

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

NIGHT CRY™

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THIS OLD MAN

LUCIUS SHEPARD

WHITE TRAINS

And more tales from
the masters of fear—

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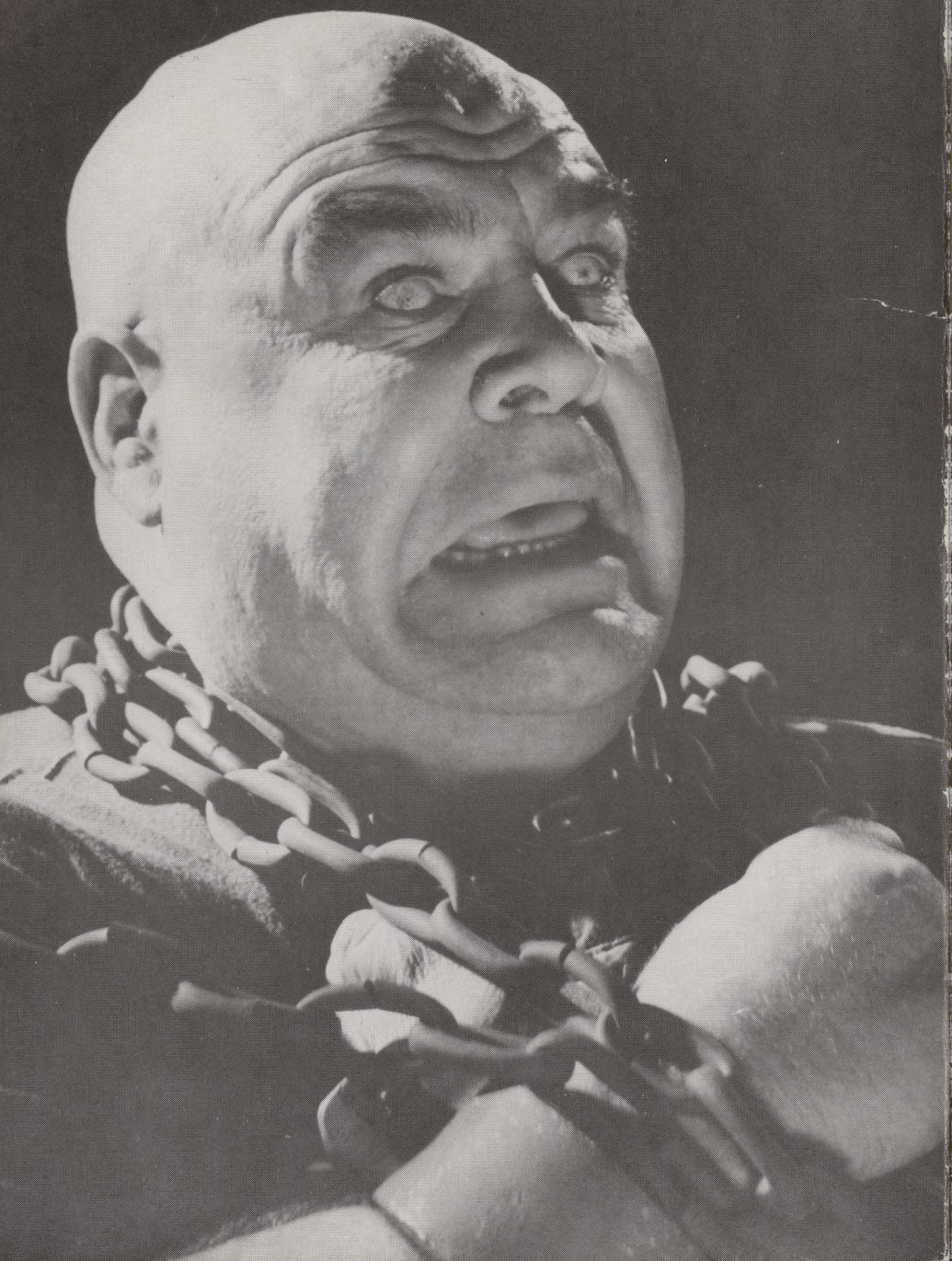
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NIGHT CRY

THE MAGAZINE OF TERROR

Vol. 2, No. 3
Spring 1987

ALAN RODGERS 6 *Introduction*

STORIES

| | | |
|-------------------------|-----|-----------------------------|
| WILLIAM RELLING JR. | 10 | <i>Blood</i> |
| CHARLES L GRANT | 27 | <i>This Old Man</i> |
| G.L. RAISOR | 64 | <i>Identity Crisis</i> |
| LESLIE FISH | 68 | <i>Amateurs</i> |
| JOHN GAWSWORTH | 86 | <i>Scylla and Charybdis</i> |
| STEPHEN MEADE | 93 | <i>The Mirror Monster</i> |
| AUGUSTINE FUNNEL | 100 | <i>Cat at Play</i> |
| JAY AND ROBERT SHECKLEY | 112 | <i>Spectator Playoffs</i> |
| CHRISTOPHER GILBERT | 144 | <i>Witch Mother</i> |
| BENTLEY LITTLE | 156 | <i>Lethe Dreams</i> |
| DARRELL SCHWEITZER | 169 | <i>Pennies from Hell</i> |

NOVELETTE

| | | |
|--------------|----|---------------------|
| S. P. SOMTOW | 38 | <i>ResurrecTech</i> |
|--------------|----|---------------------|

SERIAL

| | | |
|------------------|-----|-----------------------------------|
| J. N. WILLIAMSON | 117 | <i>The Night Seasons, Part II</i> |
|------------------|-----|-----------------------------------|

POETRY

| | | |
|----------------|-----|-------------------------------|
| A. R. MORLAN | 22 | <i>What the Janitor Found</i> |
| JOHN GAWSWORTH | 90 | <i>Four Poems</i> |
| BRUCE BOSTON | 106 | <i>Night Rides</i> |
| LUCIUS SHEPARD | 163 | <i>White Trains</i> |

NONFICTION

| | | |
|------------------|-----|--------------------------------|
| STEVE ENG | 73 | <i>Profile: John Gawsworth</i> |
| AL SARRANTONIO | 184 | <i>Books</i> |
| SAMUEL R. DELANY | 188 | <i>Film</i> |

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BY HARRY RINGEL



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power. Mimi's struggle to survive drives her near to insanity—and it is in that lonely, fearful place that she discovers and unleashes the real horror that could destroy them all.

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Introduction:

Down-Home Horror

They're cut into our heart, really. You've heard scenes just like them a thousand times:

You're somewhere in New England, a long time ago—long enough that America is still just an idea and a few towns.

You're tied to something a lot like a children's see-saw—physically like one, anyway. Sure, the wood isn't planed (in fact, in places not even all of the bark has been removed), but it's still basically a balanced lever and fulcrum, with you on one side and ... them on the other. The device's function is, well ... a little different. The fulcrum rests at the edge of the pond; your end holds you over the water—or it does for the moment, anyway. Your village's elders are holding down the far end. "Confess, witch," one of them calls and you shudder. You're sopping wet and *cold* from the last time they let you go under, and your face and throat are bruised and aching from when they tried to beat the demon out of you, and they told you this morning that a witch couldn't drown, and if you were *really* innocent you'd get to die in the water, but if you didn't drown you were a witch, and then they were going to burn you at the stake. Something in you wanted to start screaming, but you were too beaten and too tired and now you just want them to let you back into the water so you can breathe it and curl up and die, because the idea sounds as wonderful and fresh as sleeping in a cool bed.

And *God*, you wish to God you'd never told those other girls the stories your grandma told you when you were little back in the West Indies. They were just *stories*...

It's years later—a lot later, only a little less than fifty years back from the present. Your name is Moishe now, and life is going

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very badly on you. Your countrymen—Germans, just like yourself—have locked you away in a brutal and gruesome prison camp, and by all appearances they've thrown the key away. People—your friends, your neighbors—are dying here all the time, from disease, and from . . . *other* things. No one speaks of burials. Today they're taking all of you to the communal showers, and for the first time in weeks you feel a little hope; getting clean, you think, will make you feel decent, maybe even human.

Your captors have spoken to you of their reasons for imprisoning you: they say this is necessary for the purity of the master race—other things, too, that make just about as much sense. It's nonsense, pure and simple. Your family lived in that town for four hundred years; the only way to tell your brother from the *goyim* who lived four streets away is to ask him his name. It's crap, you know that—but knowing that it's wrong doesn't make it any less real.

Over on the far side of the room a big metal door slams shut with a *clang*.

Your last thought, as the shower heads begin to hiss out some pale grey-green gas, is that the only real difference between you and the men who are killing you is that you loved your God just a little differently from the way they did. And you're sad, because you know this is the last there'll be of you, but you know in your heart that God is something to die for.

It's later still—the present, more or less. It's three a.m. and you're asleep with your wife in the closet-sized apartment you share in Moscow and there's the sound of a rifle-butt, pounding, slamming on your door. You climb out of bed and hurry to open the door—if the door breaks, you may be a long while replacing it. There are men in uniform waiting for you, and the look in their eye is bloodthirsty. You recognize them and your palms begin to sweat; these men were cruel to you, once, and you had a bit of fun at their expense. "Can I help you?" you ask, and you wish your Russian wasn't so heavily accented, but there's nothing you can do about the fact that you were born in one of the outlying republics. One of them throws something on the floor, and you bend over to pick it up, to see what it is, and it's exactly what you were afraid of—the little vignette you wrote a few years ago, after that afternoon at the bureau, spoofing these men. You never even really meant to show it to anyone, but you'd been so proud

of your own wit that you'd shown it your friend Josef, and before you'd even had a chance to talk about it he'd passed it on to someone else, and then it was on the *samizdat* network, and there was no way of knowing where it was, much less getting it back.

"What is this?" you ask, still trying to play innocent, but they don't buy it for an instant. The one with the overeager rifle-butt slams it into your head so hard that there's a soft, fleshy *thunking* noise, and while it doesn't knock you out it leaves you limp and kind of senseless.

As the other one takes your collar and begins to drag you away, you see your wife. She's crying. She never sees you again.

And what all three of those scenes are about, really, is censorship—about people and even governments dragging their neighbors down into Hell because of what they've said, or what they've thought, or even just because of what they *are*. It's a terrifying thing, when people begin to feel it's their place to police and prosecute the minds of their neighbors. And here in America—where liberty and freedom are the words that brought about our nation's birth—censorship and persecution are one of our great and secret sins. One of the things that we do that truly shames us, to ourselves and to the world.

And right now it looks as though we've begun to indulge that shame again; there are people among us doing everything they can to repress publications that the constitution of our nation protects—they started with magazines like our sister publication, *Gallery*, and *Penthouse*, and *Playboy*, and they've moved on to rock 'n' roll magazines like *Rolling Stone* and *Spin*; soon enough some fool will be trying to yank *Huckleberry Finn* out of the local Waldenbooks again.

And God knows what they'll try to take away from us after that.

It's as real a terror as any I've read about or seen—not just because of the horrible things that sort of repression brings out in our society, but because choking off the words of those out of favor chokes off all possibility of hope, and of understanding.

It's one of the great and true horrors of our time. And only you can stop it, by making your voice heard.

Stop Censorship.

Do it now.

—Alan Rodgers

Blood

by WILLIAM RELING JR.

Bobby knew vampires
didn't drink blood to stay alive.
They drank blood because they *liked* it.

If anybody had asked Bobby Crespi when he was a little boy what he wanted to be when he grew up, he would have answered: "A vampire."

But no one ever bothered to ask.

It would be an understatement to say that Bobby Crespi's life was a lonely one. His parents separated when he was ten years old, and his mother Gloria took Bobby with her to her parents' house in Bakersfield, California—far away from Bobby's father Doug. Gloria Crespi was neither the brightest nor the most perceptive person in the world, but it only took her six months to remember why she had run away from Bakersfield in the first place when she was fifteen years old—to be pregnant and married by the time she was seventeen.

Gloria and Bobby moved to Hollywood, and it wasn't long before she found a job as a waitress at an International House of Pancakes in Los Feliz and met the first of a string of boyfriends—none of whom, unfortunately, wanted to marry a woman who had a son Bobby's age. But the job and the boyfriends managed to keep most of Gloria's time occupied, leaving her son Bobby to spend most of his time alone.

But Bobby didn't mind. There was never anyone else whose company he seemed to enjoy, and whenever his mother was around, he was happy just to be with her. And when she was away, Bobby simply immersed himself into a fantasy universe



made of celluloid and paper, a universe populated by werewolves and ghouls and Things Without Names.

By the time he was eighteen years old, Bobby Crespi was an authority on the subject of monsters in general, and vampires in particular. He had seen hundreds of movies and read and collected volumes of books; he knew how having led an evil or sinful life or dying a violent death or committing suicide or being buried without the proper sacraments or being bitten by a vampire yourself or any number of other things could cause someone to find himself resurrected from the grave, metamorphosed into a foul and unclean but virtually immortal creature possessed of an insatiable taste for human blood. (Bobby also knew that vampires drank blood not because they needed it to stay "alive," but simply because they *liked* it. It was a common fallacy that they sought blood in order to maintain their existence, but people believed many things about vampires—that they could assume the shapes of bats and wolves or were unable to see their reflections in mirrors or could not cross running water—that simply were not true.) Bobby was familiar with few ways in which a vampire could be destroyed: by decapitation, by driving a stake through its heart, by cremation (under the proper circumstances), by exposing the vampire to direct sunlight.

Though Bobby also knew that to kill a vampire was all but impossible, because most human beings could never be clever enough to outwit a creature that was so powerful and cunning. He himself was convinced that if vampires really did exist (and very often he allowed himself to believe that they did) they would be able to pass undetected by ordinary men and women who were just too stupid to spot the monsters that walked among them.

However, by the time he was a senior at Hollywood High School, Bobby's preoccupation with monsters had alienated everyone who had ever met him. Except for his mother, he was completely and utterly alone in the real world.

Which was why, on the night that he graduated, Bobby Crespi went insane.

Graduating from high school was the single greatest accomplishment of Bobby's life, an accomplishment that Gloria Crespi shared proudly with her son. Gloria herself had run away from home before finishing the tenth grade; in her eyes, Bobby was nothing less than a genius for having gone all the way through

school, and the prospect of his enrolling in LA Community College in the fall thrilled her.

The day of Bobby's graduation was the first Friday in June, and that morning at breakfast they made their celebration plans. Gloria had to switch her schedule with one of the other waitresses at the IHOP, had taken a ten a.m. to six p.m. shift in order to be sure that she would be off work in the evening. Since the graduates had to be at school no later than six-fifteen to line up for the ceremony that was to begin at seven on the football field—the only space on school property that could accomodate the twelve hundred students of Bobby's class and all of their families and friends—Bobby was to go on ahead by himself. Gloria promised to meet him immediately afterward in front of the tennis courts at the south end of the field. After that, it was off to *Fung Lum*, the Chinese restaurant in Universal City that was the most elegant place Bobby had ever seen. Just the two of them.

Bobby kissed his mother goodbye and watched her leave for work, thinking to himself not for the first time how good she made him feel and how lucky he was to have her; thinking to himself how wonderful it was that tonight, on the greatest night of his life, they would be together.

It was going to be something *special*.

Bobby left home at five-thirty on Friday evening, dressed in the new navy blue blazer that hung just a bit too low from his thin shoulders and the dress shirt and necktie and the grey double-knit slacks and Bass penny-loafers that his mother had bought for him at the Sears store on Santa Monica Boulevard. It was a block and a half walk to the bus stop on Highland Avenue to catch the bus that arrived at five forty-five, followed by a ten minute ride to where the bus would let him off cater-corner from his school at the intersection of Highland and Sunset Boulevard. Bobby wanted to make absolutely certain that he was there on time.

The ceremony went beautifully, and when it came his turn to step onto the stage and he heard his name announced by the school's principal over the public address system and the smattering of applause from his classmates (most of whom had no idea who he was) Bobby could feel a warm tightness in his stomach, could feel his ears burning, could feel the grin spreading across his face as he shook the hand of the chairman of the school board who congratulated him and offered to him the hard, leather-bound

case that held his diploma. As Bobby climbed down from the stage he opened the case and saw his name "Robert Douglas Crespi" written in script, and he could imagine his mother somewhere in the crowd of people that filled the grandstand opposite the stage, could picture her in his mind, could see the tears of pride running down her cheeks. The warmth in his stomach radiated outward, filling him up. He felt a hand clapping him on the back, and Bobby turned around to look into the round face of the boy who had been behind him on the stage, a Korean boy who was smiling so broadly that his eyes had disappeared behind slits. "All right, man, way to go," the boy was saying. "We made it, eh?" Bobby couldn't say a word, could only smile a foolish, happy smile in return.

After the graduation ceremony was over and Bobby had returned his cap and gown, he stood near the tennis courts watching the clusters of his classmates and their parents and their brothers and sisters and friends all moving past him, all of them exuberant with joy. Bobby stood quietly, waiting, basking in the warmth, smiling, accepting congratulations from strangers, offering congratulations in return, feeling for the first time in his life that he really was a part of the world around him, that he belonged. He waited for his mother, anxious to share with her—the only human being whom he ever really loved—this feeling that he had never ever known before.

He waited.

But his mother never came.

It was well after dark by the time Bobby Crespi got home to find the note from Gloria. She apologized to Bobby, but she had gone away with the man she had been dating for the past three months—a man whom Bobby knew only as Stan Something who sold used cars from a lot on Sunset not far from Bobby's school, a man who had told Gloria Crespi that the reason why her son was such a wimp and a nerd was because he'd grown up without the benefit of a man around the house. (That was Stan's way of urging Gloria to let him move in with her and Bobby without their having to get married. Though Gloria had long ago made a firm rule for herself that she would never live with a man who was not her husband—she told Bobby more than once that she couldn't bear the thought of being with a man whose attitude was: "Why buy the cow when you can get the milk for

for free?") But this very afternoon Stan had broken down at last, had proposed to Gloria at the IHOP and talked her into flying with him to Reno. When she saw Bobby again on Sunday, Gloria wrote, she would be bringing home with her a brand new father for her favorite son.

As Bobby read his mother's note he could feel the warmth that had filled him the entire evening turning to cold ashes. He set the note back down on the kitchen table where he had found it, then stood looking at the paper for a very long time. Then he turned away and looked around the kitchen of the house where he had lived for such a large part of his life. Only now the house was strange to him, somewhere he had never seen before. It was a place where Bobby Crespi was no longer welcome, a place where he no longer wanted to be and to which he would never return.

He walked to Hollywood Boulevard, a place that he knew well, though he came there at night only occasionally. Over the years Bobby had seen countless movies in the massive theaters on the boulevard—Mann's Chinese, the Paramount, the Egyptian, the Fox, all of them. He could identify by sight (or sometimes by smell) the inhabitants of the street—the winos and the junkies and the punks and the gang kids and the cruisers and the hookers and the pimps and the undercover cops and especially the tourists who came to the boulevard from Iowa and Kansas and North Dakota and everywhere, those who had swallowed all the hype they had been hearing for years and years and had come to Hollywood expecting it to be something that it really never had been. The tourists were always disappointed to discover that the real Hollywood possessed no glamour at all, that it was a slime pit, one of the worst parts of the entire city of Los Angeles. They were always disappointed—but they kept coming, because there was an energy to the boulevard which seemed to feed its denizens, a dark, crackling electricity that permeated the street. Usually Bobby could feel that energy whenever he came to Hollywood Boulevard—that sense of his every nerve on edge, tingling with nervous anticipation, aware of the eyes of predators upon him—and the sensation thrilled him as much as it frightened him.

But not tonight. On this night—in the middle of the crowd of people that swirled around him, on the boulevard lined with cars that glimmered in the violet-and-orange glow of the streetlamps that hovered overhead—Bobby Crespi walked alone.

He walked for hours, unaware of the passing of time or distance. He had no destination in his mind, had no sense that he was going toward some *place*. Because for him there was no place. At this moment there was only the street—and deep inside him Bobby knew that he did not belong here either, that sooner or later the street would turn him away as well, and there would be nothing for him, nothing at all . . .

Until he heard a woman's voice cooing at him softly, inviting him, asking him if he would like some company. The voice pulled him from his distraction, and for a moment Bobby wondered where he was. Then he realized that he could hear the roar of the freeway not far behind him and he knew that he had crossed the overpass into the east side of Hollywood—a place even more dark and dangerous than where he had been before.

Bobby looked up and saw her standing in the doorway of a battered apartment hotel beneath the light of a solitary bulb above the door. She was a thin, black woman wearing spike heels and red satin hot pants that shimmered in the light, and a white blouse tied in the front, open so that Bobby could see the curve of her small breasts and the smooth, chocolate skin of her belly. Her eyes were outlined in thick pale blue, her face heavily powdered in an attempt to disguise her drawn cheeks and wrinkles—she could have been nineteen years old or fifty. She smiled at him, a narrow, feral smile. Then she reached behind her and opened the door.

Bobby followed her into the hotel, through the maw of the door that she held open for him, up a flight of stairs, down a creaking hallway into a room furnished with a sagging bed and a scarred chest of drawers and a threadbare, overstuffed chair. A dim lamp glowed on a small nightstand beside the bed, and the room reeked with the odor of stale perspiration and urine and a musky aroma of sex. The woman closed the door to the room behind him then took his hand and guided him to the bed.

They paused, standing beside the bed, and Bobby asked her if she would turn out the light. She smiled at him again, then leaned close and whispered to him gently: "You nervous, baby?" He watched her move to the nightstand and switch off the lamp, and he heard the bed creaking under her weight and the soft rustle of cloth as she untied her blouse.

She whispered for him to come to her.

She slipped Bobby's jacket from his shoulders and undid the

tie from around his neck, then opened the buttons on his shirt. He could feel long fingernails lightly scratching his chest. "What's a'matter, baby," she said, her voice low but urgent. "Don't you want to touch me?"

Bobby slipped his hands around her waist, could feel her ribs beneath her flesh, brought his hands up over her breasts, pausing over her hard nipples, pressing them with his open palms. "Oooh, yeah," she breathed and she came forward to kiss his bare chest, circling her tongue upward.

Just as Bobby reached up to clutch her neck with both hands and began to *squeeze*.

She let out a small whimper—more of surprise than of pain—and Bobby imagined that he could see her eyes bulging in the darkness. She clawed at his arms, trying to pull herself free, though only for a short time.

He felt her body go limp, could no longer hear her breathing. He laid her gently on the bed and sat still for a moment. Then he bent down and turned her head to one side and lowered himself so that his lips could brush the skin of her bare neck. Bobby opened his mouth and bit her flesh—tentatively at first.

Until he could feel the warm, coppery moistness on his tongue. Until he tasted her blood and realized that it was very, very good.

His second victim that night was also a prostitute, one whom he found on the corner of Hollywood Boulevard and Las Palmas, a sixteen-year-old girl who took him to a van she had parked in a vacant lot a block up the street. His third victim was another prostitute, one who had picked him up in her own car and driven him to a motel on Sunset Boulevard, across the street from Hollywood High School. He met his fourth victim a few blocks west of the motel, shortly after four a.m. She took him back across the street to the deserted football field where just a few hours earlier Bobby Crespi had graduated. He'd asked if they could go there.

Bobby had just laid her down on the gravel at the edge of a driveway beside a chain-link fence that marked the boundary of the school property. He was kneeling over her still body when he heard behind him the roar of an automobile's engine and a squeal of brakes and he was suddenly awash in a blaze of white light. He spun around to look up and his eyes were instantly stung by a dazzling glare. He could barely see the outline of the

automobile behind the brightness, could only just make out the red and blue lights spinning on top of the vehicle's roof, the doors flopping open and the two shadow-figures that emerged from the automobile, one of whom barked at him harshly: "Freeze!"

Instead Bobby ran. He scrambled away, out of the light, climbing over the fence, dropping down onto the hard concrete of a parking lot, falling hard, then coming to his feet quickly. As he ran he glanced over his shoulder and could see one of the shadows coming over the fence after him, could hear from far away the sound of the automobile's doors slamming and the engine racing. Then he saw the vehicle shooting up the alley past the fence, the blue and red lights momentarily ricocheting off the walls of the school buildings before the automobile was out of sight.

Bobby's heart was pounding as he dashed from the rear of the parking lot toward the street, all the while listening to the hard footfalls of the shadow that pursued him, coming closer. Bobby ran between the buildings, then cut sharply to his left into a driveway that pointed toward the lights of Highland Avenue. He was less than a hundred yards away from the mouth of the drive, when the vehicle reappeared there and speared him with its headlights. Without thinking, Bobby spun to his right into a loading area behind the school's main building. He could hear the footsteps and the automobile right behind him.

Then the lights from the automobile showed Bobby that he had turned into a dead end. Ahead lay a solid grey wall.

He stopped before the wall, spreading his hands over its cool surface, pressing his fingers against painted brick, listening to the sound of his blood roaring in his ears. Then he heard the harsh voice again, commanding him: "Don't move, asshole. Don't even breath. Just keep your hands up and stay just like you are . . ."

But Bobby turned around.

And it was if all of his senses *exploded* at the same instant. He saw the bursts of fire from the pistol that the shadow figure held, could smell the burning gunpowder, could hear the sharp BAM-BAM-BAM-BAM of the pistol shots, could taste his own blood in his mouth, could feel the bullets *slamming* into him, hurling him backward, driving him against the wall, cracking his head against the hard bricks, could feel the burning agony in his chest. He collapsed against the wall, sliding down, and the last thing of which Bobby was aware was that his eyelids felt heavy, so heavy, that he had to close them because he felt so very tired,

and it occurred to him that being dead wasn't so bad if it was like this, if it took all of your pain away.

But the moment after he died, Bobby Crespi opened his eyes.

He saw the two shadow figures coming toward him from the light, saw the shadows resolve themselves into the figures of two policemen who were coming forward to where he lay. He watched them come to him and when they were close enough to see his face, Bobby opened his mouth to show them his canine teeth that had suddenly grown into sharp fangs that glistened in the harsh light from the automobile behind them.

Bobby looked up at them and he *smiled*.

He was on them before either of them had time to react, other than to gape in abject horror and disbelief at the figure that had moments before collapsed into a crumpled heap riddled with bullets only to rise up before them, its eyes glowing red, its mouth open to exhale a nauseating, fetid smell. He was on them, and with a suddenly acquired inhuman strength Bobby tore the two policemen to bloody shreds.

He ran back to the street, reveling in the *power* that coursed through him. Bobby knew with dazzling clarity what had happened to him, knew exactly the nature of the wonderful transformation he had undergone. He knew, and the knowledge exhilarated him.

He reached the end of the drive and turned to run south, along Highland Avenue. Until he reached the corner of Sunset and Highland and happened to look to his left, down the boulevard to the east.

And he froze.

There he saw the first glimmer of pinkness touching the edge of the night sky. The darkness was retreating.

Bobby stood on the corner, feeling somewhere inside him a twinge of fear. His mind raced desperately—the sun was coming. *The sun . . .*

The answer came to him: *Home*.

He realized what had to be done. He must return to his native earth—it would mean hurrying home and bringing in dirt from the backyard, maybe throwing it into his bed or under his bed and closing off all the windows and drawing the curtains and locking the door and lying down in the dirt in darkness. No one

would be there and he would be undisturbed—it would have to do until the next night, when he could take the time to find some way to make for himself a proper resting place that would be more secure, more permanent. Bobby was sure that this would do, at least for now. It would *have* to do.

He began to trot toward home, thinking to himself that this was right, that even if he had to work quickly he still had enough time. Even if his mother and Stan came home unexpectedly early and found him, all that would happen as a consequence would be a big surprise for them from their “son” . . .

Then he saw the girl.

He saw her emerge from the shadows behind the McDonald’s restaurant that lay directly across the street from where he was. He saw her small, pale figure moving slowly, almost shuffling, and in the instant that he saw her, something inside Bobby stirred. A new sensation, a kind of *craving*. He smiled darkly to himself as he started across the deserted street, and he ran his tongue over his sharp teeth, could feel them growing longer. Thinking to himself: *Why not? One for the road.*

Before she was even conscious of his presence, he had her. He clutched her by the neck and dragged her back into the shadows. She opened her eyes wide as she saw him coming down upon her, but her expression was vacant and uncomprehending rather than terrified. As if the creature that held her, that sank its needle-sharp teeth into her neck and sucked the life from her did not make her afraid, but only confused her.

Bobby himself had no time to consider the girl’s frail condition, the dullness of her expression, her lack of fear. There was only the craving for her blood. He was vaguely aware of its peculiar taste that was somehow not the same as the blood of the others he’d had. But that was before he had *changed*, so the taste was bound to be different.

But as he ingested the girl’s blood, Bobby was suddenly enveloped with a strange euphoria. The feeling was odd, not unpleasant at all, but for a moment unsettling because he now felt as if all of the burdens of his life—and his death—had vanished. Where moments before he had perceived everything around him in vibrant colors and sounds and odors and sensations, now everything had softened and slowed. The edges of his reality rounded, becoming fuzzy and indistinct, the colors and sounds and aromas merging, making him feel as if he had fallen underwater

and was floating slowly, so slowly.

This was how it was to be from now on, Bobby whispered to himself. Before the blood everything was to be sharp as crystal, each of his senses sparklingly *aware*—a magnificent enough gift as it was. But *after* he took the blood, the pleasure was indescribable.

Though Bobby had no way of knowing that only minutes before he'd attacked her, the girl had shot herself full of heroin in an apartment that lay across the alley behind McDonald's and had wandered from the apartment because she wanted to see the dawn. Had Bobby been in any condition to think clearly after the moment that the heroin in the girl's blood caused him to overdose, he would have remembered that according to some of the lore that he'd studied, vampires were often affected by drugs and alcohol in much the same way as were ordinary human beings.

But Bobby Crespi could think of nothing but the sublime contentment that washed over him. He drained the girl's body of blood, then let her fall limply to the asphalt of the parking lot behind the restaurant.

Then he walked forward, around the side of the building. He saw his reflection in the glass of the front of the restaurant, and he reached out to touch the figure that was reaching back at him. Bobby sank to his knees, his fingers pressed against the glass, the Bobby-image smiling back at him. And as he turned himself around to sit down on the sidewalk, his back resting against the glass, he was still wearing that same beatific smile. For the very first time, Bobby Crespi's life was everything that he could have wished it to be. Everything was absolutely *right*.

And then the sun came up.

What the Janitor Found

by A.R. MORLAN

The white curl of paper
covered it like a shroud.

Blue flutters of skirt

at the swinging WOMEN

down echoing halls the rumble of cheerleader feet

grows softer, dimmer

(pleated roundness against bare
thighs, pushing outward)

door, a chitter of laughter,
(a buzzing shrill, too high, and much
too forced the janitor thinks, politely
backing away, soggy grey-haired mop
in hand)

(five pairs of blue and white, special-
order-from-the-athletic-uniform-catalog
saddle shoes, ten calves surrounded in
woolen blue scissoring away from him)

(they didn't look my way . . . where
was the chirp "Hiyah, Slim!" what hap-
pened to "See ya later?")
cut off with the pneumatic swish of
blonde oak door behind him.

(Ten white basins surmounted with ten oblong
mirrors, faced with ten stalls, enameled cherry
tomato red tampon and napkin dispensers facing the

swinging door. Skin-textured tile floor, broken into tiny rectangles and squares in pink, cream, scarlet, and sand.)

His metal bucket on the wheeled platform, rags, toilet brush and plunger, bottles of gritty cleanser and sharp smelling spray are alien,

(harsh IUDs thrust into this womb of feminine pinkness)

unnatural, but an indignity to be only briefly endured.

Down the row, a toilet continues to fill, a burbling rush of water (janitor Muzak, he thinks, uncapping the cleaner)

masking out the footfalls outside the closed door.

(no one will be entering; the huge wheeled dumpster outside the door is a mute indicator of his intrusion.)

Splatter each bowl with a spray of blue-green cleanser, wipe, move on, squirt, wipe, step over, splatter, gone, go on (the water keeps bubbling, like some damned tourist-trap coin fountain, endlessly—)

down the row, pause, check the white wall-hung

(sounds like something's stuck, she probably tried to flush a used napkin—)

machines, make sure they're reasonably full

(would the blood drip down their legs if it was empty, red twisting ribbons like that biology chart upstairs, the ... the DNA spiral. Would it do that if the machine was empty ...)

then enter the

last stall by the wall, prop the door open with the wooden wedge taken from his overall pocket

(still running, gonna have to plunge 'er out—)

then begin the second ritual: lift the seat, clean the bowl, wash and rinse the seat, flush down the murky tendrils of cleanser, remove the wedge, go to the next stall,

(hasn't stopped yet, sounds
like a few stalls away—)
lift, swab, wash, rinse, flush, remove . . . begin and end over
again and—
(no wonder they didn't stop to talk—)
—encounter a little interruption in the routine.

(Wedged down there, under a feathery
caul of white biodegradable paper, in
the place where the throat of the
hole recedes from one's line of
vision; packed tight, legs and body
and one arm stuck, head and other
arm waving out at him, moving
languidly in a silent hello.)

Hands wrapped around the splintery handle of the scrub brush,
he stands, unable to return the small one's mute gesture

(did the blood run down
her legs, did she catch it
with a wad of toilet
paper before it stained
those high stockings, did
it have a chance to cry
out before taking that
short dive?)

no longer hearing the watery song of the tank,

(did she look in there
after getting off the seat,
did her friends buy her
a napkin or tampon to
stop the flow, did she
press it up *there*, and
walk tight-legged out of
the stall, even as it
floated there?)

enraptured with that miniature ballet of water bubbles and
baby, watching its miniscule hand (nails, it has nails on the
fingers) slowly gesticulate down there, brushing delicately
against the rounded whiteness of the bowl.

(did she think it would
slip down, did she flush
and flush until most of it

was gone, and cover up
the rest with a layer of
tissue, did she and the
others think no one
would know?)

The head was a marbled sphere of greyish mottled pink, shut eyes
feathery slits in the crumpled face, the nose wide and flattened
under the feeble pressure of the water, and the wet shreds of
Paper clung to it; now a tender scarf, now a semi-opaque veil
(didn't she care, did she
think it was a bowel
movement from the
wrong hole, did she
hope it would slide
down one hole into
another . . . did she
hurt, down there?)

teasing across the wrinkled skin.

(None of them had been walking funny, but God, it's so
small, probably not much of her was torn—)

He makes a move for the door:

Get the dean, call the police, round
up the girls, get the school nurse,
then come the reporters, questioning
at the police station, having to take
time off work for the trial (think of
the taxpayers footing the bill for the
trial, think of you paying more
taxes, Slim ole boy) the testimony,
the lowered eyes of the girl, the eyes
of hate from her family, the kids in
the stands, then coming back, to
work with *them* ("snitch" sniggered
behind me, in the halls), to look at
them and wonder, "Were there
others, were they flushed all the way
down while I was gone, or while I
was here? Were they stuffed in
greasy printed bags from the
hamburger joints, next to the cups
from malteds and the last

catsup-soggy fry? In twist-tied white sacks from the dorms, casually tossed in the back dumpster? Flung loose into the gully behind the sports center building? Encased in pillow cases, to be thrown out of a dorm window into the river that winds behind the students' rooms? Where *were* all the others hidden?"

(you didn't hurt much, baby, she didn't hit you, cuss you, blame you for her not getting a good guy to marry, she didn't get loaded on beer then give you a malty treat to suck, she didn't keep you, alive, so she could go on WIC and then eat up all the food herself, or collect welfare, or the food stamps . . . so she didn't treat you so bad, little wet baby, dead baby?)

Bowing his head, for a moment (did she or the other do so much for it, he wonders), then, with resigned yet firm steps he walks over to his wheeled cart, where the red-capped

(like the diaphragm she was too busy to use)

plunger is and sends the baby back home to watery familiar closeness and safety.

Later, out in the hall, feeling through the dumpsters, and the bags within them, the cheerleaders pass him by in a swirl of pleated blue and clean white and blue legs, saying hello, not hearing the dread sirens, chattering aimlessly behind him. (he almost forgets to say hello, so intent is he upon his search)

Looking up, he inspects bare legs for a tight gait, remembering the tiny wave.

THIS OLD MAN

by CHARLES L GRANT

When he dug the grave out past the garage, Rosemary complained that there were laws about such things. His only answer was to let half the next shovelful of dirt spatter her fifty-dollar sneakers.

The sky is cracking, Anthony thought, looking through his bedroom window at the stars, so many of them out there, so many of them bright, they seemed to form fault lines where the moon didn't blind them. The lawn was dressed in silver. Spider web frost grew on the car windshield. And the nightwind was using the elm tree to tap at the pane, arhythmical, hesitant.

He put a finger to the glass and felt the cold.

He breathed on the glass and watched the fog spread, and fade, and bring back the black.

A dark brown cardigan was caped across his shoulders, and the slippers on his feet were lined with matted wool. He could see this in his reflection, and he thought somewhat sourly that he ought to have a rocking chair too. Maybe a cane. Or a walker. Maybe vials and bottles and water glasses on the night stand, a stainless steel urinal on the floor under the bed. A little bell he could ring whenever he felt poorly.

Old man.

If it had been up to his daughter-in-law and his son, and probably the creature that sometimes passed for his grandson who treated him like a baby brother, all that garbage would surely have been here. More than likely from the day they'd moved in, too long ago.

He shook his head so slowly it seemed as if he were merely

glancing side to side; he sighed so softly he might have been sleeping.

Old man.

Jesus, he thought, they've got a lot to learn.

He puffed again on the glass and with his forefinger sketched the outline of a dog's bone, and pulled away from it sharply when he caught a tear in his left eye. Stupid dog, he thought. Stupid dog.

He and Grump had been together for nearly twenty years, and on a sunny afternoon in late September the black-and-white border collie had crawled under the front porch through a gap in the wood lattice work, to his favorite napping place. Anthony had been dozing, thinking about getting ready to trim back the shrubbery and rake up some leaves, when he heard a faint yelp beneath his feet.

He didn't move.

He had known what it was, had been expecting it for some weeks in the way Grump had moved painfully and nearly blindly through the house and on his walks.

At the time, as he had struggled out of his half-hearted nap, he recalled his father telling him about another dog, his mother's, who had known its time had come as well and done the same thing—under the porch, into the cool shade, giving up a last bark before giving up the ghost.

It had taken him most of the afternoon to get up the courage to look for the body, to get his son to crawl under there and bring old Grump out. And when he began to dig a grave out past the garage beside a stand of caged birch, Rosemary had complained about there being laws about such things.

Anthony had only looked at her, wiped his hands on his trousers, and contrived to scoop some dirt onto her fifty-dollar sneakers. It was petty, but it had been worth it, and Grump had been given the rites he deserved.

A voice then from the hall, and he turned away from the window, standing, letting the sweater fall to the chair. With an exasperated look to his late wife's picture on the bureau, he walked to the door and leaned a shoulder against it, hands in his pockets, eavesdropping on the latest installment in Don and Rosemary's life.

The trouble was, they moved quickly down the stairs, and as best he could figure out, they were arguing about money—what

Don made, and what his wife spent, on herself and ten-year-old Ricky.

He snorted in disgust and got himself ready for bed; the sooner morning came, the sooner he'd be able to get out, and away, and maybe win the state lottery and buy himself a castle in Montana.

"It's the only way," he said glumly to Mel Franck the next morning, while they took a stroll through the neighborhood, feeling autumn in the colors and in the gentle slap of the wind. "On the other hand, maybe I could go to New York and find one of those guys that breaks kneecaps and stuff, what do you think? Ten minutes alone with Rosemary and I guarantee they'll do it for nothing."

Mel laughed, chins wobbling, jowls jumping. "Anthony, you are too much. Crazy. You don't mean it."

"Which part?"

Mel, a friend for nearly fifty years, looked at him dolefully, finally shrugged and pointed up the street. To Miriam Silvers hobbling up the walk to her tidy Cape Cod, bright red overcoat slapping at her bowed legs, shopping cart dragging behind her, the wheels rattling like a dog nipping at her ankles.

"We had another date last night, you know," he said proudly. "Went to the movies."

