

Robert McCammon

THE COLLECTED STORIES

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NIGHTCRAWLERS

I

"Hard rain coming down," Cheryl said, and I nodded in agreement.

Through the diner's plate-glass windows, a dense curtain of rain flapped across the Gulf gas pumps and continued across the parking lot. It hit Big Bob's with a force that made the glass rattle like uneasy bones. The red neon sign that said BIG BOB'S! DIESEL FUEL! EATS! sat on top of a high steel pole above the diner so the truckers on the interstate could see it. Out in the night, the red-tinted rain thrashed in torrents across my old pickup truck and Cheryl's baby-blue Volkswagen.

"Well," I said, "I suppose that storm'll either wash some folks in off the interstate or we can just about hang it up." The curtain of rain parted for an instant, and I could see the treetops whipping back and forth in the woods on the other side of Highway 47. Wind whined around the front door like an animal trying to claw its way in. I glanced at the electric clock on the wall behind the counter. Twenty minutes before nine. We usually closed up at ten, but tonight—with tornado warnings in the weather forecast—I was tempted to turn the lock a little early. "Tell you what," I said. "If we're empty at nine, we skedaddle. 'Kay?"

"No argument here," she said. She watched the storm for a moment longer, then continued putting newly-washed coffee cups, saucers and plates away on the stainless steel shelves.

Lightning flared from west to east like the strike of a burning bullwhip. The diner's lights flickered, then came back to normal. A shudder of thunder seemed to come right up through my shoes. Late March is the beginning of tornado season in south Alabama, and we've had some whoppers spin past here in the last few years. I knew that Alma was at home, and she understood to get into the root cellar right quick if she spotted a twister, like that one we saw in '82 dancing through the woods about two miles from our farm.

"You got any Love-Ins planned this weekend, hippie?" I asked Cheryl, mostly to get my mind off the storm and to rib her, too.

She was in her late-thirties, but I swear that when she grinned she could've passed for a kid. "Wouldn't *you* like to know, redneck?" she answered; she replied the same way to all my digs at her. Cheryl Lovesong—and I *know* that couldn't have been her real name—was a mighty able waitress, and she had hands that were no strangers to hard work. But I didn't care that she wore her long silvery-blond hair in Indian braids with hippie headbands, or came to work in tie-dyed overalls. She was the best waitress who'd ever worked for me, and she got along with everybody just fine—even us rednecks. That's what I am, and proud of it: I drink Rebel Yell whiskey straight, and my favorite songs are about good women gone bad and trains on the long track to nowhere. I keep my wife happy, I've raised my two boys to pray to God and to salute the flag, and if anybody don't like it he can go a few rounds with Big Bob Clayton.

Cheryl would come right out and tell you she used to live in San Francisco in the late 'sixties, and that she went to Love-Ins and peace marches and all that stuff. When I reminded her it was nineteen eighty-four and Ronnie Reagan was president, she'd look at me like I was walking cow-flop. I always figured she'd start thinking straight when all that hippie-dust blew out of her head.

Alma said my tail was going to get burnt if I ever took a shine to Cheryl, but I'm a fifty-five-year-old redneck who stopped sowing his wild seed when he met the woman he married, more than thirty years ago.

Lightning crisscrossed the turbulent sky, followed by a boom of thunder. Cheryl said, "Wow! Look at that light-show!"

"Light-show, my ass," I muttered. The diner was as solid as the Good Book, so I wasn't too worried about the storm. But on a wild night like this, stuck out in the countryside like Big Bob's was, you had a feeling of being a long way off from civilization—though Mobile was only twenty-seven miles south. On a wild night like this, you had a feeling that anything could happen, as quick as a streak of lightning out of the darkness. I picked up a copy of the *Mobile Press-Register* that the last customer—a trucker on his way to Texas—had left on the counter a half-hour before, and I started plowing through the news, most of it bad: those A-rab countries were still squabbling like Hatfields and McCoys in white robes; two men had robbed a Quik-Mart in Mobile and had been killed by the police in a shootout; cops were investigating a massacre at a motel near Daytona Beach; an infant had been stolen from a maternity ward in Birmingham. The only good things on the front page were stories that said the economy was up and that Reagan swore we'd show the Commies who was boss in El Salvador and Lebanon.

The diner shook under a blast of thunder, and I looked up from the paper as a pair of headlights emerged from

the rain into my parking-lot.

II

The headlights were attached to an Alabama State Trooper car.

"Half alive, hold the onion, extra brown the buns." Cheryl was already writing on her pad in expectation of the order. I pushed the paper aside and went to the fridge for the hamburger meat.

When the door opened, a windblown spray of rain swept in and stung like buckshot. "Howdy, folks!" Dennis Wells peeled off his gray rainslicker and hung it on the rack next to the door. Over his Smokey the Bear trooper hat was a protective plastic covering, beaded with raindrops. He took off his hat, exposing the thinning blond hair on his pale scalp, as he approached the counter and sat on his usual stool, right next to the cash-register. "Cup of black coffee and a rare--" Cheryl was already sliding the coffee in front of him, and the burger sizzled on the griddle. "Ya'll are on the ball tonight!" Dennis said; he said the same thing when he came in, which was almost every night. Funny the kind of habits you fall into, without realizing it.

"Kinda wild out there, ain't it?" I asked as I flipped the burger over.

"Lordy, yes! Wind just about flipped my car over three, four miles down the interstate. Thought I was gonna be eatin' a little pavement tonight." Dennis was a husky young man in his early thirties, with thick blond brows over deep-set, light brown eyes. He had a wife and three kids, and he was fast to flash a wallet-full of their pictures. "Don't reckon I'll be chasin' any speeders tonight, but there'll probably be a load of accidents. Cheryl, you sure look pretty this evenin'."

"Still the same old me." Cheryl never wore a speck of makeup, though one day she'd come to work with glitter on her cheeks. She had a place a few miles away, and I guessed she was farming that funny weed up there. "Any trucks moving?"

"Seen a few, but not many. Truckers ain't fools. Gonna get worse before it gets better, the radio says." He sipped at his coffee and grimaced. "Lordy, that's strong enough to jump out of the cup and dance a jig, darlin'!"

I fixed the burger the way Dennis liked it, put it on a platter with some fries and served it. "Bobby, how's the wife treatin' you?" he asked.

"No complaints."

"Good to hear. I'll tell you, a fine woman is worth her weight in gold. Hey, Cheryl! How'd you like a handsome young man for a husband?"

Cheryl smiled, knowing what was coming. "The man I'm looking for hasn't been made yet."

"Yeah, but you ain't met Cecil yet, either! He asks me about you every time I see him, and I keep tellin' him I'm doin' every thing I can to get you two together." Cecil was Dennis' brother-in-law and owned a Chevy dealership in Bay Minette. Dennis had been ribbing Cheryl about going on a date with Cecil for the past four months. "You'd like him," Dennis promised. "He's got a lot of my qualities."

"Well, that's different. In that case, I'm *certain* I don't want to meet him."

Dennis winced. "Oh, you're a cruel woman! That's what smokin' banana peels does to you—turns you mean. Anybody readin' this rag?" He reached over for the newspaper.

"Waitin' here just for you," I said. Thunder rumbled, closer to the diner. The lights flickered briefly once... then again before they returned to normal. Cheryl busied herself by fixing a fresh pot of coffee, and I watched the rain whipping against the windows. When the lightning flashed, I could see the trees swaying so hard they looked about to snap.

Dennis read and ate his hamburger. "Boy," he said after a few minutes, "the world's in some shape, huh? Those A-rab pig-stickers are itchin' for war. Mobile metro boys had a little gunplay last night. Good for them." He paused and frowned, then tapped the paper with one thick finger. "This I can't figure."

"What's that?"

"Thing in Florida couple of nights ago. Six people killed at the Pines Haven Motor Inn, near Daytona Beach. Motel was set off in the woods. Only a couple of cinderblock houses in the area, and nobody heard any gunshots. Says here one old man saw what he thought was a bright white star falling over the motel, and that was it. Funny, huh?"

"A UFO," Cheryl offered. Maybe he saw a UFO."

"Yeah, and I'm a little green man from Mars," Dennis scoffed. "I'm serious. This is weird. The motel was so blown full of holes it looked like a war had been going on. Everybody was dead—even a dog and a canary that belonged to the manager. The cars out in front of the rooms were blasted to pieces. The sound of one of them explodin' was what woke up the people in those houses, I reckon." He skimmed the story again. "Two bodies were out in the parkin' lot, one was holed up in a bathroom, one had crawled under a bed, and two had dragged every piece of furniture in the room over to block the door. Didn't seem to help 'em any, though."

I grunted. "Guess not."

"No motive, no witnesses. You better believe those Florida cops are shakin' the bushes for some kind of

dangerous maniac—or maybe more than one, it says here." He shoved the paper away and patted the service revolver holstered at his hip. "If I ever got hold of him—or them—he'd find out not to mess with a 'Bama trooper." He glanced quickly over at Cheryl and smiled mischievously. "Probably some crazy hippie who'd been smokin' his tennis shoes."

"Don't knock it," she said sweetly, "until you've tried it." She looked past him, out the window into the storm. "Car's pullin' in, Bobby."

Headlights glared briefly off the wet windows. It was a station-wagon with wood-grained panels on the sides; it veered around the gas pumps and parked next to Dennis' trooper car. On the front bumper was a personalized license plate that said: *Ray & Lindy*. The headlights died, and all the doors opened at once. Out of the wagon came a whole family: a man and a woman, a little girl and boy about eight or nine. Dennis got up and opened the diner door as they hurried inside from the rain.

All of them had gotten pretty well soaked between the station wagon and the diner, and they wore the dazed expressions of people who'd been on the road a long time. The man wore glasses and had curly gray hair, the woman was slim and dark-haired and pretty. The kids were sleepy-eyed. All of them were well-dressed, the man in a yellow sweater with one of those alligators on the chest. They had vacation tans, and I figured they were tourists heading north from the beach after spring break.

"Come on in and take a seat," I said.

"Thank you," the man said. They squeezed into one of the booths near the windows. "We saw your sign from the interstate."

"Bad night to be on the highway," Dennis told them. "Tornado warnings are out all over the place."

"We heard it on the radio," the woman—Lindy, if the license was right—said. "We're on our way to Birmingham, and we thought we could drive right through the storm. We should've stopped at that Holiday Inn we passed about fifteen miles ago."

"That would've been smart," Dennis agreed. "No sense in pushin' your luck." He returned to his stool.

The new arrivals ordered hamburgers, fries and Cokes. Cheryl and I went to work. Lightning made the diner's lights flicker again, and the sound of thunder caused the kids to jump. When the food was ready and Cheryl served them, Dennis said, "Tell you what. You folks finish your dinners and I'll escort you back to the Holiday Inn. Then you can head out in the morning. How about that?"

"Fine," Ray said gratefully. "I don't think we could've gotten very much further, anyway." He turned his attention to his food.

"Well," Cheryl said quietly, standing beside me, "I don't guess we get home early, do we?"

"I guess not. Sorry."

She shrugged. "Goes with the job, right? Anyway, I can think of worse places to be stuck."

I figured that Alma might be worried about me, so I went over to the payphone to call her. I dropped a quarter in - and the dial tone sounded like a cat being stepped on. I hung up and tried again. The cat-scream continued. "Damn!" I muttered. "Lines must be screwed up."

"Ought to get yourself a place closer to town, Bobby," Dennis said. "Never could figure out why you wanted a joint in the sticks. At least you'd get better phone service and good lights if you were nearer to Mo—"

He was interrupted by the sound of wet and shrieking brakes, and he swivelled around on his stool.

I looked up as a car hurtled into the parking lot, the tires swerving, throwing up plumes of water. For a few seconds I thought it was going to keep coming, right through the window into the diner—but then the brakes caught and the car almost grazed the side of my pickup as it jerked to a stop. In the neon's red glow I could tell it was a beatup old Ford Fairlane, either gray or a dingy beige. Steam was rising off the crumpled hood. The headlights stayed on for perhaps a minute before they winked off. A figure got out of the car and walked slowly—with a limp—toward the diner.

We watched the figure approach. Dennis's body looked like a coiled spring, ready to be triggered. "We got us a live one, Bobby boy," he said.

III

The door opened, and in a stinging gust of wind and rain a man who looked like walking death stepped into my diner.

He was so wet he might well have been driving with his windows down. He was a skinny guy, maybe weighed all of a hundred and twenty pounds, even soaking wet. His unruly dark hair was plastered to his head, and he had gone a week or more without a shave. In his gaunt, pallid face his eyes were startlingly blue; his gaze flicked around the diner, lingered for a few seconds on Dennis. Then he limped on down to the far end of the counter and took a seat. He wiped the rain out of his eyes as Cheryl took a menu to him.

Dennis stared at the man. When he spoke, his voice bristled with authority. "Hey, fella." The man didn't look up from the menu. "Hey, I'm talkin' to *you*."

The man pushed the menu away and pulled a damp packet of Kools out of the breast pocket of his patched Army fatigue jacket. "I can hear you," he said; his voice was deep and husky, and didn't go with his less-than-robust physical appearance.

"Drivin' kinda fast in this weather, don't you think?"

The man flicked a cigarette lighter a few times before he got a flame, then he lit one of his smokes and inhaled deeply. "Yeah," he replied. "I was. Sorry. I saw the sign, and I was in a hurry to get here. Miss? I'd just like a cup of coffee, please. Hot and *real* strong, okay?"

Cheryl nodded and turned away from him, almost bumping into me as I strolled down behind the counter to check him out.

"That kind of hurry'll get you killed," Dennis cautioned.

"Right. Sorry." He shivered and pushed the tangled hair back from his forehead with one hand. Up close, I could see deep cracks around his mouth and the corners of his eyes and I figured him to be in his late thirties or early forties. His wrists were as thin as a woman's; he looked like he hadn't eaten a good meal for more than a month. He stared at his hands through bloodshot eyes. Probably on drugs, I thought. The fella gave me the creeps. Then he looked at me with those eyes—so pale blue they were almost white—and I felt like I'd been nailed to the floor. "Something wrong?" he asked—not rudely, just curiously.

"Nope." I shook my head. Cheryl gave him his coffee and then went over to give Ray and Lindy their check. The man didn't use either cream or sugar. The coffee was steaming, but he drank half of it down like mother's milk. "That's good," he said. "Keep me awake, won't it?"

"More than likely." Over the breast pocket of his jacket was the faint outline of the name that had been sewn there once. I think it was *Price*, but I could've been wrong.

"That's what I want. To stay awake, as long as I can." He finished the coffee. "Can I have another cup, please?"

I poured it for him. He drank that one down just as fast, then he rubbed his eyes wearily.

"Been on the road a long time, huh?"

Price nodded. "Day and night. I don't know which is more tired, my mind or my butt." He lifted his gaze to me again. "Have you got anything else to drink? How about beer?"

"No, sorry. Couldn't get a liquor license."

He sighed. "Just as well. It might make me sleepy. But I sure could go for a beer right now. One sip, to clean my mouth out."

He picked up his coffee cup, and I smiled and started to turn away.

But then he wasn't holding a cup. He was holding a Budweiser can, and for an instant I could smell the tang of a newly-popped beer.

The mirage was only there for maybe two seconds. I blinked, and Price was holding a cup again. "Just as well," he said, and put it down.

I glanced over at Cheryl, then at Dennis. Neither one was paying attention. Damn! I thought. I'm too young to be either losin' my eyesight or my senses! "Uh..." I said, or some other stupid noise.

"One more cup?" Price asked. "Then I'd better hit the road again."

My hand was shaking as I picked it up, but if Price noticed, he didn't say anything.

"Want anything to eat?" Cheryl asked him. "How about a bowl of beef stew?"

He shook his head. "No, thanks. The sooner I get back on the road, the better it'll be."

Suddenly Dennis swivelled toward him, giving him a cold stare that only cops and drill sergeants can muster. "Back on the *road*?" He snorted. "Fella, you ever been in a tornado before? I'm gonna escort those nice people to the Holiday Inn about fifteen miles back. If you're smart, that's where you'll spend the night, too. No use tryin' to—"

"No." Price's voice was rock-steady. "I'll be spending the night behind the wheel."

Dennis' eyes narrowed. "How come you're in such a hurry? Not runnin' from anybody, are you?"

"Nightcrawlers," Cheryl said.

Price turned toward her like he'd been slapped across the face. and I saw what might've been a spark of fear in his eyes.

Cheryl motioned toward the lighter Price had laid on the counter, beside the pack of Kools. It was a beat-up silver Zippo, and inscribed across it was *Nightcrawlers* with the symbol of two crossed rifles beneath it. "Sorry," she said. "I just noticed that, and I wondered what it was."

Price put the lighter away. "I was in 'Nam," he told her. "Everybody in my unit got one."

"Hey." There was suddenly new respect in Dennis voice. "You a *vet*?"

Price paused so long I didn't think he was going to answer. In the quiet, I heard the little girl tell her mother that the fries were "ucky." Price said, "Yes."

"How about that! Hey, I wanted to go myself, but I got a high number and things were windin' down about that time, anyway. Did you see any action?"

A faint, bitter smile passed over Price's mouth. "Too much."

"What? Infantry? Marines? Rangers?"

Price picked up his third cup of coffee, swallowed some and put it down. He closed his eyes for a few seconds,

and when they opened they were vacant and fixed on nothing. "Nightcrawlers," he said quietly. "Special unit. Deployed to recon Charlie positions in questionable villages." He said it like he was reciting from a manual. "We did a lot of crawling through rice paddies and jungles in the dark."

"Bet you laid a few of them Vietcong out, didn't you?" Dennis got up and came over to sit a few places away from the man. "Man, I was behind you guys all the way. I wanted you to stay in there and fight it out!"

Price was silent. Thunder echoed over the diner. The lights weakened for a few seconds; when they came back on, they seemed to have lost some of their wattage. The place was dimmer than before. Price's head slowly turned toward Dennis, with the inexorable motion of a machine. I was thankful I didn't have to take the full force of Price's dead blue eyes, and I saw Dennis wince. "I *should've* stayed," he said. "I should be there right now, buried in the mud of a rice paddy with the eight other men in my patrol."

"Oh," Dennis blinked. "Sorry. I didn't mean to—",

"I came home," Price continued calmly, "by stepping on the bodies of my friends. Do you want to know what that's like, Mr. Trooper?"

"The war's over," I told him. "No need to bring it back."

Price smiled grimly, but his gaze remained fixed on Dennis. "Some say it's over. I say it came back with the men who were there. Like me. *Especially* like me." Price paused. The wind howled around the door, and the lightning illuminated for an instant the thrashing woods across the highway. "The mud was up to our knees, Mr. Trooper," he said. "We were moving across a rice paddy in the dark, being real careful not to step on the bamboo stakes we figured were planted there. Then the first shots started: *pop pop pop*—like firecrackers going off. One of the Nightcrawlers fired off a flare, and we saw the Cong ringing us. We'd walked right into hell, Mr. Trooper. Somebody shouted, 'Charlie's in the light!' and we started firing, trying to punch a hole through them. But they were everywhere. As soon as one went down, three more took his place. Grenades were going off, and more flares, and people were screaming as they got hit. I took a bullet in the thigh and another through the hand. I lost my rifle, and somebody fell on top of me with half his head missing."

"Uh... listen," I said. "You don't have to—"

"I *want* to, friend." He glanced quickly at me, then back to Dennis. I think I cringed when his gaze pierced me. "I want to tell it all. They were fighting and screaming and dying all around me, and I felt the bullets tug at my clothes as they passed through. I know I was screaming, too, but what was coming out of my mouth sounded bestial. I ran. The only way I could save my own life was to step on their bodies and drive them down into the mud. I heard some of them choke and blubber as I put my boot on their faces. I knew all those guys like brothers... but at that moment they were only pieces of meat. I ran. A gunship chopper came over the paddy and laid down some fire, and that's how I got out. Alone." He bent his face closer toward the other man's. "And you'd better believe I'm in that rice paddy in 'Nam every time I close my eyes. You'd better believe the men I left back there don't rest easy. So you keep your opinions about 'Nam and being 'behind you guys' to yourself, Mr. Trooper. I don't want to hear that bullshit. Got it?"

Dennis sat very still. He wasn't used to being talked to like that, not even from a 'Nam vet, and I saw the shadow of anger pass over his face.

Price's hands were trembling as he brought a little bottle out of his jeans pocket. He shook two blue-and-orange capsules out onto the counter, took them both with a swallow of coffee and then recapped the bottle and put it away. The flesh of his face looked almost ashen in the dim light.

"I know you boys had a rough time," Dennis said, "but that's no call to show disrespect to the law."

"The law," Price repeated. "Yeah. Right. *Bullshit*."

"There are women and children present," I reminded him. "Watch your language."

Price rose from his seat. He looked like a skeleton with just a little extra skin on the bones. "Mister, I haven't slept for more than thirty-six hours. My nerves are shot. I don't mean to cause trouble, but when some fool says he *understands*, I feel like kicking his teeth down his throat—because no one who wasn't there can pretend to understand." He glanced at Ray, Lindy, and the kids. "Sorry, folks. Don't mean to disturb you. Friend, how much do I owe?" He started digging for his wallet.

Dennis slid slowly from his seat and stood with his hands on his hips. "Hold it." He used his trooper's voice again. "If you think I'm lettin' you walk out of here high on pills and needin' sleep, you're crazy. I don't want to be scrapin' you off the highway."

Price paid him no attention. He took a couple of dollars from his wallet and put them on the counter. I didn't touch them. "Those pills will help keep me awake," Price said finally. "Once I get on the road, I'll be fine."

"Fella, I wouldn't let you go if it was high noon and not a cloud in the sky. I sure as hell don't want to clean up after the accident you're gonna have. Now why don't you come along to the Holiday Inn and—"

Price laughed grimly. "Mister Trooper, the last place you want me staying is at a motel." He cocked his head to one side. "I was in a motel in Florida a couple of nights ago, and I think I left my room a little untidy. Step aside and let me pass."

"A motel in Florida?" Dennis nervously licked his lower lip. "What the hell you talkin' about?"

"Nightmares and reality, Mr. Trooper. The point where they cross. A couple of nights ago, they crossed at a

motel. I wasn't going to let myself sleep. I was just going to rest for a little while, but I didn't know they'd come so fast." A mocking smile played at the edges of his mouth, but his eyes were tortured. "You don't want me staying at that Holiday Inn, Mr. Trooper. You really don't. Now step aside."

I saw Dennis' hand settle on the butt of his revolver. His fingers unsnapped the fold of leather that secured the gun in the holster. I stared at him numbly. My God, I thought. What's goin' on? My heart had started pounding so hard I was sure everybody could hear it. Ray and Lindy were watching, and Cheryl was backing away behind the counter.

Price and Dennis faced each other for a moment, as the rain whipped against the windows and thunder boomed like shell-fire. Then Price sighed, as if resigning himself to something. He said, "I think I want a T-bone steak. Extra-rare. How 'bout it?" He looked at me.

"A steak?" My voice was shaking. "We don't have any T-bone—"

Price's gaze shifted to the counter right in front of me. I heard a sizzle. The aroma of cooking meat drifted up to me.

"Oh... wow," Cheryl whispered.

A large T-bone steak lay on the countertop, pink and oozing blood. You could've fanned a menu in my face and I would've keeled over. Wisps of smoke were rising from the steak.

The steak began to fade, until it was only an outline on the counter. The lines of oozing blood vanished. After the mirage was gone, I could still smell the meat—and that's how I knew I wasn't crazy.

Dennis' mouth hung open. Ray had stood up from the booth to look, and his wife's face was the color of spoiled milk. The whole world seemed to be balanced on a point of silence—until the wail of the wind jarred me back to my senses.

"I'm getting good at it," Price said softly. "I'm getting very, very good. Didn't start happening to me until about a year ago. I've found four other 'Nam vets who can do the same thing. What's in your head comes true—as simple as that. Of course, the images only last for a few seconds—as long as I'm awake. I mean, I've found out that those other men were drenched by a chemical spray we call Howdy Doody—because it made you stiffen up and jerk like you were hanging on strings. I got hit with it near Khe Sahn. That shit almost suffocated me. It fell like black tar, and it burned the land down to a paved parking lot." He stared at Dennis. "You don't want me around here, Mr. Trooper. Not with the body count I've still got in *my* head."

"You... were at... that motel, near Daytona Beach?"

Price closed his eyes. A vein had begun beating at his right temple, royal blue against the pallor of his flesh. "Oh Jesus," he whispered. "I fell asleep, and I couldn't wake myself up. I was having the nightmare. The same one. I was locked in it, and I was trying to scream myself awake." He shuddered, and two tears ran slowly down his cheeks. "Oh," he said, and flinched as if remembering something horrible. "They... they were coming through the door when I woke up. Tearing the door right off its hinges. I woke up... just as one of them was pointing his rifle at me. And I saw his face. I saw his muddy, misshapen face." His eyes suddenly jerked open. "I didn't know they'd come so fast."

"Who?" I asked him. "Who came so fast?"

"The Nightcrawlers," Price said, his face void of expression, masklike. "Dear God... maybe if I'd stayed asleep a second more. But I ran again, and I left those people dead in that motel."

"You're gonna come with me." Dennis started pulling his gun from the holster. Price's head snapped toward him. "I don't know what kinda fool game you're—"

He stopped, staring at the gun he held.

It wasn't a gun anymore. It was an oozing mass of hot rubber. Dennis cried out and slung the thing from his hand. The molten mess hit the floor with a pulpy *splat*.

"I'm leaving now." Price's voice was calm. "Thank you for the coffee." He walked past Dennis, toward the door.

Dennis grasped a bottle of ketchup from the counter. Cheryl cried out, "*Don't!*" but it was too late. Dennis was already swinging the bottle. It hit the back of Price's skull and burst open, spewing ketchup everywhere. Price staggered forward, his knees buckling. When he went down, his skull hit the floor with a noise like a watermelon being dropped. His body began jerking involuntarily.

"Got him!" Dennis shouted triumphantly. "Got that crazy bastard, didn't I?"

Lindy was holding the little girl in her arms. The boy craned his neck to see. Ray said nervously, "You didn't kill him, did you?"

"He's not dead," I told him. I looked over at the gun; it was solid again. Dennis scooped it up and aimed it at Price, whose body continued to jerk. Just like Howdy Doody, I thought. Then Price stopped moving. "He's dead!" Cheryl's voice was near frantic. "Oh God, you killed him, Dennis!"

Dennis prodded the body with the toe of his boot, then bent down. "Naw. His eyes are movin' back and forth behind the lids." Dennis touched his wrist to check the pulse, then abruptly pulled his own hand away. "Jesus Christ! He's as cold as a meat-locker!" He took Price's pulse and whistled. "Goin' like a racehorse at the Derby."

I touched the place on the counter where the mirage-steak had been. My fingers came away slightly greasy, and I could smell the cooked meat on them. At that instant, Price twitched. Dennis scuttled away from him like a crab.

Price made a gasping, choking noise.

"What'd he say?" Cheryl asked. "He said something!"

"No he didn't." Dennis stuck him in the ribs with his pistol. "Come on. Get up."

"Get him out of here," I said. "I don't want him —"

Cheryl shushed me. "Listen. Can you hear that?"

I heard only the roar and crash of the storm.

"Don't you *hear* it?" she asked me. Her eyes were getting scared and glassy.

"Yes!" Ray said. "Yes! Listen!"

Then I did hear something, over the noise of the keening wind. It was a distant *chuk-chuk-chuk*, steadily growing louder and closer. The wind covered the noise for a minute, then it came back: CHUK-CHUK-CHUK, almost overhead.

"It's a helicopter!" Ray peered through the window. "Somebody's got a helicopter out there!"

"Ain't nobody can fly a chopper in a storm!" Dennis told him. The noise of the rotors swelled and faded, swelled and faded... and stopped.

On the floor, Price shivered and began to contort into a fetal position. His mouth opened, his face twisted in what appeared to be agony.

Thunder spoke. A red fireball rose up from the woods across the road and hung lazily in the sky for a few seconds before it descended toward the diner. As it fell, the fireball exploded soundlessly into a white, glaring eye of light that almost blinded me.

Price said something in a garbled, panicked voice. His eyes were tightly closed, and he had squeezed up with his arms around his knees.

Dennis rose to his feet; he squinted as the eye of light fell toward the parking lot and winked out in a puddle of water. Another fireball floated up from the woods, and again blossomed into painful glare.

Dennis turned toward me. "I heard him." His voice was raspy. "He said, 'Charlie's in the light.'"

As the second flare fell to the ground and illuminated the parking lot, I thought I saw figures crossing the road. They walked stiff-legged, in an eerie cadence. The flare went out.

"Wake him up," I heard myself whisper. "Dennis... dear God... *wake him up.*"

IV

Dennis stared stupidly at me, and I started to jump across the counter to get to Price myself.

A gout of flame leaped in the parking lot. Sparks marched across the concrete. I shouted, "Get down!" and twisted around to push Cheryl back behind the shelter of the counter.

"What the *hell* —" Dennis said.

He didn't finish. There was a metallic thumping of bullets hitting the gas pumps and the cars. I knew if that gas blew we were all dead. My truck shuddered with the impact of slugs, and I saw the whole thing explode as I ducked behind the counter. Then the windows blew inward with a Godawful crash, and the diner was full of flying glass, swirling wind and sheets of rain. I heard Lindy scream, and both the kids were crying and I think I was shouting something myself.

The lights had gone out, and the only illumination was the reflection of red neon off the concrete and the glow of the fluorescents over the gas pumps. Bullets whacked into the wall, and crockery shattered as if it had been hit with a hammer. Napkins and sugar packets were flying everywhere.

Cheryl was holding onto me as if her fingers were nails sunk to my bones. Her eyes were wide and dazed, and she kept trying to speak. Her mouth was working, but nothing came out.

There was another explosion as one of the other cars blew. The whole place shook, and I almost puked with fear.

Another hail of bullets hit the wall. They were tracers, and they jumped and ricocheted like white-hot cigarette butts. One of them sang off the edge of a shelf and fell to the floor about three feet away from me. The glowing slug began to fade, like the beer can and the mirage-steak. I put my hand out to find it, but all I felt was splinters of glass and crockery. A phantom bullet, I thought. Real enough to cause damage and death- and then gone.

You don't want me around here, Mr. Trooper, Price had warned. *Not with the body count I've got in my head.*

The firing stopped. I got free of Cheryl and said, "You stay right *here*." Then I looked up over the counter and saw my truck and the station-wagon on fire, the flames being whipped by the wind. Rain slapped me across the face as it swept in where the windowglass used to be. I saw Price lying still huddled on the floor, with pieces of glass all around him. His hands were clawing the air, and in the flickering red neon his face was contorted, his eyes still closed. The pool of ketchup around his head made him look like his skull had been split open. He was peering into Hell, and I averted my eyes before I lost my own mind.

Ray and Lindy and the two children had huddled under the table of their booth. The woman was sobbing brokenly. I looked at Dennis, lying a few feet from Price: he was sprawled on his face, and there were four holes punched through his back. It was not ketchup that ran in rivulets around Dennis' body. His right arm was outflung,

and the fingers twitched around the gun he gripped.

Another flare sailed up from the woods like a Fourth-of-July sparkler.

When the light brightened, I saw them: at least five figures, maybe more. They were crouched over, coming across the parking lot—but slowly, the speed of nightmares. Their clothes flapped and hung around them, and the flare's light glanced off their helmets. They were carrying weapons—rifles, I guessed. I couldn't see their faces, and that was for the best.

On the floor, Price moaned. I heard him say "light... in the light..."

The flare hung right over the diner. And then I knew what was going on. We were in the light. We were all caught in Price's nightmare, and the Nightcrawlers that Price had left in the mud were fighting the battle again—the same way it had been fought at the Pines Haven Motor Inn. The Nightcrawlers had come back to life, powered by Price's guilt and whatever that Howdy Doody shit had done to him.

And we were in the light, where Charlie had been out in that rice paddy.

There was a noise like castanets clicking. Dots of fire arced through the broken windows and thudded into the counter. The stools squealed as they were hit and spun. The cash register rang and the drawer popped open, and then the entire register blew apart and bills and coins scattered. I ducked my head, but a wasp of fire—I don't know what, a bit of metal or glass maybe—sliced my left cheek open from ear to upper lip. I fell to the floor behind the counter with blood running down my face.

A blast shook the rest of the cups, saucers, plates and glasses off the shelves. The whole roof buckled inward, throwing loose ceiling tiles, light fixtures and pieces of metal framework.

We were all going to die. I knew it, right then. Those things were going to destroy us. But I thought of the pistol in Dennis' hand, and of Price lying near the door. If we were caught in Price's nightmare and the blow from the ketchup bottle had broken something in his skull, then the only way to stop his dream was to kill him.

I'm no hero. I was about to piss in my pants, but I knew I was the only one who could move. I jumped up and scrambled over the counter, falling beside Dennis and wrenching at that pistol. Even in death, Dennis had a strong grip. Another blast came, along the wall to my right. The heat of it scorched me, and the shockwave skidded me across the floor through glass and rain and blood.

But I had that pistol in my hand.

I heard Ray shout, "Look out!"

In the doorway, silhouetted by flames, was a skeletal thing wearing muddy green rags. It wore a dented-in helmet and carried a corroded, slime-covered rifle. Its face was gaunt and shadowy, the features hidden behind a scum of rice-paddy muck. It began to lift the rifle to fire at me—slowly, slowly...

I got the safety off the pistol and fired twice, without aiming. A spark leapt off the helmet as one of the bullets was deflected, but the figure staggered backward and into the conflagration of the station-wagon, where it seemed to melt into ooze before it vanished.

More tracers were coming in. Cheryl's Volkswagen shuddered, the tires blowing out almost in unison. The state trooper car was already bullet-riddled and sitting on flats.

Another Nightcrawler, this one without a helmet and with slime covering the skull where the hair had been, rose up beyond the window and fired its rifle. I heard the bullet whine past my ear, and as I took aim I saw its bony finger tightening on the trigger again.

A skillet flew over my head and hit the thing's shoulder, spoiling its aim. For an instant the skillet stuck in the Nightcrawler's body, as if the figure itself was made out of mud. I fired once... twice... and saw pieces of matter fly from the thing's chest. What might've been a mouth opened in a soundless scream, and the thing slithered out of sight.

I looked around. Cheryl was standing behind the counter, weaving on her feet, her face white with shock. "Get down!" I shouted, and she ducked for cover.

I crawled to Price, shook him hard. His eyes would not open.

"Wake up!" I begged him. "Wake up, damn you!" And then I pressed the barrel of the pistol against Price's head. Dear God, I didn't want to kill anybody, but I knew I was going to have to blow the Nightcrawlers right out of his brain. I hesitated—too long.

Something smashed into my left collarbone. I heard the bone snap like a broomstick being broken. The force of the shot slid me back against the counter and jammed me between two bullet-pocked stools. I lost the gun, and there was a roaring in my head that deafened me.

I don't know how long I was out. My left arm felt like dead meat. All the cars in the lot were burning, and there was a hole in the diner's roof that a tractor-trailer truck could've dropped through. Rain was sweeping into my face, and when I wiped my eyes clear I saw them, standing over Price.

There were eight of them. The two I thought I'd killed were back. They trailed weeds, and their boots and ragged clothes were covered with mud. They stood in silence, staring down at their living comrade.

I was too tired to scream. I couldn't even whimper. I just watched.

Price's hands lifted into the air. He reached for the Nightcrawlers, and then his eyes opened. His pupils were dead white, surrounded by scarlet.

"End it," he whispered. "End it..."

One of the Nightcrawlers aimed its rifle and fired. Price jerked. Another Nightcrawler fired, and then they were all firing, point-blank, into Price's body. Price thrashed and clutched at his head, but there was no blood; the phantom bullets weren't hitting him.

The Nightcrawlers began to ripple and fade. I saw the flames of the burning cars through their bodies. The figures became transparent, floating in vague outlines. Price had awakened too fast at the Pines Haven Motor Inn, I realized; if he had remained asleep, the creatures of his nightmares would've ended it there, at that Florida motel. They were killing him in front of me—or he was allowing them to end it, and I think that's what he must've wanted for a long, long time.

He shuddered, his mouth releasing a half-moan, half-sigh.

It sounded almost like relief.

I saw his face. His eyes were closed, and I think he must've found peace at last.

V

A trucker hauling lumber from Mobile to Birmingham saw the burning cars. I don't even remember what he looked like.

Ray was cut up by glass, but his wife and the kids were okay. Physically, I mean. Mentally, I couldn't say.

Cheryl went into the hospital for awhile. I got a postcard from her with the Golden Gate Bridge on the front. She promised she'd write and let me know how she was doing, but I doubt if I'll ever hear from her. She was the best waitress I ever had, and I wish her luck.

The police asked me a thousand questions, and I told the story the same way every time. I found out later that no bullets or shrapnel were ever dug out of the walls or the cars or Dennis' body—just like in the case of that motel massacre. There was no bullet in me, though my collarbone was snapped clean in two.

Price had died of a massive brain hemorrhage. It looked, the police told me, as if it had exploded in his skull.

I closed the diner. Farm life is fine. Alma understands, and we don't talk about it.

But I never showed the police what I found, and I don't know exactly why not.

I picked up Price's wallet in the mess. Behind a picture of a smiling young woman holding a baby there was a folded piece of paper. On that paper were the names of four men.

Beside one name, Price had written DANGEROUS.

I've found four other 'Nam vets who can do the same thing," Price had said.

I sit up at night a lot, thinking about that and looking at those names. Those men had gotten a dose of that Howdy Doody shit in a foreign place they hadn't wanted to be, fighting a war that turned out to be one of those crossroads of nightmare and reality. I've changed my mind about 'Nam, because I understand now that the worst of the fighting is still going on, in the battlefields of memory.

A Yankee who called himself Tompkins came to my house one May morning and flashed me an ID that said he worked for a veterans' association. He was very soft-spoken and polite, but he had deep-set eyes that were almost black, and he never blinked. He asked me all about Price, seemed real interested in picking my brain of every detail. I told him the police had the story, and I couldn't add any more to it. Then I turned the tables and asked him about Howdy Doody. He smiled in a puzzled kind of way and said he'd never heard of any chemical defoliant called that. No such thing, he said. Like I said, he was very polite.

But I know the shape of a gun tucked into a shoulder-holster. Tompkins was wearing one, under his seersucker coat. I never could find any veterans' association that knew anything about him, either.

Maybe I should give that list of names to the police. Maybe I will. Or maybe I'll try to find those four men myself, and try to make sense out of what's being hidden.

I don't think Price was evil. No. He was just scared, and who can blame a man for running from his own nightmares? I like to believe that, in the end, Price had the courage to face the Nightcrawlers, and in committing suicide he saved our lives.

The newspapers, of course, never got the real story. They called Price a 'Nam vet who'd gone crazy, killed six people in a Florida motel and then killed a state trooper in a shootout at Big Bob's diner and gas stop.

But I know where Price is buried. They sell little American flags at the five-and-dime in Mobile. I'm alive, and I can spare the change.

And then I've got to find out how much courage I have.

THE DEEP END

Winner of the 1988 Bram Stoker Award for Best Short Story

Summer was dying. The late afternoon sky wept rain from low, hovering clouds, and Glenn Calder sat in his Chevy station wagon, staring at the swimming pool where his son had drowned two weeks ago.

Neil was just sixteen years old, Glenn thought. His lips were tight and gray, and the last of his summer tan had faded from his gaunt, hollowed face. Just *sixteen*. His hands tightened around the steering-wheel, the knuckles bleaching white. *It's not fair. My son is dead – and you're still alive. Oh, I know you're there. I've figured it all out. You think you're so damned smart. You think you've got everybody fooled. But not me. Oh no – not me.*

He reached over the seat beside him and picked up his pack of Winstons, chose a cigarette and clamped the filter between his lips. Then he punched the cigarette lighter in and waited for it to heat up.

His eyes, pale blue behind a pair of horn-rimmed glasses, remained fixed on the Olympic-sized public swimming pool beyond the high chainlink fence. A sign on the admissions gate said in big, cheerful red letters: CLOSED FOR THE SEASON! SEE YOU NEXT SUMMER! Beyond the fence were bleachers and sundecks where people had lolled in the hot, sultry summer of north Alabama, and there was a bandstand where an occasional rock band had played at a pool party on a Saturday night. Steam rose from the glistening concrete around the pool and, in the silence between the patter of raindrops, with his windows rolled down and the moody smell of August's last hours inside the car, he thought he could hear ghostly music from that bandstand, there under the red canopy where he himself had danced as a kid in the late fifties

He imagined he could hear the shouts, squeals and rowdy laughter of the generations of kids that had come to this pool, here in wooded Parnell Park, since it had been dug out and filled with water back in the mid-forties. He cocked his head to one side, listening, and he felt sure that one of these ghostly voices belonged to Neil, and Neil was speaking like a ripple of water down a drain, calling "Dad? *Dad?* It killed me, Dad! I didn't drown! I was always a good swimmer, Dad! *You* know that, don't you... ?"

"Yes," Glenn answered softly, and tears filled his eyes. "I know that."

The lighter popped out. Glenn got his cigarette going and returned the lighter to the dashboard. He stared at the swimming pool as a tear crept down his cheek. Neil's voice ebbed and faded, joining the voices of the other ghosts that were forever young in Parnell Park.

If he had a dollar for every time he'd walked through that admissions gate he'd be a mighty rich man today. At least he'd have a lot more money, he mused, than running the Pet Center at Brookhill Mall paid him. But he'd always liked animals, so that was okay, though when he'd been young enough to dream he'd had plans of working for a zoo in a big city like Birmingham, travelling the world and collecting exotic animals. His father had died when he was a sophomore at the University of Alabama, and Glenn had returned to Barrimore Crossing and gone to work because his mother had been hanging on the edge of a nervous breakdown. He'd always planned on going back to college but the spool of time just kept unwinding: he'd met Linda, and they'd fallen in love. And then they'd gotten married and Neil was born four years later, and... .

Well, that was just the story of life, wasn't it?

There were little flecks of rain on his glasses, caused when the drops ricocheted off the edge of the rolled-down window. Glenn took them off to wipe the lenses with a handkerchief. Without the glasses, everything was kind of fuzzy, but he could still see all right.

His hands were trembling. He was afraid, but not terrified. Funny. He'd thought for sure he'd be scared shitless. Of course, it wasn't time yet. Oh, no. Not yet. He put his glasses back on, drew deeply at his cigarette and let the smoke leak from his mouth. Then he touched the heavy-duty chain cutter that lay on the seat beside him.

Today – the last day of summer – he had brought his own admission ticket to the pool.

Underneath his trousers he was wearing his bathing suit – the red one, the one that Linda said he'd better not wear around the bull up in Howard Mackey's pasture. Glenn smiled grimly. If he hadn't had Linda these past two weeks it might've made him slip right off the deep end. She said they were strong, that they would go on and learn to live with Neil's death, and Glenn had agreed – but that was before he'd started thinking. That was before he'd started reading and studying about the Parnell Park swimming pool.

That was before he *knew*.

After Neil had drowned, the town council had closed the pool and park. Neil had been its third victim of the summer; back in June a girl named Wanda Shackleford had died in the pool, and on the fourth of July it had been

Tom Dunnigan. Neil had known Wanda Shackleford. And Glenn remembered that they'd talked about the incident at home one night.

"Seventeen years old!" Glenn had said, reading from a copy of the Barrimore Crossing *Courier*. "What a waste!" He was sitting in his Barcalounger in the den, and Linda was on the sofa doing her needlepoint picture for Sue Ann Moore's birthday. Neil was on the floor in a comfortable sprawl, putting together a plastic model of a space ship he'd bought at Brookhill Mall that afternoon. "Says here that she and a boy named Paul Buckley decided to climb the fence and go swimming around midnight." He glanced over at Linda. "Is that Alex Buckley's boy? The football player?"

"I think so. Do you know, Neil?"

"Yeah. Paul Buckley's a center for Grissom High." Neil glued a triangular weapons turret together and put it aside to dry, then turned to face his father. Like Glenn, the boy was thin and lanky and wore glasses. "Wanda Shackleford was his girlfriend. She would've been a senior next year. What else does it say?"

"It's got a few quotes from Paul Buckley and the policeman who pulled the girl's body out. Paul says they'd had a sixpack and then decided to go swimming. He says he never even knew she was gone until he started calling her and she didn't answer. He thought she was playing a trick on him." He offered his son the paper.

