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ЧЕЛОВЕК В ЧЁРНОМ КОСТЮМЕ
THE MAN IN THE BLACK SUIT

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Стивен КИНГ

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I am now a very old man and this is something which happened to me when I was very young—only nine years old. It was 1914, the summer after my brother Dan died in the west field and three years before America got into World War I. I've never told anyone about what happened at the fork in the stream that day, and I never will . . . at least not with my mouth. I've decided to write it down, though, in this book which I will leave on the table beside my bed. I can't write long, because my hands shake so these days and I have next to no strength, but I don't think it will take long.

Later, someone may find what I have written. That seems likely to me, as it is pretty much human nature to look in a book marked DIARY after its owner has passed along. So yes—my words will probably be read. A better question is whether or not anyone will believe them. Almost certainly not, but that doesn't matter. It's not belief I'm interested in but freedom. Writing can give that, I've found. For twenty years I wrote a column called 'Long Ago and Far Away' for the *Castle Rock Call*, and I know that sometimes it works that way—what you write down sometimes leaves you forever, like old photographs left in the bright sun, fading to nothing but white.

I pray for that sort of release.

A man in his nineties should be well past the terrors of childhood, but as my infirmities slowly creep up on me, like waves licking closer and closer to some indifferently built castle of sand, that terrible face grows clearer and clearer in my mind's eye. It glows like a dark star in the constellations of my childhood. What I might have done yesterday, who I might have seen here in my room at the nursing home, what I might have said to them or they to me . . . those things are gone, but the face of the man in the black suit grows ever clearer, ever closer, and I remember every word he said. I don't want to think of him but I can't help it, and sometimes at night my old heart beats so hard and so fast I think it will tear itself right clear of my chest. So I uncap my fountain pen and force my trembling old hand to write this pointless anecdote in the diary one of my great-grandchildren—I can't remember her name for sure, at least not right now, but I know it starts with an S—gave to me last Christmas, and which I have never written in until now. Now I will write in it. I will write the story of how I met the man in the black suit on the bank of Castle Stream one afternoon in the summer of 1914.

The town of Motton was a different world in those days—more different than

I could ever tell you. That was a world without airplanes droning overhead, a world almost without cars and trucks, a world where the skies were not cut into lanes and slices by overhead power lines.

There was not a single paved road in the whole town, and the business district consisted of nothing but Corson's General Store, Thut's Livery & Hardware, the Methodist Church at Christ's Corner, the school, the town hall, and Harry's Restaurant half a mile down from there, which my mother called, with unfailing disdain, 'the liquor house.'

Mostly, though, the difference was in how people lived—how *apart* they were. I'm not sure people born after the middle of the twentieth century could quite credit that, although they might say they could, to be polite to old folks like me. There were no phones in western Maine back then, for one thing. The first one wouldn't be installed for another five years, and by the time there was one in our house, I was nineteen and going to college at the University of Maine in Orono.

But that is only the roof of the thing. There was no doctor closer than Casco, and no more than a dozen houses in what you would call town. There were no neighborhoods (I'm not even sure we knew the word, although we had a verb—*neighboring*—that described church functions and barn dances), and open fields were the exception rather than the rule. Out of town the houses were farms that stood far apart from each other, and from December until middle March we mostly hunkered down in the little pockets of stovewarmth we called families. We hunkered and listened to the wind in the chimney and hoped no one would get sick or break a leg or get a headful of bad ideas, like the farmer over in Castle Rock who had chopped up his wife and kids three winters before and then said in court that the ghosts made him do it. In those days before the Great War, most of Motton was woods and bog, dark long places full of moose and mosquitoes, snakes and secrets. In those days there were ghosts everywhere.

This thing I'm telling about happened on a Saturday. My father gave me a whole list of chores to do, including some that would have been Dan's, if he'd still been alive. He was my only brother, and he'd died of being stung by a bee. A year had gone by, and still my mother wouldn't hear that. She said it was something else, *had* to have been, that no one ever died of being stung by a bee. When Mama Sweet, the oldest lady in the Methodist Ladies' Aid, tried to tell her—at the church supper the previous winter, this was—that the same thing had happened to her favorite uncle back in '73, my mother clapped her hands over her ears, got up, and walked out of the church basement. She'd never been back since, either, and nothing my father could say to her would change her mind. She claimed she was done with church, and that if she ever had to see Helen Robichaud again (that was Mama Sweet's real name), she would slap her eyes out. She wouldn't be able to help herself, she said.

That day, Dad wanted me to lug wood for the cookstove, weed the beans and the cukes, pitch hay out of the loft, get two jugs of water to put in the cold pantry, and scrape as much old paint off the cellar bulkhead as I could. Then, he said, I could go fishing, if I didn't mind going by myself—he had to go over and see Bill Eversham about some cows. I said I sure didn't mind going by myself, and my Dad smiled like that didn't surprise him so very much. He'd given me a bamboo pole the week before—not because it was my birthday or anything, but just because he liked to give me things, sometimes—and I was wild to try it in Castle Stream, which was by far the troutiest brook I'd ever fished.

'But don't you go too far in the woods,' he told me. 'Not beyond where it splits.'

'No, sir.'

'Promise me.'

'Yessir, I promise.'

'Now promise your mother.'

We were standing on the back stoop; I had been bound for the springhouse with the waterjugs when my Dad stopped me. Now he turned me around to face my mother, who was standing at the marble counter in a flood of strong morning sunshine falling through the double windows over the sink. There was a curl of hair lying across the side of her forehead and touching her eyebrow—you see how well I remember it all? The bright light turned that little curl to filaments of gold and made me want to run to her and put my arms around her. In that instant I saw her as a woman, saw her as my father must have seen her. She was wearing a housedress with little red roses all over it, I remember, and she was kneading bread. Candy Bill, our little black Scottie dog, was standing alertly beside her feet, looking up, waiting for anything that might drop. My mother was looking at me.

'I promise,' I said.

She smiled, but it was the worried kind of smile she always seemed to make since my father brought Dan back from the west field in his arms. My father had come sobbing and bare-chested. He had taken off his shirt and draped it over Dan's face, which had swelled and turned color. *My boy!* he had been crying. *Oh, look at my boy! Jesus, look at my boy!* I remember that as if it had been yesterday. It was the only time I ever heard my Dad take the Savior's name in vain.

'What do you promise, Gary?' she asked.

'Promise not to go no further than where it forks, ma'am.'

'*Any* further.'

'Any.'

She gave me a patient look, saying nothing as her hands went on working in the dough, which now had a smooth, silky look.

'I promise not to go any further than where it forks, ma'am.'

'Thank you, Gary,' she said. 'And try to remember that grammar is for the world as well as for school.'

'Yes, ma'am.'

Candy Bill followed me as I did my chores, and sat between my feet as I bolted my lunch, looking up at me with the same attentiveness he had shown my mother while she was kneading her bread, but when I got my new bamboo pole and my old, splintery creel and started out of the dooryard, he stopped and only stood in the dust by an old roll of snowfence, watching. I called him but he wouldn't come. He yapped a time or two, as if telling me to come back, but that was all.

'Stay, then,' I said, trying to sound as if I didn't care. I did, though, at least a little. Candy Bill *always* went fishing with me.

My mother came to the door and looked out at me with her left hand held up to shade her eyes. I can see her that way still, and it's like looking at a photograph of someone who later became unhappy, or died suddenly. 'You mind your Dad now, Gary!'

'Yes, ma'am, I will.'

She waved. I waved, too. Then I turned my back on her and walked away.

The sun beat down on my neck, hard and hot, for the first quarter-mile or so, but then I entered the woods, where double shadow fell over the road and it was cool and fir-smelling and you could hear the wind hissing through the deep needled groves. I walked with my pole on my shoulder like boys did back then, holding my creel in my other hand like a valise or a salesman's sample-case. About two miles into the woods along a road which was really nothing but a double rut with a grassy strip growing up the center hump, I began to hear the hurried, eager gossip of Castle Stream. I thought of trout with bright speckled backs and pure white bellies, and my heart went up in my chest.

The stream flowed under a little wooden bridge, and the banks leading down to the water were steep and brushy. I worked my way down carefully, holding on where I could and digging my heels in. I went down out of summer and back into midspring, or so it felt. The cool rose gently off the water, and a green smell like moss. When I got to the edge of the water I only stood there for a little while, breathing deep of that mossy smell and watching the dragonflies circle and the skitterbugs skate. Then, farther down, I saw a trout leap at a butterfly—a good big brookie, maybe fourteen inches long—and remembered I hadn't come here just to sightsee.

I walked along the bank, following the current, and wet my line for the first time with the bridge still in sight upstream. Something jerked the tip of my pole down a time or two and ate half my worm, but he was too sly for my nine-year-old hands—or maybe just not hungry enough to be careless—so I went on.

I stopped at two or three other places before I got to the place where Castle Stream forks, going southwest into Castle Rock and southeast into Kashwakamak Township, and at one of them I caught the biggest trout I have ever caught in my life, a beauty that measured nineteen inches from tip to tail on the little ruler I kept in my creel. That was a monster of a brook trout, even for those days.

If I had accepted this as gift enough for one day and gone back, I would not be writing now (and this is going to turn out longer than I thought it would, I see that already), but I didn't. Instead I saw to my catch right then and there as my father had shown me—cleaning it, placing it on dry grass at the bottom of the creel, then laying damp grass on top of it—and went on. I did not, at age nine, think that catching a nineteen-inch brook trout was particularly remarkable, although I do remember being amazed that my line had not broken when I, netless as well as artless, had hauled it out and swung it toward me in a clumsy tail-flapping arc.

Ten minutes later, I came to the place where the stream split in those days (it is long gone now; there is a settlement of duplex homes where Castle Stream once went its course, and a district grammar school as well, and if there is a stream it goes in darkness), dividing around a huge gray rock nearly the size of our outhouse. There was a pleasant flat space here, grassy and soft, overlooking what my Dad and I called South Branch. I squatted on my heels, dropped my line into the water, and almost immediately snagged a fine rainbow trout. He wasn't the size of my brookie—only a foot or so—but a good fish, just the same. I had it cleaned out before the gills had stopped flexing, stored it in my creel, and dropped my line back into the water.

This time there was no immediate bite so I leaned back, looking up at the blue stripe of sky I could see along the stream's course. Clouds floated by, west to east, and I tried to think what they looked like. I saw a unicorn, then a rooster, then a dog that looked a little like Candy Bill. I was looking for the next one when I drowsed off.

Or maybe slept. I don't know for sure. All I know is that a tug on my line so strong it almost pulled the bamboo pole out of my hand was what brought me back into the afternoon. I sat up, clutched the pole, and suddenly became aware that something was sitting on the tip of my nose. I crossed my eyes and saw a bee. My heart seemed to fall dead in my chest, and for a horrible second I was sure I was going to wet my pants.

The tug on my line came again, stronger this time, but although I maintained my grip on the end of the pole so it wouldn't be pulled into the stream and perhaps carried away (I think I even had the presence of mind to snub the line with my forefinger), I made no effort to pull in my catch. All of my horrified attention was fixed on the fat black-and-yellow thing that was using my nose as a rest-stop.

I slowly poked out my lower lip and blew upward. The bee ruffled a little but kept its place. I blew again and it ruffled again . . . but this time it also seemed to shift impatiently, and I didn't dare blow anymore, for fear it would lose its temper completely and give me a shot. It was too close for me to focus on what it was doing, but it was easy to imagine it ramming its stinger into one of my nostrils and shooting its poison up toward my eyes. And my brain.

A terrible idea came to me: that this was the very bee which had killed my brother. I knew it wasn't true, and not only because honeybees probably didn't live longer than a single year (except maybe for the queens; about them I was not so sure). It couldn't be true because bees died when they stung, and even at nine I knew it. Their stingers were barbed, and when they tried to fly away after doing the deed, they tore themselves apart. Still, the idea stayed. This was a special bee, a devil-bee, and it had come back to finish the other of Albion and Loretta's two boys.

And here is something else: I had been stung by bees before, and although the stings had swelled more than is perhaps usual (I can't really say for sure), I had never died of them. That was only for my brother, a terrible trap which had been laid for him in his very making, a trap which I had somehow escaped. But as I crossed my eyes until they hurt in an effort to focus on the bee, logic did not exist. It was the *bee* that existed, only that, the bee that had killed my brother, killed him so bad that my father had slipped down the straps of his overalls so he could take off his shirt and cover Dan's swelled, engorged face. Even in the depths of his grief he had done that, because he didn't want his wife to see what had become of her first-born. Now the bee had returned, and now it would kill me. It would kill me and I would die in convulsions on the bank, flopping just as a brookie flops after you take the hook out of its mouth.

As I sat there trembling on the edge of panic—of simply bolting to my feet and then bolting anywhere—there came a report from behind me. It was as sharp and peremptory as a pistol-shot, but I knew it wasn't a pistol-shot; it was someone clapping his hands. One single clap. At the moment it came, the bee tumbled off my nose and fell into my lap. It lay there on my pants with its legs sticking up and its stinger a threatless black thread against the old scuffed brown of the corduroy. It was dead as a doornail, I saw that at once. At the same moment, the pole gave another tug—the hardest yet—and I almost lost it again.

I grabbed it with both hands and gave it a big stupid yank that would have made my father clutch his head with both hands, if he had been there to see it. A rainbow trout, a good bit larger than the one I had already caught, rose out of the water in a wet, writhing flash, spraying fine drops of water from its filament of tail—it looked like one of those romanticized fishing pictures they used to put on the covers of men's magazines like *True* and *Man's Adventure* back in the forties and fifties. At that moment hauling in a big one was about the last thing on my mind, however, and when the line snapped and the fish fell back

into the stream, I barely noticed. I looked over my shoulder to see who had clapped. A man was standing above me, at the edge of the trees. His face was very long and pale. His black hair was combed tight against his skull and parted with rigorous care on the left side of his narrow head. He was very tall. He was wearing a black three-piece suit, and I knew right away that he was not a human being, because his eyes were the orangey-red of flames in a woodstove. I don't just mean the irises, because he *had* no irises, and no pupils, and certainly no whites. His eyes were completely orange—an orange that shifted and flickered. And it's really too late not to say exactly what I mean, isn't it? He was on fire inside, and his eyes were like the little isinglass portholes you sometimes see in stove doors.

My bladder let go, and the scuffed brown the dead bee was lying on went a darker brown. I was hardly aware of what had happened, and I couldn't take my eyes off the man standing on top of the bank and looking down at me, the man who had walked out of thirty miles of trackless western Maine woods in a fine black suit and narrow shoes of gleaming leather. I could see the watch-chain looped across his vest glittering in the summer sunshine. There was not so much as a single pine-needle on him. And he was smiling at me.

'Why, it's a fisherboy!' he cried in a mellow, pleasing voice. 'Imagine that! Are we well-met, fisherboy?'

'Hello, sir,' I said. The voice that came out of me did not tremble, but it didn't sound like my voice, either. It sounded older. Like Dan's voice, maybe. Or my father's, even. And all I could think was that maybe he would let me go if I pretended not to see what he was. If I pretended I didn't see there were flames glowing and dancing where his eyes should have been.

'I've saved you a nasty sting, perhaps,' he said, and then, to my horror, he came down the bank to where I sat with a dead bee in my wet lap and a bamboo fishing pole in my nerveless hands. His slick-soled city shoes should have slipped on the low, grassy weeds which dressed the steep bank, but they didn't; nor did they leave tracks behind, I saw. Where his feet had touched—or seemed to touch—there was not a single broken twig, crushed leaf, or trampled shoe-shape.

Even before he reached me, I recognized the aroma baking up from the skin under the suit—the smell of burned matches. The smell of sulfur. The man in the black suit was the Devil. He had walked out of the deep woods between Motton and Kashwakamak, and now he was standing here beside me. From the corner of one eye I could see a hand as pale as the hand of a store window dummy. The fingers were hideously long.

He hunkered beside me on his hams, his knees popping just as the knees of any normal man might, but when he moved his hands so they dangled between his knees, I saw that each of those long fingers ended in what was not a fingernail but a long yellow claw.

'You didn't answer my question, fisherboy,' he said in his mellow voice. It

was, now that I think of it, like the voice of one of those radio announcers on the big-band shows years later, the ones that would sell Geritol and Serutan and Ovaltine and Dr. Grabow pipes. 'Are we well-met?'

'Please don't hurt me,' I whispered, in a voice so low I could barely hear it. I was more afraid than I could ever write down, more afraid than I want to remember . . . but I do. I do. It never even crossed my mind to hope I was having a dream, although I might have, I suppose, if I had been older. But I wasn't older; I was nine, and I knew the truth when it squatted down on its hunkers beside me. I knew a hawk from a handsaw, as my father would have said. The man who had come out of the woods on that Saturday afternoon in midsummer was the Devil, and inside the empty holes of his eyes, his brains were burning.

'Oh, do I smell something?' he asked, as if he hadn't heard me . . . although I knew he had. 'Do I smell something . . . wet?'

He leaned forward toward me with his nose stuck out, like someone who means to smell a flower. And I noticed an awful thing; as the shadow of his head travelled over the bank, the grass beneath it turned yellow and died. He lowered his head toward my pants and sniffed. His glaring eyes half-closed, as if he had inhaled some sublime aroma and wanted to concentrate on nothing but that.

'Oh, bad!' he cried. 'Lovely-bad!' And then he chanted: 'Opal! Diamond! Sapphire! Jade! I smell Gary's lemonade!' Then he threw himself on his back in the little flat place and laughed wildly. It was the sound of a lunatic.

I thought about running, but my legs seemed two counties away from my brain. I wasn't crying, though; I had wet my pants like a baby, but I wasn't crying. I was too scared to cry. I suddenly knew that I was going to die, and probably painfully, but the worst of it was that that might not be the worst of it.

The worst of it might come later. *After* I was dead.

He sat up suddenly, the smell of burnt matches fluffing out from his suit and making me feel all gaggy in my throat. He looked at me solemnly from his narrow white face and burning eyes, but there was a sense of laughter about him, too. There was always that sense of laughter about him.

'Sad news, fisherboy,' he said. 'I've come with sad news.'

I could only look at him—the black suit, the fine black shoes, the long white fingers that ended not in nails but in talons.

'Your mother is dead.'

'No!' I cried. I thought of her making bread, of the curl lying across her forehead and just touching her eyebrow, standing there in the strong morning sunlight, and the terror swept over me again . . . but not for myself this time. Then I thought of how she'd looked when I set off with my fishing pole, standing in the kitchen doorway with her hand shading her eyes, and how she had looked to me in that moment like a photograph of someone you expected to see again but never did. 'No, you lie!' I screamed.

He smiled—the sadly patient smile of a man who has often been accused falsely. 'I'm afraid not,' he said. 'It was the same thing that happened to your brother, Gary. It was a bee.'

'No, that's not true,' I said, and now I *did* begin to cry. 'She's old, she's thirty-five, if a bee-sting could kill her the way it did Danny she would have died a long time ago and you're a lying bastard!'

I had called the Devil a lying bastard. On some level I was aware of this, but the entire front of my mind was taken up by the enormity of what he'd said. My mother dead? He might as well have told me that there was a new ocean where the Rockies had been. But I believed him. On some level I believed him completely, as we always believe, on some level, the worst thing our hearts can imagine.

'I understand your grief, little fisherboy, but that particular argument just doesn't hold water, I'm afraid.' He spoke in a tone of bogus comfort that was horrible, maddening, without remorse or pity. 'A man can go his whole life without seeing a mockingbird, you know, but does that mean mockingbirds don't exist? Your mother—'

A fish jumped below us. The man in the black suit frowned, then pointed a finger at it. The trout convulsed in the air, its body bending so strenuously that for a split-second it appeared to be snapping at its own tail, and when it fell back into Castle Stream it was floating lifelessly, dead. It struck the big gray rock where the waters divided, spun around twice in the whirlpool eddy that formed there, and then floated off in the direction of Castle Rock. Meanwhile, the terrible stranger turned his burning eyes on me again, his thin lips pulled back from tiny rows of sharp teeth in a cannibal smile.

'Your mother simply went through her entire life without being stung by a bee,' he said. 'But then—less than an hour ago, actually—one flew in through the kitchen window while she was taking the bread out of the oven and putting it on the counter to cool.'

'No, I won't hear this, I won't hear this, I *won't!*'

I raised my hands and clapped them over my ears. He pursed his lips as if to whistle and blew at me gently. It was only a little breath, but the stench was foul beyond belief—clogged sewers, outhouses that have never known a single sprinkle of lime, dead chickens after a flood.

My hands fell away from the sides of my face.

'Good,' he said. 'You need to hear this, Gary; you need to hear this, my little fisherboy. It was your mother who passed that fatal weakness on to your brother Dan; you got some of it, but you also got a protection from your father that poor Dan somehow missed.' He pursed his lips again, only this time, he made a cruelly comic little *tsk-tsk* sound instead of blowing his nasty breath at me. 'So, although I don't like to speak ill of the dead, it's almost a case of poetic justice, isn't it? After all, she killed your brother Dan as surely as if she had put a gun to his head and pulled the trigger.'

'No,' I whispered. 'No, it isn't true.'

'I assure you it is,' he said. 'The bee flew in the window and lit on her neck. She slapped at it before she even knew what she was doing—you were wiser than that, weren't you, Gary?—and the bee stung her. She felt her throat start to close up at once. That's what happens, you know, to people who are allergic to bee-venom. Their throats close and they drown in the open air. That's why Dan's face was so swollen and purple. That's why your father covered it with his shirt.'

I stared at him, now incapable of speech. Tears streamed down my cheeks. I didn't want to believe him, and knew from my church schooling that the devil is the father of lies, but I *did* believe him, just the same. I believed he had been standing there in our dooryard, looking in the kitchen window, as my mother fell to her knees, clutching at her swollen throat while Candy Bill danced around her, barking shrilly.

'She made the most wonderfully awful noises,' the man in the black suit said reflectively, 'and she scratched her face quite badly, I'm afraid. Her eyes bulged out like a frog's eyes. She wept.' He paused, then added: 'She wept as she died, isn't that sweet? And here's the most beautiful thing of all. After she was dead . . . after she had been lying on the floor for fifteen minutes or so with no sound but the stove ticking and with that little stick of a bee-stinger still poking out of the side of her neck—so small, so small—do you know what Candy Bill did? That little rascal licked away her tears. First on one side . . . and then on the other.'

He looked out at the stream for a moment, his face sad and thoughtful. Then he turned back to me and his expression of bereavement disappeared like a dream. His face was as slack and avid as the face of a corpse that has died hungry. His eyes blazed. I could see his sharp little teeth between his pale lips.

'I'm starving,' he said abruptly. 'I'm going to kill you and tear you open and eat your guts, little fisherboy. What do you think about that?'

No, I tried to say, *please, no*, but no sound came out. He meant to do it, I saw. He really meant to do it.

'I'm just so *hungry*,' he said, both petulant and teasing. 'And you won't want to live without your precious mommy, anyhow, take my word for it. Because your father's the sort of man who'll have to have some warm hole to stick it in, believe me, and if you're the only one available, you're the one who'll have to serve. I'll save you all that discomfort and unpleasantness. Also, you'll go to Heaven, think of that. Murdered souls *always* go to Heaven. So we'll both be serving God this afternoon, Gary. Isn't that nice?'

He reached for me again with his long, pale hands, and without thinking what I was doing, I flipped open the top of my creel, pawed all the way down to the bottom, and brought out the monster brookie I'd caught earlier—the one I should have been satisfied with. I held it out to him blindly, my fingers in the red slit of its belly from which I had removed its insides as the man in the black

suit had threatened to remove mine. The fish's glazed eye stared dreamily at me, the gold ring around the black center reminding me of my mother's wedding ring. And in that moment I saw her lying in her coffin with the sun shining off the wedding band and knew it was true—she had been stung by a bee, she had drowned in the warm, bread-smelling kitchen air, and Candy Bill had licked her dying tears from her swollen cheeks.

'Big fish!' the man in the black suit cried in a guttural, greedy voice. 'Oh, *biiig fiiish!*'

He snatched it away from me and crammed it into a mouth that opened wider than any human mouth ever could. Many years later, when I was sixty-five (I know it was sixty-five because that was the summer I retired from teaching), I went to the New England Aquarium and finally saw a shark. The mouth of the man in the black suit was like that shark's mouth when it opened, only his gullet was blazing red, the same color as his awful eyes, and I felt heat bake out of it and into my face, the way you feel a sudden wave of heat come pushing out of a fireplace when a dry piece of wood catches alight. And I didn't imagine that heat, either, I know I didn't, because just before he slid the head of my nineteen-inch brook trout between his gaping jaws, I saw the scales along the sides of the fish rise up and begin to curl like bits of paper floating over an open incinerator.

He slid the fish in like a man in a travelling show swallowing a sword. He didn't chew, and his blazing eyes bulged out, as if in effort. The fish went in and went in, his throat bulged as it slid down his gullet, and now he began to cry tears of his own . . . except his tears were blood, scarlet and thick.

I think it was the sight of those bloody tears that gave me my body back. I don't know why that should have been, but I think it was. I bolted to my feet like a jack released from its box, turned with my bamboo pole still in one hand, and fled up the bank, bending over and tearing tough bunches of weeds out with my free hand in an effort to get up the slope more quickly.

He made a strangled, furious noise—the sound of any man with his mouth too full—and I looked back just as I got to the top. He was coming after me, the back of his suit-coat flapping and his thin gold watch-chain flashing and winking in the sun. The tail of the fish was still protruding from his mouth and I could smell the rest of it, roasting in the oven of his throat.

He reached for me, groping with his talons, and I fled along the top of the bank. After a hundred yards or so I found my voice and went to screaming—screaming in fear, of course, but also screaming in grief for my beautiful dead mother.

He was coming along after me. I could hear snapping branches and whipping bushes, but I didn't look back again. I lowered my head, slitted my eyes against the bushes and low-hanging branches along the stream's bank, and ran as fast as I could. And at every step I expected to feel his hands descending on my shoulders pulling me back into a final hot hug.

That didn't happen. Some unknown length of time later—it couldn't have been longer than five or ten minutes, I suppose, but it seemed like forever—I saw the bridge through layerings of leaves and firs. Still screaming, but breathlessly now, sounding like a teakettle which has almost boiled dry, I reached this second, steeper bank and charged up to it.

Halfway to the top I slipped to my knees, looked over my shoulder, and saw the man in the black suit almost at my heels, his white face pulled into a convulsion of fury and greed. His cheeks were splattered with his bloody tears and his shark's mouth hung open like a hinge.

'Fisherboy!' he snarled, and started up the bank after me, grasping at my foot with one long hand. I tore free, turned, and threw my fish-ing pole at him. He batted it down easily, but it tangled his feet up somehow and he went to his knees. I didn't wait to see anymore; I turned and bolted to the top of the slope. I almost slipped at the very top, but managed to grab one of the support struts running beneath the bridge and save myself.

'You can't get away, fisherboy!' he cried from behind me. He sounded furious, but he also sounded as if he were laughing. 'It takes more than a mouthful of trout to fill *me* up!'

'Leave me alone!' I screamed back at him. I grabbed the bridge's railing and threw myself over it in a clumsy somersault, filling my hands with splinters and bumping my head so hard on the boards when I came down that I saw stars. I rolled over onto my belly and began crawling. I lurched to my feet just before I got to the end of the bridge, stumbled once, found my rhythm, and then began to run. I ran as only nine-year-old boys can run, which is like the wind. It felt as if my feet only touched the ground with every third or fourth stride, and for all I know, that may be true. I ran straight up the righthand wheelrut in the road, ran until my temples pounded and my eyes pulsed in their sockets, ran until I had a hot stitch in my left side from the bottom of my ribs to my armpit, ran until I could taste blood and something like metal-shavings in the back of my throat. When I couldn't run anymore I stumbled to a stop and looked back over my shoulder, puffing and blowing like a windbroke horse. I was convinced I would see him standing right there behind me in his natty black suit, the watch-chain a glittering loop across his vest and not a hair out of place.

But he was gone. The road stretching back toward Castle Stream between the darkly massed pines and spruces was empty. And yet I sensed him somewhere near in those woods, watching me with his grassfire eyes, smelling of burnt matches and roasted fish.

I turned and began walking as fast as I could, limping a little—I'd pulled muscles in both legs, and when I got out of bed the next morning I was so sore I could barely walk. I didn't notice those things then, though. I just kept looking over my shoulder, needing again and again to verify that the road behind me was still empty. It was, each time I looked, but those backward glances seemed to increase my fear rather than lessening it. The firs looked darker, massier, and

I kept imagining what lay behind the trees which marched beside the road—long, tangled corridors of forest, leg-breaking deadfalls, ravines where anything might live. Until that Saturday in 1914, I had thought that bears were the worst thing the forest could hold.

Now I knew better.

A mile or so further up the road, just beyond the place where it came out of the woods and joined the Geegan Flat Road, I saw my father walking toward me and whistling 'The Old Oaken Bucket.' He was carrying his own rod, the one with the fancy spinning reel from Monkey Ward. In his other hand he had his creel, the one with the ribbon my mother had woven through the handle back when Dan was still alive. DEDICATED TO JESUS, that ribbon said. I had been walking but when I saw him I started to run again, screaming *Dad! Dad! Dad!* at the top of my lungs and staggering from side to side on my tired, sprung legs like a drunken sailor. The expression of surprise on his face when he recognized me might have been comical under other circumstances, but not under these. He dropped his rod and creel into the road without so much as a downward glance at them and ran to me. It was the fastest I ever saw my Dad run in his life; when we came together it was a wonder the impact didn't knock us both senseless, and I struck my face on his belt-buckle hard enough to start a little nosebleed. I didn't notice that until later, though. Right then I only reached out my arms and clutched him as hard as I could. I held on and rubbed my hot face back and forth against his belly, covering his old blue workshirt with blood and tears and snot.

'Gary, what is it? What happened? Are you all right?'

'Ma's dead!' I sobbed. 'I met a man in the woods and he told me! Ma's dead! She got stung by a bee and it swelled her all up just like what happened to Dan, and she's dead! She's on the kitchen floor and Candy Bill . . . licked the t-t-tears . . . off her . . . off her . . . !'

