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Skeleton Crew (English Edition)



Par Stephen King
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Par Stephen King : Skeleton Crew (English Edition) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Skeleton Crew (English Edition):

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Description : Description du produitTwenty-two stories from the "wildly imaginative" #1 Bestselling Author In this brilliant collection of stories, Stephen King takes readers down paths that only he could imagine....A supermarket becomes the place where humanity takes its last stand against unholy destruction...a trip to the attic turns into a journey to hell...a woman driver finds a scary shortcut to paradise...an idyllic lake harbors a bottomless evil...and a desert island is the scene of the most terrifying struggle for survival ever waged.

Prsentation de l'diteurFeatures The Mist now a TV series event on Spike The #1 New York Times bestseller and winner of the 1986 Locus Award for Best Collection, Skeleton Crew is Stephen King at his best (The Denver Post)a terrifying, mesmerizing collection of stories from the outer limits of one of the greatest imaginations of our time.Wildly imaginative, delightfully diabolicalKing once again proves to be the

consummate storyteller (The Associated Press). A supermarket becomes the place where humanity makes its last stand against destruction. A trip to the attic becomes a journey to hell. A woman driving a Jaguar finds a scary shortcut to paradise. An idyllic lake harbors a bottomless evil. And a desert island is the scene of the most terrifying struggle for survival ever waged. This wonderfully gruesome collection (The New York Times Book) includes: -The Mist -Here There Be Tygers -The Monkey -Cain Rose Up -Mrs. Todds Shortcut -The Jaunt -The Wedding Gig -Paranoid: A Chant -The Raft- Word Processor of the Gods -The Man Who Would Not Shake Hands -Beachworld -The Reapers Image -Nona -For Owen -Survivor Type - Uncle Ottos Truck -Morning Deliveries (Milkman No. 1) -Big Wheels: a Tale of the Laundry Game (Milkman No. 2) -Gramma -The Ballad of the Flexible Bullet -The Reach King is best known for his iconic, immersive long novels, but he is also a master of the short story, and this is a magnificent collection..comIn the introduction to Skeleton Crew (1985), his second collection of stories, King pokes fun at his penchant for "literary elephantiasis," makes scatological jokes about his muse, confesses how much money he makes (gross and net), and tells a story about getting arrested one time when he was "suffused with the sort of towering, righteous rage that only drunk undergraduates can feel." He winds up with an invitation to a scary voyage: "Grab onto my arm now. Hold tight. We are going into a number of dark places, but I think I know the way." And he sure does. Skeleton Crew contains a superb short novel ("The Mist") that alone is worth the price of admission, plus two forgettable poems and 20 short stories on such themes as an evil toy monkey, a human-eating water slick, a machine that avenges murder, and unnatural creatures that inhabit the thick woods near Castle Rock, Maine. The short tales range from simply enjoyable to surprisingly good. In addition to "The Mist," the real standout is "The Reach," a beautifully subtle story about a great-grandmother who was born on a small island off the coast of Maine and has lived there her whole life. She has never been across "the Reach," the body of water between island and mainland. This is the story that King fans give to their friends who don't read horror in order to show them how literate, how charming a storyteller he can be.

Don't miss it. --Fiona WebsterExtraitSkeleton Crew The Mist I. The Coming of the Storm This is what happened. On the night that the worst heat wave in northern New England history finally broke the night of July 19 the entire western Maine region was lashed with the most vicious thunderstorms I have ever seen. We lived on Long Lake, and we saw the first of the storms beating its way across the water toward us just before dark. For an hour before, the air had been utterly still. The American flag that my father put up on our boathouse in 1936 lay limp against its pole. Not even its hem fluttered. The heat was like a solid thing, and it seemed as deep as sullen quarry-water. That afternoon the three of us had gone swimming, but the water was no relief unless you went out deep. Neither Steffy nor I wanted to go deep because Billy couldn't. Billy is five. We ate a cold supper at five-thirty, picking listlessly at ham sandwiches and potato salad out on the deck that faces the lake. Nobody seemed to want anything but Pepsi, which was in a steel bucket of ice cubes. After supper Billy went out back to play on his monkey bars for a while. Steff and I sat without talking much, smoking and looking across the sullen flat mirror of the lake to Harrison on the far side. A few powerboats droned back and forth. The evergreens over there looked dusty and beaten. In the west, great purple thunderheads were slowly building up, massing like an army. Lightning flashed inside them. Next door, Brent Nortons radio, tuned to that classical-music station that broadcasts from the top of Mount Washington, sent out a loud bray of static each time the lightning flashed. Norton was a lawyer from New Jersey and his place on Long Lake was only a summer cottage with no furnace or insulation. Two years before, we had a boundary dispute that finally wound up in county court. I won. Norton claimed I won because he was an out-of-towner. There was no love lost between us. Steff sighed and fanned the top of her breasts with the edge of her halter. I doubted if it cooled her off much but it improved the view a lot. I don't want to scare you, I said, but there's a bad storm on the way, I think. She looked at me doubtfully. There were thunderheads last night and the night before, David. They just broke up. They won't do that tonight. No? If it gets bad enough, we're going to go downstairs. How bad do you think it can get? My dad was the first to build a year-round home on this side of the lake. When he was hardly more than a kid he and his brothers put up a summer place where the house now stood, and in 1938 a summer storm knocked it flat, stone walls and all. Only the boathouse escaped. A year later he started the big house. It's the trees that do the damage in a bad blow. They get old, and the wind knocks them over. It's mother nature's way of cleaning house periodically. I don't really know, I said, truthfully enough. I had only heard stories about the great storm of thirty-eight. But the wind can come off the lake like an express train. Billy came back a while later, complaining that the monkey bars were no fun because he was all sweated up. I ruffled his hair and gave him another Pepsi. More work for the dentist. The thunderheads were getting closer, pushing away the blue.

