

STEPHEN KING

11/22/63

A NOVEL

U. S. Weather
Cloudy, with
...
Temp range 52

EXTRA

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 23, 1963

TEN CENTS

JFK SLAIN IN DALLAS, LBJ TAKES OATH

First Lady Emerges
Unharméd; Shooter
Charged as Killer

by MAX H. LITTELL



President and Mrs. John F. Kennedy smile at the crowds lining their motorcade route in Dallas, Texas, on November 22, 1963.

DALLAS, Nov. 22—President John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the 35th President of the United States, was shot and killed by a gunman today while riding in a motorcade in downtown Dallas. He was shot at 12:30 P.M. and pronounced dead at 1:00 P.M. Central Standard Time at Parkland Hospital where he was taken. Mr. Kennedy died of severe brain trauma caused by a bullet fired from the assassin's rifle. He was 46 years old.

Vice President Lyndon Baines Johnson, who was also traveling in the motorcade, was sworn in as the 36th President of the United States, one hour and thirty-nine minutes after Mr. Kennedy's death. Mr. Johnson is 55.

The alleged assassin Lee Harvey Oswald, 24 of Dallas, was arrested by the Dallas police and charged with the crime this evening. He has also been charged with the murder of a Dallas policeman who approached him. Mr. Oswald was apprehended after a second altercation with a policeman in a nearby theater. A former Marine, Lee Harvey Oswald once defected to the Soviet Union. He has since been active in the Fair Play for Cuba Committee.



EVENING EDITION

U. S. Weather Bureau Report (Page 175) Overseas
Clarity, steady breeze at times moderate and
strong. Cold weather.
Temp range: 52-65, tomorrow: 50-72

Daily News EXTRA

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 23, 1963

TEN CENTS

JFK ESCAPES ASSASSINATION, FIRST LADY ALSO OK!

Panic Strikes
During Drive
Through Dallas
STORY PAGE 3



John Kennedy walking with wife, Jacqueline, on November 22, 1963.

AMERICANS BREATHE SIGH OF RELIEF



by PHILIP SCUDDER

DALLAS (Special) Rarely has this city seen a day in which emotions have swung so wildly. From the joy of Kennedy supporters and admirers of the First Lady when Air Force One landed at Love Field, to the cacophonous approval of the thousands who lined Main Street to see the motorcade pass, to the confusion, panic, and terror when the shots rang out, and finally to the unbridled joy that

audible prayer, some of them weeping, "When I think of what might have happened," said City Councilman Louis Sweetwater, "my blood runs cold. If Kennedy had been wounded—or, God forbid, killed—on the streets of Dallas, this city would have borne a black mark of shame forever."

As the sun went down, at the intersection of Elm and the

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**S T E P H E N
K I N G**

11/22/63

A NOVEL

SCRIBNER

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

Hey, honey, welcome to the party.

It is virtually not assimilable to our reason that a small lonely man felled a giant in the midst of his
limousines, his legions, his throng, and his security. If such a nonentity destroyed the leader of the most
powerful nation on earth, then a world of disproportion engulfs us, and we live in a universe that is absurd.

—Norman Mailer

If there is love, smallpox scars are as pretty as dimples.

—Japanese proverb

Dancing is life.

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About Stephen King

11/22/63



I have never been what you'd call a crying man.

~~My ex-wife said that my “nonexistent emotional gradient” was the main reason she was leaving me~~ (as the guy she met in her AA meetings was beside the point). Christy said she supposed she could forgive me for not crying at her father's funeral; I had only known him for six years and couldn't understand what a wonderful, giving man he had been (a Mustang convertible as a high school graduation present, for instance). But then, when I didn't cry at my own parents' funerals—they died just two years apart, Dad of stomach cancer and Mom of a thunderclap heart attack while walking on a Florida beach—she began to understand the nonexistent gradient thing. I was “unable to feel my feelings,” in AA-speak.

“I have *never* seen you shed tears,” she said, speaking in the flat tones people use when they are expressing the absolute final deal-breaker in a relationship. “Even when you told me I had to go to rehab or you were leaving.” This conversation happened about six weeks before she packed her things, drove them across town, and moved in with Mel Thompson. “Boy meets girl on the AA campus”—that's another saying they have in those meetings.

I didn't cry when I saw her off. I didn't cry when I went back inside the little house with the great big mortgage, either. The house where no baby had come, or now ever would. I just lay down on the bed that now belonged to me alone, and put my arm over my eyes, and mourned.

Tearlessly.

But I'm not emotionally blocked. Christy was wrong about that. One day when I was nine, my mother met me at the door when I came home from school. She told me my collie, Rags, had been struck and killed by a truck that hadn't even bothered to stop. I didn't cry when we buried him, although my dad told me nobody would think less of me if I did, but I cried when she told me. Partly because it was my first experience of death; mostly because it had been my responsibility to make sure he was safely penned up in our backyard.

And I cried when Mom's doctor called me and told me what had happened that day on the beach. “I'm sorry, but there was no chance,” he said. “Sometimes it's very sudden, and doctors tend to see that as a blessing.”

Christy wasn't there—she had to stay late at school that day and meet with a mother who had questions about her son's last report card—but I cried, all right. I went into our little laundry room and took a dirty sheet out of the basket and cried into that. Not for long, but the tears came. I could have told her about them later, but I didn't see the point, partly because she would have thought I was pity-fishing (that's not an AA term, but maybe it should be), and partly because I don't think the ability to bust out bawling pretty much on cue should be a requirement for successful marriage.

