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NEW BLOOD

New Fiction
By
**GRAHAM
MASTERTON**

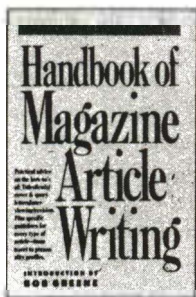
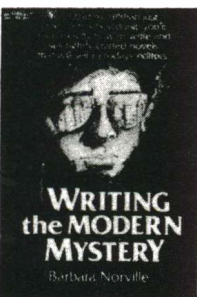
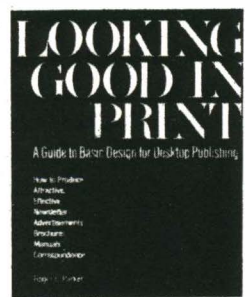
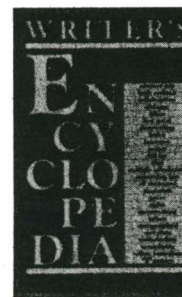
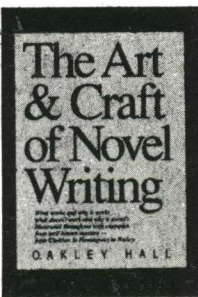
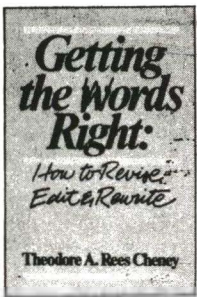
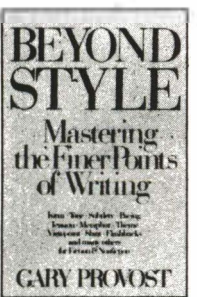
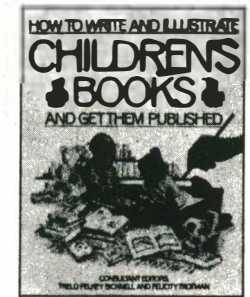
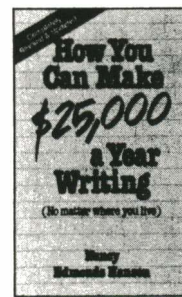
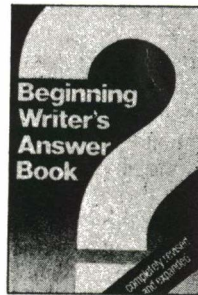
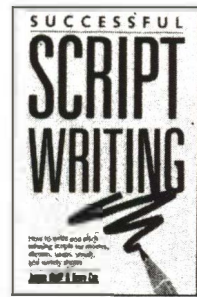
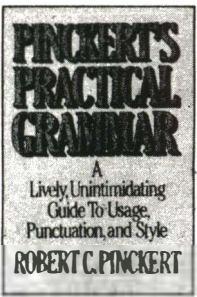
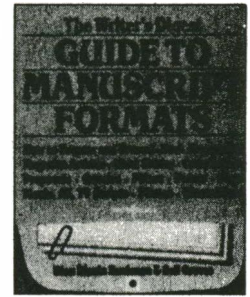
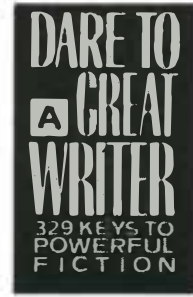
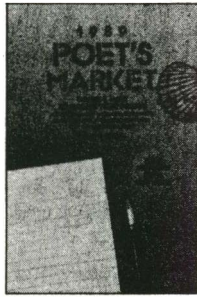
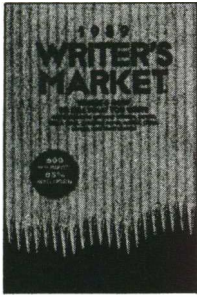


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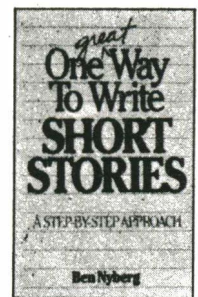
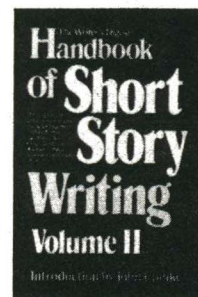
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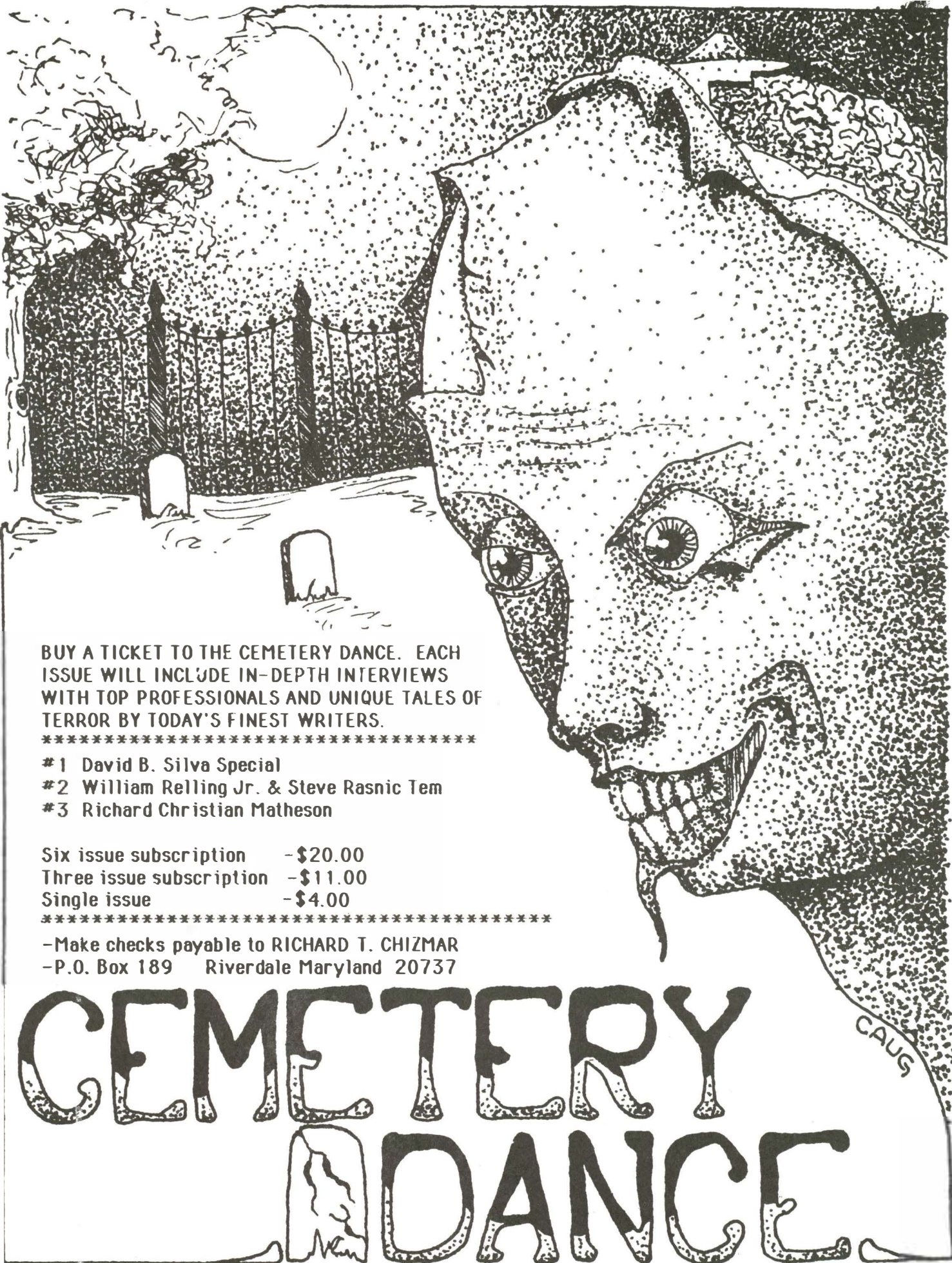
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Nb Contents
No. 5, Winter '89

FACTS:

<i>Interview: Robert R. McCammon</i>	20
Stanley Wiater	
<i>Horror in the Land of the Bicentennial</i>	24
Ron Schroer	
<i>Prose & Conversation</i>	43
Billie Sue Mosiman	
<i>Nb Hostess: Lilith</i>	49
Chris B. Lacher	
<i>Shelf Life: Book Reviews</i>	52
Mike Baker & Chris B. Lacher	
<i>Butcher's Block</i>	64
Ray R. House	

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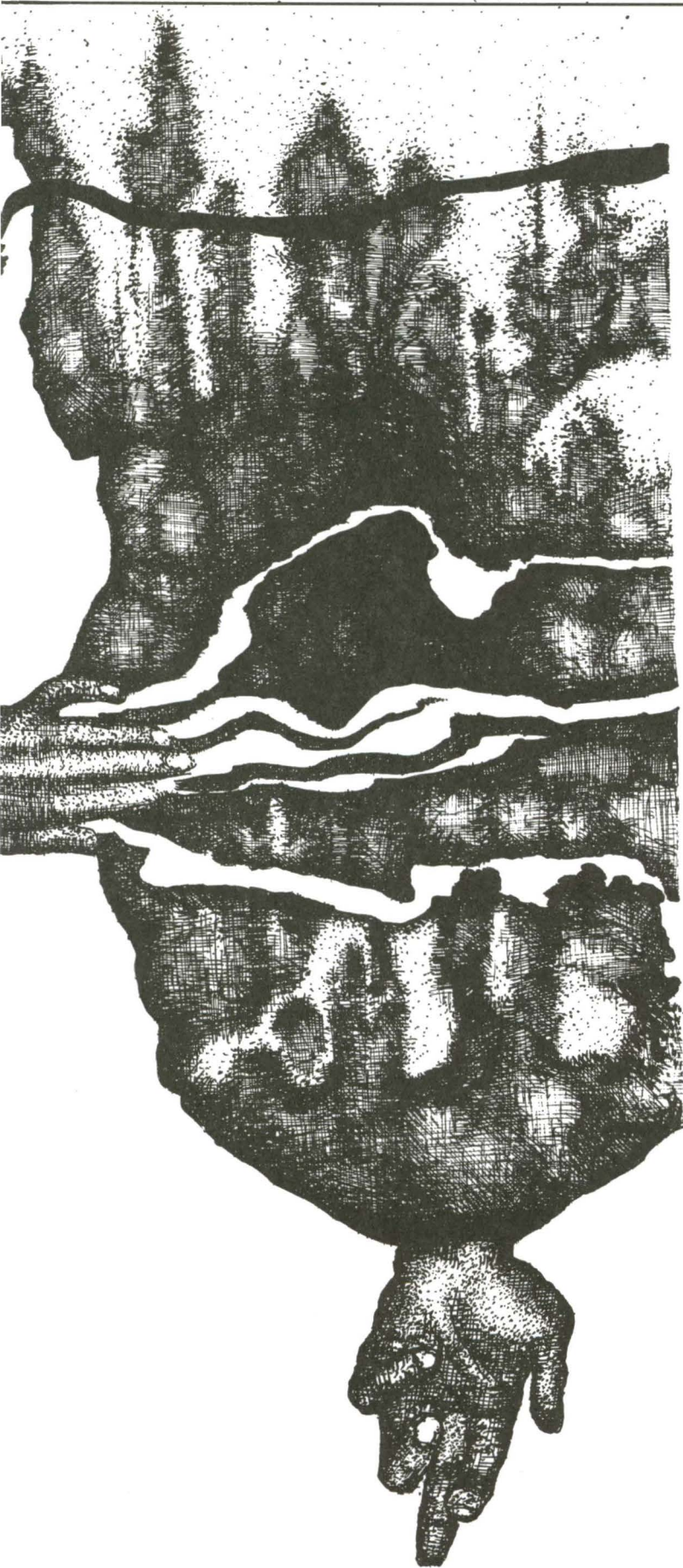
FICTION:

<i>Heart of Stone</i>	5
Graham Masterton	
<i>Happy Birthday, Dave</i>	12
Mike Thorne	
<i>Escape</i>	14
Elizabeth Massie	
<i>The Letter</i>	15
Frances Geczi	
<i>Poetic Justice</i>	17
Paul Jensi	
<i>Absolute Peace and Quiet</i>	26
J.N. Williamson	
<i>Alan's Room</i>	30
J.E. Dressler	
<i>Every Town has One</i>	33
James Robert Smith	
<i>The Bleeder</i>	37
Richard Laymon	
<i>Control</i>	46
David Lindschmidt	
<i>The Deep Blue Sea</i>	55
Steve Rasnic Tem	
<i>Atom and Eve</i>	61
Edgar F. Tatro	

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CBL.





Heart of Stone

*Graham
Masterton*

Ron Maccione stood looking at the meadow for almost five minutes without saying anything, the peak of his Budweiser cap pulled low over his forehead, his tattooed forearms intertwined like the trunks of two gnarled old trees on to which long-dead lovers had carved hearts and flowers and secret messages.

"Tennis courts, you say?" he commented, as if anybody who wanted to turn over 5½ acres of perfectly good agricultural land to the playing of ball games was either mad, or a faggot, or both.

"Six of them," said Richard, confidently. "Six international class asphalt courts. But I'm bringing in Fraser and Fairmont to lay out the courts themselves. All I want you to do is to level the site off."

Ron Maccione sniffed. "Site slopes away to the northwest more than you think. One in eight, maybe one in six. Have to bring in the heavy earthmover. Then you got all them stones to clear. A whole hell of a lot of stones. Always was one hell of a locality for stones, Preston. I've spent two-thirds of my working life clearing away stones."

Richard said, "How about it? You want to quote me a price?"

"Have to do some pretty close figuring first," Ron Maccione told him. "But I can call you Friday for sure. Ballpark, I'd say three thousand."

"That's about a third more than I had in mind."

"Sure. But you have to pick up all these goddamned stones. You can't just turn 'em over and bury 'em. They always rise to the surface again. Laws of natural physics. Cereal-box syndrome."

Richard looked around the weedy, triangular meadow. It was edged on its two far sides by dry stone-walls; and on the nearer side by a sparse screen of pine trees. Through the pines, he could just make out the paleness of the house, like a skull that had been hidden all summer in a hedge, only to be revealed by the onset of fall.

He laid his hand on Ron Maccione's shoulder, trying to act like a buddy. "Okay, whatever you say. I'll wait to hear from you."

He turned and began to walk back to the house. Ron Maccione hesitated for a moment, sniffed, and then followed him.

"Nobody thought we'd ever see a Palen back in Preston," said Ron Maccione. "The Sturgeons are all gone now. So's the Mitchells, and there hasn't been a Nugent since eighty-one."

"I never meant to come back," Richard told him, double-kicking his left ankle to help himself up the dry-stone steps that led to the house. "I always thought I'd retire to Palm Springs. Even had the plans drawn up. The Richard Palen Tennis Center. Ten tennis courts, six air-conditioned squash courts, health club, beauty parlor, restaurant. Nineteen-and-a-half million dollars."

They passed through the screen of pines, and crossed the overgrown garden. Huge rank cabbages grew amongst the grass. Artichokes stood as tall as giant thistles. The silence was complete, like a closed purse. At the end of the garden, the huge weatherboarded house stood mean and miserable, a huge raft of dried-up wisteria hanging precariously from the roof of its conservatory.

"Well, you had your good years," remarked Ron Maccione.

Richard stopped in the garden with his hand over his mouth as if he had forgotten something. Then he looked at Ron Maccione and said, "Yes, sure. I had my good years."

He stood by the front porch watching the red tail-lights of Ron Maccione's pickup truck whinking through the trees. Then he went back into the house and the closed the door.

The hallway was dark and smelled strongly of Black Flag. Everything that Richard remembered from his boyhood had disappeared; the long-case clock, the chair by the door. The last owners had left vestiges of jaundiced linoleum and multicolored venetian blinds, thick with grease and clinging fluff.

Richard stood with his back to the door, listening. The house was so silent that it seemed as if it were dead.

Even houses can be killed. Appropriate, really, since Richard had been killed, too, in almost every respect except that he was still walking, talking, breathing, and waking up each morning with the knowledge that he was faced with yet another day.

A day in which he would have to make his way in the world without wealth, without glory, and without any of the glamor of being Richard Palen, international tennis champion. A day in which he would have to survive alone, without his friends, without his children, without Sara, his wife.

Withdrawn, tight-lipped, scarcely speaking to anybody from the moment he opened his eyes in the early morning to the second he closed them at night, numb with vodka and the exhaustion of trying to forget.

But almost every hour of every day, that split-second, as abrupt and vivid as if it were really happening--as if it would *always* be happening. Turning in the driver's seat to smile at Sara, triumphant after winning the California Open. Then, instantly, a smash that he hadn't even seen coming, straight into the front of an oncoming Safeway truck.

He had spent that split-second in hell. Sara had dived beneath the glove-box in a spray of blood and ripped-apart upholstery, as if there were somewhere beneath the glove-box for her to go. Joanna and Davie had screamed like whistles. Then all he had heard was cracking glass, and the extraordinary broken-bracken noise of his legs being crushed, and somebody saying very close to his ear--maybe later, maybe immediately afterward, "*Jesus Christ.*"

The months that had followed had been an eternal calendar of pain, of white hospital laundry, of flowers that quivered in the afternoon sunlight, and friends with sympathetic, distracted expressions. Then fewer friends, and fewer flowers, but just as much pain.

After almost a year he had sat in the offices of Weinman, Westlake & Calloway, on Nob Hill, with the whole of San Francisco invisible in the fog, and his lawyer had said, "Technically, Rick, you're flat-busted."

That was why he was here, this pale gray October day, in Preston, Connecticut, in the home that his great-grandfather had passed to his grandfather, and his grandfather had passed to his father. It was here that he had met Sara Nugent only eleven years ago, and fallen in love with her. It was here that his mother had died of cancer.

His father had sold the house in 1977 to some strange people whose eyes were like blowflies and had refused to settle in the same place for more than an instant, the Millers. But it had always remained Richard's home. He always thought of the house as his.

After the Millers had left, the house had stood empty for over two years--too far from New York to interest a daily commuter, too large for a weekend cottage, dilapidated, expensive to heat, a casualty of an ageing community that had dwindled to fewer souls than had lived here in the 1700's.

But the house had been priced almost embarrass-

ingly low, and perhaps more importantly it had offered Richard a familiar home when everything familiar had been taken away from him. He planned to lay out tennis courts, renovate the house, and open it up as the Richard Palen Professional Country Club. Five guest suites, a bar, and professional coaching for vengeful executives who wanted to wipe out their senior colleagues on the tennis courts.

It had taken Richard's last \$58,000 plus as much money as he had been able to borrow from the New Milford Savings Bank (another \$75,000) plus the peculiarly cheerless determination that only the recently-bereaved can sustain.

He went through the sitting-room and sat in solitary splendor on a huge damp Sears armchair in coffee-colored velour, and unscrewed a fifth of Jack Daniel's, forbidden by his consultant.

"*Nazdravye*," he told the house, lifting his glass to the damp-jigsawed ceiling.

He didn't know when he fell asleep; but when he woke up it was raining and the first light of dawn was straining into the room, the color of cold tea. The phone was ringing.

He picked up the receiver and said, "Yes?" into the wrong end. It was Ron Maccione, the contractor. He said, "Sorry to call you so early, Mr. Palen. Got to get down to Danbury by nine. Worked your price out, thought you'd like to know it."

"All right," Richard replied, smearing his face with his hand. "What do you think?"

"Well . . . seeing as how your family are Preston folk from wayback, and there's not too many Preston folk left, and seeing how the county's just canceled my contract for asphaltting the parking-lot down at the schoolhouse . . . well, I guess I can clear that meadow for you for two-and-a-half; two-two-fifty for cash."

Richard stood alone and hungover in the middle of the sitting-room. "All right," he agreed. "Go ahead."

It wasn't really the price that decided him. It was the fact that somebody had welcomed him home.

The earth-movers arrived the following Monday, three of them, and churned up and down the field all day, while Ron Maccione came and went, and yelled instructions, and opened one can of Miller Draft after the other. Richard stood by the window feeling detached but somehow more complete, like the day they had taken the plaster cast off his smashed left ankle.

Around noon, the doorbell chimed, and Richard went to the door to find a tall milky-faced woman standing on the step, holding a dish draped in a red gingham cloth.

"I guess you could say I'm the welcome wagon," she said. She was white-blond, Scandinavian-looking, and she wore a thick old-fashioned wollen dress, gray, the color of rubbed charcoal. She held up the dish. "It's a peach pie," she told him.

"Well, thank you," said Richard. "Listen--why don't you come in? You'll have to excuse the mess."

She stepped inside, looking cautiously and curiously all around her. "I've never been inside before," she explained. "The Millers weren't sociable folk."

He took the pie and set it down on the windowsill. "I was brought up here," he said. "Do you want the cloth back?"

"Oh, later will do." She stepped across the sitting-room like a woman in a Bergman movie; unsmiling, self-possessed. "It's strange to think of all the history that you and I share."

"I'm sorry?" asked Richard.

She didn't turn around. "My name's Greta Reuter these days. But I used to be Greta Sturgeon. My family came here in 1680, same as yours."

"Oh, really?"

She turned at last, with a smile that looked as if it had been cut out of a magazine and held in front of her face. "Not that the Palens and the Sturgeons were ever friends. Not in those days."

"I didn't know that," said Richard, feeling as if he ought to apologize for something, but not quite understanding what.

"Well," she said, "the Palens accused the Sturgeons of witchcraft, back in the old days; and Nathan Nugent, too, although they withdrew that accusation when it finally came to trial. But George Sturgeon was pressed to death; and Missie Sturgeon was burned to death; and neither the Sturgeons nor the Nugents forgave the Palens for more than a hundred years."

"My late wife was a Nugent," said Richard.

"Yes . . . Sara Nugent, I knew her."

"I'm surprised I never met you when I was younger," Richard told her.

"I wasn't allowed to mix with Palens. Stay away from them Palens, that's what my mother always used to say. Palens, she said, is poison."

Richard smiled. "Would you like a drink? Maybe we can patch things up after all these years."

Greta Reuter pursed her lips and thought about it, but then she shook her head. "I'd best be getting back. I have chores to do. Baking, cleaning."

"Whatever you like," said Richard, not sure if he had made a friend or not. He formally shook Greta's hand, and then she left. He felt oddly guilty, as if he had been unfaithful to Sara for the first time.

After she had gone, he stood by the window watching Ron Maccione's caterpillars leveling the field, bright mechanical yellow amongst the dark trees. He lifted the gingham cloth from Greta Reuter's peach pie. It was heavily sifted with sugar and the crust was burned at the edge.

Across the top, Greta Reuter had cut out the pastry greeting, *Welcome Home*.

It took Ron Maccione six days to clear the meadow. They trucked over 150 tons of rocks and stones which

they stacked at the far perimeter of the property to form a dry-stone retaining wall. Then they leveled the ground in preparation for Fraser and Fairmont to asphalt and mark out the courts.

Late Thursday afternoon, as the last Caterpillar was loaded up to a flatbed trailer, Richard came out with a chilled sixpack of Olympia Gold and handed the cans around.

"Never shifted so many damned rocks in my natural life," said Ron Maccione, swallowing beer. "But you've got yourself a real clear site there now, Mr. Palen. You could lay down a spirit-level anyplace you liked, any direction."

Richard said, "You've done a fine job, Mr. Maccione. I'll go get your check."

That evening, Richard took a slow lonely walk around the meadow. The oaks were thick with shadows, like Rorschach blots. A damp, chilly wind was blowing. Home is where the heart is, he thought solemnly, but this heart is not at home. He stood for a long time on the stone retaining wall, looking back toward the house.

He was just about to walk back when he heard the hollow knocking of dislodged stones. He hesitated, listened, but there was no more knocking, and the field remained silent. Silent as a closed purse.

He walked back toward the house across the finely-graded soil which would soon be his tennis-courts. As he locked the doors and went upstairs to bed, he realized that he hadn't thought about Sara and the children all day. Maybe grief did eventually die, after all.

When he slept that night in the curtainless bedroom, on his foldaway bed, he dreamed he was being pressed down on the mattress by an unbearable oppressive weight. He struggled and twisted, but the weight grew progressively heavier, crushing him, until he could scarcely breathe.

He tried to scream, but in his dream he couldn't make himself heard. The weight on top of him began to crush his feet, and then his shins, the bones crunching and splitting like bamboo canes. Then his kneecaps were edged sideways off his knees; his thighbones splintered; and finally, agonizingly, his pelvis broke apart, flooding the bed with his intestines.

He woke up shivering, as if he were suffering from a high fever. He wiped the sweat from his face with his sheet; then he turned over and checked his watch. It wasn't even midnight yet.

He went downstairs to the kitchen and poured himself a large glass of water. He stood drinking it, holding on to the faucet the way that children do, watching his reflection in the kitchen window. He had dreamed about Sara again and again, he had dreamed about the children screaming; but he had never dreamed about himself before, being crushed.

Perhaps this was all part of the process of healing, of becoming whole again. He wasn't sure that he liked it; he wasn't sure that he could handle it; but maybe it was what

he needed.

He rinsed his glass, set it upside-down on the draining board, and switched off the kitchen light. As he set foot on the stairs, however, he heard a dry clonking noise. He stopped still, listening. Maybe it was the plumbing. But it had sounded empty, echoing, like two skulls being knocked together.

Two skulls, or two stones.

Ron Maccione said, "Are you trying to kid me, or what?"

Richard was standing in the hallway, his *Dad UR The Greatest* coffee-mug steaming on top of the kitchen stool beside him. It was a few minutes after seven o'clock; the sun had been up for less than twenty minutes.

"No kidding, Mr. Maccione. The whole field is full of them."

"Well, that's pretty damned hard to believe, Mr. Palen. We shifted over 158 tons of stone and rock off of that field. We graded that soil fine as baby-powder."

"You want to come over and check it out for yourself?"

"Sure I'll come over and check it out for myself. But I'm pretty damned tied up today. What do you say Monday?"

"Mr. Maccione, I'm going to cancel your check. You promised me no stones, remember?"

"I cleared the stones, Mr. Palen, so help me. When I left that field, there wasn't a single stone worth calling a stone."

Richard sipped coffee and burned his mouth. "You said they could come back. Some kind of physics. The cereal-box syndrome."

"Well, sure, but only if they're *there*, Mr. Palen, under the soil surface. We cleared them, Mr. Palen. We cleared them good."

Richard picked up the telephone and stepped sideways in the hallway so that he could see through the sitting-room window to the gardens at the back, and beyond, to the meadow. The early-morning light was bony and uncompromising. Even though the meadow was screened by trees, the stones that were strewn across it were obvious, even from here. Hundreds of them, scattered right across the finely-graded soil from one side of the meadow to the other.

"Shit," said Ron Maccione. "*Piove sul bagnato.*"

While he was waiting for Ron Maccione to arrive, Richard walked out across the meadow, picking his way between the stones with complete bewilderment. *I mean, how the hell--?*

Even allowing for natural geological sifting--the so called "cereal-box" effect in which the smaller particles sift and trickle downwards between larger particles, like the powdery crushed-up bits in a box of Cap'n Crunchies--all these hundreds of rocks couldn't have risen out of the ground overnight. And yet nobody could have trucked them all back again--there were no footprints on the soil,

*Sara, he thought. Help me . . .
But the night remained silent and sealed.*

no tiretracks.

Richard began to feel peculiarly alarmed, as if the reappearance of the stones were more than a scientific phenomenon. As if it were a threat, or a warning.

Some of the rocks were huge, four or five feet across, and must have weighed seven or eight hundred pounds. Others were not much larger than pebbles. He picked up one of the smaller stones and hurled it high toward the far side of the meadow.

