1990

Painted demons

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Painted Demons

by

William Ellis Rand

A Thesis Submitted to the
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BY LIGHT OF THE MOON

The snivelling little wimp. Thought he was alone.

My time came and I floated up behind his eyes and saw again. He sat at his kitchen table before a half finished plate of spaghetti and an old Faulkner hardback. A skinny yellow kitten I hadn't seen before lounged beside the book and flicked its tongue between splayed claws. Dave's right hand maneuvered dripping strands of pasta to his mouth while his left stroked the cat and turned pages. He didn't sense me yet. I probed his thoughts and saw the cat was supposed to calm his nerves while the novel took his mind off me.

I nudged David with a mild suggestion. He looked over at the wall and blinked. I felt surprise in him, but no suspicion. I pushed his mind gently and his glance shifted to the kitten and I felt his eyebrows crinkle together. I eased off, but he didn't think of me; the game was still running. The kitten looked up, meowed softly, and purred. I touched his mind again and whispered. Dave's right hand slowly shifted the prongs of his fork from the eating position to just below the edge of his palm, and closed on the handle. I pushed harder. He laughed once and reached for the cat.

His left hand moved through the air in little halting jerks. Dave shook his head and looked away. I pushed him once more and his fingers clamped down around the kitten's throat. The cat hissed and struggled, scratching at the gold-speckled formica. Dave stood and raised the fork
above the kitten's head. I told him to drive it home. He shook his head. His eyes widened.

"My God, no," he said, looking down.

Kill it, I told him. You want to.

The fork descended halfway and stopped. His hand tightened on the handle, whitening his knuckles. His heart hammered, but he'd stopped his breath. Dave raised the fork high overhead and drove it down hard. The steel prongs slammed into the formica, a quarter inch in front of the cat's nose. He opened his left hand and the kitten scampered off. I laughed. Dave threw the fork at the wall and ran from the kitchen to the opposite end of the house. I looked through his eyes as he scanned his bedroom.

Pale blue walls surrounded sloppy, gray plaster repairs. I'd gotten at the ceiling too, but he hadn't patched those holes yet. His box spring and mattress lay on the wood floor. He'd evidently thrown away the pieces I'd left of the bedframe. The rest of the house looked about the same, unless he'd done some major repairs while I was too far down to see. I didn't think so. He didn't have the will or resources to keep up with me. Sure, he had more time, but in a few minutes I could destroy what he accomplished in as many weeks. I did it laughing, and made him watch. Last time, I threw his nineteen-inch Sony through the wall between the dining room and kitchen. If he replaced the TV, I'll smash the new one through his microwave tonight. I wondered if he knew why I never broke his bedroom mirror.
He cried now into his reflected image.

"Please," he begged his God aloud, "Don't let it happen again."

He meant me. Dave Corby's image looked out from the dusty glass, and I saw myself behind the shine in his eyes. He wiped the dampness from his high cheekbones and stared into his reflection. His eyes shown an inflamed, hangover red around deep blue irises. But he knew not to rely on that. Sometimes the eyes changed last. His skin was sallow and pocked from acne. I noticed his face looked thinner than when I'd taken him, months ago. Understandable.

Dave tilted his face closer to the glass. He swallowed and squinted, etching his worry lines deeper. Lank blond hair fell over his high forehead, covering the wrinkles and nearly hiding thin, curved eyebrows. A long nose tapered to straight, cracked lips. Incongruously, sharp angular planes set the line of his jaw. Below, a hose of a neck bisected narrow, bony shoulders. His flat chest rose and fell in quick, shallow breaths under a damp, faded Colorado State T-shirt. He waited.

I came up. We felt each other and he whimpered inside. The worm. Layer by layer I rose within him. His blue eyes darkened to black. He stared into the mirror and tried to will me back. Sweat beaded his forehead and face with the effort. His heart hammered harder and faster in his chest.
My heart...my chest.

The heat of fear flushed his face suddenly, feeding me. His mouth gaped at some flicker of a thought. I didn't hear it, but it must have been about what he saw in the mirror. The stiff, black bristles coming out on his face. He slapped a hand over the glass but didn't or couldn't turn away. It was all I needed. His control slipped a notch and I moved closer, pushing.

The phone rang.

Dave squeezed his eyes shut, but I wouldn't let him drive the bell out of his mind. He opened his eyes and saw my hand on the mirror. The corners of his mouth turned down and his face wrinkled, drawing his eyes to slits. He snatched the hand away in a clenched fist and spun at the phone's fourth ring. I realized who he thought it was. A woman. So, the dweeb found himself a girlfriend since I'd last come out. I thought about putting her into the same state of disrepair as his house. I laughed and Dave's body shivered.

His resolve strengthened suddenly and I lost the edge. The hand that lifted the receiver was his again, but I held on at the weakest seam of his mind. He pressed the receiver to his ear and found his voice between us. "Hello?" I listened behind him and let him know it and the stringy muscles in his neck tensed. I felt a delicious surge of power in his fear for the bitch, but held myself back.
"David?"

I heard the concerned tone in her voice, and despised him for it. He opened his mouth. My will shut him down.

"Something wrong, Hon?" she asked into Dave's ear. "You okay?"

He wrenched his mind away from me then, with a strength I hadn't seen before. I nearly lost him in the shock. "Fine, Cindi. I'm fine," the wimp told her. "Hey, Cin, I really don't..."

"Just got off work, Davey. And what a crazy day! I just couldn't believe so many people in the store. I spent half the time in and out of the stockroom. The department manager didn't even want me to take a break. The bitch. And you know I wanted to work on my psych paper. I told her..."

"Cindi," he said, "I guess I really don't feel so hot."

I figured it out as the girl's voice began to fade in my mind. He wasn't any stronger; I was getting weaker. What the Hell?

"Oh, Dave. You sound like you've got something. I'll come over and make you dinner and a hot toddy."

Yes, I demanded to his mind. It couldn't be him. I was with him and nothing had changed.

"No, Cindi, don't..."

"I don't mind, Hon. The day wasn't really that bad."

"I don't want you to catch anything. It's just a cold..."

Tell her to come. I'd show him my strength by ripping his woman to bits.
"...I'll be okay. I don't want you to come over here and get sick."

"You probably caught it in one of your classes. Did you go today?"

"Yeah. I only had two."

Sweat made the slick against our ear. The smells of human body odor and damp canine fur mixed in the room. I drove hard into him, but he found more strength than I could manage. I held on. Above all else, I would not lose my night. I felt the scratch of bristles on the receiver, like the warmth of a spring sun after a morbid winter. My claws dug into the phone and plastic cracked in our hand.

"Davey, what was that?"

"Nothing. I...I dropped the phone."

I felt his shame at lying. Even to protect her. The runt.

Bring her here.

"You sound worse, Davey. I think you need some TLC."

We fought in his mind, but I couldn't hold him longer than a few seconds at a time. I could only think of one answer, but it wasn't likely in this age. And certainly not over the phone. I had to find out, so I submitted and listened. I didn't have the strength for much more anyway. He felt the loosening and blew out a sigh. "I'll just start with some aspirin and vitamin C. Okay, Cin?" he breathed in a hoarse whisper. "I'll call you tomorrow, when I'm better."

I knew the risk, but I couldn't wait another month, couldn't bear it. And if she met the conditions, there would be no more months. I'd have to kill her tonight.
"Okay, Hon, if that's what you want. But I don't think I'll catch anything."

Dave settled himself down onto the mattress and the springs creaked. He lowered his head and all I saw was the floor.

"It's about last night; isn't it?" she asked. "I'm sorry, Davey. I...I just need more time. Okay?"

"No, Cindi. It's not that at all. I should be apologizing for coming on so strong. I just...I'm not in a hurry. Really. I'm just sick. Why don't you go out with some of your friends? Angie, maybe. Okay, Cin?"

"It's not that I don't want to be alone, Dave. I want to be with you. And you don't have to apologize. Next time, tomorrow night, I'll..."

The truth flashed on me in the middle of their silly love talk. The bitch was a virgin. And she loved the worm. Damn. It was the only thing I couldn't get around. Silver and drowning could kill a host, but I used them to steal new bodies when the hunt closed in. I considered the only thing that could stop me: the honestly returned love of a virgin could render me powerless and silver held by such a virgin could exorcise me back down to the Master. With no chance to enter a new host. The Master would punish my failure by locking me into the body of a burned, twisted dwarf, and I would be the wimp, the release for everyone else's torment. The only way around that was to tear this little bitch's heart out. I couldn't bear to be squeezed into an eternal host knee high to the smallest human. I had to get Dave to lead me to her tonight, before he learned of her power.
I took the risk and let him go. He had to know it at once, feel me fade until I felt nothing again. Controlled nothing. I lost the smell of his fear and our sweat. My sight filmed over to gray and his shouting mind faded to a whisper. I drifted down until I was sure he thought himself alone, thought he'd won.

Dave stood and crossed the bedroom to the mirror, dragging the phone cord along. His thin face glowed with sweat. He leaned close but couldn't find me in his eyes. The blue irises reflected only a relief he didn't seem to trust. He probed his face with a long fingered, bony hand. I saw, but couldn't feel it. Temptation itched all over and I waited. He looked, tilting his head about. Finally, a smile stretched slowly across his face and I listened from deep inside his mind, and felt fear for the first time in two centuries.

"Davey? You still there?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah, Cindi. Sure."

"I'll see if Angie's still home, Hon. You sound like you need some sleep. Just call me tomorrow, okay?"

Dave's hand went out tentatively to the surface of the mirror. He turned and moved suddenly to the window and a flick of his wrist snapped the shade up. He gazed out. I imagined the stupid, giddy look on his upturned face. Understandable. I'd never let him go at my phase of the moon before.
"Okay, Cindi, but tell you what. You could maybe try me later tonight. If I'm better..."

Her relief came across the line in a squeal. "Yeah. I'll try calling in a couple hours, Davey. Love me?"

David spared the glowing full moon a last glance and went back to the mirror. "Yeah, Cindi. I love you," he whispered back. He flipped hair off one ear and held it close to the mirror to see. I left him alone, hoping I knew him well enough.

"Cindi," he began and hesitated, evaluating some thought I was too deep to hear. I didn't rise, dared not push him. I knew he didn't sense me, for I felt nothing. I trusted in the power of the moonlight to allow me to take him back before dawn, but I still shook with worry. I hid it from him, though, along with everything else. He looked in the mirror again and I knew the freedom he must have felt.

"Yeah, Davey?" she said.

"If You and Angie are doing something mellow, a movie and dinner or something, tell me where and maybe I'll meet you later."

David's voice was light and frail. The worm. I wanted to have his Cindi before either of them realized her power. There were theatres and restaurants all over town. I had to know where.

"Davey, I'd love it. I'll wear that gorgeous blue sweater you gave me, just in case. And I'm sure Angie'll go for a flick."

Which one? I didn't give a damn about her blue fucking sweater. And I couldn't make him ask. Couldn't let him know I was listening for it.
"And the other present I gave you. Take that along too."

"What...? Oh. Fort Collins just isn't that bad. I mean..."

"It won't hurt to put it in your purse; okay?"

"All right, I'll take the..."

"Great. I love you. Now which tear-jerker am I going to have to watch tonight, if I make it at all?"

I listened to her tell him where to come, listened to their damn loving small talk. And when he hung up, I came out in in frenzy and seized him.

* * *

The howl vibrated through me like an orgasm. I breathed the wind flowing off the foothills, felt it ripple through the stiff strands of my fur. David was a wimpering little entity somewhere inside my head now. I decided to let him watch through my eyes for awhile. I took off running at an easy pace down Prospect. The street stretched out dark and bumpy. I kept to the shoulder and felt the bite of gravel on the pads of my paws. A rabbit bolted silently, thirty yards to my right, by the grade school. I caught its scent right after the breeze shifted. The physical hunger it stirred felt good in me. Alive. I flexed the muscles in my chest and shoulders, noting the added weight and thickness generated by the so-called curse.

The full moon glowed down from a cluttered playground of flickering stars. Its power lightened the charcoal sky with a pale sheen. I stopped
in the black shadow of a drooping tree to feel the air. I flapped my
tongue over my muzzle and tasted the cold of an approaching hailstorm. I
sniffed the air and guessed another two days. Squirrels overhead in the
trees must have sensed me then, as I did them. I heard the clicking rustle
as they scampered to the highest branches. They leaped off to further
trees, never coming closer to the ground. I chuckled and started to run
on, but came up short when I heard the engine.

The deep rumble rose from a mile off, long before I caught the scent.
I let David know what I wanted and he begged me not to. 'Then stop me,' I
challenged him. The sound grew louder.

A motorcycle.

The rider shot through the lights on Taft Hill Avenue, and I crouched
in the tree's shadow. It took all I had to keep my tongue in my mouth and
wait. David tried to contain me like he'd done at the house. I just
laughed. The night was mine now, and all he could do was watch and nag.
The white beam of the headlamp cut a quick trail along the black ribbon,
and the approaching motor hitched and caught at a higher gear. The bike
sounded big, a seven-fifty or better. It closed and I saw the motorcycle
outline behind the light. Low handlebars and no fairing. The bike was
older, so the rider wasn't tilted way forward. Perfect.

He must have been doing sixty when I stuck an arm out and slammed my
paw into his visor. My claws shattered the plexiglass and his head came
off in my hand. The bike roared on for a few yards, then veered all over
the street. I figured the ruptured nerves were sending crazy signals
through the guy's arms. I smelled blood on the air almost immediately. The sweet smell filled my head and rolled into my stomach. Thick gobs of blood, caught in the wind, spurted back over the rider's collar. Finally, the motorcycle hit the shoulder and tipped, spitting gravel into the air. The headless body flopped off into the grass beyond the shoulder. It spasmed a bit and lay still. The engine coughed and died. I crouched against the tree and scanned the row of houses. A couple of curtains shifted and a light came on, but that was about all. Within a minute, the light blacked out and the curtains fell back. With no screams or sound of impact, I didn't expect much more. Perfect.

I hefted the guy's head. Kind of heavy with the helmet and all. I didn't really have to grip it; the impact buried my fingers into his face like into a bowling ball with warm strawberry preserves in the holes. I lapped at the blood oozing through my forearm fur. It tasted as thick and sweet as it smelled. I sniffed hard at the wet tear where his neck used to be, and a warm tingle fluttered across my shoulders. My groin tightened and I let go a long howl. I glanced around, but silence had returned to the dark street.

Nothing moved. No new lights appeared in the few houses spaced along the opposite side of the street. They were set too far back to matter. My attention returned to the weight in my hand. I shook the Bell helmet off. It clunked to the street and a short wave of dark hair fell to my forearm. The rider's face looked young, but too bashed in to see his expression. I wondered if he saw me at the last second. I licked at the blood again and
my hunger bubbled up. I tossed the head aside and walked over to the body, to the meat.

My stomach was full, after a time, but David's crying told me he knew it didn't matter. He bitched about the biker all the way to Old Town. His pleas were more snarls than the usual wimpers. I wondered if he knew. Wondered if he could read me whether I wanted him to or not. He obviously knew I was going for Cindi. I thought of shutting him down as usual, but I wanted him to see. There was nothing he could do; she was the problem. David cried and screamed inside me, trying to fight. His love for the girl wormed about inside me like the gas from a bad meal.

