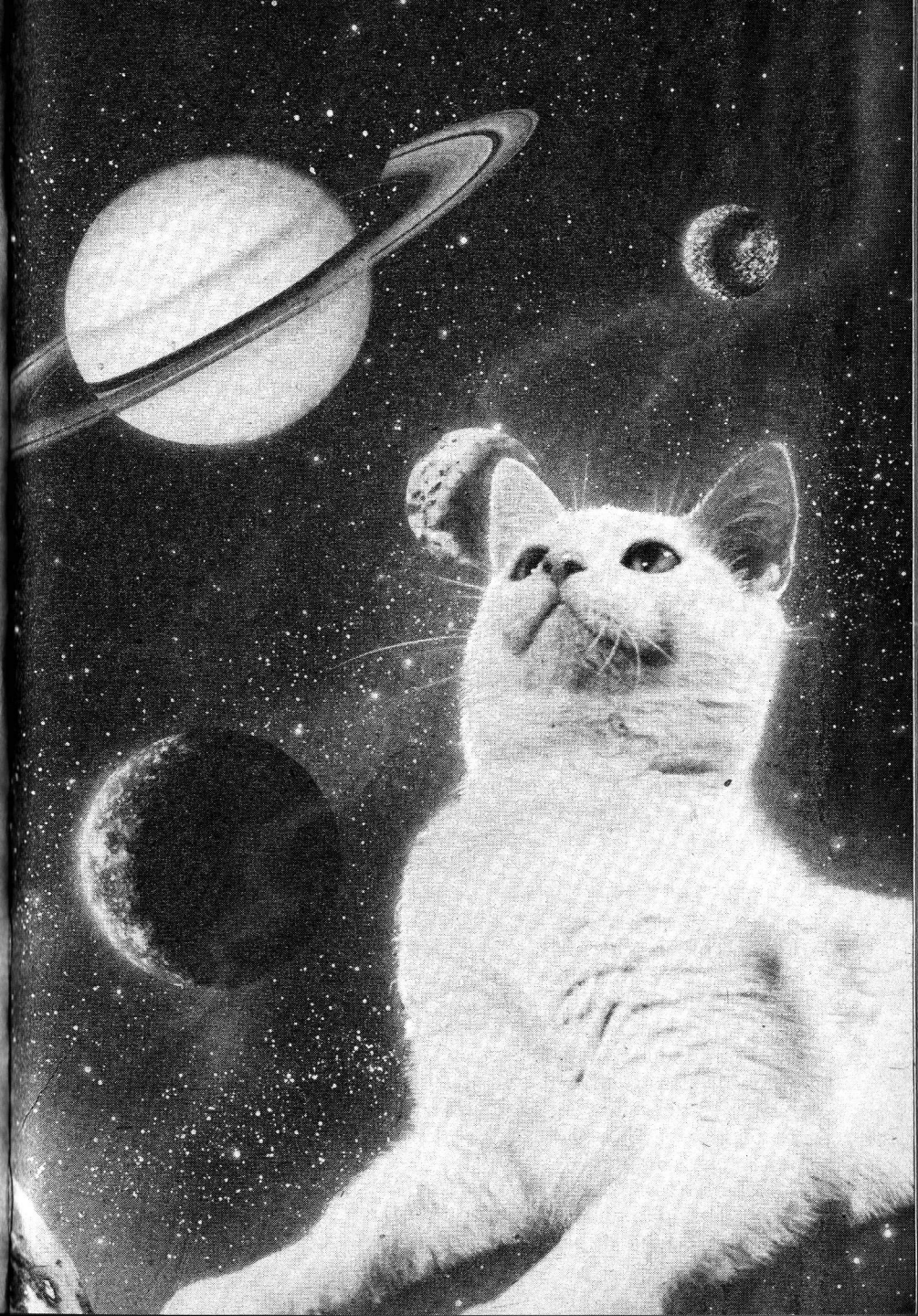
Discontent to grow greater and stronger, mystical and mistier as millennia wafted by, Nilly took on a hobby: an angle, an attitude. And when he stared into that great night he was becoming, instead of staring between planets, he began to look at one planet more than the rest.

He stared at *our* planet, the one with a blue quality. He looked at this planet and called it the best. After an age, he had trouble seeing any other world. He could barely look into the Void, though this void was himself. Because Nilly-the-Spirit was shrinking.

Nilly's spirit shrank and shrank. He had small thoughts. He thought about *his* planet, his blue planet, about a little valley there. He thought of a tiny street and a clapboard house and its not very big basement room, barely large enough to turn around in ... The spirit's thoughts wound smaller and smaller and BOOM!

Nilly had been born.

He had been born weak and full of desire. Amid the pungent reek of cat milk came heat and striving. In this churning engineroom of the living Nilly manifested as a small stupid ball of pure sensation. He took his part—and his part took him. Life



was mewling, suckling, fighting, choking down feed, growling, grappling, attenuating senses to the hunt, allowing himself to be stroked, smelling the air—so full of colors!—and knowing when things weren't right.

This he knew that last day: two pills had jumped down his throat, and then every animal thing Nilly had taken on—visions and appetites—it all slipped away. Now, in that long moment between sleeping and waking, slung atop a baggage dolly, patted by a fool child, Nilly recalled: about a space between the planets. Some being he once was. A major piece of business.

There in Kennedy International, en route to a U.S. customs inspection, Nilly stared up—it was hard but he kept staring out past the human heads, past the fluorescent lights. Maybe, the cat believed deep down, maybe if he just kept staring, he would become the High Being who looked out between planets.

"If he's okay," the child Karen said, "how come he stares like that?"

"The poor thing's exhausted." Margo was speaking for herself.

"That's stupid. Nilly's only been asleep for maybe eight hours or something."

"Doesn't look like he liked it, does it?" Margo said.

The child shuddered. The cat stared on.

Later, when Phil carried the last of the luggage into his mother's house, he asked, "What's with that cat?"

"Why don't you wrench on him and see if you can't fix him?"

"Thanks, Margo. I was an hour on the expressway, and two hours back."

Nilly stared. All he had to do was keep concentrating. He seemed to be examining a spot on the wall. His gaze was fixed, his head did not move. He would break through. The planets, the night, was out there for him . . .

"Nilly!" Phil yelled. The cat moved not a whisker.

Margo jumped about a foot in the air. "Hey!"

Phil's mom now wandered in, playing host. "Touchy, aren't we?" she said, setting out a bowl of fruit. Little Karen had lucked into a cable station showing reruns of *The Avengers*; she'd requisitioned the biggest tv. Phil's mom regarded Nilly. "Looks like you've plastered him with hairspray!"

"Doesn't look exactly alive," Phil said.

"You said to give him that stuff," Margo said, taking it personally.

"Don't take it personally," Phil said.

Nilly stared. He felt his spirit lift gently from his cat's body and rise. The flame of his cat-role died down; delicious coolness took its place. Ahead appeared the planets, crisp in his vision and whirling, grand and solid. The spaces between planets began to take on a new quality. Nilly stared on.

Meanwhile Phil's mother swept into the living room. She was smiling.

"This will fix him," she said.

Phil and Margo both spoke at once. "What will?"

"You'll see." The woman crouched over the cat.

At that moment, Nilly's spirit was floating but a little way above their heads, spiralling toward the path between planets.

After the woman worked her magic, a furious red-orange cloud surrounded Nilly. This cloud routed somehow through his abandoned body, and drilled straight into his spirit core. Lust and greed gripped Nilly by the vitals; ten stately worlds winked out of view. As Nilly lost all sight of the sky, the experience culminated in a vengeful, killing madness.

The fury reduced Nilly from will to grief, and then from grief to submission. It reduced him from submission to a crazed, spasmodic dance he'd danced before and would doubtless dance again. From this he was released into complete stupidity.

With what dignity he could find, Nilly licked his white paws and curled up on a puce throw-pillow. After his harrowing experience, a nap was certainly on the program. He slept. Margo was also asleep by now, and Phil came back from the bathroom and pointed to the cat, grinning.

Phil's mother regarded the curled pet triumphantly. You could make out fresh blood on his small white jaw.

"Hot chicken livers," she chuckled. "Plus a live wild mouse from the trap." Recalling that Margo was sleeping, she spoke softly.

"Now, " she said. "Now. Doesn't little Nilly look just like heaven?"

Profile: Arthur Conan Doyle

by MIKE ASHLEY

The man who created the ultimate skeptic was a true believer.

Arthur Ignatius Conan Doyle was born in Edinburgh on Sunday, May 22, 1859. His father, Charles Doyle, was the youngest son in an illustrious family, but he was also the unluckiest. Forever in the shadow of the achievements of his father, the famed caricaturist John Doyle (1797-1868), and his brothers, including the equally celebrated artist Richard Doyle (1824-1883), Charles acquired a burdensome inferiority complex and a less than auspicious job at the office of works in Edinburgh as an architect. His income barely supported his growing family—there were eight children who survived infancy—and he turned to drink, became an alcoholic, and in 1883 was committed to an institution where he spent the last ten years of his life.

Young Arthur always regretted the remoteness of his father and naturally drew closer to his mother, who instilled him with notions of romance and chivalry from her own obsession with her ancestry; she claimed descent from the Plantagenet kings of England. This inspired Doyle with his own sense of the past, further fired by his voracious reading, especially the works of Thomas Macaulay and Sir Walter Scott. Although he loved the terror tale—indeed, he appears to have written his first such story at the age of six, about a man eaten alive by a tiger—he held the greatest respect for the historical novel.

His sense of courage and fair play stood him in good stead with his fellow pupils during his years of education at a spartan Jesuit college, aptly named Stonyhurst, in Lancashire. Doyle grew

up in a genteel lower middle class neighborhood in Edinburgh. He was a strong and healthy lad who was active in sports, particularly cricket and boxing. It was at Stonyhurst that his talent for storytelling came to the fore. He found he could easily earn a fee in jam tarts by recounting a tale of fear and dread, stopping at certain critical moments until goaded on by further supplies of sweets. During these formative years Doyle read insatiably, delighting in the adventure stories of the now-forgotten Irish writer of boys' stories, Captain Mayne Read, and in the work of Edgar Allan Poe. He was also entranced by the work of his Uncle Richard, especially the Christmas book *In Fairy Land* (1869).

In 1876 Doyle returned to Edinburgh to study medicine at the university. It was here he met Dr. Joseph Bell, who later served as the model for Sherlock Holmes. Equally important, it was during his years at the university that Doyle became a published writer. He failed to sell his first submission, "The Haunted Grange of Goresthorpe," a spoof ghost story, but at the age of nineteen he made his first sale with "The Mystery of Sasassa Valley," eventually published in *Chamber's Journal* for September 6, 1879. An immature work, it nevertheless shows Doyle's ability to create tension and suspense. In it, three young men attempt to seek out a demon with a glowing red eye which haunts a South African valley; the eye turns out to be a massive diamond.

In 1880 Doyle decided to join a whaling ship as the ship's doctor. The voyage brought him to Greenland and the Arctic, desolate and alien worlds that deeply affected and inspired him. After graduation from Edinburgh, Doyle served another term as a ship's doctor, this time on a trading vessel along the West African coast. These two trips turned Doyle from a boy into a man. A thickset six-feet-four with broad, powerful shoulders, close-cropped hair, and intense grey eyes, he positively bubbled with physical and mental energy—an energy that would carry him through a highly active and prolific life. By this time, too, he had become increasingly disillusioned with his Catholic upbringing. "After becoming a medical student," he later wrote, "I found such discrepancies between the new knowledge and the old teaching that my views were greatly changed." His break from Catholicism horrified his family, but it gave him a spiritual release that eased his mind and conscience, allowing him to explore freely the life and world ahead.

After a brief and unfortunate medical partnership with a

former fellow student, Doyle set himself up in general practice in 1882 at Southsea, a suburb of Portsmouth. Here he remained for eight years. His patients were few, which allowed him ample time to write. They were years of discovery as a writer, years of maturing. Among his steady output of adventure stories, medical articles, and the first Sherlock Holmes novel, *A Study in Scarlet* (1887), are a number of ghost stories and horror stories, including some of his best, such as "The Captain of the *Polestar*" (1883).

Another sea story, "J. Habakuk Jephson's Statement" (1884) is an ingenious attempt to explain the mystery of the *Marie Celeste*, whose crew and passengers vanished without trace in 1873 en route from Boston to Lisbon. The mystery has still not been solved, and though Doyle's explanation is weak, it was written with such conviction that many readers took it for an authentic document.

Like all aspiring writers Doyle experimented with his own versions of oft-used themes, and he was not averse to borrowing ideas. The concept of exchanging personalities, for instance, had been used in F. Anstey's humorous novel *Vice Versa*, published in 1882. Doyle adopted the idea for his short story "The Great Keinplatz Experiment" (1885), in which a German professor and his student exchange minds. But whereas the exchange was achieved by means of a talisman in Anstey's novel, Doyle approached the subject more scientifically through the medium of hypnotism, or mesmerism, as it was then known. Mesmerism fascinated Doyle, and it was a theme he turned to again in "John Barrington Cowles" (1886). Told in the first person—a technique that Doyle favored and which he used to perfection in the Holmes stories—it tells of a beautiful and bewitching lady living in Edinburgh and of the fate of three men who love her. To each in turn she becomes their betrothed until she reveals some dreadful secret. In each case the revelation drives the men to madness and death. Doyle wisely never reveals the secret, although there are hints of lycanthropy. The plot hinges predominantly on the lady's mesmeric effect over men, and there is a powerful scene as a battle of wills take place between the girl and a visiting mesmerist.

Doyle tried variations on other old themes—that of the elixir of life in "The Ring of Thoth" (1890) and of the transmutation of gold in "The Doings of Raffles Haw" (1891). He even attempted an occult thriller in *The Mystery of Cloomber* (1889). He used the Egyptian theme again in a more atmospheric story, "Lot No.

249" (1892), one of the earliest tales of reanimated mummies. (Rudyard Kipling noted that this story had given him his first nightmare in years.)

In 1890 Doyle and his wife, Louise, moved to London where he hoped to establish a consultancy as an eye specialist. Apparently he never had a single patient. However, those long hours sitting in his consulting rooms were put to good use. Doyle had been immensely satisfied at the publication of his first historical novel, *Micah Clarke*, in 1889, and was now working on what many consider his best and was certainly his own personal favorite, *The White Company* (1891). But the course of literary history was soon to change with the appearance in January 1891 of a new popular monthly, *The Strand Magazine*. In its pages, starting with "A Scandal in Bohemia" in the July 1891 issue, would appear all of the Sherlock Holmes short stories. Before the first set of six had been published, Doyle—and Holmes—had become household names. Doyle decided that his future lay as a writer, not an eye specialist, and the road to fortune lay before him.

Despite the success of Holmes and Doyle's own passion for the historical novel, he did not desert the ghost story; indeed, the 1890s saw some of his most original. "De Profundis" (1892) reversed the plot of "The Captain of the *Polestar*." Here a woman loses her husband to smallpox, and he is buried at sea. Later she is haunted by the vision of her husband, hideously disfigured, as he rises from the depths and beckons her to join him. Doyle was an opponent of capital punishment, and in "The Los Amigos Fiasco" (1892) he tells of a criminal who survives his execution in the electric chair, the surge of electricity making him invulnerable. All further attempts to execute him prove useless.

Doyle returned to the theme of mesmerism and the *femme fatale* in "The Parasite" (1894), whose protagonist, a Professor Gilroy, volunteers to undergo a series of mesmeric experiments with the crippled Helen Penclosa. Too late he discovers that she has obtained full power over him, just as did Svengali over Trilby. (Coincidentally, *Trilby* by George DuMaurier was published in the same year.) Madame Penclosa then uses Gilroy to commit various crimes, even the attempted murder of his fiancée.

Given Sherlock Holmes's unswerving logic, it's surprising that his creator became increasingly interested in the occult—but such was the case. Doyle had begun attending séances in 1879 and had joined the Society for Psychical Research in November 1893

(shortly before starting work on "The Parasite"). By the summer of 1894 he was serving as a special investigator into reported hauntings. Teamed with two others, Doyle initially exposed a hoax phantom at a house in Dorset, but in later years he investigated several hauntings that in his belief were true. In 1898 he was approached by two members of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, a society established ten years before for the study and practice of "Hebrew Magic." At various times it would claim W. B. Yeats, Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood, and Aleister Crowley as members; and Doyle, with his occult interest, was a natural initiate. At first Doyle expressed interest and agreed to an astral examination, but this proved so "queer and disagreeable" that he became disinclined to join.

Nevertheless all these experiences provided Doyle with fine material for stories. "The Brown Hand" (1889) is narrated by a member of the Society for Psychical Research called to investigate the house of Sir Dominick Holden in Wiltshire, haunted by the ghost of an Indian who returns night after night seeking his hand, which had been amputated by Holden when in service in India. During the story Doyle imparts some of his beliefs about life after death. In "Playing With Fire" (1900) he extends those beliefs to animals. At a séance in London the normal sequence of events is interrupted by the sudden materialization of what seems to be a horse, mad with terror; it proves to be no ordinary horse, however, but a unicorn. In "The Leather Funnel" (1900) Doyle turns to the subject of psychometry, the ability to detect the history of an object by touch alone. As an experiment an occultist gives the funnel of the title to a house guest, who sleeps near it. The result is a terrifying nightmare as he relives the torture of the noted murderess the Marquise de Brinvilliers in 1676. The funnel, it seems, was the implement of torture, used to force large quantities of water into the victim.

By 1900 there were enough terrors in the real world. With the invasion of South Africa by the Boers in October 1899, Britain found herself at war. Doyle championed the British cause and promptly volunteered for service as an army surgeon. For his service he was knighted.

After the Boer War Doyle's health deteriorated, and he convalesced in Norfolk. There he came across a folk tale about a local aristocrat named Richard Cabell (ancestor of the American fantasist James Branch Cabell). Cabell, according to the tale, was

cruel to his wife; finally, in a fit of jealousy, he beat her, then pursued her across Dartmoor and stabbed her to death with a hunting knife. He was promptly torn to death by his wife's faithful hound, though before dying he was able to mortally wound the dog. To this day, so legend proclaims, the dog still haunts Dartmoor.

Doyle was hooked at once and plotted a new novel, *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1901/1902), surely the most famous Sherlock Holmes adventures of them all. Although not a supernatural story it is nevertheless as fine an example of the atmospheric tale of terror as one will find, with all the trappings of the traditional Gothic, the anticipation of the detective novel, and the chill of the suspense thriller. Doyle also worked into the story the haunted house episode he had investigated in 1894. Throughout, Holmes remains steadfastly concerned with this world and no other. When challenged by Watson as to whether he inclined to "the supernatural explanation," Holmes responds, "The devil's agents may be of flesh and blood, may they not?"—but he also concedes: "If Dr. Mortimer's surmise should be correct and we are dealing with forces outside the ordinary laws of Nature, there is an end of our investigation."

The first decade of the new century was an intense one for Doyle. He was squarely in the public eye, writing as fast and furiously as ever, assiduously investigating all forms of psychic phenomena, as well as turning private investigator himself, espousing the causes of those he believed were wrongly convicted. Privately he was devastated by the death of his wife Louise in 1906. He had remained intensely loyal to her even though, years before, he had fallen in love with another woman, Jean Leckie. Louise had been ideally suited to Doyle the country practitioner, but Jean was the perfect match for Doyle the successful author. Married in 1907, the second Lady Doyle was to support her husband through the strange years ahead.

Doyle's output of fantastic fiction began to increase following his second marriage, and with it his interest in monsters. "The Terror of Blue John Gap" (1910) is an especially strong story set in the Blue John Caverns in Derbyshire's Peak District, where a monstrous bearlike creature inhabits the subterranean depths. "The Horror of the Heights" (1913) tells of more monsters, giant jellyfishlike things in the upper atmosphere, discovered by a pioneer aviator. But his best-known tale of this period was the

full-length novel *The Lost World* (1912). This introduced his major new character, the fiery Professor Challenger who, with a group of fellow explorers, sets out to investigate a remote plateau in South America where prehistoric monsters continue to survive. Twenty years after Holmes made Doyle a star, he found he had another major success on his hands. He immediately wrote a second Challenger novel, *The Poison Belt* (1913). Rather more humorous and less convincing than the first, it explores a lifeless Earth on which Challenger and his colleagues appear to be the only survivors when the planet passes through a poisonous cloud in space.

Shortly before the outbreak of World War I, Doyle caused a stir with the publication of his story "Danger!" (1914), intended as a warning about submarine warfare, which may have inspired the German blockade of England.

The war saw a rise in the public's interest in spiritualism. For over thirty years Doyle had been attending séances, but he was still undecided. He awaited proof of contact with someone he knew intimately. That opportunity came in 1916. A regular guest at their house was Lily Loder-Symonds, a close friend of Doyle's second wife, and one who had become a channel for spirit messages through automatic writing. One day in 1916 she began to scribble messages in the handwriting of Jean's brother, Malcolm Leckie, who had been killed at the Battle of Mons in 1914. Doyle asked questions about a personal conversation he had had with Leckie, and the woman's written response convinced him. From that moment on he was totally converted to spiritualism, and he dedicated the rest of his life to furthering its cause.

The effect on Doyle was immediate. Though nearing sixty years of age and with a full and active life behind him, he seemed rejuvenated by the relief of knowing that another existence awaited him in the hereafter. When Doyle's son, Kingsley, and Doyle's brother, Innes, both died of pneumonia in 1917, Doyle consoled himself with the knowledge that they were both now safe and happy, and he continued with as much vigor as before. He now toured more extensively than ever, and from his pen poured many new books, all espousing the cause, some of which he published himself after he opened his Psychic Bookshop in London in 1925.

Whatever one's own beliefs, Doyle must be admired for standing in for a cause in which he firmly believed. His was no overnight

conversion, but came to believe only after nearly forty years of investigation and inward searching. As a public figure, he knew he would be held to ridicule by the authorities and that he would alienate many friends, yet still he persisted, regardless of public opinion. In fact, his desire to believe made him incautious, even when the Holmes in him would have looked further. The greatest evidence of his gullibility came in the famous episode of the Cottingley Fairies. In 1920 Doyle received word that the two young daughters of a Yorkshire family had proved the existence of fairies by photographing them. Doyle had held a lifelong fascination for fairy folk—doubtless inspired by the paintings of his Uncle Richard—and he took the spurious photos as authentic. He wrote about the incident in *The Strand Magazine* and in more detail in *The Coming of the Fairies* (1922). By then his credibility with the public had been stretched to its limits.

The 1920s have been regarded by many as the years of literary decline for Doyle, even though they included a number of the most ingenious Holmes stories. He also wrote what some call his best supernatural story, "The Bully of Brocas Court" (1921), about the ghost of a famous boxer who continues to challenge fighters years after his hideous death in a drunken accident. It demonstrated that Doyle had lost none of his storytelling power when he set his mind to it.