I never saw my dad cry at all, now that I think about it; at his most emotional, he might fetch a heavy sigh or grunt out a few reluctant chuckles—no breast-beating or belly-laugh for William Epping. He was the strong silent type, and for the most part, my mother was the same. So maybe the not-crying-easily thing is genetic. But blocked? Unable to feel my feelings? No, I have never been those things.

Other than when I got the news about Mom, I can only remember one other time when I cried as an adult, and that was when I read the story of the janitor's father. I was sitting alone in the teachers' room at Lisbon High School, working my way through a stack of themes that my Adult English class had written. Down the hall I could hear the thud of basketballs, the blare of the time-out horn, and the shouts of the crowd as the sports-beasts fought: Lisbon Greyhounds versus Jay Tigers.

Who can know when life hangs in the balance, or why?

The subject I'd assigned was “The Day That Changed My Life.” Most of the responses were heartfelt but awful: sentimental tales of a kindly aunt who'd taken in a pregnant teenager, an Army buddy who had demonstrated the true meaning of bravery, a chance meeting with a celebrity (*Jeopardy!* host Alex Trebek).

I think it was, but maybe it was Karl Malden). The teachers among you who have picked up an extra three or four thousand a year by taking on a class of adults studying for their General Equivalency Diploma will know what a dispiriting job reading such themes can be. The grading process hardly figures into it, or at least it didn't for me; I passed everybody, because I never had an adult student who did less than try his or her ass off. If you turned in a paper with writing on it, you were guaranteed a hook from Jake Epping in the LHS English Department, and if the writing was organized into actual paragraphs, you got at least a B-minus.

What made the job hard was that the red pen became my primary teaching tool instead of my mouth, and I practically wore it out. What made the job dispiriting was that you knew that very little of that red pen teaching was apt to stick; if you reach the age of twenty-five or thirty without knowing how to spell (*totally*, not *todilly*), or capitalize in the proper places (*White House*, not *white-house*), or write a sentence containing both a noun *and* a verb, you're probably never going to know. Yet we soldier on, gamely circling the misused word in sentences like *My husband was to quick to judge me* or crossing out *swum* and replacing it with *swam* in the sentence *I swum out to the float often after that*.

It was such hopeless, trudging work I was doing that night, while not far away another high school basketball game wound down toward another final buzzer, world without end, amen. It was not long after Christy got out of rehab, and I suppose if I was thinking anything, it was to hope that I'd come home and find her sober (which I did; she's held onto her sobriety better than she held onto her husband). I remember I had a little headache and was rubbing my temples the way you do when you're trying to keep a little nagger from turning into a big thumper. I remember thinking, *Three more of these, just three, and I can get out of here. I can go home, fix myself a big cup of instant cocoa, and dive into the new John Irving novel without these sincere but poorly made things hanging over my head*.

There were no violins or warning bells when I pulled the janitor's theme off the top of the stack and set it before me, no sense that my little life was about to change. But we never know, do we? Life turns on a dime.

He had written in cheap ballpoint ink that had blotted the five pages in many places. His handwriting was a looping but legible scrawl, and he must have been bearing down hard, because the words were actually engraved into the cheap notebook pages; if I'd closed my eyes and run my fingertips over the backs of those torn-out sheets, it would have been like reading Braille. There was a little squiggle, like a flourish, at the end of every lower-case *y*. I remember that with particular clarity.

I remember how his theme started, too. I remember it word for word.

It wasn't a day but a night. The night that change my life was the night my father murdirt my mother and two brothers and hurt me bad. He hurt my sister too, so bad she went into a comah. In three years she died without wakin' up. Her name was Ellen and I loved her very much. She love to pick flouers and put them in vayses.

Halfway down the first page, my eyes began to sting and I put my trusty red pen down. It was when I got to the part about him crawling under the bed with the blood running in his eyes (*it also run down his throat and tasted horrible*) that I began to cry—Christy would have been so proud. I read all the way to the end without making a single mark, wiping my eyes so the tears wouldn't fall on the pages that had obviously cost him so much effort. Had I thought he was slower than the rest, maybe only half a step above what used to be called "educable retarded"? Well, by God, there was a reason for that, wasn't there? And a reason for the limp, too. It was a miracle that he was alive at all. But he was. A nice man who always had a smile and never raised his voice to the kids. A nice man who had been through hell and was working—humbly and hopefully, as most of them do—to get a high school diploma. Although he would be a janitor for the rest of his life, just a guy in green or brown khakis, either pushing a broom or scraping gum up off the floor with the putty knife he always kept in his back pocket. Maybe once he could have been

something different, but one night his life turned on a dime and now he was just a guy in Carhartts that the kids called Hoptoad Harry because of the way he walked.

So I cried. Those were real tears, the kind that come from deep inside. Down the hall, I could hear the Lisbon band strike up their victory song—so the home team had won, and good for them. Later, perhaps Harry and a couple of his colleagues would roll up the bleachers and sweep away the crap that had been dropped beneath them.

I stroked a big red A on top of his paper. Looked at it for a moment or two, then added a big red B. Because it was good, and because his pain had evoked an emotional reaction in me, his reader. And isn't that what A+ writing is supposed to do? Evoke a response?

As for me, I only wish the former Christy Epping had been correct. I wish I had been emotional, not blocked, after all. Because everything that followed—every terrible thing—flowed from those tears.

WATERSHED MOMENT



Harry Dunning graduated with flying colors. I went to the little GED ceremony in the LHS gym, at his invitation. He really had no one else, and I was happy to do it.

After the benediction (spoken by Father Bandy, who rarely missed an LHS function), I made my way through the milling friends and relatives to where Harry was standing alone in his billowy black gown, holding his diploma in one hand and his rented mortarboard in the other. I took his hat so I could shake his hand. He grinned, exposing a set of teeth with many gaps and several leaners. But a sunny and engaging grin, for all that.