Face was the last word I had to say, but by then my chest was hitching so bad I couldn't get it out. My tears were flowing again, and my Dad's startled, frightened face had blurred into three overlapping images. I began to howl—not like a little kid who's skinned his knee but like a dog that's seen something bad by moonlight—and my father pressed my head against his hard flat stomach again. I slipped out from under his hand, though, and looked back over my shoulder. I wanted to make sure the man in the black suit wasn't coming. There was no sign of him; the road winding back into the woods was completely empty. I promised myself I would never go back down that road again, not ever, no matter what, and I suppose now God's greatest blessing to His creatures below is that they can't see the future. It might have broken my mind if I had known I *would* be going back down that road, and not two hours later. For that moment, though, I was only relieved to see we were still alone. Then I thought of my mother—my beautiful dead mother—and laid my face

back against my father's stomach and bawled some more.

'Gary, listen to me,' he said a moment or two later. I went on bawling. He gave me a little longer to do that, then reached down and lifted my chin so he could look into my face and I could look into his. 'Your Mom's fine,' he said.

I could only look at him with tears streaming down my cheeks. I didn't believe him.

'I don't know who told you different, or what kind of dirty dog would want to put a scare like that into a little boy, but I swear to God your mother's fine.'

'But . . . but he said . . .'

'I don't care *what* he said. I got back from Eversham's earlier than I expected—he doesn't want to sell any cows, it's all just talk—and decided I had time to catch up with you. I got my pole and my creel and your mother made us a couple of jelly fold-overs. Her new bread. Still warm. So she was fine half an hour ago, Gary, and there's nobody knows any different that's come from this direction, I guarantee you. Not in just half an hour's time.' He looked over my shoulder. 'Who was this man? And where was he? I'm going to find him and thrash him within an inch of his life.'

I thought a thousand things in just two seconds—that's what it seemed like, anyway—but the last thing I thought was the most powerful: if my Dad met up with the man in the black suit, I didn't think my Dad would be the one to do the thrashing. Or the walking away.

I kept remembering those long white fingers, and the talons at the ends of them.

'Gary?'

'I don't know that I remember,' I said.

'Were you where the stream splits? The big rock?'

I could never lie to my father when he asked a direct question—not to save his life or mine. 'Yes, but don't go down there.' I seized his arm with both hands and tugged it hard. 'Please don't. He was a scary man.' Inspiration struck like an illuminating lightning-bolt. 'I think he had a gun.'

He looked at me thoughtfully. 'Maybe there wasn't a man,' he said, lifting his voice a little on the last word and turning it into something that was almost but not quite a question. 'Maybe you fell asleep while you were fishing, son, and had a bad dream. Like the ones you had about Danny last winter.'

I *had* had a lot of bad dreams about Dan last winter, dreams where I would open the door to our closet or to the dark, fruity interior of the cider shed and see him standing there and looking at me out of his purple strangulated face; from many of these dreams I had awakened screaming, and awakened my parents, as well. I had fallen asleep on the bank of the stream for a little while, too—dozed off, anyway—but I hadn't dreamed and I was sure I had awakened just before the man in the black suit clapped the bee dead, sending it tumbling off my nose and into my lap. I hadn't dreamed him the way I had dreamed Dan, I was quite sure of that, although my meeting with him had already attained a

dreamlike quality in my mind, as I suppose supernatural occurrences always must. But if my Dad thought that the man had only existed in my own head, that might be better. Better for him.

'It might have been, I guess,' I said.

'Well, we ought to go back and find your rod and your creel.' He actually started in that direction, and I had to tug frantically at his arm to stop him again, and turn him back toward me.

'Later,' I said. 'Please, Dad? I want to see Mother. I've got to see her with my own eyes.'

He thought that over, then nodded. 'Yes, I suppose you do. We'll go home first, and get your rod and creel later.'

So we walked back to the farm together, my father with his fish-pole propped on his shoulder just like one of my friends, me carrying his creel, both of us eating folded-over slices of my mother's bread smeared with blackcurrant jam.

'Did you catch anything?' he asked as we came in sight of the barn.

'Yes, sir,' I said. 'A rainbow. Pretty good-sized.' *And a brookie that was a lot bigger, I thought but didn't say. Biggest one I ever saw, to tell the truth, but I don't have that one to show you, Dad. I gave that one to the man in the black suit, so he wouldn't eat me. And it worked . . . but just barely.*

'That's all? Nothing else?'

'After I caught it I fell asleep.' This was not really an answer, but not really a lie, either.

'Lucky you didn't lose your pole. You didn't, did you, Gary?'

'No, sir,' I said, very reluctantly. Lying about that would do no good even if I'd been able to think up a whopper—not if he was set on going back to get my creel anyway, and I could see by his face that he was.

Up ahead, Candy Bill came racing out of the back door, barking his shrill bark and wagging his whole rear end back and forth the way Scotties do when they're excited. I couldn't wait any longer; hope and anxiety bubbled up in my throat like foam. I broke away from my father and ran to the house, still lugging his creel and still convinced, in my heart of hearts, that I was going to find my mother dead on the kitchen floor with her face swelled and purple like Dan's had been when my father carried him in from the west field, crying and calling the name of Jesus.

But she was standing at the counter, just as well and fine as when I had left her, humming a song as she shelled peas into a bowl. She looked around at me, first in surprise and then in fright as she took in my wide eyes and pale cheeks.

'Gary, what is it? What's the matter?'

I didn't answer, only ran to her and covered her with kisses. At some point my father came in and said, 'Don't worry, Lo—he's all right. He just had one of his bad dreams, down there by the brook.'

'Pray God it's the last of them,' she said, and hugged me tighter while Candy

Bill danced around our feet, barking his shrill bark.

'You don't have to come with me if you don't want to, Gary,' my father said, although he had already made it clear that he thought I should—that I should go back, that I should face my fear, as I suppose folks would say nowadays. That's very well for fearful things that are make-believe, but two hours hadn't done much to change my conviction that the man in the black suit had been real. I wouldn't be able to convince my father of that, though. I don't think there was a nine-year-old that ever lived who would have been able to convince his father he'd seen the Devil come walking out of the woods in a black suit.

'I'll come,' I said. I had walked out of the house to join him before he left, mustering all my courage in order to get my feet moving, and now we were standing by the chopping-block in the side yard, not far from the woodpile.

'What you got behind your back?' he asked.

I brought it out slowly. I would go with him, and I would hope the man in the black suit with the arrow-straight part down the left side of his head was gone . . . but if he wasn't, I wanted to be prepared. As prepared as I could be, anyway. I had the family Bible in the hand I had brought out from behind my back. I'd set out just to bring my New Testament, which I had won for memorizing the most psalms in the Thursday night Youth Fellowship competition (I managed eight, although most of them except the Twenty-third had floated out of my mind in a week's time), but the little red Testament didn't seem like enough when you were maybe going to face the Devil himself, not even when the words of Jesus were marked out in red ink.

My father looked at the old Bible, swelled with family documents and pictures, and I thought he'd tell me to put it back, but he didn't. A look of mixed grief and sympathy crossed his face, and he nodded. 'All right,' he said. 'Does your mother know you took that?'

'No, sir.'

He nodded again. 'Then we'll hope she doesn't spot it gone before we get back. Come on. And don't drop it.'

Half an hour or so later, the two of us stood on the bank looking down at the place where Castle Stream forked, and at the flat place where I'd had my encounter with the man with the red-orange eyes. I had my bamboo rod in my hand—I'd picked it up below the bridge—and my creel lay down below, on the flat place. Its wicker top was flipped back. We stood looking down, my father and I, for a long time, and neither of us said anything.

Opal! Diamond! Sapphire! Jade! I smell Gary's lemonade! That had been his unpleasant little poem, and once he had recited it, he had thrown himself on his back, laughing like a child who has just discovered he has enough courage to say bathroom words like shit or piss. The flat place down there was as green and lush as any place in Maine that the sun can get to in early July . . . except

where the stranger had lain. There the grass was dead and yellow in the shape of a man.

I looked down and saw I was holding our lumpy old family Bible straight out in front of me with both thumbs pressing so hard on the cover that they were white. It was the way Mama Sweet's husband Norville held a willow-fork when he was trying to dowses somebody a well.

'Stay here,' my father said at last, and skidded sideways down the bank, digging his shoes into the rich soft soil and holding his arms out for balance. I stood where I was, holding the Bible stiffly out at the ends of my arms like a willow-fork, my heart thumping wildly. I don't know if I had a sense of being watched that time or not; I was too scared to have a sense of anything, except for a sense of wanting to be far away from that place and those woods.

My Dad bent down, sniffed at where the grass was dead, and grimaced. I knew what he was smelling: something like burnt matches. Then he grabbed my creel and came on back up the bank, hurrying. He snagged one fast look over his shoulder to make sure nothing was coming along behind. Nothing was. When he handed me the creel, the lid was still hanging back on its cunning little leather hinges. I looked inside and saw nothing but two handfuls of grass.

'Thought you said you caught a rainbow,' my father said, 'but maybe you dreamed that, too.'

Something in his voice stung me. 'No, sir,' I said. 'I caught one.'

'Well, it sure as hell didn't flop out, not if it was gutted and cleaned. And you wouldn't put a catch into your fisherbox without doing that, would you, Gary? I taught you better than that.'

'Yes, sir, you did, but—'

'So if you didn't dream catching it and if it was dead in the box, something must have come along and eaten it,' my father said, and then he grabbed another quick glance over his shoulder, eyes wide, as if he had heard something move in the woods. I wasn't exactly surprised to see drops of sweat standing out on his forehead like big clear jewels. 'Come on,' he said. 'Let's get the hell out of here.'

I was for that, and we went back along the bank to the bridge, walking quick without speaking. When we got there, my Dad dropped to one knee and examined the place where we'd found my rod. There was another patch of dead grass there, and the lady's slipper was all brown and curled in on itself, as if a blast of heat had charred it. While my father did this, I looked in my empty creel.

'He must have gone back and eaten my other fish, too,' I said.

My father looked up at me. '*Other* fish!'

'Yes, sir. I didn't tell you, but I caught a brookie, too. A big one. He was awful hungry, that fella.' I wanted to say more, and the words trembled just behind my lips, but in the end I didn't.

We climbed up to the bridge and helped one another over the railing. My

father took my creel, looked into it, then went to the railing and threw it over. I came up beside him in time to see it splash down and float away like a boat, riding lower and lower in the stream as the water poured in between the wicker weavings.

'It smelled bad,' my father said, but he didn't look at me when he said it, and his voice sounded oddly defensive. It was the only time I ever heard him speak just that way.

'Yes, sir.'

'We'll tell your mother we couldn't find it. If she asks. If she doesn't ask, we won't tell her anything.'

'No, sir, we won't.'

And she didn't and we didn't and that's the way it was.

That day in the woods is eighty-one years gone, and for many of the years in between I have never even thought of it . . . not awake, at least. Like any other man or woman who ever lived, I can't say about my dreams, not for sure. But now I'm old, and I dream awake, it seems. My infirmities have crept up like waves which will soon take a child's abandoned sand castle, and my memories have also crept up, making me think of some old rhyme that went, in part, 'Just leave them alone/And they'll come home/Wagging their tails behind them.' I remember meals I ate, games I played, girls I kissed in the school cloakroom when we played Post Office, boys I chummed with, the first drink I ever took, the first cigarette I ever smoked (cornshuck behind Dicky Hammer's pig-shed, and I threw up). Yet of all the memories, the one of the man in the black suit is the strongest, and glows with its own spectral, haunted light. He was real, he was the Devil, and that day I was either his errand or his luck. I feel more and more strongly that escaping him was my luck—*just* luck, and not the intercession of the God I have worshipped and sung hymns to all my life.

As I lie here in my nursing-home room, and in the ruined sand castle that is my body, I tell myself that I need not fear the Devil—that I have lived a good, kindly life, and I need not fear the Devil. Sometimes I remind myself that it was I, not my father, who finally coaxed my mother back to church later on that summer. In the dark, however, these thoughts have no power to ease or comfort. In the dark comes a voice which whispers that the nine-year-old boy I was had done nothing for which he might legitimately fear the devil either . . . and yet the Devil came. And in the dark I sometimes hear that voice drop even lower, into ranges which are inhuman. *Big fish!* it whispers in tones of hushed greed, and all the truths of the moral world fall to ruin before its hunger. *Biiig fiiish!*

The Devil came to me once, long ago; suppose he were to come again now? I am too old to run now; I can't even get to the bathroom and back without my walker. I have no fine large brook trout with which to propitiate him, either, even for a moment or two; I am old and my creel is empty. Suppose he were to

come back and find me so?
And suppose he is still hungry?

Task 1.

Find the Russian equivalents for the following English words and expressions.

A fork, to release, infirmity, to creep up, to lick, to glow, to drawn overhead, lane, to hunker, to be stung by a bee, to lug, to weed the beans and cukes, to be wild to try smth, a bamboo pole, to split, a stoop, a marble counter, to kneed, to sob, to swell, to take the God's name in vain, to bolt, a creel, to hiss, steep and brushy, to clutch, a stinger, pistol - shot, to tumble off, to flicker, mellow, nasty, claw, on one's hunkers, to lean forward, solemnly, talon, without remorse, to frown, to purse smb's lips, to slap, to bulge, to lick, bereavement, slack and avid, shark, to grope, fury, temple, fir, to bawl, scary, to tug, to prop, to muster, defensive, to creep up, to coax

Task 2

Reproduce the situations in which the words from Task 1 are used

Task 3

Agree or disagree with the following sentences.

1. Gary's brother was his only brother and it was his chore to help Gary.
2. Gary's father was a very greedy man and he never gave his son presents. -
3. Gary really believed that the bee he saw on his nose was exactly the bee that killed his brother.
4. Gary was sure that the man in the black suit was the Devil.
5. Gary believed that his mother was dead.
6. Gary began to laugh when he heard that the Devil was hungry.
7. Gary didn't try to escape the company of the devil.
8. Gary found his mother dead and when he told his father the story that had happened to him he didn't believe the boy. -
9. Gary is nearly 90 today and he need not fear the devil.
10. This story is considered to be the best story of the author and he really likes it.

Task 4

Answer the following questions.

1. What can we say about the story from the very beginning?
2. How did the main heroes, Gary's, brother die?
3. What did Gary have to do at that day, before going fishing?

4. What did Gary want to try in Castle Stream?
5. Did Gary visit a lot of places on his way to Castle Stream?
6. What happened to Gary when he came to the place where Castle Stream split in those days?
7. Why did Gary suddenly wake up?
8. Whom did Gary see when he was trembling on the edge of panic?
9. What was the main idea of their dialogs?
10. Why was Gary really frightened to be with this strange man?
11. How did Gary find his parents, was everything all right?

Task 5

Express the same idea using different words and grammar.

1. When Mama Sweet, the oldest lady in the Methodist Ladies' Aid, tried to tell her—at the church supper the previous winter, this was—that the same thing had happened to her favorite uncle back in '73, my mother clapped her hands over her ears, got up, and walked out of the church basement.
2. I grabbed it with both hands and gave it a big stupid yank that would have made my father clutch his head with both hands, if he had been there to see it.
3. His glaring eyes half-closed, as if he had inhaled some sublime aroma and wanted to concentrate on nothing but that.
4. When I couldn't run anymore I stumbled to a stop and looked back over my shoulder, puffing and blowing like a windbroke horse.
5. That's very well for fearful things that are make-believe, but two hours hadn't done much to change my conviction that the man in the black suit had been real.

Task 6

Use prepositions where necessary.

1. I've never told anyone ... what happened ... the fork ... the stream that day, and I never will. ... least not ... my mouth.
2. A man ... his nineties should be well ... the terrors of childhood, but as my infirmities slowly creep ... me, like waves licking closer and closer to some indifferently built castle ... sand, that terrible face grows clearer and clearer in my mind's eye.
3. She claimed she was done ... church, and that if she ever had to see Helen Robichaud again (that was Mama Sweet's real name), she would slap her eyes
4. Candy Bill followed me as I did my chores, and sat between my feet as I bolted my lunch, looking ... me with the same attentiveness he had

shown my mother while she was kneading her bread, but when I got my new bamboo pole and my old, splintery creel and started ... the dooryard, he stopped and only stood... the dust by an old roll of snowfence, watching.

5. I worked my way ... carefully, holding ... where I could and digging my heels

6. All I know is that a tug ... my line so strong it almost pulled the bamboo pole ... my hand was what brought me back ... the afternoon.

7. ... the moment it came, the bee tumbled ... my nose and fell ... my lap.

8. He leaned forward toward me ... his nose stuck ..., like someone who means to smell a flower.

9. It was your mother who passed that fatal weakness ... your brother Dan; you got some ... it, but you also got a protection ... your father that poor Dan somehow missed.

10. Because your father's the sort ... man who'll have to have some warm hole to stick it ..., believe me, and if you're the only one available, you're the one who'll have to serve.

11. My tears were flowing again, and my Dad's startled, frightened face had blurred ... three overlapping images.

12. I'd set ... just to bring my New Testament, which I had won ... memorizing the most psalms in the Thursday night Youth Fellowship competition (I managed eight, although most of them except the Twenty-third had floated ... my mind in a week's time), but the little red Testament didn't seem like enough when you were maybe going to face the Devil himself, not even when the words of Jesus were marked ... red ink.

13. I was ... that, and we went back ... the bank to the bridge, walking quick without speaking.

Task 7

Reproduce the following dialogs between.

1. Between Gary and his father
2. Between Gary and his mother
3. Between Gary and the Devil

ВСЁ ВОЗМОЖНО
EVERYTHING'S EVENTUAL
1997

Стивен КИНГ

Всё возможно (Everything's Eventual), 2002

One day, out of nowhere, I had a clear image of a young man pouring change into a sewer grating outside of the small suburban house in which he lived. I had nothing else, but the image was so clear—and so disturbingly odd—that I had to write a story about it. It came out smoothly and without a single hesitation, supporting my idea that stories are artifacts: not really made things which we create (and can take credit for), but pre-existing objects which we dig up.

I

I've got a good job now, and no reason to feel glum. No more hanging out with the gumbyheads at the Supr Savr, policing up the Kart Korral and getting bothered by assholes like Skipper. Skipper's munching the old dirt sandwich these days, but one thing I have learned in my nineteen years on this Planet Earth is don't relax, there are Skippers everywhere.

Ditto no more pulling pizza patrol on rainy nights, driving my old Ford with the bad muffler, freezing my ass off with the driver's-side window down and a little Italian flag sticking out on a wire. Like somebody in Harkerville was going to salute. Pizza Roma. Quarter tips from people who don't even see you, because most of their mind's still on the TV football game. Driving for Pizza Roma was the lowest point, I think. Since then I've even had a ride in a private jet, so how could things be bad?

'This is what comes of leaving school without a diploma,' Ma would say during my Delivery Dan stint. And, 'You've got this to look forward to *for the rest of your life*.' Good old Ma. On and on, until I actually thought about writing her one of those special letters. As I say, that was the low point. You know what Mr. Sharpton told me that night in his car? 'It's not just a job, Dink, it's a goddam adventure.' And he was right. Whatever he might have been wrong about, he was right about that.

I suppose you're wondering about the salary of this famous job. Well, I got to

tell you, there's not much money in it. Might as well get that right up front. But a job isn't just about money, or getting ahead. That's what Mr. Sharpton told me. Mr. Sharpton said that a real job is about the fringe benefits. He said that's where the power is.

Mr. Sharpton. I only saw him that once, sitting behind the wheel of his big old Mercedes-Benz, but sometimes once is enough.

Take that any way you want. Any old way at all.

II

I've got a house, okay? My very own house. That's fringe benefit number one. I call Ma sometimes, ask how her bad leg is, shoot the shit, but I've never invited her over here, although Harkerville is only seventy or so miles away and I know she's practically busting a gut with curiosity. I don't even have to go see her unless I want to. Mostly I don't want to. If you knew my mother, you wouldn't want to, either. Sit there in that living room with her while she talks about all her relatives and whines about her puffy leg. Also I never noticed how much the house smelled of catshit until I got out of it. I'm never going to have a pet. Pets bite the big one.

Mostly I just stay here. It's only got one bedroom, but it's still an excellent house. *Eventual*, as Pug used to say. He was the one guy at the Supr Savr I liked. When he wanted to say something was really good, Pug'd never say it was awesome, like most people do; he'd say it was eventual. How funny is that? The old Pugmeister. I wonder how he's doing. Okay, I suppose. But I can't call him and make sure. I can call my Ma, and I have an emergency number if anything ever goes wrong or if I think somebody's getting nosy about what's not their business, but I can't buzz any of my old friends (as if any of them besides Pug gave Shit One about Dinky Earnshaw). Mr. Sharpton's rules.

But never mind that. Let's go back to my house here in Columbia City. How many nineteen-year-old high-school dropouts do *you* know who have their own houses? Plus a new car? Only a Honda, true, but the first three numbers on the odometer are still zeroes, and that's the important part. It has a CD/tape-player, and I don't slide in behind the wheel wondering if the goddam thing'll start, like I always did with the Ford, which Skipper used to make fun of. The Ass-holemobile, he called it. Why are there so many Skippers in the world? That's what I really wonder about.

I do get *some* money, by the way. More than enough to meet my needs. Check this out. I watch *As the World Turns* every day while I'm eating my lunch, and on Thursdays, about halfway through the show, I hear the clack of the mail-slot. I don't do anything then, I'm not supposed to. Like Mr. Sharpton said, 'Them's the rules, Dink.'

I just watch the rest of my show. The exciting stuff on the soaps always happens around the weekends—murders on Fridays, fucking on Mondays—but

I watch right to the end every day, just the same. I'm especially careful to stay in the living room until the end on Thurs-days. On Thursdays I don't even go out to the kitchen for another glass of milk. When *World* is over, I turn off the TV for awhile—Oprah Winfrey comes on next, I hate her show, all that sitting-around-talking shit is for the Mas of the world—and go out to the front hall.

Lying on the floor under the mail-slot, there's always a plain white envelope, sealed. Nothing written on the front. Inside there'll be either fourteen five-dollar bills or seven ten-dollar bills. That's my money for the week. Here's what I do with it. I go to the movies twice, always in the afternoon, when it's just \$4.50. That's \$9. On Saturday I fill up my Honda with gas, and that's usually about \$7. I don't drive much. I'm not invested in it, as Pug would say. So now we're up to \$16. I'll eat out maybe four times at Mickey D's, either at breakfast (Egg McMuffin, coffee, two hash browns) or at dinner (Quarter Pounder with Cheese, never mind that McSpecial shit, what dimbulb thought *those* sandwiches up). Once a week I put on chinos and a button-up shirt and see how the other half lives—have a fancy meal at a place like Adam's Ribs or the Chuck Wagon. All of that goes me about \$25 and now we're up to \$41. Then I might go by News Plus and buy a stroke book or two, nothing really kinky, just your usual like *Variations* or *Penthouse*. I have tried writing these mags down on DINKY'S DAYBOARD, but with no success. I can buy them myself, and they don't disappear on cleaning day or anything, but they don't *show up*, if you see what I'm getting at, like most other stuff does. I guess Mr. Sharpton's cleaners don't like to buy dirty stuff (pun). Also, I can't get to any of the sex stuff on the Internet. I have tried, but it's blocked out, somehow. Usually things like that are easy to deal with—you go under or around the roadblocks if you can't hack straight through—but this is different.

Not to belabor the point, but I can't dial 900 numbers on the phone, either. The auto-dialer works, of course, and if I want to call somebody just at random, anywhere in the world, and shoot the shit with them for awhile, that's okay. That works. But the 900 numbers don't. You just get a busy. Probably just as well. In my experience, thinking about sex is like scratching poison ivy. You only spread it around. Besides, sex is no big deal, at least for me. It's there, but it isn't *eventual*. Still, considering what I'm doing, that little prudey streak is sort of weird. Almost funny . . . except I seem to have lost my sense of humor on the subject. A few others, as well.

Oh well, back to the budget.

If I get a *Variations*, that's four bucks and we're up to \$45. Some of the money that's left I might use to buy a CD, although I don't have to, or a candy-bar or two (I know I shouldn't, because my complexion still blows dead rats, although I'm almost not a teenager anymore). I think of calling out for a pizza or for Chinese sometimes, but it's against TransCorp's rules. Also, I would feel weird doing it, like a member of the oppressing class. I have delivered

pizza, remember. I know what a sucky job it is. Still, if I *could* order in, the pizza guy wouldn't leave *this* house with a quarter tip. I'd lay five on him, watch his eyes light up.

But you're starting to see what I mean about not needing a lot of cash money, aren't you? When Thursday morning rolls around again, I usually have at least eight bucks left, and sometimes it's more like twenty. What I do with the coins is drop them down the storm-drain in front of my house. I am aware that this would freak the neighbors out if they saw me doing it (I'm a high-school dropout, but I didn't leave because I was stupid, thank you very much), so I take out the blue plastic recycling basket with the newspapers in it (and sometimes with a *Penthouse* or *Variations* buried halfway down the stack, I don't keep that shit around for long, who would), and while I'm putting it down on the curb, I open the hand with the change in it, and through the grate in the gutter it goes. Tinkle-tinkle-tinkle-splash. Like a magician's trick. Now you see it, now you don't. Someday that drain will get clogged up, they'll send a guy down there and he'll think he won the fucking lottery, unless there's a flood or something that pushes all the change down to the waste treatment plant, or wherever it goes. By then I'll be gone. I'm *not* going to spend my life in Columbia City, I can tell you that. I'm leaving, and soon. One way or the other.

The currency is easier. I just poke it down the garbage disposal in the kitchen. Another magic trick, presto-change-o, money into lettuce. You probably think that's very weird, running money through the sink-pig. I did, too, at first. But you get used to just about anything after you do it awhile, and besides, there's always another seventy falling through the letter-slot. The rule is simple: no squirrelling it away. End the week broke. Besides, it's not millions we're talking about, only eight or ten bucks a week. Chump-change, really.

III

DINKY'S DAYBOARD. That's another fringe benefit. I write down whatever I want during the week, and I get everything I ask for (except sex-mags, as I told you). Maybe I'll get bored with that eventually, but right now it's like having Santa Claus all year round. Mostly what I write down is groceries, like anyone does on their kitchen chalkboard, but by no means is groceries all.

I might, for instance, write down 'New Bruce Willis Video' or 'New Weezer CD' or something like that. A funny thing about that Weezer CD, since we're on the subject. I happened to go into Toones Xpress one Friday after my movie was over (I always go to the show on Friday afternoons, even if there's nothing I really want to see, because that's when the cleaners come), just killing time inside because it was rainy and that squashed going to the park, and while I was looking at the new releases, this kid asks a clerk about the new Weezer CD. The clerk tells him it won't be in for another ten days or so, but I'd had it since

the Friday before.

Fringe benefits, like I say.

If I write down 'sport shirt' on the DAYBOARD, there it is when I get back to the house on Friday night, always in one of the nice earth-tone colors I like. If I write down 'new jeans' or 'chinos,' I get those. All stuff from The Gap, which is where I'd go myself, if I had to do stuff like that. If I want a certain kind of after-shave lotion or cologne, I write the name on DINKY'S DAYBOARD and it's on the bathroom counter when I get home. I don't date, but I'm a fool for cologne. Go figure.

Here's something you'll laugh at, I bet. Once I wrote down 'Rembrandt Painting' on the DAYBOARD. Then I spent the afternoon at the movies and walking in the park, watching people making out and dogs catching Frisbees, thinking how eventual it would be if the cleaners actually brought me my own fucking Rembrandt. Think of it, a genuine Old Master on the wall of a house in the Sunset Knoll section of Columbia City. How eventual would *that* be?

And it happened, in a manner of speaking. My Rembrandt was hung on the living room wall when I got home, over the sofa where the velvet clowns used to be. My heart was beating about two hundred a minute as I walked across the room toward it. When I got closer, I saw it was just a copy . . . you know, a reproduction. I was disappointed, but not very. I mean, it *was* a Rembrandt. Just not an *original* Rembrandt.

Another time, I wrote 'Autographed Photo of Nicole Kidman' on the DAYBOARD. I think she's the best-looking actress alive, she just gets me on so much. And when I got home that day, there was a publicity still of her on the fridge, held there by a couple of those little vegetable magnets. She was on her *Moulin Rouge* swing. And that time it was the real deal. I know because of the way it was signed: 'To Dinky Earnshaw, with love & kisses from Nicole.'

Oh, baby. Oh, honey.

Tell you something, my friend—if I worked hard and really wanted it, there might be a *real* Rembrandt on my wall someday. Sure. In a job like this, there is nowhere to go but up. In a way, that's the scary part.

IV

I never have to make grocery lists. The cleaners know what I like—Stouffer's frozen dinners, especially that boil-in-the-bag stuff they call creamed chipped beef and Ma had always called shit on a shingle, frozen strawberries, whole milk, pre-formed hamburger patties that you just have to slap in a hot frying pan (I hate playing with raw meat), Dole puddings, the ones that come in plastic cups (bad for my complexion but I love em), ordinary food like that. If I want something special, I write it down on DINKY'S DAYBOARD.

Once I asked for a homemade apple pie, specifically *not* from the supermarket, and when I came back that night around the time it was getting

dark, my pie was in the fridge with the rest of the week's groceries. Only it wasn't wrapped up, it was just sitting there on a blue plate. That's how I knew it was homemade. I was a little hesitant about eating it at first, not knowing where it came from and all, and then I decided I was being stupid. A person doesn't really know where *supermarket* food comes from, not really. I mean, we assume it's okay because it's wrapped up or in a can or 'double-sealed for your protection,' but anyone could have been handling it with dirty fingers *before* it was double-sealed, or sneezing great big whoops of booger-breath on it, or even wiping their asses with it. I don't mean to gross you out, but it's true, isn't it? The world is full of strangers, and a lot of them are 'up to no good.' I have had personal experience of this, believe me.