A new Professor Challenger novel was to many a disappointment. *The Land of Mist* (1925/1926) tells of the conversion of Challenger to spiritualism; the whole purpose of the book was to expose the unfair pressures forced upon spiritualists by unrelenting authority. The novel is rambling and lacks the vivacity of the earlier Challenger adventures, but it does contain one episode that has all the atmosphere of Doyle's earlier ghost stories. In a self-contained chapter, three of the characters investigate a haunted house in Berkshire. Based on a reported haunting in Torquay, the chapter describes murderous shadows in the old house that "had thickened, had coalesced, had taken a definite, batlike shape."

Doyle was to write two further Challenger stories. "When the World Screamed" (1928) is a well-controlled narrative of the professor's exploits in drilling through the earth's crust in an attempt to establish that the earth is a living entity. As he breaks through, the planet lets out a terrifying scream. "It was a howl in which pain, anger, menace, and the outraged majesty of Nature all blended into one hideous shriek." Doyle wrote one more

Challenger piece, an immensely trivial piece called "The Disintegration Machine" (1929). He was in more adventurous mood with *The Maracot Deep* (1927/1928), written episodically for *The Strand*. A new hero, Professor Maracot, descends into the depths of the ocean to discover the survivors of Atlantis and, after an exploration of this scientifically advanced world, confronts the real power behind the land, "The Lord of the Dark Face."

The episodes dealing with the dark lord were the last fantasy to be completed by Doyle. He died at his Sussex home on July 7, 1930, aged seventy-one. However, it was hardly likely that the champion of spiritualism was going to stay totally dead to the world. A medium reported seeing Doyle at his own memorial service a few days later. Over the next few years there were several similar claims; indeed, Doyle's ghost was credited with dictating a new book, *Thy Kingdom Come*, subsequently reprinted as *The Return of Arthur Conan Doyle* (1957). It is touchingly ironic that a man who devoted much of his life to spiritualism and the occult should today be remembered almost solely for the creation of a character who had no such belief. Yet just like Holmes, it seems that Doyle has refused to die.

Thanks to Richard Lancelyn Green for his bibliographic help on this article.

—MA

LOT No. 249

by ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE

The wisdom of men is small,
and the ways of nature are strange....
and who shall put a bound
to the dark things that await
those who seek them?

Of the dealings of Edward Bellingham with William Monkhouse Lee, and of the cause of the great terror of Abercrombie Smith, it may be that no absolute and final judgment will ever be delivered. It is true that we have the full and clear narrative of Smith himself, and such corroboration as he could look for from Thomas Styles the servant, from the Reverend Plumtree Peterson, Fellow of Old's, and from such other people as chanced to gain some passing glance at this or that incident in a singular chain of events. Yet, in the main, the story must rest upon Smith alone, and the most will think that it is more likely that one brain, however outwardly sane, has some subtle warp in its texture, some strange flaw in its workings, than that the path of Nature has been overstepped in open day in so famed a center of learning and light as the University of Oxford. Yet when we think how narrow and how devious this path of Nature is, how dimly we can trace it, for all our lamps of science, and how from the darkness which girds it round great and terrible possibilities loom ever shadowly upward, it is a bold and confident man who will put a limit to the strange by-paths into which the human spirit may wander.

In a certain wing of what we will call Old College in Oxford there is a corner turret of an exceeding great age. The heavy arch which spans the open door has bent downward in the center under the weight of its years, and the grey, lichen-blotched blocks of stone are bound and knitted together with withes and strands of ivy, as though the old mother has set herself to brace them

up against wind and weather. From a door a stone stair curves upward spirally, passing two landing, and terminating in a third one, its steps all shapeless and hollowed by the tread of so many generations of the seekers after knowledge. Life has flowed like water down this winding stair, and, waterlike, has left these smooth-worn grooves behind it. From the long-gowned, pedantic scholars of Plantagenet days down to the young bloods of a later age, how full and strong had been that tide of young English life. And what was left now of all those hopes, those strivings, those fiery energies, save here and there in some old-world churchyard a few scratches upon a stone, and perchance a handful of dust in a moldering coffin? Yet here were the silent stair and the grey old wall, with bend and saltire and many another heraldic device still to be read upon its surface, like grotesque shadows thrown back from the days that had passed.

In the month of May, in the year 1884, three young men occupied the sets of rooms which opened onto the separate landings of that old stair. Each set consisted simply of a sitting room and a bedroom, while the two corresponding rooms upon the ground floor were used, the one as a coal cellar, and the other as the livingroom of the servant, or scout, Thomas Styles, whose duty it was to wait upon the three men above him. To right and to left was a line of lecture rooms and of offices, so that the dwellers in the old turret enjoyed a certain seclusion, which made the chambers popular among the more studious undergraduates. Such were the three who occupied them now—Abercrombie Smith above, Edward Bellingham beneath him, and William Monkhouse Lee upon the lowest story.

It was ten o'clock on a bright spring night, and Abercrombie Smith lay back in his armchair, his feet upon the fender and his briar-root pipe between his lips. In a similar chair and equally at his ease there lounged on the other side of the fireplace his old school friend Jephro Hastie. Both men were in flannels, for they had spent their evening upon the river, but apart from the dress no one could look at their hard-cut, alert faces without seeing that they were open-air men—men whose minds and tastes turned naturally to all that was manly and robust. Hastie, indeed, was stroke of his college boat, and Smith was an even better oar, but a coming examination had already cast its shadow over him and held him to his work, save for the few hours a week which health demanded. A litter of medical books upon the table, with



scattered bones, models, and anatomical plates, pointed to the extent as well as the nature of his studies, while a couple of single-sticks and a set of boxing-gloves above the mantelpiece hinted at the means by which, with Hastie's help, he might take his exercise in its most compressed and least distant form. They knew each other very well—so well that they could sit now in that soothing silence which is the very highest development of companionship.

"Have some whisky," said Abercrombie Smith at last between two cloudbursts. "Scotch in the jug and Irish in the bottle."

"No, thanks. I'm in for the skulls. I don't liquor when I'm training. How about you?"

"I'm reading hard. I think it best to leave it alone."

Hastie nodded, and they relapsed into a contented silence.

"By the way, Smith," asked Hastie, presently, "have you made the acquaintance of either of the fellows on your stair yet?"

"Just a nod when we pass. Nothing more."

"Hum! I should be inclined to let it stand at that. I know something of them both. Not much, but as much as I want. I don't think I should take them to my bosom if I were you. Not that there's much amiss with Monkhouse Lee."

"Meaning the thin one?"

"Precisely. He is a gentlemanly little fellow. I don't think there is any vice in him. But then you can't know him without knowing Bellingham."

"Meaning the fat one?"

"Yes, the fat one. And he's a man whom I, for one, would rather not know."

Abercrombie Smith raised his eyebrows and glanced across at his companion.

"What's up, then?" he asked. "Drink? Cards? Cad? You used not to be censorious."

"Ah! you evidently don't know the man, or you wouldn't ask. There's something damnable about him—something reptilian. My gorge always rises at him. I should put him down as a man with secret vices—an evil liver. He's no fool, though. They say that he is one of the best men of his line that they have ever had in the college."

"Medicine or classics?"

"Eastern languages. He's a demon at them. Chillingworth met him somewhere above the second cataract last long, and he told me that he just prattled to the Arabs as if he had been born and

nursed and weaned among them. He talked Coptic to the Copts, and Hebrew to the Jews, and Arabic to the Bedouins, and they were all ready to kiss the hem of his frockcoat. There are some old hermit Johnnies up in those parts who sit on rocks and scowl and spit at the casual stranger. Well, when they saw this chap Bellingham, before he had said five words they just lay down on their bellies and wriggled. Chillingworth said that he never saw anything like it. Bellingham seemed to take it as his right, too, and strutted about among them and talked down to them like a Dutch uncle. Pretty good for an undergrad of Old's, wasn't it?"

"Why do you say you can't know Lee without knowing Bellingham?"

"Because Bellingham is engaged to his sister Eveline. Such a bright little girl, Smith! I know the whole family well. It's disgusting to see that brute with her. A toad and a dove, that's what they always remind me of."

Abercrombie Smith grinned and knocked his ashes out against the side of the grate.

"You show every card in your hand, old chap," said he. "What a prejudiced, green-eyed, evil-thinking old man it is! You have really nothing against the fellow except that."

"Well, I've known her ever since she was as long as that cherry-wood pipe, and I don't like to see her taking risks. And it is a risk. He looks beastly. And he has a beastly temper, a venomous temper. You remember his row with Long Norton?"

"No; you always forget that I am a freshman."

"Ah, it was last winter. Of course. Well, you know the towpath along by the river. There were several fellows going along it, Bellingham in front, when they came on an old market woman coming the other way. It had been raining—you know what those fields are like when it has rained—and that path ran between the river and a great puddle that was nearly as broad. Well, what does this swine do but keep the path, and push the old girl in the mud where she and her marketings came to terrible grief. It was a blackguard thing to do, and Long Norton, who is as gentle a fellow as ever stepped, told him what he thought of it. One word led to another, and it ended in Norton laying his stick across the fellow's shoulders. There was the deuce of a fuss about it, and it's a treat to see the way in which Bellingham looks at Norton when they meet now. By Jove, Smith, it's nearly eleven o'clock!"

"No hurry. Light your pipe again."

"Not I. I'm supposed to be in training. Here I've been sitting gossiping when I ought to have been safely tucked up. I'll borrow your skull, if you can share it. Williams has had mine for a month. I'll take the little bones of your ear, too, if you are sure you won't need them. Thanks very much. Never mind a bag, I can carry them very well under my arm. Good-night, my son, and take my tip as to your neighbor."

When Hastie, bearing his anatomical plunder, had clattered off down the winding stair, Abercrombie Smith hurled his pipe into the wastepaper basket, and drawing his chair nearer to the lamp, plunged into a formidable green-covered volume, adorned with great colored maps of that strange internal kingdom of which we are the hapless and helpless monarchs. Though a freshman at Oxford, the student was not so in medicine, for he had worked for four years at Glasgow and at Berlin, and this coming examination would place him finally as a member of his profession. With his firm mouth, broad forehead, and clear-cut, somewhat hard-featured face, he was a man who, if he had no brilliant talent, was yet so dogged, so patient, and so strong, that he might in the end overtop a more showy genius. A man who can hold his own among Scotchmen and North Germans is not a man to be easily set back. Smith had left a name at Glasgow and at Berlin, and he was bent now upon doing as much at Oxford, if hard work and devotion could accomplish it.

He had sat reading for about an hour, and the hands of the noisy carriage clock upon the side table were rapidly closing together upon the twelve, when a sudden sound fell upon the student's ear—a sharp, rather shrill sound, like the hissing intake of a man's breath who gasps under some strong emotion. Smith laid down his book and slanted his ear to listen. There was no one on either side or above him, so that the interruption came certainly from the neighbor beneath—the same neighbor of whom Hastie had given so unsavory an account. Smith knew him only as a flabby, pale-faced man of silent and studious habits, a man whose lamp threw a golden bar from the old turret even after he had extinguished his own. This community in lateness had formed a certain silent bond between them. It was soothing to Smith when the hours stole on toward dawning to feel that there was another so close who set as small a value upon his sleep as he did. Even now, as his thoughts turned toward him, Smith's feelings were kindly. Hastie was a good fellow, but he was rough, strong-fibered,

with no imagination or sympathy. He could not tolerate departures from what he looked upon as the model type of manliness. If a man could not be measured by a public-school standard, then he was beyond the pale with Hastie. Like so many who are themselves robust, he was apt to confuse the constitution with the character, to ascribe to want of principle what was really a want of circulation. Smith, with his stronger mind, knew his friend's habit, and made allowance for it now as his thoughts turned toward the man beneath him.

There was no return to the singular sound, and Smith was about to turn to his work once more, when suddenly there broke out in the silence of the night a hoarse cry, a positive scream—the call of a man who is moved and shaken beyond all control. Smith sprang out of his chair and dropped his book. He was a man of fairly firm fiber, but there was something in this sudden, uncontrollable shriek of horror which chilled his blood and pringled in his skin. Coming in such a place and at such an hour, it brought a thousand fantastic possibilities into his head. Should he rush down, or was it better to wait? He had all the national hatred of making a scene, and he knew so little of his neighbor that he would not lightly intrude upon his affairs. For a moment he stood in doubt and even as he balanced the matter there was a quick rattle of footsteps upon the stairs, and young Monkhouse Lee, half dressed and as white as ashes, burst into his room.

"Come down!" he gasped. "Bellingham's ill."

Abercrombie Smith followed him closely downstairs into the sitting room which was beneath his own, and intent as he was upon the matter in hand, he could not but take an amazed glance around him as he crossed the threshold. It was such a chamber as he had never seen before—a museum rather than a study. Walls and ceiling were thickly covered with a thousand strange relics from Egypt and the East. Tall, angular figures bearing burdens or weapons stalked in an uncouth frieze round the apartments. Above were bull-headed, stork-headed, cat-headed, owl-headed statues, with viper-crowned, almond-eyed monarchs, and strange, beetle-like dieties cut out of the blue Egyptian lapis lazuli. Horus and Isis and Osiris peeped down from every niche and shelf, while across the ceiling a true son of Old Nile, a great, hanging-jawed crocodile, was slung in a double noose.

In the center of this singular chamber was a large, square table, littered with papers, bottles, and the dried leaves of some

graceful, palmlike plant. These varied objects had all been heaped together in order to make room for a mummy case, which had been conveyed from the wall, as was evident from the gap there, and laid across the front of the table. The mummy itself, a horrid, black, withered thing, like a charred head on a gnarled bush, was lying half out of the case, with its clawlike hand and bony forearm resting upon the table. Propped up against the sacophagus was an old yellow scroll of papyrus, and in front of it, in a wooden armchair, sat the owner of the room, his head thrown back, his widely-opened eyes directed in a horrified stare to the crocodile above him, and his blue, thick lips puffing loudly with every expiration.

"My God! he's dying!" cried Monkhouse Lee distractedly.

He was a slim, handsome young fellow, olive-skinned and dark-eyed, of a Spanish rather than of an English type, with a Celtic intensity of manner which contrasted with the Saxon phlegm of Abercrombie Smith.

"Only a faint, I think," said the medical student. "Just give me a hand with him. You take his feet. Now on to the sofa. Can you kick all those little wooden devils off? What a litter it is! Now he will be all right if we undo his collar and give him some water. What has he been up to at all?"

"I don't know. I heard him cry out. I ran up. I know him pretty well, you know. It is very good of you to come down."

"His heart is going like a pair of castanets," said Smith, laying his hand on the breast of the unconscious man. "He seems to me to be frightened all to pieces. Chuck the water over him! What a face he has got on him!"

It was indeed a strange and most repellent face, for color and outline were equally unnatural. It was white, not with the ordinary pallor of fear, but with an absolutely bloodless white, like the underside of a sole. He was very fat, but gave the impression of having at some time been considerably fatter, for his skin hung loosely in creases and folds, and was shot with a meshwork of wrinkles. Short, stubbly brown hair bristled up from his scalp, which a pair of thick, wrinkled ears protruding at the sides. His light grey eyes were still open, the pupils dilated and the balls projecting in a fixed and horrid stare. It seemed to Smith as he looked down upon him that he had never seen Nature's danger signals flying so plainly upon a man's countenance, and his thought turned more seriously to the warning which Hastie had

given him an hour before.

"What the deuce can have frightened him so?" he asked.

"It's the mummy."

"The mummy? How, then?"

"I don't know. It's beastly and morbid. I wish he would drop it. It's the second fright he has given me. It was the same last winter. I found him just like this, with that horrid thing in front of him."

"What does he want with the mummy, then?"

"Oh, he's a crank, you know. It's his hobby. He knows more about these things than any man in England. But I wish he wouldn't! Ah, he's beginning to come to."

A faint tinge of color had begun to steal back into Bellingham's ghastly cheeks, and his eyelids shivered like a sail after a calm. He clasped and unclasped his hands, drew a long, thin breath between his teeth, and suddenly jerking up his head, threw a glance of recognition around him. As his eyes fell upon the mummy he sprang off the sofa, seized the roll of papyrus, thrust it into a drawer, turned the key, and then staggered back on to the sofa.

"What's up?" he asked. "What do you chaps want?"

"You've been shrieking out and making no end of a fuss," said Monkhouse Lee. "If our neighbor here from above hadn't come down, I'm sure I don't know what I should have done with you."

"Ah, it's Abercrombie Smith," said Bellingham, glancing up at him. "How very good of you to come in! What a fool I am! Oh, my God, what a fool I am!"

He sunk his head on to his hands, and burst into peal after peal of hysterical laughter.

"Look here! Drop it!" cried Smith, shaking him roughly by the shoulder.

"Your nerves are all in a jangle. You must drop these little midnight games with mummies, or you'll be going off your chump. You're all on wires now."

"I wonder," said Bellingham, "whether you would be as cool as I am if you had seen—"

"What then?"

"Oh, nothing. I meant that I wonder if you could sit up at night with a mummy without trying your nerves. I have no doubt that you are quite right. I dare say that I have been taking it out of myself too much lately. But I am all right now. Please

don't go, though. Just wait for a few minutes until I am quite myself."

"The room is very close," remarked Lee, throwing open the window and letting in the cool night air.

"It's balsaic resin," said Bellingham. He lifted up one of the dried palmate leaves from the table and fizzled it over the chimney of the lamp. It broke away into heavy smoke wreaths, and a pungent, biting odor filled the chamber. "It's the sacred plant—the plant of the priests," he remarked. "Do you know anything of Eastern languages, Smith?"

"Nothing at all. Not a word."

The answer seemed to lift a weight from the Egyptologist's mind.

"By the way," he continued, "how long was it from the time that you ran down, until I came to my senses?"

"Not long. Some four or five minutes."

"I thought it could not be very long," said he, drawing a long breath. "But what a strange thing unconsciousness is! There is no measurement to it. I could not tell from my own sensations if it were seconds or weeks. Now that gentleman on the table was packed up in the days of the eleventh dynasty, some forty centuries ago, and yet if he could find his tongue, he would tell us that this lapse of time has been but a closing of the eyes and a reopening of them. He is a singularly fine mummy, Smith."

Smith stepped over to the table and looked down with a professional eye at the black and twisted form in front of him. The features, though horribly discolored, were perfect, and two little nut-like eyes still lurked in the depths of the black, hollow sockets. The blotched skin was drawn tightly from bone to bone, and a tangled wrap of black coarse hair fell over the ears. Two thin teeth, like those of a rat, overlay the shrivelled lower lip. In its crouching position, with bent joints and craned head, there was a suggestion of energy about the horrid thing which made Smith's gorge rise. The gaunt ribs, with their parchment-like covering, were exposed, and the sunken, leaden-hued abdomen, with the long slit where the embalmer had left his mark; but the lower limbs were wrapped round with coarse yellow bandages. A number of little clovelike pieces of myrrh and of cassia were sprinkled over the body, and lay scattered on the inside of the case.

"I don't know his name," said Bellingham, passing his hand

over the shrivelled head. "You see the outer sarcophagus with the inscriptions is missing. Lot 249 is all the title he has now. You see it printed on his case. That was his number in the auction at which I picked him up."

"He has been a very pretty sort of fellow in his day," remarked Abercrombie Smith.

"He has been a giant. His mummy is six feet seven in length, and that would be a giant over there, for they were never a very robust race. Feel these great knotted bones, too. He would be a nasty fellow to tackle."

"Perhaps these very hands helped to build the stones into the pyramids," suggested Monkhouse Lee, looking down with disgust in his eyes at the crooked, unclean talons.

"No fear. This fellow has been pickled in natron, and looked after in the most approved style. They did not serve hods-men in that fashion. Salt or bitumen was enough for them. It has been calculated that this sort of thing cost about seven hundred and thirty pounds in our money. Our friend was a noble at the least. What do you make of that small inscription near his feet, Smith?"

"I told you that I know no Eastern tongue."

"Ah, so you did. It is the name of the embalmer, I take it. A very conscientious worker he must have been. I wonder how many modern works will survive four thousand years?"

He kept on speaking lightly and rapidly, but it was evident to Abercrombie Smith that he was still palpitating with fear. His hands shook, his lower lip trembled, and look where he would, his eye always came sliding round to his gruesome companion. Through all his fear, however, there was a suspicion of triumph in his tone and manner. His eyes shone, and his footstep, as he paced the room, was brisk and jaunty. He gave the impression of a man who had gone through an ordeal, the marks of which he still bears upon him, but which has helped him to his end.

"You're not going yet?" he cried, as Smith rose from the sofa.

At the prospect of solitude, his fears seemed to crowd back upon him, and he stretched out a hand to detain him.

"Yes, I must go. I have my work to do. You are all right now. I think that with your nervous system you should take up some less morbid study."

"Oh, I am not nervous as a rule; and I have unwrapped mummies before."

"You fainted last time," observed Monkhouse Lee.

"Ah, yes, so I did. Well, I must have a nerve tonic or a course of electricity. You are not going, Lee?"

"I'll do whatever you wish, Ned."

"Then I'll come down with you and have a shakedown on your sofa. Good-night, Smith. I am so sorry to have disturbed you with my foolishness."

They shook hands, and as the medical student stumbled up the spiral and irregular stair he heard a key turn in a door, and the steps of his two new acquaintances as they descended to the lower floor.

In this strange way began the acquaintance between Edward Bellingham and Abercrombie Smith, an acquaintance which the latter, at least, had no desire to push forward. Bellingham, however, appeared to have taken a fancy to his rough-spoken neighbor, and made his advances in such a way that he could hardly be repulsed without absolute brutality. Twice he called to thank Smith for his assistance, and many times afterward he looked in with books, papers and such other civilities as two bachelor neighbors can offer each other. He was, as Smith soon found, a man of wide reading, with catholic tastes and an extraordinary memory. His manner, too, was so pleasing and suave that one came, after a time, to overlook his repellent appearance. For a jaded and wearied man he was no unpleasant companion, and Smith found himself, after a time, looking forward to his visits, and even returning them.

Clever as he undoubtedly was, however, the medical student seemed to detect a dash of insanity in the man. He broke out at times into a high, inflated style of talk which was in contrast with the simplicity of his life.

"It is a wonderful thing," he cried, "to feel that one can command powers of good and of evil—a ministering angel or a demon of vengeance." And again, of Monkhouse Lee, he said, "Lee is a good fellow, an honest fellow, but he is without strength or ambition. He would not make a fit partner for a man with a great enterprise. He would not make a fit partner for me."

