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JOE R. LANSDALE

The Drive In

(A B-MOVIE WITH BLOOD AND POPCORN,
MADE IN TEXAS)



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*This novel is dedicated to my very good friend David Webb, and to our nocturnal
gatherings at the
famous (famous to us, anyway) TRASH THEATER. I'll bring
the nacho chips, Dave, you make the dip.*

Acknowledgments are hereby given to all the drive-ins that have influenced this book. Among them The Lumber Jack, The River Road and The Apache, as well as a little sleaze drive-in that showed bad porno movies (perhaps a redundancy in terms, but these were *really* bad) across from the Baptist church in Turnertown, Texas.

Also, all the movies I've seen at drive-ins, good or bad: horror movies, motorcycle flicks, women in chains, the whole nine yards. And though many of the incidents in this book are influenced by things that happened at these drive-ins, the influence only goes so far, and it should go without saying that nothing here is meant to represent any individual or specific drive-in theater. The Orbit is a creature of this writing creature's imagination.

Fade-in/Prologue

I'm writing now about the time before things got weird and there was high school to kiss off, college to plan, girls, parties and the All-Night Horror Show come Friday night at The Orbit Drive-in off 1-45, the largest drive-in in Texas. The world, for that matter, though I doubt there are that many of them in, say, Yugoslavia.

Think about it for a moment. Set your mind clear and see if you can imagine a drive-in so big it can hold four thousand automobiles. I mean, really think about it.

Four thousand.

On the way to The Orbit we often passed through little towns with fewer people listed on the population sign than that.

And consider that each of those cars generally contained at least two people, often more—not counting the ones hiding in the trunks—and you're talking a lot of cars and people.

And once inside, can you imagine six monstrous drive-in screens, six stories high, with six different movies running simultaneously?

Even if you can imagine all that, there's no way, unless you've been there, that you can imagine what goes on inside come Friday night and the tickets are two bucks each and the cars file in for The All-Night Horror Show to witness six screens leaking buckets of blood and decibels of screams from dusk to dawn.

Picture this, brethren:

A cool, crisp summer night, the Texas stars shining down like rattlesnake eyes glowing in a deep, dark wood. A line of cars like a tacky necklace trailing from the paybooth to the highway, stretching alongside it for a mile or better.

Horns are honking.

Children are shouting.

Mosquitoes are buzzing.

Willie Nelson is singing about blue eyes crying in the rain from a tape deck, competing with Hank Williams, Jr., Johnny Cash, ZZ Top, The Big Boys, The Cars and Country Bob and The Blood Farmers, groups and singers you can't identify. And it all rolls together into a metal-velvet haze until it's its own kind of music; the drive-in anthem, a chorus of cultural confusion.

And say your car is about midway in line, and clear as your first good wet dream, standing tall, you can see The Orbit's symbol—a big silver globe with a Saturn ring around it, spinning on a gradually tapering concrete pole jutting up to over a hundred feet above the concession stand; little blue and white fairy lights fluttering out of it, alternating colors across your windshield. Blue. White. Blue. White.

God Almighty, it's a sight. Like being in the presence of The Lord of Razzle-Dazzle, The Dark Crown Prince of Blood and Mayhem and Cheap, Bad Popcorn. The Ail-Night Horror Show God, his own sweet self.

You drive on into this Friday-night extravaganza, this Texas institution of higher partying, sex education and madness, and you see people dressed out in costume like it's Halloween night (and it is Halloween night every Friday night at The Orbit), yelling, talking, cussing and generally raising hell.

You park your car, go to the concession stand. Inside it's decorated with old horror-movie posters, plastic skulls, rubber bats and false cobwebs. And there's this thing called bloody corn that you can buy for a quarter more than the regular stuff, and it's just popcorn with a little red food coloring poured over it. You buy some and a king-size Coke to go with it, maybe some peanuts and enough candy to send a hypoglycemic to the stars.

Now you're ready. The movies begin. B-string and basement-budget pictures. A lot of them made with little more than a Kodak, some spit and a prayer. And if you've watched enough of this stuff, you develop a taste for it, sort of like learning to like sauerkraut.

Drooping mikes, bad acting and the rutting of rubber-suited monsters who want women, not for food, but to mate with, become a genuine pleasure. You can simultaneously hoot and cringe when a monster attacks a screaming female on the beach or in the woods and you see the zipper on the back of the monster's suit winking at you like the quick, drunk smile of a Cheshire cat.

So there you have it. A sort of rundown of The Ail-Night Horror Show at The Orbit. It drew me and the gang in there every Friday night like martyrs to the sacrifice; providing popcorn and Coke instead of wine and wafer.

Yes, sir, brethren, there was something special about The Orbit all right. It was romantic. It was outlaw. It was crazy.

And in the end, it was deadly.

PART ONE
THE ALL-NIGHT HORROR SHOW
(With Popcorn and Comet)

1

I suppose, ultimately, this will read like a diseased version of those stupid essays you're asked to write in school each fall after summer break. You know, "How I Spent My Summer Vacation."

Guess that can't be helped.

This is where I think it begins.

It was Saturday morning, the morning after a night at The Orbit. We drove back to Mud Creek smelling of beer, popcorn and chocolate bars.

Our eyes were cloudy, our minds more so. But we were too wired, or maybe just too stupid, to go home. So we did what we usually did. We drove over to the pool hall.

The pool hall, or Dan's Place, as it's called, is an ugly joint in an ugly section of an overall pretty nice-looking town. It's the area where you hear about knifings and the lowlife congregating, twenty-dollar women, bootleg whisky and Mud Creek's drug deals.

Dan's was a beer drinker's pool hall, had a bar along with the tables. Theoretically the place didn't serve beer until after noon, but Dan and the guys who came there were real short on theory.

There were a few men in there when we went in that morning. Most of them were in their forties or older, and they were sipping long necks, their hats on their heads or on the bar or the stools beside them. Those without cowboy hats and boots wore blue and gray work clothes with worn work boots, and it seemed that no matter how quietly you came in, they always heard you and turned to look with disapproval.

The place was supposed to be off limits to minors, but who were we to tell, and Dan wasn't telling either. Not that he liked us, but he did like our money for the pool games, and once in a small while, when he felt brave and we did too, he'd let us buy a beer, just like he didn't know we were under age.

But there was this: he always had a look about him that let us know he'd take our money, but for little or no reason wouldn't mind killing us for the fun of it. And he looked quite capable of killing us without breaking a sweat. He was kind of fat, but it was hard-looking fat, like there was a great iron washpot under his too-tight T-shirt. And his arms were big and meaty. Not bodybuilder arms, but workingman's arms; arms that had done real work: bounced drunks, and, from what I'd heard, slapped wives. He also had funny-looking knuckles; knuckles that had remolded facial flesh as if it were silly putty, and, in

turn, had been remolded themselves.

Still, we'd go in there like men born for a suicide mission. There were things we wanted out of the place. Attractions. It was forbidden, for one, and that was appealing. Gave us a sense of manhood. Danger hung in the air like a sword on a hair, and as long as the hair didn't snap and the blade didn't fall, it was stimulating.

Dan's was where we met Willard. Saw him there the first time we went inside, which was about the time we started going to the drive-in. I guess we felt if we had permission to stay out all night, we could go over to the tough section of town and shoot pool. Maybe talk some about the twenty-dollar women we didn't dare actually speak to (we weren't even sure we'd seen any) for fear we'd have to shell out money and perform. Something none of us was sure we wanted. We had heard vague stories about viruses and carnivorous insects that grew like sourdough starter in the pubic thatches of twenty-dollar women, and we felt that they would know so many tricks, and we'd know so few, that the cheap little hotel rooms where we planned to consummate our financial arrangements would ring of feminine laughter instead of the satisfying squeaks of bed-springs.

But the pool room and the possibility of violent death didn't worry us as much as sexual embarrassment, so we went there Saturdays to play pool and to watch Willard do the same.

First look at Willard, and he seemed downright skinny. But closer examination proved him long, lean and muscular. When he bunched over the table for a shot, let the cue glide over the top of his thumb, you could see the muscles roll beneath his hide, and the tattoos on his biceps popped forward and back so fast they were like billboards viewed on the highway at top speed. The left tattoo read KICK ASS and the right read EAT PUSSY. It was understood that he could do either, and probably quite well.

But Willard was a nice guy in an odd sort of way. Smart, too, if, shall we say, not classically educated. He was three years older than us physically, and about ten years older in experience.

That was one of the reasons we liked to be around him. He gave us a glimpse of a world we didn't normally see. Not one we wanted to live in, but one we wanted to investigate.

And I think Willard liked us for the reverse reason. We could talk about something besides beer, women and the plant where he worked all week and Saturday afternoons making aluminum lawn furniture.

None of us had to work. Our parents provided, and we were all college material. Had dreams and a good chance of seeing them come true, and I guess Willard wanted some of that hope to rub off on him.

We didn't really know much about him. Story was his father didn't think the kid looked like him at all, and had been told by some Louisiana Mojo man that the boy had a curse

on him, and since Willard's mother, Marjory, was into weird business, like believing in old gods and voodoo-type stuff, this made him even more suspicious. Bottom line was the father left before the baby could crawl. Baptists around town called Willard and his mother sorry as part of their entertainment, and truth was, his mother was no prize. She later took up with a man who had a bad back and a regular check of some sort, and when he went away she took up with another with ailing posture and a steady government income.

This initiated a pattern. Men with bad backs and checks, and it kept Marjory in cigarettes and Willard in throwaway diapers. But when Willard turned sixteen, his birthday present was good-bye and the street—a place he spent a lot of time anyway. Marjory went away to who knows where—probably a fresh town full of bad backs and welfare checks—and Willard did the best he could. Dropped out of school when he was old enough and got some odd jobs here and there, the best of them being a projectionist at one of the movie houses. When he turned eighteen, he went to work at the aluminum-chair factory.

It seemed obvious to me, in the short time that I had known him, that he was hungry for something beyond that, something more substantial, something that would give him respect in the eyes of the Uptown folks, though I doubt he would have admitted that—even to himself.

But to get back to it, we came into the pool hall this Saturday I'm telling you about, and there was Willard in his familiar pose, pool cue in hand, leaning over the table, eyeing a ball.

Shooting against him was a guy we'd seen a couple of times before but avoided talking to. His name was Bear, and you didn't ponder why he was called that. He was six-five, ugly as disease, had red-brown hair and a beard that mercifully consumed most of his face. All that was clearly visible were some nasty blue eyes and a snout that was garage to some troublesome nose hairs thick enough to use for piano wire. The same gruesome down as in his nose also covered his arms and curled out of the neck of his T-shirt to confuse itself with his beard. What could be seen of his lips reminded me of those rubber worms fishermen use, and I wouldn't have been surprised to see shiny silver hooks poking out of them, or to discover that the whole of Bear had been made from decaying meat, wire and the contents of a tackle box and a Crisco can.

There was something rock 'n' roll playing on the jukebox—a rarity for Dan's, which mostly catered to country and western—and Randy went over to lean on it. Wasn't just because he liked what was playing, it put him closer to the door.

Being black, Randy was a bit uncomfortable about bopping around a redneck pool hall. Even if he was with Bob, who wore a toothpick-laden cowboy hat, dipped snuff and wore snakeskin boots. And me, Mr. Average and Ail-Around Natural Blender.

Wasn't that Randy was the only black that came into the place (though just about), but he

was the only one that was skinny, five-five, with headlamp glasses and an inferiority complex. And, most importantly, he was the only black in there this morning I'm telling you about.

I guess if Bob and I had really thought about what we were putting him through as a member of our "gang," we probably wouldn't have gone in there in the first place.

This is not to say Bob and I weren't nervous. We were. We felt like weenies compared to these guys. But there were those attractions I told you about, and there was also our onrushing manhood we were trying to deal with, attempting to define.

When Willard raised up from his shot he nodded at us, and we nodded back, found places to lean and watch.

Bear wasn't playing well. He had a mild temper on, and you could tell it even though he hadn't said a word. He didn't have a poker face.

Bending over the table, Bear took a shot and missed.

"Damn," he said.

Willard winked at us, shot again, talked as he did. He wasn't a temperamental player. He liked to joke and ask us about the movies we'd seen, as he knew our schedule.

He was also interested in special effects, or professed to be, and he liked to talk to Randy about that. Randy was the resident expert; he wanted to do movie makeup and special effects when he got out of college. And there was something between those two from the start. A sort of bond. I think Willard saw in Randy the intellectual side he wanted, and Randy saw in Willard street savvy and strength. When they were together, I had the feeling they considered themselves whole, and there was a yearning to know more about one another.

Willard shot for a long time before missing.

Bear missed.

"Damn."

Willard continued to talk to Randy, shot three more times before missing, and that one was close.

He went around and got his beer off the edge of the pool table and took a long pull on it.

"Do your worst, Bear," he said.

Bear showed a few ugly teeth at one corner of his mouth, took his shot.

He missed.

"Damn."

Willard put the beer down, went around and took his shot, chattering all the while to Randy about some blood-squirting technique he'd seen in some cheap low-budget film on television, and Randy explained how it was done. And when those two were talking, no one else existed. You would have thought the yin and yang had come together, that two destined lovers had at long last met and fulfilled the will of the gods.

Willard made one ball, missed another.

Bear grunted, took his shot.

And missed.

"Damn." He turned his head slowly toward Willard as he straightened up. "Hey, Willard. Take your pet nigger somewhere else. I'm trying to shoot a game here and he's talking through it."

There was a long pause in which it seemed the seasons changed, and Willard stood where he was, expressionless, staring at Bear.

Bear wasn't looking at Willard. He was glaring at Randy. Randy's right foot kept turning out and in, like he was considering running for it, but he was too scared to make the break. He was pinned there, melting like soft chocolate under Bear's gaze.

"Maybe I'll rub your head for luck," Bear said. "You know, with my knuckles. Or maybe that ain't enough. Maybe I'll pull it off and wear it on a chain around my neck for luck. How's that sound, nigger? You like that?"

Randy didn't say a word. His lips trembled like he wanted to say something, but nothing would come out. His right foot was flopping back and forth, not quite able to lead him away.

"Kid didn't do anything," Willard said.

"Talked while I was shooting."

"So did I."

"I ain't forgot that. You want me to, best be quiet."

He and Willard looked at each other awhile, then Bear turned back to Randy. "This won't hurt long," he said, and he stepped in Randy's direction.

"Let him be," Willard said, and he was almost polite about it.

"Warning you, Willard. Don't make this your business. Step aside."

The seasons were changing again as they stared at one another, and it was the right time for us to run, but we didn't. Couldn't. We were frozen.

I glanced about for help. Dan was in the back. And though I doubted he would take our side, he was damn sure one to protect his property if-he thought it was about to get smashed. I'd heard he broke a guy's jaw once for accidentally shattering an ashtray.

But Dan didn't come out of the back, and the other guys at the bar and at the pool tables looked mildly curious, not helpful. They were hoping for a little blood, and weren't willing to let any of it be theirs. Some of them got out cigarettes and lit them, just in case what Bear was going to do might take a while.

Bear doubled up his fists and snarled at Willard. "Well, what's it going to be?"

We held our breath.

Willard smiled. "All right, Bear. He's all yours."

2

Bear showed his ugly teeth and moved forward, said, "Let's see how you bounce, little nigger."

I was going to move. I swear I was. Bear or no Bear, I was going to try something, even if I got my head torn off for the effort. So was Bob. I could feel him tense beside me, about to move. Kamikaze attack.

But we never got the chance to get ripped apart and dribbled out the door.

Willard's pool cue whizzed out and the thin end of it caught Bear across the back of the neck. There was a cracking noise like the report of small-arms fire, then the pool cue splintered, went in all directions.

Bear turned his head toward Willard and smiled. He had kind of a nice smile.

"Oh, hell," Willard said softly, and his face went sad and ash-colored.

"Stepped in it, didn't you, bro?" Bear said.

But Willard brought the rest of the cue around—the thick end—hit Bear a solid lick on the nose. Bear staggered a little. Nothing to brag about, but a little.

Willard swung again, and this time it had plenty of hip in it, and when it met the side of Bear's head it was like Reggie Jackson connecting the good wood on a clean fast ball. The blow actually brought Bear up on his toes and leaned him starboard.

But the bastard didn't go down.

Willard let what was left of the cue drop from his hands, shot out a left jab, hit Bear on the point of his two-car garage, again and again.

A tributary of blood flowed out of Bear's nostrils and made thin creeks through his mustache and beard. Bear tried to hit back, but Willard sidestepped a sloppy right, left-hooked one into him, knocked him into the pool table. Bear's big ass worked as a kind of springboard, bounced him back into Willard, and Willard gave him another combination.

When Bear's minuscule brain realized his face was being made into red grits, he tried to unleash a wild right, but it didn't even come close.

Willard ducked that baby and the wind from the swing lifted his hair. He went into Bear then with an overhand right that connected on Bear's already destructed nose, and he

followed it with a hooking left to the kidneys that made the front of the monster's pants go wet.

Then came the right again, an uppercut this time, and this one was backed with powder and a fifty-caliber load. It caught Bear on the point of his chin, lifted him onto the pool table.

Bear's feet came up high, then flopped down over the edge of the table as if his pant legs were stuffed with straw. The echo of Willard's punch reverberated through the pool hall even as Bear's chin and half his jaw turned the color of bad fruit. A thick trickle of blood fled out of his nose, over his beard and onto the greenery of the pool table.

Willard thrust his fist into his mouth and hopped around a little. "Damn, that hurt."

Dan had wandered out of the back room about the time Willard threw his first punch, but he hadn't made a move to stop the fight. He'd just stood there frowning with his arms crossed. But now that the fun was over and there was a broken pool stick and a bloodstained table to complain about, he was furious.

"That was a brand-new pool stick," he said, coming over.

"Not now it ain't," Willard said.

"And that big bastard is bleeding all over my goddamn pool table."

"Fix that." Willard reached out, grabbed Bear by a boot and jerked him onto the floor. Bear made a grunting noise when he hit the tile, but that was it.

"Blood'll mop off the floor easy," Willard said. "I'll pay you for the pool stick."

"Damn sure will. Twenty dollars."

Willard took twenty out of his billfold and gave it to Dan. "There."

"Get out," Dan said. "You hadn't brought them boys in here wouldn't have been no trouble."

"We came in on our own two legs," Bob said.

"You shut up, boy," Dan said, and he cast an eye at Randy. "And this ain't no colored hangout. Ain't no good idea to come here, you hear me, son?"

"Yes, sir."

"Don't 'sir' that line of crap," Willard said. "This is a free country, ain't it?"

Dan studied Willard. "If you're big enough, you're free to do most anything. Now you've paid for the cue, what about the table?"

"What about it?"

"Blood'll stain."

"Use cold water on it."

"Go on, you little smart-mouth sonofabitch. Get on out of here and don't come back. Take these jerks with you, and don't none of you darken this door again."

"No problem," Willard said. "I ain't gonna miss this class joint none."

"And it ain't gonna miss you," Dan said, and kicked Bear in the ribs a couple of times. "You too. Get up from there and get out." Bear didn't move. "Sorry trash."

We went out with Dan still kicking Bear and Bear still not moving.

...

Out on the sidewalk, Bob said, "Sorry we got you thrown out of there, Willard."

"No sweat. I was tired of it anyway. This whole town, for that matter. It stinks. Don't reckon I'll be staying around much longer. I got laid off at the plant yesterday, and I figure that now is as good a time as any to get out of this one-horse town. In fact, I'm glad I don't have that damn job anymore. It was like working in hell. Always felt like I was making lawn furniture for Satan. I'm free now to go somewhere better and find a good job, something with a future. I got a feeling that me losing that job was just a turning point, and that from here on out, things are going to start looking up."

We stood there, not knowing what to say. Willard watched some cars go by, got out a cigarette and put fire to it. He took a couple of drags before he spoke again.

"Before I leave for good, thought maybe I'd take in that drive-in you guys go to. What do you say? Can I go with y'all over there Friday?"

"Yeah," I said. "Sure. Why not? We leave at five. Where can we pick you up?"

"Larry's Garage. He lets me keep my bike there."

"Sounds good," Bob said. "We'll pick you up in my truck." He pointed to it in the lot.

"I know it," Willard said. "I'll be watching for you guys."

"Good," Bob said.

"Willard?" Randy said.

"Yeah, kid."

"Thanks for not letting me get killed, or otherwise mutilated in a hideous manner."

Willard almost laughed. "Sure, kid. Nothing to it. Saw your buddies were about to step into it, and I didn't want them to have all the fun."

"Generous of you," I said, "considering Bear breathes harder than we hit."

"Hell with it," Willard said. "Always figured I could take him. Now I know."

We walked Willard to his bike. He climbed on and flipped his cigarette in the gutter. Randy stuck out his hand and Willard shook it for a long time. Then he nodded at us, cranked his machine and rode off.

Randy stood there with his hand out, as if he were still shaking with Willard.

Willard didn't look back to see if we were watching him. Hell, he knew he was cool.

3

Friday morning I awoke and was attacked by the glare off the garish paperbacks in the little space for books at the head of my bed. The sun was shining through the window and making the red and yellow spines on the astrology and numerology books seem brighter yet. This wasn't the first morning I had awakened to see them there and hated them because they had let me down. I had tried to believe in the little bastards, but life and reality kept coming up against them, and pretty soon I had to decide the planets didn't give a frog jump about me and that numbers were just numbers, and when you got right down to it, pretty boring.

It was like I was punishing myself, leaving them there, and it was like my body knew to get twisted to the edge of the bed so I'd wake up with my head turned toward them so I could see their bright spines shining at me, reminding me that I had spent money on them and that some jackass writer was spending the royalties he got off them, partly provided by me, to drink beer and chase women while I read his books and made charts and tried to figure out how to use them to find the right gal and divine the secrets of the universe.

I figured as long as I was punishing myself, I might as well sit up in bed and get so I could see all the spines and really feel rotten. There were also books on Eastern religions that mainly had to do with holding your thumb next to your forefinger, wrapping a leg around your neck and making with some damn-fool chants. There was even one of those hip modern books that told me I just thought I was a schmuck, but wasn't really. It was everyone else, and I was a pretty neat fella. I liked this one best until I realized that anyone with the price of a paperback was a pretty neat fella. That sort of let the air out of my tires.

Only book I didn't have up there on my shelf was one on divining the future through chicken guts, and I'd have had it had it been for sale.

I couldn't figure why I was such a sucker for that stuff. I wasn't unhappy, but the idea of everything just being random didn't suit me, and didn't seem right. And I didn't like the big bang theory. It was kind of disappointing, came across like a lab experiment that had gone wrong and made something. I wanted things to be by design, for there to be some great controlling force with a sense of order. Someone or something up there keeping files and notes.

I figured I just hadn't found the right book.

I got out of bed, got a trash sack out of my closet and took all those little dudes off the shelf and put them in the sack. I went downstairs and threw them in the main garbage in the washroom, then went into the kitchen.

Mom was in there running that crap she has for breakfast through a blender. It smelled

like wet dog hair and mildewed newspapers to me.

"Want some eggs and bacon?" she asked, and smiled.

She was standing there in her tennis outfit, her long blond hair pulled back and bound with a rubber band. I'm sure some backyard psychiatrist will make an Oedipal thing out of this, but to heck with it. My mom is damn fine-looking.

She started pouring the smelly mess from the blender into a glass.

"Well, I don't want that," I said. "And if I were you, I'd see if a nest of roaches, or maybe a rat died in that blender overnight."

She grimaced. "Does smell bad, doesn't it?"

"Oh yeah. How's it taste?"

"Like shit."

I got some cinnamon rolls out of the fridge. "Let's have these."

She patted her flat stomach. "Nah. Got to keep my girlish figure. Otherwise, I'll die while I'm out playing tennis. Bad form to die on the court."

"You couldn't gain a pound if you were wearing galoshes."

"For that, you may have two bone-building, nutritious cinnamon rolls. And though I wouldn't normally eat that garbage, pollute my body with those foul chemicals and sugars, I will, on this occasion, knowing how you hate to eat alone, make an exception."

"If you ever finish your speech, that is."

"Precisely."

She sat down and ate four rolls and drank three cups of coffee. When she was through she smacked her lips. "God, but I hated every horrible minute of that. Each bite was agony, acid to my lips. The sacrifices mothers make for their children."

Dad came down. He was wearing an old brown bathrobe that Mom hated. She had tried to throw it away once, but he'd found it in the garbage, rescued it and slinked upstairs with it under his arm. Mom had laughed after him and he had looked down at her, hurt.

She had also given it to Goodwill, thinking they'd turn it into rags, but they'd washed it, put it on the racks. And Dad, looking for used paperbacks, saw it, bought it and came home mad. He told Mom never to say his robe had come apart in the washing again.

That robe *is* an ugly thing, tattered and threadbare. He had at least three good ones in a drawer upstairs, but as far as I knew, he had never so much as tried them on. Wearing that old brown one, his feet in house sandals and his hair thinning on top, he always reminded me of Friar Tuck.