Anyway, I tried the pie and it was delicious. I ate half of it Friday night and the rest on Saturday morning, while I was running the numbers in Cheyenne, Wyoming. Most of Saturday night I spent on the toilet, shitting my guts out from all those apples, I guess, but I didn't care. The pie was worth it. 'Like mother used to make' is what people say, but it can't be my mother they say it about. My Ma couldn't fry Spam.

V

I never have to write down underwear on the DAYBOARD. Every five weeks or so the old drawers disappear and there are brand-new Hanes Jockey-shorts in my bureau, four three-packs still in their plastic bags. Double-sealed for my protection, ha-ha. Toilet-paper, laundry soap, dishwasher soap, I never have to write any of that shit down. It just appears.

Very eventual, don't you think?

VI

I have never seen the cleaners, any more than I have ever seen the guy (or maybe it's a gal) who delivers my seventy bucks every Thursday during *As the World Turns*. I never *want* to see them, either. I don't need to, for one thing. For another, yes, okay, I'm afraid of them. Just like I was afraid of Mr. Sharpton in his big gray Mercedes on the night I went out to meet him. So sue me.

I don't eat lunch in my house on Fridays. I watch *As the World Turns*, then jump in my car and drive into town. I get a burger at Mickey D's, then go to a movie, then to the park if the weather is good. I like the park. It's a good place to think, and these days I've got an awful lot to think about.

If the weather is bad, I go to the mall. Now that the days are beginning to shorten, I'm thinking about taking up bowling again. It'd be something to do on Friday afternoons, at least. I used to go now and then with Pug.

I sort of miss Pug. I wish I could call him, just shoot the shit, tell him some of the stuff that's been going on. Like about that guy Neff, for instance.

Oh, well, spit in the ocean and see if it comes back.

While I'm away, the cleaners are doing my house from wall to wall and top to bottom—wash the dishes (although I'm pretty good about that myself), wash the floors, wash the dirty clothes, change the sheets, put out fresh towels, restock the fridge, get any of the incidentals that are written on the DAYBOARD. It's like living in a hotel with the world's most efficient (not to mention eventual) maid service.

The one place they don't mess around with much is the study off the dining room. I keep that room fairly dark, the shades always pulled, and they have never raised them to let in so much as a crack of daylight, like they do in the rest of the house. It never smells of Lemon Pledge in there, either, although every other room just about reeks of it on Friday nights. Sometimes it's so bad I have these sneezing fits. It's not an allergy; more like a nasal protest-demonstration.

Someone vacuums the floor in there, and they empty the waste-paper basket, but no one has ever moved any of the papers that I keep on the desk, no matter how cluttered-up and junky-looking they are. Once I put a little piece of tape over where the drawer above the knee-hole opens, but it was still there, unbroken, when I got back home that night. I don't keep anything top secret in that drawer, you understand; I just wanted to know.

Also, if the computer and modem are on when I leave, they're still on when I come back, the VDT showing one of the screen-saver programs (usually the one of the people doing stuff behind their blinds in this high-rise building, because that's my favorite). If my stuff was off when I left, it's off when I come back. They don't mess around in Dinky's study.

Maybe the cleaners are a little afraid of me, too.

VII

I got the call that changed my life just when I thought the combination of Ma and delivering for Pizza Roma was going to drive me crazy. I know how melodramatic that sounds, but in this case, it's true. The call came on my night off. Ma was out with her girlfriends, playing Bingo at the Reservation, all of them smoking up a storm and no doubt laughing every time the caller pulled B-12 out of the hopper and said, 'All right, ladies, it's time to take your vitamins.' Me, I was watching a Clint Eastwood movie on TNT and wishing I was anywhere else on Planet Earth. Saskatchewan, even.

The phone rings, and I think, oh good, it's Pug, gotta be, and so when I pick it up I say in my smoothest voice, 'You have reached the Church of Any Eventuality, Harkerville branch, Reverend Dink speaking.'

'Hello, Mr. Earnshaw,' a voice says back. It was one I'd never heard before, but it didn't seem the least put-out or puzzled by my bullshit.

I was mortified enough for both of us, though. Have you ever noticed that

when you do something like that on the phone—try to be cool right from the pickup—it's never the person you expected on the other end? Once I heard about this girl who picked up the phone and said 'Hi, it's Helen, and I want you to fuck me raw' because she was sure it was her boyfriend, only it turned out to be her father. That story is probably made up, like the one about the alligators in the New York sewers (or the letters in *Penthouse*), but you get the point.

'Oh, I'm sorry,' I say, too flustered to wonder how the owner of this strange voice knows that Reverend Dink is also Mr. Earnshaw, actual name Richard Ellery Earnshaw. 'I thought you were someone else.'

'I *am* someone else,' the voice says, and although I didn't laugh then, I did later on. Mr. Sharpton was someone else, all right. Seriously, eventually someone else.

'Can I help you?' I asked. 'If you wanted my mother, I'll have to take a message, because she's—'

'—out playing Bingo, I know. In any case, I want you, Mr. Earnshaw. I want to offer you a job.'

For a moment I was too surprised to say anything. Then it hit me—some sort of phone-scam. 'I got a job,' I go. 'Sorry.'

'Delivering pizza?' he says, sounding amused. 'Well, I suppose. If you call that a job.'

'Who are you, mister?' I ask.

'My name is Sharpton. And now let me "cut through the bull-shit," as you might say, Mr. Earnshaw. Dink? May I call you Dink?'

'Sure,' I said. 'Can I call you Sharpie?'

'Call me whatever you want, just listen.'

'I'm listening.' I was, too. Why not? The movie on the tube was *Coogan's Bluff*, not one of Clint's better efforts.

'I want to make you the best job-offer you've ever had, and the best one you probably ever will have. It's not just a job, Dink, it's an adventure.'

'Gee, where have I heard that before?' I had a bowl of popcorn in my lap, and I tossed a handful into my mouth. This was turning into fun, sort of.

'Others promise; I deliver. But this is a discussion we must have face-to-face. Will you meet me?'

'Are you a queer?' I asked.

'No.' There was a touch of amusement in his voice. Just enough so that it was hard to disbelieve. And I was already in the hole, so to speak, from the smartass way I'd answered the phone. 'My sexual orientation doesn't come into this.'

'Why're you yanking my chain, then? I don't know *anybody* who'd call me at nine-thirty in the fucking night and offer me a job.'

'Do me a favor. Put the phone down and go look in your front hall.'

Crazier and crazier. But what did I have to lose? I did what he said, and found an envelope lying there. Someone had poked it through the mail-slot while I was watching Clint Eastwood chase Don Stroud through Central Park.

The first envelope of many, although of course I didn't know that then. I tore it open, and seven ten-dollar bills fell out into my hand. Also a note.

This can be the beginning of a great career!

I went back into the living room, still looking at the money. Know how weirded-out I was? I almost sat on my bowl of popcorn. I saw it at the last second, set it aside, and plopped back on the couch. I picked up the phone, really sort of expecting Sharpton to be gone, but when I said hello, he answered.

'What's this all about?' I asked him. 'What's the seventy bucks for? I'm keeping it, but not because I think I owe you anything. I didn't fucking *ask* for anything.'

'The money is absolutely yours,' Sharpton says, 'with not a string in the world attached. But I'll let you in on a secret, Dink—a job isn't just about money. A real job is about the fringe benefits. That's where the power is.'

'If you say so.'

'I absolutely do. And all I ask is that you meet me and hear a little more. I'll make you an offer that will change your life, if you take it. That will open the door to a *new* life, in fact. Once I've made that offer, you can ask all the questions you like. Although I must be honest and say you probably won't get all the *answers* you'd like.'

'And if I just decide to walk away?'

'I'll shake your hand, clap you on the back, and wish you good luck.'

'When did you want to meet?' Part of me—most of me—still thought all this was a joke, but there was a minority opinion forming by then. There was the money, for one thing; two weeks' worth of tips driving for Pizza Roma, and that's if business was good. But mostly it was the way Sharpton talked. He sounded like he'd been to school . . . and I don't mean at Sheep's Rectum State College over in Van Drusen, either. And really, what harm could there be? Since Skipper's accident, there was no one on Planet Earth who wanted to take after me in a way that was dangerous or painful. Well, Ma, I suppose, but her only weapon was her mouth . . . and she wasn't into elaborate practical jokes. Also, I couldn't see her parting with seventy dollars. Not when there was still a Bingo game in the vicinity.

'Tonight,' he said. 'Right now, in fact.'

'All right, why not? Come on over. I guess if you can drop an envelope full of tens through the mail-slot, you don't need me to give you the address.'

'Not at your house. I'll meet you in the Supr Savr parking lot.'

My stomach dropped like an elevator with the cables cut, and the conversation stopped being the least bit funny. Maybe this was some kind of setup—something with cops in it, even. I told myself no one could know about Skipper, least of all the cops, but Jesus. There was the letter; Skipper could have left the letter lying around anywhere. Nothing in it anyone could make out (except for his sister's name, but there are millions of Debbies in the world), no

more than anyone could've made out the stuff I wrote on the sidewalk outside Mrs. Bukowski's yard . . . or so I would have said before the goddam phone rang. But who could be absolutely sure? And you know what they say about a guilty conscience. I didn't exactly feel *guilty* about Skipper, not then, but still . . .

'The Supr Savr's kind of a weird place for a job interview, don't you think? Especially when it's been closed since eight o'clock.'

'That's what makes it good, Dink. Privacy in a public place. I'll park right by the Kart Korral. You'll know the car—it's a big gray Mercedes.'

'I'll know it because it'll be the only one there,' I said, but he was already gone.

I hung up and put the money in my pocket, almost without realizing I was doing it. I was sweating lightly all over my body. The voice on the phone wanted to meet me by the Kart Korral, where Skipper had so often teased me. Where he had once mashed my fingers between a couple of shopping carts, laughing when I screamed. That hurts the worst, getting your fingers mashed. Two of the nails had turned black and fallen off. That was when I'd made up my mind to try the letter. And the results had been unbelievable. Still, if Skipper Brannigan had a ghost, the Kart Korral was likely where it would hang out, looking for fresh victims to torture. The voice on the phone couldn't have picked that place by accident. I tried to tell myself that was bullshit, that coincidences happened all the time, but I just didn't believe it. Mr. Sharpton knew about Skipper. Somehow he knew.

I was afraid to meet him, but I didn't see what choice I had. If nothing else, I ought to find out how much he knew. And who he might tell.

I got up, put on my coat (it was early spring then, and cold at night—it seems to me that it's always cold at night in western Pennsylvania), started out the door, then went back and left a note for Ma. 'Went out to see a couple of guys,' I wrote. 'Will be back by midnight.' I intended to be back well *before* midnight, but that note seemed like a good idea. I wouldn't let myself think too closely about *why* it seemed like a good idea, not then, but I can own up to it now: if something happened to me, something bad, I wanted to make sure Ma would call the police.

VIII

There are two kinds of scared—at least that's my theory. There's TV-scared, and there's real-scared. I think we go through most of our lives only getting TV-scared. Like when we're waiting for our blood-tests to come back from the doctor or when we're walking home from the library in the dark and thinking about bad guys in the bushes. We don't get real-scared about shit like that, because we know in our heart of hearts that the blood-tests will come back clean and there won't be any bad guys in the bushes. Why? Because stuff like

that only happens to the people on TV.

When I saw that big gray Mercedes, the only car in about an acre of empty parking lot, I got real-scared for the first time since the thing in the box-room with Skipper Brannigan. That time was the closest we ever came to really getting into it.

Mr. Sharpton's ride was sitting under the light of the lot's yellow mercury-vapor lamps, a big old Krautmobile, at least a 450 and probably a 500, the kind of car that costs a hundred and twenty grand these days. Sitting there next to the Kart Korral (now almost empty for the night, all the carts except for one poor old three-wheeled cripple safely locked up inside) with its parking lights on and white exhaust drifting up into the air. Engine rumbling like a sleepy cat.

I drove toward it, my heart pumping slow but hard and a taste like pennies in my throat. I wanted to just mat the accelerator of my Ford (which in those days always smelled like a pepperoni pizza) and get the hell out of there, but I couldn't get rid of the idea that the guy knew about Skipper. I could tell myself there was nothing to know, that Charles 'Skipper' Brannigan had either had an accident or committed suicide, the cops weren't sure which (they couldn't have known him very well; if they had, they would have thrown the idea of suicide right out the window—guys like Skipper don't off themselves, not at the age of twenty-three they don't), but that didn't stop the voice from yammering away that I was in trouble, someone had figured it out, someone had gotten hold of the letter and figured it out.

That voice didn't have logic on its side, but it didn't need to. It had good lungs and just outscrambled logic. I parked beside the idling Mercedes and rolled my window down. At the same time, the driver's-side window of the Mercedes rolled down. We looked at each other, me and Mr. Sharpton, like a couple of old friends meeting at the Hi-Hat Drive-In.

I don't remember much about him now. That's weird, considering all the time I've spent thinking about him since, but it's the truth. Only that he was thin, and that he was wearing a suit. A good one, I think, although judging stuff like that's not my strong point. Still, the suit eased me a little. I guess that, unconsciously, I had this idea that a suit means business, and jeans and a tee-shirt means fuckery.

'Hello, Dink,' he says. 'I'm Mr. Sharpton. Come on in here and sit down.'

'Why don't we just stay the way we are?' I asked. 'We can talk to each other through these windows. People do it all the time.'

He only looked at me and said nothing. After a few seconds of that, I turned off the Ford and got out. I don't know exactly why, but I did. I was more scared than ever, I can tell you that. Real-scared. Real as real as real. Maybe that was why he could get me to do what he wanted.

I stood between Mr. Sharpton's car and mine for a minute, looking at the Kart Korral and thinking about Skipper. He was tall, with this wavy blond hair

he combed straight back from his forehead. He had pimples, and these red lips, like a girl wearing lipstick. 'Hey Dinky, let's see your dinky,' he'd say. Or 'Hey Dinky, you want to suck my dinky?' You know, witty shit like that. Sometimes, when we were rounding up the carts, he'd chase me with one, nipping at my heels with it and going 'Rmmmm! Rmmmmmm! Rmmmmmm!' like a fucking race-car. A couple of times he knocked me over. At dinner-break, if I had my food on my lap, he'd bump into me good and hard, see if he could knock something onto the floor. You know the kind of stuff I'm talking about, I'm sure. It was like he'd never gotten over those ideas of what's funny to bored kids sitting in the back row of study hall.

I had a ponytail at work, you had to wear your hair in a ponytail if you had it long, supermarket rules, and sometimes Skipper would come up behind me, grab the rubber band I used, and yank it out. Sometimes it would snarl in my hair and pull it. Sometimes it would break and snap against my neck. It got so I'd stick two or three extra rubber bands in my pants pocket before I left for work. I'd try not to think about why I was doing it, what I was putting up with. If I did, I'd probably start hating myself.

Once I turned around on my heels when he did that, and he must have seen something on my face, because his teasing smile went away and another one came up where it had been. The teasing smile didn't show his teeth, but the new one did. Out in the box-room, this was, where the north wall is always cold because it backs up against the meat-locker. He raised his hands and made them into fists. The other guys sat around with their lunches, looking at us, and I knew none of them would help. Not even Pug, who stands about five-feet-four anyway and weighs about a hundred and ten pounds. Skipper would have eaten him like candy, and Pug knew it.

'Come on, assface,' Skipper said, smiling that smile. The broken rubber band he'd stripped out of my hair was dangling between two of his knuckles, hanging down like a little red lizard's tongue. 'Come on, you want to fight me? Come on, sure. I'll fight you.'

What I wanted was to ask why it had to be me he settled on, why it was me who somehow rubbed his fur wrong, why it had to be *any* guy. But he wouldn't have had an answer. Guys like Skipper never do. They just want to knock your teeth out. So instead, I just sat back down and picked up my sandwich again. If I tried to fight Skipper, he'd likely put me in the hospital. I started to eat, although I wasn't hungry anymore. He looked at me a second or two longer, and I thought he might go after me, anyway, but then he unrolled his fists. The broken rubber band dropped onto the floor beside a smashed lettuce-crate. 'You waste,' Skipper said. 'You fucking longhair hippie waste.' Then he walked away. It was only a few days later that he mashed my fingers between two of the carts in the Korral, and a few days after that Skipper was lying on satin in the Methodist Church with the organ playing. He brought it on himself, though. At least that's what I thought then.

'A little trip down Memory Lane?' Mr. Sharpton asked, and that jerked me back to the present. I was standing between his car and mine, standing by the Kart Korral where Skipper would never mash anyone else's fingers.

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

'And it doesn't matter. Hop in here, Dink, and let's have a little talk.'

I opened the door of the Mercedes and got in. Man, that smell. It's leather, but not just leather. You know how, in Monopoly, there's a Get-Out-of-Jail-Free card? When you're rich enough to afford a car that smells like Mr. Sharpton's gray Mercedes, you must have a Get-Out-of-Everything-Free card.

I took a deep breath, held it, then let it out and said, 'This is eventual.'

Mr. Sharpton laughed, his clean-shaven cheeks gleaming in the dashboard lights. He didn't ask what I meant; he knew. 'Everything's eventual, Dink,' he said. 'Or can be, for the right person.'

'You think so?'

'*Know* so.' Not a shred of doubt in his voice.

'I like your tie,' I said. I said it just to be saying something, but it was true, too. The tie wasn't what I'd call eventual, but it was good. You know those ties that are printed all over with skulls or dinosaurs or little golf-clubs, stuff like that? Mr. Sharpton's was printed all over with swords, a firm hand holding each one up.

He laughed and ran a hand down it, kind of stroking it. 'It's my lucky tie,' he said. 'When I put it on, I feel like King Arthur.' The smile died off his face, little by little, and I realized he wasn't joking. 'King Arthur, out gathering the best men there ever were. Knights to sit with him at the Round Table and remake the world.'

That gave me a chill, but I tried not to show it. 'What do you want with me, Art? Help you hunt for the Holy Grail, or whatever they call it?'

'A tie doesn't make a man a king,' he said. 'I know that, in case you were wondering.'

I shifted, feeling a little uncomfortable. 'Hey, I wasn't trying to put you down —'

'It doesn't matter, Dink. Really. The answer to your question is I'm two parts headhunter, two parts talent scout, and four parts walking, talking destiny. Cigarette?'

'I don't smoke.'

'That's good, you'll live longer. Cigarettes are killers. Why else would people call them coffin-nails?'

'You got me,' I said.

'I hope so,' Mr. Sharpton said, lighting up. 'I most sincerely hope so. You're top-shelf goods, Dink. I doubt if you believe that, but it's true.'

'What's this offer you were talking about?'

'Tell me what happened to Skipper Brannigan.'

Kabam, my worst fear come true. He couldn't know, *nobody* could, but somehow he did. I only sat there feeling numb, my head pounding, my tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth like it was glued there.

'Come on, tell me.' His voice seemed to be coming in from far away, like on a shortwave radio late at night.

I got my tongue back where it belonged. It took an effort, but I managed. 'I didn't do anything.' My own voice seemed to be coming through on that same shitty shortwave band. 'Skipper had an accident, that's all. He was driving home and he went off the road. His car rolled over and went into Lockerby Stream. They found water in his lungs, so I guess he drowned, at least technically, but it was in the paper that he probably would have died, anyway. Most of his head got torn off in the rollover, or that's what people say. And some people say it wasn't an accident, that he killed himself, but I don't buy that. Skipper was . . . he was getting too much fun out of life to kill himself.'

'Yes. You were part of his fun, weren't you?'

I didn't say anything, but my lips were trembling and there were tears in my eyes.

Mr. Sharpton reached over and put his hand on my arm. It was the kind of thing you'd expect to get from an old guy like him, sitting with him in his big German car in a deserted parking lot, but I knew when he touched me that it wasn't like that, he wasn't hitting on me. It was good to be touched the way he touched me. Until then, I didn't know how sad I was. Sometimes you don't, because it's just, I don't know, all around. I put my head down. I didn't start bawling or anything, but the tears went running down my cheeks. The swords on his tie doubled, then tripled—three for one, such a deal.

'If you're worried that I'm a cop, you can quit. And I gave you money—that screws up any sort of prosecution that might come out of this. But even if that wasn't the case, no one would believe what really happened to young Mr. Brannigan, anyway. Not even if you confessed on nationwide TV. Would they?'

'No,' I whispered. Then, louder: 'I put up with a lot. Finally I couldn't put up with any more. He made me, he brought it on himself.'

'Tell me what happened,' Mr. Sharpton said.

'I wrote him a letter,' I said. 'A special letter.'

'Yes, very special indeed. And what did you put in it so it could only work on him?'

I knew what he meant, but there was more to it than that. When you personalized the letters, you increased their power. You made them lethal, not just dangerous.

'His sister's name,' I said. I think that was when I gave up completely. 'His sister, Debbie.'

IX

I've always had something, some kind of deal, and I sort of knew it, but not how to use it or what its name was or what it meant. And I sort of knew I had to keep quiet about it, because other people didn't have it. I thought they might put me in the circus if they found out. Or in jail.

I remember once—vaguely, I might have been three or four, it's one of my first memories—standing by this dirty window and looking out at the yard. There was a wood-chopping block and a mailbox with a red flag, so it must have been while we were at Aunt Mabel's, out in the country. That was where we lived after my father ran off. Ma got a job in the Harkerville Fancy Bakery and we moved back to town later on, when I was five or so. We were living in town when I started school, I know that. Because of Mrs. Bukowski's dog, having to walk past that fucking canine cannibal five days a week. I'll never forget that dog. It was a boxer with a white ear. Talk about Memory Lane.

Anyway, I was looking out and there were these flies buzzing around at the top of the window, you know how they do. I didn't like the sound, but I couldn't reach high enough, even with a rolled-up magazine, to swat them or make them go away. So instead of that, I made these two triangles on the windowpane, drawing in the dirt with the tip of my finger, and I made this other shape, a special circle-shape, to hold the triangles together. And as soon as I did that, as soon as I closed the circle, the flies—there were four or five of them—dropped dead on the windowsill. Big as jellybeans, they were—the black jellybeans that taste like licorice. I picked one up and looked at it, but it wasn't very interesting, so I dropped it on the floor and went on looking out the window.

Stuff like that would happen from time to time, but never on purpose, never because I made it happen. The first time I remember doing something absolutely on purpose—before Skipper, I mean—was when I used my whatever-it-was on Mrs. Bukowski's dog. Mrs. Bukowski lived on the corner of our street, when we rented on Dug-way Avenue. Her dog was mean and dangerous, every kid on the West Side was afraid of that white-eared fuck. She kept it tied in her side yard—hell, *staked out* in her side yard is more like it—and it barked at everyone who went by. Not harmless yapping, like some dogs do, but the kind that says *If I could get you in here with me or get out there with you, I'd tear your balls off, Brewster*. Once the dog *did* get loose, and it bit the paperboy. Anyone else's dog probably would have sniffed gas for that, but Mrs. Bukowski's son was the police chief, and he fixed it up, somehow.

I hated that dog the way I hated Skipper. In a way, I suppose, it *was* Skipper. I had to go by Mrs. Bukowski's on my way to school unless I wanted to detour all the way around the block and get called a sissy-boy, and I was terrified of the way that mutt would run to the end of its rope, barking so hard that foam would fly off its teeth and muzzle. Sometimes it hit the end of the rope so hard it'd go right off its feet, *boi-yoi-yoinng*, which might have looked funny to some people but never looked funny to me; I was just scared the rope (not a chain,

but a plain old piece of rope) would break one day, and the dog would jump over the low picket fence between Mrs. Bukowski's yard and Dugway Avenue, and it would rip my throat out.

Then one day I woke up with an idea. I mean it was right there. I woke up with it the way some days I'd wake up with a great big throbbing boner. It was a Saturday, bright and early, and I didn't have to go anywhere near Mrs. Bukowski's if I didn't want to, but that day I *did* want to. I got out of bed and threw on my clothes just as fast as I could. I did everything fast because I didn't want to lose that idea. I would, too—I'd lose it the way you eventually lose the dreams you wake up with (or the boners you wake up with, if you want to be crude)—but right then I had the whole thing in my mind just as clear as a bell: words with triangles around them and curlicues over them, special circles to hold the whole shebang together . . . two or three of those, overlapping for extra strength.

I just about flew through the living room (Ma was still sleeping, I could hear her snoring, and her pink bakery uniform was hung over the shower rod in the bathroom) and went into the kitchen. Ma had a little blackboard by the phone for numbers and reminders to herself—MA'S DAYBOARD instead of DINKY'S DAYBOARD, I guess you'd say—and I stopped just long enough to gleep the piece of pink chalk hanging on a string beside it. I put it in my pocket and went out the door. I remember what a beautiful morning that was, cool but not cold, the sky so blue it looked like someone had run it through the Happy Wheels Carwash, no one moving around much yet, most folks sleeping in a little, like everyone likes to do on Sat-urdays, if they can.

Mrs. Bukowski's dog wasn't sleeping in. Fuck, no. That dog was a firm believer in rooty-tooty, do your duty. It saw me coming through the picket-fence and went charging to the end of its rope as hard as ever, maybe even harder, as if some part of its dim little doggy brain knew it was Saturday and I had no business being there. It hit the end of the rope, *boi-yoi-yoinng*, and went right over backward. It was up again in a second, though, standing at the end of its rope and barking in its choky I'm-strangling-but-I-don't-care way. I suppose Mrs. Bukowski was used to that sound, maybe even *liked* it, but I've wondered since how the neighbors stood it.

I paid no attention that day. I was too excited to be scared. I fished the chalk out of my pocket and dropped down on one knee. For one second I thought the whole works had gone out of my head, and that was bad. I felt despair and sadness trying to fill me up and I thought, No, don't let it, don't let it, Dinky, fight it. Write anything, even if it's only FUCK MRS. BUKOWSKI'S DOG.

But I didn't write that. I drew this shape, I think it was a sankofite, instead. Some weird shape, but the *right* shape, because it unlocked everything else. My head flooded with stuff. It was wonderful, but at the same time it was really scary because there was so fucking much of it. For the next five minutes or so I knelt there on the sidewalk, sweating like a pig and writing like a mad fiend. I

wrote words I'd never heard and drew shapes I'd never seen—shapes *nobody* had ever seen: not just sankofites but japps and fouders and mirks. I wrote and drew until I was pink dust halfway to my right elbow and Ma's piece of chalk was nothing but a little pebble between my thumb and fin-ger. Mrs. Bukowski's dog didn't die like the flies, it barked at me the whole time, and it probably drew back and ran out the length of its rope leash another time or two, but I didn't notice. I was in this total frenzy. I could never describe it to you in a million years, but I bet it's how great musicians like Mozart and Eric Clapton feel when they're writing their music, or how painters feel when they're getting their best work on canvas. If someone had come along, I would have ignored him. Shit, if Mrs. Bukowski's dog had finally broken its rope, jumped the fence, and clamped down on my ass, I probably would have ignored *that*.

It was eventual, man. It was so fucking eventual I can't even tell you.

No one *did* come, although a few cars went by and maybe the people in them wondered what that kid was doing, what he was drawing on the sidewalk, and Mrs. Bukowski's dog went on barking. At the end, I realized I had to make it stronger, and the way to do that was to make it just for the dog. I didn't know its name, so I printed BOXER with the last of the chalk, drew a circle around it, then made an arrow at the bottom of the circle, pointing to the rest. I felt dizzy and my head was throbbing, the way it does when you've just finished taking a super-hard test, or if you spend too long watching TV. I felt like I was going to be sick . . . but I still also felt totally eventual.

I looked at the dog—it was still just as lively as ever, barking and kind of prancing on its back legs when it ran out of slack—but that didn't bother me. I went back home feeling easy in my mind. I knew Mrs. Bukowski's dog was toast. The same way, I bet, that a good painter knows when he's painted a good picture, or a good writer knows when he's written a good story. When it's right, I think you just know. It sits there in your head and hums.

Three days later the dog was eating the old dirt sandwich. I got the story from the best possible source when it comes to mean asshole dogs: the neighborhood mailman. Mr. Shermerhorn, his name was. Mr. Shermerhorn said Mrs. Bukowski's boxer for some reason started running around the tree he was tied to, and when he got to the end of his rope (ha-ha, end of his rope), he couldn't get back. Mrs. Bukowski was out shopping somewhere, so she was no help. When she got home, she found her dog lying at the base of the tree in her side yard, choked to death.

The writing on the sidewalk stayed there for about a week; then it rained hard and afterward there was just a pink blur. But until it rained, it stayed pretty sharp. And while it was sharp, no one walked on it. I saw this for myself. People—kids walking to school, ladies walking downtown, Mr. Shermerhorn, the mailman—would just kind of veer around it. They didn't even seem to know they were doing it. And nobody ever talked about it, either, like 'What's up with this weird shit on the sidewalk?' or 'What do you suppose you call

something that looks like that?' (A foudler, dimbulb.) It was as if they didn't even see it was there. Except part of them must have. Why else would they have walked around it?

X

I didn't tell Mr. Sharpton all that, but I told him what he wanted to know about Skipper. I had decided I could trust him. Maybe that secret part of me knew I could trust him, but I don't think so. I think it was just the way he put his hand on my arm, like your Dad would. Not that I have a Dad, but I can imagine.

Plus, it was like he said—even if he was a cop and arrested me, what judge and jury would believe Skipper Brannigan had driven his car off the road because of a letter I sent him? Especially one full of nonsense words and symbols made up by a pizza delivery-boy who had flunked high school geometry. *Twice*.

When I was done, there was silence between us for a long time. At last Mr. Sharpton said, 'He deserved it. You know that, don't you?'

And for some reason that did it. The dam burst and I cried like a baby. I must have cried for fifteen minutes or more. Mr. Sharpton put his arm around me and pulled me against his chest and I watered the lapel of his suit. If someone had driven by and seen us that way, they would have thought we were a couple of queers for sure, but nobody did. There was just him and me under the yellow mercury-vapor lamps, there by the Kart Korral. Yippy-ti-yi-yo, get along little shopping cart, Pug used to sing, for yew know Supr Savr will be yer new home. We'd laugh till we cried.

At last I was able to turn off the waterworks. Mr. Sharpton handed me a hanky and I wiped my eyes with it. 'How did you know?' I asked. My voice sounded all deep and weird, like a foghorn.