At such hints and innuendoes stolid Smith, puffing solemnly at his pipe, would simply raise his eyebrows and shake his head, with little interjections of medical wisdom as to earlier hours and fresher air.

One habit Bellingham had developed of late which Smith

knew to be a frequent herald of a weakening mind. He appeared to be forever talking to himself. At late hours of the night, when there could be no visitor with him, Smith could still hear his voice beneath him in a low, muffled monologue, sunk almost to a whisper, and yet very audible in the silence. This solitary babbling annoyed and distracted the student, so that he spoke more than once to his neighbor about it. Bellingham, however, flushed up at the charge, and denied curtly that he had uttered a sound; indeed, he showed more annoyance over the matter than the occasion seemed to demand.

Had Abercrombie Smith had any doubt as to his own ears he had not to go far to find corroboration. Tom Styles, the little wrinkled man-servant who had attended to the wants of the lodgers in the turret for a longer time than any man's memory could carry him, was sorely put to it over the same matter.

"If you please, sir," said he, as he tidied down the top chamber one morning, "do you think Mr. Bellingham is all right, sir?"

"All right, Styles?"

"Yes, sir. Right in his head, sir."

"Why should he not be, then?"

"Well, I don't know, sir. His habits has changed of late. He's not the same man he used to be, though I make free to say that he was never quite one of my gentlemen, like Mr. Hastie or yourself, sir. He's took to talkin' to himself something awful. I wonder it don't disturb you. I don't know what to make of him, sir."

"I don't know what business it is of yours, Styles."

"Well, I takes an interest, Mr. Smith. It may be forward of me, but I can't help it. I feel sometimes as if I was mother and father to my young gentlemen. It all falls on me when things go wrong and the relations come. But Mr. Bellingham, sir, I want to know what it is that walks about his room sometimes when he's out and when the door's locked on the outside."

"Eh? You're talking nonsense, Styles."

"Maybe so, sir; but I heard it more'n once with my own ears."

"Rubbish, Styles."

"Very good, sir. You'll ring the bell if you want me."

Abercrombie Smith gave little heed to the gossip of the old man-servant, but a small incident occurred a few days later which left an unpleasant effect upon his mind, and brought the words

of Styles forcibly to his memory.

Bellingham had come up to see him late one night, and was entertaining him with an interesting account of the rock tombs of Beni Hassan in Upper Egypt, when Smith, whose hearing was remarkably acute, distinctly heard the sound of a door opening on the landing below.

"There's some fellow gone in or out of your room," he remarked.

Bellingham sprang up and stood helpless for a moment, with the expression of a man who is half incredulous and half afraid.

"I surely locked it. I am almost positive that I locked it," he stammered. "No one could have opened it."

"Why, I hear some one coming up the steps now," said Smith.

Bellingham rushed out through the door, slammed it loudly behind him, and hurried down the stairs. About half-way down Smith heard him stop, and thought he caught the sound of whispering. A moment later the door beneath him shut, a key creaked in a lock, and Bellingham, with beads of moisture upon his pale face, ascended the stairs once more and reentered the room.

"It's all right," he said, throwing himself down in a chair. "It was that fool of a dog. He had pushed the door open. I don't know how I came to forget to lock it."

"I didn't know you kept a dog," said Smith, looking very thoughtfully at the disturbed face of his companion.

"Yes, I haven't had him long. I must get rid of him. He's a great nuisance."

"He must be, if you find it so hard to shut him up. I should have thought that shutting the door would have been enough, without locking it."

"I want to prevent old Styles from letting him out. He's of some value, you know, and it would be awkward to lose him."

"I am a bit of a dog-fancier myself," said Smith, still gazing hard at his companion from the corner of his eyes. "Perhaps you'll let me have a look at it."

"Certainly. But I am afraid it cannot be tonight; I have an appointment. Is that clock right? Then I am a quarter of an hour late already. You'll excuse me, I am sure."

He picked up his cap and hurried from the room. In spite of his appointment, Smith heard him re-enter his own chamber and lock his door upon the inside.

This interview left a disagreeable impression upon the medical student's mind. Bellingham had lied to him and lied so clumsily that it looked as if he had desperate reasons for concealing the truth. Smith knew that his neighbor had no dog. He knew, also, that the step which he had heard upon the stairs was not the step of an animal. But if it were not, then what could it be? There was old Styles's statement about the something which used to pace the room at times when the owner was absent. Could it be a woman? Smith rather inclined to the view. If so, it would mean disgrace and expulsion to Bellingham if it were discovered by the authorities, so that his anxiety and falsehoods might be accounted for. And yet it was inconceivable that an undergraduate could keep a woman in his room without being instantly detected. Be the explanation what it might, there was something ugly about it, and Smith determined, as he turned to his books, to discourage all further attempts at intimacy on the part of his soft-spoken and ill-favored neighbor.

But his work was destined to interruption that night. He had hardly caught up the broken threads when a firm, heavy footfall came three steps at a time from below, and Hastie, in blazer and flannels, burst into the room.

"Still at it!" said he, plumping down into his wonted arm-chair. "What a chap you are to stew! I believe an earthquake might come and knock Oxford into a cocked hat, and you would sit perfectly placid with your books among the ruin. However, I won't bore you long. Three whiffs of baccy, and I am off."

"What's the news, then?" asked Smith, cramming a plug of bird's-eye into his briar with his forefinger.

"Nothing very much. Wilson made seventy for the freshmen against the eleven. They say that they will play him instead of Buddicomb, for Buddicomb is clean off color. He used to be able to bowl a little, but it's nothing but half-volleys and long hops now."

"Medium right," suggested Smith, with the intense gravity which comes upon a university man when he speaks of athletics.

"Inclining to fast, with a work from leg. Comes with the arm about three inches or so. He used to be nasty on a wet wicket. Oh, by the way, have you heard about Long Norton?"

"What's that?"

"He's been attacked."

"Attacked?"

"Yes, just as he was turning out of the High Street, and within

a hundred yards of the gate of Old's."

"But who—"

"Ah, that's the rub! If you said 'what,' you would be more grammatical. Norton swears that it was not human, and, indeed, from the scratches on his throat, I should be inclined to agree with him.

"What, then? Have we come down to spooks?"

"Well, no; I don't think that is quite the idea, either. I am inclined to think that if any showman has lost a great ape lately, and the brute is in these parts, a jury would find a true bill against it. Norton passes that way every night, you know, about the same hour. There's a tree that hangs low over the path—the big elm from Rainy's garden. Norton thinks the thing dropped on him out of the tree. Anyhow, he was nearly strangled by two arms, which, he says, were as strong and as thin as steel bands. He saw nothing; only those beastly arms that tightened and tightened on him. He yelled his head nearly off, and a couple of chaps came running, and the thing went over the wall like a cat. He never got a fair sight of it the whole time. It gave Norton a shake up, I can tell you. I tell him it has been as good as a change at the seaside for him."

"A garrotter, most likely," said Smith.

"Very possible. Norton says not, but we don't mind what he says. The garrotter had long nails, and was pretty smart at swinging himself over walls. By the way, your beautiful neighbor would be pleased if he heard about it. He had a grudge against Norton, and he's not a man, from what I know of him, to forget his little debts. But hallo, old chap, what have you got in your noddle?"

"Nothing," Smith answered curtly.

He had started in his chair, and the look had flashed over his face which comes upon a man who is struck suddenly by some unpleasant idea.

"You looked as if something I had said had taken you on the raw. By the way, you have made the acquaintance of Master B. since I looked in last, have you not? Young Monkhouse Lee told me something to that effect."

"Yes; I know him slightly. He has been up here once or twice."

"Well, you're big enough and ugly enough to take care of yourself. He's not what I should call exactly a healthy sort of Johnny, though, no doubt, he's very clever, and all that. But you'll

soon find out for yourself. Lee is all right; he's a very decent little fellow. Well, so long, old chap! I row Mullins for the Vice-Chancellor's pot on Wednesday week, so mind you come down, in case I don't see you before."

Bovine Smith laid down his pipe and turned stolidly to his books once more. But with all the will in the world, he found it very hard to keep his mind upon his work. It would slip away to brook upon the man beneath him, and upon the little mystery which hung round his chamber. Then high thoughts turned to this singular attack of which Hastie had spoken, and to the grudge which Bellingham was said to owe the object of it. The two ideas would persist in rising together in his mind, as though there were some close and intimate connection between them. And yet the suspicion was so dim and vague that it could not be put down in words.

"Confound the chap!" cried Smith, as he shied his book on pathology across the room. "He has spoiled my night's reading, and that's reason enough, if there were no other, why I should steer clear of him in the future."

For ten days the medical student confined himself so closely to his studies that he neither saw nor heard anything of either of the men beneath him. At the hours when Bellingham had been accustomed to visit him, he took care to sport his oak, and though he more than once heard a knocking at his outer door, he resolutely refused to answer it. One afternoon, however, he was descending the stairs when, just as he was passing it, Bellingham's door flew open, and young Monkhouse Lee came out with his eyes sparkling and a dark flush of anger upon his olive cheeks. Close at his heels followed Bellingham, his fat, unhealthy face all quivering with malignant passion.

"You fool!" he hissed. "You'll be sorry."

"Very likely," cried the other. "Mind what I say. It's off! I won't hear of it!"

"You've promised, anyhow."

"Oh, I'll keep that! I won't speak. But I'd rather little Eva was in her grave. Once for all, it's off. She'll do what I say. We don't want to see you again."

So much Smith could not avoid hearing, but he hurried on, for he had no wish to be involved in their dispute. There had been a serious breach between them, that was clear enough, and Lee was going to cause the engagement with his sister to be broken

off. Smith thought of Hastie's comparison of the toad and the dove, and was glad to think that the matter was at an end. Bellingham's face when he was in a passion was not pleasant to look upon. He was not a man to whom an innocent girl could be trusted for life. As he walked, Smith wondered languidly what could have caused the quarrel, and what the promise might be which Bellingham had been so anxious that Monkhouse Lee should keep.

It was the day of the sculling match between Hastie and Mullins, and a stream of men were making their way down to the banks of the Isis. A May sun was shining brightly and the yellow path was barred with the black shadows of the tall elm trees. On either side the grey colleges lay back from the road, the hoary old mothers of minds looking out from their high, mullioned windows at the tide of young life which swept so merrily past them. Black-clad tutors, prim officials, pale reading men, brown-faced, straw-hatted young athletes in white sweaters or many-colored blazers, all were hurrying toward the blue winding river which curves through the Oxford meadows.

Abercrombie Smith, with the intuition of an old oarsman, chose his position at the point where he knew that the struggle, if there were a struggle, would come. Far off he heard the hum which announced the start, the gathering roar of the approach, the thunder of running feet, and the shouts of the men in the boats beneath him. A spray of half-clad, deep breathing runners shot past him, and craning over their shoulders he saw Hastie pulling a steady thirty-six, while his opponent, with a jerky forty, was a good boat's length behind him. Smith gave a cheer for his friend, and pulling out his watch was starting off again for his chambers when he felt a touch upon his shoulder, and found that young Monkhouse Lee was beside him.

"I saw you there," he said, in a timid, deprecating way. "I wanted to speak to you, if you could spare me a half-hour. This cottage is mine. I share it with Harrington of King's. Come in and have a cup of tea."

"I must be back presently," said Smith. "I am hard on the grind at present. But I'll come in for a few minutes with pleasure. I wouldn't have come out only Hastie is a friend of mine."

"So he is of mine. Hasn't he a beautiful style? Mullins wasn't in it. But come into the cottage. It's a little den of a place, but it is pleasant to work in during the summer months."

It was a small, square white building, with green doors and shutters, and a rustic trellis-work porch, standing back some fifty yards from the river's bank. Inside, the main room was roughly fitted up as a study—deal table, unpainted shelves with books, and a few cheap oleographs upon the wall. A kettle sang upon a spirit-stove, and there were tea things upon a tray on the table.

"Try that chair and have a cigarette," said Lee. "Let me pour you out a cup of tea. It's so good of you to come in, for I know that your time is a good deal taken up. I wanted to say to you that, if I were you, I should change my rooms at once."

"Eh?"

Smith sat starting with a lighted match in one hand and his unlit cigarette in the other.

"Yes; it must seem very extraordinary, and the worst of it is that I cannot give my reasons, for I am under a solemn promise—a very solemn promise. But I may go so far as to say that I don't think Bellingham is a very safe man to live near. I intend to camp out here as much as I can for a time."

"Not safe! What do you mean?"

"Ah, that's what I mustn't say. But do take my advice, and move your rooms. We had a grand row today. You must have heard us, for you came down the stairs."

"I saw that you had fallen out."

"He's a horrible chap, Smith. That is the only word for him. I have had doubts about him ever since the night when he fainted—you remember, when you came down. I taxed him today, and he told me things that made my hair rise, and wanted me to stand in with him. I'm not strait-laced, but I am a clergyman's son, you know, and I think there are some things which are quite beyond the pale. I only thank God that I found him out before it was too late, for he was to have married into my family."

"This is all very fine, Lee," said Abercrombie Smith curtly. "But either you are saying a great deal too much or a great deal too little."

"I give you a warning."

"If there is real reason for warning, no promise can bind you. If I see a rascal about to blow a place up with dynamite no pledge will stand in my way of preventing him."

"Ah, but I cannot prevent him, and I can do nothing but warn you."

"Without saying what you warn me against."

"Against Bellingham."

"But that is childish. Why should I fear him, or any man?"

"I can't tell you. I can only entreat you to change your rooms. You are in danger where you are. I don't even say that Bellingham would wish to injure you. But it might happen, for he is a dangerous neighbor just now."

"Perhaps I know more than you think," said Smith, looking keenly at the young man's boyish, earnest face. "Suppose I tell you that someone else shares Bellingham's rooms."

Monkhouse Lee sprang from his chair in uncontrollable excitement.

"You know, then?" he gasped.

"A woman."

Lee dropped back again with a groan.

"My lips are sealed," he said. "I must not speak."

"Well, anyhow," said Smith, rising, "it is not likely that I should allow myself to be frightened out of rooms which suit me very nicely. It would be a little too feeble for me to move out all my goods and chattels because you say that Bellingham might in some unexplained way do me injury. I think that I'll just take my chances, and stay where I am, and as I see that it's nearly five o'clock, I must ask you to excuse me."

He bade the young student adieu in a few curt words, and made his way homeward through the sweet spring evening, feeling half-ruffled, half-amused, as any other strong, unimaginative man might who has been menaced by a vague and shadowy danger.

There was one little indulgence which Abercrombie Smith always allowed himself, however closely his work might press upon him. Twice a week, on the Tuesday and the Friday, it was his invariable custom to walk over to Farlingford, the residence of Doctor Plumptree Peterson, situated about a mile and a half out of Oxford. Peterson had been a close friend of Smith's elder brother Francis, and as he was a bachelor, fairly well-to-do, with a good cellar and a better library, his house was a pleasant goal for a man who was in need of a brisk walk. Twice a week, then, the medical student would swing out there along the dark country roads, and spend a pleasant hour in Peterson's comfortable study, discussing, over a glass of old port, the gossip of the university or the latest development of medicine or of surgery.

On the day which followed his interview with Monkhouse Lee, Smith shut up his books at a quarter past eight, the hour

when he usually started for his friend's house. As he was leaving his room, however his eyes chanced to fall upon one of the books which Bellingham had lent him, and his conscience pricked him for not having returned it. However repellent the man might be, he should not be treated with discourtesy. Taking the book, he walked downstairs and knocked at his neighbor's door. There was no answer but on turning the handle he found that it was unlocked. Pleased at the thought of avoiding an interview, he stepped inside, and placed the book with his card upon the table.

The lamp was turned half down, but Smith could see the details of the room plainly enough. It was all much as he had seen it before—the frieze, the animal-headed gods, the hanging crocodile, and the table littered over with papers and dried leaves. The mummy case stood upright against the wall, but the mummy itself was missing. There was no sign of any second occupant of the room, and he felt as he withdrew that he had probably done Bellingham an injustice. Had he a guilty secret to preserve, he would hardly leave his door open so that all the world might enter.

The spiral stair was as black as pitch, and Smith was slowly making his way down its irregular steps, when he was suddenly conscious that something had passed him in the darkness. There was a faint sound, a whiff of air, a light brushing past his elbow, but so slight that he could scarcely be certain of it. He stopped and listened, but the wind was rustling among the ivy outside, and he could hear nothing else.

"Is that you, Styles?" he shouted.

There was no answer, and all was still behind him. It must have been a sudden gust of air, for there were crannies and cracks in the old turret. And yet he could almost have sworn that he heard a footfall by his very side. He had emerged into the quadrangle, still turning the matter over in his head, when a man came running swiftly across the smooth-cropped lawn.

"Is that you, Smith?"

"Hullo, Hastie!"

"For God's sake come at once! Young Lee is drowned! Here's Harrington of King's with the news. The doctor is out. You'll do, but come along at once. There may be life in him."

"Have you brandy?"

"No."

"I'll bring some. There's a flask on my table."

Smith bounded up the stairs, taking three at a time, seized the flask, and was rushing down with it, when, as he passed Bellingham's room, his eyes fell upon something which left him gasping and staring upon the landing.

The door, which he had closed behind him, was now open, and right in front of him, with the lamp-light shining upon it, was the mummy case. Three minutes ago it had been empty. He could swear to that. Now it framed the lank body of its horrible occupant, who stood, grim and stark, and his black shrivelled face toward the door. The form was lifeless and inert, but it seemed to Smith as he gazed that there still lingered a lurid spark of vitality, some faint sign of consciousness in the little eyes which lurked in the depths of the hollow sockets. So astounded and shaken was he that he had forgotten his errand, and was still staring at the lean, sunken figure when the voice of his friend below recalled him to himself.

"Come on, Smith!" he shouted. "It's life and death, you know. Hurry up! Now, then," he added, as the medical student reappeared, "let us do a sprint. It is well under a mile, and we should do it in five minutes. A human life is better worth running for than a pot."

Neck and neck they dashed through the darkness, and did not pull up until, panting and spent, they had reached the little cottage by the river. Young Lee, limp and dripping like a broken water-plant, was stretched upon the sofa, the green scum of the river upon his black hair, and a fringe of white foam upon leaden-hued lips. Beside him knelt his fellow student, Harrington, endeavoring to chafe some warmth back into his rigid limbs.

"I think there's life in him," said Smith, with his hand to the lad's side. "Put your watch glass to his lips. Yes, there's dimming on it. You take an arm, Hastie. Now work it as I do, and we'll soon pull him round."

For ten minutes they worked in silence, inflating and depressing the chest of the unconscious man. At the end of that time a shiver ran through his body, his lips trembled, and he opened his eyes. The three students burst out into an irrepressible cheer.

"Wake up, old chap. You've frightened us quite enough."

"Have some brandy. Take a sip from the flask."

"He's all right now," said his companion, Harrington.

"Heavens, what a fright I got! I was reading here, and had gone out for a stroll as far as the river, when I heard a scream

and a splash. Out I ran, and by the time I could find him and fish him out, all life seemed to have gone. Then Simpson couldn't get a doctor, for he has a game leg, and I had to run, and I don't know what I'd have done without you fellows. That's right, old chap. Sit up."

Monkhouse Lee had raised himself on his hands, and looked wildly about him.

"What's up?" he asked. "I've been in the water. Ah, yes; I remember."

A look of fear came into his eyes, and he sank his face into his hands.

"How did you fall in?"

"I didn't fall in."

"How then?"

"I was thrown in. I was standing by the bank, and something from behind picked me up like a feather and hurled me in. I heard nothing, and I saw nothing. But I know what it was, for all that."

"And so do I," whispered Smith.

Lee looked up with a quick glance of surprise.

"You've learned, then?" he said. "You remember the advice I gave you?"

"Yes, and I begin to think that I shall take it."

"I don't know what the deuce you fellows are talking about," said Hastie, "but I think, if I were you, Harrington, I should get Lee to bed at once. It will be time enough to discuss the why and the wherefore when he is a little stronger. I think, Smith, you and I can leave him alone now. I am walking back to college; if you are coming in that direction, we can have a chat."

But it was little chat that they had upon their homeward path. Smith's mind was too full of the incidents of the evening, the absence of the mummy from his neighbor's rooms, the step that passed him on the stair, the reappearance—the extraordinary, inexplicable reappearance of the grisly thing—and then this attack upon Lee, corresponding so closely to the previous outrage upon another man against whom Bellingham bore a grudge. All this settled in his thoughts, together with the many little incidents which had previously turned him against his neighbor, and the singular circumstances under which he was first called in to him. What had been a dim suspicion, a vague, fantastic conjecture, had suddenly taken form, and stood out in his mind as a grim fact, a thing not to be denied. And yet, how monstrous it was! How

unheard of! How entirely beyond all bounds of human experience. An impartial judge, or even the friend who walked by his side, would simply tell him that his eyes had deceived him, that the mummy had been there all the time, and the young Lee had tumbled into the river as any other man tumbles into a river, and that blue pill was the best thing for a disordered liver. He felt that he would have said as much if the positions had been reversed. And yet he could swear that Bellingham was a murderer at heart, and that he wielded a weapon such as no man had ever used in all the grim history of crime.

Hastie had branched off to his rooms with a few crisp and emphatic comments upon his friend's unsociability, and Abercrombie Smith crossed the quadrangle to his corner turret with a strong feeling of repulsion for his chambers and their associations. He would take Lee's advice, and move his quarters as soon as possible, for how could a man study when his ear was ever straining for every murmur or footstep in the room below? He observed, as he crossed over the lawn, that the light was still shining in Bellingham's window, and as he passed up the staircase the door opened, and the man himself looked out at him. With his fat, evil face he was like some bloated spider fresh from the weaving of his poisonous web.

"Good evening," said he. "Won't you come in?"

"No," cried Smith fiercely.

"No? You are busy as ever? I wanted to ask you about Lee. I was sorry to hear that there was a rumor that something was amiss with him."

His features were grave, but there was the gleam of a hidden laugh in his eyes as he spoke. Smith saw it, and he could have knocked him down for it.

"You'll be sorrier still to hear that Monkhouse Lee is doing very well, and is out of all danger," he answered. "Your hellish tricks have not come off this time. Oh, you needn't try to brazen it out. I know all about it."

Bellingham took a step back from the angry student, and half-closed the door as if to protect himself.

"You are mad," he said. "What do you mean? Do you assert that I had anything to do with Lee's accident?"

"Yes," thundered Smith. "You and that bag of bones behind you; you worked it between you. I tell you what it is, Master B., they have given up burning folk like you, but we still keep

a hangman, and, by George! if any man in this college meets his death while you are here, I'll have you up, and if you don't swing for it, it won't be my fault. You'll find that your filthy Egyptian tricks won't answer in England."

