



# T H E P L A N T

*by* Stephen King

part three of a novel in progress

P H I L T R U M P R E S S

*Bangor, Maine 2000*



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## S Y N O P S I S

JOHN KENTON, who majored in English and was President of the Brown University Literary Society, has had a rude initiation into the real world as one of Zenith House's four editors. Zenith House, which captured only 2% of the total paperback market the year before (1980), is dying on the vine. All of its employees are worried that Apex, the parent corporation, may soon take extreme measures to stem the tide of red ink...and the most likely possibility is looking more and more like terminating Zenith House, with extreme sanction. The only hope is a drastic sales turnaround, but with Zenith's tiny advances and creaky distribution system, that seems unlikely.).

Enter CARLOS DETWEILLER, first in the form of a query letter received by John Kenton. Detweiller, twenty-three, works in the Central Falls House of Flowers, and is hawking a book he's written called *True Tales of Demon Infestations*. Kenton, with the vague idea that Detweiller may have some interesting stuff which can be rewritten by a staffer, encourages Detweiller to submit sample chapters and an outline. Detweiller instead submits the entire manuscript, along with a bundle of photographs. The mss is even more abysmal than Kenton—who thought the book could maybe be juiced up for *The Amityville Horror* audience—would have believed in his worst nightmares. Yet the worst nightmare of all is contained in the form of the enclosed photographs. Most are shots of painfully faked seance effects, but four of them show a gruesomely realistic human sacrifice, in which an old man's heart is being pulled from his gaping chest...and it seems very likely to Kenton that the fellow doing the pulling is none other than Carlos Detweiller himself.

ROGER WADE concurs with Kenton's feeling that they have stumbled into something which is probably a police matter—and a very nasty police matter at that. Kenton takes the photos to SGT. TYNDALE, who wires them to CHIEF IVERSON in Central Falls. Carlos Detweiller is arrested, then released when an officer assigned to surveillance sees the photos in question and remarks that he saw the so-called "sacrifice victim" sitting in the House of Flowers office that very day, playing solitaire and watching *Ryan's Hope* on TV.

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Tyndale tries to comfort Kenton. Go home, he says, have a drink, forget it. You made a perfectly forgivable mistake in the course of trying to do your civic duty.

Kenton burns the “sacrifice photos,” but he can’t forget; he receives a letter from the obviously insane Carlos Detweiller, promising revenge. Two weeks later, he receives a letter from one “Roberta Solrac,” who purports to be a great fan of Zenith’s second-hottest author, Anthony La Scorbia (La Scorbia is responsible for a series of nature-run-amok novels such as *Rats from Hell*, *Ants from Hell*, and *Scorpions from Hell*). “She” claims to have sent La Scorbia roses, and wants to send Kenton, as La Scorbia’s editor, a small plant “as a token of esteem.”

Kenton, no fool, realizes at once that Solrac is Carlos spelled backward...and Detweiller, of course, worked in a greenhouse. Convinced that the “token of esteem” is apt to be something like deadly nightshade or belladonna, Kenton sends an interoffice memo to Riddley, instructing him to incinerate any package which comes to him from a “Roberta Solrac.”

RIDDLEY WALKER, who respects Kenton more than Kenton himself would ever believe, agrees, but privately adopts a wait-and-see attitude. Near the end of February 1981, a package from “Roberta Solrac,” addressed to John Kenton, actually does arrive. Riddley opens the package in spite of a strong feeling that the sender—Detweiller—is a terribly evil man. If so, the contents of the package are hardly in keeping with such notions; it is nothing more than a sickly-looking Common Ivy with a little plastic sign stuck into the earth of its pot. The sign reads:

**HI!  
MY NAME IS ZENITH  
I AM A GIFT TO JOHN  
FROM ROBERTA**

Riddley puts it on a high shelf of his janitor’s room and forgets it.  
For the time being.

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February 25

Dear Ruth,

I've got a case of the mean reds, so I thought I'd pass some of them on—see the enclosed Xeroxes, concluding with a typically impudent communication from Riddley, he of the coal-black skin and three hundred huge white teeth.

You'll notice that Roger kicked my ass good and hard—not much like Roger, and doubly sobering for that very reason. I don't think one has to be very paranoid to see that he's talking about the possibility of firing me. If I'd talked this out with him over martinis at Flaherty's after work, I doubt very much if he would have come down so hard, and of course I had no idea he was waiting on a call from Enders. I undoubtedly deserved the ass-kicking I got—I *haven't* really been doing my job—but he has no idea of the scare that letter threw into me when I realized it was Detweiller again. I'm too goddam thin-skinned for my own good, that's what Roger thinks...but Detweiller is scary for other, less easily grasped reasons. Being the *idée* that's gotten *fixe* in some crazy's head has got to be one of the most uncomfortable feelings in the world—if I knew Jody Foster, I think I'd give her a jingle and tell her I know exactly how she feels. There's an almost palpable texture of slime about Detweiller's communications, and oh boy, oh yeah, I wish I *could* get him out of my head, but I still have nightmares about those pictures.

Anyway, I have taken care of matters as well as I can, and no, I have no intention of calling Central Falls. We have an editorial meeting tomorrow.

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I'll try to the best of my limited abilities to get back on the beam...except at Zenith House the beam is so narrow it almost doesn't exist.

I love you, I miss you, I long for your return. Maybe you being gone is part of the problem. Not to make you feel guilty.

*All my love,*

*John*

*From the journals of Riddley Walker*

2/23/81

Like a stone thrown into a large and stagnant pond, the Detweiller affair has caused any number of ripples at my place of employment. I thought that all of them had gone by; yet this afternoon one more rolled past, and who is to say even that one will be the last?

I have included a Xerox of an exceedingly curious memo I received from Kenton at 2:35 P.M. plus my own reply (the memo came just after Gelb left, in something of a huff; why he should have been in a huff eludes me since today he brought his own dice and I did him the courtesy of not even checking them, but Ah g'iss Ah woan *nevuh* understand dese white folks). I think I have covered the Detweiller affair to a nicety in these pages, but I should add that it never surprised me in the least that Kenton was the one to bring Detweiller, the rogue comet, into the erratic (and, I fear, degenerating) orbit of Zenith House. He is brighter than Sandra

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Jackson; brighter than that crap-shooting, Ivy League tie-wearing devil William Gelb; *far* brighter than Herbert Porter (Porter, as previously noted, is not above wandering into Ms. Jackson's office after she has left for the day and sniffing the seat of her office chair—a strange man, but be it not for me to judge), and the only one of the staff who *might* be capable of recognizing a commercial book if it came within his purview. Right now he is eaten up with guilt and embarrassment over *l'affaire Detweiller*, and can see only that he made a rather comic *faux pas*. He would be incapable of seeing that his decision to even *look* at the Detweiller book demonstrated that his editorial ears are still open, and still attuned to that sweetest of all tones—the celestial notes of Sweda cash registers in drugstores and book emporia ringing up sales, even if it was pointed out to him.

Incapable of seeing that it proves he's still trying.

The others have given up.

Anyway, here is this enchanting memo—between its lines I hear a man whose nerve is temporarily shot, a man who *might* be capable of facing a lion but who now cannot even look at a mouse; a man who is, in consequence, shrieking “Eeeek! Get rid of it! Get rid of it!” and swatting at it with the handiest broom, which in *dis* case jus happen t’be Riddley, who dus’ de awfishes an wipe de windows an delivah de mail. Yassuh, Mist Kenton, I git rid of it fo you! I sholy goan get rid of dat hoodoo Solrac woman’s package if she sen one!

Maybe.