He wobbled in sleepily, weaved over to the counter and came suddenly awake when he got a whiff of what was in the blender.

"Goddamn, woman," he said. "There's something dead in that blender."

"That's what I said, Dad."

"Funny," Mom said. "It's just that old robe you guys smell."

"Ah," Dad said. "The melodious voice of the serving wench. Make me some ham and eggs."

"Poof!" Mom said. "You are some ham and eggs. Any more requests?"

"None I can think of," Dad said. He got a bowl, spoon, milk and cereal, arranged them at the table and pulled up a chair.

"What happened to the ham and eggs, Your Majesty?" Mom asked.

"Too lazy to fix them myself."

"And I won't feel sorry for you, will I, snookums?"

"Looks that way," Dad said. He looked at me and grinned. "Up early, aren't you?"

"Friday," I said.

"Ah. No school and tonight is the big night. A trip to The Orbit with the boys. You should try going out with girls, son. They're a lot more fun."

"I go with girls," I said. "It's just that The Orbit is special . . . something I prefer to do with the guys."

"I always liked drive-ins with girls." He looked at Mom. "A purely puritan adventure, of course."

"That's not the way I remember you," Mom said. "Aren't you running late this morning, Mr. Big Shot?"

I own the company, my dear. I can do damn well as I please. Outside of this house anyway."

"Ha," Mom said. She got up and started for the cabinet. Dad slapped her on the butt. She whirled.

"Harold . . . could you do that again?"

I laughed. Dad stood up, grabbed her, bent her back like they do in those old movies. "Woman, my little dove: You are the love of my life. Patting your ass is a pleasure unmatched by gold and video . . . And remember, serving wench, no TV dinners tonight or I sell you to the Arab traders."

He kissed her.

"Thank you, Harold. Now will you lift me up. My back hurts."

"When the going gets rough, when it looks like we're not going to make it, I'll save the last two bullets for us."

"Harold, you're crazy. Now pull me up, will you? My back hurts."

He pulled her up. "That's what happens when you get old. Back trouble. And no sense of romance."

"Go shower and shave . . . and for heaven's sake brush that hair off your teeth," Mom said.

"My breath is sweet. I go to bed with sugar breath, and I awake with it even sweeter. I—"

"Go!"

"Yessuh, Massuh," he said, and shuffled off.

When he was gone Mom gave me an exasperated look. "He's *crazy*, you know?"

"I know," I said.

A little later on, Mom went to play tennis and Dad went to work and I never saw them again.

4

Before we started going to the drive-in, come summer mornings you couldn't get me up if you fired a bazooka under the covers. But now Friday meant *The Orbit*, and I was usually up early. And there was also *The Early Morning Monster Show* that I had acquired a taste for. It showed on Channel 6 at eight and Randy came over every Friday to watch. Bob would have, but he worked half a day at his dad's feed store. As I said, none of us had to work, but Bob was more willing, and he liked having plenty of pocket change.

So Randy came over and the movie was *The Crawling Eye*, and it wasn't bad until the monsters showed up. The wind kind of went out of its sails after that. It was hard to feel threatened by things that looked like large rubber mops. Still, I enjoyed it, and it gave Randy a chance to make fun of the special effects.

He got what I thought was a sort of strange, even perverse, pleasure out of that, considering most of those movies had been made on a rubber-band budget. But I think it was important for him to have something to look down on, considering he felt pretty much low man on life's totem pole. He had brains and he was nice, but there was some invisible thing about him that led others to direct their hatred toward him, the incident with Bear being a case in point. In fact, I sometimes felt that behind that mousy, quiet exterior was a tyrant without courage, someone looking for his edge on humanity.

He was good in school, but he didn't take any particular pride in that because no one gave a damn. He was knowledgeable about film, makeup and special effects particularly, but again, no competition. Bob and I loved that stuff too, but we weren't wrapped up in it like Randy. So the only thing he could measure his knowledge and skills against were low-budget films, mentally playing out in his mind that he could do better if given a chance.

But the thing I remember best about that morning was Randy turning to me while all hell was breaking loose in the movie (admittedly the hell in the movie wasn't as intense as it ought to have been), and saying, "Do you think Willard has a steady girl?"

"Hell, Randy, I don't know. I'm sure he has girls, but I don't think he's the wear-my-ring kind. I think the tattoo on his arm, EAT PUSSY, is sort of a statement on romance, don't you?"

"Yeah," Randy said. "I suppose so."

After that he just watched the movie, but I could tell his mind wasn't on it. He had a sort of dreamy look in his eyes, like he was thinking about something that lived way down deep in his brain.

About noon we ate some ham sandwiches and drove over to Safeway and bought some supplies for the night: Cracker Jacks, chocolate-covered almonds, potato chips, some

Cokes and a few bags of cookies. Bob was supposed to get a case of beer; he had connections. Connections that bought it cheap and sold it dear, and didn't give a damn if you were a minor or a warthog. In spite of that, Bob could deal with them better than we could. He dressed the way they did, could talk their line of talk, and the bottom line was he was so damn tight, when he blinked the skin on his dick rolled back. Just the man for hard money dealings.

He had also promised Randy and me that he would bring us some jerky from his dad, who had made it himself from last season's deer. He'd given us some of it before, and it was fine. In fact, last time he'd given us enough to feed an army. Well, mine mostly fed my dad, even if it did give his teeth a workout. He loved the stuff, tried to convince everyone who came by the house they should too. My dad and Bob's dad should have gone into business together. Bob's dad could make it and my dad could hawk it.

I remember passing the kitchen once, and Dad was sitting in there at the table with one of his business partners, and he had pushed a strip of the meat off on him, and I heard the guy say, "I'm not so hot on this stuff, Harold. It's kind of like chewing on a dead woman's tit."

From then on when I ate the stuff, I had to chew it in an absentminded sort of way, not thinking too much about the texture so I could enjoy it.

We took the goodies home, read some *Fangoria* magazines Randy had brought over, and Bob arrived an hour later than usual for our ventures.

Two things were noticeable right off. One was that the fool was fresh from the shower and hadn't bothered to dry off; his shirt was stuck to his back and the hair that hung out from beneath his hat was wet and shaggy. The second thing was that he had been in a fight; he had a black doughnut around his left eye.

"You know that girlfriend I used to have?" he said.

"Used to have?" Randy asked.

"Yep, used to have. Caught her with Wendle Benbaker."

Wendle was about the size of a small camper trailer. He had played tackle for Mud Creek High until graduation, and his hobby, when he wasn't drinking beer and talking about girls, was talking about girls and drinking beer. He was the only guy I knew who moved his lips over the *Playboy* foldout as well as the magazine's text. I think it was the staples that confused him.

And to be honest, Bob's girlfriend, Leona of the Big Tits, didn't strike me as any great loss. Her nickname was how she was known by the staunchest anti-male chauvinist, both male and female. She invited being called that, even liked it, thought it was an honor; she

wore those monstrous boobs like war medals on a proud general's chest.

"Reckon this discovery," I said, "caused you and Wendle to fight."

Bob rubbed his sore eye. "Good, Sherlock. You're right. Jeke was supposed to meet me out back of the Dairy Queen with the beer, and he did. But after I loaded it up, I saw Leona and Wendle sitting in his car around front. She was sitting so close she might as well have been wearing his pants with him. Burned my ass up. She told me she didn't do nothing on Fridays but watch TV. Told me I could go with the guys, no sweat. Now I know the hell why. She's been letting Wendle check her oil."

"What did you do?" Randy asked.

"Went over there, yanked the door open and called him a sonofabitch, I think. I was a bit under stress right then and don't remember so good."

I nodded at the black eye. "And I take it he wasn't scared none?"

"Not that I could see. And he can move fast for a big guy. Sucker popped out of that Dodge like a ripe zit and hit me in the eye before I could shag it."

"Looks bad," I said.

"You oughta see him."

"You hit him?" Randy said, amazed. "You hit Wendle the tank?"

"No, but I damn sure got some oil stains on his pants. I mean I ruined them little buddies."

Randy and I let that hang, trying to work it into the scheme of things.

"Oil stains?" I finally asked, as if I were delivering the cryptic line "Rosebud" in *Citizen Kane*.

"When he knocked me down, I crawled under his car and he crawled after me. Some car had been leaking oil there—Wendle's, I hope—and he got his white pants all nastied up. Covered both knees. Won't wash out Them boogers are ruined."

"That's showing him," I said.

"He was so big I got over beneath the muffler and he couldn't get under there after me . . . remember that if he starts for you. You get under his car by the muffler and you're safe. He can't get there."

"Good tip," I said. "Go for the muffler."

"He did kick me, though. He can get his legs under there after you pretty good, so it ain't completely safe. He jammed my little finger some, but he finally gave up, got back in the car and tried to back it over me."

"Looks to me you escaped," I said.

"Rolled out from under there like a dung bug. You remember how fast I could roll in gym when we was doing that tumbling exercise, don't you?"

"You were an ace roller, as I recall," I said.

"Damn right."

"What was Leona doing?" Randy asked.

"She got out of the car, started screaming and cussing—which was a thing that hurt me. She told me a couple of times she was a lady and didn't say them kind of words. Swore she wouldn't say 'shit' if she had a mouthful. But she was out there yelling at Wendle to pull my head off and to kick a turd down my throat.

"When I rolled out from under the car and started running, her and ole Wendle yelling at my back, I knew right then and there that things between us were over."

"Does sound kind of past the patching stage," I said.

"Well ... I ruined that sucker's pants."

We put the goodies in Bob's truck, drove over to Buddy's Fill-up to get gas and some ice for our beer chest.

While we were there, I went to the bathroom to take a leak and Bob joined me at the urinal. The two caballeros.

The place was really nasty, smelled awful. The urinal was stopped up with candy wrappers and some things I didn't want to examine too closely, lest I identify them. Over in one corner was a mashed item I hoped was a Baby Ruth.

Most of the graffiti were illiterate and the artist who had drawn naked women on the walls seemed to lack acquaintance with human anatomy. My dad told me his generation learned a lot about sex from writings and drawings on bathroom walls. I hoped to goodness our generation was getting its information from better sources.

"Nice place, ain't it?" Bob said.

"Maybe we ought to bring us some dates in here."

"We could sit on the commodes and talk."

"Bring in some dip and stuff."

"Have some of them little sausages wrapped in bread with toothpicks through them."

"Serious now," I said. "How are you making it?"

"Good enough. Splashed a little on my boots is all. But I ain't having a good enough time to stick around when I finish. Kind of stinks. How about you? What are your plans?"

"That's funny, Bob."

"Okay, I'm doing fine. She was just some ole gal. You worry about other people too much. Me included."

"Yeah, I'm a regular bleeding heart."

"Well, you are . . . but, yeah, I'm okay. I'm going to miss her some."

"There's nothing to miss, Bob."

"I don't know. Them tits were sure nice and warm."

Randy was leaning on the truck when we came out. "I was about to organize a search party," he said. "Well," Bob said, "we got to talking, you know, and damn if we don't have all kinds of things in common." "Yeah," I said. "You just wouldn't believe."

Randy rolled his eyes. "How about we get in the truck?"

We drove over to Larry's Garage, got there fifteen minutes early, but Willard was out front, smoking a cigarette, the damn thing hanging off his lip like a leech. His long hair was clean and combed back and he wore a black T-shirt with a cigarette pack stuck under one short sleeve. He had a faded blue-jean jacket tossed over one shoulder. He looked like he was waiting for someone to come along so he could mug them.

He strolled over to the truck. "Ready?"

"We're always ready," Bob said.

"You look ready," Willard said. "What happened to your eye?"

"A truck named Wendle Benbaker."

"Get in," I said, "and he'll tell you how he ruined Wendle's pants, and how to hide from him under a muffler."

Randy got out of the truck and made Willard take his place at shotgun. He went around to ride in the back, carrying a *Fangoria* with him to read.

"He's a nice little guy," Willard said when he was seated, his arm hanging out the window.

"That's the truth," Bob said, cranked the truck and drove on out of town. As we went, I took the whole place in, noticed for the first time some houses and stores I had looked at before, but hadn't really seen. We drove down the main drag, past the university that I planned to attend, past the big pines that were slowly being thinned by idiots with no concept of city planning but a firm grasp on the concept of greed; drove past the stinking chicken plant and the plywood plant and the aluminum-chair factory, which Willard saluted with an upward push of his middle finger; drove on out of there with me photographing it all in my mind, perhaps sensing somehow it was for the last time.

5

It didn't seem like a night for horrors. Least not the real kind.

It was cool and pleasant. We got there a little later than usual, due to some bad traffic. Quite a line had formed. You could see The Orbit's Saturn symbol spinning blue and silver against the night.

"I'll be damned," Willard said.

"We'll all be if we don't change our ways," Bob said.

"Wait until you see the inside," I said.

We moved up in line, finally drove by the outdoor marquee. It listed / *Dismember Mama*, *The Evil Dead*, *Night of the Living Dead*, *The Toolbox Murders* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*.

Inside, the big party had already started. There were lawn chairs planted in the backs of pickups, and folks planted in the chairs. There were people on the hoods and tops of their cars. Punkers. Aging hippies. Conservative types. Fraternity and sorority kids. Families. Cowboys and cowgirls with beer cans growing out of their fists. Barbecue grills sputtered away, lifting sweet smoke into the fine Texas sky. Tape decks whined in conflict of one another. A few lovers on blankets were so hot at it, Willard suggested that they should charge admission. Cars rocked in spastic rhythm to the sexual gyrations of unbridled youth. Someone somewhere called someone a sonofabitch.

Other people yelled things we couldn't understand. Bikini-clad women walked by. People in monster suits walked by. Sometimes young men in monster suits chased the bikini-clad women by. Dogs, let out of their owners' cars to do their business, pissed on tires or left deposits of another nature in the vicinity.

And, most important, of course, *there was the screen*.

One of six, it stood stark-white against a jet-black sky, a six-story portal into another dimension.

We tried to get as close as we could, but most of the front rows were taken. We ended up in the middle of a rear row.

We got the lawn chairs out, the goodies. Bob and I went to the concession stand and bought some bloody corn for all of us, and by the time we got back with it, the sleaze classic *I Dismember Mama* had started.

We rolled through that one, drinking, eating, laughing, shouting at the gory spots, and

finally *The Toolbox Murders* came on, and it was halfway through that one that it happened.

I don't remember any great change in the atmosphere, anything like that. Everything was normal—for The Orbit. Sights, sounds and smells as they ought to be. The bloody corn was gone, so were several Cokes, and Bob and Willard had made good work of the beers. We were about a third of the way through a bag of chocolate cookies. Cameron Mitchell had just opened his ominous box of tools to take out an industrial nailer, as he had designs to use the wicked instrument on a young lady he'd been spying on in the shower, and we were ready, hoping as much for blatant nudity as celluloid gore, when—

—*there was light.*

It was a light so bright and crimson, the images on the screen paled, then faded.

We looked up.

The source of the light was a monstrous red comet, or meteor, hurtling directly toward us. The night sky and stars around it were consumed by its light, and the thing filled our vision. The rays from the object felt soft and liquid, like being bathed in warm milk and honey.

Collision with the drive-in seemed imminent. My life didn't pass before my eyes, but I thought suddenly of things I hadn't done, thought of Mom and Dad, then, abruptly, *the comet smiled.*

Split down the middle to show us a mouthful of jagged saw-blade teeth. Instead of going out of life with a bang, it appeared we were going out with a crunch.

The mouth opened wider, and I was turning my head away from the inevitable, thinking in a fleeting second that I would be swallowed by it, like Pinocchio by the whale, when—

—*it whipped up and away, dragging its fiery tail behind it, leaving us awash in flickering red sparks and an even more intense feeling of being engulfed in warm liquid.*

When the red pupil paint peeled away from my eyes and I could see again, the sky had gone from blood-red to pink, and now that was slowly fading. The comet was racing faster and faster, ever upward, seemingly dragging the moon and stars after it, like glitter swirling down a sewerish drain. Finally the comet was nothing more than a hot-pink pinprick surrounded by black turbulence that sparked with blue twists of lightning; then the dark sky went still, the lightning died out, and the comet was memory.

At first, it looked as if nothing had changed, except for a loss of the moon and the stars. But the exterior of the drive-in was different. Beyond that seven-foot, moon-shimmering tin fence that surrounded it was . . . *nothing.* Well, to be more exact, blackness. Complete

blackness, the ultimate fudge pudding. A moment before the tops of the houses, trees and buildings had been visible beyond the drive-in, but now they were not. There was not even a dot of light.

The only illumination came from the drive-in itself: from open car doors, the concession-stand lights, the red neon tubes that said ENTRANCE (ECNARTNE from our angle) and EXIT, the projector beams, and, most brilliantly, the marquee and the tall Orbit symbol, the last two sources being oddly located on a spur of concrete jutting into the blackness like a pier over night ocean. I found myself drawn to that great symbol, its blue and white lights alternating like overhead fan slats across the concession, making the Halloweenish decorations against the window glass seem oddly alive and far too appropriate.

Then I glanced at the screen. *The Toolbox Murders* was visible again, but there was no fun in it. It seemed horribly silly and out of place, like someone dancing at a funeral.

Voices began to rumble across the lot, voices touched with surprise and confusion. I saw a rubber-suited monster take the head off his suit and tuck it under his arm and look around, hoping he hadn't seen what he thought he saw, and that it would be some kind of trick due to bad lighting through the eyes of his mask. A bikini-clad girl let her stomach sag, having lost the ambition to suck it in.

I realized suddenly I was walking toward the exit, and that the gang was with me, and Bob was chattering like an idiot, not making any sense. The din of voices across the lot had grown, and people were out of their cars, walking in the same direction we were, like lemmings being willed to the sea.

One man fired up his car. It was a new Ford station wagon and it was full of fat. Fat driver in a Hawaiian shirt with a fat wife beside him, two fat kids in the back. He jerked the car around a speaker post with surprising deftness, pulled on the lights and raced for the exit.

People scattered before the wagon, and I got a glimpse of the driver's face as he raced past. It looked like a mask made of paste with painted golf balls for eyes.

The headlights hit the darkness, but didn't penetrate. The car pushed down the tire-buster spears with a clack and was swallowed foot by foot by the pudding. It was as if there had never been a car. There was not even the sound of the motor retreating into the distance.

A tall cowboy in a Stetson full of toothpicks and feathers sauntered over to the opening, flexed his shoulders and said, "Let's find out what the hell gives here."

He put a boot on the tire-buster spears to hold them down, stuck his arm into the fudge, up to the elbow.

And the cowboy screamed. Never in my personal history of real life or movie experiences

have I heard such a sound. It was like a depth charge to the soul, and its impact blew up my spine and rocked my skull.

The cowboy staggered back, flopped to the ground and turned himself around and around like a dog with its guts dragging. His arm was gone from hand to elbow.

We ran over to help him, but before we could lay a hand on him, he yelled, "Back, goddammit. Don't touch me! It runs."

He started screaming again, but it sounded as if his vocal cords were filling with mud. And I saw then what he meant by "It runs." Slowly his arm was dissolving, the sleeve going limp at the shoulder, then the shoulder folded and he tried to scream again. But whatever was eating him from the outside seemed to be working inside him even faster.

His forehead wobbled forward as bone and tissue went to Jell-O, caved in on the rest of his collapsing face. His cowboy hat came to settle on top of the mess, floated in it. His entire body went liquid, ran out of his clothes in nauseating streams. The stink was awful.

Carefully, holding my breath, I reached out and took hold of one of his boots and upended it. A loathsome goop, like vomit, poured out of it and splattered to the ground.

Beside me, Bob let out with a curse, and Willard said something I didn't understand. I dropped the boot and looked at the darkness beyond the tin fence and the strange truth of it struck me.

We were trapped in the drive-in.

6

That we were trapped in the drive-in was realized immediately by most, but accepted slowly by all of us. And there were some who didn't know right off, like the couple in the Buick parked near where a bunch of us had gathered, looking at the hat, boots and empty clothes of the dissolved cowboy. Neither comet nor screams had reached them. They were too wrapped up in their lovemaking. They were in the back seat of the Buick, and the girl had one ankle draped across the seat and the other on the package shelf. We were all watching the car rock, watching it threaten the shock absorbers and test the strength of four-ply tires. And as the car was at a slant, dipping its rear end toward us, we could see a pale butt rising to view, vanishing, rising, vanishing, all with a regular rhythm, like an invisible man dribbling a basketball. It was something we kept our eyes on, something that tied us to our old reality, and I really hated for it to end and for the girl's ankles to come down, and a little later for them to come out of the car with their clothes rumped, looking mad at first, then confused. It was our faces that did that to them, the way we were bunched up, the rumble of our voices, the fact that more people were walking our way, and, of course, there was the absolute blackness all around.

Someone tried to tell the couple about the comet, the fat folks in the Ford and the brave (or stupid) cowboy who got dissolved, and they just grinned. The guy said, "No way."

"Well," Bob said, waving a hand at the fudge surrounding the drive-in, "I guess we just dreamed all this crap. You think we're giving you a bill of goods, why don't you two just take you a little stroll out in that shit—but don't expect to come back."

The guy looked at the girl; she looked at him; he looked at us and shook his head.

People tried radios, CBs, and some clustered to the concession to make a stab at the phones. But nothing was in order. Just a little static on the radios.

The crowd grew. Must have been over a hundred of us standing around, and more people were coming. They were starting to congregate over in Lot B too, in little spots here and there. Some were driving cars around and around, honking horns, maybe not scared yet, but certainly bewildered. But that didn't go on long. Pretty soon no cars were moving about, just groups of people, talking or looking lost.

A story came to us from Lot B about a motorcycle gang that was over there, about how one of their members panicked and drove his bike off into the stuff, with the same result as our fat man and his calorie-laden family in the Ford station wagon.

The theories started then, those by the loudest and most persistent ones among us being the ones heard. The man with the beer gut wearing a T-shirt a size too small with a mustard blossom on the neck of it, for instance.

"Well, I think it's them men from outer space, whatever color they are. They've done this to us. With us shooting our rockets and stuff up there, they were bound to get sore with us. So they've come down with some of them sophisticated weapons they've got, and they've done this. I don't see how it could be anything else."

"I don't think so," said a guy in a sports coat, his hair neat and stiff as a J.C. Penney model. "I suspect the Communists. They're a lot stronger in this country than most people imagine. And I don't want to open any old wounds here, but maybe McCarthy wasn't as far off as some people thought. These Communists are into everything, and they've said all along that they planned to take us over."

"Why in the hell would they want some Texas drive-in picture show?" Bob said. "They like horror movies, or what? That don't make no damn sense. I like the one about the guys from outer space, whatever color they are, better than that, and that's dumb."

"Hey," said the man with the mustard-colored T-shirt.

"Call 'em like I see 'em," Bob said.

"It's the will of God," said a girl in a long blue cotton dress. "There was so much sinning going on here, God has sent a blight."

The couple who had been practicing the rites of the three-toed salamander in the back of the Buick started shuffling their feet and looking over the heads of the crowd as if they were expecting someone.

"It wasn't God," said somebody at the rear of the crowd, "it was Satan done it. God doesn't punish. Man and Satan punish."

"We're uptight for nothing," said another voice. "Tomorrow the sun will come up and shine through this mess. It's just a freak of nature, that's all."

"No," said a punker girl with orange spiked hair. "It's dimensional invaders."

No one bought that one.

A pretty girl in a pink bathing suit suggested, "Maybe we're all dead, and, like, hanging in limbo or something."

Some consideration on that. A couple of maybes from the crowd; I think it might have edged out the Commie threat a bit in popularity.

"Ain't none of them things," said a fat lady with a nose like a red pickle. She was wearing a pink-and-green housecoat that could have served as a visual emetic and yellow bunny slippers. She had her arm around her skinny husband's waist and two small ankle biters (a

girl and a boy) were at her feet. "It's the ghost of Elvis Presley. I read about something like this in *The Weekly World News*, and Elvis was involved in that. His ghost came down and did some things to some sinners. He said to them that he wasn't happy with the way people were living on Earth."

"Hell," Bob said. "He's got to be a self-righteous sonofabitch now that he's dead. He wasn't nothing but a fat dooper."

"He was the King," the woman said, as if she were talking about Jesus.

"King of what?" Bob said. "Constipation? I heard he died on the floor of his toilet with a turd hanging out of his ass. Report said he died 'straining at stool.' He wasn't any more than the rest of us, except he could sing. And even then, he wasn't any Hank Williams."

"Hank Williams!" said the fat lady, taking her arm from around her husband's waist and looking as if she were about to leap. "Now there was a drunk and a dooper. And he wasn't near as good-looking as Elvis."

"That may be," Bob said, "but you don't hear of his ghost coming down to bother nobody. He knew to mind his own business."

This went on for a time, not really solving anything, but it was entertaining. I got to thinking about how much time had elapsed, and looked at my watch. It had stopped.