"You're a raving lunatic," said Bellingham.

"All right. You just remember what I say, for you'll find that I'll be better than my word."

The door slammed, and Smith went fuming up to his chamber, where he locked the door upon the inside, and spent half the night in smoking his old briar and brooding over the strange events of the evening.

Next morning Abercrombie Smith heard nothing of his neighbor, but Harrington called upon him in the afternoon to say that Lee was almost himself again. All day Smith stuck fast to his work, but in the evening he determined to pay the visit to his friend Doctor Peterson upon which he had started the night before. A good walk and a friendly chat would be welcome to his jangled nerves.

Bellingham's door was shut as he passed, but glancing back when he was some distance from the turret he saw his neighbor's head at the window outlined against the lamp-light, his face pressed apparently against the glass as he gazed out into the darkness. It was a blessing to be away from all contact with him, if but for a few hours, and Smith stepped out briskly, and breathed the soft spring air into his lungs. The half-moon lay in the west between two Gothic pinnacles, and threw upon the silvered street a dark tracery from the stone-work above. There was a brisk breeze, and light, fleecy clouds drifted swiftly across the sky. Old's was on the very border of the town, and in five minutes Smith found himself beyond the houses and between the hedges of a May-scented Oxfordshire lane.

It was a lonely and little-frequented road which led to his friend's house. Early as it was, Smith did not meet a single soul upon his way. He walked briskly along until he came to the avenue gate, which opened into the long gravel drive leading up to Farlingford. In front of him he could see the cosy red light of the windows glimmering through the foliage. He stood with his hand upon the iron latch of the swinging gate, and he glanced back at the road along which he had come. Something was coming swiftly down it.

It moved in the shadow of the hedge, silently and furtively,

a dark, crouching figure, dimly visible against the black background. Even as he gazed back at it, it had lessened its distance by twenty paces, and was fast closing upon him. Out of the darkness he had a glimpse of a scraggy neck, and of two eyes that would ever haunt him in his dreams. He turned and with a cry of terror he ran for his life up the avenue. There were the red lights, the signals of safety, almost within a stone's throw of him. He was a famous runner, but never had he run as he ran that night.

The heavy gate had swung into place behind him, but he heard it dash open again before his pursuer. As he rushed madly and wildly through the night, he could hear a swift, dry patter behind him, and could see, as he threw back a glance, that this horror was bounding like a tiger at his heels, with blazing eyes and one stringy arm out-thrown. Thank God, the door was ajar. He could see the thin bar of light which shot from the lamp in the hall. Nearer yet sounded the clatter from behind. He heard a hoarse gurgling at his very shoulder. With a shriek he flung himself against the door, slammed and bolted it behind him, and sank half-fainting on the hall chair.

"My goodness, Smith, what's the matter?" asked Peterson, appearing at the door of his study.

"Give me some brandy."

Peterson disappeared, and came rushing out again with a glass and a decanter.

"You need it," he said, as his visitor drank off what he poured out for him. "Why, man, you are as white as a cheese."

Smith laid down his glass, rose up, and took a deep breath.

"I am my own man again now," said he. "I was never so unmanned before. But, with your leave, Peterson, I will sleep here tonight, for I don't think I could face that road again except by daylight. It's weak, I know, but I can't help it."

Peterson looked at his visitor with a very questioning eye.

"Of course you shall sleep here if you wish. I'll tell Mrs. Burney to make up the spare bed. Where are you off to now?"

"Come up with me to the window that overlooks the door. I want you to see what I have seen."

They went up to the window of the upper hall whence they could look down upon the approach to the house. The drive and the fields on either side lay quiet and still, bathed in the peaceful moonlight.

"Well, really, Smith," remarked Peterson; "it is well that I know you to be an abstemious man. What in the world can have frightened you?"

"I'll tell you presently. But where can it have gone? Ah, now. look, look! See the curve of the road just beyond your gate."

"Yes, I see; you needn't pinch my arm off. I saw someone pass. I should say a man, rather thin, apparently, and tall, very tall. But what of him? And what of yourself? You are still shaking like an aspen leaf."

"I have been within hand-grip of the devil, that's all. But come down to your study, and I shall tell you the whole story."

He did so. Under the cheery lamp-light, with a glass of wine on the table beside him, and the portly form and florid face of his friend in front, he narrated, in their order, all the events, great and small, which had formed so singular a chain, from the night on which he had found Bellingham fainting in front of the mummy case until this horrid experience of an hour ago.

"There now," he said as he concluded, "that's the whole black business. It is monstrous and incredible, but it is true."

Doctor Plumtree Peterson sat for some time in silence with a very puzzled expression upon his face.

"I never heard of such a thing in my life, never!" he said at last. "You have told me the facts. Now tell me your inferences."

"You can draw your own."

"But I should like to hear yours. You have thought over the matter, and I have not."

"Well, it must be a little vague in detail, but the main points seem to me to be clear enough. This fellow Bellingham, in his Eastern studies, has got hold of some infernal secret by which a mummy—or possibly only this particular mummy—can be temporarily brought to life. He was trying this disgusting business on the night when he fainted. No doubt the sight of the creature moving had shaken his nerve, even though he had expected it. You remember that almost the first words he said were to call out upon himself as a fool. Well, he got more hardened afterward, and carried the matter through without fainting. The vitality which he could put into it was evidently only a passing thing, for I have seen it continually in its case as dead as this table. He has some elaborate process, I fancy, by which he brings the thing to pass. Having done it, he naturally bethought him that he might use the creature as an agent. It has intelligence and it has strength. For

some purpose he took Lee into his confidence; but Lee, like a decent Christian, would have nothing to do with such a business. Then they had a row, and Lee vowed that he would tell his sister of Bellingham's true character. Bellingham's game was to prevent him, and he nearly managed it, by setting this creature of his on his track. He had already tried its powers upon another man—Norton—toward whom he had a grudge. It is the merest chance that he has not two murders upon his soul. Then, when I taxed him with the matter, he had the strongest reasons for wishing me out of the way, before I could convey my knowledge to anyone else. He got the chance when I went out, for he knew my habits and where I was bound for. I have had a narrow shave, Peterson, and it is mere luck you didn't find me on your doorstep in the morning. I'm not a nervous man as a rule, and I never thought to have the fear of death put upon me as it was tonight."

"My dear boy, you take the matter too seriously," said his companion. "Your nerves are out of order with your work, and you make too much of it. How could such a thing as this 'stride about the streets of Oxford, even at night, without being seen?"

"It has been seen. There is quite a scare in the town about an escaped ape, as they imagine the creature to be. It is the talk of the place."

"Well, it's a striking chain of events. And yet, my dear fellow, you must allow that each incident in itself is capable of a more natural explanation."

"What! Even my adventure of tonight?"

"Certainly. You come out with your nerves all unstrung, and your head full of this theory of yours. Some gaunt, half-famished tramp steals after you, and seeing you run, is emboldened to pursue you. Your fears and imagination do the rest."

"It won't do, Peterson, it won't do."

"And again, in the instance of your finding the mummy case empty, and then a few moments later with an occupant, you know that it was lamp-light, that the lamp has half turned down, and that you had no special reason to look hard at the case. It is quite possible that you may have overlooked the creature in the first instance."

"No, no; it is out of the question."

"And then Lee may have fallen into the river, and Norton been garrotted. It is certainly a formidable indictment that you have against Bellingham; but if you were to place it before a

police magistrate, he would simply laugh in your face."

"I know he would. That's why I mean to take the matter into my own hands."

"Eh?"

"Yes; I feel that a public duty rests upon me, and, besides, I must do it for my own safety, unless I choose to allow myself to be hunted by this beast out of the college, and that would be a little too feeble. I have quite made up my mind what I shall do. And first of all, may I use your paper and pens for an hour?"

"Most certainly. You will find all that you want upon that side table."

Abercrombie Smith sat down before a sheet of fools-cap, and for an hour, and then for a second hour his pen traveled swiftly over it. Page after page was finished and tossed aside while his friend leaned back in his armchair, looking across at him with patient curiosity. At last, with an exclamation of satisfaction, Smith sprang to his feet, gathered his papers up into order, and laid the last one upon Peterson's desk.

"Kindly sign this as a witness," he said.

"A witness? Of what?"

"Of my signature, and of the date. The date is the most important. Why, Peterson, my life might hang upon it."

"My dear Smith, you are talking wildly. Let me beg you to go to bed."

"On the contrary, I never spoke so deliberately in my life. and I will promise to go to bed the moment you have signed it."

"But what is it?"

"It is a statement of all that I have been telling you tonight. I wish you to witness it."

"Certainly," said Peterson, signing his name under that of his companion. "There you are! But what is the idea?"

"You will kindly retain it, and produce it in case I am arrested."

"Arrested? For what?"

"For murder. It is quite on the cards. I wish to be ready for every event. There is only one course open to me and I am determined to take it."

"For Heaven's sake, don't do anything rash!"

"Believe me, it would be far more rash to adopt any other course. I hope that we won't need to bother you, but it will ease my mind to know that you have this statement of my motives.

And now I am ready to take your advice and go to roost, for I want to be at my best in the morning."

Abercrombie Smith was not an entirely pleasant man to have as an enemy. Slow and easy-tempered, he was formidable when driven to action. He brought to every purpose in life the same deliberate resoluteness which had distinguished him as a scientific student. He had laid his studies aside for a day, but he intended that the day should not be wasted. Not a word did he say to his host as to his plans, but by nine o'clock he was well on his way to Oxford.

In the High Street he stopped at Clifford's the gunmaker's, and bought a heavy revolver, with a box of central-fire cartridges. Six of them he slipped into the chambers, and, half-cocking the weapon, placed it in the pocket of his coat. He then made his way to Hastie's rooms, where the big oarsman was lounging over his breakfast, with the *Sporting Times* propped up against the coffee-pot.

"Hullo! What's up?" he asked. "Have some coffee?"

"No, thank you. I want you to come with me, Hastie, and do what I ask you."

"Certainly, my boy."

"And bring a heavy stick with you."

"Hullo!" Hastie stared. "Here's a hunting crop that would fell an ox."

"One other thing. You have a box of amputating knives. Give me the longest of them."

"There you are. You seem to be fairly on the war trail. Anything else?"

"No; that will do." Smith placed the knife inside his coat, and led the way to the quadrangle. "We are neither of us chickens, Hastie," said he. "I think I can do this job alone, but I take you as a precaution. I am going to have a little talk with Bellingham. If I have only him to deal with, I won't, of course, need you. If I shout, however, up you come, and lam out with your whip as hard as you can lick. Do you understand?"

"All right. I'll come if I hear you bellow."

"Stay here, then. It may be a little time, but don't budge until I come down."

"I'm a fixture."

Smith ascended the stairs, opened Bellingham's door and

stepped in. Bellingham was seated behind his table, writing. Beside him, among his litter of strange possessions, towered the mummy case, with its sale number 249 still stuck upon its front, and its hideous occupant stiff and stark within it. Smith looked very deliberately round him, closed the door, and then stepping across to the fireplace, struck a match and set the fire alight. Bellingham sat staring, with amazement and rage upon his bloated face.

"Well, really now, you make yourself at home," he gasped.

Smith sat himself deliberately down, placing his watch upon the table, drew out his pistol, cocked it and laid it in his lap. Then he took the long amputating knife from his bosom, and threw it down in front of Bellingham.

"Now, then," said he, "just get to work and cut up that mummy."

"Oh, is that it?" said Bellingham with a sneer.

"Yes, that is it. They tell me that the law can't touch you. But I have a law that will set matters straight. If in five minutes you have not set to work, I swear by the God who made me that I will put a bullet through your brain!"

"You would murder me?"

Bellingham had half risen, and his face was the color of putty.

"Yes."

"And for what?"

"To stop your mischief. One minute has gone."

"But what have I done?"

"I know and you know."

"This is mere bullying."

"Two minutes are gone."

"But you must give reasons. You are a madman—a dangerous madman. Why should I destroy my own property? It is a valuable mummy."

"You must cut it up, and you must burn it."

"I will do no such thing."

"Four minutes are gone."

Smith took up the pistol and he looked toward Bellingham with an inexorable face. As the second-hand stole round, he raised his hand, and the finger twitched upon the trigger.

"There! There! I'll do it!" screamed Bellingham.

In frantic haste he caught up the knife and hacked at the figure of the mummy, ever glancing round to see the eye and the weapon of his terrible visitor bent upon him. The creature crackled

and snapped under every stab of the keen blade. A thick yellow dust rose up from it. Spices and dried essences rained down upon the floor. Suddenly, with a rending crack, its backbone snapped asunder, and it fell, a brown heap of sprawling limbs, upon the floor.

"Now into the fire!" said Smith.

The flames leaped and roared as the dried and tinderlike debris was piled upon it. The little room was like the stoke hole of a steamer and the sweat ran down the faces of the two men; but still the one stooped and worked, while the other sat watching him with a set face. A thick, fat smoke oozed out from the fire, and a heavy smell of burned rosin and singed hair filled the air. In a quarter of an hour a few charred and brittle sticks were all that was left of Lot No. 249.

"Perhaps that will satisfy you," snarled Bellingham, with hate and fear in his little grey eyes as he glanced back at his tormentor.

"No; I must make a clean sweep of all your materials. We must have no more devil's tricks. In with all these leaves! They may have something to do with it."

"And what now?" asked Bellingham, when the leaves also had been added to the blaze.

"Now the roll of papyrus which you had on the table that night. It is in that drawer, I think."

"No, no," shouted Bellingham. "Don't burn that! Why, man, you don't know what you do. It is unique; it contains wisdom which is nowhere else to be found."

"Out with it!"

"But look here, Smith, you can't really mean it. I'll share the knowledge with you. I'll teach you all that is in it. Or, stay, let me only copy it before you burn it!"

Smith stepped forward and turned the key in the drawer. Taking out the yellow, curled roll of paper, he threw it into the fire, and pressed it down with his heel. Bellingham screamed, and grabbed at it; but Smith pushed him back and stood over it until it was reduced to a formless grey ash.

"Now, Master B.," said he, "I think I have pretty well drawn your teeth. You'll hear from me again, if you return to your old tricks. And now good morning, for I must go back to my studies."

And such is the narrative of Abercrombie Smith as to the singular events which occurred in Old College, Oxford, in the spring of '84. As Bellingham left the university immediately after-

ward and was last heard of in the Sudan, there is no one who can contradict his statement. But the wisdom of men is small, and the ways of Nature are strange, and who shall put a bound to the dark things which may be found by those who seek for them?

THE ANOREXIC DREAMS

by ROBERT FRAZIER

The power of starvation
gave her vision.

The Anorexic Dreams

Starved of nutrients
dehydrated and shrinking
her chalk-pale brain mass
frees itself of the skull lining
and thus inhabits an airspace
a cavern of vision
a *caverna magica*
She floats through it like a child
exploring a little-used library wing
the shelves full of eyes
here and there a face fully illuminated
her mother sleeping oozy
and slick in a cold cream mask
her father sweating and fuming at her
like he does in the grocery store
finally at the end of the stacks
she finds her waxen self-image
and drawn into the liquid stages
of her own eyes she falls
into their accelerating light
screaming along foreshortened
highways to the dream's
bull's-eye
core



The Anorexic Dreams of Eating

A bowl of light is placed before her
and she settles in her seat
bobbing like a buoy anchored
to nothing more substantial than hunger
than the room of darkness about her
Out of the light her fork like
a magician's glove captures cauliflower
she runs the tip of her tongue
along their coronal edges
tasting stars and hydrogen
she nibbles the stalks grips them in her lips
as if they were a man's genitalia
she devours them
next her fork produces a swan
a miniature carving in butter
white as the porcelain sink
she heaves over each night
the swan melts down her fork
melts like the features of her mother
when she removes her make-up
and lets her unfamiliar skin breathe
lastly the anorexic fishes out something black
wriggling like a leech under salt
dripping raw-liver juices
sour as her glistening soul
going down

The Tender Seed

by HARRY RINGEL

Sometimes when her guard slipped
 she'd hear an evil voice
 whispering to her.
You will die, it told her.
Torn in pieces, then dragged down . . .

From the novel of the same title,
 due out this fall in paperback from Warner Books.

A car was waiting outside. Mimi could hear its engine running, as fast as her stomach. *Tell me this is no punishment for last Sunday*, she begged into the trailing silence of Nana. Last Sunday, when Mimi's want had bubbled out and covered over Nana's Big Truth for just a little while and she'd gone chasing after the car with her Mommy and two big sisters in it as they drove away. She had tried reminding herself of what Nana had preached—how it was the Big Truth which said how this child must be sealed off, nurtured, raised to her destiny away from her family. But last Sunday had been such a special good Visiting Day. Life had opened and chased the gloom. Nana's house hadn't closed in on every grin. It had become a happy breathing place because of all the noise and moving about, with plates clanking and real people laughing and her sisters doing silly dances (what's hucklebuck?) in the Sitting Room afterward.

Even Mimi had laughed. Maybe that sound had gotten the Big Truth upset. Maybe Nana had known how much Mimi wanted to escape, get away. Usually she just got a lecture. *Then why no lecture this time?* she sent in thought to Nana. *Was what I did really so bad?* But Nana's thought talk answered only with silence. She would

give no hint of where Mimi must go, who she must heal. All she knew was that she had to go alone.

To die, a new voice whispered, and Mimi's heart pulled. Something had grabbed it—some mischievous thing, like the bad small folk who tugged her covers in bed in the night. But this one lived inside her. Always had. *Ignore it*, Mimi told herself, stumbling after Nana. *Just relax*, she soothed, trying to use Mommy's voice. But Mommy was back home now. And Mommy never relaxed. Mimi's head rushed as they took the first downstairs step. Black spots jumbled the air before her. The soothing voice washed away screaming inside, underwater. She watched where it sank. The face emerged, veiled as usual behind the rushing mists of her fear. The Creature of the Waters: her name for that thing within her that always rose up when the fear spilled over and stole all the air, took over and covered her pictures of Goodness and Healing and all the other things Nana was training her always to try to see.

You will die, it repeated, in that cool strong voice it could make sound so much like Nana's. *Torn in pieces, then sucked down. Yes?*

Shut up. You're not my Nana. My Nana loves me. So why was Nana giving her to strangers? Why was Nana pushing her toward the front door now with so steady and firm a hand? Why were there no *words* from Nana? The Creature smiled. The door was opening. A giant man was standing there, white-skinned and yellow-haired, tall as devil trees but with boots on. Gloves too. Hat and goggles. He had no giving in his face. He had only lips that would not smile, eyes that refused to see below him. Eager for touch, Mimi reached up to his gloved hand. He gave her one finger, no more. His boots slammed hard as he walked Mimi down the porch steps and over to the waiting black car. Mimi looked back. Nana was staring at her from the doorway. *Let go and let God*, was all her thought talk said. *Let go and let God. And whatever you do, don't embarrass me.* Mimi nodded.

The car was high and long and shiny like rich people's things. Lim-oh-zeen: she knew this word from the funerals Nana made her pray at. The man had opened the door for her. She was expected to climb in, but the step was too high. She could put her knees on it but the dress would get dirty. She could ask for help, but Nana had said not to speak to the servants, it wasn't proper. The man came over to her. Mimi felt his man hands on her soft ribs as he lifted her. She dropped onto the back seat. Its soft leather gobbled her, a gentle tan monster, her only friend. It locked her

short legs straight, hiked her shoes almost as high as her head. She almost grinned. But then the car was moving. Her home was lost. There was only the road and bent trees and the hot sun glaring through glass. She pulled low in the seat. The man's head stayed forward as he drove, on and on, across town. She watched the oily flatness of the back of his neck. It made her want to cry. She wanted to go home.

But she has sold you. The creature's voice was clear now. It spelled out her end in low mocking tones. *No*, Mimi's silent voice cried. Her stomach rose. The Creature of the Waters rose. It wanted out, insisted to be out, would chase Mimi up into her head and corner her there, trap and tear her. All the creatures inside her would tumble forth and drag her down to where they lived, as punishment for holding them prisoner all these years. But then the car was slowing down, and she had no more time for fast imaginings. It made a right, then a sudden left. Mimi peered over the front seat. They were passing up the longest driveway. Thick hedges, shaved square, lined both sides. Way farther down, the road made a circle before a giant white house. With big round columns.

Plantation, she gasped. *I have been sold.* Apologies for a life lived wrong rose to her throat. *Run away. Escape.* The thought brought forth huge dogs. Three of them, two black, one grey. They circled the car, barking low, their fluid lope an insult to its speed. If she got out and ran, they would catch her easily, tear out her arms, drag her through dirt trailing her insides, exactly the way Nana's dog Rex had done to Mimi's secret rag doll that day. The car stopped in the circle. The dogs closed in. One put its front paws on her door; Mimi looked right into its face, its open mouth and dirty teeth, pink tongue lolling like the Creature of the Waters. "Shoo!" said the man, as he opened the door. With a loud whimper, Mimi scrambled backward. *Don't embarrass me*, Nana's words echoed, and the survival died within her. Her body went limp. The man tried dragging her out by the legs. Toward the end she was scooting down, just to stop his touching. She put her finger in his glove, and they were walking up the steps. The dogs watched from the driveway, frozen like statues, heads tilted in surprise. They would come no closer; and for the first time all day, Mimi's fear lifted.

The door opened without their knocking. A woman waved them in. She was wearing a black dress, white apron, tiny lace hat. Servant woman, Mimi realized, and dark-skinned just like her. Mimi

smiled but made no curtsy. Amused, the woman smiled back. She took all of Mimi's hand. They waited on a floor of gleaming black and white checks. It was the biggest front hall Mimi had ever seen. It had chairs and tables, like most people's whole homes. A giant chandelier threw gold on them from way overhead. A great, long, white-carpeted stairway curled up out of sight. All the way to Heaven—and there, at the top, an angel did wait. The most delicate beautiful angel, her face so white, robes blue-flowing as she swept down the stairs and came to Mimi. But up close she was not so beautiful. The face was too white like chalk dust from blackboards. The eyes never stopped twitching at the corners. "I am Mrs. Berenson," she said, all jewelry and smiles. "You must be Mimi."

Mimi made a clumsy curtsy. Nana would have killed her, after all their practice. But there was no time for worrying about that. They were going upstairs, all of them, Mrs. Berenson in front and the chauffeur man behind. The maid woman still cradled Mimi's hand. Its soft clasp loosened her to explore. Never had she seen such big paintings, such long rugs, pretty shiny furniture in hallways no less. *Heaven must be like this*, Mimi was telling herself, when they passed to a different section of the house—an abandoned back section, as plain as the front part was beautiful, full of broken corridors and barren walls and empty rooms. It was as if life had taken flight from this part of the home. *Something has chased it*, Mimi thought, filling up with the old fear. *Something terrible, with the power to swallow and suffocate all that would breathe*. Their heels clacked in loud echo against drab uncarpeted floors. The wall sides seemed to narrow, as if they were climbing down a funnel. At last they stood at the narrowest point: the base of a steep flight of stairs. The air had the smell of dead musty things. There was no light at the top; they climbed anyway, in silent procession, a funeral feeling which made Mimi's insides ache. The four of them crowded on a tight square landing. All eyes turned to the one thick door. A door with no shine, Mimi saw. Not even the bolt locks gleamed—and there were four of them, gold with ball handles.