There was no doubt now that a storm was coming. Norton had turned off his radio. Billy sat between his mother and me, watching the sky, fascinated. Thunder boomed, rolling slowly across the lake and then echoing back again. The clouds twisted and rolled, now black, now purple, now veined, now black again. They gradually overspread the lake, and I could see a delicate caul of rain extending down from them. It was still a distance away. As we watched, it was probably raining on Bolsters Mills, or maybe even Norway. The air began to move, jerkily at first, lifting the flag and then dropping it again. It began to freshen and grew steady, first cooling the perspiration on our bodies and then seeming to freeze it. That was when I saw the silver veil rolling across the lake. It blotted out Harrison in seconds and then came straight at us. The powerboats had vacated the scene. Billy stood up from his chair, which was a miniature replica of our directors chairs, complete with his name printed on the back. Daddy! Look! Lets go in, I said. I stood up and put my arm around his shoulders. But do you see it? Dad, what is it? A water-cyclone. Lets go in. Steff threw a quick, startled glance at my face and then said, Come on, Billy. Do what your father says. We went in through the sliding glass doors that give on the living room. I slid the door shut on its track and paused for another look out. The silver veil was three-quarters of the way across the lake. It had resolved itself into a crazily spinning teacup between the lowering black sky and the surface of the water, which had gone the color of lead streaked with white chrome. The lake had begun to look eerily like the ocean, with high waves rolling in and sending spume up from the docks and breakwaters. Out in the middle, big whitecaps were tossing their heads back and forth. Watching the water-cyclone was hypnotic. It was nearly on top of us when lightning flashed so brightly that it printed everything on my eyes in negative for thirty seconds afterward. The telephone gave out a startled ting! and I turned to see my wife and son standing directly in front of the big picture window that gives us a panoramic view of the lake to the northwest. One of those terrible visions came to me I think they are reserved exclusively for husbands and fathers of the picture window blowing in with a low hard coughing sound and sending jagged arrows of glass into my wifes bare stomach, into my boys face and neck. The horrors of the Inquisition are nothing compared to the fates your mind can imagine for your loved ones. I grabbed them both hard and jerked them away. What the hell are you doing? Get away from there! Steff gave me a startled glance. Billy only looked at me as if he had been partially awakened from a deep dream. I led them into the kitchen and hit the light switch. The phone ting-alinged again. Then the wind came. It was as if the house had taken off like a 747. It was a high, breathless whistling, sometimes deepening to a bass roar before glissading up to a whooping scream. Go downstairs, I told Steff, and now I had to shout to make myself heard. Directly over the house thunder whacked mammoth planks together and Billy shrank against my leg. You come too! Steff yelled back. I nodded and made shooining gestures. I had to pry Billy off my leg. Go with your mother. I want to get some candles in case the lights go off. He went with her, and I started opening cabinets. Candles are funny things, you know. You lay them by every spring, knowing that a summer storm may knock out the power. And when the time comes, they hide. I was pawing through the fourth cabinet, past the half-ounce of grass that Steff and I bought four years ago and had still not smoked much of, past Billys wind-up set of chattering teeth from the Auburn Novelty Shop, past the drifts of photos Steffy kept forgetting to glue in our album. I looked under a Sears catalogue and behind a Kewpie doll from Taiwan that I had won at the Fryeburg Fair knocking over wooden milk bottles with tennis balls. I found the candles behind the Kewpie doll with its glazed dead mans eyes. They were still wrapped in their cellophane. As my hand closed around them the lights went out and the only electricity was the stuff in the sky. The dining room was lit in a series of shutterflashes that were white and purple. Downstairs I heard Billy start to cry and the low murmur of Steff soothing him. I had to have one more look at the storm. The water-cyclone had either passed us or broken up when it reached the shoreline, but I still couldnt see twenty yards out onto the lake. The water was in complete turmoil. I saw someones dock the Jassers, maybe hurry by with its main supports alternately turned up to the sky and buried in the churning water. I went downstairs. Billy ran to me and clung to my legs. I lifted him up and gave him a hug. Then I lit the candles. We sat in the guest room down the hall from my little studio and looked at each others faces in the flickering yellow glow and listened to the storm roar and bash at our house. About twenty minutes later we heard a ripping, rending crash as one of the big pines went down nearby. Then there was a lull. Is it over? Steff asked. Maybe, I said. Maybe only for a while. We went upstairs, each of us carrying a candle, like monks going to vespers. Billy carried his proudly and carefully. Carrying a candle, carrying the fire, was a very big deal for him. It helped him forget about being afraid. It was too dark to see what damage had been done around the house. It was past Billys bedtime, but neither of us suggested putting him in. We sat in the living room, listened to the wind, and looked at the lightning. About an hour later it began to crank

up again. For three weeks the temperature had been over ninety, and on six of those twenty-one days the National Weather Service station at the Portland Jetport had reported temperatures of over one hundred degrees. Queer weather. Coupled with the grueling winter we had come through and the late spring, some people had dragged out that old chestnut about the long-range results of the fifties A-bomb tests again. That, and of course, the end of the world. The oldest chestnut of them all. The second squall wasn't so hard, but we heard the crash of several trees weakened by the first onslaught. As the wind began to die down again, one thudded heavily on the roof, like a fist dropped on a coffin lid. Billy jumped and looked apprehensively upward. It'll hold, champ, I said. Billy smiled nervously. Around ten o'clock the last squall came. It was bad. The wind howled almost as loudly as it had the first time, and lightning seemed to be flashing all around us. More trees fell, and there was a splintering crash down by the water that made Steff utter a low cry. Billy had gone to sleep on her lap. David, what was that? I think it was the boathouse. Oh. Oh, Jesus. Steffy, I want us to go downstairs again. I took Billy in my arms and stood up with him. Steff's eyes were big and frightened. David, are we going to be all right? Yes. Really? Yes. We went downstairs. Ten minutes later, as the final squall peaked, there was a splintering crash from upstairs the picture window. So maybe my vision earlier hadn't been so crazy after all. Steff, who had been dozing, woke up with a little shriek, and Billy stirred uneasily in the guest bed. The rain will come in, she said. It'll ruin the furniture. If it does, it does. It's insured. That doesn't make it any better, she said in an upset, scolding voice. Your mother's dresser... our new sofa... the color TV... Shhh, I said. Go to sleep. I can't, she said, and five minutes later she had. I stayed awake for another half hour with one lit candle for company, listening to the thunder walk and talk outside. I had a feeling that there were going to be a lot of people from the lakefront communities calling their insurance agents in the morning, a lot of chainsaws burring as cottage owners cut up the trees that had fallen on their roofs and battered through their windows, and a lot of orange CMP trucks on the road. The storm was fading now, with no sign of a new squall coming in. I went back upstairs, leaving Steff and Billy on the bed, and looked into the living room. The sliding glass door had held. But where the picture window had been there was now a jagged hole stuffed with birch leaves. It was the top of the old tree that had stood by our outside basement access for as long as I could remember. Looking at its top, now visiting in our living room, I could understand what Steff had meant by saying insurance didn't make it any better. I had loved that tree. It had been a hard campaigner of many winters, the one tree on the lakeside of the house that was exempt from my own chainsaw. Big chunks of glass on the rug reflected my candle-flame over and over. I reminded myself to warn Steff and Billy. They would want to wear their slippers in here. Both of them liked to slop around barefoot in the morning. I went downstairs again. All three of us slept together in the guest bed, Billy between Steff and me. I had a dream that I saw God walking across Harrison on the far side of the lake, a God so gigantic that above the waist He was lost in a clear blue sky. In the dream I could hear the rending crack and splinter of breaking trees as God stamped the woods into the shape of His footsteps. He was circling the lake, coming toward the Bridgton side, toward us, and all the houses and cottages and summer places were bursting into purple-white flame like lightning, and soon the smoke covered everything. The smoke covered everything like a mist. II. After the Storm. Norton. A Trip to Town. Jeeepers, Billy said. He was standing by the fence that separates our property from Norton's and looking down our driveway. The driveway runs a quarter of a mile to a camp road which, in its turn, runs about three-quarters of a mile to a stretch of two-lane blacktop, called Kansas Road. From Kansas Road you can go anywhere you want, as long as it's Bridgton. I saw what Billy was looking at and my heart went cold. Don't go any closer, champ. Right there is close enough. Billy didn't argue. The morning was bright and as clear as a bell. The sky, which had been a mushy, hazy color during the heat wave, had regained a deep, crisp blue that was nearly autumnal. There was a light breeze, making cheerful sun-dapples move back and forth in the driveway. Not far from where Billy was standing there was a steady hissing noise, and in the grass there was what you might at first have taken for a writhing bundle of snakes. The power lines leading to our house had fallen in an untidy tangle about twenty feet away and lay in a burned patch of grass. They were twisting lazily and spitting. If the trees and grass hadn't been so completely damped down by the torrential rains, the house might have gone up. As it was, there was only that black patch where the wires had touched directly. Could that lectercute a person, Daddy? Yeah. It could. What are we going to do about it? Nothing. Wait for the CMP. When will they come? I don't know. Five-year-olds have as many questions as Hallmark has cards. I imagine they're pretty busy this morning. Want to take a walk up to the end of the driveway with me? He started to come and then stopped, eyeing the wires nervously. One of them humped up and turned over lazily, as if beckoning. Daddy, can lectricity shoot through the ground? A fair question. Yes, but don't worry.

