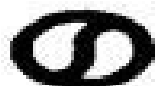


STEPHEN KING

**THE
DEAD ZONE**



A SIGNET BOOK

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DEAD ZONE**



A SIGNET BOOK

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III - Notes from the Dead Zone

Beware the Wheel of Fortune....

THE DEAD ZONE

Johnny, the small boy who skated at breakneck speed into an accident that for one horrifying moment plunged him into ... *the dead zone*.

Johnny Smith, the small-town schoolteacher who spun the wheel of fortune and won a trip into ... *the dead zone*.

John Smith, who awakened from a seemingly interminable coma with an accursed power: the power to see the future and the terrible fate awaiting mankind in ... *the dead zone*.

“Powerful tension holds the reader to the story like a pin to a magnet.”

—*The Houston Post*

WORKS BY STEPHEN KING

NOVELS

Carrie
'Salem's Lot
The Shining
The Stand
The Dead Zone
Firestarter
Cujo
THE DARK TOWER I:
The Gunslinger
Christine
Pet Sematary
Cycle of the Werewolf
The Talisman
(with Peter Straub)
It
The Eyes of the Dragon
Misery
The Tommyknockers
THE DARK TOWER II:
*The Drawing
of the Three*
THE DARK TOWER III:
The Waste Lands
The Dark Half
Needful Things
Gerald's Game
Dolores Claiborne
Insomnia
Rose Madder
Desperation
The Green Mile
THE DARK TOWER IV:
Wizard and Glass
Bag of Bones
The Girl Who Loved Tom
Gordon

Dreamcatcher
Black House
(with Peter Straub)
From a Buick 8

AS RICHARD BACHMAN

Rage
The Long Walk
Roadwork
The Running Man
Thinner
The Regulators

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Different Seasons
Skeleton Crew
Four Past Midnight
Nightmares and
Dreamscapes
Hearts in Atlantis
Everything's Eventual

NONFICTION

Danse Macabre
On Writing

SCREENPLAYS

Creepshow
Cat's Eye
Silver Bullet
Maximum Overdrive
Pet Sematary
Golden Years
Sleepwalkers
The Stand
The Shining
Rose Red
Storm of the Century

STEPHEN KING

THE
DEAD ZONE



A SIGNET BOOK

SIGNET

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

What follows is a work of fiction. All of the major characters are made up. Because it plays against the historical backdrop of the last decade, the reader may recognize certain actual figures who played their parts in the 1970s. It is my hope that none of these figures has been misrepresented. There is no third congressional district in New Hampshire and no town of Castle Rock in Maine. Chud Chatsworth's reading lesson is drawn from *Fire Brain*, by Max Brand, originally published by DODD, MEAD and Company, Inc.

THIS IS FOR OWEN I LOVE YOU, OLD BEAR

Prologue

1

By the time he graduated from college, John Smith had forgotten all about the bad fall he took on the ice that January day in 1953. In fact, he would have been hard put to remember it by the time he graduated from grammar school. And his mother and father never knew about it at all.

They were skating on a cleared patch of Runaround Pond in Durham. The bigger boys were playing hockey with old taped sticks and using a couple of potato baskets for goals. The little kids were just farting around the way little kids have done since time immemorial—their ankles bowing comically in and out, their breath puffing in the frosty twenty-degree air. At one corner of the cleared ice two rubber tires burned sootily, and a few parents sat nearby, watching their children. The age of the snowmobile was still distant and winter fun still consisted of exercising your body rather than a gasoline engine.

Johnny had walked down from his house, just over the Pownal line, with his skates hung over his shoulder. At six, he was a pretty fair skater. Not good enough to join in the big kids' hockey game yet, but able to skate rings around most of the other first graders, who were always pinwheeling their arms for balance or sprawling on their butts.

Now he skated slowly around the outer edge of the clear patch, wishing he could go backward like Timmy Benedix, listening to the ice thud and crackle mysteriously under the snow cover farther out, also listening to the shouts of the hockey players, the rumble of a pulp truck crossing the bridge on its way to U.S. Gypsum in Lisbon Falls, the murmur of conversation from the adults. He was very glad to be alive on that cold, fair winter day. Nothing was wrong with him, nothing troubled his mind, he wanted nothing ... except to be able to skate backward, like Timmy Benedix.