Bob and the lady with the red pickle nose had finally quit going at it, and a black guy wearing a straw hat and a worn-out gray sweatshirt with "Dallas Cowboys" on it spoke up then. "We could be here a time. What about food? We're gonna need that."

I thought about the cookies and junk back at the truck and wished we'd brought something more substantial, but then maybe that was carrying worry too far, projecting this strange situation too distantly in the future.

The manager of the main concession joined us then. "Look, it isn't going to come to that, worrying about food, I mean. This will pass. Whatever it is, it can't last long. But to ease your minds, let me tell you that if we're here awhile, if food becomes a problem, we've got enough back there in that concession, and over on Lot B, to last a long time."

"How long is a long time?" Willard said.

"A long, long time," the manager said. "But let's don't jump the gun here. This'll pass. Maybe some sort of industrial accident put this mess around us."

"And the comet?" Randy said.

"I don't know, but I'm sure there's a logical explanation to it all, and I don't see any need

to get worked up over starving to death. We haven't been in this mess but a few minutes, and I can tell you now, it won't last."

"God has spoken," Bob said, and the manager glared at him.

"I think we all ought to hold tight," the manager said. "Go on back to your cars, try to forget all this, get your mind on the movies. Pretty soon someone will come to get us out of this. Some kind of accident happened out there, someone knows about it. Hell, they'll have the National Guard in here pretty soon."

"That makes me feel comfy all over," Bob said. "My uncle is in the National Guard and he don't know dick about nothing, has a belly that hangs down to his knees. Great, the National Guard."

"You boys think like you want," the manager said. "Me, I'm going back to the concession, try the phones again, see if they've got to working. Tomorrow we'll all have something to tell our families about."

"Right," Randy said. "A comet smiled at us, put us in Limbo Land, and the edge of Limbo Land ate a station wagon full of fat people and dissolved a cowboy."

The manager tried to smile. "I'm not saying this isn't a dangerous situation, but I am saying we have to make the best of it. Keep our spirits up, stay away from that gas . . . jell, whatever it is ... and you'll see. We'll be fine. Now I'm going on back to the concession to try the phones."

The manager went away and Randy said, "Yeah, fine."

"He's right, though," a tall guy said. "We can't do much else. We've got to make the best of it ... unless someone here has a great idea."

No one did.

One guy went out to the trunk of his car, came back with an old box and a shovel. He scooped up the cowboy and put him in the box. The mess had lost its acidic quality and was congealing. The box remained intact. He used the point of the shovel to scoop up the clothes and the boots, dropped the hat on top of it all.

"I'll just . . . keep him in my trunk," he said. "Wife said she didn't mind . . . seems like the decent thing to do. Maybe we can figure out who he is ... get his folks to bury him when we get out . . . Anybody here know him?"

No one said they did.

"Guess he came by himself," the guy said, and carried the shovel and the cowboy in the

cardboard box away.

"What a way to end up," Bob said. "In the trunk of a car next to a spare tire."

"In a dirty box, no less," Randy said.

Now to make a long story short, or at least this part of it, this went on, this standing around and talking, this looking at the black mess and waiting for the National Guard, but no one showed up to rescue us.

"We've talked and talked about it," Willard said, "but nothing's gotten any better."

"I'm gonna get me a Baby Ruth," Bob said. "It's good for my skin."

"Not much else to do, is there," I said.

"Let's just do like the manager suggested," said the black guy in the straw hat.

We drifted away from the crowd, and the crowd started to break apart, wandering back to their cars with a stunned look on their faces. The immediate drama was over and nothing had changed. We were still trapped in the drive-in, and the adventure of it was old already.

We all went back to the truck, and I took up my position in the chair and recovered my bag of popcorn. I even found I could get interested in the movies again.

Bob came back with his Baby Ruth and smacked his lips over it enough to make me look through our stuff for some cookies. I had eaten so much I was beginning to feel queasy.

We watched the movies, but after they had run through and started over again, I began to lose interest and really worry. With that many movies shown, and them starting a second run, it ought to be getting toward dawn. There wasn't a ray of sunlight, however. Just the same artificial lights. I was getting sick of movies, the drive-in, even the goofballs who were wandering around in monster suits. I couldn't even feel any warmth for the gals in their bikinis. I felt like a roach in a toilet bowl with someone's hand on the handle, ready to flush. I wanted to go home to my nice warm bed, with Mom and Dad down the hall.

The concession manager we had talked to spoke over the speakers. "The phones still aren't on, folks, and we haven't been able to pick up anything on the radio, but I'm sure the National Guard is on this, and we'll be out of here soon—"

"Guy has a hard-on for the National Guard," Bob said.

"—until then, we're going to keep right on showing the movies, and if there's no help by the time of the third one, we'll be serving breakfast here at the concession—on the house.

No eggs and bacon, I'm afraid. But we've got hot dogs, fresh hot popcorn, plenty of candy and soft drinks, plus some real good orange drink we got in just for tonight."

The manager went off then, and Bob said, "Here we are surrounded by acidic goo, and all this guy can think about is the National Guard, free hot dogs and good orange drink."

"The odd thing to me," Randy said, "is how come the electricity works here in the drive-in, but radios, things that connect us to the outside world, don't? Hell, my watch has even stopped."

"Mine too," I said.

Bob took out his pocket watch. "This one's dead too. First time ever."

"Bet they're all dead," Willard said. It was the first time he had said a word in some time. He had just been sitting, watching the movies, eating popcorn. "Time is an outside connection too."

"You getting at something, Willard?" I asked.

"Not really. I don't know any better what's going on than anyone else. But this all has a kind of artificial feel to it ... like, hell, I don't know—"

"A B science-fiction movie," Randy said.

"Yeah," Willard said. "I guess so."

"Personally," Bob said, "I think the lady in the blanket and bunnies was right. It's the ghost of Elvis."

"I just hope the damn bulbs and such in the projectors don't burn out," Willard said. "Or in the Orbit sign. They do, and it's going to be some kind of dark in here."

Willard got out his cigarettes, passed them around. We all took one, just as if we smoked, and Willard put his lighter to them, and we leaned against the truck and puffed them until we coughed.

"That poor cowboy," Randy said. "It melted him like salt melts a slug. Looked like cheap special effects.

Like in that movie *The Hydrogen Man*, or maybe *The Blob*."

"And that fat family and their car," Bob said. "Rendered right down, I figure."

So we smoked our cigarettes and the movies rolled on.

7

After a time, I gave it up and crawled in the back of the truck, found one of the bedrolls we kept back there for camping trips, got in it and fell asleep. Kind of sleep you get from depression and absolute exhaustion.

I dreamed about what Randy had said, about this being like a B science-fiction movie, and the dream was very real. It was like I was tapped into some truth somewhere. There was this B-string god and he was making a movie. He didn't have the power to make the Big Movie, so he just borrowed some people (us) and a setting (the drive-in) and made do with that. Real shoestring stuff. There was a bunch of other creatures with him, maybe they were gods too—hell, maybe none of them were gods—and they were like technicians and the like. They were real ugly hombres. They were speaking in a language I had never heard before, but I could understand it. The main ugly was telling them that it all had to be under budget. If it wasn't, it was all over. He wanted them to do it cheap but be proud. Mostly, he wanted it quick. The technicians were very much in agreement. In fact, they seemed agreeable to most anything the main critter wanted.

It all seemed very real.

Then it was like someone was calling me, my dad yelling at me to come eat breakfast, but the voice didn't sound quite right. It sounded far away, filtered. And when I woke up and ran my hand through my hair I was in the bedroll in the camper, and the voice was coming from the outside, and it was Bob's.

I got out of the bedroll and came out of the back of the camper, still groggy.

"I was about to come in there .and drag your ass out," Bob said. "Breakfast, such as it is, is being served."

I sat on the tailgate of the truck and looked at a line forming at the concession. People were talking in a friendly, if not happy, way, but you could feel the tension in the air, like some sort of invisible mesh. Seeing all those folks thinking about what the line must be like over at Lot B, I realized that big as The Orbit was, it wasn't *that* large, and there were a lot of hungry people here, and when it came to living here awhile, it could get pretty crowded. And fast.

But at this point, things were still not bad. This was the time between hot dogs and horrors. When people were still trying to pull together, stiff upper lip, like all those old science-fiction movies where an alien menace makes them cooperate to thwart it, and in the end earth overcomes and learns to live as one, and Moscow opens some McDonald's and Disneyland puts in a branch over there.

We got in a breakfast line and went through. There were three people operating the

concession stand, plus the manager. I noticed the girl giving out the candy right off, and in time I would come to think of her as the Candy Girl. She was blond and very pretty. She had cheekbones so sharp you could have picked your teeth with them. It looked fine on her. If she hadn't been so short she would have looked like a model instead of a doll.

"There's plenty of food here," the manager said loudly, trying to keep everyone's spirits up. "Everything's going to be all right. It might take a little time, but it'll all work out in the wash."

I felt sorry for the manager. He was really trying. But Bob didn't give a damn.

"National Guard show up yet?" Bob asked.

The manager gritted his teeth. "Not yet."

I got my hot dog, drink and candy, and up close the Candy Girl was no disappointment. The dark brown uniform dress she wore set her skin and hair off nicely. She had dark brown eyes, pale, clear skin. Her legs looked nice. I wouldn't have minded being strangled between them. She was as delicious as the sweets she was passing out.

I said hi to her and she gave me a quizzical look and said it back.

So our ritual started. We would eat our meals, go back and watch the movies, visit with folks who came by and wanted to talk, mostly speculating on what was happening. Nobody had an idea any better than Willard's and Randy's about it all being a B movie, and nothing as loony as Elvis Presley's ghost, which made all the other ideas a little less loony in comparison.

One guy from Lot B came by regularly. He was tall and lean and probably thirty. He carried all the information from one lot to the other, sort of a town crier. Because of that, we got so we simply called him Crier, and he liked it and adopted the name.

"I used to drive a beer truck for Budweiser," Crier said. "Only Friday, whenever the hell that was, I got in the samples, if you know what I mean, and turned me a corner a little quick and I didn't have the door closed tight, and I slung Bud all over the highway. Bunch of cars behind me had blowouts on the glass, and some other folks grabbed up the crates that weren't broken before I could get the truck braked and run the hell off with them. Budweiser frowned on this and canned me. I got good and drunk and come to the drive-in. I wish now I'd stayed home and watched the Friday-night movie on television. It looked like it was gonna be a good one. One of them Godzilla-versus-another-guy-in-a-monster-suit movies. Before my wife left me for a Miller Lite driver, me and her and our dog Boscoe, he's dead now on account of I backed the beer truck over him, used to sit up on the couch and watch them Jap movies every chance we got. There ain't a comedy good as a Jap monster movie."

"How are things all about?" Willard asked.

"I guess it's better than heart disease at the moment, but it's about to turn real nasty. There are signs. I always had a knack for signs. I could watch the news or read in *People* magazine about something, and I could always project, you know. Meaning I could look at a thing and see where it was really going. It's a gift."

"Well, where's it going then?" Willard asked, shaking us all out a cigarette.

"As I was saying," Crier said, taking a smoke and putting it in his mouth and producing his own lighter, "there are signs. Over in Lot B a man and a woman pulled their car up close to the tin fence, got on the roof of the car and climbed over the fence into that black crap. So long, sweeties. Suckers went out like June bugs on a hot griddle. It was quick, though. I seen a fella fall under one of them rollers they use to flatten out tar on the highway once, now that was tough. And it didn't kill him right away. Can you believe that?"

"Yeah?" Willard said.

"Yeah," Crier said, and he gave details, then went away.

Without clocks, the sun and the moon to measure time by, it was up to the projectionists to mark the hours. They did this by counting the number of movies they changed. They kept them running constantly. Six of them. Three from our concession stand and film house, another three from the concession in Lot B. When one film was finished, they would measure by its reel time. Usually about an hour and a half per flick. That way, when enough films had been changed, they could compute time for meals. The manager would then announce over the speaker: "Snack bar will be serving breakfast now." Or whatever meal was on the roster. Not that it mattered, since it was the same stuff every time.

"Hot damn," Bob would say, "popcorn. They make a mean bag here, don't they? Regular four-star restaurant." And he would always ask the manager about the National Guard.

That Bob. What a kidder.

For a while I tried using one of Bob's old history composition notebooks and a Bic pen to keep time by the number of movies seen, like the projectionists. But I could never remember if the mark on paper was for the previous movie or the one I had just seen. Things ran together kind of rapid like.

I don't think I was the only one having trouble with time. I think the projectionists were missing it now and then too. Certainly, I was pretty hungry a few times, and I think they missed calling us for meals. But mistakes were expected. I could attest to the fact that keeping time by the number of movies shown wasn't an exact science. And I was sick of

the movies. I knew them by heart. You could hear people across the drive-in chanting the dialogue ahead of the actors. Sometimes I dozed when the zombies were eating guts, or when Mitchell was using the industrial nailer on the pretty woman from the shower.

People continued to be patient. Or most. There were a few fights. I saw a guy slug a guy in front of us once, but I don't know what started it. It was fast and explosive. But mostly, people were doing pretty good. It was still like what I was talking about earlier, about those old science-fiction movies where we all pull together against the menace. Only our menace was silent and surrounded us, and we didn't have any bombs to throw at it, and the damned old National Guard didn't seem likely to show up.

When we were tired, we slept in the camper using the bedrolls, giving Willard spare blankets and an old backpack for a pillow. Sometimes one of us would sleep in the cab, or lie down on our bedroll under the truck. We didn't always sleep at the same time. Bob especially seemed to have a different body clock. He would usually climb into the camper for a nap when we were waking up. There seemed to be something furtive about this, but I couldn't figure what it was, unless he wanted to masturbate.

We used the bathroom at the concession, but I could see that wasn't going to last. It didn't work well. It was getting so bad I longed for the toilet at Buddy's Fill-up.

My highlights were saying hi to the Candy Girl and eating. It got so I was getting kind of fat. I took up exercising, but I couldn't stay with it. Just too damn tired. Nothing seemed real or important. The idea of being trapped in the drive-in, though depressing, began to seem normal, as if we had always been there. I wondered why ants in ant farms didn't commit suicide.

The weather in the drive-in was fairly consistent. Not too warm, not too cold. Yet it did change occasionally. Wild winds would twist up out of nowhere and tear across the lots, blowing paper cups and popcorn bags before them like frightened coveys of quail. The paper would fly against the wind-rattled tin fences or over them and into the blackness to be consumed. Sometimes the wind was so strong it shook the truck like a mechanical pony ride.

There was also a now-and-then movement in the blackness overhead. It bulged down, made lumps. Fuzzy blue lightning leaped out of it, produced crackling stick figures that danced across the strange sky to the rhythm of metallic thunder and ran together like idiots to explode in dazzling displays of fireworks.

It never rained, however, and it got so the electrical storms were welcome. They were a break from the monotony. They gave more light. People would lie on the ground, or on top of their cars, hands behind heads, looking up, entranced.

And when there wasn't the lightning, there were the meals at the concession, and the movies. The movies, ever rolling: chainsaws and zombies, drills and screams, common as

spit.

With all of us so close together, it got so sex was super casual, 'damn near a spectator sport. There had always been this element at The Orbit, but it was more blatant than ever, and the romance had gone out of it. To the front of us a group formed that participated in orgies. We were hurt no one invited us over. We used to sit in lawn chairs and watch them wallow on the asphalt. Bob would cheer them on and call out points, and I would wonder where they got their energy. Watching them made me tired.

I remember this little girl who used to walk her poodle between the fornicating bodies. She must have been about eleven. The bodies could have been hedges for all she and the mutt cared. The dog had a pink bow, the girl a red one. The dog was too small in its white fur, the girl too small in her dress. The red ribbon against her oily blond hair looked like a wound.

There were fights. People got mad over very little. Over to our right a fellow wearing a welder's cap got into some kind of shindig with a hatless fella over the quality of the chainsaw Leatherface was using in yet another viewing of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. They did some excellent name-calling. Even Willard and Bob were impressed, and they were well versed in tongue-lashing. Willard had been raised on the streets, and Bob had a dad who thought most of humanity was a sonofa-bitch, and that the word "sonofabitch" itself was the period to a sentence. "I'll be a sonofabitch. There goes that sonofabitch. You got to watch them sonofabitches. Remember now, boys, folks are just sonofabitches."

The guy with the hat was the sharper of the two, as he had a three-foot length of two-by-four, while the hatless fella had only a popcorn sack, and that mostly empty. Even as Leatherface chased an intended victim across the screen, Hat laid a lick on Hatless's noggin that would have made a sadist wince. Hatless, wobbling a little from the blow, flapped his popcorn bag at Hat, and the bag burst open and sent popcorn bouncing into the night.

It got better than championship wrestling. Folks nearby, maybe friends or relatives, or just interested parties, got in the act, chose up sides, started kicking and slugging. After a while, sides didn't matter. It was getting the good blow in that counted. One guy got crazy, ripped a speaker off a post, went at everyone and anyone with it. He was good, too. Way he whipped that baby around on that wire made Bruce Lee and his nanchukkas look like a third-grade carnival act.

He started coming our way, whirling the speaker fast as a propeller, yelling. He smashed the windshield out of the car next to us.

From my lawn chair I could see him coming straight for me. Bob had already vacated his seat and beat a hasty retreat. He called for me to do the same, but I couldn't move. I was excited and wanted to move, but couldn't quite find the energy to get up. Lately

everything was a major chore, even fleeing before a madman. I waited for my destiny. Death by drive-in speaker.

Willard calmly got the baseball bat out of the truck and stepped smoothly over and swatted a home run with the guy's head before he could reach me. The best part of me feared the fella was dead, the worst part of me hoped he was.

"Thanks, Willard," I said. I could have been thanking him for a cigarette the way it came out.

"Hell," he said. "I was going to do that anyway." The fight was still going on, though it was now moving in the other direction. There was a guy in the car that had gotten its windshield knocked out, and he was sitting there behind the windshield with glass in his hair and on his shoulders. He looked as if he'd tried to ram his head through a block of ice and made it. "Who's gonna pay for all this?" he said. "That's what I want to know."

No one came forward with an answer.

The fight was so far down the lot now, encased in shadow, the grapplers looked like frogs jumping together. After a while, you could just hear cussing, but it was losing some of its originality.

I finally shifted my chair and started watching the next movie, *Night of the Living Dead*. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the guy Willard had swatted wake up. The side of his head looked dark and pregnant. He had one eye open and he was moving it from left to right, scoping things out.

He rolled smoothly and gently onto his stomach, started to crawl off, dragging the speaker behind him by the wire. He didn't seem to notice it was clattering on the asphalt like a bad transmission. He crawled a great distance down the row of cars and disappeared under a Cadillac festooned with so many curb feelers it might be mistaken for a giant centipede. He stayed there through most of *Night*, and by the time of the next movie, he was brave enough to crawl out from under it, go on his hands and knees for a few yards, rise up to a squatting run and weave off into a maze of parked automobiles, the speaker following him like a tail.

I looked around for Bob, Randy and Willard. They were not in sight. Perhaps they had gone to sleep, or gone off to look around the lots for girls, for action. Me, I didn't want to get out of my chair. I didn't know what was wrong with me, and couldn't seem to concern myself with it. I closed my eyes and thought again of B-string gods. In the dream these gods were made of big eyes and bladders and tentacles. They had a cobbled look, as if a good special-effects man was doing the best he could with leftover parts. They were the same creatures as in the dream before, but they were clearer this time, as if my brain had been focused.

They were up there behind the blackness, and when they writhed across it, it made those bumps we saw from time to time. They had great machines with great cogs and wheels and gears and gauges. They pulled switches that made lightning. They even had lightning that came out of the tips of their tentacles. They took clubs and beat large sheets of metal for thunder. They talked in that strange language, a noise like a rat with its tail in a fan. Like before, it made no sense, yet I understood it. They were talking about motivation of scene, drama, needing something ugly and special. One wanted some cuts. Another thought there was too much sitting around and it wasn't funny enough. He said something about humor making horror better. The gods argued. Finally they put their misshapen heads together and agreed on something, but whatever it was wouldn't stay with me. I felt as if I had tuned in on them, and was now being tuned out.

Then I wasn't thinking of that anymore. The dream had gone to steak and potatoes, country gravy and toast, a big glass of ice tea. In the background of this dream the speaker coughed out screams from *The Toolbox Murders*, or maybe it was *I Dismember Mama*. It didn't matter. I fell into a deep, deep sleep, the screams my lullaby.

8

Dingo City.

Everything started getting fuzzy around the edges. Sometimes my lawn chair moved through time and space. (Spin me around, Jesus, save me stars, get Scorpio in line with my moon, Lord Almighty, let my good number come up, put some beefsteak on the table and wish me luck.)

It got so about all I could do was eat and sit in that chair. And take care of my bodily functions, and that had become quite a chore. Not only was I weak, but the restroom had gotten so bad I didn't want to use it. The odor waited there for me like a mugger, and inside the concrete bunker the floor had gone so stale and tacky with overflowing toilets and urinals, my shoes stuck to it like cat hairs to honey. I damn near needed skis to get to the John, which was now doorless, the hinges hanging like frayed tendons. And once I made it that far, I would find the commode even more stuffed with cigarette butts, candy wrappers, used prophylactics and the stuff that was supposed to be there. What the toilet wouldn't hold was on the floor. So going into that stinking pit was rather pointless. I was terrified at the idea of standing over one of those malodorous urinals or Johns (this item of wisdom crayoned above the latter: REMEMBER, CRABS CAN POLE-VAULT) and having something ugly, fuzzy, multilegged and ravenous leap out at me.

I took to using large popcorn tubs to do my business in, carried them to the tin fence and used a flat board I had found to catapult tub and contents into the blackness to be devoured.

Take that, B-string gods.

Sometimes I was so dizzy I couldn't even carry the tubs to the fence to launch them, and then Bob would do it for me. He was the only one of us who seemed firm, relatively unchanged. I wondered what his secret was, or if he had any. I kept wanting to ask, but the words hung in my throat like phlegm. What if there wasn't a secret and there was no knowledge that could help me.

I took to sitting in the lawn chair for longer and longer periods, watching the movies. They were familiar and they made me comfortable. I liked the movies better than people. They were so damned dependable. The same ghosts were revived and slaughtered again and again. Leatherface became adorable. He seemed like an action kind of guy. Knew what he wanted and went after it. Didn't sit around in a lawn chair feeling dizzy. He ate good, too.

Bob leaned over the chair and put his face down close to mine. "You know," he said, "you need to get you some focus. Quit looking at them movies, you're starting to drift." He gave me a pat on the shoulder and went away. I fell into the well of film for a time and

came out when I heard voices, some laughter.

"What did you think about that?" Willard's voice. I was too weak to turn and look at him.

"Great." Randy's voice. "I hit him right where you said, the way you showed me, right on the button. Did it kill him?"

"Naw," Willard said. "You just decked him. You get a guy on the chin like that, especially when he's not expecting it, and most of the time he'll go down."

The camaraderie in their voices was strange. Like Siamese twins rediscovering each other after a lengthy separation at birth. Maybe meeting at a dogfight, or something bloody.

Randy had gone from quiet and shy to swaggering, and Willard had become content, like an empty cup that had been filled.

And me, I was out in Bozo Land, flying about in a lawn chair, watching stars and planets and hamburgers fly by. Something about that bothered me, but I couldn't nail down exactly what it was. I watched Leatherface for a time, then I heard:

"Let's look for trouble," Randy said.

Willard laughed. "We are trouble."

"Maybe you boys are getting a mite out of hand." It was Bob's voice. Calm and in control. "You're not eating good, none of us are, and it's changing us. We're not thinking right. We've got to—"

"Mind your own business." It was Willard's voice, and it was a snarl. "You just take care of the basket case over there and leave us alone."

"Have it your way," Bob said.

I think I flew away in my lawn chair then. I don't know how long I was gone, but when I came back to earth, my chair had been turned around so that I was facing the truck. I think Bob had done that, to keep me from watching the movies.

Randy and Willard were on the hood of the truck. Willard was stripped down to his underwear. Randy had a gallon-sized popcorn tub on his head for a hat. He had poked holes in either side of it and run a piece of leather (probably from his belt) through it so he could fasten it under his chin. He was leaning over Willard, who was lying on his stomach, and he had Willard's knife, and he was using it to cut designs in his back. He'd cut, then use a popcorn bag to sop up the blood. He'd put the bag in his mouth and suck on it while he used the black asphalt from the lot (he had it collected in a large Coke cup) to rub into the wounds he was making. From where I sat I could make out animal designs,

words, a bandolier of bullets even. All of the tattoos had the slick look of crude oil by moonlight.

Bob floated into view. "Ya'll ought to quit that. End up getting an infection and ain't a thing can be done about it here."

"I've told you to mind your own business," Willard snapped.

"Yeah," Bob said, "and I said I'd mind it too. So carve away, Randy. It's his skin. But don't screw up the hood of my truck. Blood'll rust it."

