

It's more than just
a scary movie....
...it's death.



Shadow Show

Brad Strickland

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Brad Strickland

AN [*e-reads*]BOOK

New York, NY

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*There were bad times
And there were good times
And this for three friends who shared them all:*

*Grant Keene
Gary Kerley
Michael Kerley*

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MOON DREAMS

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A Note from the Author

I would be remiss if I did not tug the reader's sleeve at this point and murmur a few thanks. This book could never have been written without the help and support of many people. First, the staffs of three libraries worked diligently to help me make sure my memories of the way things used to be weren't too far off the mark: thanks, then, to the lovely people who man the desks at the

Chestatee Regional Library, the Gainesville College Library, and the University of Georgia Library. Those are nice places to hang out, gang. Confession time: I know nothing whatever about automobiles. For lending expertise, thanks to Tom Deitz and Grant Keene — any automotive errors herein are officially mine. These guys did their part. For patience, advice, and help when I needed it, thanks to my agent, Richard Curtis, and my editor at NAL/Signet, John Silbersack. These fellows earned their pay. Last, as always, many, many thanks to my wife Barbara and my children, Jonathan and Amy, for their forbearance, patience, and love.

And a cautionary word: Gaither, Georgia, is wholly fictitious. The other towns mentioned in the book exist (I think Atlanta is for real), but Gaither and its denizens are altogether imaginary. Any resemblances between my town and characters and any real town or people are unintentional and coincidental.

Part I

The Marquee

One

*OCTOBER 1988 — HARTSFIELD INTERNATIONAL
AIRPORT ATLANTA:*

11:43 P.M.

Alan Kirby had been away from Georgia for only three days, but in those three days the weather had turned right around.

The early-morning air of October 11, the day he had flown out, had been warm and dense as moist cotton: now, late in the evening of October 13, his lightweight suit did little to keep out the chill. He yawned hugely as he stood on a concrete island, waiting with a straggle of other passengers for the shuttle to take them out to the remote parking areas. Kirby's right arm felt heavy with the weight of his one small suitcase. The fluorescent light overhead burned his eyes, and every twenty seconds or so a jet slanted up into the night sky, roaring loudly enough to make him wince.

With the thumb and forefinger of his left hand, Kirby pushed his glasses up on the bridge of his nose and massaged his closed eyelids, feeling the abrasive grit of lost sleep against his eyes. Well, at least he had cut a deal with his publishers, if not the deal he wanted. Money would be coming in. The dentist could go ahead with Laura's braces. Janet could get rid of her decade-old car and buy a new one, or at least a new used one. They could buy groceries for a little longer. And all he had to do was crank out another paperback adventure of Chris Slate for Fairway Books, write another hardcover ghost story for the same line, and finish *The Smart Boat Buyer's Guide* for Marketplace Publishers. An easy year's work.

He jangled the change in his right trouser pocket and debated phoning home. No, it was almost midnight, and on a school night;

no use waking Jean and the kids just to tell them he'd be home in an hour or so. A shuttle bus pulled by in an eye-burning reek of diesel fuel, but the bus was not his: this one bore the blue and gray logo of a downtown hotel. Kirby shifted his weight and idly looked at the other three people sharing the island with him: four people, if you counted the infant. A swarthy man, probably Cuban, leaned against one of the concrete pillars, his liquid brown eyes anxious over a short, straight nose and a thick black mustache. The man was perhaps thirty, slightly built, dark-haired, jumpy. He wore a long-sleeved white Oxford shirt open at the neck and khaki work pants, and he carried no luggage. He kept his chin low, hugged himself, and shivered as if he were freezing. Standing a little away from the man was a Career Woman. Trim in a tweedy gray business suit, she carried a folded Wall Street Journal under her left arm, and she stood in a scatter of overnight case, small suitcase, and attaché case. Her brown hair was done up in a bun, from which a few strands had escaped to trail along her neck. Over the tops of half-frame spectacles she looked not at but through Kirby, and she kept glancing at her watch every two minutes.

The last one waiting was the woman with the baby. Ordinary and dumpy, a white woman somewhere just short of thirty, she wore a navy-blue skirt, white blouse, and a pilled red sweater. Like the baby she carried on her left shoulder, she had curly blond hair. The baby, certainly not yet six months old, was asleep, one hand balled against its mouth, the other clutched absently in its hair. The woman had no luggage other than a pink quilted vinyl diaper bag. She stood near enough to Kirby for him to smell the powdery, sourish odor of the baby.

He looked at his watch: 12:01. The shuttle was slow. A jet blasted overhead again, and the baby stirred. It opened blue eyes, caught his gaze. He smiled at it absently in the way you smile at other people's babies.

It opened its mouth in a fierce grin and showed him its teeth.

Kirby gasped and started. The woman looked over her shoulder at him, her eyes blank. The baby's mouth and eyes had closed again. Its little Cupid's bow lips were smiling.

Kirby, still startled, was the last one on. The baby and its mother had taken the seat behind the driver. Kirby went all the way to the rear of the vehicle so he wouldn't have to see them.

The shuttle hissed in. Kirby, still startled, was the last one on. The baby and its mother had taken the seat behind the driver. Kirby went all the way to the rear of the vehicle so he wouldn't have to see them.

Teeth. A row of white curved teeth, pearly and sharp, not like teeth at all, really, but like — like the claws of a cat. Two dozen teeth at least, protruding from pink little gums, clutching inward —

Kirby groaned. God, don't let it be starting again. Not now. *He amended his inward prayer:* Not ever.

The shuttle lurched forward. He looked out the window, across the sea of car tops. The bus made five stops, and he was the last passenger off. His car, a three-year-old Dodge wagon, was where he had left it. He got in, started the engine, and left the lot at twenty minutes past midnight.

Driving north toward Atlanta on I-85, he turned on the radio. He punched the third button from the left for WSB, the station he habitually listened to while driving through the city. During the day they had good traffic information. At night he found the noise the least objectionable on the AM dial.

Past the gold-domed capitol building, north, under the Peachtree MARTA station. Sparse traffic this late. By a quarter to one, Kirby was well north of the city, settling in to the last leg of his drive. A tractor-trailer rumbled past in the fast lane, and the radio signal faded out.

He punched a couple of other buttons, trying to pick up another station. Though WSB should have been clear and strong —

The radio laughed at him.

Kirby jerked his hand away as though the pushbuttons had glowed red-hot. The radio laughed again, a papery, staticky hissing sound. "This time," it said, "you will die."

Kirby snapped the radio off.

"One of your friends," the implacable voice went on, a voice he remembered from years past, a voice heard not in his ears but in his head, "is already mine."

"Shut up!" Kirby screamed. He suddenly became aware that the tractor-trailer, only a few hundred yards ahead of him, had stopped dead. He jammed on the brakes. The wagon screamed and slewed left, then right. It came to a stop with its hood only inches from the rear of the truck. The truck crept forward at five miles an hour. Kirby followed, shaking.

He passed a nasty accident, one small red sports car split in half, a heavier American car — an Olds? — upside down on the median. Troopers clustered, blue lights flashed, and someone waved him past the carnage.

The radio remained silent for the rest of the drive. Nothing else happened.

Until he reached the exit ramp.

It led down off the interstate into pine thickets and darkness. He followed it, sick at heart, nauseated. He had a feeling, now, that something was about to happen.

The mother and child stepped out from the shoulder of the ramp. She stood in front of the car. He couldn't miss her, he knew he couldn't, even as his foot stamped the brake —

She threw the baby at him —

He closed his eyes as the body slammed against the windshield —

Opened them to see one tiny, pudgy hand gripping the wiper, which was pulled up, out from the blood-smeared windshield —

The car crunched over the mother's body —

Kirby stamped hard on the accelerator, left a patch, sped to the foot of the ramp, and as suddenly jammed on the brakes.

The small body lost its grip on the wiper and went hurtling out into the dark, somewhere ahead of the car's lights.

Kirby reached for the flashlight in the glove compartment, got out, flashed it behind him. No body. The wiper was in place, unwarped. And no trace of an impact showed on the front of the car. He did not go into the dark to seek the baby. He drove to the west, across a truss bridge over a dark expanse of water, an inlet of the sprawling Lake Lanier.

Home was only six miles away. He parked his car next to his wife's ten-year-old Toyota, got out, and stepped lively over to the front door. He thought he heard something rustling behind him in the dark, nearly dropped his keys, retrieved them, got the door unlocked, got inside, slammed it again, locked it, and stood breathing hard.

The house was too quiet. Oh, God, not the kids.

But ten-year-old Jay and twelve-year-old Laura were sound asleep. Janet woke up long enough to give him a sleepy kiss. He went into the kitchen, took the phone off the hook, and dialed a familiar number.

She answered before one ring had finished. "Alan?"

"Yes. You, too?"

"One of the dreams. It was bad. Are you all right?"

He exhaled, a relieved sigh, and hooked a chair over from the counter with his foot. "Yes. You?"

"Another false alarm all the way around."

"I shouldn't have left town."

"Nonsense. You can't be a prisoner here."

"I wonder about — about the others."

"So do I. What time is it now?"

He looked at his watch. "Nearly two."

"You get to bed."

"Will you be all right?"

She laughed. "As much as I have been in the past thirty years." She paused and whispered, "I love you."

"I love you, too," he replied, so softly that his wife, had she been awake and in the same room, could hardly have heard him.

She hung up.

Kirby got up from the kitchen chair, hung up the telephone, and stared out the kitchen window. The town was down there, just about a mile distant. From this vantage point it looked almost the same as it had when he was a boy. You didn't see the differences so much at night. The businesses on the Square had almost all changed, though. The store his father had owned was long gone, in its place a parking lot for the office block that had been a hotel. And up the street — well, the theater building was still there, but it was empty, or almost so. A furniture store was using it as a makeshift warehouse.

The lights around the Square were what you noticed most of all at night. They were blue now, not yellow as in the old days. Mercury vapor had exorcised the shadowy ghosts cast by the old incandescents. The Square looked safe at night now.

But there had been a time . . .

Kirby caught his breath. A pale shape was making its slow way up the slope of the backyard toward the house, crawling with deliberation, with obvious intent. He thought of the baby, of the teeth it had shown him —

No. The shape came within the rectangle of light cast by the kitchen window, looked up, and meowed. It was only Long John, the piratical

cat. Kirby opened the kitchen door, let Long John in (the cat writhed and twined between his feet, purring like a hovering helicopter), and opened a can of Little Friskies tuna. Except for the black fur patch over his left eye, Long John was truly silver, not a stripe on his long gray body, and he tucked into the cat food as if he had been long at sea on short rations.

Kirby was not sleepy. He sat in the same kitchen chair and watched Long John eat. When the cat had cleaned the plate and had washed himself, he came and jumped up in Kirby's lap. He smelled strongly of fish. Kirby tickled his chin. "See any ghosts tonight, L.J.?" he asked.

The cat shook his head, his ears making a soft burring sound.

"Then you're one up on me." Kirby grinned. He felt better now. Maybe it wasn't starting again, maybe this was no rebirth but only a stirring, a blind malevolence reaching across the years to claw impotently at him. Something like this had happened half a dozen times before, a crazy nightmare world of hallucination breaking into his everyday perception. True, the nightmares had almost killed him once or twice, coming the closest in a steamy Asian jungle when he thought for a moment that an enemy soldier was his father, clamped in the grip of a tall, thin, inhuman man. But that had passed, too. Now, if the pattern held, there should be still another telephone call, and then he could go to bed — if indeed it was not starting again, if his luck held. He hoped his luck would hold.

Because that last time, the first time, had been more than enough for him. He held the cat, stroked its head, and trusted himself enough to think back to that bad season, to that fall thirty-one years ago, and to the summer before it, the last summer of his life when he had been completely happy

Two

1

It is a clear, unseasonably cool August night in 1957 in the cotton-mill village of New Haven, not far north of the town of Gaither, Georgia.

Harmon Presley, a duly appointed deputy of Frye County, sits in his year-old Ford patrol car, parked on the shoulder of Highway 199, near its intersection with Mill Street. It is twenty minutes to twelve. A couple of hundred yards to the east is the mill itself, and its parking lot. In twenty minutes the mill shift will change and Presley will get out of the patrol car, stand in the intersection, and direct traffic. But his mind tonight is not on law enforcement. It is on his belly.

This morning he weighed two hundred and thirteen pounds by the bathroom scales, up from last month's two hundred and eight. His uniform pants are tight in the waist and in the butt now. He knows he will have to do something about his weight before long. He takes a stick of Wrigley's Spearmint Gum from a pack in his pocket, unwraps it, thrusts it into his mouth. As his jaws work, his big hands are also busy: he folds the silver inner liner around the yellow outer wrapper, doubles, it, doubles it again, working with speed and delicacy. He makes a neat aluminum package of the wrappers, the size of his thumbnail. He drops it in the ashtray to keep company with twenty others. Presley does not smoke. He cut out smoking nine years ago when he took Coach Crossland's pregame lectures seriously. He never started again.

His problem is food, not cigarettes. It's Eula's fault, he decides. His wife is too accomplished a cook for his own good. He sighs, releasing a cloud of minty scent. The mill, off to his right, hums. It is a red-brick building as long as an aircraft carrier, five stories tall, and its noise is

the most constant fact of life in this part of Gaither. Inside the doors, in the humid air of the plant itself, the sound is a physical pressure, overwhelming, penetrating, felt in the bones. It is the reason that most mill hands go deaf in the upper registers before they hit forty. But out here, it's almost soothing, partly electric, partly the distant crash of a waterfall. It is so utterly familiar that, if it ceases, as it sometimes does in power failures, people all through the mill village wake up and wonder what has happened.

Presley checks his watch: 11:49. Already a few cars are showing up, battered old Plymouths, Chevys, and Fords, a few cars even older, banged-up Hudsons, Studebakers, or Kaisers. They turn off the highway, go east on Mill Street, then turn left into the mill parking lot. There they will wait, engines blatting, puffing exhaust fumes into the night air, until the departing workers clear spaces for them. Presley could get out now, but he'd rather wait. Incoming workers are slow. Sometimes if he is out of his own car, they roll down their windows and speak to him. They were the ones who started calling him "Elvis," a name he hates, since he thinks of the singer as a white man who imitates niggers. Now almost everyone in town has called him "Elvis" at least once, but always in the daytime, and in public. Presley does not think many men in this town would dare to call him that face-to-face, in private.

The mill parking lot is a dark stretch splashed with round yellow islands of illumination. The lights are incandescent, reflected by fluted iron shades. They attract moths, hard beetles, and bats; around every light Presley can see a cloud of the night fliers now. That's another reason for not getting out of the car a moment before he has to. He hates bugs and bats.

11:57. Presley sighs, picks up his hat from the front seat, jams it on his head, and climbs out. The Ford patrol car squeaks a little on its springs. He draws a lungful of cool air. The weather has become a lot milder than it was the past week, ever since the storms of yesterday week broke a long hot, dry spell. Five cars show up, running in a pack. Presley, standing in the intersection, motions them in. He is on duty.

The real jam will come in five minutes, as the departing mill hands pull their cars out. They may run in companionable little groups on the way in to work, but on the way out they become individuals again, and that's where they split up and get competitive. Not that there was

much need for someone like Presley to oversee the process: mill workers were paid even less than a deputy sheriff, and they took good care of their clunky old cars. You wouldn't catch them bashing into each other, at least not until payday, and then not until they had a few drinks of bootleg liquor in them.

Twelve midnight, and one last car comes slowly south on the highway. It is the only traffic. The mill whistle blows. In a minute, the intersection will choke with cars, but the long black car coming south is, for the moment, alone. Presley waves it into the turn.

It is, he sees with dull surprise, a truly old car: a prewar Lincoln — what did they call them? — a Zephyr, long-nosed and jet black. But it fails to turn. It draws even with him, and Presley is aware of a cadaverous face behind the wheel, a face turned his way and grinning.

He whoops, lets out a startled squeak; then he is looking at the departing taillights of the black car as it heads on south toward Gaither.

Presley, standing in the intersection, trembles. The sweet taste of spearmint in his mouth suddenly seems to send waves of heat through him. He spits the wad of gum out.

Red-faced, Presley limps back to the patrol car. He slides inside, turns on the engine, and the tires kick gravel as he wrenches the Ford out onto the highway, heads it south. What the hell? Something about that guy's face. But why did he scream like that, like a damn girl? It was just some thin-faced old man grinning at him. But the way he read that grin — there was death in it.

In fact, at first he thought it was the face of a dead man, a man long dead, his head gone to skull and leathery dried skin.

Presley grunts. He will go on through town, then will turn off the highway and onto Willis Road. He and Eula live in a five-room bungalow there. He will rummage through the dirty laundry and find his other uniform trousers, and he'll leave this pair in its place. But he won't wake up Eula.

Meanwhile he drives with anger and humiliation, feeling the cold, clammy touch of piss all down his left leg.

Tuxedo Williams is returning home from an evening of adventure and amour.

He has a hangdog look about him as he trots gingerly across the wooden trestle over Cherokee Creek — gingerly because you never know when a train will come clanking across, on its way to drop off cotton wrapped in burlap and cinched with steel bands, or to pick up bolts of woven cloth from the loading docks behind the mill. He knows he will face the wrath of Mrs. Williams when he gets back to the house on Tailor Street. But — he can't help grinning to himself, despite the sickening stench of creosote rising from the trestle timbers — it was worth it.

Anyway, it seems to him, as he turns west, breasting through stands of weed chest-high, it wasn't really his fault.

Tuxedo blames it on the long-legged bitch.

Oh, he knew her for what she was the moment he caught sight of her, nearly five hours ago, just after seven o'clock. He had been lazing on the porch of the house, idly looking out on the street, every once in a while hearing the rush of traffic on the highway beyond, and under it all hearing the faint hum of the mill, out of sight at the far end of the street off to his left. He hadn't been bothering anybody. And then she came strutting by on those long legs. She was interested in him, he knew, for one thing only: his simple maleness.

She was aware of him. Oh, she wanted him, she was ready for him. Hell, he could smell her need from the porch. He rose, stretched elaborately and guiltily, and sauntered down the steps as if he wanted to go out for a breath of air before supper. Mrs. Williams, cooking in the kitchen way back in the house, didn't even notice his departure.

But the bitch did. She looked back only once, over her right shoulder, and then she walked on. Tuxedo followed her. As she cut through the Sylvesters' yard, he was close on her heels. She crossed the highway and went down the hill behind Harmony Baptist Church. Still heading east, she crossed Walnut Street — it dead-ended, nearly a mile to the north, into Mill Street — and climbed up the rise toward the railroad tracks. That was perfect. Copses of trees, mainly live oaks, grew there, on the other side of the railroad, all the way up to the crest of the ridge. Beyond the ridge lay a couple of miles of woods. No one would be up there on an August evening.

They found a private place, all right. She stopped in the center of a circle of five oak trees, dropped all pretense, and waited for him. There on the ridge, where they could rise up above the high grass if they

cared and see the mill village spread like a toy landscape to the west and north, he mounted her repeatedly, to their mutual satisfaction, over a period of several hours. When at last she started to snap at him, he, also sated, simply walked away.

By then it was ten o'clock. Tuxedo was a guard. He worked nights, and he was proud of his record. But tonight — well, if he went home, he was in for it. So he fooled around on the hillside, enjoying the evening sounds and smells. He startled a young rabbit once, and just for the hell of it he chased it a little way. Finally, toward midnight, he judged that Mrs. Williams would likely be asleep. Maybe it was safe to come home.

It is 11:58 when he breaks out of the weeds. Off to the north, Walnut Street becomes a mill-village street, edged by identical white frame houses (saltbox in style because the architect who designed them in 1904 was from Massachusetts, though Tuxedo does not know that), but here the street is almost empty. This is the stretch between the poor white mill village and a section of feed mills, freight yards, and coal yards. This is, almost, no-man's-land. On the east side, the hill rolls up to the tracks. On the west side are a few scattered houses, and off to Tuxedo's left, the intersection with Harmony Street. Tuxedo crosses and heads back up the hill, through people's backyards, behind Harmony Church.

If the proximity of the house of God strikes him with guilt, nothing about him shows it. In fact, his thoughts are on his partner of the evening, and, if anything, his grin becomes a bit more lickerish as he moves through the night.

The midnight whistle blows down at the mill, a thin sound this far away.

Tuxedo approaches Highway 199. He pauses on its verge, carefully looks both ways. You never can tell with cars. He reflects again on the bitch, wishes she were here right now, and steps onto the pavement.

The black car comes out of nowhere.

Tuxedo's muscles seem to freeze on him. He has just started to leap back when the left front tire hits him.

It crunches into his chest, forcing one startled yelp from his lungs. His heart is compressed. For one microsecond blood at astonishing pressure floods his skull, and the world flares out in a flash of white-hot internal lightning.

The second wheel hits him, and he explodes. There are no marks on the highway to show that the driver of the car tried to swerve; indeed, the twenty-foot-long smear of blood seems rather to indicate that the Lincoln Zephyr crossed the center line purposely to strike Tuxedo Williams. The body, torn and spurting blood, rolls off the shoulder of the highway and lies there cooling.

It remains there all night. In the morning Mrs. Williams will miss Tuxedo, will send her son Johnny out to find him. Johnny, after an hour of searching, will fail. He will be playing in the yard when Lamar Woodruff, a kid from the mill village, comes by to tell him what is down on the highway.

Other kids join them: Billy Touhy, Clipper Nix, Cindy Fellows. They are all under thirteen, with Lamar the oldest at twelve years and eleven months, and Cindy — also the toughest, and also the one who broke them all in to smoking — the youngest at eleven years and five days. They scavenge a cardboard box with a lid from Mr. Pike, who has a little one-room general store at the head of Paxton Street in the mill village. Then they take the body down into the bottom land of Cherokee Creek — not far, in fact, from the trestle — to bury it.

They make the coffin as neat as they can, lining it with soft grass. They wrap Tuxedo on a towel and put him in the box, which once contained twelve cans of Snowdrift Shortening. The five of them dig the grave, grunting as they turn over heavy brick-sized clods of wet red clay. When they have finished, after they have tamped down the mound over the grave, Johnny breaks down and cries, and then they all do, even tough Cindy.

Tuxedo Williams was just a black-and-white little mutt, but he was a good dog.

3

At midnight, Brother Odum Tate, itinerant nondenominational evangelist, kneels in the dry sedge just east of the highway. He has come there to exhort Satan and to pray to God.

His knees ache, and the earth, its dampness belying the arid grass growing on it, moistens them. He ignores discomfort.

Brother Tate has become a fixture of Gaither in the last eighteen months or so. No one really knows him. He simply showed up one

day, a scarecrow of a man in a rusty black suit, carrying a ten-pound family Bible under his arm, set up his post on the south side of the Square, and started to preach. He has been on the Square almost every day since. No one bothers him or bothers about him.

If you had lived in Gaither, you would have seen him. Maybe, let's say, you worked for an insurance company, and you had a lot of claims to do paperwork on, so you failed to finish up at the office. It's early summer, still daylight at seven o'clock. You decide to go down to the Busy Bee for supper, take the forms with you, and catch up there.

You see him as you park your DeSoto on the Square. You climb out into the warm evening, and the hoarse handsaw of his voice comes through to you: "Oh, be-WARE, brethering — hah! For Satan walks a-MONG you — hah! He walks as a MAN walks — hah! But he's the old SER-pent — hah!"

White globules of spittle fly as Brother Tate preaches, and his right arm pumps up and down in time to his pronouncements. His left hand holds the heavy Bible, open, balanced steadily.

He glares right at you. "I've SEEN old Satan — hah! Oh, I've WREST-led the serpent — hah! I KNOW him when I see him — hah!"

With a cold feeling in your spine you realize that he means you. He must. You, he, and Private Parks are the only people in the Square; and Private Parks, the Confederate statue atop its plinth, surely couldn't be Satan. Walking away from the crazy man, you flush hot with anger. How dare he call you Satan! You, who are one of the newest members of the Gaither Jaycees! You, who only this year passed five hundred thousand dollars in policies sold!

But as you pass under the marquee of the deserted State Theatre, a chilling thought strikes: What if he's right?

For you can remember a sin in your life, one that no one else has ever suspected. Yes, that one. And to compound it, you told lies about what actually happened, and yes, you got away with it, in the eyes of the world.

But what about the eyes of God?

Maybe Satan did get into you just a tad to make you do that. Okay, admit that much. But surely it didn't hurt anybody. Well — not many people, anyhow.

The crazy old man on the Square has done a job on **you**, all right. The taste of your supper at the Busy Bee is sour, and you linger over

cup after cup of coffee as you finish your paperwork. It's dark by the time you leave the restaurant and head back to the Square. The street-lights are already on.

The Square is mostly deserted now. There's not much to do in downtown Gaither after dark, not since old man Hesketh went crazy two years back and closed down the State. Your DeSoto is the only car parked on the south side of the Square.

The preacher is gone, too.

Too bad. You feel sort of — well, you make a mental note to give the old man a couple of dollars if you see him again.

But you'll try not to see him, of course.

When Odum Tate came to town, he found first a job, then a place to live. He works for the Benton Brothers Lumberyard, near the train tracks east of town. He runs an eighteen-inch circular saw for eight hours a day, six days a week, cutting boards to specified lengths and widths. He does a good job, and he never comes in drunk.

For this, Bobby and Benny Benton pay him forty-four dollars a week. Tate comes in at eight o'clock in the morning (Bobby doesn't even open until ten, but as long as Tate's work is satisfactory, the arrangement is fine with him) and starts right in to work. All day he stands in the scream of the saw, feeling its vibration as he feeds it wood. His black hair, greased and combed back from his forehead in harrowed rows, collects sawdust. More sawdust speckles his forehead, crusts yellow and dry in his nostrils. All day he stands in the sharp turpentine reek of pine or the clean, sour scent of oak. He stoops slightly, but looking at his thin build and black hair, an observer would be hard pressed to say whether Brother Tate is forty or closer to seventy.

At four o'clock he always stops work, walks the mile back to the boardinghouse where he stays — it is owned by Mrs. Hudson, and she likes him because he is neat, doesn't drink, doesn't smoke, and indicates that he thinks the late Mr. Hudson might have made it to heaven, by the infinite mercy of God.

There in his room Tate takes off the overalls, bathes himself, and dresses in his black suit, white shirt, and black tie. He picks up the big Bible, walks the additional three quarters of a mile to the Square, takes up his station, and preaches.

He doesn't always preach to people. Sometimes he does, to be sure; sometimes he will attract a crowd of as many as a dozen, and when he

is preaching the Word truly, they will chorus in with "Amen!" or "Preach it, brother!" At the end, they generally take up a collection for him, ten dollars or fifteen.

More often Brother Tate preaches to cars. That is all right, too. A congregation of Fords, Pontiacs, Plymouths, Chevys, assorted pickups, jeeps, even a Nash Rambler or two will not yield him a soul; but their eyes will never drowse or glaze over from the length of his sermon. Often enough, they sit quietly, staring at him with their headlights as he preaches to them about sin, conviction, and the mystery of Jesus crucified.

A few people in town think Brother Tate is a little bit crazy.

He has had a good day so far. He finished work, got to the Square at about the regular time, and preached to a crowd of seven. A young boy across the street had yelled a couple of taunts at him, but Brother Tate ignored him. He saw the Lord working on at least two faces in the crowd, and he hoped they would find their way to Calvary and redemption before it was too late for their immortal souls.

He had come back to the boardinghouse at eight o'clock. He had eaten simple fare with Mrs. Hudson and the other three boarders, then had gone up to his room to read his Bible. So far in his life, he had read the Bible through, cover to cover, thirteen times. This was the fourteenth tour, and he was just getting into the Acts of the Apostles.

At ten he had turned off the one hanging light bulb and had gone to bed.

He was out of bed again by eleven-thirty, disturbed by a sense of impending evil. He could not shake it. He pulled on his overalls and went out into the night.

Tate crossed the highway just before midnight. He was in an empty lot. Down the hill from him was Walnut Street, and beyond that the empty ridge. He knelt in the sedge. He was far enough from the nearest house to exhort Satan, he thought, without disturbing anyone.

He cries out, "Old serpent, God will crush your head beneath His heel!"

The echo from the ridge startles Brother Tate. His own distorted voice makes him shiver. He can smell the grass on either side of him, a bleachy scent like fresh semen, can smell the water and sour mud of Cherokee Creek, which curves west not far from here, passing under the highway through a man-high culvert.

12:03. Brother Tate is praying. He does not hear the last yelp of Tuxedo Williams, from half a mile to the north.

The black car passes behind him. In the warm gust of air from its passing, Brother Tate shudders but does not look around. "Oh, God!" he cries aloud, in a voice drawn out as if in agony. "What trial hast Thou sent us? What evil has come to Thy people?"

The night utterly swallows up these words. Not even an echo returns. In a quieter, wearier voice, Brother Tate earnestly begins to pray for himself, a sinner.

4

Three minutes to midnight. At the corner of Prior and Livingston streets, Andy McCory creeps into a doorway. Andy is drunk again. Right now he reeks of stale beer. His red hair is ruffled, his freckled red face vacant. When he spits, which he does constantly, you can see that his two top front teeth are stained with a black, spreading cavity. Andy, by common consent of the town, is no damn good.

He is twenty-two years old.

Frye County, like most of north Georgia in 1957, is a dry county. It supports forty-one places of worship and thirty-seven bootleggers. The bootlegging business is growing faster than the church business.

Frye's bootleggers, unlike the colorful characters from the Roaring Twenties that you see on the TV, are retailers, not manufacturers. They range from a man who can bring in enough popskull whiskey to anesthetize the whole VFW to smaller operators who bring in cases of beer from Atlanta or from Arcade, down toward Athens, for resale. Nobody bothers about the bootleggers, who are seen as necessary parts of society. They are even respected to some degree, for they are entrepreneurs, and men like them built this country on a firm basis of free enterprise.

Andy McCory does what he can to keep four bootleggers in business. He has visited one tonight, and he knows he is too damn drunk to go home. So he will rest for the night in this doorway — it is in the Grizzle Insurance Building, but it leads up a narrow flight of steps to old Mr. Barrow's photography studio — then go home in the morning.

Andy is a family man. He has a wife, a daughter, and a son, all of whom he sometimes beats.

But he's always been a little wild. Back in 1950, when the Korean War broke out, Andy was fifteen, the summer was ending, and it looked as if he were going to have to sit through the fifth grade again. He made up his mind one afternoon and walked barefoot (he got one pair of brogans a year, just at the beginning of school) to the Selective Service Board in the Federal Building just off the Square, and went inside. He saw Jeff Saunders, the janitor, mopping the floor. "Hey, nigger," Andy said, "whereabouts do I go to get to fight in Ko-rea?"

Jeff showed him. But Miz Merrilees, the Selective Service clerk, knew that he was only fifteen, for all his five feet eleven inches and hundred and fifty pounds, and she sent him back to his mill-village house on Porter Street with a pair of burning ears. Andy's father beat the shit out of him with a leather belt.

That didn't stop him. A week later he hitched to Atlanta, and there he found a recruiting sergeant who was glad to believe him. Two days later he stepped off a bus into the hottest weather he had ever experienced. "God damn," he said. "Is this here Ko-rea?"

It was, in fact, Fort Benning, near Columbus, Georgia. The bus had brought him about one hundred miles. At the end of the first week, Andy and all the other boys had to write home. Andy wrote:

Dear Mamma and Daddy,

Well, I guess you no I have run off I have join the army. I like it alright so far the food is lots of it but mamma not as good as your cooking. There is lots of us boys here to go and fight in korea. I will try to send some of my money home when I get paid I hope I will not get kill. Well, that's all right now I will right soon again

Your son,
Andy.

Andy never sent any money. He never wrote again. His father read the letter, snorted, crumpled it, and threw it into the fireplace. No fire was burning; Andy's mother dug the letter out, unfolded it carefully, and put it in the family Bible. For four years they would not know whether Andy was dead or alive.

At first Andy spent most of his money on booze. Then when he got to Korea, he learned from the other soldiers that there were women

who would let you do damn near anything you wanted to them for the right amount of money. Andy's drinking slacked off after that.

During his army career, Andy killed three men for sure and maybe another three. All but one of these were long-distance kills, unsatisfying to Andy. But that last one — man!

His outfit had been advancing on a hill, another goddamn hill, through mud the texture of glue. Air support had blasted the hell out of the place already, but there were still a few enemy riflemen dug in. Somehow on the way up Andy got separated from his group. He came quite suddenly upon a wounded Korean soldier.

He was a wizened little man, his face gray with pain. He had cast aside his weapon. His right hand was a splintered, bloody mess. He saw Andy approaching. He held his right hand away from the body, as though trying to keep the slow-dripping blood off his uniform. He held out his left hand and waved it at Andy, like a little kid going "bye-bye." He jabbered something in his gook lingo.

Andy stood over him. He had heard stories about how these slants would booby-trap themselves. He wasn't about to touch the bastard.

Curiously, Andy brought his M-1 to bear on the man's left kneecap. The man's eyes widened, he cried out, and, faster, he chattered some more.

Andy fired.

The leg buckled astonishingly, bent the wrong way. The knee was spurting ruin, the calf held to the thigh by only two thin strips of flesh and gristle. The little man howled.

Andy grinned and shot the other knee.

He worked his way inward, bit by bit: both legs, both arms. He was about to end the screaming with a shot between the gook's eyes when the man simply died. Just like a gook, he thought. He fired the shot anyway.

That was the best one, the only one he got to see up close. In 1954 he was discharged. He walked through the front door of the house on Porter Street, dropped his duffel bag, and said, "Well, I'm home."

His daddy cussed him out. His mama cried over him.

Andy got a job working in the cotton mill, came in drunk one night and picked a fight with his foreman, and got fired. He found a girl to run around with, got her pregnant, married her, and found another job, one that didn't pay much but one that he liked better. He worked

for a chicken processing plant. His job was to stand beside a conveyor chain that came by a foot over his head. Dangling from the chain, clamped to it by their feet, were the chickens. Andy used a sharp, curved knife to slit their throats so they would bleed and die before the belt dunked them into boiling water.

His daughter was born, then his son. Now he works long hours ankle-deep in chicken blood, and he figures he has the right to get drunk now and again. Sometimes, when he has enough money, he goes to the whorehouse south of town (one of Frye County's big secrets), close to where Cherokee Creek joins Moccasin Creek to form the Little Cherokee River. Other times, when he's broke but a little drunk, he goes there vainly hoping one of the girls will give him a free ride. When she won't, he returns home to beat up his wife.

That has been his pattern for three years. Sometimes at night he dreams about the dying Korean. He wakes up with an erection.

It is 12:09. A long black car pulls up to the curb in front of Andy. It's a real old car, he realizes through his alcoholic fog, at least twenty years old. It stops in the yellow pool of light under a street lamp. The passenger door opens. From inside the car a soft voice says, "I think we can help each other."

What the hell. Andy pushes away from the building and crosses over to the car. He rests an arm on the top and sticks his head in the open door. It smells new, leather and chrome and fresh oil. "Who are you?" he asks the dark silhouette behind the wheel.

"A friend. I can offer you a job, Mr. —"

"McCory. I got a damn job."

"This one's better. All you have to do is push a few buttons, put a few things in their places. You can stay drunk most of the time if you want. As drunk as you are now, anyway."

"Shit."

"And later there may be other benefits. You can do things to people, if you wish. It's better than chickens."

Andy is inside the car, though he has no memory of having climbed in and shut the door. "Like the Korean?" he breathes.

"Better. Is it a deal?"

Andy teeters a moment, then says, "Hell, yeah. I'm your man."

Then the odor of the new leather is just too much, too strong, and he gags. Before he knows it, he is sobbing, weeping, whooping like a

little kid. Tears and snot run down his face. Somewhere inside a forlorn voice, his own, says you've done it now, you son-of-a-bitch. You've really done it now.

The driver pats his shoulder awkwardly. "There, there," he says. "It only hurts for a little while. There, there."

5

On the corner of Bridge and Oglethorpe — which is to say, directly off the southeast corner of the Square in downtown Gaither — is a building that, according to a mangled tin sign over the marquee, is the STATE THEAT E. At 12:21, the front door of this theater is open, the padlock and chain gone for the first time in over two years. Andy McCory is banging around in the dark, holding an inadequate flashlight. Out front, under the dark marquee, the tall stranger stands. "Got it," Andy yells, referring to the switch box, and the lights come on. The marquee blazes, and the yellow light bulbs around its border begin to flash off and on in synch, setting up a crawl around the bare white field of the marquee itself. Many of the bulbs are burned out, and some are broken, but the crawl effect works.

"Good," the man says. "Now try to find the things I told you about. They will probably be in the closet of the projection booth."

Andy curses, but he stumps upstairs. The other man reaches into his breast pocket — like Brother Tate, he favors black, but his suit is new, a crisp jet color, and his tie is the same inky hue — and produces a deed. He does not unfold it, but tucks it back into place and pats it. It is the deed to the theater.

For thirty years the State Theatre showed all the latest movies to Gaither. It was, for most of that time, the only theater in town. In '48 a drive-in was built south of town, and it took some of the audience. Television took even more. But the real cause of the State's demise was the decline of its owner, Mr. Elias Hesketh.

Hesketh opened the State in May of 1925. He was not a young man then, but he was not old, either. At forty-one, he felt just fine, thank you, and was tired of working for someone else. He used all his savings to build the State on the corner of the Square, where the Simmons Livery Stable had once stood until it burned in '22. The State was a success. By 1954, when Mr. Hesketh hit seventy, it had

been through its ups and downs, but it had always provided him a decent living.

In that year, Mr. Hesketh employed a total of seven people: Venner Sosebee, the projectionist, ten years older than Hesketh (he had been the first and only projectionist at the State) but still a steady worker; Laurie Anderson and Minnie Willoughby, who took turns at the ticket window; Jamie Corrigan, Hannah Kraft, and Willie Boykin, who worked both as ushers and as concessionaires, dispensing orange drinks and popcorn; and Loftus Nable, who was black and who served as janitor.

In January of '54, during a hard sleet, Mr. Hesketh closed the theater early and went out to his car, parked in the employee lot behind the building. Just as he slipped his key into the lock of his '53 Buick, the mild stroke hit him. His right hand went heavy and dull, and his head filled with liquid pain. Still, he somehow managed to drive home, where he took four aspirin and went to bed for three days, and then came back to work, over the protests of his housekeeper. (Mr. Hesketh had been married back in the twenties, but his wife died of influenza before he even built the State.) He was not the same after that.

Loftus Nable was the first really to notice. Loftus did not like cleaning out the women's room (both the men's room and the women's room, of course, were for whites only), even after the theater was closed and locked. He had a dread that some white woman would come across him there sometime and scream rape. He always sang spirituals, very loudly, as he worked in the women's room, and he kept the door carefully ajar.

One night in February Mr. Hesketh barged in, his face brown with layers of Esquire shoe polish, and insisted on joining in chorus after chorus of "Roll, Jordan, Roll." After an hour of singing, he pressed a fifty-dollar bill into Nable's hand and went out, forgetting to lock the door behind him. Nable locked up, went home and sat for a long time in the dark on the edge of the bed he shared with his wife, Mauveen. He listened to the regular breathing of his wife, to the puffs and hums of his three sleeping children, all sharing the bedroom just next door. Finally he shook Mauveen awake. "Hon," he said, "I got to find me a new job. That white man done went crazy."

Nable was only the first to go. That spring Hesketh fell into a pattern of ferociously reviewing the movies he showed. If something was

in it that he didn't like — and he didn't like a great many things, Technicolor included — he simply yanked it and showed old Hopalong Cassidy westerns instead, of which he had a plentiful store.

Attendance fell. One by one Hesketh let his helpers go. Finally, as fall edged into a cold winter, he even released old Mr. Sosebee, the projectionist. Mr. Sosebee, who had never missed one day of work because of illness, promptly went home, caught pneumonia, and died.

By now, Hesketh showed only Hopalong Cassidy films, and rarely in any sensible fashion. The last reel might come first, or in the middle of one picture he might become bored and switch to another. All through the first part of December he showed movies to no one but himself. This culminated just before Christmas. He locked all the doors, turned on the projector, and watched nine hours of Hopalong Cassidy, in whatever haphazard order he could thread the machines, the first reel of one movie, a middle reel of another, part of a third, the end of the first, the middle of the first, part of a fourth, and so on. He wept as he stared at the screen, believing the confusion was not in the flickering black-and-white images up there, but in his brain. Hoppy would never get that screwed up.

Past midnight he stumbled out the front door of the theater, forgetting to close it. He stood on the corner, his bearings completely lost. The temperature was twenty-eight degrees, under an overcast sky, and he was in his shirt sleeves. He wondered why it was so damn cold. It shouldn't be this cold, not on the Fourth of July. He knew it was the Fourth because he could see colored fireworks strung up on every tree and telephone pole. And he couldn't find his Buick.

In a daze he walked north along Ogleshorpe Street, past the jewelry store, the Bon Ton dress shop, past Clement Studios, past the Bevan Brothers Shoe Store, past the Georgia Pharmacy, past the Belk's. Then he turned west, along Main Street, and wandered all the way to the corner, to the Trust Bank. South then, past the dime store, the other jewelry store, down to the furniture store; and then east again, circumnavigating the Square. He wandered like this for almost an hour before a policeman found him and took him home.

This time his housekeeper called the doctor. By January the theater was closed. Along in February, Hesketh's nearest relatives, some well-to-do cousins from Atlanta, had put him into an institution. The chain and padlock went on the door of the State, and its marquee went dark.

Hesketh is still alive on this August night in 1957, but he is not even aware of the fact. He sits staring at the asylum walls during the day, lies down when they lay him down, and stares at the ceiling all night. "Wonder what he's looking at," one nurse asks another idly. The second nurse shrugs.

How can they know that he watches insane, horrifying, disjointed Hopalong Cassidy movies in his head all the time now?

Andy McCory comes huffing down the stairs. He carries a cardboard box that bulges and warps with damp. "Got it," he says, lugging this out to the man in front of the theater.

"Good. I'll sort these out. Did you find the other?"

"The pole thangamadoodle? Yeah, it's up there."

"Bring it."

Andy curses, but he goes. The man rummages in the box, pulls out letters, tosses some back, puts others on the sidewalk. Andy comes back, lugging the proverbial ten-foot pole. It has a three-fingered claw at one end, a grip and handle at the other. "Excellent," the man says.

He shows Andy how to lay the letters out in sequence, how to plan their arrangement. Then he shows him how to use the mechanical hand to pick them up, one letter at a time, and slide them into place on the marquee.

Andy is still drunk. He drops some letters, gets others askew, but finally a ten-letter word marches across the marquee.

The new owner of the theater goes across the deserted street. He stands between the two dwarf crabapple trees at the southeast corner of the Square and admires the lighted marquee. Then he crosses back over to stand under it. "Good," he says. "Now take these back and replace them."

Andy gathers the mechanical hand and the box of letters and departs. Under the glare of the marquee, the tall man turns his gaze to the northwest. Diagonally across the Square, over the one-story bulk of the five-and-dime, in the distance beyond Moccasin Creek, Rainey Hill rises, a gigantic overturned rowboat in the night. Two streets circle it: Rainey Street, and higher up, Summit. Only a little of the hill is visible in the gap between the Confederate memorial and the higher building next to the dime store, and in this wedge only one or two dim lights, bathroom lights, burn. The man grins.

"Are you there?" he asks softly. "I think you are. I don't know you, but I feel you. Will you try to stop me? No, I don't think you

will. Or if you do, I don't think you will succeed. This miserable town is mine."

His eyes narrow, and his face splits into the grin that frightened Deputy Presley earlier that night. "Wake up," he says softly. Then he spins and walks through the front door of the theater, his theater.

All the crickets, all the cicadas, fall silent.

6

Alan Kirby gasps and sits up in bed. The sheet falls from his bare chest. He wonders what has wakened him. He shivers: with the window open, the night feels like fall, not summer. He becomes aware of the silence.

Alan slips from bed, pulls his sheet after him, drapes it around his shoulders as he used to do when he played Superman; but he is nearly fourteen now, and too old for such games. He wears the sheet only for warmth.

He goes to the window, looks out. The backyard falls away to a little cliff, and beyond the cliff is River Street. Beyond that is the creek; and beyond that is town. Alan draws a deep breath. The night feels cool, lonely. Summer is dying, and he is not sad to see it go; for a time comes, even during summer vacation, when a boy has exhausted all possibility and faces a boy's worst enemy: boredom.

Summer is played out. The baseball games have lost their savor, fishing is long, hot hours of nothing, the whole world is as dull as the dust-covered magnolia tree out in the backyard to the left, many of its once-shiny green leaves already dry and brown and piled beneath it. Its fruits, the exact size and shape to make them wonderful pretend hand grenades for backyard wars, lie scattered and ignored.

Alan frowns. Something about town is different. He wonders what it is. Fleetinglly, he thinks of all the things this window has been. It has been a loophole in his castle wall, and the brick buildings and white frame houses of Gaither the tents of a futile besieging army. It has been the cockpit of a B-24 roaring in for thirty seconds over Tokyo, ready to drop molten death from the skies on the Bon Ton, the Confederate monument (really a cleverly concealed antiaircraft emplacement), and especially on the Gaither City Elementary School. But tonight it's just a window, leaking premature fall into his room.

Alan pushes away and in the dark goes out into the hall. The bathroom is to his left, his father's room — Alan's mother died when Alan was eight — opposite his. But Alan turns to the right, to the next room along, also a bedroom, but used by his father as a sort of study. It contains two walls of books, a bureau, a desk, two chairs, and a radio. Without turning on the light, Alan opens the bottom drawer of the bureau and fumbles out a brown leather case that trails a broken strap. Straightening, Alan bumps a hanging picture with his elbow. It scrapes back and forth until he puts out his hand to steady it. In the dark he cannot see the face, his mother's face, that looks out of the photograph, but he remembers it. The photo stilled, Alan hefts the heavy leather case and takes it back to his room.

Other kids' fathers brought back rifles and sidearms from the war, or flags, or enemy helmets. His father brought back these binoculars, a powerful 10x50 instrument. He takes them from the case, rests his elbows on the windowsill, and begins to scan the town with them. A lone cricket strikes up, like a thumbnail rasped along the teeth of a comb, suddenly falls silent, and Alan shivers. That's what he missed: night sounds, the frying of cicadas, the burr of crickets, the insistence of katydids. After a summer of nightly noise, the emptiness makes the world seem more than lonesome, makes it seem vast, vacant, dead.

Something wells up inside Alan. He feels as he used to feel in the year after his mother died. Then, at intervals, reading a book, playing tag, swinging on the playground, he would suddenly be seized with the knowledge that his mother was dead, gone, and he would sob uncontrollably. Once he did this in Miss Turner's classroom. She hurried over, saying, "Alan, honey, what's the matter?"

Lula Hartman, who was exactly Alan's age, knew him better than the teacher did. With a terrible remote coolness, Lula had said, "Aw, he's thinkin' of his mama." She had been right.

His eyes brim now, for no reason. The field of the binoculars comes to rest on the little slice of storefronts visible over the roof of the dime store, foreshortening them. Alan checks them one by one. The marquee. That is different. The theater marquee is lighted up, the yellow lights around its border chasing themselves as they blink on and off, giving a false sense of movement, even with a third of the bulbs dead. Alan follows for a second, feeling vertigo. He thinks the lights are like people: one row of six flares to life, then go out. They are the parents,

living their moment, then dying. The next row, the children, catches fire, then goes dark; now the grandchildren and on and on around, around, eternally, meaningless.

Alan's heart pounds, saying to him with absolute knowledge: "You'll die, you'll die, you'll die. . . . "

He trembles. Through the binoculars he has just read the one word on the marquee.

Alan pulls the sash down, slamming it hard enough to rattle the panes, dives into bed, cocoons himself in the sheet. After a moment he fumbles the coverlet up from the foot of the bed and pulls it, too, over his head. He cries in the dark, being two people, a frightened, weeping child and a boy at one remove from his own fear, hoping he can keep his voice low enough not to wake his father.

He cries, but could not say why: he cries in deep and unknown despair.

Even as he feels sure that he will sleep no more this night, the strident night insects strike up again, all at once. The night goes wild, riots with crickets and July-flies, katydids, even the thrum of frogs, the screech of an owl, voices raised in the dark; but to Alan the sounds do little to chase away the despair that has come with silence. They sound, to him, like laughter in a madhouse.

He closes his eyes, still seeing the one word burned in blood-red letters against the marquee. Though he can read the word, he cannot understand it, interpret it, say why it fills him with a fear he has never known.

Cool air drifts over him from the window, working on him like a sleeping potion or a magic spell. He falls asleep in an instant. Tomorrow he will not even be certain that he was truly awake, not until he notices his father's binoculars lying discarded below the window.

Tonight, though, he sleeps and dreams terrible things.

And in dream after dream, in one form or another, he sees the word over and over, as though the glimpse through the binoculars has burned it on the inside of his eyelids.

SHADOWSHOW.

SHADOWSHOW.

SHADOWSHOW.

SHADOW

SHOW.

Three

1

Alan woke the next morning to kitchen sounds and smells. He slid from bed, the events of the night forgotten — until he saw the binoculars, on the floor under the window, standing upright on their objective lenses, like two dead soldiers (that was what his uncle Cal called empty beer bottles, left standing like that in lonely spots along county roads, dead soldiers) abandoned after a night of drinking.

Alan picked up the binoculars, held them while he remembered, and then replaced them in their case. After a moment's hesitation, he looked out the window, down at the town, a toy Lionel-train town at this distance. Nothing there seemed different. Grabbing a fresh pair of underwear and a worn but clean pair of jeans, Alan went to bathe. He liked to fill the tub usually, and lie submerged, but this morning he ran a scant three inches of water, washed in that, and hastily towed himself dry. He pulled on shorts and jeans, went back to his room for a T-shirt, and then found his father in the kitchen, eating scrambled eggs and toast and reading the Atlanta paper.

"Son," John Kirby murmured.

Alan grunted. He got his own dishes, scooped the rest of the eggs from the black skillet into his plate, and with movements almost ceremonial poured himself a cup of coffee. Every morning as he performed the ritual, Alan thought back to one of his memories of his mother: a woman with pulled-back brown hair and laughing green eyes, giving him a sip of sweetened coffee with cream, then saying, "That's enough. It'll stunt your growth."

He loved coffee with milk and sugar in it now, and somehow — he could not have said how — he even relished the little pang of heart the memory gave him every time he tasted it. “Anything in the paper?” Alan asked, sliding into place beside his dad.

John Kirby shook his head. “Wars and rumors of wars,” he said. “And the governor promises two and a half million dollars to build an atomic reactor at Georgia Tech.”

“Won’t help ’em beat Georgia, though,” Alan said through a mouthful of egg and toast.

His father, who had (briefly) attended the University of Georgia, and who at least pretended a partisanship in the immemorial rivalry between the two schools, chuckled. “Today’s Wednesday,” he said. “What will you be up to today?”

“Aw, nothing. You need me to help?”

“Probably not today, son. You okay for lunch?”

“I’ll make a sandwich.”

“You can go across to Betty’s.”

“I might.” But Alan did not plan to go over to his aunt’s, diagonally across the street from their house. His mother’s sister plied him with far too many semisuccessful experiments in baking and asked him entirely too many questions about the state of the Kirby household to make him at all comfortable. He finished his breakfast, collected his father’s plate and his own, and ran water to do the dishes.

His father looked up in surprise over the edge of his paper. “Well. You must want something pretty bad.”

Alan grinned. “Aw, Daddy.”

“I won’t say another word. Anytime you volunteer to wash dishes — ” His father shrugged and went back to the newspaper.

Alan, standing by the sink, studied his father for a moment. He was a slender man, not too tall, but just above middle height. His eyes were very pale brown, and his hair, looking thin in the morning sunlight, was auburn with a few glints of gray in it. He wore rimless spectacles and a habitual expression of preoccupation. A mild man, an observer would think, and one who probably worried too much.

The mild man looked up and caught Alan staring at him. The boy blushed, turned, and busied himself scrubbing and rinsing the dishes. “Better get a move on,” he said. “It’s nearly nine.”

“Is something wrong, son?”

For a second, just for a second, fear perched on Alan's lips; but he shooed it away with a forced smile. "Aw, no. Just nothing much to do, is all."

John Kirby pushed back from the table. "If you get too bored, come on down to the shop," he said. "I reckon I can find some use for you. Take care, son."

"You, too."

His father left him alone in the kitchen. Alan rinsed the skillet, dried it carefully, and replaced it in the slide-out drawer beneath the Kelvinator oven. If his dad had done nothing else, he had impressed Alan early with a sense of order and neatness, and by now Alan was a willing slave to a pernickety habit of putting everything in its place.

He spent a few minutes reading the funny papers, but the house seemed too empty to him this morning, and, a little after nine, he went out, not bothering to lock the door — he could not remember his father ever having locked the door, and did not even know for sure whether a key for the front door lock even existed — and climbed on his bike. He would go down to town, not to the book and card shop on South Oglethorpe, but to the schoolyard. Somebody would be there, knocking a baseball around, maybe even tossing a football. Somebody always was.

Alan pedaled his Schwinn hard, rode down the long, stomach-dropping hill toward the highway and the bridge. With the sun hot on his cheek, the wind shrill in his ears, he felt as if he were flying. For that moment, at least, the theater and its strangely ominous marquee were out of his thoughts.

2

Small towns change. You don't notice it as much if you only pass through from time to time, but they do. Gaither changed from year to year and even from minute to minute — but then it had its unchanging traditions, too, for both good and bad, and because of the kind of place it was, it cherished both kinds.

Gaither was a town set in its ways, inhabited by people set in theirs. Things tended to happen because they had always happened; that was reason enough. So the Free Will Baptist Church, for example, always presented a Christmas pageant entitled From the Manger to

the Cross, and every year some promising male high school senior (preferably one suffering least noticeably from acne) was cast in the role of Jesus as an adult. Casting was done carefully each year; still, being human, and having (perhaps) free will, the boys ensured that about once every decade the minister made a mistake.

Rube Bowen had been the mistake in 1912, though not in the actual production. He acted the part to perfection, everyone agreed; it was months later (on the anniversary, someone recalled at the time, of the sinking of the Titanic the year before) when the error occurred. Rube, thoroughly drunk on moonshine whiskey and astride a mule difficult enough to control even when her rider was sober, had plunged right through the window of Liberty Dry Goods, at that time the only true plate-glass window in town. Decently, Rube bled to death before people could talk too much.

Henry Converse was the mistake in 1925, the year of the flapper and the flivver, though his fall had nothing to do with either. Henry worked part-time for Mr. Melton, the grocer. His wrong was common enough, and involved only the pilfering of small amounts of cash from the till. But Mr. Melton was unforgiving, and Henry had to spend two years in prison for his theft of a grand total of one hundred two dollars and twelve cents. When people saw him swinging a blade on the county roads, they thought of how thrillingly he had cried, "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" on the same cross that had crucified Rube.

The next problem Jesus did not arrive on schedule. It was 1942, a war year, before it happened again. That year Bobby Waltrip played the part. His badness did not come out right away; it was not until 1944 that the folks at home heard that he had been court-martialed, away in France or someplace, for cowardice in the face of the enemy. Bobby was dishonorably discharged a few years later, after spending some time in the stockade. He never came back to Gaither.

And then, of course, there was Paul Andrews, just a few years before, in '54. In the spring of '55, Paul had had to drop out of school and marry the girl he had gotten pregnant. Paul, too, had been particularly soulful as he admonished the daughters of Jerusalem to weep for themselves and their children

But most of the Jesuses at Freewill had been good Jesuses, had grown up to marry good girls, work in the factories and stores of

Gaither, and raise good families. John Kirby had been a Jesus, back in 1939, and he had turned out well, though somehow not quite as well as people had imagined he would. Of course he had married Mary Bolton, back when World War II had broken out, and Mary had given birth to Alan a respectable year and some months later; but when he returned from the war, John had not returned to college. Instead he seemed content to work for Mr. Bolton in the card and gift shop, gradually buying out his father-in-law's interest in the store. He had become a Methodist, too.

But that, as everyone in town knew, had been the Bolton influence. When a Free Will member once chided John for abandoning the faith of his fathers, John had leaned across the counter and asked seriously, "Will, do you think the Methodist church will get me as far as heaven?"

Will Landers, many of whose dry-cleaning customers were Methodists, had stammered, "Well, John, of course it'll get you to heaven . . . "

John straightened up. "That's where I plan to get off."

The retort went around town, as things do in a small town (Will even told it on himself), and after people chuckled, they looked at each other and said, kind of sadly, "John Kirby could have made something of himself."

John sometimes thought the same thing. He was thinking something like this on the warm August morning as he parked his car, a postwar (but barely) Studebaker sedan, in the alley behind the Dixie Hotel and climbed out, a maroon money pouch thick with paper and heavy with silver in his left hand. He let himself in the shop through the back way. In the tiny office, he tied his bow tie, squinting into a rectangular mirror. He had six bow ties, one blue, two red, one black, one brown, and one green, and they stayed in the office. Each day he wore one. Today it was the red one with white polka dots.

He considered himself in uniform when the tie was tied, and he went through into the shop itself. He opened the front door, picked up a twine-bound stack of Atlanta papers from the stoop, and flipped the cardboard sign from CLOSED to OPEN. Back at the counter, he used his pocketknife to cut the twine. He put the stack of newspapers in its place, beside the three-times-a-week Gaither Advocate. This was Wednesday; a new Advocate would be in sometime after noon, to replace the three or four Monday papers still in the stack.

John checked his stock. Stationery items and sundries looked all right. The magazine rack was in good shape, though the Time magazine stack was low. Next to it the two racks of comic books were, as usual, in jumbled condition. He spent a little time putting the garish titles back in order — many younger customers preferred to leaf through them at the racks rather than buy them — slipping the DC comics into place, hardly glancing at Superman or Batman, putting the Disney comics, the Uncle Scrooges and Donald Ducks, in order, winding up with the less-approved Harveys, Little Audrey, Baby Huey, Casper. That chore done, John straightened and glanced around the store.

The shelves were in good shape: the general-interest paperbacks, the mystery section, where Ellery Queen, Agatha Christie, and John Dickson Carr companionably shared space, the adventure/war/western shelf, the miscellaneous shelf. And at the back of the store, in floor-to-ceiling shelves, his pride: the real books, the hardcovers. A Hemingway or a Faulkner might rest there for weeks before a sale; an inspirational book would go more quickly. But Kirby never returned them unsold to the wholesaler, these books, and somehow they all seemed to find homes eventually.

A bell suspended over the front door jangled. John turned, smiled at his first customer of the day. "Morning, Miz Lewis," he said to a young woman in a pink and gray blouse and gray summer skirt. "Can I help you?"

"Oh, I hope so." Her voice was comically querulous, belied by the good humor in her blue eyes, by the little laugh lines at their corners. "I need to put up a bulletin board at school, and I need some kind of background paper."

"I have some poster board," John said. "Starting a little early, aren't you?"

"A little," Ann Lewis said. "I'm bored, I guess."

John grinned. "I think my boy feels the same way."

"Well, it's the end of summer. It's time to start thinking of school."

"I suppose so." John held up a flexible rectangle of poster board, shook distant thundery sounds from it. "Will this be all right?"

"That'll do fine. I guess I'd better have about a dozen."

John counted out a dozen sheets of the heavy paper, rang up \$2.48 on the cash register, and made change for two ones and a half from his

own pocket. When the teacher had left, her purchase awkwardly under her arm, he filled the register till from the money pouch he had brought in from his house. The bell jangled again, and from then until noon John was too busy to think much about Alan. He did, however, hear from Mr. Howell Grady that the old State Theatre had a new owner, a fellow from out of town. A fellow named Nathaniel Baydon or something like that. John didn't give it much thought. When he paused to think at all, in fact, for some reason his mind kept straying back to the blue eyes and blond hair of his first customer of the day, and once or twice he even wondered what she was doing, there all alone in the school building.

3

She was weeping.

Ann Lewis sat alone at her desk in the Gaither Elementary School, called herself six different kinds of idiot, and cried nonetheless. Why not? she thought to herself. I'm more at home here than in my rooms. Why the hell can't I cry here if I feel like it?

She reached for another tissue, from a packet of Kleenex that a student had brought to school the year before, a little packet glued in the back of a Little Golden Book featuring Little Lulu and her magic tricks. She blew her nose, looked around her at the empty schoolroom, and wept again.

The elementary school had gone up in 1928, a three-story red-brick building, with high plaster ceilings supporting mushroom-shaped black sprinklers and hanging light fixtures that looked like smoothly iced upside-down layer cakes. The floors were oak, oiled and darkened by years and years of sweeping compound. The windows opened in a complicated way, the top sash pulling down and inward as simultaneously the lower sash raised and tilted out. All three windows in Miss Lewis's room were open, spilling sun into the room.

Across the top of the blackboard the cursive alphabet ran, from Aa to &. The bulletin board had been covered with four pieces of white poster board, but they were still blank. Ann Lewis sat in the straight chair behind her desk, three tissues crumpled in her hand, and cried silently. She felt old. She was rushing toward the new school year like a train approaching a long tunnel, and she feared the dark.

If only she hadn't visited her mother in Decatur last week. If only her mother hadn't said, "You could have been married."

Could have been. A change in tense, nothing more: last year her mother, in the same reproachful tone, had said, "You could get married. You're a young girl."

No, Mama, I'm not a young girl. I'm a woman. I'm almost thirty. And I don't think I'll ever get married.

Ann had come to Gaither in 1949, fresh from college, and had taught her first year in this room, the same room she had occupied for every year since. Sometimes she taught fourth grade, sometimes fifth. In 1953-54 it had been fifth, and that year she had taught Alan Kirby, a bright and likable boy of ten. He remembered her and often came by after school, still, to help her tidy the room. Ann liked Alan, and that morning, as she bought her poster board from Alan's father, the widower, her mother's words had come unbidden to mind. You could have been married. You could have had a child.

Well, spinster teachers were almost the rule in Gaither.

Ann blew her nose, tossed the tissues into the empty army-green wastepaper basket beside her desk, and told herself to get a grip on herself. There were things to be done. On the desk in front of her was a sheet of paper on which she had been sketching her bulletin board, a "Welcome Back" message to this year's fourth grade. She picked up her yellow pencil and started back to work, still sniffing, the oily odor of sweeping compound, the chalky scent of the board, the smell of school, strong in her nostrils.

She was a good, though untutored, artist, and her pencil drew in a playground with smiling children swinging, sliding, climbing on the monkey bars, tossing a ball. But however much Ann concentrated, she still felt desolate and empty, as if her upper chest were hollow. Above the scratch of her pencil point she heard the sounds of the empty building: creak of floorboards settling, flutter of a pearl-gray pigeon landing on the windowsill, faraway voices from kids on the playground, the crack of a bat against a ball.

She crumpled her first attempt, started another, and then abruptly pushed away from the desk and got up. The five rows of desks, thirty-five in all, looked back at her, tan and scarred and ink-stained. The fifth grade used ink pens in their cursive exercises, and each desk had a little round hole in the upper left corner to accommodate a tiny glass

inkwell. Most of the desks bore the blots and dribbles of years of blue Sheaffer's ink. Ann thought vaguely that she should have someone sand the desks down, begin afresh. She wandered to the window and looked out.

Three boys were on the playground, one shagging flies to the other two, who caught them bare-handed. The batter was Reese Donalds, a tough, poor kid whose father worked in the cotton mill. Alan Kirby and Jack Harwell were fielding. They moved in lazy, off-tempo strides. They looked bored. Behind first base, three bicycles lay on the grass, their front wheels turned up, the morning sun glinting on chrome and paint. At least, two of them were new enough to reflect the sun: Reese's bike, undoubtedly of prewar vintage, had rusted handlebars and a slapdash coat or two of white house paint. But the ugly bicycle's days of service were almost over. Next year Reese would be able to get a driver's license. They grew up fast.

The sun coming through the window was warm and pleasant. Ann crossed her arms over her breasts and hugged her own shoulders. It would be nice to have someone behind her, she thought, holding her that way. She yawned, hearing her jaw crack, hearing behind her the settling sound of the building. She closed her eyes, seeing the blood-red insides of her eyelids. It would be nice, she thought, to have someone come up behind her and put his arms around her. She imagined herself standing at a window naked, the sun hot against her skin, touching with a feathery lightness her breasts and belly. She imagined John Kirby stealing up behind, quite silent —

Hands closed on her bare shoulders.

Her eyes opened.

She drew in breath for a scream —

And found herself alone.

Trembling, she turned away from the window and went back to her desk. Daydreaming yet. What would her mother say if she knew that her daughter was fantasizing about — about such things? What would the principal say? Teachers aren't supposed to know about sex. Ann suspected that a good half of the female teachers at this school really didn't, except in a sort of vague and theoretical way. She smiled ruefully. A girl could get herself fired. Woman, damn it. She reached for her bulletin-board sketch and her pencil.

A moment later she sprang up from her seat, overturning her chair. The scream she had suppressed at the window broke from her, thin and high, a nerve-shivering sound, long fingernails scraped across the blackboard.

The sketch was a picture of her, clearly a picture of her — but the Miss Lewis in the sketch was a dismembered, torn, naked obscenity.

She had no memory of making the drawing.

She screamed and screamed again.

4

Reese Donalds tossed the ball into the air, cocked his bat, and squinted as he gauged the swing. A woman's scream tore his attention apart, and he missed the ball cleanly, the bat almost flying from his hands in his surprise. "Dod damn!" he said. "What was that?"

Jack and Alan, out past second base, had turned toward the school. "Sounds like — " Jack started, but two more screams came quickly, cutting him off. The three boys looked at each other, their eyes round. Jack's mouth fell open in an adenoidal way, and he punched his plastic-rimmed specs back into place.

"We oughta go see — " Alan said.

"Come on, you sonsabitches." Reese broke into a run. He shifted the bat one-handed so that his right hand choked up on it, holding it just above the tape, where it began to swell out. He was bigger and faster than the other two, and Alan, running behind him, thought that Reese, with his shaggy mane of unruly red hair, looked like a hump-shouldered caveman, an Alley Oop carrying his club. The school building was on a hill at the southwest corner of the playground, a concrete ramp leading up to it. Reese was at the top of the ramp when Alan and Jack reached the bottom.

But the door was locked, and that baffled him. He rattled it furiously as the other two boys came puffing up. "The hell can we get in?" Reese roared.

"Side door," Alan said, and he set off to the right. But that door was locked, too. "Gimme a boost," Alan said. Reese bent over and Jack helped Alan scramble up to the bigger boy's shoulders.

"Fuck this," grunted Reese, but he straightened almost as if Alan weren't up there. The fanlight above the door was unlocked — it

almost always was in the summer, when the boys needed to take a leak or to get a drink of water — and Alan pushed the transom open, then pulled himself through the opening. It was harder this year. He was bigger. He squirmed through, popped his shoulder turning around, and dropped to his feet. He pushed the door open for the other two.

Only when they stood inside the door, in the silent hallway, did the three look at each other with something like fear. “Where did it come from?” Jack asked. His new specs, with their clear plastic bottoms and their black tops, made his face owlsh.

“Somewhere in the building.” Alan grinned, but his eyes were sick. “Who’s there?” he yelled, trying to make his voice deep. Flat echoes answered him.

“Check the rooms,” Reese said, slapping his bat into his cupped left hand. The sound was sharp and somehow a little wet, and the echoes came back paf-paf-paf.

But no one was in the principal’s office, the first-, second-, or third-grade classrooms. “Upstairs,” Jack said. He hung back, though, and Reese took the lead in climbing to the second floor.

Reese went to the left at the head of the stair, Jack and Alan to the right. The first room they checked was Miss Lewis’s — and there she was.

Alan knocked awkwardly on the doorjamb, a little pecking sound. Miss Lewis, who had been standing with her back to him, jumped and turned. “Oh, it’s you.” Her voice was strained and breathless. Her hair had come undone on the right side, and two blond tendrils curled against her cheek. Her skin glistened with sweat.

“Yes, ma’am,” Alan said, noting how her pink and gray blouse clung to her shoulders, how her breasts heaved beneath it as she breathed. “Is something the matter?”

“No, no.” Her blue eyes blinked. “It’s all right.”

Alan felt a looming presence behind him. Reese had come up. “We heered you scream,” he said.

“It was — ” she bit her lip. “Just a mouse, that’s all.”

Reese pushed in. “I’ll kill it.”

“It’s gone now, Reese. That’s all right.”

“Something’s burning,” Jack said, sniffing. Alan smelled it too, a thin, acrid scent of charred paper.

"It's all right, boys," Miss Lewis said, sounding more like herself. "Go on out now. You shouldn't even be in the building."

They were silent for a long moment before Alan answered for them all: "Okay."

"Thanks for worrying about me," she said, smiling in a tremulous way.

Reese, as if not anxious to leave the scene of a potential kill, said, "Holler if the sonbi — if the rat comes back. I'll kill it for you."

"Go on, boys," Miss Lewis said. They went.

"Shit," Reese said in the stairwell. "Nothin' but a rat."

"My daddy said on Okinawa the Japs used to eat rats," Jack volunteered.

Reese snorted. "They's a crazy man lives in New Haven'll eat roach bugs. But you gotta give him a quarter to get him to do it."

Alan, bringing up the rear, said, "Miss Lewis had the trash can up on her desk."

Jack looked back up at him, blinking through his specs. "Huh?"

"She'd put the trash can on her desk. I think she burned something in it. That's what the smell was."

Reese shook his red head in impatient negation. "Didn't burn no rat." At the bottom of the stairwell, he pushed open the heavy outside door. They stepped into the sunshine, and behind them the door swung to. "I kilt a rat once with a Co'cola bottle," he said. "Sonbitch was two foot long."

"Naw," Jack said.

"Two foot long."

"Countin' the tail?"

"Shit, tail's part of the rat, ain't it?"

"Well," Jack said as they headed back down the ramp toward the playground. Jack's brown hair had been mowed short at the beginning of the summer. It was about an inch long all over now, bristling like a porcupine's quills. Alan, bringing up the rear, noticed three angry red pimples on the nape of Jack's neck. "How'd you kill it?" Jack asked.

"Ol sonbitchin rat'd been gettin in the kitchen. I stayed up one night with Pa's four-ten."

"I thought you said you killed it with a Coke bottle."

"I did. Ol rat come out his hole, and the dod-damn gun locked up on me. I'd been adrinkin a Co'cola, and I thowed the bottle at the son-

bitch. Knocked his brains right out his head. Kilt that fucker, man." Reese paused to look back. "Kirby, what you doin'?"

Alan had stopped behind, at the foot of the ramp. He was looking up at the school, at Miss Lewis's window. "Nothing."

"Come on, you sonbitch."

"You fart."

Reese did fart, resoundingly, like an oboe in lowest register, and they all three laughed. They went back to their desultory game. Fifteen minutes later, they paused to watch Miss Lewis leave. She came out, locked the door behind her, and walked away, head down. They heard her Rambler start and drive away.

That was at 9:52. They played until after eleven, and every fifteen minutes or so Alan cast an uneasy look at the school building. It dozed in the sunshine, but to Alan something about the red-brick building just didn't look right.

At eleven, Alan realized what looked out of place. Miss Lewis, always so tidy, had not remembered to close her windows. And this time of year, there was an afternoon thunderstorm as often as not.

Well, he could get Reese to boost him up and he'd run upstairs to close them himself.

Alan imagined the empty, echoing hallway.

He thought about the scent of burning paper.

He thought of himself alone in that room.

"Kirby!"

The ball thudded to the ground ten feet from him. He picked it up and threw it back to Reese. "Wake up, man!" the bigger boy yelled.

Alan thought about going into the empty school. But somehow he never got around to asking Reese for the boost.

5

The bell jangled him in just past noon. The store was fairly busy — four boys clustered around the comic-book racks, two middle-aged ladies browsed the poetry and inspirational section away at the back, and Walt Peavey, his purchases already bagged and in his hand, stood shooting the breeze with John. They looked up in some surprise. Andy McCory had never been in a bookshop in his life.

Skin and bones, John thought. Nothing but rawhide skin stretched tight over bones and liquor and meanness. What holds him together?

McCory shambled up to the counter. The stench of sweat and urine was strong on him, with the sweeter, ranker, yeasty stink of beer underneath it all. "I'm s'posed to give you this," he said, thrusting a folded paper at John.

John took it, unfolded it, and read. "Yes," he said. "We can do this. Take about three-four weeks, though. You want — "

"Do what's in the paper," McCory said.

"All right. That will be, let's see, fifty-one-fifty, tax included. Does he want me to — "

"Take it out of this." Andy thrust two bills at John, a fifty and a twenty.

"All right." John rang up the sale on the register and counted out eighteen dollars and fifty cents in change. "You pick this up or you want it delivered?"

"Just let him know when it's here. I can tell him it'll be 'bout four weeks, right?"

"Four weeks will do it."

"From today."

"Right. Here, I'll write you a receipt."

"He didn't say nothing about no receipt." McCory turned and shuffled out. One of the kids brought a handful of comic books, a Walt Disney's Comics and Stories, a Green Lantern, a Superman, and a Batman. John rang up the sale. The kids went out in a group, already bickering over who got to read what first. Walt Peavey stepped a little closer. "Better check them bills," he said.

John raised his eyebrows. "Pardon?"

"Said you better check them bills. The ones McCory gave you. He never had seventy dollars at one time in his life, not as long as there was liquor to buy. Better make sure they're all right."

John shook his head, but he took out the fifty and the twenty. "Seem okay to me."

Peavey put his package on the counter and took the fifty. He held it right up to his face, peering at it. Walt Peavey had been working for the post office for more than twenty years, and he prided himself on knowing a thing or two. "This one's all right," he said grudgingly.

"Know how you can tell? Look for the little red and blue threads in the white parts. That and the lines in the engraving. They ought to be sharp, not blurry." He handed the bill back to John. "What's Andy McCory buyin', anyhow, that costs that much?"

"Engraved stationery," John said.

Peavey snorted. "That bastard — " He remembered himself, looked around quickly, and saw that the two ladies had apparently not heard him. Nevertheless, he lowered his voice: "That bastard can't hardly write his name. What's he need stationery for?"

"Not for him," John said. He showed Peavey the order, neatly typed:

Please supply 2,500 sheets of printed letterhead stationery, 5,000 second sheets, both 20 pound bond paper, and 2,500 printed envelopes, with the following:

Athaniel B. Badon, Owner and Manager
ShadowShow Theater
East Bridge Street
Gaither, Georgia

Walt handed the paper back. "I heard somebody'd bought the building. Who is this fellow Badon? That how you say it?" Walt had pronounced the name "Bad-un."

"Bay-don," John corrected. "That's how somebody said it today, anyhow. I don't know who he is. Somebody new in town, I reckon."

"Must be, to buy that place. Never make a go of it."

"Think not?"

"Naw. Everybody's got a television. Who goes to the show anymore, besides kids?"

"I don't know. I miss not having a theater in town myself. Mary and I used to go a lot. Spent a lot of time up in that old balcony at the State."

"Yeah, well. Kids today, they go to the drive-in. And if there's anything good comes on, you can run over to Gainesville and see it."

"Can until the lake fills up," John said.

"Reckon they're ever gonna start on the new bridge?" Lake Lanier, formed by the damming of the Chattahoochee, was forming, and on two sides it threatened to cut off Gaither altogether. The west side wasn't so bad, there was no town that way for miles and miles any-

how, but off twenty miles to the east was Gainesville, a slightly bigger and busier town. A few folks liked to drive there to shop. "They ain't even finished with the pilings, I hear," Walt said.

"They'll get around to it. Help you ladies?"

The two old women had made their choices. They bought a Norman Vincent Peale book, *Stay Alive All Your Life*, and, as if as an insurance measure, last year's *The Search for Bridey Murphy*. Christian optimism and the possibility of bodily reincarnation. Trust in God, but don't rule out the occult altogether. John gave them the change from a ten, and with their books packaged, they jangled out.

"Well," Peavey said. "Guess I better get back to the P.O. Everybody there loafes when I leave 'em alone any amount of time. Come see us."

"Come again, Walt," John said.

Alone in the store for the first time in a couple of hours, John came from behind the counter and stood at the front door. Looking across the street to his left, he could see the theater and its marquee. He had an almost end-on view of the latter, however, and could not read the letters on it. He looked back down at the order in his hand. ShadowShow.

Well, that was probably as good a name as State. That was what movies were, after all: shadows projected on a screen. John Kirby felt unreasonably cold and retreated behind his counter. He got out the stationery order book and selected a nice, clean, bold style for Mr. Athaniel B. Badon's letterhead, Business Graphic 22. He wrote up the order and put it in an envelope.

Should've sent this back with Peavey, he thought. Never mind, though. The second mail delivery and pickup of the day would be around three. Time enough to send it then.

And despite Andy McCory's indifference, John wrote up a receipt for the order. He thought he'd send Alan over with it if he showed up at the store that afternoon. Alan might like to go into the old theater himself and meet Mr. A. B. Badon, John thought.

Yes, he'd let Alan do it.

For Andy McCory the world had filmed over. His movements seemed to him remote, faraway, done in slow motion like those of a deep-sea

diver. Colors were subdued, as if he were seeing his surroundings through a very thin sheet of waxed paper. Occasionally his own movements startled him, when he caught sight of his arm or leg: it was as if someone else willed their motions.

And yet he felt warm, happy. It was like the earliest stages of a good drunk, a stage past the buzz and into the ain't-everybody-great territory. Memory was going, too. Already he could not clearly recall the moment of his hiring the previous night. Already he had forgotten whether he had been home at all since then. He thought not. He had worked, oh, the dark man had made him work like a dog, cleaning up the theater, replacing burned-out bulbs, even re-pasting the wallpaper in three places where it had peeled loose; and in a couple of days he would be painting woodwork. He had worked on that theater harder, probably, than he had worked at anything else in his life.

But he had a reward to look forward to.

Andy grinned.

And there was something else, too, a boon of the dark man: he wasn't a bit tired. He felt as if he had gone away somewhere, deep inside his own head, and was resting there comfortably even now, even as he pushed open the door of the Advocate building.