"I can't imagine wanting to swim in dark water," Linda said. Her pleasant oval face was framed with pale blond hair, and her eyes were hazel, the same color as Neil's. She concentrated on making a tricky stitch and then looked up. "That's the first one."

"The first one? What do you mean?"

Linda shrugged uneasily. "I don't know. Just... well they say things happen in threes." She returned to her work. "I think the City should fill in that swimming pool."

"Fill in the *pool*?" There was alarm in Neil's voice. "Why?"

"Because last June the Happer boy drowned in it, remember? It happened the first weekend school was out. Thank God we weren't there to see it. And two summers before that, the McCarrin girl drowned in four feet of water. The lifeguard didn't even see her go down before somebody stepped on her." She shivered and looked at Glenn. "Remember?"

Glenn drew on his cigarette, staring through the rain-streaked windshield at the pool. "Yes," he said softly. "I remember." But at the time, he'd told Linda that people—especially kids—drowned in pools, ponds and lakes every summer. People even drown in their own bathtubs! he'd said. The city shouldn't close Parnell Park pool and deprive the people of Barrimore Crossing, Leeds, Cooks Springs and the other surrounding communities. Without Parnell Park, folks would have to drive either to Birmingham or go swimming in the muddy waters of nearby Logan Martin lake on a hot summer afternoon!

Still, he'd remembered that a man from Leeds had drowned in the deep end the summer before Gil McCarrin's daughter died. And hadn't two or three other people drowned there as well?

"You think you're so damned smart," Glenn whispered. "But I know. You killed my son, and by God you're going to pay."

A sullen breeze played over the pool, and Glenn imagined he could hear the water giggle. Off in the distance he was sure he heard Neil's voice, floating to him through time and space: "It killed me, Dad! I didn't drown... I didn't drown... I didn't... I—"

Glenn clamped a hand to his forehead and squeezed. Sometimes that made the ghostly voice go away, and this time it worked. He was getting a whopper of a headache, and he opened the glove compartment and took a half-full bottle of Excedrin from it. He popped it open, put a tablet on his tongue and let it melt.

Today was the last day of August, and tomorrow morning the city workmen would come and open the big circular metal-grated drain down in the twelve-foot depths of the deep end. An electric pump would flood the water through pipes that had been laid down in 1945, when the pool was first dug out. The water would continue for more than two miles, until it emptied into a cove on Logan Martin lake. Glenn knew the route that water would take very well, because he'd studied the yellowed engineering diagrams in Barrimore Crossing's City Hall. And then, the last week of May, when the heat had come creeping back and summer was about to blaze like a nova, the pipes would start pumping Logan Martin lake water back through another system of filtration tanks and sanitation filters and when it spilled into the Parnell Park swimming pool it would be fresh, clean and sparkling.

But it would *not* be lifeless.

Glenn chewed a second Excedrin, crushed his cigarette out in the ashtray. This was the day. Tomorrow would be too late. Because tomorrow, the thing that lurked in the public swimming pool would slither away down the drain and get back to the lake where it would wait in the mud for another summer season and the beckoning rhythm of the pump.

Glenn's palms were wet. He wiped them on his trousers. Tom Dunnigan had drowned in the deep end on the fourth of July, during the big annual celebration and barbecue. Glenn and Linda had been eating sauce-sloppy barbecues when they'd heard the commotion at the pool, and Linda had screamed, "Oh my God! Neil!"

But it was not Neil who lay on his stomach as the lifeguard tried to force breath back into the body. Neil had been doing cannonballs off the high dive when Tom's wife had shouted for help. The pool had been crowded with

people, but no one had seen Tom Dunnigan slip under; he had not cried out, had not even left a ripple in the water. Glenn got close enough through the onlookers to see Tom's body as the lifeguard worked on him. Tom's eyes were open, and water was running between the pale blue lips. But Glenn had found himself staring at a small, circular purple bruise at the back of Tom's neck, almost at the base of the brain; the bruise was pinpricked with scarlet, as if tiny veins in the skin had been ruptured. He'd wondered what could have caused a bruise like that, but it was so small it certainly wasn't important. Then the ambulance attendants wheeled Tom away, covered with a sheet, and the pool closed down for a week.

It was later—much later—that Glenn realized the bruise could've been a bite mark.

He'd been feeding a chameleon in the pet store when the lizard, which had turned the exact shade of green as the grass at the bottom of his tank, had decided to give him a bite on his finger. A chameleon has no teeth, but the pressure of the lizard's mouth had left a tiny circular mark that faded almost at once. Still the little mark bothered Glenn until he'd realized what it reminded him of.

He'd never really paid much attention to the chameleon before that, but suddenly he was intrigued by how it changed colors so quickly, from grass-green to the tan shade of the sand heaped up in the tank's corner. Glenn put a large gray rock in there as well, and soon the chameleon would climb up on it and bloom gray; in that state, he would be invisible but for the tiny, unblinking black circles of his eyes.

"I know what you are," Glenn whispered. "Oh, yeah. I sure do."

The light was fading. Glenn looked in the rear seat to check his gear: a snorkel, underwater mask, and fins. On the floorboard was an underwater light—a large flashlight sealed in a clear plastic enclosure with an upraised red off-on switch. Glenn had driven to the K-Mart in Birmingham to buy the equipment in the sporting goods department. No one knew him there. And wrapped up in a yellow towel in the back seat was his major purchase. He reached over for it, carefully picked it up, and put it across his lap. Then he began to unfold the towel, and there it was—clean, bright, and deadly.

"Looks wicked, doesn't it?" the K-Mart clerk had asked.

Glenn had agreed that it did. But then, it suited his needs.

"You couldn't get *me* underwater," the clerk had said. "Nossir! I like my feet on solid ground! What do you catch with that thing?"

"Big game," Glenn had told him. "So big you wouldn't believe it."

He ran his hands over the cool metal of the speargun in his lap. He'd read all the warnings and instructions, and the weapon's barbed spear was ready to fire. All he had to do was move a little lever with his thumb to unhook the safety, and then squeezing the trigger was the same as any other gun. He'd practiced on a pillow in the basement, late at night when Linda was asleep. She'd really think he was crazy if she found what was left of that tattered old thing.

But she thought he was out of his mind anyway, so what did it matter? Ever since he'd told her what he knew was true, she'd looked at him differently. It was in her eyes. She thought he'd slipped right off the deep end.

"We'll see about that." There was cold sweat on his face now, because the time was near. He started to get out of the station wagon, then froze. His heart was pounding.

A police car had turned into the parking lot, and was heading toward him.

Oh, Jesus! he thought. No! He visualized Linda on the phone to the police: "Officer, my husband's gone crazy! I don't know what he'll do next. He's stopped going to work, he has nightmares all the time and can't sleep, and he thinks there's a monster in the Parnell Park swimming pool! He thinks a monster killed our son, and he won't see a doctor or talk to anybody else about—"

The police car was getting closer. Glenn hastily wrapped the towel around the speargun, put it down between the seat and the door. He laid the chain cutter on the floorboard and then the police car was pulling up right beside him and all he could do was sit rigidly and smile.

"Having trouble, sir?" the policeman on the passenger side asked through his rolled-down window.

"No. No trouble. Just sitting here." Glenn heard his voice tremble. His smile felt so tight his face was about to rip.

The policeman suddenly started to get out of the car, and Glenn knew he would see the gear on the back seat. "I'm fine!" Glenn protested. "Really!" But the police car's door was opening and the man was about to walk over and see—

"Hey, is that *you*, Mr. Calder?" the policeman sitting behind the wheel asked. The other one hesitated.

"Yes. I'm Glenn Calder."

"I'm Mike Ward. I bought a cocker spaniel puppy from you at the first of the summer. Gave it to my little girl for her birthday. Remember?"

"Uh... yes! Sure." Glenn recalled him now. "Yes! How's the puppy?"

"Fine. We named him Bozo because of those big floppy feet. I'll tell you, I never knew a puppy so small could eat so much!"

Glenn strained to laugh. He feared his eyes must be bulging with inner pressure.

Mike Ward was silent for a few seconds, and then he said something to the other man that Glenn couldn't make out. The second policeman got back into the car and closed the door, and Glenn released the breath he'd been

holding.

"Everything okay, Mr. Calder?" Mike asked; "I mean... I know about your son, and—"

"I'm fine!" Glenn said. "Just sitting here. Just thinking." His head was about to pound open.

"We were here the day it happened," Mike told him. "I'm really sorry."

"Thank you." The whole, hideous scene unfolded again in Glenn's mind: he remembered looking up from his Sports Illustrated magazine and seeing Neil going down the aluminum ladder on the left side of the pool, down at the deep end. "I hope he's careful," Linda had fretted and then she'd called to him. "Be careful!" Neil had waved and gone on down the ladder into the sparkling blue water.

There had been a lot of people there that afternoon. It had been one of the hottest days of the summer.

And then Glenn remembered that Linda suddenly set aside her needlepoint, her face shaded by the brim of her straw hat, and said the words he could never forget: "*Glenn? I don't see Neil anymore.*"

Something about the world had changed in that moment. Time had been distorted and the world had cracked open, and Glenn had seen the horror that lies so close to the surface.

They brought Neil's body up and tried mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, but he was dead. Glenn could tell that right off. He was dead. And when they turned his body over to try to pound the life back into him, Glenn had seen the small purple bruise at the back of his son's neck, almost at the base of the brain.

Oh God, Glen had thought. Something stole the life right out of him.

And from that moment on, maybe he *had* gone crazy. Because he'd looked across the surface of the pool, and he had realized something very odd.

There was no aluminum ladder on the left side of the pool down at the deep end. On the pool's right side there was a ladder—but not on the left.

"He was a good boy," Glenn told the two policemen. There was still a fixed smile on his face, and he could not make it let go. "His mother and I loved him very, very much."

"Yes sir. Well... I guess we'll go on, then. You sure you're all right? You... uh... haven't been drinking, have you?"

"Nope. Clean as a whistle. Don't you worry about me, I'll go home soon. Wouldn't want to get Linda upset, would I?"

"No sir. Take care, now." Then the police car backed up, turned around in the parking lot and drove away along the wooded road.

Glenn had a splitting headache. He chewed a third Excedrin, took a deep breath, and reached down for the chain cutter. Then he got out of the car, walked to the admissions gate and cleaved the chain that locked it. The chain rattled to the concrete, and the gate swung open.

And now there was nothing between him and the monster in the swimming pool.

He returned to the car and threw the clippers inside, shucked off his shoes, socks and trousers. He let them fall in a heap beside the station-wagon, but he kept his blue-striped shirt on. It had been a present from Neil. Then he carried his mask, fins and snorkel into the pool area, walked the length of the pool and laid the gear on a bleacher. Rain pocked the dark surface, and on the pool's bottom were the black lines of swimming lanes, sometimes used for area swim-meets. Ceramic tiles on the bottom made a pattern of dark blue, aqua and pale green.

There were thousands of places for it to hide, Glenn reasoned. It could be lying along a black line, or compressed flat and smooth like a stingray on one of the colored tiles. He looked across the pool where the false ladder had been—the monster could make itself resemble a ladder, or it could curl up and emulate the drain, or lie flat and still in a gutter waiting for a human form to come close enough. Yes. It had many shapes, many colors, many tricks. But the water had not yet gone back to the lake, and the monster that had killed Neil was still in there. Somewhere.

He walked back to the car, got the underwater light and the speargun. It was getting dark, and he switched the light on.

He wanted to make sure the thing found him once he was in the water—and the light should draw it like a neon sign over a roadside diner.

Glenn sat on the edge of the pool and put on his fins. He had to remove his glasses to wear the facemask; everything was out of focus, but it was the best he could do. He fit the snorkel into his mouth, hefted the underwater light in his left hand, and slowly eased himself over the edge.

I'm ready, he told himself. He was shaking, couldn't stop. The water, untended for more than two weeks, was dirty—littered with Coke cups, cigarette butts, dead waterbugs. The carcass of a bluejay floated past his face, and Glenn thought that it appeared to have been crushed.

He turned over on his stomach, put his head underwater, and kicked off against the pool's side, making a splash that sounded jarringly loud. He began to drift out over the drain, directing the light's yellow beam through the water. Around and beneath him was gray murk. But the light suddenly glinted off something, and Glenn arched down through the chill to see what it was—a beer can on the bottom. Still, the monster could be anywhere. *Anywhere.* He slid to the surface, expelling water through the snorkel like a whale. Then he continued slowly across the pool, his heartbeat pounding in his ears and the sound of his breathing like a hellish bellows through the snorkel. In another moment his head bumped the other side of the pool. He drifted in another direction, guiding himself with an occasional thrust of a fin.

Come on, damn you! Glenn thought. I know you're here!

But nothing moved in the depths below. He shone the light around, seeking a shadow.

I'm not crazy, he told himself. I'm really not. His head was hurting again, and his mask was leaking, the water beginning to creep up under his nose. Come out and fight me, damn you! I'm in your element now, you bastard! Come on!

Linda had asked him to see a doctor in Birmingham. She said she'd go with him, and the doctor would listen. There was no monster in the swimming pool, she'd said. And if there *was* where had it come from?

Glenn knew. Since Neil's death, Glenn had done a lot of thinking and reading. He'd gone back through the *Courier* files, searching for any information about the Parnell Park swimming pool. He'd found that, for the last five years, at least one person had died in the pool every summer. Before that you had to go back eight years to find a drowning victim—an elderly man who'd already suffered one heart attack.

But it had been in a copy of the *Birmingham News*, dated October tenth six years ago, that Glenn had found his answer.

The article's headline read "*Bright Light*" *Frightens Lake Residents*.

On the night of October ninth, a sphere of blue fire had been seen by a dozen people who lived around Logan Martin lake. It had flashed across the sky, making a noise—as one resident put it—"like steam whistling out of a cracked radiator." The blue light had gone down into the lake, and for the next two days, dead fish washed up on shore.

You found the pipes that brought you up into our swimming pool, didn't you? Glenn thought as he explored the gray depths with his light. Maybe you came from somewhere that's all water, and you can't live on land. Maybe you can suck the life out of a human body just as fast and easy as some of us step on ants. Maybe that's what you live on—but by God I've come to stick you, and I'll find you if I have to search all—

Something moved.

Down in the gloom, below him. Down near the drain. A shadow... *something*.

Glenn wasn't sure what it was. He just sensed a slow, powerful uncoiling.

He pushed the speargun's safety off with his thumb. He couldn't see anything, dead bugs floated through the light like a dust storm, and a sudden newspaper page drifted up from the bottom, flapped in his face and sank out of sight again. Glenn's nerves were near snapping, and he thought with a touch of hysterical mirth that it might have been an obituaries page.

He lowered his head and descended.

Murky clouds swirled around him. He probed with the light, alert for another movement. The water felt thick, oily; a contaminated feel. He continued to slide down into the depths, and they closed over him. His fins stirred more pool silt, and the clouds refused the light. He stayed down as long as he could, until his lungs began to heave, and then he rose toward the surface like a flabby arrow.

When he reached the top, something grasped his head.

It was a cold, rubbery thing, and Glenn knew it was the grip of death. He couldn't help it; he shrieked around the snorkel's mouthpiece, twisted violently in the Water and caught sight of slick green flesh. His frantic movement dislodged the facemask, and water flooded in. He was blinded, water was pressing up his nostrils and the thing was wrapped around his shoulders. He heard his gurgling underwater scream, flailed the thing off him and thrashed desperately away.

Glenn kicked to the edge of the pool, raising geysers. The aluminum ladder was in front of him, and he reached up to haul himself out.

No! he thought, wrenching his hand back before it touched the metal—or what was supposed to pass as metal. That's how it had killed Neil. It had emulated the other ladder and entwined itself around Neil as he entered the water, and it had taken him under and killed him in an instant while everyone else was laughing and unaware.

He swam away from the ladder and hung to the gutter's edge. His body convulsed, water gurgling from his nostrils. His dangling legs were vulnerable, and he drew them up against his chest, so fast he kned himself in the chin. Then he dared to look around and aim the light at the monster.

About ten feet away, bouncing in the chop of his departure, was a child's deflated rubber ring, the green head of a seahorse with a grinning red mouth lying in the water.

Glenn laughed, and spat up more of the pool. Brave man, he thought. Real brave. Oh Jesus, if Linda had been here to see this! I was scared shitless of a kid's toy! His laughter got louder, more strident. He laughed until it dawned on him that he was holding his facemask's strap around his right wrist, and his right hand gripped the gutter.

In his left hand was the underwater light.

He had lost his snorkel. And the speargun.

His laughter ceased on a broken note.

Fear shot up his spine. He squinted, saw the snorkel bobbing on the surface five or six feet away. The speargun had gone to the bottom.

He didn't think about getting out of the pool. His body just did it, scrabbling up over the sloshing gutter to the

concrete, where he lay on his belly in the rain and shivered with terror.

Without the speargun, he had no chance. I can use the chain cutter, he thought. Snap the bastard's head off! But no, no: the chain cutter needed two hands, and he had to have a hand free to hold the light. He thought of driving back to Birmingham, buying another speargun, but it occurred to him that if he got in the car and left Parnell Park, his guts might turn to jelly on the highway and Neil's voice would haunt him: "*You know I didn't drown, don't you, Dad? You know I didn't...*"

He might get in that car and drive away and never come back, and today was the last day of summer, and when they opened the drain in the morning, the monster would go back to the lake and await another season of victims.

He knew what he had to do. Must do. Must. He had to put the facemask back on, retrieve the snorkel, and go down after that speargun. He lay with his cheek pressed against the concrete and stared at the black water; how many summer days had seen him in that pool, basking like a happy whale? As a kid, he couldn't wait for the clock of seasons to turn around and point him to this pool—and now, everything had changed. Everything, and it could never be the same again.

Neil was dead, killed by the monster in the swimming pool. The creature had killed part of him, too, Glenn realized. Killed the part that saw this place as a haven of youthful dreams, an anchor-point of memories. And next summer, when the monster came back, someone else's dreams would die as well.

He had to go down and get the speargun. It was the only way.

It took him another minute or so to make his body respond to his mind's command. The chill shocked his skin again as he slipped over the side; he moved slowly, afraid of noise or splashes. Then he put the mask on, swam carefully to the snorkel with his legs drawn up close to the surface; he bit down hard on the mouthpiece, thinking suddenly that if there was really a monster here it could have emulated the snorkel, and both of them would've gotten a very nasty surprise. But the snorkel remained a snorkel, as Glenn blew the water out of it.

If there was really a monster here. The thought caught him like a shock. *If.* And there it was. What if Linda was right? he asked himself. What if there's nothing here, and I'm just treading dirty water? What if everything I've thought is wrong—and I'm losing my mind? No, no, I'm right. I know I am. Dear God. I *have* to be right.

He took a deep breath, exhaled it. The collapsed green seahorse seemed to be drifting toward him again. Was its grin wider? Did it show a glint of teeth? Glenn watched the rubber ring move through the light's beam, and then he took another breath and slid downward to find the speargun.

His thrashing had stirred up more debris. The water seemed alive with reaching, darting shadows as he kicked to the bottom and skimmed along it, his belly brushing the tiles. The light gleamed off another beer can, off a scatter of pennies left by children who'd been diving for them. Something bony lay on the bottom, and Glenn decided it was a chicken drumstick somebody had tossed over the fence. He kept going, slowly swinging his light in an arc before him.

The dirty clouds opened under his waving hand, and more metal glinted. Another crushed beer can—no, no, it wasn't. His heart kicked. He fanned the murk away, and caught sight of the speargun's handle. Gripped it in his right hand with a flood of relief. Thank God! he thought. Now he felt powerful again, and the shadows seemed to flee before him. He turned in a circle, illuminating the darkness at his back. Nothing there. Nothing. To his right the newspaper page flapped like a manta ray, and to his left the clouds parted for a second to show him a glimpse of the drain. He was in the twelve-foot depth. The deep end, that place where parents warned their kids not to go.

And about three feet from the drain lay something else. Something that made Glenn's throat catch and bubbles spill from his nostrils.

And that was when the thing that had taken the shape of a speargun in his hand burst into its true form, all camouflage done. Ice-white tentacles tightened around Glenn's wrist as his fingers spasmed open.

The bubbles of a scream exploded from Glenn's mouth, but his jaws clamped shut before all his air was lost. As he tried to lunge upward, a third and fourth tentacle—pale, almost translucent and as tough as piano-wire—shot out, squeezing into the drain's grate and locked there.

Glenn fought furiously, saw the monster's head taking shape from its gossamer ghost of a body; the head was triangular, like a cobra's, and from it emerged a single scarlet, blazing eye with a golden pupil. Below the eye was a small round mouth full of suction pads like the underside of a starfish. The mouth was pulsating rapidly, and began to turn from white to crimson.

The single eye stared into Glenn's face with clinical interest. And suddenly the thing's neck elongated and the mouth streaked around for the back of Glenn's neck.

He'd known that's where it was going to strike, and he'd flung his left arm up to ward off the blow an instant before it came. The mouth sealed to his shoulder like a hot kiss, hung there for a second and withdrew with a *sputt* of distaste. The monster's head weaved back and forth as Glenn hunched his shoulders up to protect the back of his neck and spinal cord. His lungs heaved; his mouth was full of water, the snorkel spun away in the turbulence. Water was streaming into his mask, and the light had dropped from the fingers of his left hand and lay on the bottom, sending rays through the roiling clouds like a weird sunset through an alien atmosphere.

The thing's head jerked forward, its mouth aiming at Glenn's forehead; he jerked aside as much as he could, and the mouth hit the facemask glass. Glenn felt tentacles slithering around his body, drawing him closer, trying to

crack his ribs and squeeze the last of his air out. He pressed his left hand to the back of his neck. The monster's eye moved in the socket, seeking a way to the juices it craved. The mouth was bright red now, and deep in the folds of its white body, Glenn saw a crimson mass that pulsed at the same rhythm as its mouth.

Its heart, he realized. Its heart.

The blood thundered in his head. His lungs were seizing, about to grab for water. He looked down, saw the real speargun a few feet away. He had no time for even a second's hesitation, and he knew that if he failed he was dead.

He took his hand away from the back of his neck and reached for the gun, his own heartbeat about to blow the top of his skull off.

The creature's head came around like a whip. The suckers fixed to the base of Glenn's brain, and for an instant there was an agony that he thought would end only when his head split open; but then there was a numbing, floating, novocained sensation, and Glenn felt himself drifting toward death.

But he had the speargun in his hand.

The monster shivered with hungry delight. From between the suction cups tiny needle-like teeth began to drill through the pores of its prey's flesh, toward the spinal cord at the base of the brain.

One part of Glenn wanted to give up. Wanted to drift and sleep. Wanted to join Neil and the others who had gone to sleep in this pool. It would be so easy... so easy...

But the part of him that clung to life and Linda and the world beyond this pool made him lift the gun, press the barbed spear against the monster's pulsing heart and squeeze the trigger.

Sharp, head-clearing pain ripped through him. A black cloud of blood spilled into the water. The spear had pierced the creature's body and gone into his own forearm. The monster released his neck, its head whipping and the eye wide and stunned. Glenn saw that the spear had gone right through the thing's heart—if that's indeed what the organ was—and then he wrenched at his arm with all his remaining strength. The spear and the heart tore out of the monster's writhing body. The pupil of its eye had turned from gold to black, and its tattered body began to ooze through the drain's grate like strands of opaque jelly.

Glenn's lungs lurched. Pulled in water. He clawed toward the surface, his arm puffing blood. The surface was so far, so terribly far. The deep end had him, was not going to let him go. He strained upward, as dark gnawed at him and his lungs hitched and the water began to gurgle in his throat.

And then his head emerged into night air, and as he drew a long, shuddering breath he heard himself cry out like a victorious beast.

He didn't remember reaching the pool's side. Still would not trust the ladder. He tried to climb out and fell back several times. There seemed to be a lot of blood, and water still rattled in his lungs. He didn't know how long it was, but finally he pulled himself out and fell on his back on the wet concrete.

Sometime later, he heard a hissing sound.

He wearily lifted his head, and coughed more water out. At the end of the spear, the lump of alien flesh was sizzling. The heart shriveled until it resembled a piece of coal—and then it fell apart like black ash, and there was nothing left.

"Got you," Glenn whispered. "Got you... didn't I?"

He lay on his back for a long time, as the blood continued to stream from the wound in his arm, and when he opened his eyes again he could see the stars.

"Crazy fella busted in here last night," one of the overall-clad workmen said to the other as he lit a cigarette. "Heard it on the news this mornin'. Radio said a fella broke in here and went swimmin'. That's why the chain's cut off the gate."

"Is that right? Lawd, lawd! Jimmy, this is some crazy world!" The second workman, whose name was Leon, sat on the concrete beside the little brick enclosure housing an iron wheel that opened the drain and a switch that operated the electric pump. They'd spent an hour cleaning the pool out before they'd turned the wheel, and this was the first chance to sit down and rest. They'd filled a garbage bag with beer cans, dead bugs, and other debris that had collected at the bottom. Now the water was draining out, the electric pump making a steady thumping sound. It was the first morning of September, and the sun was shining through the trees in Parnell Park.

"Some folks are just born fools," Jimmy offered, nodding sagely. "Radio said that fella shot himself with a *spear*. Said he was ravin' and crazy and the policeman who found him couldn't make heads or butts outta anythin' he was sayin'."

"Musta wanted to go swimmin' awful bad. Hope they put him in a nice asylum with a swimmin' pool."

Both men thought that was very funny, and they laughed. They were still laughing when the electric pump made a harsh gasping moan and died.

"Oh, my achin' ass!" Jimmy stood up, flicked his cigarette to the concrete. "We musta missed somethin'! Drain's done clogged for sure!" He went over to the brick enclosure and picked up a long-handled, telescoping tool with a hooked metal tip on the end. "Let's see if we can dig whatever it is out. If we can't, then somebody named Leon is goin' swimmin'."

"Uh uh, not me! I don't swim in nothin' but a bathtub!"

Jimmy walked to the edge of the low diving board and reached into the water with his probe. He telescoped the handle out and began to dig down at the drain's grate, felt the hook slide into something that seemed... rubbery. He brought the hook up and stood gawking at what dangled from it.

Whatever it was, it had an eye.

"Go... call somebody," he managed to tell Leon. "Go call somebody right *quick!*"

Leon started running for the pay phone at the shuttered concessions stand.

"Hey, Leon!" Jimmy called, and the other man stopped. "Tell 'em I don't know what it is... but tell 'em I think it's dead! And tell 'em we found it in the deep end!"

Leon ran on to make the phone call.

The electric pump suddenly kicked on again, and with a noise like a heartbeat began to return water to the lake.

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DOOM CITY

He awakened with the memory of thunder in his bones.

The house was quiet. The alarm clock hadn't gone off. Late for work! he realised, struck by a bolt of desperate terror. But no, no... wait a minute; he blinked the fog from his eyes and his mind gradually cleared too. He could still taste the onions in last night's meatloaf. Friday night was meatloaf night. Today was Saturday. No office work today, thank God. Ah, he thought, settle down... settle down...

Lord, what a nightmare he'd had! It was fading now, all jumbled up and incoherent but leaving its weird essence behind like a snakeskin. There'd been a thunderstorm last night—Brad was sure of that, because he'd awakened to see the garish white flash of it and to hear the gut-wrenching growl of a real boomer pounding at the bedroom wall.

But whatever the nightmare had been, he couldn't recall it now; he felt dizzy and disorientated, like he'd just stepped off a carnival ride gone crazy. He did recall that he'd sat up and seen that lightning, so bright it had made his eyes buzz blue in the dark. And he remembered Sarah saying something too, but now he didn't know what it was...

Damn, he thought as he stared across the bedroom at the window that looked down on Baylor Street. Damn, that light looks strange. Not like June at all. More like a white, winter light. Ghostly. Kind of made his eyes hurt a little.

Brad got out of bed and walked across the room. He pushed aside the white curtain and peered out, squinting.

What appeared to be a grey, faintly luminous fog hung in the trees and over the roofs of the houses on Baylor Street. It looked like the colour had been sucked out of everything, and the fog lay motionless for as far as he could see up and down the street. He looked up, trying to find the sun. It was up there somewhere, burning like a dim bulb behind dirty cotton. Thunder rumbled in the distance, and Brad Forbes said, "Sarah? Honey? Take a look at this."

She didn't reply, nor did she stir. He glanced at her, saw the wave of her brown hair above the sheet that was pulled up over her like a shroud. "Sarah?" he said again, and took a step towards the bed.

And suddenly Brad remembered what she'd said last night, when he'd sat up in a sleepy daze to watch the lightning crackle.

I'm cold, I'm cold.

He grasped the edge of the sheet and pulled it back.

A skeleton with tendrils of brittle brown hair attached to its skull lay where his wife had been sleeping last night.

The skeleton was wearing Sarah's pale blue night-gown, and what looked like dried-up pieces of tree bark—skin, he realised, yes... her... skin—lay all around, on and between the white bones. The teeth grinned, and from the bed there was the bittersweet odour of a damp graveyard.

"Oh..." he whispered, and he stood staring down at what was left of his wife as his eyes began to bulge from their sockets and a pressure like his brain was about to explode grew in his head and blood trickled down from his lower lip where his teeth had pierced.

I'm cold, she'd said, in a voice that had sounded like a whimper of pain. I'm cold.

And then Brad heard himself moan, and he let go of the sheet and staggered back across the room, tripped over a pair of his tennis shoes and went down hard on the floor. The sheet settled back over the skeleton like a sigh.

Thunder rumbled outside, muffled by the fog. Brad stared at one skeletal foot that protruded from the lower end of the sheet, and he saw flakes of dried, dead flesh float down from it to the Sears deep-pile aqua-blue carpet.

He didn't know how long he sat there, just staring. He thought he might have giggled, or sobbed, or made some combination of both. He almost threw up, and he wanted to curl up into a ball and go back to sleep again; he did close his eyes for a few seconds, but when he opened them again the skeleton of his wife was still lying in the bed and the sound of thunder was nearer.

And he might have sat there until Doomsday if the telephone beside the bed hadn't started ringing.

Somehow, he was up and had the receiver in his hand. Tried not to look down at the brown-haired skull, and remember how beautiful his wife—a just twenty-eight years old, for God's sake!—had been.

"Hello," he said, in a dead voice.

There was no reply. Brad could hear circuits clicking and humming, deep in the wires.

"Hello?"

No answer. Except now there might have been—*might* have been—a soft, silken breathing.

"Hello?" Brad shrieked into the phone. "Say something, damn you!"

Another series of clicks; then a tinny, disembodied voice: "We're sorry, but we cannot place your call at this time. All lines are busy. Please hang up and try again later. Thank you. This is a recording..."

He slammed the receiver back into its cradle, and the motion of the air made flakes of skin fly up from the skull's cheekbones.

Brad ran out of the bedroom, barefoot and in only his pyjama bottoms; he ran to the stairs, went down them screaming. "Help! Help me! Somebody!" He missed a step, slammed against the wall and caught the banister before he broke his neck. Still screaming for help, he burst through the front door and out into the yard where his feet crunched on dead leaves.

He stopped. The sound of his voice went echoing down Baylor Street. The air was still and wet, thick and stifling. He stared down at all the dead leaves around him, covering brown grass that had been green the day before. And then the wind suddenly moved, and more dead leaves swirled around him; he looked up, and saw bare grey branches where living oak trees had stood before he'd closed his eyes to sleep last night.

"HELP ME!" he screamed. "SOMEBODY PLEASE HELP ME!"

But there was no answer; not from the house where the Pates lived, not from the Walkers' house, not from the Crawfords' nor the Lehman's. Nothing human moved on Baylor Street, and as he stood amid the falling leaves on the seventh day of June he felt something fall into his hair. He reached up, plucked it out and looked at what he held in his hand.

The skeleton of a bird, with a few colourless feathers sticking to the bones.

He shook it from his hand and frantically wiped his palm on his pyjamas—and then he heard the telephone ringing again in his house.

He ran to the downstairs phone, back in the kitchen, picked up the receiver and said, "Help me! Please... I'm on Baylor Street! Please help—"

He stopped babbling, because he heard the clicking circuits and a sound like searching wind, and down deep inside the wires there might have been a silken breathing.

He was silent too, and the silence stretched. Finally he could stand it no longer. "Who is this?" he asked, in a strained whisper. "Who's on this phone?"

Click. Buzzzzzz...

Brad punched the O. Almost at once that same terrible voice came on the line: "We're sorry, but we cannot place your call at—" He smashed his fist down on the phone's two prongs, dialled 911. "We're sorry, but we cannot—" His fist went down again; he dialled the number of the Pates next door, screwed up and stared twice more. "We're sorry, but—" His fingers went down on about five numbers at once. "We're sorry—"

He screamed and wrenched the telephone from the wall, threw it across the kitchen and it broke the window over the sink. Dead leaves began to drift in, and through the glass panes of the back door Brad saw something lying out in the fenced-in backyard. He went out there, his heart pounding and cold sweat beading on his face and chest.

Lying amid dead leaves, very close to its doghouse, was the skeleton of their collie, Socks. The dog looked as if it might have been stripped to the bone in mid-stride, and hunks of hair lay about the bones like snow.

In the roaring silence, Brad heard the upstairs phone begin to ring.

He ran.

Away from the house this time. Out through the backyard gate, up onto the Pates' front porch. He hammered at the door, hollering for help until his voice was about to give out. Then he smashed a glass pane of the door with his fist and, heedless of the pain and blood, reached in and unsnapped the lock.

With his first step into the house, he smelled the graveyard reek. Like something had died a long time ago, and been mummified.

He found the skeletons in the master bedroom upstairs; they were clinging to each other. A third skeleton—Davy Pate, once a tow-headed twelve-year-old boy—lay in the bed in the room with posters of Prince and Quiet Riot tacked to the walls. In a fishtank on the far side of the room there were little bones lying in the red gravel on the bottom.

It was clear to him then. Yes, very clear. He knew what had happened, and he almost sank to his knees in Davy Pate's mausoleum.

Death had come in the night. And stripped bare everyone and everything but him.

But if that were so... then who—or *what*—had dialled the telephone? What had been listening on the other end? What... oh dear God, what?

He didn't know, but he suddenly realised that he'd told whatever it was that he was still on Baylor Street. And maybe Death had missed him last night; maybe its scythe had cleaved everyone else and missed him, and now... and now it knew he was still on Baylor Street, and it would be coming after him.

Brad fled the house, ran through the dead leaves that clogged the gutters of Baylor Street, and headed east towards the centre of town. The wind moved again, sluggishly and heavily; the wet fog shifted, and Brad could see that the sky had turned the colour of blood. Thunder boomed behind him like approaching footsteps, and tears of terror streamed down Brad's cheeks.

I'm cold, Sarah had whispered. *I'm cold*. And that was when the finger of Death had touched her, had missed Brad and gone roaming through the night. *I'm cold*, she'd said, and there would never be any warming her again.

He came to two cars smashed together in the street. Skeletons in clothes lay behind the steering wheels. Further on, the bones of a large dog were almost covered by leaves. Above him, the trees creaked and moaned as the wind picked up, ripping holes in the fog and showing the bloody sky through them.

It's the end of the world, he thought. Judgement Day. All the sinners and saints alike turned to bones overnight. Just me left alive. Just me, and Death knows I'm on Baylor Street.

"Mommy!"

The sobbing voice of a child pierced him, and he stopped in his tracks, skidding on leaves.

"Mommy!" the voice repeated, echoing and warped by the low-lying fog. "Daddy! Somebody... help me!"

It was the voice of a little girl, crying somewhere nearby. Brad listened, trying to peg its direction. First he thought it was to the left, then to the right. In front of him, behind him... he couldn't be sure. "I'm here!" he shouted. "Where are you?"

The child didn't answer, but Brad could still hear her crying. "I'm not going to hurt you!" he called. "I'm standing right in the middle of a street! Come to me if you can!"

He waited. A flurry of brown, already-decaying leaves fell from overhead—and then he saw the figure of the little girl, hesitantly approaching him through the fog on his right. She had blond hair done up in pigtails with pale blue ribbons, and her pallid face was streaked with tears and distorted by terror; she was maybe five or six years old, wearing pink pyjamas and clasping a Smurf doll tightly in her arms. She stopped about fifteen feet away from him, her eyes red and swollen and maybe insane too.

"Daddy?" she whispered.

"Where'd you come from?" he asked, still shocked at hearing another voice and seeing someone else alive on this last day of the world. "What house?"

"Our house," she answered, her lower lip trembling. Her face looked like it was about to collapse. "Over there." She pointed through the fog at a shape with a roof, then her eyes came back to Brad.

"Anyone else alive?" Your mother or father?"

The little girl just stared.

"What's your name?"

"Kelly Burch," she answered dazedly. "My tel'phone number is... is... 633-6949. Could... you help me find... a p'liceman, please?"

It would be so easy, Brad thought, to curl up in the leaves on Baylor Street and let himself lose his mind; but if there was one little girl still left alive, then there might be other people too. Maybe this awful thing had only happened on Baylor Street... or maybe only in this part of town; maybe it was a chemical spill, radiation, something unholy in the lightning, some kind of Army weapon that had backfired. Whatever it was, maybe its effects were only limited to a small part of town. Sure! he thought, and when he grinned the child abruptly took two steps back. "We're going to be all right," he told her. "I won't hurt you. I'm going to walk to Main Street. Do you want to go with me?"

She didn't reply, and Brad thought she'd truly gone over the edge but then her lips moved and she said, "I'm looking for... for my Mommy and Daddy. They're gone." She caught back a sob, but new tears ran down her cheeks. "They just... they just... left bones in their bed and they're gone."

"Come on." He held out his hand to her. "Come with me, okay? Let's see if we can find anybody else."

Kelly didn't come any closer. Her little knuckles were white where she gripped the smiling blue Smurf. Brad heard thunder roaming somewhere to the south, and electric-blue lightning scrawled across the crimson sky like a crack in time. Brad couldn't wait any longer; he started walking again, stopped and looked back. Kelly stopped too, dead leaves snagged in her hair. "We're going to be all right," he told her again, and he heard how utterly ridiculous he sounded. Sarah was gone; beautiful Sarah was gone, and his life might as well be over. But no, no—he had to keep going, had to at least *try* to make some sense out of all this. He started off once more, east towards Main Street, and he didn't look back but he knew Kelly was following about fifteen or twenty feet behind.

At the intersection of Baylor and Ashley Streets, a police car had smashed into an oak tree. The windshield was layered with leaves, but Brad saw the hunched-over, bony thing in the police uniform sitting behind the wheel. And the most terrible thing was that its skeletal hands were still gripping that wheel, trying to guide the car. Whatever had happened—radiation, chemicals or the Devil striding through the streets of his town—had taken place in an instant. These people had been stripped to bones in the blink of a cold eye, and again Brad felt himself balanced precariously on the edge of madness.

"Ask the p'liceman to find Mommy and Daddy!" Kelly called from behind him.

"There's a police station on Main Street," he told her. "That's where we're going to go. Okay?"

She didn't answer, and Brad set off.

They passed silent houses. Near the intersection of Baylor and Hilliard, where the traffic light was still obediently blinking yellow, a skeleton in jogging gear lay sprawled on the ground. Its Nike sneakers were too small for Brad's feet, too large for Kelly's. They kept going, and Kelly cried for a few minutes but then she hugged

her doll tighter and stared straight ahead with eyes swollen almost shut.

And then Brad heard it, and his heart pounded with fear again.

Off in the fog somewhere.

The sound of a phone ringing.

Brad stopped. The phone kept on ringing, its sound thin and insistent.

"Somebody's calling," Kelly said, and Brad realised she was standing right beside him. "My tel'phone number is 633-6949."

He took a step forward. Another, and another. Through the fog ahead of him he could make out the shape of a payphone there on the corner of Dayton Street.

The telephone kept on ringing, demanding an answer.

Slowly, Brad approached the payphone. He stared at the receiver as if it might be a cobra rearing back to strike. He did not want to answer it, but his arm lifted and his hand reached towards that receiver, and he knew that if he heard that silken breathing and the metallic recorded voice on the other end he might start screaming and never be able to stop.

His hand closed around it. Started to lift it up.

"Hey, buddy!" someone said. "I wouldn't answer that if I was you."

Startled almost out of his skin, Brad whirled around.

A young man was sitting on the kerb across the street, smoking a cigarette, his legs stretched out before him. "I wouldn't," he cautioned.

Brad was oddly shocked by the sight of a flesh-and-blood man, as if he'd already forgotten what one looked like.

The young man was maybe in his early twenties, wearing scruffy jeans and a dark green shirt with the sleeves rolled up. He had sandy-brown hair that hung to his shoulders, and he looked to have a couple of days' growth of beard. He pulled on the cigarette and said, "Don't pick it up, man. Doom City."

"What?"

"I said... Doom City." The young man stood up; he was about six feet, thin and lanky. His workboots crunched leaves as he crossed the street, and Brad saw that he had a patch on the breast pocket of his shirt that identified him as a Sanitation Department workman. As the young man got closer, Kelly pressed her body against Brad's legs and tried to hide behind the Smurf doll. "Let it ring," the young man said. His eyes were pale green, deep-set and dazed. "If you were to pick that damned thing up... Doom City."

"Why do you keep saying that?"

"Because it is what it is. Somebody's tryin' to find all the strays. Tryin' to run us all down and finish the job. Sweep us all into the gutter, man. Close the world over our heads. Doom City." He blew a plume of smoke into the air that hung between them, unmoving.

"Who are you? Where'd you come from?"

"Name's Neil Spencer. Folks call me Spence. I'm a..." He paused for a few seconds, staring along Baylor Street. "I *used* to be a garbage man. 'Til today, that is. 'Til I got to work and found skeletons sitting in the garbage trucks. That was about three hours ago, I guess. I've been doin' a lot of walkin'. Lot of pokin' around." His gaze rested on the little girl, then back to Brad. The payphone was still ringing, and Brad felt the scream kicking behind his teeth. "You're the first two I've seen with skin," Spence said. "I've been sittin' over there for the last twenty minutes or so. Just waitin' for the world to end, I guess."

"What... happened?" Brad asked. Tears burned his eyes. "My God... my God... what *happened*?"

"Somethin' tore," Spence said tonelessly. "Ripped open. Somethin' won the fight, and I don't think it was who the preachers said was gonna win. I don't know... maybe Death got tired of waitin'. Same thing happened to the dinosaurs. Maybe it's happenin' to people now."

"There's *got* to be other people somewhere!" Brad shouted. "We can't be the only ones!"

"I don't know about that." Spence drew on his cigarette one last time and flicked the butt into the street. "All I know is, somethin' came in the night and had a feast, and when it was done it licked the plate clean. Only it's still hungry." He nodded towards the ringing phone. "Wants to suck on a few more bones. Like I said, man... Doom City. Doom City here, there and everywhere."

The phone gave a final, shrilling shriek and went silent.

Brad heard the child crying again, and he put his hand on her head, stroked her hair to calm her. He realised he was doing it with his bloody hand. "We've... we've got to go somewhere... got to *do* something..."

"Do what?" Spence asked laconically. "Go where? I'm open to suggestions, man."

From the next block came the distant sound of a telephone ringing. Brad stood with his bloody hand on Kelly's head, and he didn't know what to say.

"I want to take you somewhere, my friend," Spence told him. "Want to show you something real interestin'. Okay?"

Brad nodded, and he and the little girl followed Neil Spencer north along Dayton Street, past more silent houses and buildings.

Spence led them about four blocks to a Seven-Eleven store, where a skeleton in a yellow dress splotted with

blue and purple flowers lolled behind the cash register with a National Enquirer open on its jutting knees. "There you go," Spence said softly. He plucked a pack of Luckies off the display of cigarettes and nodded towards the small TV set on the counter. "Take a look at that, and tell me what we ought to do."

The TV set was on. It was a colour set, and Brad realised after a long, silent moment that the channel was tuned to one of those twenty-four-hour news networks. The picture showed two skeletons—one in a grey suit and the other in a wine-red dress—leaning crookedly over a newsdesk at centre camera; the woman had placed her hand on the man's shoulder, and yellow sheets of the night's news were scattered all over the desktop. Behind the two figures were three or four out-of-focus skeletons, frozen forever at their desks as well.

Spence lit another cigarette. An occasional spark of static shot across the unmoving TV picture. "Doom City," Spence said. "Not only here, man. It's everywhere. See?"

The telephone behind the counter suddenly started ringing, and Brad put his hands to his ears and screamed.

The phone's ringing stopped.

Brad lowered his hands, his breathing as rough and hoarse as a trapped animal's.

He looked down at Kelly Burch, and saw that she was smiling.

"It's all right," she said. "You don't have to answer. I found you, didn't I?"