I let the wimp sense me ignoring him. Not even having to struggle. The theatre lay up ahead a block on College Avenue. I hid in an alley across the street. I knew David would point them out to me when the movie ended; all I had to do was wait until his nagging rose to a squeal.

After a time, the bright theatre lobby filled with people. The glass doors swung out, before the first of them, and I watched. My mouth opened and my hanging tongue began to drip. I ran it over my nose and muzzle. So many of them. I would not lose my time here because of some chaste little twit. My shoulders twitched, and I pushed further into the shadows and felt rough, unyielding brick scrape my side. I leaned my hand lightly against a drainpipe and it felt cold on the webbing between my fingers. I caught the sharp odors of urine, garbage and small, dirty animals. Somewhere behind me a cat crooned softly. I watched the theatre. More
people came out, most of them laughing stupidly. Blue sweaters seemed to be in vogue. After the third one and no reaction from David, I began to worry. I knew he could see them...thought he could.

Finally two women, one quite pretty and the other plain, turned left out of the theatre and headed south on College. David cried out, thrashed inside me. The plain one in the blue sweater looked about his speed; her limp, mousy hair went well with the zits. Her pretty friend's high voice seemed to carry most of their conversation. David saw my attention focus on them and yelled through my head. His snarls degenerated to whimpering. He might suspect, but I figured he didn't know a damn thing. I left him up, close enough to watch.

Leave her alone...please, he cried from the bottom of my mind. She can't hurt you.

Snivelling little idiot. My heart pounded louder. They walked, laughed and pointed at something in a store window they passed. I watched their progress from the alley until they stopped for the light at the corner.

College Avenue was crowded with cruising teenagers, as usual, and brightly lit. I looked up. A ribbon of star-speckled black sky peeped between the top ridges of adjacent buildings. The brick felt rough enough, so I hooked my claws into the mortar and scrambled the three flights to the roof. I crept to the edge of the cold tar surface and scanned below. The two women crossed the street at an easy trot. I watched them talk and laugh and they gazed about everywhere but up. My mouth watered, but a
nagging worry ticked away at the back of my mind. I decided to approach them carefully to see how much strength Cindi's power would cost me. Certainly not enough to stop me from killing her. I trailed my tongue over my muzzle, smoothing the fur. It took all I had to hold back. I listened inward and David fed me with his pleading.

He'd been like that from the first. When the last one drowned himself in the City Park lake, David, out on one of his midnight walks, was close enough to take. Just sheer bad luck. He was the worst, the smallest, the weakest. One host I recalled kept me for years, enjoying the hunt, until I made a mistake that got him killed. Not David. He bitched and cried every time we went out. Begged me not to kill. He had to know it only pissed me off. And still he whined. I started to take it out on his house and furniture, smashing everything before I left. He still wouldn't shut up. I wondered how he explained his trashed house to his snotty virgin girlfriend. The little bitch probably demurely refused to go inside. She's nothing more than he deserved.

I could see from the distance that Cindi was squirrelier, wimpier than even David. Bony legs, no tits: no wonder David didn't want in her pants. But I'd let him watch me chew her guts out. Using rooftops and alleys, I followed the women easily; sometimes I even circled whole blocks. Once I crept close enough to catch Cindi's scent. She met the conditions all right, though I wondered how bad it could get. Her natural scent made me a bit light-headed, but hardly powerless. I found I couldn't scale walls
until I let her get a block ahead, but that didn't matter. I wouldn't need to scale a wall to kill her. David's strength alone would suffice. And I would have at least that. She didn't loosen my hold on him by any degree. Not alone. Not without that cursed metal. In case he hadn't considered that, I let him know. If the strength I had close to Cindi was only enough to strangle her, the bruises I left on her throat would be from his hands. I looked up as the women turned left toward Remington.

Please!

"Shut up," I said to him. "I've had enough of you."

The trapped entity, David, cried and squirmed inside me like a blistering worm on a hot street. I shoved him down until I got closer. I let the two women hear me a half block away.

Cindi's friend, Angie I guess, hooked a thumb toward me and peeped back over a shoulder. Cindi looked. I'm sure my ears, bent canine legs and the rest weren't visible in the dark. All they could have seen was a man approaching them through the shadows. I moved into the light of the moon to give them a little more to work with. Cindi's face went chalk white. Angie screamed.

The rest was easy. I felt the growl roll into my throat. Cindi mumbled something about a mad dog; she didn't know the half of it. I caught her eyes in mine and felt dizzy. I shook my head and the worst of the spin cleared. No matter. Angie took a couple of steps back, but I don't think she was aware of it. She just stared at me and screamed. The smell of fear coming off them wired me like a heavy dose of caffeine.
Angie tried another step and backed herself into a wall. She stood there, beautiful, her face crumpled in fear. Blond hair spilled over her shoulders and shimmered in the moonlight. She was bony, but her breasts were heavy and her hips, round. I turned her way and she put an arm across her chest and tried to press herself closer to the wall. Her lower lip trembled and her jeans darkened suddenly at the crotch. I shifted, boxing her in, not worried about David's bitch over by the curb. Cindi stood over a hundred yards from the nearest busy street and only eight or so feet from me. She wasn't going anywhere I couldn't reach. I stepped closer to Angie. I was having a hard time breathing, so I thought I'd test my strength. Anything to turn off the damn siren in Angie's mouth.

Angie's bony hands came up to her throat. My groin felt hot; my fingertips shook. David begged me to stop. Cindi shifted about behind me and whispered a plea to leave her friend alone. I chuckled inside. Angie held her arm up, the small white palm toward me. Useless. The lined, damp skin looked waxed-paper thin. I shot an arm out and drove my claws through her sweater and into the soft flesh of her breasts. Her frail hands clamped around my wrist, trying to pull my fingers out of her chest.

Don't kill her. I'll do anything, he said into my head.

"There's nothing I want from you, wimp," I snarled at David. I got a vision of the microwave I'd trashed in his kitchen and wanted to laugh. Cindi screamed then, loud and long.

I drove Angie against the wall and got my shoulder into it. She started to spasm when my claws brushed through her ribcage. Thick blood
spurted out around my fingers and up my arm and oozed into my fur. I dug deeper, probing everything soft and wet beneath. The girl's eyes glazed and her face went slack. Her small hands froze on my wrist, then fell away.

"Leave her alone," Cindi yelled behind me. I heard the buzz of a zipper and her hand rummaging.

I closed my hand in Angie's chest and pulled. The smell of blood thickened behind a low, wet tearing. Her ribs cracked together into a handful and came away in a slippery bunch. I heard the shot as Angie's body slipped to the concrete. I turned and saw Cindi level a cocked automatic at my chest.

The ribs and meat from Angie's chest fell from my hand. I vaguely remembered something about their phone call: a present Dave gave her. And I'd let it get by me. I moved slowly to my left; I wanted to get out of the light, spoil her aim. Cindi kept the trembling muzzle trained on me the whole way. I stopped in the shadows and growled low. Cindi circled toward a clear path to the street. If David knew the conditions, I was as good as finished. If he didn't, Cindi's weapon wouldn't matter. I had to get closer to find out. I took a step and Cindi closed her other hand around the checkered grip. I maneuvered her back into a parked car and edged closer.

"Whatever you are, I'll shoot. Please stop."

I took another two steps and she pulled the trigger. Red flame boomed from the muzzle and chips of brick exploded from the wall over my right
shoulder. I felt the nausea and the rise of my hackles then, but it didn't matter; she couldn't aim the damn thing. But Dave knew and I cursed him. Only silver produced the nausea I felt.

One true shot and I'd be a crippled dwarf for eternity. I wouldn't have them kicking me about like I did David. I couldn't bear being the wimp, having myself squeezed into something the size of a chimp. David's little box of a body was bad enough. But she couldn't aim. I leaped and, too late, saw Cindi lower the barrel to compensate. Her next round caught me high in the left shoulder. I landed hard and Cindi started backing up the street.

I waited for the pull away from David. Nothing happened. Lead. The bullets were plain lead. I sensed silver somewhere, but not in the automatic. So David, the Faulkner and Hemingway scholar, didn't know a condition any ninth grader could have taught him. I sprang up and leaped after Cindi but I forgot how weak she'd made me. My legs almost flipped out from under me. I looked down and cursed. They were bent the wrong way—the human way.

I checked my hands and my stomach fistèd into a knot. The pads on my palms had thinned and the webbing between my fingers was nearly gone. Black fur still covered the backs, but my claws looked shorter. I didn't know if it was her proximity or my panic, but I couldn't get a breath. I sprinted toward Cindi. She held her ground and got off two more rounds, loud in the thin night air. Both caught me in the chest, but I didn't lose a step. She tried to back away and tripped. I leaped, fell short and
slammed my forearm into her shin. I felt the bone in her leg shatter with her scream and heard the weapon clatter off into the darkness. I rose up over her and brought my claws down to her face.

She blocked me with her forearms and a searing pain tore into my palms. I smelled burning fur and heard my skin sizzle. I screamed and rolled off her. We both looked at her wrists. At the shiny bracelets on her wrists. I felt a pull away from David and fought it off in a rising panic.

But I couldn't fight off the nausea or the weakness. The breeze swirling through my fur felt colder. I pushed up to my knees and moved closer. All I needed was David's strength to strangle her. I could get around the bracelets. No problem. Cindi's leg lay at a strange angle, her face white as new paper. She backed to a sitting position and whimpered, dragging her broken leg along. Her hand found her open purse and pulled it in front of her. She stared at me and her jaw fell. "My God. David! You're turning into David."

No! I ran my tongue over my face. My muzzle felt shorter and the fur thinner, but nothing else. He couldn't stop me, couldn't push me back down. I growled at her, hard and low.

"I want him back. You hear me, you animal. You freak. I want him back."

"The wimp is mine," I snarled at her.

"No," she said, crying. "He's not. Fight it, Davey. Please."
Thin strands of hair stuck to her forehead in sweat. Black mascara trickled wet down her cheeks. And this twit weakened me? I laughed. She was weaker than I, and the game was over. I'd grab one of her arms in each of my hands and tear her face off with my teeth. Fuck the bracelets. I moved in.

I heard a yell, **Behind you!**

I spun around to a length of empty street. It was only David; damn him. My rage bubbled and I turned back to the bitch and sprang with what strength I had left. I didn't see the shiny letter opener in time and she drove it into my neck. Burning pain ripped through me. My frying skin sounded like the buzzing of huge insects. I tried to pull the thing out but my strength vanished in an instant. I felt the tug, hard and away from David. The sound of Cindi's crying faded in my ears. I tried to hold on, but I had nothing left to fight with.

As I was pulled out and away, I saw my face again, saw damp tufts of fur fall loose from my chest, exposing David's pink skin, protruding ribs, tiny dark nipples, freckles, veins. My long, fanged muzzle shrank in on itself, and dropped bits of damp fur onto the cracked, gray pavement. Tiny bubbles of blood trickled from David's lips and he tried to mumble something. My last sight was of Cindi dragging herself over and lifting his head into her lap.
Susan flipped the stuffed bunny over and checked the price tag. Thieves, she thought, and replaced the toy on its shelf. They sold the neatest stuff in malls and at the most outrageous prices. But she loved that bunny's crooked eyes and pale blue fur. She rummaged along the shelf, but none of the others looked any better, or cheaper. Susan shrugged and turned to look around the store for her husband. She hoped her sister wasn't trying to make dinner at home. She spotted Vince and headed over. The gift shop was tightly packed with displays and people, so she held her packages close and walked mostly sideways. She saw Vince lift something from a low shelf as she drew near. Susan looped an arm through his and wrinkled her nose at the thing in his hand.

"C'mon, Vince, you're not seriously going to spend fifty bucks on a paperweight?"

"Thinking about it,...Ms. Tightwad."

Susan cupped a hand over his biceps, held the hair out of her face, and leaned closer. "But Vince, it's so...so..."

"Gruesome?"

"Yeah," she snapped, trying hard not to smile, "it's gruesome. Can't you pick one that doesn't have a nasty old spider inside?"

"I'm buying it for the spider, Susie."
A fat woman with swinging jowls and a faint mustache squeezed past them, upsetting a display of moccasins across the aisle. Susan rolled her eyes. Vince returned the look and they grinned.

"I don't know what she thought those lashes would get her," Susan said.

"Huh?"

"Her eyelashes: fake." Susan glanced around suddenly and lowered her voice. "Didn't you see?"

"There was too much else to look at." Vince’s mouth trembled with the effort to keep a straight face.

"Shhh. I swear, all you think about is what's inside a girl's bra. I don't see why you married me."

"Cause what's in yours'll fit in my mouth."

Susan reddened. "Do you have to tell the whole store?" She took the paperweight from his hand and stretched up to kiss the end of his bearded chin. "At least let me see if any of'm are cheaper."

She tucked her long, brown hair behind her ears and squatted in the narrow aisle. Crystal ball paperweights scraped back and forth as she poked around, looking at the price tags. Whenever Susan got a case of sticker shock, she dug to the back of the rack hoping the price had recently been hiked, and the stock clerks had neglected to change the tags on the older items. Sometimes she won out. She stopped once to check her watch. She wanted to call Jennifer and tell her to stay out of the
kitchen. Susan thought she'd rather eat roadkill than another one of her sister's meals. She found a cheaper tag then, and smiled through a groan.

She tugged the globe closer, into the light. It was the same size as the others, about six inches in diameter, with the same type wood base. And it contained the same arachnid, a large, fanged, one-eyed Red Desert Tarantula. Or so the little gold sticker said. She hadn't groaned so much because of the spider, as the fact that the paperweight needed dusting, badly. Unusual for a spic and span shopping mall. She blew on it. Dust rose and tickled her nose. She sneezed and felt Vince's big hand on her shoulder.

"Susie?"

"I'm okay. Just dust."

His hand left and she heard him grunt. She checked a few others, but found none as cheap but clean. She shrugged and figured dirt washes.

"Found one," she said, looking up. "Oh, Vince, Jeez..." Susan blushed, slapping a hand over her shirt top. She glanced about quickly, stood, and handed him the paperweight.

"This one's fifteen dollars less, the same size, and it still has your yucky old spider inside...And you can see my chest at home, you pervert. If I didn't know better, I'd think you were twenty again."

"And which pervert was staring at my crotch when I was trying those jeans on in Joslin's?"

Susan cleared her throat and rolled her eyes away. "Oh. You saw that, huh?"
Vince laughed, blew some of the dust off, and opened a pamphlet taped to the base of the paperweight. "This wasn't on the other one. It says here to keep the sacred Indian spider symbol away from heat and the hides of birds and mammals," Vince read. "Yeah. I'd call fifty bucks pretty sacred."

"I'd rather you bought the one with the butterfly. But that's not macho enough for your desk.... It is going on your desk, isn't it?"

Susan's younger sister, Jennifer, had dinner ready when they got home. It looked like some kind of casserole. Susan looked at Vince. He looked delighted, but Susan knew he'd eat anything. She turned back to Jennifer and tried to smile. Jennifer was eight years younger than Susan, and had just graduated high school. The same semester, coincidentally, that Susan finished her MBA. They had decided on a joint celebration, after the family stuff, in Denver, where Susan had landed a position with Blue Cross. Vince had already been selling group insurance plans for them in California, so a transfer had come easy. Jennifer was cute, nearly beautiful, athletic, ambitious, and, unfortunately, sensitive. Susan looked at the casserole.