“Thanks for coming, Mr. Epping. Thanks so much.”

“It was my pleasure. And you can call me Jake. It’s a little perk I accord to students who are old enough to be my father.”

He looked puzzled for a minute, then laughed. “I guess I am, ain’t I? Sheesh!” I laughed, too. Lots of people were laughing all around us. And there were tears, of course. What’s hard for me comes easily to great many people.

“And that A-plus! Sheesh! I never got an A-plus in my whole life! Never expected one, either!”

“You deserved it, Harry. So what’s the first thing you’re going to do as a high school graduate?”

His smile dimmed for a second—this was a prospect he hadn’t considered. “I guess I’ll go back home. I got a little house I rent on Goddard Street, you know.” He raised the diploma, holding it carefully by the fingertips, as if the ink might smear. “I’ll frame this and hang it on the wall. Then I guess I’ll pour myself a glass of wine and sit on the couch and just admire it until bedtime.”

“Sounds like a plan,” I said, “but would you like to have a burger and some fries with me first? We could go down to Al’s.”

I expected a wince at that, but of course I was judging Harry by my colleagues. Not to mention most of the kids we taught; they avoided Al’s like the plague and tended to patronize either the Dairy Queen across from the school or the Hi-Hat out on 196, near where the old Lisbon Drive-In used to be.

“That’d be great, Mr. Epping. Thanks!”

“Jake, remember?”

“Jake, you bet.”

So I took Harry to Al’s, where I was the only faculty regular, and although he actually had a waitress that summer, Al served us himself. As usual, a cigarette (illegal in public eating establishments, but that never stopped Al) smoldered in one corner of his mouth and the eye on that side squinted against the smoke. When he saw the folded-up graduation robe and realized what the occasion was, he insisted on picking up the check (what check there was; the meals at Al’s were always remarkably cheap, which had given rise to rumors about the fate of certain stray animals in the vicinity). He also took a picture of us, which he later hung on what he called the Town Wall of Celebrity. Other “celebrities” represented included the late Albert Dunton, founder of Dunton Jewelry; Earl Higgins, a former LHS principal; John Crafts, founder of John Crafts Auto Sales; and, of course, Father Bandy of St. Cyril’s. (The Father was paired with Pope John XXIII—the latter not local, but revered by Al Templeton, who called himself a good Catlick.) The picture Al took that day showed Harry Dunning with a big smile on his face. I was standing next to him, and we were both holding his diploma. His tie was pulled slightly askew. I remember that because it made me think of those little squiggles he put on the ends of his lower-case y

Two years later, on the last day of the school year, I was sitting in that very same teachers' room and reading my way through a batch of final essays my American Poetry honors seminar had written. The kids themselves had already left, turned loose for another summer, and soon I would do the same. But for the time being I was happy enough where I was, enjoying the unaccustomed quiet. I thought I might even clean out the snack cupboard before I left. *Someone* ought to do it, I thought.

Earlier that day, Harry Dunning had limped up to me after homeroom period (which had been particularly screechy, as all homerooms and study halls tend to be on the last day of school) and offered me his hand.

"I just want to thank you for everything," he said.

I grinned. "You already did that, as I remember."

"Yeah, but this is my last day. I'm retiring. So I wanted to make sure and thank you again."

As I shook his hand, a kid cruising by—no more than a sophomore, judging by the fresh crop of pimples and the serio-comic straggle on his chin that aspired to goateehood—muttered, "Hoptoad Harry, hopped down the av-a-new."

I grabbed for him, my intention to make him apologize, but Harry stopped me. His smile was easy and unoffended. "Nah, don't bother. I'm used to it. They're just kids."

"That's right," I said. "And it's our job to teach them."

"I know, and you're good at it. But it's not my job to be anybody's whatchacallit—teachable moment. Especially not today. I hope you'll take care of yourself, Mr. Epping." He might be old enough to be my father, but *Jake* was apparently always going to be beyond him.

"You too, Harry."

"I'll never forget that A-plus. I framed that, too. Got it right up beside my diploma."

"Good for you."

And it was. It was all good. His essay had been primitive art, but every bit as powerful and true as any painting by Grandma Moses. It was certainly better than the stuff I was currently reading. The spelling in the honors essays was mostly correct, and the diction was clear (although my cautious college-bound don't-take-a-chancers had an irritating tendency to fall back on the passive voice), but the writing was pallid. Boring. My honors kids were juniors—Mac Steadman, the department head, awarded the seniors himself—but they wrote like little old men and little old ladies, all purse-mouthed and *ooo, don't slip on that icy patch, Mildred*. In spite of his grammatical lapses and painstaking cursive, Harry Dunning had written like a hero. On one occasion, at least.

As I was musing on the difference between offensive and defensive writing, the intercom on the wall cleared its throat. "Is Mr. Epping in the west wing teachers' room? You by any chance still there, Jake?"

I got up, thumbed the button, and said: "Still here, Gloria. For my sins. Can I help you?"

"You have a phone call. Guy named Al Templeton? I can transfer it, if you want. Or I can tell him you're left for the day."

Al Templeton, owner and operator of Al's Diner, where all LHS faculty save for yours truly refused to go. Even my esteemed department head—who tried to talk like a Cambridge don and was approaching retirement age himself—had been known to refer to the specialty of the house as Al's Famous Catburg instead of Al's Famous Fatburger.

Well of course it's not really cat, people would say, or probably not cat, but it can't be beef, not at a dolla

“Jake? Did you fall asleep on me?”

