

THE MOST TERRIFYING NOVEL
EVER WRITTEN



THE
EXORCIST

A NOVEL

FORTIETH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

WILLIAM PETER BLATTY



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BLATTY

HARPER

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And as [Jesus] stepped ashore, there met him a man from the city who was possessed by demons . . . Many times it had laid hold of him and he was bound with chains . . . but he would break the bonds asunder . . . And Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" And he answered, "Legion."

—LUKE 8:27–33

JAMES TORELLO: Jackson was hung up on that meat hook. He was so heavy he bent it. He was on the thing three days before he croaked.

FRANK BUCCIERI (giggling): Jackie, you shoulda seen the guy. Like an elephant, he was, and when Jimmy hit him with that electric prod...

TORELLO (excitedly): He was floppin' around on that hook, Jackie. We tossed water on him to give the prod a better charge, and he's screamin'...

—EXCERPT FROM FBI WIRETAP OF COSA NOSTRA TELEPHONE CONVERSATION RELATING TO
MURDER OF WILLIAM JACKSON

There's no other explanation for some of the things the Communists did. Like the priest who had eight nails driven into his skull ... And there were the seven little boys and their teacher. They were praying the Our Father when soldiers came upon them. One soldier whipped out his bayonet and sliced off the teacher's tongue. The other took chopsticks and drove them into the ears of the seven little boys. How do you treat cases like that?

—DR. TOM DOOLEY

Dachau

Auschwitz

Buchenwald

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Prologue

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The blaze of sun wrung pops of sweat from the old man's brow, yet he cupped his hands around the glass of hot sweet tea as if to warm them. He could not shake the premonition. It clung to his back like chill wet leaves.

The dig was over. The tell had been sifted, stratum by stratum, its entrails examined, tagged and shipped: the beads and pendants; glyptics; phalli; ground-stone mortars stained with ocher; burnished pots. Nothing exceptional. An Assyrian ivory toilet box. And man. The bones of man. The brittle remnants of cosmic torment that once made him wonder if matter was Lucifer upward-groping back to his God. And yet now he knew better. The fragrance of licorice plant and tamarisk tugged his gaze north to poppled hills; to reeded plains; to the ragged, rock-strewn bolt of road that flung itself headlong into dread. Northwest was Mosul; east, Erbil; south was Baghdad and Kirkuk and the fiery furnace of Nebuchadnezzar. He shifted his legs underneath the table in front of the lonely roadside chaykhana and stared at the grass stains on his boots and khaki pants. He sipped at his tea. The dig was over. What was beginning? He dusted the thought like a clay-fresh find but he could not tag it.

Someone wheezed from within the chaykhana: the withered proprietor shuffling toward him, kicking up dust in Russian-made shoes that he wore like slippers, groaning backs pressed under his heels. The dark of his shadow slipped over the table.

"Kaman chay, chawaga?"

The man in khaki shook his head, staring down at the laceless, crusted shoes caked thick with debris of the pain of living. The stuff of the cosmos, he softly reflected: matter; yet somehow final spirit. Spirit and the shoes were to him but aspects of a stuff more fundamental, a stuff that was primordial and totally other.

The shadow shifted. The Kurd stood waiting like an ancient debt. The old man in khaki looked up into eyes that were damply bleached as if the membrane of an eggshell had been pasted over the irises. Glaucoma. Once he could not have loved this man. He slipped out his wallet and probed for a coin among its tattered, crumpled tenants: a few dinars; an Iraqi driver's license; a faded plastic Catholic calendar card that was twelve years out of date. It bore an inscription on the reverse: WHAT WE GIVE TO THE POOR IS WHAT WE TAKE WITH US WHEN WE DIE. He paid for his tea and left a tip of fifty fils on the splintered table the color of sadness.

He walked to his jeep. The rippling click of key sliding into ignition was crisp in the silence. For a moment he paused and stared off broodingly. In the distance, shimmering in heat haze that made the world look afloat like an island in the sky, loomed the flat-topped, towering mound city of Erbil, its fractured rooftops poised in the clouds like a rubble, mud-stained benediction.

The leaves clutched tighter at the flesh of his back.

Something was waiting.

"Allah ma'ak, chawaga."

Rotted teeth. The Kurd was grinning, waving farewell. The man in khaki groped for a warmth in the pit of his being and came up with a wave and a mustered smile. It dimmed as he looked away. F

started the engine, turned in a narrow, eccentric U and headed toward Mosul. The Kurd stood watching, puzzled by a heart-dropping sense of loss as the jeep gathered speed. What was it that was gone? What was it he had felt in the stranger's presence? Something like safety, he remembered; a sense of protection and deep well-being. Now it dwindled in the distance with the fast-moving jeep. He felt strangely alone.

By ten after six the painstaking inventory was finished. The Mosul curator of antiquities, an Arab with sagging cheeks, was carefully penning a final entry into the ledger on his desk. For a moment he paused, looking up at his friend as he dipped his pen-point into an inkpot. The man in khaki seemed lost in thought. He was standing by a table, hands in his pockets, staring down at some dry, tagged whisper of the past. Curious, unmoving, for moments the curator watched him, then returned to the entry, writing in a firm, very small neat script until at last he sighed, setting down the pen as he noted the time. The train to Baghdad left at eight. He blotted the page and offered tea.