"Looks great," Vincent said. "You put meat in there?"

"Yep. Ground beef and tuna, lots."

Susan thought Jennifer looked at Vince like he was some kind of a god. She figured it must be the muscles and the beard. She wouldn't have seen much of either in high school. Susan managed to smile, but she couldn't
pull her eyes from the casserole bowl. She saw red stringy gobs floating on top. And lumps of something gray. "Looks good, Jenny," Susan said. "We'll just put this stuff away first, okay?" She hoped Vince hadn't used the last of the ketchup.

Vincent's office was right off the living room, so they dropped their packages there. Vince immediately looked through a bag and found his paperweight. Susan didn't mind waiting; Jennifer's cooking reminded her of how much she didn't want children. She knew she possessed neither the patience nor the stomach to deal with a ten-year-old's culinary experiments. She thought she'd rather sleep with Vince's spider. She watched Vincent try the paperweight on his desk first. He grunted a couple of times, shook his head, and opted instead for the bookshelf, next to his stuffed falcon. She agreed. The light from the setting sun glowed nicely off the glass of the ball, despite the awful looking spider inside.

"Let's eat," He said. Susan sighed, nodded, and followed him into the kitchen.


To her credit, Susan didn't get terribly upset when she learned her sister had ruined Vincent's new paperweight. In point of fact, she held herself more to blame. It happened at the end of the next week, on one of the last days of June and the day before Jennifer planned to leave for home. Susan had wandered into the office that Friday evening, and found Jennifer staring at the bookshelf with a white hand clamped over her mouth.
Jennifer noticed her older sister; the hand came away from her mouth slowly and pointed.

"Look at it, Susie. He's going to kill me. I just know it."

Susan walked over and looked at Vincent's paperweight. On the way, she felt her skirt catching and nipping at her bare leg stubble. Starting with her job on Monday, she supposed she'd have to start shaving every second or third day. And keeping extra pairs of pantyhose around. She was glad Vince never complained. Susan frowned at the Crystal ball on the bookshelf. She shoved the books behind it to the back of the shelf and slid the stuffed falcon aside so she could look around the ball. Somehow the glass had warped where Jennifer had evidently tried to pick it up, leaving stretched indentations where her fingers had gripped. She sensed her sister fidgeting beside her.

"It's my fault, Jenny, really. I made him get a cheaper one. This thing should be glass, but I think it's just plastic."

"Then why..."

"They said not to get it hot, but we thought that was crap, and Vince put it in the sunlight. Damn."

Jennifer twirled a long blond clump of hairs between her thumb and index finger. She looked back and forth from Susan to the ruined paperweight. "You know how he warned me to stay away from his stuff, though."

"That was his weightlifting trophies," Susan said. "This thing isn't a trophy. Let's see if it'll pop back out."
Susan set it on the desk and pushed gently against the sides, only making it worse. The sides folded in. The spider's legs extended out, distending the ball's rim. Susan's hair fell across her face and she hooked it behind her ears. She cupped her hands around the bottom and tried to ease it up, but it started to mush inward. Jennifer cursed. So did Susan, louder. She fanned the front of her skirt on her thighs a little and put her fists on her hips.

"This isn't working, Sis," Jennifer said.

"What time is it?"

"Huh?"

"What time you got, Jenny?"

Jennifer looked and told her.

"Damn," Susan said, "Too late to get to the mall for another one. You've got friends here, right?"

Jennifer nodded.

Susan handed her some bills. "Take this and go party awhile. I'll talk to Vinny. He should be on his way."

Jennifer looked at the money but didn't take it. "It doesn't matter. He's gonna be pissed anyway. He hates kids."

"No he doesn't." Susan added another five and pushed the money into Jennifer's hand. "Get me some pantyhose from Safeway while you're out, okay? Legs, size B, suntan."

"He does hate kids. So do you, anything under voting age. You two just put up with me cause I'm your sister and past puberty."
"What the hell brought this on? We just don't want any kids. Doesn't Vince treat you well?"

"Yeah...but...

"C'mon, Jenny. You're just worried. Now disappear for a coupl'a hours. Vince'll be understanding. He really will."

* * *

"She's just like a goddam kid!"

"She is not. And it was an accident, Vince."

"Can't she just look at something?"

Susan pulled away from him in bed, leaving a few inches of sheet between them and only their lower legs touching. She watched him, his face grim, one arm coiled around a pillow with the fist supporting his temple. She saw a few strands of gray there and hoped he hadn't noticed yet. He was only thirty and still vain enough to want to dye it away. "Vin, it got ruined because I made you get a cheaper one, and we put it in the sunlight. The thing just got soft. Probably would've caved in by itself in another few days."

Vincent grunted. Susan ran a hand along his shoulder and squeezed lightly. "Back off, okay? I'll get you a new one tomorrow."

Vince settled into his pillow and his face relaxed. "Forget it, Susie. I don't wanna fight with you over a damn paperweight. I'll pick up something different next time we're out. You got enough stuff for work?"
"Should be okay," Susan said. She kissed Vince's forehead and climbed out of bed. "I'll lock up, before I fall dead asleep."

"Okay. Jenny back yet?"

Susan nodded. "I heard her slip in an hour or so ago."

Vince laughed. "Hope I didn't scare her."

Taking her turn at it, Susan roamed the house, checking the range, doors and windows. She found a plastic bag on the kitchen table with two pair of pantyhose and loose change inside. Right size, wrong color. Susan shrugged and left the bag there. While in the office, she glanced at the ruined crystal ball, then drew closer. The clear ball had gone cloudy, and was torn open on one side. So, the crazy man wanted to keep the disgusting old spider anyway, she thought. She wondered where Vince put the thing, but didn't actually want to know. She shook her head, laughed, and turned out the light.

Susan peeped into the spare bedroom on her way back. The room was dark, and she could barely see Jennifer's form under the covers, limbs splayed and the cover mussed. Susan thought that when her sister found a guy, she'd have to learn not to sleep all over the bed. She smelled something heavy and sweet in the air and sniffed. The odor made her slightly nauseous. Then she heard tiny scratching and felt herself go cold. She forgot the smell and stood still, listening.
Again, faint scratching.

It came from a far corner of the room. Susan backed out in a scamper and shut the door. It took Vince several minutes to calm her when she slid out of her robe and climbed into bed beside him.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, in Jenny's room. There's mice; I heard 'em. Like at home, with my folks."

"Jenny's not scared of..."

"So what? I am."

"Okay, okay. They're not in here yet. I'll get an exterminator out tomorrow, and traps besides."

Susan let him soothe her. She relaxed and snuggled against him.

"Your legs feel nice," he whispered.

"I shaved."

"You didn't have to 'til Sunday."

"I know."

Close to him, wrapped around him, she finally slept.

Tickling...nose...tickling...sneeze coming...coming...

Dust.

Susan brushed at her nose and dreamed of feathers, a cat's fluffy tail. She drifted up from sleep. Faint light of the false dawn nudged the darkness away. Susan sniffed. Wiped at her face.
Dust falling.

Susan opened her eyes and looked up. Her sleep-clogged mind tried to distinguish past dream from present reality. Her eyes thought they saw a small hole forming in the ceiling. Plaster dust fell as the black dot grew larger. She tasted grit on her teeth and closed her mouth. The pinhole became dime sized. Nickle, Quarter. Susan stared in hazy wonder. Dreaming? She thought probably so. The hole grew. Something picked at it. Something thin, spindly. A speck of plaster dust dropped into her eye, burning. Susan snapped completely awake.

"Vinny...Vince."

She couldn't move except to rub her watering eye. Another red rod appeared, working at the hole.

A third, picking, tearing. The hole, silver dollar sized.

Susan forced an arm over and shook Vince, her eyes locked on the hole in the ceiling. Vince stirred, groaned. A tiny red ball poked through the hole and a single eye stared down and a strand of fluid dripped onto Susan's face. Clammy sweat oozed from her body everywhere. She shook her husband.

"Vince," she wimpered, "Please..."

"Wha...?"

A fourth leg appeared. A fifth. Something squeezed through the hole and attached itself to the ceiling. Vince looked at her, squinting.
"Vince, stop it!"

"I'm not doing..." Vince followed her eyes up then and saw the thing descending, by a thread, toward Susan's throat. A reflex shove sent her flying off the bed. Susan hit the floor, spun around and saw the creature land on Vince's back. Pointed legs lanced into skin and Vince yelled, grabbing behind him. Susan retreated, gulping air, staring.

The spider jabbed a pair of curved fangs into Vince's back and he screamed and struggled, tangling himself in the sheets. Susan moaned, looking around for something to pry the spider off with. The thing thrashed about, burrowing deeper into muscle. Susan's hands went to her mouth and she screamed. Shiny red lines rolled out from the wound to curl around Vince's back and pool along his chest on the bed. The spider thrust its head into the wet gash and dug with its front two legs, like a dog after a bone. Pink, shredded flesh erupted from the widening hole and a stream of blood pumped rhythmically into the air. Vince suddenly stiffened, eyes staring.

Susan saw the thing sink another pair of legs into her husband's back and a stream of hot vomit burst from her mouth and nose and splashed through the hands she still held over her face. Her eyes watered at the burning in her throat and sinuses as she dived onto the bed. She clawed at the spider and her watery eyes turned to crying. Her hands slipped on the blood and sank into Vincent's back to the wrists. She found the thing's churning legs and lumpy body. She grabbed it and pulled. Sour bile
lurched up her throat again as she felt the spider slip away, deeper into 
her husband's body.

Gone...Where?

She pulled her hands out of him and stood, sobbing. Her nose felt 
full of snot and she could barely see through her tears but she couldn't 
clean herself because her hands felt sticky with blood and bits of...She 
cried again. And stopped when she felt Vince's hand tap her leg. She 
forced her eyes open and almost threw herself on him. Then she saw it 
wasn't really him at all. His body twitched again and she saw the lump 
moving under his skin. It coursed over his upper back like a wave, around 
his shoulder, down his arm. Susan screamed herself hoarse stumbling from 
the room.

Halflight filtered through the hall, leaving the nooks and crevices in 
darkness. Susan stumbled along toward the livingroom, jarring her framed 
photographs and staining the walls with streaks of Vince's blood. She hit 
light switches as she went, sobbing, eyes darting into corners, along 
baseboards. She paused at the end of the hall, looked back once, then ran 
across the livingroom to the front door and unlatched the deadbolts. She 
suddenly remembered she was naked and grabbed a trench coat from the 
closet. Shoes didn't matter; shutting that front door between her and that 
spider did. She froze, hand on the knob.

Jennifer.

Susan leaned her forehead against the door, eyes squeezed shut. She 
couldn't go back. She pounded the door with her fist and cursed. A siren
whined far off outside and an engine gunned somewhere up the block. Susan wondered what time it was; the frosted window showed black. She lifted her head, wiped her face with the coat sleeve, and opened her mouth to yell her sister's name. A thought stopped her. What if it heard? What if it got distracted from...and came? A tremble shook her and she turned and leaned back against the door, eyes up at the ceiling. She felt the carved edges of wood on her back, the bumpy glass at her head. The tremble poured out through her feet and she tried to slow her heart. She saw the plastic bag on the kitchen table then, and pushed herself off the door.

Susan grabbed her softball bat from a closet and crept back through the livingroom. She remembered having closed her eyes and groaned. Her bare feet sank into thick carpet, her toes gripping. Blood thumped loudly, crazily, in her chest. She looked from one spot to another where the light left shadows. The room looked like a gauntlet. She couldn't force herself to kneel and peep under the long, sectional sofa or the recliner opposite. Vince's trophy case took up most of the wall across from the kitchen. The spider couldn't be underneath, but she couldn't see around the end of it, where it stuck out away from the wall. The trophies needed dusting, but she'd forgotten to remind Vince before....

She turned away from the case to the kitchen. The livingroom light illuminated most of it over the counter, but she couldn't see much of the floor. But she hoped she'd hear it scratching along the tile. She heard nothing. The room looked big and blank. Susan took another step. Another. She tried to look everywhere at once. The recliner skirt shifted
and she gasped. Realized it must have been a draft. She felt her tongue dry and closed her mouth. Sniffed the air again and connected the sickly sweet smell with blood. She looked at Vince's trophies through the glass fronted case. She knew the dates on all of them, knew where he'd placed. Her vision blurred and she shook her head and forced her eyes back to the floor. Fifteen feet to go. She took another step and stopped. She felt the presence of the case beside her and swelling heat flooded in where the trembling had been. She looked down the length of the bat to her clenched hands, turning shiny black-red and caking, and her jaw set.

"Fuck it."

Susan darted through the end of the room, around the sofa, wielding the bat overhead. Nothing moved. Nothing gave chase. Several of Susan's photographs hung framed along the hallway leading to the bedrooms. A few hung crooked from where she'd knocked against them. Streaks of blood stained the wall where she'd stumbled. The door to the master bedroom stood ajar, and no light filtered out or in. Jennifer slept in the guestroom further down, at the end of the hall. Susan wiped the sweat and blood from her hands down the front of her coat, then wiped the bat grip off the same way. Her stomach did a slow tumble at the heavy smell of blood in the hall.

"Jenny?" Susan called in a hoarse whisper. She swallowed. "Jennifer, wake up."
Nothing.

She thought of her pantyhose on the kitchen table, and of the trophy case, then wondered why her thoughts constantly wandered across things with nothing in common. Susan slid her feet a couple of short steps along the hall. She snapped her head around, checking. The livingroom still looked empty. She swallowed dry and squeezed her eyes shut against a sweat drop that trickled burning into one. Susan turned back ahead and pulled a sleeve across her face. She blinked, and the hall cleared.

It sat hunched in the center of the hall carpet, not six feet away.

Breath stopped. Susan stood gaping at it as she felt the spider measure her with its single clear, intelligent eye. Its wet, yellow fangs swiveled open and shut. And it had grown. The span of its legs could just about cover a record album now. Its body glowed wet, coated in dark blood. Vince's blood, thought Susan and the trembling returned, but hot this time and on the surface instead of cold and deep. Then she saw the trail of red, leading from the thing to Jennifer's room.

"You sonofabitch--No." Susan screamed, "Jenny!"

Jennifer's door pulled at her eyes, but she didn't want to look away from the spider. Susan heard her sister's voice then, floating up from far away. From the thing on the floor. The sound drew closer, louder, as if a deepening whisper rose from the spider's belly.

"You know how he warned me to stay away from his stuff, Sis."

Susan's eyes gaped, and her breathing came too fast. Her bare feet retreated a step on their own.
"She's just like a goddam kid!" Vincent's voice yelled from the spider's fangs. "Yeah, Susie, yeah, Babe," her husband's voice crooned, "Do that. Do it harder. Squeeze it harder."

The spider's legs crabbed it a quick foot closer and Susan jumped back, looking down at her pale toes, the nails painted a light pink. She felt her bowels loosen, go watery. The bat slipped in her grip, reminding her of it, but her mind couldn't remember how to tell her arm to raise it.