As he stepped back to watch it fall, a tissue-soft voice said, close behind him, "You're up early, Mr. Palen."

Richard turned around. Greta Reuter was standing close by, her face pale, her eyes the same crushed-sugar color as the morning light. She wore a thick maroon dress and a maroon woolen shawl.

She looked around the meadow. "I thought you were going to clear it," she said. "You can't play much tennis on this, can you? Stones trip; stones hurt the feet; stones betray."

There was something about her expression that was almost amused. Richard said, "Stones seem to have the ability to come up overnight, too. This field was cleared yesterday. Not a stone in sight."

Greta Reuter said nothing, but continued to smile.

Richard finished the last of his coffee. "You wouldn't know anything about this, would you? I mean, there isn't anybody local who doesn't like the idea of a tennis club, is there?"

Greta Reuter turned her face away. "People are very reserved hereabouts. Very jealous about their privacy."

"Jealous enough to sabotage my tennis-courts?" Richard retorted. He hesitated, and then he said, "I'm only asking. I used to be a tennis champion. I've come across jealousy before."

"I suppose it *could* be sabotage," said Greta Reuter. "But if it was, who would have done it, and more important, how was it done?"

Greta Reuter stared at him mischievously for a moment, then threw back her head and let out a loud mannish laugh.

Baffled, enraged, Ron Maccione brought two of his bulldozers back to the meadow, and spent the better part of a day-and-a-half clearing the stones back to the perimeter.

"I don't know what happened, don't even ask me," he said. "I'm taking the full responsibility, okay? I guaranteed you a clear field, no stones, *di riffe o di raffe*. But I don't know what the hell happened."

That night, Richard heard knocking noises in his sleep: heavy, hollow, knocking noises, skulls knocking together. He woke up sweating, trembling, terrified--but conscious that he hadn't been dreaming of Sara. This dream was something new, something cold, something abrasive, something to do with Preston and the stones in the meadow; and the crushed-sugareyes of Greta Reuter.

He sat up in bed and drank a glass of tepid water. Then he eased himself up, and found his old terrycloth wrap, the one that Ivan Lendl had given him after Wimbledon six years ago, and limped downstairs.

He opened the kitchen door. The moon was out. Under its colorless light, the stones were visible. All over the meadow, as many as before, even strewn across the garden this time, closer to the house.

Richard went to the sitting-room and opened up his half-bottle of Jack Daniel's and poured himself a glassful. He stared at his reflection in the mirror, and he looked like a ghost himself, a badly-frightened ghost.

Sara, he thought. Help me.

But the night remained silent and sealed, and the stones lay scattered across the meadow and the garden as if they had been beached by a prehistoric tide.

He was tempted to call Ron Maccione straight away, but he waited until morning.

"Mr. Maccione," he said. "They're back."

"What? What's back? What are you talking about?"

"The stones, they're back. In fact, they're worse."

There was a very long silence. If anybody could convey over the telephone a sense of bitterness as sharp and as rural as bitten cow-parsley, then Ron Maccione managed to do it.

"So sue me," he said.

"What?"

"You heard. Sue me. I wash my hands."

Richard spent the entire morning wheeling stones out of the garden in a squeaking barrow and tipping them on to the edge of the meadow. Even though the day was cold and thundery, with flickers of lightning in the distance, he was sweating and puffing by eleven o'clock, and he stripped off his shirt. He felt like a character in a Grimm's fairy-tale, Dick the Stone-Shifter. He was rumberling the wheelbarrow back across the garden for what he had promised himself would be the last load when he became aware that Greta Reuter was standing close to the house, watching him.

He set down the wheelbarrow and wiped sweat from

his forehead with the back of his hand. He said nothing. "I see the stones are back," she remarked, approaching him along the diagonal paths, left then right, left then right.

He nodded, still short of breath.

"Quite a phenomenon," she said, still smiling. "Have you found out what's causing it? Or *who*?"

He wiped his chest with his shirt. "You want some coffee?"

"I brought you another pie," she said. "Seeing how much you liked the last one. It's blueberry this time. Sad, sad blueberry."

"Thank you, you needn't have troubled yourself. I'm getting quite used to a diet of frozen pizzas and lima beans."

She accompanied him back to the kitchen. "Tell me," she said, "when you're playing a game of tennis, and you do something to deliberately frighten or unsettle your opponent, what do you call that?"

Richard glanced at her sharply. "I don't know. Psyching out, I guess."

"That's it," she smiled. "Psyching out."

It was only after she had left that he lifted the cloth covering the pie, and saw the pastry letters *Fare Thee Well*.

He was awakened by the sound of knocking. Dark, granite-hard knocking. He sat up in bed and switched on his bedside lamp. He sat listening. There was somebody in the house. Somebody, or something. He listened for two or three minutes, suppressing his breathing.

He heard the softest of crunching noises outside the door. He eased himself out of bed and crossed the room. He had almost reached the door when it creaked sharply; and one of the upper hinges popped.

He hesitated, hand on the doorknob. The door creaked again--a deep, twisted creak, as if the very grain of the wood were being tortured. Behind the door he heard a heavy grating and grinding. It seemed as if the whole doorframe were being subjected to enormous pressure.

But from what?

The door cracked. Richard stepped back a little; but he was too late. The door suddenly burst its hinges and collapsed on top of him, followed by an avalanche of rocks. He screamed in pain as both his ankles were broken, and the stainless-steel pins that held his thigh-bones together exploded through his skin.

He was pinned to the floor, on his back, with the rock-heaped door pressing down on top of him.

"*Aah! God! Help me!*" he screamed. "*God! Help me!*"

But nobody answered, and the door grew heavier and heavier as one more rock after another scraped itself on top of the heap.

The rocks were alive. They were like huge, blind, slow-creeping turtles, with a heartless and unstoppable determination to crush the last ounce of life out of him.

He felt his ribs clutching him; then cracking one by one. He felt something burst inside him, and blood and bile gushed up into his mouth. He spat, coughed, choked.

"*God!*" he gargled, with lungs that were so tightly compressed that they could scarcely take in any air.

His head fell back and his eyes rolled up; and it was then that he saw her standing over him, Greta Reuter, in a long grayish dress, her blonde hair loosened, smiling, calm, with her hands held up in front of her as if she were praying.

"Help me," he whispered. "Please help me."

Greta Reuter slowly shook her head. "William Palen didn't help George Sturgeon, not for God's sake, not for any sake. His wife Missie begged for his life, but William Palen hardened his heart."

"Help me," Richard repeated. "I can't--"

Again, Greta Reuter shook her head.

"William Palen piled on the last of the rocks that pressed George Sturgeon to death. And now you're back in Preston, and you're William Palen's natural heir, so you must pay the price."

She knelt down beside him and touched his forehead with cool fingertips. "Missie Sturgeon lives within me. Missie Sturgeon has lived for generations within all the Sturgeon women until the time could come when she could take her revenge. That is the way with witches."

All that Richard could do was gasp, as yet another massive rock grated its way to the top of the heap and added enough weight to break his pelvis apart.

"Fare thee well," smiled Greta Reuter, drawing back her hair so that she could kiss his bloody lips.

Richard had never imagined that being slowly crushed to death could be so painful. He felt as if every nerve in his body were being stripped, like electrical cables. But he could no longer draw enough air into his lungs to cry out.

The very worst part was wanting to scream but not being able to. *Sara*, he thought, in agony. *Sara*.

Greta Reuter left the house like a gray shadow, leaving the door open behind her. Outside, lightning danced epileptically on the horizon.

As she walked diagonally across the meadow, the stones that were strewn across it began to shift, and to knock against each other, and then to tumble.

By the time she reached the center of the meadow, with her blonde hair blowing across her face, hundreds of stones were clattering behind her in her footsteps. The lightning flickered; her eyes shone white as milky marbles.

She had not yet reached the far side of the meadow, however, when a tall dark-haired figure materialized out of the darkness. A woman with dark eyes and a face as composed as a porcelain mask.

"Where are you going, Missie Sturgeon?" the woman called in a shrill, commanding voice. Greta Reuter stopped rigidly still, and her bride's train of tumbling rocks clattered into silence.

"Who are you?" Greta Reuter demanded. "What do

you want of me?"

"What have you done, Missie Sturgeon?" the woman cried, her voice like saws; her voice like seagulls.

Greta Reuter took three stiff-legged steps forward. The rocks followed. "Sara Nugent," she whispered.

"You've killed him!" Sara accused her. "You had no right to. You had no call to."

Greta Reuter took another step forward, but Sara swung her arm and crackles of lightning skipped and popped from her fingertips, real witchery; and Greta Reuter stood stiff and terrified, her hair rising and flying straight above her, as the hair of any woman flies up when she is about to be struck by lightning. Her face contorted, screaming a wide, silent scream.

"You had no right to," Sara repeated, her voice soft and blurry with static electricity. "The sin dies with the sinner, you know that."

Greta Reuter continued to scream. The lightning struck her, directly on top of her head, and for one terrible instant her bones were visible through her skin. Then she fell backwards, in flames, convulsing and shuddering, with smoke pouring out of her wide-open mouth.

All around her, the stones cracked and split and exploded in every direction.

Sara stood over her for a long time, while the storm rumbled and gradually passed. Then she walked toward the house, where Richard at last would be waiting for her. ■



"Hi, Ogilvie . . . I found your species transformation serum . . .
where the coffee creamer should've been!"

Happy Birthday, Dave

Mike Thorne

Dave unvelcroed the crotch of his Botany unisuit and inserted his genitalia into the receptacle in the horn of his driving saddle. Ah, a perfect fit, just like the salesperson promised. Although anxious to try the Peter Beater option, Dave decided to wait until he was on the Accessway.

He turned the key, and the new Ozone 301 started with a throaty roar. The roar was fake; the Ozone was electric, like almost all the cars built in the last decade. He backed out of his personal slot, eased through the parking garage in the bowels of the Elvira Crouch Building, and turned into the street with the Accessway ramp at its end. On the ramp, the cars were spaced evenly, and Dave waited patiently for the signal that would allow him to enter. When it came, he trod on the accelerator, the surge from the Ozone pressing his slight figure against the contoured seat. At 130 kilometers per hour, his car slipped between a Mazda 1212 and an ancient Toyota.

Dave punched the button that relinquished guidance of his car to the Controller and relaxed. Time to try the Peter Beater. With fingers trembling in anticipation, he set the dial for Arabian Tongues, and turned on the unit.

He felt a slight pressure as the diaphragm surrounding his genitalia momentarily constricted. The pressure made him slightly anxious, and he had a fleeting thought of being in a wreck. What would happen to his tools?

Dave laughed. After all, when was the last time he'd heard of anyone being in a wreck? No, travel on the Accessway was as safe as the Controller could make it. He leaned forward again and pulled out the knob on his telly. Time for the weather report.

The weather person on the evening news was Erika Roberts, a stunning blonde. Clad in the latest styles--a breezy, filmy, layered dress that revealed more than it hid--Erika reminded him of Becky Wildhack, his assistant at Crouch Video. Dave saw that Erika was a true blond, or at least that she bleached bottom as well as top. Becky, on the other hand, dyed her thatch a bright blue. He felt just the slightest stirrings of tumescence as the Arabian Tongues--and the thought of Becky's thatch--worked their magic.

Becky had greeted him with surprise this morning as he stepped from the elevator. "Well, hello, Dave. I didn't

think you would be coming in on your birthday."

"I wanted to try out my new Ozone 301, Becky," Dave answered, aware that she was thinking his place was at home on his birthday, particularly on his thirtieth.

Together, they watched the latest video from production, "Jane Fonda's Tenth Workout Tape." Dave had been relieved to see that his name was spelled correctly in the credits. When the workout ended, Becky extinguished the projector.

"Would you like your present now, Dave?" She stood so close to her boss that her odor enveloped him, an odor of yeast and unrefrigerated fish.

"Yes," he sighed, and with blue enameled nails, she deftly unvelcroed his unisuit, extracting his shriveled penis. She took him into her mouth, and he was quickly satisfied.

"Happy thirtieth, Dave," Becky had said, and her words, spoken with ineffable sadness still echoed in his mind as he sat through a commercial on the latest in vacuum cleaners. "So light that even the male of the house can guide it," said a girl who reminded Dave of his youngest wife. All teeth; didn't anyone wear braces, anymore? Then, the girl on the telly bent over to reveal one of the various adjustments on the machine and revealed the assets that had probably gotten her the job.

Dave squirmed; the Arabian Tongues seemed to have grown a finger, as well. The finger, coated with some sort of lubricating gel, had slipped up his rectum and was performing the prostatic massage he had read about in the owner's manual of his Ozone. He wasn't completely sure he liked the sensation.

But he did like what the Tongues were doing. One, or several, he couldn't be sure, was constantly circling the head of his firm penis, while others gently licked the smooth patch on the bottom of his scrotum. Jesus, he thought, hard to watch the telly with all that action.

The action on the telly had changed, also. With the end of the commercial came a brief segment on sports, and Dave watched absently as the final round of last night's phantom-weight championship bout was repeated. He had already seen the fight; his wives had made him watch it. They had all rooted for the redhead in the Dior trunks, but Dave had been secretly pleased when the tall

black girl knocked her out in the seventeenth round. He wondered what women saw in fighters who were so muscular they looked like men. But maybe that was it; women liked women who looked like men because there were far too few adult males left.

Dave didn't pursue his thought. The tongues had increased the tempo of the massage, and he felt his climax approaching. "Unh, unh, unh," he breathed, bodyjerking spasmodically as his sperm jetted into some recess of the car. He relaxed then and thought of how pleased his wives would be that he had used the Peter Beater, since his semen, instantly frozen and hermetically sealed in the bowels of the Ozone, would be available to them no matter what happened to him.

The Peter Beater seemed to be resuming its activity, so Dave idly pressed the OFF button on the control panel. Nothing stopped. The Tongues began the massage. Alarmed, he used both hands to try to extract himself from the receptacle. He was stuck fast and, in fact, pressure against the diaphragm only caused it to constrict further. Oh no, he thought, as the greased finger prodded his prostate again.

The Tongues, automatically sensing his lack of response, applied all their Arabian wiles. Dave's cock was beginning to feel sore. He looked outside for the first time since he had entered the Accessway and saw that home was still fifteen minutes away, at least. Fifteen more minutes of the Arabian Tongues and he'd go insane. Dave punched the emergency code on the control console.

"Do you have a problem, Dave?" The throaty voice came from the speaker of the telly, and the interview that was being broadcast--the one with the Marilyn Monroe clone--was instantly replaced with the stern visage of the Controller's Helper, a woman who sat with her hands crossed in her lap, and smiled sympathetically at Dave as he squirmed. The persistence of the Tongues had gotten a little rise from his cock, but the prostatic massage was beginning to hurt.

"It's my Ozone 301," he said. "I think something's wrong with--"

He was interrupted by the Helper. "There's been a massive factory recall on that model, Dave. The cycle on the Peter Beater option doesn't terminate following an orgasm. I think it was programmed for a woman, originally. Is that your problem?"

"Yes." Dave was crying uncontrollably, now, and the Helper could see he didn't have much time left..

"I'm allowing you to exit the Accessway, Dave. Take the first ramp on your right, and as soon as you get to the bottom, turn off the motor. Can you do that?"

"I think so." Like the Red Sea before Moses, there was a parting in the continuous stream of traffic on Dave's right. He willed himself to hang on and slipped into the opening. Just ahead, he saw the exit ramp; he took it. Won't be long now, he told himself, trying not to be sick from the pain.

At the bottom, he rammmed on the brake and turned

off the ignition in almost the same instant. There was immediate relief from the horrible pain as the Tongues and finger withdrew and the diaphragm relaxed.

"Are you all right, Dave?"

"I think so," Dave said shakily, extracting himself from the receptacle and gently prodding his penis to see if it was still intact. Other than a little redness, there was nothing to show from his ordeal. Dave velcroed his unisuit.

"Do you want me to send an emergency unit, Dave?"

"No, I think I'll be able to make it home." This was Dave's first experience with a Helper, and he was impressed at the seemingly genuine concern. He thanked the Helper and turned off the telly. Dave was soon back in among the flow of vehicles. The rest of the journey home was uneventful, and he arrived to find his wives bustling about in the kitchen, preparing his birthday feast.

"Hi, Dave," Julie said. "Didn't expect you home so early." Julie was Dave's youngest wife, the toothy one the girl in the commercial resembled. "Want to help?"

"Of course he doesn't want to help, Julie." This came from Margaret, one of Dave's first wives. She was rather stout, but firm. Dave could remember how slender she had been when they first met. He had been a graduate student in Business. Although he already had two wives by the time they met, he knew Margaret would be an ideal addition to his growing harem. Dave had never regretted their union; Margaret was the kind of take-charge person who could keep a burgeoning household on an even keel. "You just go rest in the living room, David. We'll call you when it's time for the party." Margaret took him firmly by the shoulders, turned him around, and gave him a tiny shove in the opposite direction.

Dave lowered himself into the Lazy-Girl recliner. He closed his eyes and let his mind go out of focus, hearing but not trying to understand the gentle sounds from the kitchen. He smelled fresh bread baking, and marvelled that his wives cared so much for him that they were actually cooking. He didn't remember real cooking on any of his other adult birthdays. But then he had never been 30, before. He dozed.

When he awakened, the room was darker and the air was heavy with the odor of burning candles. His wives were stationed all around him. They held white candles in their left hands and hid their right hands behind their backs. All except Julie. Since she was left-handed, the order was reversed. Each of them was naked.

For a moment, Dave was frightened. They all looked so solemn. But then he smiled. This was his thirtieth birthday, after all, and he knew how special that was.

"Are you awake, Davey?" He recognized the voice as that of his first wife, Consuela. Only she called him Davey. His parents had arranged his marriage to her when he had just begun high school.

"Yes."

"Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday to you--"

(continued on page 59)

Escape

Elizabeth Massie

God, I didn't kill her, You know I didn't. But they sit there in them rows, like dolls on a shelf, evil dolls, staring at me with the round black eyes. If my chair was wired and their blinks was switches, my execution'd be over by now.

But I didn't kill nobody. I only found her. Found her by the river. I only lifted her to see if she was alive and her blood run over me like wet red silk.

My lawyer beside me pats my shoulder every so often, but his touch is careful. He don't believe me, either. He says, "It's okay, Stan, I believe you," but that's because he's supposed to say that. He was appointed by the court to argue for me. Even though he pats, he won't look much. He watches the judge, he watches all them witnesses at the stand who say where they last seen her. How she was an innocent thrown into my clutches. But, God, I'm in their clutches now. They'll wire me down. They'll shave my skull to give the volts room. My sweat'll betray me, carrying them killin' charges along my flesh. Flowing. Like her red silk blood.

Beneath the heavy table, I feel the warm, rough skin on my arms. There is life there. God, I can't die their way. Why don't You care enough to stop them?

My lawyer just shifted in his chair and said it was goin' to be another long afternoon. He looks around to the spectators behind him and back to the judge and the new witness, but not to me. He wants it to be over. He wants to go back to his office so he can smoke one of his owl cigars.

In my lap, under the table, I stroke my left wrist with the fingers on my right hand. I used to keep a penknife in my pocket, but of course they took everything. They laughed and winked about my penknife. The doctors said she died from a butcher knife, but they don't care. A knife's a knife, a life's a life. She was pretty and is dead. I'm ugly and alive. They don't think that's fair.

My first pinch is dull because most of my nails are bit to the quick. But some got a few ragged edges on them, and they're sharp. I pinch again, then dig the nail edges deep into my wrist. I suck air at the pain, but then my muscles droop as I feel a trickle of blood. I dig again, and again, and again, opening the vein. I take the flesh and claw it open as best I can. I put my hands deep into my pockets.

"Objection," says my lawyer, but he only stands half-way up. The judge overrules him, and the jury blinks at me. They can't wait to see me fry. They want my eyes to pop behind masking tape. They want blue smoke to come out of my mouth. Will they be mad that I took their chance away?

The blood down my pants is warm, like soft, silky fingers. My lawyer said we had a long afternoon. It's all I need, God.

All I need.

Got to keep my eyes open until the end.

Let them be angry, God.

Amen. ■

- Untitled -

1/24/89

(with apologies to e.e. cummings)

A.R. Morlan

Ted Bundy's defunct who used to drive a metallic brown volkswagon
and used to kill girls onetwotenfifteentwenty-six
just like that
lord, he thought he was a clever, handsome man
and what I'd like to know is
how do you like your blue-eyed boy, Mr. Florida Electric?

The Letter

Frances Geczi

When Jim Burnley left the doctor's office, his face was set in lines of anger.

"Stupid bastard," he mumbled, "keeps telling me there's nothing wrong with me; tells me it's just nerves. If he had to put up with this itching, he'd sing a different song."

As Jim started down the sidewalk to his car, he let go a vicious kick to the ribs of an old stray dog.

"Get going, you bastard! Stay out from under my feet!"

The mutt limped away. She turned once and gave him a sad look. The expression in the old dog's eyes bothered Jim late into the night.

The next morning, he purposely got up earlier than usual. He had been very angry for more than three weeks, now. And it had all started when he attended the reading of his grandmother's will.

She had left him nothing except a small, run-down house and one of her stupid sayings inside an envelope. Jim remembered that she had always been prolific with her "words of wisdom," as she called them.

Stupid nonsense is more like it, thought Jim.

Jim broke a soda bottle with his hammer. He tried to do it quietly so as not to awaken Cindy, his wife. He would hate like hell to have to explain his actions to her. It would probably lead to another fight, with the neighbors calling the police, just like last time. He'd barely missed going to jail. A less convincing liar would have been arrested for sure.

As he carried the broken glass into the house, he suddenly smiled. At least my grandmother's old house is good for something, he thought. For the past two nights, he'd taken his girlfriend out to the old place, where they'd made passionate love.

As Jim kneaded the broken glass into the meat, he suddenly made a deep cut into his hand.

"Son of a bitch," he muttered, "nothing ever works right for me."

Jim ran cold water onto his hand, then held a dish towel over the cut until the bleeding subsided. He put the doctored-up meat into a bag. As he got into his car, he noticed his hand was bleeding again. He reached into his pocket for a handkerchief.

He found the old dog at the same place at which he'd encountered her the previous day. When he called her, she came hesitantly, slowly wagging her tail.

"Old girl, your days are numbered." Jim laughed as he put the meat down on the sidewalk. The old dog hurriedly ate the handout and gave a Jim a grateful look as she licked her chops. Jim drove to work with a smile on his face.

He was only a couple of blocks from his office when the itching and burning began again.. This time he felt as if he were stuck in a bed of ants, covered up to the neck. He pulled his shirt up to look at his stomach.

The lines running up and down his body were an angry red hue. A thin colorless fluid leaked from the grooves.

Soon after he arrived at work, Jim called another doctor. He knew something was wrong with him, something other than nerves.

After the call to the doctor, he called Judy and arranged to meet her at the old house. All day Jim scratched at his body. He almost decided to call Judy back and cancel their date, but the thought of her body decided the issue. Jim arrived at the house fifteen minutes before Judy.

The sight that met Judy's eyes as she entered the house was beyond belief. Blood streaks completely covered one wall opposite her. There was also a trail of blood leading into the bedroom.

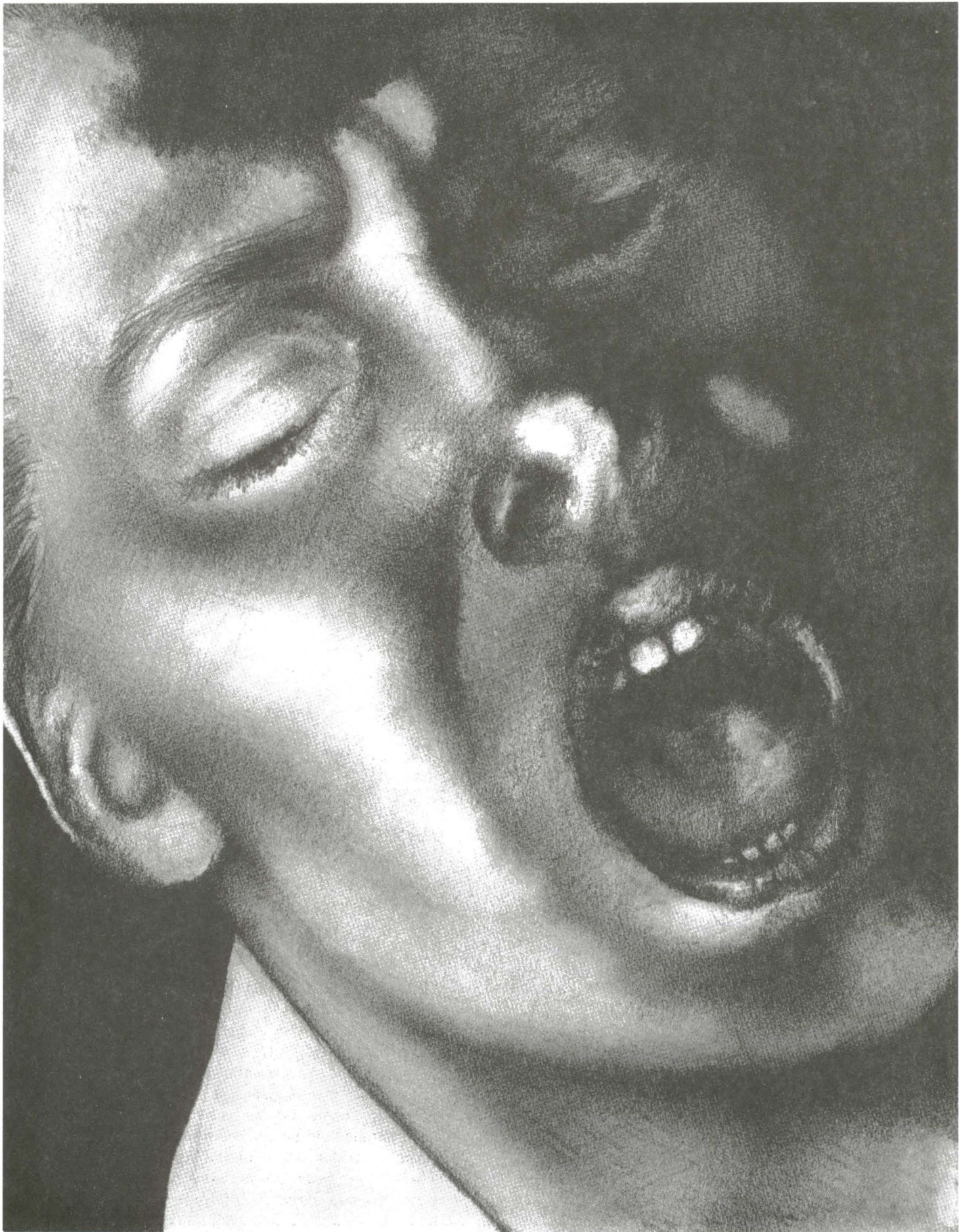
"Jim!" she screamed. "Jim, are you here?"

Judy heard a low moan coming from the bedroom. She rushed in, heedless of any impending danger.

Jim lay on the floor in a large puddle of blood. His moans were pitiful. All the angry red lines had split open, trailing all the way down to his pubic area. Most of his internal organs were protruding from the open flesh.

Judy put both hands over her mouth to stifle a scream as she ran to him. At a glance, she knew he was beyond human help. His words were incoherent, but with a last ounce of strength he handed her a bloody piece of paper.

The words almost leapt off the paper: *Enter my house only with a pure heart, otherwise the evil within you will cause you to come apart. Your loving grandmother.* ■



Poetic Justice

Paul Jenzi

Rub a damp washcloth over my thighs. Scouring the stickiness caught in the hair of my legs.

With a ball of toilet paper i pinch the bead of white liquid off the head of my penis, then the side. i can't get the juice out of the prison of my pubic hair.