"Good for you. You getting married?"

"Are you kidding? And lose all that Social Security?" He jabbed Anthony's side with an elbow. "I'm trying to get her to live in sin, but she's afraid of what her daughter will say."

Down the block he could hear shrill laughter as a group of kids piled out of a car.

Up the block, at the corner, brakes were trod hard, and he could almost smell the burning rubber.

"I would think," he said, "that she's a little too old to be asking permission for anything."

"Well," Mel said apologetically, "you know how it is. The kids, they don't always understand."

"I suppose."

And he said nothing more until they had had lunch at the same diner where they'd been eating for two decades and were on their way home, Anthony carrying a brown paper bag with a bone inside, a habit he realized he hadn't known he hadn't broken. Don's car was parked in front of the house, and Ricky

was playing in the yard. Shrieking. Laughing.

He stopped to watch him, his right hand tugging at an invisible leash until he realized what he was doing and shoved the hand in a pocket. He set the bag on the ground, between his feet.

There was no doubt about it, Ricky was a handsome boy, and he wondered what was wrong with him that he couldn't be more proud of him, couldn't see that the family was going to continue after he was gone, couldn't help wishing they were gone and Grump was back instead.

It made him feel soiled and angry at the same time; it made him feel frightened because the anger wouldn't go away.

"I know," Mel whispered beside him. "It's like they're stealing your life away, isn't it?"

Anthony looked at him sharply. "What?"

Mel pointed a stubby finger. "Them. I know what you're thinking is what I mean. Playing along. Their game. My own, they fill the house on holidays, you know what I mean? They choke on me sometimes. God knows I love them, but . . ."

Anthony waited, snapping his fingers in an absent, peculiar rhythm that always ended by tapping thumb upon thumb; Mel looked away.

Then Rosemary came to the door and ordered Ricky to quiet down, his father was sleeping, and Anthony moved to keep the tree between him and the woman. If she saw him, she'd wait at the door for him, talk to him about her day, ask him about his, and keep it up forever, until he was ready to scream.

"You're a softy," Miriam said to him once.

"They're family," he'd said, as if that should explain it.

Don had lost his job, and his subsequent depression had nearly split up the family until Anthony had offered them temporary shelter. One month. Two. Three, when Don was finally called back to the plant. Now they were looking for an apartment, but the house had spoiled them, and winter was coming.

"Excuse me, Mr. Rashlin," Mel said, tapping his arm, "but I think you're going to grow roots here."

"Mr. Franck, what I grow on my own time is my own business," he answered with a smile, and they parted with plans for a card game the next night. Don would complain that he was too old to be staying out so late, and Rosemary would hint none too subtly about waking the children.

It was the way of it; it was the way things had gone, the

way things had become.

And he strolled across the street, taking his time, watching the games, thinking that maybe he wasn't so horrible after all if Mel the saint sometimes thought the same.

It was, after all, only natural—a man lives alone for over a decade, he expects certain things to remain constant, without disruption.

The silence at night, broken only by the furnace in winter, the scratching leaves in summer; the dark in the corners and under the staircase, in the attic, in the cellar, the lights flickering during a thunderstorm when spring bumped against June; the smell of it, and the feel of it when he wandered a little at night and didn't bother switching on a lamp because he knew where everything was.

And Grump, trailing along behind him, sniffing, tail bumping into furniture, herding him here and there because he knew Anthony's routine better than Anthony did on Anthony's bad days.

On the porch he stared dumbly at the bag for a long minute before shrugging, taking the steps down again, and heading for the back, where he set the bone beside the collie's grave. Maybe, he thought, some stray will have a snack tonight and think of me kindly.

When he slept, his left hand was flat against the wall, to feel the house and know it was still there.

When he woke the next morning, his hand was still there, and there was a fight in the kitchen—mother and son, he gathered as he dressed, arguing about what sort of clothes were proper for school.

Jesus, he thought, give me some peace, huh? Jesus!

It was almost enough to make him crawl under the porch.

The thought made him shudder, and he sat in his chair facing the window, picked up a book and tried to read, at least until the war was over and the house was quiet again.

An hour later, when the fighting spread to what sounded like every room but his, he grabbed up his coat and stalked out, through the kitchen without smiling or nodding, onto the porch just as Miriam rose from behind her hedges, one hand holding a pair of clippers, the other massaging the small of her back.

"You look frazzled," she said when he joined her, her dyed black hair making her face too pale, her folds and creases too

deep. "They giving you trouble again?"

He shrugged, gingers moving.

She pointed the clippers at him. "Anthony, they're going to kill you, you know that. They will. Don't know why you did it in the first place."

"Beats me," he said.

And she answered, "Liar," with a smile. "We've been playing the game all our lives, Anthony Rashlin. We're too old to start a new one now."

He would have argued, but there was a scream, and he spun around in time to see Rosemary shove through the laurel, Ricky dangling in her arms. He stared for a moment, not understanding, didn't move until Miriam gave him a shove, telling him to get a move on while she ran in to call the doctor.

Across the street then, barely aware he was moving, seeing only Rosemary standing in the yard, holding the boy to her chest, weeping while her blouse slowly turned red.

"Your fault," she muttered as he hurried to her side. "Your fault, you old bastard, God, it's your fault!"

He reached out a hand, pulled it back, and stood there, feeling helpless, not listening, not hearing a thing as the ambulance arrived, the doctors, the police; feeling himself being guided to the chair on the porch, the sun settling over the trees, Don standing in front of him, scrubbing his hands dryly, constantly, talking about the weather, the way the neighborhood had changed, looking everywhere but at his father until he finally said something about the boy climbing over the railing, falling and landing just wrong, just . . . wrong.

"He caught . . . he caught his chest on a piece of wood, Dad," Don said, swallowing hard. "That place where Grump used to go. I've told him a hundred times not to do that. A hundred times, maybe a thousand."

Anthony took his son's hand and squeezed it, and released it when Rosemary began wailing inside the house. Don ran to her, slamming the door behind him, and he sat until it was dark, until he could see the stars and the slow climbing moon.

The yelp was so soft he thought it was his imagination.

Then he looked down at the floorboards and heard it again.

Guilt, he decided; he was punishing himself for not fixing that gap, and now he was hearing old Grump going through the dying again.

He stayed until the cold made his knees ache, his cheeks stiff, and the next day he sat there, and the day after that, listening for the dog and hating himself for not crying when he didn't miss Ricky shattering the afternoons with his shrieking.

They denied him the funeral, Rosemary's idea, and when they returned to the house, ghosts in mourning, not speaking, Don barely able to hold his wife up, Anthony felt a rage that made his hands shake, his jaw tighten, and he stalked around town until the sun had set, until his knees began to protest. Muttering to himself. On the one hand damning his soul for not caring more about his grandson; on the other, feeling a sickly pleasure at having one less overseer direct what was left of his life.

It *was* sick, he told himself, taking the porch steps so slowly he thought he'd fall over; *he* was sick, and ought to see someone who could tell him what was wrong.

He almost missed the yelp.

His hand was on the doorknob, his attention on the lights burning in the living room, and he almost missed the yelp.

His shadow drifted ahead of him, moonpale, shifting, as he moved slowly to the end of the porch, rising up on his toes, keeping a wary eye on the windows; his hands gripped the railing as he leaned over, throat hot, eyes burning; and he whispered, "Grump?" to the dark between shrubbery and wood, and sank back onto his heel when he realized what he was doing.

He almost ran into the house, ran to his room, sat at the window to watch the moon play with the dead leaves dancing.

Sick. He was sick.

"It is certainly a natural thing," Mel told him the next afternoon, on their way back from lunch, brown bag in Anthony's hand. His tone was close to scolding. "You're smart enough to see that, Anthony, don't tell me you're not. You have a family, you have a house, you want both but not both at the same time in the same place. We all ..." Mel stopped and blew his nose, cursed, the weather growing colder, and snuggled his scarf closer around his neck. "The dog's the same. My lord, you and that mangy thing even went on vacations together. What you hear is memory, Anthony. It's nothing but memory."

The look Anthony gave him forced him to turn away, but Anthony knew his friend had read his mind: *what did I do to deserve someone as fine as you in my life?*

So then, he decided, he would give his son the love he needed,

and give him fair warning that his father wasn't so much a cripple that he couldn't get along on his own. As soon as possible, without implications of hatred. Lives to be led, and platitudes like that.

Rosemary was in bed early, then, when he sat with his son in the living room, watching a night football game. Don was sprawled on the couch, Anthony in his chair, fingers and thumbs snapping over his shoe when he crossed his legs high.

"We can't, Dad," Don said, barely taking his gaze from the screen.

"I don't understand. What is this can't business?"

Don's hand rose and fell. "Rosemary . . . Ricky . . . you know. She can't leave now. She's distraught. It wouldn't be fair, right?"

Anthony stared at him, the *snap* of his thumbs on his heel like muffled gunshots. "But it's . . ." He stopped.

Don looked over, questioning.

"Never mind," he said, rose and went to the kitchen where he took the bone from the bag and carried it out to the yard. The other one was gone, and he nodded, glanced around, and dropped this one in its place. Maybe, he thought with a sudden bright smile, that stray will hang around long enough for us to get acquainted. Two against two, then, though he doubted Miriam would approve.

It was a truck a week later that evened the score, and as he stood in the backyard, leaf rake in hand, he cursed himself again for thinking that way; a truck that skidded on damp roadway, crossing the lane, sideswiping the car that took Rosemary and his son to the cemetery to visit Ricky. Don was in bad shape but expected to pull through; Rosemary in worse shape, deep in a coma.

He dropped the rake into a low pile of leaves and walked over the stiff grass to Grump and his grave. He looked down and sighed, looked up at the sharp blue and wondered why it was all happening now.

And his distress and puzzlement deepened when he found no commiseration from Mel, when they met two nights later to walk to the movie theater. The night was cool enough for sweaters, oddly warm enough to warn of Indian summer. Traffic was light, tires sounding as if they were rolling over thin ice, and most of the streets they walked were sharply black, starkly white.

Mel didn't ask how the Rashlins were doing. He was in a rare,

bitter mood not even one of the most popular comedies of the decade could calm. And by the time the film was over, Anthony was ready to strangle him for his muttering throughout, his stomping up the aisle, bulling through the other patrons, for his constant incomprehensible muttering that finally made Anthony grab his elbow in the middle of the main street.

"What?" he demanded, as if he hadn't troubles of his own. "You going to tell me or do I beat it out of you?"

Mel stared at him, flushed, a vein threading thickly across his forehead. "Is your boy like my daughter, trying to sell your house out from under you, huh?"

Anthony dropped his hand.

"Is your boy trying to have some halfassed judge declare you incompetent so he can take away everything you own, huh?"

Anthony backed away from the fist that punched none too lightly at his chest.

"Why, you ask?" Mel said, rage alarming enough for Anthony to grab his wrist and hold it, straining. Mel didn't seem to notice. "Because, you son of a bitch, I want to get married!"

A laugh began and died; a stare was shifted to the dark of a shop's display window over the main shoulder.

"Miriam?" he whispered.

"Of course, Miriam, who else?" Franck glared then at the hand covering his wrist until it fell away. Then, with a long blowing sigh, he closed his eyes for a moment. Closed his eyes and sighed again. "Who else? Who else?"

Anthony did laugh then, and clapped his friend on the shoulder. "Why, you old bastard," he said, and couldn't think of another word to say. And cursed when he realized all the bars were closed, all the fancy ones they called lounges. No place for a celebratory drink. "Mel, that's wonderful! That's ..."

But Mel had walked away, and he had to hurry to catch up, to fall into step, to wait until Franck had stifled the last of his anger.

"And your daughter?"

Mel spat.

Old man.

Anthony took his arm and the route home was dark and silent, a parting without a goodnight, instead an exchange of glances that both cried for and promised help.

But what can an old man do, he thought as he sat in the

bedroom and looked out the window; you don't have a lot of money, you don't have powerful friends, what can an old man do to save his own life?

He looked at his hands then, snapping and twirling over his knee.

He looked out at the garage, at the patch of earth where old Grump lay.

No, he thought.

He rose stiffly and leaned on the sill, forehead against the pane.

No.

And ran through the dark house, down to the kitchen, threw open the refrigerator and stared at what was left of his meal the night before—a ham bone wrapped in tin foil, waiting for the soup he would make in the morning. He lifted it out, threw the foil into the sink, and without bothering with coat or sweater carried it out to the grave.

Fingers snapping and twirling.

Snapping and twirling as he waited on the porch, listening, listening, until he heard what he wanted, and saw across the street a light snap on in Mel's living room ten minutes later.

That's the way they come, he thought; telephone calls in the middle of the night. So sorry, Mr. Franck, so sorry about your daughter. We're doing everything we can, but . . .

Shock made him gasp, and he grabbed the railing tightly, and then he looked down at his hands, for a moment he thought he had finally gone crazy. But when the moment passed there was the house, silent and warm and waiting for him. The anger was gone then, slapped away, burned away, and he slept without dreaming, woke without smiling, dressed and ate breakfast without making a sound.

Mel was on the porch, hand raised to knock, and Anthony took his arm, turned him gently round, and guided him down the steps. The thin old man and the fat old man said nothing to each other, but Anthony could tell his best friend was afraid.

"You going to the hospital?" Mel asked.

"Later," he said. "Something to do first. You all right?"

"Miriam . . . she helps."

Anthony smiled.

Mel looked at him oddly. "You haven't even asked."

Anthony smiled again. "We go for a walk," he said. "You tell

me all about it."

Mel hesitated. "You knew."

"I have to go to the store. Something I need."

Fingers snapping, twirling.

"You knew, Anthony." But Mel didn't ask how, because he looked back toward the house, down at Anthony's hands, and Anthony saw the confusion give way to fear, saw the fear slide away into guilt, into something that resembled acceptance by the time they reached the store.

"Mel," he said then—snapping, twirling, thumping the door as he stepped in, "we have to stick together, you know. We old farts, we have to stick together."

Old men.

Old man.

And said nothing more until they were home again, the bone on the grave, and Anthony waiting at the curb for the taxi cab to come.

"We'll go see your daughter," he said, touching Mel's back.

"Then what?"

Anthony didn't move when Mel's head snapped around, toward the porch, toward the sound. "Then," he said, smiling, "I'm going to visit Rosemary. I want to show her a game."

RESURRECTECH™

by S. P. SOMTOW

Postapocalyptic add-on boards
add new life to your favorite compucorpse—
now only \$199.50
at your local electronics discounter!

Owen Gallenkamp suffered a peculiarly unpleasant mishap while mowing the postage-stamp-sized front lawn of his townhouse in a middle-income Washington suburb. He had been cursing ferociously at the power mower, much to the amusement of the kids next door, who had, as usual, been playing hooky. At long last the confounded device whirled into action; and Gallenkamp, returning to his labors, was forced to swerve suddenly to avoid an encounter with a monstrous turd that glistened on the unkempt grass like a baroque jewel.

He could not have known, alas, that this was no piece of squishy excrement, but a lump of painted and varnished plaster of paris that the hooky-playing neighbors had planted there for the express purpose of arousing his ire. But so offensive was the spectacle to his refined sensibilities that Gallenkamp lost control of his mower. The coprous simulacrum caught in its mechanism. Pieces of plaster began to shrapnel the lawn, and one such shard was propelled through Gallenkamp's left eye with such force that it invaded his brain, killing him almost instantly.

He fell forward, arms outstretched, against the mower's handles, and it was in this position, a sort of hybrid of Christ and scarecrow, that his wife Elayne (having returned from the drugstore with a fresh supply of sanitary napkins) found him ten minutes later.

She sighed, went inside, and telephoned my office.

Although it took me only twenty minutes to arrive, the house was already swarming with sycophants and leeches when I stepped inside.

"Oh, there you are, Whitey," Elayne said, wringing her hands



in a convincingly distraught manner. "Gentlemen, this is Whitey Jefferson, our attorney."

A row of earnest-looking cadaverous men in dark suits stood against the far wall, from which depended several tomahawks and painted Plains Indian shields. A veritable aviary of war bonnets graced the lid of the Steinway grand piano that blocked the stairway to the second floor. Another wall sported a futuristic poster with the legend *RESURRECTECH™* in embossed chrome letters. The significance of that poster was at that time known only to me. Apart from the undertakers, then, the room was precisely as I had last seen it. Except, of course, that Elayne had not been wearing that half-zipped black dress. She had been naked.

I said, "How could there be so many undertakers so soon?"

"Mr. Gallenkamp had a device that monitored his heartbeat," said one of the undertakers with his nose in the air, "designed by the Sargnagel Corporation. It outputted directly to the Morticians' Union headquarters."

Before I had time to gape, they all started talking in turn. "Mr. Jefferson," said another of the undertakers, "I represent the firm of Mortworth, Mortworth, and Mortworth, specializing in the expeditious beautification of the Loved One's remains and offering a choice of three easy payment plans—"

"Shut up, Mortworth!" a second interrupted. "I was here first. My dear, dear Mrs. Gallenkamp! Forgive my colleague's untimely and insensitive sales pitch. I am Mr. Ruddigore, president of Ruddigore's Rapturous Havens. Wouldn't your husband have loved to lie in gently repose amongst others of his breeding, listening to the strains of Mozart on our twenty-four hour string quartet service? We also have easy listening."

"That's nothing!" crowed a third. "Surely, Mrs. Gallenkamp, a woman of your sensibilities must understand the importance of racial purity! I represent Sampson's Segregated Cemeteries. Our motto is, 'Paradise or bussed!' Get it? Har, har."

Elayne looked at me imploringly.

Suddenly the undertaker stopped gabbing. "Look! Outside!" another one screeched.

"It's him!" said Ruddigore.

They ran to the open front door. I and Elayne followed. We saw an elderly gentleman in a top hat and tails, busily directing two lackeys, who were about to lift Gallenkamp off the mower.

The other undertakers were clustered around the body, pro-

testing their right of precedence. The one in the top hat, spying us, came over and pulled out a business card.

I took it and read, "Lord Texas-Chainsaw, President, Olde Worlde Funeral Services."

"That's *Tanshawe*," he said stiffly.

"What are you talking about?"

"My name," he said, and I noticed the British accent, perhaps fake. "It's *spelt* Texas-Chainsaw, pronounced *Tanshawe*. We are a very ancient family."

"I think I'm going to puke," Elayne said as we both noticed the viscous rheum dripping from Gallenkamp's jellying eye socket.

"Go ahead, dear madam," said Texas-Chainsaw suavely. "A little regurgitation is nothing to be ashamed of in this hour of ultimate bereavement."

"I think I'm going to scream!"

"I suppose I'd better do something," I said. "I mean, to repel the invasion of the body snatchers."

"Get them out of here already!" Elayne screamed.

"Leave at once!" I said in my most majestic voice.

"But—the body—" said Mortworth.

"As Mrs. Gallenkamp's attorney, I shall inform you of her final decision in the matter of the disposition of the body."

I waved grandly, in my most Perry Masonesque manner, and the morticians fled like a herd of kine down the gentle incline of the front yard into their waiting limousines. All but this Texas-Chainsaw, that is, who stood scrutinizing me for some moments (as a biologist might peruse a microbe) before he shambled off. As he left, I knew him—as though by a sudden prescience—for my mortal enemy.

Elayne followed me into the house. I slammed the door shut. Then I embraced her, and we kissed passionately.

"What a stroke of luck!" Elayne said when our ardor had abated somewhat, steering me toward the very couch where we had last made love.

"Yes," I said, "it seems that dear Owen will be out to lunch more frequently from now on."

"And dinner," Elayne panted.

"And breakfast!" I said, anticipating the wild abandon of the night to come.

"Though I rather regret," Elayne said, "that we won't have to murder him. That was so thrilling . . . the whispered plans over

the lunch breaks . . . the debates over the most appropriate murder weapon . . ."

"Darling!"

Just then, we heard voices squawking outside: "Totally awesome! Icky! Ooooh, gross! Daddy's dead!"

"C'mon, it's just a rubber corpse. Don't you remember, he brought one down from the studio when he was doing the novelization of *The Beast That Decapitated Nuns*?"

"Crap, you can tell from the stink, stupid. Like, he's totally dead."

I opened the door and saw two dirty identical ten-year-old girls with braces and freckles. "Oh, shit!" I said. "It's Heckle and Jeckle."

"Oh, Uncle Whitey! Is he really dead, I mean, *dead dead*?"

"Come in, kids," I said, "I suppose you'd better hear the will."

"Then I'll have to decide on which of those creeps to hire for the funeral," Elayne said.

"I don't think so," I said. "Not after you hear what's in the will."

The moment of truth had finally come, and it was with a heavy heart that I pulled the sealed document from an inner pocket of my grey three-piece suit.

"So," Elayne said at last. "It's worse than we ever imagined."

"I'm afraid so."

"Want a drink?"

"Scotch." One of the twins went into the kitchen to fix it, and Elayne and I sat down and pored over the document again.

"God! Look at that part!" she said.

I read: *"I know you've been screwing that scumbag of a lawyer, Elayne darling. At first, I thought I would make the inheritance contingent on your never seeing him again, but I've thought of a worse plan."*

"Oh, God, the plan, the plan," Elayne moaned.

"Now, the Sioux used to leave their dead on platforms on the premises. I see no reason why you should not do so. If I die, I must insist that you leave my body precisely at the place of death undisturbed. Especially if I die at home. My grisly, rotting corpse will haunt you daily as you rut with that shyster, you tacky, disloyal slut. How wonderful the Sioux were! They were never tainted by your petit bourgeois sensibilities. As for those hideous children I sired, the continuous presence of a memento mori in their home will be a salutary exposure to the human condition. No one is to perform any embalming or anything else on my carcass except

Dr. Sargnagel."

"Sargnagel ... who's he?" Elayne said.

"My, he's certainly kept his life a secret from you, hasn't he? Owen owned 46% of the Sargnagel Corporation, a holding corporation which includes *RESURRECTECH™* —" I glanced at the poster on the wall.

"I thought that was just a movie he was novelizing," Elayne said.

"It could almost be one. *RESURRECTECH™* specializes in mad scientist sort of experiments ..."

"How are we going to get out of this?" Elayne wailed.

"I don't see how we can. I drew it up myself. I was humoring him, really. Didn't expect him to croak before I had a chance to monkey with it. Look at this part: *If my instructions are not obeyed to the letter, my entire estate will be bequeathed to the Sioux Nation. The corpse is not to be moved more than twelve feet from the scene of my death, and only for the purpose of cleaning or cosmetic decoration of effecting a more aesthetic arrangement.*"

"What does he mean, the Sioux Nation?" Elayne said. "He's never even met an Indian in his life."

"Our mutual friend was even more eccentric than I thought."

"Can't we just let the Indians have it? How much can there have been, anyway?"

"About eight million."

"*What!*" The screeches came simultaneously from the woman and the two little girls.

"My dear, it appears that dear Owen, whose literary works were critical and commercial failures, who appeared to be just struggling along in this decidedly unsumptuous condominium, actually amassed a vast fortune by shrewd investment of the royalties from the novelizations of *The Beast That Decapitated Nuns* and *Gangbanged on Ganymede*. A computer error at Stupendous Publishing, you see, apportioned *his* share of the royalties to the studio, and the studio's to him. In fact, I've known this for some time; that's why I agreed to become executor of the estate."

"My God ... you've always known ... do you mean to say that you've inveigled yourself into my bed for purely materialistic purposes, that you've been —"

"Using you? I hardly think you're in a position to make that accusation, darling, considering you've been guilty of adultery for the past eleven years. By the way, who is the father of those hideous twins?"

"You parasite!"

"Elayne, darling, I *know* what I am. You have yet to learn."

"How dare you—"

"Now, you wouldn't want to upset the executor of the estate, would you?"

"So what's the plan?"

We were interrupted by a scurrying sound outside. "Let's go and see," I said, anxious for any diversion, for I dreaded having to call Sargnagel's office. The sun was setting over the kiddie playground across the street. I got a whiff of Gallenkamp, and didn't terribly much care for the smell. Two figures were sulking over the corpse; a police car was parked on the curb, and farther up the service road was a limousine I recognized as belonging to Lord Texas-Chainsaw's body shop. The lord himself was there, attired in a sort of Dracula cape, and he was grimly orchestrating the theft of Owen's corpse.

"There, there," he was saying. "We don't want to take away the handle of the mower, do we? That would be stealing."

"And what do you think *this* is?" I said. "Trespassing. Stealing the personal effects of the owner, no less!"

"My dear fellow—"

"I, Whitey Jefferson, of Jefferson, Shapiro, and Tablecloth, happen to be the executor of this estate. Since no formal transfer has taken place, you are stealing the late lamented's property."

As though in agreement, Gallenkamp's head craned forward on its neck. Assorted fluids drooled from his nose and mouth. A dog ran by, sniffing longingly at the cadaver's brain-besmirched buttocks until I shoed it away.

"But I am leaving the mower intact!" Texas-Chainsaw said.

"The mower? Who cares about the mower? It's the body I'm concerned with. If a man doesn't own his own body, what *can* he call his own?"

"I see I shall have to call upon the law for assistance, Mr. Jefferson," Texas-Chainsaw said imperturbably. "I say, officer!"

From behind one of the parked police cars emerged a grotesquely blubbery policewoman brandishing a badge. "I'm officer Heartfelt," she said.

"Stay where you are!" I said. "The sidewalk may be public, but the grass isn't. Got a warrant?"

"Sir," the officer, "It is illegal in this state of ours to leave a body lying around rotting for more than twenty-four hours without

having it removed by a licensed undertaker."

"So what are you going to do?" I said. "Give it a ticket?"

"Well—" She pulled out a notebook, fished a pencil from her pocket, and began scribbling.

"Furthermore, I demand the immediate extradition of Lord Texas-Chainsaw from the premises."

"Oh, I say, I object, what. I was only doing my duty as a citizen. Why, if I didn't report your shameful neglect of the deceased, I'd be an accessory after the fact, wouldn't I?"

"Ah—" said the officer, patting her paunch thoughtfully while Elayne did a passable imitation of a grief-stricken widow.

"In any case," I said, "it isn't even twenty-four hours yet. Now will you get this idiot off the Gallenkamp turf before I call the police?"

"I am the police," said Officer Heartfelt. "I suppose you'd better come with me," she said to Texas-Chainsaw.

"Foiled again!" said the twins, who had come from the house and were nibbling between them a leviathan hunk of amaretto cheesecake. "Nyah, nyah, nyah! Gash me with a ginsu! Totally radical!"

"Go to bed!" said their mother.

"But it's not our bedtime yet," said Heckle. By the way, these are not their real names. In my years of involvement with the Gallenkamps, I had yet to learn to tell them apart. Nor would I have wanted to.

"Uncle Whitey and I have important business matters to discuss."

"You mean," said Jeckle, "that you're getting rid of us so you can fuck."

"The things these children are saying nowadays!" Texas-Chainsaw said. "Simply appalling!"

"Get him out of here," I said, and there was a concerted exeunt that left me alone with Elayne on the front lawn in the suburban sunset, about to cuckold the corpse of my best friend.

I patted the old fellow on the head. A hank of hair, matted with brain tissue, clung to my fingers. "I can see, my dear," I said, "that we must be prepared to fight a legal battle of epic proportions. But never fear! Whitey Jefferson's never lost a case yet!"

Inexplicably, Elayne began to cry. I guess it was all too much to take in, having me all to herself and all that.

When I climbed into bed with Elayne I was anticipating a night of rapturous and continuous orgasm. Instead, I was surprised to find her rather frigid. I was expecting a long and tender lay-in in the morning; indeed, I'd even left word at the office that we would be working over the details of the will and that they were to start without me on *Hobson vs. Hobbes*. Instead, we were awakened at the crack of dawn by the shrieking of the children.

I started. She moaned. I said, "So this is what actually living with a woman is like."

"Go for it, baby."

"I think I'm starting to feel nostalgic about the lunch break arrangement," I said, casually stroking one of her breasts.

"Come quickly!" one of the kids screamed from somewhere outside the house. "The storm troopers are back!"

I heard sirens, crowd noises, and various *ughs* and *ooohs* and other ejaculations of repugnance, as I helped myself to one of Owen's shirts from the closet. I even wore his underwear. I felt particularly evil doing that. It was a superb sensation. Grabbing a sheaf of papers from the living room to make it look like I had been burning the midnight oil, I flung the front door open. Elayne followed in a floral nightgown.

The sight that assailed me can only be described as a spectacle of insensate and unmitigated horror, equal to if not exceeding the notorious crowd scene from Owen Gallenkamp's *The Beast That Decapitated Nuns*, a scene which, I hasten to add, was not in the movie.

It seemed as though the entire population of Rattlesnake Junior High had played hooky that morning. My hapless friend's corpse—whose head was swarming with ants and centipedes—was completely surrounded by jeering children. Officer Heartfelt was protecting the corpse with one arm and waving a nightstick with the other. Lord Texas-Chainsaw and a gang of henchmen, all dressed in dark suits and wearing dark glasses, were beating back the children as he tried to make his way through to the corpse. Heckle and Jeckle were bombarding them with spitballs. Old Mrs. Snodgrass from across the street was standing on the doorstep, obliviously telling me the latest gossip. A Hare Krishna was selling everyone flowers.

"All right, all right," I said.

"Twenty-four hours is up," Officer Heartfelt said imposingly. "I'm now empowered to authorize the removal of the corpse."

"Over my dead body!" I shouted, gesticulating wildly. My hand smashed into Gallenkamp's decomposing face. I snatched it back. Several gloppy maggots adhered to it. The grim comedy of the situation was coming home to me. "Bring me the phone!" I shouted at the twins. One of them rushed into the house and emerged with the patio cordless. I dialed furiously as the maggots crawled from my hand to the mouthpiece. "Give me Judge Strickland," I said. "Now, this minute." To Texas-Chainsaw and Heartfelt I said, "Your asses are about to be in deep, deep, deep, deep shit."

"The law—" the officer began.

"—is the handmaiden of the well-heeled," I said as I heard Judge Strickland's phthisic voice wheezing away at the other end. "Courtney? It's Whitey. I want a court order." It would be hard to go much higher than Courtney Strickland, who was head of the president's judiciary advisory commission or something. The crowd of truants was hemming us in tight now, and I had to kick away one intrepid child who, mayonnaise jar in hand, had been trying to scrape off a memento of the dear departed. "It's the Gallenkamp case—"

"Oh, is the old bugger dead?" the judge rasped. "Wonderful news. I'll have a reboam of Moët Chandon shipped over right away."

"Hold the booze," I said. "There's trouble. The will. He picked the front lawn to die in . . ." Of course, the judge had known all about Gallenkamp's will. It had been the talk of his chambers for some months now. "They're trying to take him away."

"The rotters!" the judge said. He probably hadn't had this much fun since his triple bypass. "But of course, the State law clearly states—"

"You want me to reveal—" I cupped my hands and whispered into the phone "—your part in the seminary Brownie molestation coverup?"

"Oh, I, ah—"

"I knew you could be reasonable, your honor." I turned to Officer Heartfelt. "The court order should be here in a half hour. Get out."

She drew herself up. "Until it appears, Mr. Jefferson, I am still the law around here. We'll bring the body back when we see the document."

It was at that dramatic juncture that an enormous van pulled up in front of the townhouse. It was a sleek, streamlined thing, all

black and chrome, with a futuristic hood ornament. The sides were blazoned with the legend

RESURRECTECH™

and beneath that, in tiny letters, the words "Sargnagel Enterprises." Help had arrived at last! I thought. For Sargnagel Enterprises was, of course, one of Owen's own little projects, and Dr. Sargnagel had been mentioned in the will as the only person authorized to tinker with the corpse.

"I believe that the morticians specified in the deceased's will have finally arrived," I said.

Officer Heartfelt gave them no more than a cursory examination. Relieved that she no longer had to duel with me, she and her squad car departed; and I thumbed my nose at the unsavory Texas-Chainsaw as he and his cohorts drove away. It was only then that I turned my attention to the labcoated technicians who were piling out of the car, all carrying some high-tech device, each one more outlandish-looking than the last.

A tiny man with dark glasses, was directing them. Were he not bald, I would have pegged him as about fourteen years old. I recognized him from the photo in the dossier I had in my office—his was the thinnest file in the cabinet. In all my years as a dirt-digger I had uncovered almost no information about this fellow at all. He didn't even seem to have a birth certificate or a Social Security number—if he did, they were well hidden even from the prying computers at Jefferson, Shapiro, and Tablecloth.

"Dr. Sargnagel," I said.

He ignored me. "No, stupid!" he barked at one of the assistants. "He'll need at least a hundred foot radius circumambulation field. Plant the ROM module—" he stalked out into the middle of the lawn and pointed at a patch of ground a couple of yards away from the rotting cadaver and the power mower—"right here."

The assistant started digging immediately, while another began attaching electrodes to the body.

"Totally radical!" the twins screeched. "Can we help?"

"Hold this," Dr. Sargnagel said, thrusting wires and switches into their hands. He then advanced toward the body of my late friend and began to drill a hole in his skull with some kind of

laser device. Brains spattered his head, but he didn't seem to notice. Then he gave a signal, and one of his assistants poked a sort of computer cable into Owen's cranium.

Owen fluttered his eyelids.

"Ah, good," Sargnagel said.

"Just what the hell do you think you're doing?" I said.

"What the—oh, you must be that Jefferson dude," Sargnagel said. "Well, we have like this gigabyte ROM module, kind of a simulacrum of Gallenkamp's brain processes, and we're like installing this like interface that will like function as a digital-to-analog coprocessor. Thing is, like there's virtually no RAM, so the loved one can't learn anything new, and so like it guarantees that his character doesn't like change, and aborts the Jekyll-and-Hyde complex, you know?"

"Awesome!" Heckle crooned, while her sister placed her hand to her forehead and pretended to swoon. "You're turning daddy's body into a robot!"

I must admit that that was not at all how I had translated Sargnagel's sentiments to myself. But the young are always much more knowledgeable about scientific jargon. It was clear that my dear friend had, in effect, donated his body to some bizarre experiment. Perhaps the interests of science were being served; perhaps not. Well, I would not let it deter me from the embraces of Elayne. Or from the eight million.

I went back inside, leaving the twins to help the mad doctor. Elayne was still in bed, whinnying and heaving like a steam locomotive. Exhilarated by my victory over Officer Heartfelt and Lord Texas-Chainsaw, and by the ease with which I had blackmailed Judge Strickland, I leaped eagerly into the fray. Then we watched daytime soaps for a few hours, consumed TV dinners, and resumed our feverish fornication. By midnight I was exhausted. Flattered though I was by Elayne's continued ardor, I decided to sleep on the couch downstairs. My rest was fitful, for it was continually punctuated by sounds of hammering and by electronic beeps and buzzes from the high-tech crew on the lawn. Eventually I went back upstairs. Mercifully, Elayne had fallen asleep; I did so too. My last thoughts before I passed out were of millions upon millions of greenbacks raining down from the sky.

I was awakened by the fragrance of hot coffee. I rubbed my eyes. "You needn't have, darling," I said. Then I noticed that Elayne

was snoring away beside me. Could Heckle and Jeckle have undergone so dramatic a transformation as to bring us our morning coffee in bed? "Thank you, children," I murmured.

"You're welcome." A rasping, buzzing voice. I opened my eyes wide. A tray was being held out at me. "I thought you and my harlot wife would like a little something for breakfast."

There was an odor of putrescence behind the smell of coffee, and the tray was covered with slime.

The bearer of the tray was none other than the corpse of my old friend. He stood, quite still, stinking up the bedroom. An electronic cable led from an opening in his back (through which the spinal cord glistened with beads of coagulated blood) all the way out the bedroom door, from behind which came the diabolical giggling of the twins. Such was my astonishment that the horror of having my friend's zombie resurrection did not register at first.

"Enjoying my wife, are you?" Owen said. He gaped wide and I saw the glint of some metal device implanted in his throat. I was reminded of the prosthetics certain laryngectomy patients use to simulate speech. Owen leered. I noticed that there was a trail of slime leading to the door and presumably all the way downstairs and into the lawn.

At that moment, Elayne stirred. "Coffee? How thoughtful of you, darling," she said.

She opened her eyes and saw the rotting animated corpse of her late husband, who attempted a sheepish grin through lips stained with blood, pus, and decaying vomit.

Elayne screamed.

The television crews had been gathering since dawn. When Elayne had calmed down enough, I made her make herself up nicely and put on a moderately yuppie dress. Then I carefully waved a sliced onion in front of her face for a few minutes, so that the tears would streak the mascara so as to suggest a woman heroically struggling with her grief.

Meanwhile, the corpse puttered around the living room. It had a go at vacuuming, but the power cord became hopelessly entangled in Owen's own I/O cables, so that he tripped and made a gloppy mess out of that nice pseudo-Persian carpet Elayne had purchased from Bloomingdale's. The sight of her dead husband jerkily attempting to rise from the floor and to disentangle his entrails from the various wires and cables set off another screaming fit.

"Shut up!" I said. "They'll hear you outside. We've got to act as though this is all perfectly normal."

"I want that corpse out of my house!"

"That's a fine thing to say," the cadaver riposted. "The three of us should have a threesome sometime. I used to fantasize about that over my word-processor when I was alive." It managed to straighten itself out; it then proceeded to shamble to the sofa.

"Are we ready to meet the public?" I said.

Numbly Elayne nodded.

"Think of the money," I said.

We opened the door.

Sargnagel was already holding forth from the front steps. All the networks were there. "Well like none of the hardware is really new, but like there are whole areas in applications that we haven't had the imagination to like effectuate. I'd say the *RESURRECTECH™* process should be like totally available within like maybe a couple months. The subject's memory is downloaded from the brain like before death and cut down to fit the gigabyte ROM module and there's like this hierarchical memory banking file-management user-independent operating system. We're totally backed up with orders though."

"Are you saying that we'll soon be seeing a plethora of zombies, Dr. Sargnagel?" a reporter asked, nervously eyeing Owen, who had come outside. The cables that controlled him emanated from a machine buried in the lawn; a spooling device kept them taut, sort of like fishing tackle.

"I wouldn't exactly call them zombies," Sargnagel continued, "I just think of them as computer-enhanced cadavers—CECs for short."

To my horror I saw that the Texas-Chainsaw limo had arrived. Moreover, this time Lord Texas-Chainsaw had brought with him about half a dozen Plains Indians in war-bonnets, and they were dancing up a storm on the sidewalk.

"This is the most awesome spectacle since the Philippines election," one reporter rhapsodized as the videocameras turned and the microphone booms swivelled, causing a hardware traffic jam above our heads.

"Why are they dancing?" Elayne said.

"These representatives of the Sioux Nation have been flown in to collect their ten-million-dollar windfall," an earnest woman reporter was declaiming into one camera. "But will they get it or not? Will Elayne Gallenkamp and ace legal expert Whitey Jefferson

be able to keep the body of Owen Gallenkamp in defiance of city ordinances about proper removal of the dead?"

Texas Chainsaw was waving a document. "I have here a court order from Judge Strickland—"

"Wait a minute!" I said. I ran back into the house and returned with my own court order. I brandished it, pushing Texas-Chainsaw out of camera range. He rearranged his Dracula cape and came bouncing back. The cameras reshuffled themselves as Owen's computer-enhanced cadaver came back into view. It was socializing with the Indians, joining in the dance. I took the opportunity to look at Texas-Chainsaw's paper. *Expeditious removal of the deceased* ... Astonished, I said, "How did you manage to get Judge Strickland—"

"My dear Mr. Jefferson! How could you be so naive as to suppose that you have a monopoly on Judge Strickland's little, ah, foibles? I don't know which one you used on him, but one teeny dropped hint of his involvement in the Boy Scout heroin scandal was enough to render him *most* cooperative."

Even I hadn't known about that.