On the other hand, maybe John Kenton should have to face up to the consequences of his own actions—swat his own mouse. After all, if you don't swat your own, maybe you never really know what a harmless little thing a mouse is...and is it not possible that Kenton's useful days as an editor may be over if he cannot stare down such occasional crazies as Carlos “Roberta” Detweiller?

I shall ponder the matter. I think there is a very good chance no package will come, but I'll ponder it all the same.

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2/27/81

Something from the mysterious “Roberta Solrac” actually came today! I didn’t know whether to be amused or disgusted by my own reaction, which was staring, elemental gut-terror followed by an almost insane urge to put the thing down the incinerator, exactly as Kenton’s note had instructed. The *physicality* of my reaction as soon as my eye fell on the return address and connected the name there with Kenton’s memo was striking. I had a sudden spasm of shudders. Goosebumps raced up my back. I heard a clear, ringing tone in my ears, and I could feel the hair stiffening on my head.

This symphony of physiological atavism lasted no more than five seconds and then it subsided—but it left me as shaken as a sudden deep lance of pain in the area of the heart. Floyd would sneer and call it “a nigger reaction,” but it was no such thing. It was a *human* reaction. Not to the thing itself—the contents of the package were something of an anticlimax after all the sound and fury—but, I am convinced, to the hands which placed the lid on the small white cardboard box in which the plant came; the hands which tied twine around that box and then cut a brown paper shopping bag in which to wrap the box for mailing, the hands which taped and labelled and carried. Detweiller’s hands.

Am I speaking of telepathy? Yes...and no. It might be fairer to say that I am speaking of a kind of passive psychokinesis. Dogs shy away from people with cancer; they smell it on them. So, at least, claims my dear old Aunt Olympia. In the same way I smelled Detweiller all over that box, and now I understand Kenton’s upset better and have a good deal more sympathy for him. I think Carlos Detweiller must be dangerously insane...but the plant itself is no deadly nightshade or belladonna or Adder Toadstool (although it may have been any or all of those things in Detweiller’s feverish mind, I suppose). It’s only a very small and very tired-looking common ivy in a red clay pot.

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If not for the “nigger reaction” (Floyd Walker)—or the “human reaction” (his brother Riddley)—I might really have dumped the thing...but after that fit of the shakes, it seemed to me I had to go through with opening the package or deem myself less a man. I did so, in spite of any number of gruesome images—high explosive rigged to special pressure-tapes, noxious floods of black widow spiders, a litter of baby copperheads. And there it was, just a small ivy-plant with yellow-edged leaves (four of them) nodding from one tired, sagging stem. The soil itself is waxy brown. It smells swampy and unpleasant.

There was a little plastic sign stuck in the earth which read:

**HI!  
MY NAME IS ZENITH  
I AM A GIFT TO JOHN  
FROM ROBERTA**

It was that flash of fear which drove me to open the package. Similarly, it's that same flash which has decided me against making sure that Kenton gets it after all, which would have been easy enough to do (“*Dat* plant, Mist Kenton? Oh, *drat!* I g’iss I fo’got whatchoo said. I am de mos *f’gitten’est* man!”). Let the ripples end; let him forget Detweiller, if that’s what he wants. I’ve put Zenith the Common Ivy on a shelf in my janitorial-cum-mailroom cubicle—a shelf well above Kenton’s eye-level (not that he stops in much anyway, unlike Gelb with his dice fixation). I’ll keep it until it dies, and then I really *will* dump it down the incinerator chute. That will be the end of Detweiller *fo sho*.

Got fifty pages done on the novel over the weekend.

Gelb now owes me \$75.40.

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From *The New York Post*, page 1, March 4, 1981:

INSANE GENERAL ESCAPES OAK COVE ASYLUM,  
KILLS THREE!!

(Special to the *Post*) Major General (ret.) Anthony R. Hecksler, known to the commandos and partisans who followed him across France during World War II as "Iron-Guts" Hecksler, escaped from Oak Cove Asylum late last night, stabbing two orderlies and a nurse to death in his bid for freedom.

General Hecksler was remanded to Oak Cove in the small upstate town of Cutlersville twenty-seven months ago, following his acquittal, by reason of insanity, on charges of assault with a deadly weapon and assault with intent to kill. His victim was Albany bus driver Herman T. Schneur, whom Hecksler claimed in a signed statement to be "one of the twelve North American foremen of the antichrist."

The Oak Cove dead have been identified as Norman Ableson, twenty-six; John Piet, forty; and Alicia Penbroke, thirty-four.

State Police Lieutenant Arthur P. Ford was surprisingly gloomy when asked if he expected to recapture General Hecksler quickly. "We hope for a quick arrest, naturally," he said, "but this is a man who trained guerilla units in World War II and in Korea, and who was consulted on more than one occasion by General Westmoreland in Viet Nam. He's seventy-two

now, but still strong and amazingly agile, as his escape from Oak Cove shows."

Ford indicated he was referring to Hecksler's probable method of escape—a leap from a second floor window in the Oak Cove Administration Wing to the garden below (see photographs on pages 2, 3, and Center Section).

Ford went on to caution everyone within the immediate area to be on the lookout for the mad General, whom he described as "extremely clever, extremely dangerous, and extremely paranoid."

In a brief press interview, Ellen K. Moors, the doctor in charge of Hecksler's case, agreed. "He had a great many enemies," she said, "or so he imagined. His paranoid delusions were extremely complex, but he never lost track of the score. He was, in his way, a model inmate...but he never lost track of the score."

A source close to the investigation says Hecksler may have stabbed Ableson, Piet, and Pembroke to death with a pair of barber's shears. The source told the *Post* that there was no outcry; all three were stabbed in the throat, commando-style.

(Related story p. 12)

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*From the journals of Riddley Walker*

3/5/81

What a difference a day makes!

Yesterday Herb Porter was his usual self—fat, slovenly, smoking a cigar as he stood by the water-cooler, explaining to Kenton and Gelb how the great train of the world would run if he, Herbert Porter, were the engineer. The man is a walking *Reader's Digest* of rabbit-punch solutions, a compendium of declarative answers which are delivered amid the effluvia of cigar smoke and exquisitely bad breath. Close the borders and keep out the spies and wetbacks! End abortion on demand! Build more prisons! Upgrade possession of marijuana to a felony once again! Sell biochemical stocks! Buy cable-TV issues!

He is, in his way—or was, until today—a wonderful man: rounded and perfect in his assurances, plated with prejudices, caprisoned about with cant, and possessed of just enough native wit to hold a job in a place like this, Porter is an evocation of the Great American Median. Even his occasional surreptitious expeditions into Sandra Jackson's office to sniff the seat of her chair please me—an endearing little loophole in the walking castle of complacency that is Massa Po'tuh.

Oh, but today! What a different Herbert Porter crept into my janitorial cubbyhole today! The complacent, ruddy face had become pallid and trembling. The blue eyes shifted so regularly from side to side that Porter looked like a man watching a tennis match even when he was trying to stare right at me. His lips were so shiny with spittle that they looked almost varnished. And while he was of course still fat, he also looked as if he had somehow lost his surface tension—as if the essential Herb Porter had shrunk away from the borders of his skin, leaving that skin to sag in places where it had been previously stretched smooth.

“He's out,” Porter whispered.

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“Who’s dat, Mist Po’tuh?” I asked. I was genuinely curious; I could not imagine what mighty sling or engine could have breached such a gap in Castle Herbert. Although I suppose I should have guessed.