Sweat spreads over my forehead as i rub my face in the harsh towel. Her towel. She bought them. When she washed them, they were soft.

Under-the-sink door squeaks. Hide *Cherry Pies* in case of company--ha. i haven't seen anyone since . . .

Kitchen lights shine bright; too bright. Ice cubes crack and rise to the top to breathe as i bathe them in Scotch. Not too much water. It feels good to swallow hard before the blast of fire warms my throat and chest. She didn't like me to drink and i never bought magazines like that when she was here.

i am too old for this.

The plastic cap rattles around the glass neck of the fifth, chastity belt for alcoholics. i drink alone, and often. But can i stop? Who wants to.

Maybe i should take up smoking.

my thoughts echo in the empty house. It took forever to clean. And all my money. But i had to get all the traces of her and my son out of the carpet. Like sperm in pubic hair.

It was beginning to stink. Bad.

Not so long ago.

my notebook rests untouched. i can't go back to work yet.

But it's been three months.

i'm too tired.

School's started again. They want you back.

let them learn without me.

You need the money.

i need to drink.

She used to be in one of my classes. i didn't marry her until after the term had ended. The board bitched anyway. i was so old and she was so young. Wedding in the michigan summer. Sweat staining the armpits of my white uxedo. i smiled anyway.

Seven months later she gave me a son. Yellow like an old bruise. He left red stains on the white sheet of paper she opened her legs over--like the sheets of our wedding

night. The doctors threw the paper away. It's too difficult to get the stains out of the sheets. And carpets.

i felt so hard for pasty child. Sickly-skinny. Never completely recovered the shock of birth. Never talked much, always lived inside himself. He would make a better poet than his father.

A copy of the book rests on the table. Myscotch glass sweats onto the cover: a puckered circle rises on the paper. *The Dumb Man Speaks*. Clever title--i used to be a clever man.

The sky was an endless red on the fifth summer after our marriage. Holly had stayed home to watch Jason; he was ill again. i drove the sputtering Ford to a party. i celebrated the success of my book with my colleagues. Home early.

There were three motorcycles in the driveway. i ran to the old door of our small house. It was locked.

"Holly. Holly."

The door opened. Greasy black hair fastened to a lean skull--much taller than me. Unshaven smile, cigarette hung between his smiling lips, a bottle of whiskey in his hand.

My stomach exploded

"Come in."

"Holly!" i screamed.

Muffled reply.

I scrambled inside. She was tied to my desk chair with a thin wire that had cut through her wrists and ankles. Carpet tape where her mouth should have been.

Her shirt was open, her silky bra was slit; a hairline crack on the skin in the valley between her breasts. Fluorescent desk lamp spotlighted her shimmering brassiere.

Another man grabbed me from behind. The man who let me in said something. The orange tip bobbed up and down in his mouth. i couldn't hear what he said. i couldn't hear myself scream.

i saw my son. Hanging, dangling from the ceiling by his feet, wire through his achilles and into the ankle. Slowly turning, eyes opened under an expressionless face. Silver flecks in his back--a staple gun on the desk beside him. On the floor, several cigarette butts lying among ashes. Small red welts on Jason's chest. i yelled a

plea, a warning, an admonition with one breath, a single incoherent word.

Holly was looking at me, crying also. Her eyes begged me to save her and our child. Futile struggle against desperation.

my legs collapsed. i couldn't breathe. On my knees, forgetting to pray. Hands made me stand again.

Beerbelly slapped her breasts with dirty gloves. Nipples rose, burning red with shame. Her eyes disappeared between fleshy lids. i would have kissed them. Beerbelly giggled with perverse pleasure. my wife mumbled a protest. "Huh, baby? Sorry, can't understand you. Speak up. Oh, I see what the problem is. It's the tape, ain't it." The reply he received was her smothered sobs. "Well? Is it the tape, bitch?" A high-pitched squeak from the man behind me, unable to contain its excitement. Beerbelly slapped her face until she nodded. "Yeah, you are a bitch, ain't you?" Nothing. He touched his nose to hers, she turned her face to mine, pretty blonde hair. "Aren't you a bitch? A bitch in heat, right? Yep, you can't fool me, you're a hot cunt bitch." He turned to me. "Isn't she a horny-assed bitch, mr. jillove?"

my name. he knows my name. Noshave with the burning cigarette, the man who let me in smiling. i whine. my wife, my son. Noshave followed my eyes. Tiny purple head gently swaying. Back and forth. And back. "He's passed out," Noshave said. He walked away. Kitchen cupboards creaked open. Rush of water from the sink. He held the glass before his nose. Upside down. Water remaining level as the glass tilted. Small splatter on the carpet. Closer, closer. Dribbles in the nostril Choke, cough, spasm, wretch. My boy's body wiredances like a fish on a string.

Beerbelly said something. Noshave backed away. Beerbelly took a lighter from his cracked leather vest. Small flame. She looked at me, tearful, staring me into shame. Sparse hair, burning like gasoline. Blonde to black, flesh searing, blistering.

From the hell the odor followed, filling the room, filling my throat. i gagged. Noshave vomitted in Holly's lap. Holly's body heaved chunks of colored liquid. Dribbled through her nose and onto her chest. Her body convulsed, cough-breaths held back by tape.

"She's choking! Save her, goddamnit, please save her!"

Noshave questions Beerbelly's eyes.

A nod, the tape pulled back. Vomit spilled out of her mouth, down her chin.

"You filthy bitch." Beerbelly. "Can't keep your bodily fluids to yourself? Here, let me wash you." He reached for his cock and urinated at her mouth, then on her face and breasts while she gasped for air. She became ill again. Noshave laughed, lapping at her face. Beerbelly replaced the tape, grabbed his switchblade, threw it open. He dragged it across my little boy's throat.

Blood crammed into small veins erupted like a starburst cascading in pulses over his face. Holly erupted in savage grief. She swung her head back and forth fero-

ciously. A hurricane of hair blurred like screams held back by tape. Wild-tears running rampant. Face-rain.

i was glad. He was gone. Spared. Saved.

"Read from the book," Beerbelly shouted.

Noshave grabbed my book. "*The Dumb Man Speaks*, by Paul Jillove. Page 184. It should be apparent that, after controlling for environmental, age, and chronological variables, the standard deviation establishes a clear correlation between IQ scores and the tendency toward violence in the New York street gang The Pigs." Standard deviation.

The voice behind me. "Can we do her now?"

i became afraid again. "No!"

"Mr. jillove doesn't think it's such a good idea, Charlie," Beerbelly said.

Noshave moved closer to my wife. "Fuck him."

"You can, Charlie. I'll do his wife," Beerbelly said, running his tongue over chapped lips.

Noshave cut the wires around her wrists and ankles. She slumped over. Ragdoll in the martyred night. Beerbelly threw her to the carpet. Blonde hair snapped by a brown neck onto the thick shag. Eyes that refuse to see behind thin curtains of flesh. Thick hand, calloused on the lip of her shorts. He pulled them off over bloody ankles. She looked to me once more.

Beerbelly stood over her, staring at her. "I bet you'll enjoy this, won't you bitch." Scarred riding leathers hit the floor. "I bet she's prime for a good fuck." Looking at her face. Hoping for a response.

"Yeah," the boy-man behind me said in a husky laugh.

Beerbelly turned to me "Help me or I'll kill her."

Tears. More tears. Crying like a child. crybaby. Whine with a lump bulging in my throat. Gasp and whine like a 3 year-old afraid of the dark.

i moved toward the door. Noshave's boot so hard in my crotch it lifted me off the floor. i fell clasp my balls; they felt as if they were in a slowly closing vice. my eyes watered. i pissed in my pants.

"Take him to her, Charlie."

i tried to stay away--my feet wouldn't take root. Dragged. i fell beside her. She before me. Her head beat back and forth. Like my stomach, like my groin. No, no. No.

Noshave pinned her forehead with his knee and reached over the tears and pulled back her chin. Rippled flesh of an exposed neck, throaty tunnel of skin. A blade resting on it, tasting its elasticity. Pressure. The same knife, red steel, still wet. Jason. my son's life.

Beerbelly spoke to me. "Pull her panties off and she lives."

Ungodly wail escaped torn soul erupting deep bass timeless from quivering lips.

"Now."

i looked through her eyes.

"Or she dies."

i placed a hand on the fragile cloth. Retract. Replace. Retract. Oh, God.

"Do it." Pointed boot into the bars of her ribcage. Is that my son's or my wife's blood trickling down the side of her neck?

"Now."

Her chest throbbed. Red bubble balloon popped in her nostril.

So scared.

Pull.

"Yes."

Oh, no.

"Further."

"Off."

"That's a good boy. That's it."

i failed her.

Backhand across my cheek.

Beerbelly's hand on a stubby cock, pulled on it. Again. Once more. He fell on her, was in her. Physical animal-fuck as obscene buttocks shook with the force of his rapid thrusts. Finished. She bit her lower lip and fought against the tears. The grown-child who had held me grew impatient. Masturbated.

"Go, Charlie, go," Beerbelly cheered. "That's it, Charlie boy. Faster now, Charlie. That's a good boy. Spray her." Thick white rain; globules rolled over her hair.

i tried to move to her. Another kick anchored between my legs. On my knees, face into the carpet, spittle dangling in thin strings from my nose and mouth.

"Your turn again, Charlie."

"But I just lost it all," Grownchild said. "I can't."

"Now now, Charlie. I'm sure we can find a way that you can have this lovely piece of ass." He fondled the hole that bled sperm with the toe of his boot. "Inside your coat."

Grownchild pulled out a large hunting knife. "This?"

"Go for it."

Grownchild smiled.

Kneeling between her legs as if to worship. And he sheathed the knife in her. Spasm-pain rocked her body.

"Charlie," Beerbelly said. "You made the slut come."

i turned away. Angered, shamed. i am old for the first time, weak.

"Hey, jilove, didn't nobody teach the bitch any manners? Having her period on such a nice rug? Disgusting." Laughter. "Move, Charlie," Beerbelly ordered solemnly. "No. Leave the knife there."

i turned to look. The knife was wider than her opening. It stuck out like a grotesque phallus.

"*BITCH!*" Beerbelly kicked the knife as hard as he could. Shredded skin fell to the floor in chunks, knifetip piercing uterine wall. Blood gurgled out of Holly's mouth from under the grey tape.

i curled over on my side, bent, facing away.

Pounds against the front door. Voices.

Dull, wet thud.

Footsteps.

Door rushed open, flurry of black shoes blur past my face.

"Oh, God."

A Blueman on one knee beside me, his hands on my body. "He's all right." The sound of someone vomiting.

"These two are dead, both of'm." Cough.

Both of'm. And he said i was all right.

Voices down the hall: "Freeze! Hands behind your head! Spread'm . . . " my wife. Dear Christ.

"Sir." Blueman to me. "Sir, I need to speak with you."

Hand pulled me up by my shirt collar.

"Don't look." Too late. my wife's face drowned in a sea of chewed muscle and fragmented bone.

In the hallway, slumped against the wall, slide down. Blueman's hand to catch me.

"Can you hear me?"

i nodded my face into my hands and wept.

"We have them cuffed in the boy's room . . . " He told me he'd give me a club and three minutes of free time, cheap justice.

i wrapped my fingers around the painted wood. Thin light struggled under a clown lampshade. Unmade bed; toy cars parked all over the floor.

Three knowing nervous grins. Three blind mice. On Noshave's boot were parts of my wife's face.

"You'll never be able to hurt us like we hurt you."

i groaned. Raised the club over my head with both hands. Grownchild whined. Anger raping revenge. Brutal eyes searching out hopeless targets. The face, the ears, the groin.

Stop.

But they killed my son.

Stop.

And raped my wife.

Whose blood will bring them back?

Fuck no!

You must be strong, you're better than them. Prove it.

An eye for an eye.

Makes everybody blind.

Then so be it.

If you do it you will be no better than them.

But.

You will become the men who murdered your family.

Fine.

No better.

They must die.

They will, you will, but not by your hatred.

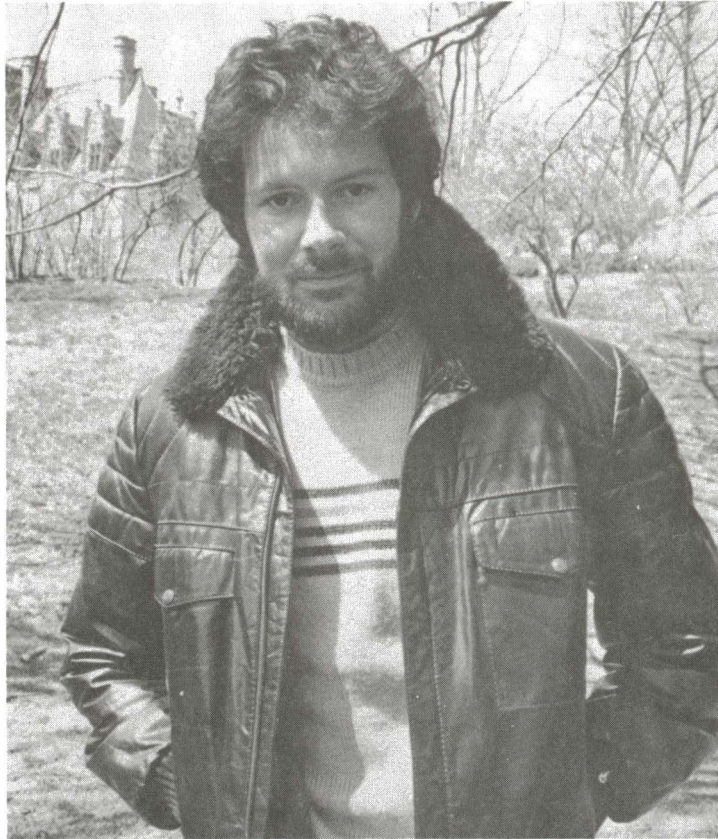
They took my son, they took my wife, they took my sanity.

Don't let them have your spirit.

i brought the stick down. Letting it fall to the floor. Confused relief pouring with sweat from distorted faces. i left the room. Slow darkness like sheets on the bodies over my eyes. i fell like the club.

After the questions, after the hospital, after the funeral, after the asylum, i write this story. Poetic Justice . . . ■

- *Mystery Walk* - *Swan Song* - *Stinger* -



Robert R. McCammon

Interview conducted by Stanley Wiater

Unlike Stephen King (four novel attempts before selling Carrie) or John Saul (ten novel attempts before selling Suffer the Children), Robert R. McCammon apparently did it right his first time out as a horror novelist. Even though he began his professional writing career as a journalist, a lack of suitable prospects soon compelled him to try his hand at fiction. No one was more surprised than he when that first novel, Baal, was bought in 1978; McCammon was all of 26. Since then he has published seven additional novels, including Bethany's Sin (1979), The Night Boat (1980), They Thirst

(1981), Mystery Walk (1983), Usher's Passing (1984), Swan Song (1987), and Stinger (1988). Although his novels have yet to be filmed by Hollywood, two of his short stories--"Makeup" and the highly acclaimed "Night Crawlers"--were adapted for the television series Darkroom and Twilight Zone, respectively.

Regardless of the usual clichés that go along with being recognized as a creator of tales of terror, in person McCammon more deftly represents the finer qualities embodied by the term "Southern gentleman." (Admittedly yet another stereotype, but certainly an

admirable one.) His consideration of other writers extends to how, in 1984, he organized the idea for the Horror Writers of America, a professional organization which currently has 300 members. (It's also open to those who don't live in the U.S., incidentally. For further information, write HWA, c/o Secretary Betty Engstrom, 84176 Lorane Hwy., Eugene, OR 97405.) One of the reasons McCammon started the organization was due to his belief that horror authors needed to "have a place they could call home," in the manner of the Science Fiction Writers of America and the Mystery Writers of America. Like

the organization, McCammon's career has been growing at a rapid rate.

Still living in his native city of Birmingham, Alabama with his wife Sally, McCammon's work has been critically recognized as possessing a depth and a maturity which belies the author's age. The Los Angeles Times for example states that among the best in horror fiction, there is "King, Straub, and now McCammon . . ." while Booklist has described him as "A true master of the gothic novel. . ." I spoke to McCammon following the publication of his latest novel, *Stinger*, which has, like his previous novels, quickly attained best-seller status.

Nb: Unlike some authors who have reached a noticeable degree of success in this field, you don't seem embarrassed to be primarily recognized as "Robert McCammon, horrorwriter." I say this because I've had others tell me that what they really write are "novels of fear" or "dark fantasy." Anything so as not to be considered a mere writer of "horror." **McCAMMON:** Well, I'm not embarrassed. In fact, I'm very pleased to be associated with the field. I'm very pleased with what horror can be for its millions of fans. I think those labels like "dark fantasy" are a glossing over of what horror really is. I think it's a gut-level kind of writing, an on-the-edge kind of writing. Horror is also really neat because it's always redefining itself. So I'm extremely pleased to be a horror writer, and would be willing to shout it from the rooftops that I love horror and that I love what I do.

Nb: That may work for you, but others have declared that they don't wish to be labeled--that it limits their careers to be thought of as horror writers. even though they don't deny that's the area of fiction they do best.

McCAMMON: The problem is not in the writing, or in the writers. The problem is with the publishers. They see horror as primarily a book with some scary elements, and they market it from that narrow perspective. But there're so many different kinds of horror, and so many things going on

in horror fiction, that it's very hard to define. But the publishers will try to define it in terms of the marketplace, and will push whatever works. I think it's the writer's responsibility to push the boundaries of what a publisher may feel is "horror fiction." It's the writer who should really get in there and try to do different things within the genre, push those boundaries. And in that way he'll eventually reeducate the publishers--and the audience--as to what horror fiction is.

I'm not sure myself what horror is. But I know it's not just one thing: it's not just *Friday the 13th* or *The Shining* and it's not just *Weaveworld*. It's all those elements--and more.

Nb: You just mentioned a novel by Clive Barker. In pushing those genre boundaries you've described, do you support the way in which Barker has pushed with his explicit descriptions of sex and violence?

McCAMMON: Absolutely! Because that's his voice. Every writer has to find his or her voice to say the things that he or she feels is important. So that's Barker's voice. I have a different one. We may be saying the same thing--or we may not be saying the same thing--but we'll be speaking in different voices.

Nb: Are there any taboo areas that you won't touch in your own work for risk of being too offensive? In other words, can there be such a concept as "bad taste" in horror fiction?

McCAMMON: I don't believe there can be such a thing as "bad taste." There can only be bad writing. You can have the most outrageous scene with the most extreme violence and handle it in such a way that it'll be extremely excruciating--but there'll be no blood. So I don't think there can be any bad taste in creating a scene, only bad writing in handling it.

Nb: A major theme in your work is the idea that, no matter how awful the situation may be, your characters always have the hope that they will somehow reach the end of the darkness or the chaos. But don't you feel the most effective horror lies in dealing with

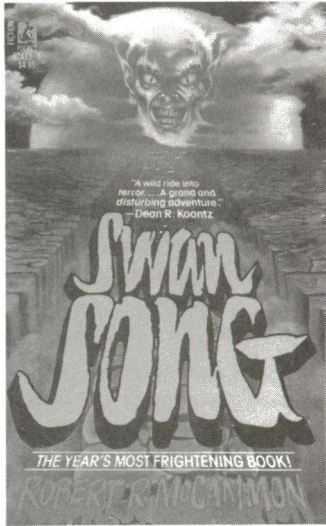
situations which eventually fade to utter black?

McCAMMON: But how do you mean "effective?" I tell stories which are effective to me in terms of hope. But then someone else might want to tell a story in terms of hopelessness. But my key word is hope; I think there's hope in any situation. And that's what motivates my characters to do what they do, because they think "there's a way out of this mess" or "there's a way I can transform myself personally . . ." Again, one voice may want to deal with horror from this perspective, while another may want to focus on the darkness. I have different tones in my stories, and hope is not always the right tone, but the element of hope is in most of my work.

Nb: You've been described as a writer who's strength lies in bringing life to his characters rather than just finding the ways of gruesomely destroying them. Do you feel others in the genre are attempting to create more than just "books with scary elements?"

McCAMMON: You know, I think horror writers are now like that Bohemian society in Paris in the 1920's, where everybody had their own style of art, and their own philosophy about art. This one was experimenting in Cubism, and this one in Naturalism . . . But what they were really all talking about was the same thing--they were really talking about Art. So it doesn't matter whether we talk today about "quiet horror" or "splatterpunk" because there's great horror within all these voices. And I know I'm trying to sound diplomatic, but I'm not: I enjoy all these spectrums, and there's room for all of them. So to say, "Well, there should only be quiet horror, no blood and guts," or that it should be the other way around diminishes the field. Diminishes the force of horror itself. It may be that horror is forever undefinable. It will always have these different voices and moods, there may be no way to tame or define it. And that may be one of the great powers of horror fiction.

Nb: Do you think the academics have



given the field a legitimacy it didn't have a decade ago? For example, both science fiction and mystery are genres which have at last been recognized as worthy of some legitimate literary acclaim.

McCAMMON: Well, I have to admit that my aged relatives don't read my books, because they would find it very uneasy to be around me! [Laughs] But I really do feel there's a change in the wind. I don't want to say that horror's become respectable--the great thing about horror is that most of it will *never* become respectable--but people are finally listening to what this kind of fiction can say about the human condition. And it's not only that people are being scared by the superficial elements of horror fiction. They really are beginning to realize that there is more to it than just scary scenes.

NB: You've stated elsewhere how horror is in fact the oldest form of literature, both written and oral.

McCAMMON: Horror fiction has as its basis the human condition, and it can talk about that condition in a way that other types of fiction cannot. It's the idea that this literature has worth--it's also fun, it's a hell of a lot of fun!--but it has worth. And I think it has enduring worth. People are beginning to realize that as well, and they're reading horror now as serious litera-

ture. I really believe that. (And I can hear the howls from that statement all the way across the Atlantic. But I really think it's so.) The longest running tradition in literature is the horror tale, and it goes back to *Beowulf*, and I'm sure it goes back to the oral tales of "You better not go by the swamp, because there's something in there . . ." These tales of warning, of danger--either in a physical or mental way--which show the ways others have dealt with it, have been around a long, long time. And will be around until the end of time.

NB: Any possibility that we'll soon be seeing movies adapted from your novels? Also, on the basis of what Hollywood has done with two of your short stories, are you looking forward to or fearing that?

McCAMMON: Some of my novels are under option, but I'm not at liberty to say exactly what is going on there just now. As for this "books into movies" thing, the book is my child. And I'm very proud of that child. But the movie version will be somebody else's child, even though it may have the same name, and some of the same scenes and dialogue. But it will be a different child. Now, it may be a brilliant child, or it may be an ignoramus, but who knows? [Laughs] You never know.

NB: It's no secret that, early in your career, some critics dismissed you as imitative of Stephen King. Now, a decade later, some critics declare you're as good, if not better, than King. How do you respond to that kind of comparison?

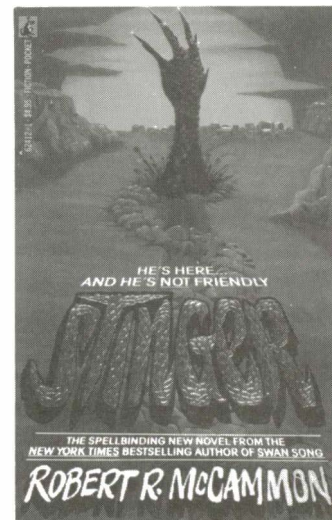
McCAMMON: Well, King is the best. He's at the top of the list. And that's why, in a way, a lot of writers get compared to him. He's the best--and most visible. People will come up to you and say, "What kind of work do you do?" I'll say, "Horror." "Oh, do you write horror stories?" And I'll say, "Yeah." "Oh, like Stephen King?" So what do you say? "No, I don't write horror like Stephen King!" [Laughs] So King is the key to the translation between other people in our field and the public at large. But it happens all

the time, and it's kind of a dilemma, to explain that you write horror stories like Stephen King, but you *don't* write horror stories like Stephen King! [Laughs] But I'm extremely flattered to be likened to King, and to be received well.

It was difficult for me because my first novel was published, and in a sense I learned how to write in public. And I was searching for my own style of expression, my own voice--in public--and I think that's where the idea that I was overly influenced by King comes from. Which was probably true, because I was reading a lot of Stephen King, and even though I was reading a lot of other people too, I thought this guy was at the top of the form! This is the person who has led all the others--so I think that's where a lot of the early criticism came from. It's an interesting situation, because the public at large doesn't know authors, unless they're really serious about the field. Some of them just automatically put King and horror together. But I'm very glad to be getting out of that shadow.

NB: It may at last seem like an appropriate cliché, but is it true you write at night, and sleep during the day?

McCAMMON: I start work at about ten at night, and finish up at around four in the morning. When I'm finishing up a book, as I am now, I'll get up about eleven in the morning and get right back to work. It takes me about nine months to write a book. I



pace myself pretty well, in terms of doing only about five or six pages a day--and those are finished pages. When I'm completing a book, I'll double up on my shift, working seven days a week. I take my summers off. I do some short stories, but generally I just enjoy the summer.

Nb: Speaking of stereotypes, why are people in this business often just the opposite of what the public expects them to be?

McCAMMON: Usually, when I talk about fellow horror writers, I find that others ask me, "Aren't those people all weird?" It's amazing that most of the people in this field are so nice. Really! And I think it's because we're able to get all this acid out on paper. To get these bad feelings and impulses out on paper, which so-called "normal" people can't do. Everybody has violent impulses sometimes, where they'd just like to rip somebody to pieces; where they're inflicted with some kind of momentary madness. But we can get it all out on paper! And we're probably a lot more healthy, mentally, than a lot of these folks running around.

I really believe that.

Nb: If someone came upon your work in a library, what would you recommend as the first of your novels they should read?

McCAMMON: I was thinking of this just recently. I really enjoyed

Mystery Walk. Looking it over again, I think it stands up pretty well. Also because it's set in Alabama. [Laughs]

Nb: Of course, not everyone is a fan of your work--or of the genre in general. What do you say to those who charge that horror--in any form in the popular media--is inherently bad for children, and is basically of no value whatsoever?

McCAMMON: Well, *life* is bad for children, too. Life makes them grow up, and that can be bad. Like it or not, there are many aspects of horror fiction which offer clear and very penetrating insights into the human condition. Yet I can see some very prim and proper person saying, "Horror fiction is no good, and it should be banned." And that's been said to me before. After I gave a speech, I once had a person stand up who was very upset and asked me: "Why was I forcing people to read this stuff?" And I said I wasn't forcing anyone to read it. Because there is nothing wrong with horror fiction!

One of the reasons I like it is because there is an element of hope in most horror fiction; it doesn't all have to be dark. It can be glorious human transformation as well as an unfortunate fall from grace. And a climb to grace. And that's what I believe the best in horror fiction entails. I think that's fantastic--I think that's fabulous! Of course, nothing I could say would probably keep anybody from

censoring horror. But it'll never be censored in this house.

Nb: Looking down the road a bit, what else is on the horizon from your fervid imagination?

McCAMMON: I'm doing a book which is extremely different from anything I've ever done. I'm finishing it up now. It's called *The Wolf's Hour*, and it's set during World War II. The story is about a British secret agent who is a werewolf. And he's the hero! It's really not what you'd normally consider a "horror novel." But what I've tried to do is write a historical novel with elements of horror in it. I'm very excited about it.

Nb: You once told me you had a great secret passion for espionage stories, and that you actually wrote a few spy novels privately for your own amusement.