"Well," I said, "We do seem to have two conflicting court orders—"

Texas-Chainsaw stepped up front of the nearest camera and began to speak in doleful, dulcet tones: "What we have here, ladies and gentlemen of the media, is a clear case of environmental pollution ... corrupt lawyers ... poor, deprived Native Americans being cheated of their inheritance to satisfy the craven lusts of—"

He went on in this vein for sometime. If there's anything I hate, It's one of these bleeding heart appeals, whether it's whales or Indians or anything else. I was getting steadily angrier. Elayne, who stood beside me, was weakening, though. I could see that she was not relishing the prospect of sharing life with her husband's corpse. "Please, let's just give up the whole thing," she whispered. "We'll go away somewhere ... at least we have each other!"

That was precisely what I was afraid of. I saw a vision of ten million smackers swirling down the toilet bowl ... and only a supply of mediocre free pussy to show for it. "Are you kidding?" I said. "This means war!"

"Totally rad!" said the twins. "Get 'em, Rambo!"

Texas-Chainsaw was saying, "... the sad state of contemporary culture ... when a man is deprived of a decent burial and made into a monster ..."

Suddenly I had an inspiration. I shoved him onto the lawn. "This is a constitutional issue," I said. "The man wants to be able to rot on his own private turf, and these henchmen of the State would deprive him of the right! I say just because a man is dead doesn't abrogate his civil rights—let alone his human rights! You, Lord Texas-Chainsaw, and you, Officer Heartfelt, are Big Brother personified! Communists! Fascist pigs!"

Texas-Chainsaw's face was becoming steadily more livid in hue. "I fail to see how you can accuse me of being both," he said.

"We've passed laws to stop discrimination against blacks and women and homosexuals," I said. "Well, I say there's one more barrier of prejudice to be overcome—our discriminatory practices against the deceased! We'll get another restraining order—" I was going to play my trump card, the fact that Judge Strickland had been getting kickbacks from the Mafia "—and we'll resist this un-American living/dead apartheid all the way to the Supreme Court . . . all the way to the President of the United States!"

I paused to take a breath. That was when the applause began. How sweet that applause was! As a lawyer I well knew that the content of a speech doesn't matter, only its rhetoric, its tone, its fervor. I had delivered a classic speech, on national television; my words were going to echo through the land.

That evening, Sargnagel's crew were making adjustments to Owen: spraying him with a fixative that hardened into a sort of Saran Wrap around him, so he wouldn't ooze and leak all over the place; fine-tuning his interfaces and cables; and—so help me—brushing and flossing his teeth.

The phone rang. It was the Reverend Obadiah Crackerjack, a popular TV evangelist. Oh, no, I thought. He's going to berate me for not allowing people their proper Christian burial. I sat down on the sofa, carefully wiping off Owen's slime, and tried to decide on the least actionable brushoff.

"Mister Jefferson, sir, I'm a-telling you, the Lord has touched you, sir, he has chosen you to bear his word."

"What?" I said, not quite believing my ears.

"I mean, I heard you on the news today, sir, and it is my belief that you have been singled out to bear a divine revelation. I got to thinking about all you said—about discriminating against the souls and wishes of the dear departed—and I think this whole

sick thing is just another example of the sin and degradation that's tainting this Christian country of ours. One moment they're telling us that the right to life is only applicable after the wee pathetic embryo has been delivered . . . and now these sodomistic sinners are saying that the right to life stops at the moment of death!"

"That's very interesting," I said noncommittally, wishing I could hand this lunatic over to my secretary. "Quite a paradox you've—ah—uncovered, Reverend."

"—When everyone knows that the soul is immortal and the death of the flesh is but the beginning of life eternal—of the glories of hell or the fires of damnation! That's why I'm a-fixing to hold a special telethon for your cause—"

Horried, I realized that I had been sucked into an unholy alliance with the forces of excruciating moral rectitude.

The Reverend continued (obviously rehearsing his sermon for later that night), "I'm a-galvanizing my congregation for a march on Washington. They'll come, believe me! Dead or alive, they'll come! Should the earthly forms of some members of my church have succumbed to the corruption of the body, I intend to be raising enough capital to purchase CEC units for all! Sargagel's RESURRECTECH™ process is the Lord's plan to prepare us for the more perfect resurrection of the life to come! Now, won't you say a few rousing words to my flock?"

"You're on TV again!" squealed Heckle or Jeckle from upstairs. "On some religious voodoo nut show! You're gonna be totally famous!"

So the reverend wasn't rehearsing. This was live. I had better make it good. But I didn't believe in any of this bullshit! And yet . . . ten million dollars . . . the computer-enhanced cadaver of my ex-best-friend hunkered in the hallway. He didn't smell bad anymore; they'd installed a couple of time-release fragrance ampoules in his armpits. Surely having him around couldn't be that bad. I mean, he might walk and talk, but he *was* dead. Dead and harmless. It was all psychological. Just your typical Owen Gallenkampian emotional blackmail.

"Well, Mister Jefferson? Do you believe?" Jeckle had come in and turned on the living room TV, so I saw the Lord's ambassador in all his porcine splendor.

"Ahem," I said, I had to say something fast. "Ah—the constitution of the United States—the—ah—habeas corpus—human rights—can't descend to the level of the Soviet Union—" I knew that one

would get them. I went on in that vein for a while, being careful to mention apple pie at least once per paragraph.

"That," said Obadiah Crackerjack, "has got to be the most moving speech we've ever heard on Heavenly Hour. And now, a word from our sponsor—"

Their sponsor! It was the Sargnagel Corporation ... with an ad for a Bible quotation PROM module, implantable in the computer-enhanced cadaver of your favorite atheist! *Why allow your beloved friends and relatives to die unsaved? Technology comes to the service of His word ... give your dead friends a second chance to accept Him into their hearts ...* It was sickening. PROMS—EPROMS would be next, whatever they were. The twins would know.

But it *was* pouring money into the coffers of Elayne and me ... as long as that talking corpse remained with us. If they took it away ... there'd be a new string of condos on the reservation.

"Hi, Owen," I said, smiling as he shambled in and sat down beside me. "Make yourself at home. Have a drink?"

"Don't be ridiculous. I'm dead."

At night, during our desultory lovemaking, I became conscious of someone else lying in bed with me and Elayne. Someone thrusting wildly and haphazardly away at the sheets. In the half dark I saw who it was.

"Jesus Christ," I said.

Elayne, eyes closed and transported by ecstasy, had failed to notice that she was participating in a particularly unusual act.

"You were never like this when you were alive," I muttered, "If you had been, Elayne would never have turned to me."

"Being a cyborg does have its advantages," he said, as Elayne heaved and panted passionately and obliviously.

Owen neither panted nor heaved. He didn't even breathe. Maybe that was the secret of his newfound sexual prowness—he didn't have to worry about his heart, his cholesterol, or his ulcers.

At last, he rolled away. There wasn't much slime; the plastic sheath was holding up quite well. Elayne cried, "Oh, not yet, not yet, darling."

"Want to finish her off?" he said.

Sighing, I returned to the ramparts of love. But somehow it wasn't the same with Owen sitting there rotting away. I just couldn't ... well, I just couldn't. I had to let old Roy Rogers back into the saddle. I had never felt more stupid in my life.

"That was wonderful, darling," Elayne whispered, as the zombie slunk back into the shadows.

To be honest, I was not displeased at this turn of events. Without the element of furtiveness, my relationship with Elayne had been reduced to the level of bourgeois adultery. Let him have her, I thought. After all, what else does he have to live for?

Contributions from Obadiah Crackerjack's church started to arrive the very next morning. I began to realize that we could never pull out now. The ten million was nothing compared to this new racket. Elayne bought several fur coats. I didn't go into the office for the fourth day running. I considered quitting the law firm altogether in order to give my full attention to this great constitutional issue. Yes, I still had qualms about aligning myself with the Crackerjack Morality Squad; but how could I resist the checks that were flooding in through the mailbox?

One day later, a group of raving religious fanatics exhumed the entire contents of a local cemetery and loaded the coffins onto Sargnagel trucks.

Three days later, zombies were spotted in nearby Springfield Mall. Their leashes were attached to mobile processor units. The zombies purchased some new-wave clothing at J.C. Penneys. There were some problems with expired credit cards, and the police were called in. A battle ensued between right-to-computer-enhanced-lifers and members of the morticians' solidarity group.

That evening, Lord Texas-Chainsaw and I were guests on CNN's *Crossfire*. He called me a environmental polluter; I called him a Communist. It degenerated into a fistfight. Luckily, I had learned kung fu; in my line of work it's always good to be able to fend off some angry client. I climbed atop the heap of debaters' bodies and—to the nation at large—I announced that we were going to march on the White House. "Zombies out of the closet!" I screamed at the top of my lungs. "Corpses of the world unite!"

A whirlwind talk-show tour followed. Mornings I spoke to studio audiences of earnest housewives. Evenings I had spots on news hours. Late nights I did the call-in circuit . . . "Mr. Jefferson, my mother has been dead for ten years and I was wondering whether computer-enhancement would be feasible" . . . "Sure. Get a good plastic engineer to reconstruct the body on the old frame. But if you haven't had the ROM-dump done, you probably can't be helped—although you might consider redesigning her personali-

ty entirely and creating a character-simulacrum for the frame." "Great show! Whitey, my uncle was cremated last week, and—" ... "Forget it! They might be able to build a plastic body, though. Did you do the dump?" ... "Do you think I could get my kids embalmed *before* they die?" ... "Most experts consider it inadvisable, but I'd make sure they sign a release first. If they're minors, you can of course do it on their behalf" ... "What happens to my IRA if I try to draw on it and I'm already dead?" ... "Call your local tax advisor." Et cetera, et cetera. I found a ready answer for almost any question they could throw at me.

Excitement grew. My best friend's right to rot had become a *cause célèbre*, and all the sickos were coming out of the woodwork ... I mean, all the Norman Bates types with their stuffed mothers in their fruit cellars ... you'd be surprised how many of them there were ... every one of them fighting mad and militant as hell.

I finally did quit the job. Actually, they fired me after the firm was retained by the morticians' solidarity caucus. I didn't even notice.

Owen started filling in for me every night now; the task of servicing Elayne had become onerous to me. Elayne had found a man—or whatever—who could match her tireless passion thrust for thrust. At first she found it rather distasteful; but with the lights off, and with the perfume ampoule set on high, she hardly seemed to notice after a while.

And me? Only the good fight mattered now. I was a man possessed. I had a vision. I had a dream. I also had millions of dollars.

The day of the great march on the White House finally dawned. It was a fine summer's day. The stench of putrescence filled the street as Elayne and I emerged from the house. We were followed by Heckle and Jeckle, who carried between them a stripped-down version of the CPU that animated Owen's corpse.

Sargnagel and Crackerjack were there to greet us. The former was surrounded by a crowd of techie nerds; the latter was at the head of a motley assortment of people and corpses. The corpses were what had been stinking up the street. There were hundreds of them. Many of them had not been as smoothly animated as that of my friend Owen; several fly-by-night CEC outfits had appeared in the past few weeks, each one seeking to bypass Sargnagel's patented microchips with bug-filled Taiwanese imitations.

The corpses jerked, flailed, and gibbered.

"My God," Elayne whispered, tripping over a human hand that had fallen by the wayside.

Then a fervent chanting arose from the gathered throng: "I'd rather be dead than dead! I'd rather be dead than dead!"

"What a singularly inspired slogan," I said. "It doesn't mean anything."

"Ah Jefferson, my son," Crackerjack said expansively, "that's because you haven't yet come to a complete understanding of the mysterious ways of the Lord. It don't matter *what* they're chanting. The important thing is that they're chanting. The second coming is at hand . . . the dead shall be raised incorruptible!"

"I don't know," I said, wrinkling my nose at a maggot-ridden liver that had landed at my feet. "Looks pretty corruptible to me."

"Believe."

"Yeah." I was in too deep now. It was my face on all those talk shows. I was the one most prominently identified with this latest extension of the right-to-life concept. I tried to keep a straight face as our contingent began to lead the marchers down the street toward the highway. After a while I got into the rhythm of it, and it seemed like no time at all before the gathering—now grown to perhaps a hundred thousand people, and a thousand or so dead bodies—reached Pennsylvania Avenue.

The corpses were a big hit. Two teenage corpses breakdanced frantically out front; one of them actually removed his own head and began juggling with it. Not to be undone, the other unzipped his legs from his torso and executed some bizarre maneuvers, such as doing a handstand ten yards away from his tapping feet, for example. As a consequence of the fine summer's day, however, the crowd was becoming increasingly rank, some of Sargnagel's shock troops moved in with hoses that sprayed embalming fluid over the celebrants.

Wellwishers lined the sidewalks, many of them waving frayed copies of *The Beast That Decapitated Nuns*. My heart swelled with pride. Here I was—I, Whitey Jefferson, a shyster from a second-rate law firm—elevated to a champion of the constitution—possibly even sainthood, at the rate the Reverend Crackerjack was carrying on!

The crowd marched on. Already we had reached Fifteenth Street; just ahead was the White House, splendid in the sunlight. The corpses began to sing, their raspy, electronic voices drowning

out the sounds of traffic and police sirens.

We paused in front of the gates. The Reverend Obadiah Crackerjack gave a rousing sermon, although I had to admit that the Biblical references went right over my head. I suppose that finding the right Biblical quote is sort of like looking up obscure legal precedents in order to flummox the opposing attorney. As Crackerjack got into his stride, I admired him more and more. His ability to prove that black is white was equalled only by my own. I wish I'd had him with me on *Hobson vs. Hobbes*.

Then it was my turn. Crackerjack had just been warming up the crowd.

Nervously, I got up front of the cameras and the throng. I cleared my throat a couple of times. What was I supposed to say? "Friends, Romans and countrymen"? Before I could begin the shouting began. Cheers, whistles, slogans, and above it all the song of the corpses bursting forth from thousands of computer-enhanced throats

.....

At that moment—

Cries of "Sabotage! What an outrage!" I turned to see that fighting had broken out. Hundreds upon hundreds of Sioux Indians were leaping from Seventeenth Street office buildings, and, with bloodcurdling screams of "Hoka hey!", were hurling themselves upon the chanting dead.

"Like, I think there's trouble," Sargnagel said, and the Reverend Crackerjack made a dive for the public address system to try to restore order.

I knew who was behind it. I just knew. And there he was, his limousine thrusting through the throng and mowing down corpses like bowling pins. The street resounded with the crack of bone and hardware. There was a whole fleet of Texas-Chainsaw hearses. More Indians, in all the feathered finery of war, were squatting on the hoods, tomahawks upraised. Others were dancing on the roofs and leaping from hearse to hearse, shooting rifles and fire arrows at the mob. Flaming zombies ran amok, sending up a stink of formaldehyde-marinated steak. Texas-Chainsaw was screaming. "The world was supposed to be divided into three parts—and you and Crackerjack want it all to yourselves!"

I stood there, feeling helpless, as I realized that mine was by no means the first unholy triumvirate that Owen Gallenkamp caused to come into existence ... that the entire edifice of my new-found wealth had been built upon the ruins of some previous en-

trepreneurial disaster . . .

"The money," I heard Elayne whimpering. "We'll lose it all unless you do something!"

I seized the microphone from the Reverend and began to speak. It wasn't a good, logical speech, one point after another. It was a direct appeal to apple pie, motherhood, and the American flag. But no one heard me, because as I started, there came the whirring thunder of overhead gunships . . .

In a few moments it was all in shambles. Texas-Chainsaw, bleeding, a microphone stand draped around his neck, was shambling off into his limousine, whose windscreen was completely covered with flailing corpses. What kind of power had Gallenkamp held over him? What bargain had he made with Sargnagel? I struggled to make sense of it all as the Reverend Crackerjack blessed the throng.

Amid the chaos, the gates of the Presidential mansion opened. Silence fell.

"The President will see you now." A man in a black suit had come to escort me inside.

The crowd was hushed. Slowly I followed him inside.

First I'd like to thank you, Mr. Jefferson. You've done a lot of the dirty work for us. You've established the right . . . ah . . . atmosphere, you see."

The familiar face, so full of sincerity and concern, watched me from the other side of the great desk. I noticed that Dr. Sargnagel's laboratory technicians were wheeling in a familiar-looking apparatus.

"Thank you, Mr. President," I said. "But why?"

Suddenly I saw it. A cable that emerged from the back of the president's head and wound its way into an outlet in the wall. The Presidential desk was covered with bloodstains and slime—sights familiar from the Gallenkamp living room.

"Jesus!" I said. "You're dead."

"An astute observation," he said. "But one which the rest of the populace has, as yet, failed to make—thanks to good makeup and tasteful camera angles."

I am, of course, well trained to adjust instantly to, for instance, startling new pieces of evidence in the courtroom, surprise witnesses, what have you. I looked around me and saw that I wouldn't get anywhere by disagreeing . . . after all, I was supposed to be here to

espouse the rights of dead people, wasn't I? ... So I switched to my most ingratiating voice. "I must say, Mr. President, you've really kept in shape ... I've seen people alive who looked more moribund than you, sir. How long has this—ah—state of affairs been going on?"

"Thanks a lot for your compliments," said the President. "I don't recall my death that well—I think they edited it out of the ROM—it was a while back. But enough small talk. The reason I brought you here is simple. You, miserable worm that you are, are the chosen instrument of God, I don't know why. The dead have clearly arisen, and the Second Coming is evidently at hand, although not quite the way we'd imagined it. It took a rare man of God—the Reverend Crackerjack—to see. That's the trouble."

"Oh, I believe, I believe," I said, looking around anxiously.

"Maybe. But we must be quite certain of it."

"I'll do anything."

"Anything?"

Too late! Secret Servicemen had rushed in and pinned my arms behind my back. More machinery was being carted into the office.

"We need a good man to fill the post just vacated by Judge Strickland," he said. "Oh, you didn't know? He's dead."

"Can't you just ... bring him back?"

"Shot himself in the head. Like, no time to do a brain dump beforehand," Sargnagel said as he fiddled with various knobs and levers on his equipment. An oscilloscope started to beep. It was just like a scene from *Gangbanged on Ganymede*.

"Poor Strickland," I said, shaking my head.

"Well, the media were threatening to reveal his AIDS test results," the president said. "That, coupled with his part in the Brownie molestation coverup and the Boy Scout cocaine ring and the SPCA's pending investigation of his animal pornography business ..."

"I guess it's better this way," I said. "Oh, and ... the morticians and the Indians, sir? What is their place in the new order?"

"My dear Jefferson, surely you have heard of manifest destiny?"

"Well, yes, but—"

"Che sera, sera," the President said. "Anyway, welcome to the government of the dead."

"I'm honored, sir," I said. But I didn't see why the guards were holding on to me so tightly.

"As well you should be! We stand on the threshold of utopia! In a CEC-controlled nation, no one need suffer again. Poverty will

be abolished. By carefully monitoring brain dumps, we can ascertain that only desirable emotions and truths are transmitted to the people. Sargnagel is a genius ... and Owen Gallenkamp, whose sleazy novelizations funded his research, is the greatest humanitarian benefactor of all time. Isn't it wonderful?" The President said, trembling at the vastness of his concept. "Wonderful ... wonderful!"

He shook his finger at an imaginary TV camera—preparing a speech, obviously. The finger flew into the air and hit me in the face. My hands bound, I could not wipe off the smear of putrescent bodily fluids that were now oozing down my cheek into the corner of my mouth. "I'm terribly sorry," he said. "Now if I'd been alive, that would have hurt like hell. Now ... one can always get another finger put on. Finger, schminger!"

"Of course, sir," I said uneasily. The stench was flooding my nostrils, but I couldn't show my anxiety.

"You see," the President continued, "the genius of Dr. Sargnagel is that he has made life itself obsolete. Life is no longer necessary ... life is ... a liability!"

"I couldn't agree more, Mr. President," I said, nodding enthusiastically.

Someone opened the window. The singing of corpses wafted into the room. Choral hallelujahs filled the air. Dr. Sargnagel and his assistants assumed a beatific expression. The president fumbled around in a drawer and pulled out a revolver.

"I'm so glad you feel that way, Mr. Jefferson," he said, pointing it at my chest. "I'm sure that you are going to be a stalwart ally in our fight to bring about the kingdom of heaven. And now, Dr. Sargnagel, if you could initialize the brain dumping hardware"

I froze, terrified. I felt something cold at the base of my skull.

The President paused. "Oh, darn! I've lost that trigger finger again! Sargnagel, next time try glue. Er—would someone else care to do the honors?"

I don't remember dying. The brain dump was over seconds before the guard killed me. It's just as well. I wouldn't want any unpleasant memories to taint the new age.

Elayne and I were married the other day. She's thinking of having it done herself. Heckle and Jeckle want to wait for puberty. Owen and Elayne and I have a lot of fun together, although I don't really have that much time for sex and other light entertainments.

For one thing, there's this counterrevolution going on somewhere in Latin America. Rumor has it that the leader is none other than Lord Texas-Chainsaw, who fled there with a group of angry Indians after the collapse of the morticians' solidarity caucus. He has vowed to return, so they say, and "run every last zombie back into the grave."

I don't care. I'm too busy dealing with the present and preparing for our shining future. After all, I'm an important man now ... the official prophet of the millennium. As long as they don't turn the power off on me.

Identity Crisis

by G.L. RAISOR

Norm Stinson was the ultimate tv fan;
if he wasn't working
he was wired to the screen.
And after the lightning struck,
the screen was wired *in* him, too.

"Norm, turn off the TV. There's a storm coming," Wendy called into her husband's study. She suppressed a giggle. Study was his word for the room. Norm called his decorating scheme early American masculine. Early locker room cretin was more apt.

"Norm," she called out once more.

"In a sec, Wendy. Hulk Hogan and Mr. T are gonna pound the crap out of *The Shepherders*. The losers have to be Cindi Lauper's hairdressers for a whole—"

The lights were extinguished and Wendy watched, horrified, as the picture tube just sort of disintegrated. Myriad spiky fingers of electricity reached outward and encased Norm in a blinding net. The image was enhanced further as Norm began flopping around like an overweight fish out of water. He made small, inarticulate noises and steam began to rise from the can of beer in his hand.

Wendy screamed.

And just as quickly as it had started, it was over.

"Are you all right, Norm?" Wendy gasped, rushing to his side. A tendril of smoke curled upward from his still form. His eyes were wide and staring.

"Norm, speak to me!" She shook him with all her strength.

No response.

Absolute panic gripped her. Forcing open his clenched jaws, she began giving him mouth-to-mouth.

"Wendy, sweetheart," in a dazed voice, "this is not the time

for amour. My beer's getting warm." He staggered from the chair and veered toward the kitchen. The doorway kept eluding his best efforts. Wendy led him, unresisting, to bed, and his snoring sounded a lot like the static that came from the TV. Once during the night, he cried out, "I want my MTV!"

So Monday afternoon, Wendy rushed him straight down to Crazy Charlie's Circuit City. Norm had seen Charlie take a chain saw to a Sony during an intermission of *Championship Wrestling*.

Their meeting was as inevitable as reruns.

"Yes, sir," Charlie mouthed around an enormous cigar as he steered them toward the most expensive set in the store. "This baby's got *everything*. It's Japanese, you see ..."

Norm stared at the polished chrome, wide screen, and row upon row of mysterious dials. Wendy wished, just once, he would look at *her* like that.

When Charlie mentioned same-day delivery, Norm's eyes began flickering like his horizontal needed adjusting.

Wendy and Norm worked long into the night hooking up the set, until exhaustion finally drove them to bed. In the morning hours, Wendy reached across the sheets and found nothing but coolness. Norm was in his study, sitting perfectly still, staring at the new TV. The disembodied glow of his cigarette tip made faint configurations in the darkness.

"Norm, why don't you turn it on?"

"I dunno," he said vaguely, "guess I forgot ..." His hand stroked the remote control with the familiarity of an old lover.

Wendy watched enviously.

And their sex life, never in the fast lane, began running a distant second to the test pattern.

She subscribed to The Playboy Channel in hopes that Norm might be inspired, but the only sweaty bodies he seemed interested in belonged to large, hairy men with names like Sargeant Slaughter and The Iron Sheik.

One day, Wendy went beserk and grabbed the remote control.

She did the unthinkable. She changed the channel.

Star Trek popped onto the screen. Norm began to rise from the recliner, and Wendy pointed the remote control at *him*.

"Beam me up, Scotty," Norm said in perfect imitation of Captain James T. Kirk.

"Hey! That's great, Norm. How do you do that?"

"Energize, Scotty, energize. The Klingons are closing in. They've got my phaser. Hurry!"

Wonderingly, she moved closer and pressed OFF.

"Wendy, what are you doing?" Norm growled in irritation as he once more struggled to lever his bulk from the recliner.

Click: "Spock!"

Click: "Wendy!"

Click: "What 'chu talkin' 'bout, Willis?"

Click: "Can we talk?"

"Holy shit," Wendy breathed. Her husband was taking on the voice and personality of television characters. Wait until *60 Minutes* got a load of this. Dazed, she hit OFF and handed the remote control back to Norm.

Nothing.

He just settled back with a placid smile and resumed watching the screen.

"Everything okay, Norm?"

"Just fine, hon."

It took about ten minutes to realize the impersonations would carry over into the bedroom. Her nights became the stuff of fantasy.

Wendy fully intended to give Norm the night off, but HBO was having a special showing of *An Officer and a Gentleman*, and that meant Richard Gere, her absolute favorite hunk in her absolute favorite movie.

It was too much for a mortal woman to resist.

From the bedroom, Wendy heard her husband fumbling around the kitchen, making one of his inevitable sandwiches. That was good. He would soon need all the energy he could muster. She laughed a decidedly wicked laugh and began humming the movie's theme song, "Up Where We Belong."

The door cracked open.

"Hi, sweetheart, what'cha doing?"

"Norm, you old sports maniac, you," she said, playfully catching him by the hand, "let's check out the action on the tube. There's some really good contact sports on tonight." She winked and *sotto voce*, "Full contact."

They entered the study, and Wendy glanced around the cluttered room, searching for the remote control. Impatience spurred her on, making her a little frantic.

Richard Gere awaited.

As she prowled about, the drone of the TV tugged at her, like a small insistent child demanding attention. Snatches of dialogue carried across the room.

Something about the words seemed familiar.

She paused and stared at the black-and-white images that flickered and danced like ghosts in the darkness.

And slowly, ever so slowly, comprehension dawned ...

... that ...

... it was an old movie ...

... one of her favorites ...

"Say, isn't that—" Wendy gasped faintly, her eyes darting back and forth between the remote control that lay crushed on the floor and the huge knife that glittered in Norm's hand, "Psycho?"

Amateurs

by LESLIE FISH

Some days *nothing*
seems to work the way it's supposed to.

The two kids came bursting through the door of the liquor store just as the big man behind me was coming up the counter. Neither of them could have been old enough to vote: The Spanish-looking kid was plainly having trouble growing a moustache, and the black kid's cheek was too smooth to have had much acquaintance with a razor.

"Don't nobody stickin' move!" the first one yelled, "This is a fuck-up!"

Somebody in line snickered, but quietly.

"... Stick-up," the other kid corrected, trying to look fierce.

They waved their cheap-looking revolvers clumsily, and bumped into each other as they took up positions near the cash register.

The grey-haired woman ahead of me turned pale, but otherwise didn't react; I got the distinct impression she'd been through this before. As for me, I only froze and stared; I hadn't been through it before. The storekeeper carefully pulled his hands away from the register, his forehead furrowing as if he were trying to think of some way out of this. The big man in the nondescript leather jacket looked the kids up and down, and laughed outright.

"Hey, you amateurs," he crackled, "don't you know better than to stand close together like that? For all you know, the storekeep's got a shotgun under the counter—and he could blow both your heads off with one shot."

Everybody turned to stare at him, including the two kids. He was tall and burly, built like a wrestler, no guessing his age. I wondered if he were an off-duty cop.

The storekeeper's eyebrows climbed up to his hairline. He plainly hadn't thought of shooting back. I doubted that he



really had a shotgun under the counter, but how could the big man know?

The kids carefully took a few steps apart. "You shut up," the black kid grumbled weakly. The other kid scowled and wagged his gun, trying to regain control of the situation. "A'right, everybody," he said. "Put all your money on the counter! Right now! No tricks!"

The woman shrugged wearily and fumbled to comply. I did the same, thinking that it was no time for heroics, even if I'd been armed with anything better than a ball-point pen. The big man pulled out his wallet and thumped it down on the counter with an odd smile.

"And you, boss-man—" The black kid pointed his wobbling gun at the storekeeper. "Empty out the register an' put it all here on the counter. Hurry it up!"

The storekeeper sighed and opened the register. I got a quick glance at it and noticed that the money-level was low. I remembered that the man usually took out most of the day's cash at six p.m. There were only two hours' worth of sales receipts in there now, which wouldn't be too bad a loss. He slapped the money angrily on the counter. The grey-haired woman blinked rapidly, as if fighting back tears.

The big man laughed again, hooking his thumbs into his jacket-pockets.

"No, no, that's not the way to do it." He grinned from ear to ear. "You should have made him step away from the register, first thing, and taken the money out yourselves. For all you know, he might've pressed a silent-alarm button while you were watching everybody else clean out their pockets." He shook his head almost pityingly. "You kids haven't been in this business long, have you?"

The two kids looked at each other, macho-fierce expressions slipping into something closer to little-kid dismay. "Silent alarm?" the black kid whispered. "How long it take one a' them to call the cops?"

The Spanish kid shrugged, visibly sweating. "Get it done fast," he whispered back. He straightened up, glared at the grinning big man, and jabbed his gun at the storekeeper. "You!" he snapped, trying to sound big and mean. "Open the safe!"

"Safe?" The storekeeper looked blank. "What safe?"

The big man guffawed.

The black kid, awkwardly tugging a plastic garbage-bag out

of his jacket, stopped to stare. "No safe...?" he almost wailed, looking so woebegone that I had to bite my tongue to keep from laughing like an idiot.

"Oh c'mon, don't gimme no crap!" the Spanish kid yelled, a shrill note creeping into his voice. "You gotta have a safe in here! Now open it up!"

"No, man, there's no safe," the storekeeper insisted. "I just take the money to the bank twice a day. You've got every cent in the house, right there."

The black kid rolled his eyes and started shovelling the mixed wallets and cash into the plastic bag. The woman's purse fell to the floor, and the kid swore and dove after it. I wondered why, if the big man were a cop, he didn't tackle them both right then. But on second thought, I guessed that he wouldn't want to risk a shootout among innocent bystanders. No doubt he'd get after them later. That thought must have occurred to the Spanish kid; he stood frozen, save for his wavering gun, looking as if he were about to cry.

The big man chuckled nastily. "What, didn't you guys check the place out first? Some bunch of Big Time Operators you are! You should've stayed honest."

"Oh, shut up," the black kid panted as he scraped up the last of the loot. "C'mon, man. Let's get outta here."

"But there oughtta be a safe," the Spanish kid insisted. "All these places got safes ... don't they?"

"I can't afford a safe!" the storekeeper wailed. "You know how much those damn things cost? Swear to God, there ain't one!"

"Even if there were," the big man cut in, "You wouldn't have time to open it. If the storekeep hit the silent alarm, you've got maybe five minutes before the nearest patrol car comes screeching up with its guns ready."

The two kids stared at each other, thinking that over.

I thought about it too. I was fairly sure that the storekeeper couldn't afford a silent-alarm system, either. The big man was pulling off a colossal bluff.

"Hell," he said, casually reaching into his left pocket. He pulled out a crumpled cigarette pack, took out a butt and stuck it in his mouth. "Go on, beat it," he urged. "That's a good enough haul, and what's the money worth if you don't make a clean getaway? Jesus, what amateurs." He turned away from them and fumbled in his other pocket for a match.

The black kid gnawed his lip, came to a decision and twisted up the neck of the loaded bag. The Spanish kid shrugged defeat, wiped sweat off his lip and began backing toward the door. "Don't nobody move," he repeated half-heartedly.

I saw that the big man's bluff was working; the kids were about to run off with a bare handful of loot, a good scare thrown into them, and no great harm done. We'd all get out of this alive, unhurt, with only a little money lost. It took effort to keep the relief off my face.

The black kid went for the door first. The Spanish kid glanced at him to check his position.

Right then, the big man's hand came out of his pocket. There was a snub-nosed, glittery-clean, professional-looking cannon-sized revolver in his fist. He raised the gun and fired.

The black kid went flying against the door-post, his chest blossoming sudden red.

The Spanish kid gave an astonished squeak, gaping at the unexpected thunder and ruin. The big man's second shot took him under the jaw and sent him somersaulting against the door.

The rest of us stared, slack-jawed. The storekeeper leaned heavily on the counter, eyes almost bolting out of his head.

The big man, his gun still smoking, strolled calmly over to the tumbled bodies and dropped to one knee beside them. He pulled the bag clear and set it down with the neck tugged open. He patted the bodies, drew out a wallet here and a folding-knife there, yanked off a ring or two, and popped them into the bag. Last, he picked up the dropped guns.

"Cheap rods," he sneered. "But they'll bring something on the street."

I felt the hair lift on the back of my neck. The grey-haired woman took a fumbling step backward.

The big man jammed the guns into the bag, twisted the neck shut, flipped it over his shoulder and stood up, grinning wolfishly.

"Hey . . ." The storekeeper whispered. "You're not a cop at all!"

"Never said I was." The big man laughed. "I'm no amateur, either. I study a place before I hit it. What the hell do you think I came here for?"

Then he stuffed his gun back into his pocket, stepped coolly over the two sprawled bodies, went through the door and walked off into the night.

Profile: John Gawsworth

by STEVE ENG

A guide to the fantastic realm
of John Gawsworth,
lord of the romantic Kingdom of Redonda.

"Gawsworth the eccentric . . . play[ed] a major role in the propagation of the British horror story . . . he could also write a genuinely macabre tale along with the best of them."

—Peter Haining

The Nightmare Reader (1973)

"A violent man, fantasist, he was partially mad."

—Derek Stanford

Inside the Forties (1977)

"That strange, lovable, self-destructive man . . ."

—G.S. Fraser

Lawrence Durrell: A Study (1973)

Professional makers of myth often weave themselves into the fabric of their own fantasies. When they die, their romantic self-caricatures may hover like ghosts to beguile future readers. Their contemporaries may complain that an author is being remembered for the "wrong" reasons; but a ghost who is having a good time, especially a literary shade, cannot be simply wished away. Among fantasy authors, the spirits of such striking personalities as Robert E. Howard, August Derleth, and H. P. Lovecraft

are probably smiling at all the posthumous controversies they're still stirring. Lovecraft, aptly called "his own most fantastic creation," is at least as interesting as his fiction.

A lesser but no less fascinating figure was that literary gadfly known as John Gawsworth (1912-1970). What is most often remembered is Gawsworth's quixotic kingdom of Redonda; what ought to be better known are his campaigns for fantasy literature. Scholars like Mike Ashley acknowledge him; anthologists Hugh Lamb and Peter Haining delve into his massive books from the 1930s. But the colorful facts and fantasies of Gawsworth's unlikely life have continued to obscure his real accomplishments, and Gawsworth himself labored all too hard at shaping both the noble and ignoble sides of his legend.

He was born in London as Terence Ian Fytton Armstrong. His romantic spirit was infused with Irish and Scottish blood and heightened by that familiar combination (for temperamental artists) of an overindulgent mother and a harsh father. The latter spent much time at the local pub, where his friends called him "the Duke." One day the son would outdo him, in both the drinking and in the acquisition of aristocratic titles.

Young Armstrong was a born collector—of stamps, coins, and autographs (at age twelve bursting into Bernard Shaw's bedroom to extort his signature). In his teens he was a rabid collector of first editions of 1890s authors. He was also attending London's Merchant Taylors' School, where the tragically short-lived Edwardian fantasy writer Richard Middleton ("The Ghost Ship") had studied. Arthur Machen (1863-1947), master of the late Victorian weird tale, had his son there. Soon young Armstrong had met Machen and became a champion of the older writer.

Out of school at sixteen, Armstrong lived in a book-lined garret dimly lit by gas. In appearance he was elfin-thin, with a reddish goatee suggesting the poet Swinburne. His nose, broken in a boxing accident, had been set badly, giving his face a jagged, worldly mien.

The world of rare books became his university and his partial livelihood. Daily he would scout the sidewalk book-bins for valuable discards to score what one friend called his "bibliographic breakfast." Armstrong, with hands as sensitive as a pianist's (he had, he once said, "magnetic fingers"), would dig through a pile of books and, almost by touch, seize collector's items costing only pennies. These he would sometimes sell back to the rare book

department of the very same store (Foyle's, as often as not) to pay for his morning ham and eggs. One day he found a *Frankenstein* first edition, another time a rare *Dracula*.

Soon he had met Arthur Machen's old friend from the 1890s, Matthew Phipps Shiel (1865-1947). Like Machen, Shiel was impoverished despite a brief revival in the 1920s. His science fiction classic of doom, *The Purple Cloud* (1901), still endured, as well as his accounts of the bizarre detective "Prince Zaleski" and such classic short tales as "The House of Sounds," a favorite of Lovecraft and Clark Ashton Smith. Young Armstrong felt rapport with this Irish romantic and soon was digging out Shiel's old manuscripts, knocking them into shape and getting Shiel published again.

By now he had begun calling himself John Gawsworth, after the manor house of his forebears, Gawsworth Hall of Cheshire ("with one of the finest jousting grounds in England"). As Gawsworth, he issued two volumes of bibliography, *Ten Contemporaries* (1932 and '33), including Shiel and such fantasy authors as Thomas Burke (1866-1945), famous for *Limehouse Nights* and other tales of London's darker side; Oliver Onions (1873-1961) whose "The Beckoning Fair One" from the 1911 *Widdershins* is a ghost classic; and John Collier, whose short, stylish weird tales were collected in *Fancies and Goodnights* (1951). Incredibly, Gawsworth had seen five hardcover books of his own appear before he was twenty-two. He also began editing a memorable line of hardcover fantasy anthologies: *Strange Assembly* (1932), *Full Score* (1933), *New Tales of Horror* (1934), and four more which were anonymous, luridly illustrated, and repetitively titled: *Thrills, Crimes, and Mysteries* (1935), *Crimes, Creeps, and Thrills* (1936), *Thrills* (1936), and *Masterpiece of Thrills* (1936). Most of these anthologies were published by newspaper companies, usually as Christmas premiums for subscribers; as fantasy historian E. F. Bleiler has noted, they were also weapons in Depression Era newspaper wars. Gawsworth's one-man fantasy movement had its parallels in Christine Campbell Thomson's eleven *Not at Night* volumes (1925-1936) and in Charles Birkin's anthologies (1932-1936). In Gawsworth's there were some weak entries, but generally his myriad friendships and bookman's zeal served him well, and more than two hundred thousand copies of the books were distributed. They included many tales by Arthur Machen and M. P. Shiel. (Some of the latter's needed refurbishing; as was his

custom, Gawsworth did the touch-up work down at the pub, recruiting whoever was present, such as the versatile Oswell Blakeston.) These anthologies were commissioned thanks, in part, to his first wife's newspaper employment. (Gawsworth had wedded a society columnist in 1933, the first of three disastrous marriages.)

Gawsworth's own few stories appeared in these anthologies as well. His "Above the River," written at age nineteen, is a precocious debut, evoking a naive young man's quest for wonder in the mystic depths of an ancient wood, where he began "muttering lond-dead tongues, if they were tongues at all, knowing not what they meant, but they, too, were natural and somehow the forest responded." The young hero's manic ecstasy turns to horror at the exact moment of enlightenment—as death befalls him. Set in Wales, in the Usk River country of Arthur Machen, it contains many echoes of the master. Gawsworth's second published tale, "Scylla and Charybdis," with the same locale, is more his own story, though the malignant trees and the antique, pagan terror they evoke may remind one of Algernon Blackwood's "The Willows."

Gawsworth's "How It Happened" is a brief, brutal *conte cruel* in which a madman confesses how he murdered his sweetheart and his own brother, whom she preferred. The slayer's detachment is chilling as he hangs his lover from a tree branch: "But Margery did not seem to understand. The jerkings gave way to stillness, a lovely stillness. The burden on the rope swayed gently, its weight alone moving it." The madman is eventually incarcerated, even though he knows he "ought to be King"—which, considering Gawsworth's later affinity for kings and all things royal, strikes a curiously prophetic note.

