

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER

STEPHEN KING

FEATURES
THE SHORT STORY
"1408"—NOW
A MAJOR MOTION
PICTURE FROM
DIMENSION FILMS

14

DARK TALES

EVERYTHING'S
EVENTUAL

1408

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STEPHEN KING

Everything's Eventual

14 DARK TALES

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What I did was take all the spades out of a deck of cards plus a joker. Ace to King = 1–13. Joker = 14. I shuffled the cards and dealt them. The order in which they came out of the deck became the order of the stories, based on their position in the list my publisher sent me. And it actually created a very nice balance between the literary stories and the all-out screamers. I also added an explanatory note before or after each story, depending on which seemed the more fitting position. Next collection: selected by Tarot.

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Introduction: Practicing the (Almost) Lost Art

I've written more than once about the joy of writing and see no need to reheat that particular skillet of ha at this late date, but here's a confession: I also take an amateur's slightly crazed pleasure in the business side of what I do. I like to goof widdit, do a little media cross-pollination and envelope-pushing. I've tried doing visual novels (*Storm of the Century*, *Rose Red*), serial novels (*The Green Mile*), and serial novels on the Internet (*The Plant*). It's not about making more money or even precisely about creating new markets; it's about trying to see the act, art, and craft of writing in different ways, thereby refreshing the process and keeping the resulting artifacts—the stories, in other words—as bright as possible.

I started to write “keeping [the stories] new” in the line above, then deleted the phrase in the interest of honesty. I mean, come on here, ladies and gentlemen, whom can I possibly kid at this late date, except maybe myself? I sold my first story when I was twenty-one and a junior in college. I'm now fifty-four, and have run a lot of language through the 2.2-pound organic computer/word processor I hang my Red Sox cap on. The act of writing stories hasn't been new for me in a long time, but that doesn't mean it's lost its fascination. If I don't find ways of keeping it fresh and interesting, though, it'll get old and tired in a hurry. I don't want that to happen, because I don't want to cheat the people who read my stuff (that would be you, dear Constant Reader), and I don't want to cheat myself, either. We're in it together, after all. This is a date we're on. We should have fun. We should dance.

So, keeping that in mind, here's yet another story. My wife and I own these two radio stations, okay WZON-AM, which is sports radio, and WKIT-FM, which is classic rock (“The Rock of Bangor,” we say). Radio is a tough business these days, especially in a market like Bangor, where there are too many stations and not enough listeners. We've got contemporary country, *classic* country, oldies, *classic* oldies, Russ Limbaugh, Paul Harvey, and Casey Kasem. The Steve and Tabby King stations ran in the red for a lot of years—not deep in the red, but far enough to bug me. I like to be a winner, you see, and while we were winning in the Arbs (that would be the Arbitron ratings, which are to radio what the Niensens are to TV), we kept coming up short on the bottom line at the end of the year. It was explained to me that there just wasn't enough ad revenue in the Bangor market, that the pie had been cut into too many slices.

So I had an idea. I'd write a radio play, I thought, sort of like the ones I used to listen to with my grandfather when I was growing up (and he was growing old) in Durham, Maine. A Halloween play, by God! I knew about Orson Welles's famous—or infamous—Halloween adaptation of *The War of the Worlds* on *The Mercury Theatre*, of course. It was Welles's conceit (his absolutely *brilliant* conceit) to do H. G. Wells's classic invasion story as a series of news bulletins and reports. It worked, too. It worked so well that it sparked a national panic and Welles (Orson, not H.G.) had to make a public apology on the following week's *Mercury Theatre*. (I bet he made it with a smile on his face—I know *I'd* be smiling, if I were ever to come up with a lie so powerful and persuasive.)

I thought what had worked for Orson Welles would work for me. Instead of starting with dance-band music, as the Welles adaptation did, mine would start with Ted Nugent wailing on “Cat Scratch Fever.” Then an announcer breaks in, one of our actual WKIT air personalities (nobody calls em deejays anymore). “This is JJ West, WKIT news,” he says. “I'm in downtown Bangor, where roughly a thousand people are jammed into Pickering Square, watching as a large, silvery disc-like object descends toward the ground . . . wait a minute, if I raise the mike, perhaps you can hear it.”

And, just like that, we'd be off to the races. I could use our very own in-house production facilities to create the audio effects, local community-theater actors to do the roles, and the best part? The very best part of all? We could record the result and syndicate it to stations *all over the country!* The resulting income,

figured (and my accountant agreed), would be “radio station income” instead of “creative writing income.” It was a way to get around the advertising revenue shortfall, and at the end of the year, the radio station might actually be in the black!

The idea for the radio play was exciting, and the prospect of helping my stations into a profit position with my skills as a writer for hire was also exciting. So what happened? I couldn’t do it, that’s what happened. I tried and I tried, and everything I wrote came out sounding like narration. Not a play, the sort of thing that you see unspooling in your mind (those old enough to remember such radio programs as *Suspense* and *Gunsmoke* will know what I mean), but something more like a book on tape. I’m sure we still could have gone the syndication route and made some money, but I knew the play would not be a success. It was boring. It would cheat the listener. It was busted, and I didn’t know how to fix it. Writing radio plays, it seems to me, is a lost art. We have lost the ability to see with our ears, although we had it once. I remember listening to some radio Foley guy tapping a hollow block of wood with his knuckles . . . and seeing Marlon Brando walking to the bar of the Long Branch Saloon in his dusty boots, clear as day. No more. Those days are gone.

Playwriting in the Shakespearean style—comedy and tragedy that works itself out in blank verse—another lost art. Folks still go to see college productions of *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, but let’s be honest with ourselves: how do you think one of those plays would do on TV against *Weakest Link* or *Survivor* *Final* *Stranded on the Moon*, even if you could get Brad Pitt to play Hamlet and Jack Nicholson to do Polonius? And although folks still go to such Elizabethan extravaganzas as *King Lear* or *Macbeth*, the enjoyment of that art-form is light-years from the ability to create a new example of that art-form. Every now and then someone tries mounting a blank-verse production either on Broadway or off it. They inevitably fail.

Poetry is *not* a lost art. Poetry is better than ever. Of course you’ve got the usual gang of idiots (as the *Mad* magazine staff writers used to call themselves) hiding in the thickets, folks who have gotten pretentious and genius all confused, but there are also many brilliant practitioners of the art out there. Check the literary magazines at your local bookstore, if you don’t believe me. For every six crappy poems you read, you’ll actually find one or two good ones. And that, believe me, is a very acceptable ratio of trash to treasure.