"He hates kids, anyway," Jennifer's voice said. "So do you, anything under voting age. You two just put up with me cause I'm your sister."

"No!" Susan's face crumpled as the thing crept closer. "You're not my Vinny. You're not my baby sister.... You're not them."

"You're next, Susan," said a low, scratching voice, different from the others. Watery yellow fluid sputtered from the slit between its fangs and soaked into the carpet. Its round hind segment twitched and flexed as its legs tensed. "You're next," the words rasped at her again, echoing through the hall. The spider ran at her feet.

Susan screamed. In one motion, she jerked her feet away and slammed the bat down. Timed perfectly, the end of the wood crushed the spider's body, flattening its legs and stopping it cold. Susan bumped into the wall, leaned against it, and dropped the bat. Her legs wobbled and she slapped at the wall to hold herself up. She wanted to lie down, needed to lie down. But she wasn't going any closer to the floor with that thing
down there, even if it was dead. Her eyelids lowered and the tears returned.

"Don't cry, Sis," Jennifer's voice pleaded. "It's only a little scratch. It doesn't hurt.... See? Not much at all."

Susan heard the scuffling noises as she looked down and felt the breath lock in her throat. The crushed body of the spider was swelling back out to a sphere. Its legs pulled and scratched for a purchase, and the arachnid rose.

Susan's face crumpled. "No..."

The spider's eye tilted up to her.

"No," Susan screamed, backing frantically out of the hall. The spider charged for her legs with a speed that chilled her skin. Susan ran sobbing into the livingroom, sensing the thing at her heels. She couldn't recall if she'd unlocked the front door, so dashed into the bathroom instead, and slammed the door behind her. A draft whipped across her feet and she sprang away from the door, screaming. She threw the light switch and looked down.

Nothing. She realized the draft was air circulating under the bottom edge of the door. She looked carefully around the room, but didn't see the spider. She depressed the knob lock and listened. All she heard was the gentle brush of the air conditioner under the door. She pounded the door and her fist left a red blotch. She looked down at herself and turned a tap on hot. Water blared into the sink. Susan snatched a facecloth from a rack and rinsed her face, hands and legs. Stringy red specks spotted the
sink and pink water spiraled into the drain. Susan thought of marble based
trophies and wiped the sink clean with the rag. She shut the water off,
squeezed the rag out, and dropped it onto the counter.

Scratching.

Susan scrambled across the room until her back hit the wall by the
shower curtain. She cursed low and let her hands fall to her sides, heavy.
Her head drooped and she sank down to sit against the tub. Vince's
softest, most seductive tone floated through the bathroom door. "Can Susie
come out to play?"

Scratching.

Susan remembered the sounds she heard in Jennifer's room earlier,
thinking them mice. She shivered and drew her knees up to her chin. The
spider scratched and tore at the door. She heard a strip of wood being
ripped loose. Then another. She looked up and around. The bathroom had
no window and she saw no weapons she could use or make to fight the thing
off. Her glance finally settled on the mirror over the sink. She
shrugged, pushed herself to her feet and went to the medicine cabinet. She
found the sharp little scissors there, stashed among a pile of Bic razors,
scattered band-aids, an old roll of gauze, some dried-up eyeliner and
Vince's allergy pills. She took the scissors out and sat back down by the
tub.

The scratching continued until she saw a pointed leg snake under the
doors and tear a splinter of wood away. Susan swallowed and jabbed her
wrist experimentally with the scissors. The idea of it made her retch,
with nothing left to throw up. She tried again, but the scissors stopped, hovering a quarter inch above her flesh. Sweat erupted on her face and hands. The room went quickly cold.

Scratching. The gap under the door became a hole.

Susan willed her hand to drive the blade of the scissors down and across her wrist. She just couldn't. But the alternative? She glanced at the door.

"I'm coming, Babe," Vince's voice called. "I'll be there, Susie, just as soon as I get done with this...."

The hole grew big enough for her fist. She watched the legs working quickly at it, pulling and tearing at the wood. Her head fell back and she sobbed aloud at the ceiling. She touched the point of the scissors to the skin of her wrist, unable to drive it in. Something made her look down. The spider was through.

Susan ripped the edge of the scissors through her wrist as the spider came. Its legs hardly seemed to touch down as they danced the spider across the tile. Susan's blood drenched the tail of her coat in the seconds it took the spider to reach her. The thing's single red eye traversed her body like a lecher as its pointy legs tapped at her feet. She tried to draw back with no room to move and groaned in disgust. The spider stepped its weight onto her and she screamed and kicked. Needles of pain lanced into her calf and the spider walked easily up her leg.

Her skin twitched under each step the spider took. She felt a warm pumping at her wrist and her hand wet. She wished it would hurry and drain
the life from her. The spider stared her in the eye and drooled yellow.

"I want you, Susie. Make love to me now."

The spider looked up and disappeared beneath the hem of her coat.

Rough digits settled onto her inner thigh and her skin quivered.

Susan thrashed about, finally turning the scissors and driving the point into the shifting lump under her coat. Thick liquid splashed over her leg and ran down to her ankle as a rotten, pungent odor filled the room. She tried to keep stabbing, but her mind felt thick, her hand heavy and slow.

The spider dug deeper, gripping with its eight legs onto her one.

Susan moaned when the fangs sank into her hip. She pulled the scissors out and tore at the thing in a frenzy, shredding the coattail. Twin needles drilled into her flesh. Susan ripped the coat open and pulled at the thing's head, mindless of the blood gushing from her wrist. Thick yellow and green pus flowed from the spider's mangled back, covering the scissors, most of Susan's hand and leg, and spreading onto the floor.

Its head was almost submerged into her hip.

"No!" she screamed. She stabbed at the thing, pulled at its head, bucked her body until the bathroom floor was coated in blood and yellow-green slime. She realized she couldn't feel the hand beneath the wrist she'd cut. Sparks flickered before her dimming eyes. She felt its legs loosen and jabbed so hard she felt pricks of pain where the scissor's point went through the spider and on into her own leg.
The digging into her hip stopped.

Susan yanked at it with her good hand. The thing let go and landed on its back in the blood on the floor. Susan leaned over it and shredded the spider's belly, severed its legs and head.

She stood and the room darkened and began to tumble. Susan made it to the medicine cabinet and found the roll of first-aid gauze. She wrapped the bandage tight around her wrist until the bleeding slowed, then towelled the blood from her hand and arm. Her hand looked too white and it scared her. And she felt so sleepy. Faster, she told herself. Keeping her eye on the spider, she pulled off more gauze and pressed a wadded handful to the hole in her hip. The spider lay in pieces. And it didn't move. Not once. Susan slipped around it on the wet floor and stumbled out of the bathroom to the phone.
He decided to kill his mother that Tuesday night.

That afternoon his wife packed his usual dinner sandwiches and helped him into his coat. Her slim hands felt strong, smoothing the fabric over his back. Raising children hadn't made them hard and calloused, only assertive. She looked into his face and suddenly giggled.

"What's so funny, Delores?"

"Oh, Jim, you're pouting like a little kid 'bout to get a whipping. Your job ain't that bad, Hon."

He tensed and studied her face. Seeing nothing, he relaxed.

"It's not the job; it's the shift. Everybody's partying when I'm working. I'm sleep when everybody else is..."

She pulled his head down and kissed him hard. He felt her soft and insistent against him and breathed in the perfume at her throat. He held her and tried to push his mother out of his mind. He kept his hands on her jeans so she wouldn't feel them wet through her thin blouse. Delores eased her lips away but kept her body pressed against his.

"You hush. It could be worse; it could be graveyard. Just be patient for a few months. You'll get on days. And what's it matter, anyway?" she said. She slid her hands down to the seat of his jeans and urged his hips closer into hers. "I still party with you after work."

Only his brother Marvin had the guts to mention how her hips had spread after the twins were born. But when they were this close, Jim
really didn't care. They kissed again and Delores pushed his brown bag between them.

"If we start that, you won't get to work at all."

"Guess so. I won't be late tonight, so..."

"I'll wait up. You want me to meet you for a beer?"

Jim thought he'd probably need something stronger than a beer. And more than one.

"Maybe. I'll call you from work if I do; okay? And I'll call Marv, too. He might want to come along." He wondered how Marvin would take their mother's death, despite the circumstances.

"Huh. I ain't heard from your brother in over two weeks. I'd like him to babysit these boys for a weekend, if they don't catch his bad habits. He gone rot his teeth with that candy he's always eating."

"Yeah. We'll catch'm in a day or two. How much are we still short on Gary's braces? I think I can get some overtime this week."

"You don't need to work extra, Hon. We'll have enough this time next month. Gary's teeth ain't going nowhere."

He nodded and she let him go.

Jim Davis drove up to the warehouse, clocked in and grabbed his load slips. He sniffed and frowned. He'd lately come to dislike the pasta smell of the place. Two lifts sat ready at the charger. Davis took one and slipped a wood pallet onto the steel forks. He rolled down aisles of pizza sauce, flour, and dried pepperoni to the refrigerator at the rear of the building. The forks pushed the heavy rubber doors open and the pallet
boards creaked. The air turned immediately colder, but the pasta smell vanished. Davis unstacked a full pallet of cheese and quickly started loading his first order of cases. He needed to get far enough ahead so he could slip away for awhile later. He figured an hour and a half for enough time to go to his mother's house, do it, and get back, unnoticed.

Any other night may have worked as well, but that particular Tuesday seemed best for the discovery of his mother's body, for the alibi, and for his conscience. Davis visited his mother every Wednesday, his day off. Everyone knew it. A previous day's death wouldn't leave her body too decomposed when he officially found it. And Tuesday was the only night he could slip away without being noticed. Nearly every Tuesday evening, his supervisor disappeared about nine o'clock and returned around ten thirty, usually smelling faintly of alcohol and perfume. That night, he left at a quarter before nine, during Davis's third trip to the loading dock. Davis watched the pudgy man go down the side steps and slip out the drivers' door before he spun the forklift around and steered it back to the refrigerator. Since his supervisor wouldn't admit to being gone, Davis could easily swear to being there. His final reason for settling on that particular Tuesday lay with the Sunday immediately before: Mother's Day. But he pushed that thought from his mind as he prepared the last order before he, too, slipped through the drivers' door.

He got to West Thirty-second a little after nine and eased his old Nova between a red Toyota pick-up and a dented tan Pontiac. Jim Davis shut the engine down, punched the lights off, and sat there. The plastic
steering wheel felt slick under his fingertips. He pushed his hands down the front of his dusty jeans, but it didn't keep his palms dry. He cracked the window and a warm May breeze washed in with the smell of fresh rain and new grass. West Denver lay dark, damp and silent outside. He watched the street and saw nothing but a double row of drab houses split by empty black asphalt. He felt watched and tried to ignore it. A heavy pulse thumped at his left temple and his chest constricted, keeping his breaths shallow and his head light. He wondered vaguely if he was bringing on a heart attack, a worry he entertained frequently since passing his fiftieth birthday. He shrugged and climbed out of the car.

Davis walked the two blocks to his mother's house and crunched quickly along the gravel drive beside the porch. He saw no one. The nearest streetlight was half a block distant but his mother's porch and livingroom lights were both on so he kept close to the wall. He reached the back door and stood in the shadows, watching. Nothing moved. Davis eased the bent screen open, produced a key and let himself into his mother's kitchen. The room was darker than the night outside; the air was hot and stale.

He moved to his right, through the dark, toward the dishwasher, and stepped over a spot he knew creaked. He found the washer and edged left to the sink. The damp surface wet his probing fingers. He reached over the faucet and gently felt along the wall until he came to the rack. He slipped the pairing knife up and out and pocketed it. Davis swallowed hard and the pulse in his head got worse. He walked back, letting the board
creak, and slammed the door shut. He gave the light switch a flick, killing the blackness.

"Hey, Ma?" Davis called, and walked through the diningroom toward the front of the house. He circled the big oak table on the way. There were ten highbacked chairs around it, enough for everyone at Easter, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. The chairs circled the table neatly, but a layer of cloudy dust covered the entire dining set. Davis counted four years since they'd eaten a holiday meal there. He recalled the family gathering traditions his mother had insisted on before her illness. He didn't know if he missed them or not, but he knew the room felt strange now, like a dry mouth about to suck him into the shadows. He hurried through and called his mother again as he crossed into the livingroom.

A handsome, nearly fat woman looked up from a paperback novel. She wore a heavy quilt robe and her hair loosely braided. The hand she raised was gnarled nearly to the point of disfigurement. The old lady tilted her glasses slightly and leaned forward.

"James?" she said. "It is you. I thought it might be your brother, Marvin. He always comes in the back way."

"I know, Mama. It's late and I didn't want to startle you coming through the front door."

She laid a marker in the book and set it on a small oval table beside her. The doily covering the tabletop looked white as chalk. She chuckled. "Startle me? Such nonsense. Is it Wednesday already? I didn't think...."

"It's Tuesday, I..."
Her smile slipped a notch. "James, are you having problems?"

"No, Ma." Davis sat in the easy chair by the stairway. He glanced once at the electric riser hugging the wall along the stairs. The chair was at the bottom.

"It's nine-twenty-five. What happened to your job, if you're not havin' problems? Did you get the day shift already?"

Davis burrowed further into the chair. "No, Mama. I just switched days off with another guy. He had a funeral...."

That Sunday had been Mother's Day. It had also been his mother's eighty-seventh birthday. True to his self-promise, he let her have that day, along with an expensive, conscience-easing gift. But he wouldn't let her pain continue longer than necessary. Five years ago, his mother's advancing arthritis earned her a plastic knee. She got another one the following year. About then, the doctors gave her another year before the pain in her hips kept the old lady bedridden. She still walked, but he didn't like to watch her face as she did it. She refused to go back to the doctors since then, even when he noticed her circulation going bad. That was three years or so ago. Her dark skin had since gone ashy gray. And she'd given up knitting for reading.

"A death in the family," she said, "That's terrible. I hope you offered that man your prayers."

"Sure, Ma."

"And how is Delores...?"
Davis sighed and ran a hand over his balding head. "She's fine. She asks about you."

"She could come by."

"There's the kids."

"The twins are in high school. They can look after themselves for a short hour. Or you could bring them."

Davis turned away from his mother's dull eyes to the portrait of Martin Luther King Jr. above the endtable. Actually it was an old calendar with curling edges and a white square at the bottom where the leaves used to be. The year printed at the top was three years old.

"She knows you don't..."

"I don't dislike your wife, Jimmy.... Look at me when I'm talkin' to you.... I don't dislike her, son."

"You don't approve of her. She can tell," Davis said. He wanted a strong whiskey and soda. He felt the knife in his pocket, wedged between his thigh and the chair cushion.

"She don't know how to run a household."

"I can run a household, Mama." Davis looked down at the carpet. He remembered it being bright blue in his childhood. It looked more iron-gray now, and the pile was worn to the threads in places. She wouldn't let him replace it. She said it was because she didn't want strange people coming into her home. His glance stopped at a book on the floor next to his chair. An image of a snarling tomcat took up half the cover. Without his reading glasses, he had to squint to see the title: something called Pet
Sematary, by Stephen King. Davis recognized the author's name. He picked the book up and laughed. "This must be Marvin's."