"The Shifting Growth," which Gawsworth wrote with Edgar Jepson (1863–1938), an old friend of Shiel, Machen, and Middleton, is as forceful and short as Gawsworth's others, belonging to a subgenre we might term "weird surgery." In it, a doctor's scalpel reveals a medical abnormality not found in textbooks: a monster which has grown, re-formed, and otherwise violated a girl's stomach as well as the laws of medicine—

a black-and-red spongy mass, dragging at the needle which held it fast. And from the middle of that seething sponge there stared up at me two set, unwinking eyes . . . An octopus! . . . Uncompressed, it looked as if it would have filled a drain-pipe, and split the colon of an ox. And

the eyes were still staring, stupidly.

The surgeon-to-the-rescue vanquishes the thing. Peter Haining, while praising the tale, believes it mirrors in part Gawsworth's own hypochondriac fear of cancer. It is an implausible yet believably told yarn.

Meanwhile Gawsworth's poetry was drawing considerable praise (he published countless volumes); and he was meeting many other writers of the day, especially in Soho—authors such as the colorful verse satirist Count Potocki, who wore a great cape and long hair, and who carried a book of parchment deeds entitling him to the throne of Poland. Back in his attic room Potocki might anoint a friend Minister of Fine Arts or some other post in his government-in-exile. Gawsworth could talk of nothing else for days. Then he remembered: his friend M.P. Shiel was also an impoverished, throneless king! Shiel had grown up on the Caribbean island of Montserrat, and his shipowner father had claimed a tiny deserted nearby island called Redundo ("Redonda"), which the British later annexed. Nonetheless, in a mock ceremony during Shiel's boyhood, the elder Shiel had brought his son to the rocky island and named him its king, dubbing him "Felipe I." Shiel later confessed that his whimsical crown may have unbalanced him a little; certainly his fiction is exalted with megalomania. With tongue-in-cheek Shiel appointed Gawsworth poet laureate; then, in a solemn ceremony on October 5, 1936, a penknife slashed both Gawsworth's wrist and Shiel's. Upon the latter's death, Gawsworth would become king of Redonda! Shiel, however, was a reticent monarch; and unlike Count Potocki's flamboyant Polish court in exile, his Redonda remained a private, gentlemen's whimsy.

While waiting to assume his kingship, Gawsworth helped Shiel in practical things, such as securing him a Civil List pension. (He helped Machen and other writers obtain similar pensions.) He toiled on Machen's biography, and began reviving the works of two deceased romantic poets who especially haunted him. One was the suicide Richard Middleton, whose horror tales he included in his anthologies, and whose other prose and verse he collected separately. His description of Middleton sounds like one of himself:

He was accepted as an idler, yet in his way he was the busiest of men; for his pockets bulged with drafts of poems, scrawled upon old enve-

lopes, and stories illegibly recorded upon the backs of bills. If the taverns of Blackfriars knew him the magazine office and the journalists's rooms knew him too. "Part swashbuckler, and part child," he was the bohemian personified. For all his learning, for all his passions, he could not grow up.

The other was Ernest Dowson, whose poems such as "The Three Witches" and "In a Breton Cemetary" have an unreal cast, and whose fantasy prose vignettes such as "The Fortunate Islands" and "The Visit" (about Death paying a call) deserve reprinting. Dowson's phrase "the days of wine and roses" rather summed up his own luckless life and excessive drinking.

Like his 1890s heroes, Gawsworth was given to spending too much time in pubs, allowing alcohol to mix more and more with his art. He even delivered an important if ironic lecture on "The Dowson Legend," defending his favorite poet from those who condemned him for his wasted living. (Twenty-five years later the "Gawsworth legend" would eclipse the former in squalid tragedy.)

Throughout these years, Gawsworth's own poetry was progressively darkening beneath the shadow of the European apocalypse. A 1940 poem ended:

O Man and Death together,
Old comrade and new friend,
Snap fingers at the weather
That ushers in the world's end.

The final lines of a 1941 poem were prophetic: "Choose Death; spread the dark pinion/Fly into final skies." Perhaps Gawsworth was imagining his own possible death, preferably in uniform, as a poet and war martyr, for by now, as T. I. F. Armstrong, he had enlisted in the Royal Air Force and soon became a Flying Officer, forsaking his career with various publishers.

World War II proved instead to be an enjoyable literary outing: shunted from North Africa to Sicily to India, Gawsworth met poets, issued a stream of war-poetry booklets, and in Calcutta oversaw publication of the now rare *Twenty Tales of Terror* (1945) with obligatory Shiel and Machen pieces. Once, when drinking with other airmen, Gawsworth got carried away and noisily proposed a toast to the living Stuart pretender to the English throne, a German prince. For a time, he found himself suspected of muttered subversion. One security officer: "I should

prefer to see him beheaded."

Back home in 1946, he visited again the seemingly ageless M. P. Shiel in his candle-lit, dusty cottage. New plans were laid for publishing old manuscripts; the two friends shook hands at the door. Back in London, Gawsworth was not informed of his friend's illness, nor of his removal to a hospital. News of Shiel's death in February 1947 devastated him. In the *London Times* obituary Gawsworth declared Shiel to be "a master of fantasy. He tossed the world about in his dreams, not with a juggler's detachment, but with a sense now bitter, now exultant of the tragedy and splendor that enwrap the *mysterium tremendum* of existence."

Other aging writer friends had also died or would soon die; to snap out of his depression, Gawsworth took stock. He was Shiel's literary executor, but the kingdom of Redonda was nowhere mentioned in Shiel's will. Fortunately Shiel had signed a transfer paper in 1936 after their blood pact. Quickly Gawsworth assumed his nonexistent throne as Juan I, without benefit of clergy (Shiel had enjoyed the presence of a local bishop at *his* ascension), and with Napoleonic hubris crowned himself.

Redonda had long been in his thoughts; in his *English Digest* he had run articles about a lady novelist who briefly became "king" (not queen) of an island, about a crackpot's attempt to become the king of New Zealand, and about the pleasures of owning your own island, noting that the "wish to dominate and control, the wish to be a governor or a king isn't a very estimable wish."

Regardless, Gawsworth convened his court, gathering about him an intellectual aristocracy of literary types. Countless dukes and knights (and some admirals) were created and immortalized on Royal State Papers which were then offered to the British Museum (where they were unkindly catalogued as representing a "fictitious" kingdom). Before Arthur Machen died he became a grand duke; other fantasy writers in the Realm of Redonda were E. H. Visiak, whose weird fiction and verse Gawsworth had edited; occultist and fantastic illustrator Frederick Carter; Lovecraft's disciple and publisher, August Derleth; Shiel's bibliographer, A. Reynolds Morse; horror writer John Metcalfe, author of the "The Smoking Leg"; mystery writers Dorothy Sayers, "Ellery Queen," and Michael Harrison (who has continued Poe's Dupin tales); even Fabian of Scotland Yard. Dylan Thomas and Henry Miller became

dukes. In *Who's Who*, Gawsworth listed his recreation as "creating nobility," a hobby that mysteriously disappeared from later editions when the avocation became almost a vocation. Redonda even had a national anthem and a sort of quasi-legitimacy; as the Colonial Office conceded, "perhaps Mr. Armstrong is entitled to call himself King . . . If it makes him happy, why not?" Thus the King of Redonda flourished, appearing socially in his regal robe—Shiel's old velveteen smoking jacket.

Through the late 1940s Gawsworth busied himself editing various magazines, including the mystical *Enquiry*, which sought out articles on occult phenomena. Its advisory board boasted such token luminaries as Dr. Carl Jung and Dr. J. B. Rhine, the ESP pioneer. In his first editorial, Gawsworth defended the kind of poetry that is "sourced in some Otherwhere, beyond the defined boundaries of psychology and logic, and emanates primarily from the terrain of dream." In this vein he published Robert Graves's "The White Goddess," keynote poem for Graves's later controversial book of the same title, which traced poetry back to a magical moon goddess. *Enquiry* characteristically featured a Machen essay attacking "the haters of wonder" and an earlier Shiel piece on life after death. Gawsworth also gathered Shiel's short stories into a 1948 English collection, selecting their earlier versions, such as "Vaila" rather than a later version "The House of Sounds," preferred by Lovecraft.

Gawsworth's own poetic career had culminated in the prestigious appearance of his *Collected Poems* (1948), which drew deserved recognition. It also drew envious sniping. The praise which he had been reaping from older writers had long incited enmity, and his guerrilla war on behalf of traditional poetry irritated the modernists. Such jealousies and literary conflicts, mixed with too much alcohol, eventually led to the collapse of Gawsworth's magazine career. Though many famous poets protested, he was fired in 1952 from his influential post at *The Poetry Review*. Despite the dozens of books he had written or edited (and two magazines he had founded), his flashy rise now became a rapid plummet. At only forty-two, he was through.

However, the Gawsworth legend only seemed to grow, if at the expense of his ruined literary reputation. Mostly it centered on M. P. Shiel and Redonda. For example, Gawsworth was literally a Shiel collector. Shiel had been cremated, and though records show that his ashes were scattered, the truth is that Gawsworth,

Shiel's pioneer enthusiast, had carried off the ashes for himself. (One thinks of Robert Bloch's hilarious tale "The Man Who Collected Poe.") After Gawsworth and his wife had picked up the packet of ashes, oppressed by the loss of their friend, they stopped at a club for a bolstering drink. The barman placed the parcel on a shelf for safekeeping. He was preparing a salmon sandwich when the couple noticed with horror that ashes were trickling down into the sandwich! It was duly handed to the customer, James Agate, an eminent drama critic, who just happened to admire Shiel and disliked Gawsworth personally. Retrieving their package, they left the club; but with Groucho Marx deadpan, Gawsworth could not resist noting: "You've just eaten part of M. P. Shiel." The critic, finishing his salmon sandwich, only answered, "You're drunk." (Perhaps coincidentally, Agate died that same year.)

For many years the ashes graced Gawsworth's mantelpiece, wherever he was living and with whomever—three wives, plus a later unofficial Queen. He would even bring the ashes to dinner, propping up this relic of M. P. Shiel in a box at the table. (Ambrose Bierce, it's said, used to claim he was keeping his son's ashes in a cigar box in his office, though in fact they had been routinely buried.)

But Gawsworth's most valuable legacy from Shiel was the intangible Redonda kingship. It particularly enchanted one acquaintance, magazine editor Reginald Hipwell, who came to covet the title. Hipwell started out as a friend (during a brief sojourn in the country he would rouse Gawsworth for a day's drinking by a shooting a pistol through his window), but he later became Gawsworth's landlord. Back rent soon totalled around £250. The method of payment was singular: the two men slashed their wrists, and by "irrevocable covenant" the Kingdom of Redonda changed hands. Hipwell frankly hoped to exploit the stamp and coin concession; and though embarrassed to boast of it in England, he found the title impressive to flaunt when traveling abroad.

Imagine his surprise when, in 1958, he read a "For Sale" ad in the *Times*: a "Caribbean kingship, with royal perogatives, 1,000 guineas" (or around three thousand dollars). Redonda had quadrupled in price! The enraged Hipwell threatened legal action, but Gawsworth's attempted sale was soon an international news item, and offers equaling £100,000 poured in. A Swedish prince even put down some option money. Gawsworth's declared motive

was to raise money to write M. P. Shiel's biography. He was quick to point out that the title was for the kingship only, the British owning the actual island. After all, who would want the responsibility of erecting a lighthouse?

Then, unaccountably, the fickle king took Redonda off the market. Perhaps Hipwell menaced him; more likely, the canny Gawsworth sensed that the monarchy still had more mileage for him. As he told a journalist: "I was vulgarizing a noble kingdom, so I withdrew the offer. Now I would not sell it for the moon." He added wryly:

This is the ghastly age of the gimmick. I am a king. I've tried using that. Redonda, I regret to say, wasn't sufficient. All that happened to me is that in the boarding house where the Queen and I live I'm referred to as "that king upstairs."

Reporters loved it. They found Gawsworth the monarch holding court on a houseboat with an actual crown, a flag, and the power to make them dukes in exchange for flattering write-ups. Redonda was becoming a long-running charade, a kind of grown-up game like that of the Baker Street Irregulars, who enjoy taking the fictional Sherlock Holmes more seriously than any living person. Indeed, Redonda's twists and turns anticipate today's complicated fantasy gaming. Certainly it was a good satire of tarnished monarchies and stuffy nobility. The players came and went, and aristocratic titles flowed as freely as burgundy from the king's everpresent bottle.

Inevitably, Gawsworth's whole Redonda act began to grow as threadbare as M. P. Shiel's old smoking jacket. Gawsworth kept up his brave facade, though, holding frequent court in local poets' pubs. Physically, he was no longer the youthfully lean poet; by the 1960s he'd become bulky of girth, full-bearded, and as long-haired as a rock singer. His Redondan antics barely concealed his private frustrations; he scraped a living from selling books, manuscripts, and letters he had gleaned from dozens of writers he'd befriended over the decades. He also filled countless notebooks with hundreds of bleak unpublished poems, at one point flinging his typewriter out the window and wrecking it.

As for his most precious possession, in 1966 Gawsworth underwent another pact sealed in blood. On paper at least, one Arthur John Roberts became King of Redonda, the other claimant,

Hipwell, having died. However, even after his abdication the erratic Gawsworth persisted in duking people.

His nostalgia for fantasy authors still flourished. He issued pamphlets on Machen's 1963 centenary, kept hammering on August Derleth to publish two U.S. editions of M. P. Shiel, and became John Metcalfe's literary executor, writing his *Times* obituary and, with typical adroitness, retrieving some final manuscripts from Metcalfe's hotel room.

In the late 1960s Gawsworth's latest landlord sold his building, and the beleaguered poet was forced once more to move. Friends helped his evacuation; as they paused for a little tea, the grotesque inevitable happened: one of them brewed up the contents of the tea-caddy from Gawsworth's mantelpiece. This mistake was not detected till most of the ashes of M. P. Shiel had been drunk down. The whole chronicle of Shiel's ashes, of course, sounds like a page out of Frazer's *Golden Bough*, with its ritual eating of dead warriors and kings in order to absorb their virtues.

Gawsworth was now homeless, sometimes sleeping in Hyde Park. A massive if naive sympathy drive raised funds to rescue him, even as a 1970 BBC television documentary hosted by Lawrence Durrell earned Gawsworth some healthy royalties. It presented him as an aging bohemian, tipsy with wine, poetry, and wry memories.

Gawsworth, a diabetic, was by now in ill health, and his final months were marked by repeated hospitalizations for bleeding ulcers. From his sickbed after a last operation in September 1970, he again tried to bequeath Redonda, this time to a reluctant author-publisher and one of his literary executors, Jon Wynne-Tyson, himself a writer of horror tales. On September 23, 1970, Gawsworth died in his sleep in the borough of Kensington, where he had been born. Like M. P. Shiel, he was cremated at Golders Green; his ashes were scattered over the crocuses instead of over Redonda, as the late king had impractically requested.

This monarch who was also his own court jester might have been forgotten, yet instead he turns up in the memoirs of other writers, his poetry is winning new notice, and his legend survives in the revived interest in M. P. Shiel. A book on Redonda has been published, as well as a detailed chart of the island with listings for "Fytton Peak" and "Gawsworth Summit," thus placing Gawsworth, who so longed for immortality, literally "on the map."

Local Caribbean tourist offices now sell both items. Though Redonda remains uninhabited, nearby Antigua persistently issues stamps for the island featuring, of all things, portraits not of Shiel or Gawsworth but of Walt Disney characters, including Donald Duck and Mickey Mouse.

Reigning king Jon Wynne-Tyson has recently visited the island, and his new novel, *So Say Banana Bird*, has a lightly disguised Redonda as a locale. However, Arthur John Roberts, who believes he bought Redonda in 1967, disputes this royal turn of events, even issuing a few dukedoms of his own as "Juan II." Wynne-Tyson, also as "Juan II," has pretty well avoided the whole practice of duking. (As if to roil the Caribbean waters even more hopelessly, Alaskan fantasy writer William Scott Home has laid his own claim to the now-cramped throne. Luxurious charters of ennoblement herald the various dukes he's dubbed, in blithe defiance of the English claimants.) Gawsworth's kingly inspiration—Count Potocki—the uncrowned monarch of Poland, lives today in France and follows the news with an amused eye. He noted that a few years ago in London, he encountered yet another Redondan claimant, a black man from the Caribbean who'd dubbed himself Cedric I. And when Wynne-Tyson took part in a recent BBC television show on Shiel, Gawsworth, and Redonda, at least four more "kings" arose to voice their alleged claims to the island!

Today Redonda's kingdom, whatever and whomever it may be, enters its own hundred and seventh year. One can easily fantasize the reaction of the ghost of John Gawsworth. While there is a truism in weird literature that a spectral tale must not be funny, for the late Juan I de Redonda an exception can be allowed. His phantom chuckle is distinctly audible.

Adieu John Gawsworth, sometimes-lovable eccentric. Such figures often seem sent to divert us for a time with their unique performances.

But "J.G.," as he occasionally styled himself, deserves more. Under the wine and poses burned enough vision and energy for half-a-dozen soberer, more plodding careers. His enormous, diverse published output proves this. The best of his polished, hard poems will persist in spite of Redonda.

And he deserves recognition from the fantasy field, for being that most elusive of talents, a middleman-of-the-arts. Such people make all the rest of it happen.

Of special help in the quest for Gawsworth have been Mike Ashley, Oswald Blakeston, Edward Craig, John Heath-Stubbs, Geoffrey Handley-Taylor, R.F.A. Jackson (the poet's cousin), A. Reynolds Morse, Arthur John Roberts, John D. Squires, Edwin Steffe (for the Arthur Machen Society), and Jon Wynne-Tyson. Gawsworth is recalled fondly by Lawrence Durrell in *Spirit of Place* (1969), and remembered quite differently by Derek Stanford in *Inside the Forties* (1977). Numerous memoirs appear in *The Romantist* No. 6-7-8 (1982-84). His poetry is discussed in *Books at Iowa* (April 1983); and over two dozen unpublished pieces about Gawsworth exist. He is covered in fantasy and horror reference works by Mike Ashley, E. F. Bleiler, and Jack Sullivan.

—SE

Scylla and Charybdis

by JOHN GAWSWORTH

She wandered for hours through the wild glades until she became uncertain where she was . . . or what had been there before her.

“ . . . can you not feel
The woods crouch like a beast behind your back.”

—*Abercrombie*

If you attain, as she attained, the inmost heart of the forest, an awe of the foliage may overwhelm you, for the air oppresses and there is no more companionable sky nor flash of cumulus-cloud to be seen. There is, indeed, a deathliness, a cessation; the atmosphere inflicts a heart-tremor, the eyes gaze wide with expectancy; the presence of an Unknown is sensed.

She had come up from the meadow-lands of Newbridge where buttercup and clover enamelled the green, where skies skimmed blue over the flat silt strands of the Usk and the spumy, cloudy amber of the river lapped through banks of purple loam. She had come up and entered Wentwood. And now she was afraid.

She had never wandered this way, which was strange enough, for the fringe of the forest was no distance at all from her home, and now she found no paths, but only giant briars coiled tortuously, swinging low in tentacled, unrestrained profusion.

The swift transition from the sun's glare to the shadow's gloom could not but affect her, the sudden cool bewildering her mind, numbing the senses as the leaves merged hazily before her into a shimmering backcloth of light-flecked tree-trunks and branches. All



was uncertain and kaleidoscopic until the glare of the afternoon wore from her sight and she viewed the shades in their more certain but nevertheless dim and eerie forms.

She had wandered then for many hours through wide and tangled glades of thorn and bracken, glades studded with primose roots and nodding foxgloves. She had lost her way and sought desperately to find it. Birds scuttled ahead of her through rootways in speedy, crackling alarm, while silver birches loomed grey and ghostly from overhanging banks. A freshening breeze brushing their arrogant heads, these fell a-whispering sibilantly, agitatedly. To the girl it seemed fearsome. Never before had she, though countrybred, heard trees *talk* at twilight. And here there were thousands of them, perhaps millions, their speech in sound and volume resembling a mighty rush of waters. Their fantastic writhings, the proud tossings of branch and spray, the descending dusk (now that the sun no longer even attempted to prick his javelins of light through the vault above); all these caused her extreme unease. She started to run, knowing and caring little whither she went so long as she left the forest far behind.

Stories of strayed children, children that never returned, obsessed her mind. She too, perhaps, would never see her hearth again, the little white-washed kitchen of the farmhouse of Croes-onen. Chill and dark in the wood it was, and they would be lighting the oil-lamps at home now. Cider and cheese would deck the trestle-table and the fire would be glinting bronze, all the kine being housed and the wickets shut. Very chill it was in the forest and she with no shawl for extra covering, and it would soon be dew-time and then night.

The branches continued to stir uneasily above her, their creaking masking words. As she ran, their sound pursued her, hissing in her ears. They were wild words, mad words, but clear; a couplet it seemed:

*"We, trees, will taste our old delight;
The dew is fire, blood-fire, tonight."*

Time and time again the girl heard the phrase. Every glade moaned and whistled it, straining tree-tendrils in waving menace. What meaning could the lines hold? Fear clutched her heart:

*"We, trees, will taste our old delight;
The dew is fire, blood-fire, tonight."*

Ahead of her it hissed again.

The dew is fire! The girl paused, panting and breathless. She envisioned in that instant the woodcuts of the cloven tongues of Pentecost in her father's old Welsh Bible. A moment hence and the air might be flaming, terrible. She would be consumed, a charred and blackened corpse, and the trees would still mock. But what could "our old delight" mean? These trees were unholy; it was not possible that their tone suggested in association with Pentecost. No, She knew now. The phrase spoke of an era pre-Roman and pre-Christian. Before her eyes she saw a quagmire . . . white girls . . . druids. Yes, now she indeed knew, and the trees—the incomparably ancient trees that had been spectators and would be again—they knew. If the fires from above were to miss her, the swamp would claim another victim, a belated sacrifice. And she was doomed, for she knew not where the morass lay. Her next step might mean her death. The selfless, unsympathetic trees still derided, and it grew darker and more dark.

"I have no time," she thought: "no time at all." The haunting refrain and the unbroken timber barrier that encompassed her—she could not pass them. They imprisoned her, mind and body, so that there was no escape.

A little spring welled and gushed at the foot of a mossgrown crag. How she wished it were a pool wherein she could rest her fevered, harassed body. The couplet was burning in her brain. She believed it implicitly. The swamp was nearer than a moment since, she felt. Shivering with fear, sweat beading her brow, she sought for shelter as anxiously as any harried doe.

High up, they swayed—the trees, tossing and lissom, dominating the frightened mortal who ran frenziedly, imploring, before them. Cool and dispassionate spectators they were of an agony and panic that could in no way move them. And ever as she stumbled, staggering at helpless loss, her two imagined perils spurring her on, the thought thundered in her head—"I have no time, no time at all."

Four Poems

by JOHN GAWSWORTH

Regal verse From King Juan I
lord and master of Redonda.

Café Royal

The cold girl she is chill tonight,
No warm blood flows beneath the skin;
Her cheeks are palid as samite,
Show ivory color, wan and thin.
Pale lips, frayed strands of broidery,
Clench over teeth, are pursed with pain.
The cold girl fights her agony,
The chill girl knows the deeps again.

Across the cloth I see her eyes
Dark with their knowledge of despair;
No pizzicato snap of strings
Lightens the message I read there.
No passion tortured from the bow,
No taut-strung ecstasy may cheer;
The cold girl needs no Romeo,
The chill girl waits no doubtful bier.

She hears the hiccought ribaldry,
She shrugs her shoulders at the throng;
The transience of mortality
Is hers. No moment many prolong

A life ordained by Death as his.
Since certainty betrayed surmise
The cold girl seeks no useless kiss,
The chill girls drinks of no man's eyes.

Roman Headstone

Julia, carissima Julia,
 Strange how you hold a beauty for me now,
 As though no sixteen centuries had dimmed your charm,
 When only crusted stones remain to trace
 Your exile life, here where I seek not balm
 To heal such wounds of body as once scarred your lord,
 But silence for my mind and peace for hands
 That they may cease their restless artifice
 And stretch at ease in tendrils and grass strands!

Naiads

Who knows what lovely noise they made,
 What light expressions of gold laughter?
 No one alive saw them, or heard
 Their voice, nor shall one after.

I have envisioned them in dreams
 By the blue marge and by the green
 Zacynthus of the uncounted leaves—
 And cannot say what I have seen.

World's End

Satanic horns are blowing
 The view halloo of doom
 And summoned Man is going
 To dig his little room.

With mattock on his shoulder
 He elbows Life away.
 He spurns the crumbling boulder,
 Assaults the firmest clay;

For he has finished thinking
And trusts no more his God.
Hell's notes all ears are drinking
Now Death turns up the sod.

O Man and Death together,
Old comrade and new friend,
Snap fingers at the weather
That ushers in World's End.

The Mirror Monster

by STEPHEN MEADE

The only thing Penfield really wanted out of life was the chance, just once, to work with his hero.

Penfield sat on the oddly uncomfortable chair without fidgeting. He was as excited as he had ever been in his life—and knew that if he handled this right, the excitement was only the beginning. But he held himself in rigid control, determined to impress his hero. As he had rather expected, Ordan did not look the part: an avuncular grey-haired man in his vigorous early fifties, with watery green eyes.

"There's nothing wrong with me, Dr. Ordan. That is, I have no physical complaint. I came here to see you in regard to a personal matter."

"This is a busy clinic, Mr. Penfield. You could have come to my home."

"I feel safer here, sir." Watching closely, he saw Ordan's eyes narrow slightly. "This office seems secure. Are there any recorders in circuit? Please," he said, as Ordan began to speak, "I'm not concerned with doctor-patient confidentiality. I think I can take it for granted. I simply want to be *certain* no one else can hear us for now, for both our sakes."

"My, my, how cryptic," Ordan said, and another might have believed the polite amusement in his voice, but Penfield was still watching the pupils, and exulted inwardly. He could *read* Ordan, see right through his skull. This *was* his hero. "You may speak freely, Mr. Penfield."

He had rehearsed this. "Dr. Ordan, I think of myself as a

superior man, and you are my idol. You are an artist, and I am your biggest fan."

"I don't understand, sir. This is an underfunded inner-city clinic no artistry takes place here, I assure you—"

"Please, Doctor. I am no kind of police; just the opposite. I'm the only one who could have tracked you here because I'm the only one who *knows* you, because I think like you. You are the Mirror Monster, the greatest genius of your age, and I have come halfway across the country to shake your hand and tell you that someone understands."

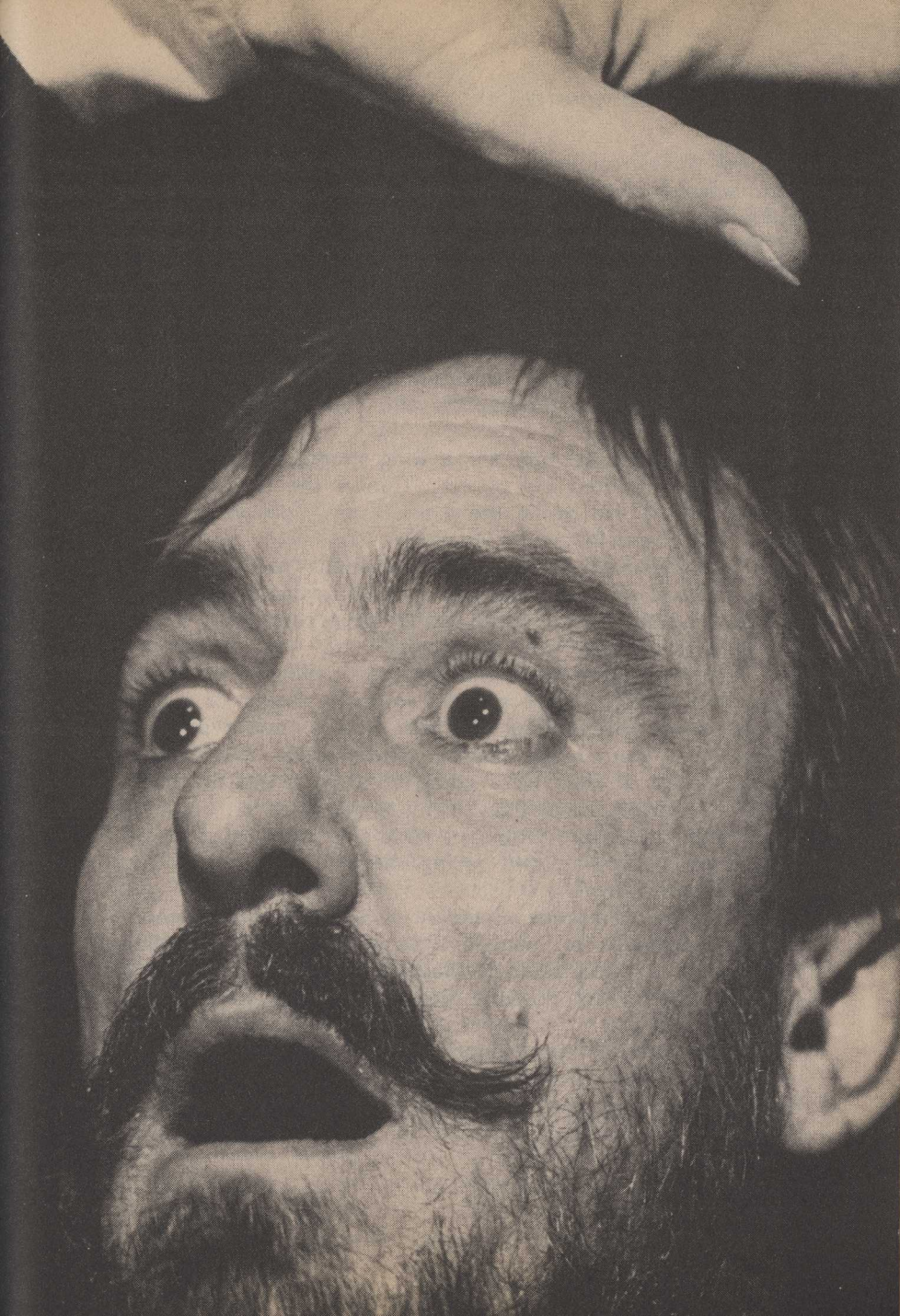
Ordan's face changed. "That is a serious accusation. The Mirror Monster, as the tabloids call him, is a serial murderer, a sexual sadist—"

"A priest of pain, a master of horror. Beside you, de Sade was a half-talented amateur." He stood up slowly. "Doctor, I know that I am in some danger now, because I have startled you, and I want to allay your natural concern, to put you at ease." He began carefully to undress. "I must convince you that I am not wearing a wire or a weapon. Besides, this will look more natural if your nurse should come in."

The doctor watched in expressionless silence until Penfield was done and seated again. The odd chair felt scratchy against his bare buttocks. "What is it that makes you think I am the Mirror Monster, Mr. Penfield?" Ordan asked.

"Study of your work," Penfield replied at once. "I know of at least six certain kills aside from the eighteen attributed to you, and I'm sure there are more. I read all the sex-horror magazines, subscribe to several clipping services, collect videos that can't even be bought in Times Square. I study refinements of cruelty. There's been no one like you since Caligula, and you have technology that didn't exist then."

"Don't worry, Doctor, the police will never find you. Policemen tend to be simple sadists. They fail to perceive wit, subtlety, humor, so they will never understand you well enough to track you as I did. They assume, for instance, that since none of the cuts look surgical, you are not a medical man. But I reasoned that a really ingenious sadist would *learn* and employ medical techniques—unless he already had a surfeit of them in his work, had already exhausted the creative possibilities. So then it was a matter of triangulating on your location by known-body distribution, and looking for the most intelligent doctors. I used grades



and IQ scores, and rejected any candidates who were not above reproach, on the assumption that an artist like yourself would cover his tracks superbly. The soundproofed basement in your home was an indicator. And then your background in physiochemistry nailed it down. You see . . ." Penfield smiled warmly, admiringly "... I know about the anesthetic."

Ordan did not move a muscle. "Do you really?"

"Brilliant. The first major breakthrough in the field since the discovery of electricity. I *deduced* it, Doctor. Had to, of course: it must break down too rapidly and completely for any autopsy to ever find it."

Ordan regarded him for a long moment with those watery eyes. then he lifted his phone. "Cancel the rest and go home, please, nurse." He broke the connection. "You are a very clever man, Mr. Penfield."

"I am your student," he said modestly, preening inside. "The utter pellucid horror of using a perfect analgesic for purposes of torture is something I could never have conceived."

"Then how did you deduce it?"

"The sheer amount of the damage. It did not seem reasonable that your victims could survive so many hours of such intense agony before succumbing to heart failure, not even the strong young girls you always choose. Their hearts should have burst much sooner, if they were going to at all. And of course there were the mirrors themselves. Why would such an artist use mirrors, when videotape would be so much more satisfactory? Why was there always a clock facing the site, even when there was no need for hurry?

"There is a morgue attendant who shares my ... interests, a fool who is under my control: I arranged several hours in private with three of your victims. Magnificent work, Doctor; I believe you extracted every possible increment of suffering. The creative use of eyesockets ... in any case, after careful study and meditation I found the tiny pinpricks near the top of each spine, obscured by the greater damage. I pondered for days—and then the answer came to me. It's been terribly hard, keeping it to myself."

"Say it."

Penfield grinned uncontrollably. "You string them up and anesthetize them utterly. Not paralyze them, or they couldn't scream; you merely numb them. You may well use video, for

yourself, but you set the mirrors up for *them*, so that they may see everything that is going to happen, every indignity, every splintered bone, every ruined organ. Then you tell them precisely how long the anesthetic is going to last. Then you set to work."

Ordan smiled for the first time. "There's a charming quality to the screams once you've taken the tongue. I like to do that first thing. And if you can arrange to be approaching orgasm just as the analgesic is wearing off, the ride is . . . exhilarating. But perhaps the best moment is earlier, the one when they first grasp the fact that they have sustained damage too great to survive—and have hours of life left, with the worst to come."

Penfield felt his penis thicken. "So I imagined. I salute you, sir."

Ordan regarded him with interest. "Are you another government recruiter? And if so which government?"

Penfield blinked. "Oh my, no. I am a private citizen, a connoisseur."

"What is it you want of me, Mr. Penfield?"

He took a deep breath. "I want to hear about the ones that didn't make the papers, for one thing. If there are videos, I would consider it an honor to view them: I would dare not hope for copies. And if you wouldn't mind, I'd like to work with you once or twice."

"Why should I take that risk?"

"Three reasons. First, once we've done one together, I can no longer be a hypothetical danger to you. Second, I know your work better than anyone else, probably *including* your victims. Most men get a thrill from a newspaper account of your work, and suppress it. A few are willing to admit to themselves that they admire it, that they half-wish they had the courage to emulate you—they collect clippings of Manson and Ng and other journeymen practitioners and hide them under the mattress. You have sold a *lot* of copies of the *New York Post*. We all have a monster inside us, men and women. We all see ourselves in your mirrors . . .

"I confess that I myself have never acted out my fantasies as yet; thanks to you I haven't needed to. But I am a serious student, and I think I know you almost as well as you know yourself. I know, for instance, that you'd never select victims among your poverty-patients here at the clinic. Not from fear of arousing suspicion, but because there is no great challenge in degrading the kind

of women I saw out there in your waiting room." His penis was stirring, beginning to lift. "Your victims are ladies."

"You said three reasons."

Penfield smiled. "I have developed a few little ideas of my own. Nothing as ingenious as yours, to be sure—but I think you may find them interesting amateur work."

Ordan took cigarettes from a drawer and lit one. "Mr. Penfield, I scarcely know what to say—"

"Doctor, please! Let me work with you—you're the best in the world! You make Spring-Heel Jack look like a common mugger. You've even inspired a competent copycat!"

"The so-called Gay Mirror Monster? You've studied him?" Ordan put the pack away again.

"Briefly. Who cares what faggots do? Or imitators?" His burgeoning erection made him shift position, and some part of the chair poked him. "You are the real genius."

Ordan smiled warmly and took his hand from the drawer. "Thank you, Mr. Penfield. It is nice to be appreciated. As you will see."

Penfield blinked rapidly. "Beg pardon? Warm in here . . ."

"Perhaps you felt a little prick in your ass just then? No? No matter; there'll be a bigger one later. How do you feel Mr. Penfield?"

"— 'll righ—" Curious. Why was he slurring his words?

"I *do* take an occassional subject from my clinic; I merely have to be a bit more careful. I imagine by now you're feeling very suggestible. Is that right?"

"Yes." He struggled to form additional words, failed.

"Why don't you say 'Yes, sir'?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good boy. You made a basic error. The same one the police and newspapers have. Because you're monosexual, you assumed that the Gay Mirror Monster was someone else." He smiled beatifically. "A truly great artist, Mr. Penfield, cannot be monosexual. You're a second-rater, and you don't know me at all."

He sat back, puffed contentedly on his cigarette. "But since, you're a connoisseur, perhaps I will tell you about one that didn't make the papers. I *have* been wanting to tell someone, and you'll appreciate it. Besides, it will fill time while we wait for the hypnotic to take full effect. I took a vacationing family once, from a state campground, young couple and a little boy and girl. I did

them all, in each others' presence, one at a time, over four days. I saved the mother for last—and then I cheated her. *I let her live.* Blind, deaf, dumb, quadriplegic. Isn't that *marvelous*? She's on life support in an institution. I visit her from time to time. She knows it's me: I can tell. Probably by smell. She hates it when I take her, even more than when the attendants do. She could last a decade, and she has no way to suicide. Strong woman. Sometimes I wish I had left the hearing."

He smiled reminiscently, then raised himself slightly to peer over his desk. "Ah, excellent, Mr. Penfield. It is nice to work with a canvas of proper size. Have you ever had bisexual leanings, Mr. Penfield?"

"No, sir."

"Excellent. The best victims *are* monosexual, when they come to one. And imaginative, like yourself." He glanced meditatively at his cigarette, stubbed it out in his ashtray with some reluctance. "Get dressed again—you can leave off the briefs—and come along. We're going for a ride. I'm keen to hear about those 'interesting little amateur ideas' of yours . . ." He giggled suddenly. "Have you ever heard the expression 'hoist by his own petard'?" The giggle became a full blown laugh.

Stanton's last rational thought was a flash of dismayed contempt. His hero had feet of clay. A man as ingenious as Ordan should have reasoned that Penfield would leave a letter in his safe deposit box. And by the time the hypnotic had worn off and Penfield had control of his vocal chords again, his tongue would be gone—a shame he would never get to see Ordan's face when . . .

Then his mind melted and he did as he was told.

Cat at Play

by AUGUSTINE FUNNELL

He knew he shouldn't have let the talking cat go spying for him. But he had to know. And now the thing was toying with him, just like he was some half-dead sparrow that'd let it get too close.

"Yeah, she's cheating on you," the cat said. David sighed, rubbed the stubble on his chin and met the cat's gaze as evenly as he could. Its eye slits widened, narrowed, almost as if the beast were laughing at him.

"You're sure of it?" He'd already lost two games of chess to Martin Carlyle earlier in the evening, and he wasn't in a good mood.

The tortoiseshell turned the orange half of its nose toward him, purring softly. It licked at a paw, examined it in the study's dim light, and fixed its slitted gaze squarely on him. "Well, it was either the dirty deed itself, or the damndest case of prickly heat I've ever seen."

"Okay, okay," David growled, and stared out the window at the streetlight where a cloud of moths took turns battering themselves against the protective glass. He felt like joining them.

So. In his heart of hearts he'd known Karen was cheating, but he hadn't permitted the knowledge to surface and establish itself. Now, with the cat's confirmation, he couldn't avoid the issue any longer. For an instant he wished he hadn't let in the cat that rainy morning a week back, wished he'd never been made privy to that other knowledge the cat had imparted to him, that "all cats are magical in one way or another, you know. If people don't know

it, it's only because we haven't bothered to tell them. But this is the fourth house I've been to trying to get out of this damned rain, and you're the only one who bothered to let me in. So here's the deal: let me use this place for home base for a while, and in return I'll permit you use of my magical ability."