“Nope, wide awake.” Also curious as to why Al would call me at school. Why he’d call me at all, for that matter. Ours had always been strictly a cook-and-client relationship. I appreciated his chow, and I appreciated my patronage. “Go on and put him through.”

“Why are you still here, anyway?”

“I’m flagellating myself.”

“Ooo!” Gloria said, and I could imagine her fluttering her long lashes. “I love it when you talk dirt. Hold on and wait for the ringy-dingy.”

She clicked off. The extension rang and I picked it up.

“Jake? You on there, buddy?”

At first I thought Gloria must have gotten the name wrong. That voice couldn’t belong to Al. Not even the world’s worst cold could have produced such a croak.

“Who is this?”

“Al Templeton, didn’t she tellya? Christ, that hold music really sucks. Whatever happened to Connor Francis?” He began to ratchet coughs loud enough to make me hold the phone away from my ear a little.

“You sound like you got the flu.”

He laughed. He also kept coughing. The combination was fairly gruesome. “I got something, all right.”

“It must have hit you fast.” I had been in just yesterday, to grab an early supper. A Fatburger, fries, and a strawberry milkshake. I believe it’s important for a guy living on his own to hit all the major food groups.

“You could say that. Or you could say it took awhile. Either one would be right.”

I didn’t know how to respond to that. I’d had a lot of conversations with Al in the six or seven years I’d been going to the diner, and he could be odd—insisted on referring to the New England Patriots as the Boston Patriots, for instance, and talked about Ted Williams as if he’d known him like a brudda—but I’d never had a conversation as weird as this.

“Jake, I need to see you. It’s important.”

“Can I ask—”

“I expect you to ask plenty, and I’ll answer, but not over the phone.”

I didn’t know how many answers he’d be able to give before his voice gave out, but I promised I’d come down in an hour or so.

“Thanks. Make it even sooner, if you can. Time is, as they say, of the essence.” And he hung up, just like that, without even a goodbye.

I worked my way through two more of the honors essays, and there were only four more in the stack, but it was no good. I’d lost my groove. So I swept the stack into my briefcase and left. It crossed my mind to go upstairs to the office and wish Gloria a good summer, but I didn’t bother. She’d be in all next week closing the books on another school year, and I was going to come in on Monday and clean out the snack cupboard—that was a promise I’d made to myself. Otherwise the teachers who used the west wing teachers’ room during summer session would find it crawling with bugs.

If I’d known what the future held for me, I certainly would have gone up to see her. I might even have given her the kiss that had been flirting in the air between us for the last couple of months. But of course I didn’t know. Life turns on a dime.

Al's Diner was housed in a silver trailer across the tracks from Main Street, in the shadow of the old Worumbo mill. ~~Places like that can look tacky, but Al had disguised the concrete blocks upon which his~~ establishment stood with pretty beds of flowers. There was even a neat square of lawn, which he barbered himself with an old push-type lawn mower. The lawn mower was as well tended as the flowers and the lawn; not a speck of rust on the whirring, brightly painted blades. It might have been purchased at the local Western Auto store the week before . . . if there had still been a Western Auto in The Falls, that was. There was once, but it fell victim to the big-box stores back around the turn of the century.

I went up the paved walk, up the steps, then paused, frowning. The sign reading WELCOME TO AL'S DINER, HOME OF THE FATBURGER! was gone. In its place was a square of cardboard reading CLOSED & WILL NOT REOPEN DUE TO ILLNESS. THANK YOU FOR YOUR BUSINESS OVER THE YEARS & GOD BLESS.

I had not yet entered the fog of unreality that would soon swallow me, but the first tendrils were seeping around me, and I felt them. It wasn't a summer cold that had caused the hoarseness I'd heard in Al's voice, nor the croaking cough. Not the flu, either. Judging by the sign, it was something more serious. But what kind of serious illness came on in a mere twenty-four hours? Less than that, really. It was two-thirty. I had left Al's last night at five forty-five, and he'd been fine. Almost manic, in fact. I remembered asking him if he'd been drinking too much of his own coffee, and he said no, he was just thinking about taking a vacation. Do people who are getting sick—sick enough to close the business they've run single-handed for over twenty years—talk about taking vacations? Some, maybe, but probably not many.

The door opened while I was still reaching for the handle, and Al stood there looking at me, not smiling. I looked back, feeling that fog of unreality thicken around me. The day was warm but the fog was cold. At that point I still could have turned and walked out of it, back into the June sunshine, and part of me wanted to do that. Mostly, though, I was frozen by wonder and dismay. Also horror, I might as well admit it. Because serious illness *does* horrify us, doesn't it, and Al was seriously ill. I could see that in a single glance. And *mortally* was probably more like it.

It wasn't just that his normally ruddy cheeks had gone slack and sallow. It wasn't the rheum that coated his blue eyes, which now looked washed-out and nearsightedly peering. It wasn't even his hair, formerly almost all black, and now almost all white—after all, he might have been using one of those vanity products and decided on the spur of the moment to shampoo it out and go natural.

The impossible part was that in the twenty-two hours since I'd last seen him, Al Templeton appeared to have lost at least thirty pounds. Maybe even forty, which would have been a quarter of his previous body weight. Nobody loses thirty or forty pounds in less than a day, *nobody*. But I was looking at it. And this, I think, is where that fog of unreality swallowed me whole.

Al smiled, and I saw he had lost teeth as well as weight. His gums looked pale and unhealthy. "How do you like the new me, Jake?" And he began to cough, thick chattering sounds that came from deep inside him.

I opened my mouth. No words came out. The idea of flight again came to some craven, disgusted part of my mind, but even if that part had been in control, I couldn't have done it. I was rooted to the spot.