'Once you were spotted, all it took was a little rudimentary detective work.'

'Yeah, but how was I spotted?'

'We have certain people—a dozen or so in all—who look for fellows and gals like you,' he said. 'They can actually *see* fellows and gals like you, Dink, the way certain satellites in space can see nuclear piles and power-plants. You folks show up yellow. Like matchflames is how this one spotter described it to me.' He shook his head and gave a wry little smile. 'I'd like to see something like that just once in my life. Or be able to do what you do. Of course, I'd also like to be given a day—just one would be fine—when I could paint like Picasso or write like Faulkner.'

I gaped at him. 'Is that true? There are people who can *see*—'

'Yes. They're our bloodhounds. They crisscross the country—and all the other countries—looking for that bright yellow glow. Looking for matchheads in the darkness. This particular young woman was on Route 90, actually headed

for Pittsburgh to catch a plane home—to grab a little R-and-R—when she saw you. Or sensed you. Or whatever it is they do. The finders don't really know themselves, any more than you really know what you did to Skipper. Do you?'

'What—'

He raised a hand. 'I told you that you wouldn't get all the answers you'd like—this is something you'll have to decide on the basis of what you feel, not on what you know—but I can tell you a couple of things. To begin with, Dink, I work for an outfit called the Trans Corporation. Our job is getting rid of the world's Skipper Brannigans—the big ones, the ones who do it on a grand scale. We have company headquarters in Chicago and a training center in Peoria . . . where you'll spend a week, if you agree to my proposal.'

I didn't say anything then, but I knew already I was going to say yes to his proposal. Whatever it was, I was going to say yes.

'You're a tranny, my young friend. Better get used to the idea.'

'What is it?'

'A trait. There are folks in our organization who think of what you have . . . what you can do . . . as a talent or an ability or even a kind of glitch, but they're wrong. Talent and ability are born of trait. Trait is general, talent and ability are specific.'

'You'll have to simplify that. I'm a high-school dropout, remember.'

'I know,' he said. 'I also know that you didn't drop out because you were stupid; you dropped out because you didn't fit. In that way, you are like every other tranny I've ever met.' He laughed in the sharp way people do when they're not really amused. 'All twenty-one of them. Now listen to me, and don't play dumb. Creativity is like a hand at the end of your arm. But a hand has many fingers, doesn't it?'

'Well, at least five.'

'Think of those fingers as abilities. A creative person may write, paint, sculpt, or think up math formulae; he or she might dance or sing or play a musical instrument. Those are the fingers, but creativity is the hand that gives them life. And just as all hands are basically the same—form follows function—all creative people are the same once you get down to the place where the fingers join.

'Trans is also like a hand. Sometimes its fingers are called precognition, the ability to see the future. Sometimes they're postcognition, the ability to see the past—we have a guy who knows who killed John F. Kennedy, and it wasn't Lee Harvey Oswald; it was, in fact, a woman. There's telepathy, pyrokinesis, telempathy, and who knows how many others. *We* don't know, certainly; this is a new world, and we've barely begun to explore its first continent. But trans is different from creativity in one vital way: it's much rarer. One person in eight hundred is what occupational psychologists call 'gifted.' We believe that there may only be one tranny in each eight *million* people.'

That took my breath away—the idea that you might be one in eight million

would take *anybody's* breath away, right?

'That's about a hundred and twenty for every *billion* ordinary folks,' he said. 'We think there may be no more than three thousand so-called trannies in the whole world. We're finding them, one by one. It's slow work. The sensing ability is fairly low-level, but we still only have a dozen or so finders, and each one takes a lot of training. This is a hard calling . . . but it's also fabulously rewarding. We're finding trannies and we're putting them to work. That's what we want to do with you, Dink: put you to work. We want to help you focus your talent, sharpen it, and use it for the betterment of all mankind. You won't be able to see any of your old friends again—there's no security risk on earth like an old friend, we've found—and there's not a whole lot of cash in it, at least to begin with, but there's a lot of satisfaction, and what I'm going to offer you is only the bottom rung of what may turn out to be a very high ladder.'

'Don't forget those fringe benefits,' I said, kind of raising my voice on the last word, turning it into a question, if he wanted to take it that way.

He grinned and clapped me on the shoulder. 'That's right,' he said. 'Those famous fringe benefits.'

By then I was starting to get excited. My doubts weren't gone, but they were melting away. 'So tell me about it,' I said. My heart was beating hard, but it wasn't fear. Not anymore. 'Make me an offer I can't refuse.'

And that's just what he did.

XI

Three weeks later I'm on an airplane for the first time in my life—and what a way to lose your cherry! The only passenger in a Lear 35, listening to Counting Crows pouring out of quad speakers with a Coke in one hand, watching as the altimeter climbs all the way to forty-two thousand feet. That's over a mile higher than most commercial jetliners fly, the pilot told me. And a ride as smooth as the seat of a girl's underpants.

I spent a week in Peoria, and I was homesick. *Really* homesick. Surprised the shit out of me. There were a couple of nights when I even cried myself to sleep. I'm ashamed to say that, but I've been truthful so far, and don't want to start lying or leaving things out now.

Ma was the least of what I missed. You'd think we would have been close, as it was 'us against the world,' in a manner of speaking, but my mother was never much for loving and comforting. She didn't whip on my head or put out her cigarettes in my armpits or anything like that, but so what? I mean, big whoop. I've never had any kids, so I guess I can't say for sure, but I somehow don't think being a great parent is about the stuff you *didn't* do to your rug monkeys. Ma was always more into her friends than me, and her weekly trip to the beauty shop, and Friday nights out at the Reservation. Her big ambition in life was to win a twenty-number Bingo and drive home in a brand-new Monte Carlo. I'm

not sitting on the pity-pot, either. I'm just telling you how it was.

Mr. Sharpton called Ma and told her that I'd been chosen to intern in the Trans Corporation's advanced computer training and placement project, a special deal for non-diploma kids with potential. The story was actually pretty believable. I was a shitty math student and froze up almost completely in classes like English, where you were supposed to talk, but I was always on good terms with the school computers. In fact, although I don't like to brag (and I never let any of the faculty in on this little secret), I could program rings around Mr. Jacubois and Mrs. Wilcoxon. I never cared much about computer games—they're strictly for dickbrains, in my humble opinion—but I could keyjack like a mad motherfucker. Pug used to drop by and watch me, sometimes.

'I can't believe you,' he said once. 'Man, you got that thing smokin and tokin.'

I shrugged. 'Any fool can peel the Apple,' I said. 'It takes a real man to eat the core.'

So Ma believed it (she might have had a few more questions if she knew the Trans Corporation was flying me out to Illinois in a private jet, but she didn't), and I didn't miss her all that much. But I missed Pug, and John Cassiday, who was our other friend from our Supr Savr days. John plays bass in a punk band, wears a gold ring in his left eyebrow, and has just about every Subpop record ever made. He cried when Kurt Cobain ate the dirt sandwich. Didn't try to hide it or blame it on allergies, either. Just said, 'I'm sad because Kurt died.' John's eventual.

And I missed Harkerville. Perverse but true. Being at the training center in Peoria was like being born again, somehow, and I guess being born always hurts.

I thought I might meet some other people like me—if this was a book or a movie (or maybe just an episode of *The X-Files*), I would meet a cute chick with nifty little tits and the ability to shut doors from across the room—but that didn't happen. I'm pretty sure there were other trannies at Peoria when I was there, but Dr. Wentworth and the other folks running the place were careful to keep us separated. I once asked why, and got a runaround. That's when I started to realize that not everybody who had TRANSCORP printed on their shirts or walked around with TransCorp clipboards was my pal, or wanted to be my long-lost Dad.

And it was about killing people; that's what I was training for. The folks in Peoria didn't talk about that all the time, but no one tried to sugarcoat it, either. I just had to remember the targets were bad guys, dictators and spies and serial killers, and as Mr. Sharpton said, people did it in wars all the time. Plus, it wasn't personal. No guns, no knives, no garrotes. I'd never get blood splashed on me.

Like I told you, I never saw Mr. Sharpton again—at least not yet, I haven't—but I talked to him every day of the week I was in Peoria, and that eased the

pain and strangeness considerably. Talking to him was like having someone put a cool cloth on your brow. He gave me his number the night we talked in his Mercedes, and told me to call him anytime. Even at three in the morning, if I was feeling upset. Once I did just that. I almost hung up on the second ring, because people may *say* call them anytime, even at three in the morning, but they don't really expect you to do it. But I hung in there. I was homesick, yeah, but it was more than that. The place wasn't what I had expected, exactly, and I wanted to tell Mr. Sharpton so. See how he took it, kind of.

He answered on the third ring, and although he sounded sleepy (big surprise there, huh?), he didn't sound at all pissed. I told him that some of the stuff they were doing was quite weird. The test with all the flashing lights, for example. They said it was a test for epilepsy, but —

'I went to sleep right in the middle of it,' I said. 'And when I woke up, I had a headache and it was hard to think. You know what I felt like? A file-cabinet after someone's been rummaging through it.'

'What's your point, Dink?' Mr. Sharpton asked.

'I think they hypnotized me,' I said.

A brief pause. Then: 'Maybe they did. *Probably* they did.'

'But why? Why would they? I'm doing everything they ask, so why would they want to hypnotize me?'

'I don't know all their routines and protocols, but I suspect they're programming you. Putting a lot of housekeeping stuff on the lower levels of your mind so they won't have to junk up the conscious part . . . and maybe screw up your special ability, while they're at it. Really no different than programming a computer's hard disk, and no more sinister.'

'But you don't know for sure?'

'No—as I say, training and testing are not my purview. But I'll make some calls, and Dr. Wentworth will talk to you. It may even be that an apology is due. If that's the case, Dink, you may be sure that it will be tendered. Our trannies are too rare and too valuable to be upset needlessly. Now, is there anything else?'

I thought about it, then said no. I thanked him and hung up. It had been on the tip of my tongue to tell him I thought I'd been drugged, as well . . . given some sort of mood-elevator to help me through the worst of my homesickness, but in the end I decided not to bother him. It was three in the morning, after all, and if they had been giving me anything, it was probably for my own good.

XII

Dr. Wentworth came to see me the next day—he was the Big Kahuna—and he *did* apologize. He was perfectly nice about it, but he had a look, I don't know, like maybe Mr. Sharpton had called him about two minutes after I hung up and gave him a hot reaming.

Dr. Wentworth took me for a walk on the back lawn—green and rolling and damned near perfect there at the end of spring—and said he was sorry for not keeping me 'up to speed.' The epilepsy test really *was* an epilepsy test, he said (and a CAT-scan, too), but since it induced a hypnotic state in most subjects, they usually took advantage of it to give certain 'baseline instructions.' In my case, they were instructions about the computer programs I'd be using in Columbia City. Dr. Wentworth asked me if I had any other questions. I lied and said no.

You probably think that's weird, but it's not. I mean, I had a long and sucky school career which ended three months short of graduation. I had teachers I liked as well as teachers I hated, but never one I entirely trusted. I was the kind of kid who always sat in the back of the room if the teacher's seating-chart wasn't alphabetical, and never took part in class discussions. I mostly said 'Huh?' when I was called on, and wild horses wouldn't have dragged a question out of me. Mr. Sharpton was the only guy I ever met who was able to get into where I lived, and ole Doc Wentworth with his bald head and sharp eyes behind his little rimless glasses was no Mr. Sharpton. I could imagine pigs flying south for the winter before I could imagine opening up to that dude, let alone crying on his shoulder.

And fuck, I didn't know what else to ask, anyway. A lot of the time I liked it in Peoria, and I was excited by the prospects ahead—new job, new house, new town. People were great to me in Peoria. Even the food was great—meatloaf, fried chicken, milkshakes, everything I liked. Okay, I didn't like the diagnostic tests, those boogersnots you have to do with an IBM pencil, and sometimes I'd feel dopey, as if someone had put something in my mashed potatoes (or hyper, sometimes I'd feel that way, too), and there were other times—at least two—when I was pretty sure I'd been hypnotized again. But so what? I mean, was any of it a big deal after you'd been chased around a supermarket parking lot by a maniac who was laughing and making race-car noises and trying to run you over with a shopping cart?

XIII

I had one more talk on the phone with Mr. Sharpton that I suppose I should mention. That was just a day before my second airplane ride, the one that took me to Columbia City, where a guy was waiting with the keys to my new house. By then I knew about the cleaners, and the basic money-rule—start every week broke, end every week broke—and I knew who to call locally if I had a problem. (Any big problem and I call Mr. Sharpton, who is technically my 'control.') I had maps, a list of restaurants, directions to the cinema complex and the mall. I had a line on everything but the most important thing of all.

'Mr. Sharpton, I don't know what to *do*,' I said. I was talking to him on the phone just outside the caff. There was a phone in my room, but by then I was

too nervous to sit down, let alone lie on my bed. If they were still putting shit in my food, it sure wasn't working that day.

'I can't help you there, Dink,' he said, calm as ever. 'So solly, Cholly.'

'What do you mean? You've *got* to help me! You *recruited* me, for jeepers' sake!'

'Let me give you a hypothetical case. Suppose I'm the President of a well-endowed college. Do you know what *well-endowed* means?'

'Lots of bucks. I'm not stupid, I told you that.'

'So you did—I apologize. Anyhow, let's say that I, President Sharpton, use some of my school's plentiful bucks to hire a great novelist as the writer-in-residence, or a great pianist to teach music. Would that entitle me to tell the novelist what to write, or the pianist what to compose?'

'Probably not.'

'*Absolutely* not. But let's say it did. If I told the novelist, 'Write a comedy about Betsy Ross screwing around with George Washington in Gay Paree,' do you think he could do it?'

I got laughing. I couldn't help it. Mr. Sharpton's just got a vibe about him, somehow.

'Maybe,' I said. 'Especially if you whipped a bonus on the guy.'

'Okay, but even if he held his nose and cranked it out, it would likely be a very bad novel. Because creative people aren't always in charge. And when they do their best work, they're hardly *ever* in charge. They're just sort of rolling along with their eyes shut, yelling *Wheeeee*.'

'What's all that got to do with me? Listen, Mr. Sharpton—when I try to imagine what I'm going to do in Columbia City, all I see is a great big blank. Help people, you said. Make the world a better place. Get rid of the Skippers. All that sounds great, except *I don't know how to do it!*'

'You will,' he said. 'When the time comes, you will.'

'You said Wentworth and his guys would focus my talent. Sharpen it. Mostly what they did was give me a bunch of stupid tests and make me feel like I was back in school. Is it *all* in my subconscious? Is it *all* on the hard disk?'

'Trust me, Dink,' he said. 'Trust me, and trust yourself.'

So I did. I have. But just lately, things haven't been so good. Not so good at all.

That goddam Neff—all the bad stuff started with him. I wish I'd never seen his picture. And if I *had* to see a picture, I wish I'd seen one where he wasn't smiling.

XIV

My first week in Columbia City, I did nothing. I mean absolutely zilch. I didn't even go to the movies. When the cleaners came, I just went to the park and sat on a bench and felt like the whole world was watching me. When it

came time to get rid of my extra money on Thursday, I ended up shredding better than fifty dollars in the garbage disposal. And doing that was new to me then, remember. Talk about feeling *weird*—man, you don't have a clue. While I was standing there, listening to the motor under the sink grinding away, I kept thinking about Ma. If Ma had been there to see what I was doing, she would have probably run me through with a butcher-knife to make me stop. That was a dozen twenty-number Bingo games (or two dozen cover-alls) going straight down the kitchen pig.

I slept like shit that week. Every now and then I'd go to the little study—I didn't want to, but my feet would drag me there. Like they say murderers always return to the scenes of their crimes, I guess. Anyway, I'd stand there in the doorway and look at the dark computer screen, at the Global Village modem, and I'd just sweat with guilt and embarrassment and fear. Even the way the desk was so neat and clean, without a single paper or note on it, made me sweat. I could just about hear the walls muttering stuff like 'Nah, nothing going on in here' and 'Who's *this* turkey, the cable-installer?'

I had nightmares. In one of them, the doorbell rings and when I open it, Mr. Sharpton's there. He's got a pair of handcuffs. 'Put out your wrists, Dink,' he says. 'We thought you were a tranny, but obviously we were wrong. Sometimes it happens.'

'No, I *am*,' I say. 'I *am* a tranny, I just need a little more time to get acclimated. I've never been away from home before, remember.'

'You've had five years,' he goes.

I'm stunned. I can't believe it. But part of me knows it's true. It *feels* like days, but it's really been *five fucking years*, and I haven't turned on the computer in the little study a single time. If not for the cleaners, the desk it sits on would be six inches deep in dust.

'Hold out your hands, Dink. Stop making this hard on both of us.'

'I won't,' I say, 'and you can't make me.'

He looks behind him then, and who should come up the steps but Skipper Brannigan. He is wearing his red nylon tunic, only now TRANSCORP is sewn on it instead of SUPR SAVR. He looks pale but otherwise okay. Not dead is what I mean. 'You thought you did something to me, but you didn't,' Skipper says. 'You couldn't do anything to anyone. You're just a hippie waste.'

'I'm going to put these cuffs on him,' Mr. Sharpton says to Skipper. 'If he gives me any trouble, run him over with a shopping cart.'

'Totally eventual,' Skipper says, and I wake up half out of my bed and on the floor, screaming.

XV

Then, about ten days after I moved in, I had another kind of dream. I don't remember what it was, but it must have been a good one, because when I woke

up, I was smiling. I could feel it on my face, a big, happy smile. It was like when I woke up with the idea about Mrs. Bukowski's dog. Almost exactly like that.

I pulled on a pair of jeans and went into the study. I turned on the computer and opened the window marked TOOLS. There was a program in there called DINKY'S NOTEBOOK. I went right to it, and all my symbols were there—circles, triangles, japps, mirks, rhomboids, bews, smims, fouders, hundreds more. *Thousands* more. Maybe *millions* more. It's sort of like Mr. Sharpton said: a new world, and I'm on the coastline of the first continent.

All I know is that all at once it was *there* for me, I had a great big Macintosh computer to work with instead of a little piece of pink chalk, and all I had to do was type the words for the symbols and the symbols would appear. I was jacked to the max. I mean my God. It was like a river of fire burning in the middle of my head. I wrote, I called up symbols, I used the mouse to drag everything where it was supposed to be. And when it was done, I had a letter. One of the special letters.

But a letter to who?

A letter to where?

Then I realized it didn't matter. Make a few minor customizing touches, and there were many people the letter could go to although this one had been written for a man rather than a woman. I don't know how I knew that; I just did. I decided to start with Cincinnati, only because Cincinnati was the first city to come into my mind. It could as easily have been Zurich, Switzerland, or Waterville, Maine.

I tried to open a TOOLS program titled DINKYMAIL. Before the computer would let me in there, it prompted me to wake up my modem. Once the modem was running, the computer wanted a 312 area code. 312's Chicago, and I imagine that, as far as the phone company is concerned, my compu-calls all come from TransCorp's headquarters. I didn't care one way or another; that was their business. I had found my business and was taking care of it.

With the modem awake and linked to Chicago, the computer flashed

DINKYMAIL READY.

I clicked on LOCALE. I'd been in the study almost three hours by then, with only one break to take a quick piss, and I could smell myself, sweating and stinking like a monkey in a greenhouse. I didn't mind. I liked the smell. I was having the time of my life. I was fucking delirious.

I typed CINCINNATI and hit EXECUTE.

NO LISTINGS CINCINNATI

the computer said. Okay, not a problem. Try Columbus—closer to home,

anyway. And yes, folks! We have a Bingo.

TWO LISTINGS COLUMBUS

There were two telephone numbers. I clicked on the top one, curious and a little afraid of what might pop out. But it wasn't a dossier, a profile, or—God forbid—a photograph. There was one single word:

MUFFIN.

Say *what*?

But then I knew. Muffin was Mr. Columbus's pet. Very likely a cat. I called up my special letter again, transposed two symbols and deleted a third. Then I added MUFFIN to the top, with an arrow pointing down. There. Perfect.

Did I wonder who Muffin's owner was, or what he had done to warrant TransCorp's attention, or exactly what was going to happen to him? I did not. The idea that my conditioning at Peoria might have been partially responsible for this disinterest never crossed my mind, either. I was doing my thing, that was all. Just doing my thing, and as happy as a clam at high tide.

I called the number on the screen. I had the computer's speaker on, but there was no hello, only the screechy mating-call of another computer. Just as well, really. Life's easier when you subtract the human element. Then it's like that movie, *Twelve O'Clock High*, cruising over Berlin in your trusty B-25, looking through your trusty Norden bombsight and waiting for just the right moment to push your trusty button. You might see smokestacks, or factory roofs, but no people. The guys who dropped the bombs from their B-25s didn't have to hear the screams of mothers whose children had just been reduced to guts, and I didn't even have to hear anyone say hello. A very good deal.

After a little bit, I turned off the speaker anyway. I found it distracting.

MODEM FOUND,

the computer flashed, and then

SEARCH FOR E-MAIL ADDRESS Y/N.

I typed Y and waited. This time the wait was longer. I think the computer was going back to Chicago again, and getting what it needed to unlock the e-mail address of Mr. Columbus. Still, it was less than thirty seconds before the computer was right back at me with

E-MAIL ADDRESS FOUND SEND DINKYMAIL Y/N.

I typed Y with absolutely no hesitation. The computer flashed

SENDING DINKYMAIL

and then

DINKYMAIL SENT.

That was all. No fireworks.

I wonder what happened to Muffin, though.

You know. After.

XVI

That night I called Mr. Sharpton and said, 'I'm working.'

'That's good, Dink. Great news. Feel better?' Calm as ever. Mr. Sharpton is like the weather in Tahiti.

'Yeah,' I said. The fact was, I felt blissful. It was the best day of my life. Doubts or no doubts, worries or no worries, I still say that. The most eventual day of my life. It was like a river of fire in my head, *a fucking river of fire*, can you get that? 'Do *you* feel better, Mr. Sharpton? Relieved?'

'I'm happy for you, but I can't say I'm relieved, because—'

'—you were never worried in the first place.'

'Got it in one,' he said.

'Everything's eventual, in other words.'

He laughed at that. He always laughs when I say that. 'That's right, Dink. Everything's eventual.'

'Mr. Sharpton?'

'Yes?'

'E-mail's not exactly private, you know. Anybody who's really dedicated can hack into it.'

'Part of what you send is a suggestion that the recipient delete the message from all files, is it not?'

'Yes, but I can't absolutely guarantee that he'll do it. Or she.'

'Even if they don't, nothing can happen to someone else who chances on such a message, am I correct? Because it's . . . personalized.'

'Well, it might give someone a headache, but that would be about all.'

'And the communication itself would look like so much gibberish.'

'Or a code.'

He laughed heartily at that. 'Let them try to break it, Dinky, eh? Just let them try!'

I sighed. 'I suppose.'

'Let's discuss something more important, Dink . . . how did it *feel*?'

'Fucking *wonderful*.'

'Good. Don't question wonder, Dink. Don't ever question wonder.'

And he hung up.

XVII

Sometimes I have to send actual letters—print out the stuff I whomp up in DINKY'S NOTEBOOK, stick it in an envelope, lick stamps, and mail it off to somebody somewhere. Professor Ann Tevitch, University of New Mexico at Las Cruces. Mr. Andrew Neff, c/o The New York *Post*, New York, New York. Billy Unger, General Delivery, Stovington, Vermont. Only names, but they were still more upsetting than the phone numbers. More *personal* than the phone numbers. It was like seeing faces swim up at you for a second inside your Norden bomb-sight. I mean, what a freak-out, right? You're up there at twenty-five thousand feet, no faces allowed up there, but sometimes one shows up for a second or two, just the same.

I wondered how a University Professor could get along without a modem (or a guy whose address was a fucking New York newspaper, for that matter), but I never wondered too much. I didn't have to. We live in a modern world, but letters don't *have* to be sent by computer, after all. There's still snail-mail. And the stuff I really needed was always in the database. The fact that Unger had a 1957 Thunderbird, for instance. Or that Ann Tevitch had a loved one—perhaps her husband, perhaps her son, perhaps her father—named Simon.

And people like Tevitch and Unger were exceptions. Most of the folks I reach out and touch are like that first one in Columbus—fully equipped for the twenty-first century. SENDING DINKYMAIL, DINKYMAIL SENT, velly good, so long, Cholly.

I could have gone on like that for a long time, maybe forever—browsing the database (there's no schedule to follow, no list of primary cities and targets; I'm completely on my own . . . unless all that shit is *also* in my subconscious, down there on the hard disk), going to afternoon movies, enjoying the Ma-less silence of my little house, and dreaming of my next step up the ladder, except I woke up feeling horny one day. I worked for an hour or so, browsing around in Australia, but it was no good—my dick kept trespassing on my brain, so to speak. I shut off the computer and went down to News Plus to see if I could find a magazine featuring pretty ladies in frothy lingerie.

As I got there, a guy was coming out, reading the Columbus *Dispatch*. I never read the paper myself. Why bother? It's the same old shit day in and day out, dictators beating the ching-chong out of people weaker than they are, men in uniforms beating the ching-chong out of soccer balls or footballs, politicians kissing babies and kissing ass. Mostly stories about the Skipper Brannigans of the world, in other words. And I wouldn't have seen this story even if I'd

happened to look at the newspaper display rack once I got inside, because it was on the bottom half of the front page, below the fold. But this fucking dimbulb comes out with the paper hanging open and his face buried inside it.

In the lower right corner was a picture of a white-haired guy smoking a pipe and smiling. He looked like a good-humored fuck, probably Irish, eyes all crinkled up and these white bushy eyebrows. And the headline over the photo—not a big one, but you could read it—said NEFF SUICIDE STILL PUZZLES, GRIEVES COLLEAGUES

For a second or two I thought I'd just skip News Plus that day, I didn't feel like ladies in lingerie after all, maybe I'd just go home and take a nap. If I went in, I'd probably pick up a copy of the *Dispatch*, wouldn't be able to help myself, and I wasn't sure I wanted to know any more about that Irish-looking guy than I already did . . . which was nothing at all, as you can fucking believe I hastened to tell myself. Neff couldn't be that weird a name anyway, only four letters, not like Shittendookus or Horecake, there must be thousands of Neffs, if you're talking coast to coast. This one didn't have to be the Neff I knew about, the one who loved Frank Sinatra records.

It would be better, in any case, to just leave and come back tomorrow. Tomorrow the picture of that guy with the pipe would be gone. Tomorrow somebody else's picture would be there, on the lower right corner of page one. People always dying, right? People who aren't superstars or anything, just famous enough to get their pictures down there in the lower right corner of page one. And sometimes people were puzzled about it, the way folks back home in Harkerville had been puzzled about Skipper's death—no alcohol in his blood, clear night, dry road, not the suicidal type.

The world is full of mysteries like that, though, and sometimes it's best not to solve them. Sometimes the solutions aren't, you know, too eventual.

But willpower has never been my strong point. I can't always keep away from the chocolate, even though I know my skin doesn't like it, and I couldn't keep away from the Columbus *Dispatch* that day. I went on inside and bought one.

I started home, then had a funny thought. The funny thought was that I didn't want a newspaper with Andrew Neff's picture on the front page going out with my trash. The trash pick-up guys came in a city truck, surely they didn't—*couldn't*—have anything to do with TransCorp, but . . .

There was this show me and Pug used to watch one summer back when we were little kids. *Golden Years*, it was called. You probably don't remember it. Anyway, there was a guy on that show who used to say 'Perfect paranoia is perfect awareness.' It was like his motto. And I sort of believe that.

Anyway, I went to the park instead of back home. I sat on a bench and read the story, and when I was done, I stuck the paper in a park trashbarrel. I didn't even like doing that, but hey—if Mr. Sharpton has got a guy following me

around and checking on every little thing I throw away, I'm fucked up the wazoo no matter what.

There was no doubt that Andrew Neff, age sixty-two, a columnist for the *Post* since 1970, had committed suicide. He took a bunch of pills that probably would have done the trick, then climbed into his bathtub, put a plastic bag over his head, and rounded the evening off by slitting his wrists. There was a man totally dedicated to avoiding counselling.

He left no note, though, and the autopsy showed no signs of disease. His colleagues scoffed at the idea of Alzheimer's, or even early senility. 'He was the sharpest guy I've ever known, right up to the day he died,' a guy named Pete Hamill said. 'He could have gone on *Challenge Jeopardy!* and run both boards. I have no idea why Andy did such a thing.' Hamill went on to say that one of Neff's 'charming oddities' was his complete refusal to participate in the computer revolution. No modems for him, no laptop word processor, no handheld spell-checker from Franklin Electronic Publishers. He didn't even have a CD player in his apartment, Hamill said; Neff claimed, perhaps only half-joking, that compact discs were the Devil's work. He loved the Chairman of the Board, but only on vinyl.

This guy Hamill and several others said Neff was unfailingly cheerful, right up to the afternoon he filed his last column, went home, drank a glass of wine, and then demo'd himself. One of the *Post*'s chatter columnists, Liz Smith, said she'd shared a piece of pie with him just before he left on that last day, and Neff had seemed 'a trifle distracted, but otherwise fine.'

Distracted, sure. With a headful of fouders, bews, and smims, you'd be distracted, too.

Neff, the piece went on, had been something of an anomaly on the *Post*, which sticks up for the more conservative view of life—I guess they don't come right out and recommend electrocuting welfare recipients after three years and still no job, but they *do* hint that it's always an option. I guess Neff was the house liberal. He wrote a column called 'Eneff Is Eneff,' and in it he talked about changing the way New York treated single teen mothers, suggested that maybe abortion wasn't always murder, argued that the low-income housing in the outer boroughs was a self-perpetuating hate machine. Near the end of his life, he'd been writing columns about the size of the military, and asking why we as a country felt we had to keep pouring on the bucks when there was, essentially, no one left to fight except for the terrorists. He said we'd do better to spend that money creating jobs. And *Post* readers, who would have crucified anyone else saying stuff like that, pretty much loved it when Neff laid it down. Because he was funny. Because he was charming. Maybe because he was Irish and had kissed the Blarney Stone.