He skated past the fire and saw that two or three of the grown-ups were passing around a bottle of booze.

“Gimme some of that!” he shouted to Chuck Spier, who was bundled up in a big lumberjack shirt and green flannel snowpants.

Chuck grinned at him. “Get outta here, kid, I hear your mother callin you.”

Grinning, six-year-old Johnny Smith skated on. And on the road side of the skating area, he saw Timmy Benedix himself coming down the slope, with his father behind him.

“Timmy!” he shouted. “Watch this!”

He turned around and began to skate clumsily backward. Without realizing it, he was skating in the area of the hockey game.

“Hey kid!” someone shouted. “Get out the way!”

Johnny didn't hear. He was *doing* it! He was skating backward! He had caught the rhythm—all at once. It was in a kind of sway of the legs ...

He looked down, fascinated, to see what his legs were doing.

The big kids' hockey puck, old and scarred and gouged around the edges, buzzed past him, unseen. One of the big kids, not a very good skater, was chasing it with what was almost a blind, headlong plunge.

Chuck Spier saw it coming. He rose to his feet and shouted, “*Johnny! Watch out!*”

John raised his head—and the next moment the clumsy skater, all one hundred and sixty pounds of him, crashed into little John Smith at full speed.

Johnny went flying, arms out. A bare moment later his head connected with the ice and he blacked out.

Blacked out ... black ice ... blacked out ... black ice ... black. Black.

They told him he had blacked out. All he was really sure of was that strange repeating thought and suddenly looking up at a circle of faces—scared hockey players, worried adults, curious little kids. Timmy Benedix smirking. Chuck Spier was holding him.

Black ice. Black.

“What?” Chuck asked. “Johnny ... you okay? You took a hell of a knock.”

“Black,” Johnny said gutturally. “Black ice. Don’t jump it no more, Chuck.”

Chuck looked around, a little scared, then back at Johnny. He touched the large knot that was rising on the boy’s forehead.

“I’m sorry,” the clumsy hockey player said. “I never even saw him. Little kids are supposed to stay away from the hockey. It’s the rules.” He looked around uncertainly for support.

“Johnny?” Chuck said. He didn’t like the look of Johnny’s eyes. They were dark and faraway, distant and cold. “Are you okay?”

“Don’t jump it no more,” Johnny said, unaware of what he was saying, thinking only of ice—black ice. “The explosion. The acid.”

“Think we ought to take him to the doctor?” Chuck asked Bill Gendron. “He don’t know what he’s sayin.”

“Give him a minute,” Bill advised.

They gave him a minute, and Johnny’s head did clear. “I’m okay,” he muttered. “Lemme up.” Timmy Benedix was still smirking, damn him. Johnny decided he would show Timmy a thing or two. He would be skating rings around Timmy by the end of the week ... backward *and* forward.

“You come on over and sit down by the fire for a while,” Chuck said. “You took a hell of a knock.”

Johnny let them help him over to the fire. The smell of melting rubber was strong and pungent, making him feel a little sick to his stomach. He had a headache. He felt the lump over his left eye curiously. It felt as though it stuck out a mile.

“Can you remember who you are and everything?” Bill asked.

“Sure. Sure I can. I’m okay.”

“Who’s your dad and mom?”

“Herb and Vera. Herb and Vera Smith.”

Bill and Chuck looked at each other and shrugged.

“I think he’s okay,” Chuck said, and then, for the third time, “but he sure took a hell of a knock, didn’t he? Wow.”

“Kids,” Bill said, looking fondly out at his eight-year-old twin girls, skating hand in hand, and then back at Johnny. “It probably would have killed a grown-up.”

“Not a Polack,” Chuck replied, and they both burst out laughing. The bottle of Bushmill’s began making its rounds again.

Ten minutes later Johnny was back out on the ice, his headache already fading, the knotted bruise standing out on his forehead like a weird brand. By the time he went home for lunch, he had forgotten all about the fall, and blacking out, in the joy of having discovered how to skate backward.

“God’s mercy!” Vera Smith said when she saw him. “How did you get that?”

“Fell down,” he said, and began to slurp up Campbell’s tomato soup.