Al got the coughing under control and pulled a handkerchief from his back pocket. He wiped first his mouth and then the palm of his hand with it. Before he put it back, I saw it was streaked with red.

"Come in," he said. "I've got a lot to talk about, and I think you're the only one who might listen. Will you listen?"

"Al," I said. My voice was so low and strengthless I could hardly hear it myself. "What's happened to you?"

“Will you listen?”

“Of course.”

“You’ll have questions, and I’ll answer as many as I can, but try to keep them to a minimum. I don’t have much voice left. Hell, I don’t have much *strength* left. Come on in here.”

I came in. The diner was dark and cool and empty. The counter was polished and crumbless; the chrome on the stools gleamed; the coffee urn was polished to a high gloss; the sign reading IF YOU DON’T LIKE OUR TOWN, LOOK FOR A TIMETABLE was in its accustomed place by the Sweda register. The only thing missing was the customers.

Well, and the cook-proprietor, of course. Al Templeton had been replaced by an elderly, ailing ghost. When he turned the door’s thumb-latch, locking us in, the sound was very loud.

4

“Lung cancer,” he said matter-of-factly, after leading us to a booth at the far end of the diner. He tapped the pocket of his shirt, and I saw it was empty. The ever-present pack of Camel straights was gone. “No big surprise. I started when I was eleven, and smoked right up to the day I got the diagnosis. Over fifty damn years. Three packs a day until the price went way up in ’07. Then I made a sacrifice and cut back to two a day.” He laughed wheezily.

I thought of telling him that his math had to be wrong, because I knew his actual age. When I’d come in one day in the late winter and asked him why he was working the grill with a kid’s birthday hat on, he said *Because today I’m fifty-seven, buddy. Which makes me an official Heinz.* But he’d asked me not to ask questions unless I absolutely had to, and I assumed the request included not butting in to make corrections.

“If I were you—and I wish I was, although I’d never wish being me on you, not in my current situation—I’d be thinking, ‘Something’s screwy here, nobody gets advanced lung cancer overnight.’ Is that about right?”

I nodded. That was exactly right.

“The answer is simple enough. It wasn’t overnight. I started coughing my brains out about seven months ago, back in May.”

This was news to me; if he’d been doing any coughing, it hadn’t been while I was around. Also, he wasn’t doing that bad-math thing again. “Al, hello? It’s June. Seven months ago it was December.”

He waved a hand at me—the fingers thin, his Marine Corps ring hanging on a digit that used to clasp cozily—as if to say *Pass that by for now, just pass it.*

“At first I thought I just had a bad cold. But there was no fever, and instead of going away, the cough got worse. Then I started losing weight. Well, I ain’t stupid, buddy, and I always knew the big C might be in the cards for me . . . although my father and mother smoked like goddam chimneys and lived into the eighties. I guess we always find excuses to keep on with our bad habits, don’t we?”

He started coughing again, and pulled out the handkerchief. When the hacking subsided, he said: “I can’t get off on a sidetrack, but I’ve been doing it my whole life and it’s hard to stop. Harder than stopping with the cigarettes, actually. Next time I start wandering off-course, just kind of saw a finger across your throat, would you?”

“Okay,” I said, agreeably enough. It had occurred to me by then that I was dreaming all of this. If so, it was an extremely vivid dream, right down to the shadows thrown by the revolving ceiling fan, marching across the place mats reading OUR MOST VALUABLE ASSET IS YOU!

“Long story short, I went to a doctor and got an X-ray, and there they were, big as billy-be-damned

Two tumors. Advanced necrosis. Inoperable.”

~~An X-ray, I thought—did they still use those to diagnose cancer?~~

“I hung in for awhile, but in the end I had to come back.”

“From where? Lewiston? Central Maine General?”

“From my vacation.” His eyes looked fixedly at me from the dark hollows into which they were disappearing. “Except it was no vacation.”

“Al, none of this makes any sense to me. Yesterday you were here and you were *fine*.”

“Take a good close look at my face. Start with my hair and work your way down. Try to ignore what the cancer’s doing to me—it plays hell with a person’s looks, no doubt about that—and then tell me I’m the same man you saw yesterday.”

“Well, you obviously washed the dye out—”

“Never used any. I won’t bother directing your attention to the teeth I lost while I was . . . away. I know you saw those. You think an X-ray machine did that? Or strontium-90 in the milk? I don’t even *drink* milk, except for a splash in my last cup of coffee of the day.”

“Strontium *what*?”

“Never mind. Get in touch with your, you know, feminine side. Look at me the way women look at other women when they’re judging age.”

I tried to do what he said, and while what I observed would never have stood up in court, it convinced me. There were webworks of lines spraying out from the corners of his eyes, and the lids had the tiny, delicately ruffled wrinkles you see on people who no longer have to flash their Senior Discount Cards when they step up to the multiplex box office. Skin-grooves that hadn’t been there yesterday evening now made sine-waves across Al’s brow. Two more lines—much deeper ones—bracketed his mouth. His chin was sharper, and the skin on his neck had grown loose. The sharp chin and wattled throat could have been caused by Al’s catastrophic weight loss, but those lines . . . and if he wasn’t lying about his hair . . .

He was smiling a little. It was a grim smile, but not without actual humor. Which somehow made it worse. “Remember my birthday last March? ‘Don’t worry, Al,’ you said, ‘if that stupid party hat catches on fire while you’re hanging over the grill, I’ll grab the fire extinguisher and put you out.’ Remember that?”

I did. “You said you were an official Heinz.”

“So I did. And now I’m sixty-two. I know the cancer makes me look even older, but these . . . and these . . .” He touched his forehead, then the corner of one eye. “These are authentic age-tattoos. Badges of honor in a way.”