That was about all. I started home. Somewhere along the way I took a detour, though, and ended up walking all over downtown. I zigged and zagged, walking down boulevards and cutting through parking lots, all the time thinking

about Andrew Neff climbing into his bathtub and putting a Baggie over his head. A big one, a gallon-size, keeps all your leftovers supermarket-fresh.

He was funny. He was charming. And I had killed him. Neff had opened my letter and it had gotten into his head, somehow. Judging by what I'd read in the paper, the special words and symbols took maybe three days to fuck him up enough to swallow the pills and climb into the tub.

He deserved it.

That's what Mr. Sharpton said about Skipper, and maybe he was right . . . that time. But did Neff deserve it? Was there shit about him I didn't know, did he maybe like little girls in the wrong way or push dope or go after people too weak to fight back, like Skipper had gone after me with the shopping cart?

We want to help you use your talent for the betterment of all mankind, Mr. Sharpton said, and surely that didn't mean making a guy off himself because he thought the Defense Department was spending too much money on smart-bombs. Paranoid shit like that is strictly for movies starring Steven Seagal and Jean-Claude Van Damme.

Then I had a bad idea—a scary idea.

Maybe TransCorp didn't want him dead because he wrote that stuff.

Maybe they wanted him dead because people—the wrong people—were starting to *think* about what he wrote.

'That's crazy,' I said, right out loud, and a woman looking into the window of Columbia City-Oh So Pretty turned around and gave me the old fish-eye.

I ended up at the public library around two o'clock, with my legs aching and my head throbbing. I kept seeing that guy in the bathtub, with his wrinkled old man's tits and white chest-hair, his nice smile gone, replaced by this vague Planet X look. I kept seeing him putting a Baggie over his head, humming a Sinatra tune ('My Way,' maybe) as he snugged it down tight, then peered through it the way you'd peer through a cloudy window, so he could see to slit the veins in his wrists. I didn't want to see that stuff, but I couldn't stop. My bombsight had turned into a telescope.

They had a computer room in the library, and you could get on the Internet at a very reasonable cost. I had to get a library card, too, but that was okay. A library card is good to have, you can never have too much ID.

It took me only three bucks' worth of time to find Ann Tevitch and call up the report of her death. The story started, I saw with a sinking sensation, in the bottom right-hand corner of page one, The Official Dead Folks' Nook, and then jumped to the obituary page. Professor Tevitch had been a pretty lady, blond, thirty-seven. In the photo she was holding her glasses in her hand, as if she wanted people to know she wore them . . . but as if she'd wanted people to see what pretty eyes she had, too. That made me feel sad and guilty.

Her death was startlingly like Skipper's—coming home from her office at UNM just after dark, maybe hurrying a little because it was her turn to make

supper, but what the hell, good driving conditions and great visibility. Her car—vanity license plate DNA FAN, I happened to know—had veered off the road, overturned, and landed in a drywash. She was still alive when someone spotted the headlights and found her, but there had never been any real hope; her injuries were too grave.

There was no alcohol in her system and her marriage was in good shape (no kids, at least, thank God for small favors), so the idea of suicide was farfetched. She had been looking forward to the future, had even talked about getting a computer to celebrate a new research grant. She'd refused to own a PC since 1988 or so; had lost some valuable data in one when it locked up, and had distrusted them ever since. She would use her department's equipment when she absolutely had to, but that was all.

The coroner's verdict had been accidental death.

Professor Ann Tevitch, a clinical biologist, had been in the forefront of West Coast AIDS research. Another scientist, this one in California, said that her death might set back the search for a cure five years. 'She was a key player,' he said. 'Smart, yes, but more—I once heard someone refer to her as 'a natural-born facilitator,' and that's as good a description as any. Ann was the kind of person who holds other people together. Her death is a great loss to the dozens of people who knew and loved her, but it's an even greater loss to this cause.'

Billy Unger was also easy enough to find. His picture topped page one of the Stovington *Weekly Courant* instead of getting stuck down there in The Dead Folks' Nook, but that might have been because there weren't many famous people in Stovington. Unger had been General William 'Roll Em' Unger, winner of the Silver Star and Bronze Star in Korea. During the Kennedy administration he was an Undersecretary of Defense (Acquisition Reform), and one of the really big war-hawks of that time. Kill the Russkies, drink their blood, keep America safe for the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, that sort of thing.

Then, around the time Lyndon Johnson was escalating the war in Vietnam, Billy Unger had a change of mind and heart. He began writing letters to newspapers. He started his op-ed page career by saying that we were handling the war wrong. He progressed to the idea that we were wrong to be in Vietnam at all. Then, around 1975 or so, he got to the point of saying *all* wars were wrong. That was okay with most Vermonters.

He served seven terms in the state legislature, starting in 1978. When a group of Progressive Democrats asked him to run for the U.S. Senate in 1996, he said he wanted to 'do some reading and consider his options.' The implication was that he would be ready for a national career in politics by 2000, 2002 at the latest. He was getting old, but Vermonters like old guys, I guess. 1996 went past without Unger declaring himself a candidate for anything (possibly because his wife died of cancer), and before 2002 came around, he bought

himself a big old dirt sandwich and ate every bite.

There was a small but loyal contingent in Stovington which claimed Roll Em's death was an accident, that Silver Star winners don't jump off their roofs even if they *have* lost a wife to cancer in the last year or so, but the rest pointed out that the guy probably hadn't been repairing the shingles—not in his nightshirt, not at two o'clock in the morning.

Suicide was the verdict.

Yeah. Right. Kiss my ass and go to Heaven.

XVIII

I left the library and thought I'd head home. Instead, I went back to the same park bench again. I sat there until the sun was low and the place had pretty much emptied out of kids and Frisbee-catching dogs. And although I'd been in Columbia City for three months by then, it was the latest I'd ever been out. That's sad, I guess. I thought I was living a life here, finally getting away from Ma and living a life, but all I've been doing is throwing a shadow.

If people, certain people, were checking up on me, they might wonder why the change in routine. So I got up, went on home, boiled up a bag of that shit-on-a-shingle stuff, and turned on my TV. I've got cable, the full package including premium movie channels, and I've never seen a single bill. How's that for an eventual deal? I turned on Cinemax. Rutger Hauer was playing a blind karate-fighter. I sat down on the couch beneath my fake Rembrandt and watched the show. I didn't see it, but I ate my chow and looked at it.

I thought about stuff. About a newspaper columnist who had liberal ideas and a conservative readership. About an AIDS researcher who served an important linking function with other AIDS researchers. About an old general who changed his mind. I thought about the fact that I only knew these three by name because they didn't have modems and e-mail capability.

There was other stuff to think about, too. Like how you could hypnotize a talented guy, or drug him, or maybe even expose him to other talented guys in order to keep him from asking any of the wrong questions or doing any of the wrong things. Like how you could make sure such a talented guy couldn't run away even if he happened to wake up to the truth. You'd do that by setting him up in what was, essentially, a cashless existence . . . a life where rule number one was no ratholing any extra dough, not even pocket-change. What sort of talented guy would fall for something like that? A naive one, with few friends and next to no self-image. A guy who would sell you his talented soul for a few groceries and seventy bucks a week, because he believes that's about what it's worth.

I didn't want to think about any of that. I tried to concentrate on Rutger Hauer, doing all that amusing blind karate shit (Pug would have laughed his ass off if he'd been there, believe me), so I wouldn't *have* to think about any of that.

Two hundred, for instance. There was a number I didn't want to think about. 200. 10 x 20, 40 x 5. CC, to the old Romans. At least two hundred times I'd pushed the button that brought the message DINKYMAIL SENT up on my screen.

It occurred to me—for the first time, as if I was finally waking up—that I was a murderer. A *mass* murderer.

Yes indeed. That's what it comes down to.

Good of mankind? Bad of mankind? Indifferent of mankind? Who makes those judgements? Mr. Sharpton? His bosses? *Their* bosses? And does it matter?

I decided it didn't matter a fuck in a rabbit-hutch. I further decided I really couldn't spend too much time moaning (even to myself) how I had been drugged, hypnotized, or exposed to some kind of mind-control. The truth was, I'd been doing what I was doing because I loved the feeling I got when I was composing the special letters, the feeling that there was a river of fire running through the center of my head.

Mostly, I'd been doing it because I could.

'That's not true,' I said . . . but not real loud. I whispered it under my breath. They probably don't have any bugs planted here, I'm sure they don't, but it's best to be safe.

I started writing this . . . what is it? A report, maybe. I started writing this report later that night . . . as soon as the Rutger Hauer movie was over, in fact. I write in a notebook, though, not on my computer, and I write in plain old English. No sankofites, no bews, no smims. There's a loose floor-tile under the Ping-Pong table down in the basement. That's where I keep my report. I just now looked back at how I started. *I've got a good job now*, I wrote, *and no reason to feel glum*. Idiotic. But of course, any fool who can pucker is apt to whistle past the graveyard.

When I went to bed that night, I dreamed I was in the parking lot of the Supr Savr. Pug was there, wearing his red duster and a hat on his head like the one Mickey Mouse wore in *Fantasia*—that's the movie where Mickey played the Sorcerer's Apprentice. Halfway across the parking lot, shopping carts were lined up in a row. Pug would raise his hand, then lower it. Each time he did this, a cart would start rolling by itself, gathering speed, rushing across the lot until it crashed into the brick side of the supermarket. They were piling up there, a glittering junkheap of metal and wheels. For once in his life, Pug wasn't smiling. I wanted to ask him what he was doing and what it meant, but of course I knew.

'He's been good to me,' I told Pug in this dream. It was Mr. Sharp-ton I meant, of course. 'He's been really, really eventual.'

Pug turned fully to me then, and I saw it wasn't Pug at all. It was Skipper, and his head had been smashed in all the way down to the eyebrows. Shattered hunks of skull stuck up in a circle, making him look like he was wearing a bone

crown.

'You're not looking through a bombsight,' Skipper said, and grinned. 'You *are* the bombsight. How do you like that, Dinkster?'

I woke up in the dark of my room, sweating, with my hands over my mouth to hold in a scream, so I guess I didn't like it very much.

XIX

Writing this has been a sad education, let me tell you. It's like hey, Dink, welcome to the real world. Mostly it's the image of grinding up dollar bills in the kitchen pig that comes to me when I think about what has happened to me, but I know that's only because it's easier to think of grinding up money (or chucking it into the storm-drain) than it is to think about grinding up people. Sometimes I hate myself, sometimes I'm scared for my immortal soul (if I have one), and sometimes I'm just embarrassed. Trust me, Mr. Sharpton said, and I did. I mean, duh, how dumb can you get? I tell myself I'm just a kid, the same age as the kids who crewed those B-25s I sometimes think about, that kids are allowed to be dumb. But I wonder if that's true when lives are at stake.

And, of course, I'm still doing it.

Yes.

I thought at first that I wouldn't be able to, no more than the kids in *Mary Poppins* could keep floating around the house when they lost their happy thoughts . . . but I could. And once I sat down in front of the computer screen and that river of fire started to flow, I was lost. You see (at least I *think* you do), this is what I was put on Planet Earth for. Can I be blamed for doing the thing that finishes me off, that completes me?

Answer: yes. Absolutely.

But I can't stop. Sometimes I tell myself that I've gone on because if I do stop—maybe even for a day—they'll know I've caught on, and the cleaners will make an unscheduled stop. Except what they'll clean up this time will be *me*. But that's not why. I do it because I'm just another addict, same as a guy smoking crack in an alley or some chick taking a spike in her arm. I do it because of the hateful fucking rush, I do it because when I'm working in DINKY'S NOTEBOOK, everything's eventual. It's like being caught in a candy trap. And it's all the fault of that dork who came out of News Plus with his fucking *Dispatch* open. If not for him, I'd still see nothing but cloud-hazy buildings in the crosshairs. No people, just targets.

You are the bombsight, Skipper said in my dream. *You are the bomb-sight, Dinkster.*

That's true. I know it is. Horrible but true. I'm just another tool, just the lens the *real* bombardier looks through. Just the button he pushes.

What bombardier, you ask?

Oh come on, get real.

I thought of calling him, how's that for crazy? Or maybe it's not. 'Call me anytime, Dink, even three in the morning.' That's what the man said, and I'm pretty sure that's what the man meant—about that, at least, Mr. Sharpton wasn't lying.

I thought of calling him and saying, 'You want to know what hurts the most, Mr. Sharpton? That thing you said about how I could make the world a better place by getting rid of people like Skipper. The truth is, *you're* the guys like Skipper.'

Sure. And I'm the shopping cart they chase people with, laughing and barking and making race-car sounds. I work cheap, too . . . at bargain-basement rates. So far I've killed over two hundred people, and what did it cost TransCorp? A little house in a third-rate Ohio town, seventy bucks a week, and a Honda automobile. Plus cable TV. Don't want to forget that.

I stood there for awhile, looking at the telephone, then put it down again. Couldn't say any of that. It would be the same as putting a Baggie over my head and then slitting my wrists.

So what am I going to do?

Oh God, what am I going to do?

XX

It's been two weeks since I last took this notebook out from under the basement tile and wrote in it. Twice I've heard the mail-slot clack on Thursdays, during *As the World Turns*, and gone out into the hall to get my money. I've gone to four movies, all in the afternoon. Twice I've ground up money in the kitchen pig, and thrown my loose change down the storm-drain, hiding what I was doing behind the blue plastic recycling basket when I put it down on the curb. One day I went down to News Plus, thinking I'd get a copy of *Variations* or *Forum*, but there was a headline on the front of the *Dispatch* that once again took away any sexy feelings I might have had. POPE DIES OF HEART ATTACK ON PEACE MISSION, it said.

Did I do it? Nah, the story said he died in Asia, and I've been sticking to the American Northwest these last few weeks. But I could have been the one. If I'd been nosing around in Pakistan last week, I very likely *would* have been the one.

Two weeks of living in a nightmare.

Then, this morning, there was something in the mail. Not a letter, I've only gotten three or four of those (all from Pug, and now he's stopped writing, and I miss him so much), but a Kmart advertising circular. It flopped open just as I was putting it into the trash, and something fluttered out. A note, printed in block letters. DO YOU WANT OUT? it read. IF YES, SEND MESSAGE '*DON'T STAND SO CLOSE TO ME*' IS BEST POLICE SONG.

My heart was beating hard and fast, the way it did on the day I came into my

house and saw the Rembrandt print over the sofa where the velvet clowns had been.

Below the message, someone had drawn a foudler. It was harmless just sitting there all by itself, but looking at it still made all the spit in my mouth dry up. It was a real message, the foudler proved it, but who had it come from? And how did the sender know about me?

I went into the study, walking slowly with my head down, thinking. A message tucked into an advertising circular. Hand-printed and tucked into an advertising circular. That meant someone close. Someone in town.

I turned on my computer and modem. I called the Columbia City Public Library, where you can surf cheap . . . and in relative anonymity. Anything I sent would go through TransCorp in Chicago, but that wasn't going to matter. They weren't going to suspect a thing. Not if I was careful.

And, of course, if there was anybody there.

There was. My computer connected with the library's computer, and a menu flashed on my screen. For just a moment, something else flashed on my screen, as well.

A smim.

In the lower righthand corner. Just a flicker.

I sent the message about the best Police song and added a little touch of my own down in The Dead Folks' Nook: a sankofite.

I could write more—things have started to happen, and I believe that soon they'll be happening fast—but I don't think it would be safe. Up to now, I've just talked about myself. If I went any further, I'd have to talk about other people. But there *are* two more things I want to say.

First, that I'm sorry for what I've done—for what I did to Skipper, even. I'd take it back if I could. I didn't know what I was doing. I know that's a piss-poor excuse, but it's the only one I have.

Second, I've got it in mind to write one more special letter . . . the most special of all.

I have Mr. Sharpton's e-mail address. And I have something even better: a memory of how he stroked his lucky tie as we sat in his big expensive Mercedes. The loving way he ran his palm over those silk swords. So, you see, I know just enough about him. I know just what to add to his letter, how to make it eventual. I can close my eyes and see one word floating there in the darkness behind my lids—floating there like black fire, deadly as an arrow fired into the brain, and it's the only word that matters:

EXCALIBUR.

Task I

Russian equivalents for the following English words and expressions.

Shit out of smb, he has been truthful so far, was never much for loving and comforting, whip on my head, be into smb, Reservation, to sugar-coat, splashed on, hung up on the second ring, file-cabinet, rummaging through it, hypnotize, junk up the conscious part, screw up your special ability, the tip of my tongue, 'baseline instructions, call on, drag smth of smb, subconscious, snail mail, suicide, Perfect paranoia is perfect awareness, motto, unfailingly cheerfulm, natural-born facilitator, hold other people together, checking up on smb, grinding up money, storm-drain, in the crosshairs, targets, WANT OUT, the spit in my mouth dry up, EXCALIBUR.

Task II

Answer the following questions.

- 1 What did Mr. Sharpton told Ma, when her son left for Peoria?
- 2 Whom did Dink miss?
- 3 What did Dink expect to find in Peoria?
- 4 How many times did Dink see Mr. Sharpton?
- 5 How did Dink spend his time?
- 6 How did Dink treated his victims, himself after all?
- 7 Who was the first victim of Dink?

Task III Describe...

Dink's mother
The behavior of Dink at school
The nightmares
Andrew Neff
Ann Televich

Task IV

**Logical
questions**

- 1 What place in the story Dink's nightmares play? How King develop the personality, psychology of the hero?
- 2 What was the use of Dink's money?
- 3 Was the boy happy?
- 4 How do you think, what's the meaning of the next frase: SEND MESSAGE *'DON'T STAND SO CLOSE TO ME' IS BEST POLICE SONG.*

5 *Will the boy become normal?*

6 *Will the boy kill Mr. Sharpton?*

7 *What does the Story ends with the word EXCALIBUR?*

Task V

Use prepositions where necessary.

If I'd been nosing around .. Pakistan last week, I very likely
would have been the one. I woke up .. the dark of my room.

You'd do that... setting him what was, essentially, a cashless
existence ...

I ended «. ... the public library around two o'clock,... my legs
aching and my head throbbing. His colleagues scoffed ...the
idea ... Alzheimer's, or even early senility.

It was like seeing faces swim you .. a second inside your Norden bomb-sight.

Stop making this hard ... both ... us.

I wake .. half my bed and ... the floor, screaming.

I could feel it... my face, a big, happy smile.

I clicked .. the top one, curious and a little afraid ...what might
pop... .

Surprised the shit .. me.

Task VI. Reproduce the following dialogues in chapter: 11, 14, 18

1408

1997

Стивен КИНГ

Кровь и дым (Blood and Smoke), 1999

Всё возможно (Everything's Eventual), 2002

As well as the ever-popular premature burial, every writer of shock/suspense tales should write at least one story about the Ghostly Room At The Inn. This is my version of that story. The only unusual thing about it is that I never intended to finish it. I wrote the first three or four pages as part of an appendix for my On Writing book, wanting to show readers how a story evolves from first draft to second. Most of all, I wanted to provide concrete examples of the principles I'd been blathering about in the text. But something nice happened: the story seduced me, and I ended up writing all of it. I think that what scares us varies widely from one individual to the next (I've never been able to understand why Peruvian boomslangs give some people the creeps, for example), but this story scared me while I was working on it. It originally appeared as part of an audio compilation called Blood and Smoke, and the audio scared me even more. Scared the hell out of me. But hotel rooms are just naturally creepy places, don't you think? I mean, how many people have slept in that bed before you? How many of them were sick? How many were losing their minds? How many were perhaps thinking about reading a few final verses from the Bible in the drawer of the nightstand beside them and then hanging themselves in the closet beside the TV? Brrrr. In any case, let's check in, shall we? Here's your key . . . and you might take time to notice what those four innocent numbers add up to. It's just down the hall.

I

Mike Enslin was still in the revolving door when he saw Olin, the manager of the Hotel Dolphin, sitting in one of the overstuffed lobby chairs. Mike's heart sank. *Maybe I should have brought the lawyer along again, after all*, he thought. Well, too late now. And even if Olin had decided to throw up another roadblock or two between Mike and room 1408, that wasn't all bad; there were compensations.

Olin was crossing the room with one pudgy hand held out as Mike left the revolving door. The Dolphin was on Sixty-first Street, around the corner from

Fifth Avenue, small but smart. A man and a woman dressed in evening clothes passed Mike as he reached for Olin's hand, switching his small overnight case to his left hand in order to do it. The woman was blond, dressed in black, of course, and the light, flowery smell of her perfume seemed to summarize New York. On the mezzanine level, someone was playing 'Night and Day' in the bar, as if to underline the summary.

'Mr. Enslin. Good evening.'

'Mr. Olin. Is there a problem?'

Olin looked pained. For a moment he glanced around the small, smart lobby, as if for help. At the concierge's stand, a man was discussing theater tickets with his wife while the concierge himself watched them with a small, patient smile. At the front desk, a man with the rumpled look one only got after long hours in Business Class was discussing his reservation with a woman in a smart black suit that could itself have doubled for evening wear. It was business as usual at the Hotel Dolphin. There was help for everyone except poor Mr. Olin, who had fallen into the writer's clutches.

'Mr. Olin?' Mike repeated.

'Mr. Enslin . . . could I speak to you for a moment in my office?' Well, and why not? It would help the section on room 1408, add to the ominous tone the readers of his books seemed to crave, and that wasn't all. Mike Enslin hadn't been sure until now, in spite of all the backing and filling; now he was. Olin was really afraid of room 1408, and of what might happen to Mike there tonight.

'Of course, Mr. Olin.'

Olin, the good host, reached for Mike's bag. 'Allow me.'

'I'm fine with it,' Mike said. 'Nothing but a change of clothes and a toothbrush.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes,' Mike said. 'I'm already wearing my lucky Hawaiian shirt.' He smiled. 'It's the one with the ghost repellent.'

Olin didn't smile back. He sighed instead, a little round man in a dark cutaway coat and a neatly knotted tie. 'Very good, Mr. Enslin. Follow me.'

The hotel manager had seemed tentative in the lobby, almost beaten. In his oak-paneled office, with the pictures of the hotel on the walls (the Dolphin had opened in 1910—Mike might publish without the benefit of reviews in the journals or the big-city papers, but he did his research), Olin seemed to gain assurance again. There was a Persian carpet on the floor. Two standing lamps cast a mild yellow light. A desk-lamp with a green lozenge-shaped shade stood on the desk, next to a humidior. And next to the humidior were Mike Enslin's last three books. Paperback editions, of course; there had been no hardbacks. *Mine host has been doing a little research of his own*, Mike thought.

Mike sat down in front of the desk. He expected Olin to sit behind the desk,

but Olin surprised him. He took the chair beside Mike's, crossed his legs, then leaned forward over his tidy little belly to touch the humidor.

'Cigar, Mr. Enslin?'

'No, thank you. I don't smoke.'

Olin's eyes shifted to the cigarette behind Mike's right ear—parked on a jaunty jut the way an old-time wisecracking reporter might have parked his next smoke just below the PRESS tag stuck in the band of his fedora. The cigarette had become so much a part of him that for a moment Mike honestly didn't know what Olin was looking at. Then he laughed, took it down, looked at it himself, and looked back at Olin.

'Haven't had a one in nine years,' he said. 'Had an older brother who died of lung cancer. I quit after he died. The cigarette behind the ear . . .' He shrugged. 'Part affectation, part superstition, I guess. Like the Hawaiian shirt. Or the cigarettes you sometimes see on people's desks or walls, mounted in a little box with a sign saying BREAK GLASS IN CASE OF EMERGENCY. Is 1408 a smoking room, Mr. Olin? Just in case nuclear war breaks out?'

'As a matter of fact, it is.'

'Well,' Mike said heartily, 'that's one less worry in the watches of the night.'

Mr. Olin sighed again, but this sigh didn't have the disconsolate quality of his lobby-sigh. Yes, it was the office, Mike reckoned. *Olin's* office, his special place. Even this afternoon, when Mike had come accompanied by Robertson, the lawyer, Olin had seemed less flustered once they were in here. And why not? Where else could you feel in charge, if not in your special place? Olin's office was a room with good pictures on the walls, a good rug on the floor, and good cigars in the humidor. A lot of managers had no doubt conducted a lot of business in here since 1910; in its own way it was as New York as the blond in her black off-the-shoulder dress, her smell of perfume, and her unarticulated promise of sleek New York sex in the small hours of the morning.

'You still don't think I can talk you out of this idea of yours, do you?' Olin asked.

'I know you can't,' Mike said, replacing the cigarette behind his ear. He didn't slick his hair back with Vitalis or Wildroot Cream Oil, as those colorful fedora-wearing scribblers of yore had, but he still changed the cigarette every day, just as he changed his underwear. You sweat back there behind your ears; if he examined the cigarette at the end of the day before throwing its unsmoked deadly length into the toilet, Mike could see the faint yellow-orange residue of that sweat on the thin white paper. It did not increase the temptation to light up. How he had smoked for almost twenty years—thirty butts a day, sometimes forty—was now beyond him. *Why* he had done it was an even better question.

Olin picked up the little stack of paperbacks from the blotter. 'I sincerely hope you're wrong.'

Mike ran open the zipper on the side pocket of his overnight bag. He brought out a Sony minicorder. 'Would you mind if I taped our conversation, Mr. Olin?'

Olin waved a hand. Mike pushed RECORD and the little red light came on. The reels began to turn.

Olin, meanwhile, was shuffling slowly through the stack of books, reading the titles. As always when he saw his books in someone else's hands, Mike Enslin felt the oddest mix of emotions: pride, unease, amusement, defiance, and shame. He had no business feeling ashamed of them, they had kept him nicely over these last five years, and he didn't have to share any of the profits with a packager ('book-whores' was what his agent called them, perhaps partly in envy), because he had come up with the concept himself. Although after the first book had sold so well, only a moron could have missed the concept. What was there to do after *Frankenstein* but *Bride of Frankenstein*?

Still, he had gone to Iowa. He had studied with Jane Smiley. He had once been on a panel with Stanley Elkin. He had once aspired (absolutely no one in his current circle of friends and acquaintances had any least inkling of this) to be published as a Yale Younger Poet. And, when the hotel manager began speaking the titles aloud, Mike found himself wishing he hadn't challenged Olin with the recorder. Later he would listen to Olin's measured tones and imagine he heard contempt in them. He touched the cigarette behind his ear without being aware of it.

'*Ten Nights in Ten Haunted Houses*,' Olin read. '*Ten Nights in Ten Haunted Graveyards*. *Ten Nights in Ten Haunted Castles*.' He looked up at Mike with a faint smile at the corners of his mouth. 'Got to Scotland on that one. Not to mention the Vienna Woods. And all tax-deductible, correct? Hauntings are, after all, your business.'

'Do you have a point?'

'You're sensitive about these, aren't you?' Olin asked.

'Sensitive, yes. Vulnerable, no. If you're hoping to persuade me out of your hotel by critiquing my books—'

'No, not at all. I was curious, that's all. I sent Marcel—he's the concierge on days—out to get them two days ago, when you first appeared with your . . . request.'

'It was a demand, not a request. Still is. You heard Mr. Robertson; New York State law—not to mention two federal civil rights laws—forbids you to deny me a specific room, if I request that specific room and the room is vacant. And 1408 is vacant. 1408 is *always* vacant these days.'

But Mr. Olin was not to be diverted from the subject of Mike's last three books—*New York Times* best-sellers, all—just yet. He simply shuffled through them a third time. The mellow lamplight reflected off their shiny covers. There was a lot of purple on the covers. Purple sold scary books better than any other color, Mike had been told.

'I didn't get a chance to dip into these until earlier this evening,' Olin said. 'I've been quite busy. I usually am. The Dolphin is small by New York standards, but we run at ninety per cent occupancy and usually a problem

comes through the front door with every guest.'

'Like me.'

Olin smiled a little. 'I'd say you're a bit of a special problem, Mr. Enslin. You and your Mr. Robertson and all your threats.'

Mike felt nettled all over again. He had made no threats, unless Robertson himself was a threat. And he had been forced to use the lawyer, as a man might be forced to use a crowbar on a rusty lockbox which would no longer accept the key.

The lockbox isn't yours, a voice inside told him, but the laws of the state and the country said differently. The laws said that room 1408 in the Hotel Dolphin was his if he wanted it, and as long as no one else had it first.

He became aware that Olin was watching him, still with that faint smile. As if he had been following Mike's interior dialogue almost word for word. It was an uncomfortable feeling, and Mike was finding this an unexpectedly uncomfortable meeting. It felt as if he had been on the defensive ever since he'd taken out the minicorder (which was usually intimidating) and turned it on.

'If any of this has a point, Mr. Olin, I'm afraid I lost sight of it a turn or two back. And I've had a long day. If our wrangle over room 1408 is really over, I'd like to go on upstairs and—'

'I read one . . . uh, what would you call them? Essays? Tales?' Bill-payers was what Mike called them, but he didn't intend to say that with the tape running. Not even though it was his tape.

'Story,' Olin decided. 'I read one story from each book. The one about the Rilsby house in Kansas from your *Haunted Houses* book—'

'Ah, yes. The axe murders.' The fellow who had chopped up all six members of the Eugene Rilsby family had never been caught.

'Exactly so. And the one about the night you spent camped out on the graves of the lovers in Alaska who committed suicide—the ones people keep claiming to see around Sitka—and the account of your night in Gartsby Castle. That was actually quite amusing. I was surprised.'

Mike's ear was carefully tuned to catch the undernotes of contempt in even the blandest comments about his *Ten Nights* books, and he had no doubt that he sometimes heard contempt that wasn't there—few creatures on earth are so paranoid as the writer who believes, deep in his heart, that he is slumming, Mike had discovered—but he didn't believe there was any contempt here.

'Thank you,' he said. 'I guess.' He glanced down at his minicorder. Usually its little red eye seemed to be watching the other guy, daring him to say the wrong thing. This evening it seemed to be looking at Mike himself.

'Oh yes, I meant it as a compliment.' Olin tapped the books. 'I expect to finish these . . . but for the writing. It's the writing I like. I was surprised to find myself laughing at your quite unsupernatural adventures in Gartsby Castle, and I was surprised to find you as good as you are. As *subtle* as you are. I expected more hack and slash.'