A young, black-haired woman sat behind a chest-high counter. "Can I help you?" she asked.

Andy's hand fumbled in his jeans pocket, came out with a folded yellow paper. He thrust it toward her. "Put this in the newspaper."

The woman leaned forward to take it from him. Her eyes came sharply up to his, and her nose twitched. Her mouth turned down in disgust. But she took the paper and unfolded it. "This is an ad," she said.

"Put it in the newspaper."

"You need to take this to Miss Carver. Through the door behind you, all the way straight back to the last desk. That's who you need to give it to." She handed the paper back to Andy.

For a second Andy literally saw red: visualized the black-haired woman torn to ribbons, pooled in her own juices. Something in the back of his head whispered, Not now. Not yet. He smiled, took the paper, and turned.

The newsroom was long and narrow, with four desks in all. Two were occupied, one by a man diligently typing away on an old

Underwood, and the one at the far end by a plump, matronly, gray-haired woman. From off to the left came the clash and clatter of a web press, and the air was scented with the thick smell of printer's ink. Andy floated back to the woman.

"Here," he said as she looked up at him. "Put this in the newspaper."

The woman took the paper without grimacing — she had taken plenty of livestock ads from some pretty ripe hog farmers in her day — and opened it. She wore brown half spectacles thrust up in her hair. She lowered them to her nose, peered at the paper, and read aloud: "Help Wanted: Usher, Concessionaire, Tkt. Clerk. Apply ShadowShow Theater (the old State) Mon.-Fri. 4:00-6:00 P.M. Full-time or part-time wrk." The woman pushed the specs back up, looked at Andy, and said, "We have to count the abbreviations as full words. The hyphenated ones count as two words each."

"All right," Andy said.

"How long is this to run?"

"When can you start?"

"It'll go in Friday's paper. Then it can run as long as you want it. There's a special rate for three or more days."

"Keep it in all next week."

"All right." She dropped her glasses back into place and counted words with the point of a pencil. "That's a dollar-five a day, four days, that would be four-twenty. Less ten percent for running it more than three days, that would be minus forty-two. That comes to three dollars and seventy-eight cents."

Andy reached in his pocket and fumbled out a five. "Here."

The woman made change. He thrust it back in his pocket and turned away. The black-haired woman in the front didn't even look at him. He ran his tongue over his teeth and thought of what he would do later.

The Advocate was the last errand. Andy walked south on Oglethorpe, trudging along under an afternoon sun. Heaped clouds, piled fluffed and white on top but dark gray underneath, herded through the sky, occasionally obscuring the sunshine. Not many people were out — the banks in Gaither and some of the stores, furniture and appliance stores mainly, closed at noon on Wednesdays. Even so, the few people that Andy passed didn't speak to him, and he did not even glance their way.

He heard the voice before he even got to the Square, a saw rasp of a voice, grating, harsh, earnest. His face felt slack from the inside. Again he noticed that peculiar dullness in the air, the muted colors around him, the sensation that sounds were coming to him muffled through cotton.

Except for the voice.

It was a preacher man, he saw as he crossed Main. A preacher standing diagonally across Bridge Street from the theater, exhorting, sawing the air with his free hand, supporting a huge Bible with the other.

Andy's lungs felt as if the air he breathed were full of sharp, stinging grains of sand. His legs went heavy on him, so that picking up his foot, swinging it forward, putting it down, was an effort. He remembered Korea, the times when his boots caked twice their thickness in mud. It was like that.

But there had not been this heat in his brain in Korea.

The preacher man was a skinny old buzzard. His neck would snap — Later, the voice in Andy's head promised. Later.

Andy stopped at the corner, right across from the preacher. He narrowed his eyes, concentrated. Andy was convinced that if he looked hard and mean enough at anybody, he could make them look at him.

Sure enough, the preacher turned his way, spittle flying, mouth gaping in the earnestness of his message. He broke off, his eyes going wide when he saw Andy. Andy grinned at him.

The preacher's chest heaved once, twice, before he resumed his rant: "The FOOL hath said in his heart-hah! That there IS no GOD-hah!"

Andy laughed, turned, and walked across the street. The front door of the theater was ajar, and he almost ran headlong into a boy on the way out. "Scuse me," the kid said, and ducked away.

Mr. Badon was in the little office at the head of the stair, just behind the projection booth. "You have finished?" he said, not even looking up as Andy appeared in the doorway.

"I done everything."

"Good. You have money left?"

Andy thrust his hand in his pocket. It came out with two twenties, some ones, and some silver. He held it out.

"No, you keep it. It will be by way of salary, yes? For the work you did for me last night and today? And your regular salary will begin Monday. Tomorrow I will teach you how to run the projectors."

"What do I do now?"

"Go home," Mr. Badon said. "Your family will be worried about you."

Andy's brain immediately began to calculate how much forty-odd dollars could buy him at the bootlegger's.

But Mr. Badon seemed to read the thought. "You will go home, Andy. You will turn the money over to your wife. You will tell her you have a good job now. And you will rest until tomorrow morning."

"All right," Andy said, knowing somehow that he would do exactly what Mr. Badon had said.

"And you will not hurt your wife. Not anymore."

"All right."

"At least, not until I tell you it is permissible."

"All right."

Badon turned back to the desk, where he was busy filling out a film order form. Andy hovered in the doorway, a feverish presence. Without looking up, Badon said, "There is something else?"

"They was a boy comin' out of the buildin'," he said.

Badon lifted a flimsy receipt form between two long fingers of his left hand, waved it in the air. The top part, punched in two places for binding, floated to and fro. "The boy came from the stationery man," he said. "You did not wait for my receipt."

"You never told me to."

"It's all right."

"Are you gonna use him?"

Badon put the receipt back on the desk. "Jealous already?"

"I wanna know."

Badon shook his head. "He is just a boy. He was a little afraid to come in here, I think. A big empty building, and dark, so dark. No windows in a cinema. But he came, and he found the stair, and he found me, and we had a nice little talk. He likes movies, that boy. I gave him some passes. But I did not hire him."

Andy nodded. He stood for a moment longer, licked his lips. "There's a black-headed woman at the newspaper," he began.

"All right," Badon said, his tones flat and nasal, in imitation of Andy's voice.

Andy blinked.

In his own voice, Badon said, "I'm not joking. I agreed. You can go now. And don't think about the woman at the newspaper anymore."

She will be available for you when it is time. And you will know when it is time."

Without another word, Andy turned away.

"Oh," Badon said from his desk. "One moment. There is one other thing you can do before you go."

Andy returned. "What?"

Badon held up a fat envelope. "Tongue out." When Andy obeyed, Badon slipped the envelope flap across his tongue.

"Ow," Andy said. The paper had cut him.

Badon smiled at him. He tucked the moistened flap shut, pressed it down. He stood and gave the envelope to Andy. "Drop this in the mail. It's stamped already. Before you go, put your tongue out again."

Andy did. He felt and tasted blood on it.

Badon moved close, put cold hands on Andy's cheeks, squeezed hard, pressed his mouth to Andy's.

For a gagging moment Andy thought he would vomit. The other had taken Andy's tongue into his own mouth, and it was cold, it was foul —

Andy felt him begin to suck.

Four

1

Alan kept the movie passes on the table beside his bed, using them to mark his place in the library book on dinosaurs he had been reading. On Saturday morning he woke up later than usual, reached for the book — Roy Chapman Andrews on a day he could devote entirely to reading was his idea of heaven — and saw the six tickets, salmon pink, overstamped “Complimentary” in purple. For some reason they made him uneasy, and when he slipped out of bed, carrying his book to the kitchen with him, he left the passes behind.

His father had already left for the shop. Alan had a quick breakfast of cornflakes and orange juice, washed his bowl and glass, and wandered into the living room. He switched on the Philco for company, sprawled on the sofa, and began to read about the Gobi Desert and the remains of protoceratops.

It was after nine, and when the TV warmed up, “Howdy Doody” was on. Alan glanced around once, in time to see Clarabell the Clown give Chief Thunderthud a faceful of seltzer, and then he went back to his book. He read through “Gumby,” “Fury,” “Captain Gallant” (automatically saying “yech” when, during the ketchup commercial, Fuzzy said he liked the stuff on his scrambled eggs), and into “True Story” before he turned the last page, closed the book, got off the couch, and switched off the TV.

He prowled back to the kitchen, put together two bologna sandwiches and ate them with a glass of milk. Again he cleaned up after himself. He went outside through the back door and, for want of anything better to do, climbed the chinaberry tree in the backyard. The

inedible berries were ripe and rank, golden wrinkled balls the size of marbles that smelled like spoiled apples. Alan didn't like them at this stage, or later, when they dropped off the tree and popped beneath his feet like bugs, though early in the summer, when they were hard green spheres, the berries made perfect ammo for a slingshot.

Alan braced himself fifteen feet from the ground, his back against the trunk, his legs straddling a sturdy horizontal branch. It was warm, eighty or thereabouts, and fair. Looking to his right, Alan could see the house tops on River Street below, and beyond them Moccasin Creek and the town. Things moved slowly in Gaither on a Saturday morning, but they moved. Farmers came into town then, with their families packed tight in the cabs and beds of ancient pickups, the boys in overalls like their fathers', the girls as often as not in dresses carefully made from flour sacks. On impulse, Alan decided to go to town. The library in the basement of the courthouse was open until two, and maybe he could find another Roy Chapman Andrews book to read. He banged the kitchen door open, got the book, went out the front door, and mounted his red Schwinn.

He went the back way, turning off Bridge Street at Tower, crossing Main, and then pulling into the parking lot behind the courthouse. He parked the Schwinn on the grass beside the basement entrance — no one would steal it, not in Gaither — and went down and into the library.

It was a dark warren of rooms, all the windows high, thin horizontal rectangles. Mrs. Poston, behind the desk, accepted the book, checked the date, replaced the card in its pocket, and put the volume on a cart to be shelved. "Do you have any more of those?" Alan whispered. Mrs. Poston, of all the librarians, was the one who held silence the most golden.

"Dinosaur books? I think so."

"No, I mean books by Roy Chapman Andrews," Alan said.

"I don't know, offhand. Check the card catalog."

"Yes, ma'am."

The catalog was housed in an enormous old wooden case, with file drawers crammed to bursting with cards. Sometimes you almost had to force a knife in to press them apart and look at titles. Alan found that there were two more books by Andrews, *Ends of the Earth* and *The New Conquest of Central Asia*. He memorized the call numbers and set forth into the Dewey jungle.

He met disappointment. Neither book was in; possibly neither even existed any longer, since the Frye County Library catalog was seldom purged. He contented himself with a dusty volume called *The Life of a Fossil Hunter*. Taking it to the desk, he got in line behind a girl about his age. "Hey, Alan," she said as Mrs. Poston stamped — ka-chink! — *her* books.

"Hey, Diane," Alan returned. He filled in the book card and surrendered the volume to Mrs. Poston.

Diane England had gathered her three books against her chest. She walked out with Alan. "What you readin'?" she asked.

"Dinosaur books," Alan said.

"Daddy says dinosaurs aren't real," Diane told him. Somehow that didn't surprise Alan much: Diane's father worked in the New Haven mill and held strong opinions about other things as well. Mr. England also had grave doubts about nuclear power, the Republican party, and the roundness of the earth. "He says if dinosaurs are real, then God can't be real, so dinosaurs aren't real."

"Uh-huh."

"Will your daddy let you go to the show?" she asked.

"The new one? I guess."

"I don't know if my daddy'll let me go or not." Diane tossed her dark hair. "Shoo, it's hot." She stood on the sidewalk at the top of the steps, looking down at her penny loafers. "I never have seen a picture show, not since I was real little."

"I got some tickets," Alan blurted. "You can go with me. If your daddy doesn't mind, I mean."

Diane blushed. "Just you an' me?"

"Well, we could get a bunch up to go. Or we could just go together."

"All right," she said softly. "If Daddy will let me. I got to go. Daddy's in the barbershop waitin' to get a haircut. When will we go?"

"Soon as the theater opens and somethin' good comes on," Alan said.

"Will you call me?"

"Okay."

Diane bit her lip, turned away. Alan watched her, the swing of her pale blue skirt, and felt his heart trip-hammering away in his chest. He had just made a date — a date with a girl. True, the girl was only Diane England, the tomboy who played soldier with the bloodthirstiest of them and who was an ace pitcher in scratch baseball games (so good,

in fact, that even Reese Donalds called her “sonbitch,” his highest accolade). Still, Diane was looking less and less tomboyish these days.

Alan slipped the dinosaur book into his saddlebag, hopped on his bike, and rode off toward the Square. He went down Gaines Street to Bridge, down Bridge to Oglethorpe, and rested the bike against the front of his father’s store. The bell overhead jangled as he came in. “Closing time,” he said, grinning.

His dad, ensconced in his high chair behind the counter, with a paperback open on his folded knees, looked up with a smile. “Near about,” he said. “What have you been up to?”

“Not much. Finished my library book and got another one. I told Diane England I’d let her use one of my passes when the show opens.”

His father looked at him for a long time. “Really? That was nice of you.”

Alan found his chest somehow tight. “Well, I have six passes.”

“You can use them next week, I hear,” John Kirby said. “Mr. McCory came in to buy a paper for Mr. Badon. He says the theater will open Monday night.”

Alan made a face. “Mr. McCory smells bad.”

“Son.”

“Well, he does.”

“Mr. McCory has a drinking problem.” Alan’s father closed his book. Behind his spectacles his eyes were serious, his voice soft but decisive. “He can’t always help himself.”

“But he’s always so dirty.”

“Not today. He was cleaned up considerable. I don’t know. This theater job might be the best thing that’s ever happened to him.”

Alan was rifling the stack of Atlanta papers. “Got any Sunday sections yet?”

“In the back. Want to open them for me?”

“Can I have one?”

“If you’ll come down and stuff this evening.”

“Deal.”

The Sunday features of the Journal-Constitution — *the* magazine section, women’s pages, and most important of all, the funnies — came in on Saturday. That night the news sections would be dropped off, and someone — Alan this evening — would have to assemble the papers. Though the store was closed on Sundays, Alan’s father kept a

coin machine in the lobby of the Dixie Hotel stocked, in case a guest should want a paper. Alan used his pocketknife to cut the string of the bundle and got out a comic section.

He perched on the corner of the desk to read the adventures of Dick Tracy. He skipped Kitty Higgins, read Dennis the Menace, ignored Rex Morgan, read Moon Mullins and Li'l Abner — there was a feud going on between Mary Worth and Li'l Abner right now, with Al Capp taking off on "Mary Worm" and the Mary Worth artist parodying the antics of an alcoholic-looking cartoonist named "Hal Rapp." Alan read Smilin' Jack and Donald Duck, Beetle Bailey and Pogo, Steve Canyon, Snuffy Smith, Peanuts, the Phantom, Mark Trail, Little Orphan Annie, Buz Sawyer, and Nancy. When he had finished, he refolded the newsprint neatly and tucked it back into its bundle. But he laid aside that feature section, knowing it was destined for home use; his father wouldn't want him to put a used set of comics back into a paper that was for sale.

His father appeared in the doorway, pulling the bow out of his blue tie. "Ready to head for home, Son?"

"Yeah. I rode my bike."

"All right. Did I tell you your aunt Betty's cooking for us tonight?"

Alan groaned.

"Frank's out of town," his father continued. "It makes Betty feel useful to look after us. Just remember she's being nice."

"All right. But I get tired of her telling me how to act."

John Kirby grinned. "Why do you think Frank's out of town so much? Scoot out of here, now. I've got to lock up."

It was three o'clock. Gaither was a Saturday-morning town: the banks closed at noon, most stores at two or three. Already the Square looked deserted. As he headed for it, Alan passed the theater. A scaffold was up over the marquee, and the huge green tin letters of the State sign lay in scattered confusion on the sidewalk. Two men in white coveralls were installing a different, newer sign. So far it read SHADOWS.

For some reason Alan shivered. Then he thought of taking Diane England to the movies, hunched his shoulders, and pedaled hard.

Ballew Jefferson drove himself home. Home, for him, was a white-columned house on Ransom Ridge, a big house clustered companion-

ably in its protective copse of poplars, cedars, and oaks: a dignified house, two-storied, off-white with tan shutters and trim, a house with an attached garage and, in the back, a brick barbecue pit. It, like all the other houses on the Ridge, bespoke comfort and money. In fact, when it had been built in 1937, the house had cost thirty-five thousand five, easing out the next contender, the Garner house down the street, by a good two thousand dollars.

The Jefferson house was a spacious house, an expensive house, a good house.

An empty house.

Mr. Jefferson, president and chief shareholder of the Trust Bank, parked his Lincoln, crushed out his Chesterfield, sighed, and climbed out of the car. Years settled around him, the twenty years (last June) that he had lived in the house, the years with Trudy and the years without her. Trudy Jefferson had died in the master bedroom in 1951, six years ago now: and her funeral was the last time, as far as Mr. Jefferson could recall, that the whole family had been together. Now there was one son in California, one in New York, and a married daughter in England. There were ten grandchildren now, three more than when Trudy had passed on. He had never seen two of them himself.

Jefferson sighed again, cocked a critical eye at the gutters — it was getting to be time to have them looked after — and unlocked the side door. Cooking smells reached him from the kitchen. He pulled his tie loose, shucked off his jacket, and hung both in his study closet, an indulgence Trudy, when alive, would never have permitted him.

He followed the aroma of food to the kitchen. A slender woman stood at the stove there, her back to him. “I’m home,” Jefferson said softly, so as not to startle her.

“Supper will be ready at five,” said Mollie Avery, not looking around.

Jefferson went to the refrigerator, opened it, got a glass from the cabinet beside it, and poured himself a long drink of ice water. “What am I having?” he asked Mollie.

“The **little** birds,” Mollie said. “I’m cookin’ both of ‘em. What you don’t eat you can heat up tomorrow after church.”

“I can finish off two Rock Cornish hens,” he said, drinking the water. He rinsed the glass and left it in the sink. “You look tired.”

"Yes, sir. Ludie's down with a cold, and I helped her clean up. She's gone now."

"Did she change the sheets?"

"I did. Ludie's back was hurtin' her some."

"Good, good. Any calls?"

"No, sir. Mail's on the hall table."

Jefferson meandered out of the kitchen and into the front hall. The mail was a small stack: advertising circulars, gas bill, a reminder from his dentist. The last envelope had only his name on it, no address, stamp, or postmark. He dropped the rest of the mail back on the hall table and restlessly went back to the kitchen. "How'd this get here?" he asked, holding up the envelope.

Mollie glanced up, her brown eyes liquid as always. "Oh. A man brought that by, about ten o'clock. He said it was for you. An ugly man."

Jefferson opened the envelope. The only thing inside was a salmon-colored theater ticket stamped "Complimentary." He grunted, dropped the ticket back into the envelope, and tossed the envelope onto the table. "What do you mean, an ugly man?"

Mollie bit her lip. "A white man," she said. "He looked ugly at me, like he — like he was thinkin' bad about me. He come in a long old black car. He grinned at me."

Jefferson shook his head in dismissal. "Some kind of advertising, I guess." He leaned against the refrigerator, a tired, paunchy man just the high side of sixty, and rubbed his bald spot reflectively. "Do you like it here, Mollie?" he asked at length.

"Yes, sir," Mollie said, keeping her downcast gaze on the potatoes she was peeling.

"I don't mean here, in this house," Jefferson continued. "I mean in Gaither, the town. Do you like it in Gaither?"

"It's my home," she said simply. "I never lived anyplace else."

Jefferson ran his palm from his forehead down over his face to his chin. "It's like an oven in here. It's going to get bad, Mollie."

"Cooler evenin's will be comin' on, sir."

"Not that. Not that. Do you know what the Civil Rights Bill is, Mollie?"

"No, sir."

"Well, it's going to pass in Congress, and it's going to make a lot of trouble for your people."

"Yes, sir."

"They'll be wanting colored children to go to school with white children. It's going to get real ugly."

Mollie began to dice the potatoes into cubes. She did not respond.

"I treat you all right, don't I, Mollie?" Jefferson asked.

"Yes, sir." The potato cubes fell into a pot of water one at a time. The knife cutting them made crisp sounds, each punctuated by a plop of water. Mollie was trembling a little.

Jefferson moved over to the sink. He saw her in profile now, high forehead, tip-tilted nose, clean chin, long neck. "You could almost pass for a white woman," he whispered.

Mollie smiled tightly, showing no teeth. "Not me, sir. Not with my hair. Not the way I talk and act."

"You'll eat with me tonight," Jefferson said.

"Yes, sir."

"And then after — "

"Yes, sir," she said. The knife slipped, raising a half-moon of skin on the base of her left thumb. She sliced the last potato wedge in two and ran cold water over the wound. The water dripped away stringy with red blood. After a half minute or so the bleeding stopped. Mollie turned off the water.

Jefferson reached to her. His fingernail traced the side of her neck, making her shiver.

"Please, sir," she said. "I've got to cook."

"It's going to get bad," Jefferson said, as if to himself.

"Yes, sir," Mollie said.

3

Diane England was uncomfortable in the barbershop. It was a place of men, redolent of the tonic they put on their hair, raucous with their laughter, littered with the clippings that fell from the barber's shears. She sat in a chair, aluminum frame covered with torn green vinyl, behind the coatrack and tried to read her book, Johnny Tremain, one they were supposed to read in school this year. Across the checkerboard green-and-white tile floor from her, her father sat in the window seat while Mr. Ivey clipped his hair. A radio, tuned to an Atlanta Crackers baseball game, droned on behind them.

"Goin' to take that youngun to the picture show?" Mr. Ivey asked, winking at her over the top of his glasses. Diane, surprised, held her breath. She had been thinking about the new theater.

"What new picture show?" Duane England asked. His eyes were closed, and his craggy, big-featured face reminded Diane more than usual of a beardless Abe Lincoln. The Emancipator's preoccupied, thin face looked out from his frame in every schoolroom in the county (often enough, to be sure, meeting the gaze of Robert E. Lee on the opposite wall). England stirred a little beneath the white apron spread over him. "I ain't heard nothin' about it."

"Sure," Mr. Ivey said, his scissors and comb busy. "Old State's been sold. Gonna open up next week, I hear."

"Picture shows. Foolishness," said England.

"Reckon you're right," Mr. Ivey said. He sighed. "Hey, laud."

"Somethin' for folks to throw their money away on."

"Bend your head forward for me. There we go. I don't know, Duane. Me an' Shug used to go to the State pretty often. I liked westerns."

"Some of 'em's okay, I guess," England muttered into his chest, and Diane's heart lifted. "Gene Autry's a pretty good man."

"They made I'd Climb the Highest Mountain up the road a piece," Mr. Ivey said.

"I know about it. That was the one about a Methodist preacher."

"Um-hmm. Let me get those sideburns for you." Mr. Ivey turned around and began to work up a lather in his soap cup. "You see that one?"

"Oh, yeah. Me and Helen went." England opened his eyes and tilted his head almost imperceptibly toward Diane. "She was a little bitty ol thing. Ol Hesketh wanted to charge us a quarter to let her in. I told him they weren't no sense in that. She gonna set on her mama's lap anyhow. He let her in for nothin'."

Mr. Ivey began to brush creamy lather onto the sides of England's head. "Lotta these little ol gals oughta be able to get into the show for nothin' then," he said. "Way they set around on their boyfriends' laps."

England laughed. "Yeah, I guess," he said.

"Hold right still now," said Mr. Ivey, opening his straight razor. He stropped it and scraped off the lather.

The chair next to Mr. Ivey's was vacant, and the one next to that was occupied by a thin, pale, redheaded man in khaki pants and a blue

chambray workshirt. His barber, the rotund Mr. Reynolds, had not spoken to him during his entire haircut, but had performed the service silently, the corners of his thin-lipped mouth turned down as if in disapproval. Mr. Reynolds swept the cloth off him now, brushed him down with talcum, and said, "That'll be a dollar."

The man unfolded himself from the chair, reached into his pocket, and produced a single. Mr. Reynolds took it by the edge, as if he thought it might be dirty. "Come again, Andy," he said, but his voice was not inviting.

Andy looked at Diane. She felt crawling all at once, as if ants were creeping over her skin. The man grinned. His newly pomaded copy hair swept up from his forehead. "Everybody in town oughta come to the picture show," he said. Then he turned and walked out.

"That Andy McCory?" Mr. England asked.

"Yeah," Mr. Reynolds said shortly, ringing open the cash register and tucking the dollar inside.

"His daddy's sho down on him," Mr. England observed.

Mr. Ivey had towed off the excess lather and was working some high-smelling pink lotion into Diane's father's hair. "Shoot, I guess everybody in town's kind of down on him. Way he treats his wife and babies." The barber shook his head and sighed, "Hey, laud," again.

Mr. Reynolds busied himself with a whisk broom, sweeping stray wisps of red hair from the seat and back of his barber's chair. "Told me he had to get a haircut. His new boss said he had to get a haircut." Reynolds snorted. "Andy McCory ain't been in a barbershop since he was a youngun. Cut his hair himself with scissors. Too cheap to spend the dollar."

Mr. Ivey tilted his head back as he carefully combed Mr. England's hair into place. "Well, be good for him to get cleaned up a little."

"Make him look better, anyhow," Mr. Reynolds said, climbing into his own chair and folding his hands over his substantial belly.

"Feel better, too." Mr. Ivey applied brush and talc, removed the apron, brushed again. "Ain't that right?"

Mr. England rose from the chair. Like McCory, he wore a blue workshirt, but like all of the mill hands, he also wore a pair of blue pin-striped overalls. "I reckon," he said, reaching into his pocket. He pulled out a fat change purse, worn black with age and use, fished a crumpled dollar out, and gave it to Mr. Ivey. "Well, come see us."

"You come back."

Diane gathered up her books. As she walked beside her father to the Square, where the battered old family Chevy was parked, she said, "Daddy, I remember that picture show."

Her father, walking preoccupied beside her, gave her a sideways glance. "What?"

"That one about the Methodist preacher. It had this little boy in it that got drowned."

"Yeah, I reckon it did," Mr. England said.

"Did you and Mama use to go to many picture shows?"

"Some," he said.

"But I never went to any but that one," she murmured. "Daddy — do you reckon I could go when the show opens again?"

Her father drew in a long breath. "Sugar, it costs money." They had reached the car, parked in front of the Trust Bank. Mr. England opened her door, and she slid in, the three library books clutched to her chest.

When her father got behind the wheel, Diane said, "Daddy, what if some kids were going, and a boy wanted to take me?"

"You're too little to think about that," he said, putting his key into the ignition.

"Alan Kirby says he'd like to take me sometime," she said.

Her father gave her a keen look, more like Abe Lincoln's than ever, she thought. "John Kirby's boy?"

"Uh-huh. He's in my grade at school."

Mr. England looked down, and Diane had the feeling that things were being balanced and weighed. "John Kirby's a good man," he said at last. "I reckon it wouldn't do no harm. But John or me, one will have to drive you and pick you up. I won't have you goin' out if there's an older boy drivin' a car. So it has to be just you and Alan."

"Thank you, Daddy," Diane said.

Her father grunted, started the car, and pulled out. They had to go around three sides of the nearly deserted Square before they were heading back north toward New Haven; at the southeast corner, she noticed some men picking big green tin letters up off the sidewalk. Above them, on the white front of the theater building, a brand-new sign proclaimed SHADOWSHOW in letters two feet high and red as blood.

Five-thirty, and he had been walking the floor since four. Three long strides: turn at the front door: three strides back. She stood in the kitchen doorway, arms crossed, hands holding on just above the elbows. The kids already sat at the table behind her, unusually quiet, big-eyed. Daddy had never been drunk like this before.

"Andy," she pleaded.

He ignored her, continued his senseless pacing, back and forth, back and forth. He opened the door once, scowled out at the copper-colored street, bathed in the light of a low sun, and closed the door behind him.

"Come and eat," she said.

"Ain't hungry."

She bit her lower lip. Andy looked better, no doubt about that: clean, combed, kept. True, he was still too thin, too hectic in his movements, and there was something in his eye, at once dull and cunning, that she distrusted, that she had never before seen there, even on those occasions when he was working himself up to hit her. Still, he looked better, younger somehow.

"Pork chops," she said, tempting him.

"Ain't hungry. When does it get dark?"

"Sun ain't even down, Andy."

"Well, hell, when does it go down?"

She shrugged her shoulders, a helpless gesture. "I don't know, Andy. Seven o'clock."

He finally came to rest, sinking on the shabby couch. At night Little Lee slept there; by day it was the newest piece of furniture in this dingy room. Andy, when he was home and sober, sometimes slept there of an afternoon, the old floor-model radio's worn speaker buzzing threateningly beneath the words or the music issuing from it. Now he just sat on the edge, the springs groaning beneath him. Andy ran both hands through his newly trimmed red hair. "I'm goin' out tonight," he said, his voice flat, brooking no disagreement.

She turned away from him and went into the kitchen again. Little Lee said softly, "Mama, what's the matter?"

"Nothing, hon. Drink your milk." It was real milk tonight, not one can of Silver Cow condensed diluted with four cans of water. That and

the pork chops and an icebox full of food had been bought with the money Andy had brought home on Wednesday, and there was both money and food left over. Lee McCory smiled at her children. "Daddy's just excited about his new job."

Danny's eyes were enormous, filled with question and doubt. "Is Daddy gonna be paid every week?" he asked. Lee felt a surge of pride in her son. He talked just fine for a three-year-old.

"Yes, honey. He's going to be paid every week." Lee reached for the pork chops, served herself one, then spooned green beans into her plate and broke herself a piece of golden cornbread. "Daddy has a good job now."

"And he ain't drinkin' beer," Little Lee said solemnly.

Lee flinched, but Andy, in the living room, gave no sign of having heard his daughter. "No," Lee whispered.

It was true: Andy had come home sober Thursday, had remained sober Friday, and then all day today. He was a binge drunk, but a constant drinker. Not for years had his breath been free of alcohol for three days straight. And there was the money . . .

"It's a good job your daddy's got," Lee said softly to her three- and four-year-old. "He's gonna have money every week, and we gonna buy you some new shoes and some clothes and maybe a coat apiece before it gets cold." And food for your stomachs, and when you get sick a real doctor and not just a trip to the drugstore to beg some aspirin on credit, she added silently. Poor babies, you deserve better than your daddy and me. I wish —

He was in the doorway. "Whyn't you tell me supper was on the table?"

Hurt brimmed in her eyes. "Set down," she said. "I'll fix you a plate."

Andy pulled one of the mismatched ladder-back chairs out from the table, slumped into it. Lee, her own food cooling on the plate, got up to put meat and vegetables before her husband. "Got any coffee?" he asked.

They had inherited the stove, a chipped white Magic Chef gas burner, from the last occupant of their rented house. Lee remembered times when they ate cold food because Andy had drunk up the money intended to replenish the propane tank out back. Well, now they could have it filled regularly, she thought as she turned to the stove. A dented tin coffeepot rested on it, its bakelite handle broken to two stubs. Wrapping her hands in a couple of dishcloths, Lee lifted the pot and

poured a cup of coffee for her husband. He took it without acknowledgment and drank deeply. Lee sat back down, looking at him. He could always do that, she thought. Always drink down coffee that would scald anybody else, always eat the hottest red pepper without even getting water in his eyes.

Andy McCory hunched over his plate, methodically shoveling food into his mouth, his jaw working like something mechanical. Around a mouthful of pork chops, he muttered, "Gonna go out tonight."

Lee nodded. Little Lee, looking at her daddy, began to cry.

Andy wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. "What's the matter with her?" he growled, nodding at his daughter.

Lee reached a protective hand to her little girl's neck. "She's tired out," she told her husband. "She's all right."

Andy grunted, gulped coffee. Silence lay heavy in the kitchen until he pushed back from the table, belched, and got up. "Goin' to town," he announced.

Lee followed him to the living room. "Where are you goin to be?" she asked him.

Andy scowled and shook his head.

Lee put her hand on his, stopping him from opening the door. "Andy, don't. Stay here." Her husband paused under her touch, but then he pulled away.

"Gotta go," Andy said, his voice genial as she remembered it being years before, in the days when he still wore his army uniform around town. "Come on, move."

She looked into his face. "Andy, I — maybe if you stayed home we could let Danny sleep on a pallet in the living room tonight. Maybe you and me could — you know."

He grinned at her, put both his hands on her waist, and picked her up. He was stronger than he looked, really terribly strong, and he set her aside as if she had been no heavier than one of the mannequins in the Bon Ton window downtown. "Be back before too late." He winked. "We'll talk about it then." He opened the door, froze — there was no other word for it, he simply froze, as if suddenly locked into position — then turned to look over his shoulder, that dull-crafty look in his eyes. "Gotta clean up the theater," he said. "Promised Mr. Badon I'd get the floors all clean tonight. Gotta be ready Monday for the show. You remember that?"

Lee nodded. "Uh-huh."

"Where'm I gonna be?"

"Andy —"

"Goddamn it, where'm I gonna be, woman?"

Her lips seemed numb. "At the theater," she mumbled. "Cleanin' the floors."

"At's right. You remember that in case — you just remember that, now."

The door closed. Behind Lee, a small voice said, "Mama?"

It was Danny, standing there hand in hand with Little Lee. Lee sank to her knees, spread her arms. Her children ran to be enfolded, buried their faces warm against her throat. Muffled, Danny's voice again: "Mama?"

Lee rocked back and forth. "What is it, hon?"

Danny pushed away, tilted his pudgy face up toward hers, his fine coppery hair adrift over his forehead. "Mama," he said, still trying to find the words to express his thoughts right, "who was he?"

"Who was who, hon?" Lee asked, the numb feeling spreading to her cheeks.

"That man."

Lee tried to smile. It felt like a grimace on her face. "Hon, that was your daddy. You know that. It was your daddy."

Danny's eyes looked stricken. His lip trembled, and his face fell apart in a terrified wail. Little Lee joined him. For a frantic moment, Lee McCory tried to shush them: then, for reasons unknown even to her, she joined in, crying as loudly, as forlornly, as the little boy and girl.

5

Brother Odum Tate paid twenty-four dollars a week for his room and board. From time to time he bought small things — a newspaper, undershorts from the dime store, a sack of peppermint candy to soothe a throat torn raw by gospel. He put whatever money was left over in a sock, and he kept the sock in the suitcase under his bed.

Now the bills and silver were spread out on top of the bed. Tate had stacked the singles in piles of ten, had spread out the larger

denominations. Stacks of dimes and quarters made dollars, stacks of nickels made half-dollars, of pennies dimes. He counted, counted again. One hundred and four dollars in bills; eleven dollars in silver and copper; thirty-three cents left over. A hundred and fifteen dollars and thirty-three cents. He was richer than he had imagined. Twenty dollars could take a man a long way on a Greyhound, north or south or west.

Tate had been sitting on the edge of the bed. He got up and went to the window of his bedroom. There, to the west, behind Rainey Hill, the sun had set, leaving the sky deep purple, shading to pink. In such skies he saw, or imagined he saw, the face of God from time to time. Tonight it just looked empty.

"Oh, God," he said, his lips barely moving. "Tell me what to do. What would You have me to do?" The big Bible rested atop a chipped blond chest of drawers, beside Tate's pocket watch, key, handkerchief, and wallet. The preacher reached to pull the chain on his hanging bulb, flooding the room with sudden yellow light. Then he stood the Bible on its spine, let it fall open.

He cast his eye on the page, trusting to God to provide guidance. He read:

1 The wicked flee when no man pursueth: but the righteous are bold as a lion.

2 For the transgression of a land many are the princes thereof: but by a man of understanding and knowledge the state thereof shall be prolonged.

3 A poor man that oppresseth the poor is like a sweeping rain, which leaveth no food.

4 They that forsake the law praise the wicked: but such as keep the law contend without them.

5 Evil men understand not judgment: but they that seek the LORD understand all things.

Proverbs, that hard book, all submission and sin and trust in God.

The hills of Tennessee were a bus ride away.

The old folks in Florida would listen to a preacher, would understand his tortured drive, a man full of God and unable to hold it.

Alabama, Mississippi.

Escape.

The wicked flee . . .

"Oh, Lord," Tate said, despair spilling from his eyes, "I have tried to be worthy of Thee."

Without hope, he let the Bible fall open again. This time he read Peter's terrible words:

But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat; the earth also, and the works that are therein, shall be burned up.

"I'm afraid," Tate whispered.

He closed the Bible, stood over the bed, looked down at the promise of his savings: North Carolina. South Carolina. Kentucky. Farther away, if he wanted.

The works of the earth.

Fervent heat.

A thief in the night.

Night had come outside now, dark and almost complete. Did the Lord lurk therein, ready to open the pit, to release a raging devil? Ready to give the final command to an angel standing with one foot on the land, the other on the sea? Ready to come as a thief in the night?

Tate sank to his knees. "Oh, God, I'm afraid," he said, his voice shaking. "Don't forsake me, God. Oh, please don't forsake Thy servant."

But all the time he tried to pray, the thought of the money, of the distance it could buy, returned again and again to his mind. His prayer, he realized bitterly, rose no higher tonight than the ceiling over his head.

A hundred fifteen dollars and thirty-three cents.

Wearily, Tate rose. He frowned down at the bills, the coins. He picked up the sock that was his bank and began to stuff the money back into it. All the while, his raspy voice shed malediction.

"Goddamn you," he grunted, stuffing his hand deep in the sock. "Goddamn you to an ever-burning hell. Oh, Goddamn you, Goddamn you!"

Tate seemed to be addressing the money. Whether it was so, or whether he cursed himself — or perhaps even God — even he could not have said.

Night.

Deputy Presley climbs in his patrol car and sets off. He will patrol the northern and eastern parts of the town first tonight. He has not directed traffic at the mill since Tuesday night, but no one has complained. He does not plan to get out of the car tonight, either. Maybe he will never get out of it again, he thinks. Not after the way Eula had treated him, not after the way she had laughed . . .

Night. The Advocate building is closed, locked up tight. No one there until Monday morning now; the scramble to get out two pages of Monday news is always the hardest of the week, for those two pages have to be tacked onto the fourteen pages of features (engagements and marriages, comics and entertainment, editorials and legal notices, fishing reports and ads, already laid out on this Saturday) so that a reader will feel he has his nickel's worth Monday afternoon. But tonight the building sleeps.

Night. The marquee of the ShadowShow is dark, its new name sign backlit by incandescent lights, showing up in silhouette against the white-painted brick façade. Inside, all is quiet; not dead; not alive.

No one moves in the theater.

But there is a sense that someone is there.

Or perhaps the building itself is there.

It waits.

Night.

Private Parks, the Confederate statue, stands wrapped in patience, as if ready to repel an invasion.

Night. Windows wink into relief against the dark. Lights come on in bedrooms, bathrooms up the hill, up the ridge. Cars prowl the streets, cut-down cars and jacked-up cars filled with teenagers and music. Pat Boone writing love letters in the sand; syrupy strings taking you around the world in eighty days; the Everly Brothers saying bye-bye to love.

Night, and the bats appear, to dive into the whirling clouds of moths and beetles beneath the streetlights and emerge with ball-round bellies full, sharp teeth bloody.

Another night in Gaither, but not like any other night in Gaither.

Tonight it comes for the first time.

Tonight.

Like a thief.

There is no night in a big city. Night has retreated there before the brimstone glare of thickly clustered streetlights, the neon effulgence on every storefront. Where in daylight you would cast one shadow, at night you cast five. The only darkness visible there is directly overhead, unrelieved by stars, haunted by the palest ghost of a moon.

There is no night in a big city.

In a small town it is different. In Gaither, for instance, night sat heavy by nine-thirty on a late summer's evening, dark and thick, even downtown. It was darker yet in the outlying streets of cheaply built and dearly rented white frame houses, streets where bright lights and neon were strangers, streets where fluted-saucer reflectors behind incandescent bulbs threw islands of light at sixty-foot intervals in the sea of night. Down one street Mr. Jefferson's Lincoln cruised, and from inside it Mollie Avery looked out, brooding, into the night.

Mollie Avery knew the dark, and the archipelago of six lights strung from South Oglethorpe Street to her house, and she dreaded it. Never used to bother me, she thought. It never used to be no distance when I worked days in the mill. I walked it in a minute and a half. But now —

Now she looked into the car window and saw her own face, a young face turning old, too thin, eyes hollowing above gaunt cheekbones, dark hair concealed under a dark scarf. Through the face she saw the lights of cars at cross streets, the windows of houses, blue-lit by television sets tuned to "Adventure Theatre" or "Mystery Is My Business" or "Bold Journey." Up front, behind the wheel of the Lincoln, Mr. Jefferson drove imperturbably, smoked his cigarette.

Mollie Avery thought he looked satisfied. Well, he should have, the white old pig. Wasn't for Billy I'd quit this job, Mollie thought. Hell with cookin' for a mean ol white man who wants me to sleep with him twice a week on top of that. And he won't even take me to my door, just lets me out on the curb. Hell with that. When Billy gets work, I'll quit, like that. Wouldn't make any difference if Mr. Jefferson offered me another thirty dollars a week to do for him. No difference if he sweet-talked me about how nobody else cooks the way I do, or how I'm almost white, how I'm so pretty. I'll quit, just like that, and never have to make that lonesome walk in the dark anymore.

The car stopped, pitching her forward a little. "Pick you up Monday morning," Mr. Jefferson said. He flipped his cigarette butt out the open window.

"Thank you, sir," Mollie whispered as she got out, clutching her purse. There was some small comfort in the purse: instead of washing the paring knife, she had stolen it. It was down there now with her billfold.

The Lincoln rumbled away. Mollie stood in the first circle of light, looking dully down at the red ash of the cigarette, still burning on the concrete. Then she lifted her eyes and looked up Slaterry Row. Five pools of light lay ahead of her. It's no real distance, she told herself. Think about it like it is in the daytime. White houses and the pecan trees and it's no distance at all from the curb to the front door. Bet before he got killed, my brother Donald used to run that far playin' football in no time at all. Come on, come on, I got to go. This is plain crazy, this standing here.

Her flat shoes slapped on the pavement. She paused to crush out the cigarette butt that Mr. Jefferson had discarded, then crossed the street, coming down a little harder than necessary with each step to make big sounds, loud sounds, firm slaps of leather against pavement, dying with no echo. Somebody had told her that snakes were scared of what they feel through their bellies.

She was in the dark between the islands, and the night clogged her throat, stopped the breath before it reached her lungs, squeezed the plum of her heart until it felt bruised. Oh, Lord, let me get to the light. Just be with me till I get to the light.

Mollie stepped across a boundary as sharp as a line drawn on a globe, stepped from night into light, and the air rushed into her chest and her heart pounded against her ribs. Four more, she thought. Four more lights and then turn right and that's my home.

No sidewalk here, but earth hard-packed from many feet, worn clean of grass. Mollie didn't break stride. She spoke her thought aloud, in a quavering voice, no louder than a puppy's whimper, and she walked to the rhythm of her words: "Four more lights and then turn right, four more lights and then turn right, three more lights — "

Beneath the third light she halted. "Who's there?" she asked, but her voice was so hushed that anyone outside the circle could not have heard. "Who that laughin'?"

No sound answered her: no leaf rustled, no breeze stirred, even the night insects seemed to have fallen silent. Mollie fixed her eyes on the next island of light. "That one and two more," she told herself. "Just that one and then two more."

The darkness seemed to weigh in on her with soft, lead-heavy pressure. She could not hear her own quick steps, could hear only the pound and rush of blood in her ears. She kept her eyes on a scrap of paper under the next streetlight, and then she was there, standing over the paper, looking down at it, a flattened white paper bag, torn and trodden, a hamburger bag from the place the white folks called the colored drive-in. A dark splotch of ketchup showed at one corner, like a blood blister inside the bag. Look down, make it easier, don't look up at all, step over the bag and into the dark —

Mollie ran, reached the fifth street light, pulled up short —

Did the sound of running footsteps persist too long, did they stop only after she stopped? Her throat clenched tight on a rising scream, shut it off. I can't even make a sound, not a sound, she thought in despair. I couldn't make a sound to save my life.

She looked behind her. Four streetlights. That was all. No snakes, nobody laughing, nobody running. Just four round patches of light floating on the face of darkness. She thought, It feels like I'm standin' on a boat. Never been on a boat, but this is how it must feel: thin wood under my feet, then deep, black nothing going down under forever. One more light, then turn right.

But when Mollie turned around, she saw only darkness. From here she should have been able to see more lights, three or four, running down the hill, then more, five or six, going up the next hill again.

All was dark. Oh God, oh dear God, they're all out. I can't go into that, I can't take another step, I —

Someone ran past her, just outside the circle of light. She screamed, but it came out a thin dry hiss, and she started to run, tripped, and the hard earth bit into her knees and bit the heels of her outthrust hands, and her purse slid down her arm to the ground and something inside it broke — (dear God, dear God, Jesus, dear God)

Mollie took deep, shuddering breaths. Her hands blurred in her vision. Her brown leather purse lay outside the circle of illumination, its brass clasp gleaming with reflected light, the tiny paring knife inside it as far out of reach as if she had left it back in Jefferson's house.

Back. I can go back and somebody will come in a car and I'll stop it and get them to take me to a phone booth and then I can call Billy. I have to get up and go back.

Mollie lifted her head. With a dull pang she saw that now there were only two lights behind her, the one she was under and the next one down, and all else on the street was dark. And even as she watched, the next circle of light died in a tinkle of broken glass.

Slowly, her breath coming in painful hitches, Mollie pulled her legs under her. She felt alone, on the last island in the world, and she tasted the salt of her own tears as she waited for the forever tide of darkness to rise around her.

Interval 1:

Scrapbook

1

FAUST: Wilt thou grant me dominion o'er power strong, Daemons, ghostes, spirits, night-hags, devils? Wilt come when I call, and spread thy sooty Pinions wide to fetch and carry? Speak thou!

DEVIL: Aye, master, sweet, sweet master, will, I will.

[Aside.] Thus digs Faust the pit that will him consume, Thus opes his eyes, and seeing-blind he falls

- George Tucker, *The Life of John. Faust, and His Death* (London: 1640?)

The tempestuous reigns of the first James and the first Charles saw devils in many guises, some dressed in Catholic surplices, others in the sombre garb of Puritanism. George Tucker, today only an obscure footnote to the history of the drama, perceived yet another form of devil, one darker than any conjured up by the warring theologians of his time. From 1638 to 1642 Tucker's star, which, like Shakespeare's before him, had risen from actor to playwright (indeed no rise at all in the eyes of his Puritan detractors), blazed briefly in the troubled skies of the era. Tucker's six known works and the three additional plays that he may have had a hand in composing are perhaps the truest representations of this intriguing mind, and yet, until the present series of volumes, they have all been long out of print

Though by no means in the same rank as Shakespeare or Marlowe, Tucker in his lamentably short career produced some works of interest. Most notable of these is the last, his version of the Faust legend, preserved only in a quarto dubiously dated 1640, though internal evidence suggests 1642 as the actual year of composition. This, according to legend, was the final play performed in London before the Civil War closed the theatres; and, if the legend be believed, the author's own mysterious death and certain abominable excesses of the Puritans may be traced to its presentation.

- Arthur W. Crossett, "Afterword," from the Facsimile Reprint of the play (London: 1939)

2

This same Jonas Highboy, on pain of inquisition, did further relate, that he at several times, did Consort with damnable Witches and their Imps of Hell He affirmed, that he did once question the Spirit of one Quohampanong, a wild Indian, dead about Twenty Years Highboy asserted, that he asked this vile Apparition or Spirit, If there be any Truth to our story of Hell. To which, the Spirit replied, Nay. Then Highboy did ask of Heaven, and was told that there was not no Heaven, neither. Highboy next made bold, to ask what there was then after Death, but deposed, That the answer given so frightened him, that he could not bear to think on it, neither would he Speak of it, in Court, despite the hardest questioning by the Magistrates.

A great many other Malefactors, whose Guilt was beyond doubt, affirmed that Highboy induced many to Sin, and to renounce God He was the Gate, by which many deceived Persons did descend to Hell. In their Meetings in the Woods, Highboy did often preside in the Place of Satan Many Witnesses affirmed, That he brought forth a wondrous Shew of marvelous Images, the which lulled them into a blind acceptance of his supposed power

Jonas Highboy, being found Guilty, and continuing unrepentant, was Hanged about the middle of August, being the seventh Wizard thus dealt with. It is asserted, That divers wonderful and terrible Visions disturbed him as he waited in his Cell for execution; and Certain it is, that he with his last Breath cursed the Sergeant who had confined him, and

the Magistrates who had sentenced him; and before the Year was nigh over, all these had died most grievous and mysterious Deaths.

- Worshipful Banford, The Revelation of a Damnable Witchcraft, Horribly Broke Out Amongst God's People (Boston: 1693)

3

It was . . . some four or five years after, before these phantasms or visions returned, this time seeming most solid and real even in the full light of day. Having in that time abstained completely from laudanum, I could attribute these visitations to no physical agency; but was convinced that, in that time of stupor to which I before alluded, I had relinquished my soul during one of the damnable meetings of the Hell-fire club.

My persecutions increased daily, until my family, conceiving me to be insane, was forced to the extremity of confining me close. Still, no matter how carefully watch was kept on the door, no matter how impossible it were that any bodily being could penetrate to my bedside, the tormentors thronged thick and fast. I cannot bring myself now to write of them, for, though I have been free of them for nearly ten years, it seems as if they are separated from me by a wall as thin as the paper on which I write, and to think of them too deeply would, I fear, be to rend that wall . . .

My horror reached its apex or zenith, during a period when, owing to what my family supposed to be a disorder of the brain, I had been placed for some days in a small chamber, having no window and furnished only with the barest necessities. Deprived even of a candle, I spent my days (or what I supposed, in that dark existence, to be days) walking to and fro across the floor and crying aloud to God to have pity on me.

It was in this interval that I fell into a kind of trance, and thought I saw Susanna, a very pretty young girl of the house, who had entered service as a maid, asleep in her bed. In my ecstasy of mind, and moved by evil thoughts, I attacked the girl; but all the while my body was, as you remember, confined within the cell I have described. I will not pollute my pen by recounting the vile injuries that, in fancy, I committed on that young serving-girl's body . . .

The next day, upon Mr. Wilkins bringing to me my supper, I observed him unusually grave and solemn. Asking him why, he told me that a girl in the neighbourhood had been foully murdered the night before, and that all the street was alarmed. Not until many months after, when, having recovered my senses sufficiently to be released, did I learn that the unfortunate victim of that night was indeed our Susanna, and that the horrid injuries inflicted on her conformed in every detail to the mad dream of delirium that I had experienced . . . This was one of the most striking instances of a waking vision or night-mare, but was, alas, far from the only one.

These and other proofs of their existence, I say, came every day during that dreadful time. Wherefore I was, nay, am yet persuaded that they were no mere idle dreams, but rather spirits from a realm darker than ours, and much more terrible.

- Andrew Hobson, *The Mysteries of Opium Revealed* (London: 1814)

4

Dark is our beginning, and our end is dark — Harlton Davies, “Ode: On New-Year’s Day” (1821)

One would give much to know why a poet like Davies, a young man of such promise and wide acquaintance, chose to end his life so dreadfully on the first day of 1821 — Thomas Lloyd, Introduction, *The Collected Poems of Harlton Davies* (London and New York: 1949)

5

The Soul-Thief . . . [is] a belief indigenous to pockets of peasantry scattered throughout Middle Europe. The modern researcher will have little difficulty in perceiving behind the terrific figure of the Soul-Thief, an evil being who compels utter obedience in even the most wretched tasks, a dim recollection of the feudal landlord

- William Edwards and Jean-Louis Piel, *Folk-Beliefs and Survivals* (Paris and New York: 1897)

6

Q: Did the defendant, did he at any time express to you the nature of these voices?

A: I don't know. I, that's hard to say.

Q: Well, did he say that the voice was the voice of God, for instance?

A: No, man. No, sir. He, he said the voices told him what to do, what to, you know, like with the knives.

Q: The voice mentioned the knives?

A: Well, Paulo said, yeah, they told him about the knives.

Q: And what to do with the knives? Mr. Feinberg: Oh, your honor, objection. That is a leading question.

Mr. Stern: Sustained.

Q: Can you tell us what Paulo said about the voices and the knives?

A: Yeah. Paulo said the voices told him to get the knives and then, you know. I mean, he told me what they wanted him to do. To kill the kids.

Mr. Zimmer: You dead, Benny. You dead, man.

- Excerpt from the testimony of Benjamin Clements during the homicide trial of Paulo Zimmer, Westbrook, New York, February, 1950

7

A RED DEVIL?

Communists, officially forbidden to believe in God, are presumably not supposed to believe in devils, either. Yet villagers of Hron, Czechoslovakia, last week fought a desperate battle with the devil — or something like him.

Even a devout capitalist might have trouble understanding why Satan would bother about such a tiny (pop. 850) prize. The villagers, however, are certain that the Old Boy has visited them. They speak of unaccountable deaths, more than thirty of them since last month, of odd visions, and of even odder compulsions.

The officially atheistic government, unable to quell the devil by decree, reportedly has even sanctioned the ancient Catholic rite of exorcism

- Time magazine, November 1954

GAITHER THEATER TO REOPEN

After more than a year, the State Theater [sic] will open under a new name and ownership.

Mr. Athaniel Badon, formerly of London and Boston, has purchased the building and plans to open it next week as the Shadow Show [sic]. Mr. Badon foresees a bright future for his new venture.

"I plan to exhibit family films," Mr. Badon says. "I would like to welcome the whole community to come to see what I have to offer."

Mr. Badon promises a continuing calendar of films, plus special shows and events. "Gaither will find something here that cannot be found on television," he says

- The Gaither Advocate, page 1, August 23, 1957

Part II

Coming Attractions

Five

1

An hour before sunup.

Harmon Presley broke his promise to himself at five o'clock that morning when he saw the dogs nosing into the bushes on Slattery Row. One of them dragged something out that looked like a woman's purse, and he stopped the car to investigate. That meant getting out.

He was the first to find the body.

The first except the dogs.

Cursing and gagging, he kicked the dogs away, took out his revolver, fired at one, missing cleanly, but driving the pack snarling and yelping down the street. A door across the street opened, a dark face scowled out, saw the white law, and went back inside. Presley got to his car and slid in. If only he had a two-way radio, like the city police, he thought. But the county hadn't appropriated the money. Now he had to go back toward town to call. Or go into one of these houses, if any of them had a phone.

He went back to town, called Sheriff Quarles at home, and was ordered back to the site. By the time he got there, dawn was washing up in the east, pale Sunday dawn. The sheriff's car parked behind Presley's, and the man himself got out, a square, athletic man of fifty, his steel-gray hair cropped close in a military cut. Presley got out to meet him. "Where is it?" Quarles asked.

"Over here. It's pretty bad, Sam."

Quarles grunted and followed Presley.

A hedge, or what if trimmed would be a hedge, separated 10 and 12 Slattery Row. The body lay in uncut knee-high grass at the base of the

hedge. Quarles paused. Presley heard him swallow. "Godamighty," the sheriff said.

The woman lay on her back. Her clothes had been cut or torn away, jacket, blouse, bra, skirt, underpants. Her eyes, filmed over, were very wide, her mouth slightly pursed, her teeth clenched. From the neck down all was ruin. Her left breast had been cut almost off and flopped back into her left armpit, exposing yellowish fatty tissue and rib. Her abdomen lay open, spilling its contents into the grass around her. Her large intestine had been pulled out and lay across her upper thighs. One single fly crept across her leg, but it was early: more would come with the heat of the day.

"Ballew Jefferson's girl, ain't it?" Quarles asked.

"Uh-huh. Got her purse in the car. Mollie Avery's her name," Presley said, his voice low, awed.

"Better see if anybody around here heard anything," the sheriff said. "Lloyd Gordon's coming already, and he's supposed to bring somebody to take pictures."

"Want me to take this side of the street?" Presley asked.

Quarles gave him a withering look. "Why don't you just take both?"

Presley, his face burning from the rebuke, walked stiffly around the end of the hedge and toward the house on the other side. Something crackled beneath his feet: a shard of glass. He squinted upward, then went on. A thin, bushy-haired black man answered his knock, stood in the doorway. No, he hadn't seen or heard nothing, no. He didn't know how long the light had been busted. The kids around here do that all the time. The man didn't ask Presley what happened.

He visited two other houses, with no better result, before the coroner's station wagon pulled up. Lloyd Gordon was a rarity in north Georgia, a coroner who was also qualified to practice medicine. He got out of the car, his doctor's bag superfluous in his hand. A younger man got out on the passenger side. Presley joined them as they approached the sheriff, who stood over the body, looking away. Quarles saw them and stepped forward, partly concealing what lay on the ground.

"Sam," Dr. Gordon said. "Looks like a murder, I guess."

Quarles nodded, his light blue eyes squinted hard at the younger man. "You work for the paper, don't you? You're —"

"Tom Davies," the younger man said, trying to look around Quarles. "Yeah, I write and take pictures for the Advocate." He hefted his camera, a Crown Graphic. "Doc said you needed some photos."

"You can't run any of these in the paper," Quarles said.

"No, sir. I'll give you the negatives and all."

"Think twenty dollars will pay for your time?"

"That include the materials?"

"No, the county'll pay for them separate."

"Twenty's fine," Davies said.

"Okay. I want shots of the general area, of the body, and anything the doctor tells you to shoot. Start from here."

The sun was up now, off to their left. Davies took two pictures from the curb, though from here the body was only a dark shape huddled in the grass. "Doc, I guess you better pronounce her dead," Quarles said.

The doctor went in, knelt down for just a moment, then stood, shaking his white head. He waded back through the grass. "Dead for hours," he said. "Autopsy, I guess."

"Uh-huh." Quarles turned to Davies. "Take the pictures."

Davies went in close. "Jesus," he said. He fitted a flashbulb in, popped it, ejected it, put another in, changed angles. "Oh, God," he said, but he went on taking pictures.

"Pick up the bulbs when you're done," Quarles said.

That reminded Presley. "Sam, the streetlights are out all through here. Busted."

Quarles rubbed his jaw. He had not bothered to shave; bristles rasped like sandpaper under his palm. "You find out anything from the neighbors?"

Presley shook his head.

"Where'd the woman live?"

Presley nodded up the street. "Sixteen Slattery, accordin' to her ID. Two doors down."

"Doc, can you go back and get an ambulance?"

"Surely."

"Hey," Davies called from the grass. "Don't leave me alone here."

"He'll be back," Quarles said. "Keep on with your pictures. And don't forget about them bulbs."

"Yes, sir." But Davies did not look happy.

Presley and Quarles walked up the street. A streetlight hung from a splintered electric pole in front of number 16. They paused beneath it and looked up. The five-hundred-watt bulb was shattered.

Number 16 had a narrow, sandy front yard and a banged-up '37 Ford beneath a pecan tree off to the side. The engine dangled from a block and tackle hitched to a main limb of the tree. The house would have been a white frame job if it had had any paint on it. Only the screen door, torn in several places and mended with puffs of dirty cotton, showed any color: its frame had been painted green sometime in the last five years or so.

"Get out your gun," Quarles said as they started up the steps.

Presley swallowed hard but drew his revolver.

Quarles drew his own weapon, stood to one side, and opened the screen door. He slapped the front door hard with his palm. "Open up! Police!"

The house stayed silent — or was there a furtive creaking from inside? Quarles looked up at Presley. "Better go round back, Harm. You be careful."

Presley swallowed again, nodded, and went down the steps. He edged around the house, past the pecan tree and the car. He saw the man just as he dropped from a back window. "Hold it!" he ordered, bringing his revolver up.

The man, a black man, landed on all fours, like a cat.

Like a cat he ran, heading through the overgrown backyard and toward a swagging, vine-grown wire fence. "Stop!" Presley yelled, and fired a shot in the air.

The running man dropped as if he had been hit. Presley yelled, "Got him, Sam!" and went over to the figure, his gun trained on the defenseless back.

The man wore a dirty white vest-type undershirt and jeans. He was barefoot: the pinks of his soles looked like raw flesh to Presley. As Presley came up, the man covered his close-cropped head with big hands. "I ain't done nothin'," he said into the dirt.

"Get up, you," Presley said. "Slow."

The back door of the house banged open, and Quarles came out. "Hold him, Harm," he said.

The man lay still. "You gonna hafta kill me layin' down," he said.

"Goddamn it, get up," Presley repeated.

"Huh-uh. You gonna hafta shoot me alayin' here. Ain't done nothin, man."

Quarles knelt beside the man, patted him down. "Get up," he said. "Nobody's going to shoot you."

Slowly, the man rose. He was very dark, young, maybe twenty-five or -six. The whites of his eyes had a yellowish tinge. He wore a thin mustache, and his left cheek was welted by a diagonal three-inch scar. Quarles finished frisking him. "Who are you?" he asked.

"Billy Resaca," the man mumbled.

"What were you doin' in that house?" Quarles said.

The eyes were sullen. "Live there, man."

"What?"

"I says I lives there, sir."

"Well, that's a little better. Do you know Mollie Avery, Billy?"

"Yes, sir. She my wife."

"Your wife?" Presley snorted.

The sullen eyes darted sideways. "Common-law," Resaca said.

"Well, Billy," Quarles said, "we're gonna have to take you in. You gonna be good for us?"

"I didn't do nothin', sir."

"Then you don't have nothin' to worry about, do you?" Quarles took his cuffs from his belt. "Hands behind you, Billy."

The three men came around the corner of the house to find the scene changed. Black men and women stood on porches and in yards, arms crossed, eyes unreadable, all up and down the street — except at the two houses on either side of the body. Tom Davies, looking pale, stood at the end of the hedge, his camera dangling at his stomach. Presley heard the intermittent drone of flies. The sun was well up now; it must be six-fifteen or later, he thought.

"Take Billy in, Harm," Quarles said. "Don't tell him anything. Keep him in the fightin' cell until I get in."

"Okay, Sam," Presley acknowledged. "Come on, you."

Just before Presley could shove him into the rear seat of the patrol car, Resaca twisted away from him. "Help!" he shouted to a group of three blacks across the street. "They killin' me!"

"Harmon!" yelled Sam from back at the hedge.

"Come on, get in," Presley said, grabbing for Resaca.

"They gonna kill me!" Resaca wailed, dropping to his knees in the street. He bit at Presley.

"God damn!" Presley hit Resaca open-handed so hard that the man's head bounced off the quarter panel of the patrol car. Then

Presley picked him up bodily and heaved him into the backseat like a sack of flour.

His hat had fallen off. He picked it up, jammed it on his head, and climbed behind the wheel of the car. He made a U-turn. The cluster of blacks across the street took a couple of steps backward.

He passed the ambulance at the foot of the street. "What is it, man?" Resaca asked from the backseat. "What you think I done?"

"Shut up," Presley said between his teeth. He wondered if he would be able to hit Resaca a couple more times before Quarles got in. He decided that if he played his cards right, he could.

He headed for the county jail.

2

Ann Lewis had been up since dawn. She rented three rooms from Mrs. Elvie Maddons, a widow of advanced years and impaired hearing; and yet Ann moved silently, as she always did. Ever since that day at school, Ann had had a fluttery stomach, a headache that eased at times but never went completely away.

She had spent most of Friday and Saturday in bed, believing that she had a touch of flu.

But after a night of little sleep she had changed her mind. Teachers were due at Gaither Elementary on Wednesday for preplanning. Try as she might, Ann could not see herself, could not imagine herself, going back into that building.

She had started and torn up the letter six times. She tried again:
Gentlemen:

I have enjoyed my years of teaching for the city school system. However, recently events have occurred which

She broke off. What would she do? Go and live with her mother? As poorly as Ann could visualize herself returning to school, she could see herself going back to her mother's house even more dimly. And where else, in Gaither, would she get a job? The mills? The chicken processing plants? She crumpled the paper and tossed it into the wastepaper basket with the others.

Sitting at her desk beside the window, Ann closed her eyes. This is ridiculous, she told herself. Nothing happened. My subconscious act-

ing out my feelings about my mother. Some psychological jargon — jargon. Bullshit. Psychological bullshit like that.

She sat there for some minutes, eyes closed, resting. When she opened her eyes, they were clear and steady. All right, she said to herself. I'll go back. I won't be alone in the building. I'll get over this. She glanced down at the paper on the desk in front of her, a little fearfully.

It was only blank paper, nothing more. No horrible sketches or words. Blank paper. A blank page, like the new school year.

But, she thought, I'm still afraid.

A bell began to ring somewhere: the Methodist bell. Eight o'clock. Ann closed her eyes again, wearily. Forget church this Sunday morning. I couldn't make the effort. Back to bed, try to get some sleep.

She rose, drew the blind, and took off her robe. The bedclothes lay tangled and twisted. She gave them a few halfhearted tugs and tweaks and got back between the sheets. Her head throbbed, just behind her eyes.

It's never been this bad. I used to look forward to the beginning of school. It's never been like this.

She felt the tension in her legs, all the way up her back, her neck. Her whole body was tight, an overwound spring. Her jaw clamped shut so hard her teeth ached.

I have to relax, she thought.

Before she drifted into an uneasy sleep, a happy thought came to her: a movie.

The theater opens again tomorrow.

I'll see a movie.

That will help.

A movie.

3

Ballew Jefferson's telephone rang as he was shaving himself. Jefferson had never gone for an electric shaver or even a safety razor: he used an old-fashioned straight razor, ivory-handled, shiny, sharp, and he foamed his own lather out of a clovery-scented bar of soap.

He had just nicked himself, in a minor way, when the phone in the bedroom trilled. Shaking his head, Jefferson grabbed a towel. He rubbed off the lather and a thin trickle of blood as he padded barefoot across the rug. He wore only trousers and undershirt this morning.

The telephone rang again as he snatched the receiver off its cradle. "Jefferson residence."

"Mr. Jefferson, this is Sam Quarles."

Jefferson rested a hip on the edge of the bed. "What is it, Sam?"

Quarles cleared his throat. "I understand you have a colored girl workin' for you, sir."

"I have a couple," Jefferson said. "Mollie Avery and Aunt Ludie Estes. Though I'm not sure what Ludie does around here could really be classified as work."

"Yes, sir. About this Mollie Avery — "

Jefferson heaved a sigh. "Is it that buck she lives with, Billy what's-his-name?"

"Well, sir — "

"How much?"

The silence at the other end went on for too long before Quarles said, "I don't think you understand."

"I suppose the man got drunk again and you have him. Mollie needs enough to bail him out. That's it, isn't it? How much does she need?"

"It isn't that, Mr. Jefferson — "

All impatience, Jefferson snapped, "Let me talk to Mollie. We'll clear this all up."

"Mr. Jefferson, you need to come down here, to the hospital."

Jefferson scowled, as if Quarles were in the same room and could see him. "Hospital? Did she let him hit her, Sheriff?"

"Mr. Jefferson, just listen for a minute. We have a body here. We think it's your colored girl. We can't let Billy Resaca identify her, he's a suspect. Nobody seems to know about her family. I need you to take a look at the body and see if it's Mollie."

Jefferson laughed. "Sheriff, you're wasting my time. It can't be her."

"We think — "

"I dropped Mollie off at her house last night. She was fine. You've made some kind of mistake."

"Mr. Jefferson — "

"I've got to get ready for church. You just — "

"Goddamn it!"

Jefferson stood up from the bed, his back stiff. "Quarles, remember who you're talking to."

"You listen to me," Quarles said, his voice fast and harsh. "I've got a dead woman here. She was carrying ID that says she's Mollie Avery of sixteen Slattery Row. This is a bad one. I need you to come to the hospital and take a look, and if I have to, I'll send a car to get you."

"Do you know who I am?"

"Yes, sir, I certainly do. But do you know who I am? Well, sir, I'm the man they elected sheriff of Frye County. I may not be much, but I'm the sheriff. Now. Do you want me to send a car?"

"This is ridiculous," Jefferson said. "It's a waste of time."

"I'll have someone pick you up."

"No." Jefferson sighed. "I'll come in. On my way to church."

"As soon as you can, please, sir."

"All right." Jefferson paused. "What was this woman wearing, Quarles?"

The sheriff sighed audibly. "Navy-blue jacket over a light blue blouse. Navy-blue skirt. Flat-heeled black shoes. Black brassiere and panties. Blue head scarf. No stockings."

Jefferson looked down. Beside the bed, two wadded balls: nylons.

"As soon as you can," the voice on the phone said.

"I'll be there," Jefferson said. He hung up the telephone.

Something clattered to the floor. He looked at it stupidly. It was the straight razor, open, in a shallow red pool.

Where did that come from, he wondered. Where did all the blood come from?

He held up his right hand, the hand that had been clenched on the razor. A scarlet line ran across the palm just under the fingers. He stretched his hand wide open and saw the line become a gash, saw the flow of blood, half closed his hand. He could not hold it all and felt the warm trickle down his forearm, dripping off his elbow.

It doesn't even hurt, he thought. It just feels a little stiff. It doesn't hurt at all.

Services at the Gaither First Methodist Church were over at twelve-thirty. Betty Lessup, in Frank's absence, was still "doing" for John and Alan Kirby, and they drove to her house for lunch. Alan, stiffly uncomfortable in his white shirt and clip-on tie, sat in the swing on her front porch,

pushing himself back and forth with the heel of his left foot. He wished he could run across the street long enough to change clothes at least, to get into some soft jeans and a T-shirt; but Aunt Betty was tearing into lunch like a human hurricane, and he knew he would be expected to remain in Sunday uniform until after the fried chicken and biscuits.

He could hear his aunt's voice, even though the kitchen was two rooms away and the front door was closed: "You ought to think of Alan. That's all I'm saying."

Alan closed his eyes. His ears burned as if the old superstition were true, as if they showed by their temperature whether or not someone was talking about him. His father's reply, pitched lower and softer than Aunt Betty's, was inaudible to the boy, but a moment later his aunt answered it: "That's just nonsense, John Howard Kirby. There are plenty of women in this town who'd be glad to marry you."

Alan squirmed in the swing. He calculated that he had at least another ninety minutes of this. His aunt bombarded his father with intimations of matrimony moment by moment, but his father, a thick-walled bastion if there ever was one, shed the bombshells with no evidence of damage.

They were two stubborn people, Alan realized, each in a different way. His aunt was all bustle and go, a short, plump woman who could halfway cook a meal or halfway repair a carburetor with equally clumsy aplomb. His father was a still point, a calm man whose serenity was thorough and pervasive. His aunt acted without thought; his father thought and did not act.

She was at him again: "My sister has been dead for nearly six years. Don't tell me what she'd want. I know what she'd want. And one thing she'd want is a wife for you and a mother for her son."

No, Alan thought. Not a mother for me. Unable to listen any longer, he got out of the porch swing and left it creaking behind him. He walked down the steps into bright sunlight and bird song, threw his head back, shaded his eyes, and squinted up at a gray mockingbird swinging on the telephone wires and throwing liquid notes into the still Sabbath air with joyous abandon.

Alan shied a pebble at the bird, missing it by a good two feet but sending it winging away, rising and dipping in its flight like a small boat on a white-water river. He went around the side of the house and inspected Uncle Frank's fig trees. All of them were barren of fruit, for

the birds got it as soon as it showed signs of ripening. But the heady scent of the figs was there, a sweetly musty reminder.

He plucked one of the broad, hairy leaves off the plant and thought about Adam and Eve. Aprons of fig leaves. Still showed a lot of skin, he thought. He pictured Eve in her botanical outfit and felt the stirrings of desire, still new enough in him to be unsettling.

He unclipped his tie and let it hang loose. He opened his shirt collar and felt that he could breathe again. If only, he thought, there were something to do.

He could go inside and listen to the radio — Aunt Betty and Uncle Frank had an RCA console TV, much bigger than the Kirbys' Philco, but there was a house rule about not watching it before lunch on Sunday. No such rule forbade listening to the radio, but at this time of day, most of the stations would be broadcasting sermons or gospel music, anyway, and he had only lately escaped from that.

Anything else he thought of involved getting dirty, so that was out.

Of course — he had been circling the fig trees aimlessly, but he paused now — of course, he could get his book and read. He had not cracked the book on fossil hunting yet. He could sit on Aunt Betty's porch — or even, he thought, on his own porch, just there across the street — and read.

He made his decision, crossed the street, and went into his own house. The door was, as always, unlocked: not many people in Gaither ever locked their houses. The Sunday stillness of the house was a little disconcerting to him, somehow different from the quiet of other days. It made him walk softly, as if he were reluctant to disturb the sleeping rooms.

He had some trouble finding the book. For some reason he hadn't put it on the bedside table, the usual place for library books, and he couldn't think why. After a few minutes of unsuccessful searching, he walked himself through his return from the library, a surefire technique. He left his bike in the backyard. He came into the kitchen, book in hand, right. He had been thirsty. He had looked in the refrigerator for a Coke — voilà. The book was on top of the fridge.

Alan pulled it down, frowning at himself. He didn't usually misplace things like that. The thought immediately came to him: I don't usually have dates to see movies, either.

He felt strange, tingly in a way, anticipatory but a little afraid at the same time.

Eve in fig leaves.

But the thought of Diane England in fig leaves, Diane who could strike out opponents one-two-three and then hit the ball a goodly country mile for a home run the next minute — well, he had to giggle a little.

The book under his arm, Alan went out the front door. He paused there. A strange car, a green Rambler, was parked at the curb in front of his aunt's house. Alan crossed the street, wondering who could have called.

". . . it's true," he heard as he mounted the steps to the porch. "He tried to kill himself, too, with a razor, I heard."

His father's voice — whose was the first voice, the woman's voice? He couldn't quite place it. But his father said, "I can't believe Ballew Jefferson would have anything to do with a murder."

"I don't know." His aunt. "When was this woman killed, Agatha?"

Click. The visitor was Agatha Islip, some kind of remote cousin to Aunt Betty. Alan saw her now and again downtown or at school functions. He vaguely knew her son Tommy, who was in fifth or sixth grade this year.

Alan found them all in the parlor. They looked around as he came in, faces showing surprise.

"Who got killed?" Alan asked.

Betty Lessup shook her head. "Nothing for you to worry about, Alan Kirby. Look at your tie."

Alan had forgotten to clip his tie. He struggled, with his book under his arm, to button his collar and replace the tie. "But who did Mr. Jefferson kill?"

John took the book from him. "Nobody, son. At least, we don't know anything for sure. A woman died last night, and Mrs. Islip says the police are questioning Mr. Jefferson, that's all."

"But who?"

"Some colored girl who worked for him," Mrs. Islip said.

"Aggie," warned Alan's aunt.

"Well, it was," Agatha insisted. "She lived down in Possum Town somewhere, and that's where they found her. All cut to ribbons she was."

Alan succeeded in his struggle. Possum Town — Niggertown to Reese Donalds and his friends — was the poor black section to the south and east of Gaither, a unit in name only. "You said Mr. Jefferson tried to kill himself."

"I heard he cut himself up with a razor," Agatha said with a definitive nod of her head. She was an incongruous doll of a woman, all curly hair and dimples and a round little chin, but her voice gave Aunt Betty's some real competition.

"That's enough of that," Aunt Betty said firmly. "Here I've got chicken on the stove and biscuits in the oven and you want to talk blood and massacre. Aggie Islip, if you want to have lunch with us like a Christian, you're more than welcome, but don't say another word about murder and mayhem, if you please."

"Thank you, Betts, but I have to go," Mrs. Islip said, just as if she had really been invited. "Mr. Jefferson's sister lives out on the Cumming Highway, and I thought I'd drop by to see if I can help her any."

Mrs. Islip fluttered and fluted out the door. Alan's father rubbed the back of his neck. "Murder in Gaither," he said. "Who would have believed it?"

Betty Lessup whirled on him. He was a good foot taller than she, but in her anger she was like a hen with its feathers up and she seemed somehow larger than John. "John Kirby, one more word and out you go. Some people in this family can behave like Christians, I hope."

John grinned, behind Betty's back. "Yes, ma'am," he said in an abashed tone.

"You come set the table."

Alan helped, but as he put the plates and glasses on the table, he thought about the murder. He had never heard of one in Gaither, and he burned to ask his father more about it. But, he thought, as his aunt set a blue platter of golden, sizzling chicken on the table, that could wait.

For the next half hour, murder was the farthest thing from his mind.

Dr. Lloyd Gordon had some trouble with the tape recorder.

It was the size of a small suitcase and had some god-awful German name, Wollensak or some such, and there were four speeds to choose from, and the microphone was terribly unhandy for someone poking

his way around a devastated body. He solved the problem finally by using adhesive tape to hang the mike from a solution stand beside the autopsy table. He started the seven-inch tape reels spinning at the slowest speed and told the machine about the damage done to Mollie Avery.

"This is the body of a Negro woman, approximately five feet six inches tall, weight in life approximately one hundred twenty pounds. Age is estimated at — oh, I'd say thirty. Complexion is light, eyes dark brown, hair black. Body has been tentatively identified as that of Mollie Avery of Gaither.

"Superficial examination reveals numerous stab or slash wounds. The left breast is partially severed; I'd say three-quarters severed, connected to the body only by a thin layer of tissue on the upper left side. This appears to have been done with a single cut from a sharp instrument, piercing the skin, connective tissues, and pectoralis major, exposing short lengths of the fourth and fifth ribs.

"The abdomen has been opened by three long slash wounds, commencing just below the sternum. The first severs the rectus abdominis and the external abdominal muscles, following the rib line to the right ilium. A second crosses that and proceeds downward from a point two inches above the ilium to the pubic bone. A third crosses that two inches above the pubis and terminates in the middle of the left rib cage. All cuts penetrate the peritoneum.

"The body shows signs of massive exsanguination. Problem: there is very little blood in evidence on the body itself or on the clothing. Also, initial examination at the site revealed relatively little blood. I cannot account at present for the absence of visible blood. Discoloration is minimal. I would estimate that approximately three-quarters of the subject's blood has been lost. Where did it go?