“Are you all right, John?” she asked, touching it gently.

“Sure, Mom.” He was, too—except for the occasional bad dreams that came over the course of the next month or so ... the bad dreams and a tendency to sometimes get very dozy at times of the day when he had never been dozy before. And that stopped happening at about the same time the bad dreams stopped happening.

He was all right.

In mid-February, Chuck Spier got up one morning and found that the battery of his old ’48 De Soto was dead. He tried to jump it from his farm truck. As he attached the second clamp to the De Soto battery, it exploded in his face, showering him with fragments and corrosive battery acid. He lost an eye. Vera said it was God’s own mercy he hadn’t lost them both. Johnny thought it was a terrible tragedy and went with his father to visit Chuck in the Lewiston General Hospital a week after the accident. The sight of Big Chuck lying in that hospital bed, looking oddly wasted and small, had shaken Johnny badly—and that night he had dreamed it was *him* lying there.

From time to time in the years afterward, Johnny had hunches—he would know what the new record on the radio was going to be before the DJ played it, that sort of thing—but he never connected these with his accident on the ice. By then he had forgotten it.

And the hunches were never that startling, or even very frequent. It was not until the night of the county fair and the mask that anything very startling happened. Before the second accident.

Later, he thought of that often.

The thing with the Wheel of Fortune had happened *before* the second accident.

Like a warning from his own childhood.

2

The traveling salesman crisscrossed Nebraska and Iowa tirelessly under the burning sun in the summer of 1955. He sat behind the wheel of a ’53 Mercury sedan that already had better than seven thousand miles on it. The Merc was developing a marked wheeze in the valves. He was a big man who still had the look of a comfed midwestern boy on him; in that summer of 1955, only four months after his Omaha house-painting business had gone broke, Greg Stillson was only twenty-two years old.

The trunk and the back seat of the Mercury were filled with cartons, and the cartons were filled with books. Most of them were Bibles. They came in all shapes and sizes. There was your basic item, The American TruthWay Bible, illustrated with sixteen color plates, bound with airplane glue, for \$1.69 and sure to hold together for at least ten months; then for the poorer pocketbook there was The American TruthWay New Testament for sixty-five cents, with no color plates but with the words of Our Lord Jesus printed in red; and for the big spender there was The American TruthWay Deluxe Word of God for \$19.95, bound in imitation white leather, the owner’s name to be stenciled in gold leaf on the front cover, twenty-four color plates, and a section in the middle to note down birth dates, marriages, and burials. And the Deluxe Word of God might remain in one piece for as long as twenty years. There was also a carton of paperbacks entitled *America the TruthWay: The Communist-Jewish Conspiracy Against Our United States*.

Greg did better with this paperback, printed on cheap pulp stock, than with all the Bibles put together. It told all about how the Rothschilds and the Roosevelts and the Greenblatts were taking over

the U.S. economy and the U.S. government. There were graphs showing how the Jews related directly to the Communist-Marxist-Leninist-Trotskyite axis, and from there to the Antichrist Himself.

The days of McCarthyism were not long over in Washington; in the Midwest Joe McCarthy's star had not yet set, and Margaret Chase Smith of Maine was known as "that bitch" for her famous Declaration of Conscience. In addition to the stuff about Communism, Greg Stillson's rural farm constituency seemed to have a morbid interest in the idea that the Jews were running the world.

Now Greg turned into the dusty driveway of a farmhouse some twenty miles west of Ames, Iowa. It had a deserted, shut-up look to it—the shades down and the barn doors closed—but you could never tell until you tried. That motto had served Greg Stillson well in the two years or so since he and his mother had moved up to Omaha from Oklahoma. The house-painting business had been no great shakes, but he had needed to get the taste of Jesus out of his mouth for a little while, you should pardon the small blasphemy. But now he had come back home—not on the pulpit or revival side this time, though, and it was something of a relief to be out of the miracle business at last.

He opened the car door and as he stepped out into the dust of the driveway a big mean farm dog advanced out of the barn, its ears laid back. It volleyed barks. "Hello, pooch," Greg said in his loudest pleasant, but carrying voice—at twenty-two it was already the voice of a trained spellbinder.