Mike steeled himself for what would almost certainly come next, Olin's variation of *What's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this*. Olin the urbane hotelier, host to blond women who wore black dresses out into the night, hirer of weedy, retiring men who wore tuxes and tinkled old standards like 'Night and Day' in the hotel bar. Olin who probably read Proust on his nights off.

'But they are disturbing, too, these books. If I hadn't looked at them, I don't think I would have bothered waiting for you this evening. Once I saw that lawyer with his briefcase, I knew you meant to stay in that goddamned room, and that nothing I could say was apt to dissuade you. But the books . . .'

Mike reached out and snapped off the minicorder—that little red staring eye was starting to give him the willies. 'Do you want to know why I'm bottom-feeding? Is that it?'

'I assume you do it for the money,' Olin said mildly. 'And you're feeding a long way from the bottom, at least in my estimation . . . although it's interesting that you would jump so nimbly to such a conclusion.'

Mike felt warmth rising in his cheeks. No, this wasn't going the way he had expected at all; he had *never* snapped his recorder off in the middle of a conversation. But Olin wasn't what he had seemed. *I was led astray by his hands*, Mike thought. *Those pudgy little hotel manager's hands with their neat white crescents of manicured nail*.

'What concerned me—what *frightened* me—is that I found myself reading the work of an intelligent, talented man who doesn't believe *one single thing* he has written.'

That wasn't exactly true, Mike thought. He'd written perhaps two dozen stories he believed in, had actually published a few. He'd written reams of poetry he believed in during his first eighteen months in New York, when he had starved on the payroll of *The Village Voice*. But did he believe that the headless ghost of Eugene Rilsby walked his deserted Kansas farmhouse by moonlight? No. He had spent the night in that farmhouse, camped out on the dirty linoleum hills of the kitchen floor, and had seen nothing scarier than two mice trundling along the baseboard. He had spent a hot summer night in the ruins of the Transylvanian castle where Vlad Tepes supposedly still held court; the only vampires to actually show up had been a fog of European mosquitoes. During the night camped out by the grave of serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer, a white, blood-streaked figure waving a knife *had* come at him out of the two o'clock darkness, but the giggles of the apparition's friends had given him away, and Mike Enslin hadn't been terribly impressed, anyway; he knew a teenage ghost waving a rubber knife when he saw one. But he had no intention of telling any of this to Olin. He couldn't afford —

Except he *could*. The minicorder (a mistake from the getgo, he now understood) was stowed away again, and this meeting was about as off-the-record as you could get. Also, he had come to admire Olin in a weird

way. And when you admired a man, you wanted to tell him the truth.

'No,' he said, 'I don't believe in ghoulies and ghosties and long-leggety beasties. I think it's good there are no such things, because I don't believe there's any good Lord that can protect us from them, either. That's what I believe, but I've kept an open mind from the very start. I may never win the Pulitzer Prize for investigating The Barking Ghost in Mount Hope Cemetery, but I would have written fairly about him if he had shown up.'

Olin said something, only a single word, but too low for Mike to make it out.

'I beg pardon?'

'I said no.' Olin looked at him almost apologetically.

Mike sighed. Olin thought he was a liar. When you got to that point, the only choices were to put up your dukes or disengage totally from the discussion. 'Why don't we leave this for another day, Mr. Olin? I'll just go on upstairs and brush my teeth. Perhaps I'll see Kevin O'Malley materialize behind me in the bathroom mirror.'

Mike started to get out of his chair, and Olin put out one of his pudgy, carefully manicured hands to stop him. 'I'm not calling you a liar,' he said, 'but, Mr. Enslin, *you don't believe*. Ghosts rarely appear to those who don't believe in them, and when they do, they are rarely seen. Why, Eugene Rilsby could have bowled his severed head all the way down the front hall of his home, and you wouldn't have heard a thing!'

Mike stood up, then bent to grab his overnight case. 'If that's so, I won't have anything to worry about in room 1408, will I?'

'But you will,' Olin said. 'You will. Because there are no ghosts in room 1408 and never have been. There's *something* in there—I've felt it myself—but it's not a spirit presence. In an abandoned house or an old castle keep, your unbelief may serve you as protection. In room 1408, it will only render you more vulnerable. Don't do it, Mr. Enslin. That's why I waited for you tonight, to ask you, *beg* you, not to do it. Of all the people on earth who don't belong in that room, the man who wrote those cheerful, exploitative true-ghost books leads the list.'

Mike heard this and didn't hear it at the same time. *And you turned off your tape recorder!* he was raving. *He embarrasses me into turning off my tape recorder and then he turns into Boris Karloff hosting The All-Star Spook Weekend! Fuck it. I'll quote him anyway. If he doesn't like it, let him sue me.*

All at once he was burning to get upstairs, not just so he could start getting his long night in a corner hotel room over with, but because he wanted to transcribe what Olin had just said while it was still fresh in his mind.

'Have a drink, Mr. Enslin.'

'No, I really—'

Mr. Olin reached into his coat pocket and brought out a key on a long brass paddle. The brass looked old and scratched and tarnished. Embossed on it were the numbers **1408**. 'Please,' Olin said. 'Humor me. You give me ten more

minutes of your time—long enough to consume a short Scotch—and I'll hand you this key. I would give almost anything to be able to change your mind, but I like to think I can recognize the inevitable when I see it.'

'You still use actual keys here?' Mike asked. 'That's sort of a nice touch. Antiquey.'

'The Dolphin went to a MagCard system in 1979, Mr. Enslin, the year I took the job as manager. 1408 is the only room in the house that still opens with a key. There was no need to put a MagCard lock on its door, because there's never anyone inside; the room was last occupied by a paying guest in 1978.'

'You're shitting me!' Mike sat down again, and unlimbered his minicorder again. He pushed the RECORD button and said, 'House manager Olin claims 1408 not rented to a paying guest in over twenty years.'

'It is just as well that 1408 has never needed a MagCard lock on its door, because I am completely positive the device wouldn't work. Digital wristwatches don't work in room 1408. Sometimes they run backward, sometimes they simply go out, but you can't tell time with one. Not in room 1408, you can't. The same is true of pocket calculators and cell-phones. If you're wearing a beeper, Mr. Enslin, I advise you to turn it off, because once you're in room 1408, it will start beeping at will.' He paused. 'And turning it off isn't guaranteed to work, either; it may turn itself back on. The only sure cure is to pull the batteries.' He pushed the STOP button on the minicorder without examining the buttons; Mike supposed he used a similar model for dictating memos. 'Actually, Mr. Enslin, the only sure cure is to stay the hell out of that room.'

'I can't do that,' Mike said, taking his minicorder back and stowing it once more, 'but I think I can take time for that drink.'

While Olin poured from the fumed-oak bar beneath an oil painting of Fifth Avenue at the turn of the century, Mike asked him how, if the room had been continuously unoccupied since 1978, Olin knew that high-tech gadgets didn't work inside.

'I didn't intend to give you the impression that no one had set foot through the door since 1978,' Olin replied. 'For one thing, there are maids in once a month to give the place a light turn. That means—'

Mike, who had been working on *Ten Haunted Hotel Rooms* for about four months at that point, said: 'I know what it means.' A light turn in an unoccupied room would include opening the windows to change the air, dusting, enough Ty-D-Bowl in the can to turn the water briefly blue, a change of the towels. Probably not the bed-linen, not on a light turn. He wondered if he should have brought his sleeping-bag.

Crossing the Persian from the bar with their drinks in his hands, Olin seemed to read Mike's thought on his face. 'The sheets were changed this very afternoon, Mr. Enslin.'

'Why don't you drop that? Call me Mike.'

'I don't think I'd be comfortable with that,' Olin said, handing Mike his drink. 'Here's to you.'

'And you.' Mike lifted his glass, meaning to clink it against Olin's, but Olin pulled his back.

'No, to you, Mr. Enslin. I insist. Tonight we should both drink to you. You'll need it.'

Mike sighed, clinked the rim of his glass against the rim of Olin's, and said: 'To me. You would have been right at home in a horror movie, Mr. Olin. You could have played the gloomy old butler who tries to warn the young married couple away from Castle Doom.'

Olin sat down. 'It's a part I haven't had to play often, thank God. Room 1408 isn't listed on any of the websites dealing with paranormal locations or psychic hotspots—'

That'll change after my book, Mike thought, sipping his drink.

'—and there are no ghost-tours with stops at the Hotel Dolphin, although they do tour through the Sherry-Netherland, the Plaza, and the Park Lane. We have kept 1408 as quiet as possible . . . although, of course, the history has always been there for a researcher who is both lucky and tenacious.'

Mike allowed himself a small smile.

'Veronique changed the sheets,' Olin said. 'I accompanied her. You should feel flattered, Mr. Enslin; it's almost like having your night's linen put on by royalty. Veronique and her sister came to the Dolphin as chambermaids in 1971 or '72. Vee, as we call her, is the Hotel Dolphin's longest-running employee, with at least six years' seniority over me. She has since risen to head housekeeper. I'd guess she hadn't changed a sheet in six years before today, but she used to do all the turns in 1408—she and her sister—until about 1992. Veronique and Celeste were twins, and the bond between them seemed to make them . . . how shall I put it? Not *immune* to 1408, but its equal . . . at least for the short periods of time needed to give a room a light turn.'

'You're not going to tell me this Veronique's sister died in the room, are you?'

'No, not at all,' Olin said. 'She left service here around 1988, suffering from ill health. But I don't rule out the idea that 1408 may have played a part in her worsening mental and physical condition.'

'We seem to have built a rapport here, Mr. Olin. I hope I don't snap it by telling you I find that ridiculous.'

Olin laughed. 'So hardheaded for a student of the airy world.'

'I owe it to my readers,' Mike said blandly.

'I suppose I simply could have left 1408 as it is anyway during most of its days and nights,' the hotel manager mused. 'Door locked, lights off, shades drawn to keep the sun from fading the carpet, coverlet pulled up, doorknob breakfast menu on the bed . . . but I can't bear to think of the air getting stuffy and old, like the air in an attic. Can't bear to think of the dust piling up until it's

thick and fluffy. What does that make me, persnickety or downright obsessive?'

'It makes you a hotel manager.'

'I suppose. In any case, Vee and Cee turned that room—very quick, just in and out—until Cee retired and Vee got her first big promotion. After that, I got other maids to do it in pairs, always picking ones who got on well with each other—'

'Hoping for that bond to withstand the bogies?'

'Hoping for that bond, yes. And you can make fun of the room 1408 bogies as much as you want, Mr. Enslin, but you'll feel them almost at once, of that I'm confident. Whatever there is in that room, it's not shy.'

'On many occasions—all that I could manage—I went with the maids, to supervise them.' He paused, then added, almost reluctantly, 'To pull them out, I suppose, if anything really awful started to happen. Nothing ever did. There were several who had weeping fits, one who had a laughing fit—I don't know why someone laughing out of control should be more frightening than someone sobbing, but it is—and a number who fainted. Nothing too terrible, however. I had time enough over the years to make a few primitive experiments—beepers and cell-phones and such—but nothing too terrible. Thank God.' He paused again, then added in a queer, flat tone: 'One of them went blind.'

'What?'

'She went blind. Rommie Van Gelder, that was. She was dusting the top of the television, and all at once she began to scream. I asked her what was wrong. She dropped her dustrag and put her hands over her eyes and screamed that she was blind . . . but that she could see the most awful colors. They went away almost as soon as I got her out through the door, and by the time I got her down the hallway to the elevator, her sight had begun to come back.'

'You're telling me all this just to scare me, Mr. Olin, aren't you? To scare me off.'

'Indeed I am not. You know the history of the room, beginning with the suicide of its first occupant.'

Mike did. Kevin O'Malley, a sewing machine salesman, had taken his life on October 13, 1910, a leaper who had left a wife and seven children behind.

'Five men and one woman have jumped from that room's single window, Mr. Enslin. Three women and one man have overdosed with pills in that room, two found in bed, two found in the bathroom, one in the tub and one sitting slumped on the toilet. A man hanged himself in the closet in 1970—'

'Henry Storkin,' Mike said. 'That one was probably accidental . . . erotic asphyxia.'

'Perhaps. There was also Randolph Hyde, who slit his wrists, and then cut off his genitals for good measure while he was bleeding to death. *That* one wasn't erotic asphyxiation. The point is, Mr. Enslin, that if you can't be swayed from your intention by a record of twelve suicides in sixty-eight years, I doubt if the gasps and fibrillations of a few chambermaids will stop you.'

Gasps and fibrillations, that's nice, Mike thought, and wondered if he could steal it for the book.

'Few of the pairs who have turned 1408 over the years care to go back more than a few times,' Olin said, and finished his drink in a tidy little gulp.

'Except for the French twins.'

'Vee and Cee, that's true.' Olin nodded.

Mike didn't care much about the maids and their . . . what had Olin called them? Their gasps and fibrillations. He did feel mildly rankled by Olin's enumeration of the suicides . . . as if Mike was so thick he had missed, not the *fact* of them, but their *import*. Except, really, there *was* no import. Both Abraham Lincoln and John Kennedy had vice presidents named Johnson; the names Lincoln and Kennedy had seven letters; both Lincoln and Kennedy had been elected in years ending in 60. What did all of these coincidences prove? Not a damned thing.

'The suicides will make a wonderful segment for my book,' Mike said, 'but since the tape recorder is off, I can tell you they amount to what a statistician resource of mine calls 'the cluster effect.'"

'Charles Dickens called it 'the potato effect,'" Olin said.

'I beg your pardon?'

'When Jacob Marley's ghost first speaks to Scrooge, Scrooge tells him he could be nothing but a blob of mustard or a bit of underdone potato.'

'Is that supposed to be funny?' Mike asked, a trifle coldly.

'Nothing about this strikes me as funny, Mr. Enslin. Nothing at all. Listen very closely, please. Vee's sister, Celeste, died of a heart attack. At that point, she was suffering mid-stage Alzheimer's, a disease which struck her very early in life.'

'Yet her sister is fine and well, according to what you said earlier. An American success story, in fact. As you are yourself, Mr. Olin, from the look of you. Yet you've been in and out of room 1408 how many times? A hundred? Two hundred?'

'For very short periods of time,' Olin said. 'It's perhaps like entering a room filled with poison gas. If one holds one's breath, one may be all right. I see you don't like that comparison. You no doubt find it overwrought, perhaps ridiculous. Yet I believe it's a good one.'

He steepled his fingers beneath his chin.

'It's also possible that some people react more quickly and more violently to whatever lives in that room, just as some people who go scuba-diving are more prone to the bends than others. Over the Dolphin's near-century of operation, the hotel staff has grown ever more aware that 1408 is a poisoned room. It has become part of the house history, Mr. Enslin. No one talks about it, just as no one mentions the fact that here, as in most hotels, the fourteenth floor is actually the thirteenth . . . but they know it. If all the facts and records pertaining to that room were available, they would tell an amazing story . . .

one more uncomfortable than your readers might enjoy.

'I should guess, for example, that every hotel in New York has had its suicides, but I would be willing to wager my life that only in the Dolphin have there been a dozen of them *in a single room*. And leaving Celeste Romandeu aside, what about the natural deaths in 1408? The so-called natural deaths?'

'How many have there been?' The idea of so-called natural deaths in 1408 had never occurred to him.

'Thirty,' Olin replied. 'Thirty, at least. Thirty that I know of.'

'You're lying!' The words were out of his mouth before he could call them back.

'No, Mr. Enslin, I assure you I'm not. Did you really think that we keep that room empty just out of some vapid old wives' superstition or ridiculous New York tradition . . . the idea, maybe, that every fine old hotel should have at least one unquiet spirit, clanking around in the Suite of Invisible Chains?'

Mike Enslin realized that just such an idea—not articulated but there, just the same—had indeed been hanging around his new *Ten Nights* book. To hear Olin scoff at it in the irritated tones of a scientist scoffing at a *bruja*-waving native did nothing to soothe his chagrin.

'We have our superstitions and traditions in the hotel trade, but we don't let them get in the way of our business, Mr. Enslin. There's an old saying in the Midwest, where I broke into the business: 'There are no drafty rooms when the cattlemen are in town.' If we have empties, we fill them. The only exception to that rule I have ever made—and the only talk like this I have ever had—is on account of room 1408, a room on the thirteenth floor whose very numerals add up to thirteen.'

Olin looked levelly at Mike Enslin.

'It is a room not only of suicides but of strokes and heart attacks and epileptic seizures. One man who stayed in that room—this was in 1973—apparently drowned in a bowl of soup. You would undoubtedly call that ridiculous, but I spoke to the man who was head of hotel security at that time, and he saw the death certificate. The power of whatever inhabits the room seems to be less around midday, which is when the room-turns always occur, and yet I know of several maids who have turned that room who now suffer from heart problems, emphysema, diabetes. There was a heating problem on that floor three years ago, and Mr. Neal, the head maintenance engineer at that time, had to go into several of the rooms to check the heating units. 1408 was one of them. He seemed fine then—both in the room and later on—but he died the following afternoon of a massive cerebral hemorrhage.'

'Coincidence,' Mike said. Yet he could not deny that Olin was good. Had the man been a camp counselor, he would have scared ninety per cent of the kiddies back home after the first round of camp-fire ghost stories.

'Coincidence,' Olin repeated softly, not quite contemptuously. He held out the old-fashioned key on its old-fashioned brass paddle. 'How is your own

heart, Mr. Enslin? Not to mention your blood-pressure and psychological condition?

Mike found it took an actual, conscious effort to lift his hand . . . but once he got it moving, it was fine. It rose to the key without even the minutest trembling at the fingertips, so far as he could see.

'All fine,' he said, grasping the worn brass paddle. 'Besides, I'm wearing my lucky Hawaiian shirt.'

Olin insisted on accompanying Mike to the fourteenth floor in the elevator, and Mike did not demur. He was interested to see that, once they were out of the manager's office and walking down the hall which led to the elevators, the man reverted to his less consequential self; he became once again poor Mr. Olin, the flunky who had fallen into the writer's clutches.

A man in a tux—Mike guessed he was either the restaurant manager or the maître d'—stopped them, offered Olin a thin sheaf of papers, and murmured to him in French. Olin murmured back, nodding, and quickly scribbled his signature on the sheets. The fellow in the bar was now playing 'Autumn in New York.' From this distance, it had an echoey sound, like music heard in a dream.

The man in the tuxedo said '*Merci bien*' and went on his way. Mike and the hotel manager went on theirs. Olin again asked if he could carry Mike's little valise, and Mike again refused. In the elevator, Mike found his eyes drawn to the neat triple row of buttons. Everything was where it should have been, there were no gaps . . . and yet, if you looked more closely, you saw that there was. The button marked **12** was followed by one marked **14**. *As if*, Mike thought, *they could make the number nonexistent by omitting it from the control-panel of an elevator.*

Foolishness . . . and yet Olin was right; it was done all over the world.

As the car rose, Mike said, 'I'm curious about something. Why didn't you simply create a fictional resident for room 1408, if it scares you all as badly as you say it does? For that matter, Mr. Olin, why not declare it as your own residence?'

'I suppose I was afraid I would be accused of fraud, if not by the people responsible for enforcing state and federal civil rights statutes—hotel people feel about civil rights laws as many of your readers probably feel about clanking chains in the night—then by my bosses, if they got wind of it. If I couldn't persuade you to stay out of 1408, I doubt that I would have had much more luck in convincing the Stanley Corporation's board of directors that I took a perfectly good room off the market because I was afraid that spooks cause the occasional travelling salesman to jump out the window and splatter himself all over Sixty-first Street.'

Mike found this the most disturbing thing Olin had said yet. *Because he's not trying to convince me anymore*, he thought. *Whatever salesmanship powers he had in his office—maybe it's some vibe that comes up from the Persian rug—he*

loses it out here. Competency, yes, you could see that when he was signing the maître d's chits, but not salesmanship. Not personal magnetism. Not out here. But he believes it. He believes it all.

Above the door, the illuminated **12** went out and the **14** came on. The elevator stopped. The door slid open to reveal a perfectly ordinary hotel corridor with a red-and-gold carpet (most definitely not a Persian) and electric fixtures that looked like nineteenth-century gaslights.

'Here we are,' Olin said. 'Your floor. You'll pardon me if I leave you here. 1408 is to your left, at the end of the hall. Unless I absolutely have to, I don't go any closer than this.'

Mike Enslin stepped out of the elevator on legs that seemed heavier than they should have. He turned back to Olin, a pudgy little man in a black coat and a carefully knotted wine-colored tie. Olin's manicured hands were clasped behind him now, and Mike saw that the little man's face was as pale as cream. On his high, lineless forehead, drops of perspiration stood out.

'There's a telephone in the room, of course,' Olin said. 'You could try it, if you find yourself in trouble . . . but I doubt that it will work. Not if the room doesn't want it to.'

Mike thought of a light reply, something about how that would save him a room-service charge at least, but all at once his tongue seemed as heavy as his legs. It just lay there on the floor of his mouth.

Olin brought one hand out from behind his back, and Mike saw it was trembling. 'Mr. Enslin,' he said. 'Mike. Don't do this. For God's sake—'

Before he could finish, the elevator door slid shut, cutting him off. Mike stood where he was for a moment, in the perfect New York hotel silence of what no one on the staff would admit was the thirteenth floor of the Hotel Dolphin, and thought of reaching out and pushing the elevator's call-button.

Except if he did that, Olin would win. And there would be a large, gaping hole where the best chapter of his new book should have been. The readers might not know that, his editor and his agent might not know it, Robertson the lawyer might not . . . but *he* would.

Instead of pushing the call-button, he reached up and touched the cigarette behind his ear—that old, distracted gesture he no longer knew he was making—and flicked the collar of his lucky shirt. Then he started down the hallway toward 1408, swinging his overnight case by his side.

II

The most interesting artifact left in the wake of Michael Enslin's brief stay (it lasted about seventy minutes) in room 1408 was the eleven minutes of recorded tape in his minicorder, which was charred a bit but not even close to destroyed. The fascinating thing about the narration was how *little* narration there was. And how odd it became.

The minicorder had been a present from his ex-wife, with whom he had remained friendly, five years before. On his first 'case expedition' (the Rilsby farm in Kansas) he had taken it almost as an afterthought, along with five yellow legal pads and a leather case filled with sharpened pencils. By the time he reached the door of room 1408 in the Hotel Dolphin three books later, he came with a single pen and notebook, plus five fresh ninety-minute cassettes in addition to the one he had loaded into the machine before leaving his apartment.

He had discovered that narration served him better than note-taking; he was able to catch anecdotes, some of them pretty damned great, as they happened—the bats that had dive-bombed him in the supposedly haunted tower of Gartsby Castle, for instance. He had shrieked like a girl on her first trip through a carny haunted house. Friends hearing this were invariably amused.

The little tape recorder was more practical than written notes, too, especially when you were in a chilly New Brunswick graveyard and a squall of rain and wind collapsed your tent at three in the morning. You couldn't take very successful notes in such circumstances, but you *could* talk . . . which was what Mike had done, gone on talking as he struggled out of the wet, flapping canvas of his tent, never losing sight of the minicorder's comforting red eye. Over the years and the 'case expeditions,' the Sony minicorder had become his friend. He had never recorded a first-hand account of a true supernatural event on the filament-thin ribbon of tape running between its reels, and that included the broken comments he made while in 1408, but it was probably not surprising that he had arrived at such feelings of affection for the gadget. Long-haul truckers come to love their Kenworths and Jimmy-Petes; writers treasure a certain pen or battered old typewriter; professional cleaning ladies are loath to give up the old Electrolux. Mike had never had to stand up to an actual ghost or psychokinetic event with only the minicorder—his version of a cross and a bunch of garlic—to protect him, but it had been there on plenty of cold, uncomfortable nights. He was hardheaded, but that didn't make him inhuman.

His problems with 1408 started even before he got into the room.

The door was crooked.

Not by a lot, but it was crooked, all right, canted just the tiniest bit to the left. It made him think first of scary movies where the director tried to indicate mental distress in one of the characters by tipping the camera on the point-of-view shots. This association was followed by another one—the way doors looked when you were on a boat and the weather was a little heavy. Back and forth they went, right and left they went, tick and tock they went, until you started to feel a bit woozy in your head and stomach. Not that he felt that way himself, not at all, but —

Yes, I do. Just a little.

And he would say so, too, if only because of Olin's insinuation that his attitude made it impossible for him to be fair in the undoubtedly subjective field

of spook journalism.

He bent over (aware that the slightly woozy feeling in his stomach left as soon as he was no longer looking at that subtly off-kilter door), unzipped the pocket on his overnighter, and took out his minicorder. He pushed RECORD as he straightened up, saw the little red eye go on, and opened his mouth to say, 'The door of room 1408 offers its own unique greeting; it appears to have been set crooked, tipped slightly to the left.'

He said *The door*, and that's all. If you listen to the tape, you can hear both words clearly, *The door* and then the click of the STOP button. Because the door *wasn't* crooked. It was perfectly straight. Mike turned, looked at the door of 1409 across the hall, then back at the door of 1408. Both doors were the same, white with gold number-plaques and gold doorknobs. Both perfectly straight.

Mike bent, picked up his overnight case with the hand holding the minicorder, moved the key in his other hand toward the lock, then stopped again.

The door was crooked again.

This time it tilted slightly to the right.

'This is ridiculous,' Mike murmured, but that woozy feeling had already started in his stomach again. It wasn't just *like* seasickness; it *was* seasickness. He had crossed to England on the *QE2* a couple of years ago, and one night had been extremely rough. What Mike remembered most clearly was lying on the bed in his stateroom, always on the verge of throwing up but never quite able to do it. And how the feeling of nauseated vertigo got worse if you looked at a doorway . . . or a table . . . or a chair . . . at how they would go back and forth . . . right and left . . . tick and tock . . .

This is Olin's fault, he thought. *Exactly what he wants. He built you up for it, buddy. He set you up for it. Man, how he'd laugh if he could see you. How —*

His thoughts broke off as he realized Olin very likely *could* see him. Mike looked back down the corridor toward the elevator, barely noticing that the slightly whoopsy feeling in his stomach left the moment he stopped staring at the door. Above and to the left of the elevators, he saw what he had expected: a closed-circuit camera. One of the house dicks might be looking at it this very moment, and Mike was willing to bet that Olin was right there with him, both of them grinning like apes. *Teach him to come in here and start throwing his weight and his lawyer around*, Olin says. *Lookit him!* the security man replies, grinning more widely than ever. *White as a ghost himself, and he hasn't even touched the key to the lock yet. You got him, boss! Got him hook, line, and sinker!*

Damned if you do, Mike thought. *I stayed in the Rilsby house, slept in the room where at least two of them were killed—and I did sleep, whether you believed it or not. I spent a night right next to Jeffrey Dahmer's grave and another two stones over from H. P. Lovecraft's; I brushed my teeth next to the*

tub where Sir David Smythe supposedly drowned both of his wives. I stopped being scared of campfire stories a long time ago. I'll be damned if you do!

He looked back at the door and the door was straight. He grunted, pushed the key into the lock, and turned it. The door opened. Mike stepped in. The door did not swing slowly shut behind him as he felt for the light switch, leaving him in total darkness (besides, the lights of the apartment building next door shone through the window). He found the switch. When he flicked it, the overhead light, enclosed in a collection of dangling crystal ornaments, came on. So did the standing lamp by the desk on the far side of the room.

The window was above this desk, so someone sitting there writing could pause in his work and look out on Sixty-first Street . . . or *jump* out on Sixty-first, if the urge so took him. Except —

Mike set down his bag just inside the door, closed the door, and pushed RECORD again. The little red light went on.

'According to Olin, six people have jumped from the window I'm looking at,' he said, 'but I won't be taking any dives from the fourteenth—excuse me, the *thirteenth*—floor of the Hotel Dolphin tonight. There's an iron or steel mesh grille over the outside. Better safe than sorry. 1408 is what you'd call a junior suite, I guess. The room I'm in has two chairs, a sofa, a writing desk, a cabinet that probably contains the TV and maybe a minibar. Carpet on the floor is unremarkable—not a patch on Olin's, believe me. Wallpaper, ditto. It . . . wait . . . !

At this point the listener hears another click on the tape as Mike hits the STOP button again. All the scant narration on the tape has that same fragmentary quality, which is utterly unlike the other hundred and fifty or so tapes in his literary agent's possession. In addition, his voice grows steadily more distracted; it is not the voice of a man at work, but of a perplexed individual who has begun talking to himself without realizing it. The elliptical nature of the tapes and that growing verbal distraction combine to give most listeners a distinct feeling of unease. Many ask that the tape be turned off long before the end is reached. Mere words on a page cannot adequately convey a listener's growing conviction that he is hearing a man lose, if not his mind, then his hold on conventional reality, but even the flat words themselves suggest that *something* was happening.

What Mike had noticed at that point were the pictures on the walls. There were three of them: a lady in twenties-style evening dress standing on a staircase, a sailing ship done in the fashion of Currier & Ives, and a still life of fruit, the latter painted with an unpleasant yellow-orange cast to the apples as well as the oranges and bananas. All three pictures were in glass frames and all three were crooked. He had been about to mention the crookedness on tape, but what was so unusual, so worthy of comment, about three off-kilter pictures? That a *door* should be crooked . . . well, that had a little of that old *Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* charm. But the door *hadn't* been crooked; his eyes had tricked him

for a moment, that was all.

The lady on the stairs tilted left. So did the sailing ship, which showed bell-bottomed British tars lining the rail to watch a school of flying fish. The yellowish-orange fruit—to Mike it looked like a bowl of fruit painted by the light of a suffocating equatorial sun, a Paul Bowles desert sun—tilted to the right. Although he was not ordinarily a fussy man, he circled the room, setting them straight. Looking at them crooked like that was making him feel a touch nauseated again. He wasn't entirely surprised, either. One grew susceptible to the feeling; he had discovered that on the *QE 2*. He had been told that if one persevered through that period of increased susceptibility, one usually adapted . . . 'got your sealegs,' some of the old hands still said. Mike hadn't done enough sailing to get his sealegs, nor cared to. These days he stuck with his land legs, and if straightening the three pictures in the unremarkable sitting room of 1408 would settle his midsection, good for him.