They waited in ragged silence. Mrs. Berenson stared hesitantly at Mimi, her smile jumping more than ever. "We'll be right outside waiting," she stammered. Her eyes were full of guilt; they held no belief. She nodded to the chauffeur man. As plain-faced as an executioner, he slid the bolts and threw two keys. The door was pulled open. Mimi felt hands in her back; she was being pushed inside. The door slammed behind her. The locks slapped back into place.

Mimi was alone, with her wild scattered thoughts. And with one more sound: breathing.

Someone was in there with her.

Mimi turned around fast. Her eyes fought the unearthly grey of day rooms when all light is blocked out. Thick, long, purple drapes covered shuttered windows; otherwise, there was no furniture for Mimi to build shapes around. No bureaus, no mirrors, no lamps; only an immense sea of floor into which she now gazed, pressing on the darkness until a high bed did come clear, shoved into the far corner. Angled beside the bed, a rocking chair was just then falling still. Mimi's eyes jumped in rapid search. The stiff, dark pole of silhouette that had been waiting to be found straightened.

It was an old woman. Mimi knew by the white, matted, stringy hair. She knew by the flat breasts, crushed chest, withered sag of nightgown, the long arms which tumbled down her sides, and the claw-length fingernails which shone white against the grey. The woman was panting, with clotted breathing like retarded people Nana had healed. She had a loose jaw, like the retarded. There was drool coming down. The bent lolling tongue of . . . how did Nana say? Mon-go-loid. This was the creature Mimi had angered. She knew by the outraged way the woman held herself, so stiff even the fingers stuck out. *Someone busy at work suddenly interrupted.* What work? My death. Suddenly Mimi could not breathe. Her face grew hot. Her heart drummed in her ears. She turned to the door and would have reached for the knob. Would have pounded and cried until they opened. But then it would just have been a race between the people outside trying to unlock the door and this slow-uncurling spider creature—this woman-thing they had caged, in large awful words like *homicidal* and *schizo-something*—would be flying across the room to grab Mimi, hold her down, fill her with stings and watch grinning while she died.

Slowly, Mimi turned back toward the woman. They stared at each other in terrible stillness, a hot whirring stillness, like snake poison. It would burn right through you if you touched it wrong. But Mimi had to touch it, to calm it; she had to find that one soft place. Find the key, Nana would say. Get moving. Heal her. Let go and let God. *And if I don't find the key, will I die?* Silence. *You never tested me this bad,* Mimi called into the stillness. She wanted to sit down on the floor and cry. But if she did that, she would surely die.

She stepped forward. Across the room long arms came up and

finger nail-claws gleamed. The mouth opened in a wide panting hiss. Mimi backed softly against the door. She put her hands behind her back and waited for this ugly picture to pass. The woman's eyes widened in bewildered offense. It hadn't worked. Nothing would. The woman was using Mimi's stare as an invitation to come forward, shred this intrusion, devour it to put weight on the bones and stop the drooling. All problems solved, including Mimi the headache. She squeezed her eyes shut. *Why, Nana, why? What did I do that was so bad, to have to die like this?* But it was not Nana who answered. Not Nana who spoke through the stillness of Beforetimes, the only time from which the good voice would come, this voice which stirred only when Mimi lay cowering at the end of desperation. No. It was not Nana or Jesus or anyone belonging to this life, these times, who whispered the solution to her: *Sing.*

The word sent panicked voices scurrying. Mimi's voice returned. She looked at the woman. How so very tired this person looked. Black hollows deepened eyes that fell away in fast downward glances, as if constantly watching for something to rise inside. *The Creature of the Waters. It drains you, too.* And so Mimi's song would be soothing, gentle—the same secret little song she would whisper, in darkness, when the Creature tried stealing toward her from the shadows of her bedroom. My Lullabye from Nowhere. She had always known it. How well she knew the words:

*I'm just a poor and lonely stranger
Traveling through this world of woe
One day soon I'll see my Savior
And with Him I will go.*

Her lost child's voice filled the room. It brushed away and outward, like Nana's healing fingers when they flicked away disease. The woman straightened. Her arms dropped. She stared astonished at the air before her, as if she had just glimpsed her pain and first known its contours. Mimi blinked in surprise. *I did this*, her soft brown eyes acknowledged. And so again she sang. Closing her eyes she sang, giving herself over to the emptiness of a soul wandering, the prayer for Dream Savior, the hope lingering in each silent pause before she would begin again, louder each time until there was no Creature, no voice, only the chant and the smile it put inside her. She stopped, out of breath. *Stop and you die, a*

bad voice called, but the warning was hollow. The woman had seated herself on the bed. The long arms were crossed, and her nails folded under. Her body bent forward in strange exhausted dignity. Mimi saw her eyes. There was softness in the rims now, sadness over a past recalled. The woman was not retarded, not Mongoloid. At the end of strength, she had simply given in to thoughts which slapped at her so much that of course her tongue would roll, of course drool would fall.

You are just as scared as I am, Mimi sent to her, in thought. *You are a thin, jumpy little-girl creature with a coating of red, not blue, the color of Nana in her power.* One knows a person truly by the color that surrounds him, Nana says. Touch this woman in her raw place and sparks will crackle, shrieks will begin. She flies against her inside walls and people come, three men usually, that chauffeur man and two others, rough men who leave bruises on her, on whom she leaves bruises. Don't touch the red, Mimi would say to them. You make more screaming, more hurt. The shape of her torment is loudness, the white that blinding light when you see your own pain, create more of it, spawn black creatures which swim around you, digging with bad grins into the red which creates more panic, more sorrow, the wild desperation of a live being which can only survive in the very darkness that gives it pain.

Mimi knows. She has carried this same pain, unquestioning, for all the months she has been locked away with Nana. Yet here she had found one even more locked away, someone driven wholly into these depths Mimi so feared, one who had dwelt with the Creature in those depths for more years than Mimi had even been alive. The woman was still now. Softly, Mimi came forward and stood watching at the edge of the bed. One hand reached forth to touch. The woman started; Mimi hummed, to send strength, and the woman sagged into the quiet again. Holding the edge of her nightgown, she drew herself up on the bed. Almost ladylike, she tucked her legs under. The longest sigh left her as she rolled back on the pillow. Her face looked so soft. Soon her breath made gentle, regular whispers. She seemed almost beautiful, Mimi thought . . . as she must have been in the old days, so long ago, before the Creature had come forth from the Waters and taken her.

Mimi backed gently to the rocking chair. As quietly as possible, she angled it toward the woman and slipped up into it. The creaking legs and soft puff of cushion scarcely rippled the peace in the room. The woman's glance did not even flicker. She had

been watching the ceiling, reading it, taking pleasure in the punishing forms that had danced for her before she slept. *I see them too*, Mimi would have said, but there was no more need for words. No more need for humming. Mimi had only to watch and wait. Once again the silence had been restored. The Creature had been made to leave, for now. But it would be back, she knew, as she sat there.

They all would be back.

Witness

by AVRAM DAVIDSON

Some of the things you can find
in the classified section of a newspaper
are simply amazing.

The man in the booth was cradling the phone between ear and shoulder and looking into a newspaper. He looked like the sort of man who would have picked up the paper, perhaps without paying for it first, and was now phoning about a job. In other words, like anybody. Nobody.

A woman answered and spoke a number instead of a name. She repeated it. He said, "Ah, I'm calling about the ad? In today's paper?"

She said, "What ad is that?"

"It said to call this number."

"Do you have the ad with you? Could you read it to me please?"

The man sighed. He gave the paper a shake and a snap. "Witnesses to accident at Elm and Harriet Saturday noon, please call 324-4457. Is this the number all right?"

The woman said, "Yes, sir, this is the right number. We are very pleased that you have called. Now, um, could you give me *your* name and address, and your own telephone number?"

The man in the phone booth dropped the newspaper and shook his head. "Hello? Hello, sir?"

"Oh. Ah, no. Anyway, not yet. Why do you wanna know?"

"Well sir. So that we can get in *touch* with you."

"Yeah? Well, you're in touch with me *now*. So—"

There was a brief pause. She asked, "Could you describe the accident, please? Sometimes, you see, people call us but they are confused, and they describe some *other* incident, so—"

He thought this over. Then he said, slowly, "I get it. This is a lawyer's office. Isn't it. Sure. This is a *law* firm. And you handle lots of accident cases. Right?"

They didn't exactly squabble. But he didn't get a direct answer. He asked, why should he tell her anything? She said, because a good citizen—He asked her not to give him that. And after a few more words, the woman said she would put it to him *this* way. Let him describe what he saw. And then they could take the next step. After all, what did he have to lose? Did he see what she meant?

For a minute he simply stood and breathed. Then he scratched his head. "Okay, I guess. Listen. I was coming down Elm. And I seen, I saw this red Jag coming like real *fast*? And in the same second, I s—I saw this guy step off the curb. Evidently *he* didn't see *nothing*. And before I could, like, say a *word*. Bam! So I didn't say—I was, like, in *shock*? Do you know what I mean?" She said, oh, she could *imagine*. And she asked him if he could describe the victim and the driver.

The man twisted his face. He seemed to be in deep thought. He said, "What's in it for me?"

"Nothing," she said at once. "If that's what you tell us. If you tell us nothing, nobody *gets* nothing."

He breathed deeply. Then he said, "Listen. The uh, *victim*? He was what I'd call like, a middle-aged man? Dark-complected? He was wearing what I'd call, ah, fancy-type Western clothes. And the driver? A big guy. Real heavy. Big. Grey-haired. Sports clothes. He got out of the car, well, no, he *didn't* get out, he only stopped and he *started* to get out. Then—huh?—ah, he was wearing this green sports—Ahah. Ahah. Now ya *believe* me, hah?"

"Now I believe you," she said. "Now I'll ask you—I have to ask you to wait just a second until I get Mister—until I get somebody else on the phone." He grunted. Asked her to make it snappy.

It was perhaps closer to a minute. The voice was smooth and confident. "I understand, sir, that you witnessed the tragic accident on Saturday? And are you willing to testify on behalf of the unfortunate victim, or, rather I should say, his family. Good. Good. Now won't you supply us with just a few—"

At this point the voice of the operator broke in demanding money. It was quickly paid. Then the man said, "You got that, Counsellor? Deposit money. How much ya gunna deposit with me?"

"Why, sir."

"Never mind. Never mind, 'Why sir.' You got a lotta witnesses? Then you don't need *me*. You ain't got no other witnesses? Then you need me plenty. Suppose you get a judgment for a million. What's it worth to—"

The smooth confident voice said that, "Speaking absolutely unofficially," a small, a very small amount might be forthcoming for, say, unofficial expenses. The man in the phone booth wipes his face with his free sleeve. "I can get you two hundred dollars this afternoon, on that basis."

"Two hundred. I want ten thousand."

"Ah, my dear man. Who knows how long it might stretch out. Or what a jury might say. Or what settlement might be reached. Whereas. Twenty nice tens in a manila envelope. This afternoon. Hm?"

The man in the phone booth said, okay: this afternoon. But no two hundred. "Two thousand. Or the hell with the poor victim and his poor family. Huh?"

There was a sigh. "You drive a hard bargain. Where'll we meet?"

After hanging up the phone the man walked quickly up the block. Then he looked at a large clock of an old-fashioned store. Then he slowed his pace. For a while he seemed to be walking aimlessly. Various emotions played on his face. Then he began walking briskly. Block after block. Eventually he made a turn. A long alley intersected the block. Someone was there, holding a manila envelope.

"This about the auto accident?"

"Yeah. Here. Count it."

"Don't worry. I'm gunna." As he was opening it a heavy-set man with grey hair, and wearing a green sports shirt, stepped very lightly up behind him and shot him twice behind the left ear. The other person stooped and picked up the manila envelope. They walked out of the alley rather quickly and, stepping into a red Jaguar which pulled up just then, were driven immediately away.

LIVE BIRTH

by CHARLES WAGNER

Sometimes love leaves behind
something more substantial
than regret.

Randy Warner studied his reflection in the mirror as he brushed his teeth before turning in.

It had been a good day. His boss had let him in on a new advertising deal. His workmate, Sue, was becoming a fine creative partner—and possibly more—and he felt good.

Everything was going down smooth.

He finished brushing and got out his electric razor, lifted the lid of the toilet and emptied the whiskers into the water.

And noticed something.

The toilet was filled with milk, or something very much like it.

Dirty pipes, he thought. That must be it.

He finished cleaning the razor and flushed. The whiskers swirled around like fleas in a blizzard and vanished down the drain.

The bowl refilled with *pink* water.

Randy shook his head and flushed again, watching patiently as the pink water was replaced by clear. Satisfied, he went on to bed.

Dirty pipes, he thought again, *that's all it is*. Then he rolled over on his side. And tried to sleep.

The night was warm. Randy thrashed about in his bed, the rustling of his sheets loud in the stillness. Upstairs, his neighbor's toilet flushed, the gurgling of the water echoing in his own and jarring him the rest of the way out of his half-asleep state.

Muttering, he slid out of bed and lurched across the room to close the bathroom door. *Better drop the lid, too*, he thought, stepping onto the cool tile.

Something was in the toilet.

Randy flicked on the light.

It was a fetus.

He stifled a scream.

The embryo—that's what it was; a human embryo—was tiny and ill-formed, an amorphous mass bobbing on its side in the water, its tiny placenta and umbilical still attached. It had arms, but no fingers; feet, but no toes. A little black spot on the side of what would be its head stared blankly at the ceiling.

Randy brought the toilet lid down with a resounding crash, hitting the flush lever in the same motion. He stared at the tank, listening for the sounds of water clearing.

It's only a few inches long, he thought. *It oughta go*.

The toilet operated normally, then was quiet.

Slowly, Randy lifted the lid.

The inside of the bowl glistened white with clear water and clean porcelain. There was no trace of red or pink—or anything else.

Forgetting his robe and wearing only boxers, he stalked out the front door of his place and into the summer night. Craning his neck to study the apartment above his, he found only dark windows and utter silence. No sign of anything unusual.

He waited.

No one came out upstairs. No one appeared anywhere around. All the nearby apartments were dark.

"*Crazy damn shit*," Randy muttered, stepping back inside and locking the door. He looked at the toilet again. A fetus . . . how could it get there? Bad plumbing? Is someone hiding upstairs, aborting babies?

Scowling, Randy sat down in the living room. How ironic, he thought. An abortionist overhead, when so many of my own relationships ended in abortions of one form or another. Just like cops—where are they when you need them? He shook his head and turned on the tv.

Thirty minutes of a late, late show later, he fell back asleep.

The next day at the agency, Randy was eager to get down to business. A memo on his desk from the boss detailed his new assignment and provided information on the prospective client.

A baby food company.

Quickly wiping the fetal image from his mind, Randy asked Sue to have lunch with him. She accepted, but first she had a meeting with another customer, so he had to hang on, watching the clock until he was able to sneak out early to the restaurant, where he took a table and eagerly watched the door.

She won't be long, he thought.

"Hi, lover-boy," a voice muttered sarcastically behind him. A woman's voice.

"Hello?" He turned.

Oh God, his mind groaned, *it's Monica.*

"Oh hi, Monica."

She stepped around behind the lone, empty chair. "Is this saved? Or can anyone join you."

"Well, uh . . ."

"Or maybe you're just waiting for the first girl that comes along."

Randy forced a smile. "I'm expecting someone, but it's business. My partner at work."

"I'll bet." She studied him cagily. "Look, I won't waste your time." She thrust out her left hand. A full carat of gleaming stone flashed before his eyes. "See, I'm engaged now."

"Congratulations," he said, feeling a twinge deep inside himself.

"Life goes on," she said. "He's a swell guy." She glanced down into the seat of the chair, then at him. "You know, when you dumped me, it really wiped me out. But I got over it. I even think back to our time together as fun. You got your kicks; I got mine."

"I'm glad you're doing well," Randy said, hoping to Christ Sue didn't walk in to see this. "I wish you both the best."

"Thanks," she said triumphantly. Her bearing was that of someone who had cast a skeleton out of the closet or gotten the best of an enemy. "I hope things work out for you, too."

"Thanks."

He watched her walk away, then sighed, shaking his head,

trying to rid his mind of emotional cobwebs.

Sue came in with a smile and a wave.

"Hi!" she said, plunking down at the table.

"Hello," he said, struggling to regain his former mood.

They ordered drinks—her first, his third.

"This is a pretty swank place," Sue said. "Is this where you bring all your lunch dates?" Her tone was light and happy, jesting him. "I've heard talk that you're quite a ladies' man."

"Not any more," he said, downing a deep gulp of his drink. "Not any more."

That night after work, Randy went to bed a little earlier than usual to make up for the night before. He fell into an immediate doze that didn't last.

He awoke with the jarring certainty that he was late for something, but the clock read eleven forty-five—only an hour after he'd retired.

It's warm, he thought. *I should turn on the fan.*

The steady motor hum would break the stillness.

But he didn't move. He stared at the ceiling as the minutes sliced by. He even tried counting them.

A few minutes after twelve the upstairs toilet flushed.

His own gurgled in reply. He could hear it even though the lid was down and the door was closed.

Randy clenched his eyes shut. He waited until he was certain there would be no further sounds, then got up and turned on the bedroom light. He paused to let his eyes adjust and nerves grow confident. Then, breathing hard, he flung the bathroom door open, snapped on the light switch, and stepped to the toilet. He waited until his calm returned, then stooped and flipped open the lid.

The fetus in the toilet quivered and scraped its tiny hands against the intruding light. Randy could see its chest heaving softly, sucking the clear water in and out. The placenta was gone, but the umbilical ran on down the drain. It was older, better-formed, and larger than before.

Retching, Randy dropped the lid and clutched his gut. Fighting down his bile, he managed to lean over the sink. He threw up once, twice, and knelt, his face in the basin. He reached over blindly and hit the lever. The water gurgled, coughed, and swirled away. When it refilled, he flushed again and stood up,

rinsing the sink and washing his face.

A moment later, he slowly raised the lid.

Empty.

It was a haggard Randy Warner that showed up for work the following day. He had waited until seven-thirty for any further sign of life from upstairs and had finally given up and gone on to work. Now he sat at his desk, numbly trying to recall his thoughts and ideas from yesterday.

"Hey, are you all right?" asked a soft, concerned voice behind him. Randy turned. It was Sue.

"No, I—I didn't sleep well last night."

"I can see that." Instead of her usual slacks, she was wearing the black dress that last week he had said he liked. "Would you like to have lunch again today?" she asked. "Yesterday was fun."

"I don't think so." He could feel the ruts under his eyes. His stomach was shrunken to a walnut.

"Too bad." She smiled at him. "What do you think of this?" she asked, switching subjects.

She held up a pastel drawing of a baby in a chef's hat eating with a spoon from a mixing bowl. Beneath it were the words Randy had coined only two days earlier: *Berger—the Chef's Choice*.

"It's just fine," he said, barely looking at the panel.

Two hours later he left the office for the rest of the day. When he got home, he noticed a man leaving the apartment above his.

"Hey!" he shouted, trying to control his interest. "How are things upstairs?"

The man stopped near the door and leaned over the railing. "Fine, I guess." He started to turn away, but Randy spoke again.

"I was just wondering. Have you been having any trouble with your plumbing lately? My toilet's been—uh, well, it's been backing up a lot. At night."

"I wouldn't know. I'm just here to paint the place."

Randy paused in front of his door. "You mean you don't room with Bob?"

"No," said the painter, "he moved out a month ago."

Randy felt sick to his stomach. "Well, has anybody been working up there nights? You know, after midnight, say?"

"No. Why do you ask?" The man was getting a little testy.

"No reason," Randy mumbled.

He went inside and closed the door.

That night, at one o'clock in the morning, the upstairs toilet flushed as before. Randy's bubbled in reply. This time he forced himself to remain in bed.

The next day he called in sick.

The process repeated through the rest of the week. The upstairs toilet flushing in an empty apartment. Randy's plumbing echoing in reply. And each time Randy trying to ignore it, to fight down the gnawing curiosity that urged him to get up and check in the bathroom.

To be sure.

He was too tired to go into the office the remainder of that week. His boss reminded him of the importance of the Gerber account, but Randy insisted that he was too sick to even think about working. Instead, he spent his afternoons calling plumbers.

They found nothing wrong.

Sue called him and asked if there was anything she could do. He told her there was nothing and that he only needed rest.

And finally it was Saturday. After consuming a bottle of scotch, Randy had slept through the nightly noises and awoke feeling somewhat refreshed.

Sitting at his kitchen table eating a light breakfast, he glanced idly at the calendar above the counter. A gift from his bank, it was one of the few things hanging on any of his walls.

Randy looked away. A mother and child walked past his patio window.

Randy looked at the calendar again. The day's date was 20 August 1983.

Three hundred seventy days ago it had been 15 August 1982.

He lurched from table to counter and thumbed open his address book. Amanda's number and address were still there. But maybe she'd moved or switched phones. (Didn't Gloria change her number after telling him to go to hell for the last time?)

It's Saturday morning, he reasoned. She oughta be home. Especially a *nice* girl like Amanda, he sarcastically added in his mind.

He dialed the number.

"Hello," said a female voice. The same voice that Randy once thought of as sensitive and understanding.

"It's Randy, Randy Warner."

"Oh great! Now I suppose I'll have to change my number.

Listen, asshole, it's been a year—buzz off!" The voice was harsh with reason, and fading.

"Don't hang up!" Randy screamed. "Please!"

"Please? You must be out of your mind." She paused, her breath easing off. "All right, what do you want?"

"It's about our baby."

"Are you nuts? I had the abortion a year ago!"

"I know, but—"

"You bastard! You made me do it. Remember?"

"Now wait—"

"You told me you weren't ready for kids. I didn't think you weren't ready for *me*!"

"I paid for the abortion, right?"

"Oh sure. You told me you'd marry me, too." She fell silent.

"Look, Amanda, let's not rehash this. Something's happening, some kinda joke."

"Now you think I'm playing a joke on you? Go to hell!"

"No! Just hear me out—please."

Amanda sighed. "All right."

Randy told her about the past week's events. He expected her to laugh or call him nuts at any moment, but the line remained quiet instead.