McCAMMON: That's right! I've always wanted to do a kind of James Bond novel. So this is a werewolf James Bond. [Laughs] I also have a collection of short stories coming out this year called *Blueworld*. It has everything I've published so far, including "Makeup" and "Nightcrawlers," plus some new stories as well. It goes from the first story I ever did to a new novelette called "Blueworld." Pocket Books also released my first four novels last fall, so a lot of good things are happening.

I'm just really excited. ■

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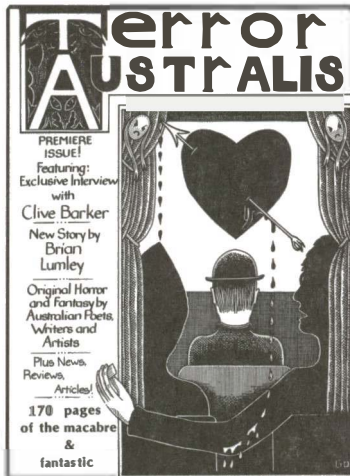
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HORROR in the LAND of the BICENTENNIAL

Ron Schroer



(Special thanks to Gony Valdez)

Like the number of flesh-eating zombies roaming the outback, the horror scene in Australia is small and scattered; the scene is underground to the point of obscurity. Nevertheless, stories and poems are being written, films are being made and reviewed, and I will be your informant for Horror in the Land of the Bicentennial.

Horror in the United States caters to all tastes; the American Small Press has always impressed me with its organization. The Small Press Writers and Artists Organization (SPWAO) is a fine example of the high level of communication between aspiring writers. But, unfortunately,

there is no similar network in Australia. So, does Australia have anything to offer horror enthusiasts in the United States?

Of course. There are many varied and talented writers, film makers and artists in Australia currently working in the horror genre.

In this first column, I'll introduce two main players in the publishing scene. *Terror Australis*, a new publication, and *Crimson Celluloid*, an established fanzine dedicated to Australian and overseas horror films.

Terror Australis is an updated version of *The Australian Fantasy & Horror Magazine* (a contradictory title, given that it concentrated on publishing works from outside Australia).

Fantasy & Horror began in 1984, but lasted only six issues. One of the people involved with the magazine was Leigh Blackmore, present editor of *Terror Australis*.

Leigh has balanced his faith in Australian talent with a calculated marketing strategy. He'll feature a lead story by an established overseas author (the premiere issue features Brian Lumley), with remaining space devoted to Australian contributions. Leigh stresses that submissions from outside Australia are by invitation only. Currently the only publication of its type in Australia, small press or otherwise, it represents an important avenue for new Australian authors. Hopefully, *Terror Australis* will be-

come a regular showcase for the best in foreign and Australian horror fiction and poetry.

Crimson Celluloid began in 1985 as a photocopied horror film magazine. Editor David Nolte admits that the first ten issues were appalling, but after seventeen issues *Celluloid* has undergone a major facelift. With 150 subscribers, the magazine now has a circulation of 1,000 copies.

This magazine means many things for Australian artists. It represents a way for aspiring critics to get published; it means publicity for a strong underground film-making scene and information about overseas horror films; and it represents a way for horror enthusiasts to meet. David and his crew organize regular well-attended film-screenings in Sydney. Subscribers also receive *Visual Violence*, a fanzine dealing with gore films.

Celluloid concentrates by necessity on films outside Australia, but there are some horror films being made here. With the exception of made-for-video marvels like *Outback Vampires* and *Houseboat Horror*, making horror films in Australia usually means working with Super-8, a low cost and versatile medium. Unfortunately, Super-8 has little commercial potential in any country.

Celluloid may change that. David eventually wants to market compilation videotapes of the very best Super-8 horror films made here, offer-



Three morgue attendants

with a successful

necrophilia service

unwittingly eat radioactive

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and are transformed

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ing fans everywhere a chance to see the talent lurking beneath the fabric of a society which relies heavily upon imported entertainment.

In my next column, I hope to offer more information about the healthy Sydney Super-8 horror scene. *Celluloid* sites Chris Mikul and Barry Patterson as leading Sydney film makers. Chris is responsible for *Human Hamburger Madness*, and Barry is currently working on three films.

One important film I can preview

is Zlatko Kasumovic's *Killer Zombies*. Although principle shooting took place in 1986, the film is just nearing completion. Shot in 16mm and only 20 minutes in length, *Killer Zombies* employed a cast and crew of 85. Zlatko wrote and directed the \$20,000 film as a student and hopes to see his work released on video.

The plot demonstrates the off-beat humor in the film: three morgue attendants with a successful necrophilia service unwittingly eat radioactive Russian chocolate and are transformed into zombies, along with thousands of others. Of course, the film features numerous gruesome effects.

Both Leigh Blackmore and David Nolte agree that the Australian horror scene is fragmented but enthusiastic. The writers, artists, film makers and fans certainly exist, but they're well hidden. You can learn what I uncover in the next dose of *Horror in the Land of the Bicentennial*.

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KLOSTERMAN ©88

Absolute Peace and Quiet

J.N. Williamson

Did you ever think about living in a police station? For more than thirty years--until recently--the department was my home. Sometimes that was literally true, if you think of a home as a place where you relax and eat and sleep. Lots of times I was on a case for thirty-six or even forty-eight hours. None of that was because of orders. See, part of a place being home involves loving it.

And I especially loved the years I spent on the Vice Squad, more, I guess, than a wife and kids. Because I never married, never had any kids. I devoted my time to my work. Gave it my heart and all my strength, too.

Which is probably why Lt. Pete Aldrich is where he is now. When you get to be nearly seventy years old and have no family to take care of you, and when you have a stroke that leaves you paralyzed, well, you don't have a lot of options.

So I'm in the rest home now, a little expensive place where all my pension goes, lying on my back and thinking back to the different slobes I busted, the hard cases--both in terms of so-called human beings who were sadists, and the cases that called for me to out-think guys with more angles than one of those new highways. Oh, I watch a little TV at times, and I joke with the nurses some, even the ones who treat me like I'm some sort of vegetable just because I'm temporarily laid up. But mostly I think. Remember. And plan.

Does that sound ridiculous to you, an old retired cop whose legs and one arm won't work, laying plans? I don't have any future, you're thinking, except possibly Heaven or Hell. But all along I figured that there would come a time when I'd get back the ability to sit up, instead of being propped up by this tilted bed; and once I can sit up, I can get around in a wheelchair; and who knows? Maybe the legs'll come back too. Anyway, when I get to where I can take care of myself more, I'll leave this antiseptic place that's like a big snow-house: white walls and ceiling, white bedclothes, white uniforms on the nurses and aides. I'm not a guy to complain, you learn not to on long nights on stake-outs; but sometimes I have to close my eyes against the cold winter-scene, this white world full of bad food and worse smells.

Anyway, I figured I'd be able to get out eventually. Until just last week. That was when they stopped taking

me to a work-out room where strong young guys exercised my legs and made me try to squeeze a rubber ball. Nobody said anything negative or anything, but when they stopped taking me there I guess some part of me just gave up on getting out.

Which is when I started thinking about one hard case in particular, the biggest vice lord in my city, the sleaziest creature in all my thirty-one years of braking up dope rings, talking nice kids into cures, talking other nice kids into giving up prostitution, booking ex-nice girls who wouldn't listen to me, and a thousand other tough jobs that nobody much wants to do. Maybe everybody has one big one that got away, and Carlos Sylvester was mine. He wasn't always named Sylvester and most of the time he didn't even use that name. Under his mug shot in my book were more AKA's than there are names on a football roster.

In fact, Sylvester was into almost everything that contributes to the misery of the human species. Early in his career, before dope became the big-deal way for dumb slobes to express their independence, he had a call-girl racket that was slick as oil. Now you have your types of regular people who say, What the hell, Aldrich, there's always been prostitution and there always will be. But the way Carlos Sylvester ran it, there were two rackets going on. He had a cadre of really smart gals who were allowed to con their johns a hundred ways. So they turned tricks, then pulled blackmail on their customers which sometimes went on for years, and Sylvester took seventy-five percent right off the top. The rest of his girls weren't permitted to breathe without him knowing about it, especially to pull a con on their own. I know for a fact about three girls he had killed because they tried to snow their johns. Worse, I estimate that more than half the girls who worked for him--both the special, sharp ones and the ordinary dolls--were enticed into the racket by men whom Sylvester hand-picked for the job. We got a few of them, but they knew better than to talk about the boss. In short, Sylvester ran it like a corporate business--and I never got a thing on him except one time when I took him downtown and had to let him go two hours later.

Now, that was my first look at him and it was a long time ago. Next time we met, it was over heroin; old Carlos

went where the big money waited. I picked him up at an airport on the day that they tried to slip a shipment through. He was able to get off clean; he had an airline ticket in his pocket and proved that he was there to board the plane. All the time I knew that he was there supervising to be sure that the operation came off smoothly.

Did it ever! We arrested the wrong guy and got the wrong load. Sylvester had prepared for me; he'd outsmarted me again.

He aged a lot between the times that I saw him, going gray and losing weight but staying sharp-nosed with dark skin and an attitude so superior to the Vice Squad men that he almost convinced even me.

I guess that's when I decided that I wanted to put him away more than anybody--and believe me, I've booked some biggies. But I never kept Sylvester in the slammer longer than that two hours I mentioned, and that's why I started thinking a lot about him now that I was in the rest home and it looked like I might stay.

Sure, I was out of the action now. But since they retired me, nobody has even developed a lead on Carlos Sylvester. Some thought he was sick. All I knew was, the scum-bag was loose and the only man who might have gotten him--Lt. Pete Aldrich--was staring at white.

Then, day before yesterday, they brought in this stroke victim. They didn't tell me that was his problem, but he looked like I'd felt when I had mine--unable to move, half-awake, pale, and generally out of it. That made two of us in the room for the first time in months and I wasn't sure I wanted the company. Sick people make me nervous, and dying ones remind me of all the poor hookers and hopheads I've scraped out of the gutter.

This tall, emaciated nurse called Miss Whiting was the one to tell me about him, give me the first clue. "His name is Charles Simmons," she whispered to me, leaning over to get to my ear like I'm a deaf old man, "and you'll have to keep your TV way down for awhile. He must have absolute peace and quiet now. But he's about your age, and I'm sure that you'll become great friends when he gets to feeling better."

"Does he have any family?" I asked, thinking about strangers traipsing through my room.

"Not a soul except a cousin who found him this way and followed some instructions that Mr. Simmons had left."

"And some money, too, I'll bet. It don't cost peanuts to stay here in the Snow Palace."

Skinny Miss Whiting gave me an oh-you-old-devil look and whispered something about being as nice to Charles Simmons as they were to me when I arrived. I allowed as how that would probably kill the S.O.B. in two or three hours.

She cranked her starched body out of there, uniform scratching loudly, and I lay back against the propped-up bed to take a better look at my new roomie.

There wasn't much to see, not at first. A lot of white hair, pale but olive-shaded skin--vaguely foreign, I thought--

and a sort of pointy nose. Simmons kept his eyes closed, either passed out or thinking his own thoughts, and he was kind of shrunken under the sheets like some old men get until you can't even tell whether they were ever tall or short, muscular or fat. I sighed. Simmons didn't look like much company to me.

But something about him did look familiar.

Thinking, I realized that the initials were C.S., Charles Simmons. That dark-skinned complexion didn't look like a Simmons to me, and my original idea was that he had probably changed his name sometime. Then I saw that the two fitted together! A name change, and C.S.--which also were the initials of Carlos Sylvester! And Charles was Anglo for Carlos!

Well, let me tell you, I almost died right there, I was so excited! Naturally, I looked at the sick man with professional eyes from that point on, studying everything about him. The skin color, allowing for the paleness of the stroke, was right; and the nose--Great Lord of our Father, the nose was perfect! I could see in my mind Sylvester's sharp nose right next to Simmons' on his pillow like two superimposed mug shots. The match wasn't close, it was perfect.

Sylvester had generally kept his hair long, and it had grayed. Simmons had long white hair, and it had been years since I saw Carlos Sylvester. His hair would surely be white by now. There had to be some way to make a better I.D.. I was sweating as I cleared my throat and began a conversation.

"Hullo there, Mr. Simmons," I said easily. I thought fast before telling him my real name because we were old foes and a smart gangster knows the cops as well as the heat knows the gangster. "My name's Neihart, Sam Neihart. Anything I can do for you?"

The eyes in the lined face cracked open, almost like the lids were breaking. The eyes were green; they took time to focus. He cleared his throat. "Don't feel--like talking."

Did I hear a faint accent? "Sure, I know how that is. I've been sick too. But sometimes it helps to get yourself back in the land of the livin'. By talking, meetin' folks and getting acquainted." My eyes, scanning him like an X-ray machine, took in the ring on his left hand little finger. And I remembered: Carlos Sylvester always wore a handsome emerald ring like that! "That's a pretty ring you've got there, Mr. Simmons."

"Don't want--to talk--about it," he said, gasping.

"Haven't seen a ring like that in years. Emerald, is it?"

His nod was barely perceptible. "Talk later. Must--get some rest."

Unable to turn over, locked in that one prone position, he closed his eyes and soon began to snore.

Fine: that gave me time to think. This man called Simmons was about my age, and Carlos Sylvester would be too. Every other known point of identification matched, right down to the ring. But I was a very good cop; I didn't take action until I was sure.

There had to be some sure-fire way to make him. Something that I remembered about Sylvester and had temporarily forgotten. I shut my own eyes against the sterile surroundings and sent my mind back through the years, dipping into the Sylvester file I had updated every chance I got, sometimes pulled out and rifled through just hoping for a clue, a lead *something* that would take me right to the big shot's top-floor apartment.

That was it! Sylvester had stayed in a fancy apartment at the top of a good building for years. When we learned that he had taken off for parts unknown, we went over that apartment like a hundred fine-toothed combs and a team of new vacuum cleaners. We didn't come up with anything to pin on him, not even a line to his whereabouts--but we found a collection of expensive coins. That told us two things: One, he had a hobby; and two, it pleased me that we had loused-up his fun and I palmed a coin as a souvenir. Still had in, in fact, on a chain in the drawer of the table next to my bed. Fifteen, twenty minutes passed. "Simmons," I called. No answer. It took three more times.

"What?" The reply was barely audible, little more than a grunt.

"Just wanna get better acquainted," I told him, "learn to be your friend. Where you from?"

"Lots of places. All over. For months--at a time."

"That right? Spend lots of time in apartments, I imagine."

He nodded and seemed to be having trouble keeping his eyes open.

"Myself, I always preferred the top floor," I lied. "Get a great view that way, Charlie. You like the pent-house?"

"Sure. Now, I--"

"I insisted on a top floor every time. How 'bout you?"

"Sure. Always." he sighed. "Now, if--"

I don't know what else he was going to say, because the busybody skinny nurse was back in. She approached my bed on tiptoe, frowning. It didn't help her face any. "Mr. Aldrich," she whispered, leaning again, "there'll be plenty of time for making friends later. I told you that Mr. Simmons must have absolute quiet. *Absolute* peace and quiet, do you understand me?"

She didn't wait for my reply--which was going to be that you got that only after you were dead--but crossed the four feet or so between our beds and bustled around C.S..

"I'll put this buzzer right by the fingers of your left hand, Mr. Simmons," she murmured. "The nightshift is coming on now, but just push it if you need anything and someone will come right in."

She paused by me before leaving. "Be a nice boy, now, Mr. Aldrich, and we'll see about some extra bacon for breakfast."

I started to tell her that it was *Lieutenant* Aldrich and always would be, but she fluttered out of the room before I could speak. It was just as well, I reflected. It wouldn't

do for C.S. to know my title. God, I realized, she called me Aldrich then!

But a quick glance at the white-haired man told me he hadn't heard. His mouth was spread now, the lips parted like a bird waiting for a worm, and his sharp nose in profile gave him the appearance of a vulture. Sick or not, if C.S. was really Carlos Sylvester instead of Charles Simmons, the law had to make him pay.

It took a lot of effort with my worthless legs and one good arm but I managed to lean to the table beside my bed and pry the drawer open. With the good hand, I found a pencil and poked through the stuff I kept in my drawer until the pencil hooked on the chain and I knew I'd struck gold. Real gold.

I held the chain up in front of my eyes and watched the way that the Sylvester coin caught the dying light from the window behind my bed. It looked almost red. Gold: a Vice Squad cop didn't see much gold unless he was dishonest. I smiled. It had always been like I'd caught a *part* of Carlos Sylvester, like he'd left a hand or a foot behind and I had succeeded in taking that much of the miserable scum out of society. I adored dangling the chain, looking at the old gold piece, thinking about Sylvester losing his precious collection.

From the corner of my eye I watched C.S.. If he was Sylvester, he'd like to look at the gold too. And he might just give himself away.

"Simmons," I beckoned. Then, louder, "Simmons!"

This time his eyes snapped open at once, like two light switches, and he looked at me like I'd scared him half to death. Well, if he *was* Sylvester, the dream he'd been having was pure evil, something too filthy for normal human eyes to see--or else full of gloating delight over some job he'd pulled off, wrecking a dozen human lives in the process. I contained my excitement with difficulty.

"See this?" I demanded, holding the chain and coin in the air above my chest. "That's a gold coin."

He stared at me. No question, those green eyes widened and stared at me, I felt, for the first time, with fear. "G-Gold?"

"Yeah. I've had it for years now. Wanna know how I got it?"

His chest was rising and falling quickly. "Tell me," he said.

"Found it in a raid on an apartment rented by a very bad dude. Interested?"

He shook his head, shook it hard. I felt sure now.

"What's the matter, Carlos? You want to blot it all out now, all the years that you've beaten and cheated and killed? All the years you've ruined nice kids, poisoned them and robbed them of their youth?"

"No, I-I--"

"Tryin' to make peace with your Maker, Carlos?"

"Yes," he said. "I mean I--"

"You might as well confess, Sylvester," I grunted. I slid the chain back in the drawer. "You're finally caught. I'm Pete Aldrich, pal, *Lt.* Aldrich to you. Of the Vice Squad. And I'm gonna put you where you won't hurt

nobody else.”

The immobile body on the nearby bed seemed to stiffen more, to become rigid in fright. His eyes rolled in his head, as if searching. “Y-You’re--*arresting* me?”

Now I loved it. “Yeah, Sylvester, I’m arresting you.”
“But--how?”

I stopped smiling, startled. I had good circumstantial evidence on him. But we were both bedridden. Then I saw the fingers of his left hand twitching, starting to move toward the buzzer Miss Whiting had left there. I hurled the top part of my body to one side, threw out my right arm as far as it would go, and--still gripping the pencil--jabbed it against Sylvester’s buzzer. It barely reached--but it touched, jabbed, drove the contraption maybe two inches from his hand! At last I’d stopped him, at last I’d won a round!

The eyes on me were fearful and wary. “What--will you do?” he gasped. “Can’t take--me in. You’re sick too.”

“The only way that’s left to me, Sylvester,” I told him. “I’m going to personally send you to Hell.” I thought about all good kids that he and his pushers had started out on pot and gradually switched to the hard stuff, thought about how *they* should be here now, to see this. “Miss Whiting told me that you needed absolute quiet, Carlos. Total peace and rest. I’m gonna make sure you get the exact opposite. Total sound, with me talkin’ to you all night. Telling you what you’ve done, remindin’ you about the people, the *humanity* that you’ve hurt and killed. I’m going to keep you awake--I’m going to *talk* you to death!”

He whispered only one word. “Please.” It didn’t even amuse me. It was like hearing Hitler or Eichmann say “please” after what they had done. Only Sylvester had had a longer reign, longer and dirtier still, his methods much more varied, his tortures the kind that took twenty *years* to kill--years of need and hunger, of deprivation, lost loved ones, agony over the desire and agony over the withdrawal, loss of pride and spirit and self-respect until there was nothing left at all.

So I began to talk, keeping the pencil handy. Perhaps every fifteen or twenty minutes his eyes would shudder closed, and I’d raise my voice, not enough to let a nurse or aide hear me but enough to jar Sylvester from his rest; or I’d reach over to poke at him with the point of the pencil, wishing it was a dagger.

“You remember Betty Elmquist?” I reminisced. “She was one of your girls. Made a couple a bills a night, and kept maybe fifteen bucks. Remember her, Carlos? Of course not! You don’t remember just *one* of your girls who committed suicide because she was gettin’ too old to turn a trick. Stuck her head in an oven, Betty did.”

The green eyes were fixed into a pattern, a steady stare that watched me attentively until I began to think that he had died; but then the eyes would blink or he’d sigh that long, painful drawn-out gasp that told me I was pushing ahead neatly.

Sometimes I couldn’t quite remember the names or all the details and I’d sing. “Lady of Spain” found me in good voice; I also soloed on “Old Man River” but

stopped when he ripped his eyes open again and before I got to the high part of the song.

“There was a kid over on Peabody Street,” I went on, and sometimes I’d get to enjoying the sound of my own voice as I dredged up the dirty time-clotted memories that were all I had inside me. “His name was Frank Steiler. Played football in high school and got himself an athletic scholarship to college. Only thing was, your boys gave him another education first. Got him to experiment with chemistry, with how much crack a strong young body could take. He found out, you S.O.B.,” I growled, jabbing him with the pencil just because I wanted to.

And he just stared back, finally blinking hard, remembering how he had managed to prove that he spent the night with a lady. A lady! Hell, everybody on the force knew what she did for a job but nobody could prove it and his alibi stuck so well we never even booked him. He looked terrible now, past being frantic, holding on to life by his fingertips. I pressed on.

“Then there’s the story of Carl and Alice,” I continued, “remember them, Sylvester?”

I looked to see if he was being attentive enough. The record I had to recite was long and I wanted him to have every single ruined life in his mind to take with him to Hell when he left. His eyes were still on me as I started to pick up the thread of my story.

That was when I saw that the green eyes weren’t blinking anymore. I jabbed him with the pencil point, hard.

“Sylvester,” I called. “Sylvester, don’t you dare die yet!”

But he had. He’d gone, and just the blank eyes were left for me to see.

Then all the old names came pouring back into my mind, all the hurt, and loss and death, a torrent of tribulation, a terrible ocean of tragedy that Carlos Sylvester had created and then parted so that he could walk god-like through to the other side, always safe and out of reach.

And now he was safe and out of reach of me again. Much to my amazement, since justice had been done at last, I began to cry.

A couple of days ago, they wheeled in a new roommate and lifted him into the other bed. There were two of us in the room again and I wasn’t sure that I really wanted company. Sick people tend to make me nervous, remind me of all the deaders I’ve had to look at through the years, all of them so efficiently wiped-out by Carlos Sylvester.

But this new guy they brought in, well, he had a shallow round face, blue eyes, and a stub of a nose like Santa Claus. Right away I saw the resemblance and couldn’t believe my eyes. This guy, lyin’ all quiet and still, needing peace and quiet the way that nice ordinary people need air--this man was the spittin’ image of Carlos Sylvester!

Well, let me tell you, I almost died right there, I was so excited. ■

Alan's Room

J.E. Dressler

From the basement, the smell of something burning drifted up to invade the kitchen. Even over the rich full smell of tomato sauce, the burning odor was unmistakable. It was somewhat sweet, yet unpleasant, as well.

Angela Novak, standing at the sink, knew her husband wouldn't stand for it. He had been complaining without stop these past few weeks about how much they were letting Alan get away with. It was only with reluctance that he'd agreed to follow Dr. Lentini's advice in the first place, advice that consisted of setting aside a room for Alan, a room other than his bedroom, where the boy could be alone, a place neither parent should enter. That one room was the cellar; Alan always kept the door locked, whether he was in the room or not, and because this was summer--the season he hated most of all--he spent anywhere from ten to fifteen hours behind that door.

He was down there now, doing God knew what. Smoking something, Angela guessed. But she wouldn't dream of going down to the cellar to find out exactly what her son was up to. Certainly not alone, anyway. Angela thought of calling Dr. Lentini; maybe he could come over to the house. But the problem couldn't be solved that easily, she knew; besides, Arthur was not very fond of the doctor or his ideas. Arthur was tired of the whole thing, in fact; last night he had tried to broach the subject of sending Alan away, but Angela had pretended to be too tired to discuss it. She was afraid he would mention it again tonight. But she would have something to say, herself.

Alan had actually gone outside. A moment of hope flickered inside Angela when she saw through the kitchen window that Alan was involved in a conversation with little Debbie Rodgers from next door. She was walking her dog, and Alan actually seemed friendly, bending to pet the small ball of fur and acting like any normal 16-year-old boy. Alan seldom had anything to do with boys or girls his own age. Dr. Lentini told her that there was nothing wrong with this--it was better than his remaining completely insular--that Alan, despite his high IQ was not as mature as others his age.

Angela reflected upon the loss of her younger son,

Mark. Alan had worshiped the boy until his death three years ago. Mark had gone through the windshield of their car after they had been sideswiped and forced off the road, running smack into a tree. Angela had suffered only minor injuries, and Alan, sitting strapped in the back seat, remained unhurt. But he did not escape the mental trauma that followed. It took him the better part of a year to even get back in a car again. He became withdrawn and often talked to himself. When they found out that he was talking to his dead brother as if he were still alive, they realized that Alan needed more help than they could give him.

After seeing Dr. Lentini, the conversations stopped. But his withdrawal deepened. So, to see him out of the house and in the company of other children--even a 10 year-old girl--did wonders for Angela. She'd mention this to Arthur.

Later, at the dinner table, Arthur sat stone-faced as he listened to her. She knew that he hated himself for letting a 16-year-old boy walk around as if he owned the house, as if they, the parents, were nothing but boarders--or worse, servants. Angela herself was a nervous wreck, worried that Arthur would notice the burning smell that still lingered in the kitchen.

"So this makes, what, the third time this week that he's refused supper? Now we're not even good enough to eat with?"

Angela could not meet her husband's stare. "He's lost his brother. It'll take time."

"It's been three years, for God's sake! I lost a son and now I'm in danger of losing another one. Alan's nearly a man, he has to start acting like one."

"Dr. Lentini said--"

"Dr. Lentini," he interrupted, "does not have to live with him. He doesn't have to put up with being treated like garbage. We've tried it Dr. Lentini's way. We've been more than fair. Alan's got all the privacy he needs. We make few demands. For the past two years, we've listened to your Dr. Lentini telling us about how intelligent Alan is, and how we need to deal with such an exceptional boy and his demands. Don't you see what this is doing to you? For God's sake, Angela, you look ten years older than you are!"

She didn't cry; she was past crying and it was true, she could have easily been mistaken for a 50-year-old. "Can't we just wait?"

Arthur swallowed a mouthful of spaghetti. "Wait? For what? Tomorrow, next week, next month?"

She didn't answer; she was lost in it all. She rose mechanically to refill his plate, but he motioned her aside.

"I'm not very hungry tonight." He got up and headed for the cellar door. She cut him off. "I'm going downstairs to let Alan know that if he wants to eat he'd better do it now. I *can* go downstairs in my own house, can't I Angela?"

He reached for the knob and opened the door; the burning smell greeted him like a punch in the stomach. He turned towards his wife and saw her face sag. She put her hand on his as if to stop him, to warm the coldness inside him. He shook her off and started down the stairs. She was forced to follow. Here, the smell was stronger. There was no denying it.

Alan had painted the words PRIVATE - KEEP OUT on the door at the bottom of the stairs. Dripping red letters; angry letters. From beneath the door, light could be seen; flickering, weak.

Arthur tried the door but, of course, it was locked.

"Open up, Alan."

No response.

"Don't make me break this door down!"

But Alan still didn't answer. Angela heard him talking. It sounded more like singing. Soft, haunting. Not one word was clear.

"I'm going to count to three, Alan, and then I'm going to break it down."

He counted slowly, setting his jaw in determination, stepping back, sizing up the door. On three, he hit it with his shoulder, putting all his weight behind it. The sound of the door breaking rang through the cellar like the tolling of a bell, a death-knell.