"Abdominal cavity has been laid completely open. Some damage to the diaphragm, but apparently no penetration into the thoracic area. Liver has been partially severed. Both small and great intestines have been cut free. Bladder has been cut free and is inside the cavity just below the liver. Left kidney appears to be missing. Pancreas has been severed approximately in half laterally. Pancreas has been cut free and is in the lower right part of the cavity . . . "

In his assured voice, a voice that had told mothers their children would get well, a voice that had offered comfort to the dying, Dr. Gordon went through the whole catalog of outrage. The next day,

when a court stenographer was given the tape to transcribe, she had no trouble at all following it. She did notice a popping noise partway through that she did not understand.

It was caused by Dr. Gordon's rewinding and restarting the tape. He didn't want the stenographer to hear his outraged, "Jesus Christ!" or his retch when he took his first look at what had been done to Mollie Avery's genitals.

6

Andy McCory woke and stretched. Sunlight streamed through the window, easily penetrating the thin bedroom curtains. He closed his eyes, his face absolutely slack. Bird songs reached him, birds raising a racket in the trees outside the house. Do something about that one of these days. He lazily scratched his stomach, dropped his hand lower to rub his penis and scrotum: he was naked beneath the sheet.

"You want somethin' to eat?"

Andy frowned and opened his eyes. Lee stood in the door, her hair tied back with a rubber band. Strawberry blond, Lee was, with that pale, pale skin. Her nipples almost as pale as her breasts, look at her in the morning when your eyes were foggy and you couldn't tell she had any nipples, hardly. He grunted at her.

"Thelma took Little Lee and Danny to church and Sunday school," Lee said. "They're gonna eat dinner with them and all."

Andy rolled his head on the pillow, side to side. He was still in his daze, still felt that strange detachment from everything, as if whatever happened was none of his doing, as if he was only occupant and not operator of his own body. His mouth tasted bad, of sour bile, and on his tongue was a raised welt an inch long. When he stuck out his tongue in front of the mirror, he could see it, a white line on the pink, pebbled surface. The badness seemed to come from there, brush his teeth hard as he wished.

"What time is it?" he heard his voice asking.

"Little after one-thirty."

"What time'd I get in?"

"It was after midnight."

"Um." He stretched, gaped, took a deep breath.

"You hadn't been drinkin'," Lee said in a small voice.

He closed his eyes, smacked his lips. He had not been drinking. He could hardly remember when he'd had a drink, even a beer. What was

it **Badon had** promised him? He could stay as drunk as he liked on this job. That was it. But Badon didn't mention the catch, no. He had no desire to be drunk, or even to drink. Or it was like he was a little drunk all the time anyway, in that remote and aloof stage of drunkenness when one can clearly see oneself as a creature external and separate, when one can be amused at the animal's capering without feeling responsible for its excesses.

Thoughts like these went incoherently through Andy McCory's head, making it hurt. He opened his eyes again. Lee still stood there, leaning against the door. "What you waitin' for?" he asked.

She shrugged. She wore a pink blouse and black pedal pushers. In the muted daylight that illuminated the room she seemed somehow fragile, nearly translucent, like a figure in porcelain. "I thought since the kids were gone . . . It's been a long time, Andy."

Andy felt himself sweep the sheet away, so that he lay naked on the double bed. He sat up, his back against the cold headboard. "Take off your clothes," he heard himself say.

"I'll pull the shades — "

"Take off your clothes."

She bit her lower lip, sharp white teeth, soft pink lips, no lipstick on them this morning, no. "All right, if you want — "

"Go ahead," he said.

She fumbled at the buttons of the blouse, opened them one at a time. The garment fell open. She shrugged her left shoulder and arm out, then let it fall from her right arm. It dropped on the foot of the little rollaway bed where Danny usually slept. Lee stood for a moment in brassiere and pedal pushers, as if trying to decide which to remove next. Then she unbuttoned and unzipped the pants, stepped out of her loafers, and pulled the slacks down. Her legs were long, smooth, pink. She reached behind her to unhook the brassiere. The straps came free of her shoulders, and she draped it over the foot of the rollaway.

As if feeling Andy's eyes sharp on her, she crossed her arms over her breasts, hands spread on her upper arms. "Can I get in bed?" she asked, her voice hardly a whisper.

"Take off all your clothes," Andy heard himself say.

She nodded, then stooped to roll her panties down over her thighs, her swung breasts moving in a soft pendulum left to right as she

stepped out of her last garment. She was so pink: pink skin, pale nipples, even a pinkish tinge to her hair.

"Turn around," Andy ordered.

Quick hurt came to her eyes, but she did as he asked.

"All the way around. Slow," he said. "Slower than that."

She stepped in a delicate, small circle, showing herself to him, front and back. Her eyelids fluttered, not in coquetry, but in an attempt to hold back tears.

Andy grunted. "Come to bed."

He pulled her against him, felt her soft warmth from his armpit to his hip, crushed her mouth with his. His hands began to play on her skin, slowly.

She stiffened at first — their lovemaking had been quick and frantic before, and sometimes she had reached climax, but more often she had been left wanting when Andy, fulfilled, rolled over to drunken sleep. She was not used to anything slow, anything tender.

Andy, from away in the back of his skull, heard her breath quicken, become a gentle moan, felt her response under his palms, her tautness and her heat. He rolled onto her, took her, and she gasped.

There came a time when he paused in his motion, looking down on her clenched and burning face. "Where was I last night?" he whispered.

Her hands clutched at his buttocks. "In the — the theater," she panted. "Working."

"You remember that."

"Andy . . ."

He moved again, bringing her release. Afterward he lay on his back and she cuddled against him, her head on his shoulder. She wept.

"What's wrong now?" Andy asked.

"I don't know. I — I don't know."

He rubbed her neck, massaging it with his palm, and she sighed. Andy thought how thin her neck was, how thin.

How fragile.

Tom Davies was alone in the Advocate darkroom. He had shot a dozen exposures of the body, and before noon he had processed the negatives. Now he used the Olympus enlarger to make eight-by-ten prints, two of each exposure, as Sheriff Quarles had told him.

He worked methodically. Already six prints had been through the dryer, in the order of their taking: three shots of the location, the body barely visible, really unrecognizable, just a dark huddle at the roots of the hedge. Then three full-body shots, the butcher's window horror of the exposed organs, the torn flesh, made somehow less horrible by the black-and-white prints.

Now he had the first close-up, a torso and head shot, in the negative carrier, ready for its second exposure and printing. He took a sheet of paper from the square box the newspaper used instead of a paper safe, put it into the easel, and turned off the amber safe light.

He had settled on an exposure of twelve seconds. He switched on the enlarger, pressed the timer, and waited until the bell rang to switch off the light. For twelve seconds he looked at the projected image, the white hair, the black face, the wounded breast in shades of gray. Then, the enlarger off, he turned the safe light back on and took the paper from the easel.

The darkroom was small, and he had only to turn around to face the counter and the sink. He dropped the paper into the first tray, agitated it, and watched the picture swim into existence beneath the safe light as he counted beneath his breath: "One thousand and one, one thousand and two, one thousand and three . . . "

It took just over a minute before the photo had reached optimum contrast and density. He pulled it from the developer, shook drops back into the tray, and slid it into the vinegary-scented stop bath. Thirty seconds of that, then into the fixer. He let the print fix for about five minutes while he whistled tunelessly between his teeth. Then he took it out, dropped it into the print bath, and turned on the water. He rinsed and dried his hands and turned back to the developer for the next exposure. The negative carrier slid out, the negative came out, and he put in the next one.

He replaced the carrier and turned on the enlarger to adjust the focus. Tom Davies frowned at what he saw. This was the last photo he'd taken, one of the whole area from across the street, showing the corners of both houses, the hedge between. Somehow he'd gotten it out of order.

Well, might as well print it up. He twiddled the focus minutely, bringing the negative nearer, then a little farther away, as he squinted at the negative image on the white easel. There . . . edges were sharp, definition good.

He reached to turn off the enlarger, but something about the image drew his attention. It could have been a strange shadow cast by the hedge, or —

Or a person, a man, standing over the body.

Davies squeezed his eyes shut, opened them. Yes, it was there: legs and torso and head, all silvery and luminous, which meant that in the print it would be a dark figure. He reached for a magnifying glass.

Still half convinced that it was a trick of shadow, Davies used the glass. It looked more like a man than ever. He was almost positive that he could see a bright suit, black shirt, white tie, all of which would be reversed on printing: a man in black, then, a tall man, a thin man, suited as if he were an undertaker, standing over the corpse.

But there hadn't been anyone in the last shot. He was sure of that. He had been alone with the body, Doc Gordon gone for the ambulance. Indeed, he had taken the shot mainly as an excuse to get across the street from — from that thing, that body.

His hands trembling a little, Davies turned off the enlarger, dug out a sheet of paper, put it in the easel. He timed the exposure, then moved the sheet to its three baths. As soon as it was out of the fixer and in the water bath, Davies turned on the overhead, its brilliant glare making his eyes water at first. He fished the print out, held it close to his face, his heart thumping.

Disappointment.

Only the hedge after all, irregular, riddled with patterns of light and shade.

No one there at all.

No man.

No ghost.

Frowning, Davies took the negative out of the carrier, though he had done only one of the two prints required. He held it up to the light and used the magnifying glass to check. No, just the hedge. No figure there.

Only —

Only there had been.

Davies suddenly shuddered. It came to him then how quiet the newspaper building was on a Sunday, when no one was around.

So lonely.

So silent.

So threatening.

Ballew Jefferson was afraid of his hand.

Stitched and bandaged as it was, it still spoke eloquently, and to Sheriff Sam Quarles, Jefferson knew, it told a tale of guilt.

Sunday was in its long decline by the time Jefferson finally was in shape to view the body. His wound, the cut across his palm, first had to be seen to: hypodermics of Novocain, the sensation of a lump of dead meat and bone at the end of his arm, the curious feeling (more a sound than feeling, really) of sutures through flesh as the emergency-room doctor worked his repairs. Seventeen stitches were required, finally, to close the gash, to begin the healing.

On top of the stitches went a dressing, bulky, mittening his hand. It was well past noon when the doctor finished with him; and then he had to rest and drink orange juice. By the time Quarles had his way and Jefferson moved, under his own power, from the first floor of the Frye County Hospital down to the dead basement, the morgue (the dead, he thought, need no windows), the afternoon had worn almost away to evening.

Quarles, tall, grim, led the way. He opened a door like the vault door in Jefferson's Trust Bank, a ponderous door (the stone was rolled away, Jefferson thought), and they stepped into freezing cold.

The morgue is an icebox, Jefferson thought. His breath came hard in his throat and chest, and it plumed before him in the darkness. There were two, three, six tables in the room, belly-high, made of steel, standing on castered pedestals. Only one was occupied, by a figure hidden beneath an oilcloth covering. I can't, he thought.

Quarles snapped a switch, and cruel blue fluorescent tubes flickered to fitful life, then took hold. It was a wrong light, a bad light, for looking at a dead face. "Ready?" Quarles asked, taking hold of a corner of the oilcloth sheet.

Jefferson was shaking. Quarles must have misread his tremor as a nod. Carefully, slowly, he peeled back the dingy white oilcloth.

Her eyes had been closed, and her mouth, but her mouth sagged open now, partway, and there was the thinnest line of white visible between the eyelids, as if she were struggling to wake from this bad dream of death. Jefferson's breath hitched in his chest. Plumes of vapor rode out on his breath, but her parted lips (so pale!) had no hint of life issuing from them.

"Is it?" Quarles asked.

Jefferson nodded.

"You ought to say it."

"It's Mollie. Mollie Avery," Jefferson muttered.

Quarles gently lowered the cloth back over the dead face. "All right. We can go."

Jefferson waited as Quarles swung the heavy door back into place. He felt the strangest urge to chuckle, to make a joke, to say, You don't have to lock her in. She'll stay put. He wanted to laugh. He wanted to weep.

Quarles pushed open a green-painted door — the whole basement seemed to have been painted in that awful light green and dark green two-tone of public buildings in the county — and said, "Let's sit here a minute and talk."

Jefferson allowed himself to be ushered in, knowing that this was planned, that Quarles had already arranged with the hospital to have someplace like this little cubbyhole handy for them to talk. It was a tiny office, equipped with a table and a couple of army-surplus green folding chairs. A Coke machine and a Lay's vending machine stood shoulder to shoulder at the wall opposite the door. A break room for janitors or orderlies, Jefferson thought. He sank into one of the chairs. It made a metallic protest at his weight.

Quarles shut the door, sat across the table from him. He fished in his uniform pocket. "Smoke?" he asked, extending a pack of Old Golds.

Jefferson shook his head and took a cigarette simultaneously. He patted his pockets until, from his seat across the table, Quarles thumbed his lighter, held it out for Jefferson, and then lit his own cigarette. He snapped the top of the lighter, dropped it into his pocket, and pulled over a green plastic ashtray already crammed with ashes and butts.

"How's the hand?" Quarles asked.

"Starting to hurt." In fact it throbbed painfully now. The cigarette seemed to make it worse.

"Bad cut. Heard about the stitches."

Jefferson nodded. "Did it when you called," he said.

"What happened?"

Ballew Jefferson wanted again to laugh, to tell Quarles what a transparency he was. But he kept his voice steady: "I was shaving when

you called. I use a straight razor. I don't know, the shock — guess I grabbed the wrong end."

"Hell of a cut," Quarles said. "Good thing you didn't cut any leaders."

Jefferson, confused for a second, took a deep drag on the cigarette. Leaders? Then it came to him: that was what the country people called tendons. He crushed the cigarette out, only half smoked. "Yes. It bled a great deal, but it's a shallow cut." He looked at Quarles, who squinted at him through a thin line of smoke pouring upward from the tip of his own cigarette. "Sheriff, the doctor can tell you that cut was fresh. I didn't kill Mollie."

"Didn't accuse you of it," Quarles said.

"Didn't you?"

Quarles raised his eyebrows and smoked on.

Jefferson began to fidget. "Is it permissible for me to leave now?" he asked as the sheriff finished his cigarette.

"Doc Gordon says Mollie Avery was raped," Quarles said.

Jefferson blinked. "Was she?"

"She had male seed inside her."

Again that wild impulse to laugh. Male seed! What a bumpkin of a man, what an Old Testament-sounding sheriff.

Quarles continued: "She was tore up bad. In the female parts. Bad."

Jefferson said carefully, "That's — shocking."

"Yeah. Well, Mr. Jefferson, there ain't nothin' else you feel like you ought to tell me?"

"What?"

"Anything that would help me."

Jefferson shook his head. "I told you that I let the woman out at the foot of the street."

Quarles nodded. "Yeah, and you didn't see anybody else, and you went straight home, yeah, I know. I mean somethin' else."

"Well, ask me, then," Jefferson said.

"All right. Did you have sexual congress with Mollie Avery?"

Jefferson stood up. "I think I will go now."

"Do you?"

The sheriff's eyes were hard, knowing. Jefferson's hand throbbed away, a drumbeat to the tempo of his heart. "That's a hell of a thing to ask," he said quietly.

"Is it?"

"I am respected in this town."

Quarles nodded. "I know you are. But this is a little town, Mr. Jefferson, and people notice things. And they talk. And I'm trying to find the man who tore that woman in there open, and I need every damn bit of help I can find. And I know the question ain't respectful, but, hell, I can't have the luxury of respect right now. Doc Gordon tells me this woman was maybe raped, and we might have a motive there. But maybe we don't."

The sheriff got up, stood behind the table. "Now, I know Billy Resaca didn't sleep with her, because she never got home for him to. And for some reason I don't think it was a rape. I don't know why, but I don't. Now, if you'll tell me the truth, and I know it's the truth, it won't leave this room, and you've got my word on that. But if I ain't satisfied, I'm gonna dig until I find the truth, and everybody in town is gonna know."

Jefferson's lips had compressed to a thin line. "You're done as sheriff in this town," he said.

"I may be, but right now I'm still sheriff. And I'm gonna ask you for a straight answer one last time. So you think about it hard, Mr. Jefferson."

For maybe a quarter of a minute they stood opposite each other. Then it was as if a string holding Jefferson had become suddenly elastic. He melted back into the chair, and his head sank forward onto the table. In a voice quite unlike his own, he said, "I was lonely, Quarles."

"You slept with her."

"Yes." He dragged the word out, ye-e-essssss, a weary sound, heavy with the weight of defeat.

"Okay," Quarles said. "That's what I needed to know."

Jefferson pushed himself back upright. "I'm ashamed," he said.

"Lots of people in town'd find it hard to forgive you. White man and nigger woman."

The banker shook his head. "Not of that. Not of that. Of the lie. I'm ashamed of the lie."

In an oddly gentle tone, the sheriff said, "Mr. Jefferson, we all have to learn to live with the lies." He sounded like a man who knew.

Billy Resaca proved an obstinate prisoner. He didn't want to talk. He didn't want to call a lawyer. He didn't want to be quiet. He wanted to

hang in the fighting cell, an iron-barred cage in the anteroom of the jail proper, usually reserved for combative drunks, and while hanging there, he wanted to bother the white men in the building.

He yelled, mostly nonsense and obscenities, until his voice grew weak. Then he stamped around the cell, barefoot — Presley had taken his belt, shoes, and socks — climbed the bars, and hung like a monkey two feet below the ceiling, the muscles in his arms bulging under black skin gleaming with sweat. There he shouted hoarse imprecations or sang snatches of song, gospel, rhythm and blues, wordless chants of his own creation.

Gil Ort, who was manning the switchboard, complained to Harmon Presley about the noise. "Get him out of the fightin' tank anyway," he said. "I can't but half hear with him makin' all that racket."

Presley looked at Ort with eyes gone tired and murderous. "I was supposed to be off this morning at six. I ain't eat since yesterday evenin', and I ain't slept for a whole day and night. You want that buck moved, you move him."

Ort, who had grown old and reedy serving Frye County, shook his head. "Ain't my job, it's yours. God sake, Harm, you don't have to get mad at me. Soon as Quarles comes in, you tell him you want to go home."

Presley swigged his latest cup of coffee. It went down acid and lay in his belly with the last one, burning his gut. "Gettin' plumb dark out, and where the hell is Sam, that's what I want to know. What this damn outfit needs is car radios. Damn cheap county. We had a car radio, you could just get him on it and get him to shake me loose."

"Shit, go on home," Ort told him. "Quarles is out runnin' this thing down, he loses track of his men, you know that. Go on home, he won't care a lick."

Presley, unwrapping a stick of spearmint gum, gave him a lugubrious look of contempt. "You know better than that. Goddamn marine sheriff we got, he'd kick me out on my ass, I bucked him on some-thin'." Back behind them, in the violent cell, Billy Resaca began yelling, a hoarse, inarticulate "WAAHH!" repeated over and over. Presley winced, thrust the gum into his mouth, turned in the swivel chair, pushed the wooden door open with his foot, and bellowed, "Shut up! I come in there and shut you up in a minute, nigger!" With vindictive movements, Presley folded the gum wrapper into a square

and threw it hard into the trash can beside Ort's desk. "Come in there and shut you up," he muttered again, jaws working on the gum.

Ort, behind the desk at the dead switchboard, said, "I wish you would."

Resaca had piped down for the moment. Presley let the door swing closed. "He's crazy."

"Playin' crazy. Knows he's gonna get burnt for cuttin' up that nigger woman."

"Probably."

"Was a time the county wouldn't have to go through a trial for somethin' like that. Somebody cut up a woman like that, white or black, he'd be hangin' from a tree next sunup."

"Yeah." Presley dumped the black, grainy dregs of his coffee into Ort's trash can.

"Hey. That damn stuff eats the bottom outa my basket. Don't pour no damn coffee in there, Harm."

Behind them, in the other room, Resaca began to rattle the door of the cell. Without even looking, Presley could picture him, barefoot, spread-eagled, holding on to the bars with fingers and toes, humping his body back and forth to clang the iron door. "Shit," Presley said. "Damn crazy nigger."

"I wish you'd make him stop."

Presley's retort was cut off by a scream, Resaca's scream, pitched absurdly high, painfully high, bubbling hoarsely away to the rasp of exhaled air. Both white men winced. "Get her outa here!" Resaca wailed. "Oh, Christ Jesus Lord get her outa here! Oh God, her guts get her out, get her out!"

Presley and Ort exchanged a look. Heavily, with the weight of fatigue in his limbs, Presley pushed himself up. He fingered the butt of his revolver. "I think," he said to Ort, "we might just have ourselves a confession."

Six

1

Like a gently shelving beach, summer sloped imperceptibly toward autumn. August was going out in a week of warm days and cool nights, September coming on with the promise of fall in her breath.

It was a dry week, a week of clear blue mornings and afternoons partly overcast by white clouds like piles of cotton. Around three o'clock every day the mercury would hit eighty-nine or ninety, warm but not debilitating, comfortable to aching muscles and joints. And not a drop of rain fell all that week. It was the way everyone remembered summer ending, droning lazy days with the cry of July-flies audible even in the center of town, days that moved as slow, sweet, and golden as sorghum syrup.

The corps of old men who sat on the benches at the foot of Private Parks's statue on the Square continued to meet, weathered and seamed faces red beneath beaten-up old hats, bleared eyes looking out from deep in nests of wrinkles, voices slow and clotted and quarrelsome or breaking in high-pitched barks of laughter. They watched the world spin by, these old men, and all the while they seemed as much a fixture of the Square as the statue at its center, living monuments to the way it used to be, faint reproachful images of regret in their present uselessness.

They talked the murder out. It was true, as Officer Ort had observed, that once on a time some folks in Gaither would have done much more than talk. Hands that now were knobbed with arthritis and that clutched a walking stick had once been younger, stronger. Some of the old men, not very many, to be sure, but one or two of

them, looking back into the past, could see dark nights and wild rides, sheets billowing, the firelight of torches gleaming red in the sweat of terrified black faces. They could recall the sudden thrumming tautening of a rope, the snap of bone at the end of a drop, the last gargled bloody breath of the swinging body. It had not happened often, but it had happened enough, and not one of the participants ever said he regretted the past, not even those in the county who still occasionally jolted from sleep believing they had heard once again that unmistakable liquid snap.

But now they were old, these men on the benches, and even the one or two who had once been riders of the night finally contented themselves with just talking it out, how it was a shame that any woman, black or white, should suffer the outrages they had heard this one had suffered. What they had heard was only gossip, but in truth, they had from the talk of the town a pretty good idea of the violence and ruin the killer had inflicted, maybe slightly exaggerated (any great exaggeration of how Mollie Avery met death was almost impossible) but still a better idea than anyone in Gaither could glean from the local paper.

The Advocate headlined the killing, as it was almost obliged to: murder was rare in Frye County, and being rare, was news. Still, the extent of the horror was masked by Editor Jenkins's artful, bloodless prose: "discovered a body," "multiple wounds," "dead on arrival." None of Tom Davies's explicit photographs made it into the paper, of course, though someone somehow dug up a five- or six-year-old studio portrait of Mollie Avery, smiling but with eyes wide and apprehensive as they stared into the camera, and a small version of that saw print.

No gore sullied the pages of the Advocate, not in word or picture. But everyone knew what had really happened. It had really been a razor killing, and a nasty one at that. Talk was that the crazy buck the woman lived with had chopped her fine and fed her to his dogs. Maybe a few people down in Possum Town felt something for Billy, some pity, some understanding, some doubt of his guilt. None of that feeling was evident on the Square. A few of the old men on the benches grumbled about the county having to feed Billy Resaca, and old knotted hands gripped walking canes a little tighter. But the sun was warm on aged bones, and times had changed, and besides Billy was only a nigger.

And so, as the week wore on, talk drifted to other concerns. On the Monday after the murder, the Ford Motor Company unveiled its new car: the Edsel. Eddie Voit, owner of the Ford dealership in Gaither, had three on his lot, a sky-blue one and two red ones. Everyone in town, it seemed, went out to look at them, but no one cared to buy, at least not for the first week or so. The bench brigade went, looked, and agreed it was a funny-damn-lookin' car.

From away up in Washington other news came down, putting the old men in a reflective mood. In a divided and troubled Senate, a man named William Proxmire took over the seat once held by Joe McCarthy. Joe was six months dead. A good man, some of the old men in the Square assured each other. Too bad the damn Reds in the gummint tore him down thataway. A good man, was old Joe McCarthy. They hoped this Proxmire fellow was half the man old Joe had been. You had to admire the way Joe called a spade a spade, the way he wouldn't take nothin' off of nobody. A right good old boy, Joe had been.

But so was a senator from a neighboring state, old Strom Thurmond. When the Republicans and the big-city boys tried to push something called the Civil Rights Bill through the Senate, old Strom rared back and told them he planned to filibuster against it. Of course, on Thursday the filibuster broke down, and the senators passed the bill by a margin of sixty to fifteen, but Strom had tried; he had held up his end of the bargain. He had stood tall for Southern ideals. The old men told each other it didn't matter a bit anyway, things around here weren't going to change. We know colored people in this town, we understand them. And they know their place. Nobody away up in Yankee Washington was gonna change that. Still, there was a note of uncertainty . . .

Sometimes, to tell the honest truth, they felt as if they sat on an unstable and threatened little island, the old men on their benches. Why, just this week the Soviet Union had tested a missile that they said could hit any target in the world. Of course, out west our own government held a test of an atomic bomb, the fourteenth in the series. Have to take them Russkies down one of these days, the old men opined. Some of them, the more religiously inclined, recalled that the book of Revelation promised the world would end in fire. Those flames would be as hot as the sun, born in the heart of the atom,

maybe, and they would purge the world of its wickedness, burn away its corruption and its sin.

And considering sin, there was that there new theater over just across the street from the Square, the ShadowShow. It opened that week, with maybe half a dozen young folks (and Andy McCory, strangely altered Andy) working for the never-seen Mr. Badon. Sinful, some of the old men called the theater and its dark promise of lies on celluloid, lies to be sent shining to the great white screen. Talking it over, the old men wondered one afternoon what had become of that preacher man who used to show up of an evening to stand on the corner of the Square and harangue the town. Nobody had seen him in some time, and it seemed a shame, in a way, because a man of God like that would surely have some powerful things to say about such a den of iniquity as the ShadowShow Theater.

Look at the titles on the marquee, in those squared-off letters: *I WAS A TEENAGE WEREWOLF INVASION OF THE SAUCER MEN*. Ugly stories about nasty things, hairy monsters or bald-headed ones chasin' girls around, girls with their titties almost showin' through tight sweaters. Trash, the men on the Square pronounced it. Ungodly trash about things that never were and never would be real. And just imagine what all them younguns (the old men saw mostly young boys and girls going in the theater in the afternoons) would be up to in the dark. The heads shook, the tongues clucked.

But already, tugging at some of them, though almost unfelt, was the desire to see for themselves, to go into the dark cave of the ShadowShow, to look on the images cast on the screen. Vague stirrings of curiosity moved under some of those tattered hats, and some would, surely enough, go in. Eventually. Not just yet, not when the sun of the last week of August was warm, not while there was somebody on the bench to talk to or just sit companionably beside. They sat on their benches, the old men on the Square, and talked over the news, and waited to die.

2

Odum Tate spent his days in the roar and howl of the lumberyard saw house and his nights in wrestling with God.

The Benton Brothers didn't notice any change in him, but then they never spoke to him. He showed up, accepted the work orders for the

lumber to be cut that day, did the work, and left; or if it was payday, he picked up his envelope first, never bothering to count it. Mrs. Hudson, the owner of the boardinghouse, fretted a little about him. His appetite was off, for one thing, and in the mornings he hardly touched his grits, ham, and eggs and in the evenings he merely pushed around on his plate the chicken, pot roast, or pork she had prepared. He had a sharp look about him, a nose growing pointed as a pen nib. Old Mr. Hudson had looked the same toward the end, as the cancer ate his insides. Mrs. Hudson worried about him.

Tate did a world of praying. Like Job, he longed for release, for destruction if that was what it took: like Job, he knew that God wanted him to be patient, to accept the evil with the good, to do what he could to be a righteous man. But here was no whirlwind, no voice to challenge him: and here was no suggestion of what he should do to relieve the burden he sensed everywhere around him in town.

Except for the boy.

Tate did not really know anyone in town, but he had seen a boy, and something inside him had told the preacher that this boy was his charge and his chance, that the building thunderstorm he felt over the town might yet be averted if only the boy could be brought into it, if the two of them could understand what it was they must fight and how to fight it.

But — a boy.

Odum Tate one night read a page in the huge ten-pound Bible that he never read anymore, a page not inspired by God as he believed every other page in the book assuredly to be. It was a page of blanks, meant to be filled in with the records of a family: births, marriages, deaths.

In the births column was one entry: Charles Benjamin Tate, 6/15/33.

In the deaths column was one entry: Charles Benjamin Tate, 11/13/42.

Tate saw more than nine years in between those two groupings of pen marks on paper. He saw his own profound iniquity, and the sufferings of a good woman and a boy (a boy, a little, little boy) brought on by his own works of evil. He saw the onset of a crippling fever, he saw himself too preoccupied with drink to carry the boy to the doctor, he saw the hopeless slide into coma and death and the look of cold, bitter hate in the eyes of the woman he had loved.

Well, God had given him nearly fifteen years of penitence now. He had not brought back his son, and he did not know where his wife was, if she still lived, but he had raised his voice against the sweet poison of sin the best he could for nearly every day of those fifteen years. And now there was another boy.

He knew he would have to seek the boy out, though he did not know where the knowledge came from. And as surely as he knew the past, Odum Tate knew he would bring into the boy's life dark evil, desperate sin, the danger of death.

3

"Did he get her?" Jack Harwell asked. He and Alan had spent half of Friday morning tossing a football around with Reese Donalds and nine or ten other kids, but now the others had gone to Moccasin Creek to swim and the two of them rested under the trees at the far side of the school playground while Alan relived the depredations of the teenage werewolf.

"It was great," Alan said. "See, he's in the gym, and this girl is on the bars, and he turns. And she sees him — "

"How'd he turn?" Jack demanded.

"It sort of looked like he was behind a pane of glass and somebody ran water over it, and he turned all hairy while the water was running. He slobbered, too. Drooled all over himself."

"I wish my old man would let me go," Jack muttered.

"I got five tickets left," Alan said. "We could go. I just want to save two of them for — somethin' else." He had almost said, for Diane and me; but Jack would not understand his wish to take Diane to the movies, as soon as something less scary than werewolves was showing.

Jack plucked a grass stem, held it in his cupped hands, and blew a trumpetlike high note. "I reckon not. I don't think the old man wants me to go to the show, period. It's not the money." He heaved a great, forlorn sigh. "So did he get this girl, or what?"

"He came up to her, and she was hanging upside down. This part was really great, I mean she has on this real tight gym suit and she's hanging so you can see just about everything, right? Anyway, you see him coming closer, only he's upside down — "

"What? How come he's upside down?"

"You're supposed to see him the way the girl hanging does, see, and she's hanging upside down, so he looks upside down to her, get it? Okay, he comes right up to her and she —"

"She says, 'Get outa here, boy, ya bother me.'" Jack Harwell's outstanding talent was mimicry, and he did the slow nasal drawl of W. C. Fields perfectly. Or, if not perfectly, at least as well as whoever did the voice for the Warner Brothers cartoons. Jack had the peculiarity of being able to imitate any voice he heard imitated. He wasn't quite as good when he tried to come up with an original impression. "Ah, yes," he continued, still Fieldsian, "you're far too hairy for me, m'dear, too hairy by far, yes, yes."

"Shut up." Alan grinned. "You goof."

Jack blew his grass trumpet again, pushed his specs up, and looked across the playground at the red-brick school, dappled with the shadows of afternoon clouds. "All over the world teachers are getting ready to open school up," he said.

Alan thumped a black ant off a stem of grass. He thought of Miss Lewis and the others, inside the school. "All over Frye County, anyhow. You hear Mickey's going to Calloway this year?" Calloway, an outlying town, was one of six in the county that housed its own school. "His daddy got tired of driving him in."

"Durn it. He was the fastest one we had. Gonna miss him when we play football."

"Yeah." Alan plucked a spear of grass. He didn't know what it was called — some kind of weed. It grew a long, tough stem, with a pale green head at the tip of it shaped something like a miniature carrot. Alan folded and twisted the stem to make a gun and popped the seed head off hard, shooting Jack in the neck with an audible thap! The other boy clapped his hand over his pimpled nape.

"Durn it, Kirby." Jack snatched up another weed, made his own gun, and in an Edward G. Robinson voice said, "Now you're gonna get it, see? Nyah. Little Caesar don't take stuff like that, see? Nyah. Eat lead, copper. Nyah. Nyah."

Alan submitted to being shot, somewhat painfully, on the **neck**. In the lull that followed, he said, "Wonder what old Ulrich's class is gonna be like."

Jack, who had been sitting holding his knees, pushed his legs out and relaxed onto his back. He wore no shirt, and a few real hairs grew

on his chest, dark and wiry against the background of silvery down. "I sure will be glad when I get out of the eighth grade and get to go to high school," he said.

"Me, too," Alan said, knowing that he was not telling the full truth. High school would be a change, and with the conservatism of all boys, he was apprehensive of change. "I hear old Ulrich shakes you if you talk back to her."

"Shakes your teeth outa your head," Jack agreed, rolling onto his stomach. "Who is that?"

Alan turned to follow his gaze. Away across the playground, at the head of the ramp, stood a figure clothed in black, a man in a funereal suit, a stick figure, an Ichabod Crane of a man. Alan shivered all at once. "Don't know," he said.

"Is it that crazy old preacher?"

"I don't know."

Jack dropped his head and the subject. He rested his forehead on his crossed arms. "Wanna go swim?" he asked the ground in front of his face.

"Huh?"

"Pay attention — I say, pay attention, boy!" Jack said in the voice of Mel Blanc doing Kenny Delmar. "I keep tossin' 'em over the plate, you keep cuttin' the air, I say air! I say, are you willin' to make like a dog and paddle? Dog paddle, that is. That's a joke, son!"

Alan stood up, not replying. The tall man in black turned slowly and walked away, past the school, toward town. "Jack," Alan said, "I gotta go."

"So go," Jack said to the earth.

Alan ran down to the playground, righted his bike, and rode it to the ramp. He walked it up to the top and rode toward town, looking for the black-clad figure, seeking to find the man but somehow not wanting to find him. He spotted the figure waiting on the corner ahead, just in front of the Pure station. Alan braked, put his foot out, stood balancing his bike.

The man looked back. It was the preacher, the one whom Alan had heard now and again, usually in the evening, down on the Square. He had never really listened to the man, but no one in the downtown area could avoid hearing him.

Alan shivered again. The long-faced man frightened him, the intensity of the dark look frightened him. The hoarse ranting sermons

frightened him perhaps most of all — Dr. Alman certainly didn't sound that way when he stood in the pulpit of the First Methodist.

Alan pedaled his bike toward the man, who waited for him — impelled by curiosity, perhaps, or perhaps something different. He could not himself have said. Archie somebody-or-other looked up from under the hood of a black '52 Ford as he passed the station, but no one else seemed to notice. No one except the waiting man.

Alan stopped a few feet from him. The traffic light at the corner changed, and the aluminum box that controlled it clacked its relays. "Boy," the preacher said.

"Sir."

The thin chest heaved, and the man looked away. When he turned back, Alan could see tears shining in the dark eyes. "The gospel is a burden, son," he said.

Alan didn't know how to respond. "Yes, sir."

"We don't know why God's finger touches one and not another." The preacher reached into his back pocket and brought out a handkerchief. He mopped his thin face. "You've felt it, too, haven't you?"

Alan frowned. He seemed to be on the edge of recalling something — a feeling, an idea, a dream. "I don't know."

The handkerchief went back in the pocket. "You've felt it. I know." Eyes steady and piercing on Alan, deep and dark. "I am a weak vessel, son. Like Jonah, I nearly fled the call of the Lord. We can only put our fate in His hands now."

"I don't understand."

"The time is not yet. I don't understand either, boy. And I can't see the end of it. All I can see is black night and fire, a time of great lamentation and an angel with a sword. We have a long way to go. What's your name, boy?"

"Alan Kirby."

"Mine is Odum Tate." The man extended a long, fine-boned hand, and Alan shook it. "I had a boy like you once," Tate said. "The Lord punished my iniquity by taking him away. The sins of the fathers are visited on the sons."

Alan, desperately unhappy, murmured, "Yes, sir."

"When the time is right, you'll find me on the Square, in the evening before sunset. You'll remember that."

Alan could only nod.

"May the Lord hold us in the palm of His hand," Tate said. "May he grant us His love and His help, for without them we cannot hope to stand in the night of our travail."

"I have to go."

The preacher nodded. Alan got on the bike and crossed the street. He looked over his shoulder once as he entered the outlying commercial district, and away behind him he saw the preacher still standing on the corner. He feared the man, and he did not trust him.

But somehow he feared the night even more. The night and the flame and the angel with the sword.

The night of his travail.

4

They had taken Billy Resaca out of the cagelike fighting tank. He was in a cell now, one of a dozen on the third and top story of the county jail. He was the only one on the floor, an important prisoner: they had doubled up some of the other inmates just to make room for him.

Billy could not understand the white men's talk about lawyers and rights, and he could not make them understand that she came by night, came to show him her wounds and to speak strange things in his ear. He was still terrified by the visits, but he no longer screamed. Billy had gone far away, deep down into his own head, and when he screamed there, it never got as far as his mouth.

She wanted him to be like her, that was what he understood. She was with him all through the night, every night, and in the morning he was worn out, in a fog, uncaring. She wanted him to be like her, to be with her, to be her.

He thought of her coming home last Saturday night, dark of the moon that had been, and Mollie always scared of the dark. Why hadn't he heard, why hadn't anybody heard? She explained that to him on one of her nocturnal visits: "I didn't want you to hear me, Billy. It felt good. It felt real good. You'll see, Billy. You won't want anybody to hear you, either." And though the voice was Mollie's, the words were like a white man's. The sounds of the words cut through his haze, were the only thing that cut through it. He had appeared in a courtroom, where white men had said things at him, but he ignored them. He spent his time in the cell sitting on the edge of his bunk, except for

when his body told him he had to change position, to answer a call of nature, to eat, to sleep.

He slept mostly in the daytime now, despite the sun coming into the cell through the high barred windows, their glass out of reach beyond quarter-inch tight-mesh wire. He had thought at first that she was a dream, that she had come in his sleep, and so now he avoided sleep — and still she came, every night. And now he couldn't even scream anymore.

The clank of the stairwell door being opened came to him, penetrating his lassitude, and then the muffled clack of the lock going back in place again. Next came the sound of the corridor door being unlocked and opened, closed and relocked. Finally the double sound of two men walking toward the cell. It was suppertime.

"Billy," a man said, "come on. Get somethin' t'eat."

Billy pushed himself off the bunk (or did something else push him, was she here now, invisible?) and slouched to the door. The older guard, Billy forgot his name, had the food tray. The younger one, whose name Billy did not even know, had the shotgun. "Stand back," the older one said, and Billy backed away.

The older guard unlocked and opened the cell door and set the tray down on the floor. He did not turn as he left the cell and locked the door again. He knew his business. At no time had he blocked the shotgun guard's line of fire. "Eat now," he said.

Billy picked up the tray, sat on the bunk again with the tray on his knees, and began to put food in his mouth. It was a hunk of boiled pork, boiled cabbage, black-eyed peas, a piece of cornbread, and a hard donut. He washed it down with the cup of water they had brought. The food was hard to eat with the utensils they gave him — wooden fork and spoon, like the kind the ice cream places gave kids to eat soupy ice cream out of a paper cup — and it was tasteless, but Billy did not notice. He made his jaws chew and his throat swallow. He ate methodically, first the pork, torn into bits he could thrust into his mouth, then the cabbage, then the peas, then the bread, then the donut. And a last swallow of lukewarm water. He took the tray to the door, put it down (the wooden fork and knife lined up on the plate side by side, the way they had told him to do it), and then he went back to sit on the edge of his bunk.

The older guard unlocked the door, retrieved the tray, and locked Billy in again. "That ol ghost been around again, boy?" he asked.

Billy did not turn his head.

"This man says a woman's ghost comes up here. You ever seen her, Eb?" the old guard asked Shotgun.

"Ain't never seen her," Shotgun said. "How the hell she get in? Sure don't come up the stairs."

"Ghosts have their own ways in." In a lower, insinuating, confidential tone: "She been comin' to see you, Billy? Showin' how bad you cut her up?"

Tell him, Billy screamed to himself. Lord God, tell him what happen ever night when I left all alone here and it black dark outdoors and she come and talk them crazy words. Tell him again, tell them all, find somebody who'll listen. He heard himself make noises, whimpering sounds like a hurt dog, but no words. He felt the tears, hot, then warm, then cold, sliding from his eyelids to his cheek to his chin. He could not make his mouth work to talk.

"Let's go," Shotgun said from the corridor.

"Holler if she comes back, Billy," Tray said. "I'd give a pretty to see somethin like that. You just give us a holler, hear?"

The two of them retreated down the hall. Billy heard the doors open and close behind them, and he was alone. But outside the sun was going down, and in four hours the cell lights would dim — they never went entirely out — and except for the hourly check-in by the guards, Billy would be in the cell alone.

The dark was coming.

She was coming with it.

It felt good, she had told him in her own voice and somebody else's words. It felt real good. Billy heard a tack-tack-tack sound at the window. It raised the hair on his neck.

But when he brought himself to look up, he saw just a moth, a big, fat, furry gray moth, tapping against the window glass. It wasn't yet time for the creatures, for the dirty glass still showed the red streaks of sunset, but this one was outside, and it wanted in.

"Go away," Billy whispered to it. "You ain't Mollie. I don't believe you Mollie. You get outa here and leave me alone."

The moth continued, maddeningly. It ticked like a clock counting off the seconds, an idiot sound, a bug hitting its head on glass with more persistence than any creature with a brain could possibly have.

Billy listened to it until it was like a piece of sandpaper rasping his exposed nerves, until the tack-tack-tack set his teeth on edge, until

everything in the world narrowed down real tiny to a little circle around that eternal sound. It loosened his knees finally, and he could stand. The window was six feet from the floor, and there was nothing in the cell to stand on. Billy grasped two bars and pulled himself up, wriggling. His arms shook. He was losing all his strength; when they first brought him in, he could hang from the ceiling of that little cage and not have shaky arms. But now it was an effort to chin himself.

Deep dusk outside now, and the fat moth still butting the glass. "Go way," Billy grunted, his face nine inches away from it. "Git!" He let go one of the bars to slap his hand against the wire-reinforced glass, and the effort made him slip. He hit hard on his feet, sending twinges through both ankles.

But when he stepped back, looking up at the window, the moth was gone. It was quiet.

Until, from behind him, she said, "Billy."

5

He had not been back to work all week. Ludie came every day to clean up, but Ludie would not cook, and so he had his meals out of cans, often not even cooking the contents, just opening them at the sink and spooning the cold condensed soup or beans or meat into his mouth. Sometimes he finished a whole can, but more often he threw half-full ones into the trash. Ludie's arthritic back pained her, making it impossible for her to empty the trash — that had always been one of Mollie's jobs — and the trash can overflowed on Wednesday. He still threw the empties onto the growing pile.

His hand, under the bandages, itched maddeningly. He could feel the stitches in his flesh, pulling tight, clamped to the wound like the jaws of big ants, and his whole palm felt stiff. He had dressed himself in a suit once, on Tuesday, for the court appearance of Billy Resaca (since Mollie's death, he had seen Billy a couple of times, but in the courtroom Billy gave no sign of recognizing him). After that he stayed in pajama tops and old slacks all day. He had not shaved since his accident, and his face felt greasy, prickly with the whiskers that glistened like iron filings on his jowls.

He saw a sick man in his bathroom mirror, eyes that had lost life, a face that seemed to be crumpling inward. He had Ludie turn callers

away with the excuse that he was sick, that he was recuperating. He listened dully when subordinates at the bank called — pretended to listen, actually he heard nothing of their queries at all — before saying “Do what you think is best” and hanging up on them.

He waited for an altogether different kind of call — a call from Mollie Avery.

Mollie had something to tell him.

He had that feeling; Mollie had wanted him to know something, some great secret, before she died; and she had never told it to him. When he closed his eyes, he could see her face, as it was in life, but now with a slyly knowing expression in the slight slant of her deep brown eyes, in the self-contained placidity of her features. She knew the great secret, and she wanted to tell it to him.

He waited for it: waited in the bedroom, where she had shared his bed (he had burned the nylon stockings, had wrapped them in a couple of pages from the *Advocate*, had placed the crumpled ball in the downstairs fireplace and had touched a match to it); he waited in the kitchen, where he had watched her cook; he waited waking and sleeping for the message, for when she decided to tell it to him, to trust him with it. She had not come.

On Saturday evening, Ballew Jefferson suddenly became aware of his condition, as if he were seeing a stranger instead of himself in the bathroom mirror. He smelled his own sweat, saw the five years that the last week had put on his face. In a paroxysm of fear and determination, he tried to do something about it.

He took a steaming shower, standing under the needle spray for a quarter of an hour or more, scrubbing his hide with a washcloth and a cake of Lifebuoy. When he got out, he peeled the sodden dressing from his hand. The wet gauze unwrapped like the covering of a mummy. The skin at the base of his fingers puckered white and wrinkled when he uncovered it. Then he eased a final gauze pad away from the stitches. It had been marked with brown dried blood and crusty yellow patches of serum. The wound itself, and the stitches X-ing it, looked black to him. Still naked except for a towel around his waist, he adhesive-taped a fresh gauze pad to his palm, then awkwardly wrapped more gauze around his hand to hold it and cushion it. He fastened this with tape, too.

His right thumb and forefinger were sore and stiff, but he could grasp the razor with them. He worked lather up left-handed, brushed

it onto his face, and began to reap the whiskers. They floated in gobs of lather, gray and spiky, in the sink. He nicked himself a couple of times and kept shaving, ignoring the tiny L-shaped cut below his right ear, the straight one an eighth of an inch long beneath his nose. At last he rinsed the razor and sink, splashed cold water on his face, and wielded the styptic pencil. The image staring back from the mirror still looked old.

Jefferson went back into his bedroom. He rummaged in his closet and found a soft pullover turtleneck sweater, pale blue. Trudy had bought it for him, oh, ages and ages ago, and though he rarely wore it, he kept it in the closet. He found a comfortable pair of blue corduroy trousers, pulled them out. He got into his underwear, then into the pants. He pulled the sweater over his head. Then he padded back to the bathroom.

He looked like an old man in a younger man's clothing. He brushed his hair with his military hairbrush, backed in silver (tarnished, he noticed: tarnished with a black spot that was in the shape of a moth with wings outspread). He put in his partial plate and brushed his teeth.

He put on garters and socks, pulled on a worn pair of tennis shoes. Then, dressed at last, he had no idea what to do. He took Trudy's picture off the wall and sat looking at it. Trudy, who were you? I see you now, and it's as if I never looked at you, not once, all the time you were alive.

I wish you could have seen all your grandchildren, Trudy. I wish I could see them. We raised our children to be independent, Trudy, to be able to leave the nest and fly on their own. They're all gone, Trudy. I wonder if they know the old man has had a little accident. Nobody called.

He set the photo down beside the bed. The alarm clock next to it had stopped ticking a day or so ago: he had not wound it since last Saturday night. The hands were stopped at 11:09. He got up, roamed into the hallway, looked into the empty bedrooms, and then went downstairs. In the living room he turned on the television.

He saw the very end of "The Charles Boyer Show" on Channel 5 before the evening news. He was a little startled to find that it was this late: he had not thought it anywhere close to eleven P.M. He watched, not absorbing, and at eleven-fifteen he switched off the set, making the

opening credits of "The Big Picture" dwindle to a tiny white dot in a black screen.

He let himself out the side door of the house and took a deep breath. The night air, still warm, was redolent of pine and poplar. Stars shone through broken cloud overhead. Away east toward town there was a faint glow in the sky. Jefferson slapped his pockets for cigarettes, but he had neglected to bring any.

There was a pack of Chesterfields in the Lincoln. He opened the car, slid behind the wheel, and got the cigarettes from the glove compartment. He started the engine and revved it a couple of times. He pressed in the cigarette lighter, and when it popped out, he lit up. On impulse, he rolled down the window and backed out of the driveway. He headed for town.

In the back of Jefferson's mind was the vague notion of finding Sheriff Quarles, of asking him what the investigation of Mollie Avery's death had turned up. He did not stop to think that Quarles was unlikely to be available at this time of night.

Town was empty, except for the very occasional car. He reached the jail, thought better of his mission, and turned right instead, heading to the Square. He wondered idly if they had buried Mollie Avery yet. A relative had been found, Quarles had told him Tuesday, a sister fifteen years older, off in Atlanta or someplace. Probably the body had been given to her.

Jefferson had finished his first cigarette on the way into town. He lit another, and after that another. He parked on the Square and sat for a little while, smoking and studying the dark profile of Private Parks against an even darker sky. Restless, he got out of the car and walked around the Square, in the dark, accompanied only by the glowing red ash of his cigarette.

The shop windows were dimly lighted. Through the front window of the pharmacy he could see a red-glowing Coca-Cola clock; Belk's had small spotlights on their window mannequins (how harsh the light was, and how accusingly the painted eyes regarded him from their shadowed sockets). His own Trust Bank showed its night-lights as usual: one over each doorway, and dim, proper lights inside. Here and there in the dime store, the Bon Ton, the shoe stores, small night-lights burned.

A convertible car blatted by on the other side of the Square, full of teenagers and trailing music behind, some boy's voice singing "That'll Be the Day," his tune nearly lost in the unmuffled snarl of the jalopy.

Jefferson dropped his cigarette, ground it out, and went on up Bridge Street, past the second dime store, past the Modiste shop, past Stark's, the tailor's where he bought most of his suits. Across Oglethorpe was the theater, dark and empty.

As he looked, though, the marquee border leaped to life with a sudden electric hum. The broken and dead bulbs had been replaced, and around the still-unlighted white background crawled a yellow endless snake, swallowing its own tail. The rest of the marquee, the fluorescents behind the panel, flickered on, and Jefferson read the legend: **MIDNIGHT SHOW**. He frowned. The side of the marquee, where the names of the starring actors generally showed up, was almost edge-on to him. Though he could not read the letters, he could tell that there was something on it. He took a few steps down Oglethorpe until he could clearly read the name: **BALLEW JEFFERSON**.

He shook his head, anger rising in him. If this was a joke, he did not appreciate it. He crossed Oglethorpe with a purposeful stride, stopped to peer into the darkened ticket booth. No one was there.

"Hello!" Jefferson shouted through the round hole cut in the glass. "Somebody!"

No one answered. And yet someone must have switched on the marquee. Impatiently, Jefferson went to the double doors to the left of the ticket booth, balled his good left hand, and pounded. The door nudged open, then swung back again.

When no one responded to his knock, Jefferson pushed the door open. He stepped into a lobby lighted by a hanging wall clock the diameter of an automobile tire (two minutes to midnight, he noted half consciously). The candy counter was deserted, the soft-drink dispensers shrouded under oilcloth draping. "Is anyone here?" Jefferson yelled.

He thought he might have heard something from the auditorium. He pushed through a second set of doors and found himself at the head of the left aisle. The theater looked much as he remembered it (good God, he thought, the last time I was here was with Trudy, during the war): walls papered in gaudy ornate peacock colors, flam-beaux light fixtures showing chevrons of different colored lights, blue, white, pink; sidelights of the rows of seats casting tiny pools of illumination on the wine-colored carpet. Jefferson took a deep breath, drawing into his nostrils the scent of stale popcorn and orange soda,

of dusty curtains and mint candies, the aroma of dreams in the dark. He turned to leave.

The door in front of him suddenly was bathed in light. The screen had come to life. He looked back.

It was his own bedroom. He and Mollie, both naked, she on her stomach, he behind her, his hands spread on her thighs, pulling her back against him. Jefferson felt as if something cold had just pierced his skull, above and between his eyes. "Oh, my God," he breathed, pressing the bandage on his palm against his mouth. He sank into the aisle seat.

Mollie faced him. From the screen she looked straight into his soul. Her face was reproachful, empty of pleasure. "You got to do it to me any way you wanted," she said, her voice booming over the speakers in the theater. Jefferson glanced wildly around, but he was alone: the sole spectator. Behind Mollie, his head thrown back, the old white man bared his teeth in his lust. "Now we're goin to do things my way for a while," Mollie continued. "You will sit there and watch, Mr. Ballew Jefferson. And you'll get the idea." She laughed then, but her eyes had filmed over, had gone nearly opaque, like the eyes of a fish dead and dry. "You'll know what to do."

And for the rest of that dreadful midnight show, Mr. Jefferson sat and watched — and learned.

6

On Labor Day, Ann Lewis realized that she had to do some shopping. She needed clothes for the fall term, for one thing, and somehow she had never gotten around to buying them. September second was a general holiday in Gaither, though; and so, with a sigh, Ann climbed into her car and headed southeast, toward Atlanta, sixty miles away.

She left early, and she drove carefully: on the car radio, just as she passed through Buford, she heard a report that six people had already been killed in Labor Day traffic accidents scattered around the state. She hated driving in Atlanta, with its confusing maze of one-way streets and (inevitably) its Peachtree Street repairs. But she made it safely downtown, past the big triangular building with the red Coca-Cola sign on it (Ann maneuvered more by landmark than by street name) and to the Rich's parking lot.

She spent much of the morning in the Rich's clothing departments, finding good bargains and running up her account ruinously. She made two trips out to the parking lot to deposit her purchases in the trunk of her car, and finally, well after noon, she had a quick lunch in the café on the bridge going across to the home-furnishings store. By one o'clock, Ann was heading north again, toward home, in heavy traffic.

She saw him first at Spring and Peachtree, a tall, cadaverous man smiling at her. She shivered a little, passed him by, and gave him no more thought.

Until, twenty minutes and fifteen miles north, she saw him again, the same man. He simply stood beside the road, not a foot away from the whizzing traffic, making no attempt to thumb a ride, just watching.

Watching for her. He nodded gravely as she passed.

He did it twice more before she got back home to Gaither, badly shaken. To get to Mrs. Maddons's house, Ann had no need to drive past the Square at all, and yet she did.

And there she saw him for the last time that day.

A man stood outside the ShadowShow Theater, changing the title on the marquee. The horror-show double feature was down and scattered on the pavement. Going up was *The Sun Also Rises*. In the glass cases on either side of the front doors, posters promised *A Hatful of Rain* and *Man of a Thousand Faces* in the weeks to come. I haven't given myself my present, Ann thought to herself. I haven't seen my movie yet. I —

The man working the mechanical hand turned a familiar face toward her and gave her the same insinuating roadside smile as she passed.

But for some reason her fear had run dry, like a trickle of water seeping into desert sands: in the blistering heat of her great indignation, fear could not flow forever. Ann Lewis got out of her car angry, walked into her rooms angry, and picked up the telephone still angry. She dialed the operator, not able, in her wrath, to wait long enough to look up the number.

The operator came on the line. "I want the police," Ann said.

"Yes, ma'am. Are you inside the city limits?"

"No, just outside in the country. But — "

"I'll give you the Frye County Sheriff's Office."

The line clicked, and then Ann heard the phone on the other end ringing. It rang four times before someone answered with a breathless, "Hello?"

"Is this the Sheriff's Department?" Ann asked.

"Yes, it is, but — "

"I want to report a man who's been bothering me."

"Ma'am, I can't — "

"Just tell me how to go about it. Do I come in there, or — "

"Just a minute, please." Ann had the impression that the man had put his hand over the receiver and was speaking to someone else. After a few seconds, the line clicked again as someone picked up an extension. A different, younger voice, said, "Sheriff Quarles."

"Mr. Quarles, my name is Ann Lewis. I teach school. All day today a man's been bothering me — "

"Is he there now?"

"No, I'm at home. But I want — "

"You're not in any danger or anything like that."

"No, but I — "

"Ma'am, uh, Miz Lewis, if you want to come in and make out a complaint, we'll see what we can do. We've about got our hands full right now — "

"Can I come in now?"

"Yes — no — Miz Lewis, I'll tell you the truth, if it ain't urgent, you might as well wait. We've had a killin'."

"Not another one," Ann said, realizing how petulant her voice was even as the words escaped.

"Yes, ma'am. And this one worse than before. This one was in the damn jail."

Someone was knocking at the door. Ann hung up without a word of farewell, and, still angry, went to answer the knock. "Who is it?" she barked through the wood.

A startled young voice said, "It's me, ma'am. Alan Kirby."

"Oh." She opened the door. "Alan, I'm busy right now, so — why, what's wrong with you?"

Alan looked at her, his face screwed into a childish, miserable expression, tears standing in his eyes. He had the face of a second-grader who's just fallen from the teeter-totter; and yet the man he would be was there, too, under the mask. "Miss Lewis, I'm scared," he said.

"Scared of what?"

"I don't know."

Ann looked past him. Her car rested in the drive, badly parked, and in its trunk were all her new purchases, and she still wanted to get some help with her own problem, with the man who somehow had dogged her for sixty miles, and — Alan needed her.

"Come on inside," she said, stepping back. She closed the door behind her. "Sit down and tell me about it."

Alan did sit down, on the sofa, with his hands clasped between his knees. "I've been having these dreams," he said. "I had one last night. This, I don't know, this thing was after a man. It got into him somehow, and he was in a cage or something and couldn't get away — " the words tumbled out.

"Alan," Ann said, "it was just a dream."

"He killed himself," he muttered. "With his teeth."

"Oh, Alan." Her tone was faintly reproachful — It's that theater, she thought at once; it's that horror show — before, like two roads converging, Sheriff Quarles's words met Alan's in her mind.

Another killing. He killed himself. This one worse than the other one. With his teeth. In a cage.

In the damn jail.

7

Harmon Presley had just about had it with William Henry Resaca. When he was called in on Monday afternoon — Labor Day! He was supposed to be off that night! — it was just about the last straw. He came in boiling.

Fortunately, Officer Ort intercepted him. "You better take it easy, Harm. Billy's dead. Everybody in the world is in Sam's office."

Presley frowned. "Dead? What the hell do you mean?"

"Killed hisself, is what I mean. I told 'em they shouldn't of left him up there by hisself. You remember I told 'em that." Ort shook his head. "Anyhow, Quarles wants you in his office, soon as he gets rid of Billy's mama and daddy." Ort leaned across his desk, away from his switchboard. "You oughta go up and see it, Harm. They'll be takin' him off before long."

Partly out of a vague desire for revenge — Labor Day! His day off! — Presley got Eb Stuart to take him up. The two of them stood outside the cell. Eb looked on in stolid indifference, Presley in astonished shock. “Great God almighty,” he breathed. “How did he do it?”

“Teeth,” Eb said laconically.

Billy Resaca had eaten his arms.

At least, that’s what it looked like at first glance: both forearms, both hands, mangled, shredded, bone showing through torn flesh, three fingers missing, scattered in the slick blood on the floor. But even Harmon could see that the flesh was still there, in gobbets and chunks and shreds, littering the floor, clinging to the walls in places. He took a deep breath, exhaled it unsteadily. “Let’s go,” he said. Labor Day didn’t seem as important here.

Presley sat on the hard wooden bench outside Quarles’s office for a quarter of an hour or so before the sheriff ushered a slight, elderly black man and a stouter, gray-haired black woman out. The woman was crying; the man had his face set in stony anger. Quarles saw them to the entryway, then came back to nod Presley in.

The sheriff’s office was small, green-walled, with a desk, a bookshelf, a floor lamp, and four chairs, not counting Quarles’s swivel chair. Built into the wall behind the desk was a rifle rack, and to the right of that the single window looked out toward town, about a mile and a half to the southwest, and toward Rainey Hill beyond. A raw-boned middle-aged man in a dark blue suit stood there looking out. Presley recognized him as Clay Sawyer, an assistant district attorney. Sawyer turned and nodded as Presley sat down and Quarles slipped into his swivel chair.

“What a mess.” Quarles sighed.

Sawyer shook his head in commiseration, turned from the window, and sat in one of the chairs. “Well. Let’s see what we can do about closing this case. Mr. Presley, I understand you found the body.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Tell me about it.”

Harmon Presley shifted his weight and told about Sunday morning a week ago, a bare-bones account but complete. Sawyer interrupted once: “Now, Resaca actually ran away from you, is that what you’re saying?”

"Yes, sir, he sure did. Like to got away."

"Go on."

When Presley had finished his story, Sawyer turned to Quarles. "What else have you learned?"

Quarles leaned back in the chair. "Resaca refused to make a statement one way or the other. We talked to the neighbors. They hadn't lived in the house long, Resaca and the woman, just since July, end of the month. Neighbors didn't much like them. They fussed and fought a lot. That's why they had to move from the last place they rented — landlady lived in the next house, got tired of their racket, and kicked 'em out. Anyhow, while they were livin' in their old place, down on Moccasin, we had two calls for domestic disturbance, both from the landlady. Mollie wouldn't swear out a warrant either time. Once it looked like she'd been beat up pretty bad before the car got there."

Quarles straightened up, picked up a sheaf of papers, leafed through them, and resumed: "There were knives in the house that could have been the murder weapon, including a deer knife that looked like it had been recently cleaned. Mollie's purse had a knife in it, too, a kitchen knife, a paring knife. It had traces of blood on it, AB negative. That's Mollie's type."

Sawyer interrupted: "I've read the autopsy report. Could a paring knife have done all that?"

Quarles tossed the papers onto his desk. "I don't know. Maybe it was used for part of the damage, another knife for the rest."

"How about the blood? There wasn't enough, the doc says."

The sheriff shook his head. "Can't explain that, either. Doc thinks she may have been killed somewhere else, then dumped there."

"And the killer put the knife in her own purse?"

"I just don't know," Quarles repeated.

Sawyer got up, went back to the window. With his back to them, he said, "This is what we've got. Mollie Avery lived with William Resaca for upward of four years. Resaca's got a criminal record of petty theft and public drunkenness. We know he used to beat her. She was found dead thirty **yards or so from** the house they shared. When Deputy Presley went to the house to investigate, Resaca climbed out a window, made a break for it, and resisted arrest. Resaca refused to make a statement. Now he's taken his own life."

The lawyer turned, silhouetted against the venetian blinds. "Sheriff, what would you say?"

Quarles took a deep breath. "Close the case."

After a moment, Sawyer nodded. "I agree."

"Me, too," Presley said. The other two men looked at him in frank surprise, as if they had totally forgotten his presence.

8

The night before school started, Johnny Williams dreamed of his little dog, Tuxedo.

In the dream, the dog, though mangled and buried, was not dead. Beneath the suffocating mud of Cherokee Creek bottom, in his cardboard box, he whimpered and stirred and started to dig.

It seemed to take him an eternity to break through the wet cardboard, to claw desperately upward through clinging red clay, to burst free at last into the night air.

And then, in Johnny's dream, Tuxedo came home. He trotted up the porch steps, sat looking up at the door, decided it was too late. He went around behind the house, found a cellar window tilted out, and got in that way. He trotted up the cellar steps, tail wagging, nails tick-ticking on the wood.

Johnny moaned in his sleep.

Tuxedo came all the way up, nosed the door open, and was in the kitchen. His dish was not in its accustomed spot on the linoleum. The dog headed up to Johnny's room.

Tuxedo pushed at the bedroom door. The lock didn't work anymore, and the doorknob was a little loose. Tuxedo had learned that if he butted the door patiently enough, it would swing open after a while.

The door opened. Tuxedo came to the bed, reared on his hind legs, and put his front paws on the sheet — his muddy paws.

Johnny woke up staring at the ceiling, sweating. He was crying, because he knew it was only a dream. Dawn lightened the window, and he could dimly see.

A foul odor, a dead odor, washed over him.

He turned his head on the pillow.

Tuxedo stared blindly at him, through eye sockets filled with writhing white maggots.

When Mr. and Mrs. Williams came in, Johnny had tumbled off the bed, had crouched in the corner, and was screaming helplessly. They tried to soothe him, tried to reason with him. They showed him that there was no trace of muddy paw prints on the floor, on the sheet. They told him it was only a dream.

But Johnny Williams was too shaken, that day, to go to school.

Seven

1

Friday evening John Kirby observed, “It might pay me to keep the shop open nights, now that the theater’s opened.”

Alan looked up. He was more than a hundred words into his “What I Did During Summer Vacation” paper, and he sprawled in the floor of the living room, under the warm glow of the table lamp. His father sat on the sofa, nearly hidden behind the Atlanta evening newspaper. **FOUR NABBED, FREED BY ARKANSAS GUARD** the title of one story read. Alan asked, “Wouldn’t you have to hire somebody?”

His dad folded the paper and looked down, the lamplight reflecting off his glasses and making them momentarily opaque. “I don’t know. I could probably start by staying open Fridays and Saturdays until, oh, maybe nine. If I had enough customers, Julie Finchley would be glad of the overtime.” Julie, a fat, dowdy woman of thirty-five, came in to clerk in the store after Thanksgiving every year and stayed through New Year’s. She also ran the place during John’s rare fishing days and vacations. Alan did not much care for Julie Finchley — she had a habit of pinching his cheeks hard enough to bring water to his eyes.

His father tossed a section of the paper to him. “Comics if you want to read them.”

“Thanks.” He chewed the eraser of his pencil and turned back to his composition. Miss Viola Ulrich had not yet grabbed him by the shoulders and shaken him, though Reese Donalds had fallen victim to her early on. Reese, back in the eighth grade for his second go-round, had come in ten minutes late on Wednesday morning. Miss Ulrich had called him to the front of the room, had asked him what he meant

coming to school at that time of day, and with no further ceremony had grasped his bony shoulders and literally rattled his teeth. Reese, upon her letting go, staggered back to his seat. He was on time on Thursday and again on Friday.

"Daddy, what did I do this summer?" he asked.

John Kirby laughed. "When are you going to learn, son? Every year you have to write that composition. One summer you'll just have to do something adventurous, that's all."

"Won't have to write it next year. Be in high school."

"So you will."

Alan rolled over on his back. His father, the lamplight making the left side of his face sharp and clear, the right side shadowed, smiled at him. "What's wrong?" Alan asked.

Kirby shook his head. "Nothing, son."

"You're lookin' at me kind of funny."

"I was thinking about growing up. Growing old."

"You're not old."

"No."

"Well, you're not."

"I said no. Don't push it too much."

Alan puffed out his cheeks. "When do the Bulldogs start?"

"They play the Longhorns in a couple of weeks. The twenty-first, I think."

"First day of fall."

"That's right. Years go faster and faster."

"Daddy."

"What?"

Alan got up and sat on the sofa beside his father. "Why didn't you finish college?"

"You know why. The war came along."

"No, I mean after."

Kirby folded the paper. Like Alan, he was obsessively neat about some things. Alan, coming across a newspaper in the house, could never tell whether his father had read it or not. "That's hard to say. I had married your mother by then, and you had come along. Takes money to raise a boy."

"But you could've gone on the GI Bill."

"Maybe I could have. Maybe."

"So why didn't you go back?"

For a long time Kirby was silent. At last he said, "I think it was because college didn't seem to mean anything to me after the war, after all the things I had seen. It took a long time to get used to some of them. After that, well, I was working for your grandfather and gradually buying him out, and it just seemed too late."

"What did you see? In the war?"

"Lots of things."

"But you never talk about it."

"There's a reason."

Alan was stubbornly silent for a long time. "I'm big enough," he said at last.

His father brushed a hand back through his thinning, graying auburn hair. "Maybe you are at that," he said. He looked at the floor, his spectacles in profile concealing his eye from Alan. "Let me tell you a little. Then maybe you can understand."

He was silent for so long that Alan believed he had had second thoughts, but finally he started to speak: "By the spring of forty-five I was a sergeant. I was in the signal corps, technically, but I had been assigned to an infantry outfit. It was toward the end of April that we came to a place called Dachau."

His father compressed his lips. "I remember the stench. You could smell the place before you could see it. A gray day, still cold, and on the air that smell. Like a farmyard, and something else. An evil smell.

"It was the concentration camp, you see. A kind of prison compound. Our men had already liberated the camp when I got there. It was a big place, but too small for the number of prisoners. Thirty thousand of them, we found out later, crowded into thirty barracks." He shook his head. "The camp was surrounded by a strip of grass, then a concrete ditch, then a fence. I remember there was water in the ditch, not more than ankle-deep. There was a crowd behind the fence, at the edge of the ditch, and down in the ditch, barefoot, a bald man in a prisoner's uniform was wading. Just going back and forth, back and forth.

"There was only one entrance. You went through this archway, and to your left were the barracks, and to your right were the camp buildings, the kitchen, the laundry. The shower rooms. And the prisoners, all looking a hundred years old, all of them shaved bald, even the women, all of them like skeletons, they would walk up and touch you.

Not say anything, not — not embrace you, or — they'd touch your sleeve, or your face. And they looked so bad, so emaciated, that you cringed inside from them. You didn't mean to, you didn't want to, but it was hard to let them touch like that . . . "

"Daddy — "

"Something like thirty thousand people died there, son. Six thousand prisoners of war were taken out to the Schiessplatz, the rifle range, and killed. There was a crematorium outside the camp, where they burned the bodies. Brick ovens, with arched doorways, like bakers' ovens I had seen in France.

"Well. I was assigned to a detail to administer the camp, and later to gather evidence for a trial the Allies had. We found that they had built a gas chamber, had it all ready to use. They took prisoners, you see, to another place, a place called Hartheim, and there they executed them. But they never used the Dachau chamber, as far as we could tell. It was disguised as a shower room, so the prisoners wouldn't know what was going to happen.

"But we learned other things. There was an experimental medical station in the infirmary, in Block Five. The Nazi doctors performed experiments there on living human beings. I gathered some of the documentation, some of the photographs."

Again his father fell silent. After a long interval, very slowly, he said, "We excavated a mass grave at one of the camps surrounding Dachau. The bodies hadn't been there long. There were more than seven thousand." He turned to look into Alan's eyes. "I'd seen death before, son, but not like that, not in that quantity. I don't know what happened to me. Until I was discharged in forty-six, it was like I was in a daze. As if I had looked into the future and seen every human being dead, their bodies all tumbled into a ditch big as the Grand Canyon, filling it full. As if I could see their dead eyes saying, 'This is what it comes to in the end, friend. And we don't even care anymore.'" He removed his spectacles and rubbed his eyes. "I had filled up on death. It took me a long time after I got home to see life again, to care again. College, well, college seemed irrelevant to me." He laughed, just once. "Listen to me. I'm talkin' like a Philadelphia lawyer. Well. You asked."

Alan waited until his father was silent. Then he said, "I'm sorry."

John Kirby put an arm around Alan's shoulder. "You brought me out of it, son. You and your mother. Over there all I could see was the evil,

the death. You and your mother showed me the goodness, showed me life. And at first you were like two little candles in the dark, and when I left home, it was as if I were going out into black night, and, God, how I wanted to come back in and warm my hands and light my eyes. But it got better. When your mother left us — when she died — I saw it differently then. And I could go on. I don't know what I would have done if she had died while I was overseas. I guess I'd be dead now, too."

"Daddy — "

"What, son?"

The words, so long unspoken, stuck in Alan's throat. "Aw, you know."

"I know, son. I love you, too."

2

Jimmy Jenkins chewed his cigarette and glared at Tom Davies. "Tell me why. That's all I'm asking you," the red-faced editor of the Advocate said.

The photographer shook his head. "I'm moving, that's why. I'm done here. I'm not gonna take any more pictures, I'm not gonna write any more stories. That's it. That's all. Give me my check."

The editor's fat jowls quivered in indignation. "Who in the hell am I gonna get to take pictures? I need somebody out at the dedication of the new Legion building in two hours. I need — "

"The camera's on my desk. Take the pictures yourself."

Jenkins scowled, scratched his gray hair just above his left ear. "Shit. Look, is it the money? You know I pay you what I can. Next year when we go daily — "

"It's not the money."

" — maybe I can talk to you then about a real raise, but maybe in the meantime I could give you another five a week."

"It's not money."

The editor's face grew a little more apoplectic than usual. "Seventy-five, by God. That's all I can do right now."

"No, sir. I don't want a raise. All I want is my paycheck for the first week in September. When you give it to me, I'll leave."

"Where you goin'?"

"There's a studio over in Gainesville that I can work at."

"How much are they payin'? Tell me, Davies."

"About five a week less than I'm getting from you."

"You're a goddamned liar."

Davies shook his head. "I'm a liar," he said. "Okay. I'm getting a thousand a week from them, okay? Now will you give me my damned check so I can pay my rent and leave this town?"

Jenkins pulled the mangled cigarette from his mouth, spat a crumb of tobacco off the end of his tongue. "Don't you ever come back to me for a job," he said, opening the company checkbook. He reached in his pocket for his fountain pen, scratched out the check in spiteful strokes. He tore the check loose, closed the book, and waved the paper back and forth to dry the ink. "Don't you ever ask me for a reference."

"I won't." Davies took the check. "Thank you, sir."

"Every bit of that camera equipment better be on your desk."

"It's out there."

He went out by the desks feeling relief. No one looked up — the Monday rush was on, with deadline looming at eleven o'clock. He paused in the anteroom to speak to Karen Yates, the dark-haired receptionist. "Miss you, darlin'," he said.

"You're really leaving."

"Yep. I'll give you a call when I get settled in Gainesville. Maybe come over and take you out now and then. We'll go to the show."

"Let's do it in Gainesville, then."

"How come?"

Karen made a scrunchy little face of displeasure. "I don't know. Shirley and me went to the ShadowShow last week to see that Tyrone Power movie, and there was this creep that kept watching us."

"Who was it?"

"How do I know. Just some old redheaded creep. Somebody told me that he works there. I just know I don't want to go back to that old ShadowShow as long as he's there."

"Okay. See you, Kay-Kay."

"Bye."

Outside the Advocate office rain fell from a leaden sky. It was cool; where last Monday the temperature had hit ninety-seven, today it hovered around seventy, and it felt like fall. Davies stood for a minute in the rain, his thin windbreaker inadequate against the chill he felt. Running away, he thought. Running away from bad dreams.

Well. Gainesville's a bigger place, anyway. More opportunity there. But when Gainesville High plays Gaither, damned if I'm going to root for the Red Elephants. He got into his car, started it, and left the Advocate parking lot. Before he got to the bank he had to start wiping the windshield with the crumpled red neckerchief he had used since the defroster had gone out on him. Reaching his destination, he pulled out of the street and into the parking lot. He was a long way from the building. He nerved himself for the run and opened the door to the cool scent of rain on concrete.

He ran into the bank and cashed his check. He had already emptied his savings account. By the time he settled all his bills here in Gaither, he calculated, he would have not quite four hundred dollars left. Not much.

But he didn't need too much. Everything he wanted to take with him — clothes, his own camera stuff, his few books, his records, his phonograph — already occupied the trunk and backseat of the car. If he could find a good cheap place to rent over in Gainesville, it shouldn't be too bad. He could make it on twenty a month less than the Advocate paid him, if he was careful.

He'd do fine, if the dream did not follow him.

If. If. If. A hell of a lot of ifs. With no trouble at all, Davies thought of still more of them: if the dream did follow, if he continued to be visited by the dead-eyed Mollie Avery, with her belly gashed and her guts falling out of it, and if she did keep after him —

I'll kill myself, Davies thought.

He shivered. He had never remotely contemplated suicide before, but the moment the thought came to him, he realized that it was so. Before I'll let that dead woman talk to me one more time, I'll kill myself.

He busied himself with the neckerchief again. He did not want to die. And because he thought that, once he got away from Gaither, he might also escape the dream, he hurried through the rest of his day, through the tasks of paying his bills, settling his obligations, running toward afternoon and toward escape.

Ludie Estes was mad. For nearly a week now Mr. Jefferson had kept her out of his house, and what kind of mess that white man was making for her to have to clean up later the Lord only knew. Bad enough

that poor Mollie had got herself cut up like that (the Lord's warning, people in the church had agreed at the funeral: the Lord's warning against living in sin), and then Ludie had the whole house to do and no help, nobody to talk to, but now old Mr. Jefferson had taken it in his head not to let anybody in.

Still, she had to try. Even on Monday in the rain, she tried. She had her oldest grandson, Michael, drive her out to the big house on the ridge, and with the arthritis gnawing at every joint, she groaned out of the car and up the steps. The door was locked, and no matter how much she rang the bell, no one would come.

But she could hear him moving around in there, upstairs, furtive movements. Once last week she had seen a curtain in the upstairs front pulled aside briefly, then let fall again. The stack of papers on the front porch was already big and getting bigger, and the mailman had already stopped trying to stuff more into the mailbox. He had taken away the accumulation Saturday and had left a note in the box for Mr. Jefferson to please call at the post office for his mail.

The Lord only knew what that white man was doing away up on the second floor of his house, all alone. It sort of put Ludie in mind of what Loftus Nable had told the family (Loftus had married Ludie's older sister's girl) about that Mr. Hesketh, the one down in Milledgeville or some other crazy house now. He had plumb lost his mind before poor Loftus realized it, and the janitor had just barely quit his job at the theater in time. Lord knows what would have happened if he had stayed. And now him with a good job workin' for Jimbo's Garage, doin' all them auto mechanics and makin' enough to feed his wife and five children with money left over. It was a sign that the Lord moved in mysterious ways.

Michael, out in the driveway, touched his horn button, and Ludie turned to scowl at him. "Hush that racket," she said, knowing that he could not hear her but believing he would understand nonetheless. "Wake the dead blowin' that car horn."

She lumbered down the porch steps and around the side. Mr. Jefferson's car was still where he had left it, right in front of the garage, with the keys inside (Lord, don't you let Michael see them keys, he'll steal that car sure) and the doors unlocked. The envelope was at the side door, where it had been every day since Mr. Jefferson had started locking her out. She opened it — the paper seam where the flap

opened and closed was getting thin, and the moisture in the air today had caused it to stick a little — and took out a five-dollar bill.

It was hers. The envelope had her name on it, LUDIE, printed big as you please in ink. Every day that she came and could not get in there was a bill in that envelope for her: a ten the first day, and every day since something, once a fifty, never less than a five. Dropping the money into a coat pocket, she tucked the empty envelope back into place between the doorjamb and the screen door. Now she could go.