His eyes still fixed upon something on the table, the man in khaki shook his head. The Arab watched him, vaguely troubled. What was in the air? There was something in the air. He stood up and moved closer; then felt a vague prickling at the back of his neck as his friend at last moved, reaching down for an amulet and cradling it pensively in his hand. It was a green stone head of the demon Pazuzu, personification of the southwest wind. Its dominion was sickness and disease. The head was pierced. The amulet's owner had worn it as a shield.

"Evil against evil," breathed the curator, languidly fanning himself with a French scientific periodical, an olive-oil thumbprint smudged on its cover.

His friend did not move; he did not comment. The curator tilted his head to the side. "Is something wrong?" he asked.

No answer.

"Father Merrin?"

The man in khaki still appeared not to hear, absorbed in the amulet, the last of his finds. After a moment he set it down, then lifted a questioning look to the Arab. Had he said something?

"No, Father. Nothing."

They murmured farewells.

At the door, the curator took the old man's hand with an extra firmness.

"My heart has a wish: that you would not go."

His friend answered softly in terms of tea; of time; of something to be done.

"No, no, no! I meant home!"

The man in khaki fixed his gaze on a speck of boiled chickpea nestled in a corner of the Arab's mouth; yet his eyes were distant. "Home," he repeated.

The word had the sound of an ending.

"The States," the Arab curator added, instantly wondering why he had.

The man in khaki looked into the dark of the other's concern. He had never found it difficult to love this man. "Goodbye," he said quietly; then quickly turned and stepped out into the gathering gloom of the streets and a journey home whose length seemed somehow undetermined.

"I will see you in a year!" the curator called after him from the doorway. But the man in khaki never looked back. The Arab watched his dwindling form as he crossed a narrow street at an angle almost colliding with a swiftly moving droshky. Its cab bore a corpulent old Arab woman, her face in shadow behind the black lace veil draped loosely over her like a shroud. He guessed she was rushing

to some appointment. He soon lost sight of his hurrying friend.

The man in khaki walked, compelled. Shrugging loose of the city, he breached the outskirts crossing the Tigris with hurrying steps, but nearing the ruins, he slowed his pace, for with every step the inchoate presentiment took firmer, more terrible form.

Yet he had to know. He would have to prepare.

A wooden plank that bridged the Khosr, a muddy stream, creaked under his weight. And then he was there, standing on the mound where once gleamed fifteen-gated Nineveh, feared nest of Assyrian hordes. Now the city lay sprawled in the bloody dust of its predestination. And yet he was here, the air was still thick with him, that Other who ravaged his dreams.

The man in khaki prowled the ruins. The Temple of Nabu. The Temple of Ishtar. He sifted vibrations. At the palace of Ashurbanipal he stopped and looked up at a limestone statue hulking *situ*. Ragged wings and taloned feet. A bulbous, jutting, stubby penis and a mouth stretched taut in a feral grin. The demon Pazuzu.

Abruptly the man in khaki sagged.

He bowed his head.

He knew.

It was coming.

He stared at the dust and the quickening shadows. The orb of the sun was beginning to slip beneath the rim of the world and he could hear the dim yappings of savage dog packs prowling the fringes of the city. He rolled his shirtsleeves down and buttoned them as a shivering breeze sprang up. Its source was southwest.

He hastened toward Mosul and his train, his heart encased in the icy conviction that soon he would be hunted by an ancient enemy whose face he had never seen.

But he knew his name.



The Beginning

Chapter One

Like the brief doomed flare of exploding suns that registers dimly on blind men's eyes, the beginning of the horror passed almost unnoticed; in the shriek of what followed, in fact, was forgotten and perhaps not connected to the horror at all. It was difficult to judge.

The house was a rental. Brooding. Tight. A brick colonial gripped by ivy in the Georgetown section of Washington, D.C. Across the street was a fringe of campus belonging to Georgetown University; to the rear, a sheer embankment plummeting steep to busy M Street and, just beyond, the River Potomac. Early on the morning of April 1, the house was quiet. Chris MacNeil was propped in bed, going over her lines for the next day's filming; Regan, her daughter, was sleeping down the hall; and asleep downstairs in a room off the pantry were the middle-aged housekeepers, Willie and Karl. At approximately 12:25 A.M., Chris looked up from her script with a frown of puzzlement. She heard rapping sounds. They were odd. Muffled. Profound. Rhythmically clustered. Alien code tapped out by a dead man.

Funny.

For a moment she listened, then dismissed it; but as the rappings persisted she could not concentrate. She slapped down the script on the bed.

Jesus, that bugs me!

She got up to investigate.

She went out to the hallway and looked around. The rappings seemed to be coming from Regan's bedroom.

What is she doing?

She padded down the hall and the rappings grew suddenly louder, much faster, and as she pushed on the door and stepped into the room, they abruptly ceased.

What the fuck's going on?

Her pretty eleven-year-old was asleep, cuddled tight to a large stuffed round-eyed panda. Pooker. Faded from years of smothering; years of smacking, warm, wet kisses.

Chris moved softly to her bedside, leaned over and whispered. "Rags? You awake?"

Regular breathing. Heavy. Deep.

Chris shifted her glance around the room. Dim light from the hall fell pale and splintery on Regan's paintings and sculptures; on more stuffed animals.