Brad whispered, "What—"

The little girl giggled, and as she continued to giggle the laugh changed, grew in intensity and darkness, grew in power and evil until it became a triumphant roar that shook the windows of the Seven-Eleven store. "DOOM CITY!" the thing with pigtailed shrieked, and as the mouth strained open the eyes became silver, cold and dead, and from that awful crater of a mouth shot a blinding bolt of blue-white lightning that hit Neil Spencer and seemed to spin him like a top, throwing him off his feet and headlong through the Seven-Eleven's plate-glass window. He struck the pavement on his belly, and as he tried to get up again Brad Forbes saw that the flesh was dissolving from the young man's bones, falling away in chunks like dried-up tree bark.

Spence made a garbled moaning sound, and Brad went through the store's door with such force that he almost tore it from its hinges. His feet slivered with glass, Brad ran past Spence and saw the other man's skull grinning up at him as the body writhed and twitched.

"Can't get away!" the thing behind him shouted. "Can't! Can't! Can't!"

Brad looked back over his shoulder, and that was when he saw the lightning burst from her gaping mouth and hurtle through the broken window at him. He flung himself to the pavement, tried to crawl under a parked car.

Something hit him, covered him over like an ocean wave, and he heard the monster shout in a voice like the peal of thunder. He was blinded and stunned for a few seconds, but there was no pain... just a needles-and-pins prickling settling deep into his bones.

Brad got up, started running again. And as he ran he saw the flesh falling from his hands, saw pieces drifting down from his face; fissures ran through his legs, and as the flesh fell away he saw his own bones underneath.

"DOOM CITY!" he heard the monster calling. "DOOM CITY!"

Brad stumbled; he was running on bones, and had left the flesh of his feet behind him on the pavement. He fell, began to tremble and contort.

"I'm cold," he heard himself moan. "I'm cold..."

She awakened with the memory of thunder in her bones.

The house was quiet. The alarm clock hadn't gone off. Saturday, she realised. No work today. A rest day. But Lord, what a nightmare she'd had! It was fading now, all jumbled up and incoherent. There'd been thunderstorm last night—she remembered waking up, and seeing lightning flash. But whatever the nightmare had been, she couldn't recall now; she thought she remembered Brad saying something too, but now she didn't know what it was...

That light... so strange. Not like June light. More like... yes, like winter light.

Sarah got out of bed and walked across the room. She pushed aside the white curtain and peered out, squinting.

A grey fog hung in the trees and over the roofs of the houses on Baylor Street. Thunder rumbled in the distance, and Sarah Forbes said, "Brad? Honey? Take a look at this."

He didn't reply, nor did he stir. She glanced at him, saw the wave of his dark hair above the sheet that was pulled up over him like a shroud. "Brad?" she said again, and took a step towards the bed.

And suddenly Sarah remembered what he'd said last night, when she'd sat up in a sleepy daze to watch the lightning crackle.

I'm cold, I'm cold.

She grasped the edge of the sheet and pulled it back.

THE NIGHT I KILLED THE KING

by Robert McCammon and Paul Schulz

Ten o'clock on a Friday night. Nasty rain comin' down, like silver needles. Miralee and me were sittin' in the parkin' lot of the Kentucky Fried Chicken place in Eustace, Arkansas, our windows rolled up and steam on the glass. "Oh Lord!" she said suddenly. "Oh Lord, that's him! Look at the way he walks!" She sat up straight, and I picked the gun up from the floorboard.

Me and Elvis, we were one of a kind.

I always got mistook for him, even before Miralee dyed my hair black and froze it in the pompadour and I started wearin' the Elvis outfits. I'm talkin' about the *real* Elvis, of course, when he was somebody worth lookin' at and he hadn't lost the Tupelo snarl, not when he was big as a whale's belly and—God forgive me—all used up. I weigh about a hundred and fifty pounds soakin' wet, so my Elvis is the King of Dreams, back before he made them dog-ass movies and carried his soul in his wallet.

I'm not knockin' money now, hear? Money is the green grease that runs this world, and you gotta have a wad of it to get by in this day and age. I used to do all sorts of things; I've been a truck driver, a mechanic, a coffin polisher in a funeral home, a used-car salesman, and a bartender in a country-western joint. You do what you have to do to get by, am I right? And nobody ever said Dwayne Pressley wasn't one to grab hold of an opportunity when it come a'knockin'. That's why I started wearin' the Elvis outfits, doin' the makeup and all, and Miralee and me went into the soul-channelin' business.

Templin is a quiet town. Hell, Arkansas is a quiet *state*. Miralee, my girlfriend goin' on six years, works at the Sophisticated Lady Beauty Shoppe on Central Street in Templin. She can tell you right off: people in Templin have been starved for entertainment for years. Last entertainer who passed this way was Joey Heatherton, and her bus was lost on the way to the National Guard Armory in Eustace, forty miles south of us. Anyway, Miralee knew about my Elvis impressions. When you kinda look like the King and your last name is Pressley, you go with the flow, know what I mean? I can sing some, and it ain't hard to find somebody who can play a guitar. Miralee got the band together for me. She's a smart little lady, and ambitious to boot. She went right out and bought some Elvis tapes for the VCR, and I started studyin' 'em. This was right after I got fired from the Templin Tap Room for sellin' liquor to minors under the table. Man's got to make a profit, don't he? Hell, that's the American way! So, anyhow, I had plenty of time to lay in bed and study ol' Elvis in them concert videos. There were tapes of him just talkin', too, about his life and everythin', so I could get the twang of his accent Memphis-perfect. Then I started practicin' with the band. You know the songs: "Hound Dog," "Burnin' Love," "In the Ghetto," "Jailhouse Rock," all those tunes that make the memories glow like barbecue coals on a summer night. I was better at the motions than I was at the singin', but then again you might have to say the same thing about the King, too.

Miralee got the costumes for me, all them black leather and high-collared jobs covered with rhinestones. She talked Mr. Riggston at the Tap Room into lettin' us do a show there on a Saturday night, and if I said I wasn't sweatin' bullets I'd be a damn liar. The first few numbers were pretty bad, and I split my tight britches, but I just kept on goin' cause some woman screamed "ELVIS!" and it kinda fired me up. I found out later that Miralee gave her five dollars to do it. But we did good. So good Mr. Riggston wanted us back the next weekend, and he even put an ad in the *Templin Journal*. About a month after that, you couldn't stir the folks in the Tap Room with a thin stick. Like I say, people were starved for entertainment.

"Ain't no way!" I told Miralee, as I watched the fella go into the Kentucky Fried Chicken place. I was wearin' a cap to hide my pompadour, and I didn't have my Elvis makeup on. I put the pistol down again. "That can't be him. Fella's as big as a barn door."

"I say it *is* him!" Her eyes, blue as Christmas, locked on me in that way she has that'd make a pit bull turn tail. "You saw the way he walked!"

"Hell, he's a big fat guy. All big fat fellers waddle like that."

"No! I mean how he moved his shoulders! You know what I'm talkin' about, you've seen it a hundret times in those videos! I say that's him, and don't you say different!"

When Miralee gets excited, she don't want nobody to slap a wet rag in her face. And God knows I wouldn't want to try. Miralee is a hundred pounds of dynamite with a two second fuse. I just shrugged. The fella I'd seen shamle into the Kentucky Fried Chicken joint had worn a raggedy brown overcoat and had on a cowboy hat that looked puke green with mildew. He'd weighed maybe near three hundred pounds, and the collar of his coat was up so you

couldn't see even his profile. As far as I was concerned, it was just some big fat Eustace dude who wanted a bucketful of fried chicken at ten o'clock on a Friday night.

"I'm goin' in to see," Miralee said all of a sudden. She opened the door, slid out from under the Chevy's steerin' wheel, and stood in the rain. "Keep that damn gun ready," she told me, and before I could say yea or nay she was stridin' across the parkin' lot.

I watched her go in. I picked up the pistol again, a little snubnosed .38 with six bullets in it. I shook a bit; the night was chilly for mid-October. I watched the restaurant's front door, and my fingers played with the .38's bone-white grip. I was scared as hell, but my mind was made up. If the King showed up with a hankerin' for fried chicken on this rainy Friday night, I was gonna kill him.

We didn't stop with the shows at the Tap Room. We were packin' 'em in every Friday and Saturday night, and suddenly Mr. Riggston was my best buddy. But then Miralee started readin' a paperback book she'd bought at a garage sale, and she walked around the house with glassy eyes. When Miralee's thinkin', she's walkin'. Round and round the house, all night long, like a cat who hears a mouse but can't find the hole. I got a look at the book's cover: *My Seven Selves*, it was called. Written by some woman whose picture showed her in a long white robe starin' at a big crystal ball in her palm.

Miralee stopped her walkin'. One mornin' she looked at me and asked, in a quiet voice, "Dwayne? You ever hear of somethin' called channelin'?"

This was her drift: that some folks—and the lady in the white robe was one of 'em—could call back the souls of the dead and make 'em talk. Yessir, believe it! That these folks, channelers they were called, could let themselves be took over by the souls of dead people and the dead people would talk through 'em. "That's the most craziest thing I've ever heard in my—" I stopped what I was sayin', 'cause Miralee had a look on her face that makes silence golden.

"Crazy or not," Miralee said, "there's money in it."

My ears perked up like a hound dog's.

The road to riches is paved with suckers and that's God's honest truth. I started studyin' the Elvis tapes harder than ever, 'til I knew every twitch and sneer. I read that book by the white-robed woman, and though I didn't get the drift of all of it, I learned enough of the babble to get by. Mostly, I worked on my Elvis accent, 'cause Miralee said that soundin' like the King was gonna be real important. Then, when she thought I was ready, she called ads in to the newspapers in Little Rock, Memphis, Knoxville, Birmingham, and Atlanta. After that, we waited.

Wasn't two days before we got the first call, from a Tennessee woman. She wanted to know if her husband was messin' round on her, and since the ads said that Elvis knew everythin', just like God, she figured that he was the one to ask. She showed up at the house on a Tuesday afternoon—a little fireplug of a woman with a white beehive hairdo—and I was scared again like my first night on stage, but I gave her the show Miralee and I had worked out. I didn't pretend I *was* Elvis, see, but I pretended I was took over by his soul and channelin' him right there in the livin' room. I wore my Elvis outfit, of course, and I had my makeup on. Oh, I gave her a dandy show, fallin' down on one knee and gyratin' around and actin' up a storm. Then I took her hands and I said, "Darlin'," in the King's voice. She looked just about to faint. "Darlin'," I said, "your man's a good 'un. He knows he better not mess around on you, 'cause you'd leave his ass in a minute and find a young stud, wouldn't you?"

"I sure as hell would, Elvis!" she answered, in a choked-up voice.

"He best hold tight to you," I told her, "and you hold tight to him. You be a good wife to him, and he won't do no strayin'. That's what the King has to say to you, darlin'. And one more thing: you've been a mighty loyal fan and I sure do appreciate your love." Then I sang "Amazin' Grace" to her, real quiet-like, and she just about fell out of her chair. Tears ran down her cheeks. She held my hand to her face, and she kissed my ring that has the big E on it in false diamonds.

I didn't like it when she cried. I don't know; it made my heart hurt, kinda. I stood up and gave a few half-assed twists and shakes, and Miralee told the woman it was the King goin' back to Rock 'n Roll Heaven. Then Miralee told her it would be fifty dollars. The woman didn't flinch, but I did. I put on my sunglasses, and I watched the woman take bills out of her purse and scratch up some change. She only had forty-one dollars. We took it.

But by God if that woman didn't leave smilin' and happy. Miralee said, "Tell your friends about the King's comeback!" and that Tennessee woman answered, "I will, I will, you better believe I will, oh mercy I'm still shakin' like a schoolgirl!"

I went to the bathroom, took off my shades and looked at my face—the King's face—in the mirror. Lord, lord; what a world this has turned out to be.

The telephone rang. Fella from a little town in Georgia wanted to know if he should open up a bowlin' alley or not. Miralee said Elvis didn't give advice over long-distance. The fella said he'd be there to see us on Thursday night. And that was just the beginnin' of it.

People are lonely. They want to believe, more than anythin'. They want to connect with somethin', they want to see into the future. Listenin' to those people, and seein' 'em look at me like I was really Elvis... well, the world's just one big Heartbreak Hotel, and all of a sudden I had the room keys in my fist. At fifty dollars a pop, ten or twelve "fans" a week, you'd better believe Miralee and I were standin' hip-deep in high cotton.

I watched the Kentucky Fried Chicken place, the pistol in my hand and rain runnin' down the windshield. The door came open, and Miralee walked out. Walkin' fast, too. My heart started hammerin'. She was comin' back to the car. I didn't want to hear what she was gonna tell me, not really. I wasn't ready for it. But then she slid back under the steerin' wheel, her black hair drenched, and she looked at me and said, "It's him. I swear to God it is." Her voice was steady, not nervous at all. She was ready, even if I wasn't. "He's buyin' two buckets of chicken, and he'll be out in a minute or two. Lord, he's gotten so fat!"

"It's not him," I said. "No way."

"I heard his voice. He tried to disguise it, and he sounds like he's been garglin' with glass, but I'd know that voice anywhere." She nodded, her mind made up. "It's him, all right. When he comes out the door, you go get him." She turned the key, and the noise of the engine firin' made me jump. "Can you believe it?" Miralee asked me, her knuckles bleachin' white as she gripped the wheel. "That sumbitch pretends to be dead for goin' on ten years, and he shows up just when our business is gettin' good!" She revved the engine, and the Chevy shook like a bull about to charge.

And that was the point, of course. That was why we were sittin' out there in front of the Kentucky Fried Chicken place, and me with a gun in my hand. We'd been hauntin' that parkin' lot for over a week, waitin' for the King to show up. *Stalkin'* him, I guess you might say. We had to kill him. Had to. See, we were makin' almost a thousand scoots a week soul-channelin' the King into our livin' room, and then all of a sudden the *Midnite Tattler* reports that a Zippy Mart clerk in Eustace says Elvis walked in at three o'clock in the mornin' and bought an armload of Little Debbie cakes and a six-pack of Dr. Pepper, and that he winked at her and left hummin' "My Way." She said he'd changed a lot, of course, but she was an Elvis fan and could see it was him right off. Not long after that, a fella says he was huntin' squirrels in the woods north of Eustace when he comes face-to-face with the King pissin' in the bushes. Said Elvis squawled and took off like Bigfoot, and that he moved mighty fast for a man his size. Well, it wasn't long before other folks said they'd seen Elvis too, and by God if some agent fella from New York didn't go on a TV show and tell the world he'd been communicatin' with Elvis over the phone for the last two months, that the King had been hidin' out and now he wanted to get back into show business, write a book, and star in a movie of his life and all.

You can guess what happened to our business. How can you soul-channel Elvis if he's still alive? Folks wanted their money back, and some of 'em even said they were gonna put the law on us. And while all that was goin' on, the reporters were swarmin' all over Eustace tryin' to hunt the King down. Miralee and me both knew a stone-cold fact: if the reporters found Elvis, we were fit to be flushed.

Where to look was the problem. I remembered somethin' from one of the tapes. Elvis was a young fella, sharp and lean as a blade, and he was about to go over to Europe in the Army. Reporter asked him what he was gonna miss most, and he drawled it with a sneer: "Southern fried chicken."

We knew that sooner or later, if the King was anywhere near Eustace, he'd make a late-night run on the only Kentucky Fried Chicken place in twenty miles.

But with that pistol in my hand and murder on my mind, I hoped I'd been wrong. I hoped Miralee was wrong too, but she's got a good eye. She sure as hell would know Elvis if she saw him, even if he did weigh near three hundred pounds.

The Kentucky Fried Chicken's front door opened, and the King waddled out into the rain with his booty of buckets.

I saw it, then. The way he walked. Movin' his shoulders. Somethin' you just can't explain. Somethin'... kingly. Like he owned the world, and everybody else was just rentin' space. Seein' him in the flesh, even that big and all, froze me. I said, "Miralee, that's not him," because I didn't want it to be.

She said, "Go *get* him," and she gave me a shove.

He was headin' to a beat-up rust-bucket of a brown Cadillac. The rain was fallin' harder, and when I got out of the Chevy the rain pelted my shoulders. I had the pistol clenched in my hand, and I started walkin' toward the King.

"Hurry!" Miralee urged.

Elvis must've heard. He stopped dead, holdin' onto his buckets. He looked at me, his face hidden under the mildewed cowboy hat. I could tell he had three or four chins. I lifted the gun, and I said, "Into the car and get come on."

"Huh?" That voice. Oh lord, that voice.

I got my tongue untangled on the next try. "Come on and get into the car!" I motioned toward the Chevy.

"I ain't nobody!" he said, clingin' to his buckets so hard they were startin' to bust open at the seams and fried chicken pieces were squeezin' out. "You don't know me! I ain't nobody!"

"I know who you are," I said, and I meant it.

The bottom popped out of one of his buckets, and chicken wings fell out.

I pulled the hammer back. "Let's go," I told him. My hand was shakin' so hard I'm surprised the gun didn't go off right then and there. The King lifted his thick arms and dropped the buckets, and he walked over fried chicken toward Miralee and the Chevy. I opened the back door for him and he squeezed in, then I climbed in right after him.

Miralee hit the gas as soon as the door was closed, and we headed out of the parkin' lot.

"We got him!" Miralee said, merrily. "We got that big sumbitch, didn't we!" She drove us over a curb and I heard the King's teeth click together. "We got him, sure did!"

"We got him!" I answered, half about to laugh and half about to cry. "Right here in the car he sits!" I poked him in the belly with the gun's barrel, just to make sure he was real, and my arm almost sank wrist-deep in flab. Elvis smelled like a pigpen, and he had a gray beard that didn't hide his triple chins. His clothes—blue jeans, a red checked shirt and that brown overcoat—were blotched with food stains. He breathed like a bellows, and I swear he made the whole car tilt slightly to one side.

"I ain't nobody," Elvis said. "I ain't nobody at all, mister."

"You're Elvis Presley and I got a damn gun in your belly!" I hollered at him. "You been hidin' and pretendin' you're dead and I got a good soul-channelin' business goin' and then you decide to come back to life so where does that leave me, huh?"

"Where does that leave *us*?" Miralee corrected, driving through the rain. The wipers were sluggish, and they made a skreeking sound across the glass. We'd been plannin' on buyin' us a new BMW when we had thirty thousand dollars saved up.

"I ain't no—" He stopped, 'cause he must've known it was no use. He just sat starin' at nothin', his head titled forward. "I knew it couldn't be forever," he said, quiet-like. He shook his head. "Knew it couldn't be." He looked at me; I couldn't see his eyes under that hat, but I knew they must still be keen. I knew his stare could still strip the bark off a tree; I felt its power, directed right at me. Elvis said, "What're ya'll plannin' on doin' with me?"

"We're gonna kill you," Miralee told him, as brightly as you please. "Take you out to the woods and kill you. Bury you deep, too." I flinched a little, because I was thinkin' of how big the hole would have to be. We had a pickaxe and a shovel in the trunk. "You wanted to be dead, didn't you?" she asked. "Well, we're gonna help you out."

I have to say, I thought it was pretty disrespectful puttin' it this way to the King. I mean, I was ready to kill him and all, but... I was still respectful. The King was fat and he smelled like a goat, but he was still the King. Until I got around to killin' him, I mean.

Elvis just sat there, and didn't say a word.

Miralee suddenly hollered and swerved the wheel, 'cause a van with ABC NEWS on the side came out of the rain and almost knocked us off the road. A few seconds later, a car with CBS NEWS and a blue blinker on it swept past us, movin' fast. Like I said, the reporters were crawlin' all over Eustace, tryin' to hunt Elvis down. We were headin' out of town to find a good spot in the woods, but a red light caught us before we got more than a mile away from the Kentucky Fried Chicken joint. Miralee pulled up beside a white station wagon that had somethin' written on the passenger door. I saw what it was: THE GERALDO RIVERA SHOW.

The King saw it too, and in the next second he moved like he had lightning in his pants. He whipped that door open and bellowed, "I'm Elvis Presley! They're gonna kill me!" and by that time I had an arm around his neck tryin' to keep him from gettin' out. He got stuck in the door, and Miralee was screamin', "Don't let him out! Don't let him out!" I jabbed the gun's barrel into his back, but he kept on thrashin'.

Fella got out of the station wagon. I saw who it was. That fella who went to Chicago to dig up Al Capone's vault. He reached out for Elvis, and Elvis strained to grip his hand. That was when the light changed, and Miralee stomped her foot down on the pedal. The Chevy laid rubber, Elvis still tryin' to squeeze through the open door, and that TV fella gave a shout and jumped back into the station wagon's passenger side. His driver gave it the gas too, and started after us. Miralee shouted, "Get that door shut, Dwayne!" The King's blue sneakers were shreddin' on the pavement. I don't believe he wanted to jump, with the engine revvin' up toward fifty. He pulled himself back into the car with a big whuff of breath, and I reached over his belly and slammed the door shut. The station wagon with that TV fella in it was right on our tail, comin' up fast so they could read the license plate. Well, there was just one thing to do about that, wasn't there? I cranked the window on my side down, leaned out into the wind and rain, and shot at the station wagon's tires. My cap flew off my head, my pompadour whippin' around like a scalded poodle. My third bullet knocked out one of the wagon's headlights, and then the driver didn't feel so nosy; he hit the brakes, and the wagon skidded off the road into a tangle of kudzu vines.

We were out beyond the town limits by now. I cranked the window up and sat there shakin', realizin' I could've killed either one of those two fellas. Only one I wanted to kill was the King, and to tell the truth I was feelin' a bit queasy about the whole business. Miralee was still flyin' us along that rain-slick highway, but I said, "Don't want a trooper pullin' us over, babe," and she cut the speed some.

I felt Elvis starin' at me again. He said, in his raspy, old man's voice, "I've got money. I'll give you all of it."

"Don't say that," I told him. I just couldn't stand it if the King started to beg. "You sit there and be quiet, all right?"

Miralee's head had cocked. "Money? How much money?"

"We're supposed to kill him, not rob him!" I complained, but she shot me a hard glance in the rearview mirror and I buttoned my lip.

"How much money?" she asked Elvis.

"A lot. A whole lot, darlin'." I winced when he used that word. "My place is six, seven miles from here. I'll show

you. You don't really want to kill me, do you?"

Miralee didn't say nothin'. I didn't either. My throat was so dry I probably couldn't have said anythin'. I mean, it's one thing to plan on killin' somebody and another to do it. I guess it was the sound of the shots that got to me, or the way the gun smelled. Maybe it was the fact that the King was sittin' beside me, livin' and breathin'. No, no! I had to quit thinkin' like that! If I didn't kill him, our business was washed up! I had to go through with this, if I liked it or not!

Miralee said, "Show us where you live." Her voice was silky; it was the way she asked me to go down in the basement and clean out the spiders.

We got to the King's place about fifteen minutes later. It was one of them tin burritos rural gents of, ahem, modest means seem to prefer. Graceland West was certainly a step down for the King. Only two things separated it from the run-of-the-mill poor-boy estate: the satellite dish off to one side and the dumpster located where most folks might put their trash cans. The dumpster looked full to overflowin', too.

I stopped the car on the graveled area in front of the King's home. Miralee got out of the Chevy first and ran up to the trailer door. She ducked inside, then stuck her head out and waved us in.

"Don't try anything now, King," I told him, and jabbed the .38 into his blubber. "Just get out nice an' easy, and walk into your home."

Once in the trailer, you could see that the King's taste in interior decoratin' fit in with his current fashion statement. Dirty clothes, empty chicken buckets, and food wrappers were strewn all about the livin' room. There was an old record player pushed against one wall, right under a velvet picture of the King in his Las Vegas days. On top of the TV was a glass statue of the King. All in all, the place looked about as invitin' as a Beirut swap meet.

"I suppose you want to know why I left it all," the King wheezed out as he settled into a La-Z-Boy.

"No, we don't," I said. "The only thing we want from you is the money you got hid out here. Where is it?"

"Oh, it's buried outside. Let me rest up a minute and we'll go get it. But anyway," the King continued, "it was in the spring of '77. One of my boys had been on vacation in England. When he got back, he brought me a little present. He said it was the biggest thing goin' over there. Thought I might get a real kick outta listenin' to what trash the kids were into.

"Well, I played that record, son. And it changed me. See, no matter what else I'd been over the years, I'd always had the Power within me. The music was the Power. Hearin' that song was like pissin' my pants. I could just feel my life drainin' away. When it was over, I was empty. There was no music left in me. I just knew I couldn't go on like before."

The King paused for a minute. I looked over to Miralee, to see what she made of all this. She was starin' at the King, but not in that nasty way she has. No, she seemed to be really payin' attention to this crap.

"I talked to the Colonel about it," the King started up again. "And we decided that I should get away for awhile, out of the public eye, 'til I was feelin' right. That's why I went underground, so to speak. Just bidin' my time, waitin' for the Power to come back to me."

"What changed then, King?" Miralee asked. Boy, she really seemed to be into it now.

"About six months ago, I read somethin' in the *Midnite Tattler* about a Harmonica Conversion. This Conversion was supposed to be some kinda mystical moment when all the spheres would line up. The *Tattler* said it was a real special time when anything might happen, even the Second Coming of the King. So I started to pave the way back for me."

"I read about that, too," Miralee jumped in. "But it said you needed a special charm to help focus the astral energies."

Elvis turned to face Miralee. "Yeah, darlin', that's right. See that little statue on the TV? There's my talisman. Got it from the Home Shopping Club for \$49.95. I've been concentratin' at it for weeks now, tryin' to make it work. Nothin's happened yet, but I can feel that the time is almost at hand."

"Say, son." The King looked at me now. "I'll bet you'd sure like to know what it was exactly that caused me to drop outta sight. Why don't you reach into that drawer next to you and I'll show you."

I opened the drawer slowly, expectin' a snake to jump out. The only thing in it was an old 45 in a greasy paper sleeve. The title on the single was blurred out and I could only make out part of the band's name: -ex Pis-

"Real impressive, King," I said, tossin' him the record. "Now, why don't we head outside and get that money before it rots in the ground."

"Just give me another minute or so," the King said. "I really want the two of you to hear this."

The King waddled over to the record player and put the single on. Out of the speakers blasted a noise like a car crusher sinkin' its teeth into an old pickup. The singer, if that's what you'd call a guy who sounds like he'd just got a butt full of buckshot, was screechin' somethin' about the Anti-Christ, Anarchy, or whatever. Just listenin' to a few seconds of it was enough to make my fillin's ache.

"Christ almighty, King!" I yelled. "Those pig farts are what made you give up your music?" Killin' him would be an act of mercy. He must already be tone dead.

The King didn't hear a word I said. He seemed to be in some kind of trance, starin' at the crystal Elvis. The statue had started to flicker with a weird milky light. The light got stronger and stronger as the song rasped on. By the

time the song got to the last chorus, it was bright enough to cast five o'clock shadows in the room.

"This is it!" the King said. "It's the Harmonica Conversion! I can feel it! My music's comin' back to me!"

The King lumbered toward the TV; Miralee got up off the couch to stop him. The King may have been plumped up like a Christmas goose, but he still had some speed left in him. He put one of those karate moves you used to see him do on stage to Miralee, and she ended up face down back on the couch. The King picked up the crystal Elvis and cradled it as if it was his day-old Lisa Marie. It was funny too, but in the light of the statue the fat seemed to melt off his face and, just for an instant, you could see the real King underneath.

That damn song finally ended. As the last note bleated away, the King turned around and faced me. He had a really odd look in his eyes, sorta like a starvin' teenager eyein' a jumbo bag of Doritos.

"Come on over here, son. I've got somethin' to show you."

I glanced over at Miralee. She was still out cold on the couch. Things were gettin' a little too weird. It was time to wrap it up.

"Okay, King," I said, though my voice wasn't any too strong. "Why don'tcha just put down that figurine and we'll go outside and dig up that stash of yours." Once the money was out of the ground, I figured the King's grave would be half dug. A quick headshot, ten minutes of shovel work, and Miralee and I would be out of here.

The King took a step toward me. "Well, son, I have to admit that I told you a little lie there. There ain't no stash. I get my money from the Colonel a little bit at a time, and this month's check hasn't come yet. But here, why don't you take this beautiful statue instead? It oughta be worth somethin'. Here."

He held out the statue. The damn thing was still glowin'. Lookin' at it made me feel a little dizzy. It was gettin' hard to keep my mind on things. I took a step back and pointed the .38 at the King.

"Turn that damn thing off before I shoot it outta your hand!" I screamed at the King.

The King just grinned and moved in. It struck me that things weren't workin' out the way Miralee and I planned. The King seemed to be followin' his own agenda now.

"Stop right there or I'll drop you where you stand!"

"But I thought that's what you came lookin' for me for." The King was gettin' too close. A few more steps and he might try that karate crap on me.

BANG! The pistol seemed to fire on its own. The King grabbed his left leg and fell to the carpet. When his 300+ pounds hit, the whole damn trailer shook. The phonograph started up and the -ex Pis- began caterwaulin' all over again.

Sweet Jesus, I couldn't believe it! I had actually shot the King. Dwayne Pressley, the Assassin of Rock 'n' Roll. That's how I'd be remembered. I didn't want to finish him off now. To hell with that stupid plan of Miralee's. I dropped the .38 and walked over to him. He just lay there, curled up like a baby, huggin' his leg and that glass Elvis.

"Oh, God, I'm sorry, King," I bawled to him. "I really didn't mean to shoot you. I ain't never shot at anything but squirrels before. Just lie still 'til I can get you a doctor."

The King rolled over to face me. "It's too late for that now, son. I'm a goner."

Now that statement seemed to be a bit odd, comin' from a man who had only been grazed in the leg. I figured the pain must have addled his wits. I saw an old sock on the floor and pressed it against the wound.

"Don't you worry now, King. You're gonna be alright."

"You're right. I'm gonna be just fine."

With that, he swung that crystal statue at my head. Only instead of hittin' my skull, it felt like it passed straight through my brain. I felt a cold shiver go all the way from my eyeballs down to my tail bone. Things got all white and I couldn't see anything except for a black dot a long ways away. The dot came closer and closer, 'til I finally got sucked all the way in.

I don't know how long I was out. When I woke up, I felt tired and fuzzy. My left leg hurt like the dickens, and I couldn't move my arms or legs. I guess I must have been sittin' up, though I couldn't really make sense of things. The King was standin' in front of me, but he looked different. He seemed to be a lot skinnier than before, and better dressed. In fact, he was wearin' my clothes. And my Miralee was standin' next to him. They were whisperin' somethin' I couldn't quite hear.

"Are you awake yet, Dwayne?" Miralee asked.

"Barely," I croaked back at her. Funny, but my voice sounded different. "Say, what happened to the King? How'd he get my duds on?"

"The Harmonica Conversion, son," the King answered. Even his voice seemed changed now. Not quite right, as if he was tryin' to do a poor imitation of hisself. "It gave me back the Power. With a little help from you all, of course."

I peeked down. Below me ballooned out some stubbly layers of chin flab, a food-speckled checked shirt, and some overstuffed blue jeans. The body fillin' the clothes seemed to be taped to one of the dinette chairs. I looked back in horror at the King.

"You damned thief! You stole my body!"

"I wouldn't call it stealin'. More like tradin' in mine on a newer model."

"Well, I don't much like the terms of the trade!" I told the King. "Put me back in my own body right now!"

"Now, why would I want to do somethin' like that, son?" the King asked. "I've been waitin' for the Power to come back, and I'm not gonna lose it now."

"Miralee, help me! What about our undyin' love, all those nights in the back of the Chevy? What about my career, the big future ahead? Untie me, honey, and we'll get this hoodoo hillbilly to put things right!"

"I don't think we can do that," Miralee piped in. "See, accordin' to the books, the Harmonica Conversion only comes around once every 34,521 years. A soul swap can only happen at that time. And the moment's gone, Dwayne. 'Course, you could always hang around 'til the next one and try again."

"You mean I'm stuck in this overstuffed sausage?" I screamed at them.

"Yes, but don't worry," Miralee said. "Just follow the *Midnite Tattler* crawdad-and-whipped-cream diet and those pounds will fly off in no time."

"Besides," Miralee continued, "I kinda like things the way they are now. Why should I keep workin' on makin' you into a blue-light-special version of the King, when I can have the real thing?" She reached over and squeezed my old body's arm.

I turned my glare back to the King. "Well, body snatcher, what are you gonna do now? I'll get the FBI after you soon as I get free."

"Son," the King drawled, "who'd believe you? You're wearin' Elvis Aron Presley's body now. Tell your story and all you'll get is a comfortable suite at the local fruit farm. Best settle in and make the best of it."

"As for me, well, I'm gonna try usin' the Power again. Of course, with the real Elvis field bein' so full up, the real King comin' back and all, I'm gonna have to get me another style. Think the world is ready for a down-home Johnny Rotten?"

"Miralee, darlin'," I pleaded with her, "help me!"

"Now hush up, Dwayne," Miralee said. "Elvis bandaged up your leg, and you'll be just fine. The newspeople will be comin' across this place in a few hours, and they'll cut you free. Just think of this as your big break. You'll be able to do the King now for the rest of your life."

After she spoke her piece, she linked arms with my old body and left the trailer. On his way out, the King began singin' a snatch of a tune about feelin' pretty vacant. I heard my Chevy fire up and roar off into the night. I stared at the glassy lump on the floor, all that was left of the Elvis statue after the big changearoo. At that moment, the lump kinda matched the feelin's in my heart.

Well, I had a long time to think things over. Even if the world believed my story, the King was right; no person in their mind, even *Midnite Tattler* readers, would buy into this yarn. The return of the King was gonna be enough of a shock as is. A line from an old movie kept runnin' through my head: "The King is dead. Long live the King." Well, maybe it was true now in more ways than one. The old King everyone knew was gone for good now. Maybe it was time for a new one.

The newspeople didn't get to me 'til late Saturday night. By that time, I was ready. I heard a car squeal to a halt outside the trailer. The door burst open and bright camera lights were shinin' in my eyes. That Al Capone fella stuck a mike in my face and started jabberin' away.

"America, this is certainly the most momentous event of my life! Even my special on the pagan groundhog cults of Fort Lynn, New Jersey, must pale beside this! Twelve years after his purported death, the King of Rock and Roll, Elvis Presley, has turned up alive and well in a trailer outside Eustace, Arkansas. So many questions to answer, so many mysteries to unravel, so many ratings to improve! Elvis, your public awaits! What do you have to say to them after all this time?"

I looked him straight in the eye. I cleared my throat, and then I spoke, as the King, for the first time. "Well, son, before we get to talkin', it might be a good idea for you to cut me loose. And while you're at it, pass me over that box of moon-pies."

NIGHT CALLS THE GREEN FALCON

1. Never Say Die

He was in the airplane again, falling towards the lights of Hollywood.

Seconds ago the craft had been a sleek silver beauty with two green-painted propellers, and now it was coming apart at the seams like wet cardboard. The controls went crazy, he couldn't hold the stick level, and as the airplane fell he clinched his parachute pack tighter around his chest and reached up to pop the canopy out. But the canopy was jammed shut, its hinges red with clots of rust. The propellers had seized up, and black smoke whirled from the engines. The plane nosed towards the squat, ugly buildings that lined Hollywood Boulevard, a scream of wind passing over the fuselage.

He didn't give up. That wasn't his way. He kept pressing against the canopy, trying to force the hinges, but they were locked tight. The buildings were coming up fast, and there was no way to turn the airplane because the rudder and ailerons were gone too. He was sweating under his green suit, his heart beating so hard he couldn't hear himself think. There had to be a way out of this; he was a never-say-die type of guy. His eyes in the slits of the green cowl ticked to the control panel, the jammed hinges, the dead stick, the smoking engines, back to the control panel in a frantic geometry.

The plane trembled; the port side engine was ripping away from the wing. His green boots kicked at the dead rudder pedals. Another mighty heave at the canopy, another jerk of the limp control stick—and then he knew his luck had, at long last, run out. It was all over.

Going down fast now, the wings started to tear away. Klieg lights swung back and forth over the boulevard, advertising somebody else's premiere. He marked where the plane was going to hit: a mustard-yellow five-floored brick building about eight blocks east of the Chinese Theatre. He was going to hit the top floor, go right into somebody's apartment. His hands in their green gloves clenched the armrests. No way out... no way out...

He didn't mourn for himself so much, but someone innocent was about to die, and that he couldn't bear. Maybe there was a child in that apartment, and he could do nothing but sit in his trap of straps and glass and watch the scene unfold. No, he decided as the sweat ran down his face. No, I can't kill a child. Not another one. I WON'T! This script has to be re-written. It wasn't fair, that no one had told him how this scene would end. Surely the director was still in control. Wasn't he? "Cut!" he called out as the mustard-yellow building filled up his horizon. "Cut" he said again, louder - then screamed it: "CUT!"

The airplane crashed into the building's fifth floor, and he was engulfed by a wall of fire and agony.

2. An Old Relic

He awoke, his flesh wet with nightmare sweat and his stomach burning with the last flames of an enchilada TV dinner.

He lay in the darkness, the springs of his mattress biting into his back, and watched the lights from the boulevard—reflections of light—move across the cracked ceiling. A fan stuttered across his chest of drawers, and from down the hall he could hear the LaPrestas hollering at each other again. He lifted his head from the sodden pillow and looked at his alarm clock on the table beside his bed; twenty-six minutes past twelve, and the night had already gone on forever.

His bladder throbbed. Right now it was working, but sometimes it went haywire and he peed in his sheets. The laundromat on the corner of Cosmo street was not a good place to spend a Saturday night. He roused himself out of bed, his joints clicking back into their sockets and the memory of the nightmare scorched into his mind. It was from Chapter One of *Night Calls The Green Falcon*, RKO Studios, 1949. He remembered how he'd panicked when he couldn't get the plane's canopy up, because he didn't like closed places. The director had said, "Cut!" and the canopy's hinges had been oiled and the sequence had gone like clockwork the second time around.

The nightmare would be back, and so would the rest of them—a reel of car crashes, falls from buildings, gunshots, explosions, even a lion's attack. He had survived all of them, but they kept trying to kill him again and again. Mr. Thatcher at the Burger King said he ought to have his head looked at, and maybe that was true. But Mr. Thatcher was only a kid, and The Green Falcon had died before was born.

He stood up. Slid his feet into slippers. Picked his robe off a chair and shrugged into it, covering his pajamas. His

eyes found the faded poster taped to the wall: NIGHT CALLS THE GREEN FALCON, it said, and showed an assemblage of fistfights, car crashes and various other action scenes. IN TEN EXCITING CHAPTERS! the poster promised. STARRING CREIGHTON FLINT, "THE GREEN FALCON."

"The Green Falcon has to piss now," he said, and he unlocked the door and went out into the hallway.

The bathroom was on the other side of the building. He trudged past the elevator and the door where the LaPrestras were yelling. Someone else shouted for them to shut up, but when they got going there was no stopping them. Seymour, the super's cat, slinked past, hunting rats, and the old man knocked politely at the bathroom door before he entered. He clicked on the light, relieved himself at the urinal and looked away from the hypodermic needles that were lying around the toilet. When he finished, he picked up the needles and put them in the trashcan, then washed his hands in the rust-stained sink and walked back along the corridor to his apartment.

Old gears moaned. The elevator was coming up. It opened when he was almost even with it. Out walked his next-door neighbor, Julie Saufley, and a young man with close-cropped blonde hair.

She almost bumped into him, but she stopped short. "Hi, Cray. You're prowlin' around kinda late, aren't you?"

"Guess so." Cray glanced at the young man. Julie's latest friend had pallid skin that was odd in sun-loving California, and his eyes were small and very dark. Looks like an extra in a Nazi flick, Cray thought, and then returned his gaze to Julie, whose dark brown hair was cut in a Mohawk and decorated with purple spray. Her spangled blouse and short leather skirt were so tight he couldn't fathom how she could draw a breath. "Had to use the bathroom," he said. Didn't that just sound like an old fool? he asked himself. When he was forty years younger such a statement to a pretty girl would have been unthinkable.

"Cray was a movie star," Julie explained to her friend. "Used to be in... what did they call them, Cray?"

"Serials," he answered. Smiled wanly. "Cliff-hangers. I was the—"

"I'm not paying you for the tour of the wax museum, baby." The young man's voice was taut and mean, and the sound of it made Cray think of rusted barbed wire. A match flared along the side of a red matchbook; the young man lit a cigarette, and the quick yellow light made his eyes look like small ebony stones. "Let's get done what we came here for," he said, with a puff of smoke in Cray Flint's direction.

"Sure." Julie shrugged. "I just thought you might like to know he used to be famous, that's all."

"He can sign my autograph book later. Let's go." Spidery white fingers slid around her arm and drew her away.

Cray started to tell him to release her, but what was the use? There were no gentlemen anymore, and he was too old and used up to be anyone's champion. "Be careful Julie," he said as she guided the man to her apartment.

"My name's Crystal this week," she reminded him. Got her keys out of her clutch purse. "Coffee in the morning?"

"Right." Julie's door opened and closed. Cray went into his room and eased himself into a chair next to the window. The boulevard's neon pulse painted red streaks across the walls. The street denizens were out, would be out until dawn, and every so often a police car would run them into the shadows, but they always returned. Like Julie did. She'd been in the building four months, was just twenty years old, and Cray couldn't help but feel some grandfatherly concern for her. Maybe it was more than that, but so what? Lately he'd been trying to help her get off those pills she popped like candy, and encouraged her to write to her parents back in Minnesota. Last week she'd called herself Amber; such was the power of Hollywood, a city of masks.

Cray reached down beside his chair and picked up the well-worn leather book that lay there. He could hear the murmur of Julie's voice through the paper-thin wall; then her customer's, saying something. Silence. A police car's siren on the boulevard, heading west. The squeak of mattress springs from Julie's apartment. Over in the corner, the scuttling of a rat in the wall. Where was Seymour when you needed him? Cray opened his memory book and looked at the yellowed newspaper clipping from the Belvedere, Indiana, *Banner* of March 21st, 1946, that said, "Hometown Football Hero Hollywood-Bound." There was a picture of himself, when he was still handsome and had a head full of hair. Other clippings—his mother had saved them—were from his high school and college days, and they had headlines like "Boomer Wins Gymnastic Medal" and "Boomer Breaks Track-Meet Record." That was his real name: Creighton Boomershine. The photographs were of a muscular, long-legged kid with a lopsided grin and the clear eyes of a dreamer.

Long gone, Cray thought, long gone.

He had had his moment in the sun. It had almost burned him blind but it had been a lovely light. He had turned sixty-three in May, an old relic. Hollywood worshipped at the altar of youth. Anyway, nobody made his kind of pictures anymore. Four serials in four years and then—

"Cut," he thought. No use stirring up all that murky water. He had to get back to bed, because morning would find him mopping the floor in the Burger King three blocks west, and Mr. Thatcher liked clean floors.

He closed his memory book and put it aside. On the floor was a section of yesterday's L.A. Times; he'd already read the paper, but a headline caught his attention: "Flip-Top Killer Challenges Police." Beneath that was a story about the Fliptop, and the eight photographs of the street people whose throats had been savagely slashed in the last two months. Cray had known one of them: a middle-aged woman called Auntie Sunglow, who rocketed along the boulevard on roller skates singing Beatles songs at the top of her lungs. She was crazy, yes, but she always had a kind tune for him. Last week she'd been found in a trash dumpster off Sierra Bonita, her head almost severed from her neck.

Bad times, Cray mused. Couldn't think of any worse. Hopefully the police would nail the Fliptop before he—or she—killed again, but he didn't count on it. All the street people he knew were watching their backs.

Something struck the wall in Julie's apartment. It sounded like it might have been a fist.

Cray heard the springs squalling, like a cat being skinned alive. He didn't know why she sold her body for such things, but he'd learned long ago that people did what they had to do to survive.

There was another blow against the wall. Something crashed over, a chair, maybe.

Cray stood up. Whatever was going on over there it sounded rough. Way too rough. He heard no voices, just the awful noise of the springs. He went to the wall and pounded on it. "Julie?" he called. "You all right?"

No answer. He put his ear to the wall, and heard what he thought might have been a shuddering gasp.

The squall of the springs had ceased. Now he could hear only his own heartbeat. "Julie?" He pounded on the wall again. "Julie, answer me!" When she didn't respond, he knew something was terribly wrong. He went out to the corridor, sweat crawling down his neck, and as he reached out to grip the doorknob of Julie's apartment he heard a scraping noise that he knew must be the window being pushed upward.