Inside the room, candlelight painted mad shadows on the back wall. Alan was crouched on the floor, naked. His body was smeared with what appeared to be grease paint; and animal fat. He was poised over the unmoving form of a young girl, a child. She too was naked, and in the confused tangle of Angela's thoughts, she was able to recognize her as Debbie Rodgers. In the flickering light of the room's single candle, a black, evil-smelling candle that spat greasy tendrils of smoke, it was difficult to tell if Debbie was still breathing.

The light caught silver over Alan's head; a knife blade. Alan's eyes, rolled up toward the ceiling, were white orbs.

"Come in" he said, in a voice neither had ever heard before. A voice that filled the room with an icy coldness. "Mark will be here soon." ■

Jaunita

wraps me in her bloodless arms,
finally safe from all that harms,
caresses me with graveyard charms,
my lifeless love, Juanita

turns my heart from red to grue,
then fills my tomb with morning's dew,
when I'm gone she'll come for you,
my queen of haunts, Jaunita

kisses me with lips of clay,
fears but light and break of day,
fondles me in vile ways,
my mistress dread, Jaunita

finally leaves my tortured dreams,
from her soul no hope dares spring,
chasing are but my screams,
my love of hate, Juanita

--Jack Karpan--

Tattoo

Unsatisfied, I watched the man,
snoring in the candle's glow,
and wondered what had brought me here, cold within a
stranger's bed.

He tossed and threw the covers back
and there it was--

the dragon; it had drawn me here.

Red and green and black,
it pranced across his chest,
fixed me with its golden eye,
crept along my arm,
slid around my neck.

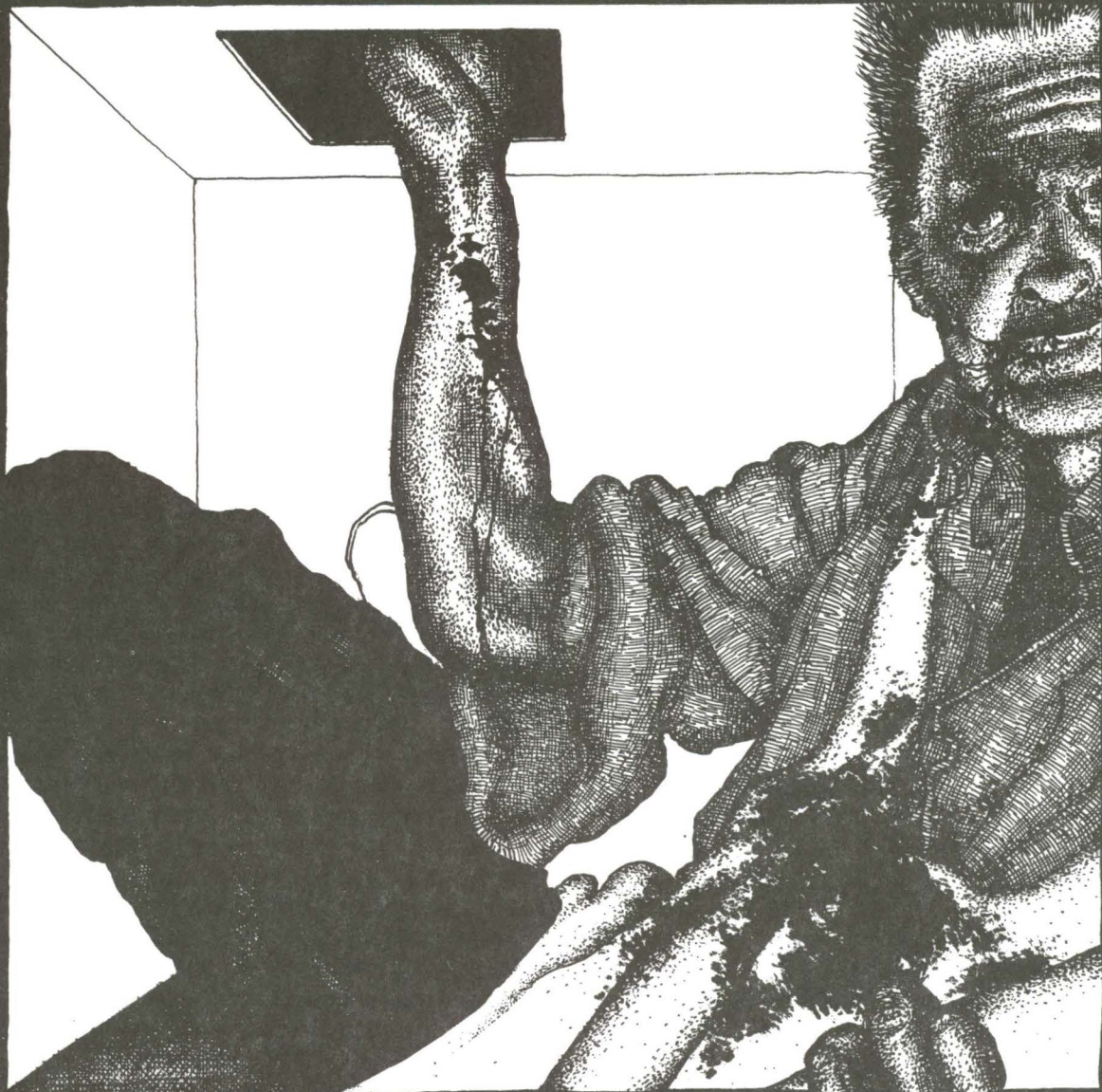
Stigma of a drunken night,
tender curl about my throat,
I grabbed it by the tail, tried to pull it off.

It hissed and bit my hand
and scurried to the man.

Drawing back, I watched it
glide through his open lips.

Choking, he woke and glared at me
with harsh, accusing eyes.

--Dona Fox--



Every Town has One

James Robert Smith

Every school in every town has one, at least. A person like Velma Binder. A loser, for some reason or another. Too ugly to be accepted. Too clumsy to take part in any activities. Too dumb to catch on. Always lacking something that everyone else has; or having something that no one *should* have. Like too much fat.

And a bad life at home.

Velma gripped the door jamb and pushed her forehead tightly against the wall, as if the pressure might somehow block what she was hearing. He was tearing everything down. He was making certain that Richard--her sweet, sweet Richard--would leave her. She heard her father's angry, senseless howls and she felt the scream trying to force its way out. But with a practiced and expert skill, she held it at bay. Still, it tore at her; more at *her* than Richard. Her father was good at making her an oblique target.

The roars bellowed out deep and threatening. "I know what you're after, you filthy bastard! Stay away from Velma!"

He was insane. She knew that now, if not before. Her father wasn't going to sit back and let her be happy. Richard had been able to overlook everything else, but there was no way he would stay with her after this. Who wanted anything to do with a girl whose father was mad? She wondered what Richard was thinking, recoiling at the horror of what was actually happening.

"Stay away from her for your own good! I'll be watching you!" The receiver crashed down. Finally.

She didn't need to turn to know that he was glaring at her. There was a kind of heat in the room, a remnant of his rage. In spite of her size, she felt very small in his presence.

"Velma."

With some effort, she forced herself to turn. His left hand was clinched around the crumpled sheet of paper, on which was written the poem. It had been foolish of her not to have hidden it. Velma knew that he regularly invaded her room and probed about. Maybe she'd wanted him to find it.

"I don't want you to ever see that boy again." He stepped closer; loomed over her. His restaurant apron was still draped about his ample midsection. She stared

at the logo. *The Station*. "Now, I do not need to be worrying over you in the next few days. Do you understand?" Spittle flew from his lips.

Velma looked at him. She felt dizzy.

"The Governor will be in town next week and *I* will be preparing a meal for him. Me! Now, I'm going to have a lot of work to do and I don't need something like *this*." He held out the wadded paper. "You heard what I told that little prick, so don't you be encouraging him to do otherwise. *I meant* what I said!" He turned then, an obscene pirouette, and stalked into the kitchen.

She stood alone, peeking through her tears at the telephone. If she picked it up and tried to call him, her father would beat her. He'd done it before. She backed away from it, quivering, denying hysteria its release.

Richard had been so good to her. He had sought her out after reading her poems in the college literary magazine. Her weight problem had not bothered him; he'd ignored how fat she was and had made her forget how unattractive she perceived herself to be. He seemed beyond such judgements and never made mention of them. And Velma would never have thought to make more of the situation than a mere friendship, until recent developments. If only she had been more careful with that poem; it was such an innocent thing: *The Kiss*. Velma gasped; a sad sound. She let hope go.

"Velma! Get in here! I need some help!"

Velma moved slowly, stepping carefully across the shiny white-tiled floor. Everything was white. The counters were white; the cupboards, the refrigerator and freezer, the stove, all of his appliances. White and spotless. 'Easier to keep clean,' he had informed her. And so she kept it for him. Twice a day she scrubbed the place, until it sparkled like new.

He stood at the counter with a huge bowl in his beefy left arm. With his right hand, he busily beat at some mixture with a silver whisk. "I'm going to need your help with some of these dishes tonight. I'm trying some new things and don't want to get anything wrong when I whip them up next week. *You know* how important this is." He didn't turn to face her as he talked. A thick slab of red, raw meat lay to his right.

"What do you need?" she asked, her voice even.

"I did up some red sauce earlier, before I was interrupted. It's in the refrigerator. Get it for me."

Velma retrieved the bowl of sauce and placed it at the end of the counter. "What now?"

"Let me see." He paused, setting down the bowl. "I guess I'd better slice up this steak. Hand me the big carving knife."

Velma looked idly at the angular block of teak which held the quintet of her Poppa's favorite knives.

"Well? Hurry it up!" Still, he wouldn't look at her. He lay down the bowl and wiped his hands. "I don't know what you could have been thinking. Why, pray tell, would that boy be interested in you? Huh? And that goddamned poetry! What good is it! *This* can't pay your bills!" He retrieved the wadded sheet of paper from his apron pocket, staining it with batter. "You waste your time with these ridiculous daydreams! I've had it with this shit!" He threw the wad to his spotless floor. "No more!" It bounced once.

His back was to his daughter and he did not see the blank expression of hatred that came over her. He did not see her as she raised the clean-edged blade high above her head and brought it down between his shoulders.

The point sheared through his slippery flesh. He gasped, an awful intake of breath. Velma screamed.

"You *bastard!*" The knife plunged deeper. "How do you like it? How does it feel? With a wrench, she pulled the knife free. He turned, trying to speak, trying to pull air into his lungs. His jaw gaped open in a terminal yawn. Again, she brought the blade down with the full weight of her bulk behind it. Ten inches of steel disappeared into the thick flesh of his upper belly. "How do you like it? How do you like it?"

Her father leaned back onto the counter, arms drooping limply to his sides, as if offering his torso as a target. His mouth was a dark, wet hole. Twice more, Velma sent the knife slicing into him. She stepped back. Her father made a kind of shuffling step toward her, his eyes, wide and staring upward, at the ceiling; the white ceiling that was dotted with dollops of red. He toppled and his skull cracked, like two billiards smacking together. His body shuddered and a death rattle bubbled past his lips.

Velma stepped back. She placed the knife upon the counter, staining it with red streaks. "Oh," she peeped, looking down at his huge body, the crimson pool spreading beneath him. She ran to the bathroom and vomited. As she crouched there above the toilet, she thought, *The shades. I'd better pull the shades down or someone'll see.* She got up and hurried back to the kitchen.

In her absence, there had been additional death throes and she had to sidestep crimson tendrils that even now crept outwardly. Her mind, though, was on the wide kitchen window. Before drawing the shade, she gazed out to make certain that no one was about. With the world shut out, Velma turned to gaze upon what her rage had wrought.

Her father had bled extensively. Blood was everywhere. There were stains on the counter; there were

spots upon the ceiling--how was she going to clean that? She'd have to make certain that the kitchen was spotless before she could admit anyone. First though, she had to move her father's body.

And she tried. She tried dragging him by his right arm, then the left. She tried lifting him from under his armpits and straddling his torso. She tried pulling him out by his ankles, but only succeeded in straining her back. She tried until his clothes--and the floor--were smeared with sticky red paste; she tried until she realized she couldn't do it.

Defeated, she sat down at the breakfast nook. With her plump, red face buried in her palms, she sat and sobbed, still struggling with unrelieved hysteria. Her father's refrigerator rattled endlessly. The freezer hummed. Velma's stomach growled. A timer went off to remind her that the fish filet was through soaking.

Velma heard her father lift himself from the floor.

No doubt about it; he had rolled over and lifted himself into a sitting position. Velma froze, unable to turn and face him. His pants slithered as he stood. He stumbled toward her. Velma heard his ruined organs shifting wetly against each other.

"Velma." Blood, spittle and vomit rolled and surged in his throat. "Velma . . ."

Her stomach growled.

"You're hungry," he told her. He put a hand upon her shoulder; it was cold and heavy, like a pound of pork.

Velma turned and looked up at him.

"Lolled," she whispered.

His dead eyes stared at her from an impossible angle.

"Lolled," she repeated. She had used the word in her writing many times. Until now, looking at her father's head dangling on the rubbery neck, she never really knew what it meant. His lolling head jiggled as his lips worked. Velma's stomach growled again.

"See? I told you you were hungry. Eat." He took his hand from her shoulder and turned toward the refrigerator. It was an effort for him to get across to it. Bottles clinked as he pulled the door open. Velma listened as he rummaged. "Ah . . ." he gurgled.

Velma still couldn't move. She couldn't even breathe.

"Salmon and dill sauce. Good cold. You always liked it cold." Sluggishly, he returned and placed the dish before her.

"Eat," he slurped. "You're hungry." He went back to the refrigerator. "Not enough, though. You need more." The door hissed open again. "More!"

Numbly, Velma rose and walked by the bent form that groped at objects with increasing dexterity. She retrieved some utensils and went back to her seat.

"Brisket," he informed her. She plunged her fork into the firm salmon, brought the portion to her lips. "There's shrimp from yesterday." He placed another platter before her. "Cheese bread and yeast rolls." This as he opened the pantry: "Swedish limpa; you know how you like that." Velma, as hungry as he told her she was, shoveled down the food. "Oh! I nearly forgot! Broccoli-

Onion Casserole! And I have some jellied chicken loaf still. Eat! Eat!"

She did eat. She ate the day away. She ate until she felt the food lying in leaden lumps in her stomach. All the while, her father stood, urging her on, returning to the larders to search for extra dishes to replace the ones she had cleaned. Velma ate until she could eat no more, as the day ebbed into hazy dusk.

"Velma! Suppertime. Eat!"

Delaying only long enough to use the bathroom, Velma went back to her place her father had set. "Beef tongue with pasta," he announced happily as she sat. "Turnip souffle and scalloped zucchini."

She chewed.

"Golden puffs."

She swallowed.

"Crabmeat crepes."

She ate while the darkness nibbled its way out of the corners to fill the house. Her father was a shapeless mass that moved and shifted gracelessly. Velma nodded sleepily.

"Your favorite!" his voice roared through phlegm. "You *must* eat it all! It's all for you!" A deep dish pecan pie stared up at her flacid jaw. "For you! All for you!" Before she passed out, she had eaten it all.

At The Station, the other cooks noticed that Chef Binder was not there when they arrived. That was odd. In fact, it had never happened before. The man was a fanatic about his work, and he was always the first to arrive. It was the way he wanted it; it allowed him to prepare the breakfast meals without anyone "screwing things up."

So they waited. And waited.

After awhile, they began to prepare things on their own. They didn't want to; they worried about the possibility of his rage since they'd worked in his kitchen without his direct instruction, but it couldn't be avoided.

He never arrived.

A phone call was made, but there was no answer at the Binder residence.

When they finally sent someone to his house, they found it locked. No one answered the door. Binder's car was in the driveway. The house was dark.

The police arrived. The nosy neighbor next door poked her head over the hedge and told them that something "strange" was going on inside. She'd heard "strange" noises, saw "strange" shadows behind the curtains. At last the police forced their way in.

Every town has one, at least. A fable of some horror or other that happened upon someone in some unspecified time in the past. The tales usually end with lines like, "And they found a hook dangling from the door," or "And there was her boyfriend, both his legs chopped off with an axe."

Velma's town has one, too. It ends like this:

After the police forced the lock, they went into the house. They called out. "Anyone here? Mr. Binder? Miss Binder? Hello?" No one answered.

They pushed on, toward the rear of the house. They stepped into the kitchen. There, on the floor smeared with blackened remnants of a flood of gore sat Velma Binder. Her father was there, too. She'd been at him with a large carving knife.

But not of all of him was there. All that was left was his head. ■

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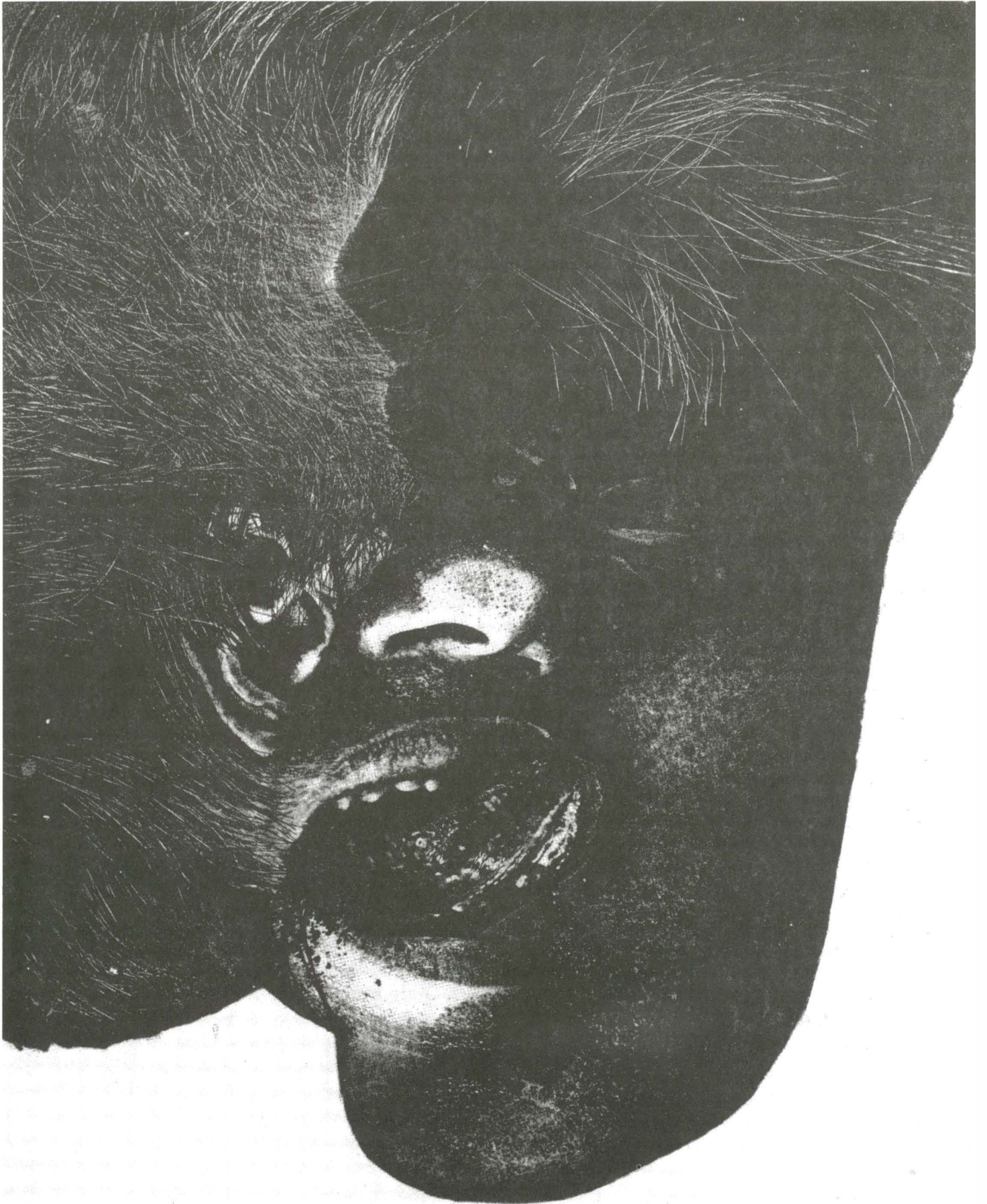
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The Bleeder

Richard Laymon

The spot of wetness on the sidewalk at Byron's feet looked purple in the mercury glow of the streetlight. It looked like a drop of blood.

He squatted down and peered at it. Then he pulled a flashlight out of the side pocket of his sport jacket. He thumbed the switch. In the bright, somewhat yellowish shine of its beam, the spot appeared crimson.

Might be paint, he thought.

But who would be wandering around at night dripping red paint?

He reached down and touched it. Bringing his fingertip close to the flashlight glass, he inspected the red smear. He rubbed it with his thumb. The stuff was kind of watery. Not gooey enough for paint. More like blood that had been spilled very recently.

He sniffed it.

He could only smell mustard from the hot dog he'd eaten during the last show, an aroma strong enough to overpower blood's subtle aroma. But it wouldn't have masked the pungent odor of paint.

Byron wiped his finger and thumb on his sock. Still squatting, he let the beam of his flashlight drift over the concrete ahead. He saw a dirty pink disk of flattened bubble gum, a gob of spit, a mashed cigarette butt, and a second drop of blood.

The second drop was three strides away. He stopped above it. Like the first, it was about the size of a nickle. Sweeping his light forward, he found a third.

Maybe someone with a nosebleed, he thought.

Or a switchblade in the guts.

No, a *real* wound and there'd be blood everywhere. Byron remembered the mess in the Elsinore's restroom last month. During intermission, a couple of teenagers had gone at each other with knives. He and Digby, one of the other ushers, had broken it up. Though the kids only had minor wounds, the john had looked like a slaughterhouse.

Compared to that, this was nothing. Just a drip once in a while. Even a nosebleed, he thought, would throw out more gore.

On the other hand, the person's clothing, or a handkerchief, might have soaked up most of it--so that only a fraction of the spillage actually hit the sidewalk.

Just a little drip now and then.

Just enough to make Byron very curious.

The trail of blood was going in his direction, anyway, so he kept his flashlight on and kept a lookout.

"Hey, the streetlights aren't bright enough for you?"

He turned around.

Digby Hymus, known to the girls who worked the refreshment stand as the Jolly Green Dork, came striding down the sidealk. The thirty year-old retired boxer had removed his green usher's jacket. Its sleeves were tied around his neck so he looked as if he were giving a piggyback ride to someone who'd been mashed by a steam roller. His arms were so thick with muscle that they couldn't swing close to his sides when he walked.

"Hate to tell you this, By, but you look like a goddamn retard with that flashlight on."

"Appearances are often deceiving," he said. "Take a gander." He aimed his flashlight at the nearest spot of blood.

"Yeah? So what?"

"Blood."

"Yeah. So what?"

"Don't you find it intriguing?"

"Probably some babe sprung a leak in her--"

"Don't be disgusting."

"Hey, you're the guy so interested in blood. You've got a real ghoulish streak, you know that?"

"If you can't say something nice, don't say it."

"Screw you," he said, and walked across the road to his parked car.

Byron waited until the car sped off, then continued to follow the trail of blood. He stopped at the corner of 11th Street. His apartment was five blocks straight ahead. But the drops of blood went to the right.

He paused for a moment, considering what to do. He knew that he ought to go on home. But if he did that, he would always wonder.

Maybe the bleeder needs help, he told himself. Even a slow leak could be fatal if it went on long enough. Maybe I'm this person's only chance.

Maybe I'll be a hero, my story will be on the news.

Then guys like Digby--girls like Mary and Agnes of the snack counter--wouldn't be so quick to poke fun at

him.

His mind made up, he turned the corner and began to follow the blood up 11th Street.

The television. He could see it now. Karen Ling on the five o'clock news. "Byron Lewis, 28-year-old poet and part-time usher at the Elsinore theatre, last night came to the aid of a mugging victim in an alley off 11th Street. The victim, 22 year-old fashion model Jessica Connors, had been assaulted earlier that evening in front of the theatre where Byron works. Bleeding and disoriented, she had staggered several blocks before falling unconscious where she was later discovered by the young poet. Byron made the grisly discovery after following Jessica's trail of blood. According to paramedics, Jessica was only minutes away from death at the time she was found. Her survival is being attributed to Byron's quick actions in applying first aid and summoning the ambulance. She is currently recovering, and extremely grateful, at Queen of Angels Hospital.

Byron smiled.

Just a fantasy, he told himself. But what's wrong with that?

The bleeder will probably turn out to be an old wino who cut his lip on a bottle of rotgut.

Or worse.

You'll probably wish you'd gone straight home.

But at least you'll know.

Stopping at Harker Avenue, he found a spot of blood on the curb. No traffic was nearby. But Byron believed in playing by the rules. So he thumbed the button to activate the WALK sign, waited for the signal to change, then started across.

If the bleeder had left any drops in the road, passing cars must have obliterated them.

He found more when he reached the other side.

The bleeder was still heading north on 11th Street.

And Byron realized, with some dismay, that he had crossed an invisible border into Skid Row.

In the area ahead, many of the streetlights were out. They left broad pools of darkness on the sidewalk and road. Every shop in Byron's sight was closed for the night. Metal gates had been stretched across their display windows and doors. He glanced through the checkered grating in front of a clothes store, saw a face at the window, and managed stifle a gasp of alarm.

Just a mannequin, he told himself, hurrying away.

He made a point to avoid looking into any more windows.

Better just to watch the sidewalk, he thought. Watch the trail of blood.

The next time he looked up, he saw a pair of legs sticking out of a tenement's recessed entryway.

The bleeder!

I did it!

Byron rushed to the fallen man. It was a *man*, unfortunately. A man with holes in the bottom of his shoes, whose grimy ankles were blotched with scabs, whose trousers were stained and crusty with filth, who

wore a ragged sweatshirt that had one empty sleeve pinned up.

No left arm.

His right arm was folded under his head like a pillow.

"Excuse me," Byron said.

The man kept snoring.

Byron nudged him with a foot. A twitch jumped up the body. The snoring stopped with a startled gasp. "Huh? Whuh?"

"Are you all right?" Byron asked. "Are you bleeding?"

"*BLEEDING?*" the man squealed and bolted upright. His head swiveled as he looked down at himself. Byron helped by shining the light on him. "I don't see no blood. Where? Where?"

Byron didn't see any blood on the man, either. But he saw other things that made him turn away and try not to gag.

"Oh God, I'm bleedin'!" the man whined. "They musta bit me. Oh, they's always bitin' me. Why they wanna bit ol' Dandy! Where'd they get me? They after ol' Dandy's stump again? Jeezum!"

Byron risked a look at Dandy and saw that the old man was struggling with his single arm to pull his sweatshirt off.

"Myabe I've got the wrong person."

"Oh, they's after me." The shirt started to rise.

Byron glimpsed the gray, blotchy skin of Dandy's belly.

"Gimme yer light, duke! C'mon, gimme!"

"I've gotta go," Byron blurted.

He staggered away from the frantic derelict--and saw a spot of blood farther up the sidewalk.

Dandy wasn't the bleeder, after all.

"I'm sorry," Byron called back. "Go back to sleep."

He heard a low groan. A voice sunken in fear and disgust said, "Aw, looky what they's done to me."

If only I'd left the guy alone, he thought.

Real neat play. I should've gone home.

But he'd come this far. Besides, he couldn't turn back without passing Dandy. He might cross to the other side of the street, but that would be cowardly. And he was no less curious than before.

The drops of blood led him to the end of the block. He waited for the traffic signal to change, then hurried into the street. This time, the trail continued over the pavement. A good sign, he thought. Maybe the bleeder had crossed so recently that no cars had yet come by to wipe out the spots.