Electricity wants the ground, not you, Billy. You'll be all right if you stay away from the wires. Wants the ground, he muttered, and then came to me. We walked up the driveway holding hands. It was worse than I had imagined. Trees had fallen across the drive in four different places, one of them small, two of them middling, and one old baby that must have been five feet through the middle. Moss was crusted onto it like a moldy corset. Branches, some half-stripped of their leaves, lay everywhere in jackstraw profusion. Billy and I walked up to the camp road, tossing the smaller branches off into the woods on either side. It reminded me of a summers day that had been maybe twenty-five years before; I couldn't have been much older than Billy was now. All my uncles had been here, and they had spent the day in the woods with axes and hatchets and Darcy poles, cutting brush. Later that afternoon they had all sat down to the trestle picnic table my dad and mom used to have and there had been a monster meal of hot dogs and hamburgers and potato salad. The Gansett beer had flowed like water and my uncle Reuben took a dive into the lake with all his clothes on, even his deck-shoes. In those days there were still deer in these woods. Daddy, can I go down to the lake? He was tired of throwing branches, and the thing to do with a little boy when he's tired is to let him go do something else. Sure. We walked back to the house together and then Billy cut right, going around the house and giving the downed wires a large berth. I went left, into the garage, to get my McCullough. As I had suspected, I could already hear the unpleasant song of the chainsaw up and down the lake. I topped up the tank, took off my shirt, and was starting back up the driveway when Steff came out. She eyed the downed trees lying across the driveway nervously. How bad is it? I can cut it up. How bad is it in there? Well, I got the glass cleaned up, but you're going to have to do something about that tree, David. We can't have a tree in the living room. No, I said. I guess we can't. We looked at each other in the morning sunlight and got giggling. I set the McCullough down on the cement areaway, and kissed her, holding her buttocks firmly. Don't, she murmured. Billy's He came tearing around the corner of the house just then. Dad! Daddy! Youghta see the Steffy saw the live wires and screamed for him to watch out. Billy, who was a good distance away from them, pulled up short and stared at his mother as if she had gone mad. Im okay, Mom, he said in the careful tone of voice you use to placate the very old and senile. He walked toward us, showing us how all right he was, and Steff began to tremble in my arms. Its all right, I said in her ear. He knows about them. Yes, but people get killed, she said. They have ads all the time on television about live wires, people get Billy, I want you to come in the house right now! Aw, come on, Mom! I wanna show Dad the boathouse! He was almost bug-eyed with excitement and disappointment. He had gotten a taste of poststorm apocalypse and wanted to share it. You go in right now! Those wires are dangerous and Dad said they want the ground, not me Billy, don't you argue with me! Ill come down and look, champ. Go on down yourself. I could feel Steff tensing against me. Go around the other side, kiddo. Yeah! Okay! He tore past us, taking the stone steps that led around the west end of the house two by two. He disappeared with his shirttail flying, trailing back one word Wow! as he spotted some other piece of destruction. He knows about the wires, Steffy. I took her gently by the shoulders. Hes scared of them. Thats good. It makes him safe. One tear tracked down her cheek. David, Im scared. Come on! Its over. Is it? Last winter... and the late spring... they called it a black spring in town... they said there hadnt been one in these parts since 1888 They undoubtedly meant Mrs. Carmody, who kept the Bridgton Antiquary, a junk shop that Steff liked to rummage around in sometimes. Billy loved to go with her. In one of the shadowy, dusty back rooms, stuffed owls with gold-ringed eyes spread their wings forever as their feet endlessly grasped varnished logs; stuffed raccoons stood in a trio around a stream that was a long fragment of dusty mirror; and one moth-eaten wolf, which was foaming sawdust instead of saliva around his muzzle, snarled a creepy eternal snarl. Mrs. Carmody claimed the wolf was shot by her father as it came to drink from Stevens Brook one September afternoon in 1901. The expeditions to Mrs. Carmody's Antiquary shop worked well for my wife and son. She was into carnival glass and he was into death in the name of taxidermy. But I thought that the old woman exercised a rather unpleasant hold over Steff's mind, which was in all other ways practical and hardheaded. She had found Steff's vulnerable spot, a mental Achilles heel. Nor was Steff the only one in town who was fascinated by Mrs. Carmody's gothic pronouncements and folk remedies (which were always prescribed in Gods name). Stump-water would take off bruises if your husband was the sort who got a bit too free with his fists after three drinks. You could tell what kind of a winter was coming by counting the rings on the caterpillars in June or by measuring the thickness of August honeycomb. And now, good God protect and preserve us, THE BLACK SPRING OF 1888 (add your own exclamation points, as many as you think it deserves). I had also heard the story. Its one they like to pass around up here if the spring is cold enough, the ice on the lakes will eventually turn as black as a rotted tooth. Its rare, but hardly a once-in-a-century occurrence. They like