She waddled toward Michael's car, drawing heavy breath. Cold day today, dark day. Her arthritis hurt her specially bad on days like this. It should have been a twenty today.

Michael did not open the door for her. He had his car radio on, listening to a news broadcast. "He ain't gonna let me in," Ludie said. "Let's go."

"Hush, Granny-Ma," Michael said.

"You blow your horn at me to come on, now you won't go."

Michael snapped off the radio and started the car. He drove with jerky motions.

"What you mad about?" Ludie asked him.

"Nothin'."

"Must be somethin'. Don't tell me nothin'. You answer me, Michael Estes."

"They thrown us out," Michael said.

"Who 'us'?"

"The president, he said colored people could go to school in Little Rock with whites if they want, and old Faubus he thrown 'em out. It said so on the radio."

"Little Rock. Where that?"

"A long way off, Granny-Ma."

"Then don't worry your head none."

Michael grunted, still acting angry. "Granny-Ma, every time they do somethin' to one of us, they do it to all of us. Can't you understand?"

Ludie looked at her grandson, handsome and dark in his sweater, his face intelligent behind the black horn-rimmed spectacles. He had applied for a scholarship to Tuskegee, and Ludie hoped and dreaded that he would get it. Her first grandson, and the smartest of the bunch. Lord, how she would miss him if he went away off yonder somewhere

to school. Speaking slowly, Ludie said, "I seen the Ku Klux and I seen my daddy hit over the head with a baseball bat. When I was just a year older than you are now, the whites took one of my neighbors and they hung him and they burnt him. Just come in the middle of the night, and his wife hangin' on and beggin' so pitiful. Took him away off past the railroad and hung him, and then brung him back to the Square and tried to burn him up where the livery stable was, where that theater is now. And his wife so pitiful, and them with six babies in the house. Don't you talk to me about how when they does it to one they does it to all. You wait until you get old, and then you know you won't have to talk about it, you feel it down in your soul."

"I'm sorry, Granny-Ma. I get mad."

"I know you does, child. We all does."

"Like that old Mr. Jefferson — "

"Hush, Michael. Don't you open your mouth about him."

"You talk about him all the time."

"I works for him. When you work for somebody, then you can talk about 'em. Lord, Lord, I sure hope your brains grows to be as big as your mouth one of these days."

They went through Gaither, heading south, and into Possum Town. Ludie's house was even farther out of town than Mollie's had been, and when they passed the turnoff to Slattery Row, Ludie gave her dead friend a fleeting thought: Poor Mollie, he shouldn't of done her that way. I don't care who held that knife, the one who killed her was old Mr. Ballew Jefferson, keepin' her so late at night and her so ascarded of the dark. Poor little Mollie.

She sighed, and as if to herself she said, "The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away."

"Granny-Ma, do you — "

"Hush, Michael. You just drive."

4

The last show ended at ten-fifty. Andy McCory rewound the final reel, pulled it off the projector, and put it into its metal can. By the time he descended the stair, the crowd was already gone. Only Mr. Badon stood by the open front door, looking out at pavement washed with rain. "A good night," he said without looking around.

"I seen her," Andy said.

"Did you." Badon did not look around, but pulled the door shut. The lobby lights were dim.

"She was in last week. The black-haired one. From the newspaper office."

"These things take time, Andy. You will go home now. Haven't I told you that you would know when it was time? You should go now. It's after eleven already."

"Who's been foolin' with the equipment at night?"

"Has the equipment been fooled with?"

"I come in today and found the projectors both switched on. I put them off before I went home last night."

Badon turned, just a darker figure against the dark, his face shadowed, unreadable. "Perhaps I left the projectors on. After the midnight show last night."

"We ain't had no midnight show."

"They are private. For one person at a time. We have had several of them. There will be many more." The voice had become silken, insinuating. "Perhaps at the proper time I will give a midnight show for you, Andy. Then you will see a thing or two. But not for a while yet, eh? You will have other things to do. They will keep you — occupied. For now, go home. Get some rest."

Andy had carried his jacket slung over his shoulder. He pulled it on. Mr. Badon leaned against the door, opening it again. Andy squeezed out past him. Under the protection of the portico, he paused to look back. "Where do you live?" he asked Badon. "You never do go home. You're here when I come in and you stay after everybody's gone. Where do you live?"

"Who says I live anywhere?"

"You want me to know. You're lettin' me ask you."

Badon shrugged. "My soul is in this theater," he said. "That's the best answer I can give you. A nice capitalistic answer, isn't it? My soul is in my enterprise, in my business. But I live in various places, Andy, and in various ways. You will understand better one day. For now, go. And be patient. The time is nearer than it was."

The rain intensified, hissing against the awning of the jewelry shop across the way, fluttering the leaves of the drawf crabapple trees on the Square. "It's a bad night for a two-mile walk," Andy said.

"You should buy a car, Andy."

Andy snorted. "I ain't got no credit." He pulled his jacket a little tighter at the neck.

Badon sighed. "Come back inside."

Andy followed him back to the lobby. Badon went upstairs and came back down with a gray metal cashbox. "What would you say a used car would cost you?" he asked.

"I don't know. Three hundred."

Badon flipped the top of the cashbox — wasn't even locked — and started to count off tens. When thirty of them lay on the counter, Badon said, "Take it. Buy your car."

Andy reached for the money. "How do I pay you back?"

Badon shook his head. "You need not worry about that. But you will tell your wife that I will hold back a portion of your salary each week until it's paid off. Five dollars? That would come to three hundred in a little over a year. Very well. As of tonight, you have a five-dollar raise. This is it. You will receive the same amount of money each Friday that we agreed on, however."

Andy folded the money and put it in his front pocket. "You're easy with a dollar."

Badon smiled at him, a smile that was all stretched skin and teeth. He pushed the cashbox over toward Andy. "Money is nothing," he said. "Andy, I will make you a deal. You can take the whole cashbox for your own — everything that's in it. I will have no more hold over you. You will be free. Or — well. You know what I can give you. The things aside from money."

Andy licked his lips. "There must be a thousand dollars in there."

"Anyway I should say a thousand. Perhaps twice that."

"You took my blood."

Badon smiled even wider. "I had need."

Andy reached for the cashbox and closed the lid. He slid the box back toward Mr. Badon. "I reckon I better go. It's a long walk in the rain."

Badon went behind the concession counter and picked up the telephone. He dialed a number and handed the receiver to Andy. "Tell them to pick you up," he said.

The line was already ringing. After a moment, a man's voice, blurred a little by alcohol, said, "City Cab."

Andy frowned at Badon, who nodded. Into the receiver, he said, "I want a cab at the ShadowShow Theater."

"Goin' which way, buddy?"

"North."

"Gotcha."

Andy gave the receiver back to Badon. Badon hung up. "There. Now I think you'd better have another five dollars. That would cover the taxi fare, would it not?"

When Badon offered the bill, Andy took it. He said, almost to himself, "When I first got out of service, I tried to get a job drivin' a taxi. I knowed some old boys that drove for them. They laughed at me."

"And now you can hire them to drive you home. I'd say you had the last laugh, Andy."

"Maybe I did."

"Go on outside. The cab will be here soon, and I have to get ready for the midnight show."

Andy nodded absently, turned, and went back out under the portico. He got a cigarette from a damp pack of Camels in his shirt pocket and a kitchen match from an aspirin tin he carried in his jeans pocket. He snapped the match alight with his thumbnail and stood just out of the rain, smoking.

The rain pattered in the streets, and a cool wind made him stick his hands deep into his pockets. He felt the bills wadded there and grinned to himself, knowing there were some things better than money.

5

A taxicab passed him, heading north. Harmon Presley said something obscene just under his breath. Taxicabs in Gaither had two-way radios, but the county was too damn cheap to buy them for the patrol cars. Man could get in serious trouble drivin' around in a patrol car and no way to call for assistance. And the rain tonight, too, slickin' up the roads. Wouldn't be surprised if there weren't some fender benders outside the mill tonight.

He thrust a stick of spearmint gum in his mouth and, driving one-handed, folded the foil and the green-and-white paper wrapper into a neat package, which he dropped in the ashtray. Passing under a street-

light, he took a quick look at his watch: 11:32. Time to do a roundabout of the Square, then he'd better get on over to the mill. But damned if he was gonna get out and direct traffic tonight. He'd sit in the car and watch, the way he'd been doing lately, and let the lint-heads take their lives into their own hands.

Presley came into town on Oglethorpe, but short of the Square he turned into the maze of business streets just outside the downtown district. Everything was quiet: only the Busy Bee, which was close enough to the outskirts to attract truckers thirsty for bad coffee, was still open. He got back on Oglethorpe, turned west on Main, then south on Gaines, and east on Bridge, circumnavigating the Square.

He had intended to continue on Bridge, eventually turning north when it connected with Maple, out toward the depot, but the lights of the ShadowShow marquee flared to life just as he passed the theater, startling him. He pulled over into one of the parallel parking slots at the curb, looked back over his shoulder. The marquee lights were on, all right, and from this end he could see the MIDNIGHT SHOW letters on the white background; but what the hell did they mean? The Square was empty of traffic and would be for the rest of the night.

Shaking his head in irritation, Presley slid across the seat and got out on the passenger side. Cold rain stung his face. He walked quickly over to the theater and up to the ticket booth, only to find it empty.

But a door was open, and from inside the theater came sounds of a movie. A war movie, Presley thought, judging from the gunfire. Or maybe a western.

Hell, he thought. Might as well check it out and see what's up.

He walked into the empty lobby, frowned, and pushed open the door into the auditorium.

A woman's Technicolor face on the screen, staring wide-eyed into the camera and screaming.

Good Christ, Presley thought. It looks a lot like Eula.

A gunshot, and the woman's left eye broke. Blood and brain tissue sprayed from the back of her head.

Presley's jaws clamped hard on his gum. What in the name of God? Movies didn't show that.

He frowned. There was old Ort, sure as shit, sitting at his little old switchboard. And he looked up, and a shot took him out, sent him

jerking back against the wall. The body slid down, leaving a slimy red trail of blood.

And next was Quarles (that goddamned marine Quarles, never thinkin' of his men), on the phone, but a shot right into that face put a hole beneath the gray military haircut, knocked old Sam Quarles over on his ass.

And then the movie camera lingered on the rifle rack behind Quarles's desk. Six rifles there, three with scopes. God knew how much ammo in the drawers. Enough.

The screen showed a tour through the jail, each stinking prisoner dealt with in turn, some of them crying, pleading, but to no avail. A single shot for each of them.

Top floor, end cell. A wickedly grinning black man held out his red ruined arms through the bars of the cell. One shot and he reeled back to lie in his own blood.

Closet off the stairway, ladder in the closet. Ladder led up to a trapdoor in the roof. You went up there to change the floodlights when they burnt out.

But a man standing on the roof of the jail had a good view all around, parts of eight streets as clear as anything, and no tall buildings until you got away off to the Square.

But even the Square wasn't impossibly far away. Not for a high-powered rifle with a good scope.

Harmon Presley slid down into a seat, his eyes rapt on the screen. He forgot entirely about the mill, about the rain, about the damn cheapskate county and the lack of two-way radios.

His finger twitched.

6

Though no one particularly noticed it at the time, the attendance statistics for Gaither Elementary for the second week of September were abnormal.

Gaither Elementary, which included grades one through eight, was the largest school in the county. Six hundred and four students were registered there as of September 3, the day school began. There were four other grade schools actually inside the city limits: Southside (which was black), with four hundred and eleven students, Porter

Memorial, to the southeast, with three hundred and seven, Church Street School, with three hundred and twenty-two, and Bailey School, with four hundred and fifteen. In addition to these were the county schools in the outlying districts, some of them, like New Haven Springs, so close that city families sent their children there.

But even allowing for its size, Gaither Elementary posted the largest absentee record of all the schools in the county between September 9 and September 13. Part of it might have been weather: the week began with a cool rain, the legacy of a tropical depression, and continued with unsettled afternoons promising or delivering violent thunderstorms. Gaither lay in Tornado Alley, and some parents were extra cautious, remembering the devastating storm of 1938 that killed eleven students and one teacher in the old Palmer Street School.

Still, there was something more. Johnny Williams, in the sixth grade, had missed the first day of school. He also missed the entire second week. Cindy Fellows stopped coming to school on Wednesday of that week. Clipper Nix dropped out of sight on Friday. There were others, but these all had this in common: they had complained to their teachers of terrifying dreams, dreams of a black and white dog nearly a month dead. Indeed, of the burial party that had interred Tuxedo, only Lamar Woodruff and Billy Touhy had a perfect attendance record that week. They did not speak to anyone about bad dreams.

Johnny's father had reached the end of his patience with his son sometime back. Johnny, miserable from lack of sleep, submitted to a belting each morning; but each day he was clearly unable to attend school, and his mother let him stay home. Only on the night of Wednesday, the eleventh, did he manage, finally, to fall into deep sleep without dreams of Tuxedo's returning.

Wednesday night was also the night that Lamar and Billy slipped away from home well after dark. They met, as they had arranged, in the brush field below the trestle. Billy, burdened with a mattock, found Lamar hunkering on his ankles near the track. The ground squished under his feet, sodden with the rains. Lamar shone his flashlight in Billy's face as he slogged toward the tracks. Billy squinted against the glare. "Don't blind me, man."

The beam dropped. "I got a shovel," Lamar whispered.

"Let's go." Lamar got up and took the lead, shovel in one hand, flashlight in the other. Billy followed, unable to use his own light

because both hands were occupied, the left with his mattock, the right with a can. They stuck to the gravel roadbed all the way to the trestle. There they turned aside. The embankment, reinforced with creosote-impregnated ties, was easy enough to negotiate, but the creek bed was a morass.

"Damn," Lamar said. "Mama's gonna burn my ass when she sees these clothes."

"We'll rinse 'em out in the creek, down at the culvert."

"Shit. Never get this mud out, man."

"Hold on a minute."

"What is it?"

"Lost my shoe, man." Billy floundered in the dark, retrieved his loafer — a shapeless lump of red clay in the glow of the flashlight — and jammed his foot back into it. "It was around here, wasn't it?"

"Yeah. There's the rock."

Billy, grunting, hefted the flat rock and placed it aside. He turned on his own flashlight and laid it on top of the rock, directing its beam toward the grave they had dug for Tuxedo. "This is dumb," he said.

"You didn't think it was so dumb last Sunday night."

"I know."

Lamar chunked the shovel's blade in and out of the earth a few times without actually starting to dig. "What did you see, man?"

"Williams's damn dog. I told you that."

"But how?"

Billy sighed. "I woke up real early. It was about three o'clock, I guess. I looked out the window, and there Tux was. Just standin' there in the streetlight, lookin' up at the house. All tore up and nasty."

"Wish I had a cigarette."

"I was so scared I nearly peed in my shorts. And then he turns and runs off down the street, guts hangin' and all."

"Wish I had a smoke," Lamar repeated. "With me it's just the sound of a dog scratchin' at the front door. But there's nothin' there when I open it."

"I wouldn't have the guts to open it, man."

"Your idea to come do this tonight, man."

Billy hefted the mattock. "That's different. If he's down there, he's dead, and he can't hurt us. If he ain't — you're gonna have to walk me home, man."

"Let's see about it."

The clay had settled back into the excavation they had made, but it turned easier than it had that first time. It took them perhaps a quarter of an hour to uncover the soggy top of the Snowdrift box.

"Puke," Lamar said, wrinkling his nose at the stench.

"Shine the light, man."

Lamar turned his flashlight on the box. Billy, using the mattock, peeled away the cardboard. The fur was streaked red with clay, but the body was Tuxedo. Billy prodded it. It gave and did not rebound under the pressure of the mattock.

"Let's end it," Lamar said from behind the flashlight.

"Gotta get him out, first. Too wet in the hole."

Neither wanted to touch Tuxedo. In the end, Lamar was able to pry the body out with his shovel, and Billy hooked the blade of the mattock under it and hauled it up to the edge of the hole. Together they worried the corpse onto the flat rock. "Now," Billy said. "Hold my flashlight, too."

Billy picked up the can he had brought and spilled gasoline over the body. The can held a little more than half a gallon. The body seemed to soak it up, thirstily, until toward the end, when more was running off than staying on. Billy reserved a few ounces. "Break off a tall weed," he told Lamar.

Lamar went to the edge of the brush field and came back with a three-foot-long stalk. Billy took out a pocket handkerchief and knotted it around the head of the stalk. He poured the last of the gasoline onto this.

"Get back, man," Lamar warned. He gathered the tools and pulled them away.

Billy took several steps back, pulled out his father's cigarette lighter, and fired the handkerchief. For a moment he stood there in the startling glare, holding a ball of flame before his face. Then he pitched it like a spear.

The bundle on the rock caught with a whump and a billow. "Shit, man," Lamar said, taking another step back. The two of them stood revealed, faces frightened and naked, in that sudden yellow light.

"Look at him," Billy said.

In the heart of the flame, Tuxedo stirred. A foreleg straightened out. The back arched.

"Just burnin', man."

The paw moved in short, jerking arcs, as if the dog were asleep and dreaming of chasing a rabbit.

"I don't know."

Billy and Lamar retreated again, into the brush field. The fire shriveled the hair off the body, popped and sang as it fed on fat and fluids. They watched it for a long time, undisturbed by anything save the night sounds — the pump of frogs, the chirr of insects, once, from up the ridge, the sound of the night freight rumbling past toward Atlanta. Moths came and danced in the light, the fat moths of summer's end.

At last the fire died down. The two boys came closer and inspected the rock. Only charred remains and some bones remained. Billy scraped them back into the hole and together they turned the rock over to hide them.

They struggled toward the culvert in shoes made leaden by mud. At the culvert they stripped to their shorts and rinsed their jeans legs. They scraped mud from their shoes, finally decided to go barefoot for the rest of the way home. "Still want me to walk you home, man?" Lamar asked as they headed toward the houses.

"Naw. I feel better now."

Lamar was silent for a long moment, as if listening to himself. "I do, too."

"We don't say nothin' about this, right?"

"Hope to die."

The moon, past full but still bright, broke through clouds, silvering the trees. "I hope this ends it," Lamar said.

"You and me both," said Billy grimly. "You and me both."

It was toward dawn, though still very dark, when the boys got home again. They fell exhausted into bed and did not dream.

That was Wednesday night, or rather Thursday morning. On the following Friday night, Johnny Williams's father would shake him roughly awake. "What is it?" the boy moaned, still half asleep.

"Get up. I want you to come in here." His father's hand jerked him unceremoniously out of bed. "Get on your feet, or I'll whup you again."

Johnny was up and shivering. "Daddy, what's the matter?"

"You and that damn dog," his father said. "You and that damn mutt of a dog. Sayin' he come back at night, gettin' your mama so worried. When somethin' is dead, it's dead for good, boy."

Johnny shook. His father sounded strange, excited and gleeful.
"Daddy, I — "

"Come with me, Johnny."

"Let me put on my pants."

"You don't need pants. Come on." His dad's huge hand clamped on the back of the boy's neck. Johnny was dragged forward, out of his room, up to the door of his parents' bedroom.

"Daddy?"

His father paused with one hand on the doorknob, the other on Johnny's neck. "When somethin' is dead, it's dead. I'm gonna show you somethin', boy."

He opened the door.

7

Quarles was ready for Harmon Presley on Thursday afternoon only because Presley's neighbor heard the first shot, and then twenty minutes later saw Presley go running out of his house and into the car, and went to investigate. As soon as he saw Eula, the man called the Sheriff's Department. Quarles took the call himself.

So Quarles was ready when Presley pulled his car up onto the curb in front of the county jail, got out, and walked up the six concrete steps to the entrance and to the niche where Officer Ort manned the switchboard. The sheriff met his deputy on the top step. "Harm," he said quietly. "I reckon I'd better take your sidearm."

Presley grinned up at him. The revolver dangled in his right hand. "Do you?"

Quarles, standing one step above him, extended his hand. "Give it to me, Harm. Butt end first, and slow."

Presley brought the gun up almost to firing position. The shot came too soon, before he even squeezed the trigger. He found himself looking at the sky, with a strange taste in his mouth. Presley tried to raise his head, got it high enough to see the man with the rifle leaning out the window.

I've been shot, he thought. Lying flat on his back at the foot of the steps, he could not find his body, could feel nothing but a kind of dreamy cold.

"Harm?" Quarles's face, leaning over him, blotting out the sky. "Why'd you do it, Harm?"

Presley laughed. The sound bubbled in his throat. "See you later, Sam," he murmured before he died.

8

When he could no longer hold out, Ballew Jefferson telephoned the bank. His own secretary, Brenda Wayly, answered on the second ring.

"Listen," he told her. "This is Mr. Jefferson. I'm still feeling ill, and I need you to do me a favor. Are you listening?"

"Yes, sir."

"Take this down. Ready? I want you to withdraw some money from my savings account. I need a thousand dollars. Got that? All right. I want it in fifties and smaller denominations. You know where I live."

"Yes, sir. We had the Christmas party there."

"That's right. Now, listen, Brenda. I want you to take off the rest of the day. You have to go shopping for me. Go to the grocery store and buy me some canned goods, soups, meats, vegetables, whatever is easy to fix. Get me about two or three weeks' worth. And tissue paper. I need several boxes of tissue paper."

"Sir? Are you all right? Your voice sounds funny."

"Of course it sounds funny. I'm sick, Brenda. I'm cold all the time. My teeth are chattering. And I need some groceries. Now be sure to buy the tissue, five or six boxes."

"Mr. Jefferson? Are you all by yourself there?"

"I'm ill, Miss Wayly, but I'm not dying. I'm doing all right. I just need some time to myself. Time to rest. Now. When you get the groceries, bring them out to my house. I want you to leave the groceries beside the side door, just in front of the garage. You'll see it. Put the rest of the cash in an envelope and drop it down inside one of the bags. It will be all right there until I can take the groceries in. Do you have all that?"

"Mr. Jefferson, I think you should call a doctor. You've been sick a long time."

"I know what's best for me, Miss Wayly."

"But — "

"Take a hundred dollars of the cash for yourself. Now. Be out here with the groceries no later than three o'clock. Do you understand that? And don't knock; just leave the groceries and go. Thank you."

"I still think — "

"I think you like your job with the Trust Bank, Miss Wayly. Am I wrong in that?"

A sigh on the line. "No, sir. I'll be there before three o'clock."

"Thank you."

Jefferson hung up the phone. Despite the two flannel shirts he wore, he shivered. He went to the stove, where the gas burners were clear and blue, and warmed himself. The thermometer he had tacked to the cabinet said it was over a hundred degrees. Well, that was a lie. He knew when he was cold, and right now he was freezing.

Over the past few days Jefferson had retreated to the kitchen. He slept there, in a sort of nest of quilts, blankets and pillows he had stolen from the bedroom in a series of jumpy, furtive, quick sorties. The pile was under the table. Another pile, heaped against the counter on the other side of the refrigerator, consisted of empty cans. His supply was running low: he had lived for the last two days on a diet of Campbell's Vegetarian Vegetable Soup, the last canned goods in the house.

Beside the table, covered incongruously with a silver serving tray, was a dented galvanized iron bucket: his sanitary arrangement. He had knocked out the screen from the window over the kitchen sink, and the bucket could be half filled with water, swirled, and dumped into the backyard, whenever he remembered to do it.

Days ago, before he saw that midnight movie, Jefferson had thought he had hit bottom and bounced back. Well, that was wrong. He had been merely miserable before. Now he was absolutely wretched. He felt filthy, and he stank: but how could he wash himself when he was freezing cold all the time? His face bristled with beard. He was dropping too much weight, drastically fast — already he had pulled his belt to the last hole over his shrinking belly, and soon he would have to punch a new hole. He wondered, briefly and bitterly, how many people in town had seen that abominable film.

A board creaked in the house, and he jerked in a spasm of fright. It was too early for her! It wasn't yet noon!

And yet she was encroaching on time even as she had encroached on space. At first only a few fleeting night-time visits in his bedroom. Then, after that movie, he began seeing her in the daytime, standing watching him, naked, eyes calm and damnably level. She would be standing in the next room, shadowed but real.

He did not dare approach her. He knew in his soul that the moment he touched her, she would dissolve into ruin and ghastliness, a corpse falling into dissolution under his fingertips. But even after he slammed the door against her he felt her there.

And the man, the man with the ruined hands. Lightning had awakened Jefferson, that time, a night or two nights after that awful film, and going to close the window, he had looked out into the yard. A flash revealed him standing there, leaves whipping around him, but his own clothes not disturbed, a black man holding his arms up as if beseeching mercy, but the hands were tattered bloody claws, and rags of flesh and strings of artery dangled from the ripped forearms. The banker had slammed the window and pulled the curtains to.

But the next day Jefferson had the feeling that he had gotten into the house as well.

He gave up space to them. He surrendered the bedroom early; and then, during the time he was sleeping on the living-room sofa, he started to hear them. They moved about, in the beginning mostly at night, steps at first overhead and then coming down the stair. He gave them the front of the house and withdrew to the kitchen. Now he had only the kitchen and the hallway for his own. He dared not go into the rest of the house even in full daylight, for recently the sounds had pushed into the forenoon hours, and they began before sunset.

On his last expedition he had fetched back a hammer and nails. The door from the kitchen to the dining room was now nailed firmly shut, and all the kitchen chairs except one were jammed tight against it, secured by more nails.

Ballew Jefferson wanted help more than anything he had wanted in his life. But each time he put his hand on the telephone, he thought of that motion picture — how had they photographed it? — and of the people in the town seeing him stripped naked, caught in his lust and his sin, a goatish, rutting creature, scarcely human. And with a nigger woman, too. Of course, that in itself wasn't so bad, most men could forgive that, but the women of the town — his own sister — they would never forget, never forgive, not until he was dead, and not really then.

And he trusted no one. Not Ludie, who still came every day to pick up her bribe (how much did she know?); and not his sister, who had called him twice before he insulted her enough to convince her that

he wasn't sick, he was just plain stubborn. Either of them might expose him.

Worse, either of them might be her in disguise.

Even Miss Wayly might not be herself.

Better to do it this way, he thought. They can't stay in my house forever. Sooner or later they'll get tired and leave, or they'll evaporate, as ghosts are supposed to do. Better to wait them out.

He sat at the table, his feet (insulated by three pairs of socks, but almost numb with cold nonetheless) on the nest beneath. He had spent days alone. He had listened to the radio until he lost his ability to endure it. Then he needed something to occupy himself.

He had it now. He had taken the biggest butcher knife in the house from its holder. He had a whetstone, oil, and a knife sharpener.

Every day, for hours, he worked on the edge of the knife, making it thinner, brighter, keener.

He had a feeling — he could not explain it, but there it was — that the knife was almost ready now.

But with stolid determination, he swept the blade slowly over the stone again and again, in preparation.

9

They found him Friday afternoon, after school, on one of the benches on the Square. Alan approached him tentatively. "Mr. Tate?"

The preacher looked around. His face was much too thin, the eyes too deeply set in their sockets, the nose too much like a beak. In his rusty black suit he was like a dark bird of prey. Or like a scavenger, a buzzard, alert for death.

"Mr. Kirby." Said that way, gravely and seriously, with no mocking intent, the "Mr." made Alan feel strange, not grown-up but burdened with years all the same. The preacher stood and looked behind Alan. "Ma'am."

"My name is Ann Lewis, Mr. Tate," the woman said, stepping forward. "Alan told me about you."

"I didn't mean any harm," Tate said in a voice sorrowful with apology.

"I know you didn't." Ann Lewis sighed. "My car's over here. Maybe we should just drive around a bit. We need to talk." When Tate did not respond, she continued: "Sir, we all three seem to feel that

there's something wrong in this town, something badly wrong. We may be the only ones in town who feel that way. I think we ought to get together on this."

Tate ducked his head for a moment. Then he looked up. "I reckon you're right," he said.

"Come with me."

The three of them crossed the Square to the slot where Ann had parked her Rambler. They got into the car, she started the engine, and they drove away, under a sky blotched with ragged gray clouds.

Andy McCory, leaning against the ticket booth of the ShadowShow, had watched them the whole time. He looked at his watch — it was almost time for reel three of *A Hatful of Rain* — *and* went back inside.

Eight

1

It was ridiculous on the face of it, but there it was: they had nowhere to meet. Mrs. Maddons, Ann's landlady, would never countenance a lone gentleman caller, let alone two at once — never mind that one was sixteen years younger and the other twenty-six years older than Ann. Tate's boardinghouse was obviously unsuitable. And although Alan might have invited them to his house, the thought of his aunt, just there across the street, was enough to kill that idea.

So it had to be the school, after all. Fortunately, there was a café and a service station not far from the school, and there were occasional reasons for a teacher to be in the building after dark; they assumed that, what with the traffic around the businesses, no one would pay much attention to Miss Lewis's car, parked inconspicuously near the corner of the building.

Still, they did not meet in the classroom, where the huge windows could not be draped. Ann let them into the teachers' workroom, a cubbyhole down beyond the girls' rest room (I've never been this far down the hall, Alan realized as she unlocked the door) which had no windows to worry about. It did have a sofa, a couple of chairs, an antiquated mimeo machine (Alan thought, So that's where the purple pumpkins and Pilgrims and Santa Clauses and Valentine hearts come from every year), a coffee table, a scatter of memos, stacks of graded papers, and a tin of English tea.

Odum Tate behaved as much like a boy as Alan in these unfamiliar surroundings: all wrists and clumsy elbows, he stood in front of the sofa until Miss Lewis said, "Please sit down," and then he did all at

once, like a marionette whose strings had been released. Alan sat next to him, and Miss Lewis took a chair across the table from them. She smoothed her dark blue skirt over her knees decorously, but she sat so near the edge of the seat that no one could get a glimpse of anything above her calf anyway. "Alan tells me you're concerned," she said.

The preacher nodded, his face grave. "I have felt evil before," he said carefully, in a halting and formal voice. "I see it, you know, sometimes when I preach. A look of hate for me, for the word of God, burning out of somebody's face. But it has always been — personal, somehow, before. This time it don't feel that way."

"Mr. Tate, what do you think is wrong?"

He shook his head. "Ma'am, Miz Lewis, I don't know. There's a nasty feel about this town now, like the pit has opened and Satan has been loosed from bondage and is walking the face of the earth. I'm sorry, I know that don't help, but it's the way it feels to me. And yet nothin' has changed, has it?"

"People have died," Alan said. "The woman, and that man who they think killed her. And then yesterday the policeman."

Ann Lewis shook her head, tossing her blond hair lightly. "That happens, Alan."

"I can't remember anybody's bein' murdered in Gaither before."

"But sometimes it happens that way. It's like, oh, I don't know, it's like a pressure cooker where the pressure builds up and up until finally something just has to give. Maybe one murder caused the others; maybe the man in the jail killed the woman and then felt remorse, felt sorry, and committed suicide. Maybe the policeman thought he had done a bad job because the man died."

Tate waited until she had finished. "I'm sorry, ma'am, Miz Lewis, but I have to agree with Alan." He frowned. "It's hard to tell you what I think. But it's like there wasn't three murders at all, but only one. Like all three deaths was part of one big death. I don't know. I have prayed to God for guidance, and He sent me to Alan. Somehow, some way, the boy and me, and maybe you, ma'am, we're all part of God's plan to end this wrongness." Tate rubbed his hand over his slicked-back black hair. "God called me to preach, ma'am, and that's all I know to do. There's a chapter in Revelation, chapter nine, that tells about the last days. It says, 'I saw a star fall from heaven unto the earth: and unto him was given the key of the bottomless pit. And

he opened the bottomless pit; and there arose a smoke out of the pit, as the smoke of a great furnace; and the sun and the moon were darkened by reason of the smoke of the pit.' It goes on to say, 'In those days shall men seek death, and shall not find it; and shall desire to die and death shall flee from them.' That's how I feel about it, Miz Lewis."

Ann had been looking at him with a frown of concentration. "I'm sorry, Mr. Tate. I try to be as good a Christian as I can, but I don't see the end of the world coming out of a little place like Gaither. I think we need something more than Bible verses to work with."

"Yes, ma'am."

Alan said, "But he's right. That's the way I feel, too, like something has darkened the world. And so many people out of school —"

"With bad dreams, yes." The teacher tugged at a lock of her hair, a habit when she was preoccupied. "And other things have happened, too. I think we need to tell each other about them. Shall I go first?" When the other two were silent, she said, "It was before school, Alan, that day you and two other boys were playing — remember? I'd been working on a bulletin board." Directly, leaving out only her fantasy about Alan's father, she told them what had happened, about the grotesque and bloody drawing that had appeared as if by magic on her desk. Alan noticed that her hands clenched with the intensity of the story. "It was a picture of me," she finished. "But dead. Stabbed. Cut, like that poor woman on the south side of town. And it was such a shock — well. That's what happened. Alan?"

"The night sounds stopped," Alan said slowly, "and that woke me up." He tried to explain how uncanny the feeling had been — "like suddenly I was the last person alive in the whole world" — and how he had felt death, death almost palpable and stalking toward him, as he looked from his window down at the town.

Tate took up when Alan had finished: "For me it was back in August, too. Just exactly like a dark cloud had settled over everything, all at once. And I went out and prayed in the fields about it, and I have never felt so empty."

Ann Lewis sighed and shook her head. "But all we have are feelings. I destroyed the drawing. No one else had noticed the insects being quiet at night. I don't know of anybody who shares your feeling, Mr. Tate. We don't have anything to fight."

"God will open the way," Mr. Tate said. Again his voice grew formal and halting: "I have been a sinner. And God in His mercy saved me from my sins. And I have tried to be a servant of the Lord's. Job says, 'Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?' All I know is that God has allowed the evil to come, and He will let us know in His time what it is we have to face."

"Then what are we to do?"

Alan spoke up, his voice squeaking from an unaccustomed deep tone to treble: "I think we should, well, pledge to be together in this. To protect one another and, well, to — to love one another." Even as he said it, a part of his mind rebelled: I can't love this frightening old man! I can't love my teacher!

But the other two nodded. "I think you may be right. And we have to try to learn what's wrong, what's really wrong," Ann Lewis said. "Well, I'll make the pledge if you will." She held out her hand.

They touched hands, solemnly, over a coffee table stacked with next week's third-grade Weekly Readers. Tate said, in a voice almost apologetic, "May I pray?"

Taking silence for assent, he bowed his head. "Lord," he said, "Thy servants are in the dark. Give us light, O Lord, to follow Thee. Lead us, Lord, out of the shadows."

2

Johnny Williams writhed in his father's grasp, pleading, "No!"

3

On the evening of that Friday the thirteenth, east of town, a tall man, dark, stood under the night sky. He carried no light, and from ten feet away an observer would have been hard put to see him, to make out his black clothes against the black land. The late moon was not yet up, and only the stars pricked the face of heaven. Little Cherokee Creek trickled nearby, soft bubbling sound of water against stone and reed. A sharp scent was on the air, burning gasoline and something else.

"Fire," the dark man said. "Who has done this thing?"

No voice answered. The man turned his face toward the hidden town. "Perhaps I have an enemy, as I sensed at first. Perhaps there is one who knows."

He searched the distant lights as if for answer, but found none. "I have others who serve," he said at last. "There are places to hide, and will be more. My appetite only feeds my hunger, and my hunger engenders new appetite."

He seemed to listen to the night wind, to the gurgle of water, to the frenzied cries of the whippoorwill away beyond the railroad. "I have merely played with you," he said. "Shall I show you what I can do when I am in earnest?"

After another moment he strode away, steps long and purposeful, undeviating.

The mud beneath his black shoes took no impression of his passing.

4

At ten-thirteen P.M. the three light bulbs in the overhead fixture of Ballew Jefferson's kitchen blew at once, bringing him scrambling from his cocoon beneath the table. He stood, feeling the layer of heat engulf his head, his chest, and heard the hiss of gas, saw the sulfurous illumination from the burners.

And heard the sounds.

Leaves drifting through the hall overhead: the sounds had that lightness and dryness, the sound of leaves long dead and moved by the memory of wind. He heard graveyards in that whispery sound, with wreaths gone brittle and bitter with the forgetfulness of the living, and he heard a body long dead stirring in its coffin, the silken mutter of the wedding dress she was buried in caressing fleshless arms. It was the sound a snake might make, gliding across the floor near your ankle, blind blue tongue flickering like the lightning of death and feeling you, knowing you, marking you, before you had even registered the sound. It was the sound of all Octobers the world had ever known, the witch-ridden wind playing with dying trees, promising death to all the world, but death without rest or release.

He reached for his knife. His numb lips fumbled a prayer. If only the lights had not gone!

The sounds cascaded down the stairway, like a mist of sound pouring in, flowing, rising to engulf him. They were right outside the door, stealthy, patient.

And Jefferson Ballew remembered. He lunged across the table, nicking his arm with the sharp edge of the blade, and grabbed the handle of the refrigerator door. He jerked it back, jerked it open, and light, yellow living light, not pale blue death light, pushed the shadows back.

Were those two arms that shrank back into the wood of the door, two torn and ragged arms?

Breathing hard, Jefferson jammed the one remaining chair against the refrigerator door, holding it open, though he felt the cold air spilling out and over him as a cut keener than the two-inch gash below his left elbow. He went on hands and knees to scabble beneath the sink. He produced four cartons of Sylvania light bulbs, seventy-five watts. With a groan of relief, he clambered to the top of the table, tried to loosen the set screws that held the light globe to the ceiling, finally in his frustration striking the glass with the butt of the knife, breaking it, shattering it. He cut the back of his hand as he reached in to unscrew the dead bulbs, to toss them across the kitchen toward the garbage pile. Each popped like the distant report of a small gun.

He screwed in three new bulbs, one at a time, their bases chattering against the sockets until he could seat them, start the threads. Each one flared to life. He was weeping.

Grown old of a sudden, he sat on the table and slid off to the floor. He stepped on a semiconical shard of glass that bit into his left instep. Limping, Jefferson jerked the chair away from the refrigerator and slammed the door before he crept beneath the table and pulled the piece of glass out with fingers already slippery from his own blood. He had hurt himself, but not badly. The old machine would heal.

The cruel lights revealed a room far gone in waste and rot. Beginning at the ceiling and coming eighteen inches down the walls was a zone of bubbled and peeling paint, shredded by the layer of intense heat from the stove. The tops of the cabinet doors, dried in the blast of hot air, were splitting and separating. Not one hung true. The floor was a litter of broken glass, empty cans, splashes of drying blood. It would be better, he thought, if he didn't have to see it all, if he could get along without the light.

But the light . . . he knew that they were gone for the moment, perhaps for the night, defeated by the bright lights. When they came back, they might think of the refrigerator. He writhed out from under the table, found the telephone and the directory and called Miss Wayly at home.

She was groggy; she had already fallen asleep. He had to speak very slowly and sanely to tell her what he wanted. She agreed, at last, to do it tomorrow morning, first thing, as soon as the stores opened — for another five hundred dollars of his own money.

That was all right, he thought, crawling back into his nest. The money was his. He didn't have to worry about it. He examined his arms, his hands, his foot. The cuts were already crusted, the flow of blood stanching; the stitched line across his palm was as black as a tattoo, the skin at the stitches puckered. He was far overdue to have the sutures removed. Well, he would have to do something about that himself.

And tomorrow he would have to do something about all the broken glass on the floor. But now, feeling, knowing, somehow that the visitors would not be back tonight, Ballew Jefferson gratefully sank into sleep.

5

In the cool of the evening John Kirby sat on his porch swing and smoked a pipe. It was a rare indulgence; two bowls of tobacco on a single night. But it was pleasant to drift ever so slightly back and forth, the chains creaking a little, and to have the burned-leaf aroma pungent in his nostrils, and to let his thoughts wander.

Saturday the twenty-first — just a week from tomorrow — would begin another fall. Next month his son would be fourteen. He thought of Alan's mother, and how like Mary his son was in some ways. He thought of his own task in raising the boy, and gave silent thanks that he had turned out as well as he had so far. Alan was all boy, and that meant he had secret corners of his life that a father could not look into. He had his midnight mischiefs and trancies (tonight, for example; Alan had been gone since before sunset, and it was now close on ten-thirty), but for the most part Alan was a good boy, open, honest, decent.

John, with that urge to pick at the wound, to bring the blood to the surface, wondered how different it might have been had Mary lived. He had gone beyond his initial feelings of guilt for her death long ago. Who expected, these days, that a perfectly normal woman after a perfectly normal pregnancy would die in childbirth, taking the child with her into death? Still, he could not help pacing, in imagination, the wider shape of his life had she and her daughter lived.

The lights went out in Betty's house across the street. Franklin Lessup liked to retire early, to lie in bed reading ("Poultry magazines!" Betty would rant to John. "I'd rather he read something dirty, like *Esquire!*") until he became drowsy enough for sleep.

Another fall almost here, with the weather gone edgy and wet this last week, temperatures skidding down to the fifties and never rising above seventy-five. It's because it's almost fall, he decided. I'm restless because it's almost fall, and because I'm growing older. Thirty-six. Within shouting distance of forty.

He thought of the times in his life when thirty-six had seemed ancient, when forty was not even to be thought of. Others might hit that age, but never John Kirby. He was going to be young forever. But that, of course, was before the war had aged him more in its final year than his life had done in the previous twenty-four years. There had been times, since 1945, when John had had to fight through the feeling that he had only leftover life, that everything real had already happened to him, that the rest was merely existing until existence stopped.

The swing creaked gently with his back-and-forth motion. The tobacco in his pipe glowed red as he inhaled, then dimmed again as he released a fragrant cloud of smoke. It was really a very mild night, but he felt a pang deep in his bones, the achy feeling of cold that you sometimes get with a fever. Not that he felt really ill; it was more a feeling of unease, not of disease, he thought. As if he were slightly out of kilter.

He heard the buzz of bicycle tires on pavement and turned to look over his left shoulder. With its headlamp flaring and fading to the uneven pump of the pedals, Alan's bike came weaving up the street. Alan pulled off into the yard, swung off the bike, and put the kickstand down. "Hey," he said as he mounted the porch.

"Son. Where have you been?"

"At school. Miss Lewis had a project that I helped her with."

"Nice of you. Sit down?"

"Okay." Alan sat next to his father. The boy was breathing heavily.

"You need a three-speed for this hill," John said.

"Nah. I just took it too fast, is all."

"You had a telephone call earlier."

"Who called?"

"Diane, I think her name was."

Alan shifted his weight, making the swing move a bit crazily.

"Diane England?"

"That's right."

"Oh, boy," Alan moaned. "I forgot."

"Forgot what?"

"I told her I'd go with her to the movies next week. It's Man of a Thousand Faces."

John didn't say anything for a moment, transported back to a day — when was it: '35 . . . '36 — when the old State had run a double feature: The Bride of Frankenstein and Phantom of the Opera. Both had frightened him, but the older silent movie, with a corny added soundtrack of organ music, had been especially eerie. The film had starred Lon Chaney, not the wolfman fellow but his father. The man of a thousand faces. "You still have some passes left, haven't you?" he asked his son.

"Yeah, five of them. Do you think it'd be okay for us to go next Saturday?"

"I suppose so."

"Uh, Daddy? Do you think you might be able to drive me to her house to pick her up, and then take her back home after? Her dad doesn't want us to ride our bikes in the evening."

"What time is the show?"

"I don't know. It's always around five o'clock. It'd be over about seven."

"I think I could handle that."

"Okay." An awkward pause. "I guess I'd better go call her before it gets too late."

"Guess you had."

Alan slipped off the swing and went into the house, the screen door banging behind him. John Kirby's pipe had burned out. He leaned

back in the swing and hoped that his son had the feeling that thirty-six wasn't too ancient an age, no matter how infinitely far away forty might seem to him.

6

His father's hands were terribly strong, forcing his head around, forcing his eyes toward what lay on the bed.

"Johnny," his father panted, "you're gonna look."

His eyes met her eyes.

"Mama," Johnny whispered, but the thing on the bed could not answer.

7

Her telephone rang at twenty minutes to eleven. "Karen?" A man's voice, soft, pleasant.

"Yes. Who is this?"

"Guess."

"Aw, I can't guess." She had taken her bath, brushed her black hair a hundred strokes, and since nine had been curled up in bed with a library *book* — Forever Amber — *and* a Coke. She dropped the book facedown across her knees and twirled the springy telephone cord in her fingers. "It isn't Dennis."

A soft laugh. "No, honey, not him. Listen, why's a pretty girl like you home alone on Friday night?" There was something behind his voice, some kind of music, not radio music. "How come you ain't on a date?"

"Well, nobody asked me, that's why. Is this somebody from the newspaper? Who is this, now?"

"You hurt my feelin's, honey. You don't even remember me."

"I'm just not good on voices." She captured a curl of wire between forefinger and thumb and gently bit it, feeling the slight give of the insulation. "This isn't anybody from the Advocate, is it? Tom Davies? No, I know his voice."

"Maybe I'm your boyfriend."

She dropped the wire and said in a provocatively soft voice, "Well, I'm kinda between boyfriends right now. I broke up with my old one."

"Uh-huh."

What was that music? "Is the television on or something?" Karen asked.

"No, honey. Not here."

"Cause I hear some music."

"No, it ain't no television."

"Well. This is stupid. If you don't want me to know who you are —"

"You'll know before too long."

" — I'm just gonna hang up, you mean old thing. I don't think it's polite to call a girl up and play guessing games with her."

"You don't?"

"No. This isn't 'The \$64,000 Question,' you know. I just don't think a gentleman would call a girl up and make her go through an old guessing game."

"How about other kinds of games?"

She giggled. "You're awful. Did you know that? You're just awful."

He laughed, too.

Something about the music suddenly clicked with her. "Are you in the movie theater?" she asked. "That sounds like the show I saw with — hey, do you have red hair?"

The man laughed and hung up the phone.

Karen scowled at the receiver. "You old redheaded butthole," she told him at last. She slammed the receiver down, reached for her Coke, and went back to the adventures of the sorely beset heroine. But her mood had been spoiled.

"He just better not call me back," she grumbled to herself.

Still, every five minutes or so, she glanced up from her book to give the silent telephone a speculative, almost imploring look.

8

Sam Quarles sat on the sofa balancing the family checkbook. His wife, Ilona, was beside him sewing and listening to the radio. "Well, I think you should take some of your vacation time," she was saying.

Sam grunted.

"I don't know what you're saving it up for, anyhow. You've got six weeks coming to you now. I mean, it's not like we're ever going anywhere or anything."

"Please. I'm trying to subtract."

Ilona was quiet for a few more stitches. The theme from *Around the World in Eighty Days* came on the radio, and she hummed along with it. "That was such a good movie," she said.

"Um."

"We had to drive all the way to Gainesville to see it. Now it'd just come here to Gaither. Wonder why the ShadowShow doesn't have that one?"

"Probably not new enough anymore."

"People would go to see it. Lots of people in town didn't get to see it before. It was such a good movie. You know what I wonder?"

"One-twenty-six-thirty-five. What?"

"I wonder why Joe E. Brown doesn't make more movies. He's such a funny man. That great big mouth and all. He tickles me. You know what I'd do if I was one of those Hollywood studios?"

"We've got a hundred and twenty-six dollars for the rest of the month," Quarles said. "You remember that when you go to the Piggly Wiggly. Looks like a lot of hamburger and chicken until payday. What would you do?"

"I'd make a movie with Joe E. Brown and Martha Raye both in it. Don't you think they'd be a cute couple? Both of them with those big mouths? That'd sure be a funny movie."

"Yeah." Quarles stretched. "Hear from Linda today?"

Ilona knotted her thread and cut it short. "No. Looks like Charlie could have found work here in Gaither instead of taking our baby off like that."

"Marietta ain't all that far."

"It's a long way to me. I wish I could drive a car. You know what I'd do if I could drive a car?"

"You'd bust up our daughter's marriage."

"You're mean, Sam Quarles."

"I'm a policeman. I'm supposed to be mean." He leaned away back in the sofa. The TV set across the room was dark, the window beside it dark. "Wonder if Little Sammy's all squared away."

"House is quiet."

"Yeah."

"I hope he doesn't get into any trouble down there."

"Why don't we run down and see him next weekend?"

"Do you think he'd mind?"

"Why should he?"

"Well," she said, sorting through the mending basket, "you know college boys."

"No, I don't. I never had the chance to go to college myself."

"You know our son, then."

"Wonder if he's going to the game next week."

"We should have taken him down to Athens."

Quarles put his arm around Ilona's shoulders. "I know. But he wanted to go on his own. Lucky the Daniels boy had room for all his junk in his car."

"They made two trips."

Quarles laughed. "Planned it, huh? Well, I don't guess Sammy can get into too much trouble living in a dorm. What was it?"

"Milledge Hall," she said at once.

"Reckon we could find it if we drove down to Athens?"

"You're the policeman," she said, sewing a button on one of his uniform shirts. "You know what I wish?"

"What?"

"I wish you'd take some vacation time this Christmas so that we could go to Florida. We could go during Little Sammy's break and be a family again."

"We won't have the money this Christmas."

"We've got some savings."

"We've got some roofing to do on the house next spring, too."

"I don't know what you're saving up all that vacation time for. It's not as if the county would go all to pieces without you — Sam? What's wrong?"

Beside her on the sofa, he had suddenly straightened. "The window."

"I don't see anything."

"I thought somebody was standing outside — better check it out." He pushed up, went into the entry foyer, and flipped on the porch light. Ilona saw the light come on and heard the door open. After a moment, she heard it close, and the porch light went off again. Sam came back to the living room looking rueful.

"What was it?" she asked.

"Nothin', I guess. I could've sworn somebody in uniform was standin' just outside the window lookin' in, though. I thought it was one of the men at first. Guess I'm just worn out."

"You've had a hard week."

"Hard month." He rubbed his eyes. "And things goin' crazy in the jail. Prisoners won't stay on the third floor, did I tell you that? They keep thinkin' they see somebody in that end cell. We had some moved up there yesterday, and they raised such a hullabaloo we had to move 'em back down. They'd rather be stuck three to a cell than put up there. You done with that?"

She cut the thread. "I am now."

"Ready for bed?"

"I suppose so." Ilona transferred the shirt to the ironing basket, stuck her needle back into the pincushion, and dropped the pincushion in the sewing basket. She started to say something and stopped with her mouth open. Her hand flew to her husband's forearm, tightened convulsively. She made a curious gagging sound.

"Ilona, honey?" Sam threw his arms around her. "What's wrong?"

"The window," she said.

Sam looked, but the window showed only night. "What was it?"

"Oh, God, Sam," she sobbed. "I — I think it was Harmon Presley!"

9

"What is she, boy?" Johnny's father demanded, shaking him.

"De-de-dead," he cried. "Daddy, daddy, don't kill me."

10

The weave shop of the New Haven Mill was having a difficult time making production that night. Hob Zaner, the second-shift supervisor, was running one job himself, and his other weavers, all except for Mrs. Tully and Mrs. Ames, were running two each. By ten-thirty they were so far behind schedule it was clearly impossible that they would come anywhere near their quota by quitting time. Zaner turned his job over to Mrs. Tully and went to the floor office. He closed the door, shutting out a little of the wall-shaking sound, and telephoned the main office.

"Jay?" he said into the phone. "Hob here. Listen, we're just not gonna make production tonight. How's third shift look?"

Jay O'Hara's voice came back, hard to catch in the surrounding roar: "Pretty bad, Hob. Got about twenty percent absent, looks like. Rest of the day's been bad, too."

"Yeah. We were behind when we started. Is everybody sick, or what?"

"I don't know. I think Warren called around during the day and some said they were down sick and some he couldn't even reach. I guess there's something going around. You want to see if we can shift some production to one of the other mills?"

"No, I guess not. It's not too bad yet. I think we can catch up if we have two or three good days. I just wish these people would let us know when they're gonna be out, that's all."

"Funny, they're usually pretty good about that."

"Well, I better get back."

"Okay. Let's hope it gets better."

"Yeah. Right."

Hob hung up and opened the office door. The weave shop was on the fourth floor of the mill. Across the floor, beyond the looms, someone was pushing a cart loaded with rolls of cotton fabric toward the elevator. Hob frowned. The elevator door was jammed open — against company policy, but everyone did it — and it looked like the elevator car wasn't even on this floor. "Hey!" he yelled, his voice lost in the clatter and clang of machinery. Cursing, he broke into a lope across the floor, between the rows of looms with their spiderwebs of yarn, their clashing dance of shuttles.

It was Pete Randall, a thirty-year veteran of the mill, tugging and pushing the truckload of cloth into position. He had it straight now, headed right into the elevator shaft. Hob, his tie flying-white shirts and narrow black ties were the uniforms of mill supervisors, as overalls were those of the hands — was nearly there. "Stop! The car's on the top floor!"

But Pete had gone to the other side of the car, had a grasp on the handle, and was hauling it backward. It took two men, generally, to handle the cloth trucks. The wiry Pete was managing to move it himself. He looked over his shoulder at the empty shaft, put his shoulders into a heave, and began to roll the truck forward.

"God's sake!" Hob got his hand on the handle of the cart, but its momentum was too great. Over the top of the rolls of cloth, Pete Randall grinned at him. Then Pete, pushed by the cart, toppled back into the open shaft. The wheels of the cart went over the lip of the shaft, and the rolls of cloth shifted. Hob was dragged forward and turned loose just in time, just as the cart went over the edge.

Hob braced his arm against the left side of the shaft and barely managed to keep from falling in. The cloth, more than a ton of it, shook the whole mill as it hit the bottom.

Hob, staring down, could see no sign of Pete at the bottom of the shaft, only the jumbled, piled rolls of cloth, like white logs. But he could imagine what the fall and the crushing impact of the cartload of fabric had done to Pete.

Someone on the first floor, hearing the crash, had started the emergency siren. Hob's weavers were leaving their jobs now — Mrs. Tully already was standing behind Hob. He turned around and shook his head. "Go shut down your jobs," he yelled. "Shut them down. Clock out and go on home."

"We still got an hour and a half," Clyde Venable objected. Hob read the words from his lips; Clyde, at the back of the crowd, was too far away to hear.

"You won't be docked," Hob shouted. "You won't be docked. Full pay tonight for everybody. Shut down and clock out. We've had an accident."

The weavers went back to the looms. One by one the machines stopped. When the last one quit, a strange and disturbing silence descended. The weavers, all of them middle-aged or older, looked sheepish in that unaccustomed quiet.

By then they all knew what had happened. They were reluctant to leave at first, but they clocked out and drifted downstairs in groups of three and four. When the last one was gone, Hob called the main office again and told Jay what he had done.

"Fine." O'Hara's voice was distracted. "Damn, Hob, what made him do it? Randall had no business in the weave shop. What the hell made him do it?"

"I don't know. Looked to me like he meant to do it, though. Was he drunk, you think?"

"I don't know. Ambulance is here now."

"He's dead, isn't he?"

"Are you kidding? Oh, God, Hob, I gotta call his wife."

"Listen, you want me to get the third shift started up? Or call it off tonight?"

"Jesus, I don't know. Call it off. Would you stay to close everything down?"

"Sure."

"Oh, God."

"What's wrong?"

"They just took him out. I can see through — oh, my God, oh God in heaven —"

Hob winced. In the haunting silence of the mill, over the telephone line, he could clearly hear the sound of Jay O'Hara vomiting.

11

Clarice Singer had left her post in the ticket booth to chat with Beebee Venner, behind the concession stand, during the last show. "The one next Tuesday looks scary to me," she said.

"Movies don't scare me none." Beebee had dropped out of high school at sixteen, two years ago, convinced that she looked twenty-one and could marry any boy she chose. Now that she was eighteen and still single, she seemed to be trying to look sixteen again, and she incessantly chewed and snapped bubble gum. She popped it now. "Hope it keeps old creepy up in the booth, though. He come down to use the phone tonight and kept lookin' at me like he wanted to take my clothes off."

Clarice, three years older than Beebee, looked over to the steps leading up to the office and the projection booth before she answered: "Don't mess with him, girl, he's married already."

"Yeah." Beebee popped her gum. "I feel sorry for his wife, married to that old redheaded thing."

"You just see he don't get a poke at you with his own old redheaded thing," Clarice whispered.

Beebee guffawed. Just then the feature ended and the doors swung open. It was a good crowd, even for a Friday night, and several people spoke to the girls or stopped to buy a candy bar on the way out. Joey Fulham, who had been ushering, came behind the counter to put up his flashlight and cap. The hubbub died down until finally the three were left alone. "Well," Clarice said, "looks like goin'-home time to me."

"Run and see if anybody's asleep in the seats, Beeb," Joey said, stretching.

"Kiss my rusty bucket, Joe Fulham. You got to usher tonight, you go check it out."

"I'm tired."

"Yeah, it's hard to set and watch a movie," Beebee told him. "Anyway, I gotta check out the ladies' room."

Grumbling, Joey turned on the houselights and went down the left aisle. Beebee grinned and winked at Clarice. "Wanna go up to the ladies' with me? Old Andy's still up there."

"Okay," Clarice said. "Oh, I'll be glad to get home and soak my feet tonight."

They went upstairs. The rest rooms were off a short hall to the left at the head of the stairs. No one was in the ladies'. When they came out, they found Andy McCory standing beside the stairway. "Time to go on home," Clarice told him.

"I can't," Andy said, gloom in his voice. "I gotta clean up. Besides, Mr. Badon ain't back yet."

"Well, it ain't too bad tonight," Beebee said. "Most of 'em bought orange drinks and popcorn and not so much gum and candy. Just pickin' up empty cups and boxes mostly. Be awful after the kiddie matinee tomorrow, probably."

"Yeah," Andy said. They left him and went downstairs. Joey was getting into his jacket.

"Ain't nobody left," Joey announced. "You look in the men's room, too?"

"You shut up," Beebee told him. "You got a dirty mind."

Joey grinned and Groucho-wiggled his eyebrows at her. "You come on home with me and I'll show you what my dirty old mind is like."

"I'd have to be pretty hard up before I'd go home with somethin' like you," Beebee said. "You lock the back exits?"

"Tight as a drum. You want to usher tomorrow?"

"Huh. With a roomful of screamin' kids? You ast for the usherin' job tonight, you can just take it tomorrow, too, Mr. Smarty. Let's go, Clarice."

They left the theater. Outside, each went to a separate car. It was a few minutes past eleven; downtown looked empty. Clarice thought it was dingier, somehow, than it used to be. The leaves were starting to turn already, not really very much, but you saw some brown and yellow in them in the daytime, and now there were pieces of windblown paper and trash caught in the trees on the Square, too. She thought about going shopping tomorrow — Mr. Badon had paid them all in

cash, as usual, when she had first come in that afternoon — and decided she would look for something warm, a nice sweater, maybe. It was getting so she felt cold, alone in the ticket booth.

Clarice's way home led down Long Street (originally named Longstreet Street, after a Civil War general, its name had been shortened by people who thought its true title sounded too much like a stutter), past the Municipal Cemetery. It was closed at sunset, but still, driving past its long hedge and its brick archway, she got a minor case of the creeps at night. Lately she had thought once or twice that she had seen someone inside the grounds as she drove past, wistful shapes crowding behind the iron-barred gates hung in the archway. She had found a way of dealing with that, however.

She looked steadfastly at the other side of the street as she drove past the entrance. Tonight she saw nothing unusual.

Yes, Clarice decided. A sweater, definitely. A sweater would be nice.

12

Mr. Williams had left his son in the same room as his wife. He had brought a length of rope, good half-inch hemp, upstairs with him earlier. Now he tied a slipknot in one end, worked it back and forth until it slid smoothly, the noose going from large to small with almost no effort. He pushed the screen out and climbed onto the porch roof. The air was cool, the sky overhead good and dark.

From the porch roof he clambered up to the second-floor roof, steeply pitched. The brick chimney was in the very center. Mr. Williams slipped the free end of the rope around the chimney, tied it together, tugged hard at the rope to test the knot. He grunted with the effort, but there was no give.

He walked down the roof beam, feet tilted in opposite directions, to the end. He looked down. It was a thirty-foot drop from here to the ground: this was the high side of the house. He had about twenty feet of rope left, he estimated.

A metal hook had been screwed into the facing board of the house just under the peak of the roof, a guide for the television antenna wire. Mr. Williams stooped and wound the rope once around the hook.

He glanced down at the street. A man stood under the streetlight, a tall man clad in black. Mr. Williams grinned. The man in the street nodded.

Mr. Williams slipped the noose around his neck. Dead is dead, he thought, and stepped off the roof.

The impact pulled the metal hook right out of the wood, splintering off a foot of the facing board at the same time. The unrestrained rope slid down the pitch of the roof and deposited Mr. Williams on the ground not far from the front-porch steps.

However, considering what the rope had done to Mr. Williams's spine, that place was as good to him as any other would be.

Under the streetlight, the man in black smiled. "Dead is dead, Mr. Williams? How does it feel to be wrong?"

Interval 2:

Of Souls and Shadows

1

Beliefs in the essential fragility of the human soul are almost as widespread as beliefs in the soul itself. In an impressive number of cultures, the incarnate or discarnate soul of an individual is believed to be susceptible to various types of injury or even to outright theft . . .

Natives of the Caribbean visualize the soul as a colony entity, made up of separate spirits inhabiting the various parts of the human body, each with its own volition. If one of these miniature souls is injured by a curse, a corresponding debility appears in the portion of the body where that spirit holds its seat, and the composite, or great, soul is thereby weakened as well According to the Guarani, the soul may depart from the body altogether during states of trance or during exceptionally deep sleep. During these intervals, the soul may wander in the physical world or in the realms of the dead, and dreams or visions record these adventures. The soul is held by these people to be extremely vulnerable during its absence from the body, and often souls are destroyed utterly as they seek to enter the afterworld

Some Chinese believe that each man has two souls, a superior soul, or hun, and an inferior soul, or p'o. Under certain conditions, a powerful wizard may abduct the hun from a living person, leaving the body animated by the baser p'o, an entity capable of the most revolting excesses As recently as 1892, the brutal murders and mutilation of an American missionary, his family, and his servants were blamed on a man whose soul had been taken from him In some ways the p'o may be regarded as all that is animalistic, dark, and evil in human nature.

- Hugh T. Kantor, "The Vulnerable Soul," from Transactions of the World Ethnology Association, vol. 6, no. 3, 1939

2

The following document is one of a cache of several dozen found by Master Sergeant John Kirby, United States Army, at Dachau Concentration Camp, spring/summer 1945.

MEMORANDUM

TO: CAMP COMMANDANT WEISS, DACHAU

FROM: DR. S. WECHSEL, EXPERIMENTAL MEDICINE

27 OCT 1942

In order to clarify the events of the last two weeks, I present the following information: the Russian prisoner of war, Churikin, born 18 June 1921, was transferred to me on 28 Sep for experiments in high-altitude stress. As the RF SS wished those prisoners already sentenced to death to be the subject of the most dangerous experiments, I selected this Russian for a decompression experiment which I was certain would be fatal. As I reported at the time of the first experiment (24 Oct), "You may be assured that the Russian will certainly not survive and will be dead by the date given for his execution." Contrary to my expectations, the man survived three repetitions of the decompression experiment. No other subject has survived even one. Since the RF SS has issued an order (21 Oct) that no Russian or Pole is to be granted pardon, I have had the Russian shot. I would like to beg you the favor of returning the body to me for autopsy and preparation of the internal organs in the Camp Pathology Department, in order to record the most unusual formation of multiple air embolisms. My wife has already written to SS Sturmbannführer Dr. Brandt with regard to this matter. I remain your obedient servant,

Heil Hitler!

Your grateful servant

S. Wechsel

3

But did Jack the Ripper actually die?

The record of brutal murders, identical in most respects to saucy Jack's work, by no means ended in November, 1888. Even a partial list reveals the scope of the mystery:

- New Orleans, Oct. 1892–Jan. 1893. Six prostitutes murdered, disemboweled, and mutilated. The heart, kidneys, and “other parts” (sexual organs?) were reported missing in two cases. No suspect ever arrested.
- Paris, summer 1897. Seven women, six prostitutes and one housemaid, butchered. The mutilations were identical to those described in the Ripper murders. All cases remain unsolved.
- Dusseldorf, 1907. Four young women, at least one of them a prostitute, were murdered and mutilated over a six-month period. All killings were done “with a sharp instrument, possibly a surgeon’s scalpel.” No arrest was made.
- Galveston, Texas, 1914–1916. A total of eleven girls and women were killed and badly mutilated here by the “Devil Surgeon.” Newspaper records indicate that at least five of the victims were “fallen women.” Though police files on the cases are mysteriously missing, surviving newspaper accounts hint at severe mutilation and theft of portions of the bodies. Police never solved the murders.
- Atlanta, October 1922. Four Negro women murdered, one every Saturday night. All bodies slashed, disemboweled, and mutilated. No arrest made.
- Tokyo, 1928. Four murders of Geishas, all done with a sharp instrument. All cases unsolved.
- San Francisco, 1931–1932. Five unsolved mutilation-murders of young girls by the “Bayside Killer.” Heart and kidneys missing in two cases.
- Buenos Aires, spring 1939. An incredible sixteen murdered and mutilated young women over a span barely ten weeks. All were killed “with surgical precision,” and twelve were mutilated. An unconfirmed report says that the police recovered the heart of one victim from an alleyway half a mile from the corpse — and that the heart continued to beat for two days and nights. No killer was arrested.

- New York City, 1947–? More than a dozen cases of the ritualistic butchering of prostitutes have been with details now familiar to us: the bodies disemboweled, the internal organs cut loose and rearranged, portions missing. Of all the murders, not one case has been solved.

And these instances just scratch the surface!

Considering them, it is natural and necessary to ask: Is Jack the Ripper really dead?

It would seem he is not.

Yet, if he were a man, the Ripper would today have to be very old, a doddering killer in his eighties or nineties.

The thought is absurd. If in fact all these killings have been perpetrated by one being, that being is not a man.

The next question, too, is natural and dreadfully necessary: If he is not a man, what in God's name can he be?

- James Bradlee, *The Ripper Lives! A Paperbound Library Original Book* (New York: 1955)

4

The JEW is the slimy head of this octopus [i.e., communism] and the NIGGER is its arms!

If God-fearing White people do nothing, godless communism will CHOKe THE LIFE from White America!

The time has come for White men to ACT!

We must CUT THE LIVING HEART out of this monster and SPREAD ITS GUTS for the world to see!

- No author credited. "Communism: Death of the White Race?" (Pamphlet distributed in Gaither, Georgia, by the White Knights of the Grand Imperial Klan, September 1954)

5

MINISTER PREACHES HELL, SLAYS FIVE

Reverend Penton Adams of the Church of Sanctified Apostles was a hellfire-and-brimstone preacher.

The thirty-three members of his Tamid, Oklahoma church saw him as a spirited evangelist who was not afraid to stand against Satan and all his evil machinations.

But last Sunday, after an unusually strong sermon claiming that “Hell has broken out on earth” and that the faces of his parishioners “are the devils’ faces,” Reverend Adams drew from behind his pulpit two Colt revolvers and opened fire on his stunned congregation!

Adams wounded eight people in all. Three died immediately and two more succumbed to their wounds in the next two days. Finally Adams took his own life.

“He stuck the barrel in his mouth,” reports Sarah Four-feathers, a parishioner, “and he pulled the trigger”

- The Tabloid Informer, page 2, June 19, 1956

6

Headlines from the Atlanta Journal, September, 1957:

MAD CHICAGO RIPPER SEIZED

KILLED 8

NASHVILLE SCHOOL GUTTED BY DYNAMITE

“ON THE BEACH” A TERRIFYING, CREDIBLE WARNING TO WORLD

CARRIE AIMS DEADLY WIND AT BERMUDA

TWO INSANE CONVICTS FLEE MILLEDGEVILLE

STUDENT HURLS LYE AT CLASS. 19 BURNED

8 NEGROES ENTER LITTLE ROCK SCHOOL FIGHTING FLARES

MYSTERY IN N. GEORGIA TOWN

MURDERS, SUICIDES UP

Part III

Horror Flicks

Nine

1

After the shocks of Sunday and Monday, the rest of the week was almost normal.

The Williams tragedy was first to be discovered, before dawn on Saturday the fourteenth, and was perhaps the most distressing to the community. The Williamses had relatives both in New Haven and in Gaither; they had been faithful members of the Harmony Baptist Church; and Mr. Williams had more friends than he had ever bothered to count, for he had been an easygoing man, good-humored and free with praise and money.

The news was all over town by noon. Perhaps that — the numb feeling the community still had from learning the news — accounted for the somehow lessened impact of the discovery, on Sunday, of the Fellows family, all dead in their house of asphyxiation. At first it seemed a terrible accident, until the fire department ascertained that every gas jet in the house (including the stove and six free-standing room heaters) had been turned on full blast, every pilot light extinguished. By Sunday afternoon, the neighbors had begun to feel how close they had come to tragedy themselves; one stray spark, and the whole house and probably all those close to it would have gone up in a fireball.

There were others, but the others went solo. They kept turning up through Monday: a mechanic who worked at the Texaco station, a clerk in the five-and-dime, the engineer for WXWV, the local radio station. There was a middle-aged divorced man who worked as a butcher at the Big Apple supermarket and an old man who used to be a train

conductor before he retired. There was a housewife from out on the Cumming Highway who killed herself before breakfast Monday, to be discovered by her two children and her husband. The final toll was fourteen dead. That had happened once before in Gaither — fourteen dead in one weekend, not from an act of God — but the last time was more understandable in human terms. It had been over the Fourth of July holiday in '52, when a car jam-packed with two families had collided head-on, at sixty miles an hour, with a pickup truck carrying a farm family in the cab and bed. Fourteen had died then, too, nine in the car and five in the truck.

But that had been an accident.

Attendance was up a little at school on Monday, but the students were subdued in the extreme. Most of them had known Johnny Williams or Cindy, Philip, and Doug Fellows. The intimations of mortality, even for a first- or second-grader, were overwhelming.

And yet they got through the day. In Alan's class, Miss Ulrich led them through a lugubrious prayer for the dead and "those left behind" right after the Pledge to the Flag. For the rest of the morning Miss Ulrich was not the martinet they had come to expect. So lax was she that she failed to spot the note Diane England passed over to Alan: "I sure am looking forward to the movie."

Just before lunch Miss Ulrich killed some spare time by reading to them. For reasons of her own, she chose a piece called "On a Dead Child," which compared the deceased infant to "a little rose among the roses." She began to weep before she finished the piece, and to the shock and astonishment of the whole class, Reese Donalds the incorrigible sprang up from his desk, helped her back to her seat, and stood patting her hand and saying, "It's all right, Miz Ulrich. It wasn't a good poem anyhow."

At lunch Alan sat beside Jack Harwell, whose eyes seemed a little sick behind his spectacles. "It's scary," he said in response to nothing, and Alan knew exactly what Jack meant. "Kids in Johnny's class say he had these horrible dreams all last week, and now this happens."

Alan was opening his milk — it came in a tiny glass bottle, and it always tasted somehow of the wax on the round paper seal — but he nodded agreement. "I've felt bad about stuff for days and days now."

"I wonder," Jack said in a voice like Boris Karloff's, "if there's anything to dreams?"

"Cut it out, fart-face," Alan growled under his breath. "The last thing I need's a spook at the table with me."

"Sorry," Jack said. "Hey, really. You think that people can see into the future and all when they dream, or what?"

Alan shook his head. "Nah. Dreams are just dreams. It's like you go kinda crazy when you're asleep. In your case, it's when you're awake, too."

"Eat it, Kirby."

"Stick it where the sun don't shine, Harwell."

They grinned at each other, food on their teeth. "Awful damn lot of kids have been havin' bad dreams," Jack said. "Seriously."

"Yeah, but Johnny Williams didn't kill his mom and dad. They say his daddy went crazy and wiped out the whole family."

"Maybe," Jack said in a Bela Lugosi voice, "it was a vampire, come to suck their blood."

"Cut it out, Harwell."

"Listen to them. The children of the night. What music they make," Jack said in a ripe Hungarian accent. "And then they become vampires, too —"

Alan suddenly sat up straighter in his chair. "That's right," he said. "They do, don't they?"

Jack looked at him for a minute and shrugged. "That's what happens in the movies, anyhow."

"It's like Dracula, I don't know, controls them somehow. They do what he wants them to do. Like in the Abbott and Costello movie about Frankenstein."

"Quiet," Jack hissed. He looked around, but they were at the end of a table and no one else seemed to be paying any attention to them in the casual chatter and uproar of lunch period. "Don't talk so crazy, man."

Alan blinked at him. "But that's the way I've been feeling about people around town," he said. "Like they're not really themselves, like they're sorta listening to something nobody else can hear. What if — hey, you know if the library has any books on vampires and stuff?"

"Shit, how would I know?"

"See ya," Alan said, grabbing his tray. He put the bottle back in the carton of empties and dumped the scraps of sandwich he had left. Miss Ulrich was at the teachers' table. He walked over and stood respectfully at her elbow.

She put out a hand and touched him to show she knew he was there, and after a moment she stopped talking to the teachers and looked at him. "What is it, Alan?" Her eyes, behind her harlequin glasses, still looked teary.

"I've finished, ma'am. May I go see Miss Lewis? I was helping her with something last week."

"Go ahead. Listen for the eighth-grade bell. It's hard to hear on the second floor."

"Yes, ma'am."

Miss Lewis was at her desk, her lunch half eaten, a stack of work sheets in front of her. The kids in grades one through five had a half-hour recess break after lunch — it sometimes seemed to Alan that he had never known how easy life had been in grades one through five until now, when it was too late — and her kids were in the gymnasium, under the supervision of the fourth-grade teachers. Outside her windows the day was gray and stormy, but she had a bright smile for him. "Hello, Alan. How are you?"

"I think it's happening," he said. "The people dying and all."

She nodded. "I think that must be part of it."

"Miss Lewis — I know it sounds crazy, but do you know any books on vampires?"

"Vampires, Alan? They're not real."

"Well, I know, but in the movies people who've been bitten by a vampire act sort of, you know, possessed or something. Like they can't control themselves. I thought — "

"I see," Ann Lewis said, her face thoughtful. "I'll look around, Alan, but I don't know any books right offhand. Of course, there's Dracula, but that's a novel."

"Who wrote it?"

"A man named Bram Stoker."

Alan repeated the name to himself. "Bram Stoker must have based the book on something, don't you think?" he asked.

"He may have. I'm sure there are folktales and legends — "

"I'm gonna see what I can find," Alan said. "Maybe that's what's happening. Maybe something, not a vampire, but like a vampire, is causing people to behave in crazy ways, causing them to kill other people. Maybe that's what we ought to be hunting."

Miss Lewis pulled at a strand of her blond hair. "All right, Alan. I'll see what I can find in books of folklore. You visit the library and learn what you can about vampires — "

"I'll look in my dad's store, too," Alan said. "There's a section of occult books and stuff."

"Well, let's see what we can find. Are you going to talk to Mr. Tate about this?"

Alan hadn't considered that. "I don't know. Should we?"

"Why don't we wait to see what we can find? It may be nothing at all."

"All right. But it's something, not nothing. Something is causing people to die."

Miss Lewis smiled at him and reached to touch his cheek, fleetingly. "Alan, you're very young. When you grow older, you'll know that people don't need evil from outside to make them do evil things. They carry their own store of it around with them."

"Yes, ma'am."

"There's the upper-grade bell. Better scoot."

Alan went back to class, but his mind was not really on the science and history lessons. After school he spoke to Diane England for a few minutes — she repeated her anticipation of seeing the movie with him — and then set off for the library. He had worn his rain gear, a rubberized yellow slicker, and he needed it: rain lashed him before he'd gotten half a mile from school, and he parked outside the courthouse in a downpour that crackled against his hood and leaped back off the pavement in sudden spikes.

The sound of the rain was muted in the dim warrens of the library. With the help of the crowded card catalog, Alan found three books, one on Bram Stoker, one on monsters both legendary and actual, and Dracula itself. He waited in the stairwell for the rain to die down, and when it was only a patter again he went out, got his bike, and drove over to the bookshop.

His father was doing a good business, or at least it looked that way: the shop was crowded, and John Kirby had little time for anything other than a quick nod at his son. Alan went through the building and put his school and library books in the Studebaker. Then he came back into the shop and tidied the comics rack before a couple of young women left

the occult area clear. He sauntered down the aisle and quickly collected a double handful of lurid-covered paperbacks: one entitled *Werewolves, Vampires, and Ghouls*, another called *Monsters in Fact and Legend*, yet another called *The Folklore of Destruction: Monsters of Many Lands*, and three more with similarly promising titles.

The total purchase for all six books — he figured quickly — would be three dollars and fifty cents, plus tax. Say three sixty-one. He had no money on him at all, but there was some in his bank account, and probably enough change in the penny bank in his room to cover it. When the crowd had thinned. Alan took the books over to the counter. “Dad, would you buy these for me? I’ll pay you back.” Alan knew better than to ask for free books. He couldn’t even get free comics from his dad’s shop, not even the dumber ones, like *Fearless Fosdick*.

“Let’s see.” His father took the books, rang up the total (just as Alan had estimated: \$3.61), and bagged them. “This is bizarre reading,” he said, handing over the paper bag. “What’s up?”

“Well, Halloween’s comin’ up at the end of next month,” Alan said. “The eighth grade’s usually in charge of the haunted house, and I thought I’d kinda get some ideas.”

“You’ll probably end up with nightmares,” John Kirby said. “But I’d rather know you’re reading trash than not know it, and I suppose you’d read it in any case. You keep these out of Aunt Betty’s sight, now.”

“Yes, sir. I’m gonna ride my bike on home. I left my books in your car, if that’s all right.”

“Homework?”

“Math and science, and some English reading.”

“I don’t mind bringing the books home, but you hit them right after supper.”

“Yes, sir. What do you want me to fix for supper?”

“There’s some hamburger in the refrigerator, and some buns in the bread box. I suppose you can open a can of green beans and fry some potatoes. Be careful around the stove.”

“I will. Will you be home by six?”

“Probably a little before. Take care.”

“Yes, sir.”

Alan rode home, let the bike crash beside the porch, and hurried to his room to dip into his paperback trove of information. He scanned

through the books one by one, but something in one of them — it was the folklore one — caught his eye:

A curious belief in some of the countries bordering northern India is that of the devil-man. This creature assumes the form of a human being to accomplish its bloody tasks, but in fact it is nothing of the sort, but a vengeful and evil spirit.