"Are you still there?" he asked.

"Sure."

"What am I supposed to do?"

"Well," she pondered, "I guess it's your baby now."

"My baby—we aborted it!" Randy screamed.

"Sure, but you *paid* for it. *It's yours.*"

Randy sat dumb-struck as Amanda hung up on him.

That evening Randy didn't even try to go to bed. He just sat up in his houseclothes, sipping scotch and watching the world grow dark from his living room.

It was quiet, as all the other nights had been. A few night owls walked past his window, glanced through the glass, and moved on. Finally all the foot traffic stopped. Nothing at all stirred, making the complex seem deserted.

Randy got up to turn on the tv.

Upstairs, a toilet flushed.

His toilet answered.

And something else . . . a small noise.

Muffled splashing.

Randy drained his glass and walked past the tv to the bathroom. He turned on the light and stood over the bowl, peering down at the lid.

The sounds grew louder. Splashing and a different sound, a verbal sound, like the cooing of a—

He threw the lid open.

"Ga-ga!" squealed the baby in the toilet bowl. It was a boy and it reached toward Randy with small, perfect hands.

"How old are you?" Randy asked softly, stopping low to draw the baby from its bath. He carried it back to the living room, where he cradled it most of the night.

By morning, it was walking.

THE OLD BLACK HAT

by G. L. RAISOR

Concerning the ultimate fate
of a certain well-known bit
of haberdashery.

In December, magic came to Gaulley Bridge. Everyone recalled the exact week it happened. It was the same week the town was plagued by two heavy snowfalls, followed by two sudden thaws.

Only one little girl knew what happened, and no one would have believed her anyway. A few of the older residents suspected something strange.

And they weren't talking either.

Of course, nobody cares to talk about what happened on that day. Just a nervous whisper now and then. But we're getting ahead of our story.

A shiny black top hat bounced down the street propelled by a gust of wind, caught in the eddying currents, rolled and tumbled end over end until it finally came to rest against the wheel of an equally shiny black car.

No one came rushing after the hat. It waited patiently to be discovered.

Seven-year-old Chris Chandler walked toward the water that cried out to be splattered. His new shoes made neat squishy sounds in the mud, and he was almost happy. Except . . . following closely

behind was the permanent hardship of his life, his younger sister, Sarah.

"Don't you ever wanna get in trouble?" he asked in a voice filled with bafflement, turning to stare at the pudgy four-year-old. Clumping along the sidewalk in her orange snowsuit, she looked a lot like an overweight carrot.

"No! And you'd better not jump in the water," Sarah warned him in a whine that always took the fun out of *everything*. "I'll tell Mom," she added, dragging a mitten across her nose.

"If you do," Chris threatened in a tone that bordered on ominous, "I'll tell you the truth about Santa Claus."

The mittens flew protectively to her ears and tears began to gather in her eyes. Chris took one look at her and relented, but only because he didn't want to see her nose run any more—it was already a pretty disgusting mess.

"Where's your Kleenex?" he asked, weighing the pleasures of one good splatter against the probability of being sent to his room for the rest of the day. If he did it just right, he could knock that sucker dry.

"In my pocket," she answered with a loud sniff. The mittens lowered. "And you'd better not say nothing bad about Santa."

"You don't really believe all that stuff about Santa Claus, do you?" Chris sneered as he ran his hand along the long, shiny black flank of the car parked in the drive. His foot nudged something. Before he could bend down, Sarah darted in and scooped up the object.

"Aw, it's only a hat," Chris said in disgust, trying to mask his envy. He quickly dismissed her treasure. "Probably belongs to the guy who drives the car."

"No, it doesn't," Sarah corrected, her face flushing with sudden excitement, "it's Frosty the Snowman's hat. I just know it is." When Chris tried to reach for the hat, she cradled it tightly against her chest. "How about we build a snow man and put the hat on him?" Her face pleaded. "Please, Chris, don't you believe in magic?"

"Look, Dopey," he said, jerking a thumb at the muddy yard, "there ain't no snow. And there ain't no magic. Come on, let's go. Mom told us not to be gone too long. We gotta get to the church."

One step inside the door and Mom pounced. He risked a quick look at her face. Storm warnings, as his dad called them, were out. He knew he was in trouble, because her lips had almost disappeared.

Out of the tirade that washed over him, he was able to pick out two familiar phrases that always sounded like one: "Where's-your-sister-and-just-look-at-those-shoes-young-man."

Everyone in the room turned to stare. Totally embarrassed by this attention, he fled to the bathroom.

A moment later, the door cracked open. "See, I told you," Sarah said smugly, "it is magic."

"What are you talking about?" Chris asked as he stared dismally at the puddle gathering by his feet. No doubt about it, his brand new dress shoes were goners. Mom was Going. To. Be. Pissed.

"The hat," she gushed. "I went in and put it on Uncle Bill."

"You got snot for brains, Sarah. Uncle Bill's dead. Dad said they already embalmed—"

At that instant hoarse, inhuman screams of pain ripped through the funeral home. More screams from the terrified mourners joined the first. The crash of furniture added to the already deafening din.

"Am I in trouble?" Sarah asked, eyes widening.

"Boy are you *ever*," Chris said in a voice filled with something akin to awe.

Four Poems

by SUSAN SHEPPARD

Moonlight pools the bones of this one's face;
in the silence, under the earth,
the other smells of lilies.

Incubus

Sleep invokes the dark
Through a pale form spread upon the bed
Sweet as a dish of magnolia petals.
Or is it me under the weird thunder
Of a lit kabuki mask: A green thing
Winging, devouring sin:
Consumer of women, eater of men?

The mole on my left hand moves:
Gateway to the soft red regions
Where flesh is wrapped. *Hush—*
He seethes as my other body lifts:
A skillet pulled from the flame.
With a touch granite and paralyzing,
He enters: Slowly speaking my name.

*Sleep near, dear one. For I am the one
Who loves you.* His voice crests
Like Lilith's song. The rasp
Of words is hard insect bodies
Ticking together, clicking close.

Yet it is night's ocean I hear
As his black, hungry mouth presses

Deep into my impenetrable dream.
 I watch from the ceiling without
 A cloud. Moonlight pools
 The bones of her face.
The river of sleep.
So beautiful.

Her hand stirs at my side sheer as glass.
 An invisible form pumps with sexual humming.

Something. A clot of amnesia in the brain.
Something. Dream of a journey going back to.
 The curve of a breast under a reeking palm.

Blue voltage surges the house. The clock chimes.
 Her eyes flick open: Dead empty zeroes.
 Bare skin ripples with a coolness
 Like fishes skimming the lake.

The woman breathes life and I sit up.
 The first crack of day unrolls.
 I pull the plush of woolen close.
It's cold. Very cold.

Labyrinth of the Unseen

As if death had changed anything,
 they come to you at night carrying wisps
 you believe to be Egyptian candles. They are silken
 like the green veins of lilies, with voices that retreat
 deep in the cave of your breast: Words held in painfully
 like a locked coffin. You think you know them
 as a future rose, tenderly felt in darkness,
 extending and blurring edges, tall
 as cathedral windows.

Sometimes rare and exotic, opiate silver mixed
 with Frankincense, they visit you through
 the blue water of dreams, lead you across
 high sidewalks fashioned from mirrors.
 In the morning, you curl against the



light, feel the nimbus of their
presence left in your head.

Later, you stumble through the house,
touching the cold spaces of air, feel
the ice of drowned bodies. Your tongue
is numb as a clapper in your jaw.
Your eyes swim the light
trying to place the surge
of faces. *But you can't
remember a thing.*

Reliquary

In a cleft of dirt we sleep.
Bodies and age are grinding together
as old teeth. No one has opened
this ground for a hundred years.
I lie here in silence

with the one who smells of lilies.
A scarlet ribbon seams my neck
holding my head in space.
I attach myself, white and clinging
like a spider with fingers rooted
in bone. His chest is hard as oak
in a suit that drapes my face
with cool crepe.

Birds sing darkly in my mouth,
building nests of chestnut hair
behind my eyes. We reach with
elbows of spun web. We do not
touch. My love.

I let them kiss, feel
the small quick bite swift
against my breast. Be still.
My heart is a green relic
that thunders in the ground.

Moss has made the carpet.
 Earth has made our home.
 We sleep deep
 in this kingdom of oblong space.
 Blessed are the ones who wait.

Unspeakable Sabbat

The worst part, the smell, like a swamp
 after a thousand years. They all say
 we watched, but me, I can't remember.
 Only Gary with his body twisted up
 like a coat hanger. We tried
 to make a fire. It was wet. So
 we littered the body with leaves,
 our hands pressing fossils in the ground.
 There was no moon when we had the tunes
 cranking. Death was a charge, a train Ricky
 never wanted to get off. Ricky, with his
 crescent of ketchup on his wrists, screaming
 at his mother, "Look what you've done."
 Ricky making Gary kneel, say "I love Satan"
 but Gary only saying, "I love my mother. Ahhh."
 That's what did it. Then the chipping at his
 eyes, an ice pick in the skull.

Before the murder, I was known as a gravedigger.
 I did it to see the bones, to see history.
 You know. That's why people go to museums.
 But I heard noises as I got closer.
 Something wasn't right. The vibes itched like
 insects buzzing in my head. Something piss yellow
 in the air. Then Gary, paper-white, saying,
 "I think you're going to kill me." And Ricky,
 with his look, the devil's wild child, you know,
 saying, "You're nuts, Gary. You're nuts."
 But all that time moving closer.

Afterwards, we went to look at the black spot
 where blood had drained. I was there when
 they threw the knife in the harbor.

Then it was Ricky who dreamed of people,
people who returned. Gary with pecked
out eyes. Gary with his effigy of
skeletons in the clouds.

Ricky knew they were going to build houses,
that he would be caught. He worried of
bones stirring out of the earth.
We went up there to watch the body
sink, all of us afraid to tell.
Then Ricky, in the cruiser,
then Ricky dead, his face smeared
in the papers, shredded like an X-ray
just like he always wanted.

It's hard now, to sleep. I stay up.
I watch Benny Hill. I still have his
jacket. His Led Zeppelin badge
with things blowing up.
That's what he would have wanted.
Sometimes I can feel his zero eyes
and then a door slams. I listen
to his tapes, the devil dispossessed.
All the different voices.

Jason, Come Home

by DARRELL SCHWEITZER

Why this is Hell,
nor am I out of it.
—Marlowe

Jason lived in a closed little world, in the upstairs bedroom he had occupied since earliest childhood, surrounded by all the accumulating strata of boyhood and adolescence and early manhood. Model airplanes dangled from the ceiling. Plastic battleships, which had once lined the shelves, were now crowded awkwardly by heaps of books and records. The walls were covered with posters: Frazetta, psychedelics, reproductions of classic paintings, and even a huge map of James Branch Cabell's imaginary land of Poictesme. This room was home to him. He went out from it into the larger world when he had to—always to return, though, to its cluttered comfort.

His father had vanished from his life early, when he was nine, one summer night after concluding a particularly spectacular quarrel with his mother. There had been a knock at the door, and his dad came in and merely said, "Goodbye son." Then he went out of the house, "to get a goddamned newspaper," as he'd shouted when Mother demanded an explanation, and he never came back. After that, Jason lived alone, his mother reduced to a noise in the background, a figure seen on the stairs, but seldom a true presence. His father had been the parent who mattered.

He remained in his room after college, puttering away at his drawing table, selling an occasional cartoon to the syndicates, but otherwise just sliding from one day into the next, with nothing more demanded or hoped for or even wanted.

The end came when he was thirty, when his mother died and

he was forced out, into a kind of exile. His uncle got him a job with an advertising agency in New York. So he left the Philadelphia suburb and his new, closed-in world was a dingy apartment in the Bronx, where the elevated trains roared by his window at all hours, and between them the traffic on the Cross Bronx Expressway was a steady whisper, like a bitter wind.

He returned to his apartment one sweltering June evening, panting after walking up five flights of stairs because the elevator wasn't working. He let himself in, then carefully locked the three locks, one after another, and wedged the iron bar of the police lock diagonally between the door and the floor. It was as he stepped into the kitchen and had one hand on the refrigerator door, with a no more complicated thought in his mind than a glass of lemonade, when he heard the distinct sound of someone rummaging through his bedroom.

He froze, unable to feel anything but a kind of resignation, as one might in that last second in front of an oncoming train, even when terror is useless. But he was able to step silently into the hall. His hands knew what they were doing. He got out his keys and unlocked one lock, then another.

Suddenly a huge, sweating black man, a complete stranger, stepped out of the bedroom with Jason's videocassette recorder in his arms.

"Hey, man . . ."

The burglar set the VCR down on a chair. A switchblade flicked open in his hand.

Jason grabbed the bar of the police lock, but the black man only grinned. A second burglar materialized out of nowhere and yanked the bar from his hands, then tossed it to the first. It was only as he stood dumbly staring at his empty hands that Jason realized that the partner must have been standing in the doorway to the bathroom, opposite the kitchen, just out of sight behind a bookcase, no more than three feet away all the time he'd been working at the locks.

The second burglar caught him by the collar and lifted him against the door. He too had a switchblade, weaving the point back and forth in front of Jason's eyes.

"You make one little sound, motherfucker . . ."

"Shit, just kill him and get the fuck outa here," the other burglar

The one holding Jason laughed. "He can't do nothing. You know how us folks all look *alike* . . ." To Jason he said, "*Ain't that right?*"

Jason's only response was a gasp as a fist slammed into his solar plexus and a knee caught him in the groin. After that he lay still on the floor, doubled up, just wishing the pain would go away, that everything would go away. It might have been hours before he realized he was alone in the apartment.

He staggered into the bedroom, standing in the doorway with his eyes closed, not daring to look. But he couldn't stand there forever, and eventually he opened his eyes and saw what he had been expecting. All the drawers had been dumped out. The books had been swept from the shelves and trampled, the posters ripped from the walls. A solitary plastic biplane dangled from the ceiling, minus its upper wing.

He sank down in the doorway and covered his face with his hands, sobbing gently. He felt like he had been raped, his innermost *self* violated. The outer world had burst in brutally, through the window overlooking the elevated tracks. As if to mock him, a particularly noisy train went by just then, rattling the apartment. The last plastic battleship slid off a shelf and broke.

He knew he was completely alone, with no one to turn to and nowhere to go. It occurred to him, in an abstract way—he couldn't apply the thought to himself, no, not really—that if he had somehow directed his life differently, years ago, he might not be here now, like this. But he had lived himself into a corner, and here he was.

He thought, too, of calling the police, but never did. He was sure they had enough statistics already.

Instead, with that same feeling of utter resignation he'd had before, he waded through the debris and reverently set up his drawing table. He re-attached the clamp-on lamp and plugged it in. Fortunately the bulb was not broken.

Then he found a pencil and righted a chair, and began to draw.

Hours passed, and he lost himself in the act of drawing. The pain of the outer world receded a little.

Then somewhere, far away, a phone was ringing.

The night seemed to go on forever, and still he worked, with faint, light touches of the pencil, his hand guided almost unconsciously, without any plan or design. It was only after a long while that he realized what he was doing: remembering and reconstructing the only place in the world he had ever been safe or happy, his old room at home. His hand called back every object in perfect detail, reproducing precisely the order of the books on

the shelves, the angle of the fake polar bear throw rug in relation to the bed, the formation of the model planes on the ceiling.

The dark, noisy New York world retreated beyond his window once more, and he was comforted.

But the phone was still ringing. It had been doing so for an hour. Slowly he came to realize that the sound was from *his* phone, at his feet among the wreckage. He picked it up.

"Jason, come home," a voice said softly.

"Who is this?"

"It's Dad. Come home, son."

He was even more afraid now than he had been when the burglar seemed about to slit his throat. He knew that voice. He had long treasured it in his memory.

"Stop it! Whoever you are, stop it!"

"Jase—"

"My father went away when I was nine. We never heard from him. He's dead."

"You sure, Jase?"

No one had ever called him *Jase* except his father. He'd once fought with a boy at school for doing it, because *Jase* was the secret name his father had given him, and no one else was allowed to use it.

"Look," he said weakly. "I can't. The house was sold to developers. It's offices now. I don't live there. Neither do you."

"Don't bother to pack, Jase. Everything is here for you. Just come home."

His journey was like a dream. The burglars hadn't taken his wallet. No, in this dream, which he secretly and deeply knew wasn't anything as simple as a dream, as night finally paled into dawn, he had money and he bought a ticket and boarded an Amtrak train. Penn Station rolled away, and at ill-defined intervals the loudspeaker called out Newark, Princeton Junction, Trenton, and finally Thirtieth Street, Philadelphia. As long as he didn't think about it, as long as he let himself drift with the current of his dream or whatever it was, everything was easy. He felt as if a great burden were lifted from him.

A local took him past familiar sights. The station names were like a litany: Wynnewood, Ardmore, Bryn Mawr, Rosemont. At last he stood on a familiar platform. Slowly, trembling with expectation, he descended the wooden steps into the parking lot, while

the early morning traffic of school children and cleaning ladies melted around him. He was alone, gazing up the hill he had so often climbed, where a Tudor house stood among oak and mimosa trees.

He climbed the hill, still unable to bring himself to question what he was doing, or even wonder why there was no sign in front of the house proclaiming its conversion into the offices of assorted doctors, lawyers, and real estate brokers. Nor did he hesitate when he found that he still had the key to the front door on his keychain.

The lock had not been changed.

He went inside, and he knew at once that he belonged here. It was something he could feel, almost as if only here he could truly breathe. He stood in the little hall at the bottom of the front stairs for a while, looking at the familiar things all around him: the grandfather clock gleaming darkly in the living room to his left, the framed tintypes of his great grandparents on the wall to his right, the antique lantern on the mail table. There was mail there, a few letters and a copy of *Treasure Chest* magazine. That startled him. He had subscribed to *Treasure Chest* as a child, but was sure it had long since ceased publication.

Then, at last, because he inevitably had to, he went reverently up the carpeted stairs, past the familiar old prints his mother had carefully restored and framed, to his own room, where the books and airplanes and the plants in the windowsill were all exactly as they had always been.

He lay down on the bed and realized that he was home now, truly and for good, and he slept peacefully, his whole New York exile no more than a rapidly fading, unpleasant dream.

Downstairs, in the kitchen, plates clacked. Silverware clinked on a glass. A teapot whistled.

He sat up suddenly, disoriented for a few seconds, remembering. He rubbed his face and shook his head.

It was still morning. He wondered if he had slept through the whole day and night, into the following morning. It felt like a long time.

He gazed slowly around the room, running his hand along the bookcase by the bed, noting the familiar titles and arrangement.

This isn't possible, he thought, but there was too much pain in thoughts like that. So he took the path of least resistance and merely rose and prepared himself for breakfast. In the bathroom,

he paused to stare at himself in the mirror. The face looking back at him was not a thirty-year-old man's, but much younger, eighteen or nineteen at most. It seemed right that way.

Afterward, he put on blue jeans and a college t-shirt and went downstairs barefoot.

He hesitated before the kitchen door, his heart racing, his thoughts a muddle.

"Mom?"

There was no answer. He gently pushed the door open. The kitchen was empty, but a place had been set, and pancakes steamed. He walked around the kitchen and peered out into the yard. Everything was as it always had been, the woodpile, the shed, the few boards nailed up from an abandoned attempt to build a treehouse.

Nothing moved out there. He listened. Nothing moved inside the house either. The grandfather clock in the living room ticked patiently. He sat down and ate, then washed his dishes and put them away, and went back to his room.

For a while he lay back on the bed daydreaming, and then he reached over for a random book. It was *The Count of Monte Christo*, which had been his favorite once. He opened it near the beginning and reread the prison sequence, caught up in the hero's desperation and the joy of his escape.

Once more he heard someone moving about the house. He put the book down and listened, but did not get up from the bed. The kitchen door opened and closed. Footsteps came up the carpeted stairway.

He sat up, tense, waiting for the door to his room to open. It had to open, any second now.

But it didn't.

"Mom?" he called out, and when no answer came, he called again, his voice breaking into an awkward squeak. "Dad?"

He got up and opened the door himself. No one was there, but a tray had been placed on the post at the top of the stairs with a sandwich and a glass of milk on it.

That afternoon he put on sneakers, got the lawnmower out of the shed in the backyard, and mowed the lawn. It was so easy, falling into the familiar pattern, doing what he always did, what was always expected of him.

But when he finished, and had put the lawn mower away, a

disquieting thought came to him. He almost remembered being someone else, somewhere else. That other person wasn't able to accept what was happening to him. That other person said again and again, *No, this isn't possible.*

He hardly knew what he was doing. Something gave him the impulse, and he walked slowly to the end of the driveway. There he stopped, looking up and down the street at the familiar houses, at the names on the mailboxes which he knew from his paper route. When he was a small child, he had ranged through all the backyards, discovering the secrets of the tangle of bushes behind the houses that all the neighborhood kids called the Jungle.

The houses were silent, the street empty.

And the vaguely remembered person said again, *No, this isn't possible.*

But Jason knew that it merely *was*, possible or not, that he was *here*, and he turned and went back into the house, up to his room.

He must have napped. It was dusk when he awoke. His legs didn't quite reach the floor. He slid off the bed, then hurried down to the living room, turned on the tv set, and plopped down on the floor, holding his face up between his fists. He watched *The Lone Ranger* first, then *Ramar of the Jungle*.

Someone was moving about in the kitchen. He heard kitchen sounds, and after a while he could smell roast chicken.

"Jase, it's time to eat," a voice said.

He got up, switched off the set, and went in to his dinner. Again he ate alone, but this time two places were set.

A door swung shut upstairs. Floorboards creaked overhead.

He stopped eating then. He sat still and remembered so many secret things, and wished, and remembered some more. He was almost crying when he finally ran to the stairs and up them.

He father was waiting at the top of the stairs. He hadn't changed at all since that night he'd gone out for the newspaper.

"Daddy?"

His father smiled and beckoned him up the stairs with a gentle flicking motion of his fingers.

"Welcome home, son. Welcome, welcome home."

He began to climb the stairs slowly, his heart pounding, his eyes wide. Halfway up he stopped, and merely stared.

"Come on, Jase. Come on."

He backed down one step, then two, then three.

"Daddy, I . . . can't."

"What's the matter, Jase?"

"I don't know, Daddy. It's like I . . . don't belong here."

"This is your home, son. Of course you belong here. Now come upstairs."

"No." He turned and ran the rest of the way down the stairs and bounded against the front door, his fingers working furiously at the chain and the lock. He said, aloud, in a voice that wasn't that of a child, "*No, this isn't possible.*"

Then he was outside and running in the darkness, along the familiar street, and something seemed to fall away from his mind, and he could think more clearly, and remember, and he began to become someone else, and the memory and the actuality changed places.