The pooch didn't respond to the friendliness in his voice. It kept coming, big and mean, intent on an early lunch of traveling salesman. Greg sat back down in the car, closed the door, and honked the horn twice. Sweat rolled down his face and turned his white linen suit darker gray in circular patches under his arms and in a branching treeshape up his back. He honked again, but there was no response. The clodhoppers had loaded themselves into their International Harvester or their Studebaker and gone into town.

Greg smiled.

Instead of shifting into reverse and backing out of the driveway, he reached behind him and produced a Flit gun—only this one was loaded with ammonia instead of Flit.

Pulling back the plunger, Greg stepped out of the car again, smiling easily. The dog, which had settled down on its haunches, immediately got up again and began to advance on him, growling.

Greg kept smiling. "That's right, poochie," he said in that pleasant, carrying voice. "You just come on. Come on and get it." He hated these ugly farm dogs that ran their half-acre of dooryard like arrogant little Caesars: they told you something about their masters as well.

"Fucking bunch of clodhoppers," he said under his breath. He was still smiling. "Come on, doggie."

The dog came. It tensed its haunches down to spring at him. In the barn a cow mooed, and the wind rustled tenderly through the corn. As it leaped, Greg's smile turned to a hard and bitter grimace. He depressed the Flit plunger and sprayed a stinging cloud of ammonia droplets directly into the dog's eyes and nose.

Its angry barking turned immediately to short, agonized yips, and then, as the bite of ammonia really settled in, to howls of pain. It turned tail at once; a watchdog no longer but only a vanquished cur.

Greg Stillson's face had darkened. His eyes had drawn down to ugly slits. He stepped forward rapidly and administered a whistling kick to the dog's haunches with one of his Stride-King airtight shoes. The dog gave a high, wailing sound, and, driven by its pain and fear, it sealed its own doom by turning around to give battle to the author of its misery rather than running for the barn.

With a snarl, it struck out blindly, snagged the right cuff of Greg's white linen pants, and tore it.

"You sonofabitch!" he cried out in startled anger, and kicked the dog again, this time hard enough to send it rolling in the dust. He advanced on the dog once more, kicked it again, still yelling. Now the

dog, eyes watering, nose in fiery agony, one rib broken and another badly sprung, realized its danger from this madman, but it was too late.

Greg Stillson chased it across the dusty farmyard, panting and shouting, sweat rolling down his cheeks, and kicked the dog until it was screaming and barely able to drag itself along through the dust. It was bleeding in half a dozen places. It was dying.

“Shouldn’t have bit me,” Greg whispered. “You hear? You hear me? You shouldn’t have bit me you dipshit dog. No one gets in my way. You hear? No one.” He delivered another kick with one blood-spattered airtip, but the dog could do no more than make a low choking sound. Not much satisfaction in that. Greg’s head ached. It was the sun. Chasing the dog around in the hot sun. Be lucky not to pass out.

He closed his eyes for a moment, breathing rapidly, the sweat rolling down his face like tears and a nestling in his crew-cut like gems, the broken dog dying at his feet. Colored specks of light, pulsing in rhythm with his heartbeat, floated across the darkness behind his lids.

His head ached.

Sometimes he wondered if he was going crazy. Like now. He had meant to give the dog a burst from the ammonia Flit gun, drive it back into the barn so he could leave his business card in the crack of the screen door. Come back some other time and make a sale. Now look. Look at this mess. Couldn’t very well leave his card now, could he?

He opened his eyes. The dog lay at his feet, panting rapidly, drizzling blood from its snout. As Greg Stillson looked down, it licked his shoe humbly, as if to acknowledge that it had been bested, and then it went back to the business of dying.

“Shouldn’t have torn my pants,” he said to it. “Pants cost me five bucks, you shitpoke dog.”

He had to get out of here. Wouldn’t do him any good if Clem Kadiddlehopper and his wife and the six kids came back from town now in their Studebaker and saw Fido dying out here with the bad old salesman standing over him. He’d lose his job. The American TruthWay Company didn’t hire salesmen who killed dogs that belonged to Christians.

Giggling nervously, Greg went back to the Mercury, got in, and backed rapidly out of the driveway. He turned east on the dirt road that ran straight as a string through the corn, and was soon cruising along at sixty-five, leaving a dust plume two miles long behind him.