I'm gaining on him. Or her.

Oh, he did hope it was a woman.

A slender blonde. Slumped against an alley wall, a hand clamped to her chest just below the swell of her left breast. "I'm here to help you," he would say. With a brave, pained smile, she would say, "It's nothing. Really. Just a flesh wound." Then she would unbutton her blouse and peel the bloody side away from her skin. She wore a black lace bra. Byron could see right through it.

He imagined himself taking out his clean, folded

handkerchief, patting blood away from the cut, and trying not to stare at her breast. His knuckles brushed against it, though, as he dabbed at the wound. "Excuse me," he told her. "That's okay," she said. "Come with me," he suggested. "I'll take you to my apartment. I have bandages there." She agreed, but she was too weak to walk without assistance, so she leaned against him. Soon, he had to carry her in his arms. He wasn't huge and powerful like Digby, but the slim girl weighed very little, and--

"Hey, you."

Startled, Byron looked up from the sidewalk. His heart gave a quick thump.

She was leaning against the post of a streetlamp, not against a wall. She was a brunette, not a blonde. She wasn't holding her chest.

Her hands, instead, were roaming slowly up and down the front of her skirt. The skirt was black leather. It was very short.

Byron walked toward her. He saw no blood on her shiny white blouse. But he saw that most of the buttons were undone. She didn't wear a black lace bra like the bleeder in his fantasy. She didn't wear one at all, and the blouse was open wide enough to show the sides of her breasts.

"Looking for someone, honey?" she asked. Running the tip of her tongue across her lower lip, she squirmed against the light post. As her hands slid upward, the skirt rose with them. It lifted above the tops of her black fishnet stockings. The straps of a garter belt were dark against her pale thighs.

Feeling a little breathless, Byron looked her in the eyes. "You aren't bleeding, are you?" he asked.

"What do you think?" She eased the skirt higher, but he didn't allow his eyes to wander down.

"I don't think you understand," he said. "I'm trying to find someone who's bleeding."

"Kinky," she said. "What's your name, sweet thing?"

"Byron."

"I'm Ryder. Wanna find out how I got my name?"

"Have you been standing here long?"

"Long enough to get lonely. And hot." One of her hands glided up. It slipped inside her blouse. Byron saw the shapes of her fingers through the thin fabric as they fondled her breast.

He swallowed. "What I mean is, did you just get here?"

"Few minutes ago. You like?" She eased the blouse aside, showing him the breast, stroking its erect nipple with the edge of her thumb.

He nodded. "Very nice. But the thing is . . . did you see anyone go by?"

"Just you, Byron. How about it?" She stared at the front of his slacks. "You look mighty sweet to me. I bet you taste real fine. I know I do. You wanna find out just how fine, too, I'll bet."

"Well . . . see, I'm looking for someone who's bleeding."

Her eyes narrowed. "That'll cost you extra."

"No, really--"

Yes, really." She curled her lower lip in and nipped it. Then she pushed the lip outward, as if offering it to Byron. A trickle of blood rolled down her mouth. When it reached her chin, she caught it on the tip of her index finger. She painted her nipple with it. "Taste," she whispered.

Byron shook his head.

Ryder smiled. More blood was dribbling toward her chin. "Oh? Do you want it someplace else?"

"No. I'm sorry. Hunh-unh." He backed away from her.

"Hey now, buster . . ."

He whirled around and ran.

Ryder yelled. He understood why she might be upset, but that was no reason to call him such names. They made him blush, even though nobody seemed to be around to hear.

I'm hearing, he thought as he dashed up the sidewalk. And I'm not half those things she's calling at me. She knows it, too. She saw.

Crazy whore.

By the time he reached the other side of the next street, she had stopped shouting. Byron looked back. She was gone.

While he gasped for air, he swept the beam of his flashlight over the sidewalk. He saw no blood spots.

I lost the trail!

His throat tightened.

It's all her fault.

He stomped his foot on the sidewalk.

Calm down, he told himself. It's not over yet. You still had the trail when you ran into her.

The DON'T WALK sign was flashing red, but Byron didn't care. After all, he hadn't even looked at the signal the first time across. Now, it just didn't matter.

Old Dandy'd been bad enough. But Ryder!

Running into people like that made traffic signals seem pretty trivial.

No cars were coming, so he hurried back across the street.

Nothing to it.

He smiled.

When he found a spot of blood on the sidewalk, a thrill rippled through him.

"Ah ha!" he pronounced. "The game's afoot!"

Now I'm talking to myself? Why not? I'm holding up fairly well, all things considered.

Spying a second drop of blood, he understood how he had lost the trail. The bleeder hadn't crossed the road, but had headed to the right along Kelsey Avenue.

Byron quickened his pace.

"Gaining on you," he said.

As he hurried along, he realized that the spots on the sidewalk were further apart than they used to be. The distance between them had been irregular from the start--but anywhere from three to five feet, usually. Now, it seemed more like eight to ten feet from one drop to the

next.

Is the wound coagulating? he wondered. Or is the bleeder running dry?

What if the blood stops entirely?

If that happens, I'll never find her.

Or find her too late--dead in a heap.

Neither outcome suited Byron.

He broke into a run.

A few strides after passing the entrance of an alley, he lost the trail again and staggered to a halt. Turning around, he returned to the alley. His flashlight reached into it, and a spot of red gleamed on the pavement two yards ahead. Odd, he thought. In his fantasies, he'd imagined finding the bleeder in an alley. What if *all* would happen just the way he'd pictured it?

Too much to hope for, he told himself.

But he felt a tremor of excitement as he entered the alley.

He shined his light from side to side, half expecting to find a beautiful woman slumped against one of the brick walls. He saw a couple of garbage bins, but nothing else.

She might be huddled down, concealed by one of the bins.

Byron stepped past them. Nobody there.

He considered lifting the lids, but decided against it. The things would stink. There might even be rats inside. If the bleeder was in one of them, he didn't want to know.

Better not to find her at all.

This was supposed to be an adventure with a glorious and romantic outcome. It would just be too horrible if it ended with finding a body in the garbage.

He kept going.

Ten strides deeper into the alley, his pale beam fell upon another drop of blood.

"Thank God," he muttered.

Of course, there were several more bins some distance ahead--dark boxes silhouetted by faint light where the alley ended at the next road.

I'll find her before then, Byron told himself.

Any minute, now.

A black cat sauntered across the alley. It glanced at him, eyes glowing like clear golden marbles.

Good thing I'm not superstitious, he thought, the back of his neck tingling.

"If only you could talk," he said.

The cat wandered over to the right side of the alley. Back hunched, tail twitching, it rubbed its side against a door.

A door!

Byron tipped back his head and inspected the building. He thought that it might be an apartment house. Its brick wall was three stories high, with fire escapes at the windows of the upper floors. All the windows were dark.

He stepped toward the door. The cat leaped and darted past him.

He almost grabbed the knob before noticing that it was wet with blood.

A chill crept through him.

Maybe this isn't such a great idea, he thought.

But he was so *close*.

Still, to enter a building where he didn't belong . . .

This might very well be where the bleeder lived. Why had she entered from the alley, though, instead of using the front? Did she feel that she had to sneak in?

"Strange," Byron muttered.

Maybe she simply wandered down the alley, lost and dazed, and entered this door in the hope of finding someone who would help her. Even now, she might be staggering down a hallway, too weak to call out.

Byron plucked a neatly folded handkerchief from his pocket, shook it open, and spread it over his left hand. He turned the knob.

With a quiet snick, the latch tongue retracted.

He eased the door open.

The beam of his flashlight probed the darkness of a narrow corridor. On the hardwood floor gleamed a dot of blood.

He stepped inside. The hot air smelled stale and musty. Pulling the door shut, he listened. Except for the pounding of his own heartbeat, he heard nothing.

His own apartment building, even at this hour, was nearly always filled with sounds: people arguing or laughing, doors slamming, voices from radios and televisions.

His building had lighted hallways.

Hallways that always smelled of food, often of liquor. Now and again, they were sweet with the lingering aromas of cheap perfume.

Nobody lives here, he suddenly thought.

He didn't like that. Not at all.

He realized he was holding his breath as he started forward. He walked slowly, setting each heel down and rolling the shoe forward to its toe. Sometimes, a board creaked under him.

He stopped at a corner where this bit of hallway met a long stretch of corridor. Leaning forward, he aimed his beam to the left. He saw no blood on the floor. His light reached only far enough down the narrow passage to reveal one door. That door stood open.

He knew that he should take a peek inside.

He didn't want to.

Byron looked to the right. Not far away, a staircase rose toward the upper stories. Beyond that was a foyer and the front entrance.

He saw no blood on the floor in that direction.

I'll check that way first, he decided. He knew it would make more sense to go left, but heading toward the front seemed safer.

He turned the corner. After a few strides, he twisted around and checked behind him with the light. That long hallway made him very nervous. Especially the open door, though he couldn't see it from here. Instead of turning his back on it, he began sidestepping.

He shined his light up and down the stairway. The balustrade flung crooked, shifting bars of shadow against the wall.

*The man standing beside the door grinned with wet,
red lips . . .*

What if the blood goes up there?

He didn't want to think about that.

He checked the floor ahead of him. Still no blood. Coming to the foot of the stairs, he checked the newelcap and ran his light up the banister. No blood. Nor did he find any on the lower stairs. He could only see the tops of five, though. After that, they were above eye level.

I don't want to go up there, he thought.

He wanted to go up there even less than he wanted to search the far end of the hallway.

Sidestepping through the foyer, he made his way to the front door. He tried its handle. The door seemed frozen in place.

He noticed that his light was shining on a panel of mailboxes. His own building had a similar arrangement. But in his building, each box was labelled with a room number and name. No such labels here.

This came as no surprise to Byron. But his dread deepened.

I've come this far, he told himself. I'm not going to back out now.

Trembling, he stepped toward the stairway. He climbed one stair, then another. The muscles in his legs felt like warm jelly. He stopped. He swept his light across the two higher treads that he hadn't been able to see from the bottom. Still, no blood.

She didn't go this way, he told himself.

If she did, she's on her own.

I didn't count on having to search an abandoned apartment house. That'd be stupid. God only knows who might be lurking in the empty rooms.

Byron backed down the stairs and hurried away, eager to reach the passage that would lead to the alley door.

He felt ashamed of himself for giving up.

Nobody will ever know.

But he hesitated when he came to the connecting hallway. He shined his light at the alley door. Twenty feet away. No more than that. He could be outside in seconds.

But what about the bleeder?

You'll never know.

You'll always wonder.

Suppose it is a beautiful young woman, wandering around in shock, slowly bleeding to death? Suppose you're her only chance?

I don't care. I'm not going to look upstairs.

But what about that open door?

He could take a look in there, couldn't he?

He swung his light toward it.

And heard the soft murmur of a sigh.

Oh my God!

He gazed at the doorway. The sigh had come from there, he was sure of it.

"Hello?" he called.

Someone moaned.

Byron glanced again at the alley door, shook his head, and hurried down the corridor.

So much for chickening out, he thought, feeling somewhat pleased with himself in spite of his misgivings.

I'll be a hero, after all.

"I'm here," he said as he neared the open door. "I'll help you."

He rushed into the room.

He jumped the beam of his flashlight here and there. Shot its bright tunnel into the corners of the room. Across bare floorboards. Past windows and a radiator.

At his back, the door slammed shut.

He gasped and whirled around.

He stared for a moment, not quite sure what he was seeing.

Then a small whimper slipped from his throat and he stumbled backward, urine running hot down his leg.

The man standing beside the door grinned with wet, red lips. He was hairless. He didn't even have eyebrows. Nor did he appear to have a neck. His head looked as if it had been jammed down between his massive shoulders.

His bloody lips grinned at Byron around a clear plastic tube.

A straw, of sorts. Flecked inside with red.

The tube curled down from his mouth to a body cradled in his thick arms.

The limp body of a young man whose head was tipped back as if he found something fascinating about the far wall. He wore jeans and a plaid shirt. The shirt hung open. From the center of his chest protruded something that resembled a metal spike--obviously hollow inside--which was joined with the plastic tubing. A single thin streamer of blood stretched from the hole, across his chest, and down the side of his ribcage.

It was the streamer, Byron knew, that had left the trail of drops which led him here.

He pictured the monstrous, bloated man carrying the body block after block down the city streets, drinking its blood as he lumbered along.

Now, the awful man shook the body. His cheeks sank in as he sucked. Some red flew up through the tubing. Byron heard a slurpy hollow sound--the sound that comes from a straw when you reach the bottom of a milk shake.

Then came another soft sigh.
"All gone," the man muttered.

His lips peeled back, baring red teeth that pinched the tube.

He dropped the body.

The spike popped out of its chest and swayed at the end of the tubing.

"Glad you're here," he said. "Got me an awful thirst."

Wrapping his thick fingers around the spike, he stepped over the body.

Byron spun around, ran, and leaped. He wrapped his arms around his head an instant before hitting the window. It exploded around him and he fell until he crashed against the pavement on the sidewalk. Then he scurried up and ran.

He ran for a long time.

Finally, exhausted, he leaned against a store front. Panting for air, he looked where he had been.

Now *that's* a trail of blood, he thought.

Too weak to go on, he let his knees unlock. He slumped down on the sidewalk and stretched out his legs.

His clothes, he saw, were shredded from the window glass.

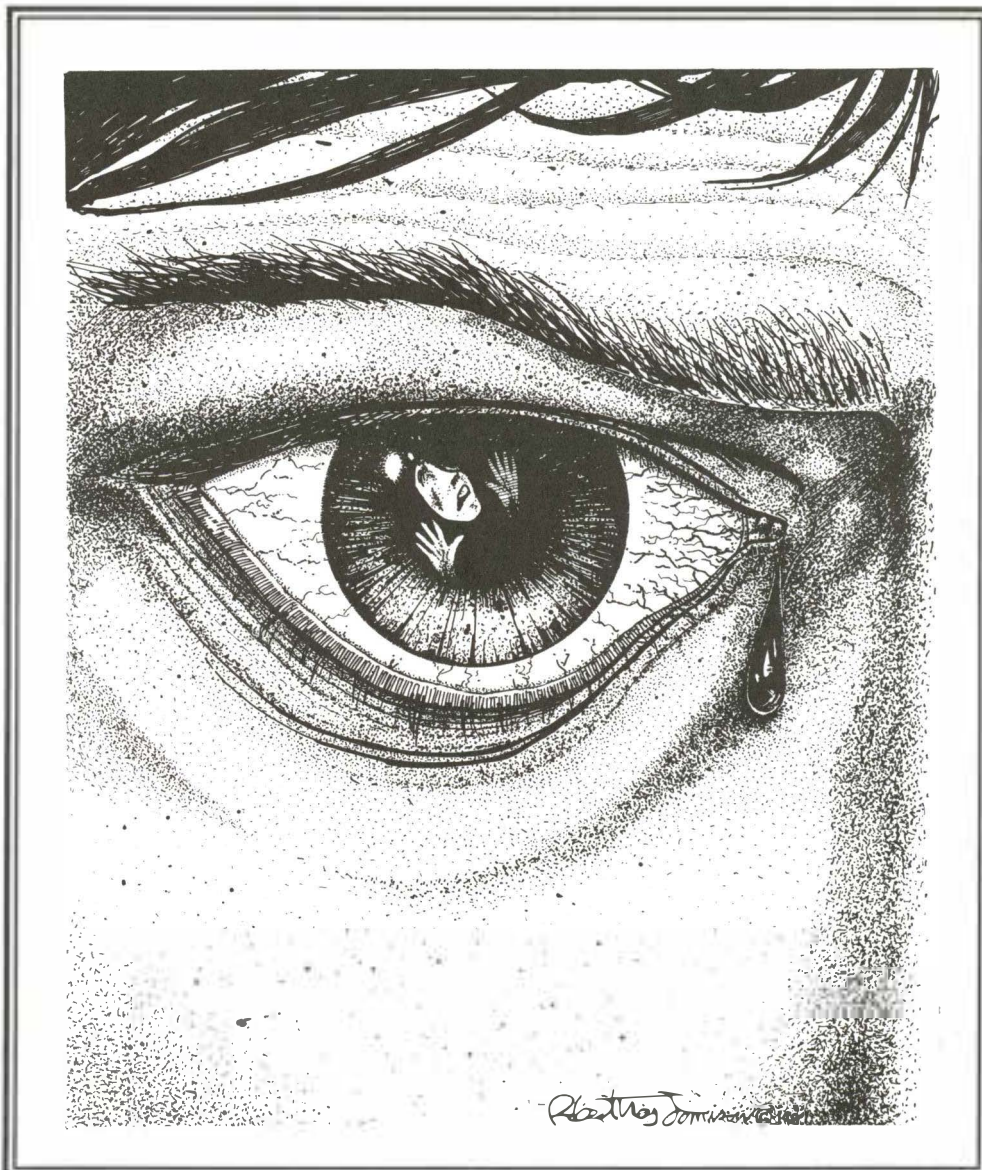
So am I, he thought.

But that *thing* didn't get me.

Smiling, he shut his eyes.

When he opened them again, he saw a woman crouching beside him. A young slim blonde. Really cute. She looked a lot like the one he'd hoped to find at the end of the trail. "You'll be all right," she said. "My partner's calling for an ambulance."

She nodded toward the patrol car idling at the curb. ■



*A strip of flesh
had been carefully
excised. Lifted,
Sliced . . .*

PROSE & CONVERSATION

\Slice/

In the second installment of this new feature,
Nb featuers an excerpt from
Billie Sue Mosiman's new novel.

Pocket Books; \$3.95.

(Chapter 2) Martin Lansing eyed the black Caddy on his tail. What now? More surveillance? For how long? A week, month, year, forever? Torrance had wanted to run him down. Another few seconds and he might have done it.

Fear coiled in Lansing's gut and produced a sharp cramp that made him wince and shift his buttocks.

Hey, I'm off? he yelled silently at the rearview reflection of the Cadillac. *I'm off and I'm walking, so get out of my life.*

It had been a close call. If the hicktown desperadoes had been on top of it, he knew he'd be facing life at the minimum, the chair at the max. Georgia loved capital punishment. If

he had done Francis Torrance in Atlanta or even Macon, they would have nailed his ass to the jailhouse door. But Jamison, Georgia, sported three thousand poor souls and two deputies who must have learned their law at Montessori preschool. The judge--what could he do?--he had to throw it out. No legally obtained evidence, no case. Mr. Virtuous Prosecutor stood there with his yap hanging open.

Lansing hung a right and coasted into the parking slot before cabin number 5 of the Hi-Way Motel. He saw the Caddy pull smoothly to the curb across the street and park.

If I flip him the bird, will he come tear out my throat? he wondered. I would if I was him and any kind of

man. Because that Frannie, boy, must have been some hot rocket, all fire and spark and sizzle like she was.

Inside Cabin 5 with the door locked and a chair back-forced beneath the doorknob for extra security, Lansing pulled off his fifty-dollar sport coat and flung it on the bed. Too bad he had to look good in court. He could use that fifty now.

He was hungry, but no time for that. Who could eat with a cobra corkscrewed nearby, its beady eyes a mirror of hostility? That Torrance. Fucking hick. Crazy hayseed dick-head motherfucker.

No, no time to eat. Pack his shit and get the hell out of Jamison. He could be in Waycross by nightfall, get to Valdosa and hit the Florida line by

supper time. Then he'd eat. Juicy ribeye, baked potato, green beans, hot biscuits. Yeah, he'd eat when he was safe. Little men like Torrance could get away with trailing him in Jamison, but he wouldn't cross the state line.

Yet if he did . . .

Lansing paused in his packing and cocked his head as if listening to an eerie wind that swirled unfettered inside his skull.

If Torrance followed him much longer, the solution was simple.

Slice him.

The switchblade appeared from his pocket and flicked into a deadly shaft of polished steel. His best friend. The illegally obtained evidence. The reason for his freedom and sanity.

(Chapter 3) Sully used the pay phone outside the Hi-Way Motel. "Carla, did you hear?"

"Sure, everyone heard. They let him go."

"Is my stuff packed?"

"Right here."

"You ready?"

"I've been waiting for your call."

"You've got the revolver?"

"Right here, Sully. Loaded."

"Okay, let's go. I'm at the Hi-Way. He might leave any minute, so hurry."

He hung up and walked back to the car. Before he opened the door, Mike Dalamas drove up alongside him. Sully sighed.

"What are you going to do?" Mike asked. Direct sunlight caused him to squint through his eyeglasses. Sully noticed his tie was askew. He looked more like an overworked insurance salesman than a criminal attorney.

"Don't worry, Mike, you did your best."

"He's a killer, Sully. You can't fight a killer."

"I said don't worry."

"You're going to stay on him, aren't you? You're going to bring Carla in on this and maybe get her killed, too, you know that, don't you?"

"You know everything, Mike. Why ask?"

"For Pete's sake, Sully, she's only eighteen. You're acting irrationally. Just because you have a death wish

doesn't mean you should drag Carla down with you."

Sully got into his car and stared straight ahead. Mike sat wiping a hand over his weary face for some seconds, and then he drove away.

What Sullivan Torrance planned to do could not be wrong. He didn't invite Carla in: She was in from the day Lansing murdered her sister, Francine. She wanted to see Francine's murderer burn in the state's electric chair; she wanted to witness it. Carla was the first to find Frannie's body, and she wanted to be the last person Lansing ever saw in his life.

By the time the sheriff had called Sully, Carla was already composed and sitting quietly in the living room. Eustus Banks, Jamison's slow-witted, fat public servant, had suggested Carla was in shock, but Sully knew better. Carla had been composed. Her big sister, beloved Frannie, her only family except for Sully, was lying sliced to ribbons on the bedroom floor, but Carla had searched and found a cold, featureless, emotionless room deep down inside herself, and she had gone there to wait for justice to run its course.

Sully had reacted the way Banks had expected he would, the way normal people react when a loved one is slaughtered like a cow or a pig. Worse. Tortured and mutilated like a victim of a warped mind. Sully grabbed the door leading into the bedroom and slid to his knees. He crawled to the covered corpse of his wife. He withdrew the dark green sheet spotted with her blood. He clenched shut his eyes and opened his mouth to wail in grief. When the pain was out into the room--their room, their double bed, their dresser, chest, shelf of old stuffed animals Frannie saved from her childhood--when the pain dripped thick as amber honey from the walls, Sully opened his eyes and forced himself to look again. He wanted to know. He wanted to remember what had been done, the sacrilege performed on the body of his beautiful dead wife.

Stab wounds in chest and stomach and abdomen. Blood coagulated there in pools. In a plastic bag nearby the towels used to mop up the blood

waited for the coroner. On Frannie's nude body further desecration had occurred. Beginning at the right shoulder blade--her ivory skin too pale--a strip of flesh had been carefully excised. The strip ran down between her smeared breasts to her left hipbone. Then on either side of this flaying the killer had taken more strips, shorter ones, all of them one inch wide. Lifted, *sliced*, from the body meticulously. Then on her legs. Straight down from groin to kneecap, then from knee to ankle, more one inch strips had been taken. It looked as if the killer had blotted the wounds so that he could see them clearly. Mutilation beyond comprehension.

Sully fell onto one arm and looked up at the sheriff. "Where are . . . ? What did he do . . . ?"

"Christ, Sully, cover her up."

"Where is the rest of my wife, Goddamn you?"

Banks pointed to the floor behind Sully. Another clear plastic bag contained the skin strips taken from the body. They curled beneath the clear plastic like red and white snakes tangled together.

"Come on, get up, Sully. Let us handle this now. Go see about Carla, she needs you."

But Carla didn't need anyone. She and Frannie had been alone since Frannie's youth. The elder sister had become a substitute mother to her. Their parents had died in a twin engine Cessna on the way to Atlanta when Frannie was twenty and Carla was ten. A year later Sully married Frannie and took Carla into his home to be his little sister, too, the sibling he had never had. He loved her almost as much as he loved his wife.

A beat-up gray Volkswagon parked behind Sully, and Carla got out carrying a big blue satchel over her shoulder, a smaller blue bag in her hand. She climbed into the passenger's seat beside her brother-in-law and shut the door.

"He come out yet?" She looked at Cabin 5, saw Lansing's green Monte Carlo. "Guess he didn't," she added.

"This is going to get bad, Carla. Unless I have to do it in self-defense, I don't know if I can stop him."

"I can."

She probably could, he reflected. The gun he had asked her to bring along was one she had talked him into buying for her fifteenth birthday. She wanted to learn how to target shoot. She had been reading about Israel's kibbutz system and how young Jewish girls were trained as soldiers. "I'm Jewish," she had said. "I want to know about my people. I might want to emigrate, Sully. They won't let me be a soldier if I'm a JAP with rocks in my head." That's how she said it, what she called herself when she thought she might be reacting like a weak female. JAP, Jewish American Princess, good for nothing but baby making and housecleaning. "Me, I'm a good JAP, but I'm going to be more."

She cleared her throat now and looked at Sully. "We going to let him know we're on him all the way?"

"I don't see why not," Sully said.

"He'll try to lose us."

"I know. I hope he won't succeed."

"Do you think they gave him back his knife?"

Sully nodded. They gave Martin Lansing back his knife, his life, his freedom to leave the courtroom, the town, and the state.

Why couldn't someone give Fran-
nie back to him? ■

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The Gourmet Cannibal

I

My supermarket cart rolls nearer to bloody
mounds of fish and meat; liver, pork,
then eels--reminders of snow snakes yet thriving,
like Big Foot, above our mountain timber lines.
Blending with surrounding white they wait, like ice
pythons, to crunch, then gulp us down whole.

II

Once a plane full of athletes with relatives and friends
flew to a soccer game--as yet unplayed.
Far down they fell among the Andean crags.

III

That plane, tubercular engine coughing out gout
of black and wind-blown smoke, lurched over
the shark-toothed peaks grazing the cabin's belly.
Arms and legs, entwined,
stirred with ample measures of frenzied shrieks
and pinches of prayer, plunged toward the snowy
slopes below, diving into a swirling, steamy
stew--like a silver bone torn from some
star-born skeleton. The bumping, rib-crunching slide
across the whipped cream crests dumped
the dead and dying out like crushed strawberries
overturned on a white linen tablecloth--
eons from the Canal summer we enjoy.

IV

A dozen survivors squirm from the shattered cabin,
evading avalanches of ice that freeze
the corpses and slip those snow snakes down among
the saved to fang them lust for starvation feasts.

V

One star toothed his late sister's thigh, and then,
as piece de resistance, gnashed his momma
down. Transsubstantiated in her son's gut,
did mother's flesh and blood engender there
some new unity than our Trinity?
That player's young and glowing face, though veiled
by my TV screen, still shows sure signs
of snow snake venom.

VI

Don't you often wonder:
does he prefer our flesh to veal--or even
to filet steaks? Thus stung by our snow snake,
does he lie? To such survivors are we but brisket,
mere chops, or just not-
so-cold-cuts--unwittingly part of the meat displayed
in this oh-so civilized supermarket toady?

--Gregory Fitz Gerald

Control

David Lindschmidt

Kelly poured the last of the tea into the sink and stared out the small window, as if searching for a place to hide. From the living room, her husband shouted out some mundane request. Just as she turned, she caught a peripheral glimpse of the skillet. In that fleeting moment when his voice came to her, demanding, expecting, she thought of hitting him with it.

Jim was mesmerized by a wrestling match on the television. Kelly sat down across from him on the love-seat. He reclined, as usual. She cracked open her half-read novel and tried to forget that she had only come fifteen miles from the hospital at which she had been born only 27 years before. Jim mumbled something to her and Kelly cringed at the sound of his deep voice. France, she thought. I'd love to go to France. In France, you went out to dine and no one was married. France.

"Oreos?"