There was dust on the glass covering the pictures. He trailed his fingers across the still life and left two parallel streaks. The dust had a greasy, slippery feel. *Like silk just before it rots* was what came into his mind, but he was damned if he was going to put that on tape, either. How was *he* supposed to know what silk felt like just before it rotted? It was a drunk's thought.

When the pictures were set to rights, he stepped back and surveyed them in turn: the evening-dressed lady by the door leading into the bedroom, the ship plying one of the seven seas to the left of the writing desk, and finally the nasty (and quite badly painted) fruit by the TV cabinet. Part of him expected that they would be crooked again, or fall crooked as he looked at them—that was the way things happened in movies like *House on Haunted Hill* and in old episodes of *The Twilight Zone*—but the pictures remained perfectly straight, as he had fixed them. Not, he told himself, that he would have found anything supernatural or paranormal in a return to their former crooked state; in his experience, reversion was the nature of things—people who had given up smoking (he touched the cigarette cocked behind his ear without being aware of it) wanted to go on smoking, and pictures that had been hanging crooked since Nixon was President wanted to go on hanging crooked. *And they've been here a long time, no doubt about that*, Mike thought. *If I lifted them away from the walls, I'd see lighter patches on the wallpaper. Or bugs squirming out, the way they do when you turn over a rock.*

There was something both shocking and nasty about this idea; it came with a vivid image of blind white bugs oozing out of the pale and formerly protected wallpaper like living pus.

Mike raised the minicorder, pushed RECORD, and said: 'Olin has certainly started a train of thought in my head. Or a chain of thought, which is it? He set out to give me the heebie-jeebies, and he certainly succeeded. I don't mean . . . ' Didn't mean what? To be racist? Was 'heebie-jeebies' short for *Hebrew* jeebies? But that was ridiculous. That would be 'Hebrew-jeebrews,' a phrase which was

meaningless. It —

On the tape at this point, flat and perfectly articulated, Mike Enslin says: 'I've got to get hold of myself. Right now.' This is followed by another click as he shuts the tape off again.

He closed his eyes and took four long, measured breaths, holding each one in to a five-count before letting it out again. Nothing like this had ever happened to him—not in the supposedly haunted houses, the supposedly haunted graveyards, or the supposedly haunted castles. This wasn't like being haunted, or what he imagined being haunted would be like; this was like being stoned on bad, cheap dope.

Olin did this. Olin hypnotized you, but you're going to break out of it. You're going to spend the goddamned night in this room, and not just because it's the best location you've ever been in—leave out Olin and you've got damned near enough for the ghost-story of the decade already—but because Olin doesn't get to win. Him and his bullshit story about how thirty people have died in here, they don't get to win. I'm the one in charge of bullshit around here, so just breathe in . . . and out. Breathe in . . . and out. In . . . and out . . .

He went on like that for nearly ninety seconds, and when he opened his eyes again, he felt normal. The pictures on the wall? Still straight. Fruit in the bowl? Still yellow-orange and uglier than ever. Desert fruit for sure. Eat one piece of that and you'd shit until it hurt.

He pushed RECORD. The red eye went on. 'I had a little vertigo for a minute or two,' he said, crossing the room to the writing desk and the window with its protective mesh outside. 'It might have been a hangover from Olin's yarning, but I could believe I feel a genuine presence here.' He felt no such thing, of course, but once that was on tape he could write almost anything he pleased. 'The air is stale. Not musty or foul-smelling, Olin said the place gets aired every time it gets turned, but the turns are quick and . . . yeah . . . it's stale. Hey, look at this.'

There was an ashtray on the writing desk, one of those little ones made of thick glass that you used to see in hotels everywhere, and in it was a book of matches. On the front was the Hotel Dolphin. In front of the hotel stood a smiling doorman in a very old-fashioned uniform, the kind with shoulder-boards, gold frogging, and a cap that looked as if it belonged in a gay bar, perched on the head of a motorcycle ramrod wearing nothing else but a few silver body-rings. Going back and forth on Fifth Avenue in front of the hotel were cars from another era—Packards and Hudsons, Studebakers and finny Chrysler New Yorkers.

'The matchbook in the ashtray looks like it comes from about 1955,' Mike said, and slipped it into the pocket of his lucky Hawaiian shirt. 'I'm keeping it as a souvenir. Now it's time for a little fresh air.'

There is a clunk as he sets the minicorder down, presumably on the writing desk. There is a pause followed by vague sounds and a couple of effortful

grunts. After these come a second pause and then a squeaking sound. 'Success!' he says. This is a little off-mike, but the follow-up is closer.

'Success!' Mike repeated, picking the minicorder up off the desk. 'The bottom half wouldn't budge . . . it's like it's nailed shut . . . but the top half came down all right. I can hear the traffic on Fifth Avenue, and all the beeping horns have a comforting quality. Someone is playing a saxophone, perhaps in front of the Plaza, which is across the street and two blocks down. It reminds me of my brother.'

Mike stopped abruptly, looking at the little red eye. It seemed to accuse him. Brother? His brother was dead, another fallen soldier in the tobacco wars. Then he relaxed. What of it? These were the spook wars, where Michael Enslin had always come off the winner. As for Donald Enslin . . .

'My brother was actually eaten by wolves one winter on the Connecticut Turnpike,' he said, then laughed and pushed STOP. There is more on the tape—a little more—but that is the final statement of any coherence the final statement, that is, to which a clear meaning can be ascribed.

Mike turned on his heels and looked at the pictures. Still hanging perfectly straight, good little pictures that they were. That still life, though—what an ugly fucking thing that was!

He pushed RECORD and spoke two words—*fuming oranges*—into the minicorder. Then he turned it off again and walked across the room to the door leading into the bedroom. He paused by the evening-dressed lady and reached into the darkness, feeling for the light switch. He had just one moment to register

(it feels like skin like old dead skin)

something wrong with the wallpaper under his sliding palm, and then his fingers found the switch. The bedroom was flooded with yellow light from another of those ceiling fixtures buried in hanging glass baubles. The bed was a double hiding under a yellow-orange coverlet.

'Why say hiding?' Mike asked the minicorder, then pushed the STOP button again. He stepped in, fascinated by the fuming desert of the coverlet, by the tumorous bulges of the pillows beneath it. Sleep there? Not at all, sir! It would be like sleeping inside that goddam still life, sleeping in that horrible hot Paul Bowles room you couldn't quite see, a room for lunatic expatriate Englishmen who were blind from syphilis caught while fucking their mothers, the film version starring either Laurence Harvey or Jeremy Irons, one of those actors you just naturally associated with unnatural acts —

Mike pushed RECORD, the little red eye came on, he said 'Orpheus on the Orpheum Circuit!' into the mike, then pushed STOP again. He approached the bed. The coverlet gleamed yellow-orange. The wallpaper, perhaps cream-colored by daylight, had picked up the yellow-orange glow of the coverlet. There was a little night-table to either side of the bed. On one was a telephone—black and large and equipped with a dial. The finger-holes in the

dial looked like surprised white eyes. On the other table was a dish with a plum on it. Mike pushed RECORD and said: 'That isn't a real plum. That's a plastic plum.' He pushed STOP again.

On the bed itself was a doorknob menu. Mike sidled up one side of the bed, being quite careful to touch neither the bed nor the wall, and picked the menu up. He tried not to touch the coverlet, either, but the tips of his fingers brushed it and he moaned. It was soft in some terrible wrong way. Nevertheless, he picked the menu up. It was in French, and although it had been years since he had taken the language, one of the breakfast items appeared to be birds roasted in shit. *That at least sounds like something the French might eat*, he thought, and uttered a wild, distracted laugh.

He closed his eyes and opened them.

The menu was in Russian.

He closed his eyes and opened them.

The menu was in Italian.

Closed his eyes, opened them.

There *was* no menu. There was a picture of a screaming little woodcut boy looking back over his shoulder at the woodcut wolf which had swallowed his left leg up to the knee. The wolf's ears were laid back and he looked like a terrier with its favorite toy.

I don't see that, Mike thought, and of course he didn't. Without closing his eyes he saw neat lines of English, each line listing a different breakfast temptation. Eggs, waffles, fresh berries; no birds roasted in shit. Still —

He turned around and very slowly edged himself out of the little space between the wall and the bed, a space that now felt as narrow as a grave. His heart was beating so hard that he could feel it in his neck and wrists as well as in his chest. His eyes were throbbing in their sockets. 1408 was wrong, yes indeed, 1408 was *very* wrong. Olin had said something about poison gas, and that was what Mike felt like: someone who has been gassed or forced to smoke strong hashish laced with insect poison. Olin had done this, of course, probably with the active laughing connivance of the security people. Pumped his special poison gas up through the vents. Just because he could *see* no vents didn't mean the vents weren't there.

Mike looked around the bedroom with wide, frightened eyes. There was no plum on the endtable to the left of the bed. No plate, either. The table was bare. He turned, started for the door leading back to the sitting room, and stopped. There was a picture on the wall. He couldn't be absolutely sure—in his present state he couldn't be absolutely sure of his own name—but he was *fairly* sure that there had been no picture there when he first came in. It was a still life. A single plum sat on a tin plate in the middle of an old plank table. The light falling across the plum and the plate was a feverish yellow-orange.

Tango-light, he thought. *The kind of light that makes the dead get up out of their graves and tango. The kind of light —*

'I have to get out of here,' he whispered, and blundered back into the sitting room. He became aware that his shoes had begun to make odd smooching sounds, as if the floor beneath them were growing soft.

The pictures on the living room wall were crooked again, and there were other changes, as well. The lady on the stairs had pulled down the top of her gown, baring her breasts. She held one in each hand. A drop of blood hung from each nipple. She was staring directly into Mike's eyes and grinning ferociously. Her teeth were filed to cannibal points. At the rail of the sailing ship, the tars had been replaced by a line of pallid men and women. The man on the far left, nearest the ship's bow, wore a brown wool suit and held a derby hat in one hand. His hair was slicked to his brow and parted in the middle. His face was shocked and vacant. Mike knew his name: Kevin O'Malley, this room's first occupant, a sewing machine salesman who had jumped from this room in October of 1910. To O'Malley's left were the others who had died here, all with that same vacant, shocked expression. It made them look related, all members of the same inbred and cataclysmically retarded family.

In the picture where the fruit had been, there was now a severed human head. Yellow-orange light swam off the sunken cheeks, the sagging lips, the upturned, glazing eyes, the cigarette parked behind the right ear.

Mike blundered toward the door, his feet smooching and now actually seeming to stick a little at each step. The door wouldn't open, of course. The chain hung unengaged, the thumbbolt stood straight up like clock hands pointing to six o'clock, but the door wouldn't open.

Breathing rapidly, Mike turned from it and waded—that was what it felt like—across the room to the writing desk. He could see the curtains beside the window he had cracked open waving desultorily, but he could feel no fresh air against his face. It was as though the room were swallowing it. He could still hear horns on Fifth, but they were now very distant. Did he still hear the saxophone? If so, the room had stolen its sweetness and melody and left only an atonal reedy drone, like the wind blowing across a hole in a dead man's neck or a pop bottle filled with severed fingers or —

Stop it, he tried to say, but he could no longer speak. His heart was hammering at a terrible pace; if it went much faster, it would explode. His minicorder, faithful companion of many 'case expeditions,' was no longer in his hand. He had left it somewhere. In the bedroom? If it was in the bedroom, it was probably gone by now, swallowed by the room; when it was digested, it would be excreted into one of the pictures.

Gasping for breath like a runner nearing the end of a long race, Mike put a hand to his chest, as if to soothe his heart. What he felt in the left breast pocket of his gaudy shirt was the small square shape of the minicorder. The feel of it, so solid and known, steadied him a little—brought him back a little. He became aware that he was humming . . . and that the room seemed to be humming back at him, as if myriad mouths were concealed beneath its smoothly nasty

wallpaper. He was aware that his stomach was now so nauseated that it seemed to be swinging in its own greasy hammock. He could feel the air crowding against his ears in soft, coagulating clots, and it made him think of how fudge was when it reached the soft-ball stage.

But he was back a little, enough to be positive of one thing: he had to call for help while there was still time. The thought of Olin smirking (in his deferential New York hotel manager way) and saying *I told you so* didn't bother him, and the idea that Olin had somehow induced these strange perceptions and horrible fear by chemical means had entirely left his mind. It was the *room*. It was the god-damned *room*.

He meant to jab out a hand to the old-fashioned telephone—the twin of the one in the bedroom—and snatch it up. Instead he watched his arm descend to the table in a kind of delirious slow motion, so like the arm of a diver he almost expected to see bubbles rising from it.

He closed his fingers around the handset and picked it up. His other hand dove, as deliberate as the first, and dialed 0. As he put the handset of the phone against his ear, he heard a series of clicks as the dial spun back to its original position. It sounded like the wheel on *Wheel of Fortune*, do you want to spin or do you want to solve the puzzle? Remember that if you try to solve the puzzle and fail, you will be put out into the snow beside the Connecticut Turnpike and the wolves will eat you.

There was no ring in his ear. Instead, a harsh voice simply began speaking. 'This is *nine! Nine!* This is *nine! Nine!* This is *ten! Ten!* We have killed your friends! Every friend is now dead! This is *six! Six!*'

Mike listened with growing horror, not at what the voice was saying but at its rasping emptiness. It was not a machine-generated voice, but it wasn't a human voice, either. It was the voice of the room. The presence pouring out of the walls and the floor, the presence speaking to him from the telephone, had nothing in common with any haunting or paranormal event he had ever read about. There was something alien here.

No, not here yet . . . but coming. It's hungry, and you're dinner.

The phone fell from his relaxing fingers and he turned around. It swung at the end of its cord the way his stomach was swinging back and forth inside him, and he could still hear that voice rasping out of the black: '*Eighteen!* This is now *eighteen!* Take cover when the siren sounds! This is *four! Four!*'

He was not aware of taking the cigarette from behind his ear and putting it in his mouth, or of fumbling the book of matches with the old-fashioned gold-frogged doorman on it out of his bright shirt's right breast pocket, not aware that, after nine years, he had finally decided to have a smoke.

Before him, the room had begun to melt.

It was sagging out of its right angles and straight lines, not into curves but into strange Moorish arcs that hurt his eyes. The glass chandelier in the center of the ceiling began to sag like a thick glob of spit. The pictures began to bend,

turning into shapes like the windshields of old cars. From behind the glass of the picture by the door leading into the bedroom, the twenties woman with the bleeding nipples and grinning cannibal-teeth whirled around and ran back up the stairs, going with the jerky delirious high knee-pistoning of a vamp in a silent movie. The telephone continued to grind and spit, the voice coming from it now the voice of an electric hair-clipper that has learned how to talk: '*Five!* This is *five!* Ignore the siren! Even if you leave this room, you can never leave this room! *Eight!* This is *eight!*'

The door to the bedroom and the door to the hall had begun to collapse downward, widening in the middle and becoming doorways for beings possessed of unhallowed shapes. The light began to grow bright and hot, filling the room with that yellow-orange glow. Now he could see rips in the wallpaper, black pores that quickly grew to become mouths. The floor sank into a concave arc and now he could hear it coming, the dweller in the room behind the room, the thing in the walls, the owner of the buzzing voice. '*Six!*' the phone screamed. '*Six*, this is *six*, this is *goddam fucking SIX!*'

He looked down at the matchbook in his hand, the one he had plucked out of the bedroom ashtray. Funny old doorman, funny old cars with their big chrome grilles . . . and words running across the bottom that he hadn't seen in a long time, because now the strip of abrasive stuff was always on the back.

CLOSE COVER BEFORE STRIKING.

Without thinking about it—he no longer *could* think—Mike Enslin tore out a single match, allowing the cigarette to drop out of his mouth at the same time. He struck the match and immediately touched it to the others in the book. There was a *ffffhut!* sound, a strong whiff of burning sulfur that went into his head like a whiff of smelling salts, and a bright flare of matchheads. And again, without so much as a single thought, Mike held the flaring bouquet of fire against the front of his shirt. It was a cheap thing made in Korea or Cambodia or Borneo, old now; it caught fire at once. Before the flames could blaze up in front of his eyes, rendering the room once more unstable, Mike saw it clearly, like a man who has awakened from a nightmare only to find the nightmare all around him.

His head was clear—the strong whiff of sulfur and the sudden rising heat from his shirt had done that much—but the room maintained its insanely Moorish aspect. *Moorish* was wrong, not even very close, but it was the only word that seemed even to reach toward what had happened here . . . what was still happening. He was in a melting, rotting cave full of swoops and mad tilts. The door to the bedroom had become the door to some sarcophagal inner chamber. And to his left, where the picture of the fruit had been, the wall was bulging outward toward him, splitting open in those long cracks that gaped like mouths, opening on a world from which *something* was now approaching. Mike Enslin could hear its slobbering, avid breath, and smell something alive and dangerous. It smelled a little like the lion-house in the —

Then flames scorched the undershelf of his chin, banishing thought. The heat

rising from his blazing shirt put that waver back into the world, and as he began to smell the crispy aroma of his chest-hair starting to fry, Mike again bolted across the sagging rug to the hall door. An insectile buzzing sound had begun to sweat out of the walls. The yellow-orange light was steadily brightening, as if a hand were turning up an invisible rheostat. But this time when he reached the door and turned the knob, the door opened. It was as if the thing behind the bulging wall had no use for a burning man; did not, perhaps, relish cooked meat.

III

A popular song from the fifties suggests that love makes the world go 'round, but coincidence would probably be a better bet. Rufus Dearborn, who was staying that night in room 1414, up near the elevators, was a salesman for the Singer Sewing Machine Company, in town from Texas to talk about moving up to an executive position. And so it happened that, ninety or so years after room 1408's first occupant jumped to his death, another sewing machine salesman saved the life of the man who had come to write about the purportedly haunted room. Or perhaps that is an exaggeration; Mike Enslin might have lived even if no one—especially a fellow on his way back from a visit to the ice machine—had been in the hallway at that moment. Having your shirt catch fire is no joke, though, and he certainly would have been burned much more severely and extensively if not for Dearborn, who thought fast and moved even faster.

Not that Dearborn ever remembered exactly what happened. He constructed a coherent enough story for the newspapers and TV cameras (he liked the idea of being a hero very much, and it certainly did no harm to his executive aspirations), and he clearly remembered seeing the man on fire lunge out into the hall, but after that everything was a blur. Thinking about it was like trying to reconstruct the things you had done during the vilest, deepest drunk of your life.

One thing he was sure of but didn't tell any of the reporters, because it made no sense: the burning man's scream seemed to grow in volume, as if he were a stereo that was being turned up. He was right there in front of Dearborn, and the *pitch* of the scream never changed, but the volume most certainly did. It was as if the man were some incredibly loud object that was just arriving here.

Dearborn ran down the hall with the full ice-bucket in his hand. The burning man—'It was just his shirt on fire, I saw that right away,' he told the reporters—struck the door opposite the room he had come out of, rebounded, staggered, and fell to his knees. That was when Dearborn reached him. He put his foot on the burning shoulder of the screaming man's shirt and pushed him over onto the hall carpet. Then he dumped the contents of the ice-bucket onto him.

These things were blurred in his memory, but accessible. He was aware that the burning shirt seemed to be casting far too much light—a sweltering

yellow-orange light that made him think of a trip he and his brother had made to Australia two years before. They had rented an all-wheel drive and had taken off across the Great Australian Desert (the few natives called it the Great Australian Bigger-All, the Dearborn brothers discovered), a hell of a trip, great, but spooky. Especially the big rock in the middle, Ayers Rock. They had reached it right around sunset and the light on its man faces was like this . . . hot and strange . . . not really what you thought of as earth-light at all . . .

He dropped beside the burning man who was now only the smoldering man, the covered-with-ice-cubes man, and rolled him over to stifle the flames reaching around to the back of the shirt. When he did, he saw the skin on the left side of the man's neck had gone a smoky, bubbly red, and the lobe of his ear on that side had melted a little, but otherwise . . . otherwise . . .

Dearborn looked up, and it seemed—this was crazy, but it seemed the door to the room the man had come out of was filled with the burning light of an Australian sundown, the hot light of an empty place where things no man had ever seen might live. It was terrible, that light (and the low buzzing, like an electric clipper that was trying desperately to speak), but it was fascinating, too. He wanted to go into it. He wanted to see what was behind it.

Perhaps Mike saved Dearborn's life, as well. He was certainly aware that Dearborn was getting up—as if Mike no longer held any interest for him—and that his face was filled with the blazing, pulsing light coming out of 1408. He remembered this better than Dearborn later did himself, but of course Rufe Dearborn had not been reduced to setting himself on fire in order to survive.

Mike grabbed the cuff of Dearborn's slacks. 'Don't go in there,' he said in a cracked, smoky voice. 'You'll never come out.'

Dearborn stopped, looking down at the reddening, blistering face of the man on the carpet.

'It's haunted,' Mike said, and as if the words had been a talisman, the door of room 1408 slammed furiously shut, cutting off the light, cutting off the terrible buzz that was almost words.

Rufus Dearborn, one of Singer Sewing Machine's finest, ran down to the elevators and pulled the fire alarm.

IV

There's an interesting picture of Mike Enslin in *Treating the Burn Victim: A Diagnostic Approach*, the sixteenth edition of which appeared about sixteen months after Mike's short stay in room 1408 of the Hotel Dolphin. The photo shows just his torso, but it's Mike, all right. One can tell by the white square on the left side of his chest. The flesh all around it is an angry red, actually blistered into second-degree burns in some places. The white square marks the left breast pocket of the shirt he was wearing that night, the lucky shirt with his mini-corder in the pocket.

The minicorder itself melted around the corners, but it still works, and the tape inside it was fine. It's the things on it which are not fine. After listening to it three or four times, Mike's agent, Sam Farrell, tossed it into his wall-safe, refusing to acknowledge the gooseflesh all over his tanned, scrawny arms. In that wall-safe the tape has stayed ever since. Farrell has no urge to take it out and play it again, not for himself, not for his curious friends, some of whom would cheerfully kill to hear it; New York publishing is a small community, and word gets around.

He doesn't like Mike's voice on the tape, he doesn't like the stuff that voice is saying (*My brother was actually eaten by wolves one winter on the Connecticut Turnpike . . .* what in God's name is *that* supposed to mean?), and most of all he doesn't like the background sounds on the tape, a kind of liquid smooshing that sometimes sounds like clothes churning around in an oversudsed washer, sometimes like one of those old electric hair-clippers . . . and sometimes weirdly like a voice.

While Mike was still in the hospital, a man named Olin—the manager of the goddamned hotel, if you please—came and asked Sam Farrell if he could listen to that tape. Farrell said no, he couldn't; what Olin could do was take himself on out of the agent's office at a rapid hike and thank God all the way back to the fleabag where he worked that Mike Enslin had decided not to sue either the hotel or Olin for negligence.

'I tried to persuade him not to go in,' Olin said quietly. A man who spent most of his working days listening to tired travellers and petulant guests bitch about everything from their rooms to the magazine selection in the newsstand, he wasn't much perturbed by Farrell's rancor. 'I tried everything in my power. If anyone was negligent that night, Mr. Farrell, it was your client. He believed too much in nothing. Very unwise behavior. Very *unsafe* behavior. I would guess he has changed somewhat in that regard.'

In spite of Farrell's distaste for the tape, he would like Mike to listen to it, acknowledge it, perhaps use it as a pad from which to launch a new book. There is a book in what happened to Mike, Farrell knows it—not just a chapter, a forty-page case history, but an entire book. One that might outsell all three of the *Ten Nights* books combined. And of course he doesn't believe Mike's assertion that he has finished not only with ghost-tales but with all writing. Writers say that from time to time, that's all. The occasional prima donna outburst is part of what makes writers in the first place.

As for Mike Enslin himself, he got off lucky, all things considered. And he knows it. He could have been burned much more badly than he actually was; if not for Mr. Dearborn and his bucket of ice, he might have had twenty or even thirty different skin-graft procedures to suffer through instead of only four. His neck is scarred on the left side in spite of the grafts, but the doctors at the Boston Burn Institute tell him the scars will fade on their own. He also knows that the burns, painful as they were in the weeks and months after that night,

were necessary. If not for the matches with CLOSE COVER BEFORE STRIKING written on the front, he would have died in 1408, and his end would have been unspeakable. To a coroner it might have looked like a stroke or a heart attack, but the actual cause of death would have been much nastier.

Much nastier.

He was also lucky in having produced three popular books on ghosts and hauntings before actually running afoul of a place that *is* haunted—this he also knows. Sam Farrell may not believe Mike's life as a writer is over, but Sam doesn't need to; Mike knows it for both of them. He cannot so much as write a postcard without feeling cold all over his skin and being nauseated deep in the pit of his belly. Sometimes just looking at a pen (or a tape recorder) will make him think: *The pictures were crooked. I tried to straighten the pictures.* He doesn't know what this means. He can't remember the pictures or anything else from room 1408, and he is glad. That is a mercy. His blood-pressure isn't so good these days (his doctor told him that burn victims often develop problems with their blood-pressure and put him on medication), his eyes trouble him (his ophthalmologist told him to start taking OcuVites), he has consistent back problems, his prostate has gotten too large . . . but he can deal with these things. He knows he isn't the first person to escape 1408 without really escaping—Olin tried to tell him—but it isn't all bad. At least he doesn't remember. Sometimes he has nightmares, quite often, in fact (almost every goddam *night*, in fact), but he rarely remembers them when he wakes up. A sense that things are rounding off at the corners, mostly—melting the way the corners of his minicorder melted. He lives on Long Island these days, and when the weather is good he takes long walks on the beach. The closest he has ever come to articulating what he does remember about his seventy-odd (*very* odd) minutes in 1408 was on one of those walks. 'It was never human,' he told the incoming waves in a choked, halting voice. 'Ghosts . . . at least ghosts were once human. The thing in the wall, though . . . that thing . . .'

Time may improve it, he can and does hope for that. Time may fade it, as it will fade the scars on his neck. In the meantime, though, he sleeps with the lights on in his bedroom, so he will know at once where he is when he wakes up from the bad dreams. He has had all the phones taken out of the house; at some point just below the place where his conscious mind seems able to go, he is afraid of picking the phone up and hearing a buzzing, inhuman voice spit, 'This is *nine! Nine!* We have killed your friends! Every friend is now dead!'

And when the sun goes down on clear evenings, he pulls every shade and blind and drape in the house. He sits like a man in a darkroom until his watch tells him the light—even the last fading glow along the horizon—must be gone.

He can't stand the light that comes at sunset.

That yellow deepening to orange, like light in the Australian desert.

Task I.

Find the Russian equivalents for the following English words and expressions.

subtly off-kilter door, woozy feeling, the feeling of nauseated vertigo, an iron or steel mesh grille, a perplexed individual, the scant narration on the tape, one grew susceptible to the feeling, the light of a suffocating equatorial sun, to persevere; bad, cheap dope; musty or foul-smelling, a book of matches, to stop abruptly, under his sliding palm, the tumorous bulges of the pillows beneath it, the vents, all members of the same inbred and cataclysmically retarded family, a reedy drone, coagulating clots, smirking, to sag like a thick glob of spit, a concave arc, an insectile buzzing sound, to write about the purportedly haunted room, the pitch of the scream, an assertion.

Task II.

Reproduce the situations in which the words from the Task I are used.

Task III.

Agree or disagree with the following sentences.

1. Mike Enslin's minicorder had been a present from his ex-wife.
2. The little tape recorder was more practical than written notes.
3. His problems with 1408 hadn't started before he got into the room.
4. There were two pictures on the wall of room 1408.
5. There was an ashtray on the writing desk, and in it was a book of matches.
6. Mike saved Dearborn's life.
7. The first time Mike saw the menu, it was in Russian.
8. Mike was also lucky in having produced two popular books on ghosts and hauntings before actually running afoul of a place that is haunted.
9. Mike's life as a writer is over.
10. Mike loves the light that comes at sunset.

Task IV.

Answer the following questions

1. What did Mike Enslin take with him when he had to stand up to an actual ghost or psychokinetic event?
2. His problems with 1408 started even before he got into the room, didn't they?
3. What did Mike notice on the walls?
4. Why did Mike think that Olin had hypnotized him?
5. What reminded the hero of his brother?
6. How did the bedroom look like?

7. Why was Mike so scared of the menu?
8. What were the changes that appeared in the pictures on the living room wall?
9. What did happen when Mike picked up the telephone?
10. Who saved the life of the man who had come to write about the purportedly haunted room?
11. What did a sweltering yellow-orange light make Dearborn think of?
12. What did Mike's agent, Sam Farrell, do with the minicorder?
13. Mike's life as a writer is over, isn't it?
14. Why does Mike sleep with the lights on in his bedroom?
5. Does Mike pull every shade and blind and drape in the house when the sun goes down on clear evenings?

Task V.

Express the same idea using different words and grammar.

1. The door was crooked.
2. All the scant narration on the tape has that same fragmentary quality, which is utterly unlike the other hundred and fifty or so tapes in his literary agent's possession.
3. Although he was not ordinarily a fussy man, he circled the room, setting the pictures straight.
4. Mike stopped abruptly, looking at the little red eye.
5. His eyes were throbbing in their sockets.
6. He was in a melting, rotting cave full of swoops and mad tilts.
7. These things were blurred in his memory, but accessible.
8. Mike Enslin had decided not to sue either the hotel or Olin for negligence.

Task VI.

Use prepositions where necessary.

1. The most interesting artifact left ... the wake ... Michael Enslin's brief stay (it lasted ... seventy minutes) ... room 1408 was the eleven minutes ... recorded tape ... his minicorder, which was charred a bit but not even close to destroyed.
2. This association was followed ... another one—the way doors looked when you were ... a boat and the weather was a little heavy.