“Al . . . can I have a glass of water?”

“Of course. Shock, isn’t it?” He looked at me sympathetically. “You’re thinking, ‘Either I’m crazy, he’s crazy, or we both are.’ I know. I’ve been there.”

He levered himself out of the booth with an effort, his right hand going up beneath his left armpit, as if he were trying to hold himself together, somehow. Then he led me around the counter. As he did so, I put my finger on another element of this unreal encounter: except for the occasions when I shared a pew with him at St. Cyril’s (these were rare; although I was raised in the faith, I’m not much of a Catlick) I happened to meet him on the street, I’d never seen Al out of his cook’s apron.

He took a sparkling glass down and drew me a glass of water from a sparkling chrome-plated tap. I thanked him and turned to go back to the booth, but he tapped me on the shoulder. I wish he hadn’t done that. It was like being tapped by Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner, who stoppeth one of three.

“I want you to see something before we sit down again. It’ll be quicker that way. Only *seeing* isn’t the right word. I guess *experiencing* is a lot closer. Drink up, buddy.”

I drank half the water. It was cool and good, but I never took my eye off him. That craven part of me

was expecting to be jumped, like the first unwitting victim in one of those maniac-on-the-loose movies that always seem to have numbers in their titles. But Al only stood there with one hand propped on the counter. The hand was wrinkled, the knuckles big. It didn't look like the hand of a man in his fifties, even one with cancer, and—

“Did the radiation do that?” I asked suddenly.

“Do what?”

“You have a *tan*. Not to mention those dark spots on the backs of your hands. You get those either from radiation or too much sun.”

“Well, since I haven't had any radiation treatments, that leaves the sun. I've gotten quite a lot of it over the last four years.”

So far as I knew, Al had spent most of the last four years flipping burgers and making milkshakes under fluorescent lights, but I didn't say so. I just drank the rest of my water. When I set the glass down on the Formica counter, I noticed my hand was shaking slightly.

“Okay, what is it you want me to see? Or to experience?”

“Come this way.”

He led me down the long, narrow galley area, past the double grill, the Fry-O-Lators, the sink, the FrostKing fridge, and the humming waist-high freezer. He stopped in front of the silent dishwasher and pointed to the door at the far end of the kitchen. It was low; Al would have to duck his head going through it, and he was only five-seven or so. I'm six-four—some of the kids called me Helicopter Epping.

“That's it,” he said. “Through that door.”

“Isn't that your pantry?” Strictly a rhetorical question; I'd seen him bring out enough cans, sacks of potatoes, and bags of dry goods over the years to know damn well what it was.

Al seemed not to have heard. “Did you know I originally opened this joint in Auburn?”

“No.”

He nodded, and just that was enough to kick off another bout of coughing. He stifled it with the increasingly gruesome handkerchief. When the latest fit finally tapered off, he tossed the handkerchief into a handy trash can, then grabbed a swatch of napkins from a dispenser on the counter.

“It's an Aluminaire, made in the thirties and as art deco as they come. Wanted one ever since my dad took me to the Chat 'N Chew in Bloomington, back when I was a kid. Bought it fully outfitted and opened up on Pine Street. I was at that location for almost a year, and I saw that if I stayed, I'd be bankrupt in another year. There were too many other quick-bite joints in the neighborhood, some good, some not so good, all of em with their regulars. I was like a kid fresh out of law school who hangs out by the shingle in a town that already has a dozen well-established shysters. Also, in those days Al's Famous Fatburger sold for two-fifty. Even back in 1990 two and a half was the best I could do.”

“Then how in hell do you sell it for less than half that now? Unless it really *is* cat.”

He snorted, a sound that produced a phlegmy echo of itself deep in his chest. “Buddy, what I sell is hundred percent pure American beef, the best in the world. Do I know what people say? Sure. I shrug off. What else can you do? Stop people from talking? You might as well try to stop the wind from blowing.”

I ran a finger across my throat. Al smiled.

“Yeah, gettin off on one of those sidetracks, I know, but at least this one's part of the story.”

“I could have kept beating my head against the wall on Pine Street, but Yvonne Templeton didn't raise any fools. ‘Better to run away and fight again some other day,’ she used to tell us kids. I took the last of my capital, wheedled the bank into loaning me another five grand—don't ask me how—and moved here to The Falls. Business still hasn't been great, not with the economy the way it is and not with all the

stupid talk about Al's Catburgers or Dogburgers or Skunkburgers or whatever tickles people's fancy, but turns out I'm no longer tied to the economy the way other people are. And it's all because of what's behind that pantry door. It wasn't there when I was set up in Auburn, I'd swear to that on a stack of Bibles ten feet high. It only showed up here."

"What are you talking about?"

He looked at me steadily from his watery, newly old eyes. "Talking's done for now. You need to find out for yourself. Go on, open it."

I looked at him doubtfully.

"Think of it as a dying man's last request," he said. "Go on, buddy. If you really are my buddy, that is. Open the door."

5

I'd be lying if I said my heart didn't kick into a higher gear when I turned the knob and pulled. I had no idea what I might be faced with (although I seem to remember having a brief image of dead cats, skinned and ready for the electric meat grinder), but when Al reached past my shoulder and turned on the light, what I saw was—

Well, a pantry.

It was small, and as neat as the rest of the diner. There were shelves stacked with big restaurant-size cans on both walls. At the far end of the room, where the roof curved down, were some cleaning supplies, although the broom and mop had to lie flat because that part of the cubby was no more than three feet high. The floor was the same dark gray linoleum as the floor of the diner, but rather than the faint odor of cooked meat, in here there was the scent of coffee, vegetables, and spices. There was another smell, too, faint and not so pleasant.