The short story is also not a lost art, but I would argue it is a good deal closer than poetry to the lip of the drop into extinction’s pit. When I sold my first short story in the delightfully antique year of 1968, I was already bemoaning the steady attrition of markets: the pulps were gone, the digests were going, the weeklies (such as *The Saturday Evening Post*) were dying. In the years since, I have seen the markets for short stories continue to shrink. God bless the little magazines, where young writers can still publish their stories for free contributors’ copies, and God bless the editors who still read the contents of their slush piles (especially in the wake of 2001’s anthrax scare), and God bless the publishers who still greenlight the occasional anthology of original stories, but God won’t have to spend His whole day—or even His coffee break—blessing those people. Ten or fifteen minutes would do the trick. Their number is small, and every year there are one or two fewer. *Story* magazine, a lodestar for young writers (including myself, although I never actually published there), is now gone. *Amazing Stories* is gone, despite repeated efforts to revive it. Interesting science-fiction magazines such as *Vertex* are gone, and, of course, the horror mags like *Creepy* and *Eerie*. Those wonderful periodicals are *long* gone. Every now and then someone will try to revive one of the magazines; as I write this, *Weird Tales* is staggering through such a revival. Mostly, they fail. It’s like those plays in blank verse, the ones that open and then close in what seems to be no more than the wink of an eye. When it’s gone, you can’t bring it back. What’s lost has a way of staying lost.

I’ve continued to write short stories over the years, partly because the ideas still come from time to time—beautifully compressed ideas that cry out for three thousand words, maybe nine thousand, fifteen thousand at the very most—and partly because it’s the way I affirm, at least to myself, the fact that I haven’t

sold out, no matter what the more unkind critics may think. Short stories are still piecemeal, the equivalent of those ~~one-of-a-kind items you can buy in an artisan's shop~~. If, that is, you are willing to be patient and wait while it's made by hand in the back room.

But there's no reason for stories to be *marketed* by the same old just-like-Father-did-it methods, simply because the stories themselves are created that way, nor is there any reason to assume (as so many stodgies and the critical press seem to have done) that the way in which a piece of fiction is sold must in some way contaminate or cheapen the product itself.

I'm speaking here of "Riding the Bullet," which has surely been my oddest experience of selling my work in the marketplace, and a story which illustrates the main points I'm trying to make: that what's lost cannot be easily retrieved, that once things go past a certain point, extinction is probably inevitable, but that a fresh perspective on one aspect of creative writing—the commercial aspect—can sometimes refresh the whole.

"Bullet" was composed after *On Writing*, and while I was still recuperating from an accident which left me in a state of nearly constant physical misery. Writing took me away from the worst of that pain; it was (and continues to be) the best pain-killer in my limited arsenal. The story I wanted to tell was simplicity itself; little more than a campfire ghost-story, really. It was The Hitchhiker Who Got Picked Up By A Dead Man.

While I was writing away at my story in the unreal world of my imagination, a dot-com bubble was growing in the equally unreal world of e-commerce. One aspect of this was the so-called electronic book, which, according to some, would spell the end of books as we'd always known them, objects of glue and binding, pages you turned by hand (and which sometimes fell out, if the glue was weak or the binding old). In early 2000, there was great interest in an essay by Arthur C. Clarke, which had been published only in cyberspace.

It was extremely short, though (like kissing your sister is what I thought when I first read it). My story, when it was done, was quite long. Susan Moldow, my editor at Scribner (as an *X-Files* fan, I call her *Age* Moldow . . . *you* work it out), called one day prompted by Ralph Vicinanza and asked if I had anything I'd like to try in the electronic marketplace. I sent her "Bullet," and the three of us—Susan, Scribner, and I—made a little bit of publishing history. Several hundred thousand people downloaded the story, and I ended up making an embarrassing amount of money. (Except that's a fucking lie, I wasn't embarrassed a bit.) Even the audio rights went for over a hundred thousand dollars, a comically huge price.

Am I bragging here? Boasting my narrow whiteboy ass off? In a way I am. But I'm also here to tell you that "Riding the Bullet" made me absolutely crazy. Usually, if I'm in one of those fancy-schamncy airport lounges, I'm ignored by the rest of the clientele; they're busy babbling into phones or making deals at the bar. Which is fine with me. Every now and then one of them will drop by and ask me to sign a cocktail napkin for the wife. The wife, these handsomely suited, briefcase-toting fellows usually want me to know I've read *all* my books. They, on the other hand, have read none. They want me to know that, too. Just too busy. Read *The Seven Habits of Highly Successful People*, read *Who Moved My Cheese?*, read *The Prayer of Jabez*, and that's pretty much it. Gotta hurry, gotta rush-rush, I got a heart attack due in about four years and I want to be sure that I'm there to meet it with my 401(k) all in order when it shows up.

After "Bullet" was published as an e-book (cover, Scribner colophon, and all), that changed. I was *mobbed* in the airport lounges. I was even mobbed in the Boston Amtrak lounge. I was buttonholed on the street. For a little while there, I was turning down the chance to appear on a giddy three talk-shows a day (I was holding out for Springer, but Jerry never called). I even got on the cover of *Time*, and *The New York Times* pontificated at some length over the perceived success of "Riding the Bullet" and the perceived failure of its cyber-successor, *The Plant*. Dear God, I was on the front page of *The Wall Street Journal*. I had inadvertently become a mogul.

And what was driving me crazy? What made it all seem so pointless? Why, that nobody cared about the story. Hell, nobody even *asked* about the story, and do you know what? It's a pretty *good* story, if I do say myself. Simple but fun. Gets the job done. If it got you to turn off the TV, as far as I'm concerned, it (or any of the stories in the collection which follows) is a total success.

But in the wake of "Bullet," all the guys in ties wanted to know was, "How's it doing? How's it selling? How to tell them I didn't give a flying fuck how it was doing in the marketplace, that what I cared about was how it was doing in the reader's heart? Was it succeeding there? Failing? Getting through to the nerve endings? Causing that little *frisson* which is the spooky story's *raison d'être*? I gradually realized that I was seeing another example of creative ebb, another step by another art on the road that may indeed end in extinction. There is something weirdly decadent about appearing on the cover of a major magazine simply because you used an alternate route into the marketplace. There is something weirder about realizing that those readers might have been a lot more interested in the novelty of the electronic package than they were in what was inside the package. Do I want to know how many of the readers who downloaded "Riding the Bullet" actually *read* "Riding the Bullet"? I do not. I think I might be extremely disappointed.

E-publishing may or may not be the wave of the future; about that I care not a fiddler's fart, believe me. For me, going that route was simply another way of trying to keep myself fully involved in the process of writing stories. And then getting them to as many people as possible.

This book will probably end up on the best-seller lists for awhile; I've been very lucky that way. But when you see it there, you might ask yourself how many *other* books of short stories end up on the bestseller lists in the course of any given year, and how long publishers can be expected to publish books of a type that doesn't interest readers very much. Yet for me, there are few pleasures so excellent as sitting in my favorite chair on a cold night with a hot cup of tea, listening to the wind outside and reading a good story which can complete in a single sitting.

Writing them is not so pleasurable. I can only think of two in the current collection—the title story and "L.T.'s Theory of Pets"—which were written without an amount of effort far greater than the relatively slight result. And yet I think I have succeeded in keeping my craft new, at least to myself, mostly because I refuse to let a year go by without writing at least one or two of them. Not for money, not even precisely for love, but as a kind of dues-paying. Because if you want to write short stories, you have to do more than *think* about writing short stories. It is *not* like riding a bicycle but more like working out in the gym: your choice is use it or lose it.