In Afghan legend, such a spirit, angered by a real or fancied slight it receives from a village, never rests until the village is punished. Punishment is effected by the subtle magic the spirit can command. First it inhabits the recently deceased and unburied body of one of the villagers. Then it recruits an army from among them, by stealing the souls of the villagers one by one. Those so treated lose their own power to distinguish between right and wrong and become merely the devil-man's puppets, willingly doing any acts of vengeance or violence the spirit may command.

The villagers are constantly alert for any sign of a devil-man's presence. These are obvious to the vigilant, for his depredations occur only subsequent to sustained and horrifying plagues of nightmares. Other signs, too, indicate his presence.

Alan turned the page, only to find that the discussion quickly moved to the kang-mi and the yeti, "man-apes from the lands above the snow line." He went to the living room, looked up Miss Lewis's number, and dialed it. As soon as she answered, he told her what he had found and read the passage aloud to her. To his considerable relief, she took it all seriously and even wrote down the title of the book and a quick description of the Afghan "devil-men."

He went back to his room. Only once more did he really sit up with the sudden feeling that he had found something significant. He had been reading a book on Jack the Ripper (Alan knew the name, the way he knew the name of Jesse James or that of Robin Hood: through the peculiar American brand of legend compounded of folktales passed along by kids, puzzling references in newspapers or magazines, and movies).

The story of the harlot killer quickly absorbed him. What disturbed him, however, was the writer's seeming assertion that Jack the Ripper had not died because he was not in fact a man, was rather something very like what an Afghan might call a devil-man or a spirit. In support, the author offered a long, multipaged list of murders

that seemed to resemble more or less exactly Jack the Ripper's crimes — and some of those had taken place in Atlanta, hardly sixty miles from Gaither.

And that wasn't all. The publisher had considerably included eight pages of illustrations, line drawings that were only "based on actual photographs of the Ripper's environment and victims" but were nonetheless horrible.

Everyone in town knew what had happened to Mollie Avery, knew how her body had been slashed and cut. The drawings of Jack's victims merely put into graphic form what Alan, what everyone in town, had already seen in imagination: the ravaged body of their own victim, missing breast, torn abdomen, and all.

For the first time in his life Alan was afraid to be alone in his own house. Heart thumping and breath coming faster than normal, he slid out of bed. The sun was going down, and the room was dim. He decided he'd sit on the porch until his father came home.

He opened the door of his room.

Somebody grabbed him.

Alan jerked and yelled, stumbling backward.

"Hey," his father said. "What's wrong?"

"Oh. It's you."

"Who did you expect? I thought you were going to have supper ready."

"I was. I will. I — sorry, Dad. I was reading."

"Trash, I take it," his father said dryly. "Well, let's hustle. I'm hungry, and you have homework to do."

"Yes, sir. Dad? I — I'm sure glad you're home."

His father gave him a long look. "Thank you. I think. Come on. You peel the potatoes and I'll cook the burgers."

"Could you peel?" Alan asked. "I'd rather not fool around with a knife right now."

"I had KP enough in the Army." Kirby ruffled his son's hair. "But, okay. You do the burgers."

"Do I have to touch the meat with my hands? I mean, it's got blood and everything —"

John Kirby slapped him across the butt. "Get in there, boy. Next week you're reading nothing but Fannie Farmer's Cookbook, I swear to God."

Sam Quarles was exhausted Monday evening. "I hope to God it's all over," he told his wife over supper. "Fourteen people since Saturday. I've never seen anything like it."

"I'm not going away," Ilona said. She had prepared salmon croquettes according to a new recipe, but neither she nor Sam really ate them. Both just picked the fish patties apart. In the kitchen and dining room, as in all the rooms of the house, the window shades were pulled down to the sills, and the drapes were drawn shut. "I won't leave you. I'm not going."

"Yes, you are."

Ilona laid down her fork. "Then you come with me."

The sheriff sighed. "Ilona, honey, you know I can't. Now, your sister will be glad to see you —"

"Patrick won't." Patrick was her sister's husband, a man who owned his own well-drilling company up in the mountain city of Blairsville, almost out of Georgia altogether. "He'll be ready to move out the day after I get there."

"You'll get along with Patrick," Quarles said. "Because you'll make the effort. It's only for a week or two, hon, just until I can find out who's been trying to scare us away from this house."

"It was him, Sam. I know Harmon Presley's face."

After an involuntary look at the muffled window, Quarles shook his head. "I do, too. But it was real dark out on the porch, and there was no way to see clearly just who it was. Anybody Harm's size and build dressed up in a uniform would've looked like Harm to you — or to me. Damn it, Ilona, Harmon's dead and in the ground. I don't know who it was, but it wasn't Harmon Presley's ghost, that's for sure."

Ilona sniffed. "How am I supposed to get all the way up to Blairsville? Patrick ain't about to drive down here for the likes of me."

"Tomorrow morning I'm gonna take you up myself. I've arranged for Dick Crawford to come in for me. We'll be all right as long as more — as long as nothing comes up. Then Lorene will bring you back in a week or two, after things have calmed down."

"I don't like it."

Quarles took a long drink of the sweet, strong iced tea Ilona always made. "I sure as hell don't like the thought of you staying here," he said. "Have you ever thought it might be somebody tryin' to get at me?"

"Who?"

"I don't know. But there's other things goin' on in town, apart from folks dyin'. Take Mr. Jefferson from the bank. He's dropped out of sight, almost. I called him today — wanted to see if any of the people killin' themselves were in money trouble, that he knew of — and they told me at the bank he hasn't been in for weeks. So I called his house, and he sounded funny. Sick, he said, but gettin' better. Anyhow, he told the folks at the bank to let me know what I needed to know and it didn't work out."

"Sounds to me like Mr. Jefferson's got a bad conscience."

"He's lost his mind." Quarles pushed his barely touched plate away from him. "That's what it looks like, anyhow. If I was that sister of his, I'd be getting in touch with Jefferson's children. He needs to be taken care of. Him out there all by himself all this time and nobody seein' about him. It ain't right."

"Well, he's never earned the gratitude of too many people in Gaither," Ilona observed. "Besides, if he's touched in the head, it might be the best thing for him to stay by himself for a while. Some folks, when they're sick, the best thing to do is just to let them alone to heal up. I don't think it's so terrible for old Mr. Jefferson to stay home if he's feelin' poorly."

"But there's other things besides Mr. Jefferson, I don't know, things that just don't seem right. The town's got so much trouble right now, and for somebody to be devilin' us that way looks suspicious."

"Are you sure it's anybody?"

"What do you mean?"

"You don't think it was Harmon Presley's ghost, you say. Are you sure we really saw somebody? That we didn't just imagine it was somebody lookin' in the window that night?"

Quarles clinked the ice in his glass, then set the glass down on the table. "There was somebody there, all right. It wasn't a reflection, and I don't have hallucinations. Nor you don't. Somebody was standin' on our porch lookin' in."

"But that doesn't make sense, Sam. Where would anybody have gone? There's no place to run but the front yard, and there's no place to hide out there. And why would anybody just come up on the porch and look in at us, anyway?"

"I don't know all that. Maybe it was just to scare us. Maybe somebody's got somethin' against me, and they're tryin' to work at me through stuff like that fellow who looked in through our window, tryin' to scare me away from investigatin' something. But somebody did look through our window."

"Harmon Presley."

Quarles slapped the table so hard his tea fell over. "It was not Harmon Presley!"

"Tea in your lap." Ilona got up, came back with a wet cloth, industriously cleaned up the spilled tea. "What are you going to do without me here to pick up after you and do for you?" she asked.

Quarles, recognizing his victory in her rhetorical question, did not bother to reply.

3

It was a week of clouds, rain, and a curious, dead calm. From Monday through Thursday some rain fell every day, and from the dark, ragged, swagging clouds that sulked over Gaither lightning fell and thunder rolled. A tension built in the air every afternoon as the air seemed to grow thicker and wetter and warmer — the temperatures by two o'clock were always eighty or better. It was weather to make people park as close as possible to stores, to send them scurrying head down on their errands.

It made them think of other weathers in other years. There had been a terrible April more than twenty years before when the morning had broken dark as the shadow of God, and toward eight o'clock there had come a roaring as if a gigantic freight train were pounding across heaven. It was the sound of a tornado, and it nearly obliterated the neighboring town of Gainesville — two hundred dead in the twinkling of an eye. And two years later, a smaller tornado had ripped the outskirts of Gaither, killing children and teachers at a school, ripping the roof off a pair of chicken houses and showering the astonished countryside with three hundred white Leghorns, most of them alive but dazed.

Terrible things could come out of a warm-weather sky, and people in Gaither did not like to look at the ominous purple-gray teats of cloud hanging over them.

Attendance at the ShadowShow fell, despite the new attraction. People were nervous about being away from home in such weather, and there was something daunting about the prospect of being in a movie house just in case a tornado should strike. People had been told from the pulpit often enough that movies were sinful. They wondered, What would happen if I were in the theater and a tornado came and the building fell in and I died?

I'd have to stand in front of the throne of the Almighty God, Jehovah the Lord of Hosts, and He would look down at me and say, "Where were you when you died?"

And I would have to say, "Well, Mr. God, to tell you the God's honest truth, I was in the aisle seat about five rows back in the ShadowShow Theater, and the roof hit me. And I sure am sorry, Mr. God, sir."

But it wouldn't do any good, not if you believed the ministers. God would probably pull a lever or something and you'd fall — zip! — right through the golden trapdoor in the floor of heaven and the next thing you knew, you'd be down in hell. And if the ministers were really right, you could watch movies as long as you wanted then, because everybody knew that the Hollywood stars went straight to perdition as soon as they checked out. But you wouldn't enjoy the movies then, no, sir.

So you kept pretty close to home, promising yourself that you were going to be good and not go to the theater at all anymore until the weather cleared up.

Andy McCory showed the cartoon and the short subject and the movie of each performance, even though sometimes the audience consisted of only five people. Mr. Badon did not come in all that week, though according to Andy he had telephoned on Wednesday to instruct Andy to pay the employees. Andy would do this on Friday, from the cashbox, counting out even his own pay meticulously. He would take not a penny more than was due him. He had a growing feeling that pay in other form was coming nearer and nearer, and he was willing to wait.

But Friday was the end of the week, and the days before that brought foreboding and a growing unease. Mostly, that stormy week, people stayed home in the afternoons and evenings, watching TV (the new shows weren't due until next week, and they had to content

themselves with reruns until then) or listening to the radio. If you liked country and western music, you could be regaled by Jim Edwards and Maxine and Bonnie Brown singing "I Heard the Bluebirds Sing" or old Jim Reeves singing "Four Walls." If you liked more sophisticated fare, there was Jane Morgan offering "Fascination" or Patti Page with "Old Cape Cod." The younger, wilder set listened to Huey Smith's "Rockin' Pneumonia and Boogie-Woogie Blues" or wild man Jerry Lee Lewis attacking a keyboard and proclaiming there was a "Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On."

Radio, however, wasn't really the answer, not with electricity crackling in the clouds and popping over the speaker. Most people in Gaither just went to bed early and tried to sleep. Some of them, families or friends of the dead, went to funerals, stood by soggy graves in a pouring rain, and wondered what was happening to this little town, but no one really put the thought into speech. No one could have found an answer if the question had been asked.

The Williams funeral was maybe the worst. Delayed by three autopsies, it was finally held on a Wednesday, and a lot of the families who attended took their children out of school so they could come, too. Harmony Baptist Church was packed, people jammed hip to hip in the pine pews and even standing in the aisles at the rear. In the humid heat of the afternoon, the cardboard fans (furnished to the church by the Detterley Funeral Home, even though the Loveland Funeral Home was in charge of the actual service) fluttered like the wings of a thousand butterflies. The sanctuary smelled like ferns and peppermint chewing gum, and at the front, just before the altar, were three gun-metal gray coffins, identical except in size.

It would have been possible to open Mr. Williams's coffin and even Johnny's for the Last Look, but Mrs. Williams's was out of the question. The violence had been too thorough for any of Mr. Loveland's trained morticians to repair sufficiently for that, and after consultation it was decided that a closed-coffin service was best.

Some of the children got the idea that it was like the funeral of the Three Bears, with a papa-sized coffin, a mama-sized coffin, and a wee little baby coffin, and these children got the giggles early, quickly suppressed. The songs played by Mrs. Vessey at the beginning of the services weren't as lively as those the congregation could hear on the

radio, but they summed up the purpose and excuse for the ritual: "Amazing Grace," "Precious Memories," and "Coming Home."

The minister, Mr. Skelton, spoke haltingly of the lives and the baffling, terrifying way in which they had been cut short. He began to weep before he had finished reading the Bible verses (the Twenty-third Psalm, and Job's exultant cry that he knew his Redeemer lived), and soon the whole congregation joined in, grown women and men whooping with sobs and little children screaming in frightened but baffled sympathy. The adults wept because they had known Mr. Williams and his wife, because they thought themselves no better or worse than the deceased, because they saw in the terrible murders and suicide a sickening reminder of their own fragility and mortality. The children wept because their parents scared them by their own weeping. Before long only the first four or five rows of mourners could even hear the preacher's voice.

Mrs. Woodley, who had lived across the street from the Williamsses for twenty years, got it in her head that the little boy was still alive in his coffin. She was sure she saw the lid move up fractionally and pictured the child, arms braced, pushing up against the silken lining. He could budge the lid only a little, poor thing, because it was screwed shut already. This notion terribly took hold of Mrs. Woodley's imagination until she was screaming more than crying. She finally had to get up and stagger outside to get away from the awful, suffocating feeling that he was alive and trying to get out.

She saw Mr. Loveland of the funeral home on the porch of the church. Mrs. Woodley hesitated only a moment before she went up to him and put one white-gloved hand on his arm. "Mr. Loveland," she said, her voice still raw from crying, "I believe that little boy is still alive."

"He's gone to a better world, ma'am," said Mr. Loveland, misunderstanding.

"No, he's trying to get out," Mrs. Woodley insisted. "Please, before you bury them, won't you open up the casket and just look at him?"

"Ma'am, I don't need to do that. That little boy is dead in body."

"I know I saw him trying to open his lid."

"Ma'am, his neck was broke. And besides he — he can't be alive."

"Mr. Loveland, I don't want to have to go to the police, but I warn you, I will."

Mr. Loveland, who wore a habitual expression of calm, dignified concern, began to look a little panicky. "Ma'am, I tell you that little boy is dead. He really is. Take my word."

"I know what I saw." Mrs. Woodley looked around. "Where is the sheriff? He should be here somewhere. I'll show you."

Mr. Loveland grabbed her by the arm. "Ma'am," he said in a low voice, "the little boy doesn't have any blood left in him. We pumped it out and put in formaldehyde. And we took out his insides, ma'am. We embalmed him. You can't be alive if you're embalmed."

A second man, a tall, mournful-countenanced man in a rusty black suit, had eased out the door and stood staring at her intently. Another man, Mrs. Woodley thought, feeling herself outflanked and defeated by superior numbers already. Her fear and anguish quickly transformed themselves into anger.

"You men think you know everything," said Mrs. Woodley, and she turned away and walked a mile and a half home, through constant rain.

4

The world rolled on despite everything. Saturday brought autumn and a job for Alan. His father telephoned him from the store at ninety-three and asked if, since the last time he had been rewarded with free passes, he wanted to make another delivery to Mr. Badon. Alan, in the middle of compiling a notebook of ideas gleaned from library and paperback books, agreed, but without much enthusiasm. His own sleep was beginning to be interrupted by dreams born of his reading: murder, ghosts, malevolent creatures from beyond reality.

Already the Blue Horse spiral notebook was nearly half full of scribbled references, notes, and quotations. No pattern had emerged: it was like the crazy quilt he slept under in the winter, gaudy and garish and somehow a whole, but without discernible design. He had learned a great deal about folk beliefs and folk bugaboos, of succubi and incubi, of astral travel, wraiths, and apparitions of the living. He had read of Sawney Bean, whose entire family had gone cannibal with him, and of the butcher of Düsseldorf, whose specialty was the murder of children. He had followed the career of the fictional Dracula but also had learned of the real Dracula, Vlad the Impaler, a

fierce warrior and bloodthirsty leader who had once had the caps of two impertinent ambassadors nailed to their heads. Through it all he seemed to glimpse something not quite in focus, something closer to home . . . He resolved to let Miss Lewis read over his notes as soon as he saw her again. For the time being, this Saturday morning, he put his books back on the shelf below his night table and carefully hid the notebook beneath his underwear in the third drawer of his chest of drawers.

Alan rode his bike into town under an unsettled sky, partly cloudy but at least presaging no more rain. He saw the usual activity around the Square, pickup trucks loaded with farm families, clusters of men on the benches, talking, women window-shopping along the streets just off the Square. Yet somehow the scene lacked life, as if everyone were a little tentative, a bit unsure.

The stationery Mr. Badon had ordered had finally come in, five huge, heavy boxes of it. Alan managed to heft it all but he was staggering by the time he crossed the street and had to put it all down just beside the ticket booth of the theater. It was only ten o'clock, and the kiddie matinee — a Roy Rogers western today, plus cartoons and a serial — didn't start until noon. He knocked on the door, and when no one answered, he pushed tentatively. The door swung open.

Having put the five boxes down, Alan found he could no longer pick them up, at least not all at once. He dragged them all into the lobby of the theater, though, and got three of them into his arms. "Hello?" he called out, his voice echoing.

The lights were out, but enough filtered in from the cracks in the doors and the little round windows for him to see the stair. He went that way and climbed the stairs carefully, not being able to see his feet. At the turning he noticed a light switch in the wall, one of the old-fashioned kind with two round push buttons, one for "on" and one for "off." Grunting, he elbowed the top button and a row of dim incandescent lights came on overhead, each bulb inset into the ceiling and shining through a round frosted pane of glass. Alan kneed and juggled the boxes the rest of the way up.

The office door was closed. He put the boxes down beside it and knocked, but no one answered. For a few seconds he stood there wondering what to do. He did not like the feeling of being alone in this cavernous building, the sensed emptiness of the auditorium not far

away. He knocked on the door behind him, too, the one marked EMPLOYEES ONLY, but no one answered. When he tried the office door it was locked. The other door opened to reveal the projection booth, a cluttered narrow room dominated by three huge projectors, two of them aimed through small windows toward the screen, the third pushed out of the way against the right-hand wall. Round aluminum film cans were rolled into a kind of rack, and the floor was littered with clipped-off ends of film.

Out of curiosity, Alan picked up a handful. He couldn't see in the room — the only light came from the small bulbs in the hall — so he stepped back outside. Holding the pieces of film up against the ceiling light, he saw that he had a piece of *I Was a Teenage Werewolf*, a shot of the boy's face looking worried. There were other snippets that he did not recognize, but he also had a color *Bugs Bunny* (the opening of a cartoon, with the rabbit's cheerful face superimposed on the Warner Bros. logo). Well, he thought, they were just in the floor. Nobody's going to miss them.

He thrust the pieces of film into his pocket and went down for the other two boxes. He brought them upstairs, too, and stacked them on top of the first three. Then, his job done, he went down the hall to the stair and descended. He paused at the landing to click the lights out. He took four steps down in the sudden dark and ran into someone.

"Ah," the man said. "The son of the bookseller, I think."

For a second Alan was too startled to breathe, let alone speak. The man had a hand on his arm. He turned him easily and sent him back upstairs. The lights came on again. Mr. Badon smiled at Alan.

"I'm glad I didn't miss you," he said.

"I — my dad sent me over with your stationery," Alan gasped out finally.

"Oh. Good, good. Yes, there it is outside my door. Would you be kind enough to move it into my office for me, young man?"

"Sure." Even though he was breathing harder than he ever had after pedaling his Schwinn up Rainey Hill.

Mr. Badon put his hand on the doorknob.

"It's lock — " Alan began.

The knob turned, and Mr. Badon pulled the door open. "Just put them all on the desk, please."

"Uh — yessir." Alan stacked the boxes on the desk — it was bare except for the telephone and telephone book and a green-shaded desk lamp.

Mr. Badon opened one of the boxes and looked at a sheet of paper. "Very good, very nice work. I approve of your father's choice of design. Please tell him that."

"Yes, sir. Thank you."

Mr. Badon turned on him so suddenly that he jumped. "And do you like the movies?" he asked.

"Well, I've only been once so far, but, yes, I like them."

"Good. I am doing well in this little town. It is very kind to me. Let me see. I gave you passes once already, did I not?"

"Yes, sir. I'm using two of them this evening. I'm bringing a girl."

"I would have thought you young for that."

Alan blushed, not knowing what to say. "She goes to school with me."

"Ah. Childhood friends." Mr. Badon smiled, but the smile was there and gone very quickly, more a quirk of his features than an expression. "I hope you will enjoy the show. Mr. Cagney gives a good interpretation of Lon Chaney, I think. A fine actor, Lon Chaney."

"Yes, sir."

"But you are too young to have seen any of his work. I forget sometimes. He was truly gifted. Did you know his parents were deaf? That, I think, made him a great artist in pantomime. And he endured discomfort, even physical pain, to transform his features. The man of a thousand faces."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, since I have given you passes already, I shall have to think of some other reward this time."

"That's all right, Mr. Badon. Oh. I picked up some pieces of film." He took them from his pocket.

"I see." Badon lifted an indifferent shoulder. "You are welcome to them. When a print breaks we sometimes have to cut out the bad part and splice it together again. That's nothing."

Alan, sliding the frames back into his pocket, suddenly jerked his finger away. "Ow!"

"What happened?"

"I cut my finger."

"Ah. Film can be sharp. Like paper."

"Not bad," Alan said. A thin beaded line of blood showed on the side of his right index finger, just below the nail.

Mr. Badon seemed to sway slightly behind the desk.

"Well, thanks," Alan said. He turned to go. "Good-bye, sir."

"Au revoir," said Mr. Badon.

5

Dr. Lloyd Gordon had been trying to see Sheriff Quarles since Tuesday, when the lawman had taken the day off. They finally got together for lunch on Saturday, in the rearmost booth of the Busy Bee. The restaurant, belying its name, was doing very little business. Leonora, the waitress, took their orders and went back to the kitchen.

"Now," Quarles said, leaning forward, his arms on the table, a toothpick twiddling between thumb and forefingers of his right hand, "what is it you have to talk about?"

"Postmortems," Gordon said. "And blood."

Quarles made a face. "And I had to order liver and onions," he groaned. "You've turned in your reports. What you got to add to them?"

Leonora brought over two heavy glasses with thick bottoms and poured them full of iced tea. The doctor waited until she had gone up front before he took a sip of tea and said, "Three cases. Elanor Williams. The engineer, Roy Cobb. The service-station man, Glenn Hutchins."

Quarles took a long drink of tea. It wasn't sweet enough for his taste, and he upended the sugar container, dribbling sugar into it. "This never works," he said. "It's too cold for the stuff to dissolve, and it just sets in the bottom of the glass." He stirred the sugar, and, as he predicted, it snowed back to the bottom after its momentum died. "Yeah," he said. "All of them cut. What about it?"

"Where's the blood?" Gordon asked.

With an exhalation that bubbled in his cheeks and lips like a horse's whinny, Quarles said, "Saw enough of it around when we picked up the bodies."

"Superficial. Less than a pint in each case."

"Listen, in the Williams house, the walls were dripping —"

"Looked like a lot, but wasn't," Gordon said. "Amazing how far a little blood can go once it gets out of the body. But really there wasn't

anywhere near enough blood in the remains or around them. Just like the Avery case last month."

"Well?"

"I thought you ought to know. It's in the report, but I didn't make a big thing of it there."

"So you think there wasn't enough blood in four cases. We got eighteen people dead in all, and four are missing some blood."

"Not some blood. A lot of it."

Their meals came, and they fell silent while being served. Quarles looked down at his liver and onions. A few minutes before he had been ravenous. Now — with a mental shrug, he picked up knife and fork and began to eat. He had ordered fried okra and creamed potatoes on the side, together with the Busy Bee's famous homemade bread. Despite of the conversation, Quarles was surprised to find his appetite undiminished once he actually began to eat.

Dr. Gordon had ordered meat loaf, steamed cabbage, and rice. He, too, began to eat, at least until the waitress was again out of earshot. Then he repeated, "A lot of it. Do you know much about blood?"

Quarles munched thoughtfully. "Know it when I see it."

The doctor swirled his fork in his rice. "Let me tell you a little about it. Wonderful stuff, really. The typical grown human contains about seven quarts of the stuff. That's an average, of course; more or less blood, depending on your sex, age, and body build. But let's just say, as an average, seven quarts. Fourteen pints, that is. That travels through a network of arteries, capillaries, and veins to every part of the body but the hair and nails. Blood cleanses the cells of toxins and delivers nutrients and oxygen. You have to have it to live."

Quarles had been nodding doggedly and chewing at the same time. "Okay."

"Ordinarily, at any given moment of your life, you have about four pints of blood in your lungs. About a quarter of your total supply, anyway. It's there to give up carbon dioxide and to absorb oxygen. If it isn't there, you simply don't live very long."

Quarles forked okra into his mouth and chewed. "So? I don't see what you're driving at."

"The four victims didn't have four pints of blood in their lungs, or anywhere near it. They might have had a few ounces. And there certainly wasn't enough blood pooled around the bodies." The doctor raised a

hand. "I know that it looked like a lot when you saw the murder sites. Blood will scare you when you see it, that's a normal reaction. Even losing a few ounces can make people think they're dying. Get a good scalp wound or mouth wound, and you'd swear the victim would turn white and die in a matter of minutes. But it doesn't happen. You could theoretically lose half your blood supply and still recover, if you were treated properly and given enough replacement fluid. These people lost nearly all of theirs, but they were left with only about a pint in the body, maybe up to a pint splashed around them. So how did they die?"

"They all bled to death."

"Couldn't have bled to death in that way. Lungs weren't cut in any case, just the abdomen. Major veins and arteries were opened, true, but the victims should have died long before the blood ran out — and you can't easily pump blood out of a dead body. Certainly not out of dead lungs. Jesus, this is making me sick." Gordon pushed his plate away.

Quarles cut another piece of liver. "So how did the blood get gone?"

"That's just what I can't understand. It's as if the heart continued to beat for a long time after it couldn't beat, medically speaking. But if it did, the blood had to leave the body. Where did it go?"

The sheriff tore another piece of bread off and slathered it with butter — real butter at the Busy Bee, not oleomargarine. "Would somebody have taken it?" He bit into the bread.

"What the hell for?" Gordon asked. "Good Lord in heaven, man, how can you sit there and eat like that?"

"I'm hungry. Go on. Why wouldn't somebody take the blood?"

"Because there's no earthly use for it, that's why. Blood from gaping wounds like that would be contaminated, bound to be. And you don't slash a person's gut open to take blood. You do that with a needle. And where would anybody put it? Anyway, there's the clotting factor. As soon as it was exposed to air, the blood would be going to coagulate. It would be useless, medically, within a very short period of time."

"So it wouldn't have been taken for anything medical, like a blood transfusion."

"Not a chance. And the types are all different, too. Well, not all different, Elanor Williams and Glenn Hutchins were both O positive, but that's the most common type. Anyway, how would you gather such a massive amount of blood? What would you put it in? How would you transport it?"

"You want your rice?"

The doctor pushed the little plate of rice across the table. "Anyway, what it boils down to is that there are approximately fifty pints of blood that I can't account for. There's no rational reason for them to be gone, but they're gone."

"Doc, you're not telling me there's a goddamn vampire or anything in town, are you?"

"I'm not crazy, Sheriff. I didn't say a word about spooks or vampires. But the blood's gone. And that's not all."

Quarles had raked the rice into the gravy remaining in his plate and was stirring it with his fork. "More?"

The doctor nodded. "Something I didn't put into the report because — well, because it was obscene. It has to do with Harmon and Eula Presley."

The sheriff looked up. "I know he cut her. But he shot her first, and there was enough blood in that bedroom to —"

"She had all her blood. It isn't that."

"What, then?"

The doctor took a long gulp of tea, the ice cubes clinking in the glass. "Something else about the cases of mutilation. There are seven of those in all, ranging from slight, like Eula Presley, to extreme, like Mollie Avery. But in every case there are parts missing."

"Parts?"

"Organs. With Mollie Avery I assumed it was — well, the dogs. They had been at her, and I thought — never mind. But there were other parts missing, too, from the other cases. In Eula Presley's case it was her spleen."

"In the stomach."

"In the abdomen. It's hard to get to, if you're a layman looking for it. But that one slash across her abdomen went just deep enough to reveal it, and about three-fourths of her spleen was gone, sliced clean away. The cut was done postmortem, by the way. That's in the report, too. She was already dead when he did that to her."

"And?"

"When I did the autopsy on Harmon's body, I analyzed the stomach contents. What I found — well, I sent a sample to the state crime people, and they confirmed late yesterday afternoon."

Quarles's fork froze halfway to his mouth. "You don't mean to tell me — "

"He ate the damn spleen raw," Dr. Gordon said. He smiled, with no mirth in his face whatever, as Quarles dropped his fork. "I thought that might get you," he said.

6

Ann Lewis called Mr. Tate that Saturday afternoon, but she had to wait for Mr. Benton to get the preacher to the telephone. When Tate picked up, he answered on an extension phone in the saw house, and the snarling whine of a circular saw almost drowned out his voice. "Can you hear me?" Ann said as loudly as she dared.

"Miz Lewis? That you?" Tate bawled.

"Yes, Mr. Tate. I called because — " She broke off at a clattering sound on the line, then realized it was only one of the Bentons hanging up the phone in the front office. "I called because I couldn't reach Alan."

"Alan? Somethin' happened to Alan?"

"No! I called you because I couldn't reach him. He's not at home, and his father's not in the shop today. But I'll get him later today." Ann sat on the edge of her bed. Scattered across the coverlet were five books, all of them hefty and printed on slick white paper. "What I called to say is I think I've found something." But she spoke into another barrage of noise from the saw.

"What?"

"I said I think I've found something."

"Just a minute."

On the other end of the wire, Tate must have taken the receiver around a corner or behind a door, for the sound of the saw diminished sharply. "Now," he said. "I can hear you better. What was that again?"

Ann explained once more that she could not get in touch with Alan. Then she added, "One of the high school English teachers I know worked in folklore studies in college; she had a comparative literature minor and an education major. Anyway, I sort of brought up the subject with her, and as it turned out, some of her textbooks covered similar topics in other cultures. She let me borrow some of her books. It's

all in the books, Mr. Tate. I think now I know what's happening in town. Only it — well, it sounds sort of crazy."

In the background the saw changed pitch, then went back to its original sound as more wood was fed into the blade. Tate asked, "What is it?"

"Not over the telephone. I think the three of us all need to meet," Ann said. "Could Alan and I see you tomorrow afternoon, after church?"

"Yes, ma'am. Do you want to meet at the school again?"

"I suppose so. I'll try Alan again tonight. Could we meet at about three o'clock?"

"Anytime." After a long pause, during which the muted circular saw whined into a higher register as it finished its meal of wood, Tate said. "It's an evil spirit, ma'am, ain't it?"

Ann felt goose bumps start on her arms. "As a matter of fact," she heard herself tell Tate, "I really think it could be."

7

That Saturday morning, Diane England had found it necessary to remind her father that he had already given her permission to go on a date with Alan. "I did say it, didn't I? I reckon you're growin' up at that," her father had told her. Her mother, with an innate and intuitive understanding of how important these days were to her, had offered her help in getting ready, even given her a little perfume to dab behind her ears. The only fly in the ointment was ten years old and was named Duane.

"I don't see how come I can't go with Sissy," he grumped to their mother.

"You can't because you can't," Mrs. England said, her voice decisive. "When you get old enough to want to go out, you won't want your sister taggin' along with you."

"Would, too. She can come when I start datin'. Please, Mama, please let me go."

"No, Duane."

Duane stomped across the living room and flung himself into the armchair, his arms crossed and his lips stuck out. "I never get to do nothin'," he said.

"Oh, hush," Diane told him, and from the throw rug in front of the coffee table little Davey looked up, drooled all over himself, and said, "Ush!"

"Shut up, rug rat," Duane yelled.

"Duane," his mother said around a mouthful of bobby pins. "Don't talk like that to your brother."

"Well, shoot, everybody tells me to shut up. I don't see why he gets to tell me to shut up and I don't get to tell him to shut up."

"He never said shut up," Mrs. England said, thrusting a bobby pin into Diane's hair. "Davey tried to say hush, not shut up."

"Ut up!" Davey yelled, laughing and slapping the rug with the flats of his hands. "Ut up, ut up, ut up!"

"See!" Duane growled. "He's tellin' me now."

"He's just a baby," said Mrs. England, securing the last bobby pin. "Now, hon, turn around. You look right nice." She glanced up at the clock. "When is Alan comin' for you?"

"Three-thirty. His dad's drivin' him."

"Well, I ain't seen John Kirby in I don't know how long. I reckon it was at Mrs. Eddy Belle Baldwin's funeral. Alan was a little old thing then."

"Oh, Mama, you saw him at the school lots of times. He was there at the Song Festival last spring."

"Well, I didn't see him to speak to. You be sure to ask him inside, now." Mrs. England tucked her hair nervously into place and smoothed the front of her housedress. "Honey, you be sure to come straight back home after your show, now."

"We're gonna get a sandwich and maybe an ice cream at the drug-store. It won't be more than half an hour after the movie ends, though."

"Ice cream!" This from Duane, who grasped the arms of the arm-chair and began to make it rear and buck in his extreme indignation.

"You stop that right now," said Mrs. England in a tone of voice that stopped him. She sighed. "Well, I reckon you do feel left out, Duane. Listen, you want to run down to Pike's and get a treat?"

"What kind of treat?" asked Duane, immediately all suspicion.

"I don't know," his mother said, feeling in her pocket. She produced a quarter. "Here, take this and get what you want."

"Can it be ice cream?"

"If you want."

"I can get me two ice creams and a Co'cola," he said. "'Less you want your change back."

"Get whatever you want," his mother told him. "You can have the whole quarter to spend." Duane was off the chair and out the door in a flash, before she could possibly change her mind. She shook her head and went to close the door, which he had left ajar. "Anyhow he won't be here when Alan comes for you."

"Thank you, Mama."

Mrs. England took both Diane's hands in hers and stepped back to look at her daughter, all feminine and blushing in a blue gingham dress. Davey got up and toddled over to his mother. He stood hanging on to her dress with one hand, cramming the other fist in his mouth, and looking up at Diane with his big blue eyes. "Pooy," he said around his fist.

"You think your big sister's pretty?" Mrs. England asked. "I do, too, hon." To Diane, she said, "You are pretty, honey. You've changed so much this year. I already talked to you about boys and girls —"

"Oh, Mama."

"Well, I have, and I don't want you havin' to quit school and get married before you're sixteen. There's lots of girls has done it, and they wind up like me."

"Mama, you didn't have to marry Daddy." Diane's face changed from indulgence to sudden doubt. "Did you?"

Mrs. England smiled at her daughter and touched her cheek. "No, hon. Your daddy's a good man, and I was a good girl. But you were our first, and I think you would of made it worth it even if I had had to get married. But I seen too many good girls get in trouble when they didn't know enough."

Diane hugged her mother suddenly and hard. Then she pushed away. "Alan never has done more than hold my hand," she said. "We never even kissed."

"That will come."

"Oh, Mama. I feel so funny about Alan. I mean, we played baseball together and all."

"I know, hon. You're gettin' to be a big girl. But you remember what I told you."

"I will."

They heard a car outside. Mrs. England picked up the baby, smoothed her dress again, and went to the door. Alan stood there, his fist raised to knock. "Come on in," Mrs. England said. She looked him

over closely without really seeming to do so: a boy just getting into that tall stage where ankles and wrists are forever outrunning their cuffs, where the chin begins to show signs of whiskers. He was neatly dressed in a white nylon shirt and black pants, and he wore his Sunday shoes, black Oxfords, not tennis shoes. "You look nice," Mrs. England said.

"Thank you," Alan said, blushing. "Diane looks nice."

"Is your daddy comin' in?"

"Well, he could."

Mrs. England opened the door. "Come in, Mr. Kirby."

The car engine died, the car door slammed, and a moment later John Kirby came into the living room. "Hello, Helen May," he said. "That couldn't be your Duane, now."

"Lord, no." She laughed. "This here's the youngest. Davey."

John Kirby reached out his finger and the baby took it, shook it, and tried to turn it this way and that to examine it. "Hard to think that you have three now."

"Time goes on by. Are you doin' all right?"

"Pretty well, thank you. How's Big Duane these days?"

"Doin' pretty fair," she said. "He was talkin' just the other day about when you and him was on the baseball team."

"Well, Duane England had an arm on him in those days," Mr. Kirby acknowledged. "With him pitching and me catching, we had a couple of good seasons back before the war."

"I remember seein' you play against the Pacolet team from Hall County one time," Mrs. England said. "Duane, he struck them all out but one, and you run and caught a pop fly right in front of home plate to put that one out. I didn't know which one of you I liked better. Playin' ball, I mean."

The baby tried to suck John's finger, and he laughed. "From the looks of these children, Helen, I'd say you picked the right one of us to marry."

Alan had joined Diane on the sofa. Both of them were trying very hard indeed not to notice each other or their parents. As that left very little else in the room to look at, Alan was staring at the toes of his shoes and Diane was looking at her hands, folded together in her lap.

Mrs. England said, "Well, here I stand not offerin' you anything. Will you have some coffee or ice tea? And set down, please."

"No, thank you, Helen. We have to get going. It's gettin' on toward four o'clock, and these younguns want to see their picture show."

"That's right. Well, I hope they have a good time."

"I'm sure they will. Now, I'll pick them up at Ledford's at seven o'clock and have Diane back home before seven-thirty. If it's all right, Alan will buy her a hamburger for supper."

"Oh, that's fine," Mrs. England said. "Well, I guess y'all better be on your way if the picture show starts at five."

Alan and Diane, still not having spoken to each other, got up together. "'Bye, Mama," Diane said, giving her a peck on the cheek.

At that moment the baby farted. Diane looked as if she were about to die.

Ten

1

After his stint at the lumberyard, Brother Odum Tate returned to Mrs. Hudson's boardinghouse. He bathed and dressed himself, then sat on the edge of his bed and turned on the radio, although for a long while he didn't pay any attention to it.

Finally he came out of his reverie just as an announcer was moving into sports: "A crowd of thirty thousand watched the Texas Longhorns whip the Bulldogs twenty-six to seven today in a game marked by many penalties against Georgia. Quarterback Charlie Britt completed a third-quarter pass to Jimmy Orr for Georgia's only touchdown. The high point of the game for the spectators was the introduction of Arkansas governor Orville Faubus. The governor stood and waved as an estimated thirty-three thousand football fans rose to their feet and cheered wildly."

Tate snapped off the radio, stood, and picked up his Bible. He had not been preaching at all for a month now, but every afternoon when the weather permitted he went down to the Square and sat on one of the benches, reading scripture and waiting for guidance. Sometimes one of the Square regulars would sit down next to him and talk to him a bit; more often he would have the whole Square to himself as evening shadows lengthened and, one by one, the stores closed.

It was warm today as he walked toward the Square. The twenty-first of September, the first day of fall, felt more like early summer. The temperature was an even eighty, and the air, still soaked with the rain-fall of the past week, held heat and humidity. Tate noticed how subdued town was, even for a Saturday afternoon, how quiet the streets,

how abstracted the people. Something, a dark cloud, the cloud from the bottomless pit, hung heavy and oppressive over Gaither, he thought.

He walked past Detterley's Funeral Home on his way to the Square. It was quiet this afternoon; earlier in the week, though, it had been the center of a whirl of activity, cars parked two deep at the curb in front of it, the parking lot behind it crammed with other parked cars as four or five funerals went on at overlapping times. There seemed to be only one body there now: no cars were out front, and only four men, looking uncomfortable in unaccustomed suits, stood smoking on the front porch. On impulse, Tate walked over to the building and climbed the steps.

One of the men on the porch nodded gravely to him, and Tate extended his hand. "My name's Odum Tate, brother," he said in the hushed voice people reserve for funerals. "I'm a preacher of the Word."

"Preacher," said the man, a tall, gangly fellow of perhaps fifty, with brushed-back wiry black hair. "Name's Dewey Eddowes." He was smoking a hand-rolled cigarette, and he took another drag on it.

"Who's dead, Brother Eddowes?" Tate asked.

"Old Miz Flora Norton. Was Flora Tedders before she married Clay Norton. My wife's great-aunt."

"I'm sorry, Brother Eddowes. How did she pass on?"

Eddowes flipped his cigarette onto the lawn. "She had a stroke, somebody said. She was eighty-seven."

"Well, that's a good old age."

"Yeah, she lived a right long time."

They stood for a moment awkwardly. Tate said, "I'll remember your family in prayer, Mr. Eddowes."

"Thank you, Preacher."

Then, because leaving the cluster of men seemed somehow awkward, Tate went into the funeral home. The floral smell was almost overpowering, cloying in the throat. Women and men stood in small, hushed clusters, and a few looked up at him as he came in. The body of Mrs. Norton lay in state in Parlor A, and Tate went to look at it: a sad-faced old lady, still and calm, in a lavender dress and a look of peace. That, he decided, was the true look of death, the way death should look: rest after long turmoil, relief from the wor-

ries of the world. Death should visit not as terror and anguish, but as release.

He left the viewing room and found an employee, recognizable by his black suit and black-tipped white carnation. The man, a chubby and youngish forty, stood a little apart from the mourners, his hands behind his back. "I'm Odum Tate," the preacher said, holding his hand out.

"Clyde Detterley." The undertaker's handshake was a little moist, a little limp. "Friend of the family?"

"Yes, sir, in a way. Is Mrs. Norton the only funeral today?"

"Yes, sir. It's slacked off since early in the week."

"Gaither had a bad week."

"Yes, sir. We handled nine funerals in all, Tuesday through Thursday. We normally might have handled three or four."

"Well, we can hope it'll get better."

"Yes, sir. May I give you one of my cards, Mr. Cape?"

"Tate." He took the pasteboard, glanced at the name, and slipped it into his breast pocket.

"If you'll excuse me, I'd better see if the chapel's ready."

Tate left unobtrusively through a side door and headed downtown. Despite his words to Detterley, the preacher had a nagging feeling that it was in no sense over, that in fact it might only have begun: and the nearly empty streets reinforced the feeling.

Tate sat on one of the benches facing Private Parks, the Confederate statue, and opened his Bible. But before he began to read, Tate meditated. He felt close to something, some idea, some notion, here at the center of town. He thought of his own life and the life of Gaither, and in sifting through it all he found much sin.

There was the sin of pride, of a self-righteous little town that thought itself far more important and far better than it actually was. This was the sin that led people to ignore crimes and cruelties in other places with a dismissive "Well, that's Atlanta." Or Gainesville. Or Little Rock. Behind it was the unspoken assumption that Gaither was somehow better than other places, above the human weaknesses that led to sorrow and suffering there; behind it was overweening pride.

There was the sin of anger. He saw it smoldering in the eyes of people as they passed by in the streets, saw it in the look a white man might dart at a black one, or that a black one might, more surrepti-

tiously, shoot at a white. It was an unfocused sort of sin, really a dissatisfaction with the sinner's own life, that could not rest until it moved outward, until it turned against someone else.

There were sins of greed, and of lust, and of profaning the Name of God. Oh, the people of Gaither considered themselves good people, and in truth they were probably as good as people anywhere else; but that meant they were born sinners, they were raised sinners, and they lived and died sinners, saved not by their own goodness if they were saved at all, but rather saved by the mysterious and undeserved grace of God.

Except that grace seemed far removed from Gaither these days.

Tate sighed. He looked into the Book, read scattered passages, not with any plan, but haphazardly, humbly, praying all the while in the back of his mind for guidance.

The demons speaking through the mouth of the possessed man told Jesus that their name was Legion, for they were many. If demons could inhabit a man, they could inhabit a town: a herd of swine, running for death, for the edge of a cliff in Gadara. Satan, the tester, in Job, serving God despite his enmity, making sure that Job was indeed a good and faithful servant after all, giving the lie to his own assertions of the essential wickedness of all men. Lucifer, the son of the morning, for whom hell moved, coming to accept him as he fell.

As the afternoon wore toward evening, Tate read and searched the scriptures, not finding what he wanted to find, and not aware that, not more than a hundred yards from the place he sat, his young friend Alan was watching a movie and feeling lost in his own private misery.

2

The show began promisingly enough, first with coming attractions: trailers for a western/adventure duo, *The True Story of Jesse James and Nightmare Alley*; then a Marilyn Monroe picture, *Bus Stop*; then a story about a woman who apparently had more than one person living inside her head, *The Three Faces of Eve*; and especially for Halloween, a shock double feature: *Curse of Frankenstein* and *X — The Unknown*.

A cartoon followed these up, a *Woody Woodpecker*. And after that, the movie itself, *Man of a Thousand Faces*, the story of Lon Chaney. At

first Alan and Diane had shared a box of popcorn and some whispered talk, but as the movie went on, they became engrossed in Chaney's biography, the story of a man who would suffer even physical pain to bring his screen portrayals to life. Well into the movie — just after the re-creation of the unmasking scene from *Phantom of the Opera*, done so well that it made both Diane and him jump — Alan began to lose track, for some reason.

He still saw the story unfolding on the screen; it wasn't that he had lost consciousness. But gradually he began to feel uneasy, short of breath. He became aware of each movement of his chest, of the inrush of air through nostrils and down into his lungs, of the aching hold, then the collapse of muscles and the slow exhalation. He felt as if the theater were too hot, the air too close, or as if the air were bad, already breathed, breathed thousands of times by people long dead.

But still greedy for the air, he thought suddenly. They're dead and they don't want to be dead, they want what I have now, life, and they'd like to take it from me if they can't have it themselves.

If he could have moved, Alan would have gotten up, mumbled an excuse, gone out to the lobby for a drink of water and a breath of air. But something seemed to hold him in his seat, to keep his attention on the flickering screen even as his discomfort grew. A tiny, distracting sound fluttered at the very edge of his awareness, like a moth not daring to come too close to a light. Part of his mind wondered what it was, worried the problem like a dog gnawing a bone, until it succeeded in identifying the sound.

Next to him, Diane was whimpering.

3

Ballew Jefferson no longer concerned himself about the dark.

Lamps, two dozen of them, brought some days ago by Miss Wayly, stood on every flat surface in the kitchen, plugged into six extension cords. A hundred-watt bulb burned in each lamp.

He had cleared away the broken glass and had finally managed to do something with the growing mound of garbage. He was now dumping everything, slop pail, chamber pot, garbage, out the back window. A sizable accumulation had already grown there, but inside, the kitchen was neater than it had been in many days.

His belt was pulled through two new notches now. His skin sagged under his growth of whiskers, and his ribs stood out beneath the fleshless covering of his chest. The cuts on his hands and arm were healing slowly, though with no sign of infection. He had finally removed the stitches in his palm himself, with the tip of the very sharp knife he had fashioned, and with the tweezers of his teeth.

The ceiling of the kitchen had grown a layer of soot over the stove, which still hissed blue gas. The thermometer he had tacked to the wall above the counter registered one hundred and five, though even as he read it Jefferson felt cold. He was thirsty all the time, too, and drank what seemed to be gallons of water, which passed right through him, emerging as red-tinged urine.

But he didn't have to worry about night anymore. The bulbs blazed with a noonday glare, spilled light plentifully into the room, drove all shadows far away. They shone unobstructed, for he had removed the shades and had crushed them before tossing them out the back window, as far as he could. Now Ballew Jefferson lived in heat and light. Not for many days had he heard her step close by. When the window grew dark, now, there was only the faintest muffled tread coming from up on the bedroom floor of the house. He thought he was winning.

The telephone was still a problem. He had offended his sister, he hoped for good, the last time she had called. People from the bank continued to phone, every other day or so, to ask for his decision on some loan or his advice on some transaction. He was curt, to the point, and evidently effective: the bank went on without him, to all intents and purposes quite as well as it had ever gone on with him there.

In his light and heat, Ballew Jefferson considered that for hours on end. He had felt twinges of mortality before: holding his first child newborn in his arms, watching all the children graduate and marry, waiting by his wife's bedside while she breathed out the last of her life. Signposts to the grave, all of them, and each one had reminded him of being just that much closer to the end of it all himself. Still, in his fantasies he supposed himself the captain of a ship, perhaps going down with the vessel but certainly never deserting it.

Yet the bank sailed serenely on without him. That last signpost, the one telling him he was no longer essential, or even particularly need-

ed, was written in the darkest characters of all. Here, he thought, is what my life comes down to: abandoned by my children, consulted only out of courtesy, fear, or greed by my employees, terrified by what the town knows of Mollie Avery and me (where had that damnable motion picture come from?), I rest alone beneath the kitchen table, protected by light, afraid of the dead woman and her dead mate (in court he had seen Billy Resaca only fleetingly, but somehow he had decided that the half-glimpsed black specter with the ruined arms was indeed the man whom Mollie called her “common-law”), starved for warmth and starved of body.

He knew, quite lucidly, that he was undoubtedly crazy.

He knew that he needed help.

And when he thought of calling for help — when he imagined the looks on the faces of the men or women who would come gasping into his private hell, whose hair would dance in the heat he required even to feel alive, whose eyes would see and evaluate and accuse — at those times his resolve would harden again.

He would wait her out.

He would wait them all out.

He gorged himself on canned foods. He punched holes in the tops of Carnation condensed milk and drank the liquid straight from the cans, for the sake of the calories. He once ate most of a stick of creamery butter, holding it like a candy bar and munching on it, before his stomach revolted and he vomited the grease up again.

Jefferson knew he had to feed the animal. What was that line from the Irish poet? A spirit fastened to a dying animal? He couldn't remember. No matter. The body had to live, the spirit had to be housed. If in this kitchen he died of malnutrition or starvation, he would win no victory.

And so he forced himself to eat, straight out of cans, beans, soups, meats. He thought it was catching hold now: not for days had he had to contemplate making another hole in his belt, the miserable diarrhea that had wrenched him on and off during the previous days had abated, and his weight seemed to stay constant. That Saturday, for the first time in a long time, he dared to hope that he might somehow win after all, that he might actually succeed in waiting out Mollie Avery.

In the late afternoon, he did something he had not done in weeks. He found a polished cookie sheet (Mollie had kept all her pots and

pans shiny, seeming almost brand-new) and used it as a mirror to study his face.

It was an unfamiliar one: hair, what was left, whiter than he recalled, matted to the scalp with sweat and heat. Chin whiskered, bristled with a respectable beard, but somehow receded for all of that: and above the beard, two cheekbones that cast triangular shadows over fallen chaps. Lips blistered, cracked, and blackened, and eyes staring out from deep sockets. He looked, he thought, like his own grandfather.

There had never before been a resemblance between Jefferson and his grandfather Arthur, the hardscrabble farmer who had been forced into the Confederate Army against his will — he kept no slaves and saw no reason to defend the self-proclaimed right of his more affluent neighbors to the south to do so — and who lived to be ninety-two, dying suddenly one summer's day back in '36. The old man's face had showed the courses of his life, mapped on forehead and cheek and throat in lines of hard work, disappointment, and stubbornness.

Ballew Jefferson, as a boy, had always been a little afraid of his grandfather, the profane, tobacco-chewing old man who had put his son through college just, as he said, "So's you can steal back from the rich sonsabitches some of what they took from me." And Sherry Jefferson, Ballew's father (he preferred the humiliation of his feminine-sounding nickname to the awful truth: his grandfather had named him Sherman in 1869, in memory of the devil who had burned Atlanta), had done that, pretty much. As a lawyer he had prospered in the county, laying up the modest wealth that would allow his son, along in the next century, to invest in the Trust Bank of Gaither.

His father, a round, soft man (though he could grow sharp and hard in court) had died only a year after his grandfather, as if the old man's iron will had kept him going, too. And people who remembered both of his forebears had told each other than Ballew resembled his father, not his grandfather. Ballew's brother Matthew was supposed to be the one who "took after" old Arthur Jefferson. But Matthew was long gone, too, dead in the trenches of France in October of 1918, only a few weeks before the Armistice.

So the bearer of Arthur Jefferson's standard turned out to be soft Ballew after all. It came to him, in his nest of light, that he was the one who had finally owned the slave. Arthur had not been able to, nor

would he ever have desired to, purchase human beings or even their labor. Sherry had always had a finicky aversion to colored help, preferring to hire only white cooks, maids, gardeners, and drivers. Ballew was the one who had employed the blacks: Ludie, Tom-Bob (he had done the yard every year up until '54, when he had an inconvenient stroke), and — of course — Mollie.

Mollie, the real slave.

Mollie, whom he had taken into his bed.

Mollie, who had been on the screen with him.

And with a clarity as piercing as the glare from his dozens of light bulbs, there in his kitchen, hiding like a cornered animal beneath his table, Ballew Jefferson at last glimpsed the truth: between the master and the slave, there is no one free. Both wear chains of servitude.

Mollie had owned him, or had thought she owned him.

And one day, someday, she would come to claim her property.

With a look on his face that made him resemble even more strongly old Arthur Jefferson, Ballew Jefferson settled in to wait. To hone his blade and wait.

But always in the light.

4

Andy McCory had bought himself a used car, a '46 Ford, and had had enough left over to buy the family a secondhand television set as well. True, its picture was more round than square, and for the size of the cabinet that housed it, the picture tube was minute, only twelve inches on the diagonal; but it worked. It pulled pictures and music into the McCory home, and it entranced the children. Now, late on a Saturday afternoon, they lay on their stomachs and watched Joe Palooka fighting it out in snowy black and white, as Lee McCory watched them, not the set, and wondered what was wrong with her husband.

For Andy was different, there was no denying that. He moved differently, talked differently, seemed even to think differently. He certainly made love differently.

That was the most difficult of all for her: having a stranger in her bed, in her arms. And yet —

And yet, if she were asked what about the change disturbed her, she would be hard put to it to give any rational answer. Andy had

not taken a drink, not so much as one beer, in all the time he had been working at his new job. Except for one or two occasions, he was home at predictable times. He had more money than he had ever had, and seemed to have more self-respect. He gave her money to buy things, clothes for the children, food for the table. He paid attention to his appearance, shaving daily, wearing a clean shirt every day, changing his trousers every other day. He even had gone to the dentist to have something done about the ugly spreading cavity in his front teeth and had had that repaired so that you could hardly even see the filling; more, the kids were to see the dentist next month, just to make sure their baby teeth were healthy. Lee had never dreamed of such extravagance.

Yes, Andy had changed, but anyone looking at him would swear he had changed for the better.

Why, then, did she draw back, as if by instinct, from his touch?

She decided it was his way of talking, for one thing. He was forgetful and fretful, screaming at her one moment for not doing things to his liking, all apology and teasing the next moment. True, he had almost stopped hitting her — had stopped, really, except for some stinging slaps across the thigh or rump, more lascivious than angry — but his moods swung wildly and without warning from affection to fury. The tension of living with him, of trying to anticipate the unpredictable weathers of his heart, was worse in a way than the beatings had been, and more painful.

And it hurt to see the children's reaction to their father. Danny and Little Lee were quiet in his presence, the silence of fear, not of respect. His touch on their heads was indifferent, dead almost, his notice of them as uncaring as it would have been of a tree or a rock. The children had stopped protesting that he was not their real father, but she read the thought in their eyes and — God help her — she had begun to have the same fantasy herself. This provider, this man with whom she slept, was somehow not her husband, not the father of Danny and Little Lee at all, but an impostor.

One event, more than all the others, had stabbed her heart like a dagger of ice. Lee's mother lived out in New Haven, in the mill house she shared with Lee's father, two brothers, and sister. When she had married Andy, her mother had seemed to write her off as dead. Lee had always been her daddy's favorite, and it wasn't hard to see him;

but not until the children were born, not until Lee had made her for the first time a grandmother, had Mrs. Summerour relented enough to allow Lee back into her house.

Now she was a doting granny, better to Little Lee and Danny — Lee thought enviously — than she had ever been to her own children. And the grandchildren, knowing a good thing when they saw it, fawned on her. But until this week, they had never spent the night at Granny Summerour's house. On Wednesday, Lee had let them sleep over, while she and Andy made love in the creaking old bed. They had made love several times, in fact, for lately Andy seemed unusually lusty.

But Thursday, when she had gone to pick them up, driving in their newly purchased car, both children had begged to stay. Annoyed, Lee had snapped, "Your granny gives you too much candy, that's what it is. That's why you love her and you don't love me."

And Danny, lip trembling, had said, "No, Mama. It's him."

She knew. Oh, she knew.

Now, as the kids watched the adventures of the blond boxer, she turned over alternatives in her mind. She could get a job in the cotton mill, in the roving department maybe or the spinning room. There was a hosiery mill in town; she could make stockings. She could work at the hatcheries, grading chicks. She could work at the poultry plant, butchering and packaging chicken. Hard work, all of it, backbreaking labor for low pay: but what else was she fit for? She had quit school to marry Andy. Who would hire someone who had never finished the tenth grade? Who would give her a decent job?

But people managed on the salaries they drew from the chicken plants or from the mills. That could be done. Only who would be left to care for the children? Even if she took the third shift, the graveyard shift, she couldn't leave Danny and Little Lee alone in the house at night, not after the awful things that had happened in town this last month, not with Andy still in town.

And she knew that her mother was no answer. The children were already a wedge between them, lodged firmly in the ill-mended crack that had broken open once before. Sooner or later there would come a time when her mother would want the children but wouldn't want Lee.

But there had to be a way.

Lee knew what the decision would have to be, knew that it would be sudden and final. "Kids," she would say, standing up, "we're moving."

The children would then go and pack all their clothes and some of their toys (almost all of their toys, really; they had so few) in a big, broken-cornered suitcase of heavy cardboard. In a smaller suitcase Lee would put her own possessions before going next door, borrowing the phone, and calling a taxi. It would take them to her mother's house, where they would spend the night.

The next day she would have to go looking for a job, perhaps managing to find a good one, a better one than she had hoped for, maybe working as a clerk in the five-and-dime. Lee imagined herself explaining to Andy about herself and the children, imagined finding him indifferent. It was even possible Andy would agree not to contest the divorce.

Sure enough, even in her fantasy, she had trouble with her mother before the year was out. But by then Lee had done so well that she was made supervisor of her shift, and she was able to hire someone to watch the kids during the day in the mill house they were renting. The divorce was final before the end of that year. Before the end of the next, Lee was dating a man she had met on the job, a kind and gentle man who worked hard as a mechanic for the Southern Railroad. They were married the next year.

The children began school, and when Little Lee was in second grade her half-sister Rose was born. Lee's new husband was able to move into a better-paying job with the Seaboard, and Lee in turn was free to quit her own job. They lived together happily as a family, and they never mentioned Andy.

All this never happened, except in Lee's idle daydream. It all flashed through her mind that Saturday afternoon as Little Lee and Danny watched their twelve-inch TV. She thought of getting out of her chair, of saying in a brisk voice, "Kids, we're moving."

But the unknown reaches of her life seemed very broad and dark, very perilous.

In the end, she bit her lip and said nothing.

In the end, she decided to give Andy one more chance.

Maybe, she thought, it isn't really as bad as it seems.

After all, she told herself, he hasn't really changed. He's still the same Andy, really.

Isn't he? Isn't he?

Isn't he?

5

Alan watched his mother die.

He didn't know when the shadows on the screen stopped being the story of Lon Chaney and started being scenes from his own life, from his own family, but they had, running like a dream in a fever, an impossibly rapid succession of images. At times he felt that he was no longer in the audience, no longer safe in his seat, but was one with those shadows, shared in their misery and ugliness.

He had already seen his father at Dachau, or someplace close to it. His father had been shockingly young, seeming hardly older than Alan himself, swollen by his baggy GI trousers and his pack, but his face, under the helmet and liner that seemed absurdly large, was the pinched, thin face of a boy. Alan stood with him as men on tractors uncovered a pit, and with him Alan stared into the pit, a jumble of human bodies, corpses obscenely, promiscuously entangled in the long sleep of death and rot. It was impossible to look, impossible to look away.

Near the trench, but just dropped in a pile on the ground, was a pile of dentures, partials, uppers, lowers, full sets, the ones on the top pink and white, the ones on the bottom faded, the gums the color of dirty old ivory piano keys, speckled green algae growing on the teeth. It was a grotesquely large pile, certainly taller than Alan.

Then it was gone, and he saw his mother groaning in labor, gasping for breath, and watched as she died. He could not move, could not stir a finger: his face was numb, his lips dead. He could not even feel the tears spilling over his cheeks, dripping from his chin. He could no more cry out than avert his eyes. The doctor, smeared, splashed with blood, shaking his head: the baby dead, too (his sister, never born, dead before the world knew her). And a sheet swept over the large still form and a sheet swept over the small still one, and they were now citizens of that underground city of the dead. They had joined the patient corpses of Dachau.

Images continued, pulling Alan in. He saw his father's face again, the helmet shadowing his eyes, and he watched his father take photo-

graph, photograph, photograph, of the horrors of war. Did he read something wild in those eyes, so much like his? Some fascination with the things he saw and recorded, some dark urge, some wish that the finger were depressing not a shutter release but a trigger, that he, too, were dealing some small share of the great death? A madness lurked there, surely.

His mother, alive again, and younger than he could ever remember her being, dressed in strange old-fashioned clothing, joked with a man at a service station, laughed at his insinuating remarks. Where was John Kirby? In the army? And what was his mother doing? Flirting with the man who changed her tire, trading innuendoes with him? What did she want?

Alan saw a crazy series of flashes: Miss Lewis standing naked (naked!) at a window, head thrown back, and a shadowy man (John Kirby, his father) coming from behind to stroke her torso, to cup her breasts in his hands, she arching her back, nuzzling her face against his cheek —

Preacher Odum Tate drinking whiskey straight from a bottle, cursing a woman, while a child cried piteously in another room —

A woman, thin and young, sprawled on the grass, her body an unspeakable ruin —

A man in police uniform firing a gun not two feet away from a woman's face —

A black man with bleeding tatters of flesh in his teeth —

All was dark.

I'm dead, Alan thought very clearly.

A voice, a thought, answered him: Clever boy. Yes, you are.

No. I don't want to be dead.

Nor does any of your breed. Yet they all come to it, in the end.

Help me.

Child. You imagined there was good on earth, that it came from within people like you. That is a lie. There is no good in man or woman. I live, and I cannot live without their evil. See them with my eyes, and you see only foulness and corruption. Look at this.

The screen was alight again. It was a scene of Gaither, but a Gaither of many years gone by: the Square looked much the same, though Private Parks had a bronze luster instead of the layers of verdigris that he now wore. But the theater, the State, the ShadowShow, was not

there: instead Alan saw a ramshackle, tin-roofed barn of a building, painted white and faded dingy gray. Ornate but weather-beaten blue letters painted across the tall front of the building proclaimed it the Simmons Livery Stable.

The scene changed, as a scene in a movie does, and Alan knew he was now inside the building. Two men, one white, one black, quarreled in front of a horse in a stall. "You ain't gettin' no five dollars from me, Jim Bascom!" the white man, stocky in boots, tan trousers, and tan shirt, bellowed.

The black man, as tall as the white one but thinner by forty pounds and younger by twenty years, grinned and almost danced in his anxiety. "Please, sir," he begged, his voice high-pitched with fear, "please, Mr. Simmons. You done promise me that five dollars. I done everything you ast me to."

"I just bet you did," Mr. Simmons growled. "I just bet everything's all fixed and done and I won't have to spend all day tomorrow doin' it again."

"Aw, Mr. Simmons. You knows I work hard."

"Get on out of here, boy. You come back tomorrow, I might just have some work for you."

"Mr. Simmons, it done been a week that I work for you. Please, sir, I needs the five dollars."

Simmons walked over to the wall, where a coil of rope hung from a nail. He took the rope down, unwound three feet of it, and came back toward the black man. The end of the rope swished viciously in the air as he twitched it like a whip. "You get on out of here, boy. You forget about comin' in tomorrow. I don't take back talk from your kind."

"Aw, now, Mr. Simmons — "

The rope hit the black cheek and drew blood. It spilled through black fingers as Bascom tried to hold it in. The eyes of Jim Bascom were small round mirrors of hatred.

Abruptly the scene changed. It was night, now, and Alan saw the stable as if from the outside, from the base of the statue in the Square. Orange light shone from within. A lick of flame tasted the frame of the loft door.

Then the world was dissolving in fire and smoke and the shrill screams of dying mules and horses. It was more than a movie: Alan felt the heat on his face, smelled the sickening stench of burning hair

and flesh, watched as black silhouetted scurrying figures threw ineffective streams of water.

Another abrupt shift. Mr. Simmons again, rope in his hands once more, and the cold light of an early dawn on his face. He was at the center of a crowd, sharing an open space with the same black man he had hit — the cut on the cheek now **crusted** over, but other wounds framing it, closing one eye, and the man himself on his knees, wrists tied behind him. Simmons slipped a noose over the man's head. "Now, nigger," he said. "Teach you to burn people's property."

The black man's voice, not high this time, but faint, hoarse, a voice of no hope: "Mr. Simmons, I never did."

"Do it," Simmons said.

Another man in the crowd struck a horse on the flank, and the animal bolted forward, jerking the black man into the air. Alan heard a muffled crack, heard the gargling of saliva (blood?) in the throat, saw the jerks and spasms of the body, smelled the sudden stench of death.

A change of scene. The ruins of the stable now, blackened earth, heaps of ash, and half-burned timbers, with the body of Jim Bascom tossed on a mound of charred wood. The eyes were open, the whites gone deep red; a blackened tongue protruded from the mouth. A white man splashed liquid over the body, stepped back, flung a match. Flames caught, smoke boiled. The wood started to burn. The black man's clothing was already afire, his hair smoldering.

And then it moved.

It lurched almost to its knees, tumbled sideways, rolled off the pyre. A man in the crowd screamed, his voice like a woman's — "Great God Amighty!" — and the crowd scattered. The corpse, facedown in a muddy puddle, lay still. Beyond it the pyramid of wood burned harmlessly.

The voice came in Alan's head: This happened right where you sit. What made him move?

Maybe I did. Maybe there is a way around death, after all. Maybe I have the secret of eternal life.

Who are you?

A papery laugh, the sound of wind in dry leaves, and the receding voice: That would be . . . telling . . .

Don't leave me alone in the dark!

Oh, child. You have much to see yet. So much to see. Much evil. See what wickedness really goes on in this town. See how those you

thought were good hold secret sins close, close! Oh, see it all. Then, child, then, decide if you want to claim your inheritance, to take your place among the people of this place — or whether you want to be mine

6

Ludie Estes had taken twenty dollars from Mr. Jefferson's envelope this Saturday evening. "You be goin' off next year this time," she said to Michael. "You be goin' to learn at that college so far away."

"I hope so, Granny-Ma." He handled the car with assurance, taking the most direct route back home, keeping them in the white section of town for the absolute minimum of time.

"I been thinkin' all day about that poor man they hung so long back," Ludie said. "He come to my mind, some way."

"There's white people all over would hang us if they could do it and not get caught, Granny-Ma."

"His wife so pitiful. Here what I taken in mind to do: you drive me out to the cemetery behind of Marsh Hollow Church."

"Right now, Granny-Ma?"

"I want to see Jim Bascom grave. For his spirit been atroublin' my thought."

Michael Estes took a quick sideways look. "I got to do this, ain't I?" he asked.

"If you a good grandson, you ought to do it."

Michael laughed, a rich, dark sound. "One thing they never gonna teach me at college, is how to get round you, old lady."

"I ain't so old I feeble-minded," Ludie said.

Michael shrugged and turned the car left on Tower Street instead of continuing south. "That's three-four miles out of town."

"They wouldn't let him be buried no closer. Did I say they burnt him?"

"Yeah. You told me that."

"Only they say he got up, dead as he was, and walked through the fire. Walk through the fire and the tempest, Lord, walk plumb through the fire."

"Then he must not've been dead, Granny-Ma."

"I never forget his wife, she cryin' and weepin' and they just take him on. Take him on and hang him. They white men livin' in this

town today that back then tied the ropes on his hands and feet, white men that set the fire the Lord let him get up and walk free from, dead though he be. Then his wife move away off somewheres with the children."

Michael grunted and concentrated on his driving. It was late afternoon, nearly five, and he had a bit of traffic to contend with, heaviest toward the railroad tracks, along Produce Row, a lane of shabby three-sided booths where farmers brought their produce in season. Corn and apples, a few pumpkins already, baskets of green beans, tomatoes, piles of cabbage there now: and, Michael reflected, not a one of the booths would sell him or Ludie an ounce of goods. Blacks had to go to the old barn off Thomson Mill Road, where the black farmers of the county brought their offerings. It was as if some imagined contamination of different flesh lingered, as if the touch of a black hand spoiled vegetables for white consumption.

They jolted and clattered across the railroad tracks, went out past the feed mills (an ungodly stench: they rolled the windows up as tight as possible), over a narrow concrete bridge, and then through a pine wood. On the other side of the woods was a straggling black community, gray houses, bare grassless lawns, hands of children waving in pink-palmed greeting as they drove past.

And then the little country church, square and white, with a skeletal steeple, open on all sides but at least roofed over, and a reclaimed train bell hanging in it. The parking lot at the side of the church was unpaved. Michael parked the car, got out, and opened the door for Ludie. She groaned up from her seat and started toward the graveyard in the half-bent attitude she had to hold for long minutes before her protesting back would allow her to straighten.

"It over there toward the woods," she said. "Off kinda by itself."

She picked her way carefully through rudely marked graves, some with thin marble tombstones, most with simple wooden markers or uncarved chunks of white quartz. Mason jars, most of them brown-fogged with dust, held sprigs and sprays of dead flowers on the low mounds. One grave had been completely outlined in marbles, aggies and cat's-eyes, cloudies and shiners.

"Here," she said, stopping at a grave that was indeed apart from the others, separated from its nearest neighbor by a good fifteen feet. It had a headstone, pitted and blackened with years, but the carving was

still readable: JAMES MAXWELL BASCOM, 1893–1922. HE THAT KINDLED THE FIRE SHALL SURELY MAKE RESTITUTION.

"It's all sunk in," Michael said, looking at the grave. It sagged below the surface of the surrounding earth, a shallow, smooth-surfaced, oval depression of red clay still shiny from the rains of the last few days.

"Jim Bascom," Ludie said softly. "Where you go, Jim Bascom? Why ain't you in your grave?"

"Granny-Ma — "

"Hush, Michael. I ain't crazy. Listen for him to answer me."

Michael looked wildly around. They were at the dark edge of the woods, and the sun was low, and the church and his car were a hundred yards away.

He had the sick feeling that someone, something, just might answer Ludie's question.

7

The screen was a lurid carnival of sin. Alan, no longer in the theater, no longer really anywhere, felt a strange kind of detached nausea.

It was a curious feeling, for he really seemed to himself to be now nothing more than perceiving eyes, bodiless, lidless, unblinking, fixed on the images before him on the screen. This is how God sees us, he thought helplessly. This is what we are, helpless and naked, hopeless and raging. Despite his disembodied state, the spectacle literally sickened him. Alan saw a crazy flashing catalog of all types of wrong, done by all those he knew so well: teachers, ministers, policemen, friends of his father, schoolmates. And each hugged wickedness tight like a forbidden lover, each one made it part of himself or herself.

Alan had once turned over a huge rock, the way ten-year-old boys will, just to see if he could move the weight. Beneath it he found squirming, crawling horror, gelid gray brown-spotted eggs of some creature stirring vaguely with almost-born life (but already looking as if death had laid a rotting hand on them), blind white grubs of unknown insects pulsing frantically, writhing maggots seeking any shade from the sun, a flat tan-colored scurrying scorpion carrying its curved sting right over its head. Alan had recoiled in horror from the damp black patch of earth, revolted by what he had revealed.

Alan felt the same way now, as if he alone were privy to all the darkest secrets of the town, and they were all like the concealed, light-hating life under the rock, all of it cold and stinking already of decomposition. On the screen that was more than a screen, antic human bodies writhed naked, human tongues told lies of stunning malice, human smiles of welcome tightened to grimaces of hatred as faces turned aside.

Still, bad as the surreal movie was, the blackness was worse. It happened several times: the images would leap more and more frantically, more feverishly, until they seemed to burst apart in a fiery, soundless explosion of light, leaving him alone in void and darkness, unconnected, with an awful feeling of falling, of dropping mile by mile down a pit that went on without end forever, with not even wind to whistle past his ears. Each time, before he struck the unfathomable bottom, light burst on him again as some new scene unfolded, slowly at first, then with increasing speed.

But finally, after what seemed years, at the end of one of these intervals, he saw a black woman in a white room.

Never had he seen a room more literally white: she stood facing him in a bare glaring cubicle of a room, illuminated with harsh light from nowhere, a bone-colored room just too small for comfort, with walls too close together, a ceiling that lowered just an inch more than he could bear it. He felt as if outside those walls, and hardly excluded by them, tons of earth lay, ready to crush, to pour in, to annihilate.

The black woman stood docile and naked.

She wasn't really black. Reese Donalds might have called her a high yaller: a trim thin woman, skin the color of coffee mixed half and half with milk, hair black and close-trimmed to her head, nose snub and cheeks high, nipples brown as milk chocolate, dark triangle of hair at the confluence of thighs and belly. Her long-fingered hands dangled loosely by her sides, her feet rested flat on the white floor, and her brown eyes were as empty as the room.

Her lips moved, and the sound came a bare instant later, as if somehow her voice was out of synchronization. "Alan. He is very strong." Each word fell somehow heavily, like lead pellets released one by one.

Alan discovered that he had a body again, was standing in his white nylon shirt (clammy patches of sweat under his arms against his ribs) and his black trousers in that vacant room, not five paces from

the naked woman. He could not look away. Two years ago he had begun to dream at night of the mysterious female bodies beneath skirts and blouses, and for the past year or so he had fantasized about them almost every night while stimulating himself to the breathless burst of relief. Here was an attractive body casually, almost elegantly displayed, breasts tilted, stomach smooth, legs strongly muscled. He felt the first stirring of desire and with it a growing embarrassment.

"You can have me," she promised. "I will give you kisses." The pink tip of her tongue showed, curled, touched her upper lip, receded. The corners of her mouth stretched wide in a soulless smile. "All the things you dreamed of doing. He will give me to you."

"Who?" Alan asked, surprised that his voice came out at all, surprised at how flat it sounded, at the empty-house echo that vibrated fractionally at the end of the monosyllable.

"The master." She took a single slow step forward, right leg swinging out a little, coming back to the left and down, toes touching the floor, flattening, the ball of the foot taking weight, then the heel. She extended her hands, nails down, palms up, reaching out to him. "You can be useful to him."

"Who?" Alan's voice was thick, pleading almost.

The ghastly mockery of a smile had never left her face. If anything, it widened a bit. "He doesn't change us. He takes away the troublesome part, the part that thinks. What's left is what you are, what we all are. What we most want to do. That is his gift to us. He gives us freedom."

"Who?"

The hands dropped and dangled, puppet arms no longer lifted by strings. Alan had the fleeting impression of great weariness, coming not from the woman before him but from somewhere far away. "Freedom. To do anything you want, to anyone you want. And live forever." The smile stretched too wide, became the rictus of a corpse.

His brief erection had wilted. The woman's eyes were dead, whatever the lips murmured. Alan took a quick step away, found his back against a bare, blank wall. There were no doors, no windows, in this white place a thousand miles under the ground. "No," he said.

The woman swayed a bit on her feet. The smile seemed only a bit more human, and the voice purred low, insinuatingly: "It's what you want. It doesn't have to be me. Would you like the little girl? He says

he will give you the little girl. Would you like to love her? To hurt her? She will be yours."

"No, no — "

Again the strange waver. The chin came down, and the woman looked at him from beneath straight brows. "You know your father killed your mother."

Alan reacted against the words, not their dull, dead tone: "He didn't!"

"Oh, but he did. You saw that he did. He lies awake at night telling himself that he did. Your father knows that he could have saved her life. Like an animal he lusted, knowing that one more child would end her, and despite his knowledge he planted in her womb the seed that killed her."

Alan put his hands over his ears, but try as he might he could not close his eyes. If he could have collapsed to the floor he would have done it, but some force held him on his unsteady legs.

His clamped hands did no good at all, for the cool, insinuating voice came through: "Your mother wants you to kill him. She hates him. Her soul is still alive, you know. Alive and burning, burning. He sent her to hell, Alan. She wants you to kill him for her."

He shook his head.

"Do you think it will hurt him to die? It doesn't hurt at all, Alan. It feels good. The knife is cool, sliding in, so cool. It makes a wet sound."

Through clenched teeth Alan tried to say a prayer, a psalm, anything. He could only grind out, "The Lord is my shepherd" before he forgot what came next, so he said it again, and again.

The woman laughed. Her voice, unlike his, stirred no echo. "Only sheep need a shepherd, Alan. Men need . . . this." Her cupped palms stroked her body, breasts and thighs, with a soft sliding rustle. "Would you like to do this for me, Alan?"

He shook his head, weeping.

She laughed, a lower sound, from deep within her, chesty, but not loud. "Live forever, Alan. Like me. Nothing can kill me now. I'm dead already, and I live forever. All the suffering, all the sorrow is over. Look. Look at my secrets." She pinched the flesh of her right breast and pulled, and with a wet, sucking sound the breast tore loose from her torso. With the other hand she grasped the skin of her abdomen and pulled, like a woman opening a coat, and her pink and purple

intestines spilled out of a growing rent, glistening. Alan felt hot bile gush in the back of his throat.

"Now," she said, smiling. "Don't you want me? Don't you think I'm pretty?" She took another step toward him, her entrails dangling to her knees, swaying with her steps. Her laugh was low, feral.

Unbidden, a memory came to Alan: Mr. Tate, Miss Lewis, and himself, pledging love, saying a prayer. Though he made no sound or movement, the woman stopped her advance, the expression on her face dazed, then angry. "Your friends," she said, and a colder edge was in the voice now. "I forgot your friends. They shall be mine, too, boy. They shall all dance to my tune."