He most assuredly didn’t want to lose the job. Not yet. He was making good money—in addition to the wrinkles the American TruthWay Company knew about, Greg had added a few of his own that they didn’t know about. He was making it now. Besides, traveling around, he got to meet a lot of people and a lot of girls. It was a good life, except—

Except he wasn’t content.

He drove on, his head throbbing. No, he just wasn’t content. He felt that he was meant for bigger things than driving around the Midwest and selling Bibles and doctoring the commission forms in order to make an extra two bucks a day. He felt that he was meant for ... for ...

For greatness.

Yes, that was it, that was surely it. A few weeks ago he had taken some girl up in the hayloft, he and the folks had been in Davenport selling a truckload of chickens, she had started off by asking if he would like a glass of lemonade and one thing had just led to another and after he’d had her she said it was almost like getting diddled by a preacher and he had slapped her, he didn’t know why. He had slapped her and then left.

Well, no.

Actually, he had slapped her three or four times. Until she had cried and screamed for someone

come and help her and then he had stopped and somehow—he had had to use every ounce of the char God had given him—he had made it up with her. His head had been aching then, too, the pulsing specks of brightness shooting and caroming across his field of vision, and he tried to tell himself was the heat, the explosive heat in the hayloft, but it wasn't just the heat that made his head ache. was the same thing he had felt in the dooryard when the dog tore his pants, something dark and crazy

“I'm not crazy,” he said aloud in the car. He unrolled the window swiftly, letting in summer heat and the smell of dust and corn and manure. He turned on the radio loud and caught a Patti Page song. His headache went back a little bit.

It was all a matter of keeping yourself under control and—and keeping your record clean. If you did those things, they couldn't touch you. And he was getting better at both of those things. He no longer had the dreams about his father so often, the dreams where his father was standing above him with his hard hat cocked back on his head, bellowing: “*You're no good, runt! You're no fucking good!*”

He didn't have the dreams so much because they just weren't true. He wasn't a runt anymore. Okay, he had been sick a lot as a kid, not much size, but he had gotten his growth, he was taking care of his mother—

And his father was dead. His father couldn't see. He couldn't make his father eat his words because he had died in an oil-derrick blowout and he was dead and once, just once, Greg would like to dig him up and scream into his moldering *face* *You were wrong, dad, you were wrong about me!* and then give him a good kick the way—

The way he had kicked the dog.

The headache was back, lowering.

“I'm not crazy,” he said again below the sound of the music. His mother had told him often that he was meant for something big, something great, and Greg believed it. It was just a matter of getting those things—like slapping the girl or kicking the dog—under control and keeping his record clean.

Whatever his greatness was, he would know it when it came to him. Of that he felt quite sure.

He thought of the dog again, and this time the thought brought a bare crescent of a smile, without humor or compassion.

His greatness was on the way. It might still be years ahead—he was young, sure, nothing wrong with being young as long as you understood you couldn't have everything all at once. As long as you believed it would come eventually. He did believe that.

And God and Sonny Jesus help anyone that got in his way.

Greg Stillson cocked a sunburned elbow out the window and began to whistle along with the radio. He stepped on the go-pedal, walked that old Mercury up to seventy, and rolled down the straight Iowa farm road toward whatever future there might be.

The Wheel of Fortune

Chapter 1

1

The two things Sarah remembered about that night later were his run of luck at the Wheel of Fortune and the mask. But as time passed, years of it, it was the mask she thought about—when she couldn't bring herself to think about that horrible night at all.

He lived in an apartment house in Cleaves Mills. Sarah got there at quarter to eight, parking around the corner, and buzzing up to be let in. They were taking her car tonight because Johnny's was laid up at Tibbets' Garage in Hampden with a frozen wheel-bearing or something like that. Something expensive, Johnny had told her over the phone, and then he had laughed a typical Johnny Smith laugh. Sarah would have been in tears if it had been her car—her *pocketbook*.

Sarah went through the foyer to the stairs, past the bulletin board that hung there. It was dotted with file cards advertising motorbikes, stereo components, typing services, and appeals from people who needed rides to Kansas or California, people who were driving to Florida and needed riders to share the driving and help pay for the gas. But tonight the board was dominated by a large placard showing a clenched fist against an angry red background suggesting fire. The one word on the poster was STRIKE! It was late October of 1970.