"Which is?"

"Why, my speech and reading ability, of course. We don't all of us have this particular gift."

David had curled his lip sarcastically. He'd never much liked cats anyway; certainly he'd never liked the way they toyed with their prey, and he felt too much like prey right now to appreciate the cat's abilities. "Big deal. So I get to talk to a cat. *That's* bound to help me end up in the loony bin somewhere."

"Look, Mister Higher Life Form, you got any business rivals you want some dirt on? You wanna know what horses are doped at the Downs next Saturday? I could wander around a bit. Who pays attention to a cat, right? We've got great hearing . . . twenty-four more muscles in our ears than you, and we receive ultrasonic frequencies of up to twenty-five thousand vibrations per second. Why—"

"Okay, okay, I get the picture!" It had taken him all of five seconds to tell the cat he suspected Karen of infidelity. And now the cat had given substance to the suspicions.

"You know who he is?" David asked the cat.

"Nope."

"Can you find out?"

The cat purred.

He wasn't able to concentrate at work. The image of Karen with another man intruded time and again, and when he found himself entering the same figures in the ledger for the fourth time he threw the pen across the room and swept his desk clear in disgust. *God damn them, anyway!*

He left shortly after lunch, not bothering to tell anyone, and drove home in a daze. When he parked the car in the driveway a blur of black and orange darted from under the front porch toward the hedge. His gaze followed it until it disappeared beneath the shrubs, then he got out of the car and started toward the house.

He was half-way to the steps when a rustling from the hedge caught his attention. He turned as the cat appeared, something held in his jaws; after a moment he recognized the thing as a spar-

row. The cat's gaze met his, and at that instant it dropped the bird to the grass. It was still alive, David saw, very much so. It fluttered its wings as it hopped, but one wing was obviously broken and it could not achieve flight. The cat batted it and it fell over, dazed, a couple of feathers dislodged.

Fascinated despite his revulsion, David watched as the cat waited patiently for the sparrow to try again. It did. It hopped away, fluttering its useless wings, and the cat followed leisurely, purring contentedly. Every time the exhausted sparrow stopped to rest the cat moved menacingly close, and the bird was forced to resume its futile attempts at flight and escape.

"Leave it alone," David heard himself whispering suddenly, horrified. "Can't you see it's hurt?"

The cat stared at him as if he were stupid, and batted the bird again, savagely this time. A few more feathers drifted through the air. A drop of blood appeared.

"That's the whole point," the cat said softly, coldly. Its eyes gleamed as it regarded him briefly, then it pounced on the bird and sunk razor-sharp teeth into its yielding neck.

The big thing, David told himself, was to act as if he suspected nothing, to live his life as normally as possible until the cat named Karen's lover. Which meant that although he would have liked to go out somewhere every night the rest of the week so Karen could arrange a little rendezvous, he had to stay in the house because he always did. But it wasn't easy. Every time Karen spoke to him he hurt in some place he hadn't even known he had, and when he heard her talking on the telephone his guts wrenched every time she laughed. How many times had she laughed that same way at some witticism her lover had uttered through that very receiver?

It was worse when the cat was in the study with him, watching the ache in his eyes and purring so contentedly, as if his problems were inconsequential and not worth the solving. When he found feathers in the top drawer of his desk, as if to remind him of how *Karen* had played with *him*, he almost demanded the cat leave, but he couldn't: he *had* to find out the name of Karen's lover, and only the cat could get it for him. Even so, when the image of the sparrow fluttered painfully through his mind he promised himself he'd keep the cat not one minute longer than he had to.

And always the cat watched him; though he would not have believed it a week earlier, he knew it was remembering Karen and her lover, and laughing at him.

Thursday was his regular chess night with Martin, and he was finally able to get out. Through the open door to his darkened study he saw the cat watching as Karen gave him a peck on the cheek, and it seemed that the tortoiseshell winked at him. Well, nothing could surprise him now.

He was wrong.

"Martin Carlyle," the cat said shortly after midnight when David returned to find Karen already in bed.

"Don't be ridiculous! I just played two games of chess with Martin Carlyle!" He frowned. "Beat me both times."

The cat hunched its shoulders, looking for all the world like it was shrugging. "Suit yourself, but when they got down to the nitty gritty bare-bottom boogie I clawed his wallet out of his pants pocket and flipped it open. His driver's license said Martin Carlyle."

"Tall? Well-built? Dark wavy hair?"

The cat purred, its eyes boring into him.

"Impossible! I was *talking* to him! We shook **hands** after both games! There's got to be a mistake."

Again the cat performed that eerie shrug of its shoulders. "Martin Carlyle."

David shook his head. "I don't understand this at all."

But after a moment the cat fixed him with an intent gaze. "I understand it very well."

David waited, but the cat was licking its fur. He had to restrain himself from strangling the damn thing. It seemed to enjoy watching him squirm, like the sparrow, trapped and doomed. He took a deep breath, then, "Okay, explain it to me."

The cat's eyes glittered. "Simple. Martin Carlyle has a shape-changing cat to take his place and play chess with you while he comes here."

David's eyes widened and his jaw dropped, but even as disbelief showed on his face acceptance accreted in the back of his mind. Yes, Martin had a cat, and no, David couldn't remember seeing it since his first suspicions of Karen's infidelity. But didn't the eyes of the chess-playing Martin take on a peculiar glow when

he concentrated? Weren't his pupils slightly elongated, something he couldn't remember noticing at work? And weren't his fingernails awfully long and sharp? He moaned in despair.

The cat purred. "I don't know why you people get so worked up over a little natural function."

"Because we have morals, damn it!" He stared out the window. How long had Karen and Martin been putting that to the lie? "I'll kill them both!"

The cat only shrugged.

The next day David found feathers in his desk at work. **Damn the thing!** He'd kill it, he promised himself, kill it dead as a stone. He didn't want to confront Martin at the office, just in case he denied his treachery so vehemently there might be cause to doubt; he decided the best thing to do was once more bide his time until Thursday. But all the days leading there each took four hundred hours to pass, and he wasn't sure he could keep up the front. Only the satisfaction of seeing their faces when he caught them in the act sustained him and gave him the patience and strength to wait.

The cat hadn't disappeared, but it no longer came into the house. Instead, it sat on the ledge outside the study window, staring through the glass at him with sparkling, intent eyes. The once he had rushed to the window it had simply leaped off and retreated, then returned when he went back to the desk, and called to him through the window, "Martin Carlyle, chump." It spit grey feathers and in the glare of the glass it seemed to grin with evil. He would kill it!

When he left for the chess match Thursday it was all he could do to restrain himself from shooting Karen when she pecked him on the cheek. Outside, he got into the car and drove it a couple of blocks away, parked, and climbed out into the night air. In his mind images of Karen and Martin locked in orgasmic union flitted back and forth, demanding he examine them in the minutest detail. He did. And after an hour of walking around the block where he'd parked he decided he had reached the point where murder would come easy. He started toward the house with fire in his eyes and the revolver in his pocket.

They weren't in the living room, but he hadn't expected they would be. He kicked open the bedroom door, but when he levelled the revolver at a startled Karen alone and reading on the bed,

he hesitated, confused. It was just long enough for the tortoiseshell to leap from the bureau toward his face, and he was far too slow to protect himself. When he went down with the cat's claws firmly entrenched in his face he tried to scream, but the beast went for his throat then, and again David was too slow. From somewhere far off he heard a female voice screaming over and over, but all he could think of was how cats toyed with their prey before killing it, and an image of the tortured sparrow appeared faintly.

The cat batted at David's spasming tongue a few times, then disgorged from its throat a single grey feather that fluttered briefly in front of David's diminishing vision before settling softly on the floor. The cat lost interest then, and started for the door. It looked back at Karen, still screaming in wide-eyed hysteria, and padded away, purring contentedly.

Night Rides

by BRUCE BOSTON

In the sere dreams of spinsters,
the hooves of satyrs scar the polished hardwood.

The Nightmare Collector

Each night he calls you
for the leading role
in his gallery
of ancestral tableaux
which trails back
through the Pleistocene
to the red primeval.

From the endless slashes
in his voluminous greatcoat
you can feel the heat
of captured bodies
invade your rumpled bed
with delirium and fever;
you can smell a brassy
sediment of tears.

From the hollow blackness
of his flapping sleeves
you can hear the pulse
and thump of unborn shadows,
a dense hysteric fugue
winding up and down
the bones of your sleep.



The nightmare collector
waits on the landing
in the unlit hall
where the instruments
of ablation are arranged
on cold leather pallets,
where the dreamer's
balustrade of terror
rushes across landscapes
of a darkening retina,
where snakes coil about
your arms and ankles
and draw you down
bodily into a forest
of bloodstained hair.

The Widow Renounced

Give your wistful stares
to another heir apparent
or some archduke manqué
you have crafted from putty
and mud and bandage leaves
while trees are skewered
by the wind and willing
suitors rush to slaughter
in armies of excitation.

For each trembling copse
there is the sudden pulse
of sacrificial anticipation,
in each tree a branch moves
which bears your name
and falls at the bidding
of your transient though
lethal infatuation.

If my vagrant limbs
are not contained
by the wet silk bondage
of your embrace,

there are other tongues
and torsos readily
petrified by passion.

If I fill the ventricles
of your ravenous heart
with depleted desire,
if I return in kind
those venomous glances,
your sinuous reticulation
can no longer web me
with fragrant musk.

My fingers are folded
upon my lifeline:
the flesh is calloused.
All along the forest wall
without your flagrant touch,
the leaves are turning color.
I am not the vintage wine
and the succulent feast;
nor am I the bloody saviour
of your consuming adoration.

Night Ride

When Morpheus
straddles the night,
a steed of fierce
and unconscious
disposition,
he rides the soul
of all that has been
through the myth-making
structures of force
and chaos.

When the dark branches
of the back brain
lay an awkward crosshatch
upon the moon,

when hooves clatter
 across the cobbles
 of our transient souls,
 reason is consumed
 in the ravenous wind
 of the rider's passage.

In the vast involucrum
 of dream possibility,
 our reinless thoughts
 race to the dawn
 across fields
 of stormy light:
 we are transformed,
 having become one
 with the beast
 of the raging night.

Dream Webs

In the fractured dreams
 of visionary wastrels,
 artists swallow
 their mercuric pigments
 and die with
 rainbows on their lips.

In the sere dreams
 of spinsters,
 the hooves of satyrs
 scar the polished hardwood
 and clack
 against the bed rail.

In the sequential dreams
 of mathematicians,
 snipped and measured,
 the incipient perfection
 of the multiverse
 is resolved
 in spheres and gradients,

future trajectories
are mapped to the microsecond.

When night descends
upon the city,
its torso consumes
both steel and stone,
its great underbelly of eyes
pierces every shade.

Bound by sticky dream webs
we wait spreadeagle,
arms open,
thighs pitched
to the proper angle.
Vulnerability anticipates
the spider's bite.

Spectator Playoffs

by JAY and ROBERT SHECKLEY

Is it still paranoia
when the world really is
out to get you?

Sure I look terrible—I got in a scrap with bad luck, and bad luck won. Yesterday all I wanted from life was to watch a hockey game. It might have been simpler to conquer Europe. Last night ESPN aired the final Stanley Cup match. I was ready. While the TV warmed up I leaned back on my new plaid sofa; I had a Coors in one hand and a good cigar in the other. "This is it!" announcer Bud Phillips was saying. "The game we've waited for: the Islanders versus the New York Rangers!" Then the color came up—how brilliant the red, blue, and white uniforms looked on cable! The players skated into the rink. Ah, life. I puffed on my cigar and washed down the smoke with beer. For a moment I closed my eyes; I was happy.

When my eyes opened, the screen was white. I stared, I blinked; still no picture. I clicked it off, then back on. And I saw the game all right—rotating. Vertical hold had gone kerblooie. I adjusted it, but the image paled into a maggot-infested snowfield, and the speaker only spewed a cross between a kettle whistle and a cackling laugh.

Was this a laugh-track from a neighboring station? I found nothing like it on any channel. When I leaned forward to check my hook-up, a hearty baritone voice came on.

"Sorry," it said unsorrowfully, "but due to technical difficulties we are unable to bring you this historic match. We present instead a winsome 1979 children's comedy: *The Muppet Movie*, starring Kermit the Frog."

Coors flattened on my tongue. *Hell*, I thought, plunking the can down on the coffee table, *Is one game too much to ask?* I stalked off downstairs to Swenson's. Jim Swenson and I have

sweetened many a night with a vicious bout of chess. Jim met the door in his sweatsuit, mumbling his usual joyless, "Oh. Hi, Dodson." But behind him I heard:

"There's Dennis Potvin . . ." It was a voice caught in a game's spell. "He's split the defense; look at him—he's going in on goal . . ." I stretched to see over Jim's left shoulder. Potvin, a big number the 5 on his back, sailed into the net.

In the time it took to assimilate my relief into a smile, Potvin had vanished, and the screen was blank. In place of Bud Phillips, we had white noise and white light. But only on ESPN. The others worked fine. Jim and I waited by his set for something, anything, to happen.

"Because of circumstances beyond our control," said an announcer. *Oh, no*, I thought. "We cannot broadcast the rest of this sports spectacular. We invite you to stay tuned for a John Muir Society feature: *Brave Condors of the Andes*."

Some men live for hockey. To us, a telecast hockey game is a shot at life, like the governor's reprieve is a special goodie for the condemned. Worst is not knowing. Not knowing breaks down hope, and after hopelessness comes bitterness, then Bellevue. But I wouldn't lose it over one major hockey game, no sir. I left Jim and went for a walk.

Out on the sidewalks, the air felt light. Among their vegetable wares, the All Nite Market offered yellow and red tulips. And I began to feel better. So when I found myself passing Gilhoolie's Saloon, I doubled back. Gilhoolie's has big-screen stereo cable. I'd have a beer, commiserate with other hockey fans, maybe even cheer them up.

The door with a big carved G bounced shut behind me, and Stu the barman looked up. In a jar between us, sausages swam in what looked like formaldehyde. Below them, tropical fish swam in the glass bar.

"Hey Dodson," Stu called. "Game's just getting good."

Above us hung a curving screen. There I saw everything—I saw Islander Mike Bossy flatten Dean Talafous. Dean got up, turning on Bossy. Fans were screaming and chanting. Players erupted from both benches. I watched along with everyone else in Gilhoolie's.

And the screen turned a blinding white. For ten seconds no sound was transmitted, and, for lack of a better charm, nobody in Gilhoolie's so much as whispered or sneezed. Finally, speakers

at either side of the bar blared this announcement:

"We interrupt our program for a live-via-satellite interview with India's Nobel Prize-winning Mother Teresa. This segment of *Feeding the Diseased* is brought you by Xerox." The wavering grey image of a tiny woman overtook the big screen. I couldn't make out what she was saying above the customers' curses.

Gilhoolie's is a nice place with seven kinds of beer, but anywhere the mood can get ugly. The customers are mostly yuppies in pinstripes, and a few commercial artists in Guess jeans. Like I say, these aren't the type fellows who curse, shout or fight usually, but somehow I couldn't risk the further disappointment of finding them uncivilized. So, slowly, I walked home to my high-rise.

Before I walked in I stared up at its even façade of lit and unlit windows; the building seemed a monument to sanity. Calmly I rode the elevator, a success at my new hobby of not thinking. But almost to my "unit," as the super calls apartments, I heard what sounded like the game playing behind every door. I reached mine in time to hear Bud Phillips's voice enthusing from 5A across the hall, "Rangers have a penalty; the Islanders are doing it again—a powerplay . . ."

The voice was coming from Mrs. Valerian's apartment. With a step I'd crossed the hall and rung the bell. Mrs. Valerian took forever getting to the door. Her ankles were as big around as coffee cans.

"I'd like to borrow two eggs," I lied.

She appraised the beer stain on my pants. "Dodson," she said. She's not much of a conversationalist. "You live across the hall."

"Do you *have* eggs?" I asked in anguish. To me at that moment, Mrs. Valerian was just a wall between me and her TV.

Mrs. Valerian trudged toward the kitchen, muttering, "Three penalties already." So she was human after all! She'd left the door open, and I stepped inside. Ah, the sight of royal blue jerseys glissading across the screen! "A dream showdown," Bud Phillips was saying. "Look at that lateral movement. This is without doubt the best playing I've seen since—"

The program stopped. A man with imposing black-framed glasses glowered from the screen. The close-up got closer. And I recognized him. It was the guy on the commercial who says, "Do YOU suffer from nagging tension headache?"

Only this time he said, "Hello. I'm Glen Monroe Wilson. You

know, over eight point seven million hockey fans in both the United States and Canada are watching the playoffs tonight. The Islanders-Rangers series has been so exciting that viewership has nearly doubled during this last game."

He took off his glasses, sighed, and stared into the camera as sincerely as anyone who does that for a living. "Now I'm going to tell you something," he went on. "Something we hoped could be left unsaid. Not everyone gets the privilege of seeing a game like tonight's. Nobody likes this, and we never give reasons. But certain people—often true hockey fans—will miss the most exciting game of the season. It's no good, Joseph Dodson."

At the sound of my name, my heart stuck in my throat.

"Dodson, it's not in the cards," he said. "Why screw things up for others? If you can't take a hint, take a warning: You have a program listing; we've got a viewer list. And you are not on it. Can't you find something *better* to do, Dodson? Dodson?"

For a moment it felt like I couldn't move, like I'd turned to wood and was doomed to stand there until I got chopped down.

Then I discovered I *could* move; I could even run. I didn't wait for Mrs. Valerian or the eggs. I didn't close her door. I ran past mine, past the strange laughter behind it. I ran past the elevator, down the fire escape stairs, down the sidewalk, and since I had to run somewhere I ran to Gilhoolie's.

In my absence the convivial suit-and-tie crowd had degenerated into eight sore-looking defense-men types. Also a good deal of broken glass had sprung up on the floor. Stu the bartender looked half alive. Nevertheless, I sat down on a red barstool, ordered a Coors, downed it and ordered another.

So it didn't take long to start talking with this guy Eddie, who said he fixes cars. That is, I tried talking to him, but he wanted to do the talking. "I'm going to sue that damn TV company," he said. Eddie's fist hit the glass-top bar. Below, in the aquarium, goldfish scattered. The brine in the sausage jars rocked. "And I'm suing *TV Guide*," he said. "When they list a hockey game, I expect hockey. I been ripped off but good. These TV guys are messing with the wrong dude. They can't do this to Eddie Brunner!"

"You!" I shouted. "I didn't get to see the game either. What makes you so sure they didn't do this to *me*?"

Then I told him about the headache commercial man I saw on Mrs. Valerian's set, how he spoke to me by name.

"Yeah?" Eddie said. "Yeah?" He wanted me to tell that part again, and his friends Greg and Vito came over to hear.

No, I don't guess they believed it. If they thought anything, it was that I was crazy. But messing with a crazy guy passes for fun in certain circles. They hadn't had any fun all night.

"Okay," Greg said slowly. "We'll *see* if the trouble is you."

"I didn't say that," I said. But Vito had already signalled the barman to turn on the set.

On TV, frail nuns carried soup to sad-eyed invalids. "Okay," Greg said to me, gesturing at the screen, "See that?"

I turned my head and he swung a punch. His fist knocked me off the stool, which kept spinning. I landed under the bar, on the cold, glass-coated floor. Then the speakers rang out, "Sudden death overtime!"

From where I lay I couldn't see the TV. I only saw an old Winston butt and an empty Planter's wrapper. But I did hear the announcer shout, "It's a goal!" I heard the fans scream.

THE NIGHT SEASONS

by J. N. WILLIAMSON

Whatever it was, it was evil—
and it was real.
God, it was real.

Part II of IV

II

"Roam with young Persephone,
Plucking poppies for your slumber . . .
With the morrow, there shall be—
One more wraith among your number."

—Dorothy Parker
Rainy Night

1. Old Home Week, the Family and the Noble Doctor

I located Doc Kinsey in that stinking mass of mankind, but he didn't want to wake up and, for an instant, I thought he wasn't going to. When I'd poked a finger into him as if he were the Pilsbury Doughboy and said, "Doc, it's Rich," I wished I hadn't bothered him. After all, sleep is a hard-to-get blessing in the lockup. One of the rough adaptations to jail life lies in the way that, like the military, jail officers don't recognize the same workaday civilians do. Later I even wondered the extent to which that one distinction played a role in everything that happened. Anyway, they'd be getting us inmates up at five a.m. with breakfast brought from the kitchen on clanging carts; so if a guy got drunked-up meaning to rise at eight, say, he not only awoke with a king-sized hangover in a cell but lost three hours of sleep. Other meals would be served from ten-thirty to noon, and dinner—giving it the benefit of the doubt—about four o'clock.

Maybe I'll write a fantastic best seller called *The REALLY Compulsory Diet Book!*

Doc had found a bunk within crawling distance of the comode, always a wise move (no pun intended) for those in their middle years. Or their years of elderly boozing. Doc Kinsey had spent his life in one or the other of those age brackets, I suspect. The fact that he was lying flat on his back in entirely relative comfort didn't mean, though, that Doc had arrived early at the party. It meant that my remarkable-if-alcoholic friend wished to recline.

"Kinsey" wasn't Doc's real name (he'd confided in me, once) nor was he a medical doctor. He'd simply liked the idea of being an expert in sexology. "A name is merely an appellation, Richard, describing one no better than the face and form he's had no choice but to display."

What he meant was that the *important* "Doc Kinsey" could not be detected by looking at him anywhere, but lived somewhere inside his similarly unindicative busy brain and chubby little body. And what he really meant but didn't explain was that being jailed represented, each time, the series of downhill tumbles and pratfalls that hurt his pride, I believe, far more than it did other men. There was a mixture of gentility and gentleness to him I found moving, yet often comical. I'd come to admire him because Doc was genuinely learned and because the dignity that came with his knowledge didn't prevent him from being witty and affable. He remained my friend only part-time because he refused to tell me what he did with life on the outside and, copying him, I offered Doc the same thoughtful rejection.

He'd squirmed until his broad back and narrow shoulders were against the wall, a common position for those of us in the drunk tank. Something in the way he knuckled his myopic eyes beneath his thick-lensed specs made him look younger: like a wise but sardonic boy who'd come to and found himself imprisoned and fifty years old. "I seem to have been carried off in the arms of Morpheus," he observed, blinking more like a plump sparrow than an owl. Doc was shorter than I by inches, and being "just under" six feet was the old lie I'd saved for blind dates on the telephone. "But if memory serves, Richard, and Alzheimer's remains at bay, you hadn't arrived when ennui overcame me."

"Just got here," I said, wondering, abruptly, why the two of us independently were arrested at the same time. "Sorry I woke you, Doc." Although we were cronies, I squeezed onto the cot next to him, unable just then to share the floor with inmates or

tiny, permanent residents of lockup. "Just wanted to let you know I was here."

Doc's abundantly well-lashed, cautious eyes turned to me and fine brows rose in dubious unison. Abruptly, I realized how immature my comment sounded. Doc was often expressionless and I didn't know how he'd taken it until he managed a grin. "You don't happen to know the hour, do you—E.S.T.?" His large, wavily grey-haired head turned slowly and he inclined it in old frustration. "Never have grasped the exigency of removing our time pieces, lad. Mayhap they're *copying* them for their own society of stunted dolts—in the hope one of them may decipher the secret of how to *use* them?"

I told him it was somewhere between one and two o'clock at night. Around us, slumped to the floor, dozens more of us lay in stark silence, unmoving.

"Adding 'at night' is superfluous, Richard." Doc yawned, stretched his round little arms. "In the lockup, it's *always* night."

And with that, he was asleep, sitting up. Not a sound issued from his sizeable red nose or his relaxed but nevertheless compressed lips. I'd never seen him sleep that way before. He was given to working out a speech for the judge, or spending half the night offering sage advice to those who had the common sense to seek it. Doc got to use the bunk if he wanted because everything in his manner said that he was a good guy, devoid of bigotry, who husbanded his malice for "targets and towers worthy of critical attack," not for people. I peered down at him in some concern, perspiration pouring from my own face and body, but saw no sign of sweat or discomfort in Doc's peaceful quietude. Cutting through the stench of beer, booze, and wine, of unwashed carcasses, dried spittle, and sweat, I caught a whiff of another kind of scent—sweeter, yet remotely bitter, or tart. Cloying.

It made me want to run, but that was stupid. There was nothing to do but wait. Before dawn, perhaps, I dozed fitfully. I'm sure that I did because fragments of the nightmare I'd had before awakening yesterday morning on the second mixed with dreams that night and clung to me like tiny arms and fingers reaching from a nocturnal quagmire. The combined nightmare strove to drag me down, keep me in it forever. I saw mind's-eye visions of men who raced in place until their hearts burst, others rooted to the ground while bulbous tumors bloated their bellies and deformed their toes. *I wish it'd change everybody, my*

stepdaughter Bett wept in a voice much older than hers; *and that it would get you: it will, Daddy—it's coming out.* Yesterday I'd have imagined that the dis-ease was cluing me in and warning me, but that was yesterday. The jail was torment, but nothing awful would happen here.

For a while, a Wednesday that *did* become terrible went according to Hoyle. All the genuine recollections I had managed to stomp into a corner of yesteryear's memories came oozing out with such numbing sameness that the dream-Bett in my mind stopped her wishing cold, and went away. Following a breakfast including things on my tin tray that I couldn't even identify by name, we were handed mops and I helped wash down our cell while Doc Kinsey offered cogent advice with gradiose gestures of his directive arm. We wanted to kill all the crawlies we could. Lou Vick, around twenty-three, married and twice divorced, took ol' Doc's lazily well-meant advice amicably. Unlike members of the Family, Lou was a stranger to me, bright but with no education, good-looking despite a bandito mustache and tendency toward crying a lot. Doc told me Lou'd become drunk after Wife One, now a distant bad memory, bled him dry and he wasn't allowed to see his little girl anymore. He felt sure the judge would send him up, not only on a reckless driving charge but for falling behind in support for Wife Two. Neither Lou nor Doc let me move a number of houseplants against one wall, and I wondered who they belonged to. I wondered, also, if they'd provided the bitterly sweet smell I'd noticed prior to my uneasy sleep.

The Family was what Doc and I and a few others called the regulars in county lockup. I'd found seventy percent of us made return visits, what with one thing or another, and approximately one-hundred of the nine-hundred-plus filling the joint to overflowing were serving short sentences right in the jail. They—were Family, yet probably farther removed from the Mafia "family" than you are. Not all of us were there for being luses, of course; I mentioned the fourteen primary classifications meant to isolate people such as child molesters, who are kept separated from the rest of us because we don't dig them, either. Jail officers and shrinks make a solid effort to segregate the two-hundred or so there for violent felonies from the non-violent, along with the two-dozen or so juveniles on hand from the same number of inmates with psychological disturbances. I forget all the stats I'd read in that piece I mentioned before, but there were twelve to fifteen

witnesses or informers who had single cells, for their own sake, and almost that number were potential suicides whom the jailers kept reasonably close track of.

Deadlock was vacant that Wednesday morning; that's the max security cell where they put inmates who'd committed the worst sin of all: Breaking the *Jail's* rules! But I saw when they took me to make my obligatory outside phone call (God knows how many hours late), the Family was well-represented. There was Dwight "Dee Dee" Lakens, an angular, six-eight black ex-high school basketball star who listened to loud music after they'd locked him up for stealing. Dee Dee was a charming kid with a dynamite smile who'd truly felt that making the Indiana All-Star Team meant his future was guaranteed; but six-eight's short for center and Dwight Lakens couldn't convert to forward. I noticed Crock—that was all the name I knew and that was the best I ever cared to know the pimp—who was known as a stud but who instantly turned bisexual the minute he was locked up. Crock was supposed to be the cruelest white man on earth, and I'd seen enough to believe it. To my chagrin, I also saw Lester Piercy in the cell, a wig-and-dress wearing faggot gay who'd once begged Crock to accept him as a lady whore. Why they'd put him in with Crock, I couldn't guess, but I feared the worst; the trim, athletic-looking Crock despised Lester and, I imagined, feared him. Feared him the way you fear a spider and mash it.

Still worse, Andre August had been tossed in with Crock and Lester. Andre was a broad-shouldered black just as powerful of construction as Crock who'd never played football up in the Gary area where he grew up and still felt guilty about letting his old high school down. Everyone in the Family of regulars knew Crock hungered for August and his soft, expressive, nearly feminine eyes; but Andre was an addict now with no particular sexuality left to him, a self-proclaimed loser who showed up in jail now and then when he'd had the shakes too bad to steal for his regular fix.

Now, however—oddly—Andre looked refreshed, free from tension, not in the least as if he would kill for a hit. If Crock was mad enough to make a pass at Andre, the fight'd be bloodier than a heavyweight championship. With little silly Lester between them, I was apprehensive. I waved at Andre just to let him know whose side I was on. Not that he acknowledged my wave before I was on the phone with Ronnie; the jail's Family tends to pair off, then to form larger and larger subset groupings to oppose the

others. And I wasn't black, a drug abuser, or even a pimp.

Sometimes the whole thing made me feel I was still on the outside.

My phone discussion with Ron was brief. What got me about it was that she didn't even sound slightly apprehensive; clearly, it hadn't taken a prophet's skill to intuit where I'd gone. It was damned hot and other men waiting to make calls were grumbling, but I asked to speak with Markie, and Ron told me he had gone to her sister's to play with the towheaded Joey, and his cousin. But I'm sure I heard my boy in the background and I think he asked if it was his Daddy. To hurt Ron some, too, I didn't ask about Bett's whereabouts.

She told me Craig Silverman would soon be there, before they took me over to the City-County Building and the courthouse. Ronnie'd automatically called him, fulfilling her obligation. At times, I believe I've spent more time with my lawyer than I have with Markie, or Bett. Then I said I loved her but the phone had gone dead.

Retracing my steps, striving to snap out of a dark mood that threatened to swallow me permanently, I spotted Family members in other cells we passed: Eddie Po, a pot-bellied Hawaiian who usually went to help out in the kitchen. I don't know what made Eddie a criminal. "Race" Alyear, a heavysset salesman with a reputation for preferring little girls, was never quite charged with child sexual abuse but had been fined several times for improbable "golden opportunities" in business. Race waved at me, but I didn't wave back, just nodded. Two professional gamblers caught, apparently, in another raid—Lew and Jimmie, who cheerfully loathed one another yet sooner or later got up a game, even in the slammer. The rangy, forty-fourish, fairheaded guy with a crewcut and bald spot, named Leighton, who might have been an All-American quarterback but lacked the first sign of self-discipline. Leighton was a natural bully often arrested for public brawling, and we exchanged muttered words of greeting; I wanted the lanky redneck to like me. It was safer that way.

Two other men who were not regulars in the Family caught my eye, and Doc, to whom data of all kinds flowed as if he were a computer memory bank with pudgy arms and legs, explained about them. The first—thirty-six or so, bulky, a snappy dresser with a fisheye who loftily ignored me when his gaze met mine—was Stephen Blackledge. Blackledge proved to be a banker caught with his hand and his whole body in the vault. He wore no prison

uniform (neither did I as yet) and Doc and I figured Stephen Blackledge would be out on bail, even O Red, before sundown.

The second newcomer was Al Calderone, a short, squat, and moon-faced zealot with eyes that leaked gooey tears and a pocket Bible they'd left with him, always open and held farsightedly at arms' length. When Doc told me about Al, his lip curled and his own chubby hands fisted. Calderone had been there awhile; he wore drab gold-colored seamless pants and a more-or-less matching shirt that scarcely buttoned across his abundant belly—the inmate uniform. "Albert," Doc began, "claims to be a deeply religious fellow and constantly prattles on about being 'saved.' Yet, Richard, he seems to have an awkward flaw." I asked Doc what it was, playing straightman. "Occasionally, so the grapevine has it, he'll be converting some young male sinner to his ostensible faith of perference—and expose himself." Doc sighed, shook his big head. "That's not why he is here, *Brother* Richard. The telephone company caught this saved little soul breathing heavily into their own instruments once too often."

Scarcely a crime for which Calderone would do life; but I re-capped our company of losers, mentally, with a dreary feeling: A musclebound white pimp, a young black guy stuck in dreams of yesterday's athletics, a "flaming faggot" who was an addict because he had never wanted to play football, an Hawaiian mystery man, a crooked salesperson with a fondness for little girls, a gambling duo that detested one another, a crewcut-shorn quarterback with a penchant for assault and battery, an embezzler out of the pages of *GQ*, and a religious fanatic with a taste for small boys.

Plus the other, unfamiliar losers; Doc and me. That instant, I wanted to be out of there. I was sweating like a pig and filled with the sort of panic you get fast in lockup but become accustomed to. There's a powerlessness that's dispiriting; you have no income and the few things you want badly you must get by trade, or swapping favors. Doc talked with me and, by the time the lunch hour was past and it was approximately noon, my mood was improved. I began wondering what had happened to my attorney, Silverman. He was always prompt.

2. Pap for the Masses, and the Gift That Goes On Giving

In my less than forty years, I guess I have met a dozen men whom I might have called "elegant." They were all either gay, freshly successful in making a buck, trying to impress someone

adequately to earn a buck, or Dr. Noble Ellair. He came to get me himself and airily insisted that nobody need accompany us to his office—which was either brave on his part, or linked to an assumption that drunks with no further prison record aren't inclined to attempt an escape. He seemed to be sharply disappointed that nobody'd mentioned him or explained his recent "good works"—Ellair used that term in my presence, believe it or not; several times—and as he stood aside to let me pass by him into his office, I had already formed a number of opinions about the guy.

Like Andre August, Noble Ellair gave the convincing impression that he was one of the few men who possessed absolutely no interest in sexual intercourse. Unlike the non-football player, he hadn't developed like that because he'd ridden a guilty hobbyhorse half his life or used drugs so much that his system was on the whack. Ellair, it seemed to me, had *never* possessed a sex drive, used drugs, or experienced guilt. Guilt is a mood that grows from imperfection, error. Ellair was the sort of professional man who had learned early in life where his passions lay, headed in that direction without allowing an iota of deviation from his course, and now contained so much unspent energy that he'd had to raise his aims, center his drives on yet higher ambitions. I was willing to bet Lew and Jimmie, the gamblers, that this Big Brain had a dozen hobbies which he treated the way most men played with their hobbies. I didn't know any priests well, but it was easy for me to imagine Noble Ellair in a virginal clerical collar, publicly going always by the book, and privately setting his sights on the Vatican.

But not making it. Somewhere along the line, those less conspicuous men and women who cast silent votes about the fundamental worthiness of the aspirant tend to feel ill at the prospect of letting the world's Ellairs have *quite everything* their way. *Maybe*, I thought as I sat across from the Noble One, *these birds are brainy enough, schooled and experienced enough, that they might actually handle leadership at the pinnacle better than the clowns like me who muddle through. But the Noble Ellairs never consider compromising, except for their own covert needs—and they're so severe and so unctuous at the same time that the rest of us will never be convinced they can forgive whenever we fuck up.*

Ellair was the new jail psychiatrist, and I believed he was a serious gentleman capable of removing someone's brain in an

ardently clinical desire to learn what was wrong—then leave it up to an assistant dumdummy to replace it safely. I could believe he really wanted to stop me from drinking; but I preferred my brain left where it was, dis-ease and all, to seeing it perfectly repaired and lying in a jar.

And I believed that he had the experience and the credentials to be somewhere much more impressive than county lockup, and wondered, not without apprehension, what the fuck he was doing here. And what he wanted with me.

"I have a gift for you, Mr. Stenvall." His eyes were bright with intelligence, I guess, and what I perceived as excitement. The heat didn't even have him perspiring. But there was nothing at all on his highly polished desk except his wiry wrists, and his hands were folded.

"Shall I guess, Doctor?" I inquired.

His eyes closed slowly. It wasn't a blink but an acceptance and a recording of my reaction. Otherwise, he didn't move. "You might have said, 'What is it?' Or," his eyes were burning now with something I couldn't identify, "'Why do you want to give me a gift?' Or you might have gone farther, Mr. Stenvall. You might have said, 'Why would Dr. Noble Ellair wish to give something to a drunk he doesn't know?' Yet you selected, instead, a quip."

"Why *would* Dr. Noble Ellair give something to a drunk he doesn't know?" I asked as steadily as possible. "Or did I earn a second chance?" When he went on staring at me, I added, smiling slightly, "Why do you want to give any stranger a present?"

This time he smiled and laughed, sort of. "Capital, Richard—if I may call you that?" Then he was ducking down under his desk to get something.

"If I may call you 'Noble,'" I said softly, tonelessly.

That stopped him, just fractionally. Why I *wanted* to stop him I wasn't even sure. Then he began lifting something into view; it was partly shielded by the curve of his shoulder and back. "This is my gift to you—Mr. Stenvall." He put just the faintest emphasis upon my reconsidered last name, but he was smiling doggedly. "A good will gift!"

Atop his gleaming, uncluttered desk he placed a large potted plant. It had only begun to flower but the colors were the most vivid and beautiful I had ever seen.

My gaze returned to Dr. Ellair. I really looked at the man for the first time. He wasn't, probably, as old as I, but his hairline

was already receding to show his pink scalp. I had the impression he blushed a lot. Staring almost fixedly at me, most of Ellair's face seemed to be concentrated above his aquiline, aristocratically thin nose; his nostrils were so small that they were virtually nonexistent. From temple to temple his skull was far wider than from the colorless line of his mouth downward. As an elderly guy one day, he'd be bald, belatedly childlike, yet also skeletal, and I shivered fleetingly in fear of what he'd become. And I also felt I was looking at a brilliant man who was childishly impulsive in his innovations—a hunch I had—yet somehow bound to his past.

"Scientists hold that such plants cannot easily adapt away from the tropical climate," Ellair'd said "scientists" with a lofty, even derisive tone. Presumably he ranked his own independent inventiveness ahead of methodology. But I also wondered what Ellair considered himself if *not* a scientist. "This little beauty hails from the dense rain forest of Costa Rica's Caribbean slopes. By carefully monitoring its progress during annual visits to the *meseta central* from December through April, and near the lowland at the Gulf of Nicoya, I was able to encourage its inherently . . . mutable . . . nature." While Dr. Ellair spoke in a rather nasal but otherwise normal tone, he listened to each of his own words and succeeded in conveying a suggestion of breathless awe. Self-awe. "Imagine, Mr. Stenvall, such beauty!"

Beauty in the midst of chaos, I thought. But I asked, "Why not, Doctor?"

He stiffened, raised a brow. "Your case folder indicated you to be an intelligent fellow, Stenvall. An alcoholic with dreams of becoming a writer."

"I'm a maintenance man," I told him shortly. "What case folder?" The thought that one existed made me pissed. It wasn't on his desk. "And what are you doing with it, if there is such a thing?"

"Oh, there is, Mr. Stenvall." The corners of his small, pale mouth rose and dipped. "I daresay there are files about you virtually everywhere you . . . do business."

I wanted to try to dig deeper, but that way lay paranoia. Or Big Brother. I still hadn't touched the plant but nodded in its direction. "Is this the same kind of 'good will gift' littering the drunk tank? I wondered who those things belonged to."

"Your BP is climbing, Mr. Stenvall, I'm certain of it. Would your defensive and angry attitude change somewhat," he began

afresh, "if you had the opportunity to leave the jail in a few days—without last night's gauche little loss of self-control going on your permanent record? Without a fine or license suspension?"

That intrigued me. I shifted in my chair, crossed my legs, and folded my arms as if relaxing into newfound importance. Why had Ellair singled me out, and for what? "Craig Silverman, my lawyer, will be here shortly to get me out. He's good." I essayed nonchalance with a shrug. "I'm not worried."

"You aren't? Well, don't make book on going home, buddy!" Ellair snapped.