To see them collected here like this is a great pleasure for me. I hope it will be for you, as well. You can let me know at www.stephenking.com, and you can do something else for me (and yourself), as well: if the stories work for you, buy another collection. *Sam the Cat* by Matthew Klam, for instance, or *The Hotel Eden* by Ron Carlson. These are only two of the good writers doing good work out there, and although it's not officially the twenty-first century, they're doing it in the same old way, one word at a time. The format in which they eventually appear doesn't change that. If you care, support them. The best method of support really hasn't changed much: *read their stories*.

I'd like to thank a few of the people who've read mine: Bill Buford, at *The New Yorker*; Susan Moldover at Scribner; Chuck Verrill, who has edited so much of my work across such a span of years; Ralph Vicinanza, Arthur Greene, Gordon Van Gelder, and Ed Ferman at *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*; Nye Willden at *Cavalier*; and the late Robert A. W. Lowndes, who bought that first short story back in '68. Also—most important—my wife, Tabitha, who remains my favorite Constant Reader. These are all people who have worked and are still working to keep the short story from becoming a lost art. So am I. And, by what you buy (and thus choose to subsidize) and by what you read, so are you. You most of all Constant Reader. Always you.

Stephen King
Bangor, Maine
December 11, 200

Autopsy Room Four

It's so dark that for awhile—just how long I don't know—I think I'm still unconscious. Then, slowly, it comes to me that unconscious people don't have a sensation of movement through the dark, accompanied by a faint, rhythmic sound that can only be a squeaky wheel. And I can feel contact, from the top of my head to the balls of my heels. I can smell something that might be rubber or vinyl. This is not unconsciousness, and there is something too . . . too *what?* Too *rational* about these sensations for it to be a dream.

Then what is it?

Who am I?

And what's happening to me?

The squeaky wheel quits its stupid rhythm and I stop moving. There is a crackle around me from the rubber-smelling stuff.

A voice: "Which one did they say?"

A pause.

Second voice: "Four, I think. Yeah, four."

We start to move again, but more slowly. I can hear the faint scuff of feet now, probably in soft-sole shoes, maybe sneakers. The owners of the voices are the owners of the shoes. They stop me again. There's a thump followed by a faint whoosh. It is, I think, the sound of a door with a pneumatic hinge being opened.

What's going on here? I yell, but the yell is only in my head. My lips don't move. I can feel them—and my tongue, lying on the floor of my mouth like a stunned mole—but I can't move them.

The thing I'm on starts rolling again. A moving bed? Yes. A gurney, in other words. I've had some experience with them, a long time ago, in Lyndon Johnson's shitty little Asian adventure. It comes to me that I'm in a hospital, that something bad has happened to me, something like the explosion that almost neutered me twenty-three years before, and that I'm going to be operated on. There are a lot of answers to that idea, sensible ones, for the most part, but I don't hurt anywhere. Except for the minor matter of being scared out of my wits, I feel fine. And if these are orderlies wheeling me into an operating room, why can't I see? Why can't I *talk*?

A third voice: "Over here, boys."

My rolling bed is pushed in a new direction, and the question drumming in my head is *What kind of mess have I gotten myself into?*

Doesn't that depend on who you are? I ask myself, but that's one thing, at least, I find I *do* know. I'm Howard Cottrell. I'm a stock broker known to some of my colleagues as Howard the Conqueror.

Second voice (from just above my head): "You're looking very pretty today, doc."

Fourth voice (female, and cool): "It's always nice to be validated by you, Rusty. Could you hurry up a little? The babysitter expects me back by seven. She's committed to dinner with her parents."

Back by seven, back by seven. It's still the afternoon, maybe, or early evening, but black in here, black as your hat, black as a wood-chuck's asshole, black as midnight in Persia, and *what's going on?* Where have I been? What have I been doing? Why haven't I been manning the phones?

Because it's Saturday, a voice from far down murmurs. *You were . . . were . . .*

A sound: *WHOCK!* A sound I love. A sound I more or less live for. The sound of . . . what? The head of a golf-club, of course. Hitting a ball off the tee. I stand, watching it fly off into the blue . . .

I'm grabbed, shoulders and calves, and lifted. It startles me terribly, and I try to scream. No sound comes out . . . or perhaps one does, a tiny squeak, much tinier than the one produced by the wheel below me.

Probably not even that. Probably it's just my imagination.

I'm swung through the air in an envelope of blackness—*Hey, don't drop me, I've got a bad back!*—I try to say, and again there's no movement of the lips or teeth; my tongue goes on lying on the floor of my mouth, the mole maybe not just stunned but dead, and now I have a terrible thought, one which spikes fright to a degree closer to panic: what if they put me down the wrong way and my tongue slides backward and blocks my windpipe? I won't be able to breathe! That's what people mean when they say someone "swallowed his tongue," isn't it?

Second voice (Rusty): "You'll like this one, doc, he looks like Michael Bolton."

Female doc: "Who's that?"

Third voice—sounds like a young man, not much more than a teenager: "He's this white lounge-singer who wants to be black. I don't think this is him."

There's laughter at that, the female voice joining in (a little doubtfully), and as I am set down on what feels like a padded table, Rusty starts some new crack—he's got a whole standup routine, it seems. I lose the last bit of hilarity in a burst of sudden horror. I won't be able to breathe if my tongue blocks my windpipe. That's the thought which has just gone through my mind, *but what if I'm not breathing now?*

What if I'm dead? What if this is what death is like?

It fits. It fits everything with a horrid prophylactic snugness. The dark. The rubbery smell. Nowadays I am Howard the Conqueror, stock broker *extraordinaire*, terror of Derry Municipal Country Club, frequent *habitué* of what is known at golf courses all over the world as The Nineteenth Hole, but in '71 I was part of a Medical Assistance Team in the Mekong Delta, a scared kid who sometimes woke up wet-eyed from the dreams of the family dog, and all at once I know this feel, this smell.

Dear God, I'm in a bodybag.

First voice: "Want to sign this, doc? Remember to bear down hard—it's three copies."

Sound of a pen, scraping away on paper. I imagine the owner of the first voice holding out a clipboard to the woman doctor.

Oh dear Jesus let me not be dead! I try to scream, and nothing comes out.

I'm breathing though . . . aren't I? I mean, I can't feel myself doing it, but my lungs seem okay, they're not throbbing or yelling for air the way they do when you've swum too far underwater, so I must be okay, right?

Except if you're dead, the deep voice murmurs, they wouldn't be crying out for air, would they? No—because dead lungs don't need to breathe. Dead lungs can just kind of . . . take it easy.

Rusty: "What are you doing next Saturday night, doc?"

But if I'm dead, how can I feel? How can I smell the bag I'm in? How can I hear these voices, the doc now saying that next Saturday night she's going to be shampooing her dog which is named Rusty, what a coincidence and all of them laughing? If I'm dead, why aren't I either gone or in the white light they're always talking about on Oprah?

There's a harsh ripping sound and all at once I *am* in white light; it is blinding, like the sun breaking through a scrim of clouds on a winter day. I try to squint my eyes shut against it, but nothing happens. My eyelids are like blinds on broken rollers.