It was suddenly morning, and he wasn't running, merely walking swiftly, looking at his watch and afraid he would miss his train. He was dressed in a suit and carrying his art portfolio. Businessmen with briefcases hurried up the wooden stairs, onto the train platform.

As he waited among the commuters, and as the conductor called out the familiar stops, he seemed to be surfacing out of some depth, like a swimmer rising toward the sunlight from the bottom of a deep pool. He changed trains at Thirtieth Street Philadelphia and soon the flat New Jersey landscape slid by the window. Then he saw New York again, and that view, too, was familiar, the grey-blue towers of Manhattan rising beyond a house-covered hill shortly before the train went underground.

He went to work that day, but he accomplished little. His mind was a muddle of shifting impressions, and memories that weren't memories, all summed up by the question, *Did any of it really happen?* For a while that was a comfort, the thought that none of it, including the burglary, had ever happened, that it was a bad dream, a mere vapor of the mind. But at the same time he felt a strange *newness* about everything, the agency, the other employees, the restaurant where he went for lunch. It was as if he didn't belong here, and had somehow been inserted into someone else's life.

Did any of it really happen?

He knew, of course, that in the end he would have to find out. He delayed as long as possible that evening, wandering the streets after dark even though he was often afraid to wander the streets, trying to put off that final moment of discovery and

confirmation.

But in the end, he returned to his apartment, and he saw the remains of everything he had managed to cling to from his home, from his room the trampled books and clothing, the ripped posters, the broken airplanes.

He could not weep now. He was beyond all that. The weeping had been done by someone else, it seemed, long ago. Now all he could do was sit down at the drawing table, clamp a fresh piece of paper in place, and begin to draw.

The thought came to him that he would draw the burglars and turn the result over to the police. He had seen them both clearly enough.

But that was someone else's thought, an intrusion, and he put it out of his mind.

The elevated train rumbled past the window.

He drew his room again, his room back home, once more calling back every detail. He worked with a desperate urgency, as if time were running out, his last chance slipping away.

He sat, barefoot and in blue jeans and a college t-shirt, in the middle of a ravaged apartment in a strange and frightening place, remembering, remembering, while someone died inside him, someone who was no more than a vaguely familiar stranger, someone who shouted for the last time, *No, this isn't possible.*

The phone rang.

Plane Crash Lover

by DEAN WESLEY SMITH

She's right on time.
She's always on time.
She hasn't been late
since the day she died.

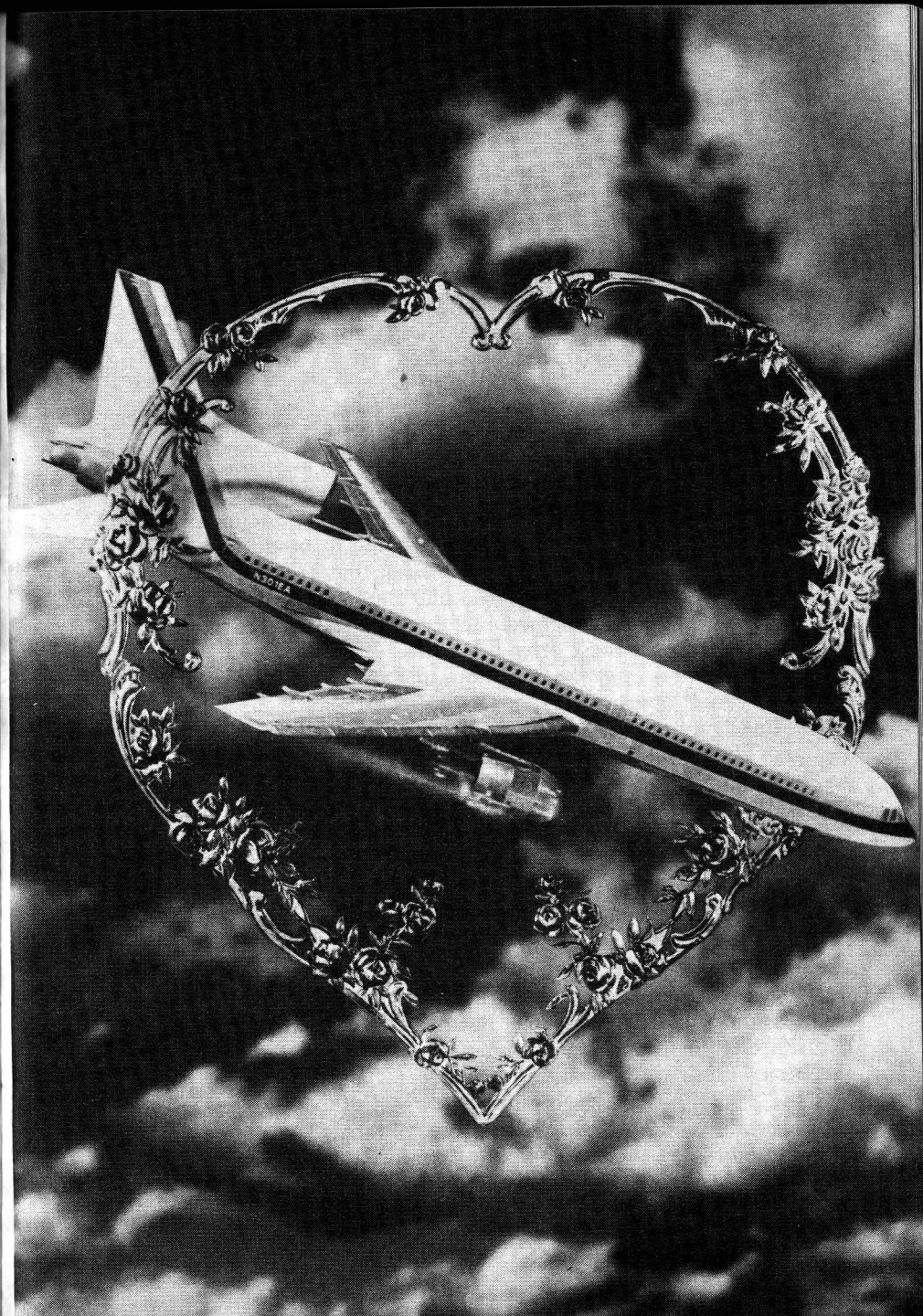
I call her my plane crash lover. She was going to be my wife. Her name's Lillian and she's been dead now six years. And for six years she's been coming into Joe's Place every Tuesday morning at exactly ten thirty a.m. That's what time it is now.

On Tuesday mornings Joe's Place is always empty except for Joe and me. Joe does all the bartending chores and I play the role of the customer. My name's Carl. Now that I think back on it, it's kind of funny that I've been the only customer on Tuesday mornings for six years. There's really no reason why, because Joe's Place is nice as far as bars go, with its two tables, ten red vinyl booths, and ten red vinyl stools.

Of course, I should count Lillian as a customer. After all, she does buy a drink.

On Tuesday mornings, I always sit on the end stool on the right, or the tenth stool from the left, depending on how I choose to look at it. This morning, I'm sitting on the right end stool. I feel on top of it this morning, even though it's Tuesday.

Joe's cutting lemons. He always cuts lemons at exactly ten thirty. At ten thirty-five, he scrapes all the lemons into a plastic dish and starts cutting oranges. He's always done with them at ten forty and then it's the limes. They always take him longer, so usually



he makes me a drink before he starts on them. Excepting, of course, when I'm drinking Marys. He lets me sip on those right through the limes and sometimes even through his wiping down the cash register and stocking the beer. Depends on how he thinks I feel.

This morning I feel on top of it, but Joe says I look like hell and he's worried about me, so he gives me a Mary. I'm working on it, letting the taste of the tomato and tabasco cut through the memory of last night's drinks, and Joe's cutting lemons, when in Lillian walks.

She's right on time.

She's always right on time.

And she's always alone. Joe says that she's one of those women who look like they shouldn't be alone, especially in a bar. I agree with him, but for six years now I've been afraid to do anything about it. I decided that this morning is going to be different. After six years, I'm tired. This morning, I decided that I'm going with her.

Joe knows that Lillian's dead. He met her once back before the plane crash and he helped me through the rough time after. Joe's just about the best friend I've ever had.

Lillian always goes through the same routine. She slowly pulls the front door open, walks one step inside and then stops. And every Tuesday morning she jumps when the door slams right behind her ass. Then she tries to smooth down her tight, knee-length skirt as she squints into the dark at Joe and me. Just like every Tuesday, Joe and I watch her as she tries to see us. It always takes a minute for a person's eyes to adjust in Joe's.

She's always dressed exactly the same. Her white blouse is slightly untucked from her blue skirt on the right side and one button too many is open below her neck. Her hair looks as if she's been running. I hate to see her like that, but now after six years, I'm used to it.

She walks carefully around the two tables that fill the middle of Joe's and puts her purse on the third stool from the left. Then she sits on the second stool. Not once has she ever come up and sat beside me. I keep waiting for her to, but she never does.

Joe wipes his hands on his bar towel, flips it over his left shoulder and slides a napkin in front of her. "Morning, Lillian."

She nods and smiles her kind of strained smile. "Scotch. Rocks. Please?" she says as if Joe doesn't know what she drinks.

"Sure thing," Joe says and starts back toward the well, giving me a look. I just keep watching her and thinking of the past.

We had it good back then. We were going to be married and the whole nine yards, just as soon as we put a little money away. That's what I always said. Lillian always said that we'd get married as soon as I cut back on my drinking. She hated Joe's Place. Only came in once to pick me up when I was too drunk to walk. She was one mad woman that night. Made me promise that I'd never drink again or she'd leave me for good. I did promise, too.

And kept it. At least for a while.

She looks over at me and smiles. I smile back, then take a drink of my Bloody Mary, swirling the last of it in the bottom of the glass as a soft lament to a lost love.

Joe sets her drink down in front of her with a click, then waves her money away. In six years he's never let her pay for a drink. He says the money would probably disappear anyhow after she left. Joe thinks I should go with her. He says I should do it just so it'll free her soul. Of course, he has no idea just where "going with her" might be, any more than I do. We've argued a lot about it.

I keep watching her, remembering the day at the airport. I broke my promise and got drunk in the airport bar. Someone called her and she caught me and started yelling. All I remember doing is running, crashing into people, stumbling. She kept chasing me, yelling, one corridor after another. I was drunk, but her tight skirt slowed her. People got in her way, while I just knocked them down. I lost her and bought a plane ticket for New York, figuring she'd never catch me there. Somehow I got aboard the plane without her knowing it and took the seat on the right, a window seat.

"Bourbon. Soda. Not much ice," I told the stewardess as they locked up the plane.

"I know what you drink," Joe says with a frown.

"Sorry," I say. "Just drifting." She's swirling one of her long nails in her drink, making the ice cubes tinkle against the side of the glass.

In a minute she'll look at me, just like she did that day.

I could see her through the scratched glass of my window seat as she pressed against the airport window and yelled for me to come back. I laughed at her. She couldn't get me now.

But as the plane jerked into motion, her stare became lost; distant. My stomach tightened and I remember thinking that what I really wanted was her. I wanted to run to her and comfort her and tell her I wouldn't do it again.

But I couldn't.

And she's given me another chance every Tuesday for six years. And every Tuesday I haven't been able to move. That is, until today—today I'm going with her.

She quits stirring her drink, picks it up quickly and downs it. Then she stands, tries to smooth her wrinkled skirt again, and looks at me.

It's that same look she gave me that day in the airport. Don't leave. Come back. I love you. All wrapped into one.

Hell. How was I to know she would take the next plane for New York. I didn't find out what had happened until I sobered up two days later.

Joe slides my drink in front of me and, embarrassed like, goes back to cutting lemons. He knows this is the rough moment for me. He knows that I'm planning to go with her. He knows that I'm afraid.

I smile kind of weak at her.

She turns to head for the door.

"Wait!" I say and slide off my stool. Christ, I did it.

She stops and looks at me again. It's the first time in six years that she's stopped. I glance over at Joe. He's watching. He nods slowly.

I take a deep breath and face her. "You want me to go with you?"

"Yes," she says, real plain and simple.

"Where would we go?"

"Away from here," she says.

"Can't you tell me where?"

She shakes her head and turns toward the door.

I look over quick at Joe. He waves with his knife hand for me to go with her. I wish it was him going instead of me. I holler, "Wait!"

She stops by the front table and looks back at me.

"I'll come with you." I grab my drink and down it with one quick gulp. Then I nod to Joe. "See you."

"Good luck," is all he says.

My stomach feels like it's got six too many drinks and wants to throw them back at the world. I catch her at the front door. She pulls it open and holds it for me to go through.

She's smiling. The first smile I've seen in six years.

I take a deep breath and hold it, as if I'm going to jump into

a deep river. The knot in my stomach moves up closer to my throat. The parking lot seems to be in front of me, but as I step through the door, everything shimmers. Then goes black.

Then comes quickly back to light.

I'm sitting back on the airplane in my window seat. She's across the way in the airport terminal yelling for me to come back. The stewardess is waiting for my drink order. They're locking up the plane.

For a moment I stare at Lillian across the open space between the plane and the window. She isn't dead. Maybe I only dreamt the last six years. I have to get off the plane or it'll all happen again. She's testing me.

I jump up and crowd my way past the business man beside me and the stewardess. "Hold the door!" I shout.

The other stewardess stops pumping the door closed. I run up the aisle and get between her and the door. "I have to get off. Please let me off?"

"Sure, mister," she says and pumps the door back open enough for me to get into the tunnel. Lillian's standing at the top of the ramp, crying softly.

I hug her and tell her that I'm sorry and that I won't do it again. I can't believe I'm standing holding her. The last six years all seem a blur. She feels even better than I remembered. She isn't dead after all. And she isn't going to be.

After a few minutes more of hugging and me saying I am sorry, we start down toward the parking lot. Right near the baggage claim, I remember my unused plane ticket and decide that I might as well get some money back.

"Why don't you just trade it in on the next flight," Lillian says, "and I'll buy a ticket and we'll take a quick vacation in New York."

My heart stops dead cold.

"No!" I shout and start dragging her toward the parking lot.

She pulls at my arm until she finally gets loose. "I want to go to New York," she says. "You were going."

"Absolutely not!" I shout at her. She looks hurt, but how the hell am I supposed to tell her about the last six years at Joe's Place. Six years that wouldn't happen if she didn't get on that plane.

"And just why not?" she shouts back. She suddenly has that stubborn look that I know means trouble.

I take a deep breath and slow down. "I have an idea. Let's go tomorrow. Let's go home, get some clothes, more money, and do

New York up right."

"I'd rather go now," she says.

"No!" Again I am shouting. People are staring.

A cold look passes over Lillian's face. Then her eyes sort of glaze over. "I need to be on that plane."

It's Lillian's voice, but it sounds just like the same voice she's always used to order her drink in Joe's.

I shudder. I can't let her get on that plane.

She turns toward the ticket counter, but I grab her arm and spin her around.

"I have to be on that plane." Her voice cuts right through me. I let go of her and she moves over to the ticket counter while I stand frozen like a rock in the middle of the river of airport people. I can see her talking to the ticket clerk, but I can't move to stop her. She hands him some money, but I can't even shout out. Finally, he hands her the ticket and she slips it into her purse. Whatever spell that held me lets go.

I run over to her and grab her arm again.

"I'm going to New York on the next plane," she says real cold, then starts back up toward the boarding gates.

I am frozen again until she's out of sight. I don't bother to ask myself how she can do that, or even what I'm doing here. I just think about the six years that she came into Joe's trying to get me to stop drinking and go with her. So now I finally do and it's going to end exactly the same. Maybe that's the only way it can. I don't think about that, either.

I just run over to the ticket counter. "You've got to stop the next plane to New York!" I shout at the man. "It's going to crash!"

The man gives the ticket agent beside him a rolled-eye look and then says, "Sure it is, mister. And just how did you find out?"

"No! No! You've got to believe me. It's going to crash. I know."

"And just how do you know?"

"I—I just know. Now stop the plane!"

"I'm not stopping any plane without a damn good reason. It's not going to crash. Now move on."

"But you don't understand—"

The ticket agent makes a motion for the cop standing at the end of the counter. He starts up the counter with his hand resting on his pistol. I look at him real quick and then back at the agent. "Would you give me a ticket on that plane?" I ask.

I fish out the other ticket from my pocket and hand it to him.

"I missed that flight."

"I bet it was going to crash, too," the agent says, and then starts laughing.

I laugh right along with him as best I can. The cop stops and then heads back down the counter. The clerk gives me the ticket and I catch up to Lillian sitting in the waiting area.

"It looks like I'm going with you again," I say.

Again she smiles a real smile.

I sit beside her and try to calm down. Maybe I had just dreamt those six years while sitting out there on the plane. I had a few drinks. Maybe the plane really isn't going to crash. And besides, I knew that Lillian's ghost really hadn't come into Joe's every Tuesday. Such a crazy idea.

But something inside of me just doesn't believe it, so I decide to try again. "Let's go home," I say to her. "I just want to be with you."

"You will be," she says and again I shiver.

But she's smiling.

"This plane is going to crash."

Lillian takes my hand in hers and holds it. Her skin feels cold, slightly damp. "I need to be on that plane," she says.

I nod my head and we sit holding hands until they make the boarding call. Then, just like newlyweds, we walk down the ramp onto the plane, still holding hands.

I get a window seat again. The tenth one over from the left.

My head is swimming around and around as I try to figure a way to get us both off the plane. I know that I can go at any moment, but I want her with me.

"Are you sure?" I ask as other passengers take their seats.

Her eyes go blank again. "Yes."

I nod. There is no way she is going to get off this doomed flight.

I watch as they lock the door of the plane. I think about the six years of drinking at Joe's. For six years I had lived with the guilt that I killed Lillian. For six years, I had watched her come into Joe's and for those six years, just like her, I had been dead. In a way, this all makes sense. I'm going to die for real this time.

I start laughing and she looks over at me.

"Are you all right?" she asks.

"I'm fine, now that I'm with you."

"Oh, that's a sweet thing to say." She leans her head on my

shoulder.

The sound of the engines starts to fill the plane. The stewardess comes down the aisle asking people for their drink orders. Lillian says no. The stewardess looks at me.

I laugh again.

"Bourbon. Soda. Not much ice," I say.

Lillian gives me her sharp, I-don't-approve look.

"I promise that this will be the very last drink."

"You've said that before," she says.

I laugh again, thinking about Joe and what he'd say if he knew how it all ended. Then I squeeze Lillian's hand in mine. "No," I say to my plane crash lover, "this drink I promise will be my very last."

Blood Rape of the Lust Ghouls

by DAVID J. SCHOW

It's not much of a movie,
but for gore fans
it's got a hell of a poster!

Hackamore decided that the crepuscular boobs who formed the readership of *Cineteratologist* ("THE review of sleaze, splatter and hardcore gore!") would never flash on the meaning of his metaphor, so he crossed it out. The line *The latest steaming shitclod swept from the Augean Stables of the stalk-and-slash ghetto* was obliterated by indelible red ink that blotted into the crossgrain of the cheap typing paper just like . . .

Nah. Too predictable.

As he frequently bragged, he was capable of cranking out such wordage by the linear foot while practically asleep. Next to his typewriter, the roach had ceased to smolder in its Disneyland ashtray; there were two fingers of juice left in his second bottle of Beck's Dark. Hackmore was on full auto-pilot.

MegaProd's newest excretion . . .

Shorter, better. The upfront mention of MegaProductions tipped the hand that the reader should gird his bowels for a punch-press ream-out of yet another cinematic stinkeroo. Grinning, Hackamore chugged the dregs of lukewarm foam from the Beck's bottle. He was gearing up to unleash a big one.

His formula for movie reviewing was so ingrained and inflexible that he looked forward to the day when it could be programmed onto a floppy disk as a template. To the prefab screeds shat forth by the printer, he could insert his around-the-bend adjectives and apocalyptic similes.

The glacier slowness of this puke-em-up crab crawler/strictly for retards, sexual geeks and anybody who reads this magazine/bigger floppola than Dolly Parton's left bazoomba/rather eat a maggotty afterbirth than suffer five seconds of this rabid porcupine diarrhea/should be melted down into guitar picks for the Butthole Surfers/like contracting AIDS visually/a gross, crass, no-class, explotative loser . . .

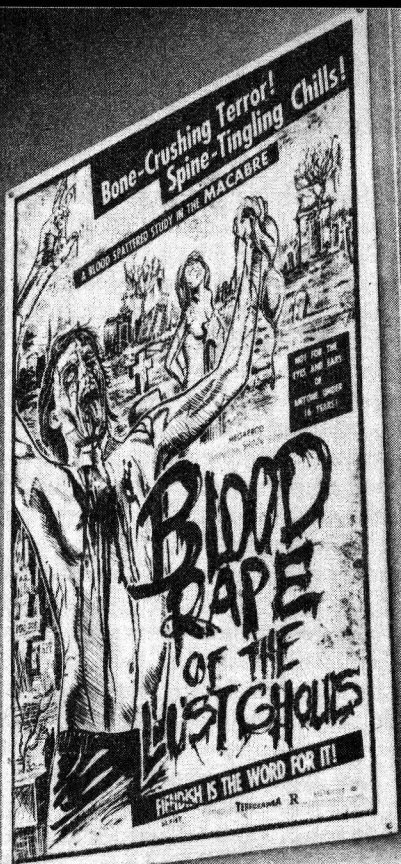
He beamed and thumbed his steel rims past the bump on the bridge of his nose. Then he began to do it all over MegaProd's latest excretion, a timeless chunk of celluloid history entitled *Blood Rape of the Lust Ghouls*. It had played on the bottom of a triple-header bill.

The first feature had been a cheesy 1981 sci-fi flick, *Siphyloid* ("Once it was HUMAN!"), recut so the alien gross-out scenes had been replaced with softcore sex. New title: *Blown to Smithereens*. It didn't merit a second bad review. Next on the menu had been *Chainsaw Cheerleaders II*—not a bonafide sequel, but another in a limitless slew of Italian zombie gorefests that masqueraded behind Anglicized titles in order to guarantee a fast turnover at the box office. Its bared flesh and raw burger was now "framed" by domestically shot and clumsily mismatched new footage featuring Lydia Weir, ex-Chainsaw Cheerleader (currently bloated gasbag has-been jailbait ingenue), now scrounging for work. As the *Cineteratologist* review noted: "She flashes some pallid meat to provide a teaser and tag for seventy solid minutes of hilariously dubbed and totally nonsensical carnage"; what Hackamore had called "a burst dike of unrelenting abbatoir slaughter!"

Hackamore knew these things.