His change of tone, the shift to curt slang, made me blink, peer harder at him. Standing, he was quite a bit taller than I, so thin he appeared underfed. But he had a flair for command. From inside his suit jacket he withdrew a notebook, turned a page; another. He said softly, "You are to appear before Judge Neblake. And the old boy is engaged in a bit of a crusade, these days. MADD—Mothers Against Drunk Drivers—has made it hot for his honor lately, and *you've* been before him in the past."

"They didn't charge me specifically with drunk driving!"

"Not at the time." He glanced up, eyes blinking. "It seems that charge has been added. Resisting arrest is only tentatively penciled in."

"What's going on?" My heart was racing now. My perspiration dripped in my eyes. I was being railroaded. "Who do you know, Ellair—what are you after?"

With his pen, he underscored a sentence or phrase, then put the notebook back into his inner pocket without speaking a word.

"Okay," I said tentatively. "You expect me to stay in the jail, do something for you 'for a few days.' In exchange for guaranteeing that Neblake lets me go and leaves it off my record. To do *what* for you? I'm not going to be any goddamned scientific experiment!"

"No, no no!" Wagging a long index finger from side to side, he nearly laughed. "Your work in exchange for not appearing before the judge *at all*. Three, maybe four days of harmlessly assisting me, and you go home with my thanks—" he smiled softly, even gently as he gestured—"and my good will gift."

"No monkey glands? Experiments for cancer cures? The CIA isn't setting me up?"

Quietly, he removed his suitcoat and hung it carefully over a padded hanger. "You have understood the purpose behind my

gift to the inmates, have you not? To provide them with beauty in their lives, something living to care for. As a focus for their repressed, better emotions—if they have any. And when they depart they take along to their hovels something no floral shop in this city can offer: a beautiful and living thing to take care of instead of their grubby little self-interests."

"What were you doing in Costa Rica, anyway?" I asked. "It's near Columbia, you said. Was the noble psychiatrist making a pot or coke deal?"

Just for a moment I thought I'd gone too far. His eyes burned into mine across his desk and there was no excitement, amusement, awe, or liking to them. "I will not be addressed in that fashion, you janitorial lush! You are not my patient at the present and I am both a medical doctor and a graduate research psychiatrist with far-ranging interests and avocations. Beyond that, I have no intention of explaining anything to you! Are we clear?"

"We are," I said shortly, standing. "Silverman's a fine attorney. I have confidence in his ability to protect my rights. Even if I am a janitorial lush."

I turned, afraid I might strike him.

"Silverman won't be coming today." Ellair slumped back into his chair, avoiding my outraged gaze. "My girl telephoned his office and notified him that you'd be working with me and a mistake was made. That the mistaken charges had been dropped."

The flush of fury that'd begun after his first sentence quickly faded. "They've been dropped *already*?" I asked.

A pause. "That is what I told my secretary to inform Mr. Silverman," Ellair replied. I noticed both that he hadn't answered my question and that he still wasn't looking at me. Then he did. "How badly do you want to find out whether they've been dropped or not, Mr. Stenvall?"

I considered him closely for an instant, scared but hopeful. I lowered a buttock to the edge of his shiny desk. "What would I be doing for you if I did hang around your jail a few days, Doctor? I take it you have something more in mind than custodial duties?"

He astounded me by breaking into a smile and a rumbly, bubbling kind of giggle capped off by his arising and sticking out his hand to me. "Look; I apologize about the crack. Okay? I would like someone out there who is one of them—"

"I'm not," I interrupted. "Not one with Crock, or Race Alyear

or that phony preacher, Calderone." I hadn't taken his out-thrust hand.

"Come, don't split hairs." Embarrassed, Ellair turned his waiting hand into a gesture of bemused apologia. "I wish for you to put on the uniform, mingle among them, freely. To *watch* them, Mr. Stenvall; closely." His eyes blinked, once. "Keep notes; draw conclusions from all that you observe—and please, try to work the conversation around to the plants wherever it's possible; what they think of the gift—and me." He paused, clearly aware that I suspected his motives. "You're not the criminal kind, Stenvall. You can understand that I busted my back to persuade the authorities to let me go *this* far. When what I seek is decent, humane treatment for inmates—the chance to change them for their own good." A shrug. "If a pretty plant eases their animosities, gives them a new focus, I may be permitted to perform other good works—eventually, even at the permanent facilities." He broke eye contact, arose. "And the approval of an intelligent third party, along with his honest records, can only advance my cause."

"But how *can* I freely 'mingle,' Dr. Ellair? The bars are in the way. Remember?"

The excitement in his youthful, strangely sexless eyes said he knew he had me, now, and I supposed he had. "I discussed all that with Sheriff Bottoms and Chief Officer Shirley Boswell in the desperate hope that someone like you might be picked up," Ellair confessed, pacing. Another annoying habit of his was implying that he was letting me in on something, just by pausing or using a certain inflection. "The old timers around here—"

"The Family," I put in.

"—they know that, from time to time, inmates are chosen as trustees—as a combination of errand boy, all-purpose aide to the guards and other officials—"

"Fink." I clarified it with a frown.

"All right! Fink, sure—stool pigeon! Spy . . . rat!" Ellair laughed out loud and he had two rows of such snowy, even teeth that they appeared to be dentures. He had the cleanest, reddest tongue I'd ever observed; the tongue of a man without a nervous stomach, drink habits, or guilt. Yet I'd have sworn that he was genuinely amused. "But tell me, Mr. Stenvall—why would they hold back or beat you up if you simply asked them what they thought about . . . *houseplants*?"

Maybe you Had to Be There, but I chuckled despite myself.

"I see your point." I very nearly raised my hand to shake his. "Three days and I go home?"

"Not an hour more than"—Ellair fleetingly closed, batted his eyes—"five. No, four and a *half* days—okay? You keep good notes, work out your own conclusions, and report to me, say, twice a day. And find out how they feel about *me*, too. All right? Deal?"

"Not yet. What about my job? I could be fired if I don't return to work. Will you phone Rudy Loomis, my supervisor, and arrange something? I can't afford to lose it because Ronnie—"

"I shall make it sound as if you had no other choice, Mr. Stenvall, but simultaneously it *won't* sound as if you were arrested. I'll apprise him of the penalties for, um, discharging somebody who is obliged to perform his civic duty."

And I could call Ronnie, tell her I was off the hook. Imply that I *was* performing a civic duty, even strongly suggest that I had known about this even before being taken in—as if I *were* a spy for government—maybe even hint that I'd never been drunk, or even drinking, at all! "Deal," I told Noble Ellair, and our hands clasped.

He produced a jail uniform for me and I headed for the door, more grateful than I had any intention of permitting the good doctor to know.

"Don't forget your good will gift!" he called, sounding almost merry.

This might not be all bad. I went back to his desk for the plant feeling like a horticultural James Bond; on the way back to the tank, I began wondering if there could be a book in this.

And I felt pretty sure that my early warning system had been exposed as a fake.

3. They've Killed Satan

I was telling Doc Kinsey what'd happened in Ellair's office when the air conditioning went out.

The consequences were instantly apparent to all of us. The shouted announcement, passed along with curses from cell to cell, was the most superfluous news I'd heard in quite a while. I'd only *thought* it was miserably hot in the jail before. Even the guards swore vividly. Nine hundred men whose first consideration was arrested. I'll apprise him of the penalties for, um, discharging somebody who is obliged to perform his civic duty."

survival, not personal hygiene, jammed into one facility—even though we weren't all on the same floor, of course—generated enough heat to power a goddamn electric chair.

I was briefly happy when I noticed that many of the morning's occupants were gone, already processed. By midnight, though, the tank'd be full again.

Doc began sweating conspicuously for the first time, but he said nothing about it after the shouting subsided and turned to moans of frustration. He was mysteriously absorbed by what I'd told him about Ellair and my "appointment." Loosening his colorful tie, worn but respectable shoes propped against the cell wall, he said he didn't like this, "Not any of it. Did you *see* the contents of your file?" I shook my head, admitted I hadn't even seen the file. "I doubt it exists. This isn't old Alcatraz, Richard," he murmured. "You and I are drunks—not desperados."

"I don't understand your point," I said. Young Lou Vick, the kid behind in his support payments, was asleep sitting up at the foot of Doc's bunk. I kneeled close to my chubby-but-wise companion for a confidential talk. It was the long part of the afternoon any inmate knows; shadows squeeze between the bars and lie like wavering dark stains on the much-marched aisle between the long rows of cells. "It seemed like a good deal, for me."

"Perhaps I'm jealous since I shall be incarcerated for quite a while, and mayhap I am prompting you to look a gift horse in the mouth and hang the risks of equine halitosis. Ere you came, I'd already looked dubiously at the fact of Dr. Ellair's presence in our blighted midst. When he interviewed me yesterday morning—"

"He had you in for a chat, too?"

"Indeed; I, and many others." Doc's eyes looked somnolent yet shiny. "You see, unless we're mere overnights, Ellair strives to converse with each of us in order to make his flowery gestures of good will to us all. Alas—" his wave encompassed his own beautiful plant "—I lack the nurturing instinct. Yet I fear for the long lives of these growing gifts. Can you imagine the bullying procurer Crock—or poor, powerful-but-powerless Andre-the-Forgetful—taking care of their plants?" I told him I could not. "I learned Ellair's credentials; presumably, he found me an educated man. And he is indescribably overqualified for service in a county jail! Richard, does it not strike you as strange that he wants your services so badly he would resort to blackmailing a guest in the

drunk tank? Is it barely possible that Ellair has less than noble ulterior motives up his well-pressed sleeve?"

I asked Doc what he'd meant by saying he would be "incarcerated for quite a while," and he surprised me by saying that he'd insisted upon a trial. This time, Doc said, "It's a matter of pride—and I haven't had occasion for suchlike in many years. You see, old fellow, I'm innocent." I gaped at him until he almost became angry and added, "It's easier to make people believe a murderer has changed for the good! But it's true; I haven't had a drop of the bubbly for over a year."

While I agreed with Doc that his reasoning about Ellair seemed sound, I thought that he was forgetting the extent to which an egotistical man desired a knowing audience, an audience capable of understanding what he was doing. Ellair, I felt, looked forward to my reports, to someone intelligent applauding him; and besides, he probably wanted a written record to support some paper he was preparing.

I was right about that much, but not a lot more.

Evening approached, the jail phone was tied up, and I couldn't call Ronnie with the good news yet. So I decided to hold up my end of the bargain with Ellair. Knowing that Dee Dee Lakens, the former basketball player, was a friendly guy and that the crooked banker Blackledge—someone else can stick in the word "allegedly"—was charged with white-collar crime, I selected them for starters. Safety first has always been my motto when I'm tossed into the slammer.

The six-eight Lakens was just completing a sign, of sorts, that he was trying to hang above his cell by reaching through the bars. Dwight Alfonso Lakens had printed a message with a crayon he found somewhere on toilet paper rolls he flattened out, clipping them ingeniously together with clever little rips in the rolls. It read: GOD BLESS THIS CELL. I gave him a hand and we rapped.

"I can dig an exotic plant," he said, bobbing his head at a vertical distance that seemed like yards to me. "It's pretty; it's cool."

"D'you plan to keep it after you go home?" I asked.

Dee Dee grinned. But his huge hands were shaking as he knotted string from his sign on his side of the bars and I wondered how long he'd hold up without a hit. "If the prosecutor had his way, this baby plant'll be fertilizer 'fore I get out." Completing his task, he lowered his long arms, tried to conceal a glint of

concern deep in his black eyes. "My auntie had a garden. Sometimes Mama let me visit her and I helped out, diggin and plantin."

"How come your Mama didn't have a garden?" I inquired.

"*She-it!*" Dee Dee exclaimed, but his frown turned quickly to a grin. "Mama worked nights in a big ol' buildin'. Time she got up was no time t'mess with flowers!"

I changed the subject. "You think Ellair, the shrink, has something then? That he really wants to help inmates by showing them he cares, giving us gifts?"

The big kid's laugh was more like a bray. But he cut it short, got cute on me. "*You working for the Man, Rich,*" Dee Dee said. He pointed at the pencil and pad I had in the hand more-or-less behind my back. "Jus' write down that he's just like ol' Santa Claus to me!"

Stephen Blackledge refused the hand I put between the bars to him. "So, you're a trusty, that it? A guy from the drunk tank?"

I agreed that the term was close enough.

"And you're out there, free to go wherever you damned well wish!"

"Not so." I observed that Blackledge, while perspiring heavily, still wore his expensive street garb and that his jail clothes lay on the bed in his cell. I wondered if they'd insist that he put them on. "I'd go home now if I were that free."

"But *I'm in here.*" He had these broad shoulders that'd nearly made a tailored suit obligatory and he'd linked his hands behind his back as if restraining himself. "I guess that's exactly what we can expect from the legal system."

I went even closer, saw rivulets of sweat ruining his stiff white collar. "I just want to know if you like having a pretty plant for company and how that makes you feel about Ellair, the psychiatrist. Look Steve, I didn't—"

Redfaced, he reached for me through the bars. I had an instant in which to note how carefully Blackledge fluffed the distinguishing streaks of white at this temples, and the way the gamblers, Lew and Jimmie—his cellmates—looked away in massive disinterest. But I'd backed away and Blackledge was left to vent his spleen on me. "It's 'Mr. Blackledge' to you, you souse! It's bad enough to be locked up like a fucking animal without your kind plaguing me!" He whirled around, snatched up his good will plant and raised it to shoulder level. "*This is what I think about Ellair's condescending gesture!*"

With that, Blackledge slammed the plant against the wall of his cell. There was a detonation of dirt and flying shards of the pot. Lew and Jimmie didn't even look up; Jimmie, who was my age, roughly, and looked good in jail clothes, idly flicked part of the flower from his shoulder.

Poor old Ellair wasn't going to be overjoyed by *that* report, I thought, and went to make my phone call home.

I'd told Ronnie the story and was waiting to see if she'd buy the part about being cold sober and "trying to help out a scientific social experiment"—my reward, I'd said, was getting the inside track on a book about it—when, suddenly, there was a God-awful sound that seemed to shake the entire building. It left in its wake a vibratory quiver that hung in the air like something tangible, and a really frightened Richard Stenvall.

"What's that, Rich?" Ronnie demanded. "What was that noise?"

An unnaturally cold gust of air slapped my right cheek and the back of my neck. "I think it was the generator going on," I said shakily, looking at the other men waiting to use the phone. All of them looked scared, or, realizing what had happened, abashed and foolish because of their sudden fear. "Something getting the air conditioning going again."

"Are you all right?" Ronnie asked. It was a little more than a whisper and I knew she'd forgiven me, whether she had bought my lie or not. "When are you coming home?"

"In a few days," I told her, grateful again for the kind of understanding only a certain kind of woman ever lets anybody see. "Tell Markie, and Bett, that Daddy . . ."

I let my voice trail off because I'd realized, abruptly, that the line was dead.

I was sweating heavily but a chill ran from the base of my neck straight down to my tailbone. I had the powerful impression that Ronnie and I had been disconnected. Knowingly and *purposefully* disconnected. Among hundreds of men, I felt alone, isolated. Cut off from the rest of the world.

I started to hang up and dial again, wanting out of there more than I'd ever yearned to leave any other place. Some oily-looking joker in a Citizens' Gas uniform was next in line and glared at me, though, even put out his hand to stop me from dialing. I got mad, the way people do when they're feeling silly about behaving like babies—or anxious to replace their fear with strong action. The dude'd been brought in just before the supper hour

and he thought he owned the fucking place. We started sizing each other up and a guard at the end of the corridor half rose from his chair and put down his copy of *Sports Illustrated*. Some M&Ms he was munching rolled under the chair.

All of us froze, staring. Someone materialized yards from me, not particularly staring at me but needing to tell somebody and finding the several of us clustered around the phone. I recognized him as Al Calderone, the moonfaced religious zealot whom Doc had described as a flasher and heavy breather. The squat little shit was breathing heavily, all right, and screaming at us with his eyes, but nothing came out for a moment. I'd never seen such fright in a man's face and I felt simultaneously burning up and unbelievably cold. Then Calderone yelled, "He's among us—*Satan's* among us! He's got horns—but somebody's *killed* him!"

I started at a run down the corridor. Everybody else, locked up, was shouting, "What's happening? What's wrong?" The guard followed me, yelling at me to stop running in case I was making a break for it, but Calderone and the other guys from the telephone were between the guard and me. For a second I didn't even know where the hell I was going; but then the two gamblers—combative ol' Lew and Jimmie, who didn't care to get involved in other folks' problems—were frantically calling and motioning wildy to me. "Over *here!* In *here!*" They were still in their cell, of course, those silly, street-smart hustlers, pressed against the far side and cringing away from what they'd seen. Cringing and pointing.

"He's dead," Calderone wheezed from behind me, "they killed Satan!" And, "Look at him—*look!*"

Stephen Blackledge had begun to change clothes from his expensive street clothes into the common jail uniform. He wore the unpressed faded-gold pants plus his own white shirt, unbuttoned. His chest was absurdly hairy; it was turning grey and a crucifix lay in the tangled nest and I wondered if anybody but his wife and maybe a mistress had even seen all that moss in the last twenty years. He'd fallen forward on his knees as if he *had* to break out, at the last, or was still reaching in his ire for me, and I wondered if we less successful men had somehow conspired to kill him. By our very presence. His well-groomed head lay against the bars at a slight angle, face up, and the eyes were open but filmed over; glossy, like transparencies. For a flash it seemed that twin substances of a cumulous or mushy kind had inexplicably

sprouted from his fluffy white dignified temples, and I understood why the fanatical Calderone had mistaken them for horns.

But the weird growths that now squeezed his fine, dead head and then suddenly forced his tongue to pop from his dead mouth actually grew from Blackledge's ears—and I saw with disgust that they *continued* to grow. He looked to me then like a man come too late to his knees in prayer who'd been summarily rejected, and punished.

"He came straight from Hell and got sent straight back!" Al Calderone squealed. His eyes were immense, and as I glanced around and up at him from where I knelt, he began doing a crazy little fox-trot. "Praise the Lord, I've looked Satan in the eye and I didn't even flinch!"

They didn't let me hang around. The guard who'd been reading the copy of *Sports Illustrated*—he dropped it and I saw it was the annual swimsuit issue from 1983—had the sense to call Ellair. By the time Noble got there—on the run, wearing the same suit I'd seen him in earlier—Calderone and I were already locked up again in the drunk tank. After they toted Blackledge's body away under a sheet, Ellair merely glanced at me out of the corner of his eye as he passed. I wondered if he was avoiding me, or if he'd just forgotten about his great social experiment for the time being.

I couldn't sleep much. But I did some, because I dreamed again—

And awakened with a terrible, jolting start when another tumultuous noise rocked the whole building, or seemed to. It brought me to a seated position, returning the stunned and scared gazes of Doc, Lou Vick, Calderone, Eddie the Hawaiian cook, and the others in the tank.

"*They're coming out of the Pit to get us,*" bug-eyed little Calderone crooned, sitting and rocking on the squalid floor of the big cell. He had a hard-on, and he rubbed it now and then absently. "We all killed Satan, and they're *free* now—that's what it is! But they'll never get *me*, because *I'm* saved!"

Young Lou and Fat Eddie, fed-up, went for him, but Doc Kinsey saved him.

Minutes after that it was hotter than I'd ever known a place to be. Al Calderone went on muttering, "They killed Satan," just softly enough that nobody attacked him again, and I decided that a religious man who believed such a thing should really sound happier about it. With nothing better to do, I leaned against the

wall and focussed my attention on the quiet beauty of our gift plants, lined up in a row like small, obedient, trouble-free children. None of us went back to sleep in that heat and it occurred to me that, for the first time in my life, I'd really learned the meaning of the cliché, "It's hotter than Hell."

When the next men died, I started wondering if Al Calderone was right.

4. Worse Than Anything Else So Far

It'll sound crazy as bat-shit, but the next morning it was as if nothing had happened. On the surface, that is, where most human beings keep most things as though their lives depended on it. No one in the world is more human than the typical inmate of a county jail; by "typical," I meant those who aren't yet mad as hatters and who have been locked up for relatively minor offenses.

A jailer I knew from my last visit—a pot-bellied cold-eyed fish named Gargan, who was one of the warmer, more human jailers of my experience, obliged to wear a Hard Guy mask to avoid being taken advantage of—Gargan came around after breakfast and let me out. Lou Vick, and some poor loser they'd brought in around three o'clock in the so-called "morning," shouted catcalls at me, delicately suggested I wouldn't be able to sit down after Doctor Ellair got through with me. I think, basically, they were kidding and not really all that jealous. Basically.

Before continuing Ellair's survey, which now seemed utterly absurd to me, I asked Gargan in a whisper what they'd done with Blackledge's body.

"How the fuck would I know?" he replied irritably, turning to start back toward his stool at the end of the cellblock. "I just come to duty an hour ago."

"Gargan," I called quickly, stopping him. "Blackledge didn't just die. C'mon, man, talk to me. Whatever killed him might be as contagious as hell."

For a second I thought the Irishman would ignore me. Instead, he paused until I reached his side, tugging a long earlobe and looking frankly worried. "I'm not sayin' you're right about that. But those gambler types who were in with him, they demanded a different cell." Gargan shrugged. "I told 'em there wasn't no room elsewheres."

I didn't answer at once. From where I stood, morning sunstream

was piddling all over three adjacent cells, one of them the one in which I'd seen Blackledge's weird-looking corpse, and it was empty. "Then where'd they go?"

Gargan pressed his lips, scratched a place his razor'd missed. "They kept bitchin' till I told 'em the only place vacant was dead-lock." His expression registered a lot of doubt about his own judgment. "It's just temporary, but that's where the two of 'em wanted to go. Just how *bad* did the Blackridge feller look, anyhow?"

"Blackledge, it was Blackledge," I said absently, trying to think. *Bad enough that two professional gamblers with tenuous mob connections prefer maximum security to being where he died.* Isolation from every other soul; no exercise; no showers, and they hated one another. "Let your own breakfast settle, Gargan," I said at last, "and maybe I'll describe him for you later."

Mentally I put it on hold, decided where to ask my idiotic questions that Thursday morning. I wanted to talk with Andre August, the all-but-mute addict whose cell was straight across from Stephen Blackledge's, but Crock and Lester were in there and I figured on getting to the sinister pimp and the fawning homosexual at the very last, unless Ellair had enough data to satisfy him by then—which I sincerely hoped. Dee Dee, whom I'd already chatted with, seemed to have gone back to sleep. Lou Vick and Doc were natural subjects who'd be cooperative and even enjoyable company, but they would be good to save until I'd interviewed somebody surly and needed a break.

Deciding that this job wasn't quite the same thing Larry King had going for him on cable, I swallowed my disgust and began the day with Race Ayear. He was a big-boned, thick-set man with the sort of face most other men take to at first sight: large and broad and casually decorated by a sandy mustache and a world-weary self-absorption, reddish coloring which advertised his willingness to tie one on with the boys, and tiny pig eyes ready to light up with agreeable hilarity at the dumbest smutty joke. He had a way of running both hamhock hands, recently manicured, through his coarse hair and leaving it looking as if he'd just stepped out of a barbershop and left a generous tip. Race was smiley but also warily businesslike, and everybody on the floor knew he preferred little girls as his sex partners and invested his illegal commissions in child porn.

One more thing about Ayear: per rumor, he'd acquired his nickname not because he was a racist—which he was—but because

of a memorized line he used on every attractive woman he met and delivered at top speed. It wasn't that he was successful in using it; it was that he impressed his male sales prospects—"pushovers," Race called them privately; "suckers"—by being crude and audacious enough to insult "squeezes" who made them feel nervous and inferior. Alyear didn't really *want* to bed women, I'd been told; most of them were far too imposing, mature, and developed for his tastes.

"Why, they's nothin' wrong with Ellair givin' us plants, Stenvall," he said airily, lounging against his bars and perfectly at home. Yet it suggested this was a "pitstop," that he had his next million-dollar deal waiting outside. "Not a thing. The doc's like a Fuller Brush man of old, you follow me? He don't make his pitch right off, minute a prospect opens the door; he puts a leetle present in the sucker's hand—" Alyear reached through the bars to snatch my hand, straighten it with his powerful manicured fingers and then poke hurtfully at the palm—"right *there*. Then, *zap! powwee!*" Race grinned boyishly, crookedly, his smug eyes glittering, "She's all set up for the qualifier: 'I'll just step inside a moment to show you what *else* you kin get for next to nothin'! Sexual in-you-endo, y'get me?"

"Then you figure Dr. Ellair is just setting us all up?" I asked, scribbling the salesman's answer with a shorthand method I made up on the spur of the moment. "For what he really wants us to buy? For an ulterior motive?"

"Definitely," Race said, nodding that big head as if it contained the wisdom of the ages. I could picture how ingratiating, assured, authoritative he'd seem to a small girl and I wanted him not to touch me again. "By the way, Richard, they's something I want to talk t' you about—you *do* have another minute, don't you?"

"Sweet Jesus! Oh, sweet JESUS!" The scream even got to Race. It was more like a shriek, as if someone had entered a world of pain unexpectedly.

I spun away from Alyear to see where it'd come from, stared down the lane between the cells. Immediately I saw it had issued from Dee Dee Laken's cell. Already, Gargan, the guard, was loping from his distant post down the corridor, but I was nearer, covered the few yards to the cell at a run. Dee Dee was *howling* now. For a moment I didn't see him even though I was staring into the cell—

Then I saw Dee Dee, climbing the bars and knocking down the religious plea he'd scribbled on his homemade sign, going up as high as he could and, his long legs locked round the bars, putting out his thin arms perilously toward the ceiling. He clutched his precious radio in one hand yet seemed determined to crawl across the top of his cell like a goddam fly. Whether it was drug withdrawal or some other horror motivating the kid, I couldn't tell. Then he let go of the radio and turned his face to watch it fall. Not a thing that I could detect marred his lantern-jawed face, other than the terror: bleak, knowing, pained terror verging that instant on some nightmarish madness. I think I called to him, his name maybe, "Dee Dee, be careful"—

Then he'd lost his balance and was falling in the oddest way, curling himself into a fetal ball enroute and crashing into his already-smashed radio. But the most peculiar thing to me was the way Dee Dee kept right *on* howling; there wasn't a break or a waver until after he had pulled himself to a seated position in the middle of the cell. And he began crying like a small boy, tears streaming down his long face. He cupped his crotch, too, in those palm-it/dribble-it/in-your-face-*dunk* hands of his, then rocked back and forth, back and forth; and I never *saw* so many tears on a grown man's face before. But I saw no growths bursting out of him the way they had from Stephen Blackledge, only a great pain that remained inside the tall kid except for the stark misery of his weeping and something in his big, black eyes that *knew* he was doomed, too.

I started to say something to calm him, if I could—

And Doc Kinsey's voice penetrated the relative stillness of the moment, even halted Dee Dee's racking sobs: "Richard! *Help* me, Richard, for God's sake!"

I vaulted around Gargan, the guard who'd begun unlocking Lakens's cell, sure that terrible things were happening to the only friend I had in that freaking hole.

But by the time I was within a few yards of the drunk tank—drenched with perspiration again, all the inmates clamoring to know what was going down and hammering on the bars of their cells in fear—I saw that Doc was merely seeking my help for another man in the tank. With fleeting guilt, I hoped it was Al Calderone.

It wasn't, though. I saw that as I grabbed the locked bars in my hands and tugged at them, started shouting at Gargan to

come let me back into the tank to help.

Young Lou Vick, guilty of marrying unwisely too often and passing through the local educational system in the same fashion, had been given the death sentence for his crimes. He was racing around in circles faster than I'd ever seen a man go in a straight line, sweat flying off him in visible torrents. I didn't know if he was trying to run away from himself or catch himself, or what he meant to do if he succeeded, but Lou's running and his unimaginable speed were unnatural, bizarre, and jolting to witness. Calderone was off in a corner with fingers stuffed in his fat mouth to the second knuckles, muttering prayers, I guessed. Doc was trying to catch hold of Lou's wildly pumping arms but they were too muscular or Doc was too old and slow. Lou's heart, I thought, couldn't *take* that—nobody's could. Two, three of the lovely plants Ellair'd given us were crunched near Lou's pounding, churning feet. But the circles he was forming abruptly began to narrow, from a sweeping electrical bolt of an impossible dash to decreasing, wavering loops at a speed that was more or less humanly conceivable.

And as he completed another loop and spun brokenly toward me, I saw shooting out of poor Lou's straining mouth a spiky growth that simultaneously looked like colorless barbed wire and human intestines that had come unsprung and now wobbled in the air with every terrifying lurch the man took. Yet his vivid blue eyes looked more alive, that second, more alert and knowing, than any eyes I'd looked into, and Lou was violently *pointing* at his stuffed mouth—jabbing at it—as if he wanted us to be certain to see it, too. That was when I heard the crack of splintering bone as Lou's jaw broke. Then his legs gave out, he crumpled to the floor as Gargan reached my side, he and Calderone saying *Jesus!* together as if they'd practiced it, and I saw Lou Vick go into the damnedest convulsions imaginable. His arms, his head, and his back were kicking so hard and so fast it was as if the kid was a machine coming apart and running down a good battery. Doc, seeing the way Lou was batting his brains out on the hard cell floor, tried to get to him but the stuff growing from his mouth—sausagey, now, but still spiky, crisp—was in his way.

Gargan and I got inside the cell a fraction of a second later. Lou wasn't moving. I think—I pray—his agony had ended.

But the growth—the goddamnedest growth which rose into the air from Lou's dead and busted mouth—was climbing into the

air the way Dee Dee Lakens had shinnied up the bars in his cell, reaching for the ceiling, for freedom (I supposed). Then, just the way Dee Dee had spread out his arms, the growth suddenly spread to one side without warning. It darted, waggled, prodded, in our direction. It was like a cobra rising out of a basket, threatening to strike, and I guess I just took root and gaped at it.

"Get out of there!" Dr. Noble Ellair, presumably there on behalf of the agonized basketball player and his howling, stood right behind me: commandingly authoritative but, I thought, weirdly angry with us. "All of you—get out of that cell! Come on, *move* it!"

The other terrified drunks, plus Gargan, obeyed at once. I thought of how, in an emergency, we welcomed anybody who took charge; how we were like little grade school kids obeying the teacher during a fire alarm drill.

But I couldn't budge for another moment since I had the impression that Ellair had nearly said, *Don't touch the growth, you might hurt it.*

Something slobbery wet was at my ear. "They're comin' out to get you," Calderone whispered. "You better get right with Jesus!"

Doc, amiable Doc, shoved Al. Gargan made a big show of separating them; this was something he understood and could handle. I went back down the hall, bombarded by inmate questions for which I had no answer, found Dee Dee's toilet paper sign and put it in my pocket. I thought I'd save it for him. Then I went to check on him.

He was still squatted on the floor holding himself, not howling, not crying, just staring. The focus of his attention was the pretty plant Ellair had given him, and I wondered what was happening in Dee Dee's often drugged-up brain to create such an expression of dreadful, mute terror on his boyish face.

Half a dozen other guards were there then, but not the chief jailer, the sheriff or any of those people. *Why aren't they here?* I wondered, shuddering because I had the notion all at once that the jail was shut off, sealed from the real world outside and I worried about Ronnie and the kids and wondered if I'd ever see them again. One of the guards, not Gargan, shouted himself red in the face demanding to know why I was out of my cell and I realized abruptly that he'd be hitting me in another moment, because the man had to have a way to let out his own fear. I

caught Noble Ellair's arm, and something he saw in my face got through to him.

"It's all right, Hawkins," he said with amazing calm. "He's conducting a little survey for me; an acting trusty."

"We need to talk, Doctor," I told him quickly. "Now."

He frowned and I think he was going to tell me No, or Later.

Before he could, Gargan shouted, "Look!" and, swearing, ran to Dee Dee's cell as he wrestled with his keys. I looked all right, and again found myself immobilized by shock. Dee Dee, stripped to his shorts, was poised on the edge of the top bunk in his two-man cell, the other guy I did not know begging him to come down.

He did. Never looking at the rest of us, soaring off the bunk like some great dark crane, Dee Dee dove headfirst onto the concrete floor of his cell. And never moved again.

From his belly down beneath the waistband of his shorts, I saw when we'd followed the shaking Gargan into the cell, there was a steady *rippling* motion, like running water. Trying to get out. Dee Dee didn't move a muscle, but there was life of some kind inside of him, under his smooth brown skin, and I looked away, bolted outside the cell, in case that rippling life managed to break through.

"We shall have that first meeting now, I believe." Doctor Ellair, cozy beside me, looking mildly concerned at worst. "Bring your notes, Mr. Stenvall, please. They're important."

I did what he told me to do, and I thought that mentioning his fucking gifts at a time like this was probably worse than anything else I had seen or heard. But that also made me wonder about the origin of these devastating deaths more deeply than I had while the men were dying. We went up to Ellair's office, leaving in our wake a sizeable number of potentially dangerous inmates who suddenly wanted, quite badly, to be anywhere else on the planet.

Before they bought it, too.

To be continued.

WITCH MOTHER

by CHRISTOPHER GILBERT

At night he dreamed he'd suffocate
on his mother's love.

She was down there, his mother was; Darren could hear the couch squeaking from the rhythmic jittering of her tightly crossed leg. And she was smoking already. He could smell it.

Timidly he started down the stairway. He didn't want to face her. Last night he'd finally told her of his hopes for the job with the veterinarian: "The animals need somebody at night, Mama. I'd be sleeping there. I could come home on weekends."

He'd braced himself for her rage, but she'd said only, "No!" and walked out of the room with that air of scornful disapproval he knew so well.

Descending so slowly, he noticed the grey dustballs in the corners of each stair. The house was so shabby now. She kept the drapes perpetually drawn, as if forcing the house to share her mourning. Despair had become her only mood.

At the bottom of the stairs was the living room, where she sat in the dark, smoking, wrapped in her soiled scarlet robe. She scarcely turned as he appeared; Darren studied her profiled face, trying to gauge her state. Her lips were pressed together and the leg kept bobbing, steady as a clock, but like the clock in a time bomb.

Still the same. Always the same. Sometimes Darren longed for her shouting again, for anything other than this sullen gloom which spread like mold through the house.



He went to the kitchen and tried to shake off the after effects of last night's fitful sleep. He had kept imagining his mother as she used to be; in his dreams she had crooned slow soothing songs, with her face looming close to his, large and radiant and loving. Their love had been strong then, and the memories were sweet. But he had awakened feeling even more small and helpless than he usually did, and that wasn't what he needed today.

Hastily he made her coffee, put it on a tray, and brought it to her. Reaching for it, she said suddenly, "Don't think about leaving. You couldn't handle that job. Besides, you're all I have left." The words were unexpressive, monotone, but the last sentence startled Darren, anchored as it was in some sort of positive emotion.

He had no answer except, "I know, Mama." Retreating, he tried to assemble breakfast from their sparse food supplies. She hadn't bothered driving to town in two weeks now. She was getting worse and he didn't know what to do about it.

He cut a grapefruit in half, cut the sections just right, and set it before her in the living room. But she glared at him and roughly smashed the grapefruit cut side down. Juice splattered in a circle. She said, "Must you always slink around trying to please me?"

He shrugged. "I was just trying to . . ." She was right. He felt desperate, and powerless to make the situation better.

He began to collect his schoolbooks. She stood and said flatly, "I need you home today."

Darren's shoulders slumped; he said "Again?"

"Read your fool books here if you want. I have a client coming next week. We'll have to clean."

Darren felt paralyzed. She always seemed irritated that he was around, yet she'd been keeping him home more and more as the anniversary of his brother's death approached.

"But I have a math test today! When is your client coming?"

"Soon. Next week. The man with the chauffeur. And you stay out of his way."

Darren remembered the man; he had been nice and spoken to him, unlike most of her furtive visitors.

"How about if I help you tomorrow? This test—I have to graduate. This is my last year."

She paused, fingered her tangled grey hair, and said with sudden agony, "Graduate? He'll never graduate! Oh, I miss Donnie

so much."

Darren watched her face collapse into slow, silent weeping. He knew how this day would go: perhaps she would clean, but she'd also wander through the house shaking her head. She'd pick up Donnie's baseball cap and stare at it, and gaze out the back window onto the field where Donnie used to play as a full-spirited twelve-year-old. At one point she'd sit in his room upstairs and stroke his empty bed, arrange his empty shoes.

To Darren she seemed to be disintegrating, shrinking inward like a rotting pumpkin, neglecting all else for the sake of obsessive reminiscence. And it seemed faintly unfair to him because he was her son as much as his brother had been. She never smiled when *he* made a joke. Her eyes did not brighten when *he* entered the room.

Darren had no friends at school, only a few teachers who liked the oddly withdrawn boy in spite of his poor grades. He was the first to fix their flat tires or offer to do their errands. He always felt best when he was helping someone.

Today he struggled to concentrate on his classes, but memories kept intruding from his toddler days, those golden times when he'd felt like a puppy with its mother all to itself. Back then, everything he did delighted her, and she had been lavish with her touches and words of love. The contrast with the way she was now saddened him.

On the way home he rode his bicycle past the animal hospital, tempted to stop in and inquire. He savored each word of what Dr. Tamiron had told him last week: "I'll need someone full time to replace Philip this summer. Would you be interested?"

Darren was far beyond interested; he craved it, and not only as a way to escape his gloomy home. He was inept and clumsy with people, but he had a touch with animals, and he loved working there on Saturdays cleaning the cages.

But Dr. Tamiron had said, "We'll let you know." Darren figured that meant not to bother him, just to wait. So he rode on home, preparing for a grim evening.

For as far back as Darren could remember, his mother had kept a certain small room all to herself. It was locked, always, even when she was in it; Darren had seen inside only once. He had puzzled over the dark jars filled with liquids and pastes, the rows of oddly-scented candles, the tarnished metal tins and cloth bags filled with obscure substances. In the end he had been

repelled by the strangeness of it.

She took her clients in there, for what purpose Darren had never known in detail because she always evaded his questions: "I 'fixed something' for that gentleman," she would say; never any explanation, only "I fixed something." Finally he'd quit asking her, unsure whether he really wanted the answer.

Home from school now, he searched the house for her and finally listened at the locked door. She was in there, and he knew the rule well: do not disturb her in that room, ever, ever.

He saw no sign of a visitor; it was unusual for her to be in there all alone.

He thought of the job again. Maybe the doctor was waiting until Saturday to tell him the job was his. He could just make a quick call now, while his mother was busy . . .

As he sat beside the phone trying to decide, she suddenly burst out of her room and came straight at Darren. She glanced at the phone. She seemed furious.

"You were going to make a call, weren't you? That fool job? Why are you trying to leave me so fast?"

The answer popped into his mind immediately but didn't make it to his lips. He stammered some evasive reply. She shook her head and returned to her room.

Her birthday, eighteen months ago; that was when he'd begun thinking about leaving. That morning his brother Donnie, having prepared nothing else, had impulsively wrapped up a castoff cap pistol in newspaper and handed it to his mother with a self-delighted grin: "Here, Mom—for you!"

Darren had presented his gift too: an antique ruby necklace in a blue velvet-lined box. He'd chosen it carefully, saved three months for it, spent an hour wrapping it. He was certain it would please her.

She'd exclaimed over the cap pistol and made a show of admiring it for weeks afterward. But the necklace she'd looked at briefly, said, "Thank you, Darren," and put it back in the box. She'd never worn it; like most of his other gifts, he'd never seen it again.

He'd finally faced the obvious stinging truth: the problem was not with the gift, but the giver, and always had been. Donnie had been vivacious, impudent, humorous. Darren was not, and his mother was not, but she loved most what she could not be.

That night Darren's childhood grew like a bubble within

his dreams. Once again feelings ruled, strong simple feelings which switched abruptly as vivid memories crowded his mind. He was two; he was three; he replayed tiny dramas and miniature adventures.

Images of his mother's face loomed large; he basked in her attention, the way he remembered her from long ago. There was a game: on the bed, her two-legged hand marched toward him across the quilt and he recoiled with squeals of laughter. The delight went on and on. She sang to him, and stroked and smoothed his silky hair.