Alan closed his eyes. He could at least close his eyes now. When he opened them again, the woman was whole, wounds gone or concealed, but she had retreated from him, was against the white wall, lips snarling away from white teeth. "Puppet," Alan said, his voice a rasp. "You're a puppet."

Now there was nothing of a woman's sound at all about the voice, just a breathy, malicious quality, not male, not female. "I shall kill you very slowly, I think. How does a year of dying sound? Or ten thousand years? They are the same to me."

"Love," Alan said. He wanted to say more, but the monosyllable was all he could force out.

There was a quick hiss of breath, then a low and mocking chuckle. "You will be mine," the woman said. Then she melted into the white wall.

Alan stared stupidly for a long time before he realized he was sitting in the second seat from the aisle in the fifth row of the ShadowShow, staring at the blank white screen. He looked at Diane beside him.

She turned toward him a face eloquent of wrenching misery. "You, too?" he whispered. He touched her arm with tentative fingers.

She jerked her arm away from him as if he had put a red-hot poker against her flesh. People were rising, shuffling, leaving, already filling the aisle.

"We have to go," Alan said, panic unraveling his voice. His shirt was cold against him where he had sweated. "Let's get out of here."

Diane stood, with disconnected, jerky movements, and he followed her up the aisle, out into the lobby. Mr. Badon stood beside the ticket booth. As they passed, he smiled and nodded at Alan.

For an instant Alan froze, transported momentarily back to the bare white room. The smile and the woman's smile were the same, a dead expression.

Now Alan thought he knew the answer to his repeated question: Who? Who? Who?

The man the woman had talked about, the "master," the puppeteer, was Mr. Athaniel Badon.

Diane went outside, Alan at her heels. "Dad will be waiting at the store," Alan said, his voice rattling in his throat.

He was surprised at how late it seemed. It was only a little before seven, but they had gone into the theater in the afternoon and were coming out into gathering twilight.

"Do you want to eat first?" Alan asked.

Diane shook her head.

She moved a little apart from him on the sidewalk as they turned the corner and went toward the bookshop. Alan, miserable, still frightened, wondered to himself just what the bastard had shown Diane — and what dark things he had promised her.

8

In the cemetery Michael Estes was no longer frightened of nothing. Now he was frightened of something.

He was afraid his grandmother was insane.

She stood patiently, back stooped, head thrust forward, in a listening attitude at the foot of the grave, as she had stood for more than an hour. The sun was already behind the trees, and the sky in the west was glowing pink and gold. Still Ludie stood, immovable as the pillar of salt in the Bible, patient as the stones of the cemetery. The sunken grave before her filled with shadows. Evening wind rattled dead flowers. A chimney-swift flying overhead twittered. A car passed the church.

"Granny-Ma — "

Ludie, swaying back and forth, turned her face toward him, her eyes closed. "I be wrong," she said. "I thinkin' it Jim Bascom comin' back to trouble us and all. I ashamed. It ain't him atall. It somethin' got in him."

"Let's go home, Granny-Ma."

The old woman nodded. "We go on home. He wonder what his wife doin', where she go after he die. She miss him so bad. She must be old now, like me. She done gone away from this town, off somewheres. Only her second eldest daughter stay behind, and she dead now her own self, and her daughter, too."

Michael took his grandmother's arm and helped her pick her way back among the grave markers. Her step suddenly hitched, and he held tighter to keep her from stumbling. "Just a minute," Ludie said. She stooped and fumbled with her skirts. After a second, Michael saw that she was entangled in a briar, a long, viny green briar with sharp brown-tipped stickers. He bent, grasped the stem between forefinger and thumb, and pulled. "Not so hard," she said. "It let go if you pull the cloth the right way. Here." Her old fingers deftly released the hem of her calico skirt from the briar's thorns.

"It gonna be dark," Michael said.

"It get dark every night." Ludie sighed, long and deeply. "Lord forgive me, I wrong about Jim Bascom. Here I be thinkin' it must be his spirit so restless, but that only part of it." They got to the corner of the church, stepped out of the graveyard. "And he burnt the stable, too."

"What?"

"Yeah, he done what the white folks say, he burnt the stable. 'Cause old Simmons wouldn't give him his fair pay. Jim Bascom shouldn't have burnt the stables, all them mules and horses dyin' so hard. But a mule or a horse still ain't a man, is it?"

"Granny-Ma, get in the car." Michael opened the door and pulled his grandmother toward the vehicle.

She grunted as she ducked her head down and climbed into the front seat, making the springs creak. "Mule a mule, horse a horse, neither of them a man. But them white folks, they kill him all the same. Lord, they lift him in the air and fling him into the fire." Michael slammed the door, went around to the driver's side. "All for burnin' wood and hay and killin' mules and horses," his grandmother said. "It ain't right."

Michael got behind the wheel and started the car. "Granny-Ma, you need to rest."

"Evil spirit here, though. It in Gaither right now. It go to work on the meanness that already here," she said. "It told him to burn that barn all them years ago. But it didn't have him, it wasn't strong

enough. But now it come back. And they some in town, Lord, that has the true evil in them. It come back to town now, it wake that evil up, and it walk round just like a man. They some in town, Lord, that hang him and put him in the fire all them years back."

The car spun gravel as it lurched onto the highway and turned back toward town. "You got to rest," Michael said.

"His poor wife. His poor daughters. I done lost sight of them poor daughters. Mollie favor her, I think."

"Who?"

"His poor wife. Didn't I say? Didn't I tell you about Mollie? Mollie, she Jim Bascom's grand-baby."

9

"So. Tonight I recognized the one I first sensed."

Andy, placing the film reels in their tins, looked at Mr. Badon. "Can it be tonight?" he asked. The final show was over, and he was ready to leave.

Badon shook his head. "I am stronger than I was, but not yet. There are things to be arranged. I think we must be respectable businessmen for a short while yet."

Andy straightened, ran a hand through his red hair, raising it up in a ruff. "You told me I could do her."

"In good time, Andy, in good time. You will be the perfect husband and father to your family, do you understand? You will not touch your wife or your children."

"Except when you get into my head and want to fuck my wife!"

"Crude, Andy," murmured Badon. He lifted a long finger. "It has been long since I sampled human lust. For my kind it is strong wine; I hope you will forgive my indulgence. But you shall have reward enough, in time; and I shall draw life and strength from your deed when you do it. It is to my interest, too, remember. But we are at a delicate balance just now. I moved perhaps a bit too rapidly at first, betrayed by my own great need. How fortunate we are that we now know our enemies. And how fortunate we are that no one will listen to them or believe their preposterous tales of ghouls and ghosts, eh? I think we shall go slowly. Next month is October, Andy. A splendid time of year, don't you think?"

Andy grunted and clattered the cans into their racks.

"The end of the month, I think. Halloween. The Eve of All Hallows' Day. That would be a fitting time to possess the town, do you think?"

"It's a whole month off."

"Oh, but I did not mean that you would have to be idle. No, there is much to do, Andy, much to do before then. We have a whole little army to recruit, and I must grow stronger, stronger, before I can be sure they move to my will always. We will travel slowly, but all the same we will go forward. And you will have treats, Andy. I think you will enjoy them."

"Can I go now?"

"If you wish. I think I shall go as well."

Andy stared at him. "You never left the theater before," he said. "You slept here always before."

"Did I?"

"Well, I thought you did, anyhow. Why should you go someplace else tonight?"

Badon smiled. "Tonight there is no midnight show, I think. I have given many of them already, and they tire me so. Did you know that I gave two more tonight, private midnight shows in the afternoon, to two special customers, while the other hogs around them saw the shadows of an ordinary film?" The smile became a wolfish grin. "I think perhaps when I am stronger, it would be interesting to give a Saturday-matinee midnight show. Yes, three hundred children all seeing it at once. I can picture them going home, the things they would do." He shrugged. "However. There are already men and women in town who have seen my special shows, and when I wish them to act on them, they will. For tonight, I no longer feel comfortable in the theater. I shall take my repose elsewhere, I think."

"It has to be soon," Andy said. "That black-haired bitch."

"Soon, Andy," Badon said, his voice silk and shadows. "Very, very soon. Yes. Very soon now indeed."

Eleven

1

Diane England was terribly abstracted all the next week. Miss Ulrich noticed it, the other students noticed it, and of course Alan noticed it.

She wasn't hysterical; she wasn't even very different. Still, there was something about the way she went through the motions of attending school that seemed mechanical, without thought. Alan pleaded with her several times to tell him what had happened, what she had seen at the movie, only to be rewarded with a vacant stare from her, a face dead to emotion, as if he were a minor annoyance, or perhaps even less, something hardly worth notice, let alone anger.

Alan, after a long night without sleep, had met with Miss Lewis and Mr. Tate in the school on Sunday afternoon. Miss Lewis read aloud to them the sections of folklore she had marked, sections describing devil-men and dream demons, beings that assumed human form to torment men and women, the basis (according to one book) for widespread vampire and werewolf legends.

It was too much like a lesson in school, and Alan lost track of what she was saying. The chair he was in seemed springy to him, though it wasn't, and the room was close and hot. He kept losing the buzz of Miss Lewis's voice, kept seeing in his mind her standing naked by a window and his father behind her, caressing her. When at last she stopped talking, Mr. Tate, looking sidelong at the boy, had asked, "Somethin' happen, Alan?"

He shook his head, found himself fighting down a sob, and then told it all, or as much as he could tell and still face them. He wept as he spoke. Miss Lewis said, "Oh, Alan," and came to hold him. His

voice broke into hitching breaths, and, her arms still around him, Miss Lewis said fiercely, "I don't care about that filthy picture anymore. But this is too much. He's a child!"

Mr. Tate said, "Ma'am, I doubt that the thing, whatever it is, devil or man, cares whether Alan's a man or a boy. There's just plain evil here, and evil is no respecter of persons."

Alan finally controlled his breathing. "There's more to it," he said. "I think maybe the beginning of it."

"The beginning?"

Miss Lewis, without fuss, offered him a handkerchief, and he wiped his eyes and nose. "Yes'm, I think it might be. Do you know if there used to be a livery stable where the theater is now?" he asked.

Tate didn't know. Miss Lewis had heard something about it. Slowly, Alan related the vision he had suffered, the black man hanged, burned, rolling free of the fire at last to lie facedown in mud and water. "I believe that has something to do with it," Alan said. "But I don't know anything about it."

Ann Lewis tugged at a lock of her hair. "The stable did burn down. I know that much. I can check the rest."

"I'll find out about it, too," Tate said. "I can ask some of the older fellows on the Square." His gaze, direct and glittering, turned full on Alan. "Do you think this is a hauntin'? This colored man's spirit comin' back?"

Alan could only shake his head. He didn't know; and something, he could not say what, kept him from talking about Mr. Badon. "I don't know. I don't think there are ghosts, but — I don't know."

But the other two would try to find out. His main worry was, at first, Diane — and she clearly did not want him to think about her at all, never mind worrying about her.

On Monday, having thought about Miss Lewis's books and about what he had gleaned from his own, Alan found something to occupy him. His uncle Frank was away again, and his aunt Betty agreed to something her husband would surely have forbidden: she gave Alan permission to use Frank's tools and workshop. Alan had given her the impression that he wanted to make something for his father, as, under Uncle Frank's supervision, he had earlier made for him a tie rack and a bookshelf. Aunt Betty had no idea what Alan was really up to.

He was making weapons.

His father had a never-used set of sterling silverware, real silver. Alan abstracted three dinner knives from the set.

After all, according to the stories in his books, vampires, warlocks, or werewolves could be quelled with silver.

In the workshop Alan honed the dull dinner-knife blades to thin stilettos, then used the drill press to drill holes in their handles. He bolted heavier new wooden handles on. It took him three evenings, but when he had finished and had restored the workshop to its original order with his customary neatness, Alan felt a lot easier. He concealed the knives in one of his bureau drawers, thinking that maybe his lie to his aunt wasn't that bad: that maybe in a way he had actually made something for his father.

September passed away in a haze of concern and fear. During the last few days of the month, Alan had to worry about his father, who had come down with fever, nausea, and aches. Dr. Smith congratulated him on the first authentic case of Asian flu in Gaither and put him to bed for a week. John Kirby was not the best of patients. Alan and his aunt Betty saw him through the last weekend in September, and then Alan had to go to school and leave him home alone. Fortunately, Alan's aunt was made for just such an emergency; Betty Lessup checked on him five or six times a day, while his temporary helper Julie Finchley happily kept the shop.

Despite John's insistence that he was really well, that nothing much was the matter with him to begin with, he was so weak that he kept pretty much to his bed, except for times when he would lie miserably on the sofa and watch television. So he welcomed in October, wheezing and groaning.

It was a wet welcome. Rain set in on Sunday, and by the first day of the month, Tuesday, an inch and a quarter had already fallen. That increased over the next couple of days, until by Thursday, the third, Gaither had received three and a third inches of rain, over three-fourths of October's normal total rainfall. The drumming of it on the roof became incessant, and by Tuesday Rainey Hill lived up to its name: the street became first a rivulet and then a torrent, so that Alan had to walk his bicycle up the hill across lawns rather than fight the current.

At least by Wednesday his father was perking up a bit, enough at least to follow on the radio the first game of the World Series. As a

matter of general principle and from the deep-seated desire to root for the underdog, John and Alan Kirby were anti-Yankee fans, and they pulled for the Milwaukee Braves. The Braves went down to defeat by a score of three to one in that first game, which just proved, John Kirby groused, that the Braves needed well people to cheer them on, not invalids.

Alan studied the papers, read them aloud to his father. He paid unusually close attention to the local obituary pages, but the columns seemed normal: seven deaths in the county that first week of October, one accidental (an electrocution) and six of natural causes, the Advocate's usual "short illness" (his father told him to read "stroke or heart attack") or "long illness" (cancer). There were no murders. True, the newspaper noted that Sheriff Quarles's wife was extending her visit to her family (her sister was ailing; the Asian flu had hit Blairsville, too) for another few days, but that seemed innocent enough.

Miss Lewis saw Alan at school on Thursday and suggested something new, something that had just occurred to her: a trip to Athens. "I can use the university library," she explained. "If whatever is happening is real and not just our imaginations, there have to be ways of dealing with it. None of the textbooks mention any kind of defenses against these — these things, but surely there'll be something in the library folklore section."

Alan was interested, but he was already feeling a little draggy himself. He went to school on Friday, sat listless in his seat, and suddenly felt Miss Ulrich's palm dry and cool on his forehead. "You're burning up!" she said. "I think you'd better see Miss Black right away, young man."

Miss Irma Black was the school nurse. She popped an alcohol-flavored thermometer in his mouth, left it there for what seemed to be an hour or so, and then announced that he had a temperature of a hundred and two. She asked if it would be all right to call his father, and he told her to call his aunt instead.

Back in the classroom, Alan explained that he would be leaving. He asked Jack Harwell to bring his bike home (Jack lived on Rainey Circle, not far from his house), and Jack responded with an impression of someone else's impression of the obstreperous Irishman from radio's "Allen" Alley: "Yes, me boy, you're not long for this world." Miss Ulrich shook Jack.

Alan was in a floating, dreamy state by the time Betty Lessup arrived. He sat in the front seat of her Packard listening to the monotonous whine and pump of the windshield wipers, which sped up as she accelerated, slowed when she stopped for a light or a stop sign. She got him to the clinic, and Dr. Smith immediately diagnosed Asian flu. "You're going to be the lucky one," Dr. Smith, fitting a needle to a hypo, told him with indifferent cheer. "Here you're getting it over with early. In a few weeks they'll be dropping like flies all over town. When the school has to be closed, you'll be out playing while everyone else is praying to get well or die. Drop your pants for me, Alan."

Betty Lessup took him home, tucked him into bed — he rolled onto his right hip, since the shot still twinged in his left buttock — and his father came in a few minutes later. John Kirby was up and around now, though still weak and achy. He sat on the foot of the bed. "Sorry, Alan," he said.

"Not your fault, Daddy."

"Well, I gave it to you. Tell you what, I'll stay home with you for the next few days. We haven't done much together lately. We'll listen to the Bulldogs tomorrow, play some hearts, talk a little. That sound all right?"

"Who's gonna cook?"

"Guess I'm up to it now."

"Good."

"You mean as opposed to your aunt's cooking?"

"Mm-hmm."

His father chuckled. "She means well."

"I'm sleepy."

The springs creaked. "All right, son. I'll look in on you from time to time."

He fell asleep and for an hour dreamed unformed nightmares, and when he woke up, he ached from shoulder to knee. His father followed Dr. Smith's instructions: lots of liquids, aspirin, a prescription of vile-tasting liquid at four-hour intervals; and Alan, after a light evening meal of chicken, peas, and rice, threw up.

More from a sense of duty than a real desire to listen to the game, he asked his father to bring the radio in the next day. John checked his son's temperature — it was now half a degree higher — and brought the radio in. Georgia was playing Michigan, and his father turned on the radio, let it warm up, and tuned it.

An excited voice was blurting out something about Russia. Alan sat up in bed, resting part of his weight on his elbows. "Daddy, what is it?" he asked, his mind flashing back to the atomic-bomb drills the students at Gaither had done every year for as far back as he could remember.

"Don't know. Listen."

" . . . scientists say the new moon will orbit the Earth about once every ninety minutes. They consider Sputnik proof that the Soviet Union has the capability of launching an intercontinental missile attack against the United States "

John Kirby sat on the end of the bed so hard that the springs squeaked in response, his face gone gray with concern. Alan shivered without knowing why.

Through the haze of fever it sank in: the artificial satellite had been launched, not, as his Weekly Reader had assured him as recently as last summer, from Cape Canaveral but from somewhere in Russia, and it had nothing to do with the International Geophysical Year. His father, still looking worried, left the room. A minute later Alan heard the television, and it, too, was all about Sputnik.

Alan talked to his father that afternoon, questioned him. Did this mean that Russia could drop atomic bombs on New York, on Chicago, on Atlanta? Did it mean the Russians would be first into space, first to claim the moon? Did it mean . . . His father didn't know.

For the rest of his life Alan Kirby would associate the space program with the Asian flu, with a stabbing ache in his shoulders and back and legs, with the dry-eyeball feeling of fever and the throb of headache. And with a despairing sense of helplessness and loss: despite the three silver knives concealed in his underwear drawer, he still had no real idea what to do about Athaniel Badon and the ShadowShow. As if to cap his misery, in the football game that weekend the Bulldogs went down to Michigan by a score of twenty-six to zero.

The rain ended at last. Karen Yates was glad to see the sun again: not that the rain bothered her very much, no bad weather could bother her as long as she was cooped up behind the reception counter of the

Advocate, but it made her fat old boss, Jimmy Jenkins, a worse slave master than ever.

She had even said that to Elsie Poole, a nice old lady who came in once a week to do the wedding and engagements, when they ran into each other in the Belk's lingerie department. Elsie, after the obligatory comment on the rain, had asked, "And how is everything down at the paper, dear?"

"Oh" — Karen had pouted — "don't get me started. Mr. Jenkins treats us like we're the field hands and him the overseer." She had turned it into a joke right away, but the old biddy probably had gone straight to Mr. Jenkins about it. Anyway, that next day he had blessed her out for cutting off one measly little old phone call that wasn't even important at all, just somebody trying to place a want ad to sell his old car.

But Sunday was fair and clear, and the new week started off well. Karen made a date on Monday, to go with Roger Lynch to a country-music show in the New Haven Auditorium that coming Saturday night. Roger wasn't a bit nice, really, but his daddy had given him a new Pontiac, and he did try to show a girl a good time before grabbing for her titties. Karen thought she and Roger had a sort of understanding now: he knew what she would stand for and what she wouldn't, and he knew when to stop.

She hadn't thought of Tom Davies for days and days when he called on Tuesday morning, just past ten. "Hey, sweet thing," he had said. "You know who this is?" And she had known at once, though his voice was different, sort of faint and scratchy over what had to be long-distance lines. "You feel like steppin' out a little tonight?" he had asked. "Or is old man Jenkins keeping your sweet little old nose to the grindstone, Kay-Kay?"

Karen twirled the phone cord. "He can't tell me when to come and go," she said in a low, provocative voice that she had practiced many times alone. "What d'you want to do tonight, anyhow?"

"Well, I'm supposed to take some pictures of the moon tonight."

"The moon?"

"Uh-huh. See, the Gainesville paper's gonna run this big series of articles on the Sputnik — "

"Shoot, who wants to read about that?"

"Well, somebody must. Anyhow, they want me to run out tonight and take some pictures of the full moon comin' up over the lake. It's full tonight, you know."

"I don't notice stuff like that." Mr. Jenkins came in, and she straightened behind the counter at once, but he went on into the newsroom without a glance at her. "Shoot, the lake isn't even full yet."

"I know that, but there's places where I can get a good photo of the moon and the water. One of them's Sullivan's Cove."

"Uh-huh," Karen said. Sullivan's Cove, off in the east part of the county, was a low, flat place, or had been before the building of Buford Dam. Now it was a wide expanse of shallow water, and the old lovers' lane was well submerged. "Well, you take your old pictures by yourself."

"Now wait. I ain't told you all of it."

"I don't want to hear any more."

"Even about a boat."

Karen looked toward the newsroom door, but it remained closed. "What about a boat?"

"Man who owns the studio here already has a cabin cruiser on the lake. Twenty-eight-footer. Got a little kitchen, little bedroom. Big old bed."

"Lake's not deep enough to have boats in it."

"It is in the channel. And guess who's borrowed it for tonight?"

"You're kiddin' me, Tom Davies."

"Hope to die. Got the keys and everything. Gonna be nice out, nice cool night, big old moon comin' up, old boat rockin' on the water."

"I haven't ever done — been on a boat before."

"How about it?"

"Well, I don't know. I might come."

"Meet me at the old Sullivan's Mill Bridge?"

"Well . . . what time?"

"You'll get off at five. You'll want to go home, put on something real pretty and comfortable. Don't worry about eating. Plenty of stuff on the boat. So drive on out to the bridge around eight o'clock, say. Be gettin' dark then. You know where the old Mill Road turns off before the bridge?"

"Yes, but, shoot, it runs into the water now."

"You can park before you get to the water. Use to be a gas station on the right, you'll see the pavement. Park there. I'll be waitin' for you. You'll probably see my car. If you don't, it'll mean I came over on the boat. But I'll be watchin' for you. Okay?"

"It better be a nice boat."

"It's a pretty boat, sweet thing. It's a beautiful boat."

"This old line is so bad I can hardly hear you."

"Well, you'll hear me better tonight, when I'm whisperin' in your ear."

She giggled. "You're a horrible person, Tom Davies, and I hate you."

"We'll see about that tonight. 'Bye."

"Bye." She hung up, paused for a moment with her hand on the receiver. There was something about Tom's voice, something unfamiliar almost, different from what she remembered. She couldn't put her finger on it, whatever it was, and she went back to the typing she was supposed to be doing. But through it all she kept drifting off into daydreams, imagining a swollen moon over the water, a big bed on a cabin cruiser, and the gentle rocking of the waves.

3

"Now," Andy McCory said to his apprentice, "when you see that little old flash, you throw this switch here. See? That begins number two and a second later turns off the light on number one. Then you run the film on number one all the rest of the way through, rewind it like I showed you, and take the reel off. Then you put the next reel on and watch for the signal to change again. See? Real easy."

Joey Fulham walked through the motions of changing reels and threaded the first machine. "How come you're takin' off?" he complained. "I got hired to usher and to watch the concessions, not to do your job."

"I'm takin' off because Mr. Badon told me to take off," Andy said. "Anyway, he's gonna pay you some extra for this. It's just for tonight. See, he needs somebody else that knows how to run the projectors, just in case I ever get sick or anything."

"How much extra?" Joey asked. Joey, eighteen, was fighting the last stages of a war against acne, a war that had left his face a pitted and scarred battlefield. He scratched his cheek now, the nails rasping over scabbed pimples. "He say that? How much extra he was gonna pay me?"

"Five dollars," Andy said, impatience sharp in his voice.

"Oh, okay. But you're gonna be back tomorrow, right?"

"Yeah, tomorrow. Now, do it again."

"Heck, Andy, you know I can — "

"Start her up this time. Let's see the cartoon and the beginnin' of the movie."

"Shit." But Joey did it, showed the Looney Tunes and the titles of Nightmare Alley.

"Now tell me what you do to change the reels," Andy said.

"Shit," Joey said again, but he went through the whole routine.

"That'll do," Andy said. "Now you be here at a quarter to seven, you hear?"

"Yeah, yeah."

"Okay. I don't want to have to come lookin' for you."

"All right. God, you'd think this was a matter of life and death or somethin'."

"Yeah," Andy McCory said.

4

Early Tuesday afternoon, Odum Tate finally found Michael Estes.

The preacher hadn't been looking for Michael, at least not by name, for he did not know him; but he had been asking some of the old men about the lynching, and one of them recalled that Ludie Estes had lived next door to the dead man, and that she had a grand-boy who drove a wrecker sometimes for the only black-owned garage in town. On Tuesday Tate saw the wrecker pulled up beside a rust-raddled old clunker of a pickup truck, jumper cables running from a battery in the bed of the wrecker under the propped-up hood of the truck. A neat young black man with horn-rimmed spectacles was just loosening the alligator grip of the cables when Tate came up.

"Be a dollar," the black man said to an older white man who sat behind the wheel of the pickup.

The white man took out a change purse and counted out a fifty-cent piece, a quarter, three nickels, and a dime. "Close that hood, boy," he said.

"Yes, sir."

"Don't lose my broom handle."

"I'll put it back." The black man raised the hood, folded the broomstick down — it was wired at the bottom to the top of the grille — and wrapped a free end of wire around the handle to hold it in place. The

hood dropped with a cough of rusted metal. The pickup, already running, eased back out into the street.

"Are you Michael Estes?" Tate asked.

The young black man started. His eyes grew wary behind the black-rimmed spectacles. "Yes, sir, that's my name."

"Your grandmother is Ludie Estes?"

Michael nodded.

"I want to talk to her," Tate said. "Can you tell me how to get in touch with her?"

"Talk to her what about?" Michael said.

Tate shook his head. "Somethin' that happened a long time back. You wouldn't know about it."

"You ain't makin' trouble for her?"

"No, son. No trouble."

"I ain't your son!" Michael frowned, his expression somewhere between fear and anger. "Don't call me that."

"I didn't mean anything."

Michael coiled the red and black cables over his shoulder, then slid them off and onto a pair of hooks in the back of the truck. "Tell me what you want to talk to her about. Then I'll see if I want to tell you how to find her."

Tate shook his head. "It's about a man who died," he said. "His name was Jim Bascom. It's been a long time ago."

Michael's speculative brown eyes went from the huge Bible under Tate's arm to the evangelist's face. "You a preacher or somethin'?"

Tate nodded.

"Think I seen you before, preachin' here on the Square." Michael looked away. "Jim Bascom."

"You wouldn't know him."

Michael laughed, showing white teeth riveted in places with silver fillings. "Preacher, you don't know what you're sayin'." He looked around the Square. It was deserted in this early part of the afternoon. "Somethin' bad happenin'," he said.

Tate nodded again. "Somethin' bad is. I'm tryin' to find out what, and how to fight against it."

"You be here later on this evenin'?"

"If you want me to."

"What I'll do, I'll go see my granny. I'll ask her if she wants to talk to you about Jim Bascom. If she don't, she don't, that's all. If she wants to talk to you, I'll be back here between five and five-thirty."

"There's a lady who might want to talk to her, too."

"White woman?"

"She's white."

"You both be here, then. I'll ask my granny. If I ain't back by five-thirty, she don't want to talk."

"All right."

Michael nodded, climbed into the driver's seat of the wrecker, and started the engine. After he drove away, Tate walked south, down to the Big Apple grocery. It was a block off the Square, and it had a public telephone. He fished in his pocket for change, dropped it in the slot, and dialed the number of the school. Yes, they could call Miss Lewis on the speaker. He waited for two or three minutes before she came on the line.

Quickly, Tate told her about finding Michael, about the possibility of speaking to Ludie. "I'll be there at five," she said. "Alan's still out sick."

"Thank you," he said.

She sounded genuinely surprised: "For what?"

"For goin' through all this for him. For us."

Silence on the line, then: "I guess I don't have any real choice, do I? I'll be there at five o'clock, Mr. Tate."

He hung up, heard the coin drop. The Bible heavy under his arm, he turned to go back to the Square, to sit on the bench and read in the mild afternoon sun.

5

Sam Quarles didn't need another headache. Ilona was on the phone long-distance every day now, wanting to know when he would let her come home; the prisoners in the jail adamantly refused to sleep on the top floor, preferring even to triple up in the other cells; telephone calls were still coming in demanding that he, Sheriff Sam Quarles of Frye County, Georgia, personally do something about that communist moon flying over the heads of good law-abiding Americans; and now Mrs. Woodley.

"He was on my porch last night," the old lady said, her faded blue eyes snapping behind her spectacles. "Just scratching and scratching at my door."

"Who was, Mrs. Woodley?" Quarles asked, rubbing his eyes.

"That little boy."

"A little boy? Shoot, chase him away."

"He's dead."

Quarles's eyes snapped open. "Who's dead?"

"The little Williams boy, from across the street."

"Williams — oh, him. Well, what's the trouble, ma'am?"

"Well, I don't want him on my porch every night scratching at the screen door."

The telephone rang. "Sheriff?" said Ort's voice. "Somebody named Crane wants to talk to you — "

"I'm busy. See if they can hold on or if they can't, take a number."

"All right."

"I knew they shouldn't ever have put that boy in the ground. And now he's out on my porch at night."

"Mrs. Woodley, I don't know what you think you saw — "

"The little Williams boy, plain as day, but his head was all sort of flopped down on his chest — "

" — but it wasn't the Williams child, ma'am. He's dead."

The phone rang. "Sheriff, he says it can't wait."

"Excuse me, ma'am." Into the receiver, Quarles said, "Sheriff here."

"Reuben Crane, Sheriff. I been thinkin' it over. Can you pay for me an airplane?"

"Reuben — "

"He might ruin my screen doors," Mrs. Woodley said.

"I figger we fly up in one of them Piper Cubs, and you take a thirty-aught-six and me with Pap's twelve-gauge, and the next time that Sputnik comes over — "

"It's too high for that."

"It certainly is not. He stood right on my porch and his fingernails went scratch, scratch, scratch, right over the screen — "

"Yeah, but with a airplane, see — "

"Forget it, Reuben, and stop drinkin' that corn liquor." Quarles hung up the phone.

"It could be a ghost," Mrs. Woodley said.

Quarles looked at her, a tiny-boned, wrinkled, gray-haired woman, her hair done up in a bun, wearing a spotless dark blue dress. "Mrs. Woodley, I can't do a thing in the world about ghosts."

"My husband paid taxes in this county for upward of fifty years, Sam Quarles."

"Yes, ma'am, but there's nothin' in the books that says I can do a blessed thing in the world about a ghost. There just ain't, that's all."

"Well." Mrs. Woodley's mouth set in a firm thin line. "Then what do you think I ought to do the next time he comes?"

"Send him home, Mrs. Woodley. Probably it ain't a ghost. Probably it's just some boy tryin' to scare you. Halloween's comin' up, you know."

"Well. Maybe I'll just bring that young man inside and give him a piece of my mind."

The phone rang. Ort said, "Sorry, Sheriff, but I got the blamedest call on the line. Some woman with somethin' about the cemetery."

"The what?"

Mrs. Woodley stood up. "I'll do that. I'll teach that little A-rab to come around scratching on my screen doors at night."

Quarles nodded at her. "Put her on," he said to Ort.

"Hello?" A woman's weepy voice.

"I may just put him over my knee," Mrs. Woodley said. "Makin' me think that little Williams boy had come back from the grave. He was still alive when they buried him, you know. I told Mr. Loveland myself, I said that little boy is still alive and tryin' to push open the lid of his casket, them's my very words. And he no more listened to me than he would to an old mongrel dog barking."

"Sheriff Quarles."

"Sheriff, there's something awful at the Municipal Cemetery. I live just across the road —"

"I'll just put him across my knee and warm his bottom."

"— grave robbers or something —"

"Wait a minute — no, not you, Mrs. Woodley — what?"

"I'll go on now, Sheriff. But, you know —"

"— right inside the gates, a whole pile of them, a whole pile."

"You just haven't been much of a help, Sam Quarles, and I have to say it."

"Yes, ma'am."

“ — just jumbled up like they was dumped off a truck or something’ — ”

Mrs. Woodley let herself out. “Pile of what, ma’am?” Quarles asked. “Coffins,” the woman said. “All kinds of coffins.”

6

Their feet whispered on the floors. Ballew Jefferson waited in his nest of light and heat for them to come. It was only midafternoon, sunlight bright outside, but they were no longer stopped by daylight; and there were more of them, five or six anyway, drifting through his house. He had the knife ready.

Now and again he felt them mass outside the nailed-shut door, an eddy of ghosts, of something: but time would pass and they would trickle away again, the sounds rustling up the stairs, overhead on the floors. Jefferson had the sure sense that it was all coming to an end, soon now. Part of him wanted to fling open the side door and flee, to run to the street, away, and keep going. This part of him looked in horror at the ruined kitchen, its whole ceiling black with soot, some of it festooned with soft black stalactites. The walls were blistered, ragged, the cabinets warped and distorted parodies of themselves.

The blue gas hissed. The temperature on the thermometer had not gone below a hundred and fifteen for days. Ballew Jefferson, standing up, could barely gasp in the super-heated air; and yet the slightest suggestion of cold made him shake uncontrollably.

The part of him that wanted to run was weaker than the part that feared the cold outside the kitchen. This part needed the light and the heat; this part was determined to kill the apparition of Mollie Avery when next it appeared.

He almost longed for it now, wanted it to be over. He had not called Miss Wayly this week. His cache of food, diminishing, had not been replenished. Jefferson sensed, somehow, that after this day he would need no more canned food. Either he would be free of Mollie Avery’s hold, or he would be dead. Neither prospect held much appeal.

He waited.

At five o’clock, someone knocked on the side door. “Mr. Jefferson? Police, sir.”

He ignored the sound.

The rap was repeated, louder. "Ballew Jefferson? Open up, sir. It's the police."

Jefferson closed his eyes.

"We know about Mollie Avery bein' after you, sir. We come to help."

His eyes flew open. "What?" he said, his voice a dry croak.

"I say we know what you been goin' through, Mr. Jefferson. We got it solved now. It's done over with, sir. You let me in and I'll help you."

Stooping to keep his face out of the hottest layer of air, Jefferson made his way to the door. "I'm going to unlock it," he said through the wood. "You wait until I get back before you come in."

"Yes, sir."

Jefferson turned the knob of the dead bolt. It slipped into its sheath smoothly. He retreated into the heat and glare of the kitchen. "All right."

A tall, heavysset man in the uniform of a deputy sheriff opened the door, stepped inside, and closed the door behind him. He swept off his hat. "Shoo. You got it hot enough in here." He grinned at Jefferson.

"It keeps her out."

The deputy nodded and came into the kitchen. "Smells a mite."

Tears welled into Jefferson's eyes. "That's not my fault! She made me lock myself here, like an animal — " His shoulders heaved and he sobbed. "Did you, did they-did people see that damned film of us, that vile — "

"Shoot, Mr. Jefferson." The other man's breath was perfumed with the minty scent of chewing gum. "Nobody pays no mind to that. Gettin' yourself a little piece of poontang, huh? Well, hell, everybody understands that with your wife bein' dead and all you needed some kinda outlet."

Jefferson sank into a chair. "It's been so hard."

"It was hard on the screen, sure enough," the deputy said crudely.

Jefferson scowled up at him. "That was uncalled for."

The deputy leaned over. "You want to see somethin' uncalled for?" He did not wait for an answer, but suddenly, shockingly, tore open his uniform shirt. Jefferson gaped. A hole the size of a quarter opened in the man's chest just left of the sternum, and through it he could see pink, pulsing things —

Jefferson kicked away from the table, falling over, rolling from the chair. He scuttled into the corner, knife held out in front of him. The

deputy grinned at him, pulling his shirt to. The buttons had all popped off, but somehow they were there again, neatly fastened. "That marine Quarles done it," he said. "I hadn't even got started good when he done it to me. But that's all right. Hey, I can start all over now and he can't kill me. There's so many I want to see."

"Get out," Jefferson said.

"Used to call me Elvis, some of them. Now, you never done that, Mr. Jefferson, I ain't talkin' about you. But some of them lint-heads used to call me Elvis just to make me mad. Well, now we gonna see how they like it when I come around to visit them, huh?"

"Get out of my house!"

The deputy smiled and shook his head. "I ain't got nothin' against you, Mr. Jefferson, but somebody had to come in and make everything ready, don't you see. He needs you. See, there's a lot of stuff he has to do, and he gets weak, like, so he has to feed now and then. He's gotta have you. But it ain't bad, Mr. Jefferson, and you'll like it. Then later it won't matter none. But I had to come to turn off the heat." The deputy walked to the stove and switched off the burners. For the first time in a month the stove died with a soft flup! of extinguished gas.

The deputy turned back. "The lights don't matter so much. Do you know I get to go out tonight? It's been a long time, seems like. You know what I can't figure? Where in hell has Eula gone? Her and me married all these years, and now she ain't with the rest of us. Some of 'em disappears, like. I don't know why. The rest of us, we're still around."

Jefferson had tremblingly straightened. He picked up a can of O'Kelley creamed corn and threw it as hard as he could at the interloper. The can passed right through him, and the deputy vanished from sight, simply dissolved to nothing.

The rustling had started again, hitching like whispered laughter. Another sound, a groan, came into the air, agonizing, slow, high-pitched. For a second Jefferson thought it came from him, but his hand placed flat on his chest felt no vibration. It was a wrenching, squealing sound, like —

Like a nail being pulled from wood.

His gaze went to the door. It was one of the nails holding the chairs against the door and wall: it protruded already an inch, and as he watched, it came out more, an inch and a half, two —

The nail jingled to the floor, rolled in a quarter circle, and was still.

Another began to groan and move, pulling itself out.
And behind the door, somehow he knew, the dead were massing.

7

They found Ludie Estes in a rocking chair, beneath a hanging light shaded by a pinned-on cone of colorful Sunday comics. "Come in," she said. "'Scuse me not gettin' up. My arthritis bad today."

Ann Lewis came in, followed by Odum Tate, then by Michael. "Sit down," Michael said, nodding toward a sofa against one wall. It had lost its original upholstery and was covered by a handmade quilt. Tate and Ann sat there. Michael took the room's only other available chair, a straight ladder-back kitchen chair. Ann looked around: the room was poor but neat, with a battered coffee table and a dresser with a mirror the only other furniture beside the chairs. A radio was on the bureau, its cord looped up to the ceiling through a hook and finally plugged into a socket at the base of the ceiling bulb. The walls held pictures of Jesus and of black babies, mottoes of hope and a calendar from Dettlerley's Funeral Home.

Ludie was an immense woman, heavy without really being obese. Her features were small in that broad face, the eyes direct and penetrating. "You come to ast me about Jim Bascom," she said.

"Yes, Miz Estes," Odum Tate replied.

Ludie sighed. "Lord, Lord. It a world of sorrow he been through in his time. And now it come back again, worse than it was before." She shook her head, and then that shrewd gaze came back to Tate. "You a preacher man, my grand-baby tell me."

"Yes, ma'am. I try to be."

"You tries to be." She shook her head again. "Sometime it don't seem they can be no good on the earth. Sometime it seem like the bad done got into everybody. But them that got some good in them, they has to try. And you the schoolteacher, miss?"

Ann nodded. "I teach at Gaither Elementary."

"My grand-baby Michael tell me the president say it all right for him to go to that school. So why he didn't get to go, when he was little?"

Ann looked at Michael, who averted his eyes. "I — the community — "

"Community? What that community?"

"The people — "

"White folks? Or like me?"

"Mrs. Estes — "

"Hush, child. I just devlin' you. I know it ain't your fault. Ain't nobody's fault, seem like, but it the way things are. He graduate from the colored high school last June. He made a speech. What do you call it, Michael?"

Michael, not looking up, whispered, "Valedictorian, Granny-Ma."

Ludie nodded. "That it. And he goin' away off yonder next year to college, after he work and save money for it. Michael, he a good boy."

"I'm sure he is," Ann said, but when Michael Estes glared at her through his black-rimmed spectacles, she blushed in confusion.

"Be better for him to go right now, without hardly no money. Evil time has come."

Tate leaned forward, making the sofa springs creak. "We want to talk to you about that, Mrs. Estes. It seems like a man named Jim Bascom might have something to do with all this."

Ludie Estes rocked back and forth. The floor, covered with a worn gray and blue linoleum rug, creaked under the rockers. "He a misled man. I remember his wife, cryin' so pitiful that night, sayin', 'Please don't, don't kill my man.' But they took him up the hill, away past the railroad tracks, and they hung him. Then they brung him back dead and throwed him on the fire, but he got up and walked away."

Tate and Ann exchanged a glance. Tate said, "Can you tell us about how he died?"

Rocking in the circle of light beneath the hanging bulb, Ludie told them the whole story: Jim Bascom, a local boy, was at first a farmer. He and his family made a decent enough living at first, during the hard times of the first war, but after, when prices dropped, he lost his land and went from job to short-lived job. His second oldest daughter married Timothy Avery and moved out, and that helped some, but at last Jim had to work for old Mr. Morgan Simmons.

"The meanest white man," Ludie said, "that ever drawed breath, that was Mr. Simmons." She told of the dispute over wages, of Jim Bascom's night visit with kerosene and matches — "I reckon the devil get into him, and he want to get back at Mr. Simmons for his babies goin' hungry."

She told of the next night, when she was awakened from sleep by the sounds of screaming. She went to the porch, looked across at the next house, and saw four white men dragging Jim Bascom toward a

car. "And old Mr. Simmons, he waitin' by the car and cussin'. And Jim's poor wife, she cryin' and prayin' and beggin', but it no use."

She told of going across to comfort Seelia Bascom and the wailing children, of waiting through the night until the news came that they already knew, that Jim was dead. She told of the black undertaker coming for the body, actually having to come and pick it up himself out of the puddle it had fallen in from the pyre. "No white man want to touch it, some way."

And then the funeral, and Seelia's move, to somewhere away off, far from Gaither, far from memory. At last Ludie fell silent, with the floor still creaking in rhythm as she rocked.

Tate, leaning forward, his hands clasped between his knees, said, "Mrs. Estes, did you know any of the white men?"

"All of them," she said.

"Who was it?"

Ludie held up a hand and began to count off the men on her fingers. "Old Morgan Simmons, first. He by the car. Then Henry Cox. He work for Simmons, too. He holdin' on to Jim's legs. Then Mack Williams. He the daddy of the man who hung hisself while back. He holdin' on to Jim's arms. Then Mr. Dover, he had the dry-goods store back then. And finally there Mr. Pollion. He new in town."

"Are they still alive?" Ann asked.

"Mr. Simmons, he die not long after the big storm. Horse throw him. Mr. Williams die two or three years back. Mr. Dover, he move off and die somewheres. Henry Cox still alive. You see him settin' down on the Square some days. He old now, like me."

"What about the other man?"

"He just go. He here one time and gone the next."

"What was his name?" Ann asked.

"It somethin' like Pollion."

"Napoleon?" Ann guessed.

Ludie shook her head. "No. Some way it seem to me his name start with a A."

"Oh, my God," said Odum Tate.

Richard Crawford shook his head at Sam Quarles. Quarles, standing just inside the gate of the Municipal Cemetery, was arguing jurisdic-

tion with Robert Goss of the city police. "It ain't in the county," Quarles, with a note of rising anger in his voice, insisted.

Goss, a taller man than Quarles, and maybe ten years older, looked away, scratching his silver hair. "It sure as hell ain't in the city. City limits end right at the gates there. Looks to me like you gotta take it, Sam."

"Bob, you try to shove off every little pissant thing you don't want to bother with — "

"It ain't in the city."

" — but that's one thing. This here is a big crime, Bob. Some crazy man's diggin' up dead bodies, for God's sake."

"The Municipal Cemetery is on county property," Goss said, as if that one fact weighed more in his mind than the improbable stack of coffins, jumbled like jackstraws, that Quarles's deputy stood beside. "The back of the cemetery opens out onto the river, and you know the river's county. Now, I got a map that shows the city limits, and they end right at them gates."

"Shit."

"I'll be glad to cooperate with you — "

"Look at these coffins!" Quarles threw his arm toward the stack. "Goddamn it, somebody dug up Harmon Presley, and the whole Williams family, and — don't you want to find out who took them bodies?"

"If you need any help — "

"Shit!"

For many seconds Quarles stood with his hands on his hips, looking off into the low forest of marble tombstones. Almost gently, Goss said at last, "You're gonna take it?"

Quarles nodded but did not speak.

"Well, good luck to you." Goss walked out of the cemetery. A moment later the sound of his car engine came to them.

Richard Crawford came over shaking his head. "Goss is a pussy," he said.

"Shut up," Quarles told him. Then, contradicting himself: "What does it look like?"

Crawford cast a despairing glance behind him. "Looks like twelve coffins, Sheriff. None of them very old. All of them open and empty."

"Let's see the graves."

The graves were the final insult to reason. None had been disturbed, seemingly, by shovel or pick; and yet all were sunken. Quarles squatted beside the Williams family plot. The three graves, each neatly covered in gravel that had until last week been piled in teardrop-shaped mounds, were sagging. "Look to you like somebody moved that gravel, dug up the graves, then put the gravel back?"

"And kept it that clean?" Crawford asked.

"What does the caretaker say?"

"He didn't know about it until you called him. He swears everything was okay last night when he made his rounds and locked up, and then again this morning when he opened the gates."

"When was that?"

"He locked up at about eight. It's supposed to be sunset, but — "

"Yeah, he was late. This morning?"

"Around eight again. And he walked right down this path here. He couldn't hardly have missed the coffins."

"No."

"Anyhow, there's no funeral scheduled here the next couple of days. He worked some on the back lots, over the hill there, he says, cuttin' the weeds along the borders, tossin' the dead flowers. He was back in his house — "

"Over on Toombs Street."

"Yeah, east of the cemetery on Toombs, when you called him. He came down and looked and went back and called you, and that's it."

"You know where the toolshed is?"

"Sure."

"Go and bring back a couple of shovels."

"What if it's locked?"

"Then walk over to Toombs Street and get the caretaker to open it for you. But it won't be locked."

"Two shovels."

"Right."

"Don't you need a court order or somethin' — "

"I don't need anything, Dick. I'm the goddamned sheriff."

Crawford was gone for a quarter of an hour. Quarles paced around the graves, squinted up into the sky: a deep blue sky, the true sky of fall. Evening was coming on, the wind fingering the red and yellow

leaves of the maples. The cemetery had them spaced at even intervals, trees of an age, all about twenty-five feet tall; between them were poplars and firs. The maples were always the first trees to turn, but it seemed to Quarles they were turning early this year, the leaves looking more hectic and feverish than gay.

Crawford came down the path, the shovels braced over his shoulders like a pair of rifles. "We gonna —"

Quarles took a shovel from him. "Let's do the boy's," he said. "Won't take as long. I want that gravel kept clean."

It was backbreaking labor, reminding Quarles of foxholes he had dug into the sandy soils of Pacific islands. Under the gravel, the loose red clay had been cemented and compacted by the unusual fall rains. It came out in muddy clumps the size of a man's head. When they got down to shoulder depth, they took turns, one man in the grave, another resting above, leaning on his shovel.

Crawford was in the hole when they hit bottom. "That's it," he said. "Here's the vault."

They got the dirt off the concrete vault. The lid just sat in place, but it was heavy, and there was little room to maneuver it in the grave. Finally, though, with a pry bar that Crawford had to go back to the toolshed to get, they upended the lid.

The vault was empty.

"Hell," Quarles said.

They dropped the lid back into place and shoveled the clay back on top. It took them less time to fill the grave than it had to dig it out, but still it was twilight when the last shovelful of gravel had been spread on top. The soil, loosened by the digging, was mounded again, but the gravel on Johnny Williams's grave, unlike that on the other two, was red from the clay, mixed with clods of dirt. It had obviously been disturbed. The other two looked pristine by contrast.

"Damn," Crawford said. "Blisters all over my hands."

"Mine, too."

"How the hell did he do it, Sam?"

Quarles shook his head.

"Where do you think the bodies are?"

"I don't know. You think we ought to stay here tonight and see if he comes back?"

"Me and you? By ourselves?"

"Yeah. We could just wait by the coffins and see who comes to collect them. Or who comes to dig up some more."

"Stakeout, huh?" said Crawford, but his voice was thin.

"Yeah. You want to take the first watch?" Quarles looked at him hard. Then he put a blistered hand on Crawford's shoulder. "I'm kiddin' you, Dick. Let's get out of here."

"I knew that," Crawford said.

On the way back to the station, Quarles said, "You got a list of all the names?"

"Right here."

"But Roy Cobb and Glenn Hutchins ain't buried here."

"No. Roy's buried in the Grace Holiness Church graveyard, and Hutchins I think was buried up at Rocky Falls, with his mama and daddy." After a moment, Crawford said, "Hey. There was fourteen people died that weekend while back — it's them. It's all of them."

Pulling the patrol car into its parking slot, Sam Quarles said, "Dick, one day you may be a policeman."

9

Six o'clock. Karen Yates stepped out of the shower and grabbed a soft towel. She loved to towel herself dry, loved the soft caress of the terry cloth. She dried herself carefully, slowly. She had brought her underwear into the bathroom: what she called her "naughties." She stepped into the black lacy panties and pulled them up, slipping a finger around the waistband to make sure it wasn't twisted. Then she slipped into the black brassiere, reached behind, and hooked herself in.

It took only a second. She wondered how long it might take Tom Davies to undo it. Men were so clumsy with brassieres. You'd think they'd get practiced at it after a while, but so far every man who had opened hers (How many? Five, six, seven. Well, seven. But six, really, because one of them didn't count. He was in high school with her, and he was so scared that he barely touched her after he had finally wrestled it loose), every one of them, had had to fumble and twist and tug.

She touched her curlers, heating on their electric foundation, and found them warm. Her permanent was about shot now, but she could do a quick touch-up. She began to roll the curlers into her black hair,

humming under her breath as she did it. From time to time she glanced over at the bed. Her pale blue skirt and pink-and-blue plaid blouse were there, laid out ready for her. She liked the way the skirt showed her legs. Well, she thought, shoot, maybe I'm not in fashion, but I like to look like a girl, not some dumpy old sack of potatoes.

That was what they were calling the new dresses this year, sack dresses, tacky old things that made women look pregnant and dumpy, even when they weren't, even when they had a nice figure, like Karen's. Sack dresses made you look like you didn't even have a waist, phooey on that. Karen decided there was only one kind of sack she was interested in getting into, and it wasn't a dress. She giggled, wondering how she could work the conversation around to fashion that evening. She'd say to Tom, "Well, there's only one kind of sack I want to get into" — provocative pause — "and it isn't a dress." She rehearsed the line as she finished with her hair.

She got into her stockings, blouse, and skirt. She decided to wear her flats — have to walk around beside the lake down at Sullivan's Cove, not much of a place for heels — and slipped into them. She checked her Timex: it was nearly seven already.

Tom had told her not to bother with eating, but, shoot, she was hungry, and anyhow she didn't want to eat like an old pig on the boat. She went into her kitchenette and opened the freezer. She had a stack of TV dinners there for evenings when she was too busy to cook, and she popped one — turkey with peas and mashed potatoes — into the oven. It would take twenty-five minutes to heat, then maybe another fifteen to eat. By then it would be about seven-thirty, time to head out to the boat.

She hummed to herself again as she laid the table. Oh, she was looking forward to tonight.

Outside the house, the red sun sank beneath the western horizon. Soon in the east a huge orange moon would rise.

The last nail fell, rolled around the spot where its point touched the floor, came to a stop. The floor and the seats of the chairs were littered with nails now. Each one had screeched its way out of the wood, a fingernails-on-blackboard sound that made Jefferson's teeth ache.

The doorknob turned slowly, first to the right, then to the left. It stopped, then turned again.

"Damn you," Ballew Jefferson wept. "Come in!"

The doorknob turned slowly to the right, then to the left.

I can stand it if I see it, Jefferson told himself. It's scaring me now because I can't see it, but if I can see it, it will be all right, because it can't be any worse than it will look, but right now it seems worse because I can imagine it.

He was edging around the kitchen (grown frigid, he thought, with a chill deep in his bones), his knife brandished in front of him. The doorknob moved again.

"Come in!" he wailed.

The door swung open, a fraction of an inch at a time. The chairs in front of it skidded over the floor, their legs brushing aside the fallen nails. At last the door was wide open, standing open, the chairs pushed to one side or the other: and in the door —

Darkness. Nothing but darkness.

Jefferson giggled. He could see clear down the hall to the front door, framed by two panels of glass, glowing dim with the twilight outside, and it was empty. He took a step toward the door. Nothing happened. He took another step. His stockinged feet trod on the fallen nails. He shoved the chairs away. There was no one in the hallway, no one at all. He swung the door to, clicked it shut. He took a deep breath.

It was cold in the room, cold. He started to the stove to relight the burners.

The door crashed open, spinning him around.

She was there.

Mollie Avery, naked, walked through the open door, her steps sinuous, one foot coming in, hips swaying, the other foot coming forward and in. She stepped barefoot on the nails and did not seem to notice. Jefferson backed away before her. "Get out of here," he said.

"You used to want me," she said.

"I was crazy. I didn't know what I was doing."

"And now you're sane. You're talking to a dead woman and you're sane."

"You're not Mollie!"

"I am."

"You don't sound — talk like — "

"But I am." She was so close he could feel the radiated heat of her body, as if she were a moving fire. In a way he longed to warm himself by it.

"Stay back!" He brandished the knife.

"No. This time I want you. And I will have you."

He was suffocating. In one moment the room had gone from unbearably cold to sweltering. His back was against the wall. He stopped. She was only a step away, breasts smooth, chin up, eyes level, a smile playing at the corners of her lips. "It won't matter," she said. "You'll see. I can even tell you now, much as I hated you, I liked it when you did those things to me. You'll see."

Her hands came to his flannel shirt, undid the first button, the second, all the way down. Then she undid the buttons of the second shirt he wore. Both fell open. "You'll have to help," she said.

"You're so pretty," Jefferson said, weeping. He shrugged his left shoulder and arm out of the shirts, turning them inside out, releasing a stench of sweat. He passed the knife to his left hand, dropped the shirts. He wore no undershirt.

"You're thin," she said. "You're so thin."

"Please," he said.

"Do it," she told him. "It feels good. Do it to me."

Rage flooded him then, rage at the weeks he had spent penned like an animal, rage at her, standing there so easy in her nakedness. Hot tears scalded his eyes: she was to blame, she had tempted him, and now she was not even ashamed. He held the knife up, and, brown eyes narrowing, she nodded. He slit her abdomen across. She merely smiled at him, though he felt the warm gush of blood over his hand. Weakness staggered him. Wouldn't she die? He thrust again, tearing her abdomen from a point below the sternum all the way to the pubic bone. He gasped for breath and felt cold.

She stepped away from him, still smiling, her face triumphant, her belly unmarked.

Jefferson looked down. He had done it to himself.

His knees gave way. He hit on them, then slumped back, his spine against the corner made by the wall and the kitchen cabinets. He could not feel his fingers. The knife clattered to the floor.

"Mollie — "

But she had melted back through the doorway. All the lights burned, but dimly, like lights in a fog: and the darkness closed in. A shape came through the doorway, a tall man in black.

"Help," Jefferson said.

The man came forward, and with each step he became more angular, blacker, less human. The body dwindled, the head bulged, insect-like, the torso tilted forward until at last the forearms came forward, too, to support the weight of the lengthening thorax.

The face was still somewhat human, the eyes large, burning, red. The mouth opened and the tongue came out, curled over, made a tube of itself, like an elephant's trunk.

It dipped into the pool of blood and Jefferson heard it suck, a rattling, liquid sound. The thorax pulsed.

"No," he whispered. The tongue, a round pink tube, a blind snake, quested across the floor, impossibly long, three feet, more, and its quivering hollow head rose up into the air.

He felt the probing tip enter his torn stomach.

Oh, God, it's inside me, help me, let me die —

He sighed.

Mollie had been right.

It did feel good.

Twelve

1

Tate's huge Bible was in Ann's car, but Ludie's family Bible was handy, wrapped in a tattered silk scarf in the top drawer of the dresser. Tate spread it open on his knees, turned to almost the end. "It's Revelation," he said. "The part about the bottomless pit bein' opened. Here it is."

And he read:

6 And in those days shall men seek death, and shall not find it; and shall desire to die, and death shall flee from them.

7 And the shapes of the locusts were like unto horses prepared unto battle; and on their heads were as it were crowns like gold, and their faces were as the faces of men.

8 And they had hair as the hair of women, and their teeth were as the teeth of lions.

9 And they had breastplates, as it were breastplates of iron; and the sound of their wings was as the sound of chariots of many horses running to battle.

10 And they had tails like unto scorpions, and there were stings in their tails: and their power was to hurt men for five months.

11 And they had a king over them, which is the angel of the bottomless pit, whose name in the Hebrew tongue is Abaddon, but in the Greek tongue hath his name Apollyon.

Tate closed the book and looked up. "Apollyon," he said.

Ludie, her eyes closed, nodded. "That the name. Apollyon. Don't know his first name."

Ann had taken the Bible from Tate. "In the Hebrew tongue Abaddon," she said. "Mr. Tate, that's not far from Badon."

"The angel of the pit," Tate murmured.

"Jim Bascom, he gone from the grave," Ludie said.

Michael got up from the kitchen chair. "Now, Granny-Ma — "

"Hush, Michael. I knows."

Ann and Tate looked at each other. Ann said, "Mrs. Estes, what do you mean he's gone?"

Ludie stared straight ahead, not looking at Ann. "We went to speak to his spirit," she said so softly that Ann had to lean close to hear her. "Went to his grave. He had to be buried away out in the country. I stood by his grave and asked him why he troublin' my dreams. But he not there. He not in there. Jim Bascom out of the grave. Come through fire, come through flood, come through the grave, Lord."

Ann gave Tate a helpless glance. Tate said, "Do you think he's not dead?"

"He dead," Ludie said with finality. "But his body be awalkin' the earth. It not his spirit the way I thought. Somebody usin' that man's body some way."

"What did he look like?" Ann asked.

"Think I got a picture of him and his children. Michael, you go to my bedroom and bring me the picture box off of the chifforobe."

"Yes, Granny-Ma." Michael got up and went through a curtained door. He was back in a minute with a heavy white cardboard box almost the size of Tate's Bible. He gave it to Ludie and sat down again in his place.

Ludie's arthritic fingers eased the top up and off the box. She laid the top upside down on the floor beside her. The box was perhaps half full of snapshots. She began to pick them up, handfuls of memory, and to sort through them. She dropped them with little audible taps into the box top, all the time talking to herself: "Here my husband Zachariah, dressed up in his suit. Here Michael when he a baby. Here the old place down in Clarke County. Here — "

She droned on for minutes until finally she stopped, holding in her fingers a deckle-edged photograph, once black-and-white, now faded sepia with age. "Here they be. Seelia and Jim Bascom. I be thinkin' they children with them, but they ain't. My old mind was fooled." She passed the photograph over to Tate. He and Ann held it beneath the light and looked at it.

Seelia Bascom was squinting into the light, her face all glistening highlights and pale shadows. Beside her was a man about thirty-five, tall, thin. "He doesn't look like anybody I know," Ann said.

"Me, either."

"He was a dark-complected man," said Ludie. "Lord, but his eldest daughter, she a bright girl, like her mama. And she marry a man most white his own self, that Avery man. Their daughter was Mollie."

Ann looked up from the photograph. "Mollie Avery was Jim Bascom's granddaughter?"

Ludie nodded. "Her folkses died when she wasn't but seventeen or eighteen. Both of 'em sickened and died. She went on her own then, worked for plenty of people around here. Mollie, she had a nice way about her, a real pleasin' way. She just as sweet. You never catch her awrinklin' her nose at you."

Tate got up. "Thank you, Mrs. Estes."

"You a real preacherman?"

"I try to be."

"Lord be with you." Ludie sighed. "I went out for my pay to Mr. Jefferson's. But he don't seem to want my work no more. I reckon I got to find somebody else to do for now."

"If I had any money — "

"No, Lord, I don't want money. I ain't about to ask you for money, you a preacher and all. But I pray for you."

"Thank you, Mrs. Estes."

Ann handed the photograph back to the old black woman. She rocked in her yellow circle of light. "I always remember Seelia that night. She so scared, and her tryin' not to take on for the children's sake. This a evil thing, Mr. Tate."

"Yes, ma'am."

"You kill it," she said. Her twisted fingers closed on the photograph, ripped it across, turned it and ripped it again. "You kill it for Jim Bascom and his Seelia."

"And for all of us," Tate said.

In Ann's Rambler, Tate said, "I think we better go see the sheriff."

Ann looked at him in surprise. It was already dark out, and she turned on the headlights. "What can we tell him? That the angel of the bottomless pit is loose in Gaither?"

"No. I was thinkin' of tellin' him maybe Henry Cox ought to be watched."

"Henry Cox — one of the men who lynched Jim Bascom?"

"The only one left alive, Ludie says." Tate stared into the night ahead of the car. "If he's still alive."

2

Mrs. Marietta Woodley sat in the dusk and looked out her window. She was sure the little boy would come again. Beside her in the dark was her husband's old twelve-gauge shotgun, not fired for twenty years now, or cleaned in that time. She had fitted two cartridges into the breech and had cocked the hammers with her thumb. Though she didn't know it, both cartridges were loaded with 00 buckshot.

Her plan was to open the door and fire over the rascal's head. That would discourage him, she thought. That would keep him from coming back and pretending to be little Johnny Williams.

She could hardly wait.

But wait she did, with the radio turned on in the background, playing music that ranged from doleful and slow to manic and feverish. Mrs. Woodley paid it very little mind. She simply sat, chin on hand, in an armchair drawn up close behind the sheer curtains, looking out into the calm street. The house across the way, the Williams house, was all dark, of course. Its FOR SALE sign was still on the lawn, bright and new. The pool of light under the streetlight was curiously empty. The boy's dog used to sit there sometimes at night, but more than that, the insects were gone: no moths swirled around the incandescent bulb.

Another summer gone. Another fall here already.

A car pulled by, slowly, the way cars did on this street. Faintly, between the pulses of song from the radio, Mrs. Woodley could hear the hum of the mill. Somebody said things were rough at the mill, between bad accidents happening and the flu hitting people now. Well, she didn't have to worry about that, she got her husband's pension and his Social Security. Still, it was a shame that when the mill had hard times, everybody in New Haven had hard times. She remembered the Depression, when the men were paid in scrip when they were paid at all. Bad times, then, but she and her husband had lived through them, right here in this house.

She heard the scratching start.

Must have fallen asleep, she thought. Sitting here staring out the window, must have dozed off. Didn't even see the little A-rab come up on the porch.

She turned on the porch light. Its yellow glare illuminated the window in the dark room. "Get on home," she said through the door.

The scratching continued, like nails raked down the screen in long, vertical swipes.

"You'd better get on home, young man!" Mrs. Woodley put all the authority she could muster in her voice.

The scratching didn't even hesitate.

"Very well." Mrs. Woodley grasped the doorknob with her left hand, the shotgun with her right, and pulled the door open.

He stood there, his head lolling grotesquely, his tongue hanging out, his hands clawing the screen.

And it was the Williams boy.

And he was dead.

Gagging from the stench of decay, Mrs. Woodley raised the gun. She had no thought now of a warning shot. She fired both barrels and found herself sitting on the floor ten feet away from the door. A gaping hole showed in the screen. She couldn't see it, but across the street the shot had bitten the bark off a twenty-foot-tall oak tree in the Williamses' yard.

And the boy was gone. Mrs. Williams tried to get up, but something grated in her hip, biting with such pain that she thought she would faint. "Hunhh," she groaned.

The wind from the open door was cold. A dog barked out in the village somewhere, far off. The stench on the air, the dead smell, faded, replaced by the scorched-sulfur reek of gunpowder.

"Help," she said, knowing as she spoke that her voice was too weak to carry, too soft to hear outside the house.

She managed to roll to her stomach. Using her left hand, she crawled to the door, dragging the shotgun behind her by the barrel, and pushed the door to. A box of cartridges was on the table beside the chair. She tugged at the table leg until she shook the box off. It fell to the floor, and two cartridges rolled out. She grabbed these two, then the box. It held another six. She worried the gun until she broke it

open and ejected the spent cartridges, smelling burnt and oily. She jammed two more in.

Only then did Mrs. Marietta Woodley think of getting to the telephone. And before she reached it, the scratching started again.

3

Karen Yates found the unpaved road easily enough. To tell the truth, back before Buford Dam had been built, when the road still ran out through the pine woods to an abandoned gristmill, she had been there a time or two with high school dates, parking. Feverish hands under sweaters, a smell like a locker room, whispered frantic words of fumbling endearment: her initiation to love.

Her car rumbled onto the overgrown road, lurching heavily and pitching from side to side. Shoot, she thought, if I get stuck off down here, nobody will ever find me. With all this brush around, you can't see anything twenty feet off the road.

The headlights revealed gleams of water as the road twisted and descended. Sullivan's Cove was a meadow standing knee-deep in the new lake, spears of grass projecting above the surface. Here the lake was about eighty feet across already. The recent rains had raised it dramatically; if the engineers didn't finish the new bridge, a half mile north of the existing bridge, soon, she thought, the old one would be all sunk under the water. But the moon was high enough now to reflect in the lake, and looking at its smoked-cheese surface, at the path of gold across the water beneath it, she found herself believing Tom Davies's story more than she had at first.

She came to the flat place where a little country store and filling station had stood, pulled off onto it, reversed, did a three-point turn, and stopped, the hood of the car facing the lake, the moon in her eyes. A hundred yards farther on, the dirt road ran right into the water. She guessed the boat would have to come up to shore that way. Karen killed the headlights, shook her hair, enjoying the springy feel of curls, and sighed. A big old boat. The moon. The water rocking lazy beneath. She turned on the dome light and checked her Timex. It was five minutes before eight. She turned the light off again and rolled the window down.

The night air was a little cool, but pleasant. Shoot, she remembered back in July, back when the newspaper building was a regular sweat-

box. She'd said then that she'd never complain about cool weather again as long as she lived. Besides, it would be warmer on the boat.

She hummed to herself. Then she saw him, swinging up the road from the lake, a silhouette in the moonlight. Grinning to herself, she opened the door and got out. She slammed the door — an echo came back, a couple of seconds later, from across the lake — and walked toward him, swinging her purse. "Shoot, Tom Davies, I was about to think you — "

"Hey," he said. She saw his teeth in the moonlight.

"It was you," she said. "I thought Tom's voice sounded funny. It was you."

Andy McCorry said, "That's right, sweet thing."

"Probably there's not even a boat." Her voice quavered, despite her attempt to make it cool.

"We don't need one."

She saw the knife.

"You stay away from me, you old redheaded thing," Karen said, taking a step back.

"You and me, we're gonna get friendly," he said.

"I'll scream, so help me God."

"Go ahead. Think anybody's gonna hear you away off down here, on a Tuesday night?"

He had backed her all the way into ankle-high grass, wet with dew. She realized, too late, that he was now between her and the car. "You better not," she said.

"Look at me."

His voice had changed so radically, so abruptly, that Karen did stare at him. She blinked. For a moment, just for a moment, he had been Tom Davies, grinning at her in the moonlight. "What you doin'?" she whispered.

"Oh, you're gonna like it," he said, coming another step closer. She smelled that old scent again, that locker-room mustiness.

"Please don't hurt me."

He said, "You don't even remember me. You treated me like a piece of dog shit, and it didn't make no difference to you. You didn't even care."

"Please."

His voice changed again, incredibly silky: "You're made for love, sweet thing. Just made for it. Now take off those clothes for me."

"Yes," she whispered, her twitching fingers already working on the buttons. "If you won't hurt me." She pulled off the blouse, dropped it, then unhooked the blue skirt. The garments fell in two little forlorn mounds of fabric on the grass. She rolled the stockings down, kicked off both shoes. She stood in her naughties, the moon pale on her skin.

"Nice," said the silken voice. "Now the rest of them."

Her lip was trembling, but she felt unbelievably calm. She reached behind her, did in an instant what it took boys ten minutes to do, and dropped the bra. She pushed the black panties down and stepped out of them. She spread her moon-silvered palms to him. "Please, just don't hurt me."

Andy McCory shook his red head like a punch-drunk boxer. "Damn you," he said, and for a second Karen thought he was cursing her, "get out of me! She's mine! You promised!"

The change in his voice gave her will again, and she bolted, running naked for the dirt road. His arm hooked her waist before she had gone ten steps and whipped her around, down. She landed on her thigh and side, bruising herself. She rolled onto her back in the wet grass —

And he was on her.

4

Jake Harris manned the sheriff's switchboard that night. He grumbled to himself this night, for it was unusually busy: somebody out in New Haven calling about hearing a gunshot, people from out on Cart Road calling about noises in the cemetery across the way, just now some preacher calling to ask about Henry Cox, if he knew where he was. Harris didn't, but it took him only a minute to check the number in the phone book, to give the caller the address along with a curt suggestion to check it out himself next time. Another line was already ringing. Jake cut off the preacher and snapped, "Sheriff's Office."

"Jake? What's the matter?"

Shit, Jake thought. "Sorry, Sheriff. Thought you were a crank caller. Had a lot of 'em tonight."

"Full moon. No, I was just checkin' in. I'm gonna try to grab a few hours' sleep, and I'll be back in later tonight. We've gotta figure out something to do with the coffins in Municipal Cemetery — "

"Funny. Lady just called a few minutes ago about that."

"About what?"

"Says she hears somethin' crashin' around in the cemetery. I told her to turn her TV up real loud."

There was silence on the line for maybe a quarter of a minute. "I guess," Quarles said, "I'd better run check it out. Could be the same people back again. Who's in the building?"

"I'm it. Everybody else is out checking complaints. We got the damnedest number of — "

"Okay." Another hesitation, then Quarles said, "I think you better lock the building, Jake. And stay at your post. I don't want you away from the lines."

"I wouldn't do that. 'Cept if I had to take a leak or — "

"Cross your legs," Quarles said, and hung up.

Jake pulled the plug. The switchboard was silent and dark. Shaking his head, he pushed up from the chair, swung the gate open, and came out from behind the counter. It was two steps down to the front door. He fished in his pocket for the keys. Jake locked the right half of the door by throwing the latches, but he had to fit the key in the left half and turn it before the door was secure. He rattled it, looking out into the dark street beyond the wire-reinforced glass. It was blue with moonlight, looking somehow unreal. He shrugged and went back to the desk.

That was at eight-thirty. By nine it occurred to him that the lines had been quiet an awfully long damn time. He plugged in an outside line and heard nothing, no dial tone. He tried the other three. All of them were dead. Dead as a hammer, his father used to say. It killed him dead as a hammer. Something had killed the telephone lines.

The racket started a minute later, from up on the second floor: men screaming in their cells. It made Jake start. "Shut up!" he shouted, but above that din no one could hear him.

It was a babel of voices, high-pitched or deep, sounding like a crap game played by maniacs or like a revival meeting attended by idiots: some chanting, some praying, some cursing, some plain old screams. "Damn!" Jake said to himself. Stay at your post, Quarles had told him; but Quarles had no way of anticipating this. Jake thought a minute, got up, and went to the sheriff's office. He flipped on the light and went to the gun case behind the desk.

He was the duty officer, and he had a key to the rack. He took a rifle, loaded it with a full clip, and clicked off the safety. Thus armed, he went to the front stair and climbed up to the cells.

He stepped into the anteroom, locked off from the cells by a door of iron bars. "Shut up!" he bawled again, shouting against a tide of moans and screams.

"Get us out of here!" a black man in the near cell shouted, rattling the door of his cage. "God's sake, he come down here after us, let us out!"

"Who come down?" Jake yelled.

Somebody way down at the other end of the row, someone with a penetrating tenor, shouted back in a curiously dispassionate seven syllables, "Will-iam Hen-ry Re-sa-ca." At the sound, the shrieks became even louder.

But over them there was a shriller sound: the phone.

Cursing again, the rifle held crossways over his chest, Jake turned and pounded down the stairs. He got to the switchboard just in time to plug in and hear the party on the other end hang up. If it was a citizen with a complaint —

He propped the rifle up, slid back into the chair, and put on the headset. If it had been a citizen, he would call back. If it had been Quarles, Jake's ass was so high in a sling he'd be toting it on his shoulders for the next few days. He could only wait. But when he tried all the lines again, he heard only silence. Dead as a hammer.

Jake sighed, reached in his pocket for his cigarettes, and shook out a Camel. He opened a drawer under the switchboard, got out a red-and-white-tipped kitchen match, and snapped it to life with his thumbnail. He lit the cigarette, shook out the match, and tossed it into the ash stand beside the chair. He took a couple of drags on the Camel, waiting for the phone to ring again.

Something cool ran down his cheek. He was sweating. He wiped his face with his palm, puffed on his cigarette again. Reaching to put a plug in — he was thinking of testing the outside lines again — Jake noticed the red stain on his hand. He opened his palm and stared at a smear of blood. Frowning, he touched his cheek, and his fingers came away red. Damn, he was bleeding, though he felt no wound. He pushed his rolling chair back from the switchboard, and it came up short.

Tilting his head back, Jake looked straight up into the slack, wide-eyed face of Billy Resaca. Resaca had his arms straight out like a sleep-walker, and they dripped on him.

Jake dropped the cigarette and grabbed for the rifle. The safety was still off. The rifle fired almost as soon as Jake had seized the barrel and banged the stock accidentally against the wall. The slug hit him just at the angle of his jaw, shattered jawbone and teeth, nicked his tongue about halfway back on the right side, penetrated the roof of his mouth just at the edge of the hard palate, passed up through his brain, beginning to tumble now, and made its exit through a hole the size of a silver dollar that it blasted in his skull, just to the left of the median line at the crown. Brain tissue and blood erupted, fell back. Jake, already dead, leaped from his seat by pure reflex action and fell against the switchboard. He slid from there to the floor.

Before he twitched once and was still, the lights began to flash and the lines to ring. And within seconds, from upstairs, the screaming started again.

5

Henry Cox lived in a house out on River Road. Forty years ago it had probably been a farmhouse: a one-story white frame house set back on a broad lawn. But any land that had gone with it had since been parceled and subdivided, and now, a hundred feet to the right of the house, a range of small single-family dwellings began, marching back into the night away from the highway. Ann saw the Cox mailbox and the drive beyond it, turned in, and stopped the Rambler behind a black Chevy pickup.

"What do you think?" she asked Tate.

"We'd better see about him."

Ann turned off the headlights. Dim yellow light shone from behind the drawn shades in the front of the house. They got out of the car, into night that smelled of late roses. The moon, cold and blue, its face smudged, rode high now. Ann waited for Tate, followed him up to the front door of the house, stood at his elbow as he knocked.

They waited for so long that Ann was about to suggest they try the knob when the door opened, inwardly and abruptly. A white man with tousled white hair and a pendulous gut stood there. His lower lip

was absurdly big for his face and trembled as he turned his head from one to the other. "Yeah?"

"Mr. Cox?"

The man nodded, his lip bobbing.

"Could we come in?"

Cox ran a hand through his hair, rumpling it more. He wore tan work pants and a long-sleeved red plaid flannel shirt, open to reveal his paunch, barely contained in a nylon undershirt. "What is it?"

"We want to talk to you. That's all," Ann said.

Cox scowled, but stepped aside. As she passed him, Ann realized the man had been drinking — the reek of alcohol was strong on his breath. "Everything's messed up," he muttered. They followed him into a room dominated by a grandfather clock in the corner. Its heavy tick, the sway of its brass pendulum behind the glass of its case, seemed to set the pace for everything in that room: slow and unhurried.

Certainly Cox's housekeeping had been slow. A sofa, two arm-chairs, and a coffee table were stacked with old newspapers and dirty dishes. Cox collected the latter, swept the papers into the floor. He went through a door, burdened with dishes, and came out again in a moment empty-handed. "Set down," he said, rumpling his hair again. His face, in the light from a floor lamp, was red and puffy, the nose bulbous. He reached in his shirt pocket, produced a pack of cigarettes. "Smoke?"

Tate shook his head, and Ann said, "No, thank you."

With a shrug, Cox dug into his pants pocket and found a nickel-plated lighter. He snapped it open and lit his cigarette. Then he held the lighter up. "Zippo," he said. "Had it ever since 1943." He clicked the lid shut and slipped the lighter into his pants pocket. "Now," he said, in a cloud of smoke, "what can I do for you?"

Tate leaned forward. "We think you may be in some trouble, Mr. Cox."

Cox's shoulders tossed as he coughed a laugh. "Me? Hell, 'scuse me, ma'am, I ain't never in trouble. I cause trouble, I don't have it."

"This time it may be different. Mr. Cox, do you remember a man named Jim Bascom?"

Cox crushed his hardy smoked cigarette out in an ashtray, got out his pack and lit a second one. "Yeah," he said. "Seems to me I remember something about a man named Bascom." He squinted through a fresh cloud of smoke. "You're that preacher man, ain't you?"

Tate nodded, introduced himself and Ann. "We talked to somebody tonight who remembered when Bascom was hung," he said.

Cox licked that bloated lower lip. "I remember it, too. Nigger burnt down a man's livelihood. What we done to him, he deserved it."

"You admit it?" Ann asked, surprised.

Cox's eyes shifted toward her. "Hell, yes, 'scuse me, ma'am, I admit it. We give him justice, plain and simple."

"They tell us," Tate said, "he walked out of the fire when you tried to burn the body."