Julie's window faced the alley. The fire escape, Cray realized. Julie's customer was going down the fire escape.

"Julie!" he shouted. He kicked at the door, and his slipper flew off. Then he threw his shoulder against it, and the door cracked on its hinges but didn't give. Again he rammed into the door, and a third time. On the fourth blow the door's hinges tore away from the wood and it crashed down, sending Cray sprawling into the apartment.

He got up on his hands and knees, his shoulder hurting like hell. The young man was across the untidy room, still struggling with the reluctant windowsill, and he paid Cray no attention. Cray stood up, and looked at the bed where Julie lay, naked, on her back.

He caught his breath as if he'd been punched in the stomach. The blood was still streaming from the scarlet mass of Julie Saufley's throat, and it has splattered across the wall like weird calligraphy. Her eyes were wet and aimed up at the ceiling, her hands gripped around the bars of the iron bedframe. Without clothes, her body was white and childlike, and she hardly had any breasts at all. The blood was everywhere. So red. Cray's heart was laboring. As he stared at the slashed throat he heard the window slide up. He blinked, everything hazy and dreamlike, and watched the young man climb through the window onto the fire escape.

Oh, God, Cray thought. He wavered on his feet, feared he was about to faint. Oh, my God...

Julie had brought the Fliptop killer home to play.

His first impulse was to shout for help, but he squelched it. He knew the shout would rob his breath and strength, and right now he needed both of them. The LaPrestas were still fighting. What would one more shout be? He stepped forward. Another step, and a third one followed. With the rusty ability of a champion gymnast, he ran to the open window and slid out to the fire escape.

The Fliptop killer was about to go down the ladder. Cray reached out, grasped the young man's T-shirt in his freckled fist, and said hoarsely, "No."

The man twisted toward him. The small black eyes regarded him incuriously: the emotionless gaze of a clinician. There were a few spatters of blood on his face, but not many. Practice had honed his reflexes, and he knew how to avoid the jetting crimson. Cray gripped his shirt; they stared at each other for a few ticks of time, and then the killer's right hand flashed up with an extra finger of metal.

The knife swung at Cray's face, but Cray had already seen the blow coming in the tension of the man's shoulder, and as he let go of the shirt and scrambled backward, the blade hissed past.

And now the Fliptop killer stepped toward him—a long stride, knife upraised, the face cold and without expression, as if he were about to cut a hanging piece of beef. But a woman screamed from an open window, and as the man's head darted to the side, Cray grasped the wrist of his knife hand and shouted, "Call the po—"

A fist hit him in the face, crumpling his nose and mashing his lips. He pitched back, stunned—and he fell over the fire escape's railing into empty space.

3. A Red Matchbook

His robe snagged on a jagged edge of metal. The cloth ripped, almost tore off him, and for three awful seconds he was dangling five floors over the alley, but then he reached upward and his fingers closed around the railing.

The Fliptop Killer was already scrambling down the fire escape. The woman—Mrs. Sargenza, bless her soul—was still screaming, and now somebody else was hollering from another window and the Fliptop Killer clambered down to the alley with the speed and power of a born survivor.

Cray pulled himself up, his legs kicking and his shoulder muscles standing out in rigid relief. He collapsed onto his knees when he'd made it to the landing's safety. He thought he might have to throw up enchiladas, and his stomach heaved, but mercifully there was no explosion. Blood was in his mouth, and his front teeth felt loose. He stood up, black motes buzzing before his eyes. Looked over the edge, gripping hard to the railing.

The Fliptop Killer was gone, back to the shadows.

"Call the police," he said, but he didn't know if Mrs. Sargenza had heard him, though she disappeared from her

window and slammed it shut. He was trembling down to his gnarly toes, and after another moment he climbed back into the room where the corpse was.

Cray felt her wrist for a pulse. It seemed the sensible thing to do. But there was no pulse, and Julie's eyes did not move. In the depths of the wound he could see the white bone of her spine. How many times had the killer slashed, and what was it inside him that gave him such a maniacal strength? "Wake up," Cray said. He pulled at her arm. "Come on Julie. Wake up."

"Oh Jesus!" Mr. Myers from across the hall stood in the doorway. His hand went to his mouth, and he made a retching sound and staggered back to his apartment. Other people were peering in. Cray said, "Julie needs a doctor," though he knew she was dead and all a doctor could do was pull the bloodied sheet over her face. He still had her hand, and he was stroking it. Her fingers were closed around something; it worked loose and fell into Cray's palm.

Cray looked at it. A red matchbook. The words "GRINDERSWITCH BAR" printed on its side, and an address just off Hollywood and Vine, three blocks over.

He opened the red matchbook. Two matches were missing. One of them had been used to light the Fliptop Killer's cigarette, out in the hallway. The Fliptop Killer had been to the Grinderswitch, a place Cray had walked past but never entered.

"Cops are on their way!" Mr. Gomez said, coming into the room. His wife stood at the door, her face smeared with blue anti-aging cream. "What happened here, Flint?"

Cray started to speak, but found no words. Others were entering the room, and suddenly the place with its reek of blood and spent passions was too tight for him; he had a feeling of suffocation, and a scream flailed behind his teeth. He walked past Mr. Gomez, out the door, and into his own apartment. And there he stood at the window, the brutal neon pulse flashing in his face and a red matchbook clenched in his hand.

The police would come and ask their questions. An ambulance without a siren would come and take Julie's corpse away, to a cold vault. Her picture would be in the *Times* tomorrow, and the headline would identify her as the Fliptop Killer's ninth victim. Her claim to fame, he thought, and he almost wept.

I saw him, he realized. I saw the Fliptop. I had a hold of that bastard.

And there in his hand was the matchbook Julie had given him. The bartender at the Grinderswitch might know the Fliptop. It was a vital clue, Cray thought, and if he gave it up to the police it might be lost in shufflings of paper, envelopes, and plastic bags that went into what they called their evidence storage. The police didn't care about Julie Saufley, and they hardly cared about the other street victims either. No, Julie was another statistic—a "crazy," the cops would say. The Fliptop Killer loved to kill "Crazies."

Julie had given him a clue. Had, perhaps, fought to keep it with her dying breath. And now what was he going to do with it?

He knew, without fully knowing. It was a thing of instincts, just as his long-ago gymnastic training, track-and-field, and boxing championships were things of instinct. Inner things that, once learned and believed in, could never be fully lost.

He opened the closet door.

A musty, mothball smell rolled out. And there it was, on its wooden hanger, amid the cheap shirts and trousers of an old dreamer.

It had once been emerald green, but time had faded it to more of a dusky olive. Bleach stains had mottled the flowing green cape, and Cray had forgotten how that had happened. Still, he'd been a good caretaker: various rips had been patched over, the only really noticeable mark a poorly stitched tear across the left leg. The cowl, with its swept-back, crisply winglike folds on either side of the head and its slits for the eyes, was in almost perfect condition. The green boots were there on the floor, both badly scuffed, and the green gloves were up on the shelf.

His Green Falcon costume had aged, just like its owner. The studio had let him keep it after he had come out of the sanatorium in 1954. By then serials were dying anyway, and of what use was a green suit with a long cape and wings on the sides of its cowl? In the real world, there was no room for Green Falcons.

He touched the material. It was lighter than it appeared, and it made a secret—and dangerous—whispering noise. The Green Falcon had made mincemeat out of a gallery of villains, roughnecks, and killers every Saturday afternoon in the cathedrals of light and shadow across North America. Why, then, could the Green Falcon not track down the Fliptop Killer?

Because the Green Falcon is dead, Cray told himself. Forget it. Close the door. Step back. Leave it to the police.

But he didn't close the door, nor did he step back, because he knew, deep at his center, that the Green Falcon was not dead. Only sleeping, and yearning to awaken.

He was losing his mind. He knew that clearly enough, as if somebody had thrown ice water in his face and slapped him too. But he reached into the closet, and he brought the costume out.

The siren of a police car was approaching. Cray Flint began to pull the costume over his pajamas. His body had thinned, not thickened, with age; the green tights were loose, and though his legs were knotty with muscles, they looked skinny and ill-nourished. His shoulders and chest still filled out the tunic portion of the costume, though, but his thin, wiry arms had lost the bulky muscularity of their youth. He got the costume zipped up, worked his feet into the scuffed boots, then put on the cape and laced it in place. The dust of a thousand moth wings shimmered gold

against the green. He lifted the gloves off the shelf but discovered the moths had enjoyed an orgy in them and they were riddled with holes. The gloves would have to stay behind. His heart was beating very hard now. He took the cowl off its hanger. The police car's siren was nearing the building. Cray ran his fingers over the cowl, which still gleamed with a little iridescence, as it had in the old days.

I shouldn't do this, he told himself. I'm going crazy again, and I'm nothing but an Indiana boy who used to be an actor...

I shouldn't...

He slipped the cowl over his head and drew the drawstring tight. And now he saw the world through cautious slits, the air coming to his nostrils through small holes and smelling of mothballs and... yes, and something else. Something indefinable: the brassy odor of a young man's sweat, the sultry heat of daredevilry, maybe the blood of a split lip incurred in a fight scene with an overeager stunt man. Those aromas and more. His stomach tightened under the green skin. "Walk tall and think tall," he remembered a director telling him. His shoulders pulled back. How many times had he donned this costume and gone into battle against hoodlums, thugs, and murderers? How many times had he stared Death in the face through these slits, and walked tall into the maelstrom?

I'm Creighton Flint, he thought. And then he looked at the faded poster that promised a world of thrills and saw STARRING CREIGHTON FLINT, "THE GREEN FALCON."

The one and only.

The police car's siren stopped.

It was time to go if he was going.

The Green Falcon held the matchbook up before his eye slits. The Grinderswitch was a short walk away. If the Fliptop Killer had been there tonight, someone might remember.

He knew he was one stride away from the loony bin, and if he went through that door dressed like this there was no turning back. But if the Green Falcon couldn't track down the Fliptop, nobody could.

It was worth a try wasn't it?

He took a deep breath, and then the one stride followed. He walked out into the hallway, and the residents gathered around Julie Saufley's saw him and every one of them recoiled as if they'd just seen a man from Mars. He didn't hesitate; he went past them to the elevator. The little numerals above the door were on the upward march. The policemen were coming up, he realized. It would not be wise to let them see the Green Falcon.

"Hey!" Mr. Gomez shouted. "Hey, who the hell are you?"

"He must be nuts!" Mrs. LaPresta said, and her husband—in a rare moment—agreed.

But Cray was already heading towards the door marked STAIRS. The cape pinched his neck, and the mask was stuffy; he didn't remember the costume being so uncomfortable. But he pulled open the door and started quickly down the stairway, the matchbook clenched in his hand and the smell of Julie's blood up his nostrils.

He was puffing by the time he reached the ground floor. But he crossed the cramped little lobby, went out the revolving door and onto Hollywood Boulevard, where the lights and the noise reminded him of a three-ring circus. But he knew full well that shadows lay at the fringes of those lights, and in those shadows it was dangerous to tread. He started walking west, toward Vine street. A couple of kids zipped past him on skateboards, and one of them gave a fierce tug at his cape that almost strangled him. Horns were honking as cars passed, and ladies of the night waved and jiggled their wares from the street corner. A punk with his hair in long red spikes peered into Cray's eyeholes and sneered, "Are you for real, man?" The Green Falcon kept going, a man with a mission. A black prostitute jabbed her colleague in the ribs, and both of them hooted and made obscene noises as he passed. Here came a group of Hare Krishnas, banging tambourines and chanting, and even their blank eyes widened as they saw him coming. But the Green Falcon, dodging drunks and leather clad hustlers, left them all in the flap of his cape.

And then there was the Grinderswitch Bar, jammed between a porno theater and a wig shop. Its blinking neon sign was bright scarlet, and out in front of the place were six big Harley-Davidson motorcycles. Cray paused, fear fluttering around in the pit of his stomach. The Grinderswitch was a place of shadows; he could tell that right off. There was a meanness even in the neon's buzz. Go home, he told himself. Forget this. Just go home and—

Do what? Vegetate? Sit in a lousy chair, look at clippings, and reflect on how lucky you are to have a job sweeping the floor at a Burger King?

No. He was wearing the armour of the Green Falcon now, and why should he fear? But still he paused. To go into that place would be like walking into a lion's den after rolling around in fresh meat. Who was Julie Saufley, anyway? His friend, yes, but she was dead now, and what did it matter? Go home. Put the costume back on its hanger and forget it. He looked at the door, and knew that beyond it the monsters waited. Go home. Just go home.

4. One-Eyed Skulls

He swallowed thickly. Walk tall and think tall, he told himself. If he did not go in, the very name of the Green Falcon would be forever tainted. Pain he could take; shame he could not.

He grasped the door's handle, and he entered the Grinderswitch.

The six motorcycle owners, husky bearded men wearing black jackets that identified them as members of the ONE-EYED SKULLS gang, looked up from their beers. One of them laughed, and the man sitting in the center gave a low whistle.

The Green Falcon paid them no attention. Bass-heavy music pounded from ceiling-mounted speakers, and on a small upraised stage a thin blonde girl wearing a G-string gyrated to the beat with all the fervor of a zombie. A few other patrons watched the girl, and other topless girls in G-strings wandered around with trays of beers and cheerless smiles. The Green Falcon went to the bar, where a flabby man with many chins had halted in his pouring of a new set of brews. The bartender stared at him, round-eyed, as the Green Falcon slid onto a stool.

"I'm looking for a man," Cray said.

"Wrong joint, Greenie," the bartender answered. "Try the Brass Screw, over on Selma."

"No, I don't mean that." He flushed red under his mask. Trying to talk over this hellacious noise was like screaming into a hurricane. "I'm looking for a man who might have been in here tonight."

"I serve beer and liquor, not lonely-hearts-club news. Take a hike."

Cray glanced to his left. There was a mug on the bar full of GRINDERSWITCH matchbooks. "The man I'm looking for is blonde, maybe in his early or mid-twenties. He's got pale skin and his eyes are very dark—either brown or black. Have you seen anybody who—"

"What the hell are you doing walking around in a friggin' green suit?" the bartender asked. "It's not St. Patrick's Day. Did you jump out of the nuthouse wagon?"

"No. Please, try to think. Have you seen the man I just described?"

"Yeah. A hundred of them. Now I said move it, and I'm not going to say it again."

"He took one of those matchbooks," Cray persisted. "He might have been sitting on one of these stools not long ago. Are you sure you—"

A hand grasped his shoulder and swung him around. Three of the bikers had crowded in close, and the other three watched from a distance. A couple of Go-Go dancers rubbernecked at him, giggling. The bass throbbing was a physical presence, making the glasses shake on the shelves behind the bar. A broad, brown-bearded face with cruel blue eyes peered into Cray's mask; the biker wore a bandanna wrapped around his skull and a necklace from which rusty razor blades dangled. "God Almighty, Dogmeat. There's somebody *inside* it!"

The biker called Dogmeat, the one who'd whistled as Cray had entered, stepped forward. He was a burly, grey-bearded hulk with eyes like shotgun barrels and a face like a pissed-off pit bull. He thunked Cray on the skull with a thick forefinger. "Hey, man! You got some screws loose or what?"

Cray smelled stale beer and dirty armpits. "I'm all right," he said with just a little quaver in his voice.

"I say you *ain't*," Dogmeat told him. "What's wrong with you, coming into a respectable joint dressed up like a Halloween fruitcake?"

"Guy was just on his way out," the bartender said. "Let him go." The bikers glared at him, and he smiled weakly and added, "Okay?"

"No, Not okay," Dogmeat answered. He thunked Cray's skull again, harder. "I asked you a question. Let's hear you speak, man."

"I'm... looking for someone," Cray said. "A young man. Blonde, about twenty or twenty-five. Wearing a T-shirt and blue jeans. He's got fair skin and dark eyes. I think he might have been in here not too long ago."

"What're you after this guy for? He steal your spaceship?" The others laughed, but Dogmeat's face remained serious. Another thunk of Cray's skull. "Come on, that was a joke. You're supposed to laugh."

"Please," Cray said. "Don't do that anymore."

"Do what? This?" Dogmeat thunked him on the point of his chin.

"Yes. Please don't do that anymore."

"Oh. Okay." Dogmeat smiled. "How about if I do this?" And he flung his half full mug of beer into Cray's face. The liquid blinded Cray for a few seconds, then washed out of his mask and down his neck. The other One-Eyed Skulls howled with laughter and clapped Dogmeat on the back.

"I think I'd better be going." Cray started to get up, but Dogmeat's hand clamped to his shoulder and forced him down with ridiculous ease.

"Who are you supposed to be, man?" Dogmeat asked, feigning real interest. "Like... a big bad superhero or somethin'?"

"I'm nobo—" He stopped himself. They were watching and listening, smiling with gap-toothed smiles. And then Cray straightened up his shoulders, and it came out of him by instinct. "I'm the Green Falcon," he said.

There was a moment of stunned silence, except for that thunderous music. Then they laughed again and the laughter swelled. But Dogmeat didn't laugh; his eyes narrowed, and when the laughter had faded he said, "Okay, Mr. Green Falcon, sir. How about takin' that mask off and... like... let's see your secret identity." Cray didn't respond. Dogmeat leaned closer. "I *said*, Mr. Green Falcon, sir, that I want you to take your mask off. Do it. *Now*."

Cray was trembling. He clenched his fists in his lap. "I'm sorry. I can't do that."

Dogmeat smiled a savage smile. "If you won't, I will. Hand it over."

Cray shook his head. No matter what happened now, the die was cast. "No. I won't."

"Well," Dogmeat said softly, "I'm really sorry to hear that." And he grasped the front of Cray's tunic, lifted him bodily off the stool, twisted and threw him across a table eight feet away. Cray went over the table, crashed into a couple of chairs, and sprawled to the floor. Stars and rockets fired in his brain. He got up on his knees, aware that Dogmeat was advancing toward him. Dogmeat's booted foot drew back, the kick aimed at the Green Falcon's face.

5. The Star and Question Mark

A shriek like the demons of hell singing Beastie Boys tunes came from the speakers. "Christ!" Dogmeat shouted, clapping his hands to his ears. He turned, and so did the other One-Eyed Skulls.

A figure stood over at the record's turntable near the stage, calmly scratching the tone arm back and forth across the platter. The Green Falcon pulled himself up to his feet and stood shaking the explosions out of his head. The figure let the tone arm skid across the record with a last fingernails-on-chalkboard skreel, and then the speakers were silent.

"Let him be," she said in a voice like velvet smoke.

The Green Falcon's eyes were clear now, and he could see her as well as the others did. She was tall—maybe six-two or possibly an inch above that—and her amazonian body was pressed into a tigerskin one-piece bathing suit. She wore black high heels, and her hair was dyed orange and cropped close to her head. She smiled a red-lipped smile, her teeth startlingly white against her ebony flesh.

"What'd you say, bitch?" Dogmeat challenged.

"Gracie!" the bartender said. "Keep out of it!"

She ignored him, her amber eyes fixed on Dogmeat. "Let him be," she repeated. "He hasn't done anything to you."

"Lord, Lord." Dogmeat shook his head with sarcastic wonder. "A talkin' female monkey! Hey, I ain't seen you dance yet! Hop up on that stage and shake that black ass!"

"Go play in someone else's sandbox," Gracie told him. "Kiddie time's over."

"Damned right it is." Dogmeat's cheeks burned red, and he took a menacing step towards her. "Get up on that stage! Move your butt!"

She didn't budge.

Dogmeat was almost upon her. The Green Falcon looked around, said, "Excuse me," and lifted an empty beer mug off a table in front of a pie-eyed drunk. Then he cocked his arm back, took aim, and called out, "Hey, Mr. Dogmeat!"

The biker's head swiveled toward him, eyes flashing with anger.

The Green Falcon threw the beer mug, as cleanly as if it were a shotput on an Indiana summer day. It sailed through the air, and Dogmeat lifted his hand to ward it off, but he was way too late. The mug hit him between the eyes, didn't shatter but made a satisfying clunking sound against his skull. He took two steps forward and one step back, his eyes rolled to show the bloodshot whites, and he fell like a chopped-down sequoia.

"Sonofabitch!" the brown-bearded one said, more in surprise than anything else. Then his face darkened like a storm cloud and he started toward the Green Falcon with two other bikers right behind him.

The Green Falcon stood his ground. There was no point in running; his old legs would not get him halfway to the door before the bikers pulled him down. No, he had to stand there and take whatever was coming. He let them get within ten feet, and then he said in a calm and steady voice, "Does your mother know where you are, son?"

Brown Beard stopped as if he'd run into an invisible wall. One of the others ran into him and bounced off. "Huh?"

"Your mother," the Green Falcon repeated. "Does she know where you are?"

"My... my mother? What's she got to do with this, man?"

"She gave birth to you and raised you, didn't she? Does she know where you are right now?" The Green Falcon waited, his heart hammering, but Brown Beard didn't answer. "How do you think your mother would feel if she could see you?"

"His mother wouldn't feel nothin'," another of them offered. "She's in a home for old sots up in Oxnard."

"You shut up!" Brown Beard said, turning on his companion. "She's not an old sot, man! She's just... like... a little sick. I'm gonna get her out of that place! You'll see!"

"Quit the jawin'!" a third biker said. "We gonna tear this green fruit apart or not?"

The Green Falcon stepped forward, and he didn't know what he was about to say, but lines from old scripts were whirling through his recollection like moths through klieg lights. "Any son who loves his mother," he said, "is a true American, and I'm proud to call him friend." He held his hand out toward Brown Beard.

The other man stared at it and blinked uncertainly. "Who... who the hell *are* you?"

"I'm the Green Falcon. Defender of the underdog. Righter of wrongs and champion of justice." *That's not me talking*, he realized. *It's from Night Calls The Green Falcon, Chapter Five.* But he realized also that his voice sounded different, in a strange way. It was not the voice of an old man anymore. It was a sturdy, rugged voice, with a bass

undertone as strong as a fist. It was a hero's voice, and it demanded respect.

No one laughed.

And the biker with the brown beard slid his hand into the Green Falcon's, and the Green Falcon gripped it hard and said, "Walk tall and think tall, son."

At least for a few seconds, he had them. They were in a thrall of wonder, just like the little children who'd come to see him during the public-relations tour in the summer of 1951, when he'd shaken their hands and told them to respect their elders, put up their toys, and do right: the simple secret of success. Those children had wanted to believe in him, so badly; and now in this biker's eyes there was that same glimmer—faint and faraway, yes—but as clear as a candle in the darkness. This was a little boy standing here, trapped in a grown-up skin. The Green Falcon nodded recognition and when he relaxed his grip, the biker didn't want to let go.

"I'm looking for a man who I think is the Fliptop Killer," the Green Falcon told them. He described the blonde man who'd escaped from the window of Julie Saufley's apartment. "Have any of you seen a man who fits that description?"

Brown Beard shook his head. None of the others offered information either. Dogmeat moaned, starting to come around. "Where is he?" Dogmeat mumbled. "I'll rip his head off."

"Hey, this joint's about as much fun as a mortician's convention," one of the bikers said. "Women are ugly as hell too. Let's hit the road."

"Yeah," another agreed. "Ain't nothing happening around here." He bent down to help haul Dogmeat up. Their leader was still dazed, his eyes roaming in circles. The bikers guided Dogmeat towards the door, but the brown-bearded one hesitated.

"I've heard of you before," he said. "Somewhere. Haven't I?"

"Yes," the Green Falcon answered. "I think you probably have."

The man nodded. Pitched his voice lower, so the others couldn't hear: "I used to have a big stack of *Batman* comics. Read 'em all the time. I used to think he was real, and I wanted to grow up just like him. Crazy, huh?"

"Not so crazy," the Green Falcon said.

The other man smiled slightly, a wistful smile. "I hope you find who you're lookin' for. Good luck." He started after his friends, and the Green Falcon said, "Do right."

And then they were gone, the sounds of their motorcycles roaring away. The Green Falcon glanced again at the bartender, still hoping for some information, but the man's face remained a blank.

"You want a beer, Greenie?" someone asked, and the Green Falcon turned to face the tall, black go-go dancer.

"No, thank you. I've got to go." To where, he didn't know, but the Grinderswitch was a dead end.

He had taken two steps towards the door when Gracie said, "I've seen him. The guy you're after." The Green Falcon abruptly stopped. "I know that face," Gracie went on. "He was in here maybe two, three hours ago."

"Do you know his name?"

"No, but I know where he lives."

His heart kicked. "Where?"

"Well... he might live there or he might not," she amended. She came closer to him, and he figured she was in her late twenties, but it was hard to tell with all the makeup. "A motel on the strip. The Palmetto. See... I used to... uh... work there. I was an escort." She flashed a quick warning glance at the bartender, as if she dared him to crack wise. Then back to the Green Falcon again. "I used to see this guy hanging out around there. He comes in here maybe two or three times a week. Asked me out one time, but I wouldn't go."

"Why not?"

She shrugged. "Too white. Amazin' Grace doesn't have to go out with just anybody. I choose my own friends."

"But you remember seeing him at the Palmetto?"

"Yeah. Or at least somebody who fits that description. I'm not saying it's the same guy. Lots of creeps on the strip, and those hot-springs motels lure most of them one time or another." She licked her lower lip; the shine of excitement was in her eyes. "You really think he's the Fliptop?"

"I do. Thank you for telling me, miss." He started toward the door, but again her husky voice stopped him.

"Hey, hold on! The Palmetto's about ten to twelve blocks east. You got a car?"

"No."

"Neither do I, but there's a cabstand down the street. I'm clocking out. Right, Tony?"

"You're the star," the bartender said with a wave of his hand.

"You want some company, Greenie? I mean..." She narrowed her eyes. "You're not a crazy yourself are you?" Gracie laughed at her own question. "Hell, sure you are! You've got to be. But I'm heading that way, and I'll show you the place if you want. For free."

"Why would you want to help me?" he asked.

Gracie looked wounded. "I've got civic pride, that's why! Hell, just because I strut my butt in this joint five nights a week doesn't mean I'm not a humanitarian!"

The Green Falcon considered that, and nodded. Amazin' Grace was obviously intelligent, and she probably enjoyed the idea of a hunt. He figured he could use all the help he could get. "All right. I'll wait while you get

dressed."

She frowned. "I *am* dressed, fool! Let's go!"

They left the Grinderswitch and started walking east along the boulevard. Gracie had a stride that threatened to leave him behind, and his green suit drew just as many double-takes as her lean ebony body in its tigerskin wrapping. The cabstand was just ahead, and a cab was there, engine running. A kid in jeans and a black leather jacket leaned against the hood; he was rail-thin, his head shaved bald except for a tuft of hair in the shape of a question mark on his scalp.

"You've got a fare, kid," Gracie said as she slid her mile-long legs in. "Move it!"

The kid said, "I'm waiting for—"

"Your wait's over," Gracie interrupted. "Come on, we don't have all night."

The kid shrugged, his eyes vacant and disinterested, and got behind the wheel. As soon as the Green Falcon was in, the kid shot away from the curb with a shriek of burning rubber and entered the flow of the westbound traffic.

"We want to go to the Palmetto Motel," Gracie said. "You know where that is?"

"Sure."

"Well, you're going the wrong way. And start your meter, unless we're going to ride for free."

"Oh, yeah." The meter arm came down, and the mechanism started ticking. "You want to go east, huh?" he asked. And without warning he spun the wheel violently, throwing the Green Falcon and Gracie up against the cab's side, and the vehicle careened in a tight U-turn that narrowly missed a collision with a BMW. Horns blared and tires screeched, but the kid swerved into the eastbound lane as if he owned Hollywood Boulevard. And the Green Falcon saw a motorcycle cop turn on his blue light and start after them, at the same time as a stout Hispanic man ran out of a Chock Full O' Nuts coffee shop yelling and gesturing frantically..

"Must be a caffeine fit," Gracie commented. She heard the siren's shrill note and glanced back. "Smart move, kid. You just got a blue-tailed fly on your ass."

The kid laughed, sort of. The Green Falcon's gut tightened; he'd already seen the little photograph on the dashboard that identified the cab driver. It was a stout Hispanic face.

"Guy asked me to watch his cab while he ran in to pick up some coffee," the kid said with a shrug. "Gave me a buck, too." He looked in the rearview mirror. The motorcycle cop was waving him over. "What do you want me to do, folks?"

The Green Falcon had decided, just that fast. The police might be looking for him since he left the apartment building, and if they saw him like this they wouldn't understand. They'd think he was just a crazy old man out for a joyride through fantasy, and they'd take the Green Falcon away from him.

And if anyone could find the Fliptop Killer and bring him to justice, the Green Falcon could.

He said, "Lose him."

The kid looked back, and now his eyes were wild and thrilled. He grinned. "Roger wilco," he said, and pressed his foot to the accelerator.

The cab's engine roared, the vehicle surged forward with a power that pressed the Green Falcon and Gracie into their seats, and the kid whipped around a Mercedes and then up onto the curb, where people screamed and leapt aside. The cab, its exhaust pipe spitting fire, rocketed toward the plate-glass window of a lingerie store.

Gracie gave a stunned little cry, gripped the Green Falcon's hand with knuckle-cracking force, and the Green Falcon braced for impact.

6. Handful of Straws

The kid spun the wheel to the left, and the cab's fender knocked sparks off a brick wall as it grazed past the window. Then he veered quickly to the right, clipped away two parking meters, and turned the cab off Hollywood onto El Centro Avenue. He floorboarded the gas pedal.

"Let's get outta here!" Gracie shouted as she grasped the door's handle, but the cab's speedometer needle was already nosing past forty. She decided she didn't care for a close acquaintance with asphalt, and anyway, the Green Falcon had her other hand and wasn't going to let her jump.

The motorcycle cop was following, the blue light spinning and the siren getting louder. The kid tapped the brakes and swerved in front of a gasoline truck, through an alley, and behind a row of buildings, then back onto El Centro and speeding southward. The motorcycle cop came out of the ally and got back on their tail, again closing the gap between them.

"What's your name?" the Green Falcon asked.

"Me? Ques," he answered. "Because of—"

"I can guess why. Ques, this is very important." The Green Falcon leaned forward, his fingers clamped over the seat in front of him. "I don't want the policeman to stop us. I'm—" Again, lines from the scripts danced through his mind. "I'm on a mission," he said. "I don't have time for the police. Do you understand?"

Ques nodded. "No," he said. "But if you want to give the cop a run, I'm your man." The speedometer's needle was

almost to sixty, and Ques was weaving in and out of traffic like an Indy racer. "Hold on," he said.

Gracie screamed.

Ques suddenly veered to the left, almost grazing the fenders of cars just released from the red light at the intersection of El Centro and Fountain Avenue. Outraged horns hooted, but then the cab had cleared the intersection and was speeding away. Ques took a hard right onto Gordon Street, another left on Lexington, and then pulled into an alley behind a Taco Bell. He drew up close to a Dumpster and cut the headlights.

Gracie found her voice: "Where the hell did you learn to drive? The Demolition Derby?"

Ques got himself turned around in the seat so he could look at his passengers. He smiled, and the smile made him almost handsome. "Close. I was a third-unit stunt driver in 'Beverly Hills Cop II.' This was a piece of cake."

"I'm getting out of here." Gracie reached for the door's handle. "You two never saw me before, okay?"

"Wait." The Green Falcon grasped her elbow. The motorcycle cop was just passing, going east on Lexington. The siren had been turned off and the blue light faded as he went on.

"Not in the clear yet," Ques said. "There'll be a lot of shellheads looking for us. We'd better sit here a while." He grinned at them. "Fun, huh?"

"Like screwing in a thornpatch." Gracie opened the door. "I'm gone."

"Please don't go," the Green Falcon said. "I need you."

"You need a good shrink is what you need. Man, I must've been crazy myself to get into this! You thinking you could track down the Fliptop!" She snorted. "Green Falcon, my ass!"

"I need you," he repeated firmly. "If you've got connections at the Palmetto, maybe you can find someone who's seen him."

"The Fliptop?" Ques asked, his interest perked again. "What about that sonofabitch?"

"I saw him tonight," the Green Falcon said. "He killed a friend of mine, and Gracie knows where he might be."

"I didn't say that, man. I said I knew where I'd seen a guy who looked like the guy who's been coming into the Grinderswitch. That's a big difference."

"Please stay. Help me. It's the only lead I've got."

Gracie looked away from him. The door was halfway open and she had one leg out. "Nobody cares about anybody else in this city," she said. "Why should I stick around and get my ass in jail... or worse?"

"I'll protect you," he answered.

She laughed. "Oh yeah! A guy in a green freaksuit's going to protect me! Wow, my mind feels so much better! Let me go." He hesitated, then did as she said. She sat on the seat's edge, about to get out. About to. But a second ticked past, and another, and still she sat there. "I live on Olympic Boulevard," she said. "Man, I am a *long* way from home."

"Green Falcon, huh?" Ques asked. "That what you call yourself?"

"Yes. That's..." A second or two of indecision. "That's who I am."

"You got information about the Fliptop, why don't you give it to the cops?"

"Because..." *Why not indeed?* he asked himself. "Because the Fliptop has killed nine times and he's going to kill again. Maybe tonight, even. The police aren't even close to finding him. We are."

"No, we're not!" Gracie objected. "Just because I saw a guy at a motel a few times doesn't mean he's the Fliptop! You've got a handful of straws, man!"

"Maybe I do. But it's worth going to the Palmetto to find out, isn't it?"

"You just don't want to go to the cops because you're afraid they'll pitch you in the nuthouse," Gracie said, and the way the Green Falcon settled back against the seat told her she'd hit the target. She was silent for a moment, watching him. "That's right isn't it?"

"Yes," he said, because he knew it was. "I..." He hesitated, but they were listening and he decided to tell it as it had been, a long time ago. "I spent some time in a sanitarium. Not recently. Back in the early fifties. I had a nervous breakdown. It... wasn't a nice place."

"You used to be somebody, for real?" Ques inquired.

"The Green Falcon. I starred in serials." The kid's face showed no recognition. "They used to show them on Saturday afternoons," Cray went on. "Chapter by chapter. Well, I guess both of you are too young to remember." He clasped his hands together in his lap, his back bowed. "Yes, I used to be somebody. For real."

"So how come you went off your rocker?" Gracie asked. "If you were a star and all, I mean?"

He sighed softly. "When I was a young man I thought the whole world was one big Indiana. That's where I'm from. Some talent scouts came through my town one day, and someone told them about me. Big athlete, they said. Won all the medals you can think of. Outstanding young American and all that." His mouth twitched into a bitter smile. "Corny, but I guess it was true. Heck, the world was pretty corny back then. But it wasn't such a bad place. Anyway, I came to Hollywood and I started to do the serials. I had a little talent. But I saw things..." He shook his head. "Things they didn't even know about in Indiana. It seemed as if I was on another world, and I was never going to find my way back home. And everything happened so fast... it just got away from me, I guess. I was a star—whatever that means—and I was working hard and making money, but... Cray Boomershine was dying. I could feel him dying, a little bit more every day. And I wanted to bring him back, but he was just an Indiana kid and I was a Hollywood star. The Green Falcon, I mean. Me. Cray Flint. Does that make any sense to you?"

"Not a bit," Gracie said. "Hell, *everyone* wants to be a star! What was wrong with you?"

His fingers twined together, and the old knuckles worked. "They wanted me to do a public-relations tour. I said I would. So they sent me all across the country... dressed up like this. And the children came out to see me, and they touched my cape and they asked for my autograph and they said they wanted to grow up just like me. Those faces... they gave off such an innocent light." He was silent, thinking, and he drew a deep breath and continued because he could not turn back. "It was in Watertown, South Dakota. April 26, 1951. I went onstage at the Watertown Palace Theater, right after they showed the tenth and final chapter of 'Night Calls The Green Falcon.' That place was packed with kids, and all of them were laughing and happy." He closed his eyes, his hands gripped tightly together. "There was a fire. It started in a storeroom in the basement." He smelled acrid smoke, felt the heat of the flames on his face. "It spread so fast. And some of the kids... some of them even thought it was part of the show. Oh God... Oh, my God... the walls were on fire and the children were being crushed as they tried to get out... and I heard them screaming! 'Green Falcon! Green Falcon!'" His eyes opened, and stared without seeing. "But the Green falcon couldn't save them, and fourteen children died in that fire. He couldn't save them. Couldn't." He looked at Ques, then to Gracie, then back again, and his eyes were wet and sunken into the mask's slits. "When I came out of the sanitarium, the studio let me keep the costume. For a job well done, they said. But there weren't going to be any more Green Falcon serials. Anyway, everyone was watching television, and that was that."

Neither Ques nor Gracies spoke for a moment. Then Gracie said, "We're going to take you home. Where do you live?"

"Please." He put his hand over hers. "I can find the Fliptop Killer. I know I can."

"You can't. Give it up."

"What would it hurt?" Ques asked her. "Just to drive up to that motel, I mean. Maybe he's right." He held up his hand before she could object. "Maybe. We could drive there and you could ask around, and then we'll take him home. How about it?"

"It's crazy," she said. "And I'm crazy." But then she pulled her leg back in and shut the door. "Let's try it."

The Palmetto was a broken-down stucco dump between Normandie and Mariposa, on the cheap end of Hollywood Boulevard. Ques pulled the cab into the trash-strewn parking lot, and he spoke his first impression: "Place is a crack gallery, folks." He saw shadowy faces peering through the blinds of second-floor windows, and blue fire-light played across a wall. "Bullet holes in a door over there." He motioned toward it. "From here on we watch our asses." He stopped the cab next to a door marked "office" and cut the engine.

"It's sure enough gone to hell since I worked here," Gracie said. "Nothing like addicts to junk a place up." Not far away stood the hulk of a car that looked as if it had been recently set afire. "Well, let's see what we can see." She got out, and so did the Green Falcon. Ques stayed behind the wheel, and when Gracie motioned him to come on, he said, nervously, "I'll give you moral support."

"Thanks, jerkoff. Hey, hold on!" she said, because the Green Falcon was already striding toward the office door. He grasped the knob, turned it, and the door opened with a jingle of little bells. He stepped into a room where lights from the boulevard cut through slanted blinds, and the air was thick with the mingled odors of marijuana, a dirty carpet and... what else was it?

Spoiled meat, he realized.

And that was when something stood up from a corner and bared its teeth.

The Green Falcon stopped. His eyes looking at a stocky black-and-white pit bull, its eyes bright with the prospect of violence.

"Oh shit," Gracie whispered.

Soundlessly the pit bull leapt at the Green Falcon, its jaws open for a bone-crushing bite.

7. The Watchman

The Green Falcon stepped back, colliding with Gracie. The pit bull's body came flying towards him, reached the end of its chain, and its teeth clacked together where a vital member of the Green Falcon's anatomy had been a second before. Then the dog was yanked back to the wall, but it immediately regained its balance and lunged again. The Green Falcon stood in front of Gracie, picked up a chair to ward the beast off, but again the chain stopped the pit bull short of contact. As the animal thrashed against its collar, a figure rose up from behind the counter and pulled back the trigger on a double-barreled shotgun.

"Put it down," the man told the Green Falcon. He motioned with the shotgun. "Do it or I swear to god I'll blow your head off." The man's voice was high and nervous, and the Green Falcon slowly put the chair down. The pit bull was battling with its chain, trying to slide its head out of the collar. "Ain't nobody gonna rob me again," the man behind the counter vowed. Sweat glistened on his gaunt face. "You punks gonna learn some respect, you hear me?"

"Lester?" Gracie said. The man's frightened eyes ticked towards her. "Lester Dent? It's me." She took a careful step forward, where the light could show him who she was. "Sabra Jones." The Green Falcon stared at her. She said, "You remember me, don't you, Lester?"

"Sabra? That really you?" The man blinked, reached into a drawer, and brought out a pair of round-lensed spectacles. He put them on and the tension in his face immediately eased. "Sabra! Well, why didn't you say so?" He uncocked the shotgun and said, "DOWN, Bucky!" to the pit bull. The animal stopped its thrashing, but it still regarded the Green Falcon with hungry eyes.

"This is a friend of mine, Lester. The Green Falcon." She said it with all seriousness.

"Hi." Lester lowered the shotgun and leaned it behind the counter. "Sorry I'm a little jumpy. Things have changed around here since you left. Lot of freaks in the neighbourhood, and you can't be too careful."

"I guess not." Gracie glanced at a couple of bullet holes in the wall. Flies were buzzing around the scraps of hamburger in Bucky's feed bowl. "Used to be a decent joint. How come you're still hanging around here?"

Lester shrugged. He was a small man, weighed maybe a hundred and thirty pounds, and he wore a Captain America T-shirt. "I crave excitement. What can I say?" He looked her up and down with true appreciation. "Life's being pretty good to you, huh?"

"I can't complain. Much. Lester, my friend and I are looking for somebody who used to hang around here." She described the man. "I remember he used to like Dolly Winslow. Do you know the guy I mean?"

"I think I do, but I'm not sure. I've seen a lot of them."

"Yeah, I know, but this is important. Do you have any idea what the guy's name might have been, or have you seen him around here lately?"

"No, I haven't seen him for a while, but I know what his name was." He grinned, gapped-tooth. "John Smith. That's what all their names were." He glanced at the Green Falcon. "Can you breath inside that thing?"

"The man we're looking for is the Fliptop Killer," the Green Falcon said, and Lester's grin cracked. "Do you know where we can find Dolly Winslow?"

"She went to Vegas," Gracie told him. "Changed her name, the last I heard. No telling where she is now."

"You're looking for the Fliptop Killer?" Lester asked. "You a cop or somethin'?"

"No. I've got... a personal interest."

Lester drummed his fingers on the scarred countertop and thought for a moment. "The Fliptop, huh? Guy's a mean one. I wouldn't want to cross his path, no sir."

"Anybody still around who used to hang out here?" Gracie asked. "Like Jellyroll? Or that weird guy who played the flute?"

"That weird guy who played the flute just signed a million-dollar contract at Capitol Records," Lester said. "We should all be so weird. Jellyroll's living uptown somewhere. Pearly's got a boutique on the Strip, makin' money hand over fist. Bobby just drifted away." He shook his head. "We had us a regular club here, didn't we?"

"So everybody's cleared out?"

"Well... not everybody. There's me, and the Watchman."

"The Watchman?" The Green Falcon came forward, and the pit bull glowered at him but didn't attack. "Who's that?"

"Crazy old guy, lives down in the basement," Lester said. "Been here since the place was new. You won't get anything out of him, though."

"Why not?"

"The Watchman doesn't speak. Never has, as far as I know. He goes out and walks, day and night, but he won't tell you where he's been. You remember him, don't you, Sabra?"

"Yeah. Dolly told me she saw him walking over on the beach at Santa Monica one day, and Bobby saw him in downtown L.A. All he does is walk."

"Can he speak?" the Green Falcon asked.

"No telling," Lester said. "Whenever I've tried talkin' to him, he just sits like a wall."

"So why do you call him the Watchman?"

"You know the way, Sabra" Lester motioned toward the door. "Why don't you show him?"

"You don't want to see the Watchman," she said. "Forget it. He's out of his mind. Like me for getting into this. See you around, Lester." She started out, and Lester said, "Don't be such a stranger."

Outside, Gracie continued walking to the cab. The Green Falcon caught up with her. "I'd like to see the Watchman. What would it hurt?"

"It would waste my time and yours. Besides, he's probably not even here. Like I said, he walks all the time." She reached the cab, where Ques was waiting nervously behind the wheel.

"Let's go," Ques said. "Cars have been going in and out. Looks like a major deal's about to go down."

"Hold it." The Green Falcon placed his hand against the door before she could open it. "If the Watchman's been here so long, he might know something about the man we're looking for. It's worth asking, isn't it?"

"No. He doesn't speak to *anybody*. Nobody knows where he came from, or who he is, and he likes it that way." She glanced around, saw several figures standing in a second-floor doorway. Others were walking across the lot toward a black Mercedes. "I don't like the smell around here. The faster we get out, the better."

The Green Falcon stepped back and let her get into the cab. But he didn't go around to the other door. "I'm going to talk to the Watchman," he said. "How do I get to the basement?"

She paused, her eyelids at half-mast. "You're a stubborn fool, aren't you? There's the way down." She pointed at a door near the office. "You go through there, you're on your own."

"We shouldn't leave him here," Ques said. "We ought to stay—"

"Shut up, cueball. Lots of bad dudes around here, and I'm not getting shot for anybody." She smiled grimly. "Not even the Green Falcon. Good luck."

"Thanks for your help. I hope you—"

"Can it," she interrupted. "Move out, Ques."