Kelly turned toward him, shook her head vacantly, then turned back to her book, back to France.

"Oreos?" he asked again, leaning forward slightly. His shirt struggled to retain his stomach as it nudged the arm of the recliner.

"No thanks," she replied, waving her small hand in the air.

"Do we have any is what I was asking."

"In the cupboard above the sink." She touched her finger tips to her mouth, working at the short nubs of nails.

Jim devoured two rows of cookies, then nonchalantly brushed the crumbs from his shirt and said, "Going to bed."

Kelly did not acknowledge him until he was standing next to her, scratching himself. "What?"

"Bed, bed, I'm going to bed."

"Night," she said, and made kissing noises in the air.

Near midnight, Kelly woke from a light slumber. Jim's rasping, intermittent snore coursed through her head with ghastly clarity, persecuting her. She lay curled into a fetal position. Her arms and lower back ached dully; her scalp was coated with a thin layer of perspiration. She listened. It wasn't his snoring that had awakened her.

The noise that had disturbed her sleep had simply jarred her subconscious mind, only to retreat when she was conscious. She jerked upright, and the novel fell to the floor.

There; it came again. A knocking sound. But something else, too, a sort of weird scraping noise. Once again. Scrape . . . *knock!*

Kelly leaped to her feet. The hazy matrix pattern on the television illuminated the room weakly. She slowly twisted around, surveying the dimness. Jim's snoring came to a sudden, sharp halt. "*Damn it!*" she said, heart racing.

Scrape . . . *knock!*

This time the obnoxious noise was more intense, louder, angrier. The tone frightened her. She fled through the dim hallway to the bedroom. A shrill, short cry followed her like a verbal conrail. She leaped onto the Posturepedic.

"Jim! Wake up!"

Jim was not there. The sudden, obtrusive reality of it spread through her coldly.

Scrape . . . knock. Weaker, as though at its end point, as if on the verge of acceptance. Scrape . . . knock.

Kelly whipped her head viciously from side to side in the darkness. Strands of her hair slapped her face, clinging . . .

Later, she sat at the kitchen table, the telephone within arm's reach, the basement door in direct view. Her reddened hands held a handkerchief wet from dabbing tears of confusion and emptiness. She was sure that the awful scrape-knock was coming from the basement. It worked on her nerves, yet she couldn't pull herself away from it.

A sharper knocking came to her ears then. She had called Wes Branson, their next door neighbor, insisting that he come over as quickly as possible. When she told him Jim was not home and that there was a strange noise in her basement, he seemed more than eager to oblige. "You poor thing," he'd said, and "Don't you worry none, sweetheart. I'll be right over." She wouldn't have been surprised if he'd brought a six-pack, the ghoul.

Kelly had always suspected that Jim looked up to

Wes for some arcane reason,, as if being forty pounds overweight, balding and tactless were some urban pinnacle. Jim hadn't even noticed when, at the annual spring block party, Wes had rubbed his loins against her backside. "Pardon me, sweetheart. Pass the corn, please."

Shewent to the door and let Wes in. "Wes, thank you for coming over." The words came out sounding plastic. She closed her eyes a second before stepping backward to give Wes a wide berth. He needed it. Her finger tips found her forehead, shrouding the contempt in her eyes. "Wes, would you look in the basement for me?"

"Where's Jim?"

"I don't know," she said, quickly dismissing the question. "Listen."

Wes cocked his head to the side. "Heater," he said, and grinned at her while moving toward the kitchen.

On the kitchen floor, in front of the stove, lay a ten-inch skillet. There was a thick goo the color of tomato paste over its bottom. Wes didn't notice it. He hooked

both thumbs under his belt and slid them around, bringing up his gray work pants. He turned and smiled fully at Kelly, licking his lips. "No problem," he said.

Kelly had been staring at the skillet. Her eyes darted quickly to meet Wes' and her look of perplexity turned to one of feigned gratitude. When he turned his back, she looked at the skillet again. She could see the coagulation, the hairs sticking to it. She remembered then, sitting on the love seat, listening to Jim's snoring, listening. The noise boiled her blood. She used her rage to bang the skillet against his skull repeatedly, until the dull, cracking thuds grew weaker, until they sounded like a stick tapping thick mud. There was the difficult task of dragging his body to the basement door and pushing it down the stairs, cleaning up the trail of blood afterward. Later, his awful clawing and knocking at the locked door; as usual, he wanted something. She knew what to do then, too. Wes squeezed past her. The room was only 10 X 14.

And she knew what to do. ■

A Litter Ration

Gabby girls, butter boys,
Dirty dungarees, tainted toys.

Inflamed ilk, scathing scorn,
Jealous joy, morose morn.

Luscious legs, comely calf,
Heated hiney, lonesome laugh.

Frenzied frown, saucy sex,
Garish gown, vigored vex.

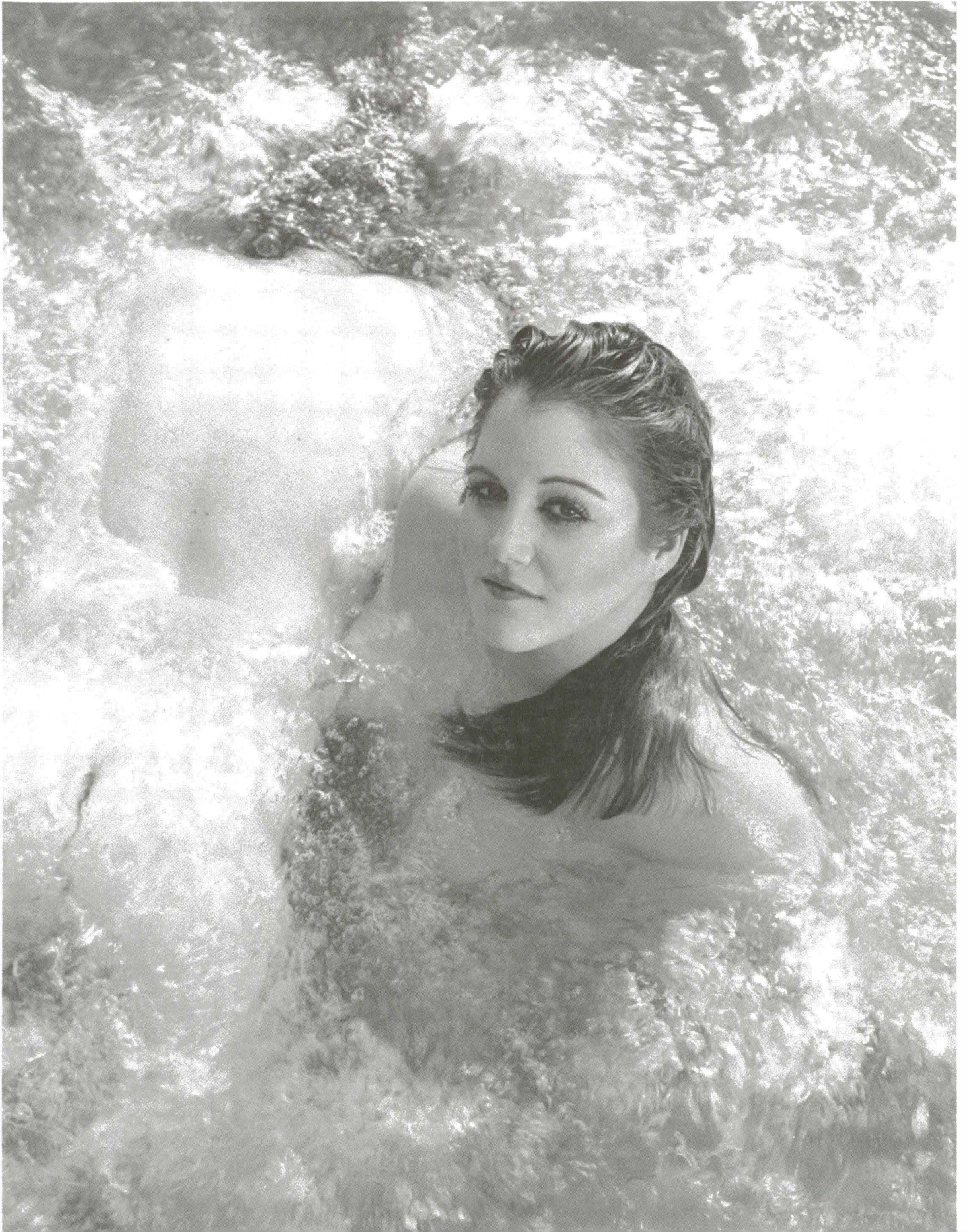
Buttered buns, reddened rear,
Putrid puns, better beer.

Peppered pecker, salted sucker,
Double decker, fateful fucker.

Obscene oration, subtly so,
Immense invitation, blatter blow.

--Dennis Fournier--





Arriving with a splash . . .

*L
i
l
i
t*



. . . our first Nb Hostess.

After twilight
The darkness of night
Yearns to feed
The fondling hands
And caressing tongues
of her children.

At the stroke of midnight
Sweet, pale moonlight
Seeps into her black
Womb of shadow
Forming festered
Dark shapes
Awaiting birth.

Before dawn
Newborn shadows
Feed on frail mortal flesh.
Darkness then dines
On their foul forms
And returns to sleep again.

(At left: Lilith's debut is marred
by tragedy.)

Welcome to our world, if you will, the hottest horror hostess alive! Lilith, legendary scorned wife of Adam, bearer of demons, and the original feminist, has found a new home in the pages of *Nb*.

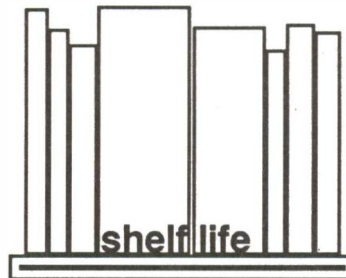
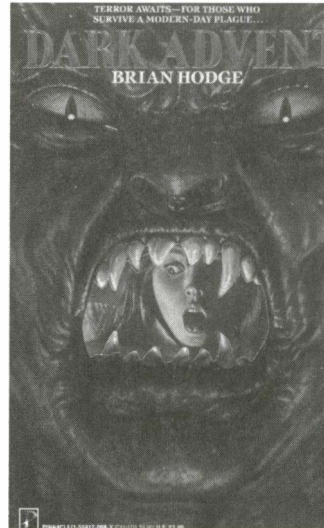
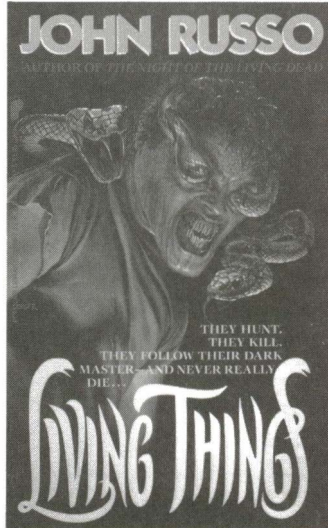
We hoped to show you more of Lilith in her debut spread, but an unforeseeable tragedy occurred, forcing us to pack up our equipment and beat a hasty retreat.

However, the good news is that Lilith suffered no physical trauma and her mental scars have virtually evaporated. In fact, with her lunar-powered strut, sleek, long legs, and knockout 38-24-34 figure, you can bet your heart's desire that Lilith will be back in these pages very soon, speaking to you directly and ready to reveal even more of her "inner-self" with a brand-new centerfold and profile. If you absolutely can't wait until then, send a check or m.o. for only \$6 to *Nb*, Attn: Lilith, 540 W. Foothill Blvd., Suite #3730, Glendora, CA 91740, U.S.A. and you'll receive a signed 8x10 photo personally inscribed to you! Remember to choose the photo you want by listing the page number with your order. Please allow 4-6 weeks for delivery.

Coming in Spring '89 - *Diva!* The *Nb* Hostess for Adults Only!

(At right: maybe things weren't so tragic after all . . .)





FLESH
LIVING THINGS
DARK ADVENT

Flesh, by Richard Laymon (Tor Books, \$3.95).

. . . He dove through the doors, tumbled into the kitchen, came up in a squat and took aim.

He didn't fire.

He didn't know what he was seeing.

The woman in the red shorts was sprawled on the floor, face up. Face up? She didn't have a face. A chin, maybe.

Ron was hunched over her, his face to her belly. No one else was in the kitchen.

The cellar door stood open.

"Ron? Ron, which way did he go?"

Ron lifted his head. A bleeding patch of his wife's flesh came with it, clamped in his teeth, stretching and tearing off. He sat up straight. He stared back at Jake. His eyes were calm. He calmly chewed. . .

There are only a few things left in this world that don't need improving: good pussy comes to mind almost immediately; songs like "The Jack" (AC/DC), "Lick it Up" (KISS), and various genre novels like *The Woods are Dark*, *The Cellar*, and now *Flesh*, all of which were penned by Richard Laymon (also known as Richard Kelly across the Atlantic).

In just a few short hours, Police Officer Jake Carey encounters more

bloodshed than he has in his entire career: a psychotic motorist is charbroiled after his van crashes; Ron Smeltzer unloads his shotgun into his wife's face, then dines from her wounds. Bizarre occurrences, indeed, but not unheard of. Unfortunately, that situation quickly changes. The autopsy performed on the second victim, Smeltzer, reveals that some type of creature had entered his body before his death and was sustaining itself through a symbiotic relationship with its human host—a parasite. However, the parasite moves on once its host is dead so, suddenly, no one is safe.

Laymon has a lot of aces up his literary sleeve. His novels have never

been populated by disheveled, disbelieving dunderheads (*Flesh* is especially exemplary because the existence of the creature is revealed during an autopsy; as bizarre as things appear, the facts are irrefutable), and he has a clear, straight-forward style. It's also evident that he has great fun with his craft—where a lesser author might serve you his dish like a snotty waiter—"Here, eat it and don't bug me"—Laymon gives you the feeling that he'll not only serve it to you on a silver platter, he'll sit right down at your table and eat along with you. He's been writing long enough to know that you write books to please yourself, but you sell them to please others. Case in point:

... *She stayed alive for a long time. It was better that way.*

Her heart still throbbed when he tore it from her chest cavity. He was almost full, so he didn't eat much of it. He stuffed what was left back into her chest, then crawled to her head.

He scalped her, cracked open her skull with the pry bar, and scooped out her warm, dripping brain.

The best part . . .

Life is good, readers. *Flesh* is Richard Laymon's 11th published novel. His 2 previous Tor novels, *Night Show* and *Tread Softly*, are still available from retailers, and Paperjacks recently reprinted his classic novel *The Cellar*. Laymon will also be appearing with *Nb* favorite Gary Brandner and Chet Williamson in *Night Visions 7*.

Living Things, by John Russo (Popular Library, \$3.95).

... *With a flash and a loud thunk, the blade of the machete hacked clean through the shoulder joint. He seized the other arm and chopped again. He kept on chopping and tossing parts aside until he had the part that he needed . . .*

Living Things, is the latest novel from horror favorite John Russo.

Actually, it's two books in one. Book One is a radical rewrite of Russo's novella *Voodoo Dawn*, published by Imagine Inc., and like that

much maligned story, it's nothing spectacular. Voodoo master Chango drowns after his boat sinks as he's fleeing from Haiti to Miami, but you can't keep a good *boker* (an evil voodoo priest) down, and soon Chango the zombie is stalking the Miami coastline, chopping up nubile young women in a very predictable slasher-movie fashion. Enter a brave pair of cops and a beautiful scientist to bring a stop to Chango's beach bingo. An exciting (yawn) battle ensues, and Chango dies (right).

Book Two (parts 2-4 in the novel) takes place three years later. Someone who bears an uncanny resemblance to Chango is holding past-life seminars and dealing cocaine. Zombie armies are wiping out rival drug lords. Chaos reigns in Miami. Can our heroes stop the evil once again?

Where story one is cliché, story two is fast-paced and original. It reads like an episode of *Miami Vice* directed by Herschell Gordon Lewis, and more than makes up for the weak 119 pages that precedes it.

... *The creature made of Chango's lightning touched the fence with its electrified hand, jolting the man with a jillion volts, frying him on the fence. In less than thirty seconds he was charred to half his size, like an overdone hamburger with all the fat cooked out, and in thirty seconds more he was a small lump of smoldering charcoal that smoked and stank and dropped in sizzling lumps to the ground . . .*

How can you not like a book with scenes like that?

Dark Advent, by Brian Hodge (Pinnacle Books, \$3.95).

... *The bald man had one of his opponents by an arm and a leg and was using him to bludgeon the other. Even over the roar of the crowd, she heard the sickening crunch of a skull. Hard to tell whose . . .*

You won't find action like that in the WWF, but you will find it in Brian Hodge's first novel, *Dark Advent*, a book that's never predictable, never

boring, and not at all easy to put down.

The time is the present. A mercenary soldier named Peter Soloman has begun to think of himself as God. He passes judgement on the world, doesn't like what he sees, and lets loose a government-created super-virus called *Pasteurella Pestis*, a potent hybrid of the bubonic plague. In almost no time at all, 99.9% of the world's population is dead. The remaining few are left to fight for control of the new world.

Most of the story takes place in St. Louis, where a group of survivors living in a department store try to escape Soloman's army, which preaches a "join us or die" philosophy.

On the surface, *Dark Advent* is simply another end-of-the-world, good guys vs. bad guys novel—and it's chock full of great bad guys: Soloman, the high-tech killer, who's creepily realistic and utterly ruthless; Travis Lane, a guy who set his neighbors on fire because they were too loud; and Pit Bull Pearson, a wrestler who gets a little too violent in the ring, as the above portrays—but it's done in a fresh style that avoids most genre clichés and makes for a very enjoyable and often surprising read.

I'll leave you with another look at Soloman:

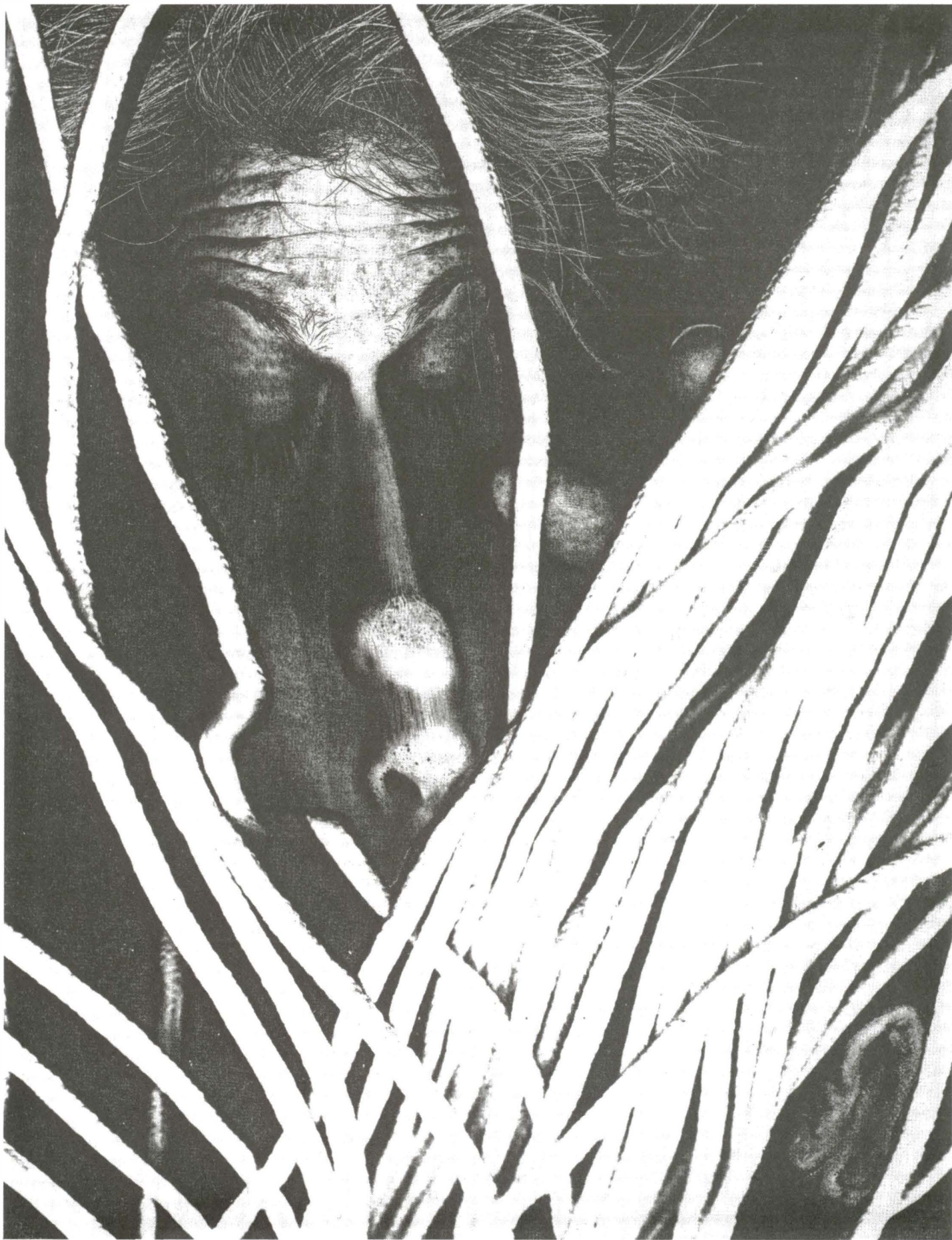
... *"I don't like you," he finally said, as if musing this thought over. "You're a real pain in the ass . . ."*

With one hand, he swung the rifle down, pointed without aiming at Henry. Popped off a quick shot.

And Henry blew up.

HOLY SHIT! Travis saw him standing there one moment, and the next there was a dull coughing roar, and the air was filled with a thick red spray. Flesh and bone turned into shrapnel, and Travis heard rather than saw the various pieces slapping down onto the asphalt. At last the bulk of Henry's body keeled over, gone from the breastbone up. Jagged lengths of denuded, shattered ribs poked through the tatters of his shirt and skin.

Brian Hodge's new novel, *Oasis*, is now available from Tor Books.



The Deep Blue Sea

Steve Rasnic Tem

What's happened to us?

Will love abuse us?

We're drifting on that Deep Blue Sea . . .

The loud music woke him. He knew it must be slightly after dawn, since that was the time his father turned on the solar-powered record player. It was the only record they had, an old bluesy, hot/cold love song, much like that 30's tune *Between the Devil and The Deep Blue Sea*. For all he knew, Koehler and Arlen had written this one, too. The label had been torn off before he was even born. The crude production values, and the look of the heavy plastic disc, made him wonder sometimes if it was a homemade job. Maybe his father had written the song in his youth. Entertainment was hard to come by on the rafts. He had to admit it was a beautiful song, but he was getting tired of it.

His left hand had been trailing in the water again. He had to figure out a way to prevent that; it made his skin all chapped and wrinkled. He stretched, his left foot dipping into the warm sea, and looked up. The rest of the family were rising from their sleeping positions on the raft.

Heavy fog had encroached upon their area during the night, stopping in a rough circle around them, perhaps two hundred yards away. The Reynolds family had the rafts to the south, but he saw no signs of shadow in the fog there. He hoped they hadn't drifted off into the soup before the Reynoldses; it had been at least a year since they'd had regular neighbors.

His sister Marilyn was up, her eyes full of sleep. She walked to the edge of the raft, squatted, and urinated casually. He turned away. Why couldn't she erect one of the screens like the rest of them? But she was only ten. He'd just been in such a bad mood lately.

Mother had started a fire on the steel plate. He wished she would say something. She used to sing them all awake each morning; now it was hard to get three words out of her. He supposed it had something to do with the change that had come over his father in the last few years. Now she shuffled around the limited area of the raft, saying nothing, making vaguely domestic gestures before the sea.

His father sat by the record player, staring out at the fog. Marilyn scratched crude pictures on her slate, played a bit with a drying piece of clay. His mother knelt at the edge of the raft and scrubbed clothes against the stones lashed tightly there.

How could I forget you?

It all started when I met you.

You've got me starin' at the sea.

The fog had retreated back to the horizon. He watched the waves rolling into the high wall of whitemist. The sea was showing its muscle today; he could feel powerful ripples building under the raft and see white caps beginning further out. The Reynolds family had drifted somewhere else during the night; even his talent at identifying specks along the horizon line hadn't uncovered them. He wasn't sure how he felt about that; they'd barely known the Reynoldses, even after a year. The infrequent contact with other rafts atrophied their social skills. But it had been nice having a few different faces around. It had disturbed him, and would again, to have every face in the small world resemble his own.

Once again the sea had gotten into his dreams last night, virtually taking them over. He was all alone, suspended in the water, and the air so humid it too was an ocean, so that he felt totally immersed in a two-compartment sea: warm water from the waist up, cool depths from the waist down.

The ocean pulled him this way and that, seemingly at random. He had no control over his movements, a sudden current would lift his hand in a greeting, a salute, or an apprehensive gesture. Sometimes he would try to change the intended direction, but the current would always pull him some other way. Sometimes he drifted for miles when he wanted to examine a small piece of drifting wood and he was never able to reach it. Other times he wanted to explore, cover great distances within minutes so that he might gain some perspective on the sweeps of the sea, but then opposite currents would hold him in place or spin him aimlessly.

Sometimes the dream was like strolling through

clouds; other times he was mired in the sea bottom. He dreamed of an ocean woman the sea would not let him reach.

*You're singing to me
on an ocean breeze.
You've got me runnin'
to the Deep Blue Sea.*

His father liked to tell them how lucky they were . . . now. How things had been much harder than before. Years ago, when they first began on the rafts, they'd been obsessed by questions of survival--what would they eat, how would they find drinking water, how were they to shelter themselves from the rains?

Now from experience, they knew to leave such needs up to the great blue sea. "The sea provides." The fish in the sea were quick to sacrifice themselves for humankind's nourishment. Showers came every afternoon, just enough to fill their containers. Then the sun was there, floating over the deep blue sea, to burn off the residue quickly and make shelter unnecessary.

He watched his father dip a pointed stick into the water. Immediately, a great fish rammed its throat over the point, killing itself. His father would do this for hours every afternoon, and throw away the fish he didn't want. The sea was eager to please him. This was the most prevalent memory of his long childhood, and he had wondered for years what became of the corpse fish when they were returned to the sea. The sea reused everything, so perhaps the corpse fish went back into the dreaming process from which the live fish were produced. As a child, he had dreamed of the deep blue sea breathing far below him, each small breath becoming an eye, then a fish. All humankind seemed to feed on death. The deep blue sea had this odd way of joking.

*You've been clutching my heart
but now you've gone too far.
I'm tired of all this swimmin',
thrashin' in the Deep Blue Sea.*

Eventually, his raft was two-thirds severed from the family's. He watched as his father methodically sawed through boards and logs, resealing the ends. He had to admire his father's care, caulking each board and rope joint. His would be a strong raft by the time he left the family, the next day, when he reached age eighteen.

There was an inevitability to it all. The older he became, the fewer the fish the sea provided them, the less water to fill their containers. The sea had made its wishes clearly known. It was a natural thing.

Sometimes he couldn't believe he was really eighteen; he wondered if his father had falsified his year marks on the north log. But his father must love him. That was the way. His father loved him; he'd learned that litany by heart.

His father had played with him often when he was a

child, although not as often as his mother. He'd formed a very special bond with his mother, who told him of the merchants' rafts travelling from colony to colony, the wonderful places he would see after he left them and before he settled down with a woman of his own, and of the times before the deep sea, when the bottom muck was elevated and dry. He found the last stories very difficult to believe. The sea was too strong; it extended too far. It rocked you awake and it rocked you to sleep. You could feel it rocking endlessly in your blood. It had colored his dreams a deep blue for as long as he could remember.