Willard, who had raised up on his elbows, relaxed again. Randy looked at Bob for a moment, then looked at me, smiled like a cannibal watching the pot, then bent to his work.

And so it went.

Movies and tattoos.

I got so weak that Bob would have to help me to the concession for my meals. The Candy Girl had lost her smile and a lot of flesh, the sharp bones in her face were like tent poles pushing at old canvas, her hair was as listless as a dead horse's tail. She didn't put the candy in your hand now; she slapped it down on the counter and let you pick it up. She seldom stood anymore, preferred to roost in a chair behind the counter, just the top of her head showing. I quit saying hi.

She didn't miss it.

The manager and the counter boy argued with patrons and with each other. Bob still asked the manager about the National Guard, but now the manager would cry. Finally, even Bob felt sorry for him and didn't mention it again.

When we got our food, Bob would help me back to the truck and feed me by hand. I couldn't make my fingers work, couldn't always keep the food down. It was too sweet. My teeth felt loose and my gums hurt.

And the drive-in changed. People were not so good now. Nobody said "please" and "thank you" anymore. Patience was as hard to find as steak. The fight I'd seen with the welding-cap fella and the others had been just a preview. It was going a step beyond that. There was lots of yelling and fighting now. We heard gunfire frequently over in Lot B and from the west screen in Lot A. When Crier came by he would talk about murder. He had developed a sense of humor about it and was able to mix it in with his telling. It had gotten so nothing was real to me.

I remember seeing the father of the little girl with the poodle come out of their car, butt

naked, climb on the roof and hop around yelling, "I feel better now, I surely do, yes, sir." Then he hopped down, ran across the lot, leaped onto the hood of a car, leaped off, repeated the process down the row until, in mid-leap from a Toyota, he was shot out of the air by a big fat guy brandishing a pump shotgun.

The little girl had come out of the car to watch her father's run, and when he was shot, she yelled, "Two points," at the top of her lungs. I thought it was more like four, and something inside me told me I should be concerned about that kind of attitude, but the voice was small and tired.

Later I saw the little girl wearing a ratty white cape held to her neck by a dog collar. The cape had a pink ribbon on it. The little girl was dragging the empty leash around the lot talking to it. Her mother, who looked like a death-camp survivor, was telling her, "Don't tug on it."

All this scared Bob enough to get his shotgun down, and he kept it close by him for a while. Eventually he returned it to the rack in the truck, chained and locked it.

I remember some of Crier's visits. He came by often. He had found a hoe handle somewhere, and he used it for a walking stick. His hair was almost to his shoulders. He said there had been murders again.

"There were these two brothers over in Lot B," he said, "and they got into it over a popcorn kernel that rolled under their truck. The fastest brother dove under after it, and the slower brother cut the quick one's throat, pried his mouth open, got the bloody kernel and ate it. Afterward, he cut his own throat."

"That ain't good," Bob said.

"I'll say. And the brothers' bodies disappeared, and a short time thereafter there were some well-fed folks over there stepping pretty lively, and I reckon what happened with the brothers was what got this couple fired up to eat their baby *raw*."

Crier had emphasized "raw" as if that were the crime. Smoked, barbecued or plain fried baby was probably all right with him, but *raw*?

Personally, I couldn't see a thing wrong with a raw baby. The idea of eating a baby had certainly not become acceptable to me, but I was beginning to think ahead to the time when it would, and I was quite certain I wouldn't mind my baby raw. Oh, I'm like anyone else, I prefer my meat cooked, but if raw was the only way my baby would come, then raw it was.

"They were out there eating this kid on the hood of their car," Crier continued. "Each one had a leg and was going at it, and the motorcycle gang over there, Banditos, I think they call themselves, seen this and they got some upset, brothers."

" 'Cause the baby was raw?" I asked. "I don't think so," Crier said. "The cycle guys have taken over in B Lot. They run the concession and keep the movies showing. They've appointed themselves the police officers for over there, and I figure this side of the lot is next when they get around to it.

"Anyway, they got this wrecker from somebody over there, took that couple of baby-eaters and hung them one at a time from the wrecker's wench. When that was done, they tore the couple's car apart looking for food. Found some popcorn kernels and a chocolate almond under the back seat. The corker is someone stole what was left of the kid when the bikers weren't looking, and one of their own men got up there on the hood and started licking the spot where the baby had been. The bikers had to take him over to the wrecker and hang him too. Afterward, the bodies of the executed disappeared faster than a horny man's conscience. Oh, they found the clothes, but not the stiffs that went in them. They watched for charcoal smoke around and about from those who brought barbecue grills, but no smoke was detected. You might say Lot B's law enforcement was thwarted."

"When you get some more cheerful news like that, Crier," Bob said, "you be sure and come share it with us."

"I will," Crier said, winking, and he moved on.

"I think he's a little too cheery about things," Bob said. "Then again, maybe my sense of humor is on the blink."

Moment by moment I felt worse. Got so bad Bob had to decide when it was time for me to sleep. He'd come get me from my chair and guide me over to the truck and put me inside to lie down. Randy and Willard had gotten even chummier, and they didn't have anything to do with us anymore. They took to sleeping under the truck.

Willard had given up his underwear and now went around naked. Randy had tattooed Willard's buttocks so that it looked as if black dahlias were blooming out of the crack of his ass. When he walked, the flower arrangement wiggled as if moved by the wind.

Black blooms on a white-marble ass. I should have seen it as some kind of omen.

The last time the concession was open, I almost didn't make it. We were having one of those electrical storms, and it was the wildest ever; blue fuzz-bolts slamming across the sky (what served as our sky anyway), colliding, blowing patterns like neon quilt designs against the blackness.

Bob got me out of my chair, said something to me that I don't remember, and started leading me. All I recall was that there was lots of light from overhead and I was as crazy as a blind mouse in a paint shaker. I leaned against him and walked, tilted my head up to watch the raging electricity. I remembered my dreams about the B-string gods and

thought if they were real, they were pretty worked up this time.

Close as we were to the concession, when we got there, a line had formed, and a long one. There were a lot of naked people. It seemed to be the fashion. Not far up in line was Willard, naked, of course, his knife on a strip of cloth around his neck. His black tattoos were flat and dull in the bad light. He had Randy on his shoulders, and Randy was naked too, except for that silly popcorn container on his head.

Since no one was bathing, it stunk there in line and it was hard to breathe. It made me feel worse than I already felt, and I hadn't thought that possible. A moment later, when we actually entered the concession and the stink of bodies was intensified, mingled with body heat, it was even more intense. I kept wondering in an absent sort of way if the air in the drive-in was limited, if, like rats under glass, we could use it all up. "Breathe through your mouth," Bob said. I was leaning against him, and he was holding me up. I turned and noticed for the first time that he had a light beard. There was a band of sweat between the brim and the crown of his hat. All the toothpicks and feathers were gone. His face was hard and there was something different about his eyes. I wondered idly what I looked like.

The Candy Girl looked worse than ever, her movements were automatic. Her mouth hung open and there was chocolate drool running out of the corners and a spot of it was beaded between her teeth. She slapped the candy onto the counter with ill humor.

The counter boy seemed to be having a hard time getting the hot dogs on the buns, and he kept squirting mustard on the outside of the bread. After dropping his third weenie, he threw the bread and mustard squirter down, walked toward the back. The manager yelled at him, "You're fired. You hear? That's it. Fired!"

"That's good," said the counter boy. "I won't have to quit. I was looking for a job when I found this one, so it's no big deal." He disappeared into the storage room.

The manager was wild-eyed and his hair looked spiked from having gone greasy and uncombed for so long. His lips were purple, and there was something on his shirt that might have been dried vomit. He was mumbling under his breath about "freeloaders and sorry no-goods."

Willard was next in line with the manager, who was doling out the popcorn, and when he got his little sack handed to him, he said, "Hell, that ain't half what you're supposed to give."

"Think not?" the manager said.

"No, it ain't half."

"That right?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"Yeah," Randy said.

"Who asked you, you four-eyed nigger?"

And then the chili hit the fan.

Willard may have lost some pounds off his frame, but unlike me, he still had some stamina. His right hand flicked out and hit the manager in the nose, flicked out again, grabbed the manager by the throat. Willard applied both hands then, and the bag of popcorn went flying. A woman dropped to her knees and scuttled after it, chased the bag across the floor. A man stepped on her hand, hard, and she screamed. A kid grabbed for the bag, but his foot was ahead of his hand, and he accidentally kicked it, and it was like a hockey puck going into play. The line broke, folks went after the bag. It sailed past us, then sailed back our way. No one could quite lay a hand on it until the girl with the poodle cape nabbed it with "I got it, I got it," but a man behind her slammed a fist into the back of her head and knocked her to the ground. "No you don't," he said triumphantly.

The bag and the little girl both were now in play, getting kicked up and down the length of the aisle. The bag burst and pops of corn rolled every which way. People scuttled after them on their hands and knees, shoving what they could grab into their mouths. I wanted that corn too, but I was too weak to let go of Bob.

Meanwhile, back to Willard, who was choking the manager.

Willard had the guy pulled across the counter, and he quit choking him long enough to grab him by the back of the hair and slam his face into the glass display case. The manager's face went through with a crack of glass and skull, and a shard of glass went through his throat, spraying the candy boxes and wrappers below with blood. The Candy Girl said, "Oh wow."

Randy, who was still miraculously on Willard's shoulders, was yelling, "Four-eyed nigger, my ass. That'll show him, that'll show him."

The little girl with the poodle cape had become open season. She was surrounded by people who were kicking her, including her mother, who was screeching, "I told you not to jerk on that leash."

"Time to shake out of here," Bob said. He grabbed me and steered me away from the line, headed me toward the door. A fist caught me in the side of the head, and it hurt, but I was already so dizzy and messed up, it didn't make much difference.

A woman with a nail file tried to stab Bob, and Bob kicked her kneecap with the toe of his boot. She went yipping and hopping along the wall, past the rows of horror-movie

posters. She clutched at a strand of black-and-orange confetti strung across the window and pulled it down, along with some paper bats and skulls. Finally she tripped over a foot and fell down. The crowd that had been kicking the little girl moved in mass over to the woman and went at it. I could see the shape of the little girl beneath her dog cape. Her body was the color of the red ribbon in her hair, but the ribbon didn't flow.

Then I saw Willard. He had his knife out. He was spinning around and around with Randy on his shoulders, slashing out at anyone in reach. For a moment Randy's eyes caught mine, held recognition, then went savage.

Bob pulled me out of there, outside into the storm.

9

Bob sat me on the tailgate of the truck and went away. He came back with the shotgun, pushed me inside, pulled up the tailgate and locked it. He sat me over by one of the camper windows, then hunkered down by me. From there we could see the concession and the lightning that was sparking across the sky. The truck rocked against the wind, paper bags and cups fluttered across the lot. It was the strongest wind yet.

People were fleeing out of the concession, jamming in the door. There were fights out front of the place. Lots of biting and kicking.

Bob moved over to the trap that held the spare tire and pulled it up. There was a cardboard box next to the spare. He took it out, opened it. It was full of homemade jerky wrapped in cellophane. I had forgotten about that. Something tried to click together in the back of my mind, but it wouldn't. All I could do was say "But—"

"Not right now," Bob said. "Take this and eat it. You're hypoglycemic, pal. Bad. You eat this. Chew it slowly and swallow the juice."

I took it and began to chew. It hurt my gums at first, but it was like new blood was being pumped into me. I wanted to gobble it, but Bob kept warning me to suck it, to make it last.

"If Willard and Randy come back to the truck," Bob said, "I'm not going to let them in. No matter what. Understand,?"

"Randy's our friend."

"Not anymore. Eat."

I looked at him holding the shotgun. He looked like a young Clint Eastwood, only shorter, ready to step out of a spaghetti Western.

"I've had the jerky all along," Bob said. "I forgot about it at first—all that was happening and it out of sight. I brought it for you and Randy to split and take home, enough there so your folks could have some. I've been slipping in here and eating it from time to time."

It was as if my head were clearing, cotton stuffing was being pulled out. "You should have told us," I said.

"I can tell you're feeling good already. You're starting to get self-righteous again. First thing you've said in a while that makes any sense. You been out in Bozo Land, pal. All you needed was a rubber nose and some flappy shoes."

"You could have told us," I said again.

"Naw. Randy and Willard were out there in orbit, man. If I'd told them about the jerky, it would have been all she wrote. Willard would have taken it from us, and if we'd given him any trouble, he'd have killed us. No, wasn't nothing friendly about it. And telling him about it and keeping him at shotgun point all the time didn't appeal to me none neither."

"It was needing protein that made them goofy," I said. I closed my eyes and chewed the last of the jerky. I had never tasted anything better in my life.

"That may be, but I ain't no hero, Jack. I was watching after me. What can I say? I knew we had us a ticklish situation here, and I wanted to have my strength for as long as I could. More meat I had, longer I could last. I took it easy on the soft drinks and the candy, tried to drink enough to keep liquid in my body, but to balance the sugar out with the meat. I figured if I could stay alive long enough, all this might go back to the way it was." "So how come you're telling me?"

"I don't know. Worse you got, worse I felt. Hell, we been partners a long time . . . Look at you. You look like crap. It was tough to look at."

"But you managed."

"For a time. My dad always said when it got right down to it, people were sonofabitches. If it was a difference between honor and no food, he said they'd take the food every time. Looks like he was right about that. We get home, I'll tell him so."

"Well, you don't look so good neither," I said. "And to hell with your old man."

"I ain't feeling up to snuff, Jack, but with this jerky in me I could kind of figure which was my left hand and my right, know my pecker from my leg, know what was going on in here wasn't just something to look at ... Man, this is humanity shredding."

"Randy's been a friend a long time," I said.

"Yeah. I care about him. But you and I been friends a long damn time—since kindergarten. And Randy has gotten real weird, partner. Him and Willard are . . . well, they didn't just get that way from lack of groceries. Those two and this drive-in and the things that have happened go together like bourbon and Coke ... I think they're happy with the way things are. Hell, I don't know, maybe they're queer and in love and it's all this making them find it out. And maybe it isn't that; maybe they're just super fucked up and this is the straw that broke the camel's back, so to speak."

"It still doesn't strike me as the way you should have handled it," I said.

"No? Here, take another piece."

I took it without argument. In fact, I took it a little too fast. I almost ate it with the cellophane on it.

"You're a nice guy, Jack. Kind of a bleeding heart, but a nice guy. I wanted to tell you about the meat, but I knew you'd tell Randy and Willard. A bite of jerky meat wasn't gonna help them none, so I couldn't have that. Finally, though, I figured, hell, I ain't gonna make this no how, no matter how much meat I hold back. So, I thought, me and Jack, we'll split it, last as long as we can. I mean . . . well, guess I still got some kind of hope in me, just like that manager. Maybe down deep I think the National Guard is going to come through too . . . You see, I had to choose between Willard and Randy and you. And I took you."

"Am I supposed to feel flattered?"

"Be nice if you were. You been fucked up so long, you ain't really got a grip on your thinking. Look out there."

He slapped his hand against the camper window and I looked. People were fighting. They were on their hands and knees going at it. They sounded like rabid dogs.

"It's like I was saying, Jack, you're kind of a bleeding heart. If I'd told you about that jerky a time back, when you were feeling good and full of all that social-morality shit, you'd have wanted to share with Randy and Willard . . . maybe even invite Crier, some of the others over for lunch. Make a picnic out of it. Sing a few songs. We'd have been out of that stuff faster than a whore's out of pride. And I'll tell you again: Willard would have killed us."

"He seemed all right to me."

"He was. He was good to us because he needed friends. In spite of that tough-guy stuff, he was lonely. I've thought on this some, had time to. But he's a survivor, and Randy's a needer. Them two are together now and they ain't two people no more, they're one."

"So what if I want to share with them now?"

"I don't know."

"Would you shoot me?"

"I might. I could eat you then. That seems to be the trend around here. But I don't think so. But I might. Just look at it this way, Jack. Randy and Willard are out there —way out there. Twilight Zone theme time. You can forget them two boys unless the manager is right and the National Guard comes in here and rescues us and we all get turkey sandwiches and some rest. Otherwise, you ain't seen nothing yet. People ain't nothing but

animals, Jack. You and me too. Things get bad enough, like animals, folks are gonna eat what they can, do what they have to."

I thought about those books I'd garbaged. All of them were junk, but the basic theme to most had been that man was better than the animals, had something inside him that blossomed like a rose and never died, even when the physical body decayed.

I looked out at the fighters in the lot. A guy in a werewolf costume with the mask missing was rolling around on the ground with a fraternity-type guy whose pants had lost their razor crease sometime back.

"And you're saying we'll end up like that too?"

"Could. We last as long as we can, though. Build up some hope. Get's too bad . . . there's always the shotgun."

I thought about Dad kidding Mom about the last two bullets back . . . when? Christ, who could know? Yesterday? Today? A century ago? What exactly was it he told her . . . ? "When the going gets rough, and it looks like we're not going to make it, I'll save the last two bullets for us."

I looked out the window again. There were people lying on the ground, not moving. A naked man was taking a swift kick in the nuts from a near-naked girl with a punk haircut. There were other people on the ground, on their hands and knees, grabbing for spilled popcorn and candy. One woman was lapping a spilled soft drink like a dog. She had her rear end to me and her dress was hiked up and she didn't have on any underpants. It was far from sexy. She looked like a desperate, dying animal. I felt sorry for her. For them. For us.

"Maybe you're thinking about going out there and giving a speech on the unity of mankind?" Bob asked.

"No," I said. "Guess not."

"That's wise. Now take one more piece of meat, chew it slowly, and be a happy animal."

10

We sat there for a time, not talking. I was thinking, watching the storm out there, and the people. I didn't want to watch them fight and kill one another, but I couldn't take my eyes off them. It was sort of like watching the Dallas Cowboys play when they were bad. You hated looking at it, but you had to see it through.

Physically, I felt better. Not ready to do any hurdles or anything, but it seemed my senses had floated to the top once more. A lot of things I'd seen while lost in the ozone clicked together now, and I could see them in a truer light. The little girl with the cape getting kicked to death, for one. Seemed to me I had wanted to kick her too. I could remember thinking that, but for the life of me couldn't remember why. Had I really watched her father get shotgunned out of the air and thought it funny? And hadn't there been something about eating a baby? (Raw as opposed to grilled.)

I thought about the jerky I had eaten and remembered what my father's friend had said about it, how it was like chewing on a dead woman's tit. The thought of that and what was happening out there, people eating one another now and then, made me feel weak and dizzy.

Maybe Bob was right. Animals. That's what we were. No different from the animals except for an opposable thumb and a desire to make popcorn and hit each other over the head with rocks, or whatever instrument was available.

Outside, it looked as if things had calmed down. No one was fighting and there were only gawkers. Standing and looking at the bodies on the ground (there were a few of those) and maybe considering them as steaks, but not quite ready to make the move.

But the calm didn't last long. A guy came walking up, and he had a revolver in his hand, a .357 Magnum. He had a big, loud voice and he was using it.

"Can't do this crap to Merve Kinsman. Merve Kinsman don't take this off anybody. I come here to get my food, real polite like, and I'll be damned if a punk without any drawers with a nigger on his back is gonna tell me dip. I don't take that crap, nosireebob. I'll blow their heads off, is what I'll do. Knife or no knife. I'll not have it, I tell you."

Merve didn't seem to be speaking to anyone in particular, but he was turning his head from side to side as he talked, as if those who were still milling about were hanging on his every word.

I looked at the concession itself. There wasn't any more activity there, and I hadn't seen Willard or Randy come out. It seemed pretty obvious that they were the "punk without any drawers" and the "nigger."

Merve Who - Didn't - Take - That - Off - Anybody stopped outside the concession and waved the revolver and talked to the air some more. "Ain't nobody gonna talk to my ass like that, you hear. I'll pull their damn head off and piss an ocean down their throat is what I'm trying to tell you."

Merve looked at one of the closest bystanders, an aging hippie dressed in old blue jeans and high-top tennis shoes and no shirt. The hippie tried to look casual. He tried a friendly smile.

"Don't you be looking at me like that, you weird little fart." Merve grabbed the hippie and gave him a rapid pistol-whipping about the head and ears and threw him down on the ground. The hippie lay on his side and tried to look dead, but I could see he was blinking. Blood was dribbling down his face. This was a long ways from sixties flower power. I imagined he was trying to figure exactly how he had looked at Merve, so if the situation came up again he could play his cards differently.

Merve pulled open the concession door and put a foot in there quick as a door-to-door salesman. He threw his chest out and stepped inside, saying, "Got some bullets here with your names on them, assholes. Come and get 'em."

Then he moved to the right inside the concession, out of view. Patrons who had been hanging around, and still had enough functioning gray matter, sauntered briskly off. A few lay down on the ground like whipped dogs. The aging hippie remained stone-still. A shot was fired inside the concession. More patrons scrambled. More briskly this time. When no more shots followed, the hippie rolled quickly to his right, came to his feet and darted off. He looked to have been taking lessons from the guy Willard had hit with the baseball bat.

The moments moved by slower than dental work, then Merve Kinsman made his appearance. He came out of the concession walking like a drunk trying to look sober. He had Willard's knife in his right eye. It was buried halfway to the hilt. Merve Kinsman Who-Didn't-Take-That-Off-Anybody was complaining, though not as loud as before. He was now Merve Kinsman Who-Would-Not-Be-Messed-With, By-God, and he wanted every damn one of us to know it. He said something about hell to pay when he found his gun, then he went face down on the lot, the knife point punching up through the back of his head.

Willard came out then. Randy was still on his shoulders, wearing the popcorn container. Willard had to duck to let Randy through the door. Willard had the .357. He looked real happy. He smiled. There was blood on his teeth (or maybe chocolate). Maybe he had been hit in the mouth or had bitten somebody. (Or had eaten an Almond Joy.)

"The concession is ours, you sapsuckers," Willard screamed. "Hear me? Ours!"

Nobody made with an argument. A few people who had been too dull to run shuffled

their feet.

Merve Kinsman Who-Didn't-Take-That-Off-Any-body, alias Merve Kinsman Who-Would-Not-Be-Messed-With, By-God, didn't come back from the dead to debate the point, and I figured if anybody could, or would, it would be that guy.

Willard stepped forward a couple more steps, waved the .357 around. Randy beat his chest and let out with an anemic Tarzan yell. Away from the direct light of the concession, shadows falling across them, it was hard to see where one body quit and the other began, especially with Willard covered in those asphalt-black tattoos.

"We're in charge now," Randy screamed.

Willard waved the .357 around some more, turned, ducked back through the concession door and closed it. He pressed his nose against the glass door and looked out. You could only see Randy's legs. The rest of him was above the door, behind solid wall, that popcorn-cup hat damn near scraping the ceiling, I imagined.

Willard went away; the smudge circle of his nose remained to mark his passing.

"Reckon that concession is theirs," Bob said, "until someone with more firepower shows up."

"You got intentions?" I asked.

"Not me, but you can bet someone does."

The blackness above grew cluttered with electric-blue veins, and pretty soon there was more blue than black, and the thunder and the snake-hiss of lightning was tough on the ears, even inside the camper.

Bob got brave enough to open up the back and look out. He said, "Will you look at this?"

I did. The Orbit symbol and the marquee were drawing lightning like decay draws germs. The lightning was hopping through the symbol, kicking out dark blue lights that mingled with the fairy blue and white. The marquee's red letters looked like bright blood blisters about to pop.

We watched as the electric bolts from the symbol expanded, reached out toward the concession and touched it (like God giving the spark to Adam). The concession glowed blue and white, and those bat and skull symbols in the windows looked almost alive.

"Look at that," Bob said.

He was referring to the symbol again, or rather what was above it. Sticking out of the

black was what looked like a green-black tentacle, though it could have been a trick of the lightning, a dipping rent in the blackness like a tornado tail. Out of the tentacle (I preferred to think of it that way as it went along with my dreams of *something* up there, something in control) the lightning was flowing faster than ever, zeroing in on the Orbit symbol, jetting from that to the strained marquee. The word "Massacre" exploded in a flutter of glass, fizzled. The rest of it looked ready to go, but held. Now another tentacle shape dropped down, twisted in the air and gave lightning from its tip, and this lightning went through the symbol and the marquee, and it made the marquee blow the word "Dismember." And that damn symbol began to spin, rapidly, kicking out more and more bolts of energy, all of it going straight to the concession.

One of the black bats in the window flapped its wings and flew away into the depths of the concession. A paper skull twisted and fell to the floor, out of sight. The lights in there were blinking like a strobe show. They went out. But there was still plenty of light from the energy bolts, and it was a strange light, and it lit the concession up inside and out, bright and garish as a cheap nightclub act.

Then I saw Willard and Randy on the roof of the concession. Willard was still carrying Randy and Randy still had that damn container on his head. Willard had the .357 in his hand. They were spinning around up there in the blue glow, raising their hands, cussing, most likely, though there was too much thunder and hissing lightning to hear.