Okay, Rags. Your old mother's ass is draggin'. Come on, say it! Say "April Fool!"

And yet Chris knew well that such games weren't like her. The child had a shy and diffident nature. Then who was the trickster? A somnolent mind imposing order on the rattlings of heating and plumbing pipes? Once, in the mountains of Bhutan, she had stared for hours at a Buddhist monk who was squatting on the ground in meditation. Finally, she thought she had seen him levitate, though when recounting the story to someone, she invariably added "Maybe." And maybe now her mind, she thought, that untiring raconteur of illusion, had embellished the rappings.

Bullshit! I heard it!

Abruptly, she flicked a quick glance to the ceiling.

There! Faint scratchings.

Rats in the attic, for pete's sake! Rats!

She sighed. *That's it. Big tails. Thump, thump!* She felt oddly relieved. And then noticed the cold. The room. It was icy.

Chris padded to the window and checked it. Closed. Then she felt the radiator. Hot.

Oh, really?

Puzzled, she moved to the bedside and touched her hand to Regan's cheek. It was smooth and thought and lightly perspiring.

I must be sick!

Chris looked at her daughter, at the turned-up nose and freckled face, and on a quick, warm impulse leaned over the bed and kissed her cheek. "I sure do love you," she whispered. After that she returned to her room and her bed and her script.

For a while, Chris studied. The film was a musical comedy remake of *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. A subplot had been added that dealt with campus insurrections. Chris was starring. She played a psychology teacher who sided with the rebels. And she hated it. *This scene is the pits!* she thought. *It's dumb!* Her mind, though untutored, never took slogans for the truth, and like a curious bluejay she would peck relentlessly through verbiage to find the glistening, hidden fact. And so the rebel cause didn't make any sense to her. *But how come?* she now wondered. *Generation gap? That's a crock; I'm thirty-two. It's just stupid, that's all, it's a...!*

Cool it. Only one more week.

They'd completed the interiors in Hollywood and all that remained to be filmed were a few exterior scenes on the campus of Georgetown University, starting tomorrow.

Heavy lids. She was getting drowsy. She turned to a page that was curiously ragged. Her British director, Burke Dennings. When especially tense, he would tear, with quivering, fluttering hands, a narrow strip from the edge of the handiest page of the script and then slowly chew it, inch by inch until it was all in a wet ball in his mouth.

Crazy Burke, Chris thought.

She covered a yawn, then fondly glanced at the side of her script. The pages looked gnawed. She remembered the rats. *The little bastards sure got rhythm,* she thought. She made a mental note to have Karl set traps for them in the morning.

Fingers relaxing. Script slipping loose. She let it drop. *Dumb,* she thought. *It's dumb.* A fumbling hand groping out to the light switch. *There.* She sighed, and for a time she was motionless, almost asleep; and then she kicked off her covers with a lazy leg.

Too hot! Too freaking hot! She thought again about the puzzling coldness of Regan's room and into her mind flashed a recollection of working in a film with Edward G. Robinson, the legendary gangster movie star of the 1940s, and wondering why in every scene they did together she was always close to shivering from the cold until she realized that the wily old veteran had been managing to stand in her key light. A faint smile of bemusement now, and as a mist of dew clung gently to the windowpanes. Chris slept. And dreamed about death in the staggering particular, death as if death were still never yet heard of while something was ringing, she gasping, dissolving, slipping off into void while thinking over and over, I am not going to be, I will die, I won't be, and forever and ever oh, Papa, don't let them, oh, don't let them do it, don't let me be nothing forever and melting, unraveling, ringing, the ringing—

The phone!

She leaped up with her heart pounding, hand to the phone and no weight in her stomach; a co with no weight and her telephone ringing.

She answered. The assistant director.

“In makeup at six, honey.”

“Right.”

“How ya feelin’?”

“Like I just went to bed.”

The AD chuckled. “I’ll see you.”

“Yeah, right.”

Chris hung up the phone and for moments sat motionless, thinking of the dream. A dream? More like thought in the half life of waking: That terrible clarity. Glean of the skull. Nonbeing. Irreversible. She could not imagine it.

God, it can't be!

Dejected, she bowed her head.

But it is.

She padded to the bathroom, put on a robe, then quickly pattered down old pine steps to the kitchen, down to life in sputtering bacon.

“Ah, good morning, Mrs. MacNeil!”

Gray, drooping Willie, squeezing oranges, blue sacs beneath her eyes. A trace of accent. Swiss. Like Karl’s. She wiped her hands on a paper towel and started moving toward the stove.

“I’ll get it, Willie.” Chris, ever sensitive, had seen the housekeeper’s weary look, and as Willie now grunted and turned back to the sink, the actress poured coffee, then sat down in the breakfast nook, where, looking down at her plate, she smiled fondly at a blush-red rose against its whiteness. *Regan. That angel.* Many a morning, when Chris was working, Regan would quietly slip out of bed, come down to the kitchen to place a flower on her mother’s empty plate and then grope her way crusty-eyed back to her sleep. On this particular morning, Chris ruefully shook her head as she recalled that she had contemplated naming her Goneril. *Sure. Right on. Get ready for the worst.* Chris faintly smiled at the memory. She sipped at her coffee and as her gaze caught the rose again, her expression turned briefly sad, her green eyes grieving in a waiflike face. She’d recalled another flower. A son. Jamie. He had died long ago at the age of three, when Chris was very young and a unknown chorus girl on Broadway. She had sworn she would not give herself ever again as she had to Jamie; as she had to his father, Howard MacNeil; and as her dream of death misted upward in the vapors from her hot, black coffee, she lifted her glance from the rose and her thoughts as Willie brought juice and set it down before her.