Early on, he knew he had spent too much time listening to his mother's tales. He had lost his father, who had become a distant, preoccupied man. He imagined his father's dreams were storm, while his were deep and still.

And once he knew his differences with his father, then he had lost his mother, as well. She was the cook, the raft-cleaner, and the one who bled.

Soon his father finished working on the raft, leaving only a few strands of rope to keep the two rafts together. Those would be severed tomorrow. Without speaking, his father returned to his place on the family raft.

*Why I should love you?
With all this bad timin'?
You've got me drownin' in the Deep Blue Sea.*

He'd been drifting for days. Sometimes he was afraid there would be a storm, the raft would break up, and he would drown. But he'd actually never seen a big storm; his father had talked about them, how he had never seen one either, but how they were what used to be. Things were calmer now, he had said. The ocean, even the very air was different. The image of the storms, the turbulent waters and the high winds, had made quite an impression on him. He was sure his father had nightmares about them. He had in fact heard his father at times moaning in his sleep . . . *the wind, the wind's got me . . . eaten alive by the wind and the rain . . .*

They'd given him extra food rations and a small distillation unit before casting him off. He'd never seen his father use the unit--it was to be used if the sea would not accept you. That was the way; if he didn't survive with those before linking up with another group, or obtaining aid from a passing wanderer, then he was finished. He was proven unfit. Already he'd passed two such rafts, empty, the new adult's body apparently washed overboard and returned to the sea for its use.

The casting off had not gone as well as he'd imagined. Just as they were cutting the lines, a strong current pulled him away, and goodbyes had to be quickened, shouted. Once again the sea had taken charge of things. His mother had paced up and down the family raft. She'd been so calm until that point, but he figured the sudden turn the ocean had provided for them had put the event in perspective for her. She was losing her first born, and had only moments to take leave. They would probably never see each other again. Finally, she walked quickly to

the edge of the raft and raised her emaciated arms high over her head, shouting, "Steer clear of rafts with lone men!"

*I ought to stop this foolishness . . .
I ought to walk right out the door . . .*

The first raft he coupled with that first season was that of an old rafter and his family. Several rafts in various conditions were moored to theirs, and a large barge-like affair contained the dismantled materials. The old man said there had been several sources for these long ago, but the old gathering places had been forgotten. He pictured a ghostyard of rafts brought together by the eccentricities of the tides.

So the rafter depended on the continuous cycle of deaths, trade-ins, and salvage for his stock. Sometimes a family needed a smaller raft, and would give up a log or two in exchange for something else. Sometimes they wanted larger. Sometimes a family'd be too large and the raft too small and somebody'd fall into the sea and drown, the old man said, laughing.

He served an apprenticeship all season, working for food and other goods. Customers arrived usually once a week, most often in flotillas. The old man was well-known, and people passed the word around when he was in their vicinity. They did a good business. They ate well that season.

He met hundreds of people, more than he had ever seen in his entire lifetime before. His own father had been so much a loner; sometimes he'd paddle the boat away if he saw someone else on the horizon line. Unless he needed something; then he'd steer close, be theatrically friendly, and his son of ten suspected his father killed some of these guests for their raft and provisions during the night when all were asleep. He'd never caught his father in the act, although he'd often tried. But too many guests fell overboard and bumped their heads, or were missing completely the next morning.

"Luck of the Sea!" his father'd say grimly at the brief funeral ceremonies.

The old rafter was the only one he'd ever met who had a raft as large as his father's, but the rafter liked people, and often did emergency repairs for free.

He saved enough supplies from that first season to coast through the next exploring. It was important for a young man to do that, the old man told him. "Let the current be your wife," he'd said. "Let it take you *completely* a season."

The old man made his raft much bigger before the young man left, in case he ran into "bad sea." Or was it more an inheritance for his family to come?

*You've been clutchin' my heart,
an' I'm tired of all this swimmin' . . .*

He let himself drift not just the next season, but several more to follow. He took odd apprenticeships

with grocers, various entertainers, teachers, and raft farmers who grew their crops in decomposed human matter. He never had an overabundance, but few he met were much better off than he.

But he never found any of the exotic locales his mother used to tell him about. Every spot on the great ocean was much the same as every other; some areas were only slightly bluer, or rougher, than others. Every small gathering of rafts resembled all the others, although once he did stumble upon a flotilla of over one hundred, the largest he had ever seen. And over two-thirds of these had been lashed tightly together so a person could travel freely for quite a while before having to jump an area of water.

The people there, however, were much the same as everywhere else. They did everything they could to survive, with just enough time left over for their outrageous dreams and tales. One man and his family told him how the flotilla dreamed of becoming still larger in the future, so that one day you could walk an entire day without ever having to cross water, and how there'd be wide paths for heavy wagons, all manner of shops, even a center where you could engage in all kinds of apprenticeships at the same time.

He'd taken them quite seriously, almost believing them, they painted such a real picture; in fact, he wanted to believe them. But then he found himself shocked by their, and his, arrogance. Waking up without the sea right there at hand, so you couldn't touch it first thing in the morning? How could they live that way? The very idea made him feel disoriented. Besides, the sea itself would never allow such a thing to occur. It would break their rafts to splinters half-way through their attempt.

That thought of the sea's power brought him contentment. He decided it was time to stop his wanderings and ready himself for the settling down period of his life. He could feel it in the way the sea rocked him, pulling on the center of his stomach, the line into his pelvis.

He'd met over five hundred people in his lifetime. It felt right now.

*How could I forget you?
It all started when I met you.
You've got me starin' at the sea.*

After leaving the great flotilla, he drifted almost half a season without encountering a soul. He had few provisions left. What had happened to everyone? At night he dreamed about a world-wide cataclysm, the great arms of the sea dragging every raft and every last soul into its vast underbelly.

But for some reason sparing him, leaving him to drift around its deceptively calm surface, alone.

After some time, it occurred to him that perhaps this was a time of preparation, a period during which the sea meant him to meditate, to review his life before taking on the responsibilities of a family man.

He spent several hours each day just cleaning and

straightening up around the raft. A cursory job wouldn't have taken him very long, but he found that after a time he had tended to drag the task out, scrubbing down into the log joints with a small brush, straightening and restraightening his sleeping roll, cook stove, and food stores. He polished his steel fire plate so often it served dual-purpose as a mirror. It was after many days of such obsessive, frantic cleaning that he had the hallucination concerning his father.

His father first appeared as a pale form floating barely on the surface of the waves, the white caps licking at his feet. He seemed pale and drawn, more sickly than his son remembered him, which made him wonder if perhaps he were visualizing the old man at his moment of death. After awhile, the father stood and walked to the raft and sat down in front of the son.

He did not speak for a long time, but somehow the son knew what he wanted; he wanted him to follow, to return to wherever the family raft had drifted, to go on as if nothing had ever happened, as if the son had never left the family raft.

"I had forgotten . . ." was all the father finally said, in a whisper like the sound held within a conch shell. And although he didn't say anything more, the son found he could fill in the missing words, and said this to his father:

"I never knew you existed; you were born while I was away. It was *amnesia*, you see, and I *would* have been there. I would have loved you if I could. I've searched for you all my life."

It was days before the son stood up again. He stared out over the ocean, trying to distinguish this place from any other, but he found he could not.

The current was stronger than at any time he could remember. It swept him away as quickly as the rivers from long ago his mother had told him about. So fast his thoughts were left behind, struggling, floundering in the water and calling desperately for his help.

*Why should I love you?
With all this bad timin'?*

He was forced to settle down for a quickened life after that. He soon discovered that all currents, waves, the entire sea moved much faster than at any time he could remember in his youth. The sea pushed him faster than he had ever wanted to go; he had no control, no power over his life.

He first saw her raft as a dot on the horizon, and he discovered he had regained his lost power of discerning objects at a great distance, for he knew immediately it was she, the one he would soon marry, although she was not the woman of his dreams, the ocean woman of long green hair, long limbs of the swimmer. A woman like that would have lived on the sea's bottom; meeting her would have taken time, risk, and enormous sacrifice. And the sea never would have allowed it in any case; such a woman belonged to the sea, the currents, the tides, the shifting landscapes below him. Her range would have been too

large for a man.

What's happened to us . . .

He could tell that she was fixing her hair, straightening her clothes, readying her raft for his arrival. He quickly rechecked his own raft, searched through his belongings for the old tie that had been in his family for years, found it, and pressed the knot firmly against his adam's apple. He only wished he owned a shirt.

She leaned back against her bedroll, smiling contentedly.

He readied the fire plate for the wedding feast.

The sea carried them closer and closer, their rafts picking up speed.

She waved.

He paced the raft.

The sea pulled them closer, closer.

They kissed. They made love. She prepared his dinner while he rested. He had wanted to help her, but the sea had lulled him.

That night they watched the sunset. He carefully examined the horizon line for any clue to their future. He watched the sea for messages in the waves. He was convinced the clues would be there, if he only looked closely enough.

Will love abuse us . . .

The current pushed them under skies tinged unfamiliar colors by the rising and waning sun.

They had a child. They argued.

The child grew into a young man and soon left on his own raft, water purifier and one season's provisions with him. The child didn't understand his father's reticence, or his mother's silence when he left.

They argued. She had a stroke.

He had to travel on without her.

How could I forget you . . .

The sea was wider than he remembered, the horizon much further away, the current stronger . . .

It all started when I met you . . .

His mother was out in the waves before him, sitting beside him, within his head.

Why should I love you . . .

She was telling the old story of how it used to be, about islands, continents and peninsulas. And how it would be that way again someday.

With all this bad timin' . . .

He was singing the old song, the sea pushing him so

quickly he thought he was flying, the sea a great wind, and his long white hair flowing out into the wind, his flesh growing tighter and more streamlined against his bones

You've got me drownin' . . .

. . . his body wasting away, his vision blurring, all so quickly, too quickly even to feel his loss, when he saw it .

You've got me drownin' . . .

. . . saw the island, the first island in generations rising whitely above the horizon, the white so pure, so brilliant, dazzling . . .

in the Deep . . .

. . . and closer, closer still, seeing the island rising, the current flinging him into the white, his body falling, eaten away . . .

in the Deep . . .

. . . when he saw them, the gleaming white skulls piled high before him, his own hand flung forward, pointing, flowing with the current, pushing, reaching out to the stoic expression of his father etched in the closest skull, and his own hand turning into a bony claw . . .

Deep Blue Sea . . . Deep . . . Blue . . .

. . . and his own white skull falling from his skeleton, carried forward by the sea's overpowering current, drifting down through the waters, floating gently to the base of the island, one more foundation piece laid beneath the deep, the blue, the . . .

Sea . . . ■

Dave (continued from page 13)

Tears sprang to Dave's eyes as they sang.

"--Happy birthday dear Dave--id--ey. Happy birthday to you." As one, the women moved to their husband. The flames from the candles were hot on his face.

"Would you like us to eat you, David?"

Trust Margaret to ask the question for the group, he thought.

"Oh, yes," he groaned.

Later, around the dining table, the main dish was divided according to rank. Since Consuela was the senior wife, she took the special organ. Cooked, it looked just like a German sausage. ■

The Metal Years - The Narrative

Making the first feature in downtown
Burbank,
we park the Datsun in the blue
handicapped zone--
wait on senior tickets
as a cheeky cashier stammers:
"You know what *this* movie's about?" Falling
back on arcane Valley talk I reply:
"Totally awesome--rad!" She freezes,
unable to plumb intent.
"I bet myself you'd ask." Kick
back until the projector
cranks out the flick at approximately 12:30.
Dolby booms the cosmic thunder of
LIZZY BORDEN, ODIN and SEDUCE.
Scanning the theatre,
I find I'm a solitary spectator in Cinema 6; George
has plunged into deep adenoidal bliss
with his head thrown back,
mouth wide open and ears nailed
shut,
leaving me alone to face a hung-over
Ozzy Osbourne
and the vintage remains of Alice Cooper,
who resembles a broken Halloween
toy left out in the rain.
The camera moves into the CAT
HOUSE:
cretinous headbangers
shriek monotonous curses--
moon hairy buns. Long
permed mops fly like
knotted flags
in a braggadacio of sex, drugs and
moola.
I LOVE IT!
Going over the edge, I
yearn to compete in Gazzarri's dance contest
alongside semi-nude girls in abbreviated leather;
gyrate like seasoned strippers--
writhe on the floor in mock
epileptic frenzy as hedonic judges
shout in unison:
"SHOW US YOUR ASSES!"
In my golden years,
I've overlooked RIGOR MORTIS
"Foaming at the Mouth";
the charisma of KISS,
the satanic spoofery of MEGADEATH,
swapping spit and gang-banging groupies.
Impacted by my loss of subcultural
sleaze,
I make a bold statement for the
90's:
snort hot buttered popcorn
on the dark, empty
stage . . .
--Bayla Winters--



Atom and Eve

Edgar F. Tatro

Lloyd Braxton moaned. He sat up in bed and checked out his digital clock . . . 3:38 A.M.. The two dots separating the hour and the minutes blinked continuously like piggy back eyes winking vertically in the darkness.

In the upper-middle region of his freckled back, he felt something sore, something sensitive, something swollen or raised. He had a bitch of a time reaching the area with his fingers. The twisted elbow, arm-behind-the-back maneuver was futile, but with a little effort the over-the-shoulder method found its mark.

"Jesus H. Christ, that's sore," he hissed to himself. Braxton crawled out from under the covers and faced the bathroom mirror. He wasn't much to look at . . . short, pudgy, bald with the halo hair image and a Cro-Magnon forehead jutting out above tiny slitlike eyes not much bigger than those of his digital clock. No wonder he was a forty-year-old bachelor.

He flipped the light switch, stationed his back to the mirror, and craned his neck to take a firsthand look. Braxton sneered. "Shit, a friggin' boil!" A puffy lump reminiscent of the contour of a World War II Nazi infantry helmet stared back at him through the mirror.

As a kid, he had suffered through three of those miserable "fuckers" right in a row. "They always come in threes," his mother had forewarned him, "just like celebrity deaths." Everything came in threes, according to his superstitious mother. He used to call her "stupidstidious" without realizing how accurately the label fit.

He remembered most vividly his last boil even though it was twenty years ago. One morning while bending over to pull up his socks, he heard a *zzzitch* sound. It felt like a slug from a .38 special searing through his flesh. It straightened up as if a splintery stick had been shoved up his ass. Near his beltline, the boil had popped. He gingerly pulled out a puss-filled wick the size and color of a cigarette filter. The remaining socket resembled a tiny moon crater which left a scar still visible today.

"They always come in threes, son."

Lloyd looked dolefully at the ceiling, as if it was heaven. "Pissa," he said, "just pissa."

Only, by 7:00 A.M. there were more than three anomalies . . . there were twenty of them . . . oddly shaped, raised

bumps the size of a man's thumb, randomly pushing up like vegetable stalks throughout not only Braxton's back and chest, but also his arms and legs.

He felt he had become a classic victim of the razor-sharp fine line between comedy and tragedy, the good news/bad news vaudeville sketch on the modern high-tech stage. Fortunately, it was winter, which meant his clothes would shield him from public scrutiny. Fortunately, he lived alone, which prevented family inspections and fortunately he wore an all-encompassing protective suit at work which assured concealment of his deformities from his peers and employers.

Unfortunately, he was convinced that somehow his work had created his present predicament. Braxton made big bucks as a "white lightning mover," a nuclear power plant waste transporter who wore an outfit reminiscent of Neil Armstrong on the moon. Freighting concrete-clad steel drums containing boiling liquids of hazardous high-level radioactive agents, toxic vapors, and intensely "hot" moist salt sludge from atomic reactors to designated storage sites known as "tank farms" was a routine assignment for the diminutive hermit. The bad news would be the easy winner today.

Realizing he had pushed fate too far, he began to wallow in self-pity for not heeding previous indicators, for being foolishly insensitive to the point of sheer stupidity. He had dismissed the anti-nuclear "hippies" and their protests against "nuke puke." He had disregarded the ominous sounding labels . . . strontium-90, cesium-137, plutonium-239, iodine-131, tritium, cobalt-60, ruthenium, ad nauseum. He had ignored the critical literature informing him of Louis Slotin's demise, another little man who had "tickled the dragons tail" by touching barehanded the guts of a New Mexico facility's nuclear bomb during a frivolous experiment. He had even scorned the horror story of the man who had sprouted fingernails on the fingerprint side of his fingers and thumbs.

No, not to me, never to me, he thought. He knelt down and vomited into his toilet bowl, then turned around briskly and moved his bowels . . . running yellow diarrhea. Braxton's body was out of control. Kafka's *Metamorphosis* leapt to the forefront of his tortured mind.

It was Thursday, a slow day at the plant, and he managed to survive without detection. Whatever was occurring was not life threatening, he was sure of that. If he had received enough rads to kill him--any measurement above LD/50, the lethal median dose of roentgens--his periodic urine and blood tests would have given him away. Braxton suspected his plight was different, something undetectable by standard medical and scientific procedures. The frightened him all the more.

Momentarily, he contemplated telling his superiors. Then he considered the possible consequences . . . Lloyd Braxton, the carnival freak, hounded by national tabloids for photographs of his unique lumps; Lloyd Braxton, guinea pig par excellence for the Nuclear Regulatory Commission's most distinguished witch doctors; Lloyd Braxton, private enemy number one, stalked by "professional mechanics" hitmen, to be snuffed out permanently to protect nuclear commercial interests from any unnecessary negative public relations. Lloyd Braxton's named spelled DILEMMA in capital letters.

Only exhaustion made it possible for him to sleep that Thursday night. The prospect of working another day without detection preyed on his frayed nerves. Resembling a kid's rubber pimple ball would kill any man's work ethic. Eventually, he fell asleep, dreaming of *The Fly*.

By 4:00 A.M., his intense need to pee forced another early wake-up call. Braxton swung his legs over the side of the bed, looked down at his paunch, and screamed outright. His tender lumps had transformed into slender, fleshy drooping spikes capped with miniature flat heads. His body craved to release fluids.

Braxton rushed for the shower and urinated into the tub from dozens of newly formed penises. Once relieved, he collapsed into puddles of his own urine.

When he awoke to discover that his hell was not an LSD-induced bummer, his voice wavered in agony. "Sweet Jesus, no . . . not peckers . . . anything but peckers!"

He was acutely aware that curly, wiry hair follicles were slowly forming circular patterns around each organ. His pubic hair was becoming mighty public.

Occasionally, desperation superceeds fear as the ultimate motivator. Braxton felt he had little to lose. Snapping up his straight razor, he extended one of his growths situated just below his Adam's apple and produced a small incision near its base. Surprisingly, there was no blood or pain. The penis was apparently bloodless dead tissue, like the hardened callouses of a long distance runner's feet.

A glimmer of hope surged through him. As carefully as a master sculptor, Braxton deftly amputated the alien organisms. Stubbled remnants of scar-tissued skin protruded from hard-to-reach areas, but Braxton was able to compose himself for one last day of work. Ironically, his Friday stint with his astronaut gear concealed a body exterior similar to the rough-hewed craters of the moon.

Saturday morning introduced another episode of the

calling of the glands. His penises had returned . . . only larger, fuller, more resilient. He dashed for the tub and emptied his hoses.

With his face a taut mask of concentrated dread, he deliberately pinched his Adam's apple extension. He was shocked to discover pain. It wasn't intolerable, but playing surgeon again was clearly out of the question. Besides, he reasoned, another reincarnation brought with it the probability of elephant trunks by Sunday sunrise.

Except for his bouts of urination in his tub like a heavy duty lawn sprinkler, Sunday morning was an uneventful session of self-exile and planning. Unless he could hide his mutations satisfactorily, he knew he would be forced to resign and surrender himself to the NRC for "analysis," an alternative intolerable to his spirit, to his body, to his very soul.

Strapping his monstrosities with strips of electrical masking tape, he ventured to the corner drug store, purchased some groceries, and returned home. No questions asked, no awkward stares.

Had he avoided conversation with his attractive neighbor, he might have applauded his efforts as successful, but Leanne Howard's inviting, full rich breasts subtly heaving underneath her red knit sweater and her tight buttocks shielded only by designer jeans were too much for any man with only one penis, much less two dozen, to withstand. As he raced for the back door to his sun porch, grey tape and clothes shredded like the opening of a leper's sores.

Braxton indulged himself with the longest shower of his life. It annoyed him to bathe in what was now his toilet, but he had no options. He instinctively knew other revolutions were taking shape within himself. Below each organ he sensed more sensitivity, more irritation, more cellular reconstruction in the works.

It was impossible to sleep. He lay in bed and watched himself transform into a modern day thyrodial, radioactive Mr. Hyde. By late Monday morning, his oversized reproductive organs stood guard above equally amazonian vaginas.

Resigned to his lot, Braxton rummaged through his bedroom closet for his shotgun. Hesitating briefly, he considered driving to the plant and blowing the heads off every son-of-a-bitch responsible for this living nightmare, but he was too damn embarrassed and drained of his energy to exit his prison. He put the weapon aside.

Dialing the phone, he managed to contact his plant foreman. "Hey Doten . . ." His tone was seething bitterness.

"Jesus Christ, Braxton, you're late. Get your butt in here," Doten said.

"You stupid turd, Doten. Don't you get it? I quit."

"You quit? You can't do that. We've got shipments to move. You can't quit a nuclear facility with a God damn phone call."

"Oh yeah, just watch me. You've got leaks over there, pal. I just hope a pecker grows in your throat and

chokes your miserable ass . . . real slowly, too.”

“You’re fried, Braxton, you know that? Wait til the feds get hold of you.”

“Go to hell, Doten!”

“Go fuck yourself, Braxton!”

The phones slammed simultaneously. Lloyd Braxton rammmed his fist against the soft plaster wall which left a half-inch imprint of his knuckles in the process.

He thought of Doten’s last words. The idea had never occurred to him as sexual urges slowly escalated. Soon, he was literally obeying his foreman’s verbal instructions. Braxton reeled in ecstasy as multiple orgasms of surrealistic proportions overwhelmed his senses.

In minutes, his breasts filled with fluid; he suspected it was nourishment. Braxton needed no rabbit to expire to deduce the next stage. Raising the shotgun, he calmly encircled the mouth of the barrel with his own and sprayed his brains across the bedroom wallpaper.

As body spasms ceased and flecks of bloody debris dripped from flowery prints to the carpeting below, the new arrivals, whose creation was instantaneous, crawled from Braxton’s wombs. ■

For Your Information

According to a recent issue of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, when the risk status of a sexual partner is unknown, the chance of contracting AIDS through a single heterosexual encounter without using a condom is one in 50,000.

Use of a condom decreases your odds of infection to one in 500,000!

Guys: Wear a condom!

Girls: Insist *your partner* wear a condom, and use *Nonoxynol - 9* spermicide for extra protection!
Be 10 times as safe!

For Your Information



Butcher's Block

"Kidnapped girls were bound with tight cords, like tourniquets, then their veins were cut with scissors . . ."

On December 30, 1610, the prime minister of Hungary, Count Thurzo Gyorgy, discovered that the horrifying rumors about his cousin, Countess Elizabeth Bathory, were true.

He entered her castle on New Year's Eve and only minutes after an orgy of blood, torture and death had concluded. Young girls, drained of their blood, lay pale and lifeless on the stone floor. Others, barely breathing, had small holes pierced through their bodies.

In the dungeon, Thurzo found scores of peasant girls chained to the walls, most of whose bodies were punctured at the neck, chest and stomach. Many, long since dead, lay decaying in their chains. The stench of their putrifying flesh flowed like gas throughout the cellars and dark passages.

When the prime minister confronted his royal cousin about the wholesale murders, she admitted freely to what she had done, saying, "Our family is of noble blood. We have the right to do whatsoever we wish with those beneath us."

Thurzo arrested his cousin and, at her trial, witnesses revealed that the kidnapped girls were beaten with whips and knives. Afterward, the Countess bathed in the blood.

"Sometimes," another witness testified, "the Countess cut their flesh and made them grill it; later she would make them eat bits of their own bodies."

Elizabeth Bathory was found guilty and sentenced to be walled up in her own bedchamber, with small slits to allow food and drink to be passed through. She died there three years later on August 24, 1614.

*

"For heaven's sake, catch me before I kill again. I cannot control myself."

The above plea was written in lipstick on a wall after eighteen-year-old William Heirens butchered Miss Frances Brown in her Chicago apartment with an eight-inch bread knife on December 10, 1945.

A month later, in one of Chicago's most elegant suburbs, Heirens climbed up a ladder into the bedroom of six-year-old Suzanne Degan. He'd never seen the child before, but he strangled her in her bed and carried her body down the ladder to dump it in a coal bin. Then, with a hunting knife, he hacked off her head. He also cut off her arms and legs and distributed the severed parts in various sewers around the city.

On June 26, 1946, Heirens was caught by the police and admitted to the gruesome murders. However, he claimed a man called George actually committed the crimes. He explained that "George" periodically took over his personality.

Heirens was found guilty of triple murder and sentenced to three consecutive life sentences in September, 1946.

*

In Chicago, on February 14, 1929, a police squad car pulled up on Clark Street across from the S.M.C. Cartage Company--a single-story red-brick garage and warehouse that was often used for bootleg liquor deliveries by Al Capone's chief rival, Bugs Moran.

Four men got out of the squad car. Two were dressed in police uniforms and the other two were wearing plainclothes. The "officers" crossed the street and entered the warehouse where seven of Moran's men were waiting for an illegal shipment of liquor. They were instructed to line up against the wall. Then they were cut to pieces with sub-machine gun fire.

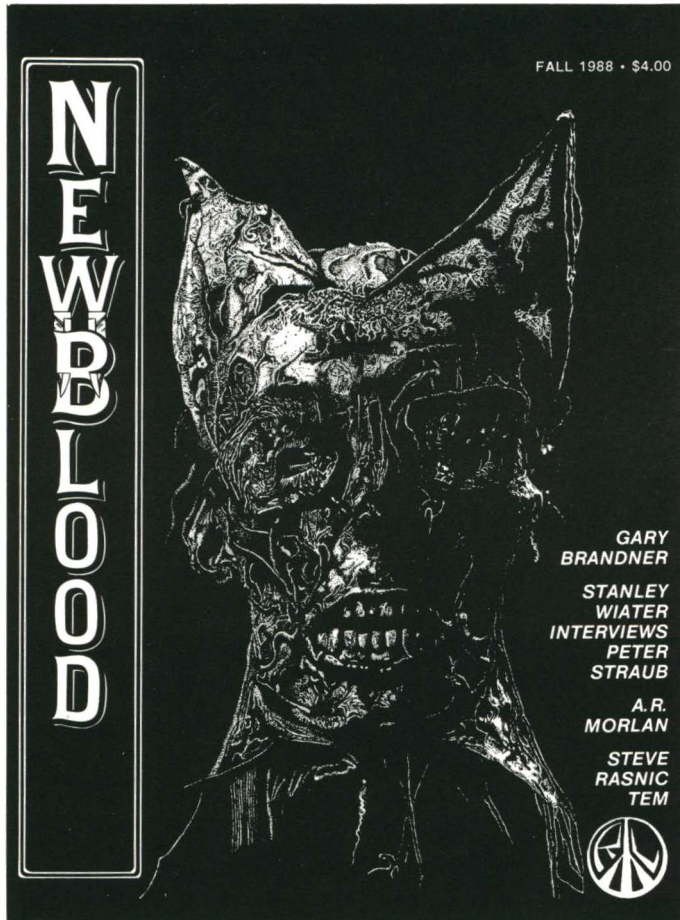
Bugs Moran was so enraged over the incredible gory scene at his warehouse that he broke the underworld's code of silence, saying publicly, "Only Capone kills like that."

However, Al Capone was conveniently in Miami on the day of the infamous St. Valentine's Day Massacre.

*

Ray R. House





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