"What's that?"

"Marv's book here. He's the only one who can afford hardback books. And he likes this horror stuff."

"Your brother must have forgotten it."

Davis felt his mother staring at him. He realized suddenly that looking directly into her eyes scared him. Had scared him for a long time. A tremble crawled beneath his skin like a wave of tiny ants. He kept his head down, wiped his hand on his pants and opened the book to a scrap of paper marking a page near the middle.

"He'll be coming back." Davis shrugged and flipped the novel onto an endtable. He heard furniture groan and glanced up. His mother was struggling to stand out of her chair.

"Mama, what...?"

"I'm go'n make you some tea. You'd like some, wouldn't you, Jimmy? Or maybe jest soda," she said. Her face squeezed in on itself as her weight shifted forward to her legs. Davis jumped up.

"Sit down. I can git around jest fine."

Davis sat. His mother worked her bulk to the edge of the chair and reached for a heavy oak cane. She positioned it to one side and, using it and the table as levers, hoisted herself up. She walked carefully, precariously, across the room, her mouth set in a pinch. She wore her old slippers and Davis saw her feet were bloodless and cracked in places near
the soles. When she passed, he got a whiff of alcohol mixed with sour milk and his stomach twisted. He rose slowly, and followed her through the dining room and into the kitchen. He got two mismatched china cups from an overhead cabinet while she poured water into the brass kettle and set it on the range.

"It's always had to be a woman runs this family," she said as she worked. "The Davis men jest ain't responsible. That's a job passes down through us like a rich family's heirloom. Your gramma was a hunnerd'n five before she thought I was ready. Some traditions--some families--jest up and die under a man's care."

"That's not fair, Mama. I might not be making much, but look at Marvin. He's district manager at..."

"I'm not talkin' 'bout that outside money stuff. I'm talkin' 'bout family." She left the water over high heat and turned to point a finger in Davis' face. She stood close and he noticed how lifeless her eyes looked. They'd gone from the shining brown of recent years to a cloudy gray. He wondered what a cataract looked like. Wondered what one felt like.

"Jimmy," she continued, "you bring home the paychecks, but I have to stay after you to hold that job. Delores should be doin' that. And them children run wild...don't look at the floor. I'm talking to you.... They do. I know it as well as you."

"I'm grown, Mama. Been grown for a lotta years. You don't need to talk to me that way."
"Years and smarts ain't the same thing, Boy. You ain't grown if you
cain't do for yourself. Never will be."

"We do okay."

"As long as I'm here to keep things right. I can't rest until one of
you finds a good woman to run things. I thought it might be Marv, but then
he went and got hisself divorced. He showed me the final papers week
before last and--I tell you--I gave up right then on either of you boys
bringin' someone home to keep things going."

Davis sighed. "Mama, the water's boiling."

Mrs. Davis sat at the small table and allowed her son to serve. He
dipped the tea bag and watched her grimace and shift her leg gently with
both hands. "My word," she whispered, "this hip of mine." She extended
her leg slowly and parted her robe to rub her knee. The joint was swollen
with tight purple lumps. Davis looked away.

"I wish you could trust us, Mama. And just relax. You don't have to
take responsibility for everything."

"Delores can't handle it."

"Just because she's not as strict..."

His mother looked up from her knee and slapped the tabletop.

"It's more than that. She should be raising those children and not
sitters. She does too much for herself--new clothes, shoes--and your baby
still needs braces."

"It's not like the boys get slighted. They don't."

"She puts you and her own self ahead of her responsibility."
"I like it that way. So do the twins. They're fifteen now. We need to show them a good relationship to model on."

"Relationship? All a child needs to know is to obey his parents. That's in your bible. You know that, Boy?"

Davis looked down. His paunch bulged out just beyond his belt and his hands hung, big, calloused, empty. "Yes, Mama. I know. But..."

"Pour the tea, boy."

Davis touched his mother's hand once while pouring. It felt cold and papery. He thought about the knife in his pocket and the time remaining before his supervisor returned to work. Not even time enough to finish their tea. He sat across from his mother and they drank in silence.

"How are your knees, Mama?" he asked after a time.

"Not too bad. I don't like to move around, but I don't want to sit still too long, either. I git afraid I might not move again."

Davis stood up. His mother gave him a raised eyebrow look and he said he needed more sugar.

"You shouldn't make your tea so strong," she said and laughed softly. "When we finish this tea, I'm going to fix you some dinner. I bought a steak yesterday for your visit."

He walked around behind her, as if he hadn't heard, and tucked a damp hand into his pocket. It came out gripped around the handle of the little knife.

"Don't you want to keep moving, Mama?"

She laughed again, whisper soft. "Get your sugar, boy."
Davis glanced at his watch. With the walk to the car and the drive back, he had to do it and leave within five minutes or not do it at all. He opened the cabinet and took two cubes from the box of sugar inside. His mother looked down at the table, or into her tea. He wasn't sure which. Her dark scalp showed through cottony wisps of white hair. Davis watched her trace a crooked finger around the rim of her cup, and the dull throb returned to pulse behind his left eye. The cabinet squeaked when he closed it. He hadn't noticed that before.

"You always were a good boy, Jimmy. Just a little wayward, like all the Davis men since the first we knew of came north from Mississippi. And impulsive. You're that, too."

"I like to believe I think things through, Mama."

The skin at her throat hung loose. He looked at his hands, sugar cubes in one and a paring knife in the other. He felt suddenly lightheaded. He turned back to her neck and searched for a spot to make it quick...

"You do try, Baby. I know that. Can't you find what you're looking for?"

Davis glanced at his watch again just as his mother turned around. He looked into her eyes, gasped, and stuck the knife into her neck. Her skin parted like soggy paper and the blood came thin and watery. She spasmed and grabbed for her throat. Davis tried to keep her from falling, but the old woman slid off her chair to the cracked linoleum floor. Davis dropped the knife and sugar cubes. He held his breath and stood watching her. Minutes passed. She didn't move. He leaned over and covered her nose and
mouth with his hand. No breath. He probed her throat under her jaw and then her wrist. No pulse. Davis backed away to the kitchen doorway and leaned there, watching his mother's blood soak into her hair, face and robe, pool out from her body. He felt sweaty and dirty all over. He checked his hands for blood, but they were clean. He thought then that he would have to wipe the knife handle off, and wash his teacup.

His mind screamed at him to move, get things done and get out. Davis's arms hung at his side. If not for his weight against the doorway, he may have fallen over. Her eyes. He tried to remember what he had seen in them. All he was sure of was that the stabbing had felt more like self defense than a mercy killing. Davis shook his head. He willed strength into his legs, leaned on them. His eyes clouded over. Cleared. He checked his watch. Ten minutes late already. He thought about the speed limit and the risk as he took a step toward his mother's body and the knife. He heard a shift of fabric and looked around frantically.

Marvin?

It came again, a low movement, a scrape. Davis isolated the sound. Looked at the floor. His mother's fingernails scraped across the tile. Her eyes snapped open and swiveled up, finding him, focusing, hardening. They held him like a speared fish. His strength leaked out of him, leaving limp, cold fear. He looked away from the eyes. Looked at the blood. There was so much of it. Her robe was soaked to the waist. Her moving expanded the puddle. She tried to get a scarred knee up under her body. Davis stared at the knee working, working, slipping in the blood. Finding
a purchase. Her arms pushed and her face lifted out of the puddle, leaving dripping red strands like shiny threads connecting her skin to the floor.

"My God...Mama?"

"Sit down, Baby. I can git up jest fine."

She left a patch of blood on a chairseat when she used it to pull herself up. She reached for her cane and limped around the red puddle to the sink. Davis stared as his mother turned a tap and leaned over to wash the blood out of her hair. Goose flesh rose high on his arms and down his back. His mother dampened a paper towel and cleaned her face and neck. She worked with her back to him. He noticed one of her shoulders sat lower than the other as her body trembled with her labor. She sponged her robe with more towels and the sink stained red.

"Jimmy," she said, her back still to him, "I need you to go git me a needle and thread from the living room. You know where my sewing kit is?"

Davis stared at her back.

She turned to him and asked, "Baby, do you know what I'm talkin' about?"

Davis caught a glimpse of pink water half filling the sink. His mother's hair, face and neck were clean and wet. The gash in her throat hung open, bloodless, like a sagging shirt pocket. Davis leaned against the table to keep on his feet.
"You hear me?" she repeated.

Davis wanted to run out the back door, but he would have to pass close to her to do that. And he didn't want to get any closer to her than he already was.

"You don' want to leave your mama already, do you?"

"What.... How?.... My God. You know what I'm thinking. You done known it all this time."

She took an unsteady step toward him. Then another and a floorboard creaked. He backed away at her third.

"You can't be up...alive. Mama, no...."

His mother probed around the gash on the side of her throat and tried to pinch it closed.

"This--it's happened before, baby. I know your intentions were good. But it jest don't work. The first time I went was by a stroke three years back. You felt me cold after and thought my circulation was going bad. My heart stopped last year, when you thought I was in bed with the flu. I can't rest until I have someone to take the family over. I cain't let the family jest go under. I got no choice."

"How in God's name...?"

"This's got nothing to do with your Baptist god."

"You say that like.... Do you pray to my God, Mama?"

She limped heavily around the red puddle. He watched her slide the kettle from the burner and turn the stove off. "You have to remember to shut this off when you're done, baby."
"What did they do to you, back in Mississippi?"

She glanced at him and her face went from open fright to squeezed rage. She turned away to move the teacups to the counter by the sink. She spoke with her voice tight. "I have to change this water before I can wash these."

Davis looked down at the blood. Droplets of it trailed to the sink alongside wet, red footprints from his mother's slippers. A thought came, and something inside him shriveled to a cold lump. "Mama, I don't want it to happen to Delores."

"Hand me that knife, and go get my sewing kit. You got to stitch this cut you put in my neck so it can heal. I don't heal so good noways."

Davis wanted to obey the way a mugging victim wants to obey, for that chance to walk away alive. He looked down. The spreading blood had touched the blade and nearly reached his toes. He stepped back and picked the knife up.

"I can't do that, Mama."

"You'll do as I say, Young Man. And maybe you'll think again about that woman you married. Now hand me that knife."

His mother stepped closer and held her hand out, palm up. Her fingers were heavy-knuckled and crooked. But they didn't look fragile, not at all. She'd said she wanted to rest. He wondered if she could rest if he wasn't around. Then there would only be his brother to worry about. He saw her smile just as he killed the thought.
"Don't jest stand there. I still have to mop this mess up. And you have to git back to work now. Your hour and a half's bout up. Ain't it, Jimmy?"

Davis nodded and his hands began to shake.

"I love you."

"I know that, baby."

She moved nearer and he caught a faint odor. It smelled like the time a mouse had crawled behind the refrigerator and died. Now the smell came from the gash he'd opened in his mother's neck.

"Do you love me, Mama?"

"You have to ask that? I take care of you, baby. That's why I'm still here."

He looked into her eyes. They sucked strength from him but told nothing. She placed an open palm gently along the side of his face. Her hand felt like ice and his skin shrank, but he was too afraid to pull away. Her lips stretched into a smile.

"And Marv?" he asked.

"Both my children."

"When I got here, you didn't really think I was Marv, did you?"

She smiled wider and shook her head. The motion made the gash on her neck split wider. "No more than you went to any funeral."

"Where's Marvin been, Mama? I ain't seen him since..."

"Do as I say, James."
The smell was getting worse, mixing with the sweet odor of the blood pooled on the floor. The smell seemed to solidify in the air around his face. His breathing went shallow and hitched, just short of gagging him. He looked at her neck in fascinated revulsion. The muscle within her cut throat looked like dried, stringy meat. Blood oozed out and she dabbed at it absently. He tried to look away. Couldn't.

"How bout my kids? Do you have to take care of them, too?" Like you took care of Marvin, he wanted to add.

"Do as your mama says. Give me the knife."

He wanted to see Delores first. Then he remembered he hadn't seen the twins all day and cursed his swing shift. All he could see now were his mother's eyes. They looked cloudy, dull. But he wasn't afraid of them now. He felt too tired. His hands fell down to his sides, heavy, and he almost dropped the knife. But his mother wanted it. And children should always obey their parents, he thought. His own mother had taught him that; he knew the right response.

"Yes, Mama."

He turned the point of the knife toward his belly, and gently placed the handle into his mother's upturned palm.
Damn well about time, Doug Crowley whispered to himself as the RTD bus hissed to a stop at the curb. Understandable, really. The storm, a near surprise in itself, dropped four more inches than expected, and the plows hadn't caught on to the idea yet. Shouldn't have been such a surprise, though, considering typical Denver weather. Crowley banged his hiking boots against the bottom step as he climbed aboard. He tugged one ragged leather glove off, pulled a handful of change from a side pocket, and counted coins into the fare box. The closing door cut off the blast of cold air behind him, and he stamped down the aisle, working needles of circulation back into his feet. Crowley sniffed at the beginnings of a cold and dropped his muscled bulk into a stiff, plastic window seat at about the middle of the bus. He grunted: not even so much as a 'good morning' from the driver.

Crowley's head snapped up abruptly. He looked around the interior of the long vehicle, then at his watch. Except for two other people, the bus was empty. And at seven forty-five, the middle of the morning rush hour. Considering the bus was half an hour late too, it should have been packed. Trembling anxiety curled up in Crowley's stomach. He'd already drawn two warnings for showing up late for work; one more would put his feet back on the street with his face in the want ads. Fingers drumming on the seat in
front, he looked at his watch. Tiny digits ticked the seconds off, but Crowley didn't believe everything he saw.

He got up, rubbed cold hands down the sides of his jeans, and crossed the aisle. The bus lurched through traffic, and Crowley grabbed an overhead rail to steady himself. The woman sitting alone was young, black and pretty. Crowley's eyes scanned her heavy chest, narrow waist, and long legs. On second glance, he noticed how out of place she appeared. Despite the frigid weather, she wore a bright yellow sweater, a short, light skirt and open toed high heels. He admired her figure again, then saw she was crying silently. Not just crying, but nearing the point of hysterics. She jumped when he tapped her shoulder.

"You have the time?" Crowley asked.

"What?" her voice cracked. She drew away from him, eyes widening. Crowley zipped his parka open, exposing a blue T-shirt with a faded design on the front.

"I wondered if you had the time. I think my watch is wrong, and I'm going to have a very pissed-off boss if I'm late again." Crowley softened his hard features into his best smile. Her hair was black, thick and curly, her eyes large, brown and deep, her skin soft, somewhere between medium and dark.

"It's snowing," she informed him.

"Huh?"

"Snowing hard for almost a half hour." Her lower lip trembled. "Is this the 52 bus?"
Loony-tunes, Crowley thought, his smile frozen. He saw that her hands shook and looked away from them. "Honey, it's been snowing most of the night, and this is the 15. What street do you want?"

She looked outside and the tears started again. "I want...." She hitched a breath and tried again. "I want Osage. But this isn't Philly; is it?" She looked at him, pleading.

"What?...Philadelphia?" Crowley badly wanted out of the conversation. He couldn't seem to get rid of the idiot grin he felt on his face. Even pretty girls could go ga-ga, he figured. For a wild second, he wondered if he was looking at a future bag lady.