"Okay," I said. "It's the pantry. Neat and fully stocked. You get an A in supply management, if there's such a thing."

"What do you smell?"

"Spices, mostly. Coffee. Maybe air freshener, too, I'm not sure."

"Uh-huh, I use Glade. Because of the other smell. Are you saying you don't smell anything else?"

"Yeah, there's something. Kind of sulphury. Makes me think of burnt matches." It also made me think of the poison gas I and my family had put out after my mom's Saturday night bean suppers, but I didn't like to say so. Did cancer treatments make you fart?

"It is sulphur. Other stuff, too, none of it Chanel No. 5. It's the smell of the mill, buddy."

More craziness, but all I said (in a tone of absurd cocktail-party politeness) was, "Really?"

He smiled again, exposing those gaps where teeth had been the day before. "What you're too polite to say is that Worumbo has been closed since Hector was a pup. That in fact it mostly burned to the ground back in the late eighties, and what's standing out there now"—he jerked a thumb back over his shoulder—"is nothing but a mill outlet store. Your basic Vacationland tourist stop, like the Kennebec Fruit Company during Moxie Days. You're also thinking it's about time you grabbed your cell phone and called for the men in the white coats. That about the size of it, buddy?"

"I'm not calling anybody, because you're not crazy." I was far from sure of that. "But this is just a pantry, and it's true that Worumbo Mills and Weaving hasn't turned out a bolt of cloth in the last quarter of a century."

"You aren't going to call anybody, you're right about that, because I want you to give me your cell phone, your wallet, and all the money you have in your pockets, coins included. It ain't a robbery; you

get it all back. Will you do that?"

"How long is this going to take, Al? Because I've got some honors themes to correct before I can close up my grade book for the school year."

"It'll take as long as you want," he said, "because it'll only take two minutes. It *always* takes two minutes. Take an hour and really look around, if you want, but I wouldn't, not the first time, because it's a shock to the system. You'll see. Will you trust me on this?" Something he saw on my face tightened his lips over that reduced set of teeth. "Please. *Please*, Jake. Dying man's request."

I was sure he was crazy, but I was equally sure that he was telling the truth about his condition. His eyes seemed to have retreated deeper into their sockets in the short time we'd been talking. Also, he was exhausted. Just the two dozen steps from the booth at one end of the diner to the pantry at the other had left him swaying on his feet. And the bloody handkerchief, I reminded myself. Don't forget the bloody handkerchief.

Also . . . sometimes it's just easier to go along, don't you think? "Let go and let God," they like to say at the meetings my ex-wife goes to, but I decided this was going to be a case of let go and let Al. Up to that point, at any rate. And hey, I told myself, you have to go through more rigamarole than this just to get on an airplane these days. He isn't even asking me to put my shoes on a conveyor.

I unclipped my phone from my belt and put it on top of a canned tuna carton. I added my wallet, a little fold of paper money, a dollar fifty or so in change, and my key ring.

"Keep the keys, they don't matter."

Well, they did to me, but I kept my mouth shut.

Al reached into his pocket and brought out a sheaf of bills considerably thicker than the one I had deposited on top of the carton. He held the wad out to me. "Mad money. In case you want to buy a souvenir, or something. Go on and take it."

"Why wouldn't I use my own money for that?" I sounded quite reasonable, I thought. Just as if that crazy conversation made sense.

"Never mind that now," he said. "The experience will answer most of your questions better than I could even if I was feeling tip-top, and right now I'm on the absolute other side of the world from tip-top. Take the money."

I took the money and thumbed through it. There were ones on top and they looked okay. Then I came to a five, and that looked both okay and not okay. It said **SILVER CERTIFICATE** above Abe Lincoln's picture, and to his left there was a big blue 5. I held it up to the light.

"It ain't counterfeit, if that's what you're thinking." Al sounded wearily amused.

Maybe not—it felt as real as it looked—but there was no bleed-through image.

"If it's real, it's old," I said.

"Just put the money in your pocket, Jake."

I did.

"Are you carrying a pocket calculator? Any other electronics?"

"Nope."

"I guess you're good to go, then. Turn around so you're looking at the back of the pantry." Before I could do it, he slapped his forehead and said, "Oh God, where are my brains? I forgot the Yellow Card Man."

"The who? The what?"

"The Yellow Card Man. That's just what I call him, I don't know his real name. Here, take this." He rummaged in his pocket, then handed me a fifty-cent piece. I hadn't seen one in years. Maybe not since I was a kid.

I hefted it. "I don't think you want to give me this. It's probably valuable."

“Of course it’s valuable, it’s worth half a buck.”

~~He got coughing, and this time it shook him like a hard wind, but he waved me off when I started toward him. He leaned on the stack of cartons with my stuff on top, spat into the wad of napkins, looked winced, and then closed his fist around them. His haggard face was now running with sweat.~~

“Hot flash, or somethin like it. Damn cancer’s screwing with my thermostat along with the rest of my shit. About the Yellow Card Man. He’s a wino, and he’s harmless, but he’s not like anyone else. It’s like he *knows* something. I think it’s only a coincidence—because he happens to be plumped down not far from where you’re gonna come out—but I wanted to give you a heads-up about him.”

“Well you’re not doing a very good job,” I said. “I have no fucking idea what you’re talking about.”

“He’s gonna say, ‘I got a yellow card from the greenfront, so gimme a buck because today’s double money day.’ You got that?”

“Got it.” The shit kept getting deeper.