Chris remembered the rats.

“Where’s Karl?”

“I am here, Madam!”

He’d come catting in lithely through a door off the pantry. Commanding and yet deferential, he had a fragment of Kleenex pressed to his chin where he’d nicked himself shaving. “Yes?” Thick muscled and tall, he breathed by the table with glittering eyes, a hawk nose and bald head.

“Hey, Karl, we’ve got rats in the attic. Better get us some traps.”

“There are rats?”

“I just said that.”

“But the attic is clean.”

“Well, okay, we’ve got *tidy* rats!”

“No rats.”

“Karl, I heard them last night.”

“Maybe plumbing,” Karl probed; “maybe boards.”

“Maybe *rats!* Will you buy the damn traps and quit arguing?”

Bustling away, Karl, said, “Yes! I go now!”

“No not *now*, Karl! The stores are all closed!”

“They are closed!” chided Willie, calling out to him.

But he was gone.

Chris and Willie traded glances, and then, shaking her head, Willie returned to her tending of the bacon. Chris sipped at her coffee. *Strange. Strange man*, she thought. Like Willie, hardworking; very loyal, very discreet. And yet something about him made her vaguely uneasy. What was it? That subtle air of arrogance? No. Something else. But she couldn’t pin it down. The housekeepers had been with her for almost six years, and yet Karl was a mask—a talking, breathing, untranslated hieroglyph running her errands on stilted legs. Behind the mask, though, something moved; she could hear his mechanism ticking like a conscience. The front door creaked open, then shut. “They are closed,” muttered Willie.

Chris nibbled at bacon, then returned to her room, where she dressed in her costume sweater and skirt. She glanced in a mirror and solemnly stared at her short red hair, which looked perpetually tousled; at the burst of freckles on the small, scrubbed face; and then crossing her eyes and grinning idiotically, she said, *Oh, hi, little wonderful girl next door! Can I speak to your husband? Your lover? Your pimp? Oh, your pimp’s in the poorhouse? Tough!* She stuck out her tongue at herself. The door sagged. *Ah, Christ, what a life!* She picked up her wig box, slouched downstairs and walked out to the piquant, tree-lined street.

For a moment she paused outside the house, breathing in the fresh promise of morning air, the muted everyday sounds of waking life. She turned a wistful look to her right, where, beside the house, a precipitous plunge of old stone steps fell away to M Street far below, while a little beyond were the antique brick rococo turrets and Mediterranean tiled roof of the upper entry to the old Car Barn. *Fun neighborhood*, she thought. *Dammit, why don’t I stay? Buy the house? Start to live? A deep* booming bell began to toll, the tower clock on the Georgetown University campus. The melancholy resonance shivered on the surface of the mud-brown river and seeped into the actress’s tired heart. She walked toward her work, toward ghastly charade and the straw-stuffed, antic imitation of dust.

As she entered the main front gates of the campus, her depression diminished; then lessened even more as she looked at the row of trailer dressing rooms aligned along the driveway close to the southern perimeter wall; and by 8 A.M. and the day’s first shot, she was almost herself: she started an argument over the script.

“Hey, Burke? Take a look at this damned thing, will ya?”

“Oh, you *do* have a script, I see! How nice!” Director Burke Dennings, taut and elfin and with a twitching left eye that gleamed with mischief, surgically shaved a narrow strip from a page of his script with quivering fingers, cackling, “I believe I’ll have a bit of munch.”

They were standing on the esplanade that fronted the university's main administration building and were knotted in the center of extras, actors and the film's main crew, while here and there a few spectators dotted the lawn, mostly Jesuit faculty. The cameraman, bored, picked up *Daily Variety*. Dennings put the paper in his mouth and giggled, his breath reeking faintly of the morning's first gin

"Oh, yes, I'm *terribly* glad you've been given a script!"

A sly, frail man in his fifties, he spoke with a charmingly broad British accent so clipped and precise that it lofted even the crudest obscenities to elegance, and when he drank, he seemed always on the verge of a guffaw; seemed constantly struggling to retain his composure.

"Now then, tell me, my baby. What is it? What's wrong?"

The scene in question called for the dean of the mythical college in the script to address a gathering of students in an effort to squelch a threatened sit-in. Chris would then run up the steps of the esplanade, tear the bullhorn away from the dean and then point to the main administration building and shout, "Let's tear it down!"

"It doesn't make any sense," Chris told him.

"Well, it's perfectly plain," Dennings lied.

"Oh, it is? Well, then explain it to me, Burkey-Wurky. Why in freak should they tear down the building? What for? What's your concept?"

"Are you sending me up?"

"No, I'm asking 'what for?'"

"Because it's *there*, love!"

"In the script?"

"No, on the *grounds*!"

"Oh, come on, Burke, it just isn't her. It's not her character at all. She wouldn't do that."

"She would."

"No, she wouldn't."