"Must be a trapdoor up there," Bob said.

"Yeah, but what the hell are they doing up there?"

"Believe me, they don't know."

Willard raised his pistol and shot at The Orbit symbol, and, almost as if in answer, a thicker strand of lightning leaped out of it like a hot, bony finger with too many joints and hit Randy on top of his popcorn container hat, turned him and Willard the color of the bolt, and made them smoke. Willard did a kind of funky-chicken dance across the length of the roof and back again. The lightning made him look like he was moving very fast. Randy stayed in place, didn't even wobble.

Willard heel-toed it over to the trapdoor, and with the two of them glowing like a nuclear accident, they dropped through the hole.

The concession was lit up like blue neon. The original lights did not come back on. The movies, defying electrical logic, continued to churn.

I looked to see if there were still any paper bats and skulls decorating the window.

Nope.

Things went from sho' is bad to sho' is rotten.

The lightning continued to shoot out of the blackness overhead (though the greenish-black tentacles were no longer visible), strike The Orbit symbol, and in turn strike the concession, and shower blueness over it.

Word of what had happened spread pretty fast through the drive-in, and in less time than it took for a messy dismemberment, the bikers showed.

They spun their bikes around in front of the concession and yelled some things. They roared around Bob's truck a few times.

Most of them had guns: shotguns, revolvers of all kinds, A few had knives, chains and tire irons. They looked nasty. There were twelve of them, and I couldn't figure exactly what had prompted them to show up, unless it was the idea of some guy with a gun and another guy on his shoulders taking over the concession that warmed their blood. Or maybe they had planned to take the concession over themselves and were just now getting around to it, mad because some chump had beaten them to it.

I tried to compute when they had taken over B concession, but couldn't. Time was just too screwed up. It could have been yesterday, last week, a month ago, a year back. No idea.

Whatever, they were here now, riding their bikes and yelling, shouting for the "sumbitches" inside to come on out and take their hanging like men.

To accommodate the hanging, one of the bikers showed up in a wrecker, which I'm sure didn't belong to him. He was more the wind and bugs-in-the-teeth type. There was a noose made of barbed wire fastened to the wrecker hook, and it looked ready for occupancy; one size fits all. I wondered where they had gotten the barbed wire, but not much. People carried everything in their pickups, wreckers and car trunks; all the tools of Texas trades.

There were also a barbecue grill and a bag of charcoal on the back of the wrecker. Not standard equipment. That made me think cannibalism wasn't a crime in the biker book anymore.

The biggest and ugliest of the bikers pulled up in front of the concession door, lifted one hip, farted, and yelled for whoever was in there to come out. Everyone else had quit yelling, and now he was giving it the "I'm the boss" tone. The others stopped their bikes, just sat on them and watched.

The one talking, calling out for Willard and Randy to give it up, was three hundred

pounds if he was an ounce. A lot of that poundage was stomach, and it stretched his yellow T-shirt (I think the coloring was due to sweat, not dye) to the point of bursting. He, unlike most of us in the drive-in, didn't seem to be missing any meals. I wondered how big he had been before all of this. For that matter, all the bikers looked pretty good.

But this guy wasn't just a fat boy. He had arms big around as my head, a head a little bigger around than my arms. His hair was long and greasy, tied back with a piece of black cloth. He was wearing leather pants, chain-strapped boots, and an open leather jacket with BANDITOS on the back of it. Part of the jacket had been cut away, and it gave the impression of being too small; it was about halfway up between his waist and armpits.

I noticed the other bikers had done a similar thing to their jackets, or, if they had leather pants, to the legs of those. It hit me that they were cutting the leather off to eat. Maybe boiling it down in Coke so it wouldn't be so tough; making their own kind of jerky.

Though, after looking at the wrecker with the barbecue grill, I assumed they were willing to try more exotic fare. And that being the case, I sat real still in the camper, looking out of those windows that were blacked on the outside so you couldn't see in. I sat there glad that Bob had the shotgun. I had gone duck and squirrel hunting with him, and he knew how to use it. I fretted over Willard and Randy. Knew they didn't have a chance against these guys, even if Willard was a bad ass and had a gun. There were just too many men out there with weapons and a bad attitude.

For that matter, I didn't even know if Randy and Willard were alive. We had seen them take lightning, lots of it, and walk away, but that didn't mean they were okay. They might have died from it; lying in there now on the floor, Randy's popcorn-container hat still on his head, Willard still gripping the gun.

The fat guy used his feet to push his bike forward, but when he reached the blue aurora around the concession, he backpedaled. It gave him such a shock that the handlebars and his hands smoked. He shook his hands rapidly and frowned.

"Damn you, in there, come on out and take it like a man. That 'lectricity ain't gonna keep you safe. Ain't nothing gonna keep you safe from the Banditos."

"That's right," one of the lackeys behind him said, and the big guy turned to look, as if the agreement had been unnecessary and off-key. The guy who had chimed out smiled wistfully. The big leader didn't smile back. "Shut up, Cooter," he yelled. "I'm the president of this here club, and I'll do the—"

But he cut short when he saw the look on Cooter's face, realized Cooter was looking at the concession.

The leader turned his head forward again, and there were Randy and Willard. They had come out of the concession, and Randy was still on Willard's shoulders and he was still

wearing the popcorn-container hat. But the lightning had melted the edges of the container, dripped it down over his head. His features had run together in such a way that one of his eyes was gone and the other had shifted to the center of his forehead. His legs had fused to Willard's shoulders, his knees sticking up like pathetic knots on a charcoaled stick.

Willard's tattoos were crawling all over his body like worms, in and out of his empty, blackened eye sockets. His nostrils had become two large round holes in his face, and his lips were gone, showing a wide mouth with smoldering teeth. Willard still had the gun, but there in the blue lightning you could see that it had fused to his hand, become one with flesh and bone. The tiger Randy had tattooed so lovingly on Willard's stomach was poking a three-dimensional head out and was growling; flesh-colored whiskers twitched against its dark face.

"Man," said the Bandito leader, "you are one geeked-out sucker. But we can fix you."

With that, the biker reached inside his jacket, under his armpit, and pulled out a pistol (also a .357) and snapped off a professional shot that hit Willard between the ears of the tiger tattoo on his stomach.

When the load hit, Willard flinched—a bit. The shot went into a rare pink space on his skin, and the flesh puckered up like a roughed mouth, spat the projectile out with a sputter. An ooze the color of Coke syrup boiled out of the hole momentarily, then the wound closed up.

"That's different," Bob said, his nose pressed to the glass.

Willard raised his revolver and grinned. Randy's mouth grinned too. For a man without eyes, Willard was unerringly accurate. His shot hit the Bandito leader between the eyes, and the biker's brains left home through the back of his skull with a slushy rush, came to rest on the sleeve of the one called Cooter.

"Man," said Cooter. "Radical."

All the bikers with guns opened fire. Slugs hit Willard and Randy repeatedly, but their, flesh spat out the buckshot and revolver loads. Even that damn popcorn tub on Randy's head had become flesh, molded into Randy's skull, and it too regurgitated lead.

Willard raised his revolver and emptied it. Hitting a biker each shot, killing two of them, wounding one. He was empty now.

Or would have been, except for the tattooed bandolier across his chest. He reached up, pinched six dark loads from it, shoved the fleshy projectiles into the revolver, which puckered open to receive them.

This was the bikers' clue to zoom out of there. Motors roared, bikes whirled, and they were off. The one called Cooter made a quick turn in front of Bob's truck and Willard fired in the general direction. The bullet came out of the barrel, hung there a moment, then it was a streak and gone. It went around the edge of the truck in hot pursuit and I heard Cooter yell.

I went across the camper, shared a window with Bob, who was also checking it out, and there was Cooter's bike still going down the row, veering slightly to the left. But the biker lay on the ground, face down, the top of his head gone. The bike hit a speaker post, went up it a foot, turned sideways in the air, came down, slid across the path and slammed up against the back of a Ranchero, bounced back into the row and lay on its side like a small foundered horse.

I rushed to the other side to take a look at Willard. He was still firing his flesh bullets. They sought out their targets like heat seeking missiles.

When he was through firing, Willard lowered the gun and looked down. His stomach bulged. The tiger tattoo stretched its neck. Shoulders appeared, then a foreleg poked out. It was as if the tiger were climbing out of a deep, inky well. Another foreleg showed. The cat leaned forward, touched both feet to the ground, pulled the rest of his body out of Willard's stomach, growing in size as it did. It stood momentarily in front of Randy and Willard and swished its tail. Then, with a roar, it went after the biker who had been injured early on, grabbed him around the head with its jaws and bit down with a sound like a duck egg being swatted with a mallet. That was all for the biker.

The tiger pulled the biker inside the concession by what was left of his head (pieces were dropping here and there like china fragments) while Willard held the door open. The tiger deposited the stiff inside, came back out licking its lips. A paper bat exited with it, fluttered up beyond the blue glow, then flapped down again and went back inside the concession. Two skulls rolled into the doorway, looked out with empty eye sockets, chattered their teeth like sidewinder rattles, then rolled out of sight, not even venturing out of doors.

The tiger, as it moved outside the influence of the blue light, softened in color until it was almost light gray; it looked weaker. Then, as it returned, dragging another body by the noggin, it would gradually darken and hold its head higher, and finally, within the confines of the blue glow, it would turn its true color and look strong again.

As each corpse passed through the doorway, I became aware of a black dot, like a bee that had been in hiding, leaping from the bodies and going into Willard's bandolier—little bullets returning to their nests.

Finished with its work, the tiger jumped at Willard and it was as if someone had tossed a can of black paint. The beast splattered against Willard's stomach, made a blot that dripped like hot tar. Its whiskers twitched and it showed its teeth, then it went still and

was nothing more than a vivid tattoo.

The other tattoos on Willard's body (they had been thrashing and lashing about) followed suit. The last of them to lie down were EAT PUSSY and KICK ASS. They had been walking across Willard's upper arms like tall, stiff ants.

Randy continued to look peaceful up there on Willard's shoulders, like a real estate agent who had just closed a big deal. I looked for a sign of my old friend in that wrecked one-eyed face, but saw not a clue.

Willard and Randy lifted a hand and waved to the left, then to the right. From my position I could see a few people waving back—reflex reaction, or maybe after seeing what these guys could do, they just felt friendly.

The mouth that belonged to Randy opened and a powerful voice came out. "I am the Popcorn King, and my rein has begun. I will take care of you."

"That's damn nice of him," Bob said.

Then the King ceased to wave and went inside the electrified concession. And so began the rein of the Popcorn King.

PART TWO
THE POPCORN KING
(With Scabcorn and Other Bad Stuffs)

1

The Popcorn King was happy.

He was a smiley kind of guy—with both mouths— and he could talk that trash. I mean, say you're in this little universe of the drive-in, and maybe we should say the smaller universe of your car or truck, and all you've got is movies. You got no real food, and you got soft drinks for liquid, you're hypoglycemic to the max and your hope don't work no more. All you got is this voice, sleek as a starlet's thighs, soft as duck fluff, as intoxicating as rum and honey. A voice that oozes out of the speaker and flows in your ears, jells around your brain like candied fruit.

The voice of the Popcorn King, telling you how it is, offering you *truth*, telling you he loves you and will feed you and take care of you, and all you've got to do is love him back, and all you've got to do is understand that what you see on the screens are the visions of gods, the way it is, ole buddy, and the manner in which you should live, for so speaks the messiah, the Popcorn King.

Yeah, the Popcorn King was happy.

And he was crazy.

And he helped make everyone else more crazy than they had become.

Back up.

Speculate.

This is how I think it came about; the birth of the Popcorn King.

So Willard and Randy go up on the roof during the storm, wandering up there because they are nuts on junk food and high on a kind of love for one another that isn't quite homosexual, nor exactly the passion of friendship. They're parasites feeding off one another, trying to make something whole out of two halves.

They wander up there on the roof after they have cleared out the concession with the knife, after they have killed. And maybe somewhere deep down, they realize this is something they don't like, this killing. Or maybe, like me, they're so high on sugar it all seems hokeydokey. Or maybe they just didn't give a fuck all along.

Well, you add all that together, toss in their insecurities, and what you have here are a couple of buddies a couple bricks shy a full load. Or to put it in Yankee terms, "They are on the verge of a nervous breakdown."

There's this storm, and it crackles and hisses and fizzles and pops, brightens the sky. Sheet-metal thunder rolls. And these guys up there on the roof are working off little more than the impulses of the primitive brain; that part that takes care of raw survival.

And so they yell at the storm (they don't like the noise, see), call it names. And perhaps by design, because the B-string gods up there are looking for a twist in the plot, or maybe they just don't like being talked to like that . . . and maybe there are no B-string gods and my dreams were just dreams and Bob and I only thought we saw tentacles poking out of the blackness and it's nothing more than an accident that this bolt pops out and zaps the living shit out of our boys, makes them one creature full of power.

Down through the trap they go, smoking like bacon too long in a pan. And they are no longer angry and confused, but they're not just well done either. They have been given power, and this power has straightened their confused asses right out. It has moved through them like a quick, happy cancer, spreading little roots of energy from head to head, from toes to toes.

They are one sho'-ugly critter now, but they are not aware of that. They feel pretty. In their mind's eye they are darling. So sweet with that one eye in the center of the top forehead, and the other head without eyes, just two gaps dripping ooze, puffing smoke.

Their brains no longer work independently of one another; this happy cancer has spread its tendrils through them so that their gray matter operates as one. Randy's eyes are Willard's eyes. Willard's muscles respond to Randy's needs. So, instead of *they* and *them*, these two are now one, and say at his feet are a few stray popcorn kernels that are blossoming in the electrical current, popping high up to greet him ("take me, take me"), and he thinks, uh-huh, happy little subjects, these popcorns, and he names himself the Popcorn King.

The Popcorn King is very happy because he feels as if he has been told the ultimate joke by the ultimate jokester, and he has understood the punch line perfectly.

He knows now he is the Chosen One. Feels that what led him up that ladder, onto the roof, was more than just confusion. It was ordained. Destiny.

Yeah, that's it. He thinks it again. Destiny.

He can feel a network of raw power spiraling through him, replacing the blood and bones inside him with something new; something that makes him master of his flesh (tattoos wiggle like maggots in dung).

The air around him hums (no particular tune) with that blue electrical current. (And while I'm hypothesizing here, sports fans, let's have some of those paper bats—now real—flap around his head, let's have some paper skulls—now real—roll at his feet and nip at his heels like happy pups.) He walks among the carnage of the concession, sees:

the manager with his face through the counter glass, his blood having splashed the wrapped and boxed candies and congealed like cold gravy; the little girl that was kicked to death, looking like strawberry pulp; other dead folks, including the Candy Girl (later I would see her corpse in the window, hanging there like a prize cold cut in a butcher's display); and he moves through the blue air, into the film room, (the bats at his head, the skulls at his feet), sees that there are three projectors, pointing like ray guns in three directions at three six-story screens.

He goes over to one of the little slots by one of the projectors and looks out, sees *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. He goes to another and looks out, sees the tail end of *I Dismember Mama*. He examines the last projector slot, sees *The Toolbox Murders*.

He sighs contentedly. This is his domain. His throne room. His damn concession stand. And all those people out there watching those movies are his subjects. He is their King, their Popcorn King. And he is a fun kind of guy.

But what's this? A bunch of fat men on motorcycles are riding around and around in circles out front of his palace, calling him names (had one of them actually called him "dog puke"? Sure sounded like it), yelling for him to come out.

The little people are upset. A rebellion is brewing. The peasants are revolting.

Time to nip this crap in the bud.

So he steps out with the gun fused to his hand, the tattoos shucking and jiving like snakes on hot glass . . .

And from there, I have given you an eyewitness account.

...

When it was over and the tattoos had settled down, and the King had waved, he went inside the concession and closed the door. And Bob went out of the back of the camper, sneaky-like, cranked the truck, turned right, bumped over the dead biker and his bike, worked us to the far end, turned right at the fence, found a front row in what was called the East Screen of Lot A. We parked in a slot next to a big yellow bus with CHRIST IS THE ANSWER IF YOU ASK THE QUESTION, THAT'S WHAT I'M TRYING TO TELL YOU written messily on the side in what looked like rust-colored paint. And underneath in dirty-white letters, much smaller, was AIN'T BEING A BAPTIST GRAND?

On the other side of us was an old Ford. It looked empty. The occupants were probably dead, or had joined up with some others and gone to a new location.

Bob got a speaker off the post, more out of habit than anything else, put it in the window,

turned the dial high as it would go, and we watched, or rather looked at, *The Evil Dead*. Ash, the character in the movie, was sticking his hand into a mirror, and the mirror had turned into some kind of liquid.

We sat there feeling numb until Bob said, "I don't think coming over here is going to help much, but I'm sort of in the mood for a change of scenery . . . Maybe out of sight, out of mind . . . And I don't think his tattoos can come this far ... too much distance between the concession and us."

"Agreed," I said.

It wasn't much, but comparatively, this was the best part of the drive-in for us to hide out. For some reason, East Screen had had a lot less badness going on. There had certainly been some stuff happening over here; Crier, who knew everything had told us about it, but compared to the rest of Lot A, and certainly B, it was pretty tame business.

The movies changed as usual, and I could imagine the Popcorn King in the film room, going from projector to projector, switching them as needed. (Didn't he need sleep?) That part of Willard that had been a projectionist was coming into play; he knew how to keep things going.

Bob and I dozed a lot, and when we were so hungry we couldn't take it anymore, we'd go to the camper and lie down and eat, chewing slowly, sometimes talking if we had something to say, listening to the movies filtering into the camper from the speaker in the cab window. It got so I was having a hard time remembering what life was like before the drive-in. I could remember Mom and Dad, but couldn't quite see their faces, recall how they moved or talked. I couldn't remember friends, or even girlfriends whose faces had haunted my dreams at home. My past was fading like cold breath on a mirror.

And the movies rolled on.

At certain intervals, the old yellow bus next door to us would crack its back door, and out of it would come this rail-thin man in a black coat, white shirt and dark tie, and with him was this bony, broad-shouldered, homely woman in a flowered housedress and false leather slippers. She walked without picking her feet up much.

They'd walk toward the center of the row, and there would be others there, and they would form a crowd, and the man in the black coat, white shirt and dark tie would go before them and talk, move his arms a lot, strut back and forth like a bantam rooster. He'd point at the movies now and then, then at the group. He'd hop up and down and stretch his facial muscles, and toward the end of this little exercise he'd be into so much hand-waving you'd think he was swatting marauding bees.

When he tuckered out, everyone would gather around him in a team huddle, and stay that way for some time. When they broke up, they all looked satisfied. They'd stand around

while the rail-thin man bowed his head and said some words, then each went on about his limited business.

Every time this little event occurred, the couple coming out of the bus, I mean, and Bob saw them, he'd say, "Well, gonna be a prayer meetin' tonight."

It got so it irritated me, him making fun of them, and I told him so.

"They've got something," I said. "Faith. It's been ages since any of these folks have eaten . . . not since the King took over the concession, and look how they act. Orderly. With strength and faith. And the rest of the drive-in ..."

You could hear screams and chainsaws frequently, and not just from the screen. Now and then a shot would puncture the air and there would be the sounds of yelling and fighting. But not here at East Screen.

"They've got food somewhere, Jack. Faith ain't gonna take care of an empty belly. Trust me on the matter."

"You'd have to have faith to know anything about it," I said.

"And I guess you do?"

"No, but I'd like to."

"It's all a lie, Jack. There ain't no magic formula, no way to know how to go. Astrology, numerology, readings in tea leaves and rat droppings, it's all the same. It don't amount to nothing. Nothing at all."

Crier came by to see us.

We were out leaning on the front bumper of the truck, watching the people over at North Screen running around like savages, killing one another, wrecking cars. Bob had his faithful twelve-gauge companion by his side, just in case radical company from over there should come by and want to kill or eat us.

None did.

I figured the reason for this was threefold. Each screen had sort of become its own community, and strange as it was, each tended to stick together; they liked killing and eating their own. Least at this point. Two, Bob had the shotgun and he looked like a man who would use it, and there was the fact that the Christians, as I had come to think of them, had formed their own patrol. The patrol walked around the perimeters of East Screen regularly, armed mostly with tire irons, car aerials and the like, but also a gun or two. The third reason they left us alone was just a surmise on my part. I figured they were

patient and were saving us for dessert.

Well, anyway, as I was saying, we were out leaning on the bumper of the truck, and along comes Crier. He looked bad. His lips were cracked and his eyes had a hollow look, as if they were shrinking in their sockets. He was using the hoe handle to keep from falling over. He seemed to concentrate heavily just to put one foot after another. I wanted to give him a piece of jerky bad, but Bob, anticipating my thinking, looked at me quickly and shook his head.

Crier came up and sat on the bumper next to Bob, let his head hang, got his breath. "I hope you boys aren't going to kill and eat me," he said almost pleasantly.

"Not today," Bob said.

"Then you wouldn't have anything I could eat, would you? I feel like fly-blown shit. You boys look pretty good. Maybe you got some food."

"Sorry," Bob said. "We did have, but we ate it. We saved a little of what we got at the concession each time, but now that's gone. No more stash."

"Well," said Crier, "I always ask. It don't hurt to do that. Getting so there ain't no use my doing this anymore, this walking around to report the news. Everyone is news now, and no one wants to listen anymore. They just want to kill or eat me. This hoe handle has saved my life a dozen times. Maybe more. I did get beat up pretty bad, though. My ribs are cracked, I think. Hurts when I breathe too deep or walk too fast."

"What can you tell us about the Popcorn King?" I asked.

"He went in there and he hasn't come out. Nobody can get in there neither. That blue light around it would fry an egg. I know, I seen an old boy get his hand burned off trying to go in there after the King and some food."

"Then why doesn't it kill the King?" I asked.

"Don't get me to lying. I ain't got the slightest," Crier said. "Maybe conditions were just different then."

"So, that's it on the King," Bob said.

"Well, almost," Crier said. "Those bodies his tiger dragged inside . . . He's eating those. Got them hung up in the window there, and every time you look, there's less meat on them."

That would be right, I thought. Willard and Randy showing their power, showing that they have food, that it's behind glass, hung up nice and neat, and that the rest of us are

lowlifes scrounging for popcorn kernels, killing one another and tearing the flesh off the bones like hyenas. But not him, not the Popcorn King. He's got it all fine and clean and well lighted, and he probably slices his meat off with a knife. Has soft drinks to go with it. Maybe some chocolate almonds for dessert. "The concession at B?" Bob asked. "Taken over again," Crier said. "But there isn't any food left. Those Banditos had already cleaned it out. Did I tell you I found a third of a bag of popcorn under a car a few movies back? Over at North Screen too. Just lying there, and hadn't nobody seen it. Kind of in the shadow of a tire, part of the way under the car. I ate that sapsucker on the spot . . . Man, you boys got it made in this section."

"Right now," Bob said.

"Why don't you stay over here then?" I asked. "Got to keep moving. It's my way. Besides, I don't know that your neighbors would want me moving in. I've been coming and going as I please so long, they let me do that, but I don't know about moving in."

"A word from us wouldn't do you no good," Bob said. "We're sort of low man on the totem pole here." "Don't need a word. No matter what happens, got to keep moving. I used to drive a beer truck, you know. Always on the road . . . Got divorced twice because I couldn't stay still. Had to stay on the go. Get home and I wanted to drive around. One reason I liked drive-ins. You came and sat in a car, and when you watched the movie it was like you were driving through a new world or something. All you had to do was put your hands on the steering wheel and imagine . . . Sure you boys haven't got a thing to eat?" "Nothing," Bob said.

"Then I'll hobble on. Take care. Hope the next time I see you ain't neither one of us so bad we want to eat one another."

"Same here," Bob said.

Crier climbed the hoe handle and started off again, moving down the row of speakers, heading for the pathway between East Screen and North.

"We should have fed him," I said. "He looks bad." "Everyone here looks bad, Jack. It ain't practical to go feeding folks. Even Crier. He gets good and hungry, he might conk our noggins and take what we got. He's all right, but he ain't nothing more than a human being."

"Which as a group you don't have a lot of respect for, do you?"

"It's damn near got so I don't have a drop," Bob said.

I thought about the Christians, their meetings, their faith. It gave me moral strength. Their attitude assured me that there was more to humanity than a good meal, a cold beer and a roll in the hay. There was something strong and noble there too, something that, like a

seed, needed fertilizing, and I told all that to Bob, and he said he thought beer, a good meal and a roll in the hay were just fine, and as for the seed that needed fertilizing, he had a strong suggestion for the type of fertilizer that would best be suited for such a seed.

You just couldn't talk to Bob. He was too narrow-minded.