He said, "Sorry," to the Green Falcon, put the cab into reverse, and backed out of the lot. Turned left across the boulevard and headed west.

And the Green Falcon stood alone.

He waited, hoping they'd come back. They didn't. Finally he turned and walked to the door that led to the Palmetto Motel's basement, and he reached for the knob.

But somebody came out of another room before he could open the door, and the Green Falcon saw the flash of metal.

"Hey, *amigo*," the man said, and flame shot from the barrel of the small pistol he'd just drawn.

8. Yours Truly

The Hispanic man lit his cigarette with the flame, then put the pistol-shaped lighter back into his pocket. "What kinda party you dressed up for?"

The Green Falcon didn't answer. His nerves were still jangling, and he wasn't sure he could speak, even if he tried.

"You lookin' for a score or not?" the man persisted.

"I'm... looking for the Watchman," he managed to say.

"Oh. Yeah, I should've figured you were. Didn't know the old creep had any friends."

Somebody called out, "Paco! Get your ass over here, NOW!"

The man sneered. "When I'm ready!" and then he sauntered toward the group of others who stood around the Mercedes.

The Green Falcon went through the door and into the darkness.

He stood on a narrow staircase, tried to find a light switch, but could not. Two steps down and his right hand found a light bulb overhead, with a dangling cord. He pulled it, and the light bulb illuminated with a bright yellow glow. The concrete stairs extended beyond the light's range, the walls made of cracked grey cinder block. The Green Falcon went down, into a place that smelled as damp and musty as a long-closed crypt. Halfway down the steps, he halted.

There had been a sound of movement over on the right. "Anyone there?" he asked. No answer, and now the sound had ceased. Rats, he decided. Big ones. He came to the bottom of the stairs, darkness surrounding him. Again he felt for a light switch, again with no reward. The smell was putrid: wet and decaying paper, he thought. He took a few steps forward, reaching out to both sides; his right arm brushed what felt like a stack of magazines or newspapers. And then the fingers of his left hand found a wall and a light switch, and when he flicked it, a couple of naked bulbs came on.

He looked around the Watchman's domain.

The basement—a huge, cavernous chamber—might have put the periodicals department of the L.A. Public Library to shame. Neat stacks of books, newspapers, and magazines were piled against the walls and made corridors across the basement, their turns and windings as intricate as a carefully constructed maze. The Green Falcon had never seen anything like it before, there had to be thousands—no, hundreds of thousands—of items down here. Maps of Los Angeles, Hollywood, Santa Monica, Beverly Hills, and other municipalities were mounted on the walls, tinged with green mold but otherwise unmarred. Here stood a stack of telephone books six feet tall, there were multiple stacks of old Hollywood Reporters. The place was an immense repository of information, and the Green Falcon was stunned because he'd never expected anything like this. A bank of battered filing cabinets stood against one wall, more newspapers stacked on top of them. There had to be thirty years of accumulated magazines and papers just in this part of the basement alone, and the chamber stretched the length of the motel. He couldn't restrain his curiosity; he went to one of the filing cabinets, which had precise little alphabet letters identifying their contents, and opened a drawer. Inside were hundreds of notebook pages covered with what appeared to be license plate numbers and the make and color of the cars that carried them, all written with an elegant, almost calligraphic handwriting. Another drawer held lists of items found in various trashcans at scores of locations and dates. A third drawer bulged with pages that seemed to record the routes of pedestrians through the city streets, how long to the second they stayed in this or that store or restaurant, and so forth.

And it dawned on the Green Falcon that this was exactly what the watchman did: he watched, recorded, filed away, all to the service of some bizarre inner logic, and he'd been doing it for years.

Something moved, back beyond the room in which the Green Falcon stood. There was a quick rustling sound of papers being disturbed... then silence. The Green Falcon wound his way through the maze, found another light switch that illuminated two more bulbs at the rear of the basement. Still more periodicals, maps, and filing cabinets stood in that area of the basement as well, but there was a cot too, and a desk with a blue blotter.

And a man in a long, dirty olive coat, huddled up with his back wedged into a corner, and his Peter Lorre eyes looked as if they were about to pop from their sockets.

"Hello," the Green Falcon said quietly. The man, gray-bearded and almost emaciated, trembled and hugged his knees. The Green Falcon walked closer and stopped, because the Watchman was shaking so hard he might have a heart attack. "I've come to talk to you."

The Watchman's mouth opened in his sallow face, gave a soft gasp, then closed again.

"I'm looking for someone you might help me find." The Green Falcon described the man. "I think he might be the Fliptop Killer, and I understand a man fitting that description used to come around here. He might have been friends with a girl named Dolly Winslow. Do you know the man I'm talking about?"

Still no response. The Watchman looked as if he were about to jump out of his skin.

"Don't be afraid. I'm the Green Falcon, and I wish you no harm."

The Watchman was so terrified there were tears in his eyes. The Green Falcon started to speak again, but he realized the futility of it. The Watchman was a human packrat, and Amazin' Grace had been right: there was nothing to be gained here.

He took off his mask and threw it aside in disgust. What had made him think he could track down the Fliptop? he asked himself. A red matchbook from a dead girl's hand? A glimpse of the killers face, and an ill-founded yearning for a counterfeit past? It was ridiculous! He was standing in a motel's dank basement with a drug deal going on over his head, and he'd better get out of here as fast as he could before he got his throat cut. "I'm sorry to have bothered you," he told the Watchman, and he started walking towards the stairs. He heard the Watchman gasp and crawl across the floor, and he looked back to see the man rummaging with frantic speed inside an old mildewed cardboard box.

This is no place for me, the Green Falcon realized. In fact, there was no place at all left for the Green Falcon, but Cray Flint's mop was waiting at the Burger King.

He kept going to the stairs, burdened with age.

"Dear davy," the voice rang out. "I am sorry I can't come to Center City this summer, but I'm working on a new mystery..."

The Green Falcon stopped.

"... and I'm very busy. I just wanted you to know that I appreciate your letter, and I like to hear from my fans very much. Enclosed is something that I want you to have, and I hope you'll wear it with pride. Remember to respect your elders, put up your toys, and do right..."

He turned, his heart pounding.

"Yours truly, the Green Falcon." And the Watchman looked up, smiling, from the yellowed, many-times-folded letter in his hands. "You signed it," he said "Right here. Remember?" He held it up. Then he scrambled to the box again, rummaged, and came up with an old wallet covered in multicolored Indian beads. He flipped it open and showed what was pinned inside. "I kept it all this time. See?"

The plastic button said THE GREEN FALCONEERS. "I see." Cray's voice cracked.

"I did right," Davy said. "I always did right."

"Yes," the Green Falcon nodded. "I know you did."

"We moved from Center City." Davy stood up; he was at least six inches taller than the Green Falcon. "My Dad got a new job, when I was twelve. That was..." He hesitated, trying to think. "A long time ago," he decided. A frown slowly settled on his deeply lined face. "What happened to you?"

"I got old," the Green Falcon said.

"Yes, sir. Me too." His frown started to slip away, then took hold again. "Am I still a Falconeer?"

"Oh, yes. That's a forever thing."

"I thought it was," Davy said, and his smile came back.

"You've got a nice collection down here." The Green Falcon walked amid the stacks. "I guess gathering all this takes a lot of time."

"I don't mind. It's my job."

"Your job?"

"Sure. Everybody's got a job. Mine is watching things, and writing them down. Keeping them, too."

"Have you actually read all these papers and magazines?"

"Yes, sir. Well... most of them," he amended. "And I remember what I read, too. I've got... like... a Kodak in my brain."

Did he mean a photographic memory? the Green Falcon wondered. If so, he might recall the man Gracie remembered? "Davy," he said in his heroic voice, "I've come to you because I need your help. I'm trying to find the Fliptop Killer. Have you heard of him?"

Davy nodded without hesitation.

"Can you think of a man like the one I described? A man who was a friend of—"

"Dolly Winslow," Davy finished for him. "Yes, sir. I remember him. I never liked him, either. He laughed at people when he didn't think they were looking."

So far, so good. The Green Falcon felt sweat on the back of his neck. "I want you to concentrate very hard, like a good Falconeer. Did you ever hear the man's name?"

Davy rubbed his mouth with the back of his hand, and his eyes took on a steely glint. He walked to a filing cabinet, bent down, and opened the bottom drawer. Looked through dozens of envelopes. And then he pulled one of them out, and he brought it to the Green Falcon. On it Davy had written: 23. "Dolly's room," he said. "He cleaned his wallet out in her trashcan one night."

The Green Falcon went to the desk and spilled the envelope's contents out on the blotter. There was a torn-open Trojan wrapper, two dried-up sticks of Doublemint gum, a few cash-register receipts, a ticket stub to a Lakers game, and...

"His name's Rod Bowers. It's on the library card," Davy said. "His address too."

The library card had been torn into quarters, but Davy had taped it back together again. And there were the name and address: Rodney E. Bowers, 1416D Jericho Street, Santa Monica.

"That was over a year ago, though. He might not be there now," Davy said.

"The Green Falcon's hands were shaking. Davy had taped together another piece of paper: a receipt that had been torn into many fragments. On that receipt was the name of a business: The House Of Blades. On December 20th, 1986, Rodney Bowers had bought himself a Christmas present of a John Wayne Commemorative Hunting Knife.

"Did I do right?" Davy asked, peering over the Green Falcon's shoulder.

"You sure did, son." He grasped the younger man's arm. "You're..." He said the first thing that came to mind: "The number-one Falconeer. I have to go now. I've got a job to do." He started striding, his pace quick, toward the stairs.

"Green Falcon, sir?" Davy called, and he paused. "I'll be here if you ever need my help again."

"I'll remember," the Green Falcon answered, and he climbed the stairs with the taped-together library card and the House Of Blades receipt gripped in his hand.

He went through the door into the parking lot—and instantly heard someone shouting in Spanish. Somebody else was hollering from the second floor, and there were other angry voices. The man named Paco was standing next to the Mercedes, and suddenly he drew a pistol—not a cigarette lighter this time, but a .45 automatic. He shouted out a curse and began firing into the Mercedes, glass from the windshield exploding into the air. At the same time, two men got out of another car, flung themselves flat onto the pavement, and started spraying Paco with gunfire. Paco's body danced and writhed, the .45 going off into the air.

"Kill 'em!" somebody yelled from the second floor. Machine-gun fire erupted, and bullets ricocheted off the concrete in a zigzagging line past the Green Falcon.

Oh, my God! Cray thought. And he realized he'd come out of the basement into the middle of a drug deal gone bad.

The two men on the pavement kept firing. Now figures were sprinting across the parking lot, shooting at the men on the second floor. Machine-gun bullets cut one of them down, and he fell in a twitching heap. The Green Falcon backed up, hit the wall, and stayed there—and then a man in a dark suit turned toward him, a smoking Uzi machine-gun in his hand, his face sparkling with the sweat of terror. He lifted the weapon to spray a burst at the Green Falcon.

9. Hell Or High Water

A black-and-white streak shot across the parking lot, and the pit bull hit the gunman like a miniature locomotive. The man screamed and went down, the Uzi firing an arc of tracers in the sky. And Lester ran past, stopped almost in front of the Green Falcon, fired a shotgun blast at another man, and then skidded on his belly behind the protection of a car.

The Green Falcon ran towards the street—and was almost struck by a cab that whipped into the lot with a shriek of burning rubber.

Ques hit the brake, and Gracie shouted, "Come on, fool!" as she threw the door open. The Green Falcon heard a bullet hiss past his head, and then he grasped the door and hung on as Ques reversed out of the lot and sped away on Hollywood.

Gracie pulled the Green Falcon in, and they got the door closed, but Ques still kept a leaden foot on the accelerator. "Slow down!" she told him. "We don't want the cops stopping us!" He didn't respond, and she slapped him on the question mark. "SLOW DOWN!"

Ques did, but only by a little. "They had guns," he said shakily. "Real guns!"

"What'd you expect drug dealers to carry? Slingshots?" She looked at the Green Falcon. "You in one piece?" He nodded, his eyes huge behind the mask. "We were circling the block, waiting for you to come out. We figured you'd

never get out of this neighbourhood alive. We were almost right, huh?"

"Yes," he croaked.

"Welcome to the big city. You find the Watchman?"

"I did." He drew a couple of deep breaths, could still smell the gunsmoke. "And something else too." He gave the library card to Ques. "That's where we're going. I think it's the Fliptop Killer's name and address."

"Not *that* again!" Gracie protested. "Man, we're taking you home!"

"No. We're going to Santa Monica. You don't have to get out of the cab if you don't want to—in fact, I'd rather you didn't. But I'm going to find the Fliptop, with you or without you."

"It'll be without me, all right," she answered, but the way he'd said that let her know he was through talking about it. The man had a mission, and he was going to do it come hell or high water. She settled back into her seat, muttering, and Ques turned toward the Santa Monica freeway.

The address was near the beach, so close they could smell the sea. The building was dark-bricked, one of those old art-deco places that probably used to be a hotel when Santa Monica was young. Ques pulled the cab to a halt in front of it and cut the engine.

"I want you both to stay here," the Green Falcon said. "I'm going in alone." He started to get out, but Gracie caught his arm.

"Hey, listen. If the Fliptop's really in there, this is the time to call the cops. No joke."

"I don't know that he's in there. It's an old library card; he might have moved. But if he's there, I've got to see his face for myself. Then we can call the police."

"She's right," Ques told him. "Listen, it's crazy to go in there. You don't have a gun or anything."

"The Green Falcon," he said adamantly, "never carries a gun."

"Yeah, and the Green Falcon's only got one life, fool!" Gracie didn't release her grip. "Playtime's over. I mean it. This isn't some old serial. This is real life. You know what reality is?"

"Yes, I do." He turned the full wattage of his gaze on her. "The reality is that... I think I'd rather die as the Green Falcon than live as an old man with a screwed-up bladder and a book of memories. I want to walk tall, just once more. Is that so terrible?"

"It's nuts," she answered. "And you're nuts."

"So I am. I'm going." He pulled loose from her and got out of the cab. He was scared, but not as much as he thought he'd be. It wasn't as bad as indigestion, really. And then he went up the front steps into the building, and he checked the row of mailboxes in the alcove.

The one for apartment D had BOWERS on it.

Apartments A, B, and C were on the first floor. He climbed the stairs, aided by a red-shaded light fixture on the wall, and stood before apartment D's door.

He started to knock. Stopped his hand, the fist clenched. A thrill of fear coursed through him. He stood there facing the door, and he didn't know if he could do it or not. He wasn't the Green Falcon; there was no such entity, not really. It was all a fiction. But Julie's death was not a fiction, and neither was what he'd been through tonight to reach this door. The sane thing was to back off, go down those stairs, get to a phone, and call the police. Of course it was.

He heard a car's horn blare a quick tattoo. The cab, he thought. Ques, urging him to come back?

He knocked at the door and waited. His heart had lodged in his throat. He tensed for a voice, or the sudden opening of the door.

The stairs creaked.

He heard the cab's horn again. This time Ques was leaning on it, and suddenly the Green Falcon knew why.

He turned, in awful slow motion, and saw the shadow looming on the wall.

And there he was: the young blonde, dark-eyed man who'd slashed Julie's throat. Coming up the staircase, step by step, not yet having seen the Green Falcon. But he would, at any second, and each step brought them closer.

The Green Falcon didn't move. The killer's weight made the risers moan, and he was smiling slightly—perhaps, the Green Falcon thought, musing over the feel of the blade piercing Julie's flesh.

And then the Fliptop Killer looked up, saw the Green Falcon at the top of the stairs, and stopped.

They stared at each other, standing not quite an arm's length apart. The killer's dark eyes were startled, and in them the Green Falcon saw a glint of fear.

"I've found you," the Green Falcon said.

The Fliptop Killer reached to his back, his hand a blur. It returned with the bright steel of the hunting knife, taken from a sheath that must fit down at his waistband. He moved fast, like an animal, and the Green Falcon saw the blade rising to strike him in the throat or chest.

"IT'S HIM!" Gracie shouted as she burst into the alcove and to the foot of the steps.

The killer looked around at her—and it was the Green Falcon's turn to move fast. He grasped the man's wrist and struck him hard in the jaw with his right fist, and he felt one of his knuckles break, but the killer toppled backward down the stairs.

The man caught the railing before he'd tumbled to the bottom, and he still had hold of the knife. A thread of

blood spilled from his split lower lip, his eyes dazed from a bang of his skull against a riser. The Green Falcon was coming down the steps after him, and the Fliptop Killer struggled up and backed away.

"WATCH OUT!" the Green Falcon yelled as Gracie tried to grab the man's knife. The killer swung at her, but she jumped back and the blade narrowly missed her face. But she had courage, and she wasn't about to give up; she darted in again, clutching his arm to keep the knife from another slash. The Green Falcon tensed to leap at the man, but suddenly the killer struck Gracie in the face with his left fist and she staggered back against the wall. Just that fast, the man fled towards the front door.

The Green Falcon stopped at Gracie's side. Her nose was bleeding and she looked about to pass out. She said, "Get the bastard," and the Green Falcon took off in pursuit.

Out front, the Fliptop Killer ran to the parked cab. Ques tried to fight him off, but a slash of the blade across Ques' shoulder sprayed blood across the inside of the windshield; the Fliptop Killer looked up saw the man in the green suit and cape coming after him. He hauled Ques out of the cab and leapt behind the wheel.

As the cab's tired laid down streaks of rubber, the Green Falcon grasped the edge of the open window on the passenger side and just had an instant to lock his fingers, broken knuckle and all, before the cab shot forward. Then he was off his feet, his body streamlined to the cab's side, and the vehicle was roaring north along serpentine Jericho Street at fifty miles an hour.

The Green Falcon hung on. The killer jerked the wheel back and forth, slammed into a row of garbage cans, and kept going. He made a screeching left turn at a red light that swung the Green Falcon's body out from the cab's side and all but tore his shoulders from his sockets, but still the Green Falcon hung on. And now the Fliptop Killer leaned over, one hand gripping the wheel, and jabbed at the Green Falcon's fingers with the knife. Slashed two of them, but the Green Falcon's right hand darted in and clamped around the wrist. The cab veered out of its lane, in front of a panel truck whose fender almost clipped the Green Falcon's legs. The killer thrashed wildly, trying to get his knife hand free, but the Green Falcon smashed his wrist against the window's frame and the fingers spasmed open; the knife fell down between the seat and the door.

Beachfront buildings and houses flashed by on either side. The cab tore through a barricade that said WARNING—NO VEHICLES BEYOND THIS POINT.

The Green Falcon tried to push himself through the window. A fist hit his chin and made alarm bells go off in his brain. And then the Fliptop Killer gripped the wheel with both hands, because the cab was speeding up a narrow wooden ramp. The Green Falcon had the taste of blood in his mouth, and now he could hear a strange thing: the excited shouts of children, the voices of ghosts on the wind. His fingers were weakening, his grip about to fail; the voices overlapped and intermingled, said, "Hold on, Green Falcon, hold on..."

And then before his strength collapsed, he lunged through the window and grappled with the Fliptop Killer as the cab rocketed up onto a pier and early-morning fishermen leapt for their lives.

Fingers gouged for the Green Falcon's eyes, could not get through the mask's slits. The Green Falcon hit him in the face with a quick boxer's left and right, and the killer let go of the wheel to clench both sinewy hands around the Green Falcon's throat.

The cab reached the end of the pier, crashed through the wooden railing, and plummeted into the Pacific Ocean twenty feet below.

10. Nightmare Netherworld

The sea surged into the cab, and the vehicle angled down into the depths.

The Fliptop Killer screamed. The Green Falcon smashed him in the face with a blow that burst his nose, and then the sea came between them, rising rapidly towards the roof as the cab continued to sink.

The last bubbles of air exploded from the cab. One headlight still burned, pointing toward the bottom, and for a few seconds the instrument panel glowed with weird phosphorescence. And then the lights shorted out, and darkness claimed all.

The Green Falcon released his prey. Already his lungs strained for a breath, but still the cab was sinking. One of the killer's thrashing legs hit his skull, a hand tearing at his tunic. The Green Falcon didn't know which way was up and which was down; the cab was rotating as it descended, like an out-of-control aircraft falling through a nightmare netherworld. The Green Falcon searched for an open window but found only the windshield's glass. He slammed his fist against it, but it would take more strength than he had to break it.

... Cut, he thought. Panic flared inside him, almost tore loose the last of the air in his lungs. CUT! But there was no director here, and he had to play this scene out to its end. He twisted and turned, seeking a way out. His cape was snagged around something—the gearshift, he thought it was. He ripped the cape off and let it fall, and then he pulled his cowl and mask off and it drifted past him like another face. His lungs heaved, bubbles coming out of his nostrils. And then his flailing hands found a window's edge; as he pushed himself through, the Fliptop Killer's fingers closed on his arm.

The Green Falcon grasped the man's shirt and pulled him through the window too.

Somewhere below the surface, he lost his grip on the Fliptop Killer. His torn tunic split along the seams, and left him. He kicked toward the top with the legs that had won a gold medal in his junior-year swim meet, and as his lungs began to convulse his head broke the surface. He shuddered, drawing in the night air.

People were shouting at him from the pier's splintered rail. A wave caught him, washed him forward. The rough surface of a barnacled piling all but ripped the green tights off his legs. Another wave tossed him, and a third. The fourth crashed foam over him, and then a young arm got him around the neck and he was being guided to the beach.

A moment later, his knees touched sand. A wave cast him onto shore and took his last tatters of his Green Falcon costume back with it to the sea.

He was turned over. Somebody trying to squeeze water out of him. He said, "I'm all right," in a husky voice, and he heard somebody else shout, "The other one washed up over here!"

Cray sat up. "Is he alive?" he asked the tan face. "Is he alive?"

"Yeah," the boy answered. "He's alive."

"Good. Don't let him go," Cray snorted seaweed out of his nostrils. "He's the Fliptop Killer."

The boy stared at him. Then shouted to his friend, "Sit on that dude till the cops get here, man!"

It wasn't long before the first police car came. The two officers hurried down to where Cray sat at the edge of the land and one of them bent down and asked his name.

"Cray Fli..." He stopped. A piece of green cloth washed up beside him, was pulled back again just as quickly. "Cray Boomershine," he answered. And then he told them the rest of it.

"This guy got the Fliptop!" one of the kids nearby called to his friend, and somebody else repeated it and it went up and down the beach. People crowded around, gawking at the old man who sat in his pajamas on the sand.

The second police car came, and the third one brought a black go-go dancer and a kid with a question mark on his scalp and a bandage around his shoulder. They pushed through the crowd, and Gracie called out, "WHERE IS HE? WHERE'S THE GREEN FAL—"

She stopped, because the old man standing between two policemen was smiling at her. He said, "Hello, Gracie. It's all over."

She came toward him. Didn't speak for a moment. Her hand rose up, and her fingers picked seaweed out of his hair. "Lord have mercy," she said. "You look like a wet dog."

"You got that sucker, didn't you?" Ques watched the cops taking the Fliptop, in handcuffs, to one of the cars.

"We got him," Cray said.

A TV news truck was pulling onto the beach. A red-haired woman with a microphone and a guy carrying a video camera and power pack got out, hurrying towards the center of the crowd. "No questions," a policeman told her, but she was right there in Cray's face before she could be restrained. The camera's lights shone on him, Gracie, and Ques. "What happened here? Is it true that the Fliptop Killer was caught tonight?"

"No questions!" the policeman repeated, but Gracie's teeth flashed as she grinned for the camera.

"What's your name?" the woman persisted. She thrust the microphone up to Cray's lips.

"Hey, Lady!" Ques said. The microphone went to him. "Don't you recognize the GREEN FALCON?!"

The newswoman was too stunned to reply, and before she could find another question, a policeman herded her and the cameraman away.

"We're going to the station and clear all this mess away," the officer who had hold of Cray's elbow said. "All three of you. Move it!"

They started up the beach, the crowd following and the newswoman trying to get at them again. Gracie and Ques got into one of the police cars, but Cray paused. The night air smelled sweet, like victory. The night had called, and the Green Falcon had answered. What would happen to him, Gracie, and Ques from this moment on, he didn't know. But of one thing he was certain: they had done right.

He got into the police car, and realized he still wore his green boots. he thought that maybe—just maybe—they still had places to go.

The police car carried them away and the TV news truck followed.

On the beach, the crowd milled around for a while. Who was he? somebody asked. The Green Falcon? Did he used to be somebody? Yeah, a long time ago. I think I saw him on a rerun. He lives in Beverly Hills now, went into real estate and made about ten million bucks, but he still plays the Green Falcon on the side.

Oh, yeah, somebody else said. I heard that too.

And at the edge of the ocean a green mask and cowl washed up from the foam, started to slip back into the waves again.

A little boy picked it up. He and his Dad had come to fish on the pier this morning, before the sun came up and the big ones went back to depths. He had seen the cab go over the edge, and the sight of this mask made his heart beat harder.

It was a thing worth keeping.

He put it on. It was wet and heavy, but it made the world look different, kind of.

He ran back to his Dad, his brown legs pumping in the sand, and for a moment he felt as if he could fly.

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SOMETHING PASSED BY

1

Johnny James was sitting on the front porch, sipping from a glass of gasoline in the December heat, when the doomscreamer came. Of course, doomscreamers were nothing new; these days they were as common as blue moons. This one was of the usual variety: skinny-framed, with haunted dark eyes and a long black beard full of dust and filth. He wore dirty khaki trousers and a faded green Izod shirt, and on his feet were sandals made from tires with the emblem still showing: Michelin. Johnny sipped his Exxon Super Unleaded and pondered that the doomscreamer's outfit must be the yuppie version of sackcloth and ashes.

"Prepare for the end! Prepare to meet your Maker!" The doomscreamer had a loud, booming voice that echoed in the stillness over the town that stood on the edge of Nebraskan cornfields. It floated over Grant Street, where the statues of town fathers stood, past the Victorian houses at the end of King's Lane that had burned with such beautiful flames, past the empty playground at the silent Bloch School, over Bradbury Park where paint flaked off the grinning carousel horses, down Koontz Street where the businesses used to thrive, over Ellison Field where no bat would smack another softball. The doomscreamer's voice filled the town, and ignited the ears of all who remained. "No refuge for the wicked! Prepare for the end! Prepare! Prepare!"

Johnny heard a screen door slam. His neighbor in the white house across the way stood on his own porch loading a rifle. Johnny called, "Hey, Gordon! What're you doin', man?"

Gordon Mayfield continued to push bullets into his rifle. Between Johnny and Gordon, the air shimmered with hazy heat. "Target practice!" Gordon shouted; his voice cracked and his hands were shaking. He was a big fleshy man with a shaved head, and he wore only blue jeans, his bare chest and shoulders glistening with sweat. "Gonna do me some target practice!" he said as he pushed the last shell into the rifle's magazine and clicked the safety off.

Johnny swallowed gasoline and rocked in his chair. "Prepare! Prepare!" the doomscreamer hollered as he approached his end. The man was standing in front of the empty house next to Gordon's, where the Carmichael family had lived before they fled with a wandering evangelist and his flock on his way to California. "Prepare!" The doomscreamer lifted his arms, sweat stains on his Izod, and shouted to the sky, "O ye sinners, prepare to—"

His voice faltered. He looked down at his Michelins, which had begun to sink into the street.

The doomscreamer made a small terrified squeak. He was not prepared. His ankles had sunk into the gray concrete, which sparkled like quicksilver in a circle around him. Swiftly he sank to his waist in the mire, his mouth open in a righteous O.

Gordon had lifted the rifle to put a bullet through the doomscreamer's skull. Now he realized a pull of the trigger would be wasted energy, and might even increase his own risk of spontaneous combustion. He released the trigger and slowly lowered his gun.

"Help me!" The doomscreamer saw Johnny, and lifted his hands in supplication. "Help me, brother!" He was up to his alligator in the shimmering, hungry concrete. His eyes begged like those of a lost puppy. "Please... help me!"

Johnny was on his feet, though he didn't remember standing. He had set the glass of gasoline aside, and he was about to walk down the porch steps, across the scorched yard, and offer his hand to the sinking doomscreamer. But he paused, because he knew he'd never get there in time, and when the concrete pooled like that, you never knew how firm the dirt would be either.

"Help me!" The doomscreamer had gone down to his chin. He stretched, trying to claw his way out, but quicksilver offers no handholds. "For God's sake, hel—" His face went under. His head slid down, and the concrete swirled through his hair. Then—perhaps two seconds later—his clawing hands were all that was left of him, and as they slid down after him, the street suddenly solidified again in a ripple of hardening silver. Concrete locked around the ex-doomscreamer's wrists, and his hands looked like white plants growing out of the center of the street. The fingers twitched a few times, then went rigid.

Gordon went down his steps and walked carefully to the upthrust hands, prodding his path with the rifle's barrel. When he was certain, or as certain as he could be, that the street wouldn't suck him under too, he knelt beside the hands and just sat there staring.

"What is it? What's going on?" Brenda James had come out of the house, her light brown hair damp with sweat. Johnny pointed at the hands, and his wife whispered, "Oh my God."

"Got on a nice wristwatch," Gordon said after another moment. He leaned closer, squinting at the dial. "It's a Rolex. You want it Johnny?"

"No," Johnny said. "I don't think so."

"Brenda? You want it? Looks like it tells good time."

She shook her head and grasped Johnny's arm.

"It'd be a waste to leave it out here. First car that comes along, no more watch." Gordon glanced up and down the street. It had been a long time since a car had passed this way, but you never knew. He decided, and took the Rolex off the dead man's wrist. The crystal was cracked and there flecks of dried concrete on it, but it was a nice shiny watch. He put it on and stood up. "Happened too fast to do anythin' about it. Didn't it, Johnny?"

"Yeah. Way too fast." His throat was dry. He took the last sip of gasoline from the glass. His breath smelled like the pumps at Lansdale's Exxon Station on deLint Street.

Gordon started to walk away. Brenda said, "Are you... are you just going to *leave* him there?"

Gordon stopped. He looked down at the hands, wiped his brow with his forearm, and returned his gaze to Brenda and Johnny. "I've got an ax in my garage."

"Just leave him there," Johnny said, and Gordon nodded and walked up his porch steps, still testing the earth with the rifle's barrel. He sighed with relief when he reached the porch's sturdy floor.

"Poker game at Ray's tonight," Gordon reminded them. "You gonna make it?"

"Yeah. We'd planned on it."

"Good." His gaze slid toward the white hands, then quickly away again. "Nothin' like winnin' a little cash to take your mind off your troubles, right?"

"Right," Johnny agreed. "Except you're the one who usually wins all the money."

"Hey, what can I say?" Gordon shrugged. "I'm a lucky dude."

"I thought I'd bring J.J. tonight," Brenda offered in a high, merry voice. Both Johnny and Gordon flinched a little. "J.J. needs to get out of the house," Brenda went on. "He likes to be around people."

"Uh... sure." Gordon glanced quickly at Johnny. He darted another look at the white hands sticking out of the street, and then he went into his house and the screen door slammed behind him.

Brenda began to sing softly as Johnny followed her into their house. An old nursery song, one she'd sung to J.J. when he was just an infant. "*Go to sleep, little baby, when you wake I'll give you some cake and you can ride the pretty little poneeee... .*"

"Brenda? I don't think it's a good idea."

"What?" She turned toward him, smiling, her blue eyes without luster. "What's not a good idea, hon?"

"Taking J.J. out of his room. You know how he likes it in there."

Brenda's smile fractured. "That's what *you* say! You're always trying to hurt me, and keep me from being with J.J. Why can't I take J.J. outside? Why can't I sit on the porch with my baby like other mothers do? Why can't I? Answer me, Johnny?" Her face had reddened with anger. "*Why?*"

Johnny's expression remained calm. They'd been over this territory many times. "Go ask J.J. why," he suggested, and he saw her eyes lose their focus, like ice forming over blue pools.

Brenda turned away from him and strode purposefully down the corridor. She stopped before the closed door to J.J.'s room. Hanging on a wall hook next to the door was a small orange oxygen tank on a backpack, connected to a clear plastic oxygen mask. Brenda had had much practice in slipping the tank on, and she did it with little difficulty. Then she turned on the airflow and strapped the hissing oxygen mask over her nose and mouth. She picked up a crowbar, inserting it into a scarred furrow in the doorjamb at J.J.'s room. She pushed against it, but the door wouldn't budge.

"I'll help you," Johnny said, and started toward her.

"No! No, I'll do it!" Brenda strained against the crowbar with desperate strength, her oxygen mask fogging up. And then there was a small cracking noise followed by a *whoosh* that never failed to remind Johnny of a pop top coming off a vacuum-sealed pack of tennis balls. Air shrilled for a few seconds in the hallway, the suction staggering Johnny and Brenda off balance, and then the door to J.J.'s room was unsealed. Brenda went in, and lodged the crowbar between the doorjamb and the door so it wouldn't trap her when the air started to leak away again, which would be in less than two minutes.

Brenda sat down on Johnny Junior's bed. The room's wallpaper had airplanes on it, but the glue was cracking in the dry, airless heat and the paper sagged, the airplanes falling to earth. "J.J.?" Brenda said. "J.J.? Wake up, J.J." She reached out and touched the boy's shoulder. He lay nestled under the sheet, having a good long sleep. "J.J., it's Momma," Brenda said, and stroked the limp dark hair back from the mummified, gasping face.

Johnny waited in the corridor. He could hear Brenda talking to the dead boy, her voice rising and falling, her words muffled by the oxygen mask. Johnny's heart ached. He knew the routine. She would pick up the dry husk and hold him—carefully, because even in her madness she knew how fragile J.J. was—and maybe sing him that nursery rhyme a few times. But it would dawn on her that time was short, and the air was being sucked out of that room into a vacuum-sealed unknown dimension. The longer the door was left open, the harder the oxygen was pulled into the walls. If you stayed in there over two or three minutes, you could feel the walls pulling at you, as if they were trying suck you right through the seams. The scientists had a name for it: the "pharaoh effect." The scientists had a name for everything, like "concrete quicksand" and "gravity howitzers" and "hutomic blast," among others. Oh,

those scientists were a real smart bunch, weren't they? Johnny heard Brenda begin to sing, in an oddly disconnected, wispy voice: "*Go to sleep, little baby, when you wake I'll give you some cake... .*"

It had happened almost two months ago. J.J. was four years old. Of course, things were crazy by then, and Johnny and Brenda had heard about the "pharaoh effect" on the TV news, but you never thought such a thing could ever happen in your own house. J.J. had gone to bed, like any other night, and sometime before morning all the air had been sucked out of his room. Just like that. All gone. Air was the room's enemy; the walls hated oxygen, and sucked it all into that unknown dimension before it could collect. They both had been too shocked to bury J.J., and it was Johnny who'd realized that J.J.'s body was rapidly mummifying in the airless heat. So they let the body stay in that room, though they could never bring J.J. out because the corpse would surely fall apart after a few hours of exposure to oxygen.

Johnny felt the air swirling past him, being drawn into J.J.'s room. "Brenda?" he called. "You'd better come on out now."

Brenda's singing died. He heard her sob quietly. The air was beginning to whistle around the crowbar, a dangerous sound. Inside the room, Brenda's hair danced and her clothes were plucked by invisible fingers. A storm of air whirled around her, being drawn into the walls. She was transfixed by the sight of J.J.'s white baby teeth in his brown, wrinkled face: the face of an Egyptian prince. "Brenda!" Johnny's voice was firm now. "Come on!"

She drew the sheet back up to J.J.'s chin; the sheet crackled like a dead leaf. Then she smoothed his dried-out hair and backed toward the door with insane winds battering her body.

They both had to strain to dislodge the crowbar. As soon as it came loose, Johnny grasped the door's edge to keep it from slamming shut. He held it, his strength in jeopardy, as Brenda squeezed through. Then he let the door go. It slammed with a force that shook the house. Along the door's edge was a quick *whooooosh* as it was sealed tight. Then silence.

Brenda stood in the dim light, her shoulders bowed. Johnny lifted the oxygen tank and backpack off her, then took the mask from her face. He checked the oxygen gauge; have to fill it up again pretty soon. He hung the equipment back on its hook. There was a shrill little steampipe whistle of air being drawn through the crack at the bottom of the door, and Johnny pressed a towel into it. The whistle ceased.

Brenda's back straightened. "J.J. says he's fine," she told him. She was smiling again, and her eyes glinted with a false, horrible happiness. "He says he doesn't want to go to Ray's tonight. But he doesn't mind that we do. Not one little bit."

"That's good," Johnny said, and he walked to the front room. When he glanced at his wife, he saw Brenda still standing before the door to the room that ate oxygen. "Want to watch some TV?" he asked her.

"TV. Oh. Yes. Let's watch some TV." She turned away from the door and came back to him.

Brenda sat down on the den's sofa, and Johnny turned on the Sony. Most of the channels showed static, but a few of them still worked: on them you could see the negative images of old shows like "Hawaiian Eye," "My Mother the Car," "Checkmate," and "Amos Burke, Secret Agent." The networks had gone off the air a month or so ago, and Johnny figured these shows were just bouncing around in space, maybe hurled to Earth out of the unknown dimension. Their eyes were used to the negative images by now. It beat listening to the radio, because on the only stations they could get, Beatles songs were played backward at half-speed, over and over again.

Between "Checkmate" and a commercial for Brylcreem Hair Dressing—"A Little Dab'll Do Ya!"—Brenda began to cry. Johnny put his arm around her, and she leaned her head against his shoulder. He smelled J.J. on her: the odor of dry corn husks, burning in the midsummer heat. Except it was almost Christmastime, ho, ho, ho.

Something passed by, Johnny thought. That's what the scientists had said, almost six months ago. *Something passed by*. That was the headline in the newspapers, and on the cover of every magazine that used to be sold over at Sarrantonio's newsstand on Gresham Street. And what it was that passed by, the scientists didn't know. They took some guesses, though: magnetic storm, black hole, time warp, gas cloud, a comet of some material that kinked the very fabric of physics. A scientist up in Oregon said he thought the universe had just stopped expanding and was now crushing inward on itself. Somebody else said he believed the cosmos was dying of old age. Galactic cancer. A tumor in the brain of Creation. Cosmic AIDS. Whatever. The fact was that things were not what they'd been six months ago, and nobody was saying it was going to get better. Or that six months from now there'd be an Earth, or a universe where it used to hang.

Something passed by. Three words. A death sentence. On this asylum planet called Earth, the molecules of matter had warped. Water had a disturbing tendency to explode like nitroglycerine, which had rearranged the intestines of a few hundred thousand people before the scientists figured it out. Gasoline, on the contrary, was now safe to drink, as well as engine oil, furniture polish, hydrochloric acid, and rat poison. Concrete melted into pools of quicksand, the clouds rained stones, and... well, there were other things too terrible to contemplate, like the day Johnny had been with Marty Chesley and Bo Duggan, finishing off a few bottles at one of the bars on Monteleone Street. Bo had complained of a headache, and the next minute his brains had spewed out of his ears like gray soup.

Something passed by. And because of that, anything could happen.

We made somebody mad, Johnny thought; he watched the negative images of Doug McClure and Sebastian Cabot. We screwed it up, somehow. Walked where we shouldn't have. Done what we didn't need to do. We picked a

fruit off a tree we had no business picking, and... .

God help us, he thought. Brenda made a small sobbing sound.

Sometime later, red-bellied clouds came in from the prairie, their shadows sliding over the straight and empty highways. There was no thunder or lightning, just a slow, thick drizzle. The windows of the James house streamed crimson, and blood ran in the gutters. Pieces of raw flesh and entrails thunked down onto the roofs, fell onto the streets, lay steaming in the heat-scorched yards. A blizzard of flies followed the clouds, and buzzards followed the flies.

2

"Read 'em and weep, gents," Gordon said, showing his royal flush. He swept the pot of dimes and quarters toward him, and the other men at the round table moaned and muttered. "Like I say, I'm a lucky dude."

"Too lucky." Howard Carnes slapped his cards down—a measly aces and fours—and reached for the pitcher. He poured himself a glassful of high-octane.

"So I was sayin' to Danny," Ray Barnett went on, speaking to the group as he waited for Gordon to shuffle and deal. "What's the use of leavin' town? I mean, it's not like there's gonna be anyplace different, right? Everything's screwed up." He pushed a plug of chewing tobacco into his mouth and offered the pack to Johnny.

Johnny shook his head. Nick Gleason said, "I heard there's a place in South America that's normal. A place in Brazil. The water's still all right."

"Aw, that's bullshit." Ike McCord picked up his newly dealt cards and examined them, keeping a true poker face on his hard, flinty features. "The whole damn Amazon River blew up. Bastard's still on fire. That's what I heard before the networks went off. It was on CBS." He rearranged a couple of cards. "Nowhere's any different from here. The whole world's the same."

"You don't know everything!" Nick shot back. A little red had begun to glow in his fat cheeks. "I'll bet there's someplace where things are normal! Maybe at the north pole or somewhere like that!"

"The north pole!" Ray laughed. "Who the hell wants to live at the damned north pole?"

"I could live there," Nick went on. "Me and Terri could. Get us some tents and warm clothes, we'd be all right."

"I don't think Terri would want to wake up with an icicle on her nose," Johnny said, looking at a hand full of nothing.

Gordon laughed. "Yeah! It'd be ol' Nick who'd have an icicle hangin' off something', and it wouldn't be his nose!" The other men chortled, but Nick remained silent, his cheeks reddening; he stared fixedly at his cards, which were just as bad Johnny's.

There was a peal of high, false, forced laughter from the front room, where Brenda sat with Terri Gleason, Jane McCord and her two kids, Rhonda Carnes and their fifteen-year-old daughter, Kathy, who lay on the floor listening to Bon Jovi tapes on her Walkman. Elderly Mrs. McCord, Ike's mother, was needlepointing, her glasses perched on the end of her nose and her wrinkled fingers diligent.

"So Danny says he and Paula want to go west," Ray said. "I'll open for a quarter." He tossed it into the pot. "Danny says he's never seen San Francisco, so that's where they want to go."

"I wouldn't go west if you paid me." Howard threw a quarter in. "I'd get on a boat and go to an island. Like Tahiti. One of those places where women dance with their stomachs."

"Yeah, I could see Rhonda in a grass skirt! I'll raise you a quarter, gents." Gordon put his money into the pot. "Couldn't you guys see Howard drinkin' out of a damn coconut? Man, he'd make a monkey look like a prince char—"

From the distance came a hollow *boom* that echoed over the town and cut Gordon's jaunty voice off. The talking and forced laughter ceased in the front room. Mrs. McCord missed a stitch, and Kathy Carnes sat up and took the Walkman earphones off.

There was another *boom*, closer this time. The house's floor trembled. The men sat staring desperately at their cards. A third blast, further away. Then silence, in which hearts pounded and Gordon's new Rolex ticked off the seconds.

"It's over," old Mrs. McCord announced. She was back in her rhythm again. "Wasn't even close."

"I wouldn't go west if you paid me," Howard repeated. His voice trembled. "Gimme three cards."

"Three cards it is." Gordon gave everybody what they needed, then said, "One card for the dealer." His hands were shaking.

Johnny glanced out the window. Far away, over the rotting cornfields, there was a flash of jagged red. The percussion came within seconds: a muffled, powerful *boom*.

"I'm bumpin' everybody fifty cents," Gordon announced. "Come on, come on! Let's play cards!"

Ike McCord folded. Johnny had nothing, so he folded too. "Turn 'em over!" Gordon said. Howard grinned and showed his kings and jacks. He started to rake in the pot, but Gordon said, "Hold on, Howie," as he turned over his hand and showed his four tens and a deuce. "Sorry, gents. Read 'em and weep." He pulled the coins toward himself.

Howard's face had gone chalky. Another blast echoed through the night. The floor trembled. Howard said, "You're cheatin', you sonofabitch."

Gordon stared at him, his mouth open. Sweat glistened on his face.

"Hold on, now, Howard," Ike said. "You don't want to say things like—"

"You must be helpin' him, damn it!" Howard's voice was louder, more strident, and it stopped the voices of the women. "Hell, it's plain as day he's cheatin'! Ain't nobody's luck can be as good as his!"

"I'm not a cheater." Gordon stood up; his chair fell over backward. "I won't take that kind of talk from any man."

"Come on, everybody!" Johnny said. "Let's settle down and—"

"I'm not a cheater!" Gordon shouted. "I play 'em honest!" A blast made the walls moan, and a red glow jumped at the window.

"You always win the big pots!" Howard stood up, trembling. "How come you always win the big pots, Gordon?"

Rhonda Carnes, Jane McCord, and Brenda were peering into the room, eyes wide and fearful. "Hush up in there!" old Mrs. McCord hollered. "Shut your traps, children!"