"It's Denver; isn't it?" she pressed. "It's Denver and February, not July."

Crowley nodded, his grin beginning to slip. They both glanced toward the front as the bus slid to a stop at Downing. An old man in a shabby gray suit struggled aboard and eased himself into a front seat. He located his pass and showed it to the driver with a hand that shook. Crowley turned back to the woman; he had missed something she said.

"Pardon?" he said.

"I said I know why we're here. This isn't a SEPTA bus anymore. It's RTD." Her control dropped another notch. She clenched her hands into fists, but it didn't stop the shaking. "Don't you see? It's happened once already. My word.... I didn't mean for it to happen."
Crowley looked around uncomfortably and pushed shaggy hair out of his eyes. He should have left her then—meant to leave her then. But something flashed in her eyes: sanity, perhaps, where he expected madness.

"What already happened?" he said.

"It was dark then. I don't know how it got light so quick. A man was sitting a few rows in front, and he had to get off. You understand?"

"What's to understand? His stop came up and he got off."

"Not like that." She sniffed and rubbed her eyes hard with a tissue, trying to get the smeared makeup off. "What's your name?"

"Doug." He sat in front of her, turned and folded his arms over the seat-back to talk.

"Doug, I'm Shirley. I feel funny talking to somebody when I don't know their name."

"That's okay. Tell me what happened. To this guy, I mean."

"He had to get off; he didn't want to." Shirley glanced out the window and her eyes scanned the street. Crowley thought at first she was looking ahead for her stop. Not that, exactly. Her expression was one of estimation, certainly, yet it went beyond that. The only time Crowley had seen that look before was on the faces of the young draftees newly arrived in 'Nam. They all looked that way in the APCs, just before crossing the DMZ. Crowley swallowed and wiped a film of sweat from his face. Suddenly, the parka felt too warm. He looked out the window and saw nothing but east Colfax Avenue covered with a deep blanket of new snow. Cars bumped along
the ruts of ice down the street. Pedestrians hurried along, huddled against the wind.

The bus crossed Colorado Boulevard, and Crowley noticed a small, unhappy-looking group waiting at the corner. They didn't react and the driver didn't stop, so he figured they were waiting for the express. The local was too slow for long rides, especially with the snow. Crowley shrugged. All of them waiting. Cold. Something tugged at the back of his mind, something not quite right. It evaporated before he could snag it. Shirley started crying again.

"Shirley, take it easy; okay? You haven't told me enough to make any sense...."

"It does, though," she said. "He didn't want to get off. He kept saying 'no' and 'please' like he was begging not to get whupped. But he got off anyway. The driver called his stop, and he got off."

"The driver hasn't been calling any stops...."

"When he got off and the doors closed, there was screaming out there. And tearing sounds, like wet rags. I heard...my word.... No." Shirley saw something outside. Doug looked.

What resembled a small apartment building burned out of control a block or so up the street. A fire engine had arrived, but no water streamed from the hoses. Crowley guessed the usual effects of the cold: a frozen water main or, more likely, running water simply freezing and bursting the hoses. Flames and gray, flecked smoke billowed from every
door and window Crowley could see. Shirley came unglued; Crowley felt her nails hard into his arm.

"Please, Doug, don't let it happen to me."

"Nothing's gonna happen."

Shirley glanced out the window again. "Yes, it will. I didn't know what I was doing. I was so mad; I just wanted to scare them."

"Scare who?" Crowley felt her fear infect him.

"Juan. I used to live here, near on three years ago, and Juan was my old man. We had a good thing, but he played around; you know? Shirley stared ahead up the street and watched the burning building draw closer. Within a block now. "I caught him once in bed with a friend of mine, a girl I work with." She leaned back, away from the window, turned to Crowley. "I hit her with the lamp by the bed. Right upside the head. Me and Juan started arguing and I guess the lamp never came unplugged. When we looked, Jannis was screaming and the bed was on fire. I don't know.... I remember the bulb breaking. They make a loud bang when they break."

"Glencoe," the driver called as the bus slowed.

"This is my stop," Shirley said. "Help me, Doug. I don't want to. Please."

Crowley grabbed her arm as Shirley stood in the aisle. "You're not getting off," he said. He didn't know what was going on; he knew less why he tried to detain her. "Tell me the rest."

Shirley looked down at Crowley's hand on her arm and shifted so she could hold onto his sleeve, too. "The door to Juan's bedroom stuck
sometimes. If you slammed it too hard, you couldn't open it from the inside. I got to go. It's my stop."

"What about the door?" Crowley felt his voice rise. A small knot of panic grew in his throat and squeezed off his air. The bus stopped across the street from the fire. The rear doors popped open. Shirley tried to pull away, at the same time begging him not to let her go.

"Juan tried to put the fire out, but I could see it was already too big to just smother. I... I ran out and slammed that door shut with all my strength. I wasn't really thinking; I just did it. I heard them screaming, and Juan pulling and banging on the door. I left the apartment and ran down the stairs and out the front door. I saw it a while later, burning like it is now."

"What?" Crowley burst out. "That's the same place that burned down three years ago?"

"It was February then, and I read in the paper that the hoses froze, so they didn't have any water. Some people died. Everyone died."

The driver yelled again, "Glencoe."

"I moved to Philly that next week; I got family. Last night, I got on the bus to go home from work. Now I'm here. I got to get off now. Please let go." Shirley shook all over. Crowley's mind told his hand to hold on, but he let her arm go.

"It's not your fault, Doug. You're a nice man; you tried."
Her eyes locked on his as she walked down between the seats and out the door. She called him once to stop her. He couldn't move. The door slammed shut behind her.

Crowley watched her cross the street to the fire. She got one shoe stuck in the snow on the way and left it. Smoke and bits of black ash rolled against the bus windows as the flaming hulk lost all resemblance to a building. Shirley stopped by a maw of jumping flames that must have been the front entrance. Crowley saw something move in the flames, separate itself from them. Something charred, shrivelled, glowing red in spots. Clawed remnants of limbs rose, reached. Pieces of charred flesh flaked off when it moved, exposing burned bone beneath. More of them, emerging from the flames.

Shirley backed away, screaming. Crowley saw them move toward her. As they left the fire, the flames shrouding them flickered out and gray ribbons of smoke trailed from the eye sockets and mouths in their ruined faces. Shirley's screams rose to high-pitched yelps as their touch burned her skin. The things dragged her into the fire, and her cries died abruptly. Crowley saw her hair and clothes burst into flame as the bus pulled out into traffic.

* * *

Crowley had no idea how much time passed afterward. He had slumped into one of the plastic seats, eyes closed, exhausted. The vibration and engine note lulled him, his mind wanting to be lulled. Shifting, turning,
deeper sound, hydraulics hissing, slowing. The bus stopped and he opened his eyes. Where his head had leaned against a hard pole before, it now sank into upholstery. The seat was wider and deeper. A luggage rack stretched above him and tiny lights ran the length of a sunken aisle. A red 'Trailways' sign glowed outside.

A middle-aged woman got on and offered her ticket to the driver. The man Crowley had seen on the bus before helped her heave a single suitcase onto the overhead rack. She sat near the old man in front and the bus pulled off. Crowley found he couldn't swallow. His stomach curled into a sick lump, leaving him too frightened to move. His watch still said seven forty-five. The seconds ticked off, but the hands didn't move and the day was wrong. It was Tuesday and his watch said Thursday. The other man passed by Crowley's seat to use the restroom in back—a restroom that hadn't existed five minutes ago. The only consistencies were in the passengers on board and the snow outside.

Crowley grabbed the man's arm on his return pass to the front. "Where are we?" Crowley asked as conversationally as he could manage.

"Ames," the man said. He glanced toward the front, shrugged and settled into the seat across from Crowley. The man was thinner than Crowley, with narrow, bony shoulders, a long neck, and protruding Adams-apple. His clothes were well made, laundered and fairly new, although he needed a shave and his brown hair hung in oily clumps. He pushed a slipping pair of wire-rims up his nose with a long, big knuckled finger.
"Aimes College?" Crowley looked dubiously out the window.

"Aimes, Iowa. North of Des Moines. You know, the campus."

"How...?" Crowley began.

The man already had a hand up. His thin shoulders slumped. His head drooped and he raised it with an effort, as if hung with weights. "This bus is a thing from Hell...or Heaven. I don't know which," the thin man whispered. "I saw what happened to the lady you were sitting with. And the man before her. I overheard some of your conversation, enough to know I'm next."

"Next? How can you just sit there and say that? I don't know what's going on, but I'm not gonna just sit here. I'm getting off this damn thing." Crowley made to get up, flushed with fresh anger.

The man across shook his head slowly. "Don't you think that occurred to me? Don't you think I've tried?" The man stopped, took a breath, tried to continue. His face seemed to crumble with the effort. "When that guy was being torn apart in the dark out there, the bus just drove off. I was up to the front, just like you'd think, yelling at the...the driver to stop. He ignored me. Kept on driving. I grabbed him next, trying to make 'em hear...I don't know...tryin' to stop him. He, that thing, turned to me. And it was a death's head. A rotting corpse. My hands sunk in where I grabbed him 'til my fingers touched. But I couldn't tear his hands off the wheel."

"You're nuts. Or drunk."
"Go ahead. Go up there and try. Get him to stop. That woman tried. Came back here screaming. Go ahead."

Crowley didn't move. He looked forward at the panel concealing the driver, and found it suddenly took effort to draw breath. "Where are we going," he said finally.

"East of Ames, a little past Toledo. It's where I murdered my uncle, five years ago."

Crowley watched the man's face turn slack and ashen in the dim light. He smelled the sweat of fear and defeat on him.

"Nothing dramatic," the thin man said, "just petty envy, not much sense and a great deal of an inheritance. B-grade movie stuff. It was winter, like now, and what with the ice, and what I did to the brakes on his Caddy..."

"Let it ride," Crowley said. "I really don't need it."

"South Tama, Toledo," the driver called. The bus slowed.

"The two before me left crying and screaming. I want to try not to do that," the thin man told nobody in particular. He stood into the aisle. A sheen of sweat shone on his face and hands and a nervous tic popped at his left eye.

"Wait," Crowley said. He tried to grab the man's arm, but found he could not lift his hands. He could move them, but not to stop the man from leaving. Some intrusive force in his mind simply forbid it. The bus angled toward the shoulder. As they slowed to a stop, ice and gravel crunched beneath the wheels and the bus tilted off the highway. The sound
of an approaching engine over the low idling bus motor awakened Crowley to the stretch of highway's desolation. Not even the sound of blowing wind rose to fill the cold fields around them. The thin man paused at the door.

The old man in the front seat looked up and allowed his gaze to wander over the man before him. Their eyes met and the old man mouthed something to the thin man, who shook his head. Crowley found time to pity the old man, with his wisps of white hair and shabby Social Security suit. A timid old man who had probably lived his life in a civil service office. The doors hissed open and Crowley forgot the old guy as the thin man stepped down into the frigid Iowa air.

Crowley ran to the front as the doors closed and craned to see through the windshield without getting far enough forward to catch even a peripheral view of the driver. Evidently the thin man had decided to make a run for it. He slipped and skated over the frozen freeway, intently watching the swerving, sliding approach of the car. The man dashed for a telephone pole across the expanse of road as the Cadillac began to fishtail. Its engine note grew to a shrill scream. Louder.

Closer.

Crowley saw that the thin man was going to make it.

He did. Hands clasped about the stout pole, the thin man peeped around as the car went into a spin.

Then it vanished.

A gasp of relief escaped the thin man's mouth in a white stream. His head tilted forward to the wood. Crowley felt sweat trickle down between
"At the last, they all fight for life," the old man whispered, "when death stands in their faces."

The bus pulled off. Crowley turned instinctively toward the driver and away from him before his mind could assemble the quick images of decay, festering and somehow living. Crowley backed up the aisle, his stomach burning, and pulled the old man with him. The bus gathered speed, rolled down the highway.

"What the hell is this?" Crowley said. "I want off this thing."

Crowley felt the material in his fist change. He still grasped the old man's lapels, but the cloth thickened, became coarser in his hand. He looked down and snatched his hands away. The old man was no longer dressed in a tattered gray suit, but almost entirely in tailored black. Crowley looked in astonishment from the mirror-polished jackboots to the Death's Head insignia on the peaked cap. One upper arm bore a tilted Swastika on a red armband, and Crowley detected the faint scent of gun oil from the luger at the old man's hip.

"There is no avoiding it," the old man said. "We are both soldiers. Surely you can recognize the inevitable when it arrives."

Crowley stared at the old man, eyebrows knitted together in puzzlement, then down at himself. Tiger-striped fatigues bloused over jungle boots had replaced his parka, jeans and hiking boots. Holding a cry behind pursed lips, Crowley shoved the old man away and ran up the narrow aisle toward the back of the bus. He felt the web gear on his back bang along the seats he passed. He tugged at a familiar strap, getting his M16
up in front, as he reached the rear windows. He checked the magazine visually, chambered a round and rotated the lever from safe to semi.

Getting out, Crowley's mind screamed.

He stopped five feet from the rear window. Snow, ice and Iowa were gone. The street outside was in itself unfamiliar, but Crowley knew the city: Ho Chi Minh--Saigon.

Crowley's hands clenched the plastic pistol grip and handguards. He pointed the muzzle at the center of the glass, thumbed the lever around to auto and pulled the trigger.

Nothing.

* * *

Doug Crowley sat slumped in the wet heat for hours as the bus bumped and pounded its way through the bush. They had picked up a middle-aged Frenchman in the city, who stamped angrily up and down the aisle, shooting questions at Crowley, the driver and the Nazi. Finally, Crowley pointed his weapon at the man's belly and he shut up and sat down. The bus broke out of the bush onto a narrow road surrounded by low, rolling hills of a deep, vibrant green. An intense sun bathed the land in waves of tangible summer heat. Crowley eventually gave in to the urge and looked out to try and get his bearings. The area looked vaguely familiar, but too much time had gone by. He remembered enough to know where his compass should be. He dug it out and took a rough heading, confirming what he already knew. All
he had to do was wait for the driver to call it out. The end of the line, as far as he was concerned.

At the time, it had seemed like no more than reasonably aggressive caution. And he had been so sure. Gunnery Sergeant Crowley's returning recon patrol had been under radio silence and had wandered slightly off course. So, when they came upon the small village of Phu Cat, they didn't know exactly who the inhabitants were. One of his squad leaders thought they were South Viets, but Crowley felt positive they were Cong. Their orders had been search and destroy and, tending toward the side of caution, they moved on the village. Crowley gave the order to terminate with extreme prejudice, and his men didn't leave much recognizable. That hit was the only serious error of judgment he had made in two tours. They had been South Vietnamese. Crowley never thought much of it later, and no official action was ever called against him. In a war, mistakes of that kind were to be expected.

So, why the damn bus ride?

"Phu Cat."

Crowley looked up at the call. The bus slowed over a rutted path leading to the village. Crowley checked his gear quickly, and moved to the front. This was different from the others, he reasoned. He was back in 'Nam, armed and under control. If he couldn't defeat whatever horror awaited him in Phu Cat, he planned to lose himself in the jungle and make his way south. Artillery fire erupted from behind the bus and the sound
comforted him. They stopped at the edge of the village and Crowley looked through the windshield, tense, alert. He felt more alive, more responsive than he had ever felt since returning to the States.