Cox crushed out his second cigarette, reached for a third, and changed his mind. "I don't know who you all have been talkin' to. First, I never thowed him on no fire. That was Morgan's doin.' He figgered since Bascom had set fire to his barn, he might as well set fire to Bascom. Second, he never done no such of a thing. He was dead when he hit that fire. What happened, the wood at the bottom burnt quick, and it give way, the wood on that side of the pile, and the body rolled off. That's all. Some of the others run away, but they just didn't want to be seen in the daylight. I stood by Morgan the whole time. Wasn't no finer man alive than Morgan Simmons."

"The person we talked to said Jim Bascom's come out of his grave," Tate said.

Ann caught her breath. She thought she was ready for any reaction: fury, guilt, denial. She wasn't ready for what happened.

For a long moment, Cox looked Tate in the face. Then, like a child, he began to cry.

6

Mrs. Woodley fired right through the door. This time the gun had no opportunity to kick her: she was half lying against the wall, and the gun butt was braced on the baseboard. Her ears sang after the blast, but even in the dark she could see the hole, a palm's breadth across, the splinters at its edges white and sharp in the light filtering in from the porch. The scratching had stopped again, or at least if it continued, she could not hear it for the ringing in her ears.

She had fired only one barrel, but she broke the gun and stuck another round in the breech. She crawled a few more feet, swept the

small telephone stand with the gun barrel, and the telephone clattered to the floor, its bell dinging once.

Mrs. Woodley scrambled for the receiver, held it to her ear. She heard emptiness. She found the base, jiggled the button. The phone was dead. She dropped the receiver, rolled to her back, almost screaming from the grating pain. Daylight, she thought. If I can hold out till daylight, they won't get me.

But the pain in her hip threatened to get into her head and make her pass out. She ground her teeth together and fought it. It wasn't somebody playing a trick at all, she thought. It was him. It was some kind of booger.

Her daddy had been a great one for telling booger tales, away back when the century measured its age in years ending with single digits. He told her, her brothers and sisters, many and many a story. She told them to herself now, finding them not frightening but nostalgic, because they made her think of the old house with the fireplace so big a half-grown girl could stand upright in it in the summertime, and look up at the distant blue rectangle of sky at the top of the chimney. Her daddy had told her she could see stars even in the daytime looking up a chimney, but she couldn't.

He told his sons and daughters about the woman who wanted a buggy ride one night about this time of year, before Halloween. It must have been '08 or '09, she thought, because Carrie had died of diphtheria in '10, and she remembered holding Carrie on her lap as she heard the tale.

There was this man, her father began, coming home from meeting late one Sunday night. And the wind went whoo-oo-oo in the trees. He was in his buggy, and he just had two little old kerosene lamps to light the way. Seems like he was about halfway home when he sees something white up ahead yonder. Wind was going whoo-oo-oo in the trees. He keeps looking and moving his head like this, trying to see what could it be away off yonder so white.

Well, he gets closer and closer, and it's a girl. It's a girl about your age, Marietta, all dressed in white. She waves him down. It's a cold night, and she's not wearing a coat, just that white ball gown, like someone coming home from a frolic. Well, he pulls up the horse, and she asks him can she ride with him a ways. He says yes, and she

climbs up. "Ain't you cold?" he asks, looking at her bare arms in the light from the kerosene lamps. She says she is, a little, and he gets up and takes off his duster and gives it to her. She thanks him and puts it over her shoulders.

Well, he starts on again, the girl there beside him, quiet. He asks her what her name is, and she says, "Bonnie Elizabeth Walker." And he asks her what she's doing out that late at night, and she says, "I'm trying to get home." And he asks her where she lives, and she says, "About three mile down this road."

The man can tell she doesn't want to talk too much, so he stops asking her questions and just looks off into the dark. And he goes about three miles, and starts looking for a house, but there's nothing but an old country church with a graveyard beside it. And he turns to ask her where her house is, and she's gone.

He knows she didn't climb down, because he would have felt it. But out of the corner of his eye, he seems to see something white going off through the graveyard. He gets a lantern and starts after her, because she still has his duster. And as he's going through the graveyard, he sees the duster folded up on the ground. He goes over to pick it up, and it's on a grave. And when he holds up the lantern to look at the tombstone, it says, BONNIE ELIZABETH WALKER, 1870-1887. And the wind goes whoo-oo-ooooo . . .

Marietta Woodley heard it all again, lying there against the wall. She saw her father leaning over her, ready to take the baby and send her up to bed. It was so real that her eyes filled with tears. "Papa," she said.

But then she saw what was leaning over her. It wasn't Papa at all. The dead boy had come right in.

Her heart simply stopped. She gasped twice for air, drummed her feet on the floor, and died.

No wind moaned outside her house.

7

The howl of sirens brought them both out of bed, John Kirby and his son. Alan was steadier now, though he still trembled after the least exertion, and his father was almost well again. They stood in the kitchen, looking out the back window down at the town, speckled with streetlights.

"Fire?" Alan guessed.

"Sounds more like police sirens and ambulances," John said. His mousy auburn hair was disheveled, standing up, framing his high bald spot with spikes. They could see no sign of the cars or ambulances from here on the hill.

Alan sat down at the kitchen table and groaned. "I don't feel well."

His father put his hand on Alan's shoulder. "It takes a while to get over, son."

"It's not just the flu," Alan said. "It's something else."

"I know."

Alan looked up in surprise. "You do?"

His father's mild eyes were steady behind the spectacles. He pulled a chair out and sat at the head of the table. "I know something's been bothering you all fall. You haven't been yourself."

"I — I'm worried," Alan said.

"You're too young to worry."

Alan shook his head. "Daddy, are there — do you think people just die, or do they go on?"

"On to heaven you mean? Or to hell?"

Alan nodded.

John Kirby smoothed his hair down. It ruffled right back up again. "Well, son, I think some part of a human being's eternal. I guess it's the part we call the soul. Now, just what that part is, or what it's like, I couldn't tell you. To tell you the honest truth, I just don't know what happens when we die. I sort of doubt we'll go to a place where the streets are paved with gold. What heaven is, or hell — well, I think they're different from anything we can possibly imagine here on earth. But I think something must go there."

"How about ghosts?"

His father laced his fingers together. The kitchen light gleamed sharp on his wedding band. "I don't know. In the light of day, I don't believe in them, but being up at" — he glanced at his watch — "half-past midnight on a fall evening, I'm less certain about them. This the result of all your reading?"

"Daddy, there's strange things going on in town."

"I think so, too."

"It's the theater. It's all tied in to the ShadowShow."

"I don't see how."

It spilled from Alan then, the whole story, from the moment he woke up to the sound of no night insects away back in August to the terrible afternoon at the movie theater. He cried through part of it, closed his eyes through part, looked out into the night beyond the window through part, but he told it all.

Then he drew a long, deep breath. "Do you reckon I'm crazy?" he asked in a miserable, small voice. "Me, and Miss Lewis, and Mr. Tate?"

His father got up. "Come on in the living room," he said. Alan followed him in. John Kirby turned on the lamp beside the sofa and picked up the receiver of the telephone. "Look up Miss Lewis's number, son," he said.

Alan pulled out the thin telephone directory from its shelf, and in the yellow lamplight he flipped through to the *Ls*. There it was. He recited, "LANier 2-0092," slowly, as his father turned the numbers on the dial.

He waited for a good long minute before hanging up. To Alan, he said, "She's not home. Any idea where she might have gone tonight?"

"No."

"Well. We'll try again later."

"You're worried, aren't you?" When his father grunted and scraped a finger over his unshaven chin, Alan added, "Are you mad at me?"

His face showed his astonishment. "Mad, Alan? Of course not. I'm a little disappointed. I think you should have told me about this before."

"You believe me?" Alan asked.

Lamplight made the lenses of his father's glasses opaque. Behind the shining circles, he said, "I guess I have to. I guess I've seen too much not to believe in ghosts, or demons, or whatever you're fighting. We're fighting, now, I guess."

Alan put his arms around his father's neck, felt the older arms holding him close. He could not speak. They embraced for perhaps a quarter of a minute.

Then a siren tore up the street, up their street, past the house, and they broke apart. A second later they heard the sound of the crash, and a second after that the whole house shook from the impact of the explosion.

"He's been here," Henry Cox sobbed. "God have mercy on me, he's been here, with a rope around his neck. Comin' for me." Cox wept like

a child, like a grade-schooler who felt mingled shame, guilt, and fear: and seeing him that way, Ann Lewis was moved to put her arm over his shoulder and rub his back, the way she would do a fourth-grader, a boy in his own mind already too big to cry, or at least too big to cry in front of his friends.

Cox fished a handkerchief out from a pocket and blew his nose. "I seen him in the yard," he said. "Standin' there and lookin' at the house, not sayin' anything. First time, I thought it was just somebody pullin' somethin'. I went out on the porch to run him off, and soon as I saw that face I knowed him. Rope around his neck, too. He kind of grinned at me and held out the free end of the rope, like he was offerin' it to me." Cox raised his head, his eyes blazing with sudden indignation. "He burnt the livery stable! He done it! And Morgan Simmons lost everything he had in the world. It ain't right that nigger won't stay in the ground, not after all these years." His voice fell silent, and the room filled itself with the slow and heavy ticking of the grandfather clock.

"Maybe you didn't see anything," Ann Lewis said into the silence. "Maybe you only thought you did."

Cox ran his hands back over the sides of his head. "I don't believe I'm crazy," he said. "I seen him just as plain as I can see you. And that ain't the last time. He's been out there other nights, not speakin', just standin' there, and when I see him, I know it's him, it's Bascom." He was quiet for a very long time. Ann found the insistent, unhurried tick-tock of the big clock almost maddening in its impersonality. When Cox spoke again, his voice was so low that it was hard to understand: "He's closer to the house every time I see him."

"Don't stay out here by yourself," Ann said. "There must be somewhere you can go."

Cox shrugged. "Ain't nobody in town I'd want to stay with. Anyhow, what would I tell 'em? That I'm bein' chased by a man who's been dead more than thirty years?"

Tate had gone to the window, had pulled aside the drapes fractionally. "I see him," he said.

Ann felt the hair on her arms rise, prickling. Her heart gave a solid thud in her chest. And yet some part of her mind was not afraid, some part was remote and filled with a kind of cold anger, not with fright. She came to the window and looked out through the slit Tate held open.

He stood on the grass, a man as dark as the night, more a shape than a figure, really. "I shot at him," Cox said from behind Ann. "I hit him more'n once. He just flies to flinders, and then he comes back."

"It could be anybody," Ann said.

"Let's see." Tate let the drapes fall back together, then turned to Cox. "Have you got a flashlight?"

"In the kitchen drawer."

"Go and get it, please, sir."

Cox rose ponderously and left them alone. After a moment they heard him rummaging in another room. "What are we going to do?" Ann asked Tate.

"I want to see what he is," Tate said.

Something in his voice made Ann glance sharply at him. "You like this," she said. "You like the chance of seeing a ghost!"

"I have had my doubts, Sister Lewis. I've doubted that anything survives the grave. But this — "

"It's not him," Ann said. "It's a devil, a — "

"If the devil exists, then God exists," he said imperturbably. Cox came back in, a long flashlight in his hand. "Here it is. Got new D-cells in her, six of them." He turned it on. The beam, even indoors, in the light, was startlingly bright.

Tate took it from him and switched it off. "You don't have to come," he said to Ann.

"I'm coming," she said.

They opened the front door to night and darkness. The figure was still there — or was it? In the night it was hard to tell, even with the moon so high and bright, for trees shaded the lawn and the man, if man it was, stood in a deep puddle of shadow. Ann put a hand on Tate's back as they descended the front steps, felt cold wet grass at her ankles. They were only a matter of a few steps from the figure when Tate snapped the flashlight on.

He looks so sad, Ann thought.

A black man, wearing overalls and frayed blue shirt, a noose around his neck, his face a mask of grief: solid it seemed as the tree behind it, and no less real, and yet there was something unreal about it, too, some whiff of nightmare.

"Who are you?" Tate asked, though Ann knew who it was. They had seen that face earlier tonight, looking out from a yellowed old photograph grasped tight in Ludie Estes's hand.

The man did not speak, did not even acknowledge their presence. His eyes, dark with anguish, stared blindly ahead.

When Tate spoke again, Ann leaped in her skin at his whiplash voice: "Depart, thou unclean spirit, in the name of Jesus!"

What happened next — whether the noose tightened, or whether the figure simply changed, somehow — Ann could never later say. Suddenly the eyes bulged, the whites reddened with shattered capillaries, the mouth gaped, a blackened tongue burst out, the whole frame shuddered — and then it was falling, already a mass of greenish mold, skin and flesh peeling back, eyes glazing and sinking, teeth grinning, clothes falling in on a wasted body, falling lower, the face fleshless now, the hair gone, a skull grinning at them, the clatter of shinbones on the ground, a sideways lurch — and it was gone.

"You did it," Ann said.

"If anything was done here tonight, the Lord did it," Tate said. "But somethin' ain't right." His flashlight swept the ground. There was no trace, not the least disturbance of dew in the grass, to mark Jim Bascom's arrival or passing. "This ain't right. I don't think we saw a body."

"What was it, then?"

"A, what-do-you-call-it, like when you see things that ain't there — "

"Hallucination?"

"Yeah, that."

"But we both saw it."

"Even so. It didn't seem like it was there, somehow. Somethin's buildin' in this town, but it ain't finished yet. I think this was just a kind of taste of things to come, somehow. I wonder if somethin' just wants us away from town tonight?"

"Why?"

"Alan," Tate said simply.

The creature that called itself Athaniel Badon moved back from the body. She's so flat, Andy McCorry thought, so pale in the moon.

She had gasped toward the end of his attentions to her, gasped like a woman carried to the brink of orgasm and beyond, but she had not died. Mr. Badon kept her from dying, somehow, until he could do that thing and drink from her. Now she lay in the moonlight like a torn package, inert, pale blue and purple further below, where the wounds began, where her insides showed.

Badon shuddered, his features melting back into human semblance. "She is yours," he said.

"She's dead."

"She is."

"What the hell good is she to me?" His voice traveled out over the empty water to the other side, and an echo mocked back, me, me.

Badon's eyes, two points of feral light in the darkness of his face, glowed. "Look at her."

McCory looked down at his feet. He was splashed with her blood, could feel it sticky and crusted on his hands, could see it across the front of his shirt. Below him, the wounds began to heal. Flesh met flesh again, silently, sealed, intestines crept and slithered and crawled back into the ripped abdomen, and behind them the skin closed without fuss or scar.

"She ain't real," McCory said.

"Of course she is," Badon said. "It's you who are not real. You're still alive. She's dead. She's more real than you are. She will never change now."

Her eyes opened, horribly empty, two silver dimes. Her mouth stretched in the imitation of a smile.

"I am strong tonight," Badon crooned. "Oh, they will know me tonight, they will have a hint of my desires."

"She's dead."

The corpse's tongue licked its lips, leaving them gleaming a pale purple. "Andy," it said, holding up its arms. "Come to me. Come to Kay-Kay."

"No . . ."

"Go ahead," Badon told him.

"But she — she ain't really — she —"

"She will welcome your embraces now. She will let you do anything now."

"Honey," said a voice from the ground.

Sam Quarles had seen things in the cemetery.

He had seen nothing he could arrest or even shoot at, but things — movements glimpsed from the corner of his eye, stealthy scuttling somethings half seen darting between distant gravestones, things that might have been rabbits or owls (he knew they were not) or, for all he knew, demons from hell.

Nothing stirred around the pile of coffins.

He heard traffic sounds, the chirps and cries of insects, the high-pitched twitter of bats overhead; and then he heard the crump of a distant explosion.

"Damn," he muttered, rising from his impious seat on the stone commemorating the existence of Purdy Lee Fowler, 1879–1939. He had left the car — his own Pontiac, not a sheriff's car — in the driveway of a house an eighth of a mile from the cemetery entrance, with the homeowner's permission. The family was sleeping over with relatives tonight, though the man of the house refused to say whether the cemetery had anything to do with the visit.

Quarles walked to the car, gravel crunching under his boots. He wished for the hundredth time that year that the county would spring for radios. It would make his life a lot easier, he thought, if he could just have a walkie-talkie with him on nights like this, or at least two-way radios in the patrol cars. On impulse, he walked to the front door of the white bungalow and tried it. It swung open. Quarles sighed. Damned idiot deserved to be robbed.

"Anybody home?" he yelled into the house. No one answered. He turned on the living-room light and saw down a hall to the kitchen beyond. Quarles walked through the house to the kitchen, and sure enough the telephone squatted on the counter there like a hunkered black toad. He picked it up and dialed the number of the Sheriff's Office.

He got a busy signal. Scowling, he dialed another number, one not given out to the public. It rang ten times before he crashed the phone back into the cradle. After frowning at the wall clock — 12:39 — he called the police department and identified himself. "I heard somethin' go up," Quarles said. "What was it?"

"Wreck, looks like," the policeman told him. "Up Rainey Hill way. Ambulance, I think."

"Shit," Quarles said. "Anybody checkin' it out?"

"It's your baby," the policeman said.

"Shit." Technically, Rainey Hill was in the county, though the residents there got city water, paid some city taxes, and sent their kids to city schools. Quarles hung up, tried the Sheriff's Office again, got nothing, and went back out to his car, vengefully slamming the house door behind him. He took out his keys, unlocked his car, and slid behind the wheel. The engine caught right away, and he backed out, headed toward town, and made the tires screech on the asphalt.

He had to go north to Bridge Street, then turn left to get to Rainey Hill. He had just made the turn when he smelled something sweet, something familiar.

The aroma of spearmint gum.

Quarles glanced to his right. Harmon Presley sat beside him. "Goin' to check it out?" Presley asked in his familiar voice

The car swerved off the road, chewed grass on the shoulder, skidded back into the road, straightened its nose, and aimed for the bridge. Quarles felt frozen, the way he had once felt as a boy when he reached to pick up what he thought was a stick, only to have the stick coil at the approach of his hand and buzz its rattles at him.

"Get out!" he barked to his companion.

Presley laughed. "This town will die," he said, and he was gone.

Quarles managed to stop the car just short of the bridge. He was alone. There was no smell of gum in the air. He tasted blood. He had bitten into his lower lip hard enough to pierce the flesh.

"No," he said. "You're not here, Harmon Presley. No, you weren't." He started the car again and drove across the bridge, toward the commotion on Rainey Hill.

He saw the crowd before he saw the accident: shoulders and heads outlined black against a strange blue, actinic illumination, swaying almost to a constant thrum and hum. Quarles knew it was bad before he stopped the Pontiac and killed the engine, though he left the headlights burning. The sheriff got out of the Pontiac. His knees shook with every step, but he made it to the edge of the crowd.

The red and white ambulance had snapped a power pole clean off. Part of the splintered stub projected from beneath the crumpled bumper, bent forward almost in a V to embrace the blackened, creosoted wood; part of the crosspieces still hung from wires sagging

low over the ambulance roof. A broken power line leaped, flashed, and sparked, now resting on the ambulance hood, now writhing on the ground.

The crowd folded Quarles in as he pushed forward. He saw that all Rainey Hill up the slope from the break was dark: men and women from the blacked-out houses, most in bathrobes or hastily donned and mismatched clothing, stood well back from the ambulance and the power line.

Hubert Willis recognized him. "I done called the power company," Willis bawled in his ear. "They gotta shut the juice off before we can get to 'em."

"Who was it comin' for?" Quarles asked.

"Don't know. It's the Loveland ambulance. That'd be Mattie Porter drivin' it. Just come abarrelin' around the curve doin' blue ninety, slid right into that pole — "

The ambulance door creaked open.

"No!" Quarles shouted.

Matthew Porter, his eyes wild behind a red mask of blood that flowed from a gash across his forehead, poised on the edge of the door and then leaped out into the night. He hit and fell forward on his left knee and his outstretched hands, three feet past the sputtering live wire.

Quarles released the breath he had caught.

The wire struck like a live thing.

It lashed across Porter's back, arching his spine. He stood up for a moment, bent impossibly back, a blackening parenthesis against the flare and flash of electricity. His hands flew stiffly out at sharp angles from his body, windmilled, and his legs did a jittering, involuntary dance. Smoke burst from his form, and a whiff of burning flesh made Quarles retch.

It ended too suddenly to be believed.

The darkness hit with palpable force: the streetlights behind the accident went out, and all the lighted squares of doors and windows. The electrical lightning died simultaneously. For a moment Quarles thought his sight had somehow failed; then he became aware that he could still see the headlights of the ambulance, burning dim, almost an ember red against the dark. His own car lights illuminated the crowd, but after the brightness of the broken wire, they were pale, ineffective.

Sounds came to him then: women praying, sobbing, and men, too.

Hubert Willis let out a long, shuddering sigh. "They turned off the power," he whispered.

There was a longer, plaintive voice above the cacophony. It came from the ambulance. Blinking as his eyes adjusted to the dark, Quarles forced himself to step forward, past the huddled, smoking form of Matthew Porter, to the ambulance. "Help me, somebody," cawed a hoarse, helpless voice.

The door still hung open. Quarles stepped in. "Who is it?" he asked.

"Lucy Spokes," croaked the voice. "Oh, Lord a mercy, what happened?"

She was in the back of the ambulance, her thin, veined hands over her face. The dome light, still smoky and uncertain after the white-hot glare outside, highlighted the bones and crackled flesh. Quarles knelt beside her. "You had a wreck," he said. "What happened, Miz Spokes?"

She lowered her hands. Her eighty-year-old eyes, sunk deep into her face, were wide, pale, and dry. "I have the flu," she said. "It seemed like I couldn't get my breath, somehow. My son Roland called the ambulance. I told him it wasn't necessary, I could wait." Her tongue licked dry lips. "But you know my son. Anyway, the ambulance came and we were going into town when Matthew Porter simply went insane. He began to scream for somebody to get away from him. The next thing I knew, he had turned on the siren and we were squealing around corners and going up and down hills — " The old hands described a roller coaster in the air. "And then there was this awful crash, and I've been strapped in here not able to get loose — "

"Mama?" The voice was Rollie Spokes's, and it came from the open door of the ambulance. "Mama? I was trying to follow the ambulance, but he lost me and — "

"Roland, get me out of this thing."

"Hold on, Miz Spokes. We'll get you out."

It took another ten minutes, but they did get her out. This time Rollie Spokes insisted on driving his mother to the hospital himself, and Quarles was glad to let him go. Another ambulance had arrived, and a truck from the power company. The crowd had drifted away a bit, coalescing into smaller groups, as crowds will. Quarles asked around, but no one else had seen the accident.

He leaned against his car and rubbed his eyes. Crazy. Mrs. Spokes and her son lived a good five miles out of town, and Rainey Hill was not on the way to the hospital. What had made Matt Porter go nuts enough to chase around that way, siren blaring, tires screeching?

But Quarles, remembering the scent of spearmint gum, thought he knew the answer to that already.

11

“John?”

Alan’s father paused, his right foot raised onto his porch, his right hand pressed against the rail, supporting his weight. He looked behind him into the darkness. “Yes?”

Ann Lewis and a tall, gaunt man materialized from the gloom. “It’s me,” she said. “And this is Mr. Tate. What happened?”

John Kirby’s shoulders sagged. “Bad accident up the hill, about forty-five minutes ago. Power’s been off for half an hour. I’ve got to go in — I left Alan alone. I think you’d better come in with me.”

“We need to talk.”

“I know.”

Streetlights and houselights suddenly flickered back on. John blinked in the light, a warm yellow glow from the porch light, a whiter glare from the street lamps. His hair was disheveled, his glasses shining with reflections. He looked at Ann Lewis for a moment, then at Odum Tate. “I guess,” he said, “we’d better go inside.”

They went into the warmth and light, closing the door on darkness.

Interval 3:

Conflagrations

1

The youngest son, he spoke to the ghost,
Heigh, ho, rattle the bones.
He started to brag and he started to boast.
Rattle the bones and the chains-o!
The youngest son said, "Begone, you fiend,"
Heigh, ho, rattle the bones.
Said, "This night will see the one of us end."
Rattle the bones and the chains-o!
He had on his side fine steel and fire,
Heigh, ho, rattle the bones.
He had his dear mother sayin' a prayer.
Rattle the bones and the chains-o!
When the sun showed his face it was fiery and red,
Heigh, ho, rattle the bones.
Ghost was still free and the third son lay dead.
Rattle the bones and the chains-o!
"The Ghost and the Three Boys"
("Rattle the Bones"), mountain ballad, ca. 1801

2

In a city of Ionia lived a certain man, Astrides, who fancied himself persecuted by a kind of evil spirit. In less than a year all of his household, wife, children, servants, and even animals sickened and died; so that the people of the city believed the house afflicted with plague, and they avoided Astrides, leaving him alone in his misery.

But he believed that a spirit, more terrible than the Furies, had claimed his house, and had feasted on the blood of all his family and servants, and yet was invisible. In his fear and misery, Astrides consulted a priest of Pallas Apollo, who assured him that the evil spirit could be exorcised from the house by ritual and sacrifice.

So on an appointed day, the priest came to the house of Astrides and performed the necessary rites, praying that the god would release the man from his terrible sufferings. And it is said that, in the midst of the rites of purification, the evil spirit appeared in a bodily shape that all could see, seeming to form from thin air in the smoke above the altar: and its form was like a blood-drinking mosquito, only many times larger, so that they said an ordinary mosquito was to the monster as a grasshopper is to a man.

Then the priest questioned the apparition, and it spoke in a voice like a man's. When the priest asked the spirit why it troubled the family, the spirit replied, "I wish to make them free."

"But you have killed them," the priest admonished.

"It is the same thing," the spirit said.

The priest, then knowing the spirit to be one of evil, burned certain leaves and made a sacrifice to Pallas Apollo. When the smoke had cleared, the apparition had gone with it; and Astrides was never again troubled with this so-called evil spirit.

This, Athenians, is what I have heard from a man who was a near neighbor of Astrides. For its truth I will not vouch, for I was not there and did not see it myself; and, as for spirits, my firm belief is that whether they be real or no, there is no need for a living person to trouble with them until they first trouble him.

- Democritus the Lesser, "Of Ghosts and Spirits" (fragment; 4th. Century B.C., translated by Gary Clarence)

3

Beloved, the Devil never brought witchcraft to Salem. Nay, he did not so much as bring one thought of evil here; nor did he need to do so.

For each one of us, each inhabitant of Salem, had evil enough within. That spirits were moved, I have yet no doubt; but they were our own spirits, beloved, and not those of devilish imps. That dark deeds

were done, that is certain; but men and women and children did those deeds.

Or if Satan indeed came among us to raise a crop for hell in that time of trouble, did we not give him fallow ground, and all the seed he needed? Did we not tend the crop ourselves? And when the bloody harvest came, did our hands not swing the sickle?

- Reverend Samuel Beverly, of Salem, "Penitential Sermon," 1720 (MS held in Colonial Collections, Boston Harbor College)

4

Scarce had Tollivant's manly shoulder burst open the door before I heard from him a cry of terror and grief. "Alas!" he cried. "Too late! Too late! Malvina has fallen prey to the fiend's terrors!"

Readers! How could I describe that ghastly room to you? Gentle hearts would need grow faint, should I speak of the wretched ruin that had been, but hours earlier, the sweet Malvina, flushed in the beautiful bloom of first youth. Nor could I tell you of the gore-spattered chamber, its very walls stained with young Malvina's heart's blood. Suffice it to say that the inhuman appetites of D'Alsace had been grossly satisfied in that room of horror . . .

"But, Gaspard!" I cried to the excitable Frenchman as he paced the floor of our apartments. "Think! Could it have been D'Alsace? Did we not exhume his body beneath the moon's baleful light? And did you not, with your own hands, drive home the stake that would forever affix his thirsting soul to its body? The vampyre is dead, Gaspard, dead!"

"Not a bit of it!" Gaspard exclaimed, his deep-set eyes ablaze with determined courage. "Ah, mon ami, we have allowed ourselves to be led up the path of the garden! I begin to see now, yes, clearly. It is not a true vampyre at all!"

My head whirled. "I do not understand. All that you have told me, all that you believed — "

"Gaspard was a fool!" my Continental friend cried, striking himself a merciless blow on his head. "An imbecile, an idiot! Alas, for Malvina and for D'Alsace's other victims! Zut! The being I mistook for a vampyre, Poison, was nothing less than a spirit of destruction!"

"A spirit! Then we have not destroyed him?"

"Not at all. We have desecrated his earthly dwelling, the body of D'Alsace; we have not destroyed him. We cannot destroy him, for a spirit is eternal!"

I slumped into a chair. "Then there is no hope, no end to this ghastly affair!"

Gaspard sprang to his feet with that feline energy I had so often observed. With a wrench he opened the draperies, flooding the room with light. "There is hope, my friend! Alors, prepare yourself to go forth. We cannot destroy the spirit, but we may cast it into darkness. We must find D'Alsace's body again — he has doubtless hidden well — and bring to it the fire."

"Fire?" I asked.

"Yes! The one thing that will defeat him, the gift of the Titan to humankind. Fire, my friend, is our ally "

- Godfrey Herbert Polwood, *The Blood-Drinker's Doom*, or, *The Lambeth Vampyre* *London*: 1896)

5

. . . hardly less bloody than the depredations of such a creature are the recommended methods of dealing with it. Like the vampire of European legend, the dream-spirit feeds on blood; but, unlike the vampire, it is spirit rather than flesh, evil impulse given form by the blood it consumes. As it feeds, it becomes more solid, and so its visible form may be arrested by methods familiar to students of vampire lore: a stake, of metal rather than wood, through its body will effectively pinion the creature, though this is only a very temporary measure.

In its true form, the dream-spirit is said to be unearthly, inhuman; but, like the manitou of Amerind myth, it normally disguises its shape by assuming the form of a human being. This form, when the dream — spirit is weak, is insubstantial. However, after the spirit has sated itself on blood, say the legends, its outer form, its human disguise, becomes palpable. This form may be transfixed with a stake, but this is (unlike in the case of the vampire) a brief respite at best. With the passage of time (seven changes of the moon, according to Tibetan

myth), the body fades into insubstantiality again, dissolving into dust and falling loose from the stake, and the spirit is freed. Then it is only a matter of time before the body re-forms itself. Alternately, the body may be dismembered completely, chopped into fine pieces and fed to animals; the animals then must be slaughtered and buried widely apart. Under no circumstances may their flesh be eaten. Still, with seven times seventy-seven changes of the moon, the bits and pieces of the body will begin to coalesce again, and once more the spirit will be at large.

In fact, the Tibetans believe there is no absolute end to the evil, for do what one will, the spirit of evil will eventually re-gather. However, the best method of disposing of a dream-spirit seems to be fire. If the false body is completely burnt, the shamans say, its unhoused spirit cannot take form again for seven times seven hundred and seventy-seven cycles of the moon

In a hut on the eastern slopes of the mountain I spoke with an old Sherpa who professed his complete belief in such notions as the dream-spirit I had heard about in the lower elevations. I teased him, arguing that the spirits, if they existed at all, were so powerful that they would have long ago taken over all the earth.

"No," the man assured me. "That cannot be. There is only one dream-spirit, and there has never been more than one."

I mentioned all the old legends of dream-spirits in different villages. The old man shook his head patiently. "There is only one. It does not die, and it moves about from place to place"

- Bill Andersen, *Legends from the Roof of the World* (New York: 1975)

Part IV

ShadowShow

Thirteen

1

Morning: milky sunlight filtered through tall windows, but did little to brighten the dark-paneled office of Cliff Warner. Sam Quarles's eyes burned from no sleep, his uniform felt tight and sweaty under his arms, and his chin bristled with a steel-filing growth of beard.

"I won't let this town go to hell, Sam," Warner said quietly. The mayor, a balding man of forty-five who had a habit of tilting his head back to hide a growing double chin, leaned far back in his chair. "I want you to find out what's been going on. Find out and stop it."

Quarles shook his head. "I don't know how to start."

Warner rubbed his eyes. "How many last night?"

"Nine out around and in the town. Three in the jail."

"Jake Harris just killed himself?"

"Looks that way. Put the barrel under his chin and —"

The mayor raised a hand. "No need to go into details."

Quarles stifled a yawn. His jaw creaked. "This could just as well go to the city police," he said. "A bunch of the —"

Warner shook his head. "It started with the Sheriff's Office," he said.

"Then if you're gonna give it to me, give me some help to go with it."

"I'll tell Bob Goss to cooperate with you —"

"More than that."

Warner's small eyes were carefully blank. "What do you mean?"

"Call out the Guard."

The mayor shook his head. "Can't do it, Sam. How would it look? Gaither has to handle its own problems —"

"I can't do it by myself. And I'm runnin' out of deputies."

" — and besides, everybody would think of Little Rock if I tried something like that. Now, you know how the mills have been fighting to stay open. I can tell you in confidence that the commissioners and the Chamber of Commerce are right on the edge of bringing in some new industry. But if this town gets a reputation of — "

"People are dying, Cliff. If we can't stop that — "

" — let me finish. If this town gets a reputation of not being a good place to live and work, if we can't stop this problem of ours, then we might as well forget about any new industry. And without it, this town's going to dry right up and blow away."

Quarles sighed and dropped his head. When he looked back up, he said, "At least do this much for me. Take the county prisoners off my hands. Put 'em in the work camp, or put 'em in the city jail. I can't keep 'em in that place after what happened last night."

"But they're county prisoners — "

"Two of 'em tore each other to pieces. The others saw it. If you won't let me move them, I swear to God, I'll open the cells and let 'em go."

Cliff Warner looked at Quarles for a long time. Then he shrugged. "All right. You see how many Buford can take in the work camp. I'll see what I can arrange with the city. How many do you have altogether?"

"Twenty-six. This morning."

"Say a dozen in the jail and the rest to the camp, then. You take care of transport?"

Quarles smiled without any sign of mirth. "Cliff, if those guys know they can stay anywhere else but the county jail, they'll walk there, get inside the cells, and lock themselves in."

"I want some answers, Quarles."

"Yeah, yeah."

"This woman out in New Haven."

"Mrs. Woodley," Quarles supplied.

"Yes, that's the one. She died a natural death?"

Quarles said, "She had a shotgun under her arm. She'd fired at least twice through the screen door, once through the wood. I don't know how natural you'd call that."

"But she died of natural causes herself?"

The sheriff frowned. "Heart attack, looked like, the doc said. But — "

"One step might be to see how many others we can write off like that. Natural death, accidental electrocutions. I have a feeling these things aren't even related, you know. That's the approach."

"Yeah," Quarles said.

Cliff Warner blew out his cheeks. "Well. At least some people are recovering."

"I don't follow."

"Ballew Jefferson," Warner said. "He sort of dropped out of sight for a while there. But I talked to him a few minutes ago on the phone. He's feeling better, he says. He's coming over to my house tonight for drinks."

2

Alan felt detached, as if he were not really there, felt light-headed and weak. But he sat in the pine-yellow wooden chair at the library table and obediently went through the indexes of ponderous books. The incandescent lights overhead were dim, and the whole place smelled of dust and old bindings.

Laying out of school, Alan thought. First time I've done that in a long time. And Miss Lewis, calling in sick. And Daddy.

His father sat across from him. It was the first time Alan had been inside the University of Georgia Library — only the third or fourth time he had been to Athens, come to that — and he was daunted by the shelves upon shelves of books. The Gaither library might have fitted easily within the tall marble foyer of the university library; though down here in the sub-basement, with its dim illumination and its reading tables shoved against the walls at the periphery of the stacks, the atmosphere was much the same.

Ann Lewis had stationed John and Alan at the table. She herself disappeared into the heart of the library, and now and again she returned with an armload of new books for the others to examine. They had come down early that morning, after Tate and Miss Lewis had spent the night at Alan's house, Miss Lewis taking John Kirby's bed, John sleeping with Alan, and Mr. Tate sleeping on the sofa. Tate, professing himself too unschooled in any book other than the Bible to be of help, had stayed behind. The three had been at their tasks for more than three hours.

Miss Lewis came back, tugging a pine library cart, its top shelf packed with more books. "This is about it," she whispered, and she transferred

the books to the table. She took a seat at the end of the table and reached for a book. "I didn't think you'd believe us," she said to John.

"I don't know if I do, altogether." Kirby smiled back at her. "But something's wrong in Gaither. I can't think of any rational explanation. We might as well look into the crazy ones."

Alan slipped a torn piece of paper into Volume III of the Coghill Reference Encyclopaedia of Myth and Folklore and coughed. His father gave him a hard look. "Are you feeling all right, son?"

The boy nodded. "Just woozy, that's all."

Miss Lewis put a warm hand on his forehead. "He doesn't have a fever," she said.

"If you feel bad, you let us know."

"Yes, sir."

They bent over the books, with Alan locating references and his father and Miss Lewis reading and comparing them. A few students, not many, drifted by. They had come in from the sunny, warm October afternoon, and the fragments of talk Alan overheard covered matters from the coming game against Tulane next Friday to Jack Benny's gag appearance on "The \$64,000 Question" the previous night, but nothing about classes, papers, or study.

During breaks they talked a little themselves, not about Gaither or its troubles, but about other things: the Red satellite, for one. Alan still could not get used to the altered sky, to the idea of a hostile presence in space itself. The adults, too, seemed newly aware of the vast sky above them, of the dangers it might hold, and of their vulnerability below. Not that gloom about outer space occupied them completely; they also talked about school, about the increasing absences from classes of students down with flu. In the whole state, only Atlanta had been hit harder by illness so far — but the flu was gaining strength in other communities, and it looked to be a long, hard siege.

But they took only a few breaks. At noon, they did take an hour off for lunch, going downtown to a little restaurant where Alan merely picked at his fried chicken, and afterward they returned to the library. Finally at about three o'clock, Ann Lewis leafed through a nearly filled notebook. "Vampires. Demon possession. Nightmares. Ghosts." She sighed. "What if there's something real behind them all?"

"And what if it's come to Gaither?" Alan's father took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. "Assume it has. What do we do about it?"

Miss Lewis closed the notebook. "I suppose we have to try the old remedies. The ones in the legends and the stories. The ones in the books."

"It's the theater," Alan said, his throat dry and tight.

The other two looked at him.

"It wasn't like this before the theater came. It's Mr. Badon. What did Mr. Tate call him? The Angel of Destruction? I don't think he's human at all."

"Well," his father said.

3

"Is Mr. Badon here?"

Behind the glass of the ticket booth, Clarice Singer bent her head toward the round hole. "Excuse me?"

The scarecrow man in black repeated her question.

"No," Clarice told him. "He's not in yet. He may come in later on."

"I'll wait on the Square."

She watched him cross the street, watched him sit on one of the benches. He was familiar, though for a few moments she couldn't place him. Then she had it: he was the crazy old preacher who used to be there every afternoon. Funny, she hadn't seen him actually preaching since the theater opened. "Who was that?" Beebee Venner asked from behind her. It was a dead time, during the first show: too early for anybody much to be buying tickets. Only five or six people were inside now, and Beebee could easily leave the concession stand while she pulled up a stool to sit and talk to Clarice.

"That old preacher fellow. Wanted to see Mr. Badon."

"Yeah, well, good luck, huh?"

"I told him he might be in later on."

"Sure. When was the last time we seen him?"

"I don't remember. What was it you were saying?"

"This guy shows up at Mama's house this morning," Beebee said, taking up the thread of her story. "Old guy. He saw the room-for-rent sign in the yard and come up to ask Mama about it. Already had his suitcases in his hand. So she rented him the room. Now, he's an old guy around here. Name's Cox, Henry Cox. And he has his own house away out yonder in the sticks somewhere, right?"

"Why did he want to rent your mama's room, then?"

"That's the crazy part of it. That's why Mama was askin' me if I thought she should call the police or what. See, he'd already give her a week's rent when she asked him how come he wanted to stay in town. And he told her a ghost was after him."

"A ghost?"

"Uh-huh. Some colored man that got killed away back yonder sometime. He said the man got burnt up here on this very spot."

"What do you mean?"

"Back when this was a stable or something instead of a show. Said the man got all burnt up right here, probably right where we're settin' now."

"Oh, hush, Beebee. You got my arms all goose skin."

Beebee laughed. "So Mama wanted to know did I think Mr. Cox was too crazy to let him stay there. I told her, I said, 'Mama, if Daddy ain't been too crazy for you for thirty years, I reckon Mr. Cox won't be no worse.'"

"He's just settin' out there starin' at us," Clarice said.

"Who is?"

"That preacher man. On the bench over there. See him?"

"Oh. I thought you meant it was the ghost."

"Beebee, you hush."

"Woo — ooo — ooo," moaned Beebee, grinning.

"Hush, now," pleaded Clarice.

4

Jack Harwell noticed that something was different about Ballew Jefferson's house. For a moment he couldn't place it; then he realized all the newspapers were gone. He had tossed one paper a day onto the porch every afternoon for weeks (except for the Sunday paper, which came before dawn and which he tossed there early every Sunday morning), and a formidable pile of them had stacked up. He was on the verge of cutting off service altogether: Mr. Jefferson hadn't paid his bill since August, and here it was halfway through October.

Rich people, Jack thought, walking down the drive toward the big house. It was easier to collect from poor families that lived down in the mill village than it was from the people up here on the ridge. The mill hands paid their ninety cents every week with no fuss and no grum-

bling. The rich folks on the ridge paid by the month, three-sixty, but just try to get it from them. It was always, "My husband's out right now. You'll have to see him," or "Come back next week. I don't have anything smaller than a twenty." Still, most of them eventually paid up, though some fell three months into arrears first. And it didn't pay to antagonize rich people.

Jack heaved the pouch of newspapers into a marginally more comfortable position, took one out, and hurled it from thirty feet away onto the front porch of Mr. Jefferson's house. It thwacked solidly against the door, then lay there, the only paper on the porch now, looking a little sad. Jack shivered for no reason and hurried back up the driveway. But before he crossed the street, he paused to look back. Did someone twitch aside a curtain in the upstairs window? He frowned. He could almost swear that there, in the dark rectangle of the panes, he saw a form standing and looking down at him. He put a hand up over his spectacles, in the attitude of a saluting soldier, shading his eyes.

It was a woman, he decided, a woman's silhouette. Was she — he swallowed — was she naked? She looked that way, smooth figure dark against a slightly darker background. Jack squeezed his eyes shut and opened them again.

No, it was no woman. It was a man, and a bulky one at that; and he was not naked. He wore, at least, the broad-brimmed Smokey Bear hat of a deputy, and the tilt of his head, the slouch of his shoulders was somehow familiar.

Harmon Presley.

Jack bit down on his own heart, which had tried to leap right out of his mouth. He blinked. Was the figure still there? Yes, but it was not Presley. It was — it was old Mr. Jefferson himself, of course it was.

Jack hesitated. A Buick came down the street, forcing him over to the other side. He thought of the two months' subscription that Mr. Jefferson owed him. Every week he had to pay for all the papers he delivered, whether his customers paid him or not. Most weeks he cleared eleven, twelve dollars; once a month, when his monthly customers paid, his take zoomed to sixty or seventy. Seven dollars and twenty cents would make a difference when he settled up this week.

The figure was still there. Jack shivered again, shivered the warm flood of October sunshine, and made the most important decision of his life.

He turned on the heel of his P.F. Flyers and continued on up the ridge, leaving the Jefferson house behind him.

5

Sundown.

In Athens, Alan, his father, and Miss Lewis walk from the library down the hill to the visitors' parking lot at the north end of the football stadium. It seems a long walk to Alan, most of it downhill: a long flight of concrete steps, then another, then another. A few clouds are in the sky, and the evening air has just the barest edge of chill in it. A couple passes by them, holding hands, giving them a curious look.

We look like a family, Alan thinks.

He wishes they were.

Sundown.

Mayor Warner stands beside his living-room window and scans the street. He feels anxious, without knowing why. He is waiting for Ballew Jefferson to drop by for a drink, maybe to talk a little business, certainly to commiserate about the precarious state of the town. He is ahead of the game, for he sips already at a tumbler with a healthy knock of bourbon in it. He feels old, sad. All the deaths in town lately. Damn it, anyway.

What were they thinking of when they died off like that? Didn't people realize how hard it was to attract businesses to a place like Gaither?

His wife pauses in the doorway. "Dinner about eight, then?"

"I guess," he says.

"Well, if Ballew is only staying for drinks — "

"That's what he said."

"I'll be upstairs."

Mayor Warner nods curtly, takes another sip of bourbon. It tastes awful, and he grins, trying not to make a face. He thinks how crazy it is that Frye is a dry county, and he wonders if there will ever come a time when liquor is legal here. Or beer and wine, anyway.

He begins to tote up, in his imagination, all the business that might come to the county if alcohol were legal.

Sundown.

Dr. Gordon reads over the note he has just written. His handwriting, like the old joke, is wretched, but this note is readable, neatly lettered in black ink on cream-white stationery. His wife is still fussing about upstairs. Well, let her fuss. Take her a while to get used to the idea, that was all.

Dr. Gordon reads the note:

Dear Sam,

I'm sorry to break the news to you this way, but I am leaving town for a while. I have had it. I've told Dr. Franklin about it — he thinks I have an ailing relative that I have to visit. He will sub for me until I get back, if I come back. Evelyn and I are going to Florida for the next month.

I would urge you to leave, too, though I know you won't. There is something wrong in this town, Sam, and you know it as well as I do.

The doctor sighs, starts to sign the note, and then, on impulse, lowers the gold tip of his fountain pen to scratch one additional line onto the paper before he does: "For God's sake, at least be careful." Then he signs his name, folds the note, puts it in an envelope, and addresses it to Sam Quarles. His hands shake.

Sundown.

Jack Harwell comes in and slings his empty newspaper pouch in the corner of the living room. His mother, off in the kitchen, says, "Put that thing up."

"All right already," Jack says in Jack Benny's voice. But he picks up the pouch and takes it to his own room. Then he goes to the bathroom and scrubs his hands. The Lava soap is gritty against his palms. The bubbles are gray from a good layer of newsprint ink. The water swirling down the drain is streaked with it. He rinses twice before using the towel.

His dad, mother, and sisters wait for him at the table. He slides into place, bows his head as his father gives thanks, and then reaches for the pot roast.

"Make him give me some, Mama," Katie says.

Jack serves her. No one comments. His dad asks, "Everything go all right on the route today?"

Jack shrugs. "All right."

"Because you were a little late."

"I shoulda turned left at Albuquerque," he says in Bugs Bunny's

"You look a little flushed," his mother says. "Do you feel all right?"

Jack looks at her. "I feel fine," he says. Perhaps because he says it in his own voice, not Fred Allen's or Jimmy Durante's or Groucho Marx's, his mother immediately rises and puts her hand on his forehead.

"No fever," she says. "If you start feeling sick, you tell us. There's this awful flu going around."

Jack nods, adjusts his glasses, and helps himself to green beans. He feels fine, he thinks to himself. A little funny, but fine. And naked women turning into dead deputies turning into a man who owes you seven dollars and twenty cents — well, that isn't Jack's idea of ideal suppertime conversation.

Sundown.

Sam Quarles, stretched out on a cot in his office, wakes suddenly, feels tears wet on his face. He gets up, goes to the lavatory, splashes water onto his face. Ilona. God, he misses her. But he doesn't dare let her come back home. And the last time she called, she was talking about divorce. Of course, as soon as she mentioned the word, she added a tight little laugh to show she really wasn't serious.

Just a joke. Ha, ha.

Like this damn town was getting to be a joke. Like this building, empty except for him and two deputies, was a great big joke. Like moving the switchboard all the way into the main office was a joke. Like the splash of blood on the front wall was a joke.

Ha, ha.

He stares at his eyes in the mirror. They are red-rimmed, bloodshot, exhausted, haunted.

Oh, God, that smell of gum in the patrol car.

Harmon Presley grinning at him.

Empty graves.

Sam Quarles gets the shakes. He is afraid of the coming night. Of what it might bring.

Of what might be in it.

Sundown.

The coffins have been removed from sight, stacked: the graves yawn empty. So do the houses across the road from the cemetery, all of them. The owners and inhabitants have found other places to be. A brown dog trots along beside the cemetery fence, pauses at the gate, looks in. It throws back its head and howls, a sound of grieving.

Then it hurries on, looking back over its shoulder, furtively, now and again.

Beyond the fence something moves.

Sundown.

Mrs. Dilcey Venner, who had asked her daughter Beebee's advice about her new boarder, hears a sharp noise from upstairs. She looks across the dinner table to her husband, but he just goes on eating, his jaws working, his gray head tilted slightly as he listens to the news over WSB radio.

Mrs. Venner sighs, pushes away from the table, and goes upstairs herself, taking each stair slowly, her knees popping. The rented room is on the left at the head of the stair. It used to be Beebee's brother's room, but Clyde is off in the air force now, stationed over there in Germany. Mrs. Venner makes a fist, taps on the door with her knuckles. "Mr. Cox? Mr. Cox, I have supper on the table."

Already that day he has refused to come downstairs for lunch. He does not answer her knock.

Mrs. Venner pauses, her hand on the door. Then she sets her mouth into a straight line. It is her house, after all. She turns the knob.

At first she thinks he is changing a light bulb, standing on a chair.

Then he turns slowly, and she sees the rope tied to the light fixture. It's a wonder it holds him at all, but it does.

The chair he kicked away made the noise she heard.

She watches, fascinated, as the purple face, the popping eyes, the bulging tongue turn her way. She smells the fecal odor of death by hanging.

I'm glad he paid in advance, she thinks inconsequentially. Then she screams.

Sundown.

Andy McCorry starts as a hand touches his shoulder. The big projector spins on, casting its colored shadows down on the screen. Mr. Badon says, "I may need you tonight."

"I want her again," Andy says.

"And you shall have her. But I may need you tonight. There is a man outside. He wishes me ill."

"I want her right now."

"Do you. I will deal with him myself, I think: but there are things I cannot do. You understand."

"Can I — "

"Later," Mr. Badon says. His tone snaps the lid shut on the conversation. It is over. Andy, his face red in the dim light of the projection booth, thinks of the black-haired woman.

Sundown.

Lee McCorry stands over the gas stove, cooking supper for her children. The gas burns clear and blue and strong: the man came only that afternoon to refill the white propane tank in the backyard, the tank that sometimes is a spaceship for the children, sometimes a submarine. Lee tells herself she is lucky, that things are better. But as she slices the chicken, she might as well be cutting her own heart.

Rolling the chicken pieces in flour, dropping them into hot grease, she whispers a half-remembered prayer from childhood. She wishes she knew why she feels so bad. Why she is so frightened.

Sundown.

Mr. Tate sees the door of the ShadowShow open, sees a thin man stand there briefly, then swing the door to. He rises, the weight of his Bible ponderous beneath his arm. He is afraid. He speaks to himself: "Put on the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world "

He squares his shoulders and walks toward the darkness.

6

Alan Kirby always remembered the drive home as if it had been only a part of his sickness. He remembered lying in the backseat, exhausted, the day outside turning into night. He lay there, the upholstery prickly against his cheek, and heard the radio announcer talking about the World Series, about the Braves and the Yankees, about Burdette's inspired pitching. Music then, a string of tunes: Debbie Reynolds singing "Tammy," Johnny Mathis singing "Chances Are," Paul Anka singing "Diana." Buddy Holly with "That'll Be the Day." The lyrics made him feel a deep ache of fear. Death was on his mind at the moment, and the day when he, Alan Kirby, would die.

Above the music he heard his father and Miss Lewis talking calmly about fantastic things, incredible things: crucifixes and garlic, stakes and silver bullets. Miss Lewis had a crucifix that had come from

Rome. His dad had a shotgun and a set of sterling silverware that had never been used. "I suppose it would be easy enough to take a hacksaw to the forks. Cut the tines to short pieces, pack a couple of shells with them. That should do as well as a silver bullet, don't you think?"

But when you do, Alan thought, you'll find some knives are missing. Calm voices, crazy speeches. Alan thought he knew what his father had meant when he told him about Dachau, about the pit of corpses. Alan felt himself that he had feasted on death, had gorged on it, and was sick of it. And now this discussion straight out of a horror movie rammed more of it right down his throat.

"I don't know if the Catholic church will let us have holy water," Ann was saying, "or a consecrated Host. But I'll talk to Father Haliburton about it."

"He can't afford to lose any more parishioners," John said.

The Catholic church, St. Michael's, was very small. Most people in Gaither were Baptists or Methodists, with a leavening of other denominations; Holiness, Church of Christ, Nazarenes, a Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses, a small Episcopal congregation, even some Seventh-Day Adventists: but of all the congregations in Gaither, the Catholic was one of the smallest. Father Haliburton ministered to no more than two dozen families in the little church to the north of town. Three of the families had lost loved ones in the past six weeks.

Alan thought there was at least a chance the priest would listen.

"But what do we do?" his father asked, and Alan realized he had dozed. He sat up in the backseat, looked out into the darkness.

"I think we have to find out, that's all," Ann Lewis was saying. The radio was playing Don Rondo's "White Silver Sands" under her voice. "We have to confront him. Somehow I don't think he can hide his nature, not from us."

"But if he does? I can't see myself whipping out a cross, or worse yet, filling him full of Mary's grandmother's dinner service."

"We'll know," Alan said, his voice sluggish from sleep.

"Among the living again, are you?" his father asked.

"We'll know," Alan said again. "I feel it. Miss Lewis is right. He can't hide from us, not when we know about him."

There was a long silence before John Kirby answered. "We'll see." He sighed. "I don't know what will happen, but I'm afraid things will never be the same after this is over."

"And I'll talk to Mrs. Estes," Ann said, carrying on the conversation, Alan guessed, from the time when he had been sleeping. "I think she may have a suggestion or two. And her grandson Michael wants us to keep him posted, too. "

"Where are we?" Alan asked.

"About five miles out of town," his father said. "Go back to sleep."

Alan couldn't, of course, no more than he could shake the feeling of doom that gripped him. No more than he could get the tune of "Tammy" out of his head. It circled and circled inside his mind in an idiot whirl, meaningless at last, and empty as the night outside the car.

7

The dead walked in Gaither that night.

Odum Tate felt them, felt the weight of their deaths, felt the pressure of their mockery of life. Standing in the peppermint-scented lobby of the ShadowShow, he felt them out there, beginning to stir. The young lady behind the concession stand looked at him whenever he looked away from her. She had told him that the manager was not in, and she insisted that no one had opened the door. But, yes, Mr. Badon might come in later. The preacher had determined to wait inside. The girl was a little afraid of him, he thought, and found himself smiling a bitter smile at the notion. She worked for the monster, and she feared him.

The auditorium doors were closed, but through them came a drift of sound, voices raised in argument or music thrumming an encouragement to imagination. Tate did not want to see the movie. He made no move toward the auditorium doors. He merely stood there, slightly behind the box office, ten steps in front of the concession counter, hearing but not hearing the sounds of the movie as he prayed silently.

The whole armor of God.

And yet he knew, God help him, of all the chinks in his own armor, weak places rusted away by the corrosions of sin and unbelief. He would need more than any earthly armor, he thought, to protect him.

But there was more, somehow: a power. He had sensed it before, sensed it at times while preaching when it seemed to him his words flowed of their own accord, took flight like doves winging to heaven, when he was possessed by something not of him but greater than

him: rare times. He had felt the power on maybe half a dozen occasions. For the rest, he was a man doing what a man could do, fallible, weak, but trying.

The power did not possess him now. Still, he sensed it, felt it. It was like the charged air beneath high-tension wires, electric, full, overflowing, there to be used if he could tap it. Despite the tug of his Bible beneath his arm, Tate sensed, too, that it was a power that did not live between the covers of that or any book, that it was universal, reaching to and beyond the stars, and immutable. He had the awful impression that the truths he tried to preach were reflections of this power, but not the power itself; that the truth behind the reflections was more terrible and more wonderful than his mind, or the mind of any man or woman, could grasp.

Laughter clattered through the closed doors of the auditorium. Tate closed his eyes. In his mind he saw the dead, their beings the same and yet altered somehow, the spirit animating the flesh no longer theirs but his, Badon's. The dead man outside Cox's house, there but not real, and not himself, stirred again in recollection. He had other mental visions, of people he did not know but about whom he had dreamed: the dead woman with the ruined stomach moved in his mind's gaze; another black man, with arms ripped and dripping, waited there; a heavyset policeman with bullet wounds grinned at him, dead jaws working on a wad of gum. A child . . .

Tate shook himself and opened his eyes. Andy McCory was there, looking at him with jittery eyes, frightened eyes. "You want to see him," McCory said.

Tate nodded.

"Come on."

The woman behind the counter bawled, "Where you goin'? Who's gonna watch the projectors?"

"I'll be back," Andy said, his voice shaking. He turned away and Tate followed him up the stair. He expected they would turn toward the office at the top, as Alan had described it, but instead they turned to the left, toward the rest rooms. "This way," Andy muttered, pulling a bunch of keys from his pocket.

Andy paused in front of a door just beyond the room, jangled his keys, and finally produced one that opened the lock. He pulled the door open. "Come on."

It was a passage, raw and unfinished. Outside the walls of the theater were covered with wallpaper: here the right wall was brick, the outer wall of the theater actually, not meant to be seen and dripping with hardened clumps and clods of mortar. Brown Pan-pipe tubes clung to it, too, the nests of dirt-dauber wasps. The wall to the left was age-darkened wood, unfinished, sprouting pipes that came from the men's room. The floor they walked on was wood, too, similarly unfinished and littered with dust, grit, and loose pieces of mortar. Three sixty-watt bulbs threw it all into dim illumination. Andy walked purposefully ahead, and Tate followed, aware that they were walking the length of the theater, over the heads of the patrons. At the far end Andy stood in an alcove. A spiral led down into the darkness. "He's down there," Andy said.

"Are you going first?"

Andy shook his head. "I got to get back." But he waited.

"All right," Tate said. He started down the spiral stair, his hand tight on the rail. "All right." His head dropped to the level of Andy's knees, then his feet.

Andy grinned down at him. "'Bye, preacher man." He turned and strode back the way they had come.

Tate swallowed and stepped down again, feeling his way, his feet tentative. At first it was very dark, and then it was silvery light: looking up, Tate realized he was behind and to one side of the screen. He saw the dim reversed images of giants, two giants kissing. He followed the stair down to stage level.

There he stepped away from the foot of the stair and took a deep breath. The brick walls towered up over him, and the stage stretched narrow and long in front. He was alone.

The actors on the screen suddenly exploded in laughter, and another sound crashed almost at Tate's feet. He squinted down. He could make out a darker square almost against the back wall. After a second, he realized a trapdoor had been thrown open. His hand on the rough brick for balance, he walked over to it. He hunkered at the edge. "Are you there?" he called, but softly.

No answer.

"Give me some light," he said.

A response came in the form of light. True, it was dim, orange light, the light of a low-watt bulb almost swallowed in the large space, but

it was enough to illuminate a run of steps going down. Tate got up, muttered a prayer, and stepped into the opening.

The cellar of the theater gaped before him. He felt his heart in his chest, beating too strongly but not really very fast, as he descended. It was a wide room, fifty feet at least, and perhaps half again that long. Rows of brick pillars held up a heavily beamed ceiling — actually the floor of the theater, Tate realized — swagged with ancient dusty cobwebs. The dirt floor was littered with cast-off coils of wire, stacks of film canisters rusted to the color of strong coffee, a tumble of discarded seats painted green with mildew. A small bulb burned from a porcelain socket set about eye level on the back wall. On either side of that were windows looking out into an alley and into night.

"Where are you?" Tate asked, stepping onto the ground.

Here. I am here.

He stared, at first believing he had heard the voice; but then he knew it was inside his head, and yet not of him. "Serpent," Tate said.

Dark laughter. Yes. I have been called that.

"I know you."

Do you, old man?

"The angel of the pit."

Angel. I like that.

"Show yourself."

No. Though it was only in his mind, the voice had an indulgent quality, patronizing, regretful. No. You do not know me as well as you believe, and yet you know me too well. I do not think you could bear to see me as I really am, and you know just too much to see me any other way.

Overhead the trapdoor slammed. A second later a fine snow of gritty dust sifted against Tate's neck. "God stands with me," Tate said.

Does he. I don't see him. I haven't seen him for, oh, years and years. "Satan."

Hollow unheard laughter. No. That is some figure of man's own making. I am the face behind the mask, the reality behind the shadow.

"Liar."

Yes. You are correct there. I am a liar. We are liars.

The light flickered and went out. Tate said into the darkness, "I carry with me the light of the world."

In his mind he heard a quick, scalded hiss. Fool.

"That hurt you."

You hate sin.

"I do."

Then join me. Join me. You do not know what sins I expose, what punishments I bring. You say you serve your God. Do I not serve him as well? "Lead us not into temptation," you pray. Do I not provide the temptation, the trial? Wherewith shall the gold be known as pure, except it be tried in the furnace?

Tate licked his lips, aware suddenly that they were dry and cracked. He closed his eyes. "You're afraid of me," he said.

No.

"Yes, you are. I don't know why, but you are afraid of me."

And light burst inside his closed eyes, illumination from beyond and from within. For an ecstatic moment his soul was gone, not there, not in the smothering cellar of a theater building, but free, at a great height. He laughed aloud, and in a dim far corner of his mind he heard a scream of pain.

"Why, you're nothing," he said in wonderment. "You are born in fear and agony, and without them you die. You can harm us only as we let you harm us. You're our creation, not God's."

No. You are wrong, old man. I am spirit. Yes, your fears make me strong, and your blood gives me form; but I am eternal, and you are born to die.

"Then come and get me," Tate said, opening his eyes.

The cellar was full of light, blinding and pure, the light of a thunderbolt frozen and made to last, and it flowed from —

From Tate himself.

Every darkness stood revealed in that light, every shadow faded. "Come and get me!" he yelled again, a fierce joy in his throat. "Show yourself, you God-damned coward!"

The ground began to seethe.

Tate stumbled back. The earthen floor was swelling, rising like monstrous dough, pressing toward the ceiling. He saw it, felt it, and realized that it would crush him. Rusted film canisters clattered against the wall, discarded stinking seats rolled off the belly of that monstrous pregnancy.

And as Tate's heart thumped hard again, his light faded.

He felt himself thrown back against the brick wall, felt himself rolled over and over as the ground rose, an inflating balloon, pressing against him, trying to smash him like an insect. His flailing elbow struck glass, and he dimly realized the floor had raised him to the level of the windows. He turned on his belly, his feet higher than his head, and pushed the Bible ahead of him.

It broke more glass and dropped out into the alley. He got his hands on either side of the frame and pulled, even as a heave of the rising floor raised him almost vertical, head down. Tate dragged himself through the window, an aged child in a wretched parody of birth, with blood spilling around him from hands cut by shards of glass. He stuck for a moment and then burst through, tumbled onto pavement.

He lay there, hurting.

When he opened his eyes, he saw the great Bible spread open and facedown in the dirt. He could smell the raw ripe scent of garbage.

We can beat him, he thought to himself.

The light came from a street lamp down at the mouth of the alley. In it he saw his hands were lacerated. His cheek burned, too, and he knew he had cut himself there. He got to his feet and retrieved the Bible.

We can beat him, he said to himself again. Badon can do nothing to us that we don't allow him to do. He's not strong enough yet. And the dead are not ghosts, they're puppets, with his hands on the strings.

Tate staggered toward the mouth of the alley. Why, he's not even alive, not really. Something allows him to have a kind of form and shape — blood, he said — but he's more shadow than substance.

He stepped under the light and looked at his hands. Not too bad: he'd had worse from splinters at the lumberyard.

The sound of a car made him look up. To his right, toward the Square, an old black car began to roll forward.

With an unnatural clarity he saw, even at this distance, Andy McCory's face behind the wheel.

With an unnatural certainty he knew, in the second before the fender struck him, that Badon might himself be impotent, that the dead might be puppets, but that the driver of the car was as real as himself.

And then the world exploded in a flash of red pain.

Fourteen

1

It took John Kirby another day and night to learn what had happened. By that time Mr. Tate was in intensive care in the Frye County Hospital, slipping in and out of a coma, in grave condition, and not expected to recover. Efforts were being made, John was told, to locate the next of kin.

That was Friday morning. The three of them, Ann, John, and Alan, kept vigil that night and Saturday morning. Dr. Smith, making his rounds at ten A.M., finally got them in to see Tate.

Alan, already sick at heart, felt a wave of nausea as he stood in the doorway of the hospital room. The sight of Tate, bandaged, pale, a tube running into his nose and another into his arm, made him weep. The old face was bloodless, the lips even thinner, the cheeks hollow under sharp outcrops of bone, the nose all cartilage and waxy flesh. Tate's chest heaved with each intake of breath, and the air whistled in his mouth.

He's going to die, Alan thought.

Ann Lewis took Tate's left hand in hers. "We're here," she said. Then she, too, burst into tears. John Kirby put an arm around her shoulders, awkwardly, like a boy on a first date, and she leaned against him.

Alan looked away. The window, shaded and darkened by half-closed blinds, gave a view of treetops rolling away and up to Ransom Ridge. The air in the room smelled of disinfectant and disease, a heavy odor that lay oppressive in the lungs. From the bed came a drawn-out sigh.

"Mr. Tate?" John Kirby said, his voice hushed.

Alan looked back. Tate's eyes were partly open. His lips moved. John stooped low. "What?" he asked. The old man on the bed murmured something more. Then the eyes fluttered closed again.

Dr. Smith opened the door. "That's probably enough," he said. "He's not very strong."

They went back to the waiting room. Others were there: a man of fifty-five or sixty in green dungarees and a faded, patched, but clean work-shirt, smoking cigarette after cigarette and staring at nothing; a young woman, plump, brown-haired, weeping silently as she chewed the side of her right forefinger. The two were separate, in individual compartments of worry; Alan, his father, and Miss Lewis shared another.

"What did he tell you?" Ann asked.

Alan's father shook his head. "He said to tell Alan to resist temptation."

Alan's cheeks burned. The other two looked at him. "I don't know what it means," he whispered. "I don't!"

But he did.

To live forever, the woman on the screen had said. To have the troublesome part, the thinking part, cut out of you. To do only what you felt like doing . . .

Ye shall not surely die. It was the ancient lie, bitter poison but seeming honey-sweet: you will never gasp out your life in a bed, riddled by tubes, racked by pain. No, there is another way.

To live forever . . .

Oh, Alan knew what the preacher's words meant.

They saw him twice more, but on neither occasion did Tate come out of his coma. Alan was frightened of him, lying there, his black hair suddenly seeming thin, what showed from under the cap of bandages, his skin slack, his face empty. He remembered the way the preacher had frightened him at their first meeting, but this was different, a sensation more of dread than fright, and it was even harder for Alan to confront.

He tried to pray, remembering Tate's implicit trust in prayer, but he felt no relief from his attempts. He touched Tate's hand and found no current flowing there, no indication of the other's presence in that battered and dying body.

The attending doctor, not Dr. Smith but a Dr. Nesheim, only shook his head when they asked about his chances. Tate had suffered brain

damage, broken bones, bleeding, and now had pneumonia, they were told. It would take a miracle.

During those long hours at the hospital, Alan overheard his father talking over the case with a sheriff's deputy and with the doctor, and he pieced together what had happened: Mr. Tate had stepped out of the alley behind the ShadowShow onto Oglethorpe Street, not far across the street from Mr. Kirby's shop, and a car had hit him. He had been slammed against the side of the Dugan Hardware Store, had collapsed to the sidewalk, and there he was found late Wednesday night by "Deke" Dugan, who just came back because he wasn't sure he had locked the side door of the shop.

Tate carried no identification other than the Bible, which was intact, resting closed on the sidewalk not three feet from his head. The hospital admitted him as a John Doe, and what with slow work on the part of the police department, he wasn't identified until Thursday night — by which time his friends had grown frantic with worry.

But Thursday night a patrolman driving toward the Square had noticed some kids in a huddle against the side wall of the ShadowShow. They had found a wallet, with very little money in it, but with Tate's ID. The cop collected the wallet, carried it around with him until the next morning, and then turned it in. And only then did the hospital realize that the old John Doe up in the IC wing was the same person that John Kirby had called about.

By that time it was almost too late. The nurses attending him had heard Tate's whispered words from time to time as he rose from coma and sedation, but they heard them without registering them. They had heard worse from other dying patients.

"Kill the head," he had said once.

"Puppets, puppets," he had groaned another time.

Only his third and last speech, to John Kirby, was attended to.

After that, Tate never awakened again.

2

He was gone.

Andy McCorry felt the absence from the theater, felt the vacuum left behind. Athaniel Badon simply was not there, in body or — in spirit?

Saturday morning Andy walked the ShadowShow inch by inch, seeking him. He had not felt Badon's presence since **the old** man had come into the building. Andy had the uneasy feeling that he had been left alone to take the blame for all the things that he (Badon!) had made him do. Even running the old man down had been his (Badon's!) idea. In fact, he (Badon! It was Badon!) had all but done the deed himself.

But now Badon had absented himself. Or so it seemed during the half hour Andy took to pace the auditorium, the offices, even the rest rooms.

But finally he caught the trail on stage behind the screen, like a lingering odor. He heaved the trapdoor open and gasped, for the atmosphere came boiling, spilling, out from there. And then, knowing where Badon was at last, Andy lowered himself down the ladder and turned on the light.

The scent of earth was strong and musty here, earth and decay. One of the windows was broken, the other bleared with grime. Beneath his feet was a hard dirt floor, dark and oily in the weak glow of the one light. Andy took a deep breath and a long look around.

He was alone in the brick-columned basement.

But the other was here.

"Where are you?" Andy called, his voice coming back at him flat an instant later. "Where are you now?"

Here. Inside his head.

Andy's mind reeled with an impression of utter weariness, of pain too deep for groans. He staggered a little, coughed, and croaked, "What's wrong?"

I reached beyond my strength. My need and my anger betrayed me.

Andy thrust out a hand, braced it against the rough brickwork. "Are you — okay?"

I will be.

The voice was thin. Andy swallowed hard and licked his lips. "Do you need — blood?"

No. Rest.

The imagined voice had no direction, but Andy caught sight of a deeper shadow behind a pile of discarded theater seats. He edged toward it, at last stood over it. It was man-sized, man-shaped, a slumped figure sitting with back against the brick wall. Andy reached

in his front pocket, pulled out the neat rectangular Ronson lighter he had given himself not long before. He thumbed the friction wheel and the yellow light of the flame fell on the slumping form. "God!"

It was Badon, or Badon's dummy. Empty sockets stared at him, hollow, clotted with darkness no light could lift. Flesh gone the mellow color of old leather split across temple and forehead, peeled back from ivory bone. Teeth showed through ripped chaps, through black lips shrunk, cracked, and curled away from the underlying skull. Green mold splashed the remaining skin of the forehead, the corrugated flesh of the throat, and mildew sprinkled the white shirtfront. The black suit was a ruin of rot and fungus, dead-looking fleshy fingers sprouting from chest, from thighs, ugly thrusting blind white talons of toadstool.

Andy felt the hair on the back of his neck stirring. The mouth of the dead thing opened and closed, once, very slowly.

I am better than I was, the mute reproachful voice said in Andy's head. Not so long ago I was dust and bone. Already I am this. The right hand, little more than bone, clenched and unclenched with the soft sound of distant castanets.

Andy snapped the lid of his lighter shut, blacking out the vision, though it lingered in vivid memory. Bitter gall surged in his throat; he gagged. After a long while, he drew a deep, shivering breath. "What can I do?"

Run the ShadowShow. Wait. I grow stronger with the turning of the moon. I grow stronger with the coming of each night. Soon I will stir abroad, moving in the bodies of our friends. In the turning of two weeks my flesh will be whole again. Then will come the time for blood.

In the dimness Andy's eyes grew smaller, crafty. "The woman. Can I have her?"

A cosmic sigh, resigned and edged with anger that seemed old and dull. Yes. But not tonight. Soon. I promise.

"To keep, I mean. Instead of the other one, my wife."

Yes, to keep.

"All right." Andy laughed aloud. "Guess we can't shake hands on it, huh?"

Inside his head there was a kind of watchful silence.

"Guess if I wanted to I could haul your old bones off now. Throw them in the furnace. Bury them right here in the dirt. If I wanted to."

It would not matter.

"Yeah? Wouldn't matter a bit."

I would grow again.

"But I'm saying that if I wanted to, I could test that out, now, couldn't I?"

If you wanted to betray yourself as well. But if you want life, life everlasting — if you want the soft flesh of the black-haired woman — Andy groaned.

I thought so. You will not hinder me, will you, Andy?

"No." But it was a reluctant word.

Good. You shall be rewarded, I promise. Rewarded most — fittingly. Go now. Leave me. I will grow strong again.

"All right."

So Andy took charge of the kiddie matinee himself, and things ran fairly smoothly. As Andy began to issue orders during the next days, the others griped a little — who did Andy think he was? — but since Andy controlled the payroll box, they did not gripe too much, or too loudly. And as the days went by, things settled into a routine for them. Each one did his or her job and no one gave much of a thought for Badon.

Except Andy.

Andy could feel him down there, resting, growing stronger.

Waiting.

3

Odum Tate died quietly at five P.M. Sunday. He had not spoken again.

Sam Quarles talked with John Kirby at about five-thirty, in an empty hospital room, Quarles perched on the foot of the bed, Kirby sitting in a chair shoved against the wall beside the window. "So he didn't tell you anything about who might have hit him?" Quarles asked again.

Kirby shook his head. "Sorry Sam. Not a word."

Quarles sighed. "It's homicide now. Too damn many in this little town already, and now it's one more."

Kirby said, "Do you have a feeling that there's something wrong with the town, Sheriff?"

"Oh, yeah," Quarles said. "Oh, yeah. Like vampires, you mean." Kirby started, and Quarles grinned at him. "Or ghosts. Or something else that ain't real, ain't supposed to be real, that if I mentioned 'em to

the commissioners would get me fired quick as you please, or stuck in a rubber room down in Milledgeville. Yeah, something's wrong with this little town, all right."

Kirby wet his lips. "What if I told you I thought I knew something about it?"

"Is it vampires or ghouls or some damn thing?"

Kirby nodded.

Quarles got up, the bed keeping its impression of his narrow buttocks, and went over to look out the window. Kirby could see new glints of white in the other man's iron-gray hair, could see dried lines of blood where the sheriff had nicked himself shaving. Without looking at him, Quarles said, "You think you can end it?"

"I think maybe so. Can you help?"

Quarles finally looked at him, anger and bafflement in his eyes. "Well, that's the question, ain't it? Can I help? No, I guess not, not in the way you mean. I can't give you firepower or assistance or my permission to — to do whatever it is you think you got to do. So no, I can't give you any official help." He pulled his nose. "But if you can end this thing, end it any old how you can, I can promise that nobody's gonna ask too many questions."

"The law — " Kirby began.

"I'm the law, Mr. Kirby. I know I'm not supposed to be, and I know it's a bad thing, but that's the way it is in Frye County, sir. Sam Quarles is the law. He's the one who decides that Banker Jefferson gets a mite of a break for speeding, but Rufus Pruitt don't. See, people in this county ain't too keen on the law being something written in a book somewhere. They want law they can touch, smell, argue with. And I'm it. I've tried to be square with everybody, much as I can, and to give everybody a fair shake; and maybe the next sheriff the county elects won't try, and that's bad, too. But people in this county want to be taken care of, Kirby, and they've told me to do it. So — all I can say to you is do what you can. Do what you have to. The law won't notice you."

John Kirby stood up and held out his hand. "All right."

The sheriff shook his hand, perfunctorily. "It's eased a little bit," he said. "It was strong early this week, like a craziness just about to bust loose, but it's not that bad now. What have you done to it?"

Kirby shook his head. "Not me. But I have the feeling that the preacher might have something to do with it."

"God rest his soul, then," Quarles said.

"Amen," Kirby said.

4

On Monday a judge who owed Sheriff Quarles a favor or two declared that Odum Tate had died intestate and indigent. He granted John Kirby's petition for the body and the personal effects of the deceased, pending location of kin.

The Benton Brothers, who had a nephew in insurance, let John know of the small life policy all their employees were required to take out. Tate had first named a Sarah Roberts Tate, current address unknown, as beneficiary, but only recently, at the end of the previous week, in fact, he had changed the policy to benefit Alan Kirby. Alan asked his father to take care of it for him. Alan's father told him that the policy would almost, but not quite, pay the hospital expenses and the burial expenses. He himself made up the difference of seventy-two dollars.

The funeral, taken care of by Detterley's Funeral Home, was on Tuesday, at the Methodist church. Aside from Dr. Alman, whose eulogy was brief and strained, only Ann Lewis, John Kirby, Alan Kirby, and Mrs. Hudson, Tate's landlady, attended.

Tate was laid to rest in the Kirby family plot in Municipal Cemetery. The hospital released his torn clothing and his huge old Bible to John Kirby. Mrs. Hudson turned over to John the money, clothing, and other possessions Tate had left behind in his room. John paid Tate's outstanding rent from the cash.

After his interment there were no more complaints about noises from the cemetery.

Those who had disturbed the silence there seemed to have gone elsewhere.

The rest slept quietly.

5

Lee McCorry was awake late Tuesday night when her husband returned from work. "Andy," she said, "Danny's real sick." From her lap the little boy raised red-rimmed eyes to his father's face.

"He's all right," Andy said, shucking off his jacket. The nights were turning chilly and damp, rain building up overhead.

"He's burnin' up," she told him.

Danny coughed.

"Take him to the doctor tomorrow," Andy said, shaking a Camel out of its packet. He lit it with his gold lighter.

"I need some money."

Andy dug his wallet out of his back pocket, threw it at her. It slapped the side of Lee's face hard, fell to the floor. Danny screamed hoarsely, gagged, and coughed, his voice sounding like old rags tearing. "Hush," Lee said, holding him close and rocking back and forth. "Hush, Danny. Daddy didn't mean it."

Andy stomped through the house to the bathroom. Danny, burning hot in Lee's embrace, shivered. She rocked him and wept. She would sit awake all night long, rocking him. The next morning she would dress him as warmly as she could and would take a taxi to the doctor's office. Dr. Fortner would take one look at Danny and slap him into the hospital.

There Danny McCory would die, of influenza complicated by pneumonia, on the dismal morning of October 26.