He proffered me the paper—the *Post*, of course. He’s the only one around here who reads it. Kenton and Wade read the *Times*, Gelb and Jackson *bring* the *Times* but secretly read the *Daily News* (the hand that rocks the cradle may rule the world, but de han which empty de white folks’ wastebaskets know de *secrets* of de worl), but the *Post* was made for fellows such as Herb Porter. He plays Wingo religiously and says if he ever wins a bundle he is going to buy a Winnebago, paint the word WINGOBAGO on the side, and tour the country.

I took it, opened it, and read the headline.

“The General’s escaped,” he whispered. His eyes stopped bouncing back and forth for a moment and he stared at me in dismay and utter horror. “It’s as if that damned Detweiller cursed us. The General’s escaped *and I rejected his book!*”

“Now, now, Mist Po’tuh,” I said. “Ain’t no need to take on so. Man lak dis prob’ly got fo-five dozen scores to settle befo he git to you.”

“But I could be number one,” he whispered. “After all, I rejected his goddam *book.*”

It was true, and it is ironic how two such fundamentally different men as Kenton and Porter have managed to get themselves into exactly the same situation this late winter—each the target of a rejected author (Detweiller’s rejection a bit more dramatic than that of the Major-General, granted, but that was indubitably Detweiller’s own fault) who just happens to be insane. The difference—I know it, even if no one else does (and I believe Roger Wade might)—is that, while Kenton thought there might actually be the germ of a book in Detweiller’s obsession, Porter knew better concerning the General’s. But Porter is one of those men who has read omnivorously—and vicariously—about World War II, that Pickett’s Charge of western man (western *white* man) in the 20th century, and he

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knew who Hecksler was...in a war filled with military celebrities Hecksler was, granted, of the Hollywood Squares type (if you see what I mean), but to Porter he was *somebody*. So he asked to see the completed manuscript of *Twenty Psychic Garden Flowers* in spite of the abysmal outline, thereby encouraging a man who was, by the quality and content of his own written words, a palpable psychotic. I felt that the result and his present terror, although unforeseen, were partly his own fault.

I allowed as how it was true that he could be number one on the General's hit list (if indeed the poor madman is doing anything other than cowering in drainage ditches or scouring alley garbage cans for offal at this point), but reiterated that I thought it unlikely. I added that he might well be caught before he could get within fifty miles of New York City even if he had decided to come after Porter, and finished by telling him that many psychotics released suddenly into an uncontrolled environment took their own lives...although I did not say so in exactly those words.

Porter regarded me suspiciously for a moment and then said, "Riddley—don't take offense at this—"

"Nawsah!"

"Have you *really* been to college?"

"*Yassah!*"

"And you took psychology courses?"

"Yassah, I sho did."

"*Abnormal* psychology?"

"Yassah, and I'se pow'ful familier wid de suicidal syndrome associated wid de paranoid-psychotic personality! Why, dat Gen'l Hecksler could be slittin' his wrists or garglin' wid a lightbulb even while we's heah talkin, Mist Po'tuh!"

He looked at me for a long time and then said, "If you've been to college, Riddley, why do you talk that way?"

"What way is dat, Mist Po-tuh?"

He regarded me for a moment longer and then said, "Never mind."

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He leaned close—close enough so I could smell cheap cigars, hair tonic, and the graywater stench of fear. “Can you get me a gun?”

For a moment I was literally without a response—which is like saying (Floyd would, anyway) that China was for a moment without manpower. I had an idea that he had changed the subject completely, and that what I had heard as *Can you get me a gun?* had actually been *Can you get me some fun*, as in ho. Definition of a ho: dahk-skin woman who do it fo money on account of de food-stamps is gone and de las fix be cookin in de spoon. My response was to either fall down, shrieking wildly with laughter, or to throttle him until his face was as purple as his tie. Then, belatedly, I began to understand he really *had* said gun...but in the meantime he had taken the overload in my mental switchboard for refusal. His face fell.

“You’re sure?” he asked. “I thought that up there in Harlem—”

“Ah lives in Dobbs Ferry, Mist’ Po’tuh!”

He merely waved this aside, as if we both knew my Dobbs Ferry address was just a convenient fiction I maintained—that I might even actually go there after work, but of course was drawn back to the velvety reaches beyond 110th as soon as the sun went down.

“Ah g’iss I could git you a gun, Mist’ Po’tuh, suh,” I said, “but it wouldn’t be no better or wuss’n one you could git yo’sef—a .32...maybe a .38...” I winked at him. “And a gun you buy under de countuh in a bah, cain’t never tell it ain’t goan blow up in yo face fust time you pulls de trig-gah!”

“I don’t want anything like that, anyway,” Porter said morosely. “I want something with a laser sight. And exploding bullets. Did you ever see *Day of the Jackal*, Riddley?”

“Yassah, and it sho was fine!”

“When he shot the watermelon...*plowch!*” Porter tossed his arms wide to indicate how the watermelon had exploded when the assassin tried an exploding bullet on it in *The Day of the Jackal*, and one of his hands struck the ivy sent to Kenton by the mysterious Roberta Solrac. I

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had all but forgotten it, although it's been less than two weeks since I put it up there.

I tried to assure Porter again that he was probably far from the top of Hecksler's perhaps infinite list of pet paranoias, and that the man was, after all, seventy-two.

"You don't know some of the stuff he did in Big Two," Porter said, his eyes beginning to move hauntedly from side to side again. "If those guys who hired the Jackal had hired Hecksler instead, DeGaulle never would have died in the rack."

He wandered off then, and I was glad to see him go. The smell of cigars was beginning to make me feel mildly ill. I took down Zenith the Common Ivy and looked at him (it is ridiculous to assign a male pronoun to an ivy, and yet I did it automatically—I, who usually write with the shrewish care of a French *petit bourgeoise* housewife picking over fruit in the marketplace). I began this entry by saying what a difference a day makes. In the case of Zenith the Common Ivy, what a difference *five* days has made. The sagging stem has straightened and thickened, the four yellowish leaves have become almost wholly green, and two new ones have begun to unfurl. All of this with absolutely no help from me at all. I watered it and noticed two other things about my good old buddy Zenith—first, it's even put out its first tendril—it barely reaches to the lip of the cheap plastic pot, but it's there—and second, that swampy, unpleasant smell seems to have disappeared. In fact both the plant and the soil in which he is potted smell quite sweet.

Perhaps it's a psychic ivy. If General Hecksler shows up here at good old 490 Park, I must be sure to ask him, hee-hee!

Got twenty pages done on the novel this week—not much, but think (hope!) I am approaching the halfway point.

Gelb, who had a modest run of luck yesterday, tried to push it today—this was about an hour before Porter hopped in, looking for armaments. Gelb now owes me \$81.50.

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March 8, 1981

Dear Ruth,

Just lately you've been harder to reach on the phone than the President of the United States—I swear to God I'm getting to hate your answering machine! I must confess that tonight—the third night of “Hi, this is Ruth and I can't come to the phone right now, but...”—I got a little nervous and called the other number you gave me—the super. If he hadn't told me he'd seen you going out around five with a big load of books under your arm, I think I might have asked him to check and make sure you were okay. I know, I know, it's just the time difference, but things have gotten so paranoid here lately that you wouldn't believe it. Paranoid? *Weird* is a better word, maybe. We'll probably talk before you receive this, making ninety per cent of this letter obsolete (unless I send it Federal Express, which makes long distance look like an austerity measure), but if I don't narrate it by some means or other I think I may explode. I understand from Herb Porter, who is nearly apoplectic (a condition I sympathize with more than I would heretofore have believed, following *l'affair* Detweiller), that General Heckler's escape and the murders which attended it have made the national news the last two nights, but I assume you haven't seen it—or didn't make the connection—or I would have heard from you via Ma Tinkerbelle ere now (prolix as ever, you see—would that I could be as succinct as Zenith's faithful custodian Riddley!). If you *haven't* heard, the enclosed *Post* clipping (I didn't bother to include the centerfold photo of the asylum with the obligatory dotted line marking the dotty General's likely route of escape and the obligatory X's marking the locations of his victims) will bring you up to date as quickly and luridly as possible.