"Shall we summon the writer? I believe he's in Paris!"

"Hiding?"

"Fucking!"

He'd clipped the word off with impeccable diction, his fox eyes glinting in a face like dough as the word rose crisp to Gothic spires. Chris fell to his shoulders, weak and laughing. "Oh, Burke, you're impossible, dammit!"

"Yes." He said it like Caesar modestly confirming reports of his triple rejection of the crowd. "Now then, shall we get on with it?"

Chris didn't hear him. Checking to see if he'd heard the obscenity, she'd darted a furtive, embarrassed glance to a Jesuit in his forties standing amid the cordon of spectators. He had a dark, rugged face. Like a boxer's. Chipped. Something sad about the eyes, something grieving, and yet warm and reassuring as they fastened on hers and as, smiling, he nodded his head. He'd heard it. He glanced at his watch and moved away.

"I say, shall we get on with it?"

Chris turned, disconnected. "Yeah, sure, Burke. Let's do it."

"Thank heaven."

"No, wait!"

“Oh, good Christ!”

She complained about the tag of the scene. She felt that the high point was reached with her line opposed to her running through the door of the building immediately afterward.

“It adds nothing,” said Chris. “It’s dumb.”

“Yes, it is, love, it is,” agreed Burke sincerely. “However, the cutter insists that we do it,” he continued, “so there we are. You see?”

“No, I don’t.”

“No, of course you don’t, darling, because you’re absolutely right, it *is* stupid. You see, since the scene right after it”—Dennings giggled—“well, since it begins with Jed coming *into* the scene through a door, the cutter feels certain of a nomination if the scene before it ends with you moving *off* through a door.”

“Are you kidding?”

“Oh, I agree with you, love. It’s simply cunting, puking mad! But now why don’t we shoot it and trust me to snip it from the final cut. It should make a rather tasty munch.”

Chris laughed. And agreed. Burke glanced toward the cutter, who was known to be a temperamental egotist given to time-wasting argumentation. He was busy with the cameraman. The director breathed a sigh of relief.

Waiting on the lawn at the base of the steps while the lights were warming, Chris looked toward Dennings as he flung an obscenity at a hapless grip and then visibly glowed with satisfaction. He seemed to revel in his eccentricity. Yet at a certain point in his drinking, Chris knew, he could suddenly explode into temper, and if it happened at three or four in the morning, he was likely to telephone people in power and viciously abuse them over trifling provocations. Chris remembered a studio chief whose offense had consisted in remarking mildly at a screening that the cuffs on Dennings’s shirt looked slightly frayed, prompting Dennings to awaken him at approximately 3 A.M. to describe him as a “cunting boor” whose father, the founder of the studio, was “more than likely psychotic!” and had “fondled Judy Garland repeatedly” during the filming of *The Wizard of Oz*, the next day on the following day would pretend to amnesia and subtly radiate with pleasure when those he had offended described in detail what he had done. Although, if it suited him, he would remember. Chris smiled and shook her head as she remembered him destroying his studio suite of offices in a gin-stoked, mindless rage, and how later, when confronted by the studio’s head of production with an itemized bill and Polaroid photos of the wreckage, he’d archly dismissed them as “obvious fake” since “the damage was far, far worse than that!” Chris did not believe he was an alcoholic or even a hopeless problem drinker, but rather that he drank and behaved outrageously because it was expected of him: he was living up to his legend.

Ah, well, she thought; I guess it’s a kind of immortality.

She turned, looking over her shoulder for the Jesuit who had smiled when Burke had uttered the obscenity. He was walking in the distance, head lowered despondently, a lone black cloud in search of the rain. She had never liked priests. So assured. So secure. And yet this one...

“All ready, Chris?”

“Ready.”

“All right, absolute quiet!” the assistant director called out.

“Roll the film,” ordered Burke.

“Rolling!”

“Speed!”

“Now *action!*”

Chris ran up the steps while extras cheered and Dennings watched her, wondering what was on her mind. She'd given up the arguments far too quickly. He turned a significant look to the dialogue coach, who immediately padded up to him dutifully and proffered his open script to him like an altar boy handing the missal to his priest at solemn Mass.

They had worked with only intermittent sun, and by four, the sky was dark and thick with roiling clouds.

“Burke, we're losing the light,” the AD observed worriedly.

“Yes, they're going out all across the fucking world.”

On Dennings's instruction the assistant director dismissed the company for the day and now Chris was walking homeward, her eyes on the sidewalk, and feeling very tired. At the corner of Thirty-sixth and O she stopped to sign an autograph for an aging Italian grocery clerk who had hailed her from the doorway of his shop. She wrote her name and “Warm Best Wishes” on a brown paper bag. Waiting for a car to pass before crossing the road at N Street, she glanced diagonally across the street to a Catholic church. Holy Something-or-other. Staffed by Jesuits. John F. Kennedy had married Jackie there, she had heard, and had worshiped there. She tried to imagine it: John F. Kennedy among the votive lights and the pious, wrinkled women; John F. Kennedy with his head bowed down in prayer; *I believe ... détente with the Russians; I believe, I believe ... Apollo IV amid the rattlings of the rosary beads; believe in the resurrection and the life ever—*

That. That's it. That's the grabber.

Chris watched as a Gunther beer truck lumbered by on the cobbled street with a sound quivering, warm, wet promises.