And so we got worn down and went to sleep, the speaker rattling movie dialogue and sound tracks through the camper as we drifted into nocturnal lands of cold shadow and dark dreams. And it was then that the Popcorn King came to us over the speaker, oozed into our brains and outlined his plans for us, told us how we fit into the scheme of things. And I will admit, they sounded inviting, these plans. He would be there to watch over us, feed us, give us a point on which to fix our wretched lives. And finally there was that voice, that lovely voice that was kind of Randy's and kind of not; that other voice that was kind of Willard's and kind of not, the one that hummed softly, shucked and jived, put a word in edgewise in just the right place. Those voices, those honey-poison, hot and cold voices of the Popcorn King.

2

So spake the Popcorn King—first one mouth and then the other:

My little dearies, my little popcorn eaters and movie lovers, my little heathens and mortals, you who take dukies beside your cars, how are you, babies, how are you? And listen up tight now, 'cause you done gone and went and got yourself the Popcorn King here, and I want to whisper to you, tell you some secrets, make your life complete, and talk on a subject that is dear to both mine and your hearts.

Popcorn.

Food, my subjects. Chow. Grub. Chewables. Hit it, mouth number two.

(chuckachew, chuckachew, chuckachewchewchew)

Yes, brethren—

(pseudo organ music from other mouth)

—I am here to talk to you about how things are going to be. How things are, in fact, though you may not know it yet. But before I do, let me tell you about the corn, about the sweet, popping corn, hot and fine and ready to melt in your mouth; good ole popcorn the color of fresh bird shit, but the texture and taste of life.

Corn, babies, corn.

Hit it again, mouth number two.

(chuckachew, chuckachew, chuckachewchewchew)

So I come off the roof, and I'm feelin' wild, walk in the house, jive down the aisle. There's some blue air here, some blue air there, lots of dead bodies sho' everywhere—

(chuckachew, chuckachew, chuckachewchewchew)

—blood on the candy, blood on the floor, dried and gone nasty, and there'll be more.

(pappapap, pappapap, pappapap, pappachew-chewchew)

Yes sir now, babies, friends and pals, gonna tell you a story 'bout the Popcorn King, how he rolled and walked and talked so clean, yessiree billy, I'm the Popcorn King.

(chuckachew, chuckachew, chuckachewchewchew)

Put your ears to the speakers, put your brain on hold, listen up, honeys, and don't get bold, popcorn's the magic and that's no load.

(jujujujujujujuju-pap, pap, pap, pap, yeah, chuckachew, chuckachew, chuckachewchewchew)

Yeah, Popcorn's the magic, it's the tiny bomb, when it sees your insides goes off like a four-alarm.

(chuckachew, chuckachew, chuckachewchewchew)

Now if you been eatin' your kids, dead dogs too, licking cold shit off the bottoms of your shoes, this oughta thrill you, oughta make you feel grand. I'm here to tell you Popcorn King is a friendly man—

(boop, boop, boop—tadtadtad tadachew, chuckachewchewchew)

—gonna offer somethin' special, offer somethin' fine, gonna tell you a story of the popcorn kind.

(chuckachew, chuckachew, chuckachewchewchew)

Listen up tight, don't stray from me, keep them ears wide open and I won't tell you no lie.

(jujujujujujujuju-pap, pap, pap, yeah, chuckachew, chuckachew, chuckachewchewchew)

You ain't gonna make it, you don't be my friend, so better do what I'm askin' then.

(boop, boop, boop—tadatada, tadachew, chuckachewchewchew)

Now we gonna close up shop with the rappin' man, gonna take us a trip to the Promised Land.

(bringing in the sheaves, bringing in the sheaves, we'll all come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves)

Yes sir, brethren, I have come to you today with a line of pure truth. I come to fill your hearts with love or panic or hate or blood, whatever it takes. Listen up, sinners, let me tell you about the Lords of Popcorn. Let me tell you that those movies are lights from the very eyes of the Lords.

(amen, brother, amen)

Was a time, though I can only distantly remember it and can't make sense of it, when I

was a man like you. Two men, to be exact. And sinners in the eyes of the Lords of Popcorn, (amen)

Yes sir, a sinner, I surely was, a great sinner ... a damn big sinner. Where's the amen corner? (amen, brother, amen)

I didn't know the laws of popcorn and soda, of hot dogs and chocolate-covered almonds, didn't know blood and death were the paths to destruction, didn't know that the very flesh of man was salvation and that all we could do was to please our needs and instincts and all else was out the window. Yeah, didn't know love and beauty when it was looking me in my own eye. (no you didn't, brother, no you didn't) That's right, I didn't, so the Lords of Popcorn in their ultimate wisdom—blessed are those Lords—seen this, and chillun, they saw I was trying to live like everyone else, and they brought me here. (yes they did, brother, yes they did) And I was picked by those Lords as your messiah, your grand executioner, your grand lover, your Popcorn King. They gave me the lightning and the lightning gave me the powers, and these powers made me better than you, and that's all there is to that tune, (tell it like it is, Brother Corn) But I come down off that roof a new man made of two, and I come in here and I saw these movies and I knew the truth, seen it was all a sign.

(come to you in a flash of light, this sign)

That's right, it did. Say amen.

(AMEN)

Man but I feel good, sanitized and homogenized. Say it again, good brother.

(AMEN)

Oh, but I like the sound of that. One more time.

(AMEN)

All right, glory hallelujah, popcorn and corpses be praised.

(amen on that popcorn and dead folks)

You see, I saw these movies were the juice of the Lord's brains, the very juice done squirted out of their heads and onto them big white things we call screens. There is the way to live, brethren. It's a dog-eat-dog, folk-eat-folk world, and ain't nothing matters but one thing. That you ain't the one that gets et, if you know what I mean.

(that's the truth, Brother Corn, ain't no denying)

And I said aloud right off the top set of my lips—

(yes, you did)

—I have been sent down here from that roof a changed couple of individuals to make sure those little people out there who are not nearly as neat as I am have an example, someone to follow . . . someone with the corn. 'Cause this place is full of corn, my friends. You too can eat again, and not your neighbor. I'll eat your neighbors, just bring them to me when they go belly up ... get tired of living, bring your own self, I'll be glad to kill your ass dead.

(be thrilled to do it, yes, he will)

And now you say, but what is the point of all this? It is confusing, Brother Corn.

(was gonna ask that)

Sure you were. And the point is I do as I like when I like and you do what I like when I like. And there is just really very little that I want.

(ain't asking much)

No I'm not. Just that meat I told you about, alive or dead. And another little thing. The-most important thing. I want you to know the movies to be real.

(just as real as can be)

They are the reality and you are the nonreality. You cannot prove your reality by touching yourself. That means nothing.

(go on, touch yourself, don't mean a thing)

It's what you can't touch that's real.

(can't touch reality, no matter how hard you try)

If you want to become as real as the lights on the screens, you have to give yourself to them, do as they do, live as they live. They are the scripture and I am their voice.

(talking for them just as plain as can be)

So come on over to the other side, Reality City. Embrace the truth of the flickering dream, hold on to reality and let the nonreality flow out of you like piss from a bladder. Take the first step toward gratification, toward becoming real. All you got to do to have this thing and the popcorn—

(bless that popcorn)

—is listen to me, dear hearts, the voice of the scripture. All you got to do is listen, and give me what I want.

(amen, Brother Corn, amen)

3

What the nutcase in the concession wanted was simple.

Power.

For the King, power was the end and the beginning —the snake biting its tail. There was nothing else. For in his brains were the distant and confused memories of Randy and Willard. Two people who had seen themselves as outsiders, felt like hitchhikers on the road of life, forever watching fast cars pass them by.

But now, *they* were the drivers, hands firm on the wheel. It was *they* who drove with the pedal to the metal, smiling, looking out at the pedestrians, passing them by, shooting them the finger, giving them a rude honk and a flicking wave.

And if you could have heard the King's voice, that incredible voice massaging your brain like a cat kneading a pillow, you could understand a little how he suckered those folks in, gave them the religion of violence and greed to believe in.

And if Bob and I hadn't had the jerky, the juice of it giving fuel to our thoughts, keeping our brains clearer than the masses (but not as clear as the Christians fueled on the higher octane of faith), we would have joined right up with old King, praised him on high, begged for the corn, worshiped the action on the screens and tried not to think about the time we would die.

And it must be said that the Popcorn King not only had the voice, he had presence. He'd stand out in front of the concession with smiles on both his faces, plastic bags of popcorn in all of his hands (both of Randy's and one of Willard's—the other being permanently full of .357), and he'd close his eyes and flex his body, and the tattoos would quiver, and he'd open his eyes, and the popcorn would begin to pop in the bags, bursting them, and the King would toss the bags forward, beyond the blue glow, and it would snow corn onto the asphalt and fights would begin (the King would chuckle) as people tried to secure the puffs. But there was always plenty— least at this time I'm telling you about—and the fights were more ritualistic than desperate, like punk rockers slam-dancing.

Then would come the buckets of soft drinks carried by the King. Big buckets with paper cups floating in the liquid. People would form unruly lines, come forward one at a time, take a cup, dip from the buckets and drink the syrupy drinks, increasing, more than satisfying, their thirst. But that was the thing that bothered me most as Bob and I stood at the back of East Screen looking over the hood of an abandoned car, those people lifting those cups and seeing little drips of liquid running down their chins. All we had for liquid was the juice from the jerky, but it wasn't water, and we were feeling the slow effect of dehydration. But still, we held out.

Then the weak and the dead would be brought to the King, laid before the blue glow like sacrifices, and the tiger tattoo would leap from the King's stomach, finish off the living, then drag all the bodies inside, where later they would appear in the window, gradually losing flesh in strips.

These eaters and drinkers were not only from Lot A, but B as well. They would all come to eat the King's corn and drink his soft drinks, and afterward go back to their cars and sit on the hoods or roofs and quote the lines in the movies. Quote them with the reverence of holy scripture.

And ole Popcorn King, from inside the concession, using the intercom, would talk to his congregation via the speakers, that hot-cool voice fogging their brains. He would quote the movie lines with them. He would turn the sound down, preach at them, rap at them. This version of loaves and fishes continued for a time to the happy contentment of the followers, and then the popcorn stopped.

Zip.

Nada.

No corn.

The King did not appear in front of the concession, and his voice did not grace the speakers. There were just the movies rolling on and on, giving evidence to the fact that someone was changing them, keeping them in order, but the King did not make an appearance.

The faithful continued to gather outside the concession, and they would call to the King, but he would not respond. The calls turned to chants, and finally to angry cries, but still no King. The meat in the window gradually disappeared. Someone was eating it. (The bats and the skulls? Nope, cut too cleanly from the bone.)

Bob and I got brave, and we'd go over there for a look, standing behind that same abandoned car, but there was never anything to see besides that confused crowd and those pathetic bodies in the window. People looked at us, but they looked at the shotgun too. Bob made sure they saw it, displayed it like a proud rooster tossing his comb.

I always carried the baseball bat. I liked its weight. It was my friend, Louisville Slugger.

One time we're up there standing behind that old car (a Fairlane Ford with the windows knocked out, I might add), watching, not really expecting anything, but maybe hoping for something. Standing there with our mouths and throats dry as Kitty Litter, our bellies howling and rolling like a storm, thinking maybe how it would be to have something warm to eat and sweet to drink, thinking hard on that meat in the window there, when out of the concession steps the Popcorn King.

The King had turned quite a bit darker, both Randy's naturally dark flesh and Willard's. They had blended together to make a charcoal hue, except in spots where Willard's original flesh tone swirled amid the darker skin like twists of vanilla in a chocolate Bundt cake.

The popcorn tub hat was now amalgamated with Randy's head, and veins like garden hoses stood out from it and extended down his forehead and came to rest above the single eye. The eye itself reminded me of that old Pinkerton ad with the bloodshot eye and the slogan that read: WE NEVER SLEEP.

Randy's knees had blended almost entirely into Willard's chest and shoulders, and the back of Willard's skull had nestled deeply into Randy's crotch like a large egg in a nest. Willard's blinded eyes had sealed over, and there were holes where his nostrils and mouth had been. Even Willard's sex had dried up and fallen off, like the shriveled stem of an overripe apple.

The tattoos, as usual, were quite busy. The animal designs made the appropriate, though diminutive, noises, fussed and snapped at one another like ill-tempered neighbors. The rude arm remarks (KICK ASS and EAT PUSSY), the bandoliers and the like moved about as if looking for better terrain. The tiger on Willard's stomach was silent, however, and, except for the lazy blink-ings of its eyes, remained stationary.

An involuntary cry went up from the crowd, and it was a ragged bunch. They reminded me of those photos I had seen of starved, mistreated Jews in books about the war. Some of the women had little round stomachs, and it struck me that they might be pregnant. My God, had we been in the drive-in that long?

The King held up both hands like a victorious prizefighter. His mouths smiled. And out of the top mouth came: "I have returned. I offer you manna from the bowels of the messiah."

With that he opened his mouths phenomenally wide, the teeth folding back against the roofs of his mouths like tire-buster spears, and with a rumble and a methane-ish stink we could smell from where we stood, out came *popcorn*.

Sort of.

The velocity of the vomit was tremendous, the well from which it gorged endless. The content of the vomit looked to be cola and popcorn. It hit the crowd like a fire-hose blast, dispersed them, knocked them down. It spewed all the way back to Lot B.

Then it ceased. The shaken crowd found their feet.

Again the King opened his mouth, and once more the vomit spewed. More powerful than

before. And when it ended this time, the King said, "Take of me and eat."

The crowd, somewhat recovered, examined the corn, looked at it long and hard. And then one man picked up a big puffy kernel and closed his eyes and put it in his mouth and bit down. You could hear his sigh of contentment throughout The Orbit.

Everyone, as of old, began to shove and fight for the corn, and a stray kernel, perhaps launched by an excited foot, came rolling our way, went under the Fairlane and lay between mine and Bob's legs.

We looked at it.

We looked at one another.

We looked at it again.

It looked back.

It was the general shape of popcorn, slightly off-white in color with a sort of scabby look between the creases, along with thread-thin veins that pulsed . . . and in its center was an eye. A little eye that had no lid, but was instead a constant thing that matched the eye in the center of the King's top forehead.

Bob put his foot on it and pressed down. It was like stepping on one of those big dog ticks that are flat and gray until they've fed and dropped off their hosts to lie big as plump raisins.

"It moved under my boot," Bob claimed. "I felt it."

"Jesus," I said, and it sounded like a plea.

We looked back at the people. They were popping the corn into their mouths, oblivious of its appearance, or not caring. Blood oozed from between their lips. I could see their bodies rippling as if a sonic wave were passing beneath their flesh. Their grunts and cries of satisfaction and anxiety came to me like hyena barks, their squeals and lip-smacking like the sound of hogs at trough.

And a part of me, the hungry part, envied them.

The King looked at us over the top of the Fairlane. It was a decent distance away, if not outstanding, and I couldn't determine with his features the way they were, if he recognized us. I doubted it. Least not in a way that really mattered.

"Come," came that sweet-sour voice, "join us, brothers. Eat."

"Not just now," Bob said. "Maybe later."

And we turned and walked quickly away, back to the camper. When we got there, Bob took some wire cutters out of his toolbox, went out and cut the speaker wire off at the post, flung the speaker far away from us.

4

That's when I made my decision to join the "church."

If I was destined to go down before evil, or simply to starve to death, I wanted to make sure I would be embraced by the arms of our Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ.

It was odd that I hadn't seen this obvious truth before. Odd that it had always been right before me, and I had denied it. But now it was all very clear, as if a visionary light had opened from the blackness above, a light unlike the fuzzy blue lightning, but instead a warm yellow light that struck me in the top of the head, penetrated my skull and filled me with sudden understanding.

Shortly thereafter, for it took little to tire us, we climbed into the back of the camper to sleep, and when I heard Bob's breathing go regular, I got up and snuck out and went over to that bus.

As I was nearing it, the back door opened, and the contents of an improvised bedpan went flying. I was glad I wasn't along a little farther when this happened, or my first meeting with them might have been less than auspicious.

Watching where I stepped (for this bedpan procedure had been followed for quite some time), I went over and called just as the door was closing.

With the door half open, the woman of the bus stuck her head out and looked at me in the same way all the Christians looked at me. With that cold stare that told me I was an outsider. She had her hair up, and some of it had escaped over her face like spider legs. She was wearing an ugly duster and pink house slippers I hadn't seen before. They had MEXICO written- across the top of the insteps.

"I want to be one with the Lord," I said.

She just kept staring.

"I am not a Christian, and I see that you folks are, and I like what I see. I want to be one of you. I want to join in salvation, and—"

"Hold it a minute," she said, turned back into the bus and yelled, "Sam!"

After a moment the door cracked wider and the scrawny man stood there. Behind him it was dark, but there was enough light from the storm overhead that I could see the bus's walls were lined with shelves and the shelves were full, though I couldn't tell with what.

I noticed the man's tie wasn't a real tie at all. It was painted on. He eyeballed me for a

long moment. "Whatchawant, sinner?"

"I want to be a Christian."

"Say you do. Want to be baptized and the like?"

"If that's what it takes."

"Does."

"Then baptize me."

"That's the spirit. Come around front of the bus, I'll let you in."

"Sam?" the woman said.

"Now, don't you worry," he said. "This here's a nice boy. Besides, he wants to become a Christian. Right, son?"

"That's right," I said.

"See, there you are," he said to the woman. Then to me: "Come around front."

They closed the door and I went around to the door at the front side of the bus, and Sam opened it. I stepped inside and saw that a blanket curtain had been put behind the driver's seat, blocking off the rest of the bus from view. The woman was still back there.

There was a special seat bolted to the floor next to the one behind the steering wheel, and hanging from the mirror was a plastic Jesus that glowed in the dark, one of those things you buy across the border in Juarez. I had never wanted one. Lastly, in upraised rainbow stencil on the dash was this message: GOD IS LOVE.

"Sit down, boy." He patted the seat beside him, and I took it. "Now," he said, pursing his lips, "you want to become a Christian, do you?"

"I've been watching you folks . . . your meetings going on ... Well, I like what I see."

"Don't blame you ... I was a plumber, you know."

"Beg your pardon?"

"And a painter. Did plumbing and painting. Paint a little, plumb a little. Mostly plumbing, 'cause I'm kind of wiry, you see. Get up under them houses like a snake, fix them pipes. Some of the other plumbers called me that —Snake, I mean. They'd say, 'Snake, you sure can get under them houses,' and I'd say, 'Yeah, I can.' 'Cause I could."

"I see," I said.

"Painting now . . . that was different. I did it, but I didn't care for it. All them fumes make you sick, real sick. I'd sign on to paint a house, and I'd be sick through the whole thing. Not a minute's peace, just queasy and kind of headachy all the time. Even at night when I was away from it, after I'd cleaned up, I could smell that paint under my fingernails. It kind of hung on me like a cloud, it did. Much preferred plumbing. Sewer smell ain't nothing to a paint smell. Sewer smell is good honest smell. Human smell. But paint . . . paint is just paint, you see what I mean?"

I had begun to sense a parable. "Well ... I suppose so."

The blanket moved then and the woman came out from behind it. She had put on another duster, not any more attractive than the first. She had on the same house shoes. I noted that she kept the backs broken down so her heels could hang out.

"It was just awful when he was painting," the woman said, picking right into the conversation. "He wasn't no fun at all. Grouchy all the time, like a poisoned dog. Hi. My name is Mable."

"Glad to meet you," I said. "I guess this is your seat."

"Oh no," Mable said. "You just keep it. I'll stand right here. I'm fine. I used to say to Sam about the way he acted when he was painting, 'Now you gonna act like that, you go out and sleep in the yard.' Didn't I say that to you, honeybunch?"

"Yes, you did, dumpling. She'd just say it right out, and mean it too. 'You gonna act like that, Sam,' she'd say, 'then you go out there in the yard and sleep. Take your piller with you, but get on out of this house.' That would straighten me right up, it would. Couldn't stand to be without my dumpling."

I was beginning to suspect this wasn't a parable.

The woman moved close to him, and he reached up and put an arm around her waist. She patted him on the head. I thought maybe she would give him a dog treat next.

"Painting is why I got preaching on my mind," Sam said. "They used to say, 'Be a Baptist preacher and you don't have to do no work,' and that sounded good to me. So, I started trying to teach myself about it, just so I could quit painting, you see, and you know what, son?"

I said I didn't.

"The call come over me. I'd been reading the Bible, trying to get a handle on it, trying to

get all them names separate in my head, you know, and one night I'd just finished all that—I'd been painting earlier in the day—and I was dozing, listening to the radio, one of them country and western stations, and God, the Big Man himself come to me over that radio and told me some things he hadn't told none of them other preachers. Gave me some insights into His ways."

"Hallelujah, honey," the woman said.

"His name be praised. So God come to me over that radio, and I remember it was right in the middle of a pretty good ole song too, and he said, 'Sam, I'm giving you the call, and I want you to spread my word.' That was it. He didn't lay out no details or nothing, just matter-of-fact about it, and I packed up our things, built us a traveling home out of this bus—"

"They come and took our house 'cause we couldn't pay for it," Mable added.

"Yes, they did, didn't they, dumpling. And I got this bus fixed up, and we started traveling around the country, doing a little fixing here and there, plumbing mostly, little painting when I couldn't get out of it and we needed the money, and I did a lot of preaching."

"It paid better than the plumbing or painting," the woman said. "It was just a sight to see how full that offering plate would be after a night of Sam's preaching. People just loved him."

"But the money wasn't the important thing. The thing was, I was reaching people with the Lord, taking the offering to keep this bus running, to feed our faces and keep us at the Lord's work."

"Sam made so many conversions," Mable said.

"Yes, I did. And one night while we was traveling, we come by this place, seen all those cars in line, and I thought, now wouldn't this be a golden oppurtunity?"

"Them's the exact words you used, sugar," Mable said. "You turned to me and said, 'Wouldn't this be a golden oppurtunity?'"

"I thought during intermission I might turn on my loudspeaker and start preaching. Try to bring some souls to God. But then this thing happened, this thing of the Devil. He'll do that every time, son. You got some good designs, well, ole Devil will come right in there on you, trying to mess things up. Even Oral Roberts, and you know how close he is to God, has problems with the Devil. Ole booger come right in Oral's bedroom once and tried to choke him, tried to choke the life out of him."

"But his wife run the Devil off and saved him," Mable said. "She come right in there and ran him right off." She patted Sam on the head. "I'd do that for you, wouldn't I,

sugarbunch?"

"Yes, you would, dumpling, you surely would. But now, what we got here is a boy that wants to join our flock. Am I right, boy?"

"That's right," I said.

"Good, good . . . You ain't got no food on you, do you?"

"No," I said. I thought about the jerky back in the camper, but it was really Bob's and I couldn't offer it without his permission. Besides, I was afraid he'd shoot me.

"Well, let's get the baptizing part over with." With that Sam spit on his fingers and rubbed them across the top of my head. "I baptize you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost. Amen. Okay."

"That's it?" I asked.

"You were expecting a tub?"

"No ... I mean ... I guess it's okay."

"Sure it is. You feel any different?"

I thought about it. "No, not a thing."

"Just a little tingle or something?"

"Nope."

Sam looked distressed. "Well, sometimes it takes some time, so you give it some. Thing I'm gonna want you to do is go to the services a little later on. You come to that, son, and I'll hand you the Lord on a silver platter. Mable, bring the sand, will you, darling?"

Mable went behind the blanket curtain and came back with a big hourglass. The sand in the top half had almost run out.

"This here has come in handy. It was just one of them things we picked up once and hadn't never used, but since we been here in this outdoor picture show, we've used it quite a bit. It's an eight-hour hourglass. When it runs through twice, we have services. Unless we forget to turn it or we sleep through, but that ain't often."

We sat there a minute and he told me a couple of plumbing adventures, then he said he had to go get ready and he went behind the blanket curtain and left me with Mable, who took his seat in front of the steering wheel. She looked at the rainbow GOD IS LOVE on

the dash for a while, then put her eye on the Jesus hanging from the mirror, and finally looked out at the wing mirror as if she might find a revelation there. Things being as they were, I was kind of short on small talk, and as the weather was constant, that was out. I was beginning to feel like an enormous jackass.

"You know," Mable said out of the clear blue, "wish I had me some ham bone and some dried beans— pintos. I think I miss that the most, ham bone and beans. I can make the best pot of beans. I just take me some pintos, the dried kind, and soak them in a pan of water overnight, then the next morning I start cooking them, making sure I don't let all the water boil down. I chop me up a bunch of onions, put some salt and pepper in there, and that ham bone, and just cook and cook and cook till that water gets real soupy. You fix you some cornbread with that, even hot-water cornbread, and I tell you, you've got major eating, mister. I just dream about food all the time. How about you?"

"I think about it a lot," I said. "Mostly hamburgers. Sometimes pizza."

"You do like pinto beans and cornbread, though?"

"I've got no complaints against it. Right now most anything sounds good."

She seemed to consider that for a moment, then she said, "You know, this is all the work of the Devil.