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You may remember that I mentioned Hecksler to you in a letter only six weeks ago—something like that, anyway. Herb rejected his book, *Twenty Psychic Garden Flowers*, and provoked a barrage of paranoid hate-mail. Joking aside, his bloody escape has created a real atmosphere of unease here at Z.H. I had a drink with Roger Wade after work tonight in Four Fathers (Roger claims that the owner, a genial man named Ginelli with a soft voice and these odd, gleeful eyes, is a *mafioso*) and told him about Herb's visit to me that afternoon. I pointed out to Herb that it was ridiculous for him to be as frightened as he obviously is (it's sort of funny—under his steely Joe Pyne Exterior, the resident Neanderthal turns out to be Walter Mitty after all) and Herb agreed. Then, after a certain amount of patently artificial small talk, he asked me if I knew where he could get a gun. Mystified—sometimes your ob'dt correspondent is amazingly slow in making the obvious connections, m'dear—I mentioned the sporting goods store five blocks from here, at Park and 32nd.

“No,” he said impatiently. “I don't want a shotgun or anything like that.” Here he lowered his voice. “I want something I can carry around with me.”

Roger nodded and said Herb had been into his office around two, feeling him out on the same subject.

“What did you say?” I asked him.

“I reminded him that the penalties for carrying concealed weapons without a permit in this state are damned severe,” Roger said. “At which point Herb drew himself up to his full height (which is, Ruth, about five-seven) and said, ‘A man doesn't need a permit to protect himself, Roger.’”

“And then?”

“Then he walked out. And tried you. Probably tried Bill Gelb as well.”

“Don't forget Riddley,” I said.

“Ah, yes—and Riddley.”

“Who might just be able to help him.”

Roger ordered another bourbon, and I was thinking how much older than his actual forty-five he is coming to look when he suddenly grinned

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that boyish, winning grin that so charmed you when you first met him at that cocktail party in June of '80—the one at Gahan and Nancy Wilson's place in Connecticut, do you remember? "Have you seen Sandra Jackson's new toy?" he asked. "*She's* the one Herb should have gone to for black market munitions." Roger actually laughed out loud, a sound I have heard from him very seldom in the last eight months or so. Hearing it made me realize again, Ruth, how much I like and respect him—he could have been a really great editor somewhere—perhaps even in the Maxwell Perkins league. It seems a shame that he's ended up piloting such a leaky craft as Zenith House.

"She's got something called the Rainy Night Friend," he said, still laughing. "It's silver-plated, and almost the size of a mortar shell. Fucking thing fills her whole purse. There's a flashlight set into the blunt end. The tapered end emits a cloud of tear-gas when you press a button—only Sandra says that she spent an extra ten bucks to have the tear-gas canister replaced with Hi-Pro-Gas, which is a hopped-up version of Mace. In the middle of this device, Johnny boy, is a pull-ring that sets off a high-decibel siren. I did not ask for a demonstration. They would have evacuated the building."

"The way you describe it, it sounds as if she could use it as a dildo when there were no muggers around," I said.

He went off into gales of half-hysterical laughter. I joined him—it would have been impossible not to—but I was concerned for him, as well. He's very tired and very close to the edge of his endurance, I think—the parent corporation's steadily eroding support for the house has really started to get to him.

I asked him if something like the Rainy Night Friend was legal.

"I'm not a lawyer so I couldn't tell you for sure," Roger said. "My impression is that a woman who uses a tear-gas pen on a potential mugger or rapist is in a gray area. But Sandra's toy, loaded up with a Mace hybrid... no, I don't think something like that can be kosher."

"But she's got it, and she's carrying it," I said.

"Not only that, but she seems fairly calm about it all," Roger agreed.

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“Funny—she was the one who was so scared when the General was sending his poison pen letters, and Herb hardly seemed aware any of it was going on...at least until the bus driver got stabbed. I think what freaked Sandra out before was that she’d never seen him.”

“Yes,” I said. “She even told me that once.”

He paid the tab, waving away my offer to pay my half. “It’s the revenge of the flower-people,” he said. “First Detweiller, the mad gardener from Central Falls, and then Heckler, the mad gardener from Oak Cove.”

That gave me what the British mystery writers like to call a nasty start—talk about not making obvious connections! Roger, who is far from being anyone’s fool, saw my expression and smiled.

“Didn’t think of that, did you?” he asked. “It’s just a coincidence, of course, but I guess it was enough to set off a little paranoid chime in Herb Porter’s head—I can’t imagine him getting so fashed otherwise. We could have the basis of a good Robert Ludlum novel here. *The Horticultural Something-or-Other*. Come on, let’s get out of here.”

“*Convergence*,” I said as we hit the street.

“Huh?” Roger looked like someone coming back from a million miles away.

“*The Horticultural Convergence*,” I said. “The perfect Ludlum title. Even the perfect Ludlum plot. It turns out, see, that Detweiller and Heckler are actually brothers—no, considering the ages, I guess father and son would be better—in the pay of the NKVD. And—”

“I’ve got to catch my bus, John,” he said, not unkindly.

Well, I have my problems, dear Ruth (who knows better than you?), but realizing when I’m being a bore has never been one of them (except when I’m drunk). I saw him down to the bus stop and headed home.

The last thing he said was that the next we heard of General Heckler would probably be a report of his capture...or his suicide. And Herb Porter would be disappointed as well as relieved.

“It isn’t General Heckler Herb and the rest of us have to be worried about,” he said—his little burst of good humor had left him and he looked

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slumped and small, standing there at the bus stop with his hands jammed into the pockets of his trenchcoat. “It’s Harlow Enders and the rest of the accountants who are going to get us. They’ll stab us with their red pencils. When I think about Enders, I almost wish I had Sandra Jackson’s Rainy Night Friend.”

No progress on my novel this week—looking back over this epistle I see why—all this narrative that should have gone into *Maymonth* tonight went ended up here instead. But if I went on too long and in too much novelistic detail, don’t chalk it *all* up to prolixity, my dear—over the last six months or so I have become a genuine Lonely Guy. Writing to you isn’t as good as talking to you, and talking to you isn’t as good as seeing you, and seeing you isn’t as good as touching you and being with you (steam-steam! pant-pant!), but a person has to make do with what he has. I know you’re busy, studying hard, but going so long without talking to you has got me sorta crazy (and on top of Detweiller and Hecksler, more crazy I do not need to be). I love you, my dear.

*Missing you, needing you,*

*John*

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March 9, 1981

Mr. Herbert Porter  
Designated Jew  
Zenith House  
490 Park Avenue  
New York, NY 10017

Dear Designated Jew,

Did you think I had forgotten you? I bet you did. Well, I didn't. A man doesn't forget the thief who rejected his book after stealing all of the good parts. And how you tried to discredit me. I wonder how you will look with your *penis* in your *ear*. Ha-ha. (But not a joke)

I am coming for you, "big boy."

Major General Anthony R.  
Hecksler (Ret.)

P.S. Roses are red.

Violets are blue.

I am coming to castrate.

A Designated Jew.

M.G.A.R.H. (Ret.)