At the morning alarm he awoke tangled in his sheets, feeling the deep contentment fade as he returned to awareness. Then, suddenly alert, he sniffed and discovered something that was not fading away: her scent.

Her scent was on his skin and on his bed; on the pillow next to his were three strands of straight grey hair, in a hollow where her head must have lain.

Darren arose quickly. Downstairs he set about making his mother's toast and coffee, bewildered, moving mechanically. *On my bed. In my bed.* His mind raced, but he dared not question her; the possible answers only frightened him.

As he was leaving for school she came to the door and smiled, and said, "I'm going to make some nice cookies today—one of your favorites." Any other time he would have welcomed this sign of improvement. But now his thoughts were turning to self-protection, and her pleasantness only made him cautious and uneasy.

School failed to distract him. His mind kept slipping away to the night and morning until he began to feel weak with apprehension. *Mother. Mother.* Something to do with her was intruding a little more each night, something disturbing enough to make him dread going to sleep.

At dinner Darren gathered his courage and said, "Mama, I don't know what's going on, but I've been having some weird dreams."

She set her fork down, then looked up. "Really? Don't worry about your dreams, Darren," she answered briskly. "Dreams aren't real."

"I know, but—" He hesitated; their relationship was so fragile now. Finally he asked in a small voice, "Are you fixing something?"

Instead of taking offense, she rose, stood behind him, and quite tenderly began smoothing his hair. Darren sat frozen, for two reasons: she hadn't touched him in months. And she hadn't responded to his question.

She said presently, in a distracted way, "Am I? I think we both are. We're so alike, aren't we? We just don't fit into the world out there. Yet we're so needy. You mustn't leave, my sweet ... my precious ..."

Her voice slid into crying. Darren tried to turn to comfort her somehow, but she removed her hand and abruptly left. The door to her room closed in such a way that Darren knew she wouldn't come out again that evening.

Darren was confused by her words; she said so many odd things. He tried to study, gave up, went to bed trying to forget what she'd said, resisting sympathy, resisting trust.

He had a plan: tomorrow was Saturday. He'd go to work and find out for sure about the full-time job. If it was his, he'd ask Mr. Tamiron if he could start staying there a few weeks early, sleeping on the cot they kept in the kennels.

One way or another he had to leave.

Darren fought sleep, but it came anyway, sucking him into scenes of his past. He played with his electric train, arching himself like a bridge over the tracks, watching the train pass under him an inch from his nose. He remembered pushing a battered red metal tractor with black rubber treads. He had a flash of sitting in a patch of sunlight on a dusty carpet, staring at the dust motes in the sunbeam as if nothing else existed.

Many things happened that night. He remembered how he fit himself in his mother's lap so she could present him with glittery treasures, objects he could grasp and squeeze. And there were delicious treats: rice pudding with cinnamon and raisins, soft cookies sprinkled with coarse sugar crystals and little frosting faces.

When he awoke he turned on the radio and discovered that it was Sunday morning. Not Saturday, *Sunday*. Furthermore, his pajamas were on the floor. He was nude.

Alarmed, he donned his robe and rushed downstairs shouting, "Is it really Sunday, Mama? I missed my job! What happened? I missed Saturday!" He found her in the kitchen mixing something in a bowl.

"You slept all day yesterday," she said.

"I never did that before! Why'd you let me? Did my job call?"

"I don't know. I don't like to answer the phone. Maybe you're sick. You shouldn't be working anyhow. Would you get the sugar over there for me?" She had put on an apron and gathered her hair back, and she seemed more normal and cheery than he'd seen in over a month.

That morning he began worrying in earnest. An extra day of sleep should have energized him, but instead he felt a syrupy restraint in his limbs, as if being pulled down—or back. He could not understand missing a day. It wasn't fatigue; he wasn't sick; something else was happening.

Fragments of memory kept pushing up, sproutlike, through his other activities. Again and again he fell into a reverie of long ago, after his father had left them and before Donnie had been born, when he'd had his mother all to himself. He had been happy then.

Inevitably his mood drew him upstairs to Donnie's room. The window shades were raised and sunlight flooded in, making it seem more inhabited. Darren looked fondly at the dusty toys and stuffed animals on the shelves; he and Donnie had both grown up here.

But a terrible memory hung spider-like in his mind, and chose this moment to stir again. It had happened eleven months ago. One ordinary morning his mother had come up here to awaken Donnie for school. Sitting at the breakfast table downstairs, Darren had heard her shout "Donnie!" four times, with rising volume and mounting alarm. Hurrying up the stairs, he'd heard her muttering in a strange harsh voice words from a language he did not recognize.

He had seen her pulling at Donnie's body, making what seemed like ritual gestures. The movements and the sharp repetitive exclamations had chilled Darren so that he stood like a statue in the hall.

Finally his mother had slumped and backed away, mumbling "No life ... all gone ..." and waiting for tears to come.

Donnie had died in his sleep. There was no warning, no explanation; he simply did not wake up.

Darren stared now at the toys, the bed, and the footsteps in the dust. He noticed a half-eaten cookie on the window sill and his eyes stopped abruptly. It looked mauled; there were crumbs all around. He squeezed and smelled it. The cookie was still soft, not old at all.

He was standing there like that, thinking hard, when his mother appeared in the doorway. In a very tight voice she said, "I thought you were up here. What is it?"

"I'm not sure. I'm having lots of dreams lately about when I was a baby."

She relaxed a little, nodded wistfully. "Those were nice times, weren't they? You were a beautiful child, my very first, so lovable."

Darren wanted to say *Sure, until Donnie came along*. But instead he said, "Mama, what's going on? Why did I lose a day? Please tell me!"

She wouldn't answer, but would not look at him either. Then, without warning, she gave a long collapsing sigh and said, "Please don't blame me! I need things too, I have feelings too like anyone, but they come so strong . . . Not only mine, yours too! It's you too! Please don't leave!" She leaned against the doorway and looked away, shaking her head as the tears came.

Darren led her downstairs, dried her eyes, and fixed her some coffee. She sat smoking and nervously shredded a tissue, rolling the pieces between her fingers. Later when Darren emptied her ashtray, he noticed the compressed bits of tissue, which looked like little thread worms.

He didn't know what to do. His inner voice was shouting *Get out! Get out now!* He was afraid, yet his resolve to leave was wavering. All that day Darren tried to think that his mother could take care of herself, that she could get along without him. He tried to think it.

The next morning at school he fretted until lunchtime, then shut himself in the school phone booth and called Fairway Animal Hospital. He was nervous; the phone was slippery in his sweaty hands. When the doctor's wife answered, Darren said, "This is Darren. I'm sorry I didn't come in Saturday; I was . . . sick. Did Dr. Tamiron decide yet, about the summer job?"

Mrs. Tamiron said coolly, "Oh. Yes. Just a moment." He heard her hand cover the mouthpiece, but sound leaked past enough for him to hear: "Ward, it's that boy Darren! Shall I tell him?"

There was a muffled reply, then the wife's voice, barely audible: "*Good! He gives me the creeps!*"

Darren began to blush and his heart thumped as he felt the

phrase invading him like poison. When the doctor came to the phone Darren could barely speak from shame, but it was hardly necessary anyway since the doctor always took charge of conversations.

"Say, I'm sorry about the job, pal, but I think my nephew can handle things here for the summer. He lived on a farm in Nebraska once. Very good with animals. But you can keep coming Saturdays if you want, though, okay? Have to run, pal. So long."

The whole thing took about twenty seconds. Darren slowly lowered the phone. His lips were trembling and he began to crumble inside.

Riding his bicycle home, Darren saw from afar the man's limousine parked outside his house. The car was the same polished black one he remembered, long and splendid, with a chauffeur stretched out comfortably in the front seat reading.

Darren parked his bike and quietly approached the house. He could tell they were in her special room.

Once, nearly two years ago, Darren had brought this man a fresh iced tea, and he had said in return: "You'd be a damn good waiter, son. Wish I could teach your style to some of the clowns who work for me. If you ever need a job . . ." He'd winked ridiculously as he'd said it, wrinkling up his overstuffed face, but he'd been kind.

His mother had said then, with bitterness, "*Him* a waiter? Sure! He's as servile as they come." He'd had to look the word up, and still hadn't understood completely until later. Now he winced at the memory.

He decided his best strategy was to be trimming the long grass around the front gate. He got the shears from the shed and began clipping, very slowly, drawing out the task. Meanwhile he constructed a phrase which would make him sound like a good waiter. He'd heard waiters talk. As he clipped the grass, he rehearsed his phrase in a whisper: "It's nice to see you again, sir. How have you been?"

He was so nervous, but it had to work; he had to make the man stop and talk to him. He practiced, and waited.

Finally the door opened and the footsteps came fast, slapping toward him on the sidewalk. Darren looked up at just the right moment, trying to feign surprise, and said his line in a rush: "Oh, hello, sir! It's nice to see you again. How have you been?"

The man wore a dark suit and an old-fashioned brim hat,

which he took off when he looked down at Darren. "Hello, son, how are you? I'm sorry to hear about your brother."

"Yes sir. Thank you. But I'm—I'm looking for a job now, a summer job. Maybe permanent."

"Is that right! Well, good luck!" The man started to walk away. Darren stood suddenly, dropping his shears.

"Wait! I *have* to find a job, away from here! You said once I could be a waiter for you—remember?"

The man stopped and looked more closely at him. "Did I? Maybe so. Well, let's talk it over—"

Then Darren saw his mother at the window. The man looked up and saw her too. Could she possibly hear from that distance? Was she shaking her head?

That fast, the man's tone changed. "You know, my closest restaurant is over seventy miles from here, way out in Manchester. And your mother is alone now, son. She's still very upset about the boy. Don't you think you should stay with her?"

"I could come home weekends! It'd be all right—"

"Weekends is really our busiest time," he answered. "No, son, I couldn't take you away at a time like this. Try to find something around here. Your mother needs you."

Out of arguments, Darren nodded obediently, bleakly. The man grinned, waved, and walked to his car.

And that was that.

Darren stayed outside for a while, absently clipping grass. He looked south toward the wavy purple line of the hills, which seemed so far away now. All those towns out there, so many roads, but maybe they were best for other people.

"You're not suited to the outside," his mother had often told him. "You're not like your brother. They'd crush you out there." Instead of resenting those words, he hung onto them now. Didn't she know best?

Anyway, he was all she had, and she seemed to need him now. That had to come first.

Feeling better, he went inside to the kitchen. She was waiting for him. "What did he say to you?" she asked, a little too pointedly.

"He said he was sorry about Donnie. He said I should take care of you."

She nodded, and seemed to relax. "No one else will be visiting for a while," she said. She stood with her arms folded,

head tilted, and her voice was softer, even somewhat inviting. Then she just barely smiled at him, enough to make her seem like his own mother again, the way she used to be.

Darren washed his hands and started to take the peanut butter out of the refrigerator, then changed his mind and put it back. He could no longer pretend life-as-usual.

"You *are* fixing something, aren't you, Mama?" he said. "This isn't just dreams I'm having."

She didn't answer for a while, then said, "Does it scare you?" Her voice was cautious but no longer flat.

"It does, but . . . it was nice back then, before Donnie."

"I know. I know. I liked it too." Her mask of control suddenly broke, and she held her face in her hands, crying again.

"Oh Darren, I'm sorry, you try so hard, but you can't help being like me. All this—" She gestured to the house, the outdoors; "this just isn't for us."

Darren stood and rubbed her arm. "Don't cry, Ma. Hey, I'm sort of sleepy. All that sun today. I think I'll take a nap." He looked at her for a moment and then started up the stairs.

On the way up, he passed the toy tractor which he remembered playing with long ago. The tractor tread was made of soft black rubber which left marks when pushed too hard.

The black marks were there on the wall, fresh, one foot above the baseboard.

So much evidence all around: he knew, and didn't know, but mostly just didn't want to think about it all now. He undressed and got under his bedcovers, and waited for sleep to come.

Very late that night Darren blinked and drifted out of sleep. His mother sat on the bed, smiling warmly at him, and in the dim light his eyes were drawn by the flash of her necklace. It was only faintly familiar to him. He studied the red gem and the ornate golden setting: so bright! So pretty! He reached out and closed his pudgy baby fist around it.

"No no, honey," she said very gently, guiding his hand away. She tickled him in the ribs to distract him. He squealed in mock terror. It was one of their games.

Lethe Dreams

by BENTLEY LITTLE

The dreams left his
mind with images of a
strangely askew reality.

They always put the baby to bed before seven. Babies need their sleep, Cindy said. Whoever heard of letting an infant stay up as late as her parents?

But that meant she was awake and crying only two hours after they'd gone to bed themselves, Marc argued. That meant they had to get up and feed her and comfort her and then try to fall back asleep before getting up again for her early morning feeding. "Why don't we put her to bed the same time we go to bed ourselves?" he asked. "That way she wouldn't wake up until four or five o'clock in the morning. It's a hell of a lot easier to get up at five than one."

"She is a baby," Cindy said, slowly shaking her head at him as if he were either too dense or too myopic to see her point. "Babies need their sleep."

"So do adults. Don't you ever get tired of waking up in the middle of the night to feed her? Every night?"

"That's one of the responsibilities of being a parent," she replied, lips tight. "Try, for once, to think of someone other than yourself."

"Look, she sleeps all the time anyway. What difference does an hour or two here or there make? What does it matter to her whether it's early or late? Jesus, it's not as though it's a school day or anything. She won't even be able to talk for another six months or so."

Cindy turned away from him. "I don't want to discuss it anymore." She walked into the kitchen and he heard her banging around in the cupboards, loudly letting him know that she was preparing the baby's formula.

Marc slunk back into his chair, gently massaging his temples with the thumb and forefinger of his right hand. His headache had returned, amplified beyond all reasonable measure. The Tylenols he'd taken less than an hour ago had already worn off. Either they were getting weaker, the headaches were getting stronger, or he was becoming immune to the medicine's effect.

"I'll tell you what," Cindy called from the kitchen. "It's your turn, but I'll take care of her tonight for you. How's that?"

He did not even bother to answer.

Jesus, the head . . .

He was sure the headaches were connected somehow to the unnatural hours he'd been keeping for the past two months. His body simply wasn't used to having its rest interrupted each night. His mind, too, was having a difficult time adjusting. For the past week the baby's cries had broken his dreams off in mid-stream, leaving his waking mind with the vestigial images of a strangely askew reality. He never remembered these dreams in the morning, but in the half-awake feeding interim they played hell with his sensibilities.

Squinting in the vain hope that it would help relieve his pain, he stood up and walked slowly into the kitchen. He crept past Cindy, who was stirring the Similac in a pot on the small stove, and took the bottle of Tylenol from its place in the round plastic condiment holder in the spice cupboard. He popped off the red childproof cap with the ease of an expert and shoved two of the acidic pills into his mouth, swallowing them without the aid of water.

Cindy fixed him with a concerned stare, her brows lightly furrowed. "You have another headache?" All traces of argument had vanished from her voice. Her tone was gentle, caring.

He waved her away as though it were nothing, even as the blood pounded agonizingly in his temples. "I'm all right."

"No you're not." She stopped stirring the Similac and turned off the gas burner—placing the formula-filled pot on another, colder, section of the stove. She took his arm. "Come on. You're going to bed."

"I'm fine, I'm telling you."

"Let's go." She led him firmly down the hall to the bedroom. "This has gone far enough. You've gone through half a bottle of aspirin in one week."

"Tylenol," he said.

"Whatever." She let go of his arm and pointed to the quilt-covered brass bed. "Lay down."

He grinned. "Now you're talking."

Her expression remained serious, "I mean it. I want you to make an appointment with the doctor tomorrow."

"We'll see how I feel."

She was shaking her head before he had finished the sentence. "I'm tired of hearing that. Just be practical for once. Do something sensible for once in your life."

He let it drop. She fussed around the room for a few minutes more, regurgitating her mother's sickbed advice, and went back out to the kitchen to finish preparing the formula. He sat up against the barred headboard after she'd gone. The headache was better already. The Tylenol worked fast.

He stared at the wall opposite the bed, at the cluster of Impressionist prints Cindy had mounted and framed last winter in a frenzy of decorating madness. She had (or *they* had, under her direction) also repainted the living room, converting its sterile white-white to a warmer off-white, and had drilled holes into the ceilings of each room in order to accomodate her new menagerie of hanging plants. The entire house had been virtually transformed over the space of a single weekend.

He heard Cindy's high-heeled step clicking down the hardwood floor of the hall from the kitchen to the nursery, where Anne was busily crawling around her playpen waiting for dinner.

Marc smiled. Babies *were* a pain. They cut into sleep time and recreation time and they ate up money parents didn't really have. But they were worth it. He closed his eyes for a second, leaning back, and opened them in blackness. Cindy was sleeping soundly beside him, her bare back pressed against his chest. She had taken his clothes off somehow, while he was asleep, and they were carefully folded over the back of an antique chair.

He sat up. His headache was gone, but his brain was not still. The demon phantasms of a particularly vivid nightmare were imprinted onto the backs of his pupils. He saw them reeling wildly around the dark room even as he saw the firm substance of reality about him. There was a woman, not unlike Cindy, but with

torn and ragged hair and grinningly misshapen teeth, who was trying to kill a low-slung scuttling crablike creature.

The images frightened him, made him want to fall back asleep—made him unable to fall back asleep. He could see them, or sense them, sneaking around the edges of the room, hiding in shadows just out of range of his peripheral vision. He wanted to wake Cindy, to be reassured by her live presence, to have her comfort him in his nightmare fears the way she used to. But something held him back. Instead, he pressed closer against her, feeling the soft flesh of her back against his chest. He reached over and ran his fingers through the thin part in her silky brown hair, the part which remained perfectly straight and unmoved even through the dishevelment of sleep. She stirred under his touch, her back snuggling into him, and he ran his hand down the smooth flesh of her thin arm.

Déjà vu.

He pulled his hand back quickly; so quickly that Cindy shifted from her side to her stomach, uttering an incomprehensible moan before settling back into deep sleep. He lay there staring at her. The feeling had been so strong, so powerful, so instantaneous, that he had felt a moment of sudden panic, of intuitive fear. He wiped the sweat from his forehead. A certain amount of déjà vu was inevitable in a married relationship, he knew. There were only a limited number of things which two people could do within the limited space of a bed. There were bound to be repeated actions, repeated movements.

But this had been different. He had done this before. He had lain here on this night, in this position, and had stroked her bare arm in exactly the same way.

But why? Where had he—?

He had dreamed it.

The answer came immediately and incontrovertibly. He could feel the beginnings of a headache stirring in the back of his skull. He closed his eyes. He tried to fall asleep. He thought of nothing, thought of blackness, thought of emptiness.

He knew he would remember none of this in the morning.

He awoke with the alarm clock. But the clock did not say five o'clock; it said seven-thirty. Cindy was standing over him, smiling, a glass of orange juice in one hand and a half-eaten slice of toast in the other. "I decided to let you sleep in," she said. "How's your head?"

He shook it to test for pain. There was none. "Fine," he said.

She sat down next to him on the bed. "You wouldn't believe how good she was last night. Didn't cry or anything. I fed her and she went instantly to sleep."

Marc smiled. "Figures. Now that it's my turn, she'll probably be up all night screaming."

Cindy laughed. "Probably." She leaned over to kiss him, her lips tasting faintly of orange juice and peanut butter. "You going to work today?"

"No." He sat up, stretching. "It's another 'staff development day.' Last thing I want to do is put up with that crap."

"Good. We'll go on a picnic then. Me, you, and Anne. Our first family outing."

"First? We've been to the doctor. We've gone to the store."

"Those aren't family outings."

"What are they?"

She socked him playfully on the arm. "Just get dressed."

They spent the day at the zoo, and although his headache came back around noon, Marc didn't say anything. He kept smiling, ignored it, and in another hour it had almost completely disappeared. There was one bad moment in the reptile house—a momentary flashback to a twisted dreamscape which caused his flesh to bristle with cold—but it passed as soon as they moved on to the next exhibit, and he forgot about it almost immediately.

They got back in time for Ann's midafternoon feeding. The baby had slept through three fourths of the zoo trip, had slept in the car on the way there and on the way back, and she fell asleep right after having her bottle. Cindy carried her to the crib in their bedroom, and she and Marc made love on the living room floor with the drapes open, the way they used to.

After dinner, Marc announced that he was going to bed. Cindy asked if he was still sick, if his headache had come back, but he smiled and said no, he just wanted to get enough rest to go to work tomorrow. He did not tell her that he wanted to get in at least four hours of sleep before waking up to take care of the baby. He did not mention Anne's sleeping schedule at all.

Cindy said she was going to stay up. There was an old James Bond movie she wanted to see; one of the Sean Connery Bonds. She would wake him when it was time to feed the baby.

He walked down the hall to the bedroom, checking on Anne to make sure she was all right. He left his clothes in a dis-

carded pile on the floor and crawled into bed. He could hear Anne's thin breathing from the crib at the foot of the bed, whistling lowly beneath the rhythmic babble from the TV in the living room. He switched off the lamp on the walnut nightstand next to his head and closed his eyes, letting the baby's breath and the TV's talking lull him to sleep.

The dream was strange. Something to do with a dark closeted room and a wide expanse of unbroken plain. The room was filled with furtive shadows, its blackness broken periodically by flashing red and blue lights. The plain was completely devoid of all life, and its sandy floor moved in liquid currents. The two were connected somehow, intertwined in an evil and undefinable way.

Cindy woke him up, as promised, in time for the baby's feeding. Feeling her hands shake him roughly awake, he rolled onto his side and looked at her with half-shut eyes. "You're up already," he said. "You feed her."

Her voice was as sleepy as his. "I am not up. And it's your turn."

"But you woke me up."

"And the alarm woke me up. It's an even trade."

His sleep-numbed brain could not follow the logic, but he got out of bed anyway, slipping on his robe and lurching down the hallway to the kitchen. Once there, he took a baby bottle from the purifier and a nipple from the drawer and heated the formula over the stove. The simple act of movement, the sheer effort of standing for several minutes on his feet while he stirred the Similac on the stove, caused him to wake up somewhat. And he was conscious, if not fully alert, as he made his way back down the hall to the bedroom.

Cindy was fast asleep by the time he got back, and he left the room lights off so as not to disturb her. She had moved the crib from the foot of the bed to the space right next to her nightstand, and he walked around the bed holding the warm bottle tightly. He placed the bottle on top of the nightstand and reached into the crib for Anne. He drew his daughter out and hugged her to him. The slatted shafts of moonlight which fell through the partially open curtains illuminated the baby's face, highlighting the red gash of a mouth painted garishly onto her cheesecloth head. Under the strings of yarn hair, one of her eyes was missing. But the other eye—a sewed-on black button—stared knowingly into his.

The baby's rag-stuffed arms hung limply at her sides as he

cradled her in his arms, and her cotton doll legs swung loosely in the air.

Marc held the baby lovingly, picked up the bottle from the nightstand and pressed it to her painted lips. The formula dripped down her inanimate face, some of it falling onto the floor, the rest being absorbed by the material of her body. When the bottle was empty, he rocked the baby slowly in his arms, humming.

"Honey?"

He looked over toward the bed. Cindy was sitting up, smiling, holding her arms forward.

"Let me have her," she said gently.

Marc handed the baby to his wife. She expertly held the rag doll to her shoulder, patting her on the back. Only a single slice of moonlight reached the bed, but it cut across the baby's cheesecloth face, and Marc saw the corners of her red painted mouth creep slowly upward. "Look," he said, "Anne's smiling."

"She's happy," Cindy said.

And the baby's legs started slowly to kick.

White Trains

by LUCIUS SHEPARD

Concerning the strange events
outside the Castle Monosodium Glutimate Works.

White trains with no tracks
have been appearing on the outskirts
of small anonymous towns,
picket fence towns in Ohio, say,
or Iowa, places rife with solid American values,
populated by men with ruddy faces and weak hearts,
and women whose thoughts slide
like swaths of gingham through their minds.
They materialize from vapor or a cloud,
glide soundlessly to a halt in some proximate meadow,
old-fashioned white trains with pot-bellied smokestacks,
their coaches adorned with filigrees of palest ivory,
packed with men in ice cream suits and bowlers,
and lovely dark-haired women in lace gowns.
The passengers disembark, form into rows,
facing one another as if preparing for a cotillion.
and the men undo their trouser buttons,
their erections springing forth like lean white twigs,
and they enter the embrace of the women,
who lift their skirts to enfold them,
hiding them completely, making it appear
that strange lacy cocoons have dropped from the sky
to tremble and whisper on the bright green grass.
And when at last the women let fall their skirts,

each of them bears a single speck of blood
at the corner of their perfect mouths.
As for the men, they have vanished
like snow on a summer's day.

I myself was witness to one such apparition
on the outskirts of Parma, New York,
home to the Castle Monosodium Glutamate Works,
a town whose more prominent sophisticates
often drive to Buffalo for the weekend.
I had just completed a thirty-day sentence
for sullyng the bail bondsman's beautiful daughter
(They all said she was a good girl
but you could find her name on every bathroom wall
between Nisack and Mitswego),
and having no wish to extend my stay
I headed for the city limits.

It was early morning, the eastern sky
still streaked with pink, mist threading
the hedgerows, and upon a meadow bordering
three convenience stores and a laundromat,
I found a number of worthies gathered,
watching the arrival of a white train.
There was Ernest Cardwell, the minister
of the Church of the Absolute Solstice,
whose congregation alone of all the Empire State
has written guarantee of salvation,
and there were a couple of cops big as bears
in blue suits, carrying standard issue golden guns,
and there was a group of scientists huddled
around the machines with which they were
attempting to measure the phenomenon,
and the mayor, too, was there, passing out
his card and declaring that he had no hand
in this unnatural business, and the scientists
were murmuring, and Cardwell was shouting
"Abomination," at the handsome men
and lovely women filing out of the coaches,
and as for me, well, thirty days and the memory
of the bail bondsman's beautiful daughter
had left me with a more pragmatic attitude,



and ignoring the scientists' cries of warning and
 Cardwell's predictions of eternal hellfire,
 the mayor's threats, and the cops' growling,
 I went toward the nearest of the women
 and gave her male partner a shove and was amazed
 to see him vanish in a haze of sparkles
 as if he had been made of something insubstantial
 like Perrier or truth.

The woman's smile was cool and enigmatic
 and as I unzipped, her gown enfolded me
 in an aura of perfume and calm,
 and through the lacework the sun acquired
 a dim red value, and every sound was faraway,
 and I could not feel the ground beneath my feet,
 only the bright sensation of slipping inside her.
 Her mouth was such a simple curve, so pure
 a crimson, it looked to be a statement of principle,
 and her dark brown eyes had no pupils.
 Looking into them, I heard a sonorous music;
 heavy German stuff, with lots of trumpet fanfares
 and skirling crescendos, and the heaviness
 of the music transfigured my thoughts,
 so that it seemed what followed was a white act,
 that I had become a magical beast with golden eyes,
 coupling with an ephemera, a butterfly woman,
 a creature of lace and heat and silky muscle ...
 though in retrospect I can say with assurance
 that I've had better in my time.

I think I expected to vanish, to travel
 on a white train through some egoless dimension,
 taking the place of the poor soul I'd pushed aside,
 (although it may be he never existed, that only
 the women were real, or that from those blood drops
 dark and solid as rubies at the corners of their mouths,
 they bred new ranks of insubstantial partners),
 but I only stood there jelly-kneed watching
 the women board the train, still smiling.
 The scientists surrounded me, asking questions,
 offering great sums if I would allow them to do tests

and follow-ups to determine whether or not I had contracted some sort of astral social disease, and Cardwell was supplicating God to strike me down, and the mayor was bawling at the cops to take me in for questioning, but I was beyond the city limits and they had no rights in the matter, and I walked away from Parma, bearing signed contracts from the scientists, and another presented me by a publisher who, disguised as a tree stump, had watched the entire proceeding, and now owned the rights to the lie of my life story. My future, it seemed, was assured.

White trains with no tracks
continue to appear on the outskirts
of small anonymous towns, places
whose reasons have dried up, towns
upon which dusk settles
like a statement of intrinsic greyness,
and some will tell you these trains
signal an Apocalyptic doom, and
others will say they are symptomatic
of mass hysteria, the reduction of culture
to a fearful and obscure whimsey, and
others yet will claim that the vanishing men
are emblematic of the realities of sexual politics
in this muddled, weak-muscled age.
But I believe they are expressions of a season
that occurs once every millennium or so,
a cosmic leap year, that they are merely
a kind of weather, as unimportant and unique
as a sun shower or a spell of warmth in mid-winter,
a brief white interruption of the ordinary
into which we may walk and emerge somewhat
refreshed, but nothing more.

I lecture frequently upon this subject
in towns such as Parma, towns whose lights
can be seen glittering in the dark folds of lost America
like formless scatters of stars, ruined constellations
whose mythic figure has abdicated to a better sky,
and my purpose is neither to illuminate nor confound,

but is rather to engage the interest of those women whose touch is generally accompanied by thirty days durance on cornbread and cold beans, a sentence against which I have been immunized by my elevated status, and perhaps my usage of the experience is a measure of its truth, or perhaps it is a measure of mine.

Whatever the case, white trains move silent as thought through the empty fields, voyaging from nowhere to nowhere, taking on no passengers, violating no regulation other than the idea of order, and once they have passed we shake our heads, returning to the mild seasons of our lives, and perhaps for a while we cling more avidly to love and loves, realizing we inhabit a medium of small magical transformations that like overcoats can insulate us against the onset of heartbreak weather, hoping at best to end in a thunder of agony and prayer that will move us down through archipelagoes of silver light to a morbid fairy tale wherein we will labor like a dwarves at the question of forever, and listen to a grumbling static from above that may or may not explain in some mystic tongue the passage of white trains.

PENNIES FROM HELL

by DARRELL SCHWEITZER

"See a penny, pick it up;
all the day you'll have good luck. . . .
See a penny, leave it lay;
death will find you that same day."

I met Jim Bowen for the first time in over ten years in a Fifties Revival bar in Philadelphia. It was the sort of place with posters of James Dean, Marilyn Monroe, and Elvis on the walls, the waiters in regulation Duck's Ass hairdos, an interior decorating style which can only be described as Art Tacko, and of course, inevitably, a dance floor. The sign over the entrance said: BOP TILL YOU DROP.

It wasn't Jimbo's style, but there he was. I called him over to my table. He looked up, didn't seem to recognize me at first, and then slid off his barstool, glass in hand, not stumble-down drunk but walking, ah, *carefully*. That, too, wasn't his style.

"You've changed," I said.

"Well, I'm *forty-three*, Chuckie-boy. I can still call you that, I hope, for all you're a big-time novelist now. For me the downhill slide into senility has already begun. Not much longer and I'll be decrepit enough to get a job as an extra in *Night of the Return of the Revenge of the Living Dead, Part II*."

I could tell that he was, as we literary types phrase it, into his cups.

"This isn't like you."

"At least it's a grown-up obsession." He nodded toward his glass.

I glanced at the picture of Roy Rogers and Trigger on the wall behind him.

"So why are you suddenly worried about being grown-up all the sudden?"

"You remember what I used to say, Chuckie-boy? In American society we remain adolescents until they issue us bifocals. Well, I wear contacts, but the time has come, as inevitably it must. I think that's why I come here." He lifted his glass and pointed one finger at Jimmy Dean, then at Elvis. "This place is a mausoleum of lost youth. It reminds us that time is passing."

"Awfully morbid of you, Jimbo, old buddy."

"Well, God damn it, I have every *right* to be morbid. Sometimes I get to thinking about Joe Eisenberg—"

"The cartoonist who . . . died?"

"Yeah. He was after your time. You'd gone off to commit literature by then."

"I met him in your office once," I said. "Besides, after I stopped writing for underground comics, I still read them, at least the ones you published. I loved Eisenberg's stuff. As far out as S. Clay Wilson, only he could draw. I particularly remember the upside-down face series, this guy with his nose pointing up, and corks with little crucifixes stuck in his nostrils, and the caption: *Damned uncomfortable, but it sure keeps the snot vampires away*. Great stuff, elegant, tasteful—"

"But he never grew up, and it was a childish obsession that killed him."

"I never knew exactly how he died."

Jim went back to the bar for another drink. I had a hunch I was going to need an excuse to linger for some time yet, so I called a waitress over and ordered a Brown Cow and a Wangadangburger.

My friend came back, sat down again, and drank in silence for several minutes. Then, finally, he said, "I suppose I've set myself up for this. I might as well tell you the whole story. You don't have to believe a word of it, but you can listen. Maybe you can use some of it in a book."

"Jimbo, I may have called you a lot of things, but never a liar."

"Just listen."

"Okay," I said.

"Well, the first thing you have to remember," Jim began, "is that Joe Eisenberg was like one of the characters in his own cartoons. Mock-pedantry was definitely his schtick. You *couldn't*

tell when he was serious and when he wasn't. He'd explain something like the Spooch Theory in the driest professorial tone, like an arcane point of real linguistics."

"The *what* theory?"

"The idea was that *spooch* is an inherently funny word on the phonetic level. The double-'o' sound is inherently funny. The 'sp' sort of slides you in there, and the hard 'ch' traps you inside the word, so the 'oo' can resonate until it reaches the humor threshold. A soft sound at the end, and you'd escape. That's why 'spoon' isn't funny, but *spooch* is."

I snickered. Jim took another sip of his drink and said, "You see? That proves it. Or that's what Joe used to say. And he had lots more where that came from."

"Weird."

"Yeah, but creative people are allowed to be weird. The same secret committee that issues the bifocals assigns weirdness quotas, and underground comic book artists get more than most people. And Joe was fun that way. We used to call him Spoocho Marx. The other Marx Brothers had locked him in the refrigerator and forgotten about him, sometime back in the '30s, so here he was. He looked the part too, like a dark-haired version of Harpo.

"But somewhere he went too far, and the silliness turned into craziness of a less pleasant sort. I think it began about a year after he'd started working for me, one evening in December. I was still prosperous then, and lived in the suburbs, and Joe and I used to go home on the same train.

"We had been working late over some storyboards. It was the beginning of Joe's *Miracles of Saint Toad* series that later got such a tremendous response in *Zipperhead Funnies*. He had the art wrapped in a plastic trashcan liner under one arm, and we ran for the train, the wind and rain blasting in our faces. I reached the entrance first, and I could hear the train rumbling in downstairs. We would have made it, but Joe suddenly called out, 'Jim! Help!'

"He'd spilled the artwork, all of it, half inside the doorway, half out. Rain splattered over the floor. Late commuters rushed in, not too careful where they stepped.

"I ran back and helped him recover it, but by then several panels had been ruined. They'd have to be redone. We missed the train, and had to wait another hour inside the station. Much of that time was spent drying the storyboards with paper towels

from the men's room.

"How the Hell did you drop them?" I asked.

"Oh," he said, digging into his coat pocket. "Here's why." He held up a penny. "You know what they say, *See a penny, pick it up; all the day you'll have good luck—*"

"That was real dumb," I said. "Grade-A Idiot Maximus. You're running to catch a train, in the rain, and you're carrying art that took you days or even weeks to produce, and you risk it all for *one crummy cent*. Not what I would call sound financial planning, my dear fellow. Not at all."

"He went on for a minute drying a spot where the ink had run badly, then he gave me his best Harpo smile and said, 'It isn't the money, Jimbo. It's more *luck*. If I don't have luck, I might lapse into superstition, which is *really* bad luck. It's where I get my inspiration from. I've found that out. It works like this: I have to find at least one penny every day. That's basic recognition from the gods.'"

"The gods?"

"Yeah, Zeus and all that crowd. Nobody sacrifices oxen or goes to oracles anymore, so this is how they stay in touch with the few remaining faithful."

"Uh-huh . . ."

"Like I said, you find one penny a day and that's a sign that at least nothing disastrous will happen. Find more, or dimes or quarters, and you're ten times blessed, or twenty-five times, and things will turn out real nice. Find a bright, shiny penny, and something *new* will come into your life, while an old, tarnished thing means that you'll find something or do something which is old and familiar, but still good. It's a form of divination, I suppose. There are lots of ramifications. I could go on for hours."

"He proceeded to do so. He explained away the accident with the art by the fact that he hadn't yet picked up a penny that day, and so was sailing under a curse, so to speak. But the evening would be better. He would probably get a lot of work done, or inherit money from a long-lost uncle, or hear from his old girlfriend, or something. The penny foretold it. He had a whole system worked out, as elaborate as anything in an astrology manual, and he was absolutely serious as he explained it all, in the station while we waited, then on the train all the way to his stop.

"Any other time it might have been hilarious, but I was thinking about deadlines and distributors, and the sort of scene

my then-wife Carol was going to cause when I got home late and her special organic dinner was cold.

"'Christ, Joe,' I said at last. 'I don't have time for this bullshit.'

"He turned to me, a hurt look on his face. 'It isn't bullshit,' he said quietly.

"Before I could say anything, the train arrived at his stop, and he got up and left.

"Things got rapidly weirder after that, but I didn't care, because Joe was hot. He was turning in great stuff. Before long I gave him his own book, *Saint Toad's Cracked Chimes*, and by the time the third issue was out and the returns were in on the first, I knew we had a hit. If he had discovered the secret of success by picking up pennies on the street, well, all I could say was more power to him.

"It's hard for me to think of any scene in what was left of his life that didn't have a penny in it. I mean, he found them *everywhere*. In a dark alley, during a *blackout*, for God's sake, he stopped, bent over, and said, 'Ah, here we go!'

"That summer we went to a comic art convention in Boston. The two of us shared the taxi from the train station to the hotel, and, sure enough, there was a penny on the floor in front of him. He held it up to the window, doing his best Harpo act, and, true to character, whipped out an oversized magnifying glass and began to scrutinize the coin minutely.

"'What do you expect to find on it, the secret of the ages?' I asked.

"'Something like that, Jimbo.'

"Joe was a big success with the fans. He could be a real charmer when he wanted to be. But he got a lot of odd looks, always bending over to pick up pennies. There were a lot of jokes about how badly I paid my artists, that they had to scrounge change to stay alive. And once, in the middle of a panel discussion, all the microphones went dead. Joe calmly unscrewed the top of his, shook it, and a penny dropped onto the table top. He gave the audience his trademarked grin, and there was nervous laughter, as if most people didn't get the joke.

"'There's a fortune written on it,' he told them. 'It says: *You will find true love and get laid.*'

"That got a laugh, and, you know, the prediction came true,

at least in part. There was a groupie in the audience, who used Joe's schtick to bait him . . . literally. She laid out a trail of pennies, up a flight of stairs, along a corridor, and under the door to her room. The door was unlocked. And that, to make a steamy story short, is how Joe Eisenberg lost his virginity, at the age of twenty-seven. Because the gods had revealed that he would, he told me afterward.

"I'm sure glad I picked up *that* penny," he said.

"I think he used his silliness to hide social awkwardness. And somewhere along the line, all this very much ceased to be amusing.

"He found I don't know *how* many pennies during the remainder of the convention, and on the train ride back. The way he pounced on them told me that the totally overdone gag was turning into a mania. It was a wonder he didn't walk right into people. He was always scanning the floor, looking for pennies.

"'Awright! Enough of this!' I told him in my best Graham-Chapman-as-a-British-Army-Officer voice. 'This has got to stop. It's getting silly.'

"I only wish it were, Jimbo," he said softly, then turned to stare out the train window.

It was early November when he came into my office one evening late with a stack of new artwork. Things were going badly for me by then, for all Joe's stuff sold better than anything else I had. The early '70s were bad times for undergrounds. Sex and obscenity had lost a good deal of their novelty, and the Moron Majority was after us. Head shops were closing, and with them went much of the distribution. Books that had sold seventy-five thousand copies five years previously now were lucky to do twenty thousand. And so I was *living* in that dingy office above the record store on South Street. My suburban apartment, and my wife Carol, had gone in the course of belt-tightening.