And we can beat the Devil if we try. My next-door neighbor back when Sam was plumbing all the time was named Lillie, and she had these Hell's Angel types move in across from her. Drove them motorsickles, you know. And she said they were worshipping the Devil, 'cause she could hear that loud rock music, you know. The stuff where you play the records backwards and it's got some sort of ooga-booga about the Devil on it. And she started praying, and darn if they didn't move. Just up and moved six months later, and she said it was on account of her praying all the time. The Lord heard her prayers, and those Hell's Angels just up and moved." Right. Up and moved six months later. I wondered if Bob would do me the favor of kicking my butt around the camper a few times.

In the middle of an apple-pie recipe, Sam returned. He had on his coat; it sagged badly. He had on a different shirt, and though it was in pretty tough shape, it did look better than the other one. Even the tie was painted on better. It must have been the shirt he used for Christmas because the tie was bright red.

Mable went behind the curtain then to do "a little touchin' up," and Sam sat down behind the steering wheel and looked at me like a loving, but stern father. "Son, I want you to know that now, no matter what happens, you are in the hands of the Lord. If something really ugly should happen to you . . . if a ton of bricks fell out of the sky and crushed you flatter than a pie pan, you'd be one with the Lord. He's waiting on you, son. Waiting for you to join His kingdom. What do you think of that?"

"It's a comfort," I said. I wondered if Bob would loan me his shotgun so I could shoot myself. I had been a bean head to see anything wonderful about these people and their way of life. The truth was I was going to die, and there wasn't any heaven to go to. Unless it was some sort of B-string heaven for extras in bad movies. That's what this all had to be. A bad movie.

When Mable came back she had on a long overcoat, and I could tell the pockets were filled with something, but I had no idea what.

"Well, how do I look?" she asked Sam cheerfully.

"Like a million dollars, sugarbunch, like a million dollars." He smiled at her, then looked at the hourglass. "Almost time. I got to go next door and tap on Deacon Cecil's car window, get him to get everybody ready for tonight's services. You're gonna like this, son. It's gonna put you straight with God."

I was beginning to doubt that. If these were God's chosen people, He had poor taste, and if I wanted in with them, then I had even poorer taste. But as it stood, in for a penny, in for a pound. It wasn't like I had a pressing engagement elsewhere, but I was beginning to plan one. Maybe Bob would like the idea. We could maybe find a hose somewhere and run the exhaust fumes into the back of the camper. Just go to sleep and not wake up. It sure seemed like a good proposition to me.

Sam got up and I let him pass by me and out the door to get Deacon Cecil. When he was gone, Mable shrugged and said, "Well, here we are."

She told me a story about how she'd won a baking contest in Gladewater, Texas, once, and by then Sam was back.

"Are things ready?" Mable asked.

"Ready," he said, and looked at me and smiled.

I smiled back.

We went out of the bus, and as we walked, Sam put his arm around my shoulders and told me about the Kingdom of Heaven. None of it was particularly inspiring. The smell from his armpit kept my mind off what he was saying and made me woozy.

As we neared the selected spot, I could see a number of the Christians strutting rapidly toward it. They really seemed worked up and excited this time, like they'd just arrived at the company picnic.

On the other hand, I was considerably less than worked up. My entire religious experiment so far had been a vast disappointment. Sort of like when I found out my pet

gerbil wouldn't live forever, and later, after I'd cleaned the little turds out of his cage for what seemed like an enormous period of time, thought the little fucker would never die.

When we were all gathered there, Sam introduced me as a "boy who wants to join God," and the others told me how nice that was, and a girl who might have been pretty, had she not been so thin and her hair so greasy, said, "A fresh one, huh?"

"You know," Mable said, looking up at the lightning flashing across the blackness, "this reminds me of when we used to camp out, and sometimes it looked like it was going to rain. And we'd build us a big fire anyway, and we'd take some coat hangers and straighten them out and roast wienies over the fire. It was so much fun. We'd just let them cook until they were black, and they tasted so good. That just don't make sense really, 'cause if you burn them at home they aren't any good at all, but out there on an open fire you can cook them black as a nigger, and they're just as fine as they can be."

"We'll start the services with a little round of prayer," Sam said, "then we'll have communion."

At mention of the word "communion," a collective sigh went up from the crowd. These were some communion-loving folks. I remembered the sighs from the Popcorn King's followers when they were eating the results of his vomit. There hadn't been a lot of difference in sounds.

"God," Sam said, "you sure have allowed some odd things here. In fact, I would say you have outdone yourself. But if that's your will, that's it. Still, sure would like to know the why of it ... We also have this young fella amongst us, just baptized and craving the Lord, and we thought we'd bring him to you ... It would certainly be nice if you'd do something to that old Popcorn King, by the way. Like maybe kill him. And it wouldn't hurt my feelings, or the feelings of anyone here, if you'd make this black mess go away and give us back our highway and things. Amen."

"Amen," said the crowd.

"Bad as things is," Mable whispered to me, "you got to be thankful. Things will work out, I know they will- I had a cousin, her name was Frances, and she didn't have good thoughts on nothing or nobody, and she got this rash on her foot and it got infected, and she wouldn't do nothing but wear this old sock on it, day in, day out. It just stunk something awful. I'd say to her, 'Frances, you need to go and pour you some chemicals on that thing. It's done gone and got infected.' But you know, she wouldn't listen, and her foot got so infected they had to cut it off. Had a foot one day, next she didn't. Just had this little stub and they got this leather thing they put over it, and she had to put on this artificial foot, and she'd pull a stocking over that and she could slip a shoe on, you know, and it looked almost real. But when she walked, she walked something like this." She showed me how her cousin Frances walked. The congregation and Sam had stopped to look at her, but she didn't seem to notice. She did a sort of stiff step with one foot and

dragged the other after it. "That's how she looked. And there's some little ole mean kids that live down the block from her, and they'd get up behind her when she was walking to the store, and they'd all walk like her." She showed me the walk in more exaggerated form. "It was just like a bunch of crippled ducks following their ole crippled mama. They'd been my kids I'd have worn their little hind ends out so bad they couldn't have sat down for a week. But the reason she got her foot rotted off like that and got mocked by them children is because she didn't have no faith and doesn't look on the bright side of things. God keeps score on them kind, you can bet he does."

"Mable," Sam said patiently, "if you're through with the story about your cousin's rotting foot, we'd like to continue."

"Oh, I am sorry," said Mable. "Don't you pay me no never mind. Ya'll just go right on with your rat killing and I'll hush and listen."

"That would be nice," Sam said.

Then came the sermon. It had a lot of storm clouds, sinners, fire and brimstone and the work of the Devil in it. Sam hopped around and waved his arms a lot. But somehow it wasn't very exciting. There were quite a few references to plumbing and painting and a parable about a little girl that got hit by a truck, which I couldn't seem to work into the rest of the sermon or find the point of.

A man beside me leaned over to another and said, "I'm really sick of this crap."

"It's a thing to get through," the other man said.

Finally Sam's sermon sort of petered out, like maybe he couldn't keep it on his mind anymore. He said "amen" and called his flock to him. This was the huddle I'd seen, and Mable put her arm around me and pushed me toward it. In the huddle it was hot and full of sweaty pits, unwashed clothes and bad breath; all this ganged up on me and I felt dizzy and weak, and before I knew it, I was in the center of the huddle and hands were touching me, then suddenly Sam stepped forward and kicked my feet out from under me. I went down hard and hit my head, tried to rise, but Sam shoved me down with his foot, and the next thing I know there's two guys holding my arms, and the girl with the greasy hair has one of my legs and Mable has the other.

"What in hell are you doing?" I yelled.

"Communion," Sam said. He took a tin of sardines out of his rumpled coat, and that made me aware suddenly of what was filling that shabby coat of Mable's. More sardine tins. "We been sharing these with the congregation," Sam said. "Folks have been real nice about it too, especially since they know I got the bus rigged up with a bomb, and they mess where they ain't supposed to be messin' when we're away from there, and BLAM!"

"That's got nothing to do with me . . . Tell these people to let me go."

"It's got everything to do with you. We also drink a little of each other's blood."

"Like this," Mable said, and she put her knee over my ankle to hold me down and produced a penknife from the pocket of her coat. She opened it smoothly and drew it across her palm. A line of blood appeared there and she held her hand up without looking and a man who was standing above her grabbed it and put his mouth to the wound and sucked. He trembled he was so excited. Mable's tongue worked from one corner of her mouth to the other and her eyes closed.

A man in the crowd began speaking softly. "Yeah, brother, get it, get it, go, go."

"Oh yes," Mable said, "Oh yes, yes, yes. Suck, suck, oh God in Heaven, suck, yes, oh yes."

Then other knives and razors flashed and flesh was opened and mouths were pleased. It sounded like a convention of leeches, or an orgy—or, to be more precise, both.

Sam squatted down close to my face. There was blood on his lips. "You see," he said, patting my chest. "We made a pact. We wouldn't let nobody else in. We would convert them if they wanted, but they couldn't join us, and we'd eliminate competition. It's a tough thing to do, but the Lord moves in mysterious ways his miracles to perform . . . and food lasts longer this way."

A man took Mable's place holding my leg and she inched down to me and held the penknife where I could see it. "And we have to take advantage of any food that comes our way," she said. "It would be sinful to waste . . . and we've had our eyes on you and your friend for a while."

"We just didn't want to get shot," Sam said. "Your pal never seems to leave his shotgun."

"But you're Christians," I said.

"That we are," Sam said, "and that should make you feel proud and special. You'll be with God in Heaven in a short time now. He'll embrace you and—"

"Then why don't you go join him," I said. "You're holier than me, you should go first." Sam smiled. "It isn't my time."

"It's a little thing," Mable said. "Nothing to it, really. We got to do this thing, and you've got to accept it . . . And this here knife may be small, but it's sharp. It won't hurt much. They say the blood goes out of you fast when it's done right, that you just get terrible sleepy, then it's all over. I've cut many a hog's throat in my day, and though couldn't none of them tell me if it was sleepy or not, they seemed to go pretty peaceful, wouldn't you

say, Sam?"

"I would," Sam said.

"But I'm no hog," I said.

"Cut the gab," a man said, and he dropped a rusty-looking hubcap beside my head; it clanged, rattled, stopped.

"Turn him," Sam said.

The two holding my legs let go, and the men who had my arms flipped me onto my knees, pulled my arms back so hard behind my back my shoulder blades met. They pushed me forward so that my face was over the hubcap.

"Won't none of you waste," Mable said. "I thought you'd like to know that. We'll take the blood to drink, then we'll have us a little ole cookout with the rest of you."

"Mable can cook like the dickens; don't matter what it is, she can cook it."

The greasy-haired girl who had held one of my legs earlier came around and bent down to look me in the face. "I'm gonna love you, sugar. I'm gonna just love you to death. Gonna wrap my lips around you, and chew and chew and chew."

"Get on with it, for Pete's sake," the man who had dropped the hubcap said.

Mable grabbed my hair. "Just think about something pleasant, like good ole turnip greens and black-eyed peas. It'll be over quick-like."

I closed my eyes, but I didn't think of turnip greens and black-eyed peas. I tried to remember how things were before the drive-in, but nothing would come. There was only the dark behind my eyelids, the sound of all those hungry Christians breathing, the smell of their bodies. Mable lifted my head more to expose my neck. I hoped it would be quick and that I would not have to hear my blood draining into the hubcap for very long.

And just when I expected to feel the blade, there was an explosion, a thud in the hubcap and I was warmly wet from chin to forehead.

PART THREE
THE ORBIT MUST DIE
(Death and Destruction and School Bus-Fu)

1

I thought my throat had been cut and the blood from the wound had sprayed my face, and that simultaneously there had been a loud clap of thunder, though it didn't sound right, not even for the artificial thunder of the drive-in.

Against my will I opened my eyes, saw lying in the hubcab beneath me a hand, and lying next to it in a little pond of blood was the penknife.

The men had let go of my arms and I was able to rock up on my knees and see Mable. She was still on her knees, but now she was holding her arm in front of her, minus her hand, and watching blood leap from the wound like freshly tapped oil.

Mable looked at me and said, "Oh my."

A number of the congregation dropped down to try and suck at the stump of her arm, and the girl with the greasy hair began lapping at the blood that had sprayed my face. Her tongue was rough and dry, like a cat's.

"Who's next?" a voice called, and I turned to see Bob standing there with the shotgun, a wreath of gun-smoke about his head. With his hair and beard grown long, his sweaty hat drooping, he looked like an old-time desperado. At his feet two men lay holding their heads. He had apparently cleared himself a path into the huddle with the stock of his gun. "Mess with me," he said, "and I'll shoot you just to check the pump action on this baby."

Mable said, "Sam, Sam, my hand's done come *off* . . . Do you think we can get me an artificial one?"

"They cost too much," Sam said, and Mable fainted forward on her face. The stump-suckers stayed with her, working on her arm, pushing and shoving each other out of the way, tongues darting and colliding as they pursued the taste of the hot blood.

"Quit that sucking on her," Bob said. "Get away from there." He stepped in and gave one of the lappers a quick kick to the seat of the pants. "Spread the hell out."

They did.

"And you," he said, giving the greasy-haired girl a kick in the ribs, "you quit licking his face."

She scrambled away. I sort of hated that. I was beginning to like her.

A guy tried to pull a pistol on Bob, and Bob saw him out of the corner of his eye and gave him the stock of the shotgun to eat. The man went down and the gun slid across the

asphalt. Bob looked at the greasy-haired girl and said, "Do me a favor, sugar, hand me that gun. Easy-like."

She gave it to him without protest and he put it in his belt.

"All right, all other weapons hit the deck," Bob said, "or I'm gonna start opening up heads."

Another pistol dropped to the ground. Can openers, knives, clubs, coins in socks. A condom full of marbles.

Bob nodded at the pistol. "I'd like that one too, sugar. Okay?"

The greasy-haired girl gave it to him. He put it in his belt next to the other one. Now he did look like a desperado.

The crowd had spread out, and I got up. I felt a little on the limp side.

"Take off your belt, Jack," Bob said, "and give it to that preacher fella to put on the woman. He doesn't make her a tourniquet pretty quick, she's gonna die."

"She's gonna die anyway," a man in the crowd said. "Why don't you just let us go on and eat her, and you two can join in. Hell, you can go first."

"That's a good idea," the greasy-haired girl said.

"No thanks," Bob said.

I took off my belt and gave it to Sam. He got down on his hands and knees and applied it to Mable's arm, about six inches above the wound. It cut off most of the bleeding.

"I think you're supposed to let that off now and then," Bob said. "You don't, she'll lose her whole arm ... if it don't kill her."

"I got some idea how to do it," Sam said. When he leaned over to make an extra adjustment on the belt, a can of sardines tipped out of his pocket. All eyes went to that can.

"They've got a lot of those," I said to Bob. "That's how they've been holding things together. And nobody's tried to take it away from them because they've got the bus rigged with a bomb."

"You don't say?" Bob said. "And here I was thinking this was all just the power of the Lord, and it's cans of sardines."

"You mess with that bus," Sam said, "it'll blow you out of this drive-in."

"That's an idea," Bob said. "Okay, Mr. Preacher, get your wife there. Jack, give him a hand. Ya'll come with me. Rest of you Christians just sort of lick up here while we're gone."

Sam and I got our arms around Mable and got her up. She came to briefly, but she couldn't walk. We dragged her away, the toes of her house shoes scraping the asphalt. I looked back over my shoulder as we went away from there, and the greasy-haired girl grabbed the sardines and tried to make a run for it. She was swarmed. At the bottom of the mound of thrashing arms and legs you could hear her yelling, "Mine, mine."

The guy who had dropped the hubcab snatched Mable's hand from it, sprinted off tearing at it with his teeth. He rounded an elderly Chevy, practically leaped from one row to the other, weaved into some other cars and disappeared into shadows, perhaps to lie under some automobile and chew on his prize like a contented terrier.

A middle-aged woman in jean shorts and a red blouse dove down on the hubcab and began to lap at the blood there. A man dropped to his knees to join her. They growled at each other like Dobermans.

"Praise the Lord," Bob said.

"Oh, shut up," I said.

When we came to the bus, Bob made Sam put Mable down and give him the key. Sam said he would give him the key if he was going to be so foolish, but he would rather be shot point-blank with the shotgun before he would open it himself. The results would be too terrible, and the death of all of us would be on his hands.

Bob put the key in the lock and opened the back door.

He looked at us and smiled. "Boom," he said.

"Well," Sam said, "it worked up until now."

Bob climbed inside and we went after. The bus had shelves and the shelves had wire over them, and behind the wire were oodles of canned goods, mostly sardines and Vienna sausages. Two of my all-time nonfavorites under normal conditions. Right now they looked rather attractive. My stomach growled like an attack dog.

"Comfy in here," Bob said.

Sam and I helped Mable over to a bed that folded away from the bus wall, and Sam got a bucket and put that by the bed and took the pressure off the tourniquet. Blood shot out of

the wound and into the bucket. "We were afeared of a nigger takeover," Sam explained as he tightened the tourniquet again. "Figured it came down to us or the niggers, we'd have this food put back, and that would hold us for a time."

I looked around more now that my eyes were adjusted. There was all manner of stuff in there. Plumbing tools, carpentry tools, painting equipment, even a welding torch and the tanks to go with it arranged on a dolly.

"Guns?" Bob asked.

"We hadn't gotten around to that," Sam said. "That was next."

"Wouldn't lie to me, would you?"

"I'm telling the truth . . . Damn you, why'd you have to shoot Mable's hand off?"

"Seemed sort of necessary," Bob said. "She was about to cut my buddy's throat. Though I figure the dumb sucker deserved it. Christians, my ass."

"Watch your language," Sam said. "If it had been her foot, that wouldn't have been so bad. But her hand. She likes to cook and give me back rubs, and she needs two good hands to do them things right."

"She wasn't holding the knife with her foot," Bob said. "Just be glad I'm shooting slugs, or you'd have all got peppered."

I looked at Mable. Her face was as pale as a baby's ass, and her eyes were foggy. I figured she wasn't going to make it.

About then she opened her eyes and said, "You know, the thing that would do me some good right now is a chicken fried steak. Maybe some mashed taters and cream gravy and rolls with it. Big ole glass of ice tea."

"Rest now," Sam said.

"It's the batter does it on them steaks," Mable said. "Don't got that right, it ain't worth eatin'. You dip the steak in the milk-and-egg batter, then into the flour, then back into the milk and egg, then back into the flour. Makes it extra crispy."

"Ssshhhh, now, sugar bee, you rest."

"Don't do it that way, you don't get that good flaky crust, and I do like a good flaky crust." She passed out again.

Bob came over and gave me one of the pistols from his belt. "Here, you might want- to shoot someone later."

I took it and walked to the open door at the back of the bus and looked out. The Christians were fist-fighting, probably over drops of blood on the asphalt, or what was left of the sardines Sam had dropped. I could see the greasy-haired girl lying on her side with her eyes wide open. There was a young man with a knife cutting strips of meat off her legs. I took a deep breath and closed the door.

2

Bob and I ate sardines while Sam lay asleep on the floor near Mable, who now and then came awake and gave us in great detail one of her favorite recipes. We had been through cherry pie, buttermilk biscuits, chili and hominy cakes.

"I feel kind of bad eating another person's food," I said.

"They were going to eat you," Bob said. "Look at it that way."

"A point," I said, and ate a little faster.

"You're going to need your strength when the Christians come for us. They're not going to be worried about the bomb anymore. They'll have it figured now, since we didn't get blown up."

"How'd you know the bus wasn't rigged with a bomb?"

"Just figured . . . didn't know for sure . . . Hell, Jack, I don't care anymore. If this is life, it ain't worth living. I think what you and I ought to do is something real foolish. Otherwise, we'll end up licking blood out of hubcaps."

"What you got in mind?" I asked.

"Destroy The Orbit symbol."

I mulled that over awhile. "It has a ring to it. Any reason?"

Bob looked back to make sure Sam and Mable were still sleeping. "Come with me." He pulled the lever and opened the door and we went outside. "You've been a mite busy to notice, but when I woke up and seen you were gone, I figured you'd joined the Christians."

"Okay, I was a jackass. Happy?"

"It's just your way, Jack. I'm used to it. Anyway, I woke up and come out of the camper and the first thing I seen was that."

He pointed at The Orbit symbol. "And it's worse now than when I'm talking about."

"God Almighty," I said.

The Orbit symbol had turned a hot blue, so blue it hurt my eyes. It was getting the juice from the tentacles —there were twelve of them now and I couldn't think of them as

anything other than tentacles—and they were twisting and lashing across the blackness, spitting lightning from their tips like venom, and this lightning no longer ran the length of the pole, but just gathered in the symbol alone, and the symbol was spinning very fast, hurling more lightning than ever from it, striking the concession. The concession glowed so violently that at any moment I expected it to move, like amputated frog legs hopping in response to a live wire. The marquee was no longer there. I figured it had exploded and crumbled down, like a charcoaled stick.

"I figure something new is about to happen," Bob said, "and I'm not sure it's worth waiting around for. Last time we had something like this we got the Popcorn King."

I agreed with Bob. I felt it was gearing up for something bigger and more catastrophic. I tried to figure exactly what it was with the symbol and why the power from the lightning concentrated itself there before going to the concession. A number of B movie possibilities presented themselves: The symbol had accidentally been made from smeltered iron ore that had been mixed with some strange and horrid sentient metal that had come to earth in a meteor, and once it had been converted to The Orbit symbol it had awakened from a long sleep and was now tormenting us earthlings for lack of anything better to do. I figured being a chunk of rock, or even a sign, could get pretty boring. It was the sort of thing that could give you a bad attitude. And I thought again of the B movie gods, and that idea appealed to me most of all. Their motives seemed to fit in with those of most low-budget moviemakers. Bring it in on time. If it doesn't make sense in spots, well, make it pretty or exciting. Don't let them think about it too long.

"You getting hypoglycemic again," Bob said, bringing me up from the pit of my thoughts.

"No," I said. "I was just thinking."

"About what?"

"About rewriting the script."

"The script?"

"Let's just say this is a movie and those tentacles—"

"Just drips of goo, Jack."

"—belong to the B movie gods, and they're manufacturing all this, using us as actors, only we're not acting, and they're making up the script as they go. They've isolated us, they've given us our monster, the Popcorn King, and now they're looking for the big finish, and I don't think they've planned a heroic ending. I think this is one of those downbeat films."

"Always got to have something to believe in, don't you, Jack? Astrology, Christianity, now B movie gods."

"Give me something to blame all this on. A random universe with no god, evil or otherwise, is just too much for me. Just let me say it's the B movie gods and they have this bad scenario planned, and you and me, we're not going to stand for it. We're going to destroy the symbol . . . Hell, let's do something even if it's wrong."

"Believe the ghost of Elvis is doing it if you like," Bob said. "It don't make a hang to me. But I've got a plan for taking that symbol down."

...

Bob woke Sam up when we got back to the bus. He pulled him up front and said, "You know how to use that torch and stuff?"

"I don't just carry it around, boy. Sure, I know. But I ain't got a hankering at the moment."

"I'm going to give you a hankering," Bob said. "We're going to cut The Orbit symbol down."

"Have at it," Sam said.

"We want you to do it. You know how to use the equipment."

"After what you done to Mable, you think I'm gonna help you? You shouldn't oughta shot her hand off, little buddy."

I thought he might add "nahnahnahnah," but he passed on that.

"We want to cut that sucker down and drop it on the concession," Bob said. "See if we can smash the Popcorn King . . . Christ, we want to do something besides wait to get eaten, or end up eating one another. What say, Sam?"

"Don't use the Saviour's name in vain ... I don't know. You have to cut it just right, get it to fall that way."

"That's why we need you," Bob said. "You're the expert."

"Well," Sam said, rubbing his fingers along his chin, "it might not change a thing, but it sure could give a man peace of mind for trying, now couldn't it?"

"Our point exactly," Bob said. "You'll do it then?"

"All right, but this don't mean we're friends."

"Wouldn't think of it ... One more thing. We're gonna need this bus, and when we finish

with it, it won't be in any shape at all."

"No sir," Sam said, "you ain't gonna . . ." Then he looked hard at Bob and the shotgun. "It don't matter what I say, does it? You'll take the bus anyway."

"We'd like to have your permission," Bob said, "just to be sociable."

Sam nodded wearily. "Well, tell me what you're gonna do to it."

The bus was part diversion, part weapon.

We tore the wire off the shelves, took the food and put it in a couple of blankets and tied it up, pulled it to the rear of the bus. We took the wire outside and Sam welded it into a kind of pen on the hood of the bus while Bob watched with his shotgun, just in case we had visitors. When Sam finished, I brought all the cans of paint thinner he had and put them in the wire enclosure, made sure they fit snug by pushing a couple of moldy pillowcases in between them.