to pass it around, but I doubt that many could pass it around with as much conviction as Mrs. Carmody. We had a hard winter and a late spring, I said. Now were having a hot summer. And we had a storm but its over. Youre not acting like yourself, Stephanie. That wasnt an ordinary storm, she said in that same husky voice. No, I said. Ill go along with you there. I had heard the Black Spring story from Bill Giosti, who owned and operated after a fashion Giostis Mobil in Casco Village. Bill ran the place with his three tosspot sons (with occasional help from his four tosspot grandsons... when they could take time off from tinkering with their snowmobiles and dirtbikes). Bill was seventy, looked eighty, and could still drink like twenty-three when the mood was on him. Billy and I had taken the Scout in for a fill-up the day after a surprise mid-May storm dropped nearly a foot of wet, heavy snow on the region, covering the new grass and flowers. Giosti had been in his cups for fair, and happy to pass along the Black Spring story, along with his own original twist. But we get snow in May sometimes; it comes and its gone two days later. Its no big deal. Steff was glancing doubtfully at the downed wires again. When will the power company come? Just as soon as they can. It wont be long. I just dont want you to worry about Billy. His heads on pretty straight. He forgets to pick up his clothes, but he isnt going to go and step on a bunch of live lines. Hes got a good, healthy dose of self-interest. I touched a corner of her mouth and it obliged by turning up in the beginning of a smile. Better? You always make it seem better, she said, and that made me feel good. From the lakeside of the house Billy was yelling for us to come and see. Come on, I said. Lets go look at the damage. She snorted ruefully. If I want to look at damage, I can go sit in my living room. Make a little kid happy, then. We walked down the stone steps hand in hand. We had just reached the first turn in them when Billy came from the other direction at speed, almost knocking us over. Take it easy, Steff said, frowning a little. Maybe, in her mind, she was seeing him skidding into that deadly nest of live wires instead of the two of us. You gotta come see! Billy panted. The boathouse is all bashed! Theres a dock on the rocks... and trees in the boat cove... Jesus Christ! Billy Drayton! Steff thundered. Sorry, Mabut you gottawow! He was gone again. Having spoken, the doomsayer departs, I said, and that made Steff giggle again. Listen, after I cut up those trees across the driveway, Ill go by the Central Maine Power office on Portland Road. Tell them what we got. Okay? Okay, she said gratefully. When do you think you can go? Except for the big tree the one with the moldy corset of moss it would have been an hours work. With the big one added in, I didnt think the job would be done until eleven or so. Ill give you lunch here, then. But youll have to get some things at the market for me... were almost out of milk and butter. Also... well, Ill have to make you a list. Give a woman a disaster and she turns squirrel. I gave her a hug and nodded. We went on around the house. It didnt take more than a glance to understand why Billy had been a little overwhelmed. Lordy, Steff said in a faint voice. From where we stood we had enough elevation to be able to see almost a quarter of a mile of shoreline the Bibber property to our left, our own, and Brent Nortons to our right. The huge old pine that had guarded our boat cove had been sheared off halfway up. What was left looked like a brutally sharpened pencil, and the inside of the tree seemed a glistening and defenseless white against the age-and-weather-darkened outer bark. A hundred feet of tree, the old pines top half, lay partly submerged in our shallow cove. It occurred to me that we were very lucky our little Star-Cruiser wasnt sunk underneath it. The week before, it had developed engine trouble and it was still at the Naples marina, patiently waiting its turn. On the other side of our little piece of shorefront, the boathouse my father had built the boathouse that had once housed a sixty-foot Chris-Craft when the Drayton family fortunes had been at a higher mark than they were today lay under another big tree. It was the one that had stood on Nortons side of the property line, I saw. That raised the first flush of anger. The tree had been dead for five years and he should have long since had it taken down. Now it was three-quarters of the way down; our boathouse was propping it up. The roof had taken on a drunken, swaybacked look. The wind had swirled shingles from the hole the tree had made all over the point of land the boathouse stood on. Billys description, bashed, was as good as any. Thats Nortons tree! Steff said. And she said it with such hurt indignation that I had to smile in spite of the pain I felt. The flagpole was lying in the water and Old Glory floated soggily beside it in a tangle of lanyard. And I could imagine Nortons response: Sue me. Billy was on the rock breakwater, examining the dock that had washed up on the stones. It was painted in jaunty blue and yellow stripes. He looked back over his shoulder at us and yelled gleefully, Its the Martinses, isnt it? Yeah, it is, I said. Wade in and fish the flag out, would you, Big Bill? Sure! To the right of the breakwater was a small sandy beach. In 1941, before Pearl Harbor paid off the Great Depression in blood, my dad hired a man to truck in that fine beach sand six dumptrucks full and to spread it out to a depth that is about nipple-high on me, say five feet. The workman charged eighty bucks for the job, and the sand has never moved. Just as well, you know, you cant put a sandy beach in on your land now. Now that the sewerage runoff from the