The only movie of the trio worth stabbing with his critical quill was *Blood Rape of the Lust Ghouls*. And Hollywood Boulevard offered only one theater where the discriminating moviegoer might catch presentations of such caliber at three flicks for three bucks—the World. It had calmed down from the bad old days, when armed policemen prowled up and down the aisles, weapons and cuffs clinking in the darkness as some horror movie bimbo got her throat opened up on the big screen. For the most part, it was no longer home to snoring junkies, or gang scruffs slicing up the seats and each other. The hyperjive black dudes who argued loudly with the characters onscreen still came to do their thing, but you could find them in any other theater on either side of the street.

The World was still special to Hackamore, though, and not



just because of its raunchy past glory. It was the one place his wife would never follow him, not after she'd blown a Quarter Pounder (with cheese) all over his Reeboks during the exploding monster baby scene in *Embryo Suckers*. The World had thus been baptized as sanctified ground. They had both sworn *never again* ... in different directions. In that instant, their marital battle lines had been sketched in. Polarization had begun. Hackamore had but to invoke the name of the theater to make Chloe react like a vampire with a crucifix shoved up its ass: *World! Aaggahh! Hssss!*

Under an impossible deadline, ducking salvo after salvo from Chloe, he had fled to the World, where *Blood Rape of the Lust Ghouls* waited. He'd hated it going in. Coming out, he wanted to fuck it till it bled. A dynamite followup to his revised opening line—*MegaProd's newest excretion*—had concretized in his mind when Chloe interrupted, booting open the door and stealing another tiny chunk of his creativity, his palsied career, his cut-rate soul, his life.

"Aren't you done with that shit yet?"

Whatever marginal prettiness she had once possessed had been lost in the war—the determinedly grim battle to rope Hackamore into wedlock (as she had been humorlessly trained to do throughout her entire youth), then forge him into her parents' repressed ideal of a responsible hubby via some calculatedly accidental breeding. Three years of the Rhythm Method, two children, a sand-dune of bills and many lifetimes of bitching later, the battle lines were inked solid. Then etched in granite.

Chloe had the haunted look of a woman betrayed, one who had hitched her wagon to a falling meteor. Now her plain face looked horsey, punched-in and sallow. For revenge, she extracted Hackamore's blood as often as she could, jerking his chain with an infantile, though sadistically smug kind of glee:

"You've been sitting on your ass watching stupid gore films all day while I've been watching Ernie and Waldo since sun-up!"

What passed between them telepathically was so familiar it did not require vocalization. Her tone, and the way she *sneered* certain words, were the incoming buzz bombs of the latest skirmish. Hackamore internalized their sting. If he let her see him react, or bristle at her snide bait, she'd score points.

"I'm working. Give me an uninterrupted hour, and I'll take over." There was just a hint of threat in the meter of his response. He was dead set against letting her win.

"Working. Tch."

He emptied his lungs in a huge sigh, and with his breath, lost the words in his head. The encyclopedia of resentment in Chloe's whine caused his fingers to flinch back from the typewriter keys. She'd scored first, by stopping his work. He turned in his chair, so they could have at each other face-to. Little Ernie was clutching her green rayon stretch pants for support, his thumb plugged into his face, his china blue eyes bright with fear. Baby Waldo was crooked into one full and sagging breast, smack between a broad, wet patch in the armpit of Chloe's t-shirt and a nipple that aimed at the floor, just like its partner. Her breasts had mutated into pendulant udders while no one was looking.

"*Working* is when you wake up at a decent hour in the morning, and take a shower and get in the car and punch a clock and get a paycheck every two weeks, like normal people," she spat angrily. She'd been rehearsing. "*Working* is having a regular job, and earning enough money to have a goddamn car in the first place—"

With bowed shoulders, he rode out this hailstorm, not rising from his chair because that would provoke her into physical vituperation ("*Bald spot! Beanpole! Adam's apple looks like ya swallowed a baseball!*"). Or, she'd start hurling his stuff around. Too much was broken already. He let her rage out, and when she started to splutter, he gave her three beats, then overrode.

"Oh, it's the 'get a real job' rap again. Why don't you regurgitate it while I step out for a beer? Call me if you come up with anything new. Be a drone, that's what you're saying, right, Chloe? Like your brother Malcolm, the no-accountant. Like that fat, flatulent frog who says he's your father." That froze her tirade in mid-rant. Hackamore had been rehearsing as well. "What you're saying is fuck my career, if it means you have to do without a Toyota and a Trinitron. Am I warm? I told you before—you want a *real* job, hoist your expanding ass out onto the bricks and snare one. I'll watch the kids. They sleep, they play, they watch cartoons. They help me type. No problem."

This was not the correct answer.

Chloe flushed scarlet, her mouth turning mean, her eyes backing darkly into her brow. "You're the husband! You're supposed to *support* the family! I'm *doing* my job! I'm raising *your* children!"

"So why are you pestering me about watching the kids, if that's your job?" He smiled. It was the calmness and logic she hated most of all.

"Oh, grow up!" She was copping out, slapping on her Patented

Chloe Attitude. "Be real. Be *normal* for a change!"

"*Fuck* normal." He dredged up his *why fight* expression, then cut her some ceremonial slack. "Chloe, just hang on, all right? Trust me." He held up thumb and forefinger. "I'm this far from the managing editorship of *Cinteratolo*—"

"Oh, *fuck* Krueger and his stupid fucking magazine," she said with a lemon-sucking smile, showing him her middle finger of her free hand. Ernie started howling. Waldo seemed stunned into baby catatonia, half-smothered by the shapeless pillow of his mom's boob. When Chloe turned vulgar, it meant she was preparing to huff off-screen after slamming the door. "*Fuck* your stupid fucking gore movies!" She gave the birdie to the poster of *Blood Rape of the Lust Ghouls* Hackamore had thumbtacked to the wall after getting the presskit. "And *fuck* that stupid fucking writing that never *fuck*-ing pays!"

Hackamore's control nearly snapped. "Think you can use the word '*fuck*' one more time, sweetums?"

"And *FUCK YOU!*" she shrieked, in full livid flower now. *Slam!* Hackamore heard paint flakes and pieces of the door molding sift down. From without came Ernie's best banshee wail. He was bugeyed with terror by now.

Hackamore turned back to his typewriter. As Chloe had blossomed into anger, so had his headache, with regular, thudding, one-two jabs to each temple. His neck muscles were grinding cement. His verve had been bled away, and Chloe's voice hung in the room like a vindictive ghost, telling him what a gross, crass, no-class, exploitative loser he was. He kneaded his eyelids, trying at least to distribute the pain evenly, and when he refocused he was staring at the poster, into the six-inch, dripping Day-Glo lettering: *Blood Rape of the Lust Ghouls*. Softly, he cursed, his brain fighting to ignore the adrenalin-spiking argument that waited to ambush him beyond the slammed door. It had to cease to exist in order for him to concentrate.

C'mon, he thought, c'mon, the movie was crap, they're all crap, you can reel out this review on automatic, you can rip out *Blood Rape's* heart without even looking ...

The poster depicted a skull-faced, rotting goon with one eye dangling from a pink stalk of ligament. Its decaying fist was oversized, in forced perspective, holding a shredded bikini top. Blood drooled from every likely orifice, and gobbets of glistening brown stuff webbed its fingers and were stuck in its broken teeth. Behind

the goon, the tilting headstones of a hillside cemetery were silhouetted by a bilious full moon, and a nude cutie cowered in the middle distance, the R-rated bits of her anatomy artfully concealed by the configurations of a grave marker topped by a Star of David. Subtle, thought Hackamore. A masterpiece of lowbrow exploitation hog-calling. It inspired the closing line for his review: *But for sleaze fans, it's got a great poster.*

That was perfect—just the right amount of chic contempt. Get the one-sheet, forget the film, it said. Hackamore knew it was an insult from which he could work backward. He had written reviews inside-out before. Now to zero-in and annihilate each of the film's flaws, piecemeal.

The imbecilic ending, for one thing. *Blood Rape of the Lust Ghouls* was another in a tediously long line of films that inserted an eleventh-hour kneejerk routine—a last minute shock to make audiences jump. The effect was illogical, irrelevant to the preceding plot, and totally galvanic. In this case, Hackamore recalled, the Lust Ghouls had all been fricasseed in the morgue fire. The teen hero and his plucky bimbo squeeze had retired to the backseat of his GTO to drop trou and, in Chloe's words, get normal. There followed a quick cut to a rain-slicked alley, and a character not seen earlier in the film. He's being stalked, he knows it, and he turns full-face into the camera just in time to eat a gutterally razzing chainsaw. Pop to black; roll end credits.

The animals in attendance at the World had jumped on cue. The schlock shock had poked them, and they'd jumped—those that were not already asleep, unconscious, or beyond reality altogether. Stupid!

Hackamore channeled his seething frustration into his writeup, chopping and slicing and dicing the movie into helpless, bleeding chunks, then chasing the chunks around until even the most fleeting, accidental shot of the boom microphone could not escape unskewered. It was gore writing, sort of. It was the brand of relentless napalm attack that made him popular with the readers of *Cineteratologist* (by definition, "a student of the cinema of malforms, monsters, and deviates," quoth Kreuger, who was probably the ultimate fleapit weirdo).

Hackamore sat back and regarded his completed opening zinger: *MegaProd's newest excretion, a mega-turd entitled BLOOD RAPE OF THE LUST GHOULS is a cinema coprophiliac's delight—this movie eats shit, and if you enjoy similar gustatory pursuits, you'll 'gasm over*

this 92-minute spree of muff-diving zombie cannibals, tomb-stone-humping T & A microcephalics, and chunk-spewing graphic mutilation.

Glowing inside now, Chloe exiled to a cold back burner of his mind, Hackamore leaned back in his chair to pat the poster that leered at him from the wall. Nice victim.

When his hand sank into the poster halfway to the elbow, he yelped and jerked it back out. His chair upended, introducing his butt to the hardwood floor with an ungainly thump.

He slammed his eyes shut; he struggled to force his raging heart-beat into deceleration. When he stood, his knees were watery and knocking. He shook his head. He had to go easier on the damned imported beer.

It was okay; nothing had really happened.

He squared off with the poster loose-jointedly, like a gunslinger fixing to make some slow-draw schmuck bite the hardpan. *Blood Rape's* goon leered back, unchanged. "Awright, pilgrim," he drawled, "Let's see you try that one again." He was cocky now, goofy and amused in that silly-slow way good dope could leave you sometimes.

He pushed his arm right through the center of the goon's chest—zip! No resistance. No ectoplasmic goop, either. He reached in until his elbow was gone, and waved his hand around in a void he could not see. Cool air moved past his fingers. He withdrew his hand intact. It was like a very good special effect; no matte lines.

A pressure valve laugh jumped out of him, sharp and sudden, like a bark. He stifled it. It would not do to have Chloe barging in while he was feeling up another dimension, or marveling with the sort of lopsided smile he saw most often on those walking lobotomies who were bussed to visit the zoo in gangs. But for once his vast repository of words had failed him. Confronted with this overwhelming cosmic surprise, all he could find to say was, "Shiiiiit . . ."

This was some unique poster, he decided.

He thought of shoving in a broom, or maybe his Polaroid. No. Chloe had already squandered the film on twenty sugar-cute shots of Waldo with his bare rump in the air. A broom or a probe was not required yet; so far the poster hadn't done anything hostile. He reinserted his hand, finger-deep, tracing the inside border of the poster all the way around, to see whether this was some kind of 4-D gap that might contract shut when he wasn't looking and

snip his head off, or worse.

Nope. The access, the hole, the *void* was exactly the same size as the poster.

He knew what came next. He had to see; why wait? And what could possibly be more important?

He packed in a deep breath and braced his hands against the wall on either side of the poster. As his insides gave a rollercoaster horripilation, he leaned forward and penetrated headfirst, right above the dripping *Blood Rape* logo.

His hands trembled, threatening to dump him. He had to dare himself to pull his eyes open.

What he saw was mundane. But he was so astonished, he felt certain he might faint for the first time in his life, to hang limply, half-in, half-out. What a hoot *that* would be.

He was looking into a neatly ordered, pastel-coordinated bedroom. By itself, it was unremarkable. But Hackamore had hung the poster on an exterior wall, and knew that the only thing on the other side of that wall, back in *his* world, was a five-storey drop into the apartment building's collection of trash dumpsters.

He caught his breath. There was Earth-type air in this bedroom, spicy with the lingering suggestion of some bottled scent. There was also a double king-sized bed, covered with a bulky, salmon-colored comforter. A cedar chest stood at the footboard, near a perfectly matching antique rocking chair and hassock. There was a vanity with an oval mirror, an *escritoire*, and a dresser and end tables in matched oak. Gallery prints hung framed in stainless steel, under soft, indirect lighting. The carpeting was lustrous brown, with the rich nap agitated in the traffic areas. The whole arrangement looked quite expensive and comfy.

Tilting his head, he noticed a full-length mirror which hung on the back of a half-open closet door. In it, he could see his head protruding from a poster of *Blood Rape of the Lust Ghouls* that hung, somewhat incongruously, on the bedroom wall. He made a face at himself. It was for real.

Air shifted around his face and he heard a door close in an adjacent room. That was enough to freak him into yanking his head swiftly back. He plopped on his ass again, jaw hanging unhinged, metabolism whacking away, his brain pulsing, literally throbbing with excitement.

Quickly, he scanned around his office. When he spotted the pewter stein on his desk, he leapt for it, dumping its cargo of pen-

cils, inkles pens, X-acto knives and erasers onto the floor. He used the edge of his sweatshirt to polish the smudges from both sides of the stein's glass bottom, then bounded back to the poster. He inserted the base of the stein near the bottom line of the movie credits, at a depth of about an inch, gently, as though trying not to ripple the surface of a pond. It slid silently through. Then he put his eye to it.

Hackamore gasped.

Strolling into the pastel bedroom was a gorgeous woman with ash-blond hair that fell well below her shoulder blades. She was sheathed inside a clingy, diaphanous thing that was slit to show off traffic-stopping legs, and curved upward to model modest but perfect breasts. She glided through the room gracefully, and Hackamore imagined her scent as she moved. Her eyes were deep brown and serious, her face darkly complexioned, which made the contrast with her nearly snow-white hair more startling and stimulating. She pulled off a pair of crystal drop earrings, toed away her heels, and stopped to assess herself in the mirror. While Hackamore felt the jig would be up any second, she did not give any indication of noticing his spyglass, though she eyed the poster several times with marked distaste. The ambient light was quite dim; he was probably safe. He watched her shrug at her reflection, then pull a drawstring; the dress unfurled around her and she hung it in the closet. Halfway to the bed she kicked out of a pair of gossamer panties that were almost invisible. Hackamore gulped and nearly dropped his stein through to the other side. Then the mystery woman lay back on the vast, downy comforter and began doing things to herself with a tiny amber bottle of hash oil and a couple of mechanical devices that made Hackamore acutely conscious of the sudden lack of maneuvering room inside his jockey shorts.

Crazily, he wondered if all the press kit recipients had gotten a poster like this one.

The woman petrified, like a cat on alert status. A man entered the room. They commenced a vigorous argument Hackamore could not overhear. He stared. He stared at the man because the man was him.

The naked beauty on the bed was arguing with another Hackamore. Same build, identical male pattern baldness, equal six-plus height and equally protuberant Adam's apple. Hackamore recognized the way the veins on his forehead bulged redly when he was ticked off.

It was like watching a movie starring himself, and he'd seen enough plot twists like this one to extrapolate what came next. The poster was just not a fluke that permitted convenient crosstown voyeurism. He wasn't looking into some other apartment. He was looking into *his* apartment, in some parallel plane where everything was a ninety-nine percent matchup except for his *Miami Vice* wardrobe, his sumptuous digs and his centerfold-girl cohabitant.

It was while the woman was dressing down his other self that he recognized her. It was Chloe. A *corrected* version of his wife—revised, lit, and edited with hedonistic care. A version designed for maximum impact. A truly significant Significant Other.

Right behind this, another frisson sped past: In all likelihood, an enormous bank balance was waiting for him on the flip side of *Blood Rape of the Lust Ghouls*, in this world where his talents had been appreciated; his success, marked.

The moment Hackamore realized this was transcendent. He was at a unique pinnacle of bliss and excitement; it was the high point of his life. And he *knew* it. Most mortals saw the peaks of their lives only in retrospect. But here, now, Hackamore held his entire future in his hands . . . and had a pretty good idea what to do with it.

Naturally, this was the moment that Chloe—*his* Chloe—kicked open the door and commenced fire while Hackamore was still glued to the wall, pulling his prong.

Just as naturally, Hackamore executed the first thought that came to his mind. And Chloe. *His* Chloe.

It happened so blindingly fast, he automatically thought SMASH CUT TO TWISTED CORPSE.

She bled a lot. It seemed absurd and unfair that she should bleed so much, ruining the floor and splattering everything within range. If he had done her with an electric carving knife, or a straight razor, or a chainsaw, then yes, you'd expect the sweet red stuff to fly by the gallon. But he'd only hit her once with the stein. A semicircular dent embossed her noggin. When the glass bottom of the stein had shattered, it had opened up all her scalp veins and freed the rain of blood.

Chloe was dead dead dead, as Ernie would have bumbled.

The spreading blood had soaked her t-shirt logo to unreadability. It was one of Hackamore's shirts, and he knew it said *Master* in big yellow letters. When he stepped over her, a throw rug squished. He saw the cottage cheese of her butt against the taut

stretch pants and thought, *Christ, she must run to two hundred and ten pounds. If he'd killed one of the kids, at least they'd be easier to move.*

Two hundred methods for disposing of Chloe's corpse slid through Hackamore's brain, and all of them were from gore movies he'd reviewed. One of his favorites was from *Piece by Piece*, in which a fitness nut stuffed his wife's flesh down the disposal, her bones in the trash compacter and her organs into the Cuisinart, to be frapped into high-protein milkshakes. But Hackamore had no such kitchen toys, and just taking the body anywhere without a car would be a major production.

And why bother? The thought intruded and pushed other considerations aside. Why bother, when the kids were asleep and nobody else knew the poster was hanging there like a big blinking arrow reading THIS WAY OUT?

Why bother? With such a tasty option, there was no time for Chloe and the kids. Not when he was savoring the thought of giving his overdressed alter-ego a healthy shove through the poster in the opposite direction. He could sprawl on top of Chloe and take the rap while Hackamore was busy ripping the poster from the pastel wall of the bedroom that was not an office. The guy didn't know how good he had it; why not give him a taste of being real, being normal?

Hackamore stepped over Chloe (*squish*) and edged up on the poster. The goon still grimaced. The cutie cringed. He poked his nose and eyes through, to reconnoiter. The pastel bedroom was empty. The salmon comforter was still rumpled from where the blonde had been grinding toward ecstasy.

He leaned in a bit further, and listened. No voices. He pulled out and looked again at Chloe. No contest. When he saw her, the only thing he felt was vague dissatisfaction at her caved-in skull. It didn't look real enough. Nowhere near as neat as the bashed-in craniums in *Knifekill Headhunters*.

He clicked off his desk lamp, exhaled his last breath in this unsatisfactory world, and stepped through.

The pain was unexpected, but it was not exactly pain. Passing through the dimensional portal was shivery, uncomfortable, as if a magician had stripped his underwear free while leaving his outer clothing unmolested. His intestinal pipework fluttered.

He pulled his right leg the rest of the way through and stood, apparently intact, in the pastel bedroom. It was cool and dark and

the blonde's fragrance still teased the air. On the wall behind him was the poster from *Blood Rape of the Lust Ghouls*, so out of place in this decor.

A wild blur burst from the goon's mouth right in front of Hackamore's face. He recoiled a few fumbling steps backward. By the time he identified the blur as a human hand, it had grabbed the upper edge of the poster. By the time he realized it was *his* hand—with a gold ring on the third finger, attached to an arm wearing a silk shirtsleeve pushed to the elbow in accordance with current fashion—the poster was vanishing. The goon's mouth appeared to gulp down the poster as it imploded into the blank wall.

By the time he jumped to do something about it, the poster was gone. His hands closed on air.

He stood alone in the pastel bedroom, in a parallel world where he'd figured every detail to be a ninety-nine percent match-up. It was so close that his better-dressed self had stepped through the poster at the same time Hackamore had. Like a rubber glove pulling him inside-out, Hackamore had climbed right through his alternate self—only the *other* guy had yanked his doorway in after himself. Right about now he'd be tripping over Chloe's cooling body in the dark.

All Hackamore had to do now was to follow the smell that smacked him as soon as he reached the bedroom door. It was not perfume—not even to a seasoned gorehound such as himself.

The naked blonde was in the bathtub. In this world, Hackamore found, he *did* own a razor. And a disposal, a trash compacter, a carving knife, a chainsaw, and a Cuisinart. It looked like all of them had been used on her. She was in the bathtub. Her head was stopping up the toilet. One hand lay palm-up in the sink. The rest of her, freshly butchered, was strewn around the floor and hanging from the robe hooks and towel rods. There were organs that even Hackamore's experienced eye could not name.

At the sound of sirens, Hackamore fled.

When he smashed through the exit door of the fire stairs he saw the flashbars of several metro police units bouncing red and blue light off the front of the apartment building. The evil fucker that was his other self had alerted the cops before ducking out. That was a nasty plot twist Hackamore had missed.

It was raining lightly outside, a pattering, hissing sound that obscured the commotion of his panic. He felt his way past the trash dumpsters, and toward the rear alley. The streetlamps were blown.

Here it was safer, darker.

He relaxed. Here it was . . .

He jerked around. Somewhere behind him, at the mouth of the alley, beyond the veil of rain-mist, was a dork sitting in the World theater, picking his nose in the dark. Scribbling vitriolic notes, and aceing him out, and ripping *Blood Rape of the Lust Ghouls* a brand new chute.

The burp-start noise brought him full around, widdershins. It was showtime, and he knew it. Lights, camera, et cetera . . . and not even the word *cut* could save him here. There was not even time for a long, loud, cinematic scream in smash close-up. There was only time to wish he'd loved the stupid fucking movie instead.

Then the ripsawing blade rammed in hard, razzing and chewing and spraying chunks, and Hackamore faded to black.

He didn't even rate a courtesy credit.

Many thanks to Stanley Wiater for the term *cineteratology*.

—DJS

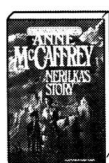
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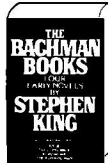
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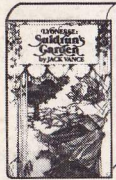
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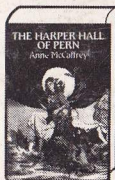
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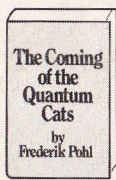
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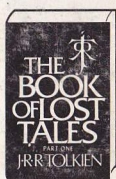
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