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MAILGRAM FROM MR. JOHN KENTON TO RUTH TANAKA

MS. RUTH TANAKA  
10411 CRESCENT BOULEVARD  
LOS ANGELES, CA 90024

MARCH 10, 1981

DEAR RUTH

THIS IS PROBABLY PRIMO STUPIDO BUT PARANOIA BEGETS PARANOIA AND I STILL CAN'T RAISE YOU. FINALLY GOT PAST THAT BLANK-BLANK ANSWERING MACHINE THIS MORNING TO YOUR ROOMMATE WHO SAID SHE HADN'T SEEN YOU LAST TWO DAYS. SHE SOUNDED FUNNY. I HOPE ONLY STONED. CALL ME SOONEST OR I'LL BE KNOCKING ON YOUR DOOR THIS WEEKEND. LOVE YOU.

JOHN

March 10, 1981

Dear John,

I imagine — no, I know — you must be wondering why you haven't heard from me much over the last three weeks. The reason is simple enough; I've been feeling guilty. And the reason I am writing now instead of calling is that I am a coward. Also I think, although you may not believe me when you read the rest of this, which is the hardest letter I've ever had to write, because I love you very much and want so much not to hurt you. All the same I suppose this will hurt and knowing I can't help it makes me cry.

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John, I've met a man named Toby Anderson and have fallen head over heels in love with him. If it matters to you — and it probably won't — I met him in one of the two English Restoration drama courses I'm taking. I held him off as best as I could for a long time — I very much want and need you to believe that — but by mid-February I just couldn't hold him off any longer. My arms got tired.

The last three weeks or so have been a nightmare for me. I don't really expect you to sympathize with my position, but I hope you'll believe I am telling the truth. Although you're on the east coast and I'm three thousand miles away on the west, I felt as if I were sneaking around on you. And I was. I was! Oh, I don't mean in the sense that you might come home early from work one night and find me with Toby, but I felt terrible all the same. I couldn't sleep, couldn't eat, couldn't do my yoga positions or the Jane Fonda Workout. My grades were slipping, but to hell with the grades — my heart was slipping.

I've been ducking your calls because I couldn't bear to hear your voice — it seemed to bring it all home to me — how I was lying and cheating and leading you on.

It all came to a head two nights ago when Toby showed me the lovely diamond engagement ring he had bought for me. He said he wanted me to have it and he hoped I wanted to take it, but he said he couldn't give it to me even if I did until I talked or wrote to you. He's such an honorable man, John, and the irony is that under different circumstances I am sure you would like him very much.

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I broke down and cried in his arms and before long his tears were mingled with mine. The upshot of it all was me saying I would be ready for him to slip that gorgeous love-ring on my finger by the end of the week. I think we are going to be married in June.

You see that in the end I took the coward's way out, writing instead of phoning, and it's still taken me the last two days to get this much down—I've cut every class and have practically put down roots in the library kareel where I should be studying for a Transformational Grammar prelim. But to hell with Noam Chomsky and deep structure! And although you may not believe this either, each word of the letter you're reading has been like a lash across my heart.

If you want to talk to me, John—I'd understand if you didn't but you may—you could call me in a week...after you've had a chance to think all this over and get it into some kind of perspective. I am so used to your sweetness and charm and kindness, and so afraid you'll be angry and accusatory—but that is up to you and I'll just have to "take you as you are," I suppose. But you need that time to cool off and settle down, and I need some time, too. You should receive this on the eleventh. I'll be in my apartment from seven to nine-thirty on the nights of the eighteenth through the twenty-second, both expecting your call and dreading it. I won't want to speak to you before then, and I hope you understand—and I think maybe you will, you who were always the most understanding of men in spite of your constant self-deprecation.

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One other thing — both Toby and I are in agreement about this: don't take it in your head to just suddenly jump on a plane and "wing your way into the golden west" — I wouldn't see you if you did. I'm not ready to see you face to face, John — my feelings are still too much in flux and my self-image too much in a state of transition. We will meet again, yes. And dare I say that I even hope you will come to our wedding? I must dare, as I see I have written it down!

Oh, John, I do love you, and I hope this letter has not caused you too much pain — I even hope God has been good and you may have found your own "somebody" in the last couple of weeks — in the meantime, please know that you will always (always!) be somebody to me.

My love,

Ruth

PS — And although it is trite, it is also true: I hope we can always be friends.

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interoffice memo

TO: Roger Wade  
FROM: John Kenton  
RE: Resignation

I've been a trifle formal here because this really is a letter of resignation, Roger, memo form or no. I'll be leaving at the end of the day—will, in fact, begin cleaning out my desk as soon as I've finished this. I'd rather not go into my reasons—they are personal. I realize, of course, that leaving with no prior notice is very bad form. Should you choose to take the matter up with the Apex Corporation, I would be happy to pay a reasonable assessment. I'm sorry about this, Roger. I like and respect you a great deal, but this simply has to be.

*From John Kenton's diary*

March 16, 1981

I haven't tried to keep a diary since I was eleven years old, when my Aunt Susan—dead lo these many years—gave me a small pocket diary for my birthday. It was just a cheap little thing; like Aunt Susan herself, now that I think about it.

I kept that diary, off and on (mostly off) for almost three weeks. I might not get even that far this time, but it doesn't really matter. This was Roger's idea, and Roger's ideas are sometimes good.

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I've junked the novel—oh, don't think I did anything melodramatic like casting it into the fire to commemorate the spontaneous combustion of My First Serious Love; I'm actually writing this first (and maybe last) entry in my diary on the backs of the manuscript pages. But junking a novel doesn't have anything to do with the actual pages, anyway; what's on the pages is just so much dead skin. The novel actually falls apart inside your head, it seems, like the parson's wonderful one-hoss shay. Maybe the only good thing about Ruth's cataclysmic letter is that it's put paid to my grandiose literary aspirations. *Maymonth*, by John Edward Kenton, sucked that fabled hairy bird.

Does one need to begin a diary with background information? This was not a question which crossed my mind when I was eleven—at least not that I recall. And in spite of the great shitload of English courses I've taken in my time, I don't recall ever attending one which covered the Protocol of Journals. Footnotes, synopses, outlines, the proper placement of modifiers, the correct form of the business letter—these were all things in which I took instruction. But on how to start a diary I am as blank as I am, say, on how to continue your life after its light just went out.

Here is my decision, after a full thirty seconds of weighty consideration: a little background information wouldn't hurt. My name, as mentioned above, is John Edward Kenton; I am twenty-six years of age; I attended Brown University, where I majored in English, served as President of the Milton Society, and was exceedingly full of myself; I believed that everything in my life would eventually turn out just fine; I have since learned better. My father is dead, my mother alive and well and living in Sanford, Maine. I have three sisters. Two are married; the third is living at home and will finish her senior year at Sanford High this June.

I live in a two-room Soho apartment which I thought quite pleasant until the last few days; now it seems drab. I work for a seedy book company which publishes paperback originals, most of them about giant bugs and Viet Nam veterans out to reform the world with automatic weapons. Three days ago I found out my girl has left me for another man. Some response to this seemed to be required, so I tried to quit my job. No sense trying to go

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into my mental state either then or now. It was none too calm to begin with, due to an outbreak of what I can only call Crazy Fever at work. I may elaborate on *that* business at some later date, but for the time being the importance of Detweiller and Heckslar seems to have receded far into the background.

If you have ever been abruptly left by someone you did and do love deeply, you'll know the sort of fugue I have been experiencing. If you haven't, you can't. Simple as that.

I keep wanting to say *I feel the way I did when my father died*, but I don't. Part of me (the part that, writer or not, constantly wants to make metaphors) would like to make it into a bereavement, and I believe Roger was partly right when he made that comparison at the mostly liquid dinner we had the night of my resignation, but there are other elements, too. It is a separation—as if someone told you that you could no longer have your favorite food, or use a drug to which you had become addicted. And there's something worse. However you define the thing, I find that my own sense of self-esteem and self-worth have somehow gotten mixed up in it, and it hurts. It hurts a lot. And it seems to hurt all the time. I always used to be able to escape mental pain and psychic distress in my sleep, but that's no good this time. It hurts there, too.