"When the front end hits that electrical field," Bob said, "it'll blow. And if we can get enough momentum behind this baby, really put the hammer down, it'll run on into the concession and the gas tank will go. We're lucky, that'll get the Popcorn King. Or the symbol will when it comes down. The idea here is to try and hit him with both things at once. I've got a flare gun in the camper, and I'll give that to one of you. When the symbol is about to drop, shoot off the flare and I'll put my foot through it, put this sucker in his lap."

"And how will you get out?" I asked.

"I'll jump. I'm a jumping sonofabitch, didn't I tell you?"

"No. I knew you could hide under mufflers good, but I didn't know about the jumping."

Bob smiled. "If Wendle was here right now, big guy or no big guy, I'd kick his butt . . . after I had me something to eat, that is, like about ten cans of those sardines in there."

"I don't doubt it," I said. "But right now, let's kick the King's butt."

"I'll get the flare gun," Bob said.

Bob got the flare gun, then we took the blankets of food over to the camper, trying to make sure no one was watching, but not worrying too much about it. It was most likely a formality anyway. I didn't really expect to be coming back. If our plan failed, the Popcorn King would have plans for us—lunch, probably.

Fact was, I figured our time was running out anyway. So far the King had been patient,

waiting for us to get hungry enough to join his flock, or maybe not thinking about us at all. He didn't seem to have any master plan. Feed the flock, and gradually feed on the flock. An insane demigod without true design; a voyeur of human destruction; the Jim Jones of Popcorn.

When we got back to the bus Sam was sitting on the bed beside Mable. "Died," he said. "Just gave her buttermilk-biscuit recipe and died. Didn't quite make it to the part about how long to keep them little buddies in the oven."

Bob nodded and went to the front of the bus.

"You did this, cowboy," Sam yelled at Bob's back.

Bob pulled the door lever and went outside. I went after him. He was leaning against the bus, the shotgun cradled in his arms. He was watching the movie. It was *The Toolbox Murders*.

I went up and leaned beside him. "You saved my life. I'm sorry you had to shoot the woman, but thanks for saving my life."

"I never said I was sorry for shooting her," Bob said, but he didn't look at me.

We leaned that way for a time. "Movie any good?" I asked.

"It's all right," Bob said, "but I've seen it."

I laughed and clapped him on the shoulder. "Come on," I said. "We've got things to do."

We went back inside the bus.

Sam looked at me and snarled. "Damn you, if you'd just gone on and cooperated, we'd have eaten you and things would have gone on like they were . . . least for a while."

"I have days when I'm obstreperous," I said.

"To hell with this talk," Bob said. "We're going on _wwith it, Sam, with or without you even if I have to teach myself how to use that torch by trial and error and let Jack drive the bus. So how's it going to be? You in or out?"

Sam turned to look at Mable. He closed her eyes with his fingertips, then looked at us. "I'm in," he said.

Bob nodded. "Now . . . what would you like to do with her body?"

There was no way to bury her, and options were few. We could toss her into the acidic

blackness or we could leave her on the bus to burn when it exploded. (If it exploded. Just because we had a plan didn't mean I had a lot of faith in it.)

Sam preferred to leave her on the bus. He got some cans of sardines out of her overcoat pockets (he wasn't so sentimental as to leave those), and put some old clothes on top of her to help her catch fire. He took some plastic plumbing pipe, couplings and pipe glue, used a hacksaw to make her an artificial hand. Or that's what it was supposed to be. It looked like a dull garden rake to me. He tied it to the stump of her arm with some rounds of twine and a twisted coat hanger.

Finished, he put a blanket over her and tied it and Mable to the bed with some strips of old sheet, changed out of his festive-tie shirt and put back on the one with a black tie. He said some words over her, then changed back to the shirt with the red tie painted on. I presumed that was also his welding shirt.

"Sam," I said, "I'm not one to meddle, but I've been meaning to ask you. Why do you paint those ties on your shirts?"

"Can't tie the knots," he said.

Made sense.

We ate some sardines, talked the plan over one more time, then Sam and I lowered the dolly with the welding equipment on it out the back of the bus.

"Go for it," Bob said. We shook hands and he gave me the flare pistol. I slipped it into my belt next to the revolver.

"Let's get on with it," Sam said. "I ain't gonna shake hands with nobody."

I took hold of the dolly, cocked it back and started pushing it across the lot at a dog trot. Sam ran alongside me, wheezing like a tire going flat.

3

We weren't too worried about the Popcorn King noticing us. We were a good distance away, and hey, it wasn't like there wasn't something strange going on all the time anyway.

But the closer we got to the little fence that led out to the stretch of concrete where The Orbit symbol was, the more nervous I became. My courage began to falter, and I wanted to go back to the truck and get into the sardines and eat those, and just hope for the best.

Still, I kept running, and Sam was staying up with me. We saw the Christians here and there, standing around, watching, wondering, I suppose. None of them waved. Stuck up.

I looked toward the concession. It glowed beautifully against the blackness, like some exotic gem on black velvet. One of those little winds that kicked up out of nowhere from time to time started going and it carried the stink of the no-longer-used toilets to me, and the smell was as hard and mean as a head-on collision.

In the window of the concession I could see the bodies hanging, like big fish in a market. Some of them were little more than skeletons.

We came to the wooden fence and Sam got up there and straddled it, and I pushed the dolly up where he could get hold of it and twist it over, lower it to the other side.

Sam followed after it and I took his place, straddling the fence. I looked out at the great tin fence surrounding the drive-in (except this area that led out to The Orbit symbol), and saw the cruel blackness beyond. I saw some of the screens and their movies and wondered how they had gone on so long without being destroyed. But then I knew. They were light. They were holy shrines to a mad god. I wondered how it would be if we managed to destroy the concession here in Lot A and the three movies went out. Once in darkness, would it all end, like bad dreams tumbling down the throat of sleep?

Nope. Lot B would be the center then, for how ever long that lasted. Lot B with its empty concession and its manned film room, carrying on with or without the King until there was mass murder and/or starvation and finally over there the lights went out as well.

I could see people moving around the drive-in, a number of them moving toward the concession. Probably time for the next meal of popcorn vomit. I figured some of the patrons could see me up there, but it most likely wouldn't excite them much. Many had gone over the fences and out into the blackness, and in their eyes I'd just be one more quitter.

"You gonna lay an egg up there, or what?" Sam said.

I went on over and took hold of the dolly and started pushing it out on the spur toward the

symbol. It was brighter out there because of the lightning, and the ozone was so thick it smelled like a wound being cauterized.

The spur narrowed as we went and the ebony pudding was close on either side of us, and I thought about how easy it would be to end it all. I mean it was right there taunting me, inviting me to freedom. But I kept pushing.

When finally we made the tall, tapering pole that held the symbol, I looked up at the tentacles (liked to think I could see suckers on one side of them, like on an octopus) and the lightning coming out of them, watched the bolts strike the symbol, spin off and engulf the concession. Looking up at that great light, those tentacles, made me feel small and weak and hated.

Sam tried to arc a spark on the torch, but wasn't having much luck. He talked to it. "Come on, now, be good. Come on. Hot A'mighty, that's the way."

A spark jumped to the torch and he turned it up and the flame licked out and he put it to the pole, began to cut through. "Might as well get comfy," he said. "This is going to take a while."

I remembered it was not wise to look at a torch without goggles because a spark could jump to your eyes, and I didn't want to watch Sam work without goggles. The way he was squinting at the flame made me ache. I turned and looked at the blackness, but that was too dreary and it had a siren's call, so I turned and looked at the fence and the back and top of the concession. I could see the upper half of one of the screens beyond that and I tried to watch the movie, *Night of the Living Dead*, but it seemed too much like reality and I knew all the lines by heart. I closed my eyes and tried to think of nothing, but there was just too much in my head for that. I wondered what Bob was doing and how he felt sitting there in the bus, waiting for our signal. I wondered if he really would jump. I figured he might have already turned the bus toward the concession, and he would be watching the symbol, waiting for our flare. God, I hoped the bus would start.

Then I didn't think about that anymore. I thought of Randy and Willard and I felt pity, something I was afraid I might have lost, then there were tears in my eyes and they might have been for Randy and Willard.

"Getting there," Sam said.

I thought, no, the tears are not for Randy and Willard, they are for all the good dreams I've dreamed, for all the good gods, who do not exist, for all the good in man that is only social conditioning to keep the bigger man from breaking his head. Yes, that was what I was weeping for, mankind. The fact that *man is not kind* at all. But then I knew that was malarkey and that I was weeping for myself, all my loneliness, disappointment, the awareness of my mortality, the realization that the universe was a dark, empty place and life was nothing more than a carnival ride and that when the bell sounded to end the ride

and you got off, you stepped out into nothing. It was all over then, all there was was ended, flesh and soul might as well have never been.

Even the B movie gods could not be proved except in my dreams. Maybe they were not gods at all but some sort of life-form that was far enough advanced that they served the purpose of gods—counterfeit deities. Alien filmmakers. Youthful aliens who have had an interesting accident with their chemistry set. Or nothing more than my need for there to be reason and design where there was none; I so desperately wanted there to be gods and magic, even if they were bad.

"Timber," yelled Sam.

I turned and looked up and the pole was starting to go, dragging its lightning after it.

"The flare," Sam said.

I pulled the flare gun, lifted it and fired at an angle, not knowing the height of our sky. The flare went bright red and pretty against the dark and the strands of blue lightning. I dropped the gun and started running for the fence, Sam behind me, wheezing. Before we made it there, the symbol came down, and it lost its lightning; it was like the lightning was bubble gum and it had been stretched too far and had popped free. The symbol came down on the concession with a crunch, and there was a momentary crackling and sizzling that hurt my ears and made my flesh feel warm, then debris flew and the lights of the projectors went out.

I got hold of the fence and pulled myself up, straddled it. There was still plenty of light from the lightning overhead, and I could see that Bob had gotten a late start, but was coming. The old bus whined like an unpleasant child, the lights shone like miniature suns. The bus hit the concession with a screech and a blast, and a rush of flame went through it, blew the windows out and wrapped around the roof, kicked the back door open. All manner of crap propelled out the open door and went sailing, including the bed Mable was strapped to. It skidded across the asphalt, twisted sideways and struck a Volkswagen, ricocheted back toward the burning bus, stopped spinning halfway there, sat smoldering like a cheap cigar. The blanket had been torn partially free, and Mable's arm with the plumbing-pipe hand came out from under it and struck the ground, lay there like a stiff white spider unable to run. The recipe cards had also escaped from beneath the blanket and they were fluttering down. Some had been flame-kissed and were nothing now but blackened wisps.

I saw Bob. He had jumped. He was on his feet and limping toward me. He had the shotgun and he was still wearing his hat. I felt like cheering, but before I could celebrate, the debris shifted, boards lifted and dropped as the Popcorn King stood up out of the rubble. He was charred from head to foot. That part of his head that was the popcorn cup had a lick of flame fluttering out of it like a feather in a fez. A board had gone through his top chest. Glass poked out of his flesh. He looked very unhappy, and he was looking

directly at me.

He reached up with his top right hand and pulled the board out of his chest and tossed it aside. He started walking out of the debris, toward me.

"Get away from there," Bob yelled. "Run."

But I was frozen, watching the King. He was moving slowly, staggering. He no longer had the blue glow. He looked more like a bad acrobat act, a little guy on a big guy's shoulders.

The King opened his mouth and coughed out smoke. He fell to his knees and the tattoos dripped off him like melting licorice and formed a dark pool on the ground. The King lay face down and quit moving.

I got down off the fence and went over there. I could hear Sam calling to me to help him over, asking what was happening. I could hear Bob telling me to run, but I didn't pay either of them any mind.

I bent down to the King and whispered, "Randy?"

The head lifted slightly. The single eye looked at me. I couldn't tell if there was recognition there or not. Maybe it was just confusion. A tooth fell out of his mouth and clinked on the asphalt, was followed by a little lake of vomit in which one of the cyclopean popcorns floated; the eye was dead and filmed over.

"Eat and be fed, brother," the King's upper mouth said.

"I don't think so," I said.

"Turning down a sick man," the King said, and it was the lower mouth this time. "That's a hell of a note."

He laid his head down gently, his face in the vomit. His head was turned so I could still see the single eye. He opened his top left hand and there was a crumpled paper skull in it. "Second-rate materials. Second-rate effects," Randy's voice said. "I could have done better with household supplies."

The one eye closed. The Popcorn King was dead.

But Mable wasn't. About that time she screamed.

4

When I turned, I saw that at Mable's scream Sam had made it over the fence and sprinted over to her. Bob was ahead of him, tearing off the smoldering blanket. Sam and Bob got arms around her and lifted her up and Sam said, "Oh, honey bugs, I thought you were croaked. Done gone to be with Jesus."

Mable was clutching one of the recipe cards in her good hand. She looked at it there in the light of the burning concession and the lightning overhead. "Polk salad," she said. "Now that's a good one, if you get it when the shoots are young. Don't, you might as well cook you up a mess of Johnson grass."

I started over to join them, stopped. The patrons of both lots were coming out of the shadows, into the light of the great fire, coming toward us. A more unpleasant crowd I'd never seen. The patrons from Lot A no longer had their movies, and neither lot had their King and their popcorn.

Sam and Bob saw me looking, and they swiveled Mable around so that they were all facing the crowd. I pulled the pistol from my belt and held it against my leg and walked over there.

Bob and Sam gently lowered Mable to the ground. She sat there reading the polk salad recipe, nodding over it.

"It ain't over," Sam said. "It ain't never over."

"The King," went the cry from the crowd. "The King," Then they swarmed us. I heard Bob's shotgun roar and I got off one shot—and missed. In a crowd, no less. Jack the deadly gunman. Sweaty, hot bodies piled on me and I struck the ground hard and someone said an obscenity in my face and some other smart aleck twisted the gun out of my hand and hit me with it, which is kind of humiliating, getting clubbed with your own gun, I mean. Next the crowd started dribbling me around the lot with fists and feet and I got beyond pain and entered into nice, dark, cozy unconsciousness.

But that didn't last long.

Lot A built a bigger and better fire out of the smoldering lumber of the concession stand so they would have plenty of light to work by, but they managed to save enough of the lumber for cooking and building.

What they built was crosses.

They got some nails out of the wreckage and someone had a hammer, and they stripped us naked and held us down and crucified us. That hurt bad enough, but when they dropped our crosses into the holes the concession pilings had been in, that was real pain.

It shook my entire body until I felt as if the tips of my teeth would bulb up and squirt blood.

They packed the holes tight with junk from the concession, then piled lumber around the bottoms of the crosses and looked up at us like chefs contemplating the larder.

The nails hurt something awful, but worse was the racking pain throughout the body and the pressure it put on the lungs. Now and then I had to make my legs work so I could force myself up on the nail through my feet and get some good breaths. I'd stay that way long as I could until the muscles in my feet cramped and I had to let go. Then I'd have trouble breathing again, and I'd get my strength back just enough before my lungs collapsed, and I'd push up once more. I had just thought Coach Murphy's calisthenics in PE were tough.

They got the Popcorn King's body, put it on a pole and stuck it upright in that part of the wreckage that wasn't on fare. The King had gone seriously ugly. The tattoos had fallen off him and lay like ink pools on the ground where he had lain. That part of the body that had been Willard was pink again; he had even lost the tattoos he had come to the drive-in with.

Members of the crowd took a blanket and put it over the King's head so his face would show, and they took a nail and nailed through it into the top of his hat so it wouldn't fall off. Then they stretched the blanket behind him so that he looked like he was standing there wearing a hooded robe. One young woman with spiky hair claimed she had been possessed by the King's spirit, or some such thing (I wasn't in the mood to take it all in, actually), and she floundered around and did a kind of Jezebel dance by the body, and after a while she let her voice go deep, though it cracked some, and she gave the impression the King was talking through her. The crowd liked that, and she got behind the body, under the stretched-out blanket, and patrons would come by and ask the King questions and she'd answer for him and everyone was pleased with this oracle.

They did this until it got boring and they turned back to us and started piling more lumber. One of the pilers was especially annoying. He kept singing "Mama's Little Baby Loves Short'nin' Bread," and he couldn't carry a tune in a safety-deposit box. It just wasn't the way for a man to die. On a cross, about to be cooked, with some idiot singing "Short'nin' Bread."

I could turn my head and see the others to my left. Sam, Bob and Mable. Mable, who had lost her plumbing-pipe hand, had gotten nailed through the wrist a couple of times and I think she was bleeding worse than the rest of us. She cashed in early, her last words being something about how to wrap tamale meat in corn shucks. I kept expecting her to come alive again and start on some other recipe, but this time she was dead for real. Her shapeless white body hung out from the cross like a swollen grub.

When Sam knew she was gone he went to preaching. Said something about Jesus and the thieves on either side of him.

"Ain't stole nothing in my life," Bob said. " 'Cept maybe your bus and sardines, and I don't think that counts."

Sam went on with his story, said those suckers on either side of Jesus had repented and Jesus had saved their lives and they went on to Paradise. Being as I was in the thieves' position, I could sympathize with their line of thinking, but just having had a rather uninspiring religious experience, I declined to join Sam in Paradise.

But Sam kept at it. I couldn't figure where he was getting the wind. I could hardly breathe at all. I reckon he felt like a big wheel because he was in the middle. He preached for quite some time before his mouth went dry and he couldn't say anything else, which I was grateful for.

I blacked out off and on, and once I had what might have been a dream. In the dream the lightning overhead ceased and out of the blackness came a face, an indescribable face, but a face that had the look of someone, or something, with a mission. He opened his toothy mouth and roared, "Over budget, you fools. Over budget. Cut. Wrap." Then the face withdrew into the black and there was light. The dream ended.

I opened my eyes and saw below that the patrons were piling more wood around me, and that one of them had a piece of board wrapped in a shirt and it was on fire. He was about to put it to my pile of lumber. I hoped fire was quick. I had read somewhere that it was a tough way to go, and that smoke inhalation killed you first. I decided I would breathe a lot of smoke quickly, get it over with.

And then there was a change. I looked up. The lightning was still there and so was the blackness, but there was something bright moving behind it, a red glow that was expanding.

I looked down at my captors, at the faces of those close to the fire and at the shadowy shapes of those beyond; the more clearly outlined, if distant, shapes over in Lot B, where the movies still rolled. They all seemed to be looking up.

I lifted my head again. It wasn't just delirium. It was lighter up there and growing lighter still. Then it looked as if a great apple broke through the chocolate pudding, but it was the comet tearing through the poison sky. Down it came, dragging daylight behind it, white clouds, the sun.

The drive-in went red and the comet smiled.

Up it whipped again, this time pulling the blackness with it. Up, up, up and away, until it was not even a speck against the bright blue sky, and there was nothing left but a fine warm day with the smell of trees in the air and the touch of hot sun on our faces.

It was nice, but I didn't feel like a picnic or nothing.

The patrons just sort of stood there for a while, marveling at the world beyond the tin fence.

There were lots of trees visible. Big trees. The guy with the burning board dropped it—not on the wood pile, fortunately. People began wandering off, some began to run. Cars were cranked.

Engines seemed to be working fine. Like a line of insects the cars and trucks rolled out of the drive-in. Some people whose cars had been totaled walked. Some hot-wired and took other cars. Everyone was in a hurry to get out of there. They didn't mention getting us down. No one waved or shot us the finger as they went by.

A tall, skinny man with long hair and a hoe handle for a cane came up. He looked up at Bob.

"How's it going?"

"Hanging around," Bob said, not missing a beat.

"Maybe you'd like down?" Crier said.

"That would be right nice," Bob said.

Crier got down on his hands and knees and started pulling the junk out of the piling holes and pretty soon the crosses were wobbling and then Crier pushed us down. When I hit the ground I thought my arms and legs would come off.

Crier went away for a while and when he came back he had a hammer. He used the claw end to free us. It hurt like hell. He got Mable free last, since she wasn't in any hurry.

"I broke into your camper to get this hammer," Crier said to Bob. "I figured you'd have one. Hope you don't mind."

"Nah," Bob said, "it's insured."

My hands and feet hurt so bad I couldn't move them and I couldn't walk, least not without help. My legs seemed to have died. Sam looked walleyed and had gone to singing "The Old Rugged Cross" in a whispery kind of voice, and that wasn't helping my nerves.

"What you driving?" Bob said.

"Well," Crier said, "this is kind of odd, but I can't remember what car I came in. Can't remember who I came with."

"Don't matter," Bob said. "We'll take the camper. You can drive, can't you?"

"Is it an automatic?"

"Yep."

"I can drive. I remember that much. But you don't look like you got a key on you."

"There's one underneath the dash in a magnetic box. Doors aren't locked."

"Okay," Crier said. "I'll drive it over here and pick you up."

"You wouldn't just drive off and leave us, would you?" Bob said.

"Gone this far for you, might as well go the whole hog."

When Crier came back with the truck, Bob said, "There's some blankets in the back. There's a knife back there too. We can cut a hole in the blankets and slip them over our heads."

"Why the trouble?" Crier asked. "You boys got dates?"

"Just a thing I prefer, if you'll do it," Bob said.

Crier found the blankets and the sardines and the knife. He brought the sardines out and we ate all we could stand, Crier feeding them to us, as our hands didn't work so good.

He cut the blankets and pulled them over our heads. Sam didn't even notice. He was trying to sing "When the Roll Is Called Up Yonder."

"What about her?" I asked, nodding at Mable.

"Dead, ain't she?" Crier said.

"Maybe you could pile some boards on her or something, set her on fire if you had a mind to. She ought to have some kind of burial."

"Ain't you something," Crier said.

"And the Popcorn King," I said. "He ought not just be left."

"You're kind of tight with everybody, ain't you?" Crier said.

"Before he was that, he was two friends of ours," Bob said. "I know it's a bother, but could you?"

"Hell," Crier said. "Good thing you boys are paying by the hour." He piled some boards on Mable and set fire to her and she caught poorly at first, but after a time was blazing away. It didn't take so much to get the Popcorn King burning. He caught quick and flared like a torch, the blanket whipping to flame immediately. Black smoke churned up from the corpses and floated up into the clear sky and faded.

"Now," Crier said. "Any little ole chores you boys want performed? Just anything would be all right. Maybe you'd like to see if I can make a few laps around the lots."

"Would you?" Bob said.

"You know what you can do," Crier said.

Crier helped Bob and Sam into the back of the truck and led me around to the cab. It seemed to take forever and my feet felt like raw stumps. I had Crier on one side holding me up, and the truck on the other. I touched the truck with my elbow because my hand wouldn't take it. I still couldn't open or close either one of them. They looked like talons.

Inside the cab, Crier started the truck again, leaned on the wheel and looked around. "Strange, I feel funny leaving."

"Maybe you can get over it," I said.

"Maybe."

"One thing, Crier," I said. "You saw what that crowd was about to do to us. I know you couldn't have stopped them, but would you have helped eat us? Could you have done that?"

"Been the first in line if I could have. No sense missing a free meal, even if it is made up of a couple of guys I kind of like."

"Well," I said, "that's one way of looking at things."

Epilogue

I leaned against the door and kept my sore hands in my lap. As we started rolling, I looked around at all the vacant cars, many of them wrecked. There were also lots of bones. You could see that clearly now. We drove by one car with its roof decorated with human skulls wearing popcorn sacks, and there was another car with a baby seat sitting on top of it with a little skeleton in the seat holding a rattle.

I glanced through the gun rack and the back glass, saw Bob and Sam stretched on the floor of the camper. Bob was up on one elbow, gingerly managing sardines from a can Crier had opened and left for him. Sam wasn't moving. Later Bob told me he died before we got out of the lot.

We went through the exit, and though the highway was there, the yellow line had faded and the concrete had buckled and grass grew up through it in spots. Nothing else was remotely familiar. I wasn't in the least bit surprised. I remembered what Sam had said: "It ain't over yet. It ain't never over." No, it wasn't over. It was time for the second feature. A lost world movie. As we drove, a massive shape stepped out of the jungle foliage at the right of the highway and Crier eased on the brake and we watched. It was a *Tyrannosaurus rex* covered in batlike parasites, their wings opening and closing slowly, like contented butterflies sipping nectar from a flower.

The dinosaur looked at us in a disinterested way, crossed the highway and was swallowed by the jungle.

"I don't think this leads home anymore," Crier said, and eased forward again, started picking up speed. I looked in the truck's wing mirror and I could see the drive-in in it, one of the screens in Lot B. The projector might still be running back there, but if it was, I couldn't make out a picture. The screen looked like nothing more than an enormous slice of Wonder Bread.

CUT/FADE-OUT

Roll Credits

JOE R. LANSDALE is a full-time writer and a lifelong resident of East Texas. He is the author of five novels and more short stories than anyone wants to count. He generally writes Westerns, science fiction, mysteries, horror, and fantasy and has appeared in most of the genre magazines. His most recent Doubleday books are an award-winning anthology, *Best of the West*, and a Double D Western novel, *The Magic Wagon*. Mr. Lansdale lives in Nacogdoches, Texas, with his wife, son, and daughter.