booming cottage-building industry has killed most of the fish and made the rest of them unsafe to eat, the EPA has forbidden installing sand beaches. They might upset the ecology of the lake, you see, and it is presently against the law for anyone except land developers to do that. Billy went for the flag then stopped. At the same moment I felt Steff go rigid against me, and I saw it myself. The Harrison side of the lake was gone. It had been buried under a line of bright-white mist, like a fair-weather cloud fallen to earth. My dream of the night before recurred, and when Steff asked me what it was, the word that nearly jumped first from my mouth was God. David? You couldn't see even a hint of the shoreline over there, but years of looking at Long Lake made me believe that the shoreline wasn't hidden by much; only yards, maybe. The edge of the mist was nearly ruler-straight. What is it, Dad? Billy yelled. He was in the water up to his knees, groping for the soggy flag. Fogbank, I said. On the lake? Steff asked doubtfully, and I could see Mrs. Carmody's influence in her eyes. Damn the woman. My own moment of unease was passing. Dreams, after all, are insubstantial things, like mist itself. Sure. You've seen fog on the lake before. Never like that. That looks more like a cloud. It's the brightness of the sun, I said. It's the same way clouds look from an airplane when you fly over them. What would do it? We only get fog in damp weather. No, we've got it right now, I said. Harrison does, anyway. It's a little leftover from the storm, that's all. Two fronts meeting. Something along that line. David, are you sure? I laughed and hauled my arm around her neck. No, actually, I'm bullshitting like crazy. If I was sure, I'd be doing the weather on the six-o'clock news. Go on and make your shopping list. She gave me one more doubtful glance, looked at the fogbank for a moment or two with the flat of her hand held up to shade her eyes, and then shook her head. Weird, she said, and walked away. For Billy, the mist had lost its novelty. He had fished the flag and a tangle of lanyard out of the water. We spread it on the lawn to dry. I heard it was wrong to ever let the flag touch the ground, Daddy, he said in a businesslike, let's-get-this-out-of-the-way tone. Yeah? Yeah. Victor McAllister says they lectercute people for it. Well, you tell Vic he's full of what makes the grass grow green. Horseshit, right? Billy is a bright boy, but oddly humorless. To the champ, everything is serious business. I'm hoping that he'll live long enough to learn that in this world that is a very dangerous attitude. Yeah, right, but don't tell your mother I said so. When the flags dry, we'll put it away. We'll even fold it into a cocked hat, so we'll be on safe ground there. Daddy, will we fix the boathouse roof and get a new flagpole? For the first time he looked anxious. He'd maybe had enough destruction for a while. I clapped him on the shoulder. You're damn tooting. Can I go over to the Bibbers and see what happened there? Just for a couple of minutes. They'll be cleaning up, too, and sometimes that makes people feel a little ugly. The way I presently felt about Norton. Okay. Bye! He was off. Stay out of their way, champ. And Billy? He glanced back. Remember about the live wires. If you see more, steer clear of them. Sure, Dad. I stood there for a moment, first surveying the damage, then glancing out at the mist again. It seemed closer, but it was very hard to tell for sure. If it was closer, it was defying all the laws of nature, because the wind was very gentle and was against it. That, of course, was patently impossible. It was very, very white. The only thing I can compare it to would be fresh-fallen snow lying in dazzling contrast to the deep-blue brilliance of the winter sky. But snow reflects hundreds and hundreds of diamond points in the sun, and this peculiar fogbank, although bright and clean-looking, did not sparkle. In spite of what Steff had said, mist isn't uncommon on clear days, but when there's a lot of it, the suspended moisture almost always causes a rainbow. But there was no rainbow here. The unease was back, tugging at me, but before it could deepen I heard a low mechanical sound whut-whut-whut! followed by a barely audible Shit! The mechanical sound was repeated, but this time there was no oath. The third time the chuffing sound was followed by Mother-fuck! in that same low I'm-all-by-myself-but-boy-am-I-pissed tone. Whut-whut-whut-whut Silence then: You cunt. I began to grin. Sound carries well out here, and all the buzzing chainsaws were fairly distant. Distant enough for me to recognize the not-so-dulcet tones of my next-door neighbor, the renowned lawyer and lakefront-property-owner, Brenton Norton. I moved down a little closer to the water, pretending to stroll toward the dock beached on our breakwater. Now I could see Norton. He was in the clearing beside his screened-in porch, standing on a carpet of old pine needles and dressed in paint-spotted jeans and a white strappy T-shirt. His forty-dollar haircut was in disarray and sweat poured down his face. He was down on one knee, laboring over his own chainsaw. It was much bigger and fancier than my little \$79.95 Value House job. It seemed to have everything, in fact, but a starter button. He was yanking a cord, producing the listless whut-whut-whut sounds and nothing more. I was gladdened in my heart to see that a yellow birch had fallen across his picnic table and smashed it in two. Norton gave a tremendous yank on the starter cord. Whut-whut-whutwhutwhut-WHAT! WHAT! WHAT!... WHAT!... Whut. Almost had it there for a minute, fella. Another Herculean tug. Whut-whut-whut. Cocksucker, Norton whispered fiercely, and bared his teeth

at his fancy chainsaw. I went back around the house, feeling really good for the first time since I got up. My own saw started on the first tug, and I went to work. *** Around ten o'clock there was a tap on my shoulder. It was Billy with a can of beer in one hand and Steffs list in the other. I stuffed the list in the back pocket of my jeans and took the beer, which was not exactly frosty-cold but at least cool. I chugged almost half of it and oncerarely does a beer taste that good and tipped the can in salute at Billy. Thanks, champ. Can I have some? I let him have a swallow. He grimaced and handed the can back. I offered the rest and just caught myself as I started to crunch it up in the middle. The deposit law on bottles and cans has been in effect for over three years, but old ways die hard. She wrote something across the bottom of the list, but I can't read her writing, Billy said. I took out the list again. I can't get WOXO on the radio, Steffs note read. Do you think the storm knocked them off the air? WOXO is the local automated FM rock outlet. It broadcasts from Norway, about twenty miles north, and was all that our old and feeble FM receiver would haul in. Tell her probably, I said, after reading the question over to him. Ask her if she can get Portland on the AM band. Okay, Daddy, can I come when you go to town? Sure. You and Mommy both, if you want. Okay. He ran back to the house with the empty can. I had worked my way up to the big tree. I made my first cut, sawed through, then turned the saw off for a few moments to let it cool down the tree was really too big for it, but I thought it would be all right if I didn't rush it. I wondered if the dirt road leading up to Kansas Road was clear of falls, and just as I was wondering, an orange CMP truck lumbered past, probably on its way to the far end of our little road. So that was all right. The road was clear and the power guys would be here by noon to take care of the live lines. I cut a big chunk off the tree, dragged it to the side of the driveway, and tumbled it over the edge. It rolled down the slope and into the underbrush that had crept back since the long-ago day when my dad and his brothers—all of them artists, we have always been an artistic family, the Draytons had cleared it away. I wiped sweat off my face with my arm and wished for another beer; one really only sets your mouth. I picked up the chainsaw and thought about WOXO being off the air. That was the direction that funny fogbank had come from. And it was the direction Shaymore (pronounced Shammore by the locals) lay in. Shaymore was where the Arrowhead Project was. That was old Bill Giostis theory about the so-called Black Spring: the Arrowhead Project. In the western part of Shaymore, not far from where the town borders on Stoneham, there was a small government preserve surrounded with wire. There were sentries and closed-circuit television cameras and God knew what else. Or so I had heard; I'd never actually seen it, although the Old Shaymore Road runs along the eastern side of the government land for a mile or so. No one knew for sure where the name Arrowhead Project came from and no one could tell you for one hundred percent sure that that really was the name of the project if there was a project. Bill Giosti said there was, but when you asked him how and where he came by his information, he got vague. His niece, he said, worked for the Continental Phone Company, and she had heard things. It got like that. Atomic things, Bill said that day, leaning in the Scouts window and blowing a healthy draught of Pabst into my face. That's what they're fooling around with up there. Shooting atoms into the air and all that. Mr. Giosti, the air's full of atoms, Billy had said. That's what Mrs. Neary says. Mrs. Neary says everything's full of atoms. Bill Giosti gave my son Bill a long, bloodshot glance that finally deflated him. These are different atoms, son. Oh, yeah, Billy muttered, giving in. Dick Muehler, our insurance agent, said the Arrowhead Project was an agricultural station the government was running, no more or less. Bigger tomatoes with a longer growing season, Dick said sagely, and then went back to showing me how I could help my family most efficiently by dying young. Janine Lawless, our postlady, said it was a geological survey having something to do with shale oil. She knew for a fact, because her husband's brother worked for a man who had Mrs. Carmody, now... she probably leaned more to Bill Giostis view of the matter. Not just atoms, but different atoms. I cut two more chunks off the big tree and dropped them over the side before Billy came back with a fresh beer in one hand and a note from Steff in the other. If there's anything Big Bill likes to do more than run messages, I don't know what it could be. Thanks, I said, taking them both. Can I have a swallow? Just one. You took two last time. Can't have you running around drunk at ten in the morning. Quarter past, he said, and smiled shyly over the top of the can. I smiled back not that it was such a great joke, you know, but Billy makes them so rarely and then read the note. Got JBQ on the radio, Steffy had written. Don't get drunk before you go to town. You can have one more, but that's it before lunch. Do you think you can get up our road okay? I handed him the note back and took my beer. Tell her the road's okay because a power truck just went by. They'll be working their way up here. Okay. Champ? What, Dad? Tell her everything's okay. He smiled again, maybe telling himself first. Okay. He ran back and I watched him go, legs pumping, soles of his zori showing. I love him. It's his face and sometimes the way his eyes turn up to mine that make me feel as if things are really okay. It's a lie, of