Ruth's letter (question: how many Dear John letters have actually been sent to Johns? Should we form a club, like the Jim Smith Society?) came on the eleventh—it was waiting in my mailbox like a time-bomb when I got home. I scribbled my resignation on a memo form the next morning and sent it down to Roger Wade's office via Riddley, who is our janitor *cum* mail-clerk at Zenith House. Roger came down to my office as if he had rockets on his heels. In spite of the pain I'm feeling and the daze I seem to be living in I was absurdly touched. After a short, intense conversation (to my shame I broke down and wept, and although I managed to refrain from telling him specifically what the problem was/is, I think he guessed) I agreed to defer my resignation, at least until that evening, when Roger suggested we get together and talk the situation over.

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“A couple of drinks and a medium-rare steak may help to put the situation in perspective,” was the way he put it, but I think it actually turned out to be more like a dozen drinks...each, maybe. I lost count. And it was to be Four Fathers again, naturally. At least a place for which I have no associations with Ruth.

After agreeing to Roger’s dinner suggestion, I went home, slept for the rest of the day, and woke up feeling thick and dazed and headachey—that feeling of mild hangover I am left with whenever I get too much sleep I don’t really need. It was 5:30, almost dark, and in the unlovely light of a late winter dusk I couldn’t imagine why in God’s name I had allowed Roger to talk me into the compromise measure of making my resignation provisional for even twelve hours. I felt like an ear of corn on which someone has performed a fabulous magic trick. Taken the corn and the cob and left the green shield of leaves and the fine yellow-white poll of tassel intact.

I am aware—God knows I have read enough to be—of how Byronic-Keatsian-Sorrows-of-Young-Werther that sounds, but one of the diary joys I discovered at eleven and may be rediscovering now is that you write with no audience—real or imagined—in mind. You can say whatever you fucking well want.

I took a very long shower, mostly just standing dazedly under the spray with a bar of soap in one hand, and then I dried off and dressed and sat in front of the TV until quarter of seven or so, when it was time to go off and meet Roger. I took Ruth’s letter off my desk and stuffed it into my pocket just before I left, deciding that Roger ought to know just what had derailed me. Was I looking for sympathy? A tender ear, as the poet says? I don’t know. But mostly I think I wanted him to be sure—really, really sure—that I wasn’t just a rat deserting a sinking ship. Because I really like Roger, and I’m sorry for the jam he’s in.

I could describe him—and if he were a character in one of my fictions I suppose I would do so lovingly, in too much detail—but since this diary is for me alone and I know perfectly well what Roger looks like, having trod the metaphoric grapes just down the hall from him for the last seventeen

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months, there is really no need to. I find that fact unaccountably liberating. The only salient points about Roger are that he is forty-five, looks eight to ten years older, smokes too much, is three-times divorced...and that I like him very much.

When we were settled at a table in the back of Fathers with drinks in front of us, he asked me what was wrong besides the obvious unfortunacies of this evil year. I took Ruth's letter out of my pocket and tossed it wordlessly across the table to him. While he read it I finished my drink and ordered another. When the waiter came with it Roger finished his own drink at a gulp, ordered another, and laid Ruth's letter beside his plate. His eyes were still going over it.

"Before long his tears were mingled with mine?" he said in a low just-talking-to-myself voice. "Each word has been like a lash across my heart? Jesus, I wonder if she's ever considered writing bodice-rippers. There just might be something there."

"Cut it out, Roger. That isn't funny."

"No, I suppose not," he said, and looked at me with an expression of sympathy that was at the same time deeply comforting and deeply embarrassing. "I doubt if much of anything seems very funny to you now."

"Not even slightly," I agreed.

"I know how much you love her."

"You couldn't."

"Yeah, I could. It's on your face, John."

We drank without saying anything for a little while. The *maitre d'* came bearing menus and Roger waved him away with barely a look.

"I have been married three times and divorced three times," he said. "It didn't get better, or easier. It actually seemed to get worse, like bumping the same sore place time after time. The J. Geils Band was right. Love stinks." His new drink came and he sipped it. I half-expected him to say *Women! Can't live with 'em, can't live without 'em!*, but he didn't.

"Women," I said, beginning to feel like a figment of my own imagination. "Can't live with 'em, can't live without 'em."

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“Oh yes you can,” he said, and although his eyes were on me he was quite clearly looking somewhere else. “You can live without ’em quite easily. But life without a woman, even if she’s a shrew and a nag, sours a man. It turns an essential part of his soul into a pimple.”

“Roger—”

He held up one hand. “You may not believe it, but we’re almost done talking about this,” he said. “We may get drunk and maudlin and run our gums on the subject, but we’ll only be talking about how we’ve got a skinful, which is the only subject drunks ever talk about, really. I just want to tell you that I’m sincerely sorry Ruth has left you, and I am sorry for your pain. I’d share it if I could.”

“Thanks, Roger,” I said, my voice a little hoarse. For a second there were three or four Rogers sitting across the table from me and I had to wipe my eyes. “Thanks a lot.”

“You’re welcome.” He took a sip of his drink. “For the moment let us leave what I’m helpless to reverse or alleviate and talk about your future. John, I want you to stay with Zenith House, at least until June. Maybe until the end of the year, but at least until June.”

“I can’t,” I said. “If I stayed I’d just be another millstone around your neck, and I think you’ve got enough of those already.”

“I wouldn’t be happy to see you go either time,” he said as if he hadn’t heard. He had taken the cigarette case he carried—it was too old and scratched and beaten to seem like an affectation—from his inside jacket pocket and was selecting a Kent from among what appeared to be several plump joints. “But I could let you go in June if we look like we’re getting on our feet. If Enders swings the axe, I’d like you to stay on until the end of the year and help me wind things up in orderly fashion.” He looked at me with something in his eyes that was very close to naked pleading. “Except for me, you’re the only sane person *at* Zenith House. Oh, I guess none of them are as crazy as General Hecksler—although sometimes I wonder about Riddley—but it’s only a matter of degree. I’m asking you not to leave me alone in this purgatory, and that’s what Zenith House is this year.”

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“Roger, if I could—if I—”

“Have you made plans, then?”

“No...not exactly...but—”

“Not planning to go out and confront her, in spite of what this letter says?” He tapped it with a fingernail and then lighted his cigarette.

“No.” The idea had certainly crossed my mind, but I didn’t need Ruth to tell me it was a bad idea. In a movie the girl might suddenly realize her mistake when she saw the hero of her life standing before her, one hastily packed bag in his hand, shoulders drooping and his face tired from the transcontinental flight on the redeye, but in real life I would only turn her against me completely and forever or provoke some sort of extreme guilt reaction. And I might very well provoke an extreme pugilistic reaction in Mr. Toby Anderson, whose name I have already come to cordially hate. And although I have never seen him (the only thing she forgot to include, the jilted lover said bitterly, was a picture of my replacement), I keep picturing a young cleft-chinned man, very big, who looks, in my imagination at least, as if he belongs in a Los Angeles Rams uniform. I have no problem with landing in traction for my beloved—there is, in fact, a masochistic part of me which would probably welcome it—but I would be embarrassed, and I might cry. It disgusts me to admit it, but I cry rather easily.

Roger was watching me closely but not saying anything, merely twiddling the stem of his drink glass.