The area outside lay in absolute quiet, the only sound the booming of the distant guns. Dead bodies littered the center of the village. Crowley's men were nowhere to be seen, but no matter. Whatever vengeance waited out there must exist in no more than the handful of Viets who had gotten away from them into the jungle. If they were South Vietnamese, their fighting capacity was surely sub par with his own. Braced, Crowley flung himself through the opening door of the bus.

A short recon of the perimeter yielded nothing. The bus didn't move, so Crowley assumed something had yet to happen. He had no intention of waiting for it in the open. He took a quick heading toward the artillery emplacements. As he started off, he heard rustling behind him.

Crowley spun and rolled to his right for cover, the M16 aimed toward the noise. It came from the edge of Phu Cat. One of the bullet-riddled corpses was on its knees, trying to stand. Crowley gaped, breath held. As a second body rose, then a third, he heard the bus gun its engine. Crowley forced himself to react. The bus was not an option he cared to consider. Instead, he raced into the bush, roughly along his planned heading. Twenty yards into the jungle, he broke out into a clearing.

Phu Cat.

Crowley checked the heading. Correct. He looked up. More of the damned things were up and walking his way. They weren't even breathing.
Most had faces and limbs blown apart by automatic rifle fire. Crowley felt his control slip. He took another heading: south, but away from the guns, and dashed into the trees. He figured he must have veered off at an angle and curved back into the village. This time, he kept his line of travel as straight as possible and made frequent visual checks on his heading. Been out too long, he mused, and lost that sense of direction in the field.

Blood pounded in his head and against his ribs, but he kept his heading steady. Settling twilight and dense, overhanging tree limbs prevented him from noticing the lightening sky until he walked out of the bush and into the perimeter of the village. Crowley took two lurching steps forward in bewilderment. He saw the bus crawling through the center of the village, away from him. Crowley raised the '16 and fired off an angry burst. The weapon kicked in his hands, but had no effect on the retreating vehicle. Crowley's chest suddenly seemed nowhere near big enough to accommodate his expanding lungs. The dead villagers closed behind the departing bus and stumbled toward him. He fired a three shot burst into the chest of the nearest. The thing faltered a step as the rounds slammed home, but it kept coming. Crowley looked around, desperate.

He looked up. The heat from the setting sun bore down on him in waves. He felt the ground soft underfoot, and the webbed LBE straps taut at his shoulders. The weapon in his hands was real, as was the sweat streaming his face, back and arms. The walking corpses came at him. Crowley pointed the rifle and pulled the trigger, stitching one of them from sternum to forehead. The back of its skull blew apart in dry bits.
It took a staggering step, regained its balance, and kept coming in shuffling strides that left streaks in the dust. Crowley turned to run.

An unbroken rank of the dead things stood behind him. Crowley spun round. The bus had stopped at the edge of the village and he saw the old Nazi standing at the back window, watching. The old man shook his head sadly. Crowley shook his angrily. He turned and ran into the beasts behind him, between himself and the jungle. The firing pin clicked on an empty chamber. Crowley dropped the magazine and reloaded on the run. He fired a long burst into the two before him, and drove his rifle sideways through them.

The corpses fell away and Crowley went down hard. He rolled and kicked. Cold, dead hands groped. He felt a hand grab his thigh. Crowley kicked and pulled, but the thing held on, tightening its grip. Crowley plunged the '16 into its throat and fired. Shards of bone and flesh exploded out the back of its neck. With nothing to support it, the villager's head tilted slowly sideways and fell off onto Crowley's chest. He threw it off in a fit of revulsion and looked down at his leg. The decapitated corpse still held a grip on his thigh. Crowley felt its fingers tighten, dig. He jerked at the thing with his free hand. Another of them pulled his hand away, wrenched it around. The corpse dug at his leg. Crowley felt fingers pierce cloth, then sink into his skin and he screamed, trying to twist free. Blood soaked through his pantsleg as the dead villager's fingertips sank into Crowley's thigh.
The fingers met, intertwined and pulled, tearing away a moist hunk of meat from Crowley's leg. Crowley's face went ashen at the pain. More of them grabbed at him, tearing, ripping. Crowley saw the headless thing hold the bloody lump high. With what strength remained, he tugged the muzzle of his rifle up under his chin, squeezed his eyes shut, and pulled the trigger.

* * * * *

The old man shook his head sadly, and left the back window. He sat for a long time in the front of the moving bus before a bewildered voice asked him where they were going.

"A camp in Polish Upper Silesia," the old man said. "I am Sturmbannführer Erich Guggenheim, Executive Officer of what you would recognize as the receiving department of that particular camp. We are going there because I have been called to account. As have you, where ever that may be."

The old man adjusted his cap, turned to the window and watched the landscape roll by.
The doorbell rang and Mrs. Dempsey frowned. She couldn't recall when she'd last heard that sound: years, probably. And it was so late at night, way past eleven. She lowered her needlepoint, glanced toward a framed photograph on the table beside her, and shook her head. Her son, Bryce, was still in Memphis. She knew that. And it couldn't be his wife, Laura. She never thought to visit. The bell rang again. Mrs. Dempsey tapped her hearing aid and the wrinkle between her eyebrows deepened. The bell had sounded louder. She looked across the living room, filled with dated, faded furniture. The walls were bare white but for the red fireplace brick. A folded American flag sat atop the stone mantel, its only ornament.

The bell's third ring pulled her glance from the blue and white flag. She put her needlepoint on the table, within the lamp's glow, set her cane between her legs and pulled herself to her feet. The ache in her knees flaired, but not quite enough to require aspirin. She glanced down at her work until the joint twinge flickered away. Nearly done, the needlepoint pattern finally looked big enough to cover her bedside table upstairs. She smiled and turned toward the door.

Her knees hurt again on the way across the room, making her forget that it was too late for her son to be calling. She drew the curtains aside and peeped out, but saw nothing through the falling snow. But hadn't
the doorbell rung just then? Mrs. Dempsey squinted and tiny black footprints focused in. The trail meandered along the pavement, up her steps and across her porch to the door, below her line of sight. Mrs. Dempsey frowned again. The footprints were so small. A tightness in her chest relaxed. She pulled her thick terrycloth robe tighter around her throat and unlocked the door with her free hand.

She opened it half the width of her body and gasped. Heavy wet flakes spun around her into the room. Others settled onto her light blue fuzzy slippers, turning them navy. A half foot of new snow hid the street against an equally black night. Beyond, dull electric orbs hung from poles along the street at tree height and the arthritic elm limbs caught the snow into long peaked tufts, like tiny mountain ridges. And a small girl stood shivering on her carpeted stoop.

A thick carpet of snow shallowed like a retreating wave and stopped a few inches behind the heels of the girl. Glued down Astro-turf slid the rest of the way to her stoop like wet sand. The gasp chilled Mrs. Dempsey's throat, and a snifflle began almost immediately. The little girl answered with one of her own. Neither spoke. The child pulled a thin hand from a pocket and tucked a long, wet clump of yellow hair behind an ear. Her eyes were light blue and startled wide. Her nose and mouth were tiny and red and her lower lip pouted the way children do just before a cry. Mrs. Dempsey felt caressing warmth at her back and frigid wind pushing against her bare face and ankles. She started to speak and felt icy air in her mouth. She thought about making herself a cup of hot cocoa very soon,
if she didn't want to spend the next week sick in bed. With Bryce away, no one would make her meals; she couldn't count on Laura at all.

"...would you know how many, ma'am?"

Mrs. Dempsey concentrated on the girl. Her coat looked thin but in no way shabby. It was unbuttoned, revealing a damp sweatshirt speckled with snow. She was thin, but not from lack of eating, Mrs. Dempsey decided. She blinked, realizing the girl had spoken.

"I'm sorry, Honey," she said, trying not to swallow too much cold air. "What did you say?"

"I'm sorry to bother you, ma'am. I can't see the street signs 'cause they're covered with snow. Is Elizabeth two blocks over left or right, please?"

Such a well mannered child, she thought. Mrs. Dempsey glanced past the girl, momentarily confused. She frowned and looked back down into the blank, pale face. Narrow rivulets of melted snow trickled from her hairline down her forehead. A wide, intelligent forehead, Mrs. Dempsey decided. She touched two stiff fingers to the bridge of her nose.

"I'm sorry, Dear. I don't know where my mind is tonight." The old woman leaned over and braced her weight on her cane. "Are you lost? The street you want is three...no, five blocks south of here."

The girl turned, following the line of Mrs. Dempsey's pointing finger. The child sniffed again, loud and watery. She looked back into Mrs. Dempsey's eyes.

"Left?"
"Yes," Mrs. Dempsey said. She hitched the robe higher around her throat. "...if you go right at the bottom of my stairs to the corner. But why are you out so late? It must be past your bedtime."

"I'm sorry."

"That's.... Why don't you come in for a minute and get warmed up a little. I'll call your mom and dad to come get you."

Mrs. Dempsey opened the door wide enough for the girl to pass. She glanced in, around Mrs. Dempsey's narrow hip, then up again into her eyes.

"It's all right, really. I don't get much company."

The girl's eyes dropped. "I'm not lost," she mumbled.

"Of course not, Honey. I just want to warm you up a little so you don't catch cold. I know you can find your own way home."

"I'm not a baby."

"I can see that. You're quite a young woman. How old are you now?"

The girl looked up. "Seven. Almost seven and a half."

"Second grade?"

"Almost going to third grade."

"Excellent. Now how about it? Wouldn't you like to warm up, just a little?"

Mrs. Dempsey pressed her lips into a thin white line. The child's tennis shoes were soaked, but her jeans didn't look too wet yet. Mrs. Dempsey shifted a foot, turning herself to widen the doorway gap. She touched a hand to the back of the girl's shoulder.

"Only if I can bring Charcoal. He's cold, too."
"Charcoal?"

The girl retreated to the porch railing, and her red tennis shoes disappeared in the snow.

"My dear, don't. Your feet...."

The girl called out and the old woman heard muffled scurrying beneath her porch, then a yip, shrill and loud. A small wiry black dog appeared at the bottom of the stairs, tail wagging. It bounded up two steps and stopped, eyes on Mrs. Dempsey. The girl called again and the dog came on shyly. When it made the top, it tucked a mousy tail between its legs and scurried over to sit leaning against the little girl's leg. Mrs. Dempsey looked down at the dog and frowned; she couldn't distinguish the breed. And it was so wet. But, she mused, so was the girl, the little darling. The girl looked up into her eyes.

"Please?"

A towel drying fluffed the dog's coarse, black coat, but did nothing about the wet fur smell. Mrs. Dempsey sniffed. And it had taken two of her good towels to dry the animal. But no matter, the girl was dry, too. Her skin was pale from the cold, nearly transparent. Her blue eyes and high cheekbones seemed Scandinavian, and her smile looked clear and innocent. Had the girl born red hair, the old woman may have taken her for her own native Irish. Mrs. Dempsey liked to guess ancestry, but never asked for fear she might be wrong. A faint clunking from deep within the house shifted her thoughts. She wondered what it was. The child took a
third towel from around her head and handed it over. Golden blond hair fell nearly to her waist.

"Thank you, Mrs. Dempsey. I think my hair's dry."

She accepted the damp towel. "And it's very pretty, too. Feel a little better, now, Angela?"

The girl smiled and nodded. The clunking stopped abruptly and Mrs. Dempsey looked off.

"I guess my socks and shoes are dry, too."

"Of course, the dryer. I'll get them. Would you like some hot cocoa?"

Angela nodded. "Yes, please."

Mrs. Dempsey wondered again what a seven year old was doing out in such a storm. The child was so small; she looked nearly swallowed up in that old recliner. Mrs. Dempsey remembered then how suddenly the snowfall had begun and shrugged. She glanced over at Angela's coat, hanging from the doorknob, still dripping water into her cake pan. A shiver made her decide to turn the heat up just a bit before she made the cocoa.

Mrs. Dempsey brought two mugs of hot cocoa into the livingroom on a silver tray. The metal was tarnished and stained, but it didn't matter; she couldn't remember when she'd last served a guest. Bryce and Laura never stayed for dinner. She laid the tray on the coffeetable and excused herself to turn the heat up. She had no doubt she'd forgotten. When she returned, the dog was up in Angela's lap. At least it was well mannered.
Just like Angela. It didn't bark or squirm; all it did was look at Mrs. Dempsey with its shiny black eyes. She tried to recall its name.

Angela sipped her cocoa and left a brown smudge along her upper lip. She licked it away.

"Thank you, ma'am."

"Enjoy it, Dear. I just love to serve guests."

"Mrs. Dempsey, my shoes?"

"Yes...? Oh, I'm sorry, Angela. I just plain...let me go get them..."

She stopped at the head of the cellar stairs as a thought occurred: Angela's hair had finally dried to auburn, actually faint shades from a true brown. She breathed a little grunt and went down to the dryer. Angela's sweat socks and canvas Adidas were dry and slightly warm, but the shoes looked too small to fit. Mrs. Dempsey grinned. The difference wasn't much, and they certainly hadn't shrunk. She grunted, annoyed, and shook her head. "The eyes are going, old girl."

Angela pulled her socks on and laid the tennis shoes on the floor beside the chair. She went back to examining Mrs. Dempsey's needlepoint.

"What's this going to be?"

"Oh, nothing...just another doily."

"For a table upstairs?"

"Why, yes, Angela." Mrs. Dempsey's face tried to frown and smile at once. "What a good guess. Where's your cup?"
Angela leaned over and dropped the needlepoint onto the coffee table. The dog didn't move. Mrs. Dempsey saw how small it was and wondered again at the two towels.

"I put it in the sink. I always did guess things good."

"You guess things 'well', child. Anyway... I don't remember everything these days, Angela, let alone being able to make guesses. Like your little dog. What was her name?"

"His name's Charcoal. Is there more chocolate?"

Mrs. Dempsey smiled. "Why certainly; I think the water's still hot. Just one minute." She knew she really should call the girl's parents. Right after her next cup of cocoa. Mrs. Dempsey walked carefully back into the kitchen and spooned cocoa mix into Angela's mug. The walking back and forth was becoming tedious, but she loved the company. The house got so lonely during winter. She refilled the kettle and left it on low heat.

Mrs. Dempsey nodded to herself as she handed Angela her cup. Nothing like hot chocolate to coax the winter out of a child. Angela's face and hands had warmed to a soft tan. Mrs. Dempsey touched her own nose and cheeks, rubbed her hands together. No wonder the child had asked for more cocoa. She excused herself to turn the heat up.

She returned and settled into her recliner to watch the girl. Angela looked back and sipped her cocoa, holding the cup carefully above the dog's head. Mrs. Dempsey squinted. She noticed brown strands speckling Charcoal's black fur. The dog turned toward her and stared.
"Angela, what breed of dog is Charcoal?"

"I don't know, Mrs. Dempsey. I guess he's just a mix."

"Have you had him long?"

Angela turned toward the mantel and pointed to the folded flag. "Was Mr. Dempsey a war hero?"