"Nobody calls me a cheater, damn you!" Gordon flinched as a blast pounded the earth. He stared at Howard, his fists clenched. "I deal 'em honest and I play 'em honest, and by God, I ought to..." He reached out, his hand grasping for Howard's shirt collar.

Before his hand could get there, Gordon Mayfield burst into flame.

"Jesus!" Ray shrieked, leaping back. The table upset, and the cards and coins flew through the air. Jane McCord screamed, and so did her husband. Johnny staggered backward, tripped, and fell against the wall. Gordon's flesh was aflame from bald skull to the bottom of his feet, and as his plaid shirt caught fire, Gordon thrashed and writhed. Two burning deuces spun from the inside of his shirt and snapped at Howard's face. Gordon was screaming for help, the flesh running off him as incandescent heat built inside his body. He tore at his skin, trying to put out the fire that would not be extinguished.

"Help him!" Brenda shouted. "Somebody help him!" But Gordon staggered back against the wall, scorching it. The ceiling above his head was charred and smoking. His Rolex exploded with a small *pop*.

Johnny was on his knees in the protection of the overturned table, and as he rose he felt Gordon's heat pucker his own face. Gordon was flailing, a mass of yellow flames, and Johnny leapt up and grasped Brenda's hand, pulling her with him toward the front door. "Get out!" he yelled. "Everybody get out!"

Johnny didn't wait for them; he pulled Brenda out the door, and they ran through the night, south on Silva Street. He looked back, saw a few more figures fleeing from the house, but he couldn't tell who they were. And then there was a white flare that dazzled his eyes and Ray Barnett's house exploded, timbers and roof tiles flying through the sultry air. The shock wave knocked Brenda and Johnny to the pavement; she was screaming, and Johnny clasped his hand over her mouth because he knew that if he started to scream it was all over for him. Fragments of the house rained down around them, along with burning clumps of human flesh. Johnny and Brenda got up and ran, their knees bleeding.

They ran through the center of town, along the straight thoroughfare of Straub Street, past the Spector Theatre and the Skipp Religious Bookstore. Other shouts and screams echoed through the night, and red lightning danced in the cornfields. Johnny had no thought but to get them home, and hope that the earth wouldn't suck them under before they got there.

They fled past the cemetery on McDowell Hill, and there was a crash and *boom* that dropped Johnny and Brenda to their knees again. Red lightning arced overhead, a sickly-sweet smell in the air. When Johnny looked at the cemetery again, he saw there was no longer a hill; the entire rise had been mashed flat, as if by a tremendous crushing fist. And then, three seconds later, broken tombstones and bits of coffins slammed down on the plain where a hill had stood for two hundred years. *Gravity howitzer*, Johnny thought; he hauled Brenda to her feet, and they staggered on across Olson Lane and past the broken remnants of the Baptist church at the intersection of Daniels and Saul streets.

A brick house on Wright Street was crushed to the ground as they fled past it, slammed into the boiling dust by the invisible power of gravity gone mad. Johnny gripped Brenda's hand and pulled her on, through the deserted streets. Gravity howitzers boomed all across town, from Schow Street on the west to Barker Promenade on the east. The red lightning cracked overhead, snapping through the air like cat-o'-nine-tails. And then Johnny and Brenda staggered onto Strieber Circle, right at the edge of town, where you had a full view of the fields and the stars, and kids used to watch, wistfully, for UFOs.

There would be UFOs tonight, and no deliverance from the Earth. Gravity howitzers smashed into the fields, making the stars shimmer. The ground shook, and in the glare of the red lightning Johnny and Brenda could see the effect of the gravity howitzers, the cornstalks mashed flat to the ground in circles twelve or fifteen feet around. The fist of God, Johnny thought. Another house was smashed to rubble on the street behind them; there was no pattern or reason for the gravity howitzers, but Johnny had seen what was left of Stan Haines after the man was hit by one on a sunny Sunday afternoon. Stan had been a mass of bloody tissue jammed into his crumpled shoes, like a dripping mushroom.

The howitzers marched back and forth across the fields. Two or three more houses were hit, over on the north

edge of town. And then, quite abruptly, it was all over. There was the noise of people shouting and dogs barking; the sounds seemed to combine, until you couldn't tell one from the other.

Johnny and Brenda sat on the curb, gripping hands and trembling. The long night went on.

3

The sun turned violet. Even at midday, the sun was a purple ball in a white, featureless sky. The air was always hot, but the sun itself no longer seemed warm. The first of a new year passed, and burning winter drifted toward springtime.

Johnny noticed them in Brenda's hands first. Brown freckles. Age spots, he realized they were. Her skin was changing. It was becoming leathery, and deep wrinkles began to line her face. At twenty-seven years of age, her hair began to go gray.

And sometime later, as he was shaving with gasoline, he noticed his own face: the lines around his eyes were going away. His face was softening. And his clothes: his clothes just didn't fit right anymore. They were getting baggy, his shirts beginning to swallow him up.

Of course, Brenda noticed it too. How could she not, though she tried her best to deny it. Her bones ached. Her spine was starting to bow over. Her fingers hurt, and the worst was when she lost control of her hands and dropped J.J. and a piece of him cracked off like brittle clay. One day in March it became clear to her, when she looked in the mirror and saw the wrinkled, age-freckled face of an old woman staring back. And then she looked at Johnny and saw a nineteen-year-old boy where a thirty-year-old man used to be.

They sat on the porch together, Johnny fidgety and nervous, as young folks are when they're around the gray-haired elderly. Brenda was stooped and silent, staring straight ahead with watery, faded blue eyes.

"We're goin' in different directions," Johnny said in a voice that was getting higher-pitched by the day. "I don't know what happened or why. But... it just did." He reached out, took one of her wrinkled hands. Her bones felt fragile, bird-like. "I love you," he said.

She smiled. "I love you," she answered in her old woman's quaver.

They sat for a while in the purple glare. And then Johnny went down to the street and pitched stones at the side of Gordon Mayfield's empty house while Brenda nodded and slept.

Something passed by, she thought in her cage of dreams. She remembered her wedding day, and she oozed a dribble of saliva as she smiled. *Something passed by*. What had it been, and where had it gone?

Johnny made friends with a dog, but Brenda wouldn't let him keep it in the house. Johnny promised he'd clean up after it, and feed it, and all the other stuff you were supposed to do. Brenda said certainly not, that she wouldn't have it shedding all over her furniture. Johnny cried some, but he got over it. He found a baseball and bat in an empty house, and he spent most of his time swatting the ball up and down the street. Brenda tried to take up needlepoint, but her fingers just weren't up to it.

These are the final days, she thought as she sat on the porch and watched his small body as he chased the ball. She kept her Bible in her lap, and read it constantly, though her eyes burned and watered. The final days were here at last, and no man could stop the passage of their hours.

The day came when Johnny couldn't crawl into her lap, and it hurt her shoulders to lift him, but she wanted him nestled against her. Johnny played with his fingers, and Brenda told him about paradise and the world yet to be. Johnny asked her what kind of toys they had there, and Brenda smiled a toothless grin and stroked his hair.

Something passed by, and Brenda knew what it was: time. Old clocks ticking down. Old planets slowing in their orbits. Old hearts laboring. The huge machine was winding to a finish now, and who could say that was a bad thing?

She held him in her arms as she rocked slowly on the front porch. She sang to him, and old sweet song: "*Go to sleep, little baby, when you wake... .*"

She stopped and squinted at the fields.

A huge wave of iridescent green and violet was undulating across the earth. It came on silently, almost... yes, Brenda decided. It came on with a lovely grace. The wave rolled slowly across the fields, and in its wake it left a gray blankness, like the wiping clean of a schoolboy's slate. It would soon reach the town, their street, their house, their front porch. And then she and her beautiful child would know the puzzle's answer.

It came on, with relentless power. She had time to finish her song: "*... I'll give you some cake and you can ride the pretty little poneeee.*"

The wave reached them. It sang of distant shores. The infant in her arms looked up at her, eyes glowing, and the old woman smiled at him and stood up to meet the mystery.

LIZARDMAN

The lizardman, king of his domain, rode on air into the swamp and gnashed his teeth against the night.

He had a feeling in his bones. A mighty feeling. He was old and wise enough to know the power of such feelings. Tonight—yes, tonight—he would find the beast he sought. Out there amid the cypresses and on the mud flats, somewhere betwixt moonrise and dawn, the Old Pope waited for him, in robes of gnarled green. Tonight he would pay his respects to the Old Pope, that chawer of bones and spitter of flesh, and then he would sail his lasso around the Old Pope's throat and drive his gaffhook into the white bellyflesh to pierce a heart as tough as a cannonball.

The Lizardman chewed on his unlit cigar, the wind streaming his long white hair back from his leather-brown face, and powered the airboat over a sea of weeds. The light of a single battery lamp, mounted on the frame behind his seat, speared a direction for him, but he could have found his way in the dark. He knew the sounds of the swamp—the chirrs, croaks, and whispers—and he knew the smells of the swamp, the stale wet odors of earth caught between dry land and sea. The lizardman had navigated this place in drought and monsoon; he knew it as a man knows the feel of a well-worn shirt, but in all these many years the Old Pope had found a secret pocket and would not come out to play.

"You'll come out," the lizardman growled. The wind ate his words. "You'll come out tonight, won't you? Yessir. you'll come out tonight and we'll dance us a little dance."

He had said those same words every night he'd left the shore and ventured into the swamp. Saying those words was a habit now, a ritual, but tonight... tonight he could feel the true power in them. Tonight he felt them prick the hide of the Old Pope, like darts thunking into treebark, and the Old Pope stirring in his underwater cavern, opening one red eye and exhaling a single bubble from the great, gruesome snout.

The lizardman changed his direction, a wrinkled hand nudging the tiller. South by southwest, into the sweet and rancid heart of the swamp, where honeysuckle covered the hulks of decaying boats and toads as big as dinner platters sang like Johnny Cash. Some of those boats had belonged to the lizardman's friends: other lizardmen, who had sailed the sargasso seas of the swamp in search of Old Pope, and found their eternity here. Their corpses had not been recovered. The lizardman knew where they were. Their guts and gristle had nourished Old Pope, had rushed through the reptilian bulk in bloody tides to be expelled into the dark mud thirty feet down. Their bones had moldered on the bottom, like gray castles, and slowly moss had streamed from their ramparts and consumed them in velvet slime. The lizardman knew. His friends, the old braggers and bastards and butchers, had made their living from the swamp, and the swamp now laid new foundations on their frames.

"Gonna dance a little dance," the lizardman said. Another correction of the tiller, the fan rotor roaring at his back. "Gonna prance a little prance."

He had seen sixty-three summers; this sweltering August was his sixty-fourth. He was a Southern man, burned dark by the Florida sun, his skin freckled and blotched, his eyes dark brown, almost black, revealing nothing. He lived alone, drank rotgut whiskey straight from the moonshiner's still, played a wicked game of five-card stud, had two ex-wives who couldn't stand the sight or smell of him, and he made his money off gator skins. He'd done his share of poaching, sure, but the gators were growing wild in Florida now and it was open season. He'd read in the paper last week that a gator had chomped three fingers off a golfer's hand when he'd reached into the bushes for his ball on a Sarasota course. That didn't surprise the lizardman. If it moved or used to move, a gator would go after it. Mean sonsofbitches, they were. Almost as mean as he was. Well, the lizardman figured, it took mean and ugly to kill mean and ugly.

A slight nudge of the tiller sent the airboat heading straighter south. He could smell honeysuckle and Indian weed, the sweet tang of wild persimmons and the musky fragrance of cypress. And the odor of death in the night air, too: rot and fungus, putrifying gas from the muddy bottom, something long dead caught in a quicksand pool. The wind took those aromas, and he arrowed on, following the beam of light. Wasn't too far now; maybe a mile or so, as the buzzard flew.

The lizardman did not fear the swamp. That didn't mean, of course, that he came in asking to be gator bait. Far from it: in his airboat he carried two gaffhooks, a billyclub with nails driven into it and sticking out like porcupine quills, a double-barreled shotgun, a bangstick, and his rope. Plus extra food, water, and gasoline. The swamp was a tricky beast; it lulled you, turned you into false channels and threw a mudbar up under your keel when you thought you were in six feet of water. Here, panic was death. The lizardman made a little extra money in tourist season, guiding the greenhorns through. It always amazed him how soft the tourists were, how white and overfed. He could

almost hear the swamp drool when he brought the tourists in, and he made sure he stayed in the wide, safe channels, showed the greenhorns a few snakes and deer and such, and then got them out quick. They thought they'd seen a swamp; the lizardman just smiled and took their money.

The Seminoles, now, they were the tall-talers. You get a Seminole to visit the little hamlet where the lizardman lived, and his stories would make curly hair go straight. Like how Old Pope was a ghost gator, couldn't be killed by mortal man but only by God himself. Like how Old Pope had ridden on a bolt of lightning into the heart of the swamp, and any man who went looking for him was going to end up as nuggets of gator dung.

The lizardman believe that one, almost. Too many of his friends had come in here and not come out again. Oh yeah, the swamp had teeth. Eat you up, bury you under. That was how it was.

He cut his speed. The light showed a green morass ahead: huge lily pads, and emerald slime that sparkled with iridescence. The air was heavy, humid, pungent with life. A mist hung over the water, and in that mist glowed red rubies; the eyes of gators, watching him approach. As his airboat neared, their heads submerged with thick *shuccck* ing sounds, then came back up in the foamy wake. The lizardman went on another hundred yards or so, then he cut off the rotor and the airboat drifted, silent through the mist.

He lit his cigar, puffed smoke, reached for his rope, and began to slip-knot a noose in it. The airboat was drifting over the lily pads, making toads croak and leap for safety. Just beyond the area of lily pads was a deeper channel that ran between glades of rushes, and it was at the edge of this channel that the lizardman threw his anchor over the side, a rubber boot full of concrete. The airboat stopped drifting, in the midst of the rushes on the rim of the deep channel.

The lizardman finished knotting the rope, tested it a few times and found it secure. Then he went about the business of opening a metal can, scooping out bloody chunks of horseflesh, and hooking them onto a fist-sized prong on the end of a chain. The chain, in turn, was fixed to the metal framework of the airboat's rotor and had a little bell on it. He tossed the bait chain out, into the rushes, then he sat on his perch with a gaffhook and the lasso near at hand, switched off the light, and smoked his White Owl.

He gazed up at the stars. The moon was rising, a white crescent. Off in the distance, toward Miami, heat lightning flared across the sky. The lizardman could feel electricity in the night. It made his scalp tingle and the hairs stand up on the backs of his sinewy, tattooed arms. He weighed about a hundred and sixty pounds, stood only five feet seven, but he was as strong as a Dolphins linebacker, his shoulders hard with muscle. The lizardman was nobody's kindly old grandpap. His gaze tracked a shooting star, a red streak spitting sparks. The night throbbed. He could feel it, like a pulse. To his right somewhere a nightbird screeched nervously, and a gator made a noise like a bass fiddle. Tonight the swamp seethed. Clouds of mosquitoes swirled around the lizardman's face, but the grease and ashes he'd rubbed onto his flesh kept them from biting. He felt the same powerful sensation he'd experienced when he was getting ready to cast off from shore: something was going to happen tonight, something different. The swamp knew it, and so did the lizardman. Maybe the Old Pope was on the prowl, mean and hungry. Maybe. Laney Allen had seen Old Pope here, in this channel a year ago. The big gators cruised it like submarines, placid in the depths, angry on the surface. Laney Allen—God rest his soul—said the biggest gator paled beside the Old Pope. Said the Old Pope had eyes that shone like Cadillac headlamps in the dark, and his ebony-green hide was so thick cypress roots grew out of it. The Old Pope's wake could drown an airboat, Laney had said, and from grinning snout to wedge-shaped tail the Old Pope looked like an island moving through the channel.

Laney and T-Bird Stokes had come out here, in late April, armed with shotguns, rifles, and a few sticks of dynamite, to root Old Pope out of his secret pocket. In May, a Seminole had found what was left of their airboat: the rotor and part of the splintered stern.

The bell dinged. The lizardman felt the boat shudder as a gator took the bait.

Teeth clenched around the cigar's butt, he picked up a high-intensity flashlight from its holder beside his seat and flicked it on. The gator was thrashing water now, turning itself over and over on the end of the chain. The lizardman's light found it, there in the rushes. It was a young gator, maybe four feet long, not very heavy but it was madder than hell-cast Lucifer and ready to fight. The lizardman got down off his perch, put on a pair of cowhide gloves, and watched the gator battle against the prongs jabbed in its jaws. Foamy water and dark mud splattered him, as the beast's tail smacked back and forth. The lizardman couldn't help it; though he and the gators were always on opposite ends of the chain, he found a savage beauty in the saw-toothed grin, the red-filmed eyes, the heaving, slime-draped body. But money was more beautiful, and the hides kept him alive. So be it. The lizardman waited until the gator lifted its head to try to shake the prongs loose, then he let fly with the lasso.

His aim, born of much practice, was perfect. He snared the gator's throat, drew the beast in closer, the muscles standing out in his arms and the boat rocking underneath him. Then he picked up the gaffhook and speared the white belly as the gator began to turn over and over again in the frothy gray water. Blood bloomed like a red flower, the heart pierced. But the gator still fought with stubborn determination until the lizardman conked it a few times on the skull with the nail-studded billyclub. The gator, its brain impaled, expired with a last thrash that popped water ten feet into the air, then its eyes rolled back into the prehistoric head and the lizardman hauled the carcass over the side. He gave the skull another hard knock with the billyclub, knowing that gators sometimes played possum until they could get hold of an arm or leg. This one, however, had given up the ghost. The lizardman

slipped the chain out of the prongs, which were deeply imbedded and would have to be pulled out with pliers at a later date. He had a cardboard box full of prongs, so he attached another one to the chain, baited it with horseflesh, and threw it over the side.

He freed his lasso from around the bleeding, swamp-smelling carcass, turned off his flashlight, and climbed again onto his perch.

This was what his life was all about.

An hour passed before the bait was taken again. This gator was larger than the first, heavy but sluggish. It had one claw missing, evidence of a fight. The lizardman hauled it in some, rested, hauled it in the last distance with the lasso and the gaffhook. Finally, the gator lay in the bottom of the airboat with the first, its lungs making a noise like a steam engine slowly losing power.

The lizardman, slime on his arms and his face glistening with sweat, waited.

It was amazing to him that these creatures had never changed. The world had turned around the sun a million times, a hundred times a million, and the gators stayed the same. Down in the mud they dwelled, in their secret swamp caverns, their bodies hard and perfect for their purpose. They slept and fed, fed and bred, slept and fed, and that was the circle of their existence. It was weird, the lizardman thought, that jet airplanes flew over the swamp and fast cars sped on the interstate only a few miles from here while down in the mud dinosaurs stirred and crept. That's what they were, for sure. Dinosaurs, the last of their breed.

The lizardman watched shooting stars, the dead cigar clamped in his teeth. The hair prickled on his arms. There was a power in the night. What was it? Something about to happen, something different from all the other nights. The swamp knew it too, and wondered in its language of birdcalls, gator grunts, frog croaks, and whistles. What was it?

The Old Pope, the lizardman thought. The Old Pope, on the move.

The moon tracked across the sky. The lizardman brought in his bait—found a water moccasin clinging to it—then he pulled up anchor and guided the boat through the weeds with a gaffhook. The water was about five feet deep, but nearer the channel the bottom sloped to twelve or more. He found what he thought might be a good place next to a clump of cypress, a fallen tree angled down into the depths and speckled with yellow crabs. He let the anchor down again, threw out the bait chain, got up on his perch, and sat there, thinking and listening.

The swamp was speaking to him. What was it trying to say?

Ten minutes or so later, the bell dinged.

Water foamed and boiled. A big one! the lizardman thought. "Dance a little dance!" he said, and turned on the flashlight.

It was a big gator, true, but it wasn't Old Pope. This beast was seven feet long, weighed maybe four hundred pounds. It was going to be a ballbreaker to get in the boat. Its eyes flared like comets in the light, its jaws snapping as it tried to spit out the prongs. The lizardman waited for the right moment, then flung his rope. It noosed the gator's muzzle, sealing the jaws shut. The lizardman pulled, but the gator was a powerful bastard and didn't want to come. Careful, careful, he thought. If he lost his footing and went overboard. God help him. He got the gaffhook ready, the muscles straining in his shoulders and back, though he already knew he'd have to use the shotgun on this one.

He started to pick up the shotgun when he felt the airboat rise on a pressure wave.

He lost his balance, came perilously close to slipping over, but the rubber grips of his boots gripped to the wet deck. He was surprised more than anything else, at the suddenness of it. And then he saw the gator on the end of the chain thrash up and almost leap out of the foaming water. If a gator's eyes could register terror, then that was what the lizardman saw.

The gator shivered. There was a ripping noise, like an axed tree falling. Bloody water splashed up around the reptile's body. Not only bloody water, the lizardman saw in another second, but also ropy coils of dark green intestines, billowing out of the gator's belly. The beast was jerked downward with a force that made the rope and the chain crack taut, the bell dinging madly. The lizardman had dropped his light. He fumbled for it, amid the gator carcasses, the rope scorching his cowhide glove. The airboat lifted up again, crashed down with a mighty splash, and the lizardman went to his knees. He heard terrible, crunching noises: the sounds of bones being broken.

And just that fast, it was all over.

He stood up, shaking. The airboat rocked, rocked, rocked, a cradle on the deep. He found the light and turned it on the beast at the chain's end.

The lizardman gave a soft gasp, his mouth dry as Sahara dust.

The gator had been diminished. More than half of it had been torn away, guts and gore floating in the water around the ragged wound.

Bitten in two, the lizardman thought. A surge of pure horror coursed through him. Bitten by something from underneath...

"Good God A'mighty," he whispered, and he let go of the rope.

The severed gator floated on the end of the chain, its insides still streaming out in sluggish tides. On the fallen tree trunk, the crabs were scrambling over each other, smelling a feast.

The lizardman realized that he was a long way from home.

Something was coming. He heard it pushing the reeds aside on the edge of the deep channel. Heard the swirl of water around its body, and the suction of mud on its claws. Old Pope. Old Pope, risen from the heart of the swamp. Old Pope, mean and hungry. Coming back for the rest of the gator, caught on the chain's end.

The lizardman had often heard of people bleating with fear. He'd never known what that would've sounded like, until that moment. It was, indeed, a bleat, like a stunned sheep about to get its head smashed with a mallet.

He turned toward the airboat's engine, hit the starter switch, and reached for the throttle beside his seat. As soon as he gave the engine some gas, the rotor crashed against the frame, bent by the force of Old Pope on the chain, and it threw a pinwheel of sparks and crumpled like wet cardboard. The airboat spun around in a tight circle before the engine blew, the flashlight flying out of the lizardman's grip as he fell onto the rough hides of the dead gators. He looked up, slime dripping from his chin, as something large and dark rose up against the night.

Swamp water streamed from Old Pope's armored sides. The lizardman could see that Laney had been right: roots, rushes, and weeds grew from the ebony-green plates, and not only that but snakes slithered through the cracks and crabs scuttled over the leathery edges. The lizardman recoiled, but he could only go to the boat's other side and that wasn't nearly far enough. He was on his knees, like a penitent praying for mercy at Old Pope's altar. He saw something—a scaled claw, a tendril, something—slither down and grasp the snared gator's head. Old Pope began to pull the mangled carcass up out of the water, and as the chain snapped tight again the entire airboat started to overturn.

In another few seconds the lizardman would be up to his neck in deep shit. He knew that, and knew he was a dead man one way or the other. He reached out, found the shotgun, and gave Old Pope the blast of a barrel.

In the flare of orange light he saw gleaming teeth, yellow eyes set under a massive brow where a hundred crabs clung like barnacles to an ancient wharf. Old Pope gave a deep grunt like the lowest note of a church organ, and that was when the lizardman knew.

Old Pope was not an alligator.

The severed gator slid into Old Pope's maw, and the teeth crunched down. The airboat overturned as the lizardman fired his second barrel, then he was in the churning water with the monster less than fifteen feet away.

His boots sank into mud. The flashlight, waterproof, bobbed in the turbulence. Snakes writhed around Old Pope's jaws as the beast ate, and the lizardman floundered for the submerged tree trunk.

Something oozing and rubbery wound around his chest. He screamed, being lifted out of the water. An object was beside him; he grabbed it, held tight, and knew Old Pope had decided on a second meal. He smelled the thing's breath—blood and swamp—as he was being carried toward the gaping mouth, and he heard the hissing of snakes that clung to the thing's gnarled maw. The lizardman saw the shine of an eye, catching the crescent moon. He jabbed at it with the object in his grip, and the bangstick exploded.

The eye burst into gelatinous muck, its inside showering the lizardman. At the same time, Old Pope roared with a noise like the clap of doom, and whatever held the lizardman went slack. He fell, head over heels, into the water. Came up again, choking and spitting, and half-ran, half-swam for his life through the swaying rushes.

Old Pope was coming after him. He didn't need an eye in the back of his head to tell him that. Whatever the thing was, it wanted his meat and bones. He heard the sound of it coming, the awful suction of water and mud as it advanced. The lizardman felt panic and insanity, two Siamese twins, whirl through his mind. Dance a little dance! Prance a little prance! He stepped in a hole, went in over his head, fought to the surface again and threw himself forward. Old Pope—swamp-god, king of the gators—was almost upon him, like a moving cliff, and snakes and crabs rained down around the lizardman.

He scrambled up, out of the reeds onto a mudflat. Hot breath washed over him, and then that rubbery thing whipped around his waist like a frog's tongue. It squeezed the breath out of him, lifted him off his feet, and began to reel him toward the glistening, saw-edged jaws.

The lizardman had not gotten to be sixty-four years old by playing dead. He fought against the oozing, sticky thing that had him. He beat at it with his fists, kicked and hollered and thrashed. He raged against it, and Old Pope held him tight and watched him with its single eye like a man might watch an insect struggling on flypaper.

It had him. It knew it had him. The lizardman wasn't far gone enough in the head not to know that. But still he beat at the beast, still he hollered and raged, and still Old Pope inspected him, its massive gnarly head tilted slightly to one side and water running through the cracks on the skull-deep ugly of its face.

Lightning flashed. There was no thunder. The lizardman heard a high whine. His skin prickled and writhed with electricity, and his wet hair danced.

Old Pope grunted again. Another surge of lightning, closer this time.

The abomination dropped him, and the lizardman plopped down onto the mudflat like an unwanted scrap.

Old Pope lifted its head, contemplating the stars.

The crescent moon was falling to earth, in a slow spiral. The lizardman watched it, his heart pounding and his arms and legs encased in mire. The crescent moon shot streaks of blue lightning, like fingers probing the swamp's folds. Slowly, slowly, it neared Old Pope, and the monster lifted claw-fingered arms and called in a voice that wailed over the wilderness like a thousand trumpets.

It was the voice, the lizardman thought, of something lost and far from home.

The crescent moon—no, not a moon, but a huge shape that sparkled metallic—was now almost overhead. It hovered, with a high whine, above the creature that had been known as Old Pope, and the lizardman watched lightning dance around the beast like homecoming banners.

Dance a little dance, he thought. Prance a little prance.

Old Pope rumbled. The craggy body shivered, like a child about to go to a birthday party. And then Old Pope's head turned, and the single eye fixed on the lizardman.

Electricity flowed through the lizardman's hair, through his bones and sinews. He was plugged into a socket of unknown design, his fillings sparking pain in his mouth. He took a breath as the Old Pope stepped toward him, one grotesque, ancient leg sinking into the earth.

Something—a tendril, a third arm, whatever—came out of Old Pope's chest. It scooped up mud and painted the lizardman's face with it, like a tribal marking. The touch was sticky and rough, and it left the smell of the swamp and reptilian things in the lizardman's nostrils.

Then Old Pope lifted its face toward the metallic crescent, and raised its arms. Lightning flared and crackled across the mudflats. Birds screeched in their trees, and the voices of gators throbbed.

The lizardman blinked, his eyes narrowed against the glare.

And when the glare had faded, two seconds later, the lightning had taken Old Pope with it. The machine began to rise, slowly, slowly. Then it ascended in a blur of speed and was gone as well, leaving only one crescent moon over the cacophonous swamp.

The Seminoles had been right, the lizardman thought. Right as rain. Old Pope had come to the swamp on a bolt of lightning, and was riding one home again too.

Whatever that might be.

He rested awhile, there in the mud of his domain.

Sometime before dawn he roused himself, and he found a piece of his airboat floating off the mudflat. He found one of his gaffhooks too, and he lay on the splintered remnant of his boat and began pushing himself through the downtrodden rushes toward the far shore. The swamp sang around him, as the lizardman crawled home on his belly.

HAUNTED WORLD

Well, I knew it was the end of the world for sure when I walked into my den and found William Shakespeare sittin' in my BarcaLounger.

At least I think it was him. Anyways, it was one of them fellas wore starched collars and a velvet suit and said a lot of "thees" and "thous" like they used to do every year at the high school senior play down the road. I called Vera in. I said, "Vera, come in here and take a look at this right quick!" and she came runnin'. Of course, we'd seen ghosts before, just like everybody else in the world had by then, but Will Shakespeare sittin' in your den watchin' *Crosswits* on the TV is a damn peculiar sight.

Every so often he'd speak, as if he were tryin' to answer the *Crosswits* questions. Then he'd rest his head back, and I saw him close his eyes and heard him say, "Woe is me," clear as a church bell. By then Ben Junior had come in, and he pressed in between his momma and me, and we all three watched the ghost tryin' to talk to the man on TV. Ol' Will was the same as the other spirits: He wasn't all there. Oh, you could make him out all right, and even see the color of his hair and skin and suit, but he was kinda smoky too, and you could see the chair right through him. He reached out toward the lamp beside him, but his hand was misty and couldn't touch it. "Woe is me," he said again, and then he looked at us standin' in the doorway. His eyes were sad. They were the eyes of a man who was lost on a long trip and couldn't find the right road again.

Vera said, "Would you like me to change the channel?" She was always mannerly to house guests. Even uninvited ones. Ol' Will started to fade away then, bit by bit. Didn't surprise us none, 'cause we'd seen the others do it too. In another minute just his face was left, floatin' in the air like a pale moon. Then nothin' but his eyes. They blinked a couple of times, then those were gone too. But we all knew ol' Will hadn't vanished for good, and he hadn't gone too far away neither. He was like all the other ones roamin' around the haunted world. Hell of a mess, that's for sure.

Wasn't too long before Ben Junior said, "Dad?" and he motioned me and his momma over to the big picture window in the front room, the one that has such a pretty view over the meadow. It was October, and the world was turnin' deep red and purple. The sky was that greenish-gray it gets just before it happens. Vera said a while back that the sky reminds her of a lizard's skin, and I guess that about hits the nail on the head. Ben Junior pointed, and he said in a quiet voice, "There's another one."

Vera and I looked, and of course we saw it. Have to be blind as a bat in a Bundt cake not to see one of those things, once they get started.

The tornadoes are always that peculiar lizard-skin color. One of 'em whipped right across Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, D.C., the other day. I saw it on the five o'clock news. Anyway, there was a tornado whippin' and whirlin' down the hillside into our meadow not two hundred yards away. Things started poppin' and creakin' in our house like the whole place was fixin' to come unjointed. A light bulb blew out and right after that the power went. "Lord," Vera whispered, standin' beside me in the lizard-green light. "Lord have mercy."

You could see 'em in the tornado, goin' around and around and tumblin' over each other from the bottom of the cone to the top of the spout. How many were there it was hard to say. Hundreds, I reckon. Some of 'em were smoky, but others looked just as solid as you and me. The tornado was spittin' 'em out hither and yonder, and they were fallin' to earth like autumn leaves. They drifted into the treetops and onto the grass, and they fell over the fence and onto the road that leads to Concordia. Some of 'em were tattered to pieces, like old rags caught in the blades of a lawn mower, but others stood up and staggered around like Saturday night drunks. The tornado took a turn away from our house and marched up the hillside again toward the south, spittin' out ghosts with every whirl, and then Vera reached out and pulled the curtains shut, and we all stood in the twilight listenin' to the trees moan as the tornado went on.

"Well," I said, because there wasn't much else to say. Deep subject, I know. Cold, too. Vera walked over to the wall switch and flicked it up and down with a vengeance, but the power wasn't goin' to come back on for quite a while. "There goes a hot dinner," she said, and she sounded like she was about to cry. I put my hand on her shoulder, and then she kind folded up against me and hung on. Ben Junior sneaked a peek through the curtain, but what he saw he didn't care for, because he let the curtain drop back real quick.

Someone — somethin' — called from outside. "Mary?" It was a man's voice, and it was terribly lonely. "Mary? Are you in there?"

I started to go to the door, but Vera held me tight. We both knew I had to go. I pulled away from her, and I went to the door and opened it.

On our front porch stood a frail-lookin' man with dark hair slicked back and parted in the middle. He wore a dark suit—black or brown, I couldn't really tell. His face was pale and kinda yellow, like spoiled milk. He took a step back when he saw me, and he was wearin' old high-top shoes. He was shiverin', and he looked around himself. If he saw all the others staggerin' about in the meadow, nothin' registered on his face but pure puzzlement. Then he looked at me again, and when his mouth opened, his voice was like the chilly wind. You felt it more than heard it. "Mary? Is Mary waiting for me?"

"Mary's not here," I told him.

"Mary?" he asked again. "Is she waiting for me?"

"No," I said. "Not here."

He stopped speakin', but his mouth stayed open. His eyes looked wet, like those of a dog that had just gotten kicked in the ribs. "I don't think you know anybody here," I told him, because he seemed to be waitin' for somethin' else. And then his mouth closed, and he turned away from my door and started across the meadow in his high-topped shoes. "Mary?" I heard him call. "Mary?" He started fadin' away as he passed a Roman soldier sittin' sprawled in the grass, and he was almost gone when a little boy in knickers ran right through him. The man who was searchin' for Mary faded away like a Polaroid left in the noonday sun too long, but the Roman soldier stayed where he was, and the little boy ran into the woods. There were maybe forty or fifty others out in the meadow, wanderin' around like strangers at a weird garden party. Or a Halloween party, it bein' October and all. Out on the edge of the meadow there was what looked like somebody from Revolutionary times, a skinny man wearin' a powdered wig and a three-cornered hat. Near him was a cowboy in a yellow duster. Over there on the other side was a black-haired woman in a long blue gown that trailed on the grass, and not far from her stood a man in a suit, lookin' around as if he was waitin' for the next bus. The blue mist of ghosts trailed from the trees like cobwebs and drifted over the meadow in an ankle-deep haze. Ghosts were all in the woods, and you hear 'em babblin' and calling' in a bedlam of accents and languages. "Dan!" I heard one American-speakin' woman—ghost, I mean—shout from over on the edge of the woods. "Damn it, Dan, where's my robe?" she hollered, as she walked buck naked across the grass. Not walked, actually. Kinda wobbled is more like it. The wind hit her and tattered her to pieces so we didn't have to look at her big, old flabby butt anymore. Ben Junior was peekin' out beside me, and I shoved him back inside and shut the door.

Vera and I just stared at each other, there in the gloom, as the ghosts hollered and chattered outside. We heard an Indian war-whoopin', and somebody screamin' that she'd lost her cat, and somebody else raisin' a ruckus in what sounded like Greek to me. They were all searchin' for their own world, the one they used to be part of. But of course they couldn't get back there. They couldn't find anybody or anythin' that was familiar, because this wasn't their world anymore. It was our world. And that's the hell of it. See?

I remember what Burt Truman said. I remember, because it seemed so right. Burt looked at me, his eyes huge behind those bottle-bottom glasses he wears, and he said, "You know why this is happenin', Ben? Well, I'll tell you my opinion. You take the air and the water nowadays. Both so polluted you can't take a safe breath or a decent sip. And what happened on them beaches last summer, all that garbage and crap washin' up 'cause the ocean can't take no more. He lifted up his glasses and scratched his nose. "Seems to me heaven—or hell—can't take no more either. And all the dead folks are gettin' cast back up on shore. Whatever that place is that kept the dead, it's full to overflowin'. The dead folks are washin' back up into our world, and that's God's truth or I ain't sittin' here in Clyde's barbershop."

"Bullshit," Clyde said as he clipped Burt's side burns. Clyde has a voice like a steam shovel with stripped gears. "Damn ghosts are comin' through the ozone hole. That's what they said on Dan Rather yesterday."

"God's shut with us," Phil Laney offered. He's a deacon at the Baptist church, and he was gloomin'-and-doomin' long before all this started. "Only way for us to fix this is to get down on our knees and pray like we've never prayed before. I mean, serious prayin'. We've got to get right with God before this thing'll be fixed."

"Hell, this thing's done broke to pieces," Luke McGuire said. Ol' Luke's a big fella, stands about six foot three and wears raggedy overalls, but he's got the best farmland in south Alabama. "Just like a machine," he said as he rolled himself another cigarette. "You bust a cylinder on your tractor, ain't prayin' that gets it fixed. You bend a blade on a tiller, you don't get on your knees and kiss the ground until it's straight again. Hell, no. The world's a machine. Thing's done broke to pieces, and the repair shop's shut down."

This was the sort of conversation that could fill most of a Saturday afternoon and evenin' and still leave you goin' in circles. But I mostly thought of what Burt said, about the dead overflowin' and washin' back up into our world. The tornadoes brought 'em back, of course, but I knew what he meant. Heaven and hell were like busted pipes, and the ghosts were spillin' out.

And right about then, as Luke and Phil were arguin' hammer and tongs, a knight in tarnished armor walked past the window of Clyde Butler's barbershop. Walked right out in the street, he did, and Mrs. Beacham in her green Oldsmobile swerved the wheel and crashed into the front of Sammy Kane's Stag Shop for Men. Clothes dummies flew all over the place, broken arms and legs lyin' on the pavement. That knight just kept on goin', fine as you please, and he took a few more rusty steps before he vanished into the unknown. But he didn't go far. We all knew that. He couldn't go far, see. He was still stuck in the haunted world, like all the other dead folks.

After all that commotion had died down, Luke McGuire picked his teeth with a splintered match and brought up the question: "How come the ghosts are wearin' clothes?"

Not all of 'em were, of course, but most of 'em did. We thought about that for a little while, and then Luke went on in that thick drawl of his that always makes me think of mud simmerin' in the bottom of a ditch. "Clothes," he said. "Ghosts of people are one thing. But are they wearin' ghosts of *clothes*?"

We drifted into talkin' about what ghosts were, and that was a tangled thicket. Then Clyde brought up the next skull knocker. "Thank God they're ghosts, that's all I can say." He brushed hairs off Burt's shoulders. "Not solid, I mean." He glanced around at everybody, to see if we'd gotten the point. We hadn't. "You can drive cars through ghosts. You can put your hand through 'em. They don't need food or water, and they can't touch you neither. Take that fella in armor just walked past here. Think you'd like to feel him slap you upside the head? I looked out my window this mornin' and saw the woods full of damn ghosts, blowin' in the breeze like old newspapers. One of 'em had a long black beard and carried a sword 'bout as big as ol' Luke. Think you'd like to get stabbed a few times with somethin' like that?"

"Wasn't a real sword," Luke observed sagely. "Was a ghost of a sword."

"Yeah, and thank God for that," Clyde steam-shoveled on. "What do you think would happen if every body who ever died in the whole world came back?"

"We might find out," I said. "Seems like that's happenin' right now." I knew, like we all did, that this thing was happenin' not just in Concordia, Alabama, but in Georgia and North Carolina and New York and Illinois and Wyoming and California and everywhere else under the sun. Ghosts were roamin' the streets of London and Paris, and stompin' through Red Square. Even the Australians were seein' ghosts, so when I say haunted world that's exactly what I mean.

"Thank God, they're ghosts and not real," Clyde said, as he finished up on Burt. "There you go." He handed Burt a mirror. "Slicker'n owl shit."

Luke switched on the barbershop's TV to catch the midday news. There was a report from Washington, D.C. It showed somethin' that looked like Thomas Jefferson, sittin' on the steps of the Capitol and cryin' his eyes out.

It hit me then, as I was standin' in the gloom starin' at Vera and the ghosts were catterwaulin' outside. The power was out. How were we gonna see the TV show tonight? They'd been advertisin' it for a week. Tonight Tom Edison was supposed to be a guest on the Johnny Carson show. I'm talkin' about the Tom Edison who invented the light bulb, the genuine article. Seems Edison—his spirit, I mean—had been talked into appearin' on TV. Tonight was the night. Shirley MacLaine was supposed to be a guest too, but she wasn't even dead yet, so what did she know? Anyway, the power was off!

I went to the phone and called Clyde. "They got the juice back on over here," Clyde said, speakin' from eight miles away. The phone was hiss'n with static, but I could hear him good enough. "I just got a call from Phil, too," Clyde told me. "His TV's out. I reckon mine is at home too. You want to watch that show, come on over to the barbershop tonight. Hell, I'll get us some beers and we'll have a time of it."

I said that was a fine idea. Ben Junior was tuggin' at my sleeve, and Vera was starin' out the window again. I hung up the phone and walked over to see what had been roused up this time.

More Roman soldiers were out in the meadow. I guess they were Roman, but I'm not sure. There were about a hundred of 'em, and they had shields and swords. Ghost shields and swords, I mean. And there were about a hundred or so Chinese-lookin' fellas too, half-naked and with long braids in their hair. Well, the Romans and the Chinese had taken to fightin'. Maybe they were tryin' to finish up an old battle, or maybe all they knew was fightin' and that was their job. The Romans were swingin' their ghost swords, and the Chinese were kickin' with their ghost legs, and nothin' but mist was bein' hit. From out of the woods swarmed other ghosts: cowboys, musketeers, guys with bowl-shaped haircuts and long robes, women in lacy dresses, and black Africans with animal-skin shields and spears like in that English movie Ben Junior and me watched one Saturday. All the ghosts swirled around each other like they were part of a big churnin' whirlpool, and I'm tellin' you that the noise they made—hollerin' and screamin' at each other was somethin' fearsome. No doubt about it: Even when people were dead, they still couldn't get along. Then a few dogs were even runnin' around out among the ghosts—ghost dogs, snappin' at ghost ankles. Maybe there was a horse or two out there, but I'm not sure. Anyway, it looked like Animal Heaven had started overfiowin' too. "Lord save us!" Vera said, but Ben Junior said, "Neat!" and I saw he was grinnin'. Boy's got a strange sense of humor. Takes after me, I reckon, because I was kinda fascinated at the sight of all those ghosts tanglin' and whirlin'.

Vera turned away from the window, and that was when she screamed.

I looked. I think Ben Junior let out a strangled squawk. It might've been my voice.

Standin' in front of us, right in our pine-paneled livin' room, was a red-bearded man with a double bladed battle-ax. That sumbitch stood at least six foot six, taller even than Luke McGuire, and he had on some kind of ragged animal skin and a metal skullcup with bull horns sticking out on either side of it. His face looked like a lump of meat wrapped up in wrinkled leather. He had green eyes under red brows as big as scrub brushes, and he let out a holler that shook the room as he lifted that battle-ax up over his head.

What would you have done? I knew he was a ghost and all, but at a time like that you don't think exactly calm. I shoved Vera out of the way of that battle-ax, and I picked up the first thing that came to hand: a lamp table beside

the couch. The lamp flew off of it, and I thrust that little wooden table up like a Vikin' shield, my shoulders tensin' for the shock.

It didn't come. The battle-ax, a misty thing, went right through the table. I swear I saw a glint of metal, though, and old blood on the edge. I could smell that sumbitch, sure enough; he smelled like a dead cow. He took another step forward, crowdin' me, and he flailed back and forth with that battle-ax like he really thought he was gonna hit somethin'. His face was splotted with red. Ever heard the expression, "mad as a ghost"? I just made it up, 'cause he was mad as hellfire sure enough. He chopped the ax back and forth a dozen times, and the rage on his face would've been terrible if he'd been flesh and blood instead of colored mist. I laughed, and that made him madder still. The ax kept whippin' back and forth, through the table. I said, "Fella, why don't you put that toy away and get the hell out of my house?"

He stopped choppin', his big chest heavin' up and down. He glared at me for a minute, and I could tell he hated me. Maybe for bein' alive-I don't know. Then he gave a growl and started to fade away. His beard was the last thing to go. It hung in the air for a few seconds, workin' as if it still had a mouth under it, and then it went.