"I was working late with some bills, and Joe knew I'd be there. He had a key and he just came in. I hardly glanced up.

"Just as he stepped through the door my Selectric jammed and began making a hideous rattle.

"Somehow he was expecting it. Joe dropped his artwork on a chair and ran to my desk, leaning over my shoulder, reaching into my typewriter with the longest pair of tweezers I have ever laid eyes on, and extracted—you don't have to guess—a shiny,

new, goddamn *penny* from the innards of my typewriter. As soon as he did, the machine reverted to a contented hum.

"Out came the magnifying glass again. I knew better than to expect an explanation.

" 'This is great!' he said in something that was almost a tone of reverential awe. 'The pattern is complete. I have all the answers now.'

"Without another word, he left, not bothering to even discuss the artwork. But, as I said, I was pretty used to his, ah, eccentricities by now. So I just got up and looked at the art myself.

"And in a minute, I'd forgotten my troubles, how weird Joe was getting, and everything. The stuff was brilliant. It was the first of that final sequence of the *Saint Toad* strips, in which the warty sage sets out on his pilgrimage to find the Meaning of Life in the Land of Reversible Cups. I was laughing aloud. It was a breakthrough, which put Joe on a level with the immortal R. Crumb, or even a notch above.

" 'Wow,' I said to myself. 'Mister Natural, move over.'

"It was part of a sustained burst of creativity on Joe's part. I didn't see him much after that. He sent his stuff in Federal Express. There was enough there to keep *Saint Toad* going for several years. Weird, metaphysical stuff, all full of dooms and prophecies—and some of his predictions were just uncanny, as things turned out. You know, about the World Series and Comet Kohoutek and the President's brain.

"There were pennies in every panel. It became a trademark, a game, to see where he had hidden them. Even in the *Fantastic Voyage* parody sequence, where the hero sails a tiny submarine up his own asshole, if you look very closely, there's an Indian-head cent lodged in the pancreas.

"It was completely impossible for me to think of Joe Eisenberg without thinking of pennies, and vice-versa. 'My God,' I told myself, 'he must have buckets of them by now.'

"By the time the following January came around, the sale of Joe's work was all that was keeping my operation afloat. So you can understand my alarm when I tried to call him one day and got a recorded message saying his phone had been disconnected.

"It was a mistake, I told myself. Or maybe he had just forgotten to pay the bill. I sent him a letter, certified, so he'd have to

come to the door and sign for it.

"The letter was returned undeliverable.

"There was another Joe Eisenberg schtick that came to mind: mock-childish eagerness over the question, *Can we panic now? Huh? Huh? Can we?*

"Yes, I thought, *we can panic now.*

"I decided to pay him a visit. It was raining that evening as I walked to the train station. I couldn't help but think of the night when the penny-mania had all begun. Joe no doubt would have called it a sign from the gods, a meaningful symmetry or something.

"There was a discarded newspaper on the seat beside me as the train pulled out of Thirtieth Street and headed for the suburbs. I glanced out at the familiar scenes for a while, then picked up the paper. It was a back section, and there, under a snide headline, was a little piece about a 'local character,' the Penny Man, who spent whole days wandering the streets after loose change, the bulging pockets of his old overcoat jangling. For all there was no photo and no names were mentioned, I knew it was Joe.

"*'Oh shit,'* I muttered to myself, crumbling the newspaper. *'Oh shit ...'*

"Joe lived on one of the few sleazy side streets in the posh Main Line town of Bryn Mawr, in an upstairs apartment over a drugstore. I went up the back stairs—wooden stairs outside the building—and tapped gently on his door. No answer. I peered through the glass. The apartment was dark. It was just my luck. Maybe he was out picking up pennies again, hoping to find the secret of the universe that way—and in my state of mind, I didn't doubt he could actually do it—or else the pennies had revealed that he should move without telling me. I was ready to believe anything.

"Then I heard slow, shuffling footsteps, a metallic clang, and the sound of coins pouring onto the floor, followed by incoherent obscenities. But I knew that tired, almost-sobbing voice.

"He opened the door, then lunged for my feet. I jumped back, startled. He picked up a penny off the mat, looked at it, then put it in his pocket and turned to go back inside.

"Not yet," he said to himself. *'A little more time.'*

"He made to shut the door, as if he hadn't noticed me at all.

"Joe, aren't you going to ask me in?"

" 'Uh, hello Jim' he said, a little disoriented.

"I got a good look at him then, and I hardly recognized him. Now you'll recall that there were still a lot of hippies then, and squalor hadn't totally fallen into disfavor yet—but Joe had gone beyond acceptable limits. It was a cold, damp winter night, and there he was barefoot, wearing old jeans with both knees out, and a bathrobe held shut with safety pins. He hadn't shaved in at least a week, and he smelled like he hadn't bathed in twice that. And he was haggard, his face pale and sunken, his eyes bloodshot, his gaze wild and distracted. Like a crazy man's. Like the look you see on bag people, when they sit for hours in a corner somewhere, staring into nothing.

" 'How are you, Joe?'

" 'Jimbo, I'm . . . I knew you would come by eventually. I suppose you deserve an explanation. Come in.'

"I followed him silently along an unlighted corridor, stepping over boxes and piles of papers. His studio was a mess, paint chipping from the walls, trash in cardboard boxes heaped in corners, orange peels on the floor. Something moved behind the boxes. Maybe it was a cat, maybe not.

"I wondered how he could work here. The only window looked out on a brick wall. The overhead light apparently didn't work, so the only illumination came from a small lamp he'd clamped onto his drawing table.

"I waded forward, careful not to step on any artwork, and looked at the drawing on the table. It was a rough pencil sketch of the opening spread for what turned out to be the final issue of *Saint Toad*, the scene where they sacrifice Little Nell to Odin. I was selfishly relieved to see that, for all Joe Eisenberg might be going mad, his creative powers were not failing. His stuff would continue to sell comic books.

"Still Joe didn't say anything. I turned away from the table, and began to scan the bookshelves, reading titles as best I could in the gloom. You know, you can tell a lot about someone by what is on their bookshelves. Joe was full of surprises. Oh, there were lots of comics, and the hardcover reprints of the E.C. classics, but also lots of classics in the literary sense. He had most of the Elizabethans, and even Latin and Greek writers. And there were scholarly books on religion, folklore, magic, that sort of thing. I could only make out a few titles: Franz Cumont books on Roman paganism, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, the

Joshi translation of *Al Azif*, and a few more. Not what you'd expect for the average cartoonist. Of course Joe wasn't the average cartoonist, and his strips were fantastically erudite sometimes.

"Jim," he said at last, 'you are probably wondering ...'

"You could say that."

"I'll bet you have." Then he bent over and I noticed something I hadn't seen before. All along one wall was a row of buckets, and they were indeed filled with pennies. He picked up a handful of them, and let them dribble through his fingers. *'See a penny, pick it up; all the day you'll have good luck. Do you know what the next verse is, Jimbo?'*

"No, but I think you've going to tell me."

"*'See a penny, leave it lay; death will claim you that same day. I learned that from the Penny Elves. That's one of the many things they told me.'*

"The what kind of elves?"

"Penny Elves, Jim. Like tooth fairies who have been promoted, only they're not good enough to work for Santa Claus. I used to think it was the old gods, and that was a grand and serene and beautiful way to look at it—the Olympian powers exiled, forgotten, reduced to communicating to the few mortals who still acknowledge them by penny-divination. There's a certain pathos in the idea. But it isn't true. It's all the work of these loser elves. They resent the job. They want the prestige of being in the employ of the Big Claus, but they know they haven't made the grade. So they put us humans through the paces, just to make us look ridiculous. They bait the trap with real knowledge, real predictions, and lead us on."

"He said all this with such conviction, such passive yet intense resignation, that the effect was *scary*. I can't put it any other way.

"Is this ... like the Spooch Theory, Joe?"

Suddenly he was angry. I had never seen him angry before. He threw the remaining pennies down hard, and started shooing me toward the door.

"Forget it, Jimbo. You keep asking me if I can be serious. Well you can't. That's pretty obvious. You won't understand. Don't worry about your goddamn artwork. You'll get it on time. What you need to worry about is, *What are you going to do when this starts happening to you?* Huh, Jimbo? What?"

"He slammed the door in my face. I stood there for a minute at the top of the stairs, stunned, and then I headed for the Bryn

Mawr train station. There was nothing I could do. I had never felt so helpless in all my life. Joe had no family that I knew of, and I couldn't very well spend seventy-five dollars an hour—even if I had it—explaining to a shrink that I had *this friend* who was suffering from extraordinary delusions. What was left? Call up the police and tell them Joe was behaving irrationally? There are lots of irrational people in our society, and nobody cares a bit about them. You see them in every big city, sleeping on vents.

"So I caught the last train back into Philly and did nothing.

"I was disturbed to notice that there was an unusual amount of loose change on the floor of the train car I was riding in. Nobody stooped to pick any of it up.

"Joe Eisenberg was as good as his word. He remained punctual until the end. His work came in on time, as brilliant and wonderful as ever. Somewhere in the deep recesses of his tangled mind, *genius* still remained. I don't use the word lightly. *Genius*.

"My own behavior in the following couple of months was selfish, even shameful. That whole scene had been a cry for help from a very disturbed individual, but I tried to put him out of my mind. He was an adult, I told myself, his own responsibility. I was his publisher, not his daddy.

"Mostly I retreated into my work. When I'd started out publishing undergrounds, it was a lark, a mixture of joking and idealism, a way of showing what we called The Establishment in those days that the true spirit of freaky America had not been stifled. I never imagined that it would become a desperate, grinding *business* frequently interrupted by messages from the sponsor, that is to say the landlord, who swore he would turn me and mine out on the sidewalk if the rent was late one more time. Then there were the artists. I managed to pay some of them, some of the time. I felt bad about that.

"But Joe never complained. He was faithful till the end.

"The end came on the last evening of April, Walpurgisnacht. I suppose that figured. I had been out most of the day, trying to find a second-hand typewriter to replace my Selectric, which had rattled and gurgled its last. When I got back to the office-cum-apartment, there was a package between the inner and outer doors, with no markings at all, save a single word scribbled on the back in magic marker: GOODBYE.

"I recognized Joe's handwriting, of course. I hurried inside

and slit open the package. Several pennies fell out, onto the carpet. The package contained artwork, another—the final—installment of *Saint Toad's Cracked Chimes*, beginning with the sacrifice scene I'd seen on his drawing table during my visit. Well fine, I thought. He's delivering them himself now.

"Then the phone rang. It was the printer, who wasn't going to print the next *Zipperhead* unless I paid him for the jobs he'd done on the previous *four*. As soon as I got myself out of that one, another artist called and threatened to go on strike if I didn't pay him what I owed him.

"One thing followed another, and I didn't manage to even think of Joe again until quite late that night. It must have been around eleven when I noticed that one of the coins on the rug was much larger than the others. I picked it up. It wasn't an American penny, but a very old, large-sized British one, with Queen Victoria on the front.

"On the back were the words: WATCH THIS SPACE FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENTS.

"I dropped it with a yelp, as if it were red hot. I was sure I was seeing things, going a bit mad myself. The coin lay on the rug at my feet, the message fading in and out: WATCH ... WATCH ... WATCH ...

"Then the phone rang one more time. I assumed it was another creditor. It's never too late at night when people are after you for money.

" 'Hello!' I snarled.

"It was Joe. He sounded exhausted, his voice cracking as he spoke. I think he had been crying.

" 'Jim,' he said. 'You've been good to me, as good as anyone. I think you ought to know. It's too late to do anything for me, but I ought to tell you the truth.'

"There was a long pause, as if he couldn't bring himself to speak.

" 'What is it, Joe?' I asked him gently. 'You can tell me.'

" 'It isn't elves. There are no such things as Penny Elves.'

"For an instant I felt a rush of relief, as I hoped that somehow Joe had snapped out of it, had become sane again. But he didn't sound any saner. If anything, he sounded worse.

" 'It's devils,' he said. 'Devils right out of Hell. A special subdivision of them. They work for Mammon, the demon of avarice, and they lead people to damnation through, well ... money. I

made a pact with them, Jim. I did it before I knew who they really were. It all started as a game, picking up pennies, tying them in to coincidences, pretending they were omens and prophecies. But then, somehow, I discovered that they *really worked*. Forbidden knowledge, Jim. That's what it was. They told me . . . all sorts of things . . . wonderful, terrible. I made a deal. I wanted to be good, Jim. I wanted to be the best, so I made a deal, and I learned how to read the signs more closely than ever before. That's where my inspiration came from, *Saint Toad*, all the rest. Made in Hell. You know what they say about me—devilishly funny.'

"No, Joe,' I said. 'This is crapola. It's *you*. You're a genius. It comes out of *your* head. You didn't get it off the back of any stupid penny.'

"The back, Jimbo? How did you know the message is always on the back? I never told you that.'

"I looked down at the coin on the rug. There, on the back of it, was something new: JOE IS DYING.

"Joel' I said. 'Don't do anything! Stay where you are! I'm coming out there right now!'

"I appreciate the thought, my friend, but you can't help me. They're coming for me tonight. They're coming to collect on an old debt. They told me this, on the last penny I found.'

"He babbled for a while after that. I could barely make out one word in five. Then he was weeping, and reciting poetry:

*'Cut is the branch that might have grown full straight,
and burned is Apollo's laurel-bough,
That sometime grew within this learned man.
Faustus is gone; regard his hellish fall,
Whose fiendful fortune may exhort the wise—'*

"I'm coming out there," I said, and hung up on him.

"I ran for the train station, only to find when I got there that I had missed the last train. I was desperate. I would have to take a cab, but then I realized that I didn't have enough money on me.

"The floor of the train station was littered with coins, which no one else seemed to notice. A cop paced calmly, kicking hundreds of nickels and dimes this way and that.

"I didn't look at any of them. They burned in my hands as I gathered them, but after a few minutes I had my pockets full, just like the Penny Man the newspaper writer had found so amusing.

"It was a long ride to Bryn Mawr. I didn't even bother to ask the cabbie why there was so much loose change on the floor in the back of his cab. Something scratched beneath the seat, and I thought I caught a whiff of sulfur. This same cabbie was more surprised than angry when I paid my fifteen-dollar fare with a double handful of coins.

"'You count it!' I yelled, as I ran up the stairs to Joe's apartment.

"There was a thunderous racket coming from the alley beneath the studio window. Coins were pouring out, rattling off the tops of trashcans like rainwater. When I got to Joe's door, the sound from inside was like what you'd hear if every slot machine in Atlantic City hit the jackpot at once.

"Of course I was too late. He was already dead by the time I forced open the door and crawled the length of that hall, through three or four *feet* of loose change, which seemed to wriggle and heave beneath me, while millions of coins poured out of the darkness overhead, battering, nearly suffocating me.

"I think Joe had been trying to draw at the very end. His table was still standing, and there were a few random lines across a sheet of paper clamped there. His stool was buried. I dug frantically.

"I found him at last, face down on the floor, half underneath the drawing table. I pulled him to the surface and clung to him, as if somehow that would do some good, but he was already dead. I just sat there for a while as the coins rained down and the whole structure of the building creaked from the weight of them. My mind blanked out. His corpse was a kind of life preserver. I hung on because I couldn't let go. I was still holding him when the police arrived."

Jim Bowen stopped talking, and took another sip of his drink. My Wangadamburger had gotten cold on the plate. The waitress was staring at us.

"That's the story," he said. "I don't expect you to believe it, but that's the story."

"Wait a goddamn minute," I said, almost convinced I was the victim of the most inscrutable, poker-faced put-on in history. "You can't end it *there*. I mean, the police find you half-buried in something like forty million dollars worth of small change, and Joe Eisenberg is in your arms, crushed to death—you must have

had quite a time explaining."

"He wasn't crushed. He'd choked on a single coin. Otherwise the apartment was its usual mess. All those pennies were gone."

"Except the one he'd choked on."

"That wasn't a penny, Chuck. It was a *solidus*."

"A *what*?"

"An ancient Roman coin, gold, about the size of a nickel. The figure on it was Julian the Apostate, who was the last emperor to honor the old gods. He was heavily into divination, I understand."

"But what has that got to do with—?"

"I think the devils, or whatever they were, thought it would make a particularly fine finishing touch, that's all. It was embedded in his esophagus. A doctor showed it to me after the autopsy."

I didn't know what to say next. Jim Bowen seemed so sincere about all this. That, as he'd put it, was the scary part.

I rose to leave.

"I suppose it is about that time," Jim said.

The waitress came with our checks on a little tray. I reached for my wallet, but Jim said, "No, you listened to my story. I'll treat you."

He put some bills down, and the waitress took them away. Then he picked up his napkin. There were coins under it, nickels, dime, but mostly pennies.

He recoiled in disgust, as if the tabletop were covered with live spiders.

What are you going to do when this starts happening to you? Joe Eisenberg had supposedly asked. Jim was clearly wondering. So was I, just a little bit.

I thought I was going to faint. But instead, very gingerly, he brushed the tabletop clear.

Then the waitress came back, offering him a little tray.

"For God's sake! *Keep the change!*"

Books

by AL SARRANTONIO

IT by Stephen King;
Viking, \$22.95.

Dark Gods by T.E.D. Klein;
Bantam, \$3.95.

Shadows 9 edited by Charles L. Grant;
Doubleday, \$12.95.

Since this is my first column, I thought I'd say all kinds of swell and brilliant things about what it means to be a book reviewer, the burdens, the responsibilities, the joys—but I'm so worn out after reading Stephen King's *IT* that, if you don't mind, I think I'll skip all that baloney and get right to business.

Since I read every one of *IT*'s 1138 pages, I feel I have the right to split the book into two parts. I have a reason.

My Part One of *IT*, which consists of about the first thousand pages, is a messy masterpiece. Messy not in the area of craftsmanship, because the book is masterfully jigsawed together and there are some brilliant novelistic techniques, including a segue device from present to past in mid-sentence that left me drop-jawed. The messiness is in the style, and in some instances of fraudulent or inconsistent characterization. Notice, I did use the word masterpiece with messy.

Stephen King has always been a sloppy stylist. He kicks and butts his story along, using whatever means comes to hand. And in a book this big, he employs an amazing number of means; the prose rollercoasters frighteningly from Bradburyian lyricism down to lavender exclamatory language worthy of the brittlest pulp stock.

But King's strength has never been in the words he uses, rather in his awe-inspiring talent as a storyteller. The narrative drive in the best of his work is a mysterious and wonderful thing to experience—he could use two-letter words and still find a way to mesmerize you. An image I've always held of Stephen King's work is that when you open one of his books, out pops a portable

campfire, with attendant darkness and night-noises—and there's Stephen King sitting across from you, grinning through the dancing flames, telling you his spook story.

IT is about the something underneath Derry, Maine, that comes up through storm drains every 27 years or so and kills kids. Bill Denbrough, stuttering leader of seven misfits, loses his little brother Georgie to IT and burns for revenge. The seven (there's a fat kid, a wise-ass, a tomboy, a Jewish kid, a runt with asthma, and the book's only unfocused and self-consciously drawn character, a black kid named Mike Hanlon) almost kill IT, but not quite, and 27 years later they are called back to try and finish the job.

A lot happens in my Part One of *IT*, and much of it is often terrifying and sometimes hauntingly beautiful (there is a picture-perfect scene involving the fat kid, Ben Hanscom, that describes a frigid ice-blue Maine winter day with aching vividness). If the special effects sometimes get out of hand (there are rolling heads, staring eyeballs, giant birds, a horrid clown named Pennywise with bunches of balloons that sport ominous messages and float against the wind, slimy stuff, crackly stuff—even an ironic kitchen sink that spits out blood) that's okay. King keeps kicking and butting the story along with that marvelous narrative power of his.

My Part Two of *IT*, which covers only the last hundred and some-odd pages, is where King runs into *serious* trouble. Suddenly he stops kicking and butting, decides it's time to explain what IT is, rolls up his sleeves, and takes on the whole universe. And I mean literally. He takes us on a 2001-type voyage beyond time and space, employing along the way enough exclamation points to fill six thousand *Action* comics, throwing in for good measure a prepubescent sex scene that's supposed to unite the seven misfits but succeeds only in being extremely unsavory.

My advice? Who needs it! But what I'm doing with my copy of *IT* is ripping out my Part Two, throwing it away, and putting Part One up there on the shelf with the best of my horror collection.

One of the books that's up on that shelf already is T.E.D. Klein's *Dark Gods*, now out in paperback. Klein is a meticulous and thoughtful writer, and in these four long stories (I couldn't care less whether they're novelettes or novellas—I've got better things to do than count words) he carves out a metropolitan niche in the Cthulhu mythos: the stories are good *New Yorker* fiction with the heebie-jeebies thrown in for free. Klein is so proficient

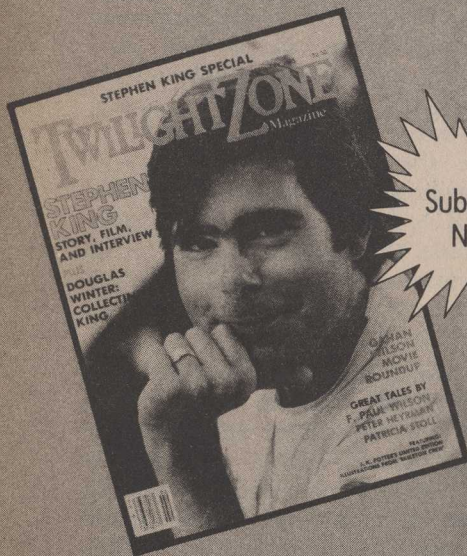
that even when you know what's going to happen (in "Children of the Kingdom," a virtual walking tour of the Upper West Side of Manhattan, we know pretty quick what's going on) you want to see how Klein is going to develop his themes. The stories have that much substance. "Nadelman's God," the last of the quartet, concerning an advertising executive whose bombastic college-magazine poetry which finds its way into a heavy-metal song and provides a recipe for concocting a nasty deity, is one of those rare stories that picks up momentum and gets better as it proceeds. If "Nadelman's God" wasn't any good, I'd tell you to consult your copies of *Dark Forces*, *Shadows 2*, and *New Tales of the Cthulhu Mythos*, where the first three tales in this book appeared, and forego it. As it is, you'll have to fork over the pesos to have all four of these cornerstones of T.E.D. Klein's solid and growing reputation.

And speaking of *Shadows 2*, can you believe we're up to number 9? If you can trust me to count backward (it's forward I have trouble with) the first *Shadows* volume appeared in 1978, when Jimmy Carter was president—which serves no purpose except to mark how long this excellent series has been around.

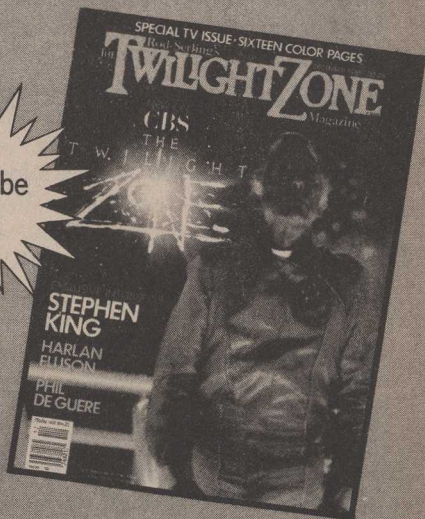
Shadows 2 boasted T.E.D. Klein's "Petey"; what about *Shadows 9*? No knockouts this time, I'm afraid, but as always no real dogs, either. What I did find was an amazing consistency of atmosphere, a brooding sense of unease that marked each story as a "Shadows-type." Charles L Grant has managed to keep the product pure, producing another volume of thoughtful and distinct dark fantasy. If anything did bother me, it was the fact that there really wasn't one story that struck me as a rounded whole; many of the 18 entries were either anecdotal or began to sputter as they neared their conclusions. Some of the stories I honestly couldn't remember by the time I finished the book. If it wasn't for Grant's overall vision, which creates what might be called the *Shadows Atmosphere*, the whole collection would have flown to pieces. With that vision behind me, though, along with strong material from Leanne Frahm, Stephen Gallagher, T.L. Parkinson, Craig Shaw Gardner, Leslie Alan Horvitz, Lou Fisher, Peter Tremayne, and Steve Rasnic Tem (whose story "Bloodwolf," a haunted house/werewolf piece that cried out, with excellent visual touches, for more development and length), I'd have to say that with *Shadows 9*, as with the other Jimmy Carter- and Ronald Reagan-era volumes, the destination was surely worth the trip.

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Film

by SAMUEL R. DELANY

Pigs (or, at any rate, grunts) in space

Aliens

Produced by Gale Anne Hurd

Directed by James Cameron

When I first saw this picture, in which Sigourney Weaver, with a bunch of interplanetary marines, protects a dirty and engagingly demented little girl from the ravages of an interstellar nightmare, the first thing I thought of was how a gun used to be called an "equalizer." It made a strong man and a weakling one. Somehow, though, at least in American movies, it never made a woman the equal of a man. For years on the screen if a curvaceous blonde got hold of one, as often as not, the hero or the villain would just reach over and snatch it from her—and down she'd go, like the ERA.

Sigourney Weaver, *Aliens'* hero, is not a blonde. She's a human-looking and dignified brunette who can project fine shades of indifference, preoccupation, concern, anger, controlled frustration, and sheer committed intensity within that limited range the camera imposes to keep things from turning into grand opera. Like Robert DeNiro, like Geraldine Page, like Mickey Rourke, she's a dauntingly accomplished film actor. Could anyone else, for example, put so much personal insecurity into her angry, abusive, and unforgiveable line to the android (an "artificial person"), Nash? "Just don't come near me, you hear!" she blurts when she finds out he's not human. Among the fighting space-toughs with whom she's breakfasting, you'd expect that line to get her a punch in the jaw for its blatant paranoid prejudice. But Weaver makes it *almost* sympathetic.

That's acting.

Director Cameron was, of course, the script writer for last year's blockbuster, *Rambo*. And just when *Aliens* becomes its most intense—when the marines have failed and Weaver must go into the nest of horrors alone, armed with all the blunderbusses and bazookas left-over from her slaughtered companions—for a moment we see her, in full gear, silhouetted against the smoke of the burning power station; and she *is* Sly Stallone before the foggy jungles of Viet Nam.

The Forty-Second Street audience with whom I saw the film—mostly young, mostly male, and most from black and Hispanic working class families—broke out in cheers at the filmic allusion, shouting, "Rambo! Rambo!" as pleased with themselves as any bunch of graduate students who'd just caught a reference to Dante's *Inferno* somewhere in *Ulysses*. But what the allusion tells us about both the source film and the film that quotes it is that, Stallone's muscles aside, technology is the *real* equalizer; and technology, in case you've forgotten, is the stuff that runs from birth control pills to H-bombs.

The final conflict in *Aliens* would seem to be between two images of motherhood—at least the film's early critics have all been very quick to tell us that. Weaver, who has been faithful to the dirty little, brave little, good little girl, is everything a good mother should be, while the Ultimate Alien, who manages to cling to the shuttle craft, only to confront our heros back on the "mother" ship and get revenge for her scrambled eggs, takes her initial image from a giant termite queen, out of some sixties or seventies nature film: it's motherhood gone utterly insectoid, inhuman, and monstrous. But I suspect the critical anxiety that made the filmmakers try to keep the conflict centered between two female forces is the same anxiety that impells the critics to keep insisting that, really, no matter how violent it looks, it's just a glorified hen fight. But all you have to do is *watch* it to realize it's more than that. It seemed to me, once the big A tears away from its loose, flimsy, liquescent, pale, bulbous, and ballooning egg-laying device, it leaves all traces of femaleness behind: what actually stalks Sigourney is huge, hard, shiny, and black; it's precise, vicious, efficient, and implacable. It impales Nash on its immensely phallic tale, lifts him up, and tears him in two. I'm sorry, kids. But that's no lady.

As far as I could tell, once we doffed that hysterical reproduc-

tive load, the boys around me in the theater stopped responding to the creature as female in any way. The conflict was now between technologically amplified humanity (Weaver within the exoskeleton of her mechanical loader) and nature run amuck and away from *all* the social order implied by gender distinctions or the burden of childbirth, however and by whomever they're exploited.

We have to talk here a bit about Judith Goldstein, who plays the gutsy Hispanic marine who nearly steals the show from Weaver.

"Oh, man," said the fifteen-year-old, a seat in front of me and to my right, a minute after she came out of cold sleep and began doing chin-ups, "you *know* she's gonna be the first one to get killed!"

Well, she wasn't. She was the last one to buy it, in a double suicide with the company coward. Her short hair, small breasts, and well-muscled physicality start her out as the image of sexual ambiguity, which the film grabs up as soon as the camera looks at her. "Hey, Vasquez," one of the other marines asks her, pushing by her as she finishes her exercises, "did anyone ever mistake you for a man?" The dialogue articulates the fifteen-year-old's anxiety, just a beat after the fact.

But Vasquez turns her ambiguity into a mirror. "No. Did anyone ever mistake *you* for one?" she answers, for which she gets hand-slapping approbation all around.

That's when the fifteen-year-old settled down and really started watching.

In big budget F/X films, the acting often gets so loaded down under the make-up and machinery that when it does emerge as fine (Tim Cury's devil in *Legend*; Lou Gossett Junior's "drach" in *Enemy Mine*), I think we should applaud it. Myself, I feel Goldstein deserves an Academy Award as the most *supportive* supporting actresses this year. I mean, she puts up with all those louts and even seems to love one of them—the big, slightly retarded Nazi type she likes to work out with. He, of course, is the first to die, sautéed by the aliens' acid blood while Goldstein shrieks. With her boyfriend gone, how much longer *can* a man—I mean a woman—last? At least that's what the fifteen-year-old figured, narrowing his eyes and wondering if he'd at last got the big, corporate chess puzzle in the sky worked out.

When Vasquez finally goes (her parting words to her male companion, who dies along with her, are: "You always *were* an

woman—last? At least that's what the fifteen-year-old figured, narrowing his eyes and wondering if he'd at last got the big, corporate chess puzzle in the sky worked out.

When Vasquez finally goes (her parting words to her male companion, who dies along with her, ate: "You always *were* an asshole."), the stakes are death before—well, not *exactly* dishonor, but certainly death before becoming surrogate parent to another alien embryo.

She's already a *bad* mother. She doesn't need to become one.

What the delayed expectation of Vasquez's death does is distract all hostile feelings, for the first three-quarters of the film, from Weaver onto Goldstein: the filmmakers were obviously afraid that, without a foil, Weaver would be perceived as too mannish. But the film's entire *middle class* audience seems to have fallen in love with Ms. Goldstein for more or less taking on the white woman's burden.

The Aliens themselves? I've saved them for last because the film keeps them largely in the dark. They are menacing flickers, shadows off among other shadows, strange secretions left behind on the stairs or coating the walls and ceiling, things that move too fast and efficiently really to see. The movie milks these violent visual suggestions for as much menace as it can. Most of the time they're just out of sight but, our instruments tell us, moving nearer and nearer and *nearer*...! And because these filmmakers really knew the difference between intricate suggestion and ham-handed over statement, they've made one of the most exciting and satisfactory sf suspense films in years.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre II

Produced by Menachem Golen and Yoram Globus

Directed by Tobe Hooper

Tobe Hooper has made three great American films, which, along with the work of George (the *Living Dead* trilogy) Romero, pose a vehement, outrageous, and, in Hooper's case, vicious (in Romero's, blackly comic) analysis of the darkest side of the American psyche.

Today Hooper is probably better known for the overhyped *Poltergeist*, the overbusy *Lifeforce*, and the overrestrained remake of *Invaders from Mars*. But his great films are the first *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, an incredible horror flick called *The Fun*

House (occasionally released as—ho-hum—*The Haunted Fun House*), and, now, I maintain, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre II*.

Both *Massacre* films are simply extreme, in a way almost impossible to describe to someone who has not seen them. The visual texture of the narrative, brought out largely by the manic hysteria of the acting Hooper is able to call up, is simply unlike anything any other American film director has put on celluloid. Only director Sam (*The Evil Dead*) Raimi has gotten recognizable narrative filmic language to talk coherently about anything quite so demented. Yet, for all the films' electric twitchiness, Hooper's ethical analysis is never even vaguely clouded.

The earlier *Massacre* film said, with great power, that when ordinary people are faced with a certain catastrophic human evil there is no privileged human trait that can assure survival. Neither the weak nor the strong, neither the whole nor the part, neither the wise nor the foolish, nor the good nor the bad have any edge. If someone *does* manage to endure, it's wholly a matter of grace—not any aspect of human character.

The second *Massacre* film, ten years later, has a much more pessimistic message: a certain order of human horror, it tells us, even when leavened with love, will still transform the highest human motives into a maniacal parody of the horror itself that marks it. The drive-in splatter films and low-budget morality tales that flicker over our country's second- and third-string screens are the closest thing present American shopping-mall culture has to a widely accepted demotic iconography on the practical mechanics of damnation. And Hooper's morality, let's face it, is bigger-hearted than most. His vision is also personal, extremely intense; and, amidst the glut of modern horror imagery, it has remarkable staying power.

In the underground horror chamber where Hooper's monsters live and make chili beneath a modern-day Western theme park, the badgering, hectoring older brother of the psychotic family seems the single member who could pass for human out in the real world. But when he wins the prize in the annual chili making contest at the small-town hotel, he dribbles sauce down his shirt as he makes his acceptance speech. "It's all in the meat," he says to the good folks standing around, guzzling down the grue. No, the point is not subtle: *we* know what that meat really is, and, in Hooper's vision, we're all, whether we know it or not, cannibals. Big brother is as much a creep as Leatherface or the half-bald

creature with the metal skull plate who cuts himself up for kicks and snacks on burned bits of his own scabby scalp.

It's odd how many recent horror films have had women in the media as their heroine/victims: a newscaster (*The Howling*), a photographer (*The Eyes of Laura Mars*), a disk jockey (*The Fog*). In this film, it's another articulate woman disk jockey who's the focus of the insanity. Her transgression is that she tries to use her access to the airwaves to bring crime and corruption to public notice. She's a brave young woman with ideals, who wants to reach beyond herself, "to do something," in her own words, "meaningful." The sexist implications of choosing such a female victim are all too apparent. Start to talk about them and we talk about nothing else. But I also wonder if this trend doesn't reflect a national distrust of the media themselves.

Big, bearlike, barely human Leatherface is brought along by his hammer and coat-hanger-wielding brother to trash the broadcast studio, once it seems our heroine is close to letting their cat out of the bag on prime time. But Quasimodo falls in love with Esmeralda all over again. Still, however unbearable and ludicrous his sexual flirtation, somehow we know, whatever charnelhouse it manifests itself in, it's a Good Thing. As absurd and horrific as it is, it's the very element of perversity in it that finally saves our heroine: when Leatherface thrusts his murderous chainsaw between the terrorized girl's open legs, so that the teeth snag on the freyed ends of her cut-offs, sexuality itself has been so far displaced that he just can't bring himself to get it on—or, in this case, turn it on. And so he retreats, to swing his roaring blade about, futilely and ineffectually, in the empty store room, stalled in the gap where true lust just misses its connection with true love.

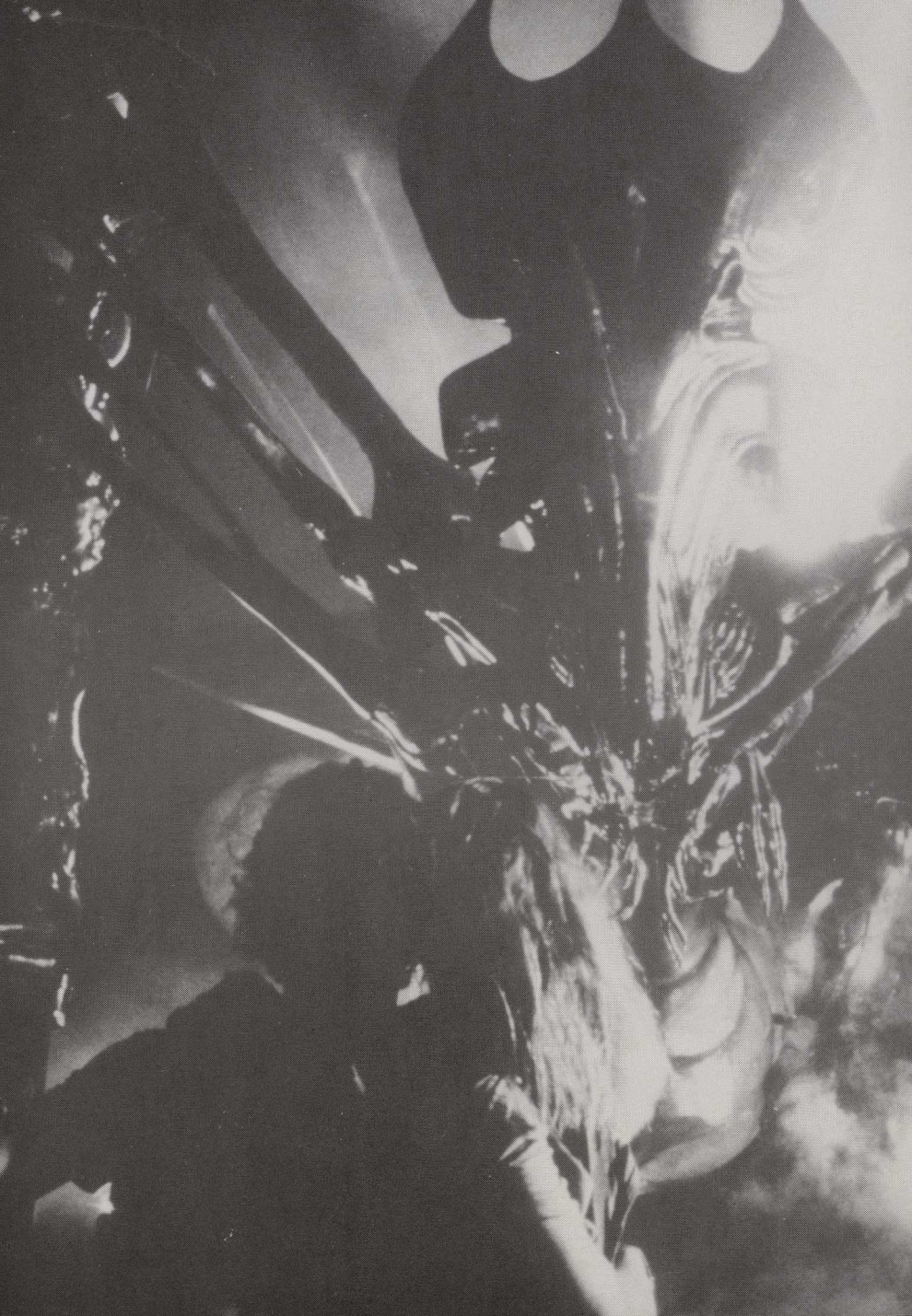
The heroine lives.

But he has touched her. She has been contaminated.

The futile motions Leatherface makes are the same ones she will make, at the film's end, not from frustrated love, but from sheer fury turned at last to madness, as she raves with her own chainsaw before an image of what Freud would call "the phallic mother," (always an evil archetype in patriarchal society), but, I bet, a lot cheaper to create than the phallic mother who embodies the essence of evil maternity in *Aliens*. Hooper both exploits and titillates the American working classes with his fearfully distorted image of their lumpen first cousins. But he also has something to say about the astonishing extremes under which patriarchal family

structure can endure, when it constitutes itself under an image of maternity that has (literally, as in *Psycho*) been dead for years.

In a sense, Hooper's film talks about what the horror of a family gone wholly and socially amiss can turn idealism into: this shot of the nasty white underbelly suggests what *Aliens* might really be about. Hooper's is a more naked film than Cameron's. And, if you can stomach it, it's a more interesting one, too. But if only because of its unreal intensity, it's not likely to be more popular. See it, however, and you'll be exposed to a tight-focus, no-pimples-and-pustules-barred view of one of the uglier aspects of the American domestic dream, reviewed as nightmare, that, most of the time, nobody even looks at at all.



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