She crossed, and as she walked down O and passed the Holy Trinity grade school auditorium, a priest rushed by from behind her, hands in the pockets of a nylon windbreaker. Young. Very tense. In need of a shave. Up ahead, he took a right, turning into an easement that opened to a courtyard behind the church.

Chris paused by the easement, watching him, curious. He seemed to be heading for a white frame cottage. An old screen door creaked open and still another priest emerged. He nodded curtly toward the young man, and with lowered eyes, he moved quickly toward a door that led into the church. Once again the cottage door was pushed open from within. Another priest. It looked—*Hey, it is! Yeah, that's the one who was smiling when Burke said “fucking”!* Only now he looked grave as he silently greeted the new arrival, putting his arm around his shoulder in a gesture that was gentle and somehow parental. He led him inside and the screen door closed with a slow, faint squeak.

Chris stared at her shoes. She was puzzled. *What's the drill?* She wondered if Jesuits went to confession.

Faint rumble of thunder. She looked up at the sky. Would it rain? ... the resurrection and the life ever...

Yeah. Yeah, sure. Next Tuesday. Flashes of lightning crackled in the distance. *Don't call us, kids. We'll call you.*

She tugged up her coat collar and slowly moved on.

She hoped it would pour.

A minute later she was home. She made a dash for the bathroom. After that, she walked into the

kitchen.

“Hi, Chris, how’d it go?”

Pretty blonde in her twenties sitting at the table. Sharon Spencer. Fresh. From Oregon. For the last three years, she’d been tutor to Regan and social secretary to Chris.

“Oh, the usual crock.” Chris sauntered to the table and began to sift messages. “Anything exciting?”

“Do you want to have dinner next week at the White House?”

“Oh, I dunno, Marty; whadda *you* feel like doin’?”

“Eating candy and getting sick.”

“Where’s Rags?”

“Downstairs in the playroom.”

“What doin’?”

“Sculpting. She’s making a bird, I think. It’s for you.”

“Yeah, I need one,” Chris murmured. She moved to the stove and poured a cup of hot coffee. “Were you kidding me about that dinner?” she asked.

“No, of course not,” answered Sharon. “It’s Thursday.”

“Big dinner party?”

“No, I gather it’s just five or six people.”

“Hey, neat-o!”

She was pleased but not really surprised. They courted her company: cabdrivers; poets; professors; kings. What was it they liked about her? Life?

Chris sat at the table. “How’d the lesson go?”

Sharon lit a cigarette, frowning. “Had a bad time with math again.”

“Really? That’s strange.”

“Yeah, I know; it’s her favorite subject.”

“Oh, well, this ‘new math.’ Christ, I couldn’t make change for the bus if—”

“Hi, Mom!”

Her slim arms outstretched, Chris’s young daughter had come bounding through the door toward her mother. Red pigtails. A soft, shining face full of freckles.

“Hi ya, stinkpot!” Beaming, Chris caught her in a bear hug and kissed her pink cheek with smacking ardor; she could not repress the full flood of her love. “Mmum-mmum-mmum!” More kisses. Then she held Regan out and probed her face with eager eyes. “So what’djya do today? Anything exciting?”

“Oh, stuff.”

“So what *kinda* stuff? Good stuff? Huh?”

“Oh, lemme see.” She had her knees against her mother’s, swaying gently back and forth. “Well, of course, I studied.”

“Uh-huh.”

“An’ I painted.”

“Wha’djya paint?”

“Oh, well, flowers, ya know. Daisies? Only pink. An’ then—oh, yeah! This *horse!*” She gre

suddenly excited, eyes widening. “This man had a *horse*, ya know, down by the river? We were walking, see, Mom, and then along came this horse, he was *beautiful!* Oh, Mom, ya should’ve seen him, and the man let me sit on him! *Really!* I mean, practically a minute!”

Chris twinkled at Sharon with secret amusement. “Himself?” she asked, lifting an eyebrow. Coming to Washington for the shooting of the film, the blonde secretary, who was now virtually one of the family, had lived in the house, occupying an extra bedroom upstairs. Until she’d met the “horseman” at a nearby stable, at which point Chris decided that Sharon needed a place to be alone and had moved her to a suite in an expensive hotel and insisted on paying the bill.

“Yes, himself,” Sharon answered with a smile.

“It was a *gray* horse!” added Regan. “Mother, can’t we get a horse? I mean, *could* we?”

“We’ll see, baby.”

“When could I have one?”

“We’ll see. Where’s the bird you made?”

At first Regan looked blank, then she turned around to Sharon and grinned with a mouth full of braces and shy rebuke. “You told!” she said before turning to her mother and snickering, “It was supposed to be a surprise.”

“You mean...?”

“With the long funny nose, like you wanted!”

“Oh, Rags, you’re so sweet. Can I see it?”

“No, I still have to paint it. When’s dinner, Mom?”

“Hungry?”

“I’m *starving.*”

“Gee, it’s not even five. When was lunch?” Chris asked Sharon.

“Oh, twelvish,” Sharon answered.

“When are Willie and Karl coming back?”

Chris had given them the afternoon off.

“I think seven,” said Sharon.

“Mom, can’t we go Hot Shoppe?” Regan pleaded. “Could we?”