At three, he is not even the youngest victim of the epidemic in Gaither. Four other infants will not recover. His brief life is summed up in the health reports for Frye County for the year of our Lord 1957, child mortality tables. For October, he is the only one in the category of Ages Three to Five. Such is his monument.

By the time he dies, Lee McCory will have no feeling left for her husband at all. For by then Andy will be completely rapt in the grip of something greater than himself, will have lost himself, in fact, altogether in a greater darkness.

And by then his wife will feel no love for him, no desire; and yet she will feel no hatred, either.

If her emotion must have a name, call it despair.

Alan went to school only one day that week, Wednesday. Classes were strange, more than half empty: Reese Donalds was out sick, and Jack Harwell, and sixteen others, from Alan's room alone. Miss Ulrich was

ill, and Mrs. Canup, who substituted for her, was old and deaf. The remaining students were subdued, strained. They sensed that school would not long continue in this condition.

Alan had a chance at lunch to speak to Diane England. She had come back, he thought, at least partway; but still she was not the same as she had been before their date, before *Man of a Thousand Faces* and its aftermath.

Alan sat beside her and for a few minutes pretended to eat. Then he spoke to her quietly: "We're going to get him."

Diane looked at him. Tears brimmed in her eyes.

"We're going to get him good."

"It's no use," she said.

"Yes. We'll make things all right again."

"You can't. Not like they were before."

Alan pushed his tray back. "It was all lies, Diane. I don't know what it was you saw, but it was all lies."

She shuddered. "No. And you can't put things back the way they were before. I know you can't."

"We're going to try." Alan looked down at his half-eaten lunch. "You want to help?"

"No."

"Diane — "

She got up and walked away, carrying her tray to the lunchroom counter. Something whispered in Alan's ear: Do you want her?

No.

Live forever, live forever . . .

He got up and carried his own tray across.

The next day the school board canceled classes for the rest of that week and all the next, hoping that by that time the Asian flu would have run its course. Alan, dressed for school, heard the news on the radio. It did not elate him as it might have under other circumstances.

Gaither was a very sick town.

Here is how sick Gaither was: Ann Lewis moved into John Kirby's house, and no one said anything about it.

Of course, this occurred on Wednesday, October 16, the day school let out; and of course, on the Tuesday before that Frank Lessup had left town yet again, but this time fleeing to the warmer and presumably healthier clime of Florida, and this time taking Aunt Betty with him.

Still, for no one to raise comment, to cluck a tongue at least — well, the town was very sick. Mrs. Maddons, Ann's landlady, lay in the hospital herself, and her son, who lived out of town, was just as grateful that the house was empty and that he didn't have to worry about taking care of any tenant his mother might have. He didn't feel so well himself. He feared that he, like the town, was becoming very, very sick.

And the weather was sick, too: low gray skies sprinkled a cold, gelid rain down, swelling Moccasin Creek and Cherokee Creek to overflowing (the whorehouse at the confluence of the two streams had to be evacuated late that week, but with both the girls and their clientele down with the flu, no one noticed that very much, either), filling the streets with turbid, white-capped streams of brown muddy water. This in the arid month of October! This in a month when in Georgia leaves hang brown or yellow or flaming red, but all of them crisp as potato chips, dry, desiccated. But this year the rain bore and beat down the autumn leaves, then swept them away, or in flat areas piled them into thick mats. The leaden skies looked wrong, looked like another symptom of the illness that gripped the whole town.

Life was interrupted. The library closed temporarily, its whole staff laid up with aches, nausea, and fever. Sam Quarles found himself short-handed, with only one deputy on duty at night, the others racked with the flu. The Advocate, its staff ailing, combined two editions into one and took a hiatus that week. John Kirby went into town each day to open the store, but on his best day he had few customers. The paperboy (not Jack Harwell, who had a route on the other side of town and in part of New Haven, but another boy) fell ill, and his father had to deliver the papers, creeping his turtle-backed Hudson through the flooded streets, flinging the Constitution at porches with an arm grown too old for accuracy, too stiff with arthritis and the wet for strength.

The weather kept Alan and Ann inside, in separate rooms, reading, or together, talking. The talk was gloomy and the news no more cheerful than the talk. It didn't matter to Alan now that the Braves had taken the World Series in the final game, or that the Brooklyn Dodgers had announced that they were moving to Los Angeles; nor, in the coming days, did other news stories matter to him, stories about the Georgia Bulldogs' loss to Navy (after a win over Tulane the week before) or about the State Department rejecting a Russian summit, or

a school-bus accident in neighboring Jackson County, or about Bing Crosby's marriage to Cathy Grant.

He noted these things in a dull sort of way, but he, his father, and Ann Lewis devoted their thoughts and their conversations to the ShadowShow and to Mr. Badon. John had called the theater several times, asking to speak to the man, only to be told that he was unavailable.

At night they held councils from time to time, ghoulish discussions that seemed to come right out of Alan's collection of dog-eared paperbacks. "Seven times seven hundred and seventy-seven," his father had murmured once. "A good long time, if we can chase him away that long."

"And I don't think he comes back often to the same place," Ann said. "He did here. He was here in 1922, I think, posing as Mr. Apollyon, and somehow or other the death of Jim Bascom didn't work out as he planned —"

"The burning," Alan said.

"— so, if that book is right, he moved to Atlanta then. If that was Badon. But for some reason, he came back."

"Unfinished business," Alan's father said.

They had begun dimly to see Athaniel Badon as he must really be: a hungering force, masked as human but unable to maintain that mask for too long at a time. He struck, fed, and moved again: and when his victims were whores or derelicts in huge cities, people hardly noticed. But in a town like Gaither — well. He could kill the town. And this time, this visitation, he seemed to be strong, to drag in his wake spirits of the dead, or something very like them. Perhaps his goal this time was to have the town.

Once Alan, late at night, murmured, "He eats people." He could not explain what he meant, beyond a vague impression that Badon somehow was what he was because he took in, incorporated, something of the people he killed: and that something was more than blood, different from blood. Not the soul, exactly, but something, some animating passion, certainly flowed from those who died into Badon, and now he had feasted exceptionally well, was bloated, fat with shadows.

But as days went by without sign or word of Athaniel Badon, the three of them began to wonder. On another night, later, during a second week of rain, Ann voiced the hope that Badon had been destroyed, that Tate had somehow done it.

But Alan shook his head. "He's not dead. If he was, I'd feel it. He's waiting for something. I don't know what."

"Should we try?" Ann asked him.

"I don't think so." Alan struggled to express what he only vaguely felt: "It's like, like, he's gone away temporarily. Or like he's in hiding. I don't think we could even find him right now. Or if we did, I don't think it would help."

"But he's not dead?" his father asked, very seriously.

"I'd feel it," Alan said again.

And, he thought to himself, I wouldn't dream at night of immortality. Of living forever. Of being free. For dream he did, dark dreams filled with blood, night, and honeyed poison. So easy — it would be so easy to welcome the dream, to fall into it, to spend forever there.

Resist temptation, the old man had said.

Alan groaned under the burden.

Still, nothing happened, aside from the unseasonable and oppressive rain and the spread of the flu bug. The week wore on toward the end of the month and Halloween with nothing more out of the ordinary than deaths from flu.

On Friday, the twenty-fifth, the school board met again, assessed its constituency, and announced that school would re-open the following Wednesday, October 30. That afternoon the temperature dropped, and the next day it was unseasonably cold.

"It's getting ready to happen," Alan said that Saturday evening after supper. "I feel it." He went back to his room and returned in a few moments. "I made these," he said, and gave a knife to his father and one to Ann.

They turned them over in surprised appraisal, two wooden-hilted stilettos, thin wicked blades burnished and shining like —

"Silver," his father said. "You beat me to it."

"Uh-huh."

"Thank you, son."

Ann looked up, her eyes sick. "We have to go there, don't we. To the ShadowShow."

"I'm afraid we do," John Kirby said. "I'm afraid we do."

Fifteen

1

On Saturday, October 26, the New Haven mill stood silent. The epidemic of flu, together with unusual accidents, normal absenteeism, and a strange unrest, had closed the plant. The workers stayed home, sick or well, and all worried about paychecks. Jay O'Hara, Hob Zaner, and a dozen other supervisors met that day in the conference room next to O'Hara's silent office to work out production shifts and to create a new work schedule. Zaner estimated that the mill could open again after a week's layoff. They planned to try to start up again on November 1, but the faces in the office were grim: a national recession had already bitten into the textile business, and with this now happening — no one mentioned closing down for good, but it was a thought in many minds.

Beyond the office, the mill stood empty as a cavern. Looms, carders, rovers stood motionless in the dim light filtering in through windows painted over with blue paint. Buster Melton, whose father had once owned a grocery store (it went under in the Depression), and who now was a watchman, walked uneasily through the production rooms. It seemed wrong to him that they were so silent, these rooms usually filled to bursting with sound, sound that you could almost bite down on. He roamed through the mill on his rounds, taking the same route that the dope wagon took when the mill was in operation: from the east end he took the elevator to the top floor, then down the length of the mill; the west elevator down to the fourth, through the weave shop; the east elevator down to the third, through the spinning department; the west elevator down to the second,

through roving and carding; and then the east down and through the ground floor, past the loading dock, past offices, into the warehouses, and then back.

Buster wished the dope wagon was running. It operated out of a mill-owned cafeteria on the first floor and was in fact a tiny cafeteria on wheels. It had a hot compartment to store hamburgers and hot dogs, a cold compartment for Coca-Colas (hence the name: the old-timers called Cokes “dopes” to this day), and shelves of snacks, candy bars, potato chips. A kid pushed the wagon along through the mill twice each shift, relieving the workers of the inconvenience of having to stop and go somewhere away from their post to eat a meal. Buster could use a cup of coffee, he thought. But he was alone in the echoing emptiness of the mill.

He walked faster than usual past the first-floor freight elevator, remembering the accident there. A ton of cloth crashing all the way down from the weave shop . . . Buster moved on past.

The meeting of supervisors broke up just as Buster came past the offices. Filing out with glum faces, some of the bosses spoke to him and others didn't. Jay O'Hara gave him a grim smile. “Take care of her, Buster,” he said. “You'll be on your own today and tomorrow. We'll get some sweepers in Monday. Might as well clean up while we're waiting to reopen.”

“But we are gonna reopen,” Buster said.

“Oh, sure,” O'Hara muttered.

Buster stood in the doorway and watched O'Hara and the others scatter. It was a cold, dark Saturday outside, the temperature only forty at eleven A.M., and the clouds overhead seemed pregnant with more rain. Buster shivered and locked himself in the mill. He felt like an ant crawling through a fifty-five-gallon oil drum.

But he made his rounds faithfully, until late that afternoon. That was when, once again on the first floor of the mill, he passed by the closed doors of that freight elevator again and heard something behind them, something moving. Something, from the sound of it, trying to get out.

Buster backed away. He went down the hall that led to the big front doors of the mill, and he kept the doors of the elevator in sight all the while. His back hit the wood just as he saw the twin elevator doors heave apart an inch, fall together, move two inches apart again.

He spun and frantically fitted his key into the lock. Behind him the elevator rattled open. Something stepped out, something that made wet, sucking, squishy sounds when it walked. It staggered toward him.

The key turned.

Buster flew from the mill. He never looked back.

If anything left and headed for Ransom Ridge, Buster did not see it.

2

Ilona Quarles came back home. Her husband looked ill — though he insisted the flu had passed him by. But he had lost weight, had gained haggard new lines in his face and new white streaks in his hair. He sat at the kitchen table with her on that Saturday and tried to put his fears into words.

"It's more than murder and suicide," he told her. "Right now I've got four or five missing persons. A Yates woman that works for the Advocate; she's been gone for weeks. The little Johnson girl, who lived next door to the Williamses — she's dropped out of sight, too. And there are more. Things like that just don't happen in Gaither, Ilona. It's something more than I can explain, and you know it."

"I don't care," Ilona said. "If you knew how I'd been treated — if you want me out of Gaither, Sam Quarles, you're gonna have to take me out yourself."

"I can't."

"Then I'm staying right here with you." Ilona looked around the kitchen with a contemptuous gaze. "Just look at the mess you been livin' in. Take me a week just to get things clean."

Quarles sighed. "I know. I'm sorry."

"Well, you should be." Impulsively, Ilona reached across to take his hand in both of hers. "Oh, Sam, I know there's something wrong here in town. But I'd rather be here with you than anywhere else. You know that."

The sheriff nodded and squeezed her hand. "I was just startin' to breathe easier. Just for a while there I thought it might be over." He shook his head. "But it ain't. Now it's Cliff Warner."

Ilona's eyes widened at the mayor's name. "What?"

"Yeah, Cliff Warner. He's gone like Mr. Jefferson did a while back. Locked himself in his house and won't come out. His wife came to me

for help, but I couldn't give her any. She's moved out on him now, moved over to Cumming with her eldest boy, I hear. Warner won't even answer the phone. He's gone crazy or something, and I don't know what caused it."

"But Mr. Jefferson's better, isn't he?"

Quarles yawned. "I reckon. He still ain't comin' in to work at the bank, but he's been out and about. He went to — " Quarles broke off for a moment. When he resumed, it was as if he were speaking to himself, not to Ilona: "He went to visit Cliff Warner a couple of weeks back. Cliff said he came in, had a couple of drinks, and left. Acted strange and talked kinda funny, Cliff said, and laughed a lot. Gave him a ticket to some kind of show. And now Cliff won't come out of his house."

Ilona pulled her hand away from him, took a sip of coffee. "People just don't care anymore, Sam. That's what bothers me the most. These terrible things happening, and nobody goes over to offer help the way they used to. Remember during the war how we all depended on each other? That's all gone now. It's awful the way people don't care about each other anymore."

"They're afraid."

"Of each other? Of people they've been around all their lives? How can they be afraid of each other?"

"Of something. I know how it is, Ilona. I'm afraid, too. That night we thought we saw Harm Presley outside the window — I think it was him, Ilona. I saw him again. No, don't ask me about it. Maybe someday I'll tell you, but not now." Quarles got up to pace the kitchen floor. "It's like a bad dream. It's like we can't wake up from it. Ghosts or monsters or some damn thing. You know what? I called up somebody not long ago, somebody I worked with before, a man in Atlanta. And I started to tell him about the ghosts, about how my jailhouse is haunted, about how nobody can even stay in the building alone for five minutes without seein' things out of the corner of their eye. And you know what? I couldn't say a word to him about it. I couldn't. Not that I didn't want to — the words just wouldn't come out, that's all. And I think it's that way with almost everybody. They all know there's something bad wrong, but most of them can't talk about it, can't even seem to think about it. And the few that can don't know what to do."

Ilona stared down at the coffee cup. "It's going to be bad again, isn't it, Sam?"

"Yeah. I'm afraid it is."

"Well," she said. "Now we're together."

3

On Friday evening Andy McCorry had made the arrangements, had paid everyone and had given a bonus — Beebee Venner bitched a little about it not being two full weeks' pay, but the others shushed her — and had told everyone not to come in until November 1. "Talked to Mr. Badon, and he says it's no sense in showin' pictures to an empty house," Andy had said, and the others had to agree that was true. The rain and the illness in town had dwindled their audiences to nothing. The big Halloween shock show had to be canceled.

So on Saturday, just before the kiddie matinee was scheduled to begin at noon, Andy hung the sign on the ShadowShow door:
closed

please call again

Not long after that he came out of the theater with Mr. Athaniel Badon. Badon, walking stiffly, leaning on Andy's arm in fact, looked older and frailer than he had before, but anyone seeing him would naturally attribute that to a touch of the flu. The two did not lock the door behind them.

Andy's car was parked behind the theater. Badon paused beside it to look at the crimped left front fender, to touch it with thin white fingers quivering like the antennae of a pale insect. "He died?"

"Yeah," Andy said. "Knocked him up against the buildin' down there. I didn't hang around. Somebody found him, and they took him to the hospital but it was too late."

"Good. You did not think to have the damage to your automobile repaired?"

Andy shrugged and grinned. "Hell, who'd notice a couple more dents in this crate? Besides, nobody saw me. It went just like you said it would."

"Still. We'd better take my car."

"Take your car? Where the hell is your car?"

"Around the corner." Badon, tall and more cadaverous than ever in his black suit, turned on his heel, paused a moment as if gathering his strength, and walked down the alley. Broken glass crunched under his

shoes as he passed the broken window. Have to fix that, Andy thought to himself, following.

Aloud, Andy said, "There ain't no car parked back here. I took the trash out — " He broke off. The new-old Zephyr was here, black and shiny, parked beyond the dustbins.

"You will drive," Badon said, climbing in the passenger side. He settled low in the seat with a weary sigh.

"Yeah," Andy said. He opened the driver's door. The key was already in the ignition. "Wasn't even locked. Anybody could of drove it away. But I guess nobody steals your car, right?"

"No one steals it," Badon agreed. "We will go to a place where I have gathered our friends," he said. He leaned back and closed his eyes. "The body is weak," he murmured. "Your bodies are heavy as clay. They are wearisome to wear."

Andy started the engine. "My kid's sick," he said.

Badon opened his eyes. A ghost of a smile played over his lips. Staring straight ahead, he murmured, "No."

"Yeah, he — "

"He is dead."

Andy turned his head sharply.

"He died not an hour ago in the hospital."

"My boy?" Andy asked, his voice choking.

"It does not matter," Badon said. "You all die."

Andy began to shake.

"Karen Yates is there," Badon said. "Where we're going."

"Goddamn you," Andy whispered.

"Yes. If you like. Goddamn me by all means. But you have no choice in the matter anymore, do you? Let's go."

Andy McCory started the car. It rolled out into the streets of Gaither, turned east, and headed for Ransom Ridge.

John Kirby parked at a slot in front of the theater at twenty minutes past five o'clock. He, Alan, and Ann climbed out of the car into a bleak, cold afternoon, so dark already that the streetlights around the Square had been turned on. John touched the CLOSED sign on the ShadowShow door. Then he tried the door itself and found it unlocked.

"Well," he said.

They entered the theater in a cluster, drawing comfort from being close to each other. "Should we split up?" Kirby asked.

Alan shook his head. Ann Lewis said, "No. We ought to stay together."

"I'd feel better that way, too." Kirby smiled.

Andy McCory had left the houselights on. The three of them looked at the empty box office, at the vacant concession stand. They climbed the stair and peeked into the deserted theater office, into the idle projection booth. Alan thought to himself that the theater seemed different from his memory of it, shabbier somehow, empty of personality as well as of people. "It feels different. He's not here."

"Or he's hiding." Kirby, like the others, gripped a small silver knife. He had also brought in a flashlight, but not needing it, he thrust it into his side pocket.

"We'd better look in the rest rooms," Ann said.

They went together. Alan was furiously embarrassed when they looked into the men's, when Ann Lewis could see the urinals hanging on the wall in a row of three; and he was even more embarrassed when they went into the women's and he saw the mysterious gray dispenser on the wall.

But the three found nothing. They tried the door beyond the men's room and explored the long, dim corridor, illuminated by the three widely spaced and inadequate bulbs. They climbed down the spiral stair to the stage and paced the dusty space behind the blank screen. They opened the trapdoor and stood smelling the musty scent of earth.

John Kirby grimaced. "I'll go down." He switched on his flashlight and descended. "The smell," he said. "Like something long dead." The others followed him down.

They found a stain on the earth floor, roughly man-long and roughly man-shaped, an oily black stain on the dark oiled earth and the bricks, as if something had rested there a long time. But they did not find Badon, and all climbed back up to the stage. Alan felt disappointment, but he also felt relief.

They stood in a cluster behind the screen, talking in unnecessary whispers. "Where else?" John Kirby asked.

Ann shook her head. "I don't know."

Alan started to speak, but afterward he never remembered what he wanted to say.

The lights went out.

Then illumination washed over them from the screen.

Shapes there, moving, without definition yet but colorful, colorful shapes.

“Don’t look!” someone yelled — was it Alan? — but too late.

They had all, involuntarily, turned toward the screen, and Ann Lewis saw herself there in lewd embrace with John Kirby, saw herself naked to the world, displayed on the screen. Yes, she thought, no, she wanted it, she didn’t want it —

She tried to close her eyes and found herself in John Kirby’s bed, next to the long warmth of him. He had an arm around her, lazily fondling one breast — she felt the gentle pressure, the teasing slip of flesh against flesh. Her nipple stood up beneath it, and gooseflesh crept across her arms. John smiled. “What’s wrong?”

She sat up, the covers falling away. She could smell the bedroom smells, the furniture polish, the sunshine smell of sheets new-washed and hung out to dry and put crisp and clean on a marriage bed. “This isn’t right,” she said. “How did we — ”

He pulled her back down, silenced her with a long kiss, and she tasted the spice of his mouth. “You had a bad dream,” he said, his breath murmuring warm into the hollow of her throat. “Just a bad dream. You tossed and turned just before you woke up. Tell me about it.”

It isn’t real

But the covers were warm around her, and his hands tender and warm on her. Through white lace curtains the window looked out into a fall morning, misty, hung with the last late leaves: and there, through the veiling curtains, across the street, she could see the prosaic face of another house. She bit her lip and tasted real pain.

but it isn’t real it isn’t

He nuzzled her, the little spines of his morning beard prickling her bare shoulder. “Come on. You can tell your husband.”

And when he spoke the words, she remembered it all, remembered it in bright colors, in Technicolor:

Speaking to him in his shop last August.

His asking her out to dinner.

Their delighted discovery of things they both loved, authors they both read.

Their shopping trip together to Atlanta on Labor Day.

His presenting her with the ring (she looked) that she wore on her left ring finger right now, the diamond that now sparkled next to a plain gold band.

The wedding, yesterday, in the Methodist church.

Last night in bed together.

It's wrong it never happened

She remembered it all, and her heart cried out with love for him and with the pain of doubt. "Where is Alan?" she asked.

"Alan? He's staying with his aunt and uncle this week. You know that. But he may be outside already, if that's what you mean. Boys get up early. He's probably down at the playground with Reese and Jack."

"The theater — "

He began to stroke her naked stomach slowly. "We can go tonight."

She shook her head. "It's closed. Everyone's sick. People have died."

He laughed. "What? That does it. No more champagne for you, ever, darling. That's what comes of letting a teetotaling little Methodist have a drink."

She closed her eyes, but she still saw everything as clearly as before. His hand stroking her stomach, just above her pubic mound, slowly, so slowly. "Jim Bascom," she said.

"That nigger deserved to die."

She opened her eyes.

it was John Kirby

She opened her eyes

it was Jim Bascom

She opened her eyes

it was Athaniel Badon

he had a blade in his hand, right over her stomach

With a scream and thrust Ann rolled sideways, off the bed, and fell forever. Alan Kirby

saw Molly Avery in her white, white room. The room had grown, though, had become enormous, stretched back into distance and faint blue-gray haze; and behind Mollie there milled an army of others.

Johnny Williams was there, his black and white dog Tuxedo beside him. Both grinned at Alan. And Cindy Fellows, irony in her eyes and a cigarette in her mouth. And two black men, one in funny old-fash-

ioned clothes and the other repeatedly stroking his arms. And Mr. Ballew Jefferson, smiling, smiling. Others. Too many others.

"We're all dead, Alan," Mollie said. "Us and you, too. Not so bad, is it?"

"No!"

"Oh, yes, we are. All of us. I'm dead, you're dead. And you don't feel any different, do you?"

"Shut up!"

She laughed, deep in her throat. He tried to close his eyes to the smooth tan skin, the darker nipples, the triangle of black hair, but still he saw her. "Mr. Badon is too strong, Alan. He's always been too strong for just people like us. He's won. He has already won. Your Mr. Tate is here somewhere."

"No, he's not!"

"Here he is."

From far behind her, materializing from the mist like a specter, a tall figure in a somber black suit walked slowly forward, head bent, arms locked behind it. "We failed," it whispered from all that distance away, and yet Alan heard the whisper clearly. "We failed and now it doesn't matter."

Alan shook with weeping.

The man in black came closer through the mist. It wrapped him and clung to him, concealing, revealing, as he neared. And now they were alone, not in the white room, but alone somewhere on a breathless flat expanse of bare ground, surrounded, muffled in the clinging gray mist. Closer, he came closer, his hand reaching out as though in benediction. "All my beliefs were wrong. And I misled you, too, Alan. My prayers were empty, my sins heavy on my head. And now he has you, too. You have joined us in the kingdom of the dead. I am sorry for my false teachings, Alan. My poor boy. My poor, dead boy."

Alan fell to his knees. "No . . . "

The man in black was almost over him now, reaching for him. "My poor Alan — "

"You're not the preacher!"

Hands hooked to claws.

The head jerked back and away.

The mist faded.

With an inarticulate scream, Alan leaped toward the snarling figure of Athaniel Badon. The figure receded impossibly into the distance.

Alan, howling, found himself held back, blocked by a yielding but firm barrier. He snatched at it, felt his hands slide over it, and then he thought of the knife — John Kirby

felt tears streaking his face. "Mary — ?"

She didn't look a day older. She wore the dress she had worn when they got married, white and full. Light from behind poured around her, a brilliant radiance, the light of saints.

She smiled at him. She was not beautiful, but she had a beautiful smile, the smile of an angel.

"Mary — ?"

"Yes, John."

He almost dropped the thing he carried at his side, almost rushed forward to sweep her up, to hold her, to test his reality. Almost but not quite.

"I've missed you," she said.

"You're not here," he croaked, the words bitter bile in his mouth. "This is some trick of his."

But Mary tilted her head to one side just as she always had and smiled her funny crooked smile, the same little dimple showing up at the right corner of her mouth. "Is it?"

"How?" he asked.

"No questions. Come to me. I want you with me, John."

He stepped into her light. She was so close, so close. He could put forth a hand and touch her, caress her cheek. He saw her through tears. "I'm sorry."

"You wanted another baby," she said, with no hint of reproach in her voice. Still, her words struck ice into his heart.

"Mary, I — "

"It doesn't matter. We all die anyway."

He could not reply.

"Some of us never see our children grow up. Some of us never hear our husbands' farewells. We all die. Nothing matters in the end. It's all the same, love or hate, youth or age."

"Mary, I — "

"Hush. You said you were sorry. Oh, John, you never even knew me and you loved me. What a fool you were then."

"I love you."

"But did you ever wonder if I loved you? It doesn't matter now, but I was unfaithful to you. Oh, yes. You gone in the army and I left at home.

How many times? Nine dozen? Two different men. They all knew, my father and my mother and all the people in town. I was shameless."

He looked at her in stunned horror. She smiled on, showing her dimple. "Yes, they knew. They laughed at you, John. They laughed at the good soldier boy coming home, taking a job with Daddy-in-law, never knowing, never suspecting. I got rid of one baby, did you know that? I ditched one. There I was home and alone and pregnant, and what was I to tell you? It was a dark little basement I went to in Atlanta, and a dark little man cut and cut and it came out, but oh he hurt me and that's why your baby killed me, John, that's why." She laughed at him, laughed in a coarse bray. "You fool."

He had a knife in his hand

"Yes, you should have killed me. You should have done it then, as soon as you saw me again. But with a gun or a knife, not with a baby. Yes, you should have killed me, you fool. I never loved you. Never. You hog, you — "

He raised the knife.

"That's right. Do it. Do it now. Do it right, do it with a knife, John." She raised her hands and ripped open the bodice of her wedding gown, exposing the full swell of her breasts. "Now! Do it!"

I'll be cutting out my own heart

The knife plunged down

She tilted her head back, eyes closed, ecstatic, a woman awaiting orgasm

John lunged past her, swept her aside

The knife tore not into her but through the solid light behind her

The world went crazy.

Colored light washed over them, the three of them, stumbling and thrashing against each other: a ragged rip grew as John Kirby dragged the knife down the screen. He had plunged the knife through a good two and a half feet over his head; now he had torn a gash nearly ten feet long, a smiling mouth, a great reversed sickle of darkness ripped into the jangle of light. But she was gone —

Alan, tears streaming, grasped the heavy fabric of the screen and pulled, tearing the gap even more. Sandpapery, silvery, the screen ripped, a horizontal line at first and then curving up to the upper right corner —

Ann Lewis had fallen to the floor. She got to her knees and stabbed the screen, her blond hair plastered in sweatsoaked tendrils to her

forehead, her breath coming in grunts of fury and effort as she stabbed again and again, her knife making pocking sounds in the taut fabric —

As abruptly as a movie, their shared fury ended. They panted, then fell together in an embrace. “Oh, God,” Ann said. “I imagined — ”

“It was like the movie I saw,” Alan said.

They broke apart. John Kirby looked up at the ruined screen. “The son-of-a-bitch. The damned yellow coward. He left us a little present. Mr. Badon ran away, but he left us something behind.”

“We have to find him,” Ann Lewis said.

Alan kicked the curtain. It billowed, and in the dim light from the house silver particles sifted down. “He’s scared of us,” Alan said. “He’s hiding.”

“Where?”

“We have to find out,” Alan said.

5

Reese Donalds and Jack Harwell were both over the flu, although now both their families were sick. So together, not knowing that the theater was closed, they decided to go to the shock show. Jack, having started to collect the monthly paper bills, was flush enough to treat them. They rode their bikes through the gathering cold of evening, close enough to talk to each other.

“Doddamn,” Reese said, picking up a conversation they had broken in his yard. “So you stopped leavin’ him a paper, huh?”

“Yeah,” Jack said. “Jeez, it’s cold.” He wore a heavy coat and bent over his handlebars so far that his nose nearly touched the yoke. “Think I’m goin’ nuts or something?”

Reese, on his old white hand-painted bike, said, “I dunno. There’s been a shitload of stuff happenin’, people dyin’ and all. Man, you know who you should tell about old man Jefferson’s spook house?”

They turned onto Oglethorpe Street, hurtled beneath lighted street lamps, headed toward the Square. “Who?”

“Old Alan Kirby, that’s who. He’s all the time readin’ all them damn books.”

“Vampires,” Jack agreed in a Bela Lugosi voice. “Blood.”

The two boys flew their bikes past Belk’s and toward the theater. Under a sky like a dead winter’s ceiling, downtown lay grim, gray,

emptier even than on a normal Saturday evening. Reese hit the curb in front of the jewelry store, bounded over it, and shot out into Bridge Street again without even looking. They crossed the street and pulled up in front of the theater, under the dead marquee.

"Well, shit," Reese said, staring at the sign that hung on the theater door.

"Closed," Jack read. He looked at the lurid Frankenstein poster with longing. "Fool. Wonder why it's closed."

Reese sat his bike, his left foot thrust out to take his weight and balance him. He rolled the bike forward and back a few inches. "Doddamn flu, probably. Shit."

"What you want to do?" Jack asked, pushing his thick spectacles back into place on the bridge of his nose. "Go to your house?"

"Nah. My old lady's sick as a damn dog, man. How about your place?"

Jack shook his head. "Everybody's sick there."

Reese sniffed the air. "Damn, feels like it's gonna snow."

"Not in October."

"Nah." Reese perked up. "Look here," he said. A patrol car was coming down the street toward them. "That's the sheriff and who's the woman?"

Jack squinted in the darkness. The woman beside Quarles in the front seat had sort of light-colored hair. He did not recognize her. "Dunno."

The car stopped at the curb and Quarles climbed out. He glanced at the CLOSED sign and then at the two boys. "I'm lookin' for Andy McCorry," he said.

Reese spat into the gutter. "Shit, try Miz Bertha's."

Despite his shock, Jack got the giggles. Miz Bertha was the madam of the whorehouse down on River Road south of town. Quarles did not laugh. "Son, it's not a joke. It's a family emergency."

Reese shrugged. Quarles walked over to the theater door and tried it. It swung open easily and the lawman disappeared inside. Reese looked at Jack, grinned, and hopped off his bike, letting it fall with a clatter to the pavement. He followed Quarles inside. "Reese," protested Jack, but the other boy was already gone. Jack gave the woman in the car a quick glance (She looks so sad, he thought), kicked down the stand of his bike, and went in after Reese.

The red-haired boy stood in the auditorium doorway. "Shit, would ya look at that," he said. Jack came up and got on tiptoe to look over his shoulder. The screen of the ShadowShow was a hanging ruin, gashed, slashed, ribboned. "Man," Reese said. "Somebody done a job on that. Won't be no movies for a while, that's for doddamn sure."

Behind them Sheriff Quarles clumped downstairs. "You boys shouldn't be in here," he said.

Reese let the auditorium door swing to as he turned. "Was Andy McCory upstairs, Sheriff?"

"No. Get on out, now."

They went back out under the overhang of the marquee. Quarles climbed back into the patrol car, spoke briefly to the woman, and then drove away. Reese immediately turned back to the theater door. Jack caught his arm. "What're you up to?"

"Come on." Reese went back in, and Jack trailed him. This time Reese didn't go toward the auditorium; he made a line straight for the concession stand. He clambered up and over the counter and tried the door of the glass display case. "It's open! What you want, man?" His hands scrabbled in among Baby Ruths and Butterfingers, licorice whips, Pompoms, Goobers, Jordan Almonds, Junior Mints.

"Hey," Jack said. "That's stealin', man."

Reese was stuffing his jacket pocket. "Shit hard luck for whoever left the door open, that's all. Hell, anybody could take this stuff. Might as well be us, man."

"Not for me," Jack said. He left Reese and went outside.

A few seconds later, Reese joined him. "Pussy," he said.

"We could get arrested, man."

"Yeah, sure. For stealin' a Baby Ruth. Gonna send you to Reidsville for stealin' a damn candy bar, right."

"Come on." Jack got on his bike.

Reese picked up his own. "Where to?"

"Let's go see what Kirby's doin'."

"Okay," Reese said.

"How much did you get?"

They pushed off together. Reese didn't answer. Finally, a long way down Bridge Street, he muttered something. Jack dropped back and said, "What?"

"Said I put it all back, fart-face. Didn't take nothin'."

For some reason that made Jack feel better. He stood on the pedals and made his bike fly. They raced across the bridge and he won by a front wheel.

6

"You got to go," Old Ludie said from her bed. She lay there, not really sick anymore but not yet well, either, drifting in and out of light fever and dreams. "You knows you got to go."

Michael Estes, his back jammed upright in the uncomfortable old wooden ladder-back chair, shook his head. "Granny-Ma, the white folks don't want me. They don't need me."

"They needs the Word." Ludie sighed. Her mother, dead for forty years, put a cool hand on her forehead. "I restin' easier, Maw-Maw," Ludie said politely. "I thank you."

Michael stirred uneasily in his chair. "Maw-Maw ain't here, Granny-Ma —"

"Hush, boy." Ludie closed her eyes. "You think the dead leaves us. They never leaves. I know. I know all about it. Jim Bascom, he say you got to go."

"Granny-Ma, I can't leave you alone. You sent Mama off —"

"Your mama needed her rest before she gets sick, too. Besides, I ain't alone, bless your soul, child. And I better already. You know that."

Michael's glasses reflected the dim shaded light. "Oh, yeah. Two days back you didn't know who I was, even. You're some better. But you're not well yet, not by a long sight."

"I ain't gonna die. Not this time, no way. I seen those gone through the valley before, child, and they told me it ain't my time yet. But that poor white lady, she got to have help. She and her friends, they lost in the wild woods. Atangled up and hopeless, Lord, not knowin' which way to turn. You go and tell them. You promise me you'll go and tell them."

Michael grunted, feeling himself give in, as he had given in when he drove Ludie to visit Jim Bascom's grave. "What'm I supposed to say, then?"

Ludie's eyes opened and closed. "Tell 'em the serpent has gone to his hole. A white old house on a high hill. He got friends there. No, got

slaves there. Got slaves. The devil, he got no friends, just slaves that has to serve him, little serpents to help the big one. The others bite, too. They gathered and they gathering. Seem like all the shadows of the world runnin' to that one place. You tell 'em. They got to be careful. They got to watch that they don't put they feet the snares and the traps, you tell 'em. I can't see it all, but the evil, it gone to its nest."

"Granny-Ma — "

"Poor old Mr. Jefferson. He one of them now. I didn't suspect what had ahold of him, and it too late now. He so lost. Poor old man. It his house, Michael. You tell 'em."

"Yes, ma'am," Michael said. He sat while his grandmother fell into a doze. She woke fifteen minutes later and chased him out. He paused beside his truck for a few minutes, then went to the next house and pounded on the door. Mrs. Gideon, nearly as old as his grandmother and half deaf, finally opened to him. "Miz Gideon," he bawled, "I have to run an errand for my Granny-Ma. Would you be so kind as to come set with her?"

"Let me get my shawl."

It took thirty minutes to get the two old ladies together. By the time Michael left the house and started toward town, Reese Donalds and Jack Harwell had already crossed the bridge. Sam Quarles had not yet found Andy McCory. Lee McCory, numbed by the death of her son, sat mute beside him while the patrol car searched the streets. Overhead the strange sky grew darker and the air grew colder.

In the Jefferson house, things moved.

Sixteen

1

Ann Lewis managed a supper of bologna sandwiches and Campbell's chicken noodle soup for the three boys. Reese Donalds couldn't get over her presence in Alan's house. Jack seemed abashed by her, his normally high spirits dampened, his antic impressions stilled. Reese Donalds was a whole different story, though — Alan saw in Reese's eyes a thousand dancing questions and crude jokes. Ann sensed the awkwardness and after supper she made an excuse to leave, to go "home"; but Alan knew she would be back later.

After the table was cleared and the dishes washed, Alan's father left the boys in the living room, sprawled in front of the TV. Reese immediately asked, "So they gonna get married, or what?"

"Stop it," Alan said. "Miss Lewis just came because we've been sick. My aunt's been sorta nursin' us, but she's gone to Florida for two weeks."

"Miz Lewis is nursin' you, huh? Hey, does she like nursin' your old man?" Reese asked, snickering. "I could nurse offa them titties myself." He puckered his mouth and made loud sucking noises.

"Hey, shut up," Jack said from the sofa. "This is a neat show comin' on."

"Oh, man," groaned Reese. "Is it that beaver show?"

For Jack had gone absolutely ape-shit over a new show called "Leave It to Beaver," a series about a kid whose worst problem seemed to Alan to be a chronic case of telling people things he should have told them right off the bat. But somehow the TV kid's troubles always wrapped themselves up neatly by the last commercial. The Beaver was lucky. He had a mom and a dad who understood him and

an older brother who wasn't too much of a creep. To Alan real life seemed different from the world of the show.

This time, though, Jack said, "No, stupid, it's not 'Beaver.' This is 'Perry Mason.' You won't like it. Dumb-asses can't understand it."

Halfway through the show, Reese, his attention wandering sure enough, said, "Old Jack's been seein' spooks, man."

"Shut up," Jack growled again.

"No shit. Tell him about it, Jack."

Alan felt his face flush. The last thing he wanted right now was more ghost stories. "He doesn't hafta," he muttered.

But Jack was primed. "It was a strange and eerie sight," he said, stealing the voice from someone's impression of Boris Karloff. "Figures moving behind a window. Shadows of people who never were — "

"Cut it out, butt-face," Alan said. "I'm in no mood."

The redheaded boy squealed with high-pitched laughter. "Butt-face," he said. "Old four-eyed butt-face." He bounced from the floor up to the sofa beside Jack. "Harwell, if I had a dog as ugly as you, I'd shave his ass and make him walk backward."

"You're so cool, Donalds," Jack said. "You got your guts in your head, and when they work, shit comes out your mouth."

Reese rolled on the couch, laughing, and despite himself, Alan smiled. "Lay off, you turds. Dad's gonna come in and kick your asses up between your shoulder blades in a minute."

Reese sat up and hit Jack hard on the point of his left shoulder. Jack retaliated. They exchanged blows for a minute before Jack grunted. "Ow! Damn, Reese, that hurt."

"You hollered first! I get to smash ya balls!" Reese crowed, aiming a fist at Jack's crotch. Jack rolled sideways on the sofa and took the punch on his hip. "Two for flinchin', man!"

"Shut up!" Alan looked around, but his father did not materialize in the doorway. "I swear you guys act like you're crazy sometimes."

"Don't say that, man," Jack muttered, rubbing his hip. "I thought I was crazy there when I saw the nekkid woman."

"Tell him, tell him," Reese urged, dropping back the couch to the floor and then raising himself up on his knees. "Nekkid nigger woman he saw, just as plain."

Alan felt a chill. "Where?" he asked, his voice a croak.

"Up on Ransom Ridge. Hey, let's see the show," Jack said.

"Tell me."

Jack looked over at Alan. He shrugged. "Not much to tell. I went to collect for old man Jefferson's paper and I thought I saw him in his window. But it wasn't. I don't know who it was. I thought it was a nekkid woman and I thought it was a deputy sheriff. But I never went to the door. Damn place scared the shit out of me, man, and that's the truth." Jack drew up his legs and hugged them, resting his chin on his knees.

Alan felt sick with knowing. "Let's check it out," he heard himself say.

Jack glanced at the window. "You nuts, man? Look how dark it is, almost night out there. And it's damn cold."

"Let's go," Donalds said. "This fuckin' show's no good. I wanna see the beaver. You're a big fan of the beaver, ain't you, Jack? Hell, let's go see the beaver."

Jack wavered. "You guys both want to go?"

Reese nodded. After a moment Alan did, too.

Jack sighed. "Shit. But we're not goin' in, all right? I'll show you the house, but that's it. That's all. We are not goin' in that place, you guys got that?"

Alan went to his room for his jacket. He could have told his father then that he was going, and he could even have told him where.

But for some reason he didn't want to.

They left the house on their bikes at 6:57. At that moment Michael Estes was leaving Odum Tate's boardinghouse, feeling numb with shock: somehow he had missed the word on the old preacher's death. Mrs. Hudson had kindly given him John Kirby's address. It would take Michael a long while to make up his mind to go there.

Across town three bikes rolled through dark, empty streets and then rode the rising ground of the ridge up toward Ballew Jefferson's white house.

Where things moved.

Ann Lewis tossed clean underwear into her last overnight case and cursed herself for being so foolish. Two boys, two little boys that she had taught, looked at her appraisingly and she blushed like a seventh-

grader with a crush on the vice-principal. Well, she was going back. And if John Kirby wanted to make something of her presence —

Well, let it happen, she told herself. He likes you. There's nothing wrong with that. Nothing wrong with the way you feel about him.

But there was something wrong, tonight, with her apartment.

She shivered. Mrs. Maddons's son had turned off the heat, prudently saving pennies, and the place was dank and cold. She took a last look around, closed the overnight case, and picked it up. I wish I never had to come back, she thought.

She turned off the light and stepped outside. Cold, the night was unseasonably cold, for Georgia, for October. It was almost freezing out here in the dark. She found her latchkey and locked the door. Crossing the yard, she felt the crunch of dry leaves under her feet. Poor Mrs. Maddons. She hated having an untidy yard. She'd be upset when she got back from the hospital and saw that her son hadn't had the leaves raked.

Ann opened the Rambler and tossed the overnight case into the backseat. With the door open and the dome light on, she isolated her ignition key on the ring. Then she got behind the wheel and slipped the key into the ignition.

She paused for a moment, sniffing. What was that smell? Mint? She had it: Wrigley's Spearmint. She occasionally made her students spit out wads of it. But she never chewed gum herself.

"Turn the engine on," a man's voice said beside her.

She sat upright, eyes wide. From the corner of her eye she saw him, a bulking brown shape in the seat beside her, a heavy man. She felt the flesh of her belly crawl beneath her clothes.

"You're all right," the voice crooned. "You're gonna be just fine, little lady. You turn on the engine. See, you gotta do what I tell you 'cause I'm the law."

Her traitor fingers turned the key, switched on the motor. That's right," the voice purred. "That's just fine. Now I'm gonna tell you where to go, little lady. We gonna have a party."

She had dwindled away to a tiny little woman locked in the darkness of her own skull. As her body obeyed Harmon Presley's commands, she collapsed somewhere there inside herself and screamed and screamed.

Silently.

So silently.

Sam Quarles was bone-tired. He dropped Lee McCory off at her house at seven, then went to the office. Gil Ort was there, alone: the tough old man was the only member of the squad who didn't seem to mind the building and its bloody history, even at night, even when he was by himself. "Any problems tonight?" Quarles asked.

"Nah, nothin' much." Ort leaned back, stretched his hands far over his head, and yawned. "Got Alberts out makin' the rounds. I know he's no damn good, but somebody needs to run a patrol. You ever run down Andy McCory, Sheriff?"

"Nobody's seen him. We checked with the others who work for the show, all but Badon. You know somethin' funny, Gil? That guy Badon doesn't have an address. Nobody knows where he lives. I checked with the phone company, the paper, everything. There's just no record of him livin' in this town. And Beebee Venner and Joey Fulham tell me he ain't been at work for two-three weeks."

"Another MP?"

"Nobody's reported him missin' yet. Damned if I'm gonna pile up any more files than I have to." Quarles hooked a chair over, fell into it, rubbed his eyes. "God, Gil, Miz McCory's pitiful. That baby dead and her old man God knows where."

"Andy McCory's never been no good. People like that, they oughta be shot."

"Not worth the powder," Quarles said. "There was somethin' I was gonna do today that I never got around to."

"Ought to put some damn antifreeze in the patrol cars," Ort said. "It's cold out there. Never remember an October when it got this cold."

"It's a bad year."

"Uh-huh. You know what you oughta do? You ought to see if Warner's really gonna try to get us another car — "

"Warner," Quarles said, sitting up straighter. "That's it. I meant to check on Cliff Warner and see if he's all right. Put in a call to him, will you?"

Ort dialed from the switchboard. After half a minute, he shook his head. "Nobody's gonna answer."

Quarles frowned. "Anybody seen Ballew Jefferson around town lately?"

"I thought he'd retired," Ort said. "Somebody over at the bank was tellin' me he ain't comin' in anymore — "

The sheriff got up. "I think I'll run up to the ridge," he said. "An old man alone like that — I think I better check on him." The switchboard buzzed as he turned away. He had just pushed open the outer door when Ort's voice called him back.

"What is it?" Quarles asked, coming back into the squad room.

"Your wife. I think you better — "

Quarles grabbed the phone. Ilona's voice, shrill and reedy, was audible before he got it to his ear. " — his arms are all bleeding, oh, God, he's trying to get in the door, oh Jesus help me he's all torn up — "

Quarles threw the receiver to Ort, spun on his heel, and dashed for the door, the Jefferson house forgotten.

4

Ransom Ridge was a hard pull for boys on one-speed bikes. The three of them had to dismount and walk the bikes up, panting out breath that steamed in the light from street lamps. Houses here were widely spaced, separated by vine-covered wooden fences or by short rows of trees. "Over there," Jack gasped, nodding to the right.

The house stood well back from the street, dark windows looking blind. The cold air brought a wispy scent of decay and rot to Alan. He shuddered.

"Just a house," Reese Donalds said.

"Yeah, you weren't here when I saw it," Jack puffed. They stood their bikes on the sidewalk, looking across the broad lawn, through the six widely spaced trees, at the bulk of the house. It was even darker than it should have been. Jack looked up. "Damn street-light's out."

"Which window'd you see the sonbitch in, Harwell?"

Jack paused before answering Reese's question. "Top window, over on the left," he said. "I was closer. I'd gone up the drive to throw the paper and all. But that's where it was."

The top left window showed suddenly in a blaze of yellow light. They all jumped. "Shit fire," Reese whispered. Then he drew a long, shaky breath and laughed softly. "See the beaver now, Jack?"

"Shut up," Jack said. "Let's go, man. I don't like this at all."

Alan stared at the window.

Ye shall not surely die.

"Dare you to run up and touch the door," Donalds said.

"Dares are for kids. Come on, Alan."

Alan shook his head in the cold, in the dark, and stared at the warm yellow promise of the window.

She was there.

He could not see her, but she was there.

Live forever, live forever

Lies, he thought. Someone tugged at his arm. He jerked away.

"Betcha Kirby ain't chicken," Reese Donalds said. "You a pussy, Kirby? Run up and slap the door if you ain't."

"Shut up!" Jack's voice, but far away.

"You ain't got hair on your ass if you don't do it," Reese taunted.

Alan dropped his bike and started down the drive.

"Oh, shit," Jack groaned. "Alan! Come back here!"

Even Reese's voice changed register: "Kirby! I was just kiddin' you, man!"

They whispered around Alan's ears, telling him this was right, this walk in the dark, this golden reward at the end of the cold journey, voices thick, clustering, echoing down all the years: some spoke in exotic tongues, some blandished with the thees and thous of a bygone year, some sounded like mutterings only with no words to offer, but all bore him onward. The night was full of shadows, and they spoke to Alan Kirby. He reached the steps, took them, crossed the porch. Someone cried out far behind him.

The door opened. Light, warmth spilled out. She was there, not naked now, but trim in a light tan dress with white collar and cuffs. She stepped back. He walked into the house.

"Oh, shit," groaned Jack Harwell again. He turned his bike and leaped on it.

"Wait up!" Reese Donalds behind him, pumping hard to catch up. "Doddamn it!"

"I'm gonna tell," Jack gibbered, the cold wind whistling around his ears as the bike took up speed, the tires whistling almost against the pavement. "I'm goin' back to Alan's house and tell his dad."

"Who is it?"

The streetlights flashed by as they hurtled downhill. "It was Mollie Avery, you dumb fuck!" Jack was weeping, his voice hitching. "She's dead, but she let him in that goddamn house!"

"Look out, man!"

They swerved around an oncoming car. Jack lost it, went ass over head rolling across a lawn. Reese swung around, U-turned, lost his speed heading back up hill. By the time he got to Jack, the other boy was already mounting his bike again. "You okay?" Reese asked.

"Yeah. Skinned my hands. Oh, God."

"You go on," Reese panted. "I'm headin' back."

"What?"

"God, man, didn't you see who was in that car?"

Jack shook his head.

"It was Miz Lewis, man. And I think that dead policeman was with her. Go on, hurry, get!" Reese stood on the pedals and got a wobbly uphill start. Jack pushed off and let gravity ride him downhill. His hands smarted as the icy wind found the blood, and his legs already ached from the trip up the ridge, but he lost no thought for that in his headlong flight to Rainey Hill.

5

In an antique chair with a high carved back he who called himself Athaniel Badon sat, thin arms resting on either side of him. "Well, boy," he said.

Alan stood alone. Alan stood in a crowd. He saw them from the corners of his eyes, filling every inch of floor space in the big old room: Mollie Avery, naked again now, her guts dangling; Johnny Williams, his head lolling on a broken neck; a little girl with a bloody hole where her right eye once was and no back to her skull at all; others, thick, crowding in, until he looked directly at them, and then they were gone.

"Well, boy."

He doesn't even look frightening, Alan thought. Skinny old man with bony knees. Big knobby head. Deep dark eyes. Bag of bones.

"So we are together at last. Together forever, wouldn't you say?"

Alan shook his head. His lips felt numb. He heard himself breathing but could not feel the heaving of his chest.

"You are the worthy one," he said. "You can visualize, you can almost make them real just by thinking about them. That's power, son."

There was a faraway sound, animal gruntings.

The old man grinned. "In the next room is a fool. He had served me for the pleasure I gave him. In exchange he has given me blood and souls. But a fool is a blunted instrument. I think he will die tonight, yes?"

His eyes so dark in their deep hollows

"Do you know what he is doing? He killed a woman for me not long ago, yes, killed her and gave her blood to me. And so I animate her for him now, and she does whatever he wishes, and he has her — " the thin lips turned down, tasting something rotten — "her love. Anything he wishes she will do, do you understand? Anything."

Wet sounds from the next room, slapping sound of flesh against flesh

"I took his blood, but only a little. He is too stupid to become part of me. But you, you are a clever boy. A clever, clever boy. Some who enter my service hardly change, for they are stupid, and they act as animals act, by instinct, even after I free them from their shells. But a clever, clever boy like you, my son, will learn and grow over the years, perhaps even become like me, eh? A taker of blood? There is life in blood, young Alan. And when you give your life to me, I keep it safe forever. You will be my right hand, eh? You will do the tasks I require. And you will do them wisely, not as that fool does them. We will start with the town, eh? You hate certain people in it. You may have them to play with, just to begin. Yes, you will pipe the tune and they will dance! And you will live forever."

Mollie was right at his side, her soft breast almost touching his arm, her soft fingers stroking his cheek, but when he turned he found empty air.

"My service is sweet."

Resist temptation

"Come, boy. My son."

who had said that, resist, resist

The old hands spread wide for him. He took a step forward.

The old face split in an ivory smile.

She parked the Rambler in front of the house.

"Get out now, little lady," Harmon Presley said.

She opened the door and got out. She stood, hands dangling, beside the car.

He had not opened the door but somehow he was out and beside her. "That's right. Now we gonna go meet some people. We goin' up the steps — "

A demon screamed out of the night. A red-haired demon flew head-long into Harmon Presley, went through him, and racked up his bike against the front steps. Reese Donalds did a flip and crashed hard on his back on the porch.

Ann Lewis screamed.

"Now, now," Harmon Presley said, turning toward her with the same easy grin, but uncertainty flickered in his empty eyes now, like a bad light bulb.

Reese was down the stairs, crying, cursing. "Let her alone, you son-bitch. You let Miz Lewis alone!"

"Son, I'm the law."

Reese stood chest to chest. "Fuck that! You're dead! You get out of here!"

The deputy reached for him, clutched at him.

Reese spat in the slack face. "You sorry sonbitch! I don't believe in Santa Claus and I don't believe in the Easter Rabbit, and I sure as hell don't believe in you!"

There wasn't much light, only what spilled from the windows of the Jefferson house (all now blazing), but in that light Harmon Presley dissolved. He tottered for a moment, a rotten fabric, a derelict scarecrow guarding crops long gone, a tatter of flesh and bone and rotting clothes, and then he folded into himself, went out like a candle flame.

"Run!" Ann Lewis screamed.

Reese Donalds collapsed, crying. "Can't! My doddamn arm is broke!"

It's a dream, she thought, and knowing it wasn't, she bent to pick up Reese, bigger than she was but bawling like a baby.

John Kirby had to pull over at the bridge to avoid hitting Jack Harwell. The boy leaped off his bike, let it fall clamoring to the side of the road,

and tore the door open. "You gotta come," he screamed, lack of breath making his voice a screek. "The Jefferson place — "

"I know. Get in." Alan's father turned and opened the back door. Jack clambered in, feeling his heart nearly burst at every beat from fear and exertion.

He closed his eyes. When he opened them, he said, "Who's that?"

"My name's Estes," said the black man beside John's father. "I think we both came for the same reason."

"They got him," Jack groaned. As the car ran through a red light, he began to cough out the story.

8

Sam Quarles got his hands on Billy Resaca's shoulders before the apparition could even turn around. He felt a momentary lurch of surprise — damn, he's solid — *before* he spun the ghost around. A wet string of artery swung loose from the bitten flesh and slapped Sam across the forehead.

He planted his own fist in Resaca's face.

It shot through as if he had punched a rotten Halloween jack-o'-lantern. Pain lit his eyes as his fist connected with the doorpost. Billy Resaca collapsed down, dwindling like the Wicked Witch in The Wizard of Oz when the water hit her: and then he was gone.

Sam cursed, shaking his hand, feeling the grind of broken bone. "Ilona! It's me!"

She rushed into his arms, still screaming. She buried her screams in his shoulder, and they became great hitching sobs. Behind her the telephone was ringing. "Goddamn," Sam muttered. He walked Ilona into the house, put his right arm around her, his damaged hand clenched, and picked up the receiver with his left. "Yeah?"

"Sheriff?" It was Gil Ort, back at the switchboard. "Listen, I just got a call from John Kirby. Somethin's goin' on up at Ballew Jefferson's place. I think we better get somebody on it before somebody else gets killed."

Yeah. The goddamned Jefferson place. Where he had started for when that thing distracted him by coming for his wife.

"I got it." He hung up and shook Ilona. "You listen to me, now," he said. "You just be quiet and listen to me."

"His arms," she wailed. "All blood and bone — "

"Damn it, Ilona, he wasn't real! He just went to pieces when I touched him. He wasn't real! Now you listen to me. I'm takin' you next door to the Edges'. I want you to stay inside with them. Don't open the door unless it's me. I gotta go, Ilona — "

"No!"

"I wanted you to stay out of town! Damn it, woman, I have to go. Come on."

Broken hand and all, he dragged his wife next door and frightened the Huey Edge family into accepting her.

9

The hands had flown from Alan's shoulders to a hiss of frustration. The world wavered: for a moment the old man in front of him was not human at all, was a distended parody of a human, bulging-headed, long slobbery tube of a tongue, thin-bodied, belly swelling like that of a praying mantis: and then he was an old man, smiling still, but with uneasiness lurking in those deep-pooled eyes.

"No," Alan said.

"I must insist." the quiet voice murmured.

"You're almost dead," Alan said. "You can hardly hold things together. He nearly beat you, didn't he? Mr. Tate just nearly beat you!"

The head twitched in angry negation. "A sheep of a man! A weak, sniveling sheep of a man — "

"You need our belief," Alan said. "You have a sort of hold on that body, but you can't do anything unless we believe in you. That's it. And you lie, you throw shadows at us. You can't give eternal life — you can only work dead bodies like puppets, play the shadows over and over, like your movies — "

"Andy!" The old voice was sharp, high-pitched, edged with — was it fear? Could it be?

The door opened. The man standing in the doorway was redder of hair than even Reese Donalds, a pale man, lank. A cigarette hung from his lip. "You made her go away," he said.

"I need you. This young man. He has to be — treated."

"Hell with that."

This one's real, Alan thought. Looking at the two of them together, he could see the difference: the old man was wrong, somehow, nearly

translucent, a dimstore Halloween costume with nobody inside. But Andy McCory was real. And dangerous.

“Andy!” The voice a lash now.

Outside the sound of brakes squealing. The old man clenched his hands on the armrests of the chair, half rose. “No!”

Alan shook the knife from its nesting place in the sleeve of his jacket.

Andy McCory took an uncertain half step forward, the cigarette falling from his mouth.

The door blasted open behind Alan.

Badon’s face writhed, dissolving into an inhuman mask of hate.

And Alan sprang.

He wielded the knife with both hands, swung it back over his head in an arc of silver, brought it slicing down as his knee drove Badon back into the chair. The blade impaled him

no, no, you and pinned him to the high carved chair back, pinned him like an insect through a thin and narrow thorax

no as he writhed, melted, screamed, pulled almost free

you will die you will die but other hands pressed him back now, John Kirby’s hands, Ann Lewis’s hands, Michael Estes’s hands as the inhuman mouth gaped, closed, gaped, pursed, and spat out something, a black insect the size of a hornet, spreading its wings, buzzing in anger

stop I command it help me Andy McCory opened his mouth and the black hornet-thing flew right in between his lips and his eyes opened and he choked and a river of blood gushed out, poured out, leaped out

help me my children they loomed now, all of the dead, clawed hands reaching, impotent, all of them groaning, nearly solid but not solid enough

help . . . me . . . it was not Badon now or anything that could pass for human. The long tubelike tongue sprang out of the mouth, a horrible jack-in-the-box, snake-in-the-box, and it lashed, wrapped itself around the neck of Andy McCory (his eyes wide, turned down, on the flow of bright arterial blood gargling from his open mouth), struck like a snake right into his mouth

aiee . . . grsgrlxx . . . agharra the body quivered, quivered, and the shadows fell away, dissolved. The tongue let go its hold on McCory’s throat.

Andy McCory toppled forward onto his face.

"Daddy," Alan cried, embracing his father.

They stepped back from the being pinned to the chair. It did not stir. Reese Donalds, holding his left arm in his right, came through the front door. "You killed him," he said.

A thin siren wail cut the night. "I think there's somebody in there," Alan said, nodding toward the door from which Andy McCory had come. "I heard something."

"Let's go see," his father said. "Together."

The hallway led to the kitchen.

The kitchen was a charnel house.

They were all there, even the blackened bones that were all that remained of Tuxedo. Every body was there, piled in putrescent confusion: entrails spilled, bellies bloated, nakedness piled on shroud. A little girl lay on the fat belly of a middle-aged man; Billy Resaca's ruined arms embraced the ruined body of Mollie Avery; blood slimed the floor. Looking above the pile, which lay jumbled on him, like a man sitting up to his neck in water, was banker Jefferson, his eyes dead and dry and silver, his mouth open, his purple tongue lolling. The blackened, heat-blasted kitchen was a den of death and decomposition. Alan gagged on the stench of it.

Michael Estes drew a deep breath. "Granny-Ma says the fire purifies," he said.

"Alan, Ann," Mr. Kirby said. "Go on outside."

Reese had waited for them by the front door. Sam Quarles came up the steps just as they reached the porch. "It's over," Alan told him.

A moment later Michael Estes and John Kirby joined him. "I wouldn't go in," John said.

"Mr. Kirby, I reckon I have to."

But the sheriff was inside for only a moment or two. He came out looking staggered. "Was that the devil that had a hold of the town?" he asked.

John nodded.

Reese Donalds sniffed the air. "Somethin's burnin'."

Sam Quarles had a handkerchief wrapped tight around his right hand. He was pulling it even tighter when Reese made the remark. Quarles himself sniffed, look quickly at John Kirby (He knows, Alan thought), and then said, "We better pull the cars back a ways."

The flames took the house from the rear, screaming up into the cold night, into the black. If neighbors had been awake and alert, the fire department would have come long before they did, just at midnight, when the house was already gone. But Gaither had been a very sick town, and the people were resting, recovering. No neighbor was awake to call the firemen. Not until a motorist just passing through town happened to look up and see there on the distant ridge a flaming beacon did anyone notify the fire department.

The three boys and the four grown-ups stood in a tight knot out on the edge of the lawn, watching the windows blaze, watching the black smoke roll. The whole house was a huge torch when, at midnight, the piercing cries of the coming fire truck distracted them. "They're too late," Quarles said.

"Oh, my God!" It was Ann Lewis. She pressed her hands against her mouth.

Alan looked and felt his heart fly into his throat.

A car was coming down the drive.

A new-old black car.

And behind the wheel was the blood-spattered corpse of Andy McCory.

10

The black sedan left the drive to avoid the cars parked there, threaded between two poplars, bounced across the lawn, lurched over the sidewalk and curb, screeched in a tight turn, and headed down Ransom Ridge. "God," Quarles said. "He was dead. I made sure he was dead when I went in — " "It isn't McCory," John snapped. "It's him, Badon, the thing." Quarles cursed again, clambered into his patrol car, and spun out. "Get in the car, son," John Kirby said. "We have to see it through." He turned to Ann. "Get the rest of them out of this. Get them to our house. Go!"

The others piled into the Rambler as John started the Studebaker. Alan fumbled with the door, barely getting it slammed closed in time. Ahead he saw the flashing red lights of the fire trucks and vanishing taillights of the patrol car. The car squealed in the turn. Alan looked up the ridge to his left. The fire lit the sky there, turned the draggling bellies of cloud a dull crimson. In the glare he saw Miss Lewis's car

following them down the hill. They made the corner and he lost sight of the Rambler.

"Where?" his dad asked.

"There he is," Alan said. "He turned toward New Haven."

They made a hard right. The Studebaker flashed through streets of sleeping mill houses, always managing to keep on the trail of the patrol car somehow, even when it disappeared for long stretches.

"He's stopped!" Alan yelled.

The patrol car was half off the street, in the dirt yard of a mill house. Its headlights shone on the black car. Steam still plumed from the tailpipe.

"There," John Kirby said. "He's on the porch."

Sam Quarles was pistoning his foot against the closed front door of the house. John stopped the car behind the sheriff's vehicle as the wood splintered and the door crashed open. "Wait!" he yelled, climbing out of the car.

But Quarles had vanished inside. A woman screamed somewhere in the house, and another door banged open. "Out back," Alan gasped. Father and son ran to the left, downhill.

They saw him then.

Andy McCory, or something that looked like him, was dragging a woman across the yard. They reached the white propane tank just as the back door opened and a beam of light — Quarles's flashlight — hit McCory in the face.

Alan bit back a scream. The mouth still gaped open, ropy streams of blood still drooling from it to the naked chest, but that wasn't the worst. The face crawled, trying to be Badon, trying to form the human tongue into the obscene feeding tube: and the hands were ripping at the woman's throat.

"Don't let him!" Alan yelled.

The woman hooked her nails into the flesh of his face and tore. An eyeball madly protruded; skin opened.

And closed again, throbbing, trying to alter, to crawl into new features.

It needs blood, Alan thought. It's almost gone, there's nothing left but hate and the desire to keep going, to stay in a body, but to do that it needs the blood.

The changing head lowered at the instant that Sam Quarles fired. It was a good shot for a man holding a flashlight in his left hand and operating the pistol with his broken right hand.

The bullet struck McCory's forehead, went through, spanged into the tank behind.

The head jerked back, caught, began to dip forward again. Brain tissue crawled or was sucked back into a closing wound. The torn flesh mended itself as the head lowered, the tongue lolled.

Alan heard a hiss. The sheriff's bullet had ruptured the propane tank.

"Fire," he yelled. "It has to be fire!"

The woman screamed. McCory's, the thing's, hands had ripped an opening in her throat. It stooped to suckle a jetting gush of blood. Alan heard it slurp.

The woman may have heard Alan.

Her hand ripped away the right front pocket of McCory's jeans, clenched hard. Something glittering and gold showed there in the shaking beam of Quarles's flash.

A gold Ronson lighter.

She screamed something inarticulate and her hand jerked, working the lighter. A spark leaped.

The tank exploded.

Alan saw it in slow motion: a rushing fireball, the two figures at first black against it and then part of it. And before the yellow wave of flame reached him, his father had knocked him back, had covered him.

Alan never heard, or if he heard never remembered, the sound. He felt the wash of heat, and there on his back looking up he saw a rising billow of flame, flame that seemed to claw and writhe like a live thing trying to take some definite shape before the cold air pushed it up, darkened it. Then everything else went black, too.

11

He screamed out of a dream. His father held him. "Easy, son."

Alan held his father's arms. "Daddy?"

"You're all right. Everyone's all right."

"The woman — ?"

"She was Mrs. McCorry, son. No. I'm sorry."

He fell back. He was in his room, in his own bed. "I don't remember anything after the fire."

"There were two fires."

"The last one."

"You got the wind knocked out of you. We saw the doctor at the emergency room. Kept him busy. Your buddy Reese had a busted arm, Jack needed some stitches. You got a sedative. It made you sleep a long time."

"What time is it?"

"Monday morning, son. Want to see something strange?"

John Kirby rose from the bed and pulled the window shade. It spun up, revealing a world of strange, cold light. Alan couldn't register what it meant for a moment; then his eyes widened. "It snowed?"

"Three inches. Earliest snow we've ever had in north Georgia, they say. A white Halloween, almost."

Alan sat up. He ached. The fairy-white hill fell away down to a town made magic by the white touch of winter. It looked clean, fresh, pure. "Miss Lewis?"

"She's back in her apartment. But she'll be by later today, son."

Alan lay back and swallowed. "Did we win?"

John Kirby took his son's hand in his own. "I don't know if there is any such thing as winning for good, Alan. But this time, here, in this place, yes, we won. It's gone."

"I think it is."

His father sat back down on the bed. "Gaither won't be the same. Not ever. The Jefferson house is gone, burned to nothing. The McCorry house partly burned. The sheriff got the little girl out, though. But there are other things — people are dead. The town has changed. It won't ever be the same again."

"No." Alan twisted in the bed. "Daddy — the room full of dead people. Did it — did it remind you of anything?"

His father nodded. "Yes. But that was a long time ago, and I think I've changed, too. I think I can handle it now. What about you?"

After a while, Alan nodded. "Yeah. I think so." He choked. "I'm gonna miss Mr. Tate."

"I know, son."

"Daddy, I love you."

"I love you, too, Alan."

And Alan lay back in the cool sheets, the pure white sunlight reflecting off the snow and pouring through the window, and thought he was done forever with darkness.

Seventeen

OCTOBER 1988 — GAITHER, GEORGIA

Alan, his eyes grainy from lack of sleep, sat stroking Long John Silver and wondering where the years had gone. Here he was past forty, writing three books a year; a little bit of a celebrity in Gaither, and known to some small extent in other places, too.

And yet at times he still felt fourteen years old. Like tonight, for instance.

He glanced at the kitchen clock: it was past four already. He explored his feelings, tentatively, as a man with a newly extracted tooth will thrust his tongue into the unfamiliar and painful hole. He still did not know whether it was all starting again or whether this was another flashback, like a half-dozen others he had suffered over the years.

The years. The hungry years. Alan thought of all that had filled them, of all they had consumed. It had seemed so short a time, so brief a space, and yet so much had happened.

The ShadowShow never reopened. People didn't even wonder very much about it; the town had been very sick that October of 1957, and a dead theater was the least of the town's worries as it fought its way back to health. The accidental death of banker Jefferson made for some gossip. Kids at school talked about Reese Donalds's broken arm, but not about how he had broken it (the story of that night was perhaps the only secret that Jack and Reese together ever successfully kept). The commitment of Mayor Warner to the state hospital for the insane in Milledgeville made for still more gossip. But somehow the really dark things slipped from memory.

Gaither recovered, reeled into the sixties, taking Alan with it. At seventeen he had gone away to college — the University of Georgia, naturally, to fulfill his father's old dream — and at first he had sat in white classrooms, surrounded by white students. He saw the turmoil when the first blacks came to the campus, was reminded of Gaither's simmering hatreds, felt sick, and befriended one or two of the new students. On visits home he saw his father and Ann Lewis, sometimes together — but never together in the way he imagined for them, wished for them. Old habits, even those of solitude, are hardest to break.

And the times they were achanging, as somebody said. As soon as Alan left college, he found himself in the Army, never mind his English major and his knack with a typewriter. Alan could never recall much of basic training, and rarely troubled about trying to recall any of the rest: a dripping jungle, an enemy too often unseen, one horrible night on patrol when he was plunged back into the nightmare of the past, as he had temporarily been tonight.

More than times were achanging, friend. When Alan returned to Gaither, in 1969, the whole town was deeply different, radically altered. It had changed more between '64 and '69, his dad said, than it had from '14 to '64. Alan, looking around him in the first year of the Nixon presidency, had to believe his father. That was the year John Kirby moved the bookshop to the new mall on the edge of town. That was the year Ludie Estes died, peacefully and surrounded by her family. Alan, Miss Lewis, and his father, the only white people in the congregation, had sat in a hot, crowded church to bid her farewell. When the service was over, a tall, thin black man with a fierce Afro and a bristling mustache came to shake hands with them: Michael Estes, trained as an educator and famous throughout the nation as an uncompromising young civil-rights advocate. He would go on to tame the Afro and lose the mustache and represent the district in the state legislature. Alan had seen him several times since then, though rarely to speak to.

The years passed, with Alan and John Kirby two bachelors in this old house, Alan beginning to write, finally selling a story to *Male*, then another to *Stag*, at last several to magazines that didn't make Ann Lewis blush when she bought them to read his stuff, and finally, in '74, his first novel. His father had pushed that book harder than any pub-

lication since the Gutenberg Bible, until Alan had complained that the only rare edition of that particular paperback would be the ones without his autograph in them.

There were two more novels in the next two years. And then, just as Alan was beginning to get serious about Janet Brown — Diane England, after trouble with her family, had left town years before, never even having finished high school — his father complained one evening of chest and arm pains. It was only a mild attack, the doctors said, and they sent him back home in a few weeks.

It was on June 18, 1976, that John and Alan sat together in the swing on the front porch, looking across the street at the house Betty and Frank Lessup had vacated for good in '70, when Alan's grandmother Bolton down in Florida had died. John Kirby had said, "I think maybe tomorrow I'll go back to work," and had rested his chin on his chest. It took Alan a minute to realize what had happened. The paramedics told Alan it had probably been painless.

In the weeks following, Alan learned a few things about his father that he had not known. Since 1957, for instance, his father had kept a very small savings account in the Trust Bank. Even in 1976, even after nine years of collecting interest, it amounted to only a bit over one hundred dollars. It puzzled Alan for some time, until he remembered how old Mrs. Hudson, Preacher Tate's landlady, had given his father a little cash that Tate had kept in his room. John Kirby had settled the rent bill and had banked the cash, and here it still waited for Mr. Tate's wife, should she ever turn up. Knowing she never would, Alan gave the money to charity.

Alan sold his father's bookshop to a national chain. He had by that time had three or four flashbacks, and the shop for some reason — even though he consciously knew it was a different shop — seemed to stir them up. He and Janet were married in December of 1976. Everyone in town was impressed when Reese Donalds, in the popular mind the best sheriff the county had had in years — Sam Quarles had resigned in '60, and he and his wife Ilona had moved away — provided the honeymoon-bound newlyweds with a police escort out of the county.

Ann Lewis never married. She still taught fourth grade, though now at the Greater Consolidated School that had replaced the old brick building in '80, and despite the fading of her blond hair

toward white she still held a fragile look of loveliness, like fine porcelain touched lightly by the fingers of the years. Whenever it got bad, one of them would call, as he had earlier that night, just to reaffirm the ancient pledge of love she, Alan, and the lost Odum Tate had exchanged in the Gaither Elementary School all those years ago.

Ironically, one of her more troublesome pupils, Jack Harwell, was now a teaching colleague of hers. Jack had been named the district Star Teacher two times, and he had made science about the most popular course in the new high school. He was popular himself, and at parties he could still be induced, after a certain number of drinks (Frye County had voted itself wet back in '75), to render his impressions of Bogart or Fields or Cagney — and today even of Nicholson, Pacino, and Cruise.

Other faces, other names. A fellow named Tom Davies, a regional stringer for Newsweek, or was it Time, had photographed him once for a review of his first hardcover novel, a horror tale. Davies had casually mentioned that he himself came from Gaither and had gone on to add that he had gotten out at the right time. Alan pretended not to know what the photographer meant, although he had a strong feeling that he did know. Little Lee McCorry, the only surviving member of Andy's family, had been brought up by her grandparents and was today Lee Patterson, who edited the family section of the Gaither Daily Advocate, which fat Jimmy Jenkins, well past the age of retirement and seemingly possessed of a magic formula to ward off coronaries, still ran with profane energy.

The buildings downtown had changed. The Square was different, the home now of second-rate shoe stores, bargain shops, even the Salvation Army used-clothing store. Only the five-and-dime, Ledford's Pharmacy, and the Trust Bank remained in the same locations. The ShadowShow, a great empty echoing barn of a structure, stood deserted until the furniture store bought it from the Hesketh family, to whom it had returned when Mr. Badon disappeared. Now it was only a warehouse, stacked with sofas, tables, chairs made in Hong Kong. No one had ever acquired the land where the Jefferson house had stood: it was a jungle, now, overgrown with blackberry bushes, sumac, pine trees tall enough for a boy to climb. The hole where the foundation had been held dark water all year

round except in very dry years, and boys frightened each other with tales about it and the things that lurked beneath the surface of the pool.

And Alan occupied his father's house, and his own family slept in its rooms. Long John awoke, stretched, yawned, and leaped from Alan's lap to swagger over to the food dish and cast an accusing glance over his left shoulder when he found it empty.

The telephone rang. It was 4:27 in the morning. Alan picked up the receiver. "Hello."

Her voice came to him over distance, across years: "Did you have one tonight?"

"Yes," he said. "Not too bad this time. You think it will pass?"

"Uh-huh." Her voice was ragged with cigarettes or whiskey. "Damn, I wish it'd stop."

A long uneasy silence. Then Alan: "Diane, are you still in California?"

"Long Beach. You're still in your little crumby house on the hill."

"Yeah."

"Well. I don't guess he's gonna get us tonight, huh?"

"I guess not."

"Better go. Got a long time ahead of me. Lotta tricks to turn before sunup."

"Diane."

"Yeah?"

"Nothing."

"I guess we had that conversation already, huh?"

"I guess we did."

She sighed. "I never got over it, you know? People are such scum. And I never knew it until he did that thing to us in the movies. And he was right. God, he was right. You should see the freaks — " She broke off.

"I'd like to see you again," Alan said.

The line scratched, dead air. "Sure," she said, her voice mocking. "Just one of the freaks myself now, kid. You wouldn't know me if you saw me. And you'd be lucky at that. Hey, I gotta go. I hope he didn't shake you up too bad tonight."

"He didn't."

"Wonder when he'll get us?"

And she was off the line. Alan got up, replaced the receiver. Diane's call had been a sort of signal: the danger was past, the beast was still dead, the virgin still foolish. Alan went to look in on his children: first his daughter, asleep in his own old room, then his son, sleeping in the room from which Alan had taken the binoculars to spy out the mar-quee so many sorrows ago. In the doorway, Alan wondered about the past and the future: wondered at the fate that had kept him here and had spun Diane off into her own orbit, lost beyond hope of return.

"I hope it doesn't come again, son," Alan said. "Not in my lifetime. Not in yours."

For he had always known that it wasn't finally dead, the thing that had called itself Athaniel Badon. Perhaps it couldn't die. Perhaps it was only in the bottomless pit, waiting to get out, waiting to offer others the intoxicating drink of freedom, the drug of violence, the wine of eternal servitude.

But not tonight, and not in this house. Weary to his marrow, Alan Kirby went to his own bedroom, undressed, and slipped into bed next to his warm wife. She murmured something sleepy and put an arm across his chest. He lay still, thought of the mysterious paths of time and the tortured ways of love, and drifted at last into sleep, deep because he was exhausted, pleasant because it was unvisited by any dream.

Biography

Brad Strickland

Brad Strickland has written and co-written 41 novels, many of them for younger readers. He is the author of the fantasy trilogy *Moon Dreams*, *Nul's Quest* and *Wizard's Mole* and of the popular horror novel *Shadowshow*. With his wife Barbara, he has written for the *Star Trek* Young Adult book series, for Nickelodeon's *Are You Afraid of the Dark?* book series, and for *Sabrina, the Teenage Witch* (Pocket Books). Both solo and with Thomas E. Fuller, he has written several books about *Wishbone*, Public TV's literature-loving dog. When he's not writing, he teaches English at Gainesville College in Gainesville, Georgia. He and Barbara have two children, Amy and Jonathan, and a daughter-in-law, Rebecca. They live and work in Oakwood, Georgia.