A face bends over me, blocking off part of the glare, which comes not from some dazzling astral plane but from a bank of overhead fluorescents. The face belongs to a young, conventionally handsome man of about twenty-five; he looks like one of those beach beefcakes on *Baywatch* or *Melrose Place*. Marginal, smarter, though. He's got a lot of dark black hair under a carelessly worn surgical-greens cap. He's wearing the tunic, too. His eyes are cobalt blue, the sort of eyes girls reputedly die for. There are dusty arcs of freckles high up on his cheekbones.

"Hey, gosh," he says. It's the third voice. "This guy *does* look like Michael Bolton! A little long in the o

tootharoo; maybe . . .” He leans closer. One of the flat tie-ribbons at the neck of his greens tunic tickles against my forehead. “. . . but yeah. I see it. Hey, Michael, sing something.”

Help me! is what I’m *trying* to sing, but I can only look up into his dark blue eyes with my frozen dead man’s stare; I can only wonder if I *am* a dead man, if this is how it happens, if this is what *everyone* goes through after the pump quits. If I’m still alive, how come he hasn’t seen my pupils contract when the light hit them? But I know the answer to that . . . or I think I do. They *didn’t* contract. That’s why the glare from the fluorescents is so painful.

The tie, tickling across my forehead like a feather.

Help me! I scream up at the *Baywatch* beefcake, who is probably an intern or maybe just a med-school brat. *Help me, please!*

My lips don’t even quiver.

The face moves back, the tie stops tickling, and all that white light streams through my helpless-to-look-away eyes and into my brain. It’s a hellish feeling, a kind of rape. I’ll go blind if I have to stare into it for long, I think, and blindness will be a relief.

WHOCK! The sound of the driver hitting the ball, but a little flat this time, and the feeling in the hands is bad. The ball’s up . . . but veering . . . veering off . . . veering toward . . .

Shit.

I’m in the rough.

Now another face bends into my field of vision. A white tunic instead of a green one below it, a greasy untidy mop of orange hair above it. Distress-sale IQ is my first impression. It can only be Rusty. He’s wearing a big dumb grin that I think of as a high-school grin, the grin of a kid who should have a tattoo reading BORN TO SNAP BRA-STRAPS on one wasted bicep.

“Michael!” Rusty exclaims. “Jeez, ya lookin *goood!* This’z an honor! *Sing* for us, big boy! Sing your dead ass off!”

From somewhere behind me comes the doc’s voice, cool, no longer even pretending to be amused by these antics. “Quit it, Rusty.” Then, in a slightly new direction: “What’s the story, Mike?”

Mike’s voice is the first voice—Rusty’s partner. He sounds slightly embarrassed to be working with a guy who wants to be Andrew Dice Clay when he grows up. “Found him on the fourteenth hole at Derry Municipal. Off the course, actually, in the rough. If he hadn’t just played through the foursome behind him, and if the foursome hadn’t seen one of his legs stickin out of the puckerbrush, he’d be an ant-farm by now.”

I hear that sound in my head again—*WHOCK!*—only this time it is followed by another, far less pleasant sound: the rustle of underbrush as I sweep it with the head of my driver. It *would* have to be fourteen, where there is reputedly poison ivy. Poison ivy and . . .

Rusty is still peering down at me, stupid and avid. It’s not death that interests him; it’s my resemblance to Michael Bolton. Oh yes, I know about it, have not been above using it with certain female clients. Otherwise, it gets old in a hurry. And in these circumstances . . . *God.*

“Attending physician?” the lady doc asks. “Was it Kazalian?”

“No,” Mike says, and for just a moment he looks down at me. Older than Rusty by at least ten years. Black hair with flecks of gray in it. Spectacles. *How come none of these people can see that I am not dead?* “There was a doc in the foursome that found him, actually. That’s his signature on page one . . . see?”

Ruffle of paper, then: “Christ, Jennings. I know him. He gave Noah his physical after the ark grounded on Mount Ararat.”

Rusty doesn’t look as if he gets the joke, but he brays laughter into my face anyway. I can smell onions on his breath, a little leftover lunchstink, and if I can smell onions, I must be breathing. I *must* be, right? If on

Before I can finish this thought, Rusty leans even closer and I feel a blast of hope. He's seen something. He's seen something and means to give me mouth-to-mouth. God bless you, Rusty! God bless you and your onion breath!

But the stupid grin doesn't change, and instead of putting his mouth on mine, his hand slips around my jaw. Now he's grasping one side with his thumb and the other side with his fingers.

"He's *alive!*" Rusty cries. "He's *alive*, and he's gonna sing for the Room Four Michael Bolton Fan Club."

His fingers pinch tighter—it hurts in a distant coming-out-of-the-Novocain way—and begin to move my jaw up and down, clicking my teeth together. "If she's *ba-aaad*, he can't see it," Rusty sings in a hideously atonal voice that would probably make Percy Sledge's head explode. "She can do no *rrr-ongggg . . .*" My teeth open and close at the rough urging of his hand; my tongue rises and falls like a dead dog riding the surface of an uneasy waterbed.

"Stop it!" the lady doc snaps at him. She sounds genuinely shocked. Rusty, perhaps sensing this, does not stop but goes gleefully on. His fingers are pinching into my cheeks now. My frozen eyes stare blindly upward.

"Turn his back on his best friend if she put him *d—*"

Then she's there, a woman in a green-gown with her cap tied around her throat and hanging down her back like the Cisco Kid's sombrero, short brown hair swept back from her brow, good-looking but severe—more handsome than pretty. She grabs Rusty with one short-nailed hand and pulls him back from me.

"Hey!" Rusty says, indignant. "Get your hands off me!"

"Then you keep your hands off *him*," she says, and there is no mistaking the anger in her voice. "I'm tired of your Sophomore Class wit, Rusty, and the next time you start in, I'm going to report you."

"Hey, let's all calm down," says the *Baywatch* hunk—doc's assistant. He sounds alarmed, as if he expected Rusty and his boss to start duking it out right here. "Let's just put a lid on it."

"Why's she bein such a bitch to me?" Rusty says. He's still trying to sound indignant, but he's actually whining now. Then, in a slightly different direction: "Why you being such a bitch? You on your period, that it?"

Doc, sounding disgusted: "Get him out of here."

Mike: "Come on, Rusty. Let's go sign the log."

Rusty: "Yeah. And get some fresh air."

Me, listening to all this like it was on the radio.

Their feet, squeaking toward the door. Rusty now all huffy and offended, asking her why she doesn't just wear a mood-ring or something so people will *know*. Soft shoes squeaking on tile, and suddenly that sound is replaced by the sound of my driver, beating the bush for my goddam ball, where is it, it didn't go too far in. I'm sure of it, so where is it, Jesus, I *hate* fourteen, supposedly there's poison ivy, and with all the underbrush, there could easily be—

And then something bit me, didn't it? Yes, I'm almost sure it did. On the left calf, just above the top of my white athletic sock. A red-hot darning needle of pain, perfectly concentrated at first, then spreading . . .