Mrs. Dempsey followed the direction of Angela's finger and frowned. "My husband died almost thirty years ago. Cancer took him." Mrs. Dempsey looked off at nothing and her face blanked. "And he was so young and handsome right to the end, not even a gray hair. Bryce has grown into his father's looks, you know." The old woman turned back to the girl and her features hardened to a smile. "But no, Dear, my husband never fought in a war. He only fought me." Mrs. Dempsey blinked and turned away. "I'm sorry, Angela. I didn't mean to say that. It's true we didn't get along, but he's passed on, so there's no reason to...."

"Is he with the Father?"

"Why, yes," Mrs. Dempsey tried to smile. "He was a good man, really. I think he's with God."

"Then where did you get the flag, Mrs. Dempsey?"

Mrs. Dempsey turned back to the mantel. She blinked, frowned. "I don't recall. It was a gift."

"Who's that?" Angela asked, pointing to the framed photograph on the endtable.

"Oh, that's our son, Bryce. Such a nice boy."
Angela turned to her, and Mrs. Dempsey noticed the girl's eyes were almost the same brown as those of the dog. It sat placidly in Angela's lap, its small body blending with the shadows and the black of her Levis.

"Is he with Darrell?" Angela asked.

"Darrell passed away, Angela. I told you. Did I tell you?... But no," Mrs. Dempsey laughed, a bit shrilly. "My son is in Memphis, Tennessee, on business. He sells insulation to building contractors."

"Your son did that before he went to Vietnam. I'm getting hungry, ma'am. Is there any peanut butter sandwiches?"

"'Are' there any...." Mrs. Dempsey felt suddenly cold. The room faded out to gray and back. He did no such thing, her mind screamed in on itself. She breathed slowly, deeply. The room drifted, tilted, righted itself and settled. She focused on the dark haired girl in the other recliner, staring back. Mrs. Dempsey thought the girl's olive skin looked so beautiful, so Italian. She reproached herself for forgetting the child's name. Then she had it: Angela. And what had she just said? Of course....

"Of course you'd be hungry, Angela. How far did you walk, anyway?"

"I don't remember, Mrs. Dempsey. But it was miles and miles."

Mrs. Dempsey smiled. "I'm sure it was a lot of miles even for such a big girl. It was peanut butter, right?"

Angela nodded and smiled wide.

"And jelly?.... Coming right up," Mrs. Dempsey said.
When Mrs. Dempsey stood, she noticed the room had gotten cold. But she was sweating. How odd. She stopped to turn the heat up on the way to the kitchen, but the dial was already at the top setting. She forgot about it in the warmth of the kitchen, as she made the sandwiches. It was the warmth that first made her fear the child. The kitchen felt too hot and she could hear the furnace downstairs moaning at full strength. It wasn't her frail body, then.

Mrs. Dempsey stacked the sandwiches onto the tray and walked slowly toward the livingroom. The chill touched her halfway through the diningroom like a gentle, stroking caress. Three steps more and the heat began to fade. The tray trembled. She gripped it harder and kept walking. Her skin tightened in the cold of the livingroom. She laid the tray within Angela's reach, on the coffee table, got a sweater from her coat closet and sat with a fresh cup of hot cocoa to watch the girl.

Angela devoured her first sandwich in four bites and reached for another. Charcoal glanced once at the motion of Angela's hands, then back to Mrs. Dempsey. He neither sniffed the food nor begged. He might have been a stuffed toy, but for his wet fur smell still heavy in the room. Angela placed a bronzed arm across his back and scratched the dog's fur. Mrs. Dempsey flinched. Shifted her gaze to Angela's hair. It was black.

"Don't you remember who gave you the pretty flag, Mrs. Dempsey?"

"What...? I...I'm sorry?" Mrs. Dempsey shook her head, expelling the image. "What did you say, Angela?"
"It came off a coffin. A Marine Corps Chaplain gave it to you. He gave Laura one, too. Twenty years ago. She thinks you're a senile old bag."

Mrs. Dempsey paled. Her cup tilted, spilling a thin brown stream onto the carpet, but she didn't notice. Angela tore a huge bite from the sandwich and swallowed it whole.

"No," Mrs. Dempsey whispered, "My son is in Memphis. He works there in..."

"Your son is with the Father. And with Darrell."

"No," she said, louder.

Angela looked into her eyes and said, "The Father took Bryce from Tayninh in 1969, almost 1970, when a mortar blew everything away below his ribs. They found his boots, but they were full of yellow mud. And they found his arms. They were covered with little black leeches."

"Stop.... Please stop."

Mrs. Dempsey brought a shaking hand to her mouth. Angela tore another piece of peanut butter and jelly sandwich off and swallowed. A red dab of strawberry jelly spotted her chin. The dog settled across Angela's lap and his head disappeared behind the arm of the chair. Mrs. Dempsey felt numb all over. She heard a dull thud and glanced down. She had dropped her cup, but only the delicate handle had broken. The old woman looked down at it, laying on its side in the brown stain. She leaned over, lifted the cup, and placed the little handle inside.
"Oh dear, I'll have to clean that up. Please excuse me for a moment, Angela."

"Okay, Mrs. Dempsey," Angela said, and took the last dainty bite of her sandwich. She chewed slowly, delicately. Mrs. Dempsey stood and turned toward the kitchen.

"Mrs. Dempsey?"

"Yes, Dear?"

"Are there any more sandwiches?"

"Certainly," Mrs. Dempsey said. Her face relaxed. Her shoulders settled. She tensed then and turned. The plate before Angela was empty. She glanced at the flag, then, and tried to recall their last conversation. All her thoughts brought were anxiety. And another memory that seemed more important.

"I think I'd better call your folks, Angela. They might be worried."

"Okay. But my Mom won't be worried. And Daddy's not there. He's with the Father, too."

"I'm sure she'll wonder where you are in this storm. Where do you live?"

"On Havana at Fifth Street."

"But there's no Havana in Fort Collins. In Denver...but you couldn't have..."

"Miles and miles." Angela smiled up at Mrs. Dempsey and the old woman shivered. She noticed the white puffs coming from Angela's mouth. She
blew out and saw her own breath condense. She thought the wet fur smell should fade as the animal dried, but the odor was getting worse.

"What is your mother's name, Angela?" she whispered.

"Amy Jameson. Didn't I tell you?"

Mrs. Dempsey shook her head and pointed to the stain. She said she'd get a towel and water and left the room. Left the girl there, looking over at her mantel.

"Hello?" The voice sounded civil, curious. Mrs. Dempsey kept her finger on the page of her Denver phonebook. There were two pages full of Jamesons, but only one Amy. And her address was listed as Havana, between Fifth and Sixth. The voice in Mrs. Dempsey's ear felt comforting, confirming the state of her mind. Mrs. Dempsey told the woman she was calling about her daughter.

"Oh, Nancy. Are you one of her teachers?"

"No, Mrs. Jameson, I meant Angela."

Silence.

"Mrs. Jameson?"

"Are you from some agency?"

Mrs. Dempsey unbuttoned her sweater and pulled it open. She reached for a tissue and wiped her forehead. Her hand shook.

"An agency? I'm afraid I don't understand."
"Well, I don't understand this call. My daughter...my daughter, Angela, died six years ago, not quite a month after my husband. Is there some record...paperwork...?"

Mrs. Dempsey dropped the damp tissue and reached for another. The phone felt slippery, hard on her ear. Her heart pounded against the papery thin skin over her chest.

"I... Yes, just a little.... Could you tell me her age when she died? And her description? I'm sorry. Children are reported runaways, and I..."

"Damn. Why can't you people leave me alone? Can't you get your records straight? She was seven and five months; she had long, light blond hair and blue eyes. I don't see what this is for. You people keep calling..."

"Did she own a pair of red tennis shoes?"

"What?... They were her favorites, those red Adidas. Why can't you stop..."

"I'm so sorry.... I..."

The woman on the other end started crying then, and the line went dead. Mrs. Dempsey cradled her phone gently.

"Mrs. Dempsey," from the livingroom. The old woman looked, but could see only the front door and a slash of beige window curtain. She turned to her back door and the kitchen window beside it. Powdery snow pushed against the glass. She heard faintly the whistle of the wind outside and looked down at her sweater, long skirt and fluffy slippers. Her legs were
thin and covered with heavy veins. She was sixty, but knew she looked older, with her hair gone iron-gray and her back bending. Still, her health was good. But she couldn't take the cold, or a walk of more than a few blocks. She thought of her cane, still leaning against the livingroom endtable.

"Mrs. Dempsey?"

She buttoned her sweater and went to see what Angela wanted.

"Bryce wants to talk to you. If you'll go to him, then the Father will let me see my daddy."

Mrs. Dempsey wrapped a scarf around her neck and buttoned an overcoat over her sweater and still felt cold. She tried not to look at the girl. Angela's skin had become darker, mottled. Her hair had grown straight and coarse. She dragged long nails across the arms of the chair and smiled with a row of tiny, pointed teeth. The dog had shrank to a furry mound in her lap and all Mrs. Dempsey could distinguish were its eyes. They were black again, the same color as Angela's.

"Why did you say my son is with God, Angela?"

"I didn't say that, ma'am. Aren't there any more sandwiches?"

"I'm sorry; I forgot. I'll get them. But you did; you said..."

"I said he's with the Father. Not any mean god."

"You mean an angry God, like the pilgrim..."

"Jonathan Edwards was an ignorant, uncultured ass. My uncle told me so. I'm really hungry, Mrs. Dempsey."
"How can you consider God mean, Honey? He is in Heaven, after all."

She smiled at Angela to back it up.

"He's not."

"Did your uncle tell you that, too?"

Angela nodded.

Mrs. Dempsey held her attention on the girl. Forced herself to speak.

"And how does your uncle know?"

"He knows the Father. He fixed it so I could go to him and see my daddy. It hurt, though."

"It hurt?"

Angela folded stiff shanks of hair out of her face with a muscular hand. Tendons like heavy rope flexed beneath the skin of her forearm. Her eyes stopped shifting and dulled. "Yes, ma'am," she said. "He took me first. Then he used the knife. See here?" Angela pulled her sweatshirt up, exposing a hairy stomach and taut, dark nipples with a gaping pink gash between them. The hot spark returned to Angela's face and she giggled. The humor stopped just short of her eyes. She lowered the shirt and stood.

Mrs. Dempsey looked to Angela's lap, expecting to see the dog fall. The dog was gone. Instead, she saw a long bulge in the crotch of Angela's jeans. She watched it swell, lengthen and her heart pounded into her throat.

"You understand, don't you, Mrs. Dempsey? All you have to do is want to see your son. He's waiting, you know."
Angela took a step and Mrs. Dempsey tried to stand. She looked around frantically. "Please don't hurt me. Where's your dog? Where is it?"

"He's part of me now. And he'll be part of you for awhile. He goes along to make sure you don't get away before you can get someone else. That's the deal, you see. You help someone else. Then you get to see Bryce. Like I'm getting to see Daddy by helping you." Angela pulled a short carving knife from her pocket. "You just have to want it. The Father fixes the rest."

Mrs. Dempsey looked into Angela's eyes. Red sparks circled the black irises. The girl's eyes deepened, broadened, and Mrs. Dempsey thought of her son. She remembered him small, playful. His clothes were always filthy, but she didn't mind the washings. Then good in school, serious. He let his hair grow long. It always fell across his eyes when he bent over a desk, studying. Then leaving in uniform, but promising to write, the long hair gone.

"My baby," she mumbled, "I knew I'd get to see you again."

She felt her legs being pushed apart by something hard. Something cold, hairy. She squeezed her eyes shut and screamed. The thing left and Mrs. Dempsey got to her feet and away from the chair. Angela stood near her, holding the knife loose at her side. She had grown nearly to Mrs. Dempsey's shoulders and several pounds thicker in muscle. Her face looked blank.
"Mrs. Dempsey, I don't want to hurt you.... Uncle said I have to get it right this time. When I do it wrong, he takes me back to him to punish me and makes me start over."

"Leave me be, child. Please."

"Uncle..." Angela said, before her face became thoughtful. Her features set, then twisted into a snarl. "You're the one. I've looked for you. I've waited for you. Charcoal found you. He did. You want him, you bitch. You want that Bryce, but you won't see him until I see my daddy."

The knife came up.

"It's a lie," Mrs. Dempsey screamed. "All of it. The father your uncle told you about isn't any father. It's Satan, the devil."

"NO! My daddy isn't there. I don't believe you."

Mrs. Dempsey backed away under Angela's advance. She dodged as Angela swung. The blade tore through her overcoat, just snagging the sweater beneath. She backed into the endtable and heard the lamp smash on the floor behind her. She tried to feel her way around it and tripped. She landed hard on her back and pain shot through her hip and elbow.

"You old whore, my daddy's not in Hell! You'll see. You'll see. I don't care if you want it or not."

Angela ripped the front of her jeans apart. Mrs. Dempsey glanced once at the fur covered erection and the wet, pink tube growing out of it before Angela kicked her legs apart and knelt between them. Pungent dog's breath blew into the woman's face and she choked back a thrust of soupy vomit.
Angela planted an icy hand on Mrs. Dempsey's chest and raised the knife overhead.

"He's not, Angela. Your daddy's in Heaven. Like...like my son. But the father your uncle worships is the devil. Think about it, girl. Your father was good. Would he want you to do this to me?"

The knife wavered. Mrs. Dempsey watched it, waiting. She couldn't look at the other thing. And dared not look into those eyes. Her own need was there.

"I want to see him. My daddy...I..."

"You'll see him, Angela. But not this way."

"Damn you--" 

Mrs. Dempsey saw the blade hitch and thrust down at her face. She closed her eyes, tried to get her hands up, and heard the knife drop loose onto the carpet beside her. She looked up and saw Angela crying. The rage was gone from her face and with it some of the cold. Mrs. Dempsey sat up and cradled the girl in her arms.

"I did it wrong again," Angela cried into Mrs. Dempsey's shoulder.

"No, Baby. You did right."

"He'll pull me back. Uncle will pull me back to him and I won't see Daddy."

"Honey, no. He can't..."

Angela leaned into the old woman and sobbed. Mrs. Dempsey felt the girl relax. She caressed Angela's hair and felt it soften, saw it lighten.
Her elbow and hip burned, but she held on as the girl softened and shrank until Mrs. Dempsey held onto nothing but her own arms.

Mrs. Dempsey winced getting to her feet. She needed the cane to hobble over to the mantel. She leaned it up against the brick and took the flag down with both hands, turned to the empty room. Angela's overcoat, no longer dripping, hung from the doorknob and her red Adidas sat by the chair where she'd left them. Mrs. Dempsey sat on the sofa, her eyes on the tennis shoes. Her joints needed aspirin badly, but the pain dulled a bit as the room warmed. The folded flag felt heavy, the material coarse in her hands. She looked down, traced her finger along the white stars and tried to recall the day she'd first accepted that flag into her arms. The memory refused to surface, but she knew he was gone. She looked over for Bryce's picture, but the endtable was overturned. The crystal lamp lay in a heap of white slivers. She spotted the framed photo, face down on the floor near the knife. She thought of that cold hand on her chest and hugged the flag over her bosum. Mrs. Dempsey closed her eyes, lowered her head and cried.