And there was something else, wasn’t there? Or maybe it was really the only thing, and the others are just rationalizations. In the last couple of months I’ve gotten a big dose of craziness. Not just the occasional bag-lady who rails at you on the street or the drunks in bars who want to tell you all about the nifty new betting systems with which they mean to take Atlantic City by storm, but real sicko craziness. And being exposed to that is like standing in front of the open door of a furnace in which a lot of very smelly garbage is being burned.

Could I be driven into a rage at seeing them together, her new fella—he of the odious football-player name—maybe stroking her ass with the

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blasé unconcern of acknowledged ownership? Me, John Kenton, graduate of Brown and president of the blah-blah-blah? Bespectacled John Kenton? Could I perhaps even be driven to some really irrevocable act—an act that might be more likely if he did in fact turn out to be as big as his odious name suggests? Shrieky old John Kenton, who mistook a bunch of special effects for genuine snuff photos?

The answer is, I don't know. But I know this: I awoke from a terrible dream last night, a dream in which I had just thrown battery acid into her face. That was what really scared me, scared me so badly I had to sleep the rest of the night with the light on.

Not his.

*Hers.*

Ruth's face.

"No," I said again, and then poured the rest of my drink over the dryness I heard in my voice. "No, I think that would be very unwise."

"Then you *could* stay on."

"Yes, but I couldn't *work*." I looked at him with some exasperation. My head was starting to buzz. It wasn't a very cheerful buzz, but all the same I signaled the waiter, who had been lurking nearby, for another. "Right now I'm having trouble remembering how to tie my own shoelaces." No. Wrong. That was hip and it sounded good, but it wasn't the truth—my shoelaces had nothing to do with it. "Roger, I'm depressed."

"Bereaved people shouldn't sell the house after the funeral," Roger said, and in my state of buzziness that seemed extremely witty—worthy of H. L. Mencken, in fact. I laughed.

Roger smiled, but I could tell he was serious. "It's true," he said. "One of the few interesting courses I ever took in college was called the Psychology of Human Stress—one of these nifty little blocks they give you to fill up the final eight weeks of your senior year after you're done student teaching—"

"*You* were going to be a teacher?" I asked startled. I couldn't see Roger teaching—and then, all of a sudden I could.

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“I *did* teach for six years,” Roger said. “Four in high school and two in elementary. But that’s beside the point. This course took up human stress situations like marriage, divorce, imprisonment, and bereavement. The course wasn’t really a Signposts for Better Living sort of deal, but if you kept your eyes open you couldn’t help but notice a few. One was this thing about living out at least the first six months of a really deep bereavement in the house where you and your loved one were living when the death occurred.”

“Roger, this is not the same thing.” I sipped my new drink, which tasted just like my old drink. It occurred to me that I was getting fried. It also occurred to me that I didn’t care in the slightest.

“But it *is*,” He said, leaning solemnly toward me. “In a queer way Ruth is dead to you now. You may see her from time to time over the years, but if the break is as final and complete as that letter sounds, the Ruth we could call your Lover-Ruth is dead to you. And you are grieving.”

I opened my mouth to tell him he was full of shit, and then I closed it again because he was at least partly right. That’s what carrying a torch really means, isn’t it? You’re grieving for the lover who died—the lover who is dead to you, anyway.

“People tend to think of ‘grief’ and ‘depression’ as interchangeable terms,” Roger said. His tone was a good deal more pedantic than usual, and his eyes were rimmed with red. It occurred to me that Roger was getting fried, too. “They’re really not. There’s an element of depression in grief, of course, but there are a whole slew of other feelings as well, ranging from guilt and sadness to anger and relief. A person who runs from the scene of those feelings is a person in retreat from the inevitable. He arrives in a new place and discovers he feels exactly the same mixture of emotions we call grief—except now he feels homesickness as well, and a feeling of having lost the essential linkage which eventually turn grief into remembrance.”

“You remember all of that from an eight-week psychology block course you took eighteen years ago?”

Roger sipped modestly at his drink. “Sure,” he said. “I got an A.”

“Bullshit you do.”

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“I also banged the grad student who taught the course. What a piece of ass *she* was.”

“It’s not my *apartment* I was planning to leave,” I said, although I had no idea if I intended to leave it or not...and I know that wasn’t his point anyway.

“It wouldn’t matter whether you left that two-room cockroach condo or not,” he said. “You know what I’m talking about here. Your *job* is your house.”

“Yeah? Well the roof is sure leaking,” I said, and even *that* seemed sort of witty to me. I was getting fried, all right.

“I want you to help me fix the leak, John,” he said, leaning forward earnestly. “That’s what I’m saying. That’s why I asked you out tonight. And your agreement is the only thing capable of mitigating what is undoubtedly going to be one of the most beastly hangovers of my life. Help us both. Stay on.”

“You’ll pardon me if all of this sounds just a little bit self-serving and fortuitous.”

He sat back. “I respect you,” he said a trifle coldly, “but I also like you, John. If I didn’t I wouldn’t be breaking my ass to keep you on.” He hesitated, seemed on the point of saying something more, then didn’t. His eyes said it for him: *And humiliating myself by damn’ near begging.*

“I just don’t understand why you’re trying so hard,” I said. “I mean, I’m flattered, but—”

“Because if anyone can bring in a book or create an idea that will keep Zenith from going belly-up, it’s you,” he said. There was an intensity in his eyes I found almost frightening. “I know how fucking embarrassed you were by the whole Detweiller business, but—”

“Please,” I said. “Let’s not add insult to injury.”

“I had no intention of even bringing it up,” he said. “It’s just that your very openness to such an off-the-wall proposition—”

“It was off the wall, all right—”

“Will you shut up and *listen*? Your response to the Detweiller query

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showed you're still alive to a potentially commercial idea. Herb or Bill would simply have dropped his letter in the circular file."

"And we all would have been a lot better off," I said, but I saw where he was going and would be lying if I didn't say I was flattered...and that I felt a little better about the Detweiller affair for the first time since my humiliation at the police station.

"*This* time," he agreed. "But those guys *also* would have turned down V. C. Andrews with her *Toys in the Attic* series, or some brand new idea. Boom, into the circular file and then back to contemplating their navels." He paused. "I need you, Johnny, and I think it would be good if you stayed—for you, for me, for Zenith. There's no other way I can put it. Think it over and give me your answer. I'll accept it either way."

"You'd be paying me for the equivalent of cutting out paper dolls, Roger."

"That's a chance I'm willing to take."

I thought about it. I'd started to clean out my desk that day and hadn't gotten very far—to paraphrase Poe, who would have thought the old desk could have had so much crap in it? Or maybe it was just me, and that crack about not even being able to tie my own shoelaces wasn't so wrong, after all. I'd gotten two empty cardboard cartons from Riddley's room (which smells oddly green lately, like fresh marijuana—and no, I didn't see any) and did nothing but stare from one to the other. Maybe with a little more time I could at least complete the elementary job of cleaning up my old life before starting some unimaginable new one. It's just that I've felt so fucking *dreary*.

"Suppose we table the resignation until the end of the month," I said. "would that ease your mind?"

He smiled. "It's not the best I'd hoped for," he said, "but it's not the worst I was afraid of, either. I'll take it. And now I think we better order while we can still sit up straight."

We ordered steaks, and ate them, but by then my mouth was too numb to taste much. I suppose I just ought to be grateful that no one had to perform the Heimlich Maneuver on either of us.

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As we were leaving—holding onto each other, assisted by the anxious *maitre d'* (who no doubt only wanted to get us the fuck out of there before we broke something), Roger told me: “Something else I learned in that psychology course—”

“What did you say they called it? The Psychology of Damaged Souls?”

We were outside by then, and his cackles drifted away in little frosty plumes of vapor. “It was the Psychology of Human Stress, but I actually like yours better.” Roger energetically flagged down a cab, whose driver would shortly be very sorry he picked us up. “It also said that it helps to keep a diary.”