course things are not okay and never have been but my kid makes me believe the lie. I drank some beer, set the can down carefully on a rock, and got the chainsaw going again. About twenty minutes later I felt a light tap on my shoulder and turned, expecting to see Billy again. Instead it was Brent Norton. I turned off the chainsaw. He didn't look the way Norton usually looks. He looked hot and tired and unhappy and a little bewildered. Hi, Brent, I said. Our last words had been hard ones, and I was a little unsure how to proceed. I had a funny feeling that he had been standing behind me for the last five minutes or so, clearing his throat decorously under the chainsaw's aggressive roar. I hadn't gotten a really good look at him this summer. He had lost weight, but it didn't look good. It should have, because he had been carrying around an extra twenty pounds, but it didn't. His wife had died the previous November. Cancer. Aggie Bibber told Steffy that. Aggie was our resident necrologist. Every neighborhood has one. From the casual way Norton had of ragging his wife and belittling her (doing it with the contemptuous ease of a veteran matador inserting banderillas in an old bull's lumbering body), I would have guessed he'd be glad to have her gone. If asked, I might even have speculated that he'd show up this summer with a girl twenty years younger than he was on his arm and a silly my-cock-has-died-and-gone-to-heaven grin on his face. But instead of the silly grin there was only a new batch of age lines, and the weight had come off in all the wrong places, leaving sags and folds and dewlaps that told their own story. For one passing moment I wanted only to lead Norton to a patch of sun and sit him beside one of the fallen trees with my can of beer in his hand, and do a charcoal sketch of him. Hi, Dave, he said, after a long moment of awkward silence a silence that was made even louder by the absence of the chainsaw's racket and roar. He stopped, then blurted: That tree. That damn tree. I'm sorry. You were right. I shrugged. He said, Another tree fell on my car. I'm sorry to hear that, and then a horrid suspicion dawned. It wasn't the T-Bird, was it? Yeah. It was. Norton had a 1960 Thunderbird in mint condition, only thirty thousand miles. It was a deep midnight blue inside and out. He drove it only summers, and then only rarely. He loved that Bird the way some men love electric trains or model ships or target-shooting pistols. That's a bitch, I said, and meant it. He shook his head slowly. I almost didn't bring it up. Almost brought the station wagon, you know. Then I said what the hell. I drove it up and a big old rotten pine fell on it. The roof of it all bashed in. And I thought I'd cut it up... the tree, I mean... but I can't get my chainsaw to fire up... I paid two hundred dollars for that sucker... and... and... His throat began to emit little clicking sounds. His mouth worked as if he were toothless and chewing dates. For one helpless second I thought he was going to just stand there and bawl like a kid on a sandlot. Then he got himself under some halfway kind of control, shrugged, and turned away as if to look at the chunks of wood I had cut up. Well, we can look at your saw, I said. Your T-Bird insured? Yeah, he said, like your boathouse. I saw what he meant, and remembered again what Steff had said about insurance. Listen, Dave, I wondered if I could borrow your Saab and take a run up to town. I thought I'd get some bread and cold cuts and beer. A lot of beer. Billy and I are going up in the Scout, I said. Come with us if you want. That is, if you'll give me a hand dragging the rest of this tree off to one side. Happy to. He grabbed one end but couldn't quite lift it up. I had to do most of the work. Between the two of us we were able to tumble it into the underbrush. Norton was puffing and panting, his cheeks nearly purple. After all the yanking he had done on that chainsaw starter pull, I was a little worried about his ticker. Okay? I asked, and he nodded, still breathing fast. Come on back to the house, then. I can fix you up with a beer. Thank you, he said. How is Stephanie? He was regaining some of the old smooth pomposity that I disliked. Very well, thanks. And your son? He's fine, too. Glad to hear it. Steff came out, and a moment's surprise passed over her face when she saw who was with me. Norton smiled and his eyes crawled over her tight T-shirt. He hadn't changed that much after all. Hello, Brent, she said cautiously. Billy poked his head out from under her arm. Hello, Stephanie. Hi, Billy. Brent's T-Bird took a pretty good rap in the storm, I told her. Stove in the roof, he says. Oh, no! Norton told it again while he drank one of our beers. I was sipping a third, but I had no kind of buzz on; apparently I had sweat the beer out as rapidly as I drank it. He's going to come to town with Billy and me. Well, I won't expect you for a while. You may have to go to the Shop-and-Save in Norway. Oh? Why? Well, if the powers off in Bridgton Mom says all the cash registers and things run on electricity, Billy supplied. It was a good point. Have you still got the list? I patted my hip pocket. Her eyes shifted to Norton. I'm very sorry about Carla, Brent. We all were. Thank you, he said. Thank you very much. There was another moment of awkward silence which Billy broke. Can we go now, Daddy? He had changed to jeans and sneakers. Yeah, I guess so. You ready, Brent? Give me another beer for the road and I will be. Steffy's brow creased. She had never approved of the one-for-the-road philosophy, or of men who drive with a can of Bud leaning against their crotches. I gave her a bare nod and she shrugged. I didn't want to reopen things with Norton now. She got him a beer. Thanks, he said to Steffy, not really thanking her but