Chris lifted her daughter’s hand; smiled fondly, kissed it, then answered, “Run upstairs and get dressed and we’ll go.”

“Oh, I *love* you!”

Regan ran from the room.

“Honey, wear the new dress!” Chris called out after her.

“How would you like to be eleven again?” mused Sharon.

“I dunno.”

Reaching for her mail, Chris began sorting through scrawled adulation. “With the brain I’ve got now? All the memories?”

“Sure.”

“No deal.”

“Think it over.”

Chris dropped the letters and picked up a script with a covering letter from her agent, Edward

Jarris, clipped neatly to the front of it. "Thought I told them no scripts for a while."

"You should read it," said Sharon.

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yes, I read it this morning."

"Pretty good?"

"I think it's great."

"And I get to play a nun who discovers she's a lesbian, right?"

"No, you get to play nothing."

"Shit, movies *are* better than ever! What in freak are you talking about, Sharon? What's the gr for?"

"They want you to direct," Sharon exhaled coyly along with the smoke from her cigarette.

"What?"

"Read the letter."

"Oh, my God, Shar, you're kidding!"

Chris pounced on the letter, her eyes snapping up the words in hungry chunks: "... new script ... triptych ... studio wants Sir Stephen Moore ... accepting role provided—"

"*I direct his segment!*"

Chris flung up her arms, letting loose a hoarse, shrill cry of joy. Then with both her hands she cuddled the letter to her chest. "Oh, Steve, you angel, you remembered!" Filming in Africa, drunk and in camp chairs watching the vermilion and gold end of day. "*Ah, the business is bunk! For the act it's crap, Steve!*" "*Oh, I like it.*" "*It's crap! Don't you know where it's at in this business? Directing! Then you've done something, something that's yours; I mean, something that lives!*" "*Well, then do love! Do it!*" "*Oh, I've tried, Steve. I've tried; they won't buy it.*" "*Why not?*" "*Oh, come on, you know why: they don't think I can cut it.*" "*Well, I think you can.*"

Warm smile. Warm remembrance. Dear Steve...

"Mom, I can't find the dress!" Regan called from the landing.

"In the closet!" Chris answered.

"I looked!"

"I'll be up in a second!" Chris called. She flipped through the pages of the script, and then stopped looking wilted as she murmured, "I'll bet it's probably crap."

"Oh, I don't think so, Chris! No! I really think it's good!"

"Oh, you thought *Psycho* needed a laugh track."

"Mommy?"

"I'm coming!"

"Got a date, Shar?"

"Yes."

Chris motioned at the mail. "You go on, then. We can catch all this stuff in the morning."

Sharon got up.

"Oh, no, wait," Chris amended. "No, I'm sorry, there's a letter that's got to go out tonight."

"Oh, okay." Sharon reached for her dictation pad.

A whine of impatience. "Moth-therrrr!"

Chris exhaled a sigh, stood up and said, "Back in a minute," but then hesitated, seeing Sharon checking the time on her watch. Chris said, "What?"

"Gee, it's time for me to meditate, Chris."

Chris eyed her narrowly with fond exasperation. In the last six months, she had watched her secretary metamorphose into a "seeker after serenity." It had started in Los Angeles with self-hypnosis, which then yielded to Buddhist chanting. During the last few weeks that Sharon was quartered in the room upstairs, the house had reeked of incense, and lifeless dronings of "*Nam myohou renge kyo*" ("See, you just keep on chanting that, Chris, just that, and you get your wish, you get everything you want...") were heard at unlikely and untimely hours, usually when Chris was studying her lines. "You can turn on the TV," Sharon generously told her employer on one of these occasions. "It's fine. I can chant when there's all kinds of noise."

Now it was Transcendental Meditation.

"You really think that kind of stuff is going to do you any good, Shar?"

"It gives me peace of mind," responded Sharon.

"Right," Chris commented tonelessly, and then turned and started away with a murmured "*Nam myohou renge kyo*."

"Keep it up about fifteen or twenty minutes," Sharon called to her. "Maybe for you it would work."

Chris halted and considered a measured response. Then she gave it up. She went upstairs to Regan's bedroom, moving immediately to the closet. Regan was standing in the middle of the room staring up at the ceiling.

"So what's doin'?" Chris asked Regan as she hunted in a closet for the dress. It was a pale-blue cotton. She'd bought it the week before, and remembered hanging it in this closet.

"Funny noises," said Regan.

"Yeah, I know. We've got friends."

Regan looked at her. "Huh?"

"Squirrels, honey; squirrels in the attic." Her daughter was squeamish and terrified of rats. Even mice upset her.

The hunt for the dress proved fruitless.

"See, Mom, it's not there."

"Yes, I see. Maybe Willie picked it up with the cleaning."

"It's gone."

"Yeah, well, put on the navy. It's pretty."

After a matinee screening of Shirley Temple in *Wee Willie Winkie* at an art-house cinema in Georgetown, they drove across the river on the Key Bridge to the Hot Shoppe in Rosslyn, Virginia, where Chris ate a salad while Regan had soup, two sourdough rolls, fried chicken, a strawberry shake, and blueberry pie topped with chocolate ice cream. *Where does she put it, Chris wondered. In her wrists?* The child was slender as a fleeting hope.