“And he *does* have a yellow card, tucked in the brim of his hat. Probably nothing but a taxi company card or maybe a Red & White coupon he found in the gutter, but his brains are shot on cheap wine and he seems to think it’s like Willy Wonka’s Golden Ticket. So *you* say, ‘I can’t spare a buck but here’s half a rock,’ and you give it to him. Then he may say . . .” Al raised one of his now skeletal fingers. “He *may* say something like, ‘Why are you here’ or ‘Where did you come from.’ He may even say something like ‘You’re not the same guy.’ I don’t think so, but it’s possible. There’s so much about this I don’t know. Whatever he says, just leave him there by the drying shed—which is where he’s sitting—and go out the gate. When you go he’ll probably say, ‘I *know* you could spare a buck, you cheap bastard,’ but pay no attention. Don’t look back. Cross the tracks and you’ll be at the intersection of Main and Lisbon.” He gave me an ironic smile. “After that, buddy, the world is yours.”

“Drying shed?” I thought I vaguely remembered *something* near the place where the diner now stood, and I supposed it might have been the old Worumbo drying shed, but whatever it had been, it was gone now. If there had been a window at the back of the Aluminaire’s cozy little pantry, it would have been looking out on nothing but a brick courtyard and an outerwear shop called Your Maine Snuggery. I had treated myself to a North Face parka there shortly after Christmas, and got it at a real bargain price.

“Never mind the drying shed, just remember what I told you. Now turn around again—that’s right—and take two or three steps forward. Little ones. Baby steps. Pretend you’re trying to find the top of the staircase with all the lights out—careful like that.”

I did as he asked, feeling like the world’s biggest dope. One step . . . lowering my head to keep from scraping it on the aluminum ceiling . . . two steps . . . now actually crouching a little. A few more steps and I’d have to get on my knees. That I had no intention of doing, dying man’s request or not.

“Al, this is stupid. Unless you want me to bring you a carton of fruit cocktail or some of these little jelly packets, there’s nothing I can do in h—”

That was when my foot went down, the way your foot does when you’re starting down a flight of steps. Except my foot was still firmly on the dark gray linoleum floor. I could see it.

“There you go,” Al said. The gravel had gone out of his voice, at least temporarily; the words were spoken with satisfaction. “You found it, buddy.”

But what had I found? What exactly was I experiencing? The power of suggestion seemed the most likely answer, since no matter what I felt, I could see my foot on the floor. Except . . .

You know how, on a bright day, you can close your eyes and see an afterimage of whatever you were just looking at? It was like that. When I looked at my foot, I saw it on the floor. But when I *blinked*—either a millisecond before or a millisecond after my eyes closed, I couldn’t tell which—I caught a glimpse of my foot on a step. And it wasn’t in the dim light of a sixty-watt bulb, either. It was in bright sunshine.

I froze.

~~“Go on,” Al said. “Nothing’s going to happen to you, buddy. Just go on.” He coughed harshly, then said~~
in a kind of desperate growl: *“I need you to do this.”*

So I did.

God help me, I did.

I took another step forward and went down another step. My eyes still told me I was standing on the floor in the pantry of Al's Diner, but I was standing straight and the top of my head no longer scraped the roof of the pantry. Which was of course impossible. My stomach lurched unhappily in response to my sensory confusion, and I could feel the egg salad sandwich and the piece of apple pie I'd eaten for lunch preparing to push the ejector button.

From behind me—yet a little distant, as if he were standing fifteen yards away instead of only five feet—Al said, “Close your eyes, buddy, it's easier that way.”

When I did it, the sensory confusion disappeared at once. It was like uncrossing your eyes. Or putting on the special glasses in a 3-D movie, that might be closer. I moved my right foot and went down another step. It *was* steps; with my vision shut off, my body had no doubt about that.

“Two more, then open em,” Al said. He sounded farther away than ever. At the other end of the diner instead of standing in the pantry door.

I went down with my left foot. Went down with my right foot again, and all at once there was a pop inside my head, exactly like the kind you hear when you're in an airplane and the pressure changes suddenly. The dark field inside my eyelids turned red, and there was warmth on my skin. It was sunlight. No question about it. And that faint sulphurous smell had grown thicker, moving up the olfactory scale from barely there to actively unpleasant. There was no question about that, either.

I opened my eyes.

I was no longer in the pantry. I was no longer in Al's Diner, either. Although there was no door from the pantry to the outside world, I *was* outside. I was in the courtyard. But it was no longer brick, and there were no outlet stores surrounding it. I was standing on crumbling, dirty cement. Several huge metal receptacles stood against the blank white wall where Your Maine Snuggery should have been. They were piled high with something and covered with sail-size sheets of rough brown burlap cloth.

I turned around to look at the big silver trailer which housed Al's Diner, but the diner was gone.

Where it should have been was the vast Dickensian bulk of Worumbo Mills and Weaving, and it was in full operation. I could hear the thunder of the dyers and dryers, the *shat-HOOSH, shat-HOOSH* of the huge weaving flats that had once filled the second floor (I had seen pictures of these machines, tended by women who wore kerchiefs and coveralls, in the tiny Lisbon Historical Society building on upper Main Street). Whitish-gray smoke poured from three tall stacks that had come down during a big windstorm in the eighties.

I was standing beside a large, green-painted cube of a building—the drying shed, I assumed. It filled half the courtyard and rose to a height of about twenty feet. I had come down a flight of stairs, but now there were no stairs. No way back. I felt a surge of panic.

“Jake?” It was Al's voice, but very faint. It seemed to arrive in my ears by a mere trick of acoustics, like a voice winding for miles down a long, narrow canyon. “You can come back the same way you got there. Feel for the steps.”

I lifted my left foot, put it down, and felt a step. My panic eased.

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