only mouthing a word. It was the way you thank a waitress in a restaurant. He turned back to me. Lead on, Macduff. Be right with you, I said, and went into the living room. Norton followed, and exclaimed over the birch, but I wasn't interested in that or in the cost of replacing the window just then. I was looking at the lake through the sliding glass panel that gave on our deck. The breeze had freshened a little and the day had warmed up five degrees or so while I was cutting wood. I thought the odd mist we'd noticed earlier would surely have broken up, but it hadn't. It was closer, too. Halfway across the lake now. I noticed that earlier, Norton said, pontificating. Some kind of temperature inversion, that's my guess. I didn't like it. I felt very strongly that I had never seen a mist exactly like this one. Part of it was the unnerving straight edge of its leading front. Nothing in nature is that even; man is the inventor of straight edges. Part of it was that pure, dazzling whiteness, with no variation but also without the sparkle of moisture. It was only half a mile or so off now, and the contrast between it and the blues of the lake and sky was more striking than ever. Come on, Dad! Billy was tugging at my pants. We all went back to the kitchen. Brent Norton spared one final glance at the tree that had crashed into our living room. Too bad it wasn't an apple tree, huh? Billy remarked brightly.

That's what my mom said. Pretty funny, don't you think? Your mother's a real card, Billy, Norton said. He ruffled Billy's hair in a perfunctory way and his eyes went to the front of Steff's T-shirt again. No, he was not a man I was ever going to be able to really like. Listen, why don't you come with us, Steff? I asked. For no concrete reason I suddenly wanted her to come along. No, I think I'll stay here and pull some weeds in the garden, she said. Her eyes shifted toward Norton and then back to me. This morning it seems like I'm the only thing around here that doesn't run on electricity. Norton laughed too heartily. I was getting her message, but tried one more time. You sure? Sure, she said firmly. The old bend-and-stretch will do me good. Well, don't get too much sun. I'll put on my straw hat. We'll have sandwiches when you get back. Good. She turned her face up to be kissed. Be careful. There might be blowdowns on Kansas Road too, you know. I'll be careful. You be careful, too, she told Billy, and kissed his cheek. Right, Mom. He banged out of the door and the screen cracked shut behind him. Norton and I walked out after him. Why don't we go over to your place and cut the tree off your Bird? I asked him. All of a sudden I could think of lots of reasons to delay leaving for town. I don't even want to look at it until after lunch and a few more of these, Norton said, holding up his beer can. The damage has been done, Dave old buddy. I didn't like him calling me buddy, either. We all got into the front seat of the Scout (in the far corner of the garage my scarred Fisher plow blade sat glimmering yellow, like the ghost of Christmas yet-to-come) and I backed out, crunching over a litter of storm-blown twigs. Steff was standing on the cement path which leads to the vegetable patch at the extreme west end of our property. She had a pair of clippers in one gloved hand and the weeding claw in the other. She had put on her old floppy sunhat, and it cast a band of shadow over her face. I tapped the horn twice, lightly, and she raised the hand holding the clippers in answer. We pulled out. I haven't seen my wife since then. *** We had to stop once on our way up to Kansas Road. Since the power truck had driven through, a pretty fair-sized pine had dropped across the road. Norton and I got out and moved it enough so I could inch the Scout by, getting our hands all pitchy in the process. Billy wanted to help but I waved him back. I was afraid he might get poked in the eye. Old trees have always reminded me of the Ents in Tolkien's wonderful Rings saga, only Ents that have gone bad. Old trees want to hurt you. It doesn't matter if you're snowshoeing, cross-country skiing, or just taking a walk in the woods. Old trees want to hurt you, and I think they'd kill you if they could. Kansas Road itself was clear, but in several places we saw more lines down. About a quarter-mile past the Vicki-Linn Campground there was a power pole lying full-length in the ditch, heavy wires snarled around its top like wild hair. That was some storm, Norton said in his mellifluous, courtroom-trained voice; but he didn't seem to be pontificating now, only solemn. Yeah, it was. Look, Dad! He was pointing at the remains of the Ellitches barn. For twelve years it had been sagging tiredly in Tommy Ellitch's back field, up to its hips in sunflowers, goldenrod, and Lolly-come-see-me. Every fall I would think it could not last through another winter. And every spring it would still be there. But it wasn't anymore. All that remained was a splintered wreckage and a roof that had been mostly stripped of shingles. Its number had come up. And for some reason that echoed solemnly, even ominously, inside me. The storm had come and smashed it flat. Norton drained his beer, crushed the can in one hand, and dropped it indifferently to the floor of the Scout. Billy opened his mouth to say something and then closed it again good boy. Norton came from New Jersey, where there was no bottle-and-can law; I guess he could be forgiven for squashing my nickel when I could barely remember not to do it myself. Billy started fooling with the radio, and I asked him to see if WOXO was back on the air. He dialed up to FM 92 and got nothing but a blank hum. He looked at me and shrugged. I thought for a moment. What other stations were on the far side of that peculiar fog front? Try WBLM, I said. He