"Is it gone? Is it gone? Ben, tell me it's gone!" Vera had scrunched herself up into a corner, her arms hugging herself and her eyes wide and starey. I didn't like the looks of them. Ben Junior was kinda dazed. He stood where the Vikin' had been, feelin' around in the air.

"It's gone, hon," I said to Vera. "Wasn't ever here, really. You okay?"

"I've never... I've never... seen anything... like that." She could hardly get a breath, and I set the table down and put my arms around her while she trembled.

"They're not real," I told her. "None of them are. They're just... pictures in the air. They hang there for a while, and then they go away. But they're not real. Okay?"

She nodded. "Okay," she said, but she sounded choked.

"Dad?"

"Just a minute. You want me to go get you an aspirin? You want to lie down awhile?" I kept my arms around Vera, for fear her knees might give way.

"Dad?" Ben Junior's voice was a little higher. "Look at this."

"I'm all right," Vera said. She had a strong constitution. Livin' on a farm for over twenty years makes you that way. "See what Ben Junior wants."

I looked over at the boy. He was standin' there, starin' at the table I'd just set down. "Dad?" he repeated. "I... don't think this was here before."

"What wasn't there before?" I walked over beside him, and I saw what he was talkin' about.

On the table's surface was a single diagonal scratch. It wasn't much. The tip of a nail might've done it. Only Ben Junior was right, and I knew that at once. The scratch hadn't been there before. I touched it to make sure it was real, and ran my finger along its length. The lamp's base had green backing on it, to keep it from scratchin' anythin'. I looked at Ben Junior. He was a smart boy, and I knew he knew. And he knew I knew, too.

"Vera?" I tried to sound calm, but I don't think I did. "Let's drive on into town and get some dinner. How does that suit you?"

"Fine." She took my hand and wouldn't let go of it, and I walked with her to the closet to get her sweater. Ben Junior went back through the hallway at a cautious pace, stirrin' the air before him with his hands to make sure nothin' was there, and a minute later he returned with a jacket from his room. I got my wallet and the keys to the pickup, and we went outside into the gray-green twilight. The driveway was full of fightin' ghosts: Chinese, Romans, an Indian or two, and a husky fella wearin' a kilt. I backed the truck right through 'em, and none of 'em seemed to mind.

On the drive to Concordia I turned on the radio, but all the stations were screwed up with the most god-awful static you ever heard. I switched it off real quick, because the noise sounded to me like the whole world was screamin'. Vera touched my arm and pointed off toward the right. Another tornado was movin' across the hills, blowin' red leaves' before it and leavin' ghosts in its wake. The sky was green and low, shot through with pearly streaks. Half-formed, misty figures swept past the truck. I turned on the windshield wipers.

We passed Bobby Glover's pasture. There were so many ghosts wanderin' and staggerin' around that field it looked like a spirit convention. Things that looked like pieces of filmy cloth were hangin' in Bobby's barbed-wire fence, and they were growin' arms, legs, and heads. An old woman dressed like a Pilgrim was walkin' in the middle of the road, and she saw us comin' and made a noise like a cat gettin' skinned as the truck went through her. I looked back in the rear-view mirror and saw blue mist floatin' in the air where the Pilgrim lady had been a second before. Somethin' occurred to me real strange just about then: Somewhere in the world my own father and mother were wanderin'. Vera's mother, too; her father was in a rest home in Montgomery. Somewhere all our ancestors were out in the haunted world, and the ancestors of everybody who'd ever drawn a breath. I hadn't seen any ghosts of babies yet. I hoped I wouldn't, but you never knew. Peculiar thoughts whirled through my brain, like those red leaves thrown by the tornado: My father had died six years ago, and my mother had gone on a year later. They could be roamin' the jungles of Brazil or the streets of Dallas for all I knew. I hoped my father didn't come back in Tokyo. He'd fought the Japanese in World War II, and that would be pure hell for him.

About three miles from Concordia, we came upon a station wagon that had gone into a ditch. Both the front doors were open, but nobody was around. I stopped the truck and was gonna get out to take a look, but I heard what sounded like Indian war whoops off in the woods somewhere. I thought about that scratch on the table, and I swallowed hard and drove on.

I took the next curve pretty fast. Anyway, we were on him before we knew it. Vera screamed and her foot plunged to the floorboard, but of course the brake pedal was on my side, and I sure as hell wasn't gonna hit it.

He looked more ape than human, really. He was monstrous, and he wore a tattered lion's skin that still had the lion's head on it. He bellowed and charged the pickup, his fangy teeth showin'. I tried to swerve, but there wasn't much use, and I sure didn't want to go into a ditch. The caveman lifted a club that had sharp rocks embedded in it, and he swung that thing like it weighed a feather.

The club turned to mist an instant before it would've hit the fender. I heard the caveman bellow again—right up next to my head, it seemed like—and I gave the truck all the gas she could handle. We sped on down the road, the engine poppin' and snarlin'. I guess that caveman—ghost of a caveman, I mean—must've thought we were somethin' good to eat. I looked in the rearview mirror, but he was gone.

"It wasn't real, was it?" Vera said in a quiet voice. Her gaze was fixed straight ahead. "It was just a picture that hung in the air, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, that's right," I answered. I thought about the scratched table. My fingers were clenched real hard around the steerin' wheel. That table hadn't been scratched before the Vikin' sumbitch had swung his ax at me. My mind was wanderin' in dangerous country. The Vikin' was a ghost, with the ghost of a battle-ax. Just a picture, hangin' in the air. So how come the table was scratched, as if the slightest edge of metal had grazed it?

I didn't care to think about that anymore. Such thoughts made the hair prickle on the back of your neck.

Concordia was a small town, hardly much to look at, but it had never been prettier. The sun was goin' down fast, into a lizard-skin horizon, and Concordia's street lights were glowin' in the murk. We went straight to the Concordia Cafe. It was crowded, I guess because a lot of folks had the same idea as us. Bein' with real people was a comfort, though the food was as bad as usual. You can be sure that ghosts were the prime topic of conversation, and every so often somebody would holler for everybody else to look out the windows and you could see spirits on Main Street. The sky flashed and flickered, blue lightnin' jumpin' from horizon to horizon, and we all sat in the Concordia Cafe and watched the parade of ghosts. Here came a fella dressed up in a tuxedo, his hair gleamin' with pomade, and spats on his shoes, and he was callin' for somebody named Lily in a broken voice, ghost tears runnin' down his cheeks. Then a Nazi soldier ran past, carryin' a ghost rifle. A little girl in a nightgown, her hair red and curly, staggered along the street callin' in a language I couldn't understand. Some of the women wanted to go out and help her, but the men blocked the door. It was a ghost little girl, and the hell if we wanted her in here among the livin'.

A whole bunch of 'em wandered past the cafe: half-naked Egyptians brown as berries, women in gaudy dance-hall duds, a pair of fellas in those tall caps with fur on 'em, and ghosts in rags. And then the ghost of a boy about twelve, Ben Junior's age, came over and peered in the cafe's window, and he was joined by the ghost of a woman with long white hair and no teeth. A man in a striped prison suit looked in another window, and peerin' in over his shoulder was the ghost of a tall, skinny fella in clown makeup. In a few minutes more they were all around the cafe, starin' in through the windows at us, and Lord knows our appetites fled. Fifty or sixty ghosts were out there, lookin' in and maybe longin' to join us. Grace Tarpley, the head waitress, started closin' all the blinds, then Mitch Brenner and Tommy Shawcross got up from their tables and helped her. But as soon as all the blinds were down and the windows sealed up, the ghosts outside took to moanin' and catterwaulin' and that was the end of our dinner. Some folks—live folks, I mean—started cryin' and wailin' too, specially some of the children. Hell, I even saw a couple of men break down and start bawlin'. This wasn't no fun, that's for sure.

Anyway, the noise comin' out of the Concordia Cafe must've scared the ghosts off, because their voices started gettin' fainter and fainter until finally it was just the live people moanin'. Then Gracie let out a scream that almost lifted the roof, because the old farmer sittin' by himself at a booth in the back, an untouched cup of coffee on the table before him, suddenly stood up and faded away. Nobody had known him, but I guess we all figured he was from the next county. It was gettin' so you couldn't tell the livin' from the dead anymore.

The night moved on. It seemed like nobody wanted to go home to their haunted houses. Jack and Sarah Kelton came by our table for a few minutes and said the power was still out their way and they'd heard the lines were all fouled up. Which didn't sound so good, since the Keltons lived about two miles closer to town than us. The lights flickered off and on a few times in the cafe, which made everybody scream to high heaven, but Gracie said the men were workin' on the wires down the road and not to worry because there were plenty of flashlights and candles. As Jack talked on about seein' a ghost he swore was Abraham Lincoln strollin' along Highway 211, I looked out the blinds and watched the blue lightnin' cracklin' across the sky. It was a bad night here. Hell, it was a bad night everywhere.

I don't know how many cups of coffee Vera and I had. Ben Junior got stuffed on potato chips, and gettin' his belly full is a true miracle. Anyway, the crowd started thinnin' out, folks decidin' to go home to sleep—if they could sleep, that is. It was almost time for the Johnny Carson show, and I paid the bill and took Vera and Ben Junior to Clyde's

barbershop down the street.

The regulars were there, and the cast-iron stove was stoked up warm and ruddy. The TV was on, the show about ten minutes away from startin'. We found chairs and sat down next to Phil and Gloria Laney. Luke McGuire was there with his wife Missy and their two kids, the Trumans were there and so was Sammy and Beth Kane. Clyde had a few sixpacks of Bud ready, but none of us felt like a beer.

The show started, Johnny Carson came out—all serious this time, didn't even crack a funny—and he showed a few old pictures of Thomas Edison. The first guest was a fella who'd written a biography of Edison, then Mickey Rooney came on because he played Young Edison in a movie a long time ago. The next guest was a man who talked about the ghosts appearin' all over the world, and he said ghosts had been seen from the Sahara desert to the South Pole. He was an expert, I guess, but exactly what at I don't know. While the talkin' was goin' on, buildin' up to Edison appearin', I was thinkin' about the scratched table. What had made that mark? The edge of that Vikin's battle-ax? No, that couldn't be! The ghosts were just pictures hangin' in the air. They weren't real. But I thought about that station wagon we'd seen in the ditch on the way to town, and the sound of Indians war-whoopin' in the woods.

I remembered Clyde saying, "What do you think would happen if everybody who ever died in the whole world came back?"

Ghosts of everybody who'd ever died was one thing. But what if—I liked to choke thinkin' about this... what if everybody who'd ever died in the whole world *did* come back? Maybe as ghosts first, yes, but... maybe they weren't always gonna stay ghosts. Maybe death had reversed itself. Maybe some of 'em were already turnin' solid, a little piece at a time. As solid as the sharp edge of an ax blade. As solid as Indians, who'd pulled somebody out of their station wagon and—

I shook those thoughts out of my head. Ghosts were ghosts. Weren't they?

Shirley MacLaine came on next, carryin' a crystal ball. She said Thomas Edison was a good friend of hers.

And then it was time.

They lowered the lights in the studio, I guess so Edison wouldn't get spooked. Then all the guests started callin' his name and Johnny Carson asked the audience to be real quiet. They guests kept on callin' Thomas Edison's name and askin' him to join them, but the seat next to Johnny's desk stayed empty. It went on awhile, and pretty soon Johnny got that look on his face like when he has a talkin' dog on the show and it won't pip a squeak. I mean, the whole thing was almost ridiculous. "I need a beer," Luke said, and he reached for one.

His hand never got there. Because suddenly we all gasped. There was a shape just beginnin' to take form in that empty chair next to Johnny's desk. Some of the audience started talkin', but Johnny hushed them up. The shape was becomin' the body of a man: a white-haired, sad-faced man, dressed in a wrinkled white suit that looked as if it had been slept in for quite some time. The figure got clearer and clearer, and damned if it wasn't the man who was in those old yellowed photographs.

"Got on clothes," Luke rasped. "How can a ghost wear clothes?"

"Shush!" Phil told him, and he leaned closer to the TV.

Clyde turned up the volume. Thomas Edison his own self was sittin' in that chair on the Carson show, and even though the lights were dim he blinked as he looked around as if they stung his eyes. He was tremblin'. So was Johnny, and 'most everybody else. Thomas Edison looked like somebody's frail, scared old grandpap.

"Hello, Mr. Edison," Johnny finally said. He sounded like he had a chicken bone caught in his throat. "Can I... call you Tom?"

Edison didn't answer. He just shook and gasped, plain terrified. "Stage fright," Burt said. "Happened to me once when I gave a speech to the Civitan Club."

"Tom?" Johnny Carson went on. "Do you know who I am?"

Edison shook his head, his eyes wet and glassy.

"Mr. Edison," Shirley said, "we're all your friends here."

Edison gave a soft moan, and Shirley recoiled from him a little bit. "Tom?" Johnny tried again. "Where did you come from?"

"I... don't..." Edison started to speak, but his voice was wispy. "I... don't..." He looked around, gasping for words. "I... don't... belong here." He squinted at the audience. "I don't... like this place."

"We all love you," Shirley told him. "Tell us about your journey, and what you've seen on the other si—"

If ever hell broke loose on earth, it was the next instant.

Somebody in the audience took a picture. You could see the quick pop and glare of the flashbulb, right in Tom Edison's eyeballs. Another flash went off, and a third. Johnny Carson jumped up and shouted, "No pictures! I said no pictures! Somebody get those cameras!" The studio lights came on, real sudden. Tom Edison almost jumped out of his chair. People in the audience were rushin' the stage, and Johnny Carson was yellin' for everybody to stay back, but you could hardly hear him over the noise. More flashbulbs were poppin', and I guess somehow the reporters had gotten into the studio when they weren't supposed to be there. Lights flashed in Tom Edison's face, and all of a sudden he reached out and plucked that crystal ball off Shirley's lap, and he threw it straight into the TV camera that was trained on him. The camera smashed, zigzag lines goin' all over the screen. Another TV camera trained on

Edison and caught him as he stood up, screamed at the top of his lungs, and vanished in a whirl of blue mist. "Everybody sit down!" Johnny was shoutin'. People were still tryin' to get closer, and now you could see folks grapplin' with each other like a backwoods wrestlin' match. "Everybody please sit—"

The screen went dark. "Somebody stepped on a cord," Burt said. Static jumped and jittered across the screen, and then a message came on: NETWORK DIFFICULTY. PLEASE STAND BY.

We stood by, but the Carson show didn't come back on. "He picked it up," Luke said quietly. "Did you see that? He picked it up."

"Picked what up?" Clyde asked. "What're you babblin' about?"

"Thomas Edison picked up the crystal ball and flung it," Luke told him, and looked around at the rest of us. "A ghost picked up somethin' solid. How can a ghost pick up somethin' solid?"

Nobody answered. I almost did, but I kept my mouth shut. I didn't want what I was thinkin' to be true. Maybe I should have said somethin', but the time slipped past.

Lightnin' flared and crackled over Concordia. About three seconds later, the barbershop's lights flickered once, twice, and went out. All of Concordia lay in darkness. Vera grasped my hand so hard I thought my knuckles were about to bust.

"Well, that's that," Clyde said. He stood up in the dark, and Luke lit a match. In its pale glow we all looked like ghosts. Clyde turned off the dead TV. "I don't know about everybody else," he said, "but I'm goin' home and get a good night's sleep, ghosts or not."

The group started breakin' up, and Clyde locked the doors. "We ought to go to the Holiday Inn over near Grangeville," I told Vera and Ben Junior as we were walkin' back to the pickup. "Maybe they'll have the power on over there. All right?"

Vera wouldn't let go of my hand. "No," she said. "I can't sleep in a strange bed. Lord knows all I want to do is get in my bed and pull the covers over my head and hope I wake up from this nightmare in the mornin'."

"Holiday Inn might be safer," I said. Instantly I regretted it, because Vera stiffened up. "Safer?" she asked. "Safer? What's that mean?"

If I told her what I was thinkin', that would be all she wrote. You'd have to peel Vera off a wall. Ben Junior was listenin' too, and I knew he knew, but still and all, home was where we belonged. "All right, hon," I said, and put my arm around her. "We'll sleep in our own bed tonight." Vera relaxed, and I was mighty glad I hadn't steered her into dark, deep water.

We started off. The pickup's headlights were a comfort. Maybe we should sleep in the truck tonight, I thought. No, we'd all have cricked backs in the mornin'. Best to get on home and pull the covers over our heads just like Vera wanted to. I found myself thinkin' about the rifle down in the basement. I ought to get that out and loaded. Wouldn't hurt to have it beside the bed if I needed—

"Look out, Ben!" Vera shouted, and I went for the brake, but too late.

The caveman was standin' in the road. He snarled and lifted that club studded with sharp-edged rocks, and as he swung it I could see the muscles ripple in his ape-like shoulders.

I expected the club to turn to mist. I wanted it to. I prayed for it, in that long instant as it came at the fender in a powerful blur. Oh, God, I prayed for it.

The club smashed into the front of our pickup truck with a shock that lifted us all off the seat. Vera screamed and so did Ben Junior, and I think Ben Senior let out a scream too. One of the headlights shattered and went out. I felt and heard somethin' boom and clatter in the engine, behind the crushed radiator. The truck lurched, and steam bellowed out around the crumpled hood. The caveman jumped back as the truck passed him, but I think he was scared just as witless as we were. I looked into the rearview mirror and saw him standin' there in the glare of the red taillights. Lightnin' flared behind him, over dark Concordia. I think he was grinnin'. He swung his club, and he started lumberin' along the road in the direction we were goin'.

The truck was laborin'. "Come on, come on!" I said, and I kept my foot to the gas. Vera's scream had broken; she was a shakin' moan, pressed up against my ribs. "He hit us, Dad!" Ben Junior said. "That sumbitch hit us!"

"Yeah," I told him. Wheezed it, really. "Yeah, I know he did."

The truck kept goin'. Chevy builds 'em strong. But I watched the gauges and I listened to the engine racketin', and I knew the eight miles home was askin' way too much.

Finally, with a groan and a shudder, the engine quit. I let the truck coast as far as she'd go, and I prayed again, this time for a slope to take us home, but I knew the road was flat as a flounder all the way to our front porch. We rolled to a stop, and we sat there.

"We've stopped, Dad," Ben Junior said.

I nodded. One part of me wanted to wring his neck. One part of me wanted to wring my own neck. Vera was sobbin', and I put my arm around her tight. "Don't cry," I said. "We're all right. We're gonna be fine. Don't cry, now." She kept cryin'. Words were cheap.

We sat for a while longer. Out in the night we could hear the freight-train roar of a tornado movin' through the hills. "Dad?" Ben Junior said at last, "I don't think we ought to stay here all night." I hadn't raised a dummy, that was for sure; I was the dumb one, for not insistin' we go to the Holiday Inn.

I hesitated at openin' the door. Vera was clingin' to me, and I'm not sure whose heart was poundin' harder. I was thinkin' about the caveman, with his club that must've weighed seventy or eighty pounds. He was between us and Concordia, and every second we wasted brought him closer. I got out of the truck real quick, pulled Vera out, and Ben Junior scam bled out the other side. Lightnin' crackled overhead, and you could hear tornadoes moanin' in the night.

"We've got to get home," I said, maybe just to steady up my own nerves. Once I had my hands on that rifle and we were shut up in our bedroom with our backs to the wall, we'd be just fine. "Sooner we start, the sooner we'll get there."

"It's dark," Vera whispered, her voice shakin'. "Oh, Lord, it's so dark."

I knew she was talkin' about the road that lay ahead. I knew every curve and bump in it, but tonight it was a road that led through the haunted world. Out in the woods were Indians, Roman soldiers, Nazis, Chinese karate kickers, at least one Vikin' with a battle-ax, and God only knew what else. And behind us, maybe stalkin' somethin' good to eat, was a caveman with an eighty-pound club.

And all of 'em, all the ghosts, maybe gettin' more solid by the hour. What was gonna happen, I wondered, when all the billions and billions of people who'd ever died in the world were back on earth again, hungry and thirsty, some of 'em peaceful folks for sure, but others ready to chop your head off or bust your skull with a club? One rifle suddenly seemed an awful puny thing. I had a thought: If we got killed, we wouldn't stay dead very long, would we?

The tornadoes sounded closer, whirlin' more ghosts into the woods. I said, "Come on," in the calmest voice I could manage, and I pulled Vera along with me. Ben Junior walked close to me on the other side, his hands clenched into fists. We had a long way to go. Maybe a car would come along. Maybe. This wasn't a night fit for travelin'. The road ahead was dark, so very dark. We had no choice but to walk it.

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EAT ME

Winner of the 1989 Bram Stoker Award for Best Short Story

A question gnawed, day and night, at Jim Crisp. He pondered it as he walked the streets, while a dark rain fell and rats chattered at his feet; he mulled over it as he sat in his apartment, staring at the static on the television screen hour after hour. The question haunted him as he sat in the cemetery on Fourteenth Street, surrounded by empty graves. And this burning question was: when did love die?

Thinking took effort. It made his brain hurt, but it seemed to Jim that thinking was his last link with life. He used to be an accountant, a long time ago. He'd worked with a firm downtown for over twenty years, had never been married, hadn't dated much either. Numbers, logic, the rituals of mathematics had been the center of his life; now logic itself had gone insane, and no one kept records anymore. He had a terrible sensation of not belonging in this world, of being suspended in a nightmare that would stretch to the boundaries of eternity. He had no need for sleep any longer; something inside him had burst a while back, and he'd lost the ten or twelve pounds of fat that had gathered around his middle over the years. His body was lean now, so light sometimes a strong wind knocked him off his feet. The smell came and went, but Jim had a caseload of English Leather in his apartment and he took baths in the stuff.

The open maw of time frightened him. Days without number lay ahead. What was there to do, when there was nothing to be done? No one called the roll, no one punched the time-clock, no one set the deadlines. This warped freedom gave a sense of power to others; to Jim it was the most confining of prisons, because all the symbols of order—stoplights, calendars, clocks—were still there, still working, yet they had no purpose or sense, and they reminded him too much of what had been before.

As he walked, aimlessly, through the city's streets he saw others moving past, some as peaceful as sleepwalkers, some raging in the grip of private tortures. Jim came to a corner and stopped, instinctively obeying the **DON'T WALK** sign; a high squealing noise caught his attention, and he looked to his left.

Rats were scurrying wildly over one of the lowest forms of humanity, a half-decayed corpse that had recently awakened and pulled itself from the grave. The thing crawled on the wet pavement, struggling on one thin arm and two sticklike legs. The rats were chewing it to pieces, and as the thing reached Jim, its skeletal face lifted and the single dim coal of an eye found him. From its mouth came a rattling noise, stifled when several rats squeezed themselves between the gray lips in search of softer flesh. Jim hurried on, not waiting for the light to change. He thought the thing had said *Whhhhyyy?* and for that question he had no answer.

He felt shame in the coil of his entrails. When did love die? Had it perished at the same time as this living death of human flesh had begun, or had it already died and decayed long before? He went on, through the somber streets where the buildings brooded like tombstones, and he felt crushed beneath the weight of loneliness.

Jim remembered beauty; a yellow flower, the scent of a woman's perfume, the warm sheen of a woman's hair. Remembering was another bar in the prison of bones; the power of memory taunted him unmercifully. He remembered walking on his lunch hour, sighting a pretty girl and following her for a block or two, enraptured by fantasies. He had always been searching for love, for someone to be joined with, and had never realized it so vitally before now, when the gray city was full of rats and the restless dead.

Someone with a cavity where its face had been stumbled past, arms waving blindly. What once had been a child ran by him, and left the scent of rot in its wake, Jim lowered his head, and when a gust of hot wind hit him he lost his balance and would have slammed into a concrete wall if he hadn't grabbed hold of a bolted-down mailbox. He kept going, deeper into the city, on pavement he'd never walked when he was alive.

At the intersection of two unfamiliar streets he thought he heard music: the crackle of a guitar, the low grunting of a drumbeat. He turned against the wind, fighting the gusts that threatened to hurl him into the air, and followed the sound. Two blocks ahead a strobe light flashed in a cavernous entrance. A sign that read **THE COURTYARD** had been broken out, and across the front of the building was scrawled **BONEYARD** in black spray paint. Figures moved within the entrance: dancers, gyrating in the flash of the strobes.

The thunder of the music repulsed him—the soft grace of Brahms remained his lullaby, not the raucous crudity of Grave Rock—but the activity, the movement, the heat of energy drew him closer. He scratched a maddening itch on the dry flesh at the back of his neck and stood on the threshold while the music and the glare blew around him. The Courtyard, he thought, glancing at the old sign. It was the name of a place that might once have served white wine and polite jazz music—a singles bar, maybe, where the lonely went to meet the lonely. The Boneyard it was

now, all right: a realm of dancing skeletons. This was not his kind of place, but still... the noise, lights, and gyrations spoke of another kind of loneliness. It was a singles bar for the living dead, and it beckoned him in.

Jim crossed the threshold, and with one desiccated hand he smoothed down his remaining bits of black hair.

And now he knew what hell must be like: a smoky, rot-smelling pandemonium. Some of the things writhing on the dance floor were missing arms and legs, and one thin figure in the midst of a whirl lost its hand; the withered flesh skidded across the linoleum, was crushed underfoot as its owner scrambled after it, and then its owner was likewise pummeled down into a twitching mass. On the bandstand were two guitar players, a drummer, and a legless thing hammering at an electric organ. Jim avoided the dance floor, moving through the crowd toward the blue neon bar. The drum's pounding offended him, in an obscene way; it reminded him too much of how his heartbeat used to feel before it clenched and ceased.

This was a place his mother—God rest her soul—would have warned him to avoid. He had never been one for nightlife, and looking into the decayed faces of some of these people was a preview of torments that lay ahead—but he didn't want to leave. The drumbeat was so loud it destroyed all thinking, and for a while he could pretend it was indeed his own heart returned to scarlet life; and that, he realized, was why the Boneyard was full from wall to wall. This was a mockery of life, yes, but it was the best to be had.

The bar's neon lit up the rotting faces like blue-shadowed Halloween masks. One of them, down to shreds of flesh clinging to yellow bone, shouted something unintelligible and drank from a bottle of beer; the liquid streamed through the fissure in his throat and down over his violet shirt and gold chains. Flies swarmed around the bar, drawn to the reek, and Jim watched as the customers pressed forward. They reached into their pockets and change purses and offered freshly-killed rats, roaches, spiders, and centipedes to the bartender, who placed the objects in a large glass jar that had replaced the cash register. Such was the currency of the Dead World, and a particularly juicy rat bought two bottles of Miller Lite. Other people were laughing and hollering—gasping, brittle sounds that held no semblance of humanity. A fight broke out near the dance floor, and a twisted arm thunked to the linoleum to the delighted roar of the onlookers.

"I know you!" A woman's face thrust forward into Jim's. She had tatters of gray hair, and she wore heavy makeup over sunken cheeks, her forehead swollen and cracked by some horrible inner pressure. Her glittery dress danced with light, but smelled of grave dirt. "Buy me a drink!" she said, grasping his arm. A flap of flesh at her throat fluttered, and Jim realized her throat had been slashed. "Buy me a drink!" she insisted,

"No," Jim said, trying to break free. "No, I'm sorry."

"You're the one who killed me!" she screamed. Her grip tightened, about to snap Jim's forearm. "Yes you are! You killed me, didn't you?" And she picked up an empty beer bottle off the bar, her face contorted with rage, and started to smash it against his skull.

But before the blow could fall a man lifted her off her feet and pulled her away from Jim; her fingernails flayed to the bones of Jim's arm. She was still screaming, fighting to pull away, and the man, who wore a T-shirt with *Boneyard* painted across it, said, "She's a fresh one. Sorry, mac," before he hauled her toward the entrance. The woman's scream got shriller, and Jim saw her forehead burst open and ooze like a stomped snail. He shuddered, backing into a dark corner—and there he bumped into another body.

"Excuse me," he said. Started to move away. Glanced at whom he'd collided with.

And saw her.

She was trembling, her skinny arms wrapped around her chest. She still had most of her long brown hair, but in places it had diminished to the texture of spiderwebs and her scalp showed. Still, it was lovely hair. It looked almost healthy. Her pale blue eyes were liquid and terrified, and her face might have been pretty once. She had lost most of her nose, and gray-rimmed craters pitted her right cheek. She was wearing sensible clothes: a skirt and blouse and a sweater buttoned to the throat. Her clothes were dirty, but they matched. She looked like a librarian, he decided. She didn't belong in the Boneyard—but, then, where did anyone belong anymore?

He was about to move away when he noticed something else that caught a glint of frenzied light.

Around her neck, just peeking over the collar of her sweater, was a silver chain, and on that chain hung a tiny cloisonné heart.

It was a fragile thing, like a bit of bone china, but it held the power to freeze Jim before he took another step.

"That's... that's very pretty," he said. He nodded at the heart.

Instantly her hand covered it. Parts of her fingers had rotted off, like his own.

He looked into her eyes; she stared—or at least pretended to—right past him. She shook like a frightened deer. Jim paused, waiting for a break in the thunder, nervously casting his gaze to the floor. He caught a whiff of decay, and whether it was from himself or her he didn't know; what did it matter? He shivered too, not knowing what else to say but wanting to say something, anything, to make a connection. He sensed that at any moment the girl—whose age might be anywhere from twenty to forty, since Death both tightened and wrinkled at the same time—might bolt past him and be lost in the crowd. He thrust his hands into his pockets, not wanting her to see the exposed fingerbones. "This is the first time I've been here," he said. "I don't go out much."

She didn't answer. Maybe her tongue is gone, he thought. Or her throat. Maybe she was insane, which could be a real possibility. She pressed back against the wall, and Jim saw how very thin she was, skin stretched over frail

bones. Dried up on the inside, he thought. Just like me.

"My name is Jim," he told her. "What's yours?"

Again, no reply. I'm no good at this! he agonized. Singles bars had never been his "scene", as the saying went. No, his world had always been his books, his job, his classical records, his cramped little apartment that now seemed like a four-walled crypt. There was no use in standing here, trying to make conversation with a dead girl. He had dared to eat the peach, as Eliot's Prufrock lamented, and found it rotten,

"Brenda," she said, so suddenly it almost startled him. She kept her hand over the heart, her other arm across her sagging breasts. Her head was lowered, her hair hanging over the cratered cheek.

"Brenda," Jim repeated; he heard his voice tremble. "That's a nice name."

She shrugged, still pressed into the corner as if trying to squeeze through a chink in the bricks.

Another moment of decision presented itself. It was a moment in which Jim could turn and walk three paces away, into the howling mass at the bar, and release Brenda from her corner; or a moment in which Brenda could tell him to go away, or curse him to his face, or scream with haunted dementia and that would be the end of it. The moment passed, and none of those things happened. There was just the drumbeat, pounding across the club, pounding like a counterfeit heart, and the roaches ran their race on the bar and the dancers continued to fling bits of flesh off their bodies like autumn leaves.

He felt he had to say something. "I was just walking. I didn't mean to come here." Maybe she nodded. Maybe; he couldn't tell for sure, and the light played tricks. "I didn't have anywhere else to go," he added.

She spoke, in a whispery voice that he had to strain to hear: "Me neither."

Jim shifted his weight—what weight he had left. "Would you... like to dance?" he asked, for want of anything better.

"Oh, no!" She looked up quickly. "No, I can't dance! I mean... I used to dance, sometimes, but... I can't dance anymore."

Jim understood what she meant; her bones were brittle, just as his own were. They were both as fragile as husks, and to get out on that dance floor would tear them both to pieces. "Good," he said. "I can't dance either."

She nodded, with an expression of relief. There was an instant in which Jim saw how pretty she must have been before all this happened—not pretty in a flashy way, but pretty as homespun lace—and it made his brain ache. "This is a loud place," he said. "Too loud."

"I've... never been here before." Brenda removed her hand from the necklace, and again both arms protected her chest. "I knew this place was here, but..." She shrugged her thin shoulders. "I don't know."

"You're..." *lonely*, he almost said. *As lonely as I am.* "... alone?" he asked.

"I have friends," she answered, too fast.

"I don't," he said, and her gaze lingered on his face for a few seconds before she looked away. "I mean, not in this place," he amended. "I don't know anybody here, except you." He paused, and then he had to ask the question:

"Why did you come here tonight?"

She almost spoke, but she closed her mouth before the words got out. I know why, Jim thought. Because you're searching. Just like I am. You went out walking, and maybe you came in here because you couldn't stand to be alone another second. I can look at you, and hear you screaming. "Would you like to go out?" he asked. "Walking, I mean. Right now, so we can talk?"

"I don't know you," she said, uneasily.

"I don't know you, either. But I'd like to."

"I'm..." Her hand fluttered up to the cavity where her nose had been. "*Ugly*," she finished.

"You're not ugly. Anyway, I'm no handsome prince." He smiled, which stretched the flesh on his face. Brenda might have smiled, a little bit; again, it was hard to tell. "I'm not a crazy," Jim reassured her. "I'm not on drugs, and I'm not looking for somebody to hurt. I just thought... you might like to have some company."

Brenda didn't answer for a moment. Her fingers played with the cloisonné heart. "All right," she said finally. "But not too far. Just around the block."

"Just around the block," he agreed, trying to keep his excitement from showing too much. He took her arm—she didn't seem to mind his fleshless fingers—and carefully guided her through the crowd. She felt light, like a dry-rotted stick, and he thought that even he, with his shrunken muscles, might be able to lift her over his head.

Outside, they walked away from the blast of the Boneyard. The wind was getting stronger, and they soon were holding to each other to keep from being swept away. "A storm's coming," Brenda said, and Jim nodded. The storms were fast and ferocious, and their winds made the buildings shake. But Jim and Brenda kept walking, first around the block and then, at Brenda's direction, southward. Their bodies were bent like question marks; overhead, clouds masked the moon and blue streaks of electricity began to lance across the sky.

Brenda was not a talker, but she was a good listener. Jim told her about himself, about the job he used to have, about how he'd always dreamed that someday he'd have his own firm. He told her about a trip he once took, as a young man, to Lake Michigan, and how cold he recalled the water to be. He told her about a park he visited once, and how he remembered the sound of happy laughter and the smell of flowers. "I miss how it used to be," he said, before he could stop himself, because in the Dead World voicing such regrets was a punishable crime. "I miss

beauty," he went on. "I miss... love."

She took his hand, bone against bone, and said, "This is where I live."

It was a plain brownstone building, many of the windows broken out by the windstorms. Jim didn't ask to go to Brenda's apartment; he expected to be turned away on the front steps. But Brenda still had hold of his hand, and now she was leading him up those steps and through the glassless door.

Her apartment, on the fourth floor, was even smaller than Jim's. The walls were a somber gray, but the lights revealed a treasure—pots of flowers set around the room and out on the fire escape. "They're silk," Brenda explained, before he could ask. "But they look real, don't they?"

"They look... wonderful." He saw a stereo and speakers on a table, and near the equipment was a collection of records. He bent down, his knees creaking, and began to examine her taste in music. Another shock greeted him: Beethoven... Chopin... Mozart... Vivaldi... Strauss. And, yes, even Brahms. "Oh!" he said, and that was all he could say.

"I found most of those," she said. "Would you like to listen to them?"

"Yes. Please."

She put on the Chopin, and as the piano chords swelled, so did the wind, whistling in the hall and making the windows tremble.

And then she began to talk about herself: She had been a secretary, in a refrigeration plant across the river. Had never married, though she'd been engaged once. Her hobby was making silk flowers, when she could find the material. She missed ice cream most of all, she said. And summer—what had happened to summer, like it used to be? All the days and nights seemed to bleed together now, and nothing made any of them different. Except the storms, of course, and those could be dangerous.

By the end of the third record, they were sitting side by side on her sofa. The wind had gotten very strong outside; the rain came and went, but the wind and lightning remained.

"I like talking to you," she told him. "I feel like... I've known you for a long, long time."

"I do too. I'm glad I came into that place tonight." He watched the storm and heard the wind shriek. "I don't know how I'm going to get home."

"You... don't have to go," Brenda said, very quietly. "I'd like for you to stay."

He stared at her, unbelieving. The back of his neck itched fiercely, and the itch was spreading to his shoulders and arms, but he couldn't move.

"I don't want to be alone," she continued. "I'm always alone. It's just that... I miss touching. Is that wrong, to miss touching?"

"No. I don't think so."

She leaned forward, her lips almost brushing his, her eyes almost pleading. "Eat me," she whispered.

Jim sat very still. Eat me: the only way left to feel pleasure in the Dead World. He wanted it, too; he needed it, so badly. "Eat me," he whispered back to her, and he began to unbutton her sweater.

Her nude body was riddled with craters, her breasts sunken into her chest. His own was sallow and emaciated, and between his thighs his penis was a gray, useless piece of flesh. She reached for him, he knelt beside her body, and as she urged "Eat me, eat me," his tongue played circles on her cold skin; then his teeth went to work, and he bit away the first chunk. She moaned and shivered, lifted her head and tongued his arm. Her teeth took a piece of flesh from him, and the ecstasy arrowed along his spinal cord like an electric shock.

They clung to each other, shuddering, their teeth working on arms and legs, throat, chest, face. Faster and faster still, as the wind crashed and Beethoven thundered; gobbets of flesh fell to the carpet, and those gobbets were quickly snatched up and consumed. Jim felt himself shrinking, being transformed from one into two; the incandescent moment had enfolded him, and if there had been tears to cry, he might have wept with Joy. Here was love, and here was a lover who both claimed him and gave her all.

Brenda's teeth closed on the back of Jim's neck, crunching through the dry flesh. Her eyes closed in rapture as Jim ate the rest of the fingers on her left hand—and suddenly there was a new sensation, a scurrying around her lips. The love wound on Jim's neck was erupting small yellow roaches, like gold coins spilling from a bag, and Jim's itching subsided. He cried out, his face burrowing into Brenda's abdominal cavity.

Their bodies entwined, the flesh being gnawed away, their shrunken stomachs bulging. Brenda bit off his ear, chewed, and swallowed it; fresh passion coursed through Jim, and he nibbled away her lips—they *did* taste like slightly overripe peaches—and ran his tongue across her teeth. They kissed deeply, biting pieces of their tongues off. Jim drew back and lowered his face to her thighs. He began to eat her, while she gripped his shoulders and screamed.

Brenda arched her body. Jim's sexual organs were there, the testicles like dark, dried fruit. She opened her mouth wide, extended her chewed tongue and bared her teeth; her cheekless, chinless face strained upward—and Jim cried out over even the wail of the wind, his body convulsing.

They continued to feast on each other, like knowing lovers. Jim's body was hollowed out, most of the flesh gone from his face and chest. Brenda's lungs and heart were gone, consumed, and the bones of her arms and legs were fully revealed. Their stomachs swelled. And when they were near explosion, Jim and Brenda lay on the carpet,

cradling each other with skeletal arms, lying on bits of flesh like the petals of strange flowers. They were one now, each into the other—and what more could love be than this?

"I love you," Jim said, with his mangled tongue. Brenda made a noise of assent, unable to speak, and took a last love bite from beneath his arm before she snuggled close.

The Beethoven record ended; the next one dropped onto the turntable, and a lilting Strauss waltz began.

Jim felt the building shake. He lifted his head, one eye remaining and that one sated with pleasure, and saw the fire escape trembling. One of the potted plants was suddenly picked up by the wind. "Brenda," he said—and then the plant crashed through the glass and the stormwind came in, whipping around the walls. Another window blew in, and as the next hot wave of wind came, it got into the hollows of the two dried bodies and raised them off the floor like reed-ribbed kites. Brenda made a gasping noise, her arms locked around Jim's spinal cord and his handless arms thrust into her ribcage. The wind hurled them against the wall, snapping bones like matchsticks as the waltz continued to play on for a few seconds before the stereo and table went over. There was no pain, though, and no reason to fear. They were together, in this Dead World where love was a curseword, and together they would face the storm.

The wind churned, threw them one way and then the other—and as it withdrew from Brenda's apartment it took the two bodies with it, into the charged air over the city's roofs.

They flew, buffeted higher and higher, bone locked to bone. The city disappeared beneath them, and they went up into the clouds where the blue lightning danced.

They knew great joy, and at the upper limits of the clouds where the lightning was hottest, they thought they could see the stars.

When the storm passed, a boy on the north side of the city found a strange object on the roof of his apartment building, near the pigeon roost. It looked like a charred-black construction of bones, melded together so you couldn't tell where one bone ended and the other began. And in that mass of bones was a silver chain, with a small ornament. A heart, he saw it was. A white heart, hanging there in the tangle of someone's bones,

He was old enough to realize that someone—two people, maybe—had escaped the Dead World last night. Lucky stiff, he thought.

He reached in for the dangling heart, and it fell to ashes at his touch.

BLACK BOOTS

Under the hard green sky, Davy Slaughter ran from Black Boots.

He glanced back over his shoulder, his face shadowed by the brim of his sweat-stained hat. Gritty sand and stones shifted underfoot, and his horse nickered with thirst. He had been leading the roan for the better part of an hour across the no-man's land between Jalupa and Zionville. The sun, white as a pearl in the emerald air, was burning the moisture out of both man and beast. Davy thought he could hear his skin frying. He reached for his canteen slung around his shoulder, uncapped it and took a drink. Then he poured a little in his hand and gave it to the horse. The roan's tongue scraped his palm. Davy swigged once more from the precious canteen, and something writhing oozed into his mouth.

Davy gagged and spat. White worms trailed from his lips and fell to the sand. He watched with almost a bland curiosity as they squirmed around his feet. One was caught between his cheek and gum, like a little plug of tobacco. He picked it out and let it fall. The worms were bleeding into the sand. They were becoming less solid and more liquid with each passing second. And then they were gone, just a wet blotch where they'd been. That was a new one, Davy thought. His tongue roamed his mouth, but found no more invaders. He shook the canteen, and a measly amount of remaining water sloshed faintly inside it. He capped the canteen, wiped his mouth with the back of his sweating hand, and looked toward the shimmering horizon in the direction of Jalupa.

Scraggly cacti, as purple as bullet holes on the body of a dead man, stood on the desert's floor. Furnace heat undulated before him like banners of misery. But of Black Boots there was no sign. That didn't matter, Davy knew. Black Boots was back there, somewhere. Black Boots was always back there, coming after him. Getting closer and closer, as the white sun beat down and the desert was hot enough to cook lizards in their skins. Black Boots was always back there.

Davy should know. He'd killed Black Boots yesterday afternoon, at just after four o'clock, in a barroom in Cozamezas. Two bullets had done the job: one to the chest, one to the skull. Black Boots had gone down, spewing blood onto the dirty boards.

But Black Boots—the crafty bastard—had gotten off a single shot. Davy looked at the back of his gunhand, where the slug had left a burned streak. His fingers were still stiff from the shock. Crafty bastard, Davy thought. Softening me up for the next time. Used to be I could cut him down before he drew his pistol. Used to be I could send him to Hell in an eyeblink. But Hell couldn't hold Black Boots. He was back there, crossing the no-man's land, getting closer all the time.

Davy worked his fingers, his eyes scanning the horizon. No sign of Black Boots. There never was, until it happened. He turned away from Jalupa and, holding the horse's reins, continued walking toward Zionville. His stride was a little faster than before. He glanced at his gunbelt fastened around the roan's saddlehorn. His Colt pistol had a handle of yellow ivory, and in that ivory were twenty-two notches. He'd stopped notching it the fifth time he'd killed Black Boots.

The horse made a nervous, rumbling noise. Davy saw a vulture circling overhead. It swooped down low, smelling him. And then it climbed again into the green sky, and as it flapped its wings it began to fall to pieces, drifting apart like dark whorls of smoke. Davy looked away from it, and went on.

His real name was not Slaughter. It was Gartwood. He was twenty-four years old, and he had been born with the eyes of a rattlesnake. Speed was his mistress, and gunsmoke his god. When he'd run with the Bryce Gang three years ago, they'd called him "Slaughter" after the bank job in Abilene. That had a better ring than Gartwood. Gartwood was the name of a grocer, or a shoe salesman. Slaughter was his name now, and he was proud of it. He'd shot down four people in a two-minute gun battle in Abilene. So Slaughter it was.

A sidewinder moved across his path, leaving a trail of fire that dwindled to cinders as he passed. He stared straight ahead, toward unseen Zionville. He knew this country, with the true knowledge of a predator. Another glance over his shoulder; Black Boots was still not in sight. Davy felt tight inside, full of rusted springs. His bones were melting under this terrible heat. He touched his Colt to make sure it was still real. It was, mercifully. In this day and age, a friend was hard to find.