Johnny had the front apartment on the second floor—the penthouse, he called it—where you could stand in your tux like Ramon Navarro, a big slug of Ripple wine in a balloon glass, and look down upon the vast, beating heart of Cleaves Mills: its hurrying after-show crowds, its bustling taxis, its neon signs. There are almost seven thousand stories in the naked city. This has been one of them.

Actually Cleaves Mills was mostly a main street with a stop-and-go light at the intersection (which turned into a blinker after 6 P.M.), about two dozen stores, and a small moccasin factory. Like most of the towns surrounding Orono, where the University of Maine was, its real industry was supplying the things students consumed—beer, wine, gas, rock 'n' roll music, fast food, dope, groceries, housing, movies. The movie house was The Shade. It showed art films and '40's nostalgia flicks when school was in. In the summertime it reverted to Clint Eastwood spaghetti Westerns.

Johnny and Sarah were both out of school a year, and both were teaching at Cleaves Mills High, one of the few high schools in the area that had not consolidated into a three- or four-town district. University faculty and administration as well as university students used Cleaves as their bedroom community and the town had an enviable tax base. It also had a fine high school with a brand-new media wing. The townies might bitch about the university crowd with their smart talk and their Commie marches to end the war and their meddling in town politics, but they had never said no to the tax dollars that were paid annually on the gracious faculty homes and the apartment buildings in the area some of the students called Fudgey Acres and others called Sleaze Alley.

Sarah rapped on his door and Johnny's voice, oddly muffled, called, "It's open, Sarah!"

Frowning a little, she pushed the door open. Johnny's apartment was in total darkness except for the fitful yellow glow of the blinker half a block up the street. The furniture was so many humped black shadows.

"Johnny ... ?"

Wondering if a fuse had blown or something, she took a tentative step forward—and then the face appeared before her, floating in the darkness, a horrible face out of a nightmare. It glowed a spectral rotting green. One eye was wide open, seeming to stare at her in wounded fear. The other was squeezed shut in a sinister leer. The left half of the face, the half with the open eye, appeared to be normal. But the right half was the face of a monster, drawn and inhuman, the thick lips drawn back to reveal snaggle teeth that were also glowing.

Sarah uttered a strangled little shriek and took a stumble-step backward. Then the lights came on and it was just Johnny's apartment again instead of some black limbo, Nixon on the wall trying to sell used cars, the braided rug Johnny's mother had made on the floor, the wine bottles made into candle bases. The face stopped glowing and she saw it was a dime-store Halloween mask, nothing more. Johnny's blue eye was twinkling out of the open eyehole at her.

He stripped it off and stood smiling amiably at her, dressed in faded jeans and a brown sweater.

"Happy Halloween, Sarah," he said.

Her heart was still racing. He had really frightened her. "Very funny," she said, and turned to go. She didn't like being scared like that.

He caught her in the doorway. "Hey ... I'm sorry."

"Well you ought to be." She looked at him coldly—or tried to. Her anger was already melting away. You just couldn't stay mad at Johnny, that was the thing. Whether she loved him or not—a thing she was still trying to puzzle out—it was impossible to be unhappy with him for very long, or to harbor a feeling of resentment. She wondered if anyone had ever succeeded in harboring a grudge against Johnny Smith, and the thought was so ridiculous she just had to smile.

"There, that's better. Man, I thought you were going to walk out on me."

"I'm not a man."

He cast his eyes upon her. "So I've noticed."

She was wearing a bulky fur coat—imitation raccoon or something vulgar like that—and his innocent lechery made her smile again. "In this thing you couldn't tell."

"Oh, yeah, I can tell," he said. He put an arm around her and kissed her. At first she wasn't going to kiss back, but of course she did.

"I'm sorry I scared you," he said, and rubbed her nose companionably with his own before letting her go. He held up the mask. "I thought you'd get a kick out of it. I'm gonna wear it in homeroom Friday."

"Oh, Johnny, that won't be very good for discipline."

"I'll muddle through somehow," he said with a grin. And the hell of it was, he would.