Chris lit a cigarette over her coffee and looked through the window on her right at the spires of Georgetown University before lowering a pensive and moody gaze to the Potomac's deceptive, placid surface, which offered no hint of the perilously swift and powerful currents that surged underneath it. Chris shifted her weight a little. In the soft, smoothing light of evening, the river, with

its seeming dead calm and stillness, suddenly struck her as something that was planning.

And waiting.

“I enjoyed my dinner, Mom.”

Chris turned to Regan’s happy smile, and, as so often had happened before, caught a quick gasping breath as once again she experienced that tugging, unsummoned little ache that she sometimes felt on suddenly seeing Howard’s image in her face. It was the angle of the light, she often thought. She dropped her glance to Regan’s plate.

“Going to leave that pie?”

Regan lowered her eyes. “Mom, I ate some candy before.”

Chris stubbed out her cigarette and smiled.

“Come on, Rags, let’s go home.”

They were back before seven. Willie and Karl had already returned. Regan made a dash for the basement playroom, eager to finish the sculpture for her mother. Chris headed for the kitchen to pick up the script. She found Willie brewing coffee; coarse; open pot. She looked irritable and sullen.

“Hi, Willie, how’d it go? Have a real nice time?”

“Do not ask.” Willie added an eggshell and a pinch of salt to the bubbling contents of the pot. The car had gone to a movie, Willie explained. She had wanted to see the Beatles, but Karl had insisted on a art-house film about Mozart. “Terrible,” she simmered as she lowered the flame. “That dumbhead!”

“Sorry ’bout that.” Chris tucked the script underneath her arm. “Oh, Willie, have you seen the dress that I got for Rags last week? The blue cotton?”

“Yes, I see it in her closet this morning.”

“Where’d you put it?”

“It is there.”

“You didn’t maybe pick it up by mistake with the cleaning?”

“It is there.”

“With the cleaning?”

“In the closet.”

“No, it isn’t. I looked.”

About to speak, Willie tightened her lips and scowled. Karl had walked in.

“Good evening, Madam.”

He went to the sink for a glass of water.

“Did you set those traps?” asked Chris.

“No rats.”

“Did you *set* them?”

“I set them, of course, but the attic is clean.”

“Tell me, how was the movie, Karl?”

“Exciting,” he said. His tone of voice, like his face, was a resolute blank.

Humming a song made famous by the Beatles, Chris started to leave the kitchen, but then abruptly turned around.

Just one more shot!

“Did you have any trouble getting the traps, Karl?”

His back to her, Karl said, "No, Madam. No trouble."

"At six in the morning?"

"All-night market."

Chris softly slapped a hand against her forehead, stared at Karl's back for a moment, and then turned to leave the kitchen, softly muttering, "Shit!"

After a long and luxurious bath, Chris went to the closet in her bedroom for her robe, and discovered Regan's missing dress. It lay crumpled in a heap on the floor of the closet.

Chris picked it up. The purchase tags were still on it.

What's it doing in here?

Chris tried to think back, then remembered that the day she had purchased the dress she had also bought two or three items for herself.

Must've put 'em all together, she decided.

Chris carried the dress into Regan's bedroom, put it on a hanger and slipped it onto the clothes rack in Regan's closet. Hands on her hips, Chris appraised Regan's wardrobe. *Nice. Nice clothes. Yeah, Rags, look here, not over there at the daddy who never writes or calls.*

As she turned from the closet, Chris stubbed her toe against the base of a bureau. *Oh, Jesus, the smarts!* Lifting her foot and massaging her toe, Chris noticed that the bureau was out of position by about three feet.

No wonder I bumped it. Willie must have vacuumed.

She went down to the study with the script from her agent.

Unlike the massive living room with its large bay windows and view of Key Bridge arching over the Potomac to Virginia's shore, the study had a feeling of whispered density; of secrets between rich uncles: a raised brick fireplace, cherrywood paneling and crisscrossed beams of a sturdy wood that looked as if hewn from some ancient drawbridge. The room's few hints of a time that was present were a modern-looking bar with suede and chrome chairs set around it, and some color-splashed Marimekko pillows on a downy sofa where Chris settled down and stretched out with the script from her agent. Stuck between the pages was his letter. She slipped it out now and read it again. *Faith, Hope and Charity:* a film with three distinct segments, each one with a different cast and director. He would be "Hope." She liked the title. Maybe dull, she thought; but refined. *They'll probably change to something like "Rock Around the Virtues."*

The doorbell chimed. Burke Dennings. A lonely man, he dropped by often. Chris smiled ruefully, shaking her head, as she heard him rasp an obscenity at Karl, whom he seemed to detest and continually baited.

"Yes, hullo, where's a drink!" he demanded crossly, entering the room and moving to the bar with his glance averted and his hands in the pockets of his wrinkled raincoat.

He sat on a barstool looking irritable, shifty-eyed and vaguely disappointed.

"On the prowl again?" Chris asked.

"What the hell do you mean?" Dennings sniffed.

"You've got that look." She had seen it before when they'd worked on a picture together in Lausanne. On their first night there, at a staid hotel overlooking Lake Geneva, Chris had difficulty sleeping. At a little after 5 A.M., she flounced out of bed and decided to dress and go down to the lobby in search of either coffee or some company. Waiting for an elevator out in the hall, she glanced

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