How Black Boots had gotten onto his trail, he didn't know. The Wanted Dead Or Alive posters were up all over Texas and Oklahoma. Maybe that was it. Black Boots had seen the posters, and he wanted the fifty dollar bounty. A man who could get killed so many times and come back again with a cold hand must need money mighty bad, Davy figured. Hell, if I had fifty dollars I'd give it him, just to let me be. But Black Boots wanted to earn his money, that much was crystal clear.

Davy started to look back again, but he checked himself. I don't need to, he told himself. "I ain't scared of him," he said aloud. The roan's ears twitched. "I've killed him eight damn times. I can kill him again. I ain't scared of him, no sir."

A half-dozen more steps, and his head swiveled back over his shoulder.

Davy Slaughter stopped in his tracks.

There was a figure on the horizon. A man on horseback? Maybe. It was hard to tell, because the heatwaves were tricky. They made you see things that weren't there. Davy reached for his Colt, twisted his stiff fingers around the notched handle, and lifted the gun from the supple leather. Davy's heart was beating harder, and his throat was dry. His mouth tasted of white worms, and there was a hurting in his skull. He eased the Colt's hammer back, then he stood and watched the faraway figure coming as drops of sweat trickled through his beard.

The figure had stopped too. Whoever it was, they were a long ways off. Davy squinted in the green glare. The figure was just sitting there, watching him. Davy felt one of the rusted springs inside him break, and his mouth opened. "You after me?" he shouted. The man jumped, startled. "You after me, you sonofabitch?" He took aim, his gunhand trembling. Green fire glinted off the barrel. Steady! he told himself. Damn it, *steady!* He let go of the horse's reins, and grasped his wrist with his other hand.

Behind a haze of rising heat, the figure neither retreated nor advanced.

"How many times do I have to kill you?" Davy shouted. "You want another bullet in your damned head?" The calmness of the figure enraged him. If there was anything he couldn't stand, it was when somebody had no fear of him. "All right!" he said. "All right, then!" He squeezed the trigger, a motion he'd performed so many times that it was as instinctive as breathing and just as sweet. The solid, balanced weapon gave a little kick, but it was a tame beast. The noise of the shot made his eardrums crack. "All right, have another one!" he cried out, his voice getting ragged. A second, almost loving squeeze of the trigger, and another bullet left the Colt's barrel.

He was about to fire off a third shot when it came to him, quite clearly. He was shooting at a cactus.

Davy blinked into the distance. He laughed, a croaking sound. It wasn't Black Boots after all, was it? Hell, no! He rubbed his eyes with grimy fingers and looked again. The cactus was still there, and Black Boots was nowhere in sight. "Wasn't him," Davy said to the roan. "Oh, he's scared of me, is what he is. Keepin' his distance. He knows I'll kill him again, stiff hand or not. Hell, I'll drill him right straight through the eye next time." He returned the hot Colt to the gunbelt and grasped the horse's reins again. He began walking, leading the roan across the tortured land to Zionville. Davy looked back a few times, but Black Boots wasn't there. Not yet, anyway. It occurred to Davy that this was the type of day his father would've liked. The elder Gartwood, in his last years, used to like to strip naked and lie out in the sun, reading his Bible. The elder Gartwood burned raw, was covered with blisters and boils, and he read the Good Book aloud as the sun ate him alive. Not Davy nor his mother nor his sister could get the elder Gartwood to find some shade. He wants to die, Davy remembered his Ma saying. And something else, too, she used to proclaim in her righteous voice: Those whom the Lord would destroy, He first makes insane.

Davy's gunhand was aching. He worked the fingers. The knuckles felt bruised. He gazed at the burned streak of the bullet's kiss, and he recalled that the first time he'd killed Black Boots the sonofabitch hadn't even been fast enough to clear leather. The second time, Black Boots had died with his gun just barely out of the holster. In their third encounter, Black Boots had fired into the ground as he'd stumbled backward with a Colt slug in his throat. Davy licked along the bullet's track, tasting the salt of his sweat.

No doubt about it, Davy thought. No doubt at all. Black Boots was getting faster.

It stood to reason. A man couldn't die eight times without learning something.

Davy was thirsty again. He uncapped the canteen, opened his mouth, and drank.

Warm liquid trickled over his tongue. It tasted coppery. Water's gone bad, he thought. He spat it out in his palm, and watched as the crimson blood oozed through his fingers and dripped to the sand.

Davy walked on, leading the roan, as the white sun burned down from an emerald sky and blood dribbled over his chin. Black Boots was on his mind.

Zionville wasn't much. There was a stable, a general goods store, a saloon, a church and graveyard and a few ramshackle houses, all bleached white as old bones. A red dog with two heads ran circles around Davy and the roan, both mouths yapping, but a kick to its ribs taught it some respect. In front of the goods store, a gawky kid with a bowl-haircut was sweeping off the boards, and he stopped his work to watch Davy pass. Two elderly women stood in a slice of shade, speaking in whispers. Davy noticed a little stucco structure with SHERIFF'S OFFICE painted on the door, but the windows were boarded up and the way the sand had drifted against the bottom of that door told him Zionville's sheriff was long gone. That suited him just fine. He tied the roan to the hitch in front of the saloon, which had no name, and then he took his gunbelt off the saddlehorn and buckled it on. As he laced the holster down against his thigh, he felt himself being watched. He glanced around, his eyes narrowed in the glare, and saw a thin man wearing dungarees and a sodbuster's shapeless hat sitting on a bench in front of a small wooden building. A weatherbeaten sign identified the place as a Wells Fargo bank. Rathole wasn't worth robbing, Davy decided. Probably didn't have anything in there but a few sacks of change. Still, it might be nice to hear his pockets jingle when he left town.

He saw the kid in front of the goods store staring at him, leaning on his broom. The door opened with the clang

of a cowbell, and a brown-haired woman in an apron peered out. She followed the kid's line of sight and saw Davy. "Joseph!" she said. "Come inside!"

"In a minute, Ma," the kid answered.

"Joseph, I said *now*!" The woman caught his sleeve and tugged at him, and the kid was reeled inside like a hooked fish. The door was firmly shut.

"Yeah, Joseph," Davy said under his breath. "You mind your momma." He gazed along the length of the street, saw a few more faces watching him through windows. Nobody was going to give him any trouble here. He walked into the saloon, his boots clumping on the boards. One drink of whiskey and a mulling over of whether to take the bank or not, and then he was going to be on his way.

Stale heat hung in the saloon. Sawdust had been scattered on the floor, and the light was gray through dirty windows. The bartender was a fleshy man with slicked-back black hair and a bovine face. He was swatting flies with a rolled-up newspaper when he looked into the cracked mirror behind the bar and saw Davy approaching. "Afternoon," he said to the mirror image.

Davy nodded. He leaned against the bar and propped one foot up on the bar rail. "Somethin' wet," he said, and the bartender pulled the cork from a brown bottle and poured him a shot. Davy had already seen the two middle-aged men who were playing cards at the back of the saloon. They'd paused only briefly, to note his laced-down holster, before they returned to their game. Over by a battered old piano, an elderly man slept in his chair as a fly buzzed his head. Davy accepted the shotglass and sipped fire.

"Hot day," the bartender said.

"Sure is." Davy scanned the shelves behind the bar. "Got any cold beer?"

"Got beer. No ice, though."

Davy shrugged and sipped at the whiskey again. There was more water in it than liquor, but that was all right with him. He'd killed a man for watering his whiskey once, when he was younger. Today it didn't matter so much. "Quiet town you got here."

"Oh, yeah. Zionville's real quiet." The bartender swatted another fly. "Where you goin'?"

"Me? From here to there, I reckon." Davy watched the man's thick hands as they scraped the smashed fly off the bartop. "I just stopped to rest for a little while."

"You picked the right place. What's your name?"

Davy looked into the bartender's face. It was a mess of green flies, only the small dark eyes showing. Flies were crawling merrily in and out of the man's nostrils and they covered his lips. "Ain't that kinda uncomfortable?" Davy asked.

"Huh? What's uncomfortable?" The bartender's face was clear again, not a single fly on it.

"Nothin'," Davy said. He stared at the bullet crease on the back of his hand. "My name's Davy. What's yours?"

"Carl Haines. This is my place." The man said it proudly, as if talking about his child.

"I pity you," Davy told him, and Carl looked stung for a few seconds, but then he laughed. It was a nervous laugh. Davy heard that kind of laugh before, and it pleased him. "You got a sheriff in this town?"

Carl's laugh stopped. He blinked. "Why?"

"Just curious. I saw the sheriff's office, but I didn't see no sheriff." He took another taste of the watered-down whiskey. "I'd like to know. Do you have a sheriff?"

"No," Carl said warily. "I mean... there's one on the way. He'll be here directly. Comin' from El Paso."

"Well, that's a far piece from here, ain't it?" Davy turned the shotglass between his fingers. "An awful far piece."

"Ain't so far," Carl said, but his voice was weak. He cleared his throat, glanced at the card players and then back to Davy. "Uh... you wouldn't want to cause any trouble now, would you?"

"Do I look like the kind of fella who'd want to cause--" Davy stopped speaking. He noticed that Carl Haines had only one eye. There was a black, empty socket in the bartender's face. And from that socket began to slide the snout of a rattlesnake, forked tongue flicking out to taste the air.

"We're peaceful folks here," Carl said, as the rattler slowly emerged from his eyehole. "We don't quarrel with nobody. Honest to God."

Davy just stared, fascinated. The rattler's wedge-shaped head was all the way out now, and its eyes were bright amber. Davy's skull hurt. It felt about to burst open, and the thought of what might spew out terrified him. He had an image of a withered skeleton lying in the burning sun, reading aloud from the Book of Job.

"Nothin' around here worth takin'," Carl went on. "Zionville's about dried up."

The bartender had two eyes again. The rattlesnake was gone, Davy set the shotglass down and pushed it aside with trembling fingers. Something wanted to scream inside him; he almost released it, but then he smashed it down and it shrank to its dark place.

"What's wrong?" Carl asked. "How come you're lookin' at me like that?"

"My last name," Davy said, his voice husky, "is Slaughter. Do you know that name?"

Carl shook his head.

"Anybody been around here, askin' for me?"

Again, a shake of the head.

"You ever see a man," Davy said, "who wears black boots?"

"I don't know. Hell, a lot of drifters pass through. I can't remem--"

"You'd remember him, if you saw him." Davy leaned forward slightly, staring into the bartender's eyes. He was looking for the rattlesnake again. It was hiding inside Carl's head. Hiding there, coiled up and waiting. "This man who wears black boots is tall and skinny. He looks like he ain't had a good meal in a long time. He looks hungry. His face is dusty-white, but you can't set eyes on him very long because you feel cold inside, like your bones are freezin' up. Sometimes he'd dressed like a dandy. Sometimes he's ragged. Have you ever seen a man like that?"

"No." The word was soft and strained. "Never."

"I have." Davy's fingers played on the handle of his Colt, where the notches were. "I've killed him eight times. The same man. Ol' Black Boots. See, he's stalking me. He figures he can catch me when I'm not ready for him. But I was born ready, Carl. You believe that?"

Carl made a choking sound, and a bead of sweat ran along his hooked nose.

"He's got nerve, I'll say that for him," Davy continued. "Not many men would face me down eight damned times, would they? No sir." He smiled faintly, watching a nerve tick at the corner of Carl's mouth. "Oh, he won't give up. Nope. But I won't give up neither." He took his hand off his gun, and worked his fingers. "He's gettin' faster, Carl. Everytime I kill him, he gets a little faster." Davy heard the soft crackling of flames. He looked toward the piano, and saw the old sleeping man ablaze with blue fire. In the old man's lap was an open Bible, and black pages were whirling out of it like bats at twilight.

"I swear," Carl managed to say, "I... ain't seen nobody like that."

There was the scrape of a boot on timbers. Davy saw Carl glance quickly toward the saloon's swinging doors. Davy felt the presence behind him, and fear like a streak of lightning shot through his bones. As he twisted toward the door, he had his hand on the Colt and had drawn and cocked it before the movement was complete. He brought the gun up to fire at chest-level, his finger tightening on the trigger.

"No!" Carl shouted. "Don't!"

Davy hesitated, ready to blast Black Boots to Hell again. But it wasn't Black Boots. It was the lanky kid who'd been sweeping in front of the goods store, his eyes wide as he peered over the doors at the gunfighter. The seconds stretched, Davy's finger touching the trigger. The kid lifted his hands. "I ain't got a gun, mister," he said in a reedy voice. "See? I'm just lookin'."

Davy scanned the other men in the bar. The card players had stopped their game, and the old man by the piano was awake and had ceased burning. Carl said, "It's just Joey McGuire. He don't mean no harm. Joey, get on away from here! You know your Ma don't like you hangin' around!"

The kid stared at the Colt in Davy's hand. "You ain't gonna shoot me, are you?"

Davy thought about it. Once his blood was stirred, it was hard to cool it down. But then he eased the trigger forward. "You came mighty close to playin' a harp, boy."

"Go on home, Joey!" Carl urged. "This ain't no place for you!"

"Do like he says," Davy told him. He returned the Colt to his holster. "This is a man's place."

"Hell, I'm a man!" Joey had pushed one of the doors partway open. "I can come in if I want to!"

The kid was fifteen or sixteen, Davy figured. Eager to set foot where it didn't belong. Eager to grow up, too. Like I was, Davy thought. He turned his back on the kid and finished off his shot of whiskey. It was time to be on his way, before Black Boots got here. He looked at Carl. There was a red-edged, jagged fissure across the bartender's forehead, and something gray was oozing out. "How much I owe you?"

"Nothin'," Carl said quickly, slime trickling down his face. "It's on the house. Okay?"

"Mister?" Joey had put a foot into the saloon. "You from around here?"

"Nope." Davy watched the fissure in Carl's head writhe. It was splitting open some more, and the brains were swelling out. "I ain't from nowhere."

"You know how to use that gun?"

"Maybe." Davy heard the kid's mother calling. Her voice echoed up the street: "Joseph! Joseph, come back here!" Twisted gray tissue was squeezing through the wound in Carl's forehead. Davy thought it was an interesting sight.

"I can come in if I want to," Joey said adamantly, turning a deaf ear to his mother. "Ain't no place I can't go, if it suits me."

"Your Ma's callin' you, Joey," Carl told him. "She'll raise hell at me again."

"I'm comin' in," the boy decided, and he pushed through the saloon doors. His boots clomped on the sawdusty boards.

"Don't that hurt?" Davy asked, and started to poke a finger at the oozing wound. Before his finger got there, he glanced up into the mirror behind the bar.

The kid who'd been sweeping in front of the goods store was not reflected there. The mirror told Davy Slaughter that someone else had entered the saloon.

The man was tall and skinny. He looked hungry, and his face had never seen the sun. Davy heard the black boots on the floor, saw the gunfighter who would not die reaching in a blur of motion toward the pistol slung low on his hip.

Black Boots, that crafty bastard, had gotten in wearing a kid's skin.

A surge of cold terror gripped at Davy's throat. He saw the shine of the man's black, fathomless eyes in the mirror, and then Davy shouted, "Damn you!" and was whirling as he shouted it, his stiff hand going for his Colt. Black Boots was drawing his own pistol out, was just about to clear leather. Davy's Colt slid out, quicker by far. He heard Carl shout something, but Davy was already lifting his gun. He thrust it toward Black Boots and squeezed the trigger. Black Boots was knocked backward, a hole appearing in his chest. He gripped his pistol, but hadn't been fast enough to take aim. Black Boots staggered back through the saloon doors with blood all over his chest.

"Are you crazy?" Carl screamed. "Are you crazy?"

"I got you, didn't I?" Davy jeered. His voice cracked. "I got you again, you bastard!" He strode to the swinging doors, his heart hammering but his mind clear and calm, and he stood there watching as Black Boots fell to the dust on his knees. A woman screamed. Davy saw the kid's mother about twenty feet away. She retreated a drunken step, her face bleached white and her hand pressed to her mouth. Her shocked eyes found Davy and seized on him. Black Boots was trying to get up, trying to aim his gun. "You sonofabitch," Davy said, and fired a shot into Black Boots' forehead. The woman screamed again, a nettlesome sound. Black Boots pitched over on his side, the back of his head burst open. "I got you," Davy told him. "Serves you right, sneakin' up on me like--"

Black Boots was no longer lying in the dust. Where Black Boots had been was a kid, maybe fifteen or sixteen. His face and chest were all bloody. The woman made a groaning sound, turned and ran toward the goods store with dust whirling up beneath her shoes. Davy's head was hurting something awful. He looked up at the green sky, and his eyes stung. Then he returned his gaze to the dead boy. What had happened to Black Boots? He was there just a minute ago. Wasn't he? Davy backed away from the corpse. Somebody else was shouting in the distance: "Get off the street! Get off the street!" Davy kept backing away, and he retreated through the swinging doors into the saloon, away from the blinding light and that dead boy somebody had shot.

He heard the click of a trigger being cocked.

He spun around, cocking his Colt at the same time, and that was when Black Boots rose up from behind the bar. Black Boots had a rifle this time, and as its barrel swung upon him, Davy shouted with rage and fired his pistol.

The Colt and the rifle spoke at the same instant. Davy was suddenly on the floor, though he had no recollection of how he'd gotten there. His left shoulder was wet and numb. Black Boots was chambering another slug, and behind him the mirror had been shattered to pieces. "Get him!" one of the card players hollered. The rifle took aim, but Davy had already found his mark and he shot Black Boots in the throat before another heartbeat had passed.

Black Boots slammed back into the shelves of bottles, his throat punctured, and the rifle went off, but the bullet whacked into the wall over Davy's head. With a rush of air through the hole in his throat, Black Boots slid down to the floor behind the bar. Davy got up. He glanced at the old man who'd been over by the piano; the man was hiding under a table, his flesh patterned with gray diamonds like the skin of a sidewinder. Davy walked to the bar, his head pulsing with pain, and he leaned over and shot Black Boots in the face.

Except it was not Black Boots. It was a man with slicked-back black hair, a rifle clenched in his twitching hands. Blood and air bubbled from the ruin of Carl's throat. Davy's legs felt weak. About to pass out, he thought. I'm shot. Sonofabitchin' Black Boots got me, didn't he? He staggered through the swinging door, leaving a trail of crimson, blue smoke wafting from the Colt's barrel. In the glare of the hard green sky, Davy saw that the horse he'd hitched in front of the saloon no longer had skin. It was a skeleton horse with a saddle and bridle. But it still had four legs, and in its cage of bones its red lungs and heart were still working. Davy pulled the reins free, swung himself up onto the skeleton horse, and turned it toward the way out of Zionville. He dug his heels into the bare ribs. The horse shot forward, but in the next instant Davy realized he was going the wrong way. He was heading back the way he'd come, toward Jalupa again. He tried to get the skeleton horse turned around, but it wheeled and fought him.

He heard the noise of a cowbell.

Black Boots had just emerged from the goods store, a pistol in his hand. Davy lost the reins. He saw Black Boots running toward him, and Davy tried to take aim but the horse wheeled again and then Black Boots was right there and the pistol was thrust out at arm's-length. He thought he saw Black Boots smile.

The first bullet grazed Davy's cheek. The second hit him in the side, and the third caught him in the stomach and knocked him out of the saddle. He fell into the dust, the horse's bony legs thrashing around him. Davy crawled away from the bucking skeleton, and a shadow fell upon him.

His eyes heavy-lidded and blood in his mouth, he looked up at Black Boots. The man was just standing there, dust swirling around him, the gun hanging at his side. Davy coughed up crimson, and he forced a crooked grin. "You... never beat me," Davy whispered. "I was always faster. Always." And then he lifted his own gun, aimed it at Black Boots' chest and squeezed the trigger.

The hammer fell on an empty chamber. Six bullets had been fired: two in the no-man's land, four killing Black Boots. Davy laughed, a broken sound.

Black Boots shot Davy Slaughter twice, once in the belly and once at close range in the skull. Davy twitched a few times. The Colt fell from his fingers, and he lay staring up at the sky. Joey's mother stood there a moment longer. She was shaking, and tears had streaked her face. She dropped the pistol, wiped her palm on her apron, and then she began to walk toward her dead son as the people of Zionville emerged from shelter. Burning down from a fierce

blue sky, the sun threw long shadows. Not far away, the roan horse had ceased its bucking and stood in the middle of the street waiting for a guiding hand.

No one knew the gunfighter. He was crazy as hell, old Braxton said. Shot Joey down for no reason at all. Crazy as hell, he was. Pine boxes cost money, and no one came forward to offer any. The gunfighter was wrapped up in a canvas sack, his pallid face showing through, and somebody leaned him up against a wall while a picture was taken. The new sheriff from El Paso would want to know about this. Then a hole was dug, way over on the edge of the cemetery away from where Zionville's own lay. The reverend said a few words over the gunfighter, but nobody was there to hear them. Then the corpse was laid down into the hole, the reverend went away, and the man who threw dirt on the gunfighter's face wore black boots.

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BEAUTY

Welcome, Beauty was what the sign said. It was right up in front of the SeaHarp Hotel, where everybody in the world could see it. What I didn't find out until later was that the sign had said *Welcome, Miss Greystone Bay Beauty*, but the windstorm the night before had blown the rest of the letters to kingdom come. When my Momma and I saw that sign, she squeezed my hand and I felt like my heart was going to burst open. My Momma always called me Beauty, and now the SeaHarp was calling me Beauty too.

Oh, that was a wonderful day! My Momma used to tell me the story of Cinderella. I could never get enough of it. And when we took the curve in that fancy, long black car they'd sent for us, and I saw the SeaHarp Hotel up on the hill in front of us, I knew how Cinderella felt. If you were to take a dream and put sugar frosting on it, you'd have the SeaHarp. All those windows, that green grass, the blue sky over us... and that sign. It made my blood thrill, to think the SeaHarp knew my name. 'Course, my little sister Annie had to come along with us, and she was kicking a fuss because it was my day to get all the attention. But I didn't mind. Not much. I missed Daddy being there, but Mr. Teague wouldn't let him off from the mill, not even for a day like this. Momma says things about Mr. Teague that I wouldn't tell a soul.

The driver pulled us on up to the front steps. Another man in a uniform came down and opened the door for us. We got out, and we went up to the porch and we didn't even have to carry our own bags. Then I stood at the open doors looking in at the SeaHarp like a frozen statue while Annie danced and raised Cain all around me. Momma told her to hush and not disgrace us, and the man in the uniform smiled and said, "It's our honor, Mrs. Guthrie," in a voice that let you know you'd gotten to where you were supposed to be. My Momma smiled, but her lips were tight; she was always ashamed of her teeth, the front one broken and all.

Before we went in, I turned toward the Bay. It was full of sunshine. And then I just let my head turn along the crescent of the water, and way off in the distance I saw a smudge of smoke against the sky. It was coming up from a long brown building that hardly had any windows. "My Daddy's there," I told the man at the door, and I pointed. I saw my Momma flinch just a little bit, but the doorman smiled real nice.

I won the contest, see. The Greystone Bay Beauty Contest, for young ladies sixteen to eighteen. The winner got a dozen roses, a hundred dollars and a weekend stay at the SeaHarp. And her picture in the paper too, of course. I'd just turned sixteen, on the second day of May. My Momma always had faith in me. She said I could sing up a storm, and my voice was okay I guess. She said, "Beauty, someday you're gonna go far. Gonna see and do things I never did. I wish I could go with you to those places."

I said, "You can. Momma! You can always go with me!"

She smiled, a little bit. "You're a beauty," she said, and she took my hands and held them. "Beauty outside, beauty inside. Me, I'm just a tired rag."

"No!" I told her. "Don't you say that!" Because my Momma was a pretty woman, and there's nobody better say she wasn't. Isn't, I mean.

The manager was waiting to meet us, in that big lobby bathed in light. He was a tall man, in a dark blue suit with pinstripes. He said how happy he was that the SeaHarp could host us for the weekend, but I hardly heard him. I was looking around that lobby, and trying to figure out how many of our house could fit in it. Maybe ten. We only had four rooms; they called where we lived a "shotgun shack," and the walls were gray. Not in the SeaHarp. The walls were white, like clouds. I'd never seen so many chairs, sofas and tables outside of a furniture store, and there were crystal vases full of fresh-cut flowers. I've always loved flowers. I used to pick daffodils in the Spring, where they grew along the creekbed outside our back door.

"Hello," the manager said to me, and I said hello back. "Someone's wearing some nice perfume."

"That's violets," Momma said. "She always wears the scent of violets, because that's a right smell for a beauty like her."

"Yes," the manager agreed, "it certainly is." And then he snapped his fingers and you would've thought the carpet has sprouted bellboys like mushrooms.

It's strange, how you notice things. Like the pink dress my Momma and Daddy had bought for me to wear. It looked fine in the gray light of our house, but at the SeaHarp... it looked like the pink was old and faded. It looked like something that had been on a hanger for a long, long time. And the sheets of my bed in that room were so cool and crisp; they embraced you. They didn't want you to leave them. The windows were all so clean, and the sun was so bright, and you had hot water whenever you wanted it. Oh, that was a Cinderella dream come true.

Momma said Daddy was going to come visit the SeaHarp when he got off work, even if it was at nine o'clock at

night. She said Daddy was so proud of me, just like she was. All Annie did, though, was prance around and make a mighty fool of herself. Momma said she was going to lie down and have a rest, and for me to watch Annie and keep her out of mischief. We went off together, through the white hallways, and we found the stairs.

Annie said she could dance better than me, and I said she couldn't. I was sixteen, but there was enough little girl in me to want to show her who was a better dancer. So we danced up and down those stairs, like that scene where Shirley Temple dances on the steps and she goes up three, down two, up four, down two, up five, down...

My head hurts.

Sometimes I get tired real easy. Sometimes day seems like night, and night seems like a long day when clocks won't move. I get tired, and I can't think right.

I leave my room, where the crisp cool sheets of that bed are always laid open like a blue wound, and I go to the elevator. I know the elevator man's name: Clancy. He's a black man with gray hair, and he knows me too. He brings the elevator to where I wait, and when he cranks the doors open I step in smooth as pink silk.

"Evenin', Beauty," Clancy says. I say hello to Mr. Clancy. "Mighty quiet in the SeaHarp tonight," he says—this is what he always says. Mr. Clancy only works during the quiet hours. He cranks the doors shut, pulls a lever and the old elevator begins its descent. I listen to the cables and gears turning above our heads. A gear needs oiling; it squeaks too loudly.

"What time is it?" I ask Mr. Clancy.

"Gloria's sister June is gonna have a baby," he answers. Oh, he can be a mean man! Sometimes he acts as if you have no voice at all! "Got the names all picked out. Third baby for her, shouldn't be no big thing."

"Is it springtime, Mr. Clancy?" I ask. "At least tell me that."

"Smithie got a raise. Seems like I oughta get a raise. You know, that Smithie's always complainin' 'bout one thing or another."

I want to scream, but that would be beneath me. To tell the truth, I like hearing Mr. Clancy talk to me. I like the sound of his voice, and the noise of the elevator. I don't care for the stairs.

The elevator arrives at the lobby. The doors open, and I see the lamps glowing and the beautiful walls and furniture; all there, all just the same as the first day. "You sure smell nice tonight. Beauty," Mr. Clancy says as I leave—he always says this—and I turn back and say thank you to his blind-eyed face. Then Mr. Clancy sits on his stool and rests awhile, waiting for me to return. I roam the lobby, between the walls of clouds. There are new, fresh-cut flowers in the crystal vases. I decide it must be springtime, after all. At the SeaHarp, it's always springtime.

This is my Cinderella dream. I can sing here, and dance across a carpet the color of sun on the Bay. Once I saw a young man walking here; he was a handsome young man, older than me. Maybe he was twenty. I walked beside him, but he had a newspaper under his arm and no time for beauty. I drift amid the vases, and some of the flowers rustle as I pass. Sometimes I hear other voices here: fragile voices, drifting in and out. Daddy used to have an old radio he kept in the front room, and Annie and I listened to it. That's what those voices are like: from faraway places, places that aren't nearly so beautiful as this.

I don't like the attic. They don't keep it clean enough, and the voices up there want you to do naughty things.

Once I was here, dancing and singing, and I saw the manager. The very same man. I recognized him by his walk, and the way he snapped his fingers at the people behind the front desk. They jumped like whipped dogs. I came up behind him and snapped my fingers at his ear, and he turned around real quick and for a second he looked right straight into my eyes.

Oh, no, I thought. Oh, no. This couldn't be the same man. I was wrong. This was an old man, with white hair and a wrinkled face. Oh, the man I was thinking about was a lot younger than this. But he must've smelled my violets, because he made a gasping sound and stepped back against the counter and his eyes were as big as silver dollars. "Talk to me," I said. "Somebody talk to me."

But the old man just gasped, and I went on.

What time is it? My head... sometimes it hurts so bad. Momma? I thought I heard—

I get tired, real easy.

Mr. Clancy takes me in the elevator, back up to the third floor. "Goodnight, Beauty," he says, and I wish him goodnight too. Momma always said being polite was a sign of good blood.

The door to Room 301 is open. It's always open. I wouldn't have it any other way, because if anyone wants to come in and talk to me, I want them to know they're welcome. I go inside—and there's a woman sitting in a chair, a lamp with a blue shade burning next to her. She looks up as soon as I come in, and her eyes widen. She shakes a little bit, as if she's about to get up and run for the door. But she settles down and sticks, and I drift past her toward the bed with blue sheets.

"You're there, aren't you?" the woman asks. Her voice is strained, but... I know that voice, from somewhere.

"You're there," she says, positive now. "It's Ann, Beauty. It's your sister Ann."

"I know who my sister is!" I say, turning toward the woman. "But you're not her!" This is an old woman sitting in my chair; an old woman with gray in her hair and deep lines on her face. "My sister's a little girl!"

"I... don't know if you can understand this or not." The old woman who's pretending to be my sister stands up,

and she grips her hands in front of her as if she's afraid they're going to fly away like wrinkled birds. "I wanted you to know... that Momma died tonight. At the hospital. The cancer got her."

"Liar!" I shout. "You dirty old liar! Get out of my room!"

"Momma asked me to come tell you," the crazy old woman goes on. "I was right there when she died. Can you understand what I'm saying?"

"NO! NO! NO! NO!"

"Jesus, I must be a damn fool." The woman shakes her head. "I'm talking to the walls. I'm in a damn hotel room, talking to the walls."

"Get out!" I want to knock the stuffing out of the old woman. I want to pick her up like a scarecrow and throw her through the door. I want to drag her by the hair to the stairs and shove her down the...

My head. My head hurts. Oh, my head...

"It's better she passed on," the woman says. Why did such a crazy old fool think I'd believe she was Annie? "Momma had some pain. It's better this way." She looks at her hands, and I can see them too, in the lamplight. The fingernails are broken, and her hands are rough and cracked. They're the hands of my Momma. "I... came up the stairs, Beauty," she says. "I was going to take the elevator, but..." She shrugs. "I needed to walk up the stairs." Then she lifts her head, and I watch her look all around the room as if she's searching for a ghost. "Beauty," she says, in a very quiet voice, "I want to ask you something. It's been... tearing at me, for such a long time. Beauty, please tell me... I didn't make you fall down those stairs, did I?"

She's not my sister! My sister's a little girl! "YOU GET OUT!" I shout at her...

"Please tell me. It's been killing me, all these years. I didn't make you fall... did I?"

She waits. Annie, what happened to us? What happened, in an instant when balance failed? What time is it, and where is our Momma?

"Please... please," Annie says, and she lowers her head and begins to cry.

"No," I tell her. "Annie? You didn't make me fall. Okay?"

Annie keeps crying. She always did like attention.

"I'm all right now," I say. "See?"

She sobs, and runs a hand over her eyes. I remember something, now: here, in my room, Momma sitting on the bed and crying as she told me Daddy had died. An accident at the mill, she said. An accident... just like yours was an accident.

"Annie!" I say. "I'm all right! Stop crying!"

"I just wanted to tell you about Momma," Annie says. She blows her nose on a tissue and wads it up. An old stranger, she moves toward the door. Then she stops, on the threshold. "Beauty? I don't know why you stayed here. Maybe Momma did, but I didn't. Maybe you're here and maybe you're not, but... if you can, could you go be with Momma? I mean... it seems like it's time for you to leave here, Beauty. It's time for you to go on."

And then my sister goes through the door, and I follow her to the staircase. She descends, treading carefully, and I watch her out of sight.

"Annie?" I call down after her. "I love you!"

Momma? Are you here, Momma? Have you come to be with your Beauty?

No, Wherever Momma is, she's not at the SeaHarp. She's gone to a place I should have gone to first. She's already seen things I never have. But we can be together again! Can't we?

If I want to be with her, I have to leave the Cinderella dream. I don't think I'm ready for that yet. I'm afraid. I love the springtime, and I'm so afraid of winter.

But I have my answer now. I know what time it is. Annie told me: it's time to leave here. It's time to go on.

Maybe I will. Maybe. But if you were to take a dream and put sugar frosting on it, you'd have the SeaHarp. Do all dreams have to end at midnight? Do they?

My head hurts. I get tired real easy. I want to rest in the blue sheets, and I want to hear the Bay crash against the rocks. I want to dream of pink dresses, a dozen roses, and a sign that said *Welcome, Beauty*. Maybe my Momma will find me in that dream. Maybe she's waiting for me there, and if I hurry we can go together.

But the SeaHarp holds me. It's so full of light and beauty, so full of dreams. Can't I stay here, just a little while longer?

I need to rest. Mr. Clancy will be waiting, at the elevator. He is the master of his little square of the SeaHarp, just as I am the mistress of mine. Tomorrow is the first day of spring. I am sixteen years old, there will be fresh-cut flowers in the crystal vases, and all the world will be beautiful.

A PROFILE OF ROBERT McCAMMON

"My key word is hope; I think there's hope in any situation."
(Robert McCammon in *Fear*, Nov/Dec 1988, p.27)

The Kings, the Herberts, the Barkers, the Straubs. It's only been comparatively recently that you could add the surname McCammon to such a formidable lineup of names popularly associated with the modern horror genre. After 17 years, 13 books and a lot of adverse opinion regarding his novels, Robert R. McCammon has at last struck gold, not only in terms of critical success (there have been awards: *Boy's Life*, for instance, won the World Fantasy Award for Best Novel in 1992) but also with regard to the richness of his writing. For the novels and short stories of this talented American author are nowadays acclaimed as amongst the best in the field, indeed any field you care to mention.

Robert McCammon began his career as a journalist. In 1978, at the age of 26, he sold his novel *Baal* at the first attempt; these were followed by a succession of bestselling horror novels including *Bethany's Sin* (1979), *The Night Boat* (1980), *They Thirst* (1981), *Mystery Walk* (1983) and *Swan Song* (1987). To date his novels have yet to be filmed although two of his short stories ('Makeup' and 'Nightcrawlers') have been adapted for U.S. television. In 1984, McCammon came up with the idea of The Horror Writers Of America for which he has acted as contributing editor for the Association's vampire anthology *Under The Fang*. He currently lives in Birmingham, Alabama.

Perhaps what first brought McCammon to the public's attention was not the originality of his style or plots but instead the comparisons which were made to other name writers of the seventies, in the main one Stephen King. The parallel was undeniable. His first success *Baal* with its demonic-child-wreaks-havoc-on-mankind scenario was mirrored to a certain extent by King's first effort *Carrie*, the story of a troubled teenage girl with telekinetic powers. Never mind that the former was a better novel, it soon became fashionable to equate McCammon's books with his revered rival and often with justification. *They Thirst*, for example, is the author's foray into the much-trod fictional arena of the vampire novel. Though intrinsically different from King's vampire opus *Salem's Lot*, there were certainly plot similarities thankfully balanced out by McCammon's very different characters and ideas. And then there's *Swan Song*, post-apocalyptic and long; versus King's *The Stand*, post-apocalyptic and very long.

There's actually some mileage to be had in comparing McCammon to other authors: it sheds light (both favourable and equivocal) on the many varying aspects of his writing and at the same time gives us an overview of his career, presenting his work in a better-understood light. Another writer associated with the deep south is Joe R. Lansdale. Could you compare the two and get away with it? Both McCammon's and Lansdale's characters are warm but often enigmatic in the extreme; both mix old-fashioned morality tales with sometimes extremely brutal violence in a mixture that conversely works well. McCammon's stories however tend to be spread across a very broad canvass whereas Lansdale usually restricts his tales to a more personal viewpoint. Or what about the fact that more recent McCammon novels have followed the trend set by Clive Barker, Peter Straub and Dean Koontz in that they have tended to move away from supernatural horror and have merely retained elements of the fantasy genre to supplement their more mainstream works. In McCammon's case, examples of these would include *Mine*, *Boy's Life* and *Gone South*.

Which brings us to the type of books that the author writes. Certainly the horror tag is applicable to a good many of them. *Baal*, *Bethany's Sin*, *The Night Boat*, *They Thirst*, *Mystery Walk*, *Usher's Passing*: all classifiable as "horror novels". Others range into more diverse territory. The post-apocalyptic terror of *Swan Song* which follows the plight of several unrelated characters in the aftermath of a nuclear holocaust; the out-and-out sci-fi of *Stinger* (assorted alien monsters let loose on a small town); the frank and at times spiritual account of a porn actress in the novella *Blue World*; *Gone South* with its bizarre assortment of characters including an awful Elvis impersonator called Pelvis Eisley, his partner, a freak with a mean streak and a woman with a disfiguring birthmark, all headed for the Louisiana swamplands. Into all of these books McCammon has thrust enough assorted ingredients to ensure readability at all times: despite not writing such conspicuously horror-based novels of late, all of his novels have utilised sex, violence, terror, humour and hope. Whether it is a book such as *Usher's Passing*, an intriguing pseudo-historical updating of Poe's legendary story *The Fall Of The House Of Usher*, which lends a depth (not to mention genuine scares) to the original, or the Bradbury-like nostalgia of a young boy's tale of loss, redemption and

innocence in *Boy's Life*, Robert McCammon has demonstrated his competence several times over.

Arguably he hit high gear with the publication of *Mystery Walk* in 1983. This sensitive and often very eerie tale concerns a young boy and his extraordinary "gift" to help the deceased "pass on" following an often traumatic and sudden death. Following his path to manhood it sets him against many obstacles including a crackpot preacher determined to prove his powers are less than holy. It's a beautifully paced novel, full of affecting moments and sensitive characterisation with enough ghostly chills to please any cynical horror fan. Following this with another masterly effort, *Usher's Passing*, McCammon soon became a force to be reckoned with.

The Wolf's Hour (1989) is the story of a British Secret Agent who is actually a werewolf and what's more, a World War II hero to boot! As unlikely as it sounds, it was probably his best book to date taking an epic plot and weaving it in a way that was more focused than his previous epic, *Swan Song*.

1990 saw the publication of the psychological thriller *Mine*. It showed the author at the pinnacle of his ability. Mary Terrell is a former member of a 60s Liberation Army movement who years later, yearning for the "good old days" of violent protests goes underground and eventually, quite mad. She decides to kidnap a baby from a hospital, and the rest of the novel examines the plight of the mother whose baby was stolen, her attempts to locate Mary and reclaim her offspring. Being a current and, as recent cases both in the UK and the U.S. have proved, pertinent issue, the book makes enthralling reading and you literally hold your breath during the scenes involving the extremely unpredictable Mary wondering what on earth she's going to do next.

It's been said before that one of the most important things about McCammon's novels is the element of hope that infiltrates his fictional situations time and time again. True enough there is almost always a positive ending to his books but as in the best horror/fantasy novels, the characters really go through the mix before arriving, shop-soiled but basically intact at the conclusions to their personal journeys. And it is these characters that more than anything else determine the pedigree of a Robert McCammon novel.

McCammon's people are often a strange assortment: the Elvis impersonator in *Gone South*; the bag lady-turned-heroine in *Swan Song*; the sewer-dweller with a heart in *They Thirst*. All endear themselves to our hearts because we all love an outcast. His players are some of the most rounded and fascinating in horror fiction. Although his narrative moves at a fast pace, he spends a lot of time showing us his major (and minor) characters, characters who are sometimes larger than life but always interesting enough to engage our attention through even his longest novels.

It is probably true that the author has used old plots and stereotypes with great frequency down the years, but it is the interpretation he gives his subject matter that counts. So McCammon has done vampires, he's done werewolves, resurrected zombies, the apocalypse, people with paranormal gifts: yet he's also executed each idea with a certain individuality and an undeniably intelligent finesse. Remove the chills from his novels and you're still left with fine writing and quick-witted observation about the big L, Life.

Combined with the above assets, Robert McCammon has always demonstrated an astute ear for dialogue. Like several of his contemporaries, he seems to be able to be able to tell you as much about his characters through what they say as through straightforward description.

Note the following naturalistic dialogue, taken from his short story, *Yellachile's Cage* (*Blue World*, p.67):

I've spent time in juve centres and workhomes and crap like that, but you say "Prison" and your talking a different animal. You walk in a prison like the Brickyard and you be twenty-one years old and you better keep a tight ass and your head tucked down real low to the ground or somebody he gone knock it off cause thats his kick... Anyways, I didn't pay a feller no respect and I was in the hospital bout three hours after the Cap'n dropped me down the chute.

Important too is the visual aspect inherent in his novels. In one magazine, McCammon comments that he writes his books as a film-maker constructs a film, taking into account sets, costumes, and actors. Bearing this in mind, one wonders why we haven't seen the transition of print into celluloid with any of his longer works. (On the other hand, maybe that's no bad thing considering what has happened to many of our best genre stars when their visions were debased and turned into some really dreadful movies.)

So what makes a powerful McCammon story? To answer this, let's take a brief look at a short story and a novel both of which are good examples of why McCammon's fiction has such universal appeal. Firstly, the short story, 'The Deep End' (*Night Fears*, 1989). It's the story of Glenn whose son Neil "drowned" in the local public swimming pool. However, the father is suspicious when he discovers that there have been similar deaths for at least the past five summers, and together with the evidence he found on his son's neck (possibly bite wounds), he decides to investigate further in the hope of destroying the creature he suspects inhabits the pool, one which can change its shape and colour to suit its environment. What follows is typically McCammon in terms of style, content and characterisation. Almost Twilight Zone-ish in its story, we are made to feel the father's anguish and self-doubt (Is the creature real? Is the grief driving him mad?) but also his hope, for revenge, for peace of mind. Typical also is the skillfully portrayed pathos and the simple but exciting storyline which sees a confrontation with an alien life-form and a climactic fight for life. Some of McCammon's best stories feature heroism prominently—for example, 'Night Calls The Green Falcon', 'Yellachile's Cage' and 'Wolf's Hour'—and in 'The Deep End' we are once more confronted with a hero, whose deeds not only avenge his son's death but also save a town from further tragedy.

Described by its creator as a "fictography"—a mixture of fiction and biography—*Boy's Life* (1991) is set in an Alabama town in 1964. It portrays a young boy and the adventures he has as a result of what he and his father witness one fateful morning. Here we have one of those nostalgic, often sentimental (though never melodramatic) epics which the likes of Ray Bradbury, Stephen King and Dan Simmons have tackled in the past and whose movie equivalents include *Stand By Me*, *The Lady In White*, and *Something Wicked This Way Comes*. In a letter included at the back of the U.S. edition of Mine, McCammon makes this comment:

"*Boy's Life* is not about lost innocence, because I believe we all maintain the pool of innocence and wonder inside us no matter how far we get away from our childhood."

Whatever the author intended his book be about it's certainly an uplifting experience in every way. Few modern authors possess the asset of such a capable imagination that allows them to depict a grown man's reminiscences of his magical past in quite such a moving, funny and enlightening manner. By means of affecting nostalgia McCammon takes us with his character through episodic accounts of practical realism (the witnessing of a tragedy), sharply etched humour (the "stinging sermon") and fantastic improbability (a huge beast that appears during a flood), introducing us along the way to some of the most memorable characters ever devised. Here are all the elements intact: pathos; tragedy; humour; optimism. There are reminiscences on the golden age of science fiction, creepy moments, sad reflections: all lovingly presented in what is probably McCammon's best book to date.

Robert McCammon and his work have been labelled many things over the years, but more and more recently these have included such descriptions as "electric", "blistering" and "enthraling". He has even been cast in the "splatterpunk" mode by some critics, though this is a term obviously ill-suited to a writer of such diverse books. As American as apple pie and with all the best attributes one expects from a talented modern author, it will be fascinating to discover to what heights Robert McCammon has yet to aspire if indeed such a pinnacle has not already been reached.

Version 1.0. Compiled for #bookz by Ted aka BearBear aka TedBear, August 2003.
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