. . . then darkness. Until the gurney, zipped up snug inside a bodybag and listening to Mike ("*Which one did they say?*") and Rusty ("*Four, I think. Yeah, four*").

I want to think it was some kind of snake, but maybe that's only because I was thinking about them when I hunted for my ball. It could have been an insect, I only recall the single line of pain, and after all, what does it matter? What matters here is that I'm alive and they don't know it. It's incredible, but they don't know it. Of course I had bad luck—I know Dr. Jennings, remember speaking to him as I played through his foursome on the eleventh hole. A nice enough guy, but vague, an antique. The antique had pronounced me dead. Then *Rusty*, with his dopey green eyes and his detention-hall grin, had pronounced me dead. The lady

doc, Ms. Cisco Kid, hadn't even *looked* at me yet, not really. When she did, maybe—

"I *hate* that jerk," she says when the door is closed. Now it's just the three of us, only of course Ms. Cisco Kid thinks it's just the two of them. "Why do I always get the jerks, Peter?"

"I don't know," Mr. *Melrose Place* says, "but Rusty's a special case, even in the annals of famous jerks. Walking brain death."

She laughs, and something clanks. The clank is followed by a sound that scares me badly: steel instruments clicking together. They are off to the left of me, and although I can't see them, I know what they're getting ready to do: the autopsy. They are getting ready to cut into me. They intend to remove Howard Cottrell's heart and see if it blew a piston or threw a rod.

My leg! I scream inside my head. *Look at my left leg! That's the trouble, not my heart!*

Perhaps my eyes have adjusted a little, after all. Now I can see, at the very top of my vision, a stainless steel armature. It looks like a giant piece of dental equipment, except that thing at the end isn't a drill. It's a Gigli saw. From someplace deep inside, where the brain stores the sort of trivia you only need if you happen to be playing *Jeopardy!* on TV, I even come up with the name. It's a Gigli saw. They use it to cut off the top of your skull. This is after they've pulled your face off like a kid's Halloween mask, of course, hair and all.

Then they take out your brain.

Clink. Clink. Clunk. A pause. Then a *CLANK!* so loud I'd jump if I were capable of jumping.

"Do you want to do the pericardial cut?" she asks.

Pete, cautious: "Do you want me to?"

Dr. Cisco, sounding pleasant, sounding like someone who is conferring a favor and a responsibility: "Yes, I think so."

"All right," he says. "You'll assist?"

"Your trusty co-pilot," she says, and laughs. She punctuates her laughter with a *snick-snick* sound. It's the sound of scissors cutting the air.

Now panic beats and flutters inside my skull like a flock of starlings locked in an attic. The Nam was a long time ago, but I saw half a dozen field autopsies there—what the doctors used to call "tentshop postmortems"—and I know what Cisco and Pancho mean to do. The scissors have long, sharp blades, *very* sharp blades, and fat finger-holes. Still, you have to be strong to use them. The lower blade slides into the gut like butter. Then, *snip*, up through the bundle of nerves at the solar plexus and into the beef-jerky wall of muscle and tendon above it. Then into the sternum. When the blades come together this time, they do so with a heavy crunch as the bone parts and the rib cage pops apart like a couple of barrels which have been lashed together with twine. Then on up with those scissors that look like nothing so much as the poultry shears supermarket butchers use—*snip-CRUNCH, snip-CRUNCH, snip-CRUNCH*, splitting bone and shearing muscle, freeing the lungs, heading for the trachea, turning Howard the Conqueror into Thanksgiving dinner no one will eat.

A thin, nagging whine—this *does* sound like a dentist's drill.

Pete: "Can I—"

Dr. Cisco, actually sounding a bit maternal: "No. These." *Snicksnick*. Demonstrating for him.

They can't do this, I think. They can't cut me up . . . I can FEEL!

"Why?" he asks.

"Because that's the way I want it," she says, sounding a lot less maternal. "When you're on your own, Petie-boy, you can do what you want. But in Katie Arlen's autopsy room, you start off with the pericardial shears."

Autopsy room. There. It's out. I want to be all over goose-bumps, but of course, nothing happens; my flesh remains smooth.

“Remember,” Dr. Arlen says (but now she’s actually lecturing), “any fool can learn how to use a milking machine . . . but the hands-on procedure is always best.” There is something vaguely suggestive in her tone. “Okay?”

“Okay,” he says.

They’re going to do it. I have to make some kind of noise or movement, or they’re really doing to do it. If blood flows or jets up from the first punch of the scissors they’ll know something’s wrong, but by then it will be too late, very likely; that first *snip-CRUNCH* will have happened, and my ribs will be lying again against my upper arms, my heart pulsing frantically away under the fluorescents in its blood-glossy sac—

I concentrate everything on my chest. I *push*, or try to . . . and something happens.

A sound!

I make a sound!

It’s mostly inside my closed mouth, but I can also hear and feel it in my nose—a low hum.

Concentrating, summoning every bit of effort, I do it again, and this time the sound is a little stronger, leaking out of my nostrils like cigarette smoke: *Nnnnnnnnn*—It makes me think of an old Alfred Hitchcock TV program I saw a long, long time ago, where Joseph Cotten was paralyzed in a car crash and was finally able to let them know he was still alive by crying a single tear.

And if nothing else, that minuscule mosquito-whine of a sound has proved to *myself* that I’m alive, that I’m not just a spirit lingering inside the clay effigy of my own dead body.

Focusing all my concentration, I can feel breath slipping through my nose and down my throat, replacing the breath I have now expended, and then I send it out again, working harder than I ever worked summer for the Lane Construction Company when I was a teenager, working harder than I have ever worked in my *life*, because now I’m working *for* my life and they must hear me, dear Jesus, they must.

Nnnnnnnnn—

“You want some music?” the woman doctor asks. “I’ve got Marty Stuart, Tony Bennett—”

He makes a despairing sound. I barely hear it, and take no immediate meaning from what she is saying . . . which is probably a mercy.

“All right,” she says, laughing. “I’ve also got the Rolling Stones.”

“*You?*”

“Me. I’m not quite as square as I look, Peter.”

“I didn’t mean . . .” He sounds flustered.

Listen to me! I scream inside my head as my frozen eyes stare up into the icy-white light. *Stop chattering like magpies and listen to me!*

I can feel more air trickling down my throat and the idea occurs that whatever has happened to me must be starting to wear off . . . but it’s only a faint blip on the screen of my thoughts. Maybe it *is* wearing off, but very soon now recovery will cease to be an option for me. All my energy is bent toward making them hear me, and this time they *will* hear me, I know it.

“Stones, then,” she says. “Unless you want me to run out and get a Michael Bolton CD in honor of your first pericardial.”

“Please, no!” he cries, and they both laugh.

The sound starts to come out, and it *is* louder this time. Not as loud as I’d hoped, but loud enough. Surely loud enough. They’ll hear, they *must*.