She came to school every day wearing big, schoolmarmish glasses, her hair drawn back into a bun so severe it seemed on the verge of a scream. She wore her skirts just above the knee in a season when most of the girls wore them just below the edges of their underpants (and my legs are better than any of theirs, Sarah thought resentfully). She maintained alphabetical seating charts which, by the law of averages, at least, should have kept the troublemakers away from each other, and she resolutely sent unruly pupils to the assistant principal, her reasoning being that he was getting an extra five hundred dollars a year to act as ramrod and she wasn't. And still her days were a constant struggle with that freshman teacher demon. Discipline. More disturbing, she had begun to sense that there was a collective unspoken jury—a kind of school consciousness, maybe—that went into deliberations over every new teacher, and that the verdict being returned on her was not so good.

Johnny, on the face of it, appeared to be the antithesis of everything a good teacher should be. He ambled from class to class in an agreeable sort of daze, often showing up tardy because he had stopped

to chat with someone between bells. He let the kids sit where they wanted to so that the same face was never in the same seat from day to day (and the class thugs invariably gravitated to the back of the room). Sarah would not have been able to learn their names that way until March, but Johnny seemed to have them down pat already.

He was a tall man who had a tendency to slouch, and the kids called him Frankenstein. Johnny seemed amused rather than outraged by this. And yet his classes were mostly quiet and well-behaved; there were few skippers (Sarah had a constant problem with kids cutting class), and that same justice seemed to be coming back in his favor. He was the sort of teacher who, in another ten years, would have the school yearbook dedicated to him. She just wasn't. And sometimes wondering why drove her crazy.

"You want a beer before we go? Glass of wine? Anything?"

"No, but I hope you're going well-heeled," she said, taking his arm and deciding not to be maudlin anymore. "I always eat at least three hot dogs. Especially when it's the last county fair of the year. They were going to Esty, twenty miles north of Cleaves Mills, a town whose only dubious claim to fame was that it held ABSOLUTELY THE LAST AGRICULTURAL FAIR OF THE YEAR IN NEW ENGLAND. The fair would close Friday night, on Halloween.

"Considering Friday's payday, I'm doing good. I got eight bucks."

"Oh ... my ... God," Sarah said, rolling her eyes. "I always knew if I kept myself pure I'd meet a sugar daddy someday."

He smiled and nodded. "Us pimps make biiiig money, baby. Just let me get my coat and we're off."

She looked after him with exasperated affection, and the voice that had been surfacing in her mind more and more often—in the shower, while she was reading a book or prep-ping a class or making her supper for one—came up again, like one of those thirty-second public-service spots on TV. *He's a very nice man and all that, easy to get along with, fun, he never makes you cry. But is that love? Or just mean, is that all there is to it? Even when you learned to ride your two-wheeler, you had to fall off a few times and scrape both knees. Call it a rite of passage. And that was just a little thing.*

"Gonna use the bathroom," he called to her.

"Uh-huh." She smiled a little. Johnny was one of those people who invariably mentioned the nature calls—God knew why.

She went over to the window and looked out on Main Street. Kids were pulling into the parking lot next to O'Mike's, the local pizza-and-beer hangout. She suddenly wished she were back with them, one of them, with this confusing stuff behind her—or still ahead of her. The university was safe. It was a kind of never-never land where everybody, even the teachers, could be a part of Peter Pan's band and never grow up. And there would always be a Nixon or an Agnew to play Captain Hook.

She had met Johnny when they started teaching in September, but she had known his face from the Ed courses they had shared. She had been pinned to a Delta Tau Delta, and none of the judgments that had applied to Johnny had applied to Dan. He had been almost flawlessly handsome, witty in a sharp and restless way that always made her a trifle uncomfortable, a heavy drinker, a passionate lover. Sometimes when he drank he turned mean. She remembered a night in Bangor's Brass Rail when that had happened. The man in the next booth had taken joking issue with something Dan had been saying about the UMO football team, and Dan had asked him if he would like to go home with his head clutched backward. The man had apologized, but Dan hadn't wanted an apology; he had wanted a fight. He had begun to make personal remarks about the woman with the other man. Sarah had put her hand on Dan's arm and asked him to stop. Dan had shaken her hand off and had looked at her with a queer, flickering light in his grayish eyes that made any other words she might have spoken dry up in her throat.

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