“Shit,” I said. “I haven’t kept a diary since I was eleven.”

“Well what the hell,” he said. “*look* for it, John. Maybe it’s still around somewhere.” And he went off into another wild run of cackles which only ended when he leaned over and puked nonchalantly on his own shoes.

He did it twice more on the way to his apartment building at 20th and Park Avenue South, leaning as far out the window as he could (which wasn’t too far since it was one of those Plymouths where the rear windows will only roll down about halfway and there’s a grim little yellow and black sign that says DO NOT FORCE THE WINDOW!) and just sort of blowing it into the slipstream and then settling back with that same nonchalant expression on his face. Our driver, a Nigerian or Somalian by his accent, was horrified. He pulled over to the curb and ordered us out. I was willing, but Roger sat tight.

“My friend,” he said, “I would get out if I could walk. Since I cannot, you must convey us hence.”

“I want you out my caib, good sah.”

“So far I have done you the courtesy of vomiting out the window,” Roger said with that same nonchalant and rather pleasant expression on his face. “It hasn’t been easy because of the angle, but I have done it. I think in another few seconds I am going to vomit again. If you don’t convey us hence, I am going to do it in your ashtray.”

At Roger’s building I assisted him into the lobby and saw him into the elevator with his apartment key in his hand. Then I wove my way back to the cab.

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“You git annoder cab, mon,” the driver said. “You just pay me and git annoder. I don’t want to no mo convey you hence.”

“It’s just down to Soho,” I said, “and I’ll give you a hell of a tip. Also, I don’t feel like puking.” This was a bit of a lie, I’m afraid.

He took me, and from the look of my wallet the next day I did indeed give him a hell of a tip. And I actually managed to make it upstairs before throwing up. Although once I started I didn’t stop for quite awhile.

I didn’t go in the next day—it was all I could do to get out of bed. My head felt monstrous, bloated. I called in around three and got Bill Gelb, who told me Roger hadn’t shown, either.

Since then I have done a lot of crying and have had mostly sleepless nights, but perhaps Roger wasn’t so wrong—the only hours that I feel even halfway myself are the ones spent on the 9th floor at 490 Park. Riddley has just about had to sweep me out the door along with his red sawdust the last two nights. Maybe there is something to that old “he threw himself into his work” crap after all. Even this diary idea feels right...although it may only be the relief of finally being done with my dreadful pastoral novel.

Maybe I’ll stay on after all. Onward and upward...if there is any upward left for me. Man, I still can’t believe she’s gone.

And I still haven’t lost hope that she may change her mind.

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March 21, 1981

Mr. John "Poop-Shit" Kenton  
Zenith House Publishers, Home of the Pus-Bags  
490 Kaka Avenue South  
New York, New York 10017

Dear Poop-Shit,

Did you think I had forgotten you? My plans for revenge will go forward no matter WHAT! happens to me! You and all your fellow "*Pus-Bags*" will soon feel the WRATH! of CARLOS!!

I have covened the powers of Hell,

Carlos Detweiller

In Transit, U.S.A.

P S—Smell anything "*green*" yet, Mr. Poop-Shit Kenton?

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*From John Kenton's diary.*

March 22, 1981

Had a letter from Carlos today. I laughed until I shrieked. Herb Porter came on the run, wanted to know if I was dying or what. I showed it to him. He read it and only frowned. He wanted to know what I was laughing about—didn't I take this Detweiller fellow seriously?

“Oh, I take him seriously...sort of,” I said.

“Then why in hell are you laughing?”

“I guess I just must be a warped plank in the great floor of the universe,” I said, and then went off into even madder gales of laughter.

Frowning so deeply now that the lines in his face had become crevasses, Herb laid the letter on the corner of my desk and then backed into the doorway, as if whatever I had might be catching. “I don't know why you're so weird lately,” he said, “but I'll give you some good advice anyway. Get yourself some personal protection. And if you need psychiatric help, John—”

I just kept laughing—by then I'd worked myself into a semi-hysterical frenzy. Herb stared at me a moment longer, then slammed the door and walked away. Just as well, really, as I finished by crying.

I expect to speak to Ruth tonight. By exercising all of my willpower I have managed to hold off on calling her, expecting each day that she must call me. Maddening images of her and the odious Toby Anderson cavorting together—the locale which keeps recurring is a hot-tub. So I'll call her. So much for willpower.

If I had a return address for Carlos Detweiller I think I'd drop him a postcard: “Dear Carlos—I know all about covening the powers of Hell. Your Ob'd Servant, Poop-Shit Kenton.”

Why I bother to write all this crud down, or why I keep plowing through the stacks of old unreturned manuscripts in the mailroom next to Riddley's janitorial closet, are both mysteries to me.

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March 23, 1981

My call to Ruth was an utter disaster. Why I should be sitting here and writing about it when I don't even want to *think* about it defies reason. Perversity upon perversity. Actually, I *do* know—I have some dim idea that if I write it down it will lose some of its power over me...so let me by all means confess, but the less said, the better.

Have I written here that I cry very easily? I think so, but I haven't the heart to actually look back and see. Well, I cried. Maybe that says it all. Or maybe it doesn't. I guess it doesn't. I had spent the day—the last two or three days, actually—telling myself that I would not *a.)* cry, or *b.)* beg her to come back. I ended up doing *c.)* both. I've had a lot of gruff locker room chats with myself over the last couple of days (and mostly sleepless nights) on the subject of *Pride*. As in, "Even after everything else is gone, a man's got his *Pride*." I would draw some lonely comfort from this thought and fantasize myself as Paul Newman—that scene in *Cool Hand Luke* where he sits in his cell after his mother's death, playing his banjo and crying soundlessly. Heart-rending, but cool, definitely cool.

Well, my cool lasted just about four minutes after hearing her voice and having a sudden total remembrance of Ruth—something like an imagistic tattoo. What I'm saying is that I didn't know how gone she was until I heard her say "Hello? John?"—just those two words—and had this searing 360 degree memory of Ruth—God, how here she was when she was here!

Even after everything else is gone, a man's got his *Pride*? Samson might have had similar sentiments about his hair.

Anyway, I cried and I begged and after a little while *she* cried and in the end she had to hang up to get rid of me. Or maybe the odious Toby—I never heard him but am somehow sure he was in the room with her; I could almost smell his Brut cologne—picked the phone out of her hand and did her hanging up for her. So they could discuss his love-ring, or their June wedding, or perhaps so he could mingle his tears with hers. Bitter—bitter—I know. But I've discovered that even after *Pride* has gone, a man's got his *Bitterness*.

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Did I discover anything else this evening? Yes, I think so. That it is over—genuinely and completely over. Will this stop me from calling her again and debasing myself even further (if that is possible)? I don't know. I hope so—God, I do. And there's always the possibility that she'll change her phone number. In fact, I think that's even a probability, given tonight's festivities.

So what is there for me now? Work, I guess—work, work, and more work. I'm tunneling my way steadily into the logjam of manuscripts in the mailroom—unsolicited scripts which were never returned, for one reason or another (after all, it says right in the boiler-plate that we accept no responsibility for such orphan children). I don't really expect to find the next *Flowers in the Attic* in there, or a budding John Saul or Rosemary Rogers, but if Roger was wrong about that, he was sublimely right about something much more important—the work is keeping me sane.

Pride...then Bitterness...then Work.

Oh, fuck it. I'm going to go out, buy myself a bottle of bourbon, and get shitty-ass drunk. This is John Kenton, signing off and going for the long bomb.

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END OF THE PLANT, PART THREE

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