Then, just as I begin to force the sound out of my nose like some rapidly solidifying liquid, the room is filled with a blare of fuzztone guitar and Mick Jagger’s voice bashing off the walls: “*Awww, no, it’s only rock and roll, but I LIYYYYYKE IT . . .*”

“*Turn it down!*” Dr. Cisco yells, comically overshouting, and amid these noises my own nasal sound,

desperate little humming through my nostrils, is no more audible than a whisper in a foundry.

Now her face bends over me again and I feel fresh horror as I see that she's wearing a Plexi eyeshield and a gauze mask over her mouth. She glances back over her shoulder.

"I'll strip him for you," she tells Pete, and bends toward me with a scalpel glittering in one gloved hand. She bends toward me through the guitar-thunder of the Rolling Stones.

I hum desperately, but it's no good. I can't even hear myself.

The scalpel hovers, then cuts.

I shriek inside my own head, but there is no pain, only my polo shirt falling in two pieces at my sides. Sliding apart as my rib cage will after Pete unknowingly makes his first pericardial cut on a living patient.

I am lifted. My head lolls back and for a moment I see Pete upside down, donning his own Plexi eyeshield as he stands by a steel counter, inventorying a horrifying array of tools. Chief among them are the oversized scissors. I get just a glimpse of them, of blades glittering like merciless satin. Then I am laid flat again and my shirt is gone. I'm now naked to the waist. It's cold in the room.

Look at my chest! I scream at her. *You must see it rise and fall, no matter how shallow my respiration. You're a goddam expert, for Christ's sake!*

Instead, she looks across the room, raising her voice to be heard above the music. (*I like it, like it, yes I do* the Stones sing, and I think I will hear that nasal idiot chorus in the halls of hell through all eternity.) "What's your pick? Boxers or Jockeys?"

With a mixture of horror and rage, I realize what they're talking about.

"Boxers!" he calls back. "Of course! Just take a look at the guy!"

Asshole! I want to scream. *You probably think everyone over forty wears boxer shorts! You probably think when you get to be forty, you'll—*

She unsnaps my Bermudas and pulls down the zipper. Under other circumstances, having a woman as pretty as this (a little severe, yes, but still pretty) do that would make me extremely happy. Today, however,

"You lose, Petie-boy," she says. "Jockeys. Dollar in the kitty."

"On payday," he says, coming over. His face joins hers; they look down at me through their Plexi masks like a couple of space aliens looking down at an abductee. I try to make them see my eyes, to see me *looking at them*, but these two fools are looking at my under-shorts.

"Ooooh, and *red*," Pete says. "A *sha-vinguh!*"

"I call them more of a wash pink," she replies. "Hold him up for me, Peter, he weighs a ton. No wonder he had a heart attack. Let this be a lesson to you."

I'm in shape! I yell at her. *Probably in better shape than you, bitch!*

My hips are suddenly jerked upward by strong hands. My back cracks; the sound makes my heart leap.

"Sorry, guy," Pete says, and suddenly I'm colder than ever as my shorts and red underpants are pulled down.

"Upsa-daisy *once*," she says, lifting one foot, "and upsa-daisy *twice*," lifting the other foot, "off come the *mocs*, and off come the *socks*—"

She stops abruptly, and hope seizes me once more.

"Hey, Pete."

"Yeah?"

"Do guys ordinarily wear Bermuda shorts and moccasins to play golf in?"

Behind her (except that's only the source, actually it's all around us) the Rolling Stones have moved on to "Emotional Rescue." *I will be your knight in shining abh-mah*, Mick Jagger sings, and I wonder how funny he'd dance with about three sticks of Hi-Core dynamite jammed up his skinny ass.

“If you ask me, this guy was just *asking* for trouble,” she goes on. “I thought they had these special shoes—~~very ugly, very golf-specific, with little knobs on the soles~~—”

“Yeah, but wearing them’s not the law,” Pete says. He holds his gloved hands out over my upturned face, slides them together, and bends the fingers back. As the knuckles crack, talcum powder sprinkles down like fine snow. “At least not yet. Not like bowling shoes. They catch you bowling without a pair of bowling shoes, they can send you to state prison.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want to handle temp and gross examination?”

No! I shriek. *No, he’s a kid, what are you DOING?*

He looks at her as if this same thought had crossed his own mind. “That’s . . . um . . . not strictly legal, it, Katie? I mean . . .”

She looks around as he speaks, giving the room a burlesque examination, and I’m starting to get a vibe that could be very bad news for me: severe or not, I think that Cisco—alias Dr. Katie Arlen—has got the hot spots for Petie with the dark blue eyes. Dear Christ, they have hauled me paralyzed off the golf course and into an episode of *General Hospital*, this week’s subplot titled “Love Blooms in Autopsy Room Four.”

“Gee,” she says in a hoarse little stage-whisper. “I don’t see anyone here but you and me.”

“The tape—”

“Not rolling yet,” she said. “And once it is, I’m right at your elbow every step of the way . . . as far as anyone will ever know, anyway. And mostly I will be. I just want to put away those charts and slides. And you really feel uncomfortable—”

Yes! I scream up at him out of my unmoving face. *Feel uncomfortable! VERY uncomfortable! TO UNCOMFORTABLE!*

But he’s twenty-four at most and what’s he going to say to this pretty, severe woman who’s standing inside his space, invading it in a way that can really only mean one thing? *No, Mommy, I’m scared?* Besides, he wants to. I can see the wanting through the Plexi eye-shield, bopping around in there like a bunch of overage punk rockers pogoing to the Stones.

“Hey, as long as you’ll cover for me if—”

“Sure,” she says. “Got to get your feet wet sometime, Peter. And if you really need me to, I’ll roll back the tape.”

He looks startled. “You can do that?”

She smiles. “Ve haff many see-grets in Autopsy Room Four, *mein Herr*.”

“I bet you do,” he says, smiling back, then reaches past my frozen field of vision. When his hand comes back, it’s wrapped around a microphone which hangs down from the ceiling on a black cord. The mic looks like a steel teardrop. Seeing it there makes this horror real in a way it wasn’t before. Surely they won’t really cut me up, will they? Pete is no veteran, but he *has* had training; surely he’ll see the marks of whatever bit me while I was looking for my ball in the rough, and then they’ll at least suspect. They’ll *have* to suspect.

Yet I keep seeing the scissors with their heartless satin shine—jumped-up poultry shears—and I keep wondering if I will still be alive when he takes my heart out of my chest cavity and holds it up, dripping, in front of my locked gaze for a moment before turning to plop it into the weighing pan. I could be, it seems to me; I really could be. Don’t they say the brain can remain conscious for up to three minutes after the heart stops?

“Ready, doctor,” Pete says, and now he sounds almost formal. Somewhere, tape is rolling.

The autopsy procedure has begun.

“Let’s flip this pancake,” she says cheerfully, and I am turned over just that efficiently. My right arm goes

He finally plucked the thermometer out—oh dear God, the relief—and on the wall I could see his shadow holding it up.

“94.2,” he said. “Gee, that ain’t too shabby. This guy could almost be alive, Katie . . . Dr. Arlen.”

“Remember where they found him,” she said from across the room. The record they were listening to was between selections, and for a moment I could hear her lecturely tones clearly. “Golf course? Summer afternoon? If you’d gotten a reading of 98.6, I would not be surprised.”