3. He bent ..., unzipped the pocket ... his overnighter, and took ... his minicorder.
4. His thoughts broke ... as he realized Olin very likely could see him.
5. There's an iron or steel mesh grille ... the outside.
6. All three pictures were ... glass frames and all three were crooked.
7. There was an ashtray ... the writing desk, one ... those little ones made ... thick glass
that you used to see ... hotels everywhere, and ... it was a book ... matches.
8. There was a picture ... a screaming little woodcut boy looking his shoulder ... the
woodcut wolf which had swallowed his left leg ... the knee.
9. He turned, started ... the door leading back ... the sitting room, and stopped.
10. He sits like a man ... a darkroom ... his watch tells him the light—even the last fading
glow along the horizon—must be gone.

Task VII.

Reproduce the following situations:

1. Mike's behaviour before entering the room.
2. Mike's impression of the first room he saw.
3. Mike's feelings while being in the bedroom
4. Mike and his life after lucky rescue.

ВСЁ, ЧТО ТЫ ЛЮБИШЬ, БУДЕТ УНЕСЕНО
ALL THAT YOU LOVE WILL BE CARRIED AWAY
2001

Стивен КИНГ

Всё возможно (Everything's Eventual), 2002

It was a Motel 6 on I-80 just west of Lincoln, Nebraska. The snow that began at midafternoon had faded the sign's virulent yellow to a kinder pastel shade as the light ran out of the January dusk. The wind was closing in on that quality of empty amplification one encounters only in the country's flat midsection, usually in winter-time. That meant nothing but discomfort now, but if big snow came tonight—the weather forecasters couldn't seem to make up their minds—then the interstate would be shut down by morning. That was nothing to Alfie Zimmer.

He got his key from a man in a red vest and drove down to the end of the long cinder-block building. He had been selling in the Midwest for twenty years, and had formulated four basic rules about securing his night's rest. First, always reserve ahead. Second, reserve at a franchise motel if possible—your Holiday Inn, your Ramada Inn, your Comfort Inn, your Motel 6. Third, always ask for a room on the end. That way, the worst you could have was one set of noisy neighbors. Last, ask for a room that begins with a one. Alfie was forty-four, too old to be fucking truck-stop whores, eating chicken-fried steak, or hauling his luggage upstairs. These days, the rooms on the first floor were usually reserved for non-smokers. Alfie rented them and smoked anyway.

Someone had taken the space in front of Room 190. All the spaces along the building were taken. Alfie wasn't surprised. You could make a reservation, guarantee it, but if you arrived late (late on a day like this was after 4 P.M.), you had to park and walk. The cars belonging to the early birds were nestled up to the gray cinder block and the bright-yellow doors in a long line, their windows already covered with a scrim of light snow.

Alfie drove around the corner and parked with the nose of his Chevrolet pointed at the white expanse of some farmer's field, swimming deep into the gray of day's end. At the farthest limit of vision he could see the spark lights of a farm. In there, they would be hunkered down. Out here, the wind blew hard enough to rock the car. Snow skated past, obliterating the farm lights for a few moments.

Alfie was a big man with a florid face and a smoker's noisy respiration. He was wearing a topcoat, because when you were selling that was what people liked to see. Not a jacket. Storekeepers sold to people wearing jackets and John Deere caps, they didn't buy from them. The room key lay on the seat beside

him. It was attached to a diamond of green plastic. The key was a real key, not a MagCard. On the radio Clint Black was singing 'Nothin' but the Tail Lights.' It was a country song. Lincoln had an FM rocker now, but rock-and-roll music didn't seem right to Alfie. Not out here, where if you switched over to AM you could still hear angry old men calling down hellfire.

He shut off the engine, put the key to 190 in his pocket, and checked to make sure he still had his notebook in there, too. His old pal. 'Save Russian Jews,' he said, reminding himself. 'Collect valuable prizes.'

He got out of the car and a gust of wind hit him hard, rocking him back on his heels, flapping his pants around his legs, making him laugh a smoker's surprised rattlebox laugh.

His samples were in the trunk, but he wouldn't need them tonight. No, not tonight, not at all. He took his suitcase and his briefcase out of the backseat, shut the door, then pushed the black button on his key fob. That one locked all the doors. The red one set off an alarm, what you were supposed to use if you were going to get mugged. Alfie had never been mugged. He guessed that few salesmen of gourmet foods were, especially in this part of the country. There was a market for gourmet foods in Nebraska, Iowa, Oklahoma, and Kansas; even in the Dakotas, although many might not believe it. Alfie had done quite well, especially over the last two years as he got to know the market's deeper creases—but it was never going to equal the market for, let's say, fertilizer. Which he could smell even now on the winter wind that was freezing his cheeks and turning them an even darker shade of red.

He stood where he was a moment longer, waiting for the wind to drop. It did, and he could see the spark lights again. The farmhouse. And was it possible that behind those lights, some farmer's wife was even now heating up a pot of Cottager Split Pea Soup or perhaps microwaving a Cottager Shepherd's Pie or Chicken Français? It was. It was as possible as hell. While her husband watched the early news with his shoes off and his sock feet on a hassock, and overhead their son played a video game on his GameCube and their daughter sat in the tub, chin-deep in fragrant bubbles, her hair tied up with a ribbon, reading *The Golden Compass*, by Philip Pullman, or perhaps one of the Harry Potter books, which were favorites of Alfie's daughter, Carlene. All that going on behind the spark lights, some family's universal joint turning smoothly in its socket, but between them and the edge of this parking lot was a mile and a half of flat field, white in the running-away light of a low sky, comatose with the season. Alfie briefly imagined himself walking into that field in his city shoes, his briefcase in one hand and his suitcase in the other, working his way across the frozen furrows, finally arriving, knocking; the door would be opened and he would smell pea soup, that good hearty smell, and hear the KETV meteorologist in the other room saying, 'But now look at this low-pressure system just coming over the Rockies.'

And what would Alfie say to the farmer's wife? That he just dropped by for

dinner? Would he advise her to save Russian Jews, collect valuable prizes? Would he begin by saying, 'Ma'am, according to at least one source I've read recently, all that you love will be carried away'? That would be a good conversation opener, sure to interest the farmer's wife in the wayfaring stranger who had just walked across her husband's east field to knock on her door. And when she invited him to step in, to tell her more, he could open his briefcase and give her a couple of his sample books, tell her that once she discovered the Cottager brand of quick-serve gourmet delicacies she would almost certainly want to move on to the more sophisticated pleasures of Ma Mère. And, by the way, did she have a taste for caviar? Many did. Even in Nebraska.

Freezing. Standing here and freezing.

He turned from the field and the spark lights at the far end of it and walked to the motel, moving in careful duck steps so he wouldn't go ass over teakettle. He had done it before, God knew. Whoops-a-daisy in half a hundred motel parking lots. He had done most of it before, actually, and supposed that was at least part of the problem.

There was an overhang, so he was able to get out of the snow. There was a Coke machine with a sign saying, USE CORRECT CHANGE. There was an ice machine and a Snax machine with candy bars and various kinds of potato chips behind curls of metal like bedsprings. There was no USE CORRECT CHANGE sign on the Snax machine. From the room to the left of the one where he intended to kill himself, Alfie could hear the early news, but it would sound better in that farmhouse over yonder, he was sure of that. The wind boomed. Snow swirled around his city shoes, and then Alfie let himself into his room. The light switch was to the left. He turned it on and shut the door.

He knew the room; it was the room of his dreams. It was square. The walls were white. On one was a picture of a small boy in a straw hat, asleep with a fishing pole in his hand. There was a green rug on the floor, a quarter-inch of some nubbly synthetic stuff. It was cold in here right now, but when he pushed the Hi Heat button on the control panel of the Climatron beneath the window the place would warm up fast. Would probably become hot. A counter ran the length of one wall. There was a TV on it. On top of the TV was a piece of cardboard with ONE-TOUCH MOVIES! printed on it.

There were twin double beds, each covered with bright-gold spreads that had been tucked under the pillows and then pulled over them, so the pillows looked like the corpses of infants. There was a table between the beds with a Gideon Bible, a TV-channel guide, and a flesh-colored phone on it. Beyond the second bed was the door to the bathroom. When you turned on the light in there, the fan would go on, too. If you wanted the light, you got the fan, too. There was no way around it. The light itself would be fluorescent, with the ghosts of dead flies inside. On the counter beside the sink there would be a hot plate and a Proctor-Silex electric kettle and little packets of instant coffee. There was a smell in here, the mingling of some harsh cleaning fluid and mildew on the

shower curtain. Alfie knew it all. He had dreamed it right down to the green rug, but that was no accomplishment, it was an easy dream. He thought about turning on the heater, but that would rattle, too, and, besides, what was the point?

Alfie unbuttoned his topcoat and put his suitcase on the floor at the foot of the bed closest to the bathroom. He put his briefcase on the gold coverlet. He sat down, the sides of his coat spreading out like the skirt of a dress. He opened his briefcase, thumbed through the various brochures, catalogues, and order forms; finally he found the gun. It was a Smith & Wesson revolver, .38 caliber. He put it on the pillows at the head of the bed.

He lit a cigarette, reached for the telephone, then remembered his notebook. He reached into his right coat pocket and pulled it out. It was an old Spiral, bought for a buck forty-nine in the stationery department of some forgotten five-and-dime in Omaha or Sioux City or maybe Jubilee, Kansas. The cover was creased and almost completely innocent of any printing it might once have borne. Some of the pages had pulled partially free of the metal coil that served as the notebook's binding, but all of them were still there. Alfie had been carrying this notebook for almost seven years, ever since his days selling Universal Product Code readers for Simonex.

There was an ashtray on the shelf under the phone. Out here, some of the motel rooms still came with ashtrays, even on the first floor. Alfie fished for it, put his cigarette on the groove, and opened his notebook. He flipped through pages written with a hundred different pens (and a few pencils), pausing to read a couple of entries. One read: 'I suckt Jim Morrison's cock w/my poutie boy mouth (LAWRENCE KS).' Restrooms were filled with homosexual graffiti, most of it tiresome and repetitive, but 'poutie boy mouth' was pretty good. Another was 'Albert Gore is my favorite whore (MURDO S DAK).'

The last page, three-quarters of the way through the book, had just two entries. 'Dont chew the Trojan Gum it taste's just like rubber (AVOCA IA).' And: 'Poopie doopie you so loopy (PAPILLION NEB).' Alfie was crazy about that one. Something about the '-ie,—ie,' and then, boom, you got '-y.' It could have been no more than an illiterate's mistake (he was sure that would have been Maura's take on it) but why think like that? What fun was that? No, Alfie preferred (even now) to believe that '-ie,—ie,' . . . wait for it . . . '-y' was an intended construction. Something sneaky but playful, with the feel of an e. e. cummings poem.

He rummaged through the stuff in his inside coat pocket, feeling papers, an old toll-ticket, a bottle of pills—stuff he had quit taking—and at last finding the pen that always hid in the litter. Time to record today's finds. Two good ones, both from the same rest area, one over the urinal he had used, the other written with a Sharpie on the map case beside the Hav-A-Bite machine. (Snax, which in Alfie's opinion vended a superior product line, had for some reason been disenfranchised in the I-80 rest areas about four years ago.) These days Alfie

sometimes went two weeks and three thousand miles without seeing anything new, or even a viable variation on something old. Now, two in one day. Two on the *last* day. Like some sort of omen.

His pen had COTTAGER FOODS THE *GOOD STUFF*! written in gold along the barrel, next to the logo, a thatched hut with smoke coming out of the quaintly crooked chimney.

Sitting there on the bed, still in his topcoat, Alfie bent studiously over his old notebook so that his shadow fell on the page. Below 'Dont chew the Trojan Gum' and 'Poopie doopie you so loopy,' Alfie added 'Save Russian Jews, collect valuable prizes (WALTON NEB)' and 'All that you love will be carried away (WALTON NEB).' He hesitated. He rarely added notes, liking his finds to stand alone. Explanation rendered the exotic mundane (or so he had come to believe; in the early years he had annotated much more freely), but from time to time a footnote still seemed to be more illuminating than demystifying.

He starred the second entry—'All that you love will be carried away (WALTON NEB)'—and drew a line two inches above the bottom of the page, and wrote.*

*'To read this you must also look at the exit ramp from the Walton Rest Area back to highway, i.e. at departing transients.'

He put the pen back in his pocket, wondering why he or anyone would continue anything this close to ending everything. He couldn't think of a single answer. But of course you went on breathing, too. You couldn't stop it without rough surgery.

The wind gusted outside. Alfie looked briefly toward the window, where the curtain (also green, but a different shade from the rug) had been drawn. If he pulled it back, he would be able to see chains of light on Interstate 80, each bright bead marking sentient beings running on the rod of the highway. Then he looked back down at his book. He meant to do it, all right. This was just . . . well . . .

'Breathing,' he said, and smiled. He picked his cigarette out of the ashtray, smoked, returned it to the groove, and thumbed back through the book again. The entries recalled thousands of truck stops and roadside chicken shacks and highway rest areas the way certain songs on the radio can bring back specific memories of a place, a time, the person you were with, what you were drinking, what you were thinking.

'Here I sit, brokenhearted, tried to shit but only farted.' Everyone knew that one, but here was an interesting variation from Double D Steaks in Hooker, Oklahoma: 'Here I sit, I'm at a loss, trying to shit out taco sauce. I know I'm going to drop a load, only hope I don't explode.' And from Casey, Iowa, where SR 25 crossed I-80: 'My mother made me a whore.' To which someone had added in very different penmanship: 'If I supply the yarn will she make me

one?"

He had started collecting when he was selling the UPCs, noting various bits of graffiti in the Spiral notebook without at first knowing why he was doing it. They were just amusing, or disconcerting, or both at the same time. Yet little by little he had become fascinated with these messages from the interstate, where the only other communications seemed to be dipped headlights when you passed in the rain, or maybe somebody in a bad mood flipping you the bird when you went by in the passing lane pulling a rooster-tail of snow behind you. He came gradually to see—or perhaps only to hope—that something was going on here. The e. e. cummings lilt of 'Poopie doopie you so loopy,' for instance, or the inarticulate rage of '1380 West Avenue kill my mother TAKE HER JEWELS.'

Or take this oldie: 'Here I sit, cheeks a-flexin', giving birth to another Texan.' The meter, when you considered it, was odd. Not iambs but some odd triplet formula with the stress on the third: 'Here I *sit*, cheeks a-*flexin*', giving *birth* to *another Texan*.' Okay, it broke down a little at the end, but that somehow added to its memorability, gave it that final mnemonic twist of the tail. He had thought on many occasions that he could go back to school, take some courses, get all that feet-and-meter stuff down pat. Know what he was talking about instead of running on a tightrope of intuition. All he really remembered clearly from school was iambic pentameter: 'To be or not to be, that is the question.' He had seen that in a men's room on I-70, actually, to which someone had added, 'The real question is who your father was, dipstick.'

These triplets, now. What were *they* called? Was that trochaic? He didn't know. The fact that he could find out no longer seemed important, but he could find out, yes. It was something people taught; it was no big secret.

Or take this variation, which Alfie had also seen all over the country: 'Here I sit, on the pooper, giving birth to a Maine state trooper.' It was always Maine, no matter where you were it was always Maine State Trooper, and why? Because no other state would scan. Maine was the only one of the fifty whose name consisted of a single syllable. Yet again, it was in triplets: 'Here I *sit*, on the *pooper*.'

He had thought of writing a book. Just a little one. The first title to occur to him had been 'Don't Look Up Here, You're Pissing on Your Shoes,' but you couldn't call a book that. Not and reasonably hope someone would put it out for sale in a store, anyway. And, besides, that was light. Frothy. He had become convinced over the years that something was going on here, and it wasn't frothy. The title he had finally decided on was an adaptation of something he'd seen in a rest-area toilet stall outside Fort Scott, Kansas, on Highway 54. 'I Killed Ted Bundy: The Secret Transit Code of America's Highways.' By Alfred Zimmer. That sounded mysterious and ominous, almost scholarly. But he hadn't done it. And although he had seen 'If I supply the yarn, will she make me one' added to 'My mother made me a whore' all over the country, he had never

expounded (at least in writing) on the startling lack of sympathy, the 'just deal with it' sensibility, of the response. Or what about 'Mammon is the King of New Jersey'? How did one explain why New Jersey made it funny and the name of some other state probably wouldn't? Even to try seemed almost arrogant. He was just a little man, after all, with a little man's job. He sold things. A line of frozen dinners, currently.

And now, of course . . . now . . .

Alfie took another deep drag on his cigarette, mashed it out, and called home. He didn't expect to get Maura and didn't. It was his own recorded voice that answered him, ending with the number of his cell-phone. A lot of good that would do; the cell-phone was in the trunk of the Chevrolet, broken. He had never had good luck with gadgets.

After the beep he said, 'Hi, it's me. I'm in Lincoln. It's snowing. Remember the casserole you were going to take over to my mother. She'll be expecting it. And she asked for the Red Ball coupons. I know you think she's crazy on that subject, but humor her, okay? She's old. Tell Carlene Daddy says hi.' He paused, then for the first time in about five years added, 'I love you.'

He hung up, thought about another cigarette—no worries about lung cancer, not now—and decided against it. He put the notebook, open to the last page, beside the telephone. He picked up the gun and rolled out the cylinder. Fully loaded. He snapped the cylinder back in with a flick of his wrist, then slipped the short barrel into his mouth. It tasted of oil and metal. He thought, *Here I SIT, about to COOL it, my plan to EAT a fuckin' BOOL-it*. He grinned around the barrel. That was terrible. He never would have written that down in his book.

Then another thought occurred to him and he put the gun back in its trench on the pillow, drew the phone to him again, and once more dialled home. He waited for his voice to recite the useless cell-phone number, then said, 'Me again. Don't forget Rambo's appointment at the vet day after tomorrow, okay? Also the sea-jerky strips at night. They really do help his hips. Bye.'

He hung up and raised the gun again. Before he could put the barrel in his mouth, his eye fell on the notebook. He frowned and put the gun down. The book was open to the last four entries. The first thing anyone responding to the shot would see would be his dead body, sprawled across the bed closest to the bathroom, his head hanging down and bleeding on the nubbly green rug. The second thing, however, would be the Spiral notebook, open to the final written page.

Alfie imagined some cop, some Nebraska state trooper who would never be written about on any bathroom wall due to the disciplines of scansion, reading those final entries, perhaps turning the battered old notebook toward him with the tip of his own pen. He would read the first three entries—'Trojan Gum,' 'Poopie doopie,' 'Save Russian Jews'—and dismiss them as insanity. He would read the last line, 'All that you love will be carried away,' and decide that the

dead guy had regained a little rationality at the end, just enough to write a halfway sensible suicide note.

Alfie didn't like the idea of people thinking he was crazy (further examination of the book, which contained such information as 'Medger Evers is alive and well in Disneyland,' would only confirm that impression). He was not crazy, and the things he had written here over the years weren't crazy, either. He was convinced of it. And if he was wrong, if these were the rantings of lunatics, they needed to be examined even more closely. That thing about don't look up here, you're pissing on your shoes, for instance, was that humor? Or a growl of rage?

He considered using the john to get rid of the notebook, then shook his head. He'd end up on his knees with his shirtsleeves rolled back, fishing around in there, trying to get the damn thing back out. While the fan rattled and the fluorescent buzzed. And although immersion might blur some of the ink, it wouldn't blur all of it. Not enough. Besides, the notebook had been with him so long, riding in his pocket across so many flat and empty Midwest miles. He hated the idea of just flushing it away.

The last page, then? Surely one page, balled up, would go down. But that would leave the rest for them (there was always a them) to discover, all that clear evidence of an unsound mind. They'd say, 'Lucky he didn't decide to visit a schoolyard with an AK-47. Take a bunch of little kids with him.' And it would follow Maura like a tin can tied to a dog's tail. 'Did you hear about her husband?' they'd ask each other in the supermarket. 'Killed himself in a motel. Left a book full of crazy stuff. Lucky he didn't kill *her*.' Well, he could afford to be a little hard about that. Maura was an adult, after all. Carlene, on the other hand . . . Carlene was . . .

Alfie looked at his watch. At her j.—v. basketball game, that's where Carlene was right now. Her teammates would say most of the same things the supermarket ladies would say, only within earshot and accompanied by those chilling seventh-grade giggles. Eyes full of glee and horror. Was that fair? No, of course not, but there was nothing fair about what had happened to him, either. Sometimes when you were cruising along the highway, you saw big curls of rubber that had unwound from the recap tires some of the independent truckers used. That was what he felt like now: thrown tread. The pills made it worse. They cleared your mind just enough for you to see what a colossal jam you were in.

'But I'm not crazy,' he said. 'That doesn't make me crazy.' No. Crazy might actually be better.

Alfie picked up the notebook, flipped it closed much as he had flipped the cylinder back into the .38, and sat there tapping it against his leg. This was ludicrous.

Ludicrous or not, it nagged him. The way thinking a stove burner might still be on sometimes nagged him when he was home, nagged until he finally got up

and checked and found it cold. Only this was worse. Because he loved the stuff in the notebook. Amassing graffiti—thinking about graffiti—had been his real work these last years, not selling price-code readers or frozen dinners that were really not much more than Swansons or Freezer Queens in fancy microwavable dishes. The daffy exuberance of 'Helen Keller fucked her feller!' for instance. Yet the notebook might be a real embarrassment once he was dead. It would be like accidentally hanging yourself in the closet because you were experimenting with a new way of jacking off and got found that way with your shorts under your feet and shit on your ankles. Some of the stuff in his notebook might show up in the newspaper, along with his picture. Once upon a time he would have scoffed at the idea, but in these days, when even Bible Belt newspapers routinely speculated about a mole on the President's penis, the notion was hard to dismiss.

Burn it, then? No, he'd set off the goddamned smoke detector.

Put it behind the picture on the wall? The picture of the little boy with the fishing pole and the straw hat?

Alfie considered this, then nodded slowly. Not a bad idea at all. The Spiral notebook might stay there for years. Then, someday in the distant future, it would drop out. Someone—perhaps a lodger, more likely a maid—would pick it up, curious. Would flip through it. What would that person's reaction be? Shock? Amusement? Plain old head-scratching puzzlement? Alfie rather hoped for this last. Because things in the notebook were puzzling. 'Elvis killed Big Pussy,' someone in Hackberry, Texas, had written. 'Serenity is being square,' someone in Rapid City, South Dakota, had opined. And below that, someone had written, 'No, stupid, $\text{serenity} = (va)^2 + b$, if v =serenity, a =satisfaction, and b =sexual compatibility.'

Behind the picture, then.

Alfie was halfway across the room when he remembered the pills in his coat pocket. And there were more in the glove compartment of the car, different kinds but for the same thing. They were prescription drugs, but not the sort the doctor gave you if you were feeling . . . well . . . sunny. So the cops would search this room thoroughly for other kinds of drugs and when they lifted the picture away from the wall the notebook would drop out onto the green rug. The things in it would look even worse, even crazier, because of the pains he had taken to hide it.

And they'd read the last thing as a suicide note, simply because it *was* the last thing. No matter where he left the book, that would happen. Sure as shit sticks to the ass of America, as some East Texas turnpike poet had once written.

'If they find it,' he said, and just like that the answer came to him.

The snow had thickened, the wind had grown even stronger, and the spark lights across the field were gone. Alfie stood beside his snow-covered car at the edge of the parking lot with his coat billowing out in front of him. At the farm,

they'd all be watching TV by now. The whole fam' damly. Assuming the satellite dish hadn't blown off the barn roof, that was. Back at his place, his wife and daughter would be arriving home from Carlene's basketball game. Maura and Carlene lived in a world that had little to do with the interstates, or fast-food boxes blowing down the breakdown lanes and the sound of semis passing you at seventy and eighty and even ninety miles an hour like a Doppler whine. He wasn't complaining about it (or hoped he wasn't); he was just pointing it out. 'Nobody here even if there is,' someone in Chalk Level, Missouri, had written on a shithouse wall, and sometimes in those rest-area bathrooms there was blood, mostly just a little, but once he had seen a grimy basin under a scratched steel mirror half filled with it. Did anyone notice? Did anyone report such things?

In some rest areas the weather report fell constantly from overhead speakers, and to Alfie the voice giving it sounded haunted, the voice of a ghost running through the vocal cords of a corpse. In Candy, Kansas, on Route 283, in Ness County, someone had written, 'Behold, I stand at the door and knock,' to which someone else had added, 'If your not from Pudlishers Cleering House go away you Bad Boy.'

Alfie stood at the edge of the pavement, gasping a little because the air was so cold and full of snow. In his left hand he held the Spiral notebook, bent almost double. There was no need to destroy it, after all. He would simply throw it into Farmer John's east field, here on the west side of Lincoln. The wind would help him. The notebook might carry twenty feet on the fly, and the wind could tumble it even farther before it finally fetched up against the side of the furrow and was covered. It would lie there buried all winter, long after his body had been shipped home. In the spring, Farmer John would come out this way on his tractor, the cab filled with the music of Patty Loveless or George Jones or maybe even Clint Black, and he would plow the Spiral notebook under without seeing it and it would disappear into the scheme of things. Always supposing there was one. 'Relax, it's all just the rinse cycle,' someone had written beside a pay phone on I-35 not far from Cameron, Missouri.

Alfie drew the book back to throw it, then lowered his arm. He hated to let it go, that was the truth of it. That was the bottom line everyone was always talking about. But things were bad, now. He raised his arm again and then lowered it again. In his distress and indecision he began to cry without being aware of it. The wind rushed around him, on its way to wherever. He couldn't go on living the way he had been living, he knew that much. Not one more day. And a shot in the mouth would be easier than any living change, he knew that, too. Far easier than struggling to write a book few people (if any at all) were likely to read. He raised his arm again, cocked the hand with the notebook in it back to his ear like a pitcher preparing to throw a fastball, then stood like that. An idea had occurred to him. He would count to sixty. If the spark lights of the farmhouse reappeared at any time during that count, he would try to write the

book.

To write a book like that, he thought, you'd have to begin by talking about how it was to measure distance in green mile markers, and the very width of the land, and how the wind sounded when you got out of your car at one of those rest areas in Oklahoma or North Dakota. How it sounded almost like words. You'd have to explicate the silence, and how the bathrooms always smelled of piss and the great hollow farts of departed travellers, and how in that silence the voices on the walls began to speak. The voices of those who had written and then moved on. The telling would hurt, but if the wind dropped and the spark lights of the farm came back, he'd do it anyway.

If they didn't he'd throw the notebook into the field, go back into Room 190 (just hang a left at the Snax machine), and shoot himself, as planned.

Either way. Either way.

Alfie stood there counting to sixty inside his head, waiting to see if the wind would drop.

I like to drive, and I'm particularly addicted to those long interstate barrels where you see nothing but prairies to either side and a cinderblock rest area every forty miles or so. Rest-area bathrooms are always full of graffiti, some of it extremely weird. I started to collect these dispatches from nowhere, keeping them in a pocket notebook, got others off the Internet (there are two or three websites dedicated to them), and finally found the story in which they belonged. This is it. I don't know if it's good or not, but I cared very much for the lonely man at its center and really hope things turned out okay for him. In the first draft things did, but Bill Buford of The New Yorker suggested a more ambiguous ending. He was probably right, but we could all say a prayer for the Alfie Zimmers of the world.

Task I.

Find the Russian equivalents for the following English words and expressions.

Virulent yellow, interstate, franchise motel, florid face, noisy respiration, old pal, a gusp of wind, rattlebox laugh, parking lot, a furrow, wayfaring stranger, corpses of infants, thumb through the brochures, a buck (coll.), notebook's binding, flip through, an entry, rummage through, viable variation on smth, an omen, mundane, demystifying, transient, to dip headlights, down pat, frothy, take a deep drag on a cigarette, a gadget, to snap back, a barrel, to sprawl

across, state trooper, insanity, rantings of lunatics, growl of rage, blur some of the ink, thrown tread, to jack off, to scoff at the idea.

Task II.

Reproduce the situations in which the words from task I are used.

Task III.

Adree or disagree with the following sentences.

1. It was a Motel 6 where Alfie stayed that night.
2. Alfie had been selling in the Midwest for ten years.
3. Alfie was forty-eight.
4. Alfie preferred rooms that begin with a one.
5. Alfie was a thin man with a florid face.
6. Alfie had never been mugged.
7. Alfie's daughter's name was Clarene.
8. There was a red rug on the floor in the room.
9. Alfie didn't like the room.
10. There wasn't any ashtray in the room.

Task IV.

Answer the following questions.

1. What was Alfie's occupation?
2. What rules had Alfie formulated about securing his night's rest?
3. How did Alfie look like?
4. Was it bad weather that night?
5. Describe the room where Alfie stayed that night.
6. Did Alfie smoke?
7. What kind of entries were there in Alfie's notebook?
8. When did Alfie started to collect those entries?
9. What did Alfie himself think of the entries in his notebook?
10. Did people think Alfie was crazy? Was he really crazy?
11. Why did Alfie wanted to commit a suicide? Why did he hasitate?
12. What did he decided in the end?

Task V.

Express the same idea using different words and grammer.

1. The wind was closing in on that quality of empty amplification one encounters only in the country's flat midsection.

- 2.The cover was creased and almost completely innocent of any printing it might once have borne.
- 3.These days Alfie sometimes went two weeks and three thousand miles without seeing anything new.
- 4.Know what he was talking about instead of running on a tightrope of intuition.
- 5.They cleared your mind just enough for you to see what a colossal jam you were in.

Task VI.

Insert the prepositions.

- 1.He got his key ... a man in a red vest.
- 2.Alfie was a big man ...a florid face.
- 3.He shut ...the engine and put the key to 190 in his pocket.
- 4.He just dropped dinner.
- 5.He turned ...the field and the spark lights at the far end of it and walked to the motel.
- 6.He flipped ...pages written ...a hundred different pens.
- 7.Restrooms were filled ...homosexual graffiti.
- 8.He rummaged ...the stuff ...his inside coat pocket.
9. Yet little by little he had become fascinated ...these messages ...the interstate.
- 10.Alfie took another deep drag ...his cigarette, mashed it..., and called home.
- 11.He sat there tapping the notebook... his leg.
- 12.' Behold, I stand ...the door and knock.'
13. The voices ... those who had written and then moved

Task VII.

1. Think of the possible end of the story.
2. What would you advise to improve the situation in which Alfie was captured.