“Right, right,” he said, sounding chastened. Then: “Is all this going to sound funny on the tape?” Translation: *Will I sound stupid on the tape?*

“It’ll sound like a teaching situation,” she said, “which is what it is.”

“Okay, good. Great.”

His rubber-tipped fingers spread my buttocks, then let them go and trail down the backs of my thighs. I would tense now, if I were capable of tensing.

Left leg, I send to him. Left leg, Petie-boy, left calf, see it?

He must see it, he *must*, because I can *feel* it, throbbing like a bee-sting or maybe a shot given by a clumsy nurse, one who infuses the injection into a muscle instead of hitting the vein.

“Subject is a really good example of what a really bad idea it is to play golf in shorts,” he says, and I find myself wishing he had been born blind. Hell, maybe he *was* born blind, he’s sure acting it. “I’m seeing all kinds of bug-bites, chigger-bites, scratches . . .”

“Mike said they found him in the rough,” Arlen calls over. She’s making one hell of a clatter; it sounds like she’s doing dishes in a cafeteria kitchen instead of filing stuff. “At a guess, he had a heart attack while he was looking for his ball.”

“Uh-huh . . .”

“Keep going, Peter, you’re doing fine.”

I find that an extremely debatable proposition.

“Okay.”

More pokes and proddings. Gentle. Too gentle, maybe.

“There are mosquito-bites on the left calf that look infected,” he says, and although his touch remains gentle, this time the pain is an enormous throb that would make me scream if I were capable of making any sound above the low-pitched hum. It occurs to me suddenly that my life may hang upon the length of the Rolling Stones tape they’re listening to . . . always assuming it *is* a tape and not a CD that plays straight through. If it finishes before they cut into me . . . if I can hum loudly enough for them to hear before one of them turns it over to the other side . . .

“I may want to look at the bug-bites after the gross autopsy,” she says, “although if we’re right about his heart, there’ll be no need. Or . . . do you want me to look now? They worrying you?”

“Nope, they’re pretty clearly mosquito-bites,” Gimpel the Fool says. “They grow em big over on the west side. He’s got five . . . seven . . . eight . . . jeez, almost a dozen on his left leg alone.”

“He forgot his Deep Woods Off.”

“Never mind the Off, he forgot his digitalin,” he says, and they have a nice little yock together, autopsy room humor.

This time he flips me by himself, probably happy to use those gym-grown Mr. Strongboy muscles of his, hiding the snake-bites and the mosquito-bites all around them, camouflaging them. I’m staring up into the bank of fluorescents again. Pete steps backward, out of my view. There’s a humming noise. The table begins to slant, and I know why. When they cut me open, the fluids will run downhill to collection-points at its base. Plenty of samples for the state lab in Augusta, should there be any questions raised by the autopsy.

I focus all my will and effort on closing my eyes while he’s looking down into my face, and cannot

produce even a tic. All I wanted was eighteen holes of golf on Saturday afternoon, and instead I turned in Snow White with hair on my chest. And I can't stop wondering what it's going to feel like when those poultry shears go sliding into my midsection.

Pete has a clipboard in one hand. He consults it, sets it aside, then speaks into the mike. His voice is a little less stilted now. He has just made the most hideous misdiagnosis of his life, but he doesn't know it, and so he's starting to warm up.

"I am commencing the autopsy at 5:49 P.M.," he says, "on Saturday, August 20th, 1994."

He lifts my lips, looks at my teeth like a man thinking about buying a horse, then pulls my jaw down. "Good color," he says, "and no petechiae on the cheeks." The current tune is fading out of the speakers and I hear a click as he steps on the footpedal which pauses the recording tape. "Man, this guy really *could* still be alive!"

I hum frantically, and at the same moment Dr. Arlen drops something that sounds like a bedpan. "Doesn't he *wish*," she says, laughing. He joins in and this time it's cancer I wish on them, some kind that is inoperable and lasts a long time.

He goes quickly down my body, feeling up my chest ("No bruising, swelling, or other exterior signs of cardiac arrest," he says, and what a big fucking surprise *that* is), then palpates my belly.

I burp.

He looks at me, eyes widening, mouth dropping open a little, and again I try desperately to hum, knowing he won't hear it over "Start Me Up" but thinking that maybe, along with the burp, he'll finally be ready to see what's right in front of him—

"Excuse yourself, Howie," Dr. Arlen, that bitch, says from behind me, and chuckles. "Better watch out for Pete—those postmortem belches are the worst."

He theatrically fans the air in front of his face, then goes back to what he's doing. He barely touches my groin, although he remarks that the scar on the back of my right leg continues around to the front.

Missed the big one, though, I think, maybe because it's a little higher than you're looking. No big deal, my little Baywatch buddy, but you also missed the fact that I'M STILL ALIVE, and that IS a big deal!

He goes on chanting into the microphone, sounding more and more at ease (sounding, in fact, a little like Jack Klugman on *Quincy, M.E.*), and I know his partner over there behind me, the Pollyanna of the medical community, isn't thinking she'll have to roll the tape back over *this* part of the exam. Other than missing the fact that his first pericardial is still alive, the kid's doing a great job.

At last he says, "I think I'm ready to go on, doctor." He sounds tentative, though.

She comes over, looks briefly down at me, then squeezes Pete's shoulder. "Okay," she says. "On-na wide da show!"

Now I'm trying to stick my tongue out. Just that simple kid's gesture of impudence, but it would be enough . . . and it seems to me I can feel a faint prickling sensation deep within my lips, the feeling you get when you're finally starting to come out of a heavy dose of Novocain. And I can feel a twitch? No, wishful thinking, just—

Yes! *Yes!* But a twitch is all, and the second time I try, nothing happens.

As Pete picks up the scissors, the Rolling Stones move on to "Hang Fire."

Hold a mirror in front of my nose! I scream at them. *Watch it fog up! Can't you at least do that?*

Snick, snick, snickety-snick.

Pete turns the scissors at an angle so the light runs down the blade, and for the first time I'm certain, really certain, that this mad charade is going to go all the way through to the end. The director isn't going to freeze the frame. The ref isn't going to stop the fight in the tenth round. We're not going to pause for a word from our sponsors. Petie-Boy's going to slide those scissors into my gut while I lie here helpless, and

then he's going to open me up like a mail-order package from the Horchow Collection.

He looks hesitantly at Dr. Arlen.

No! I howl, my voice reverberating off the dark walls of my skull but emerging from my mouth not all. *No, please no!*

She nods. "Go ahead. You'll be fine."

"Uh . . . you want to turn off the music?"

Yes! Yes, turn it off!

"Is it bothering you?"

Yes! It's bothering him! It's fucked him up so completely he thinks his patient is dead!

"Well . . ."

"Sure," she says, and disappears from my field of vision. A moment later Mick and Keith are finally gone. I try to make the humming noise and discover a horrible thing: now I can't even do that. I'm too scared. Fright has locked down my vocal cords. I can only stare up as she rejoins him, the two of them gazing down at me like pallbearers looking into an open grave.

"Thanks," he says. Then he takes a deep breath and lifts the scissors. "Commencing pericardial cut."

He slowly brings them down. I see them . . . see them . . . then they're gone from my field of vision. A long moment later, I feel cold steel nestle against my naked upper belly.

He looks doubtfully at the doctor.

"Are you sure you don't—"

"Do you want to make this your field or not, Peter?" she asks him with some asperity.

"You know I do, but—"

"Then cut."

He nods, lips firming. I would close my eyes if I could, but of course I cannot even do that; I can only steel myself against the pain that's only a second or two away now—steel myself for the steel.

"Cutting," he says, bending forward.

"Wait a sec!" she cries.

The dimple of pressure just below my solar plexus eases a little. He looks around at her, surprised, upset, maybe relieved that the crucial moment has been put off—

I feel her rubber-gloved hand slide around my penis as if she meant to give me some bizarre handjob. Safe Sex with the Dead, and then she says, "You missed this one, Pete."

He leans over, looking at what she's found—the scar in my groin, at the very top of my right thigh, glassy, no-pore bowl in the flesh.

Her hand is still holding my cock, holding it out of the way, that's all she's doing; as far as she's concerned she might as well be holding up a sofa cushion so someone else can see the treasure she's found beneath it—coins, a lost wallet, maybe the catnip mouse you haven't been able to find—but something is happening.

Dear wheelchair Jesus on a chariot-driven crutch, *something is happening*.

"And look," she says. Her finger strokes a light, tickly line down the side of my right testicle. "Look at these hairline scars. His testes must have swollen up to damned near the size of grapefruits."

"Lucky he didn't lose one or both."

"You bet your . . . you bet your you-knows," she says, and laughs that mildly suggestive laugh again. Her gloved hand loosens, moves, then pushes down firmly, trying to clear the viewing area. She is doing better than an accident what you might pay twenty-five or thirty bucks to have done on purpose . . . under other circumstances, of course. "This is a war-wound, I think. Hand me that magnifier, Pete."

"But shouldn't I—"

“In a few seconds,” she says. “*He’s* not going anywhere.” She’s totally absorbed by what she’s found. Her hand is still on me, still pressing down, and what was happening feels like it’s *still* happening, but maybe I’m wrong. I *must* be wrong, or he would see it, she would *feel* it—

She bends down and now I can see only her green-clad back, with the ties from her cap trailing down like odd pigtails. Now, oh my, I can feel her *breath* on me down there.

“Notice the outward radiation,” she says. “It was a blast-wound of some sort, probably ten years ago at least, we could check his military rec—”

The door bursts open. Pete cries out in surprise. Dr. Arlen doesn’t, but her hand tightens involuntarily as she’s gripping me again and it’s all at once like a hellish variation of the old Naughty Nurse fantasy.

“*Don’t cut im up!*” someone screams, and his voice is so high and wavery with fright that I barely recognize Rusty. “*Don’t cut im up, there was a snake in his golf-bag and it bit Mike!*”

They turn to him, eyes wide, jaws dropped; her hand is still gripping me, but she’s no more aware of that at least for the time being, than Petie-Boy is aware that he’s got one hand clutching the left breast of his scrub-gown. He looks like *he’s* the one with the clapped-out fuel pump.

“What . . . what are you . . .” Pete begins.

“Knocked him flat!” Rusty was saying—babbling. “He’s gonna be okay, I guess, but he can hardly talk. Little brown snake, I never saw one like it in my life, it went under the loadin bay, it’s under there right now, but that’s not the important part! I think it already bit that guy we brought in. I think . . . holy shit, doc, whatja tryin to do? Stroke im back to life?”

She looks around, dazed, at first not sure of what he’s talking about . . . until she realizes that she’s now holding a mostly erect penis. And as she screams—screams and snatches the shears out of Pete’s limp gloved hand—I find myself thinking again of that old Alfred Hitchcock TV show.

Poor old Joseph Cotten, I think.

He only got to *cry*.

AFTERNOTE

It’s been a year since my experience in Autopsy Room Four, and I have made a complete recovery, although the paralysis was both stubborn and scary; it was a full month before I began to get back the finer motions of my fingers and toes. I still can’t play the piano, but then, of course, I never could. That is a joke, and I make no apologies for it. I think that in the first three months after my misadventure, my ability to joke provided a slim but vital margin between sanity and some sort of nervous breakdown. Unless you’ve actually felt the tip of a pair of postmortem shears poking into your stomach, you don’t know what I mean.

Two weeks or so after my close call, a woman on Dupont Street called the Derry Police to complain of a “foul stink” coming from the house next door. That house belonged to a bachelor bank clerk named Walter Kerr. Police found the house empty . . . of human life, that is. In the basement they found over sixty snakes of different varieties. About half of them were dead—starvation and dehydration—but many were extremely lively . . . and extremely dangerous. Several were very rare, and one was of a species believed to have been extinct since midcentury, according to consulting herpetologists.

Kerr failed to show up for work at Derry Community Bank on August 22nd, two days after I was bitten. One day after the story (PARALYZED MAN ESCAPES DEADLY AUTOPSY, the headline read; at one point I was quoted as saying I had been “scared stiff”) broke in the press.

There was a snake for every cage in Kerr’s basement menagerie, except for one. The empty cage was unmarked, and the snake that popped out of my golf-bag (the ambulance orderlies had packed it in with n

“corpse” and had been practicing chip-shots out in the ambulance parking area) was never found. The toxin in my blood-stream—the same toxin found to a far lesser degree in orderly Mike Hopper’s bloodstream—was documented but never identified. I have looked at a great many pictures of snakes in the last year, and have found at least one which has reportedly caused cases of full-body paralysis in humans. This is the Peruvian boomslang, a nasty viper which has supposedly been extinct since the 1920s. Dupont Street is less than half a mile from the Derry Municipal Golf Course. Most of the intervening land consists of scrub woods and vacant lots.

One final note. Katie Arlen and I dated for four months, November 1994 through February of 1995. We broke it off by mutual consent, due to sexual incompatibility.

I was impotent unless she was wearing rubber gloves.

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At some point I think every writer of scary stories has to tackle the subject of premature burial, if only because it seems to be such a pervasive fear. When I was a kid of seven or so, the scariest TV program going was Alfred Hitchcock Presents, and the scariest AHP—my friends and I were in total agreement on this—was the one starring Joseph Cotten as a man who has been injured in a car accident. Injured so badly, in fact, that the doctors think he’s dead. They can’t even find a heartbeat. They are on the verge of doing a postmortem on him—cutting him up while he’s still alive and screaming inside, in other words—when he produces one single tear to let them know he’s still alive. That was touching, but touching isn’t in my usual repertoire. When my own thoughts turned to this subject, a more—shall we say modern?—method of communicating liveliness occurred to me, and this story was the result. One final note, regarding the snake: I doubt like hell if there’s any such reptile as a Peruvian boomslang, but in one of her Miss Marple capers, Dame Agatha Christie does mention an African boomslang. I just liked the word so much (boomslang, not African) I had to put it in this story.

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