dialed down to the other end, passing WJBQ-FM and WIGY-FM on the way. They were there, doing business as usual... but WBLM, Maines premier progressive-rock station, was off the air. Funny, I said. Whats that? Norton asked. Nothing. Just thinking out loud. Billy had tuned back to the musical cereal on WJBQ. Pretty soon we got to town. The Norge Washateria in the shopping center was closed, it being impossible to run a coin-op laundry without electricity, but both the Bridgton Pharmacy and the Federal Foods Supermarket were open. The parking lot was pretty full, and as always in the middle of the summer, a lot of the cars had out-of-state plates. Little knots of people stood here and there in the sun, noodling about the storm, women with women, men with men. I saw Mrs. Carmody, she of the stuffed animals and the stump-water lore. She sailed into the supermarket decked out in an amazing canary-yellow pantsuit. A purse that looked the size of a small Samsonite suitcase was slung over one forearm. Then an idiot on a Yamaha roared past me, missing my front bumper by a few scant inches. He wore a denim jacket, mirror sunglasses, and no helmet. Look at that stupid shit, Norton growled. I circled the parking lot once, looking for a good space. There were none. I was just resigning myself to a long walk from the far end of the lot when I got lucky. A lime-green Cadillac the size of a small cabin cruiser was easing out of a slot in the rank closest to the markets doors. The moment it was gone, I slid into the space. I gave Billy Steffs shopping list. He was five, but he could read printing. Get a cart and get started. I want to give your mother a jingle. Mr. Norton will help you. And Ill be right along. We got out and Billy immediately grabbed Mr. Nortons hand. Hed been taught not to cross the parking lot without holding an adults hand when he was younger and hadnt yet lost the habit. Norton looked surprised for a moment, and then smiled a little. I could almost forgive him for feeling Steff up with his eyes. The two of them went into the market. I strolled over to the pay phone, which was on the wall between the drugstore and the Norge. A sweltering woman in a purple sunsuit was jogging the cutoff switch up and down. I stood behind her with my hands in my pockets, wondering why I felt so uneasy about Steff, and why the unease should be all wrapped up with that line of white but unsparkling fog, the radio stations that were off the air... and the Arrowhead Project. The woman in the purple sunsuit had a sunburn and freckles on her fat shoulders. She looked like a sweaty orange baby. She slammed the phone back down in its cradle, turned toward the drugstore and saw me there. Save your dime, she said. Just dah-dah-dah. She walked grumpily away. I almost slapped my forehead. The phone lines were down someplace, of course. Some of them were underground, but nowhere near all of them. I tried the phone anyway. The pay phones in the area are what Steff calls Paranoid Pay Phones. Instead of putting your dime right in, you get a dial tone and make your call. When someone answers, theres an automatic cutoff and you have to shove your dime in before your party hangs up. Theyre irritating, but that day it did save me my dime. There was no dial tone. As the lady had said, it was just dah-dah-dah. I hung up and walked slowly toward the market, just in time to see an amusing little incident. An elderly couple walked toward the IN door, chatting together. And still chatting, they walked right into it. They stopped talking in a jangle and the woman squawked her surprise. They stared at each other comically. Then they laughed, and the old guy pushed the door open for his wife with some effortthose electric-eye doors are heavyand they went in. When the electricity goes off, it catches you in a hundred different ways. I pushed the door open myself and noticed the lack of air conditioning first thing. Usually in the summer they have it cranked up high enough to give you frostbite if you stay in the market more than an hour at a stretch. Like most modern markets, the Federal was constructed like a Skinner boxmodern marketing techniques turn all customers into white rats. The stuff you really needed, staples, like bread, milk, meat, beer, and frozen dinners, was all on the far side of the store. To get there you had to walk past all the impulse items known to modern maneverything from Cricket lighters to rubber dog bones. Beyond the IN door is the fruit-and-vegetable aisle. I looked up it, but there was no sign of Norton or my son. The old lady who had run into the door was examining the grapefruits. Her husband had produced a net sack to store purchases in. I walked up the aisle and went left. I found them in the third aisle, Billy mulling over the ranks of Jello-O packages and instant puddings. Norton was standing directly behind him, peering at Steffs list. I had to grin a little at his nonplussed expression. I threaded my way down to them, past half-loaded carriages (Steff hadnt been the only one struck by the squirreling impulse, apparently) and browsing shoppers. Norton took two cans of pie filling down from the top shelf and put them in the cart. How are you doing? I asked, and Norton looked around with unmistakable relief. All right, arent we, Billy? Sure, Billy said, and couldnt resist adding in a rather smug tone: But theres lots of stuff Mr. Norton cant read either, Dad. Let me see. I took the list. Norton had made a neat, lawyerly check beside each of the items he and Billy had picked uphalf a dozen or so, including the milk and a six-pack of Coke. There were maybe ten other things that she wanted. We ought to go back to the fruits and vegetables, I

said. She wants some tomatoes and cucumbers. Billy started to turn the cart around and Norton said, You ought to go have a look at the checkout, Dave. I went and had a look. It was the sort of thing you sometimes see photos of in the paper on a slow newsday, with a humorous caption beneath. Only two lanes were open, and the double line of people waiting to check their purchases out stretched past the mostly denuded bread racks, then made a jig to the right and went out of sight along the frozen-food coolers. All of the new computerized NCRs were hooded. At each of the two open positions, a harried-looking girl was totting up purchases on a battery-powered pocket calculator. Standing with each girl was one of the Federals two managers, Bud Brown and Ollie Weeks. I liked Ollie but didnt care much for Bud Brown, who seemed to fancy himself the Charles de Gaulle of the supermarket world. As each girl finished checking her order, Bud or Ollie would paperclip a chit to the customers cash or check and toss it into the box he was using as a cash repository. They all looked hot and tired. Hope you brought a good book, Norton said, joining me. Were going to be in line for a while. I thought of Steff again, at home alone, and had another flash of unease. You go on and get your stuff, I said. Billy and I can handle the rest of this. Want me to grab a few more beers for you too? I thought about it, but in spite of the rapprochement, I didnt want to spend the afternoon with Brent Norton getting drunk. Not with the mess things were in around the house. Sorry, I said. Ive got to take a raincheck, Brent. I thought his face stiffened a little. Okay, he said shortly, and walked off. I watched him go, and then Billy was tugging at my shirt. Did you talk to Mommy? Nope. The phone wasnt working. Those lines are down too, I guess. Are you worried about her? No, I said, lying. I was worried, all right, but had no idea why I should be. No, of course Im not. Are you? No-ooo... But he was. His face had a pinched look. We should have gone back then. But even then it might have been too late. III. The Coming of the Mist. We worked our way back to the fruits and vegetables like salmon fighting their way upstream. I saw some familiar facesMike Hatlen, one of our selectmen, Mrs. Reppler from the grammar school (she who had terrified generations of third-graders was currently sneering at the cantaloupes), Mrs. Turman, who sometimes sat Billy when Steff and I went outbut mostly they were summer people stocking up on no-cook items and joshing each other about roughing it. The cold cuts had been picked over as thoroughly as the dimebook tray at a rummage sale; there was nothing left but a few packages of bologna, some macaroni loaf, and one lonely, phallic kielbasa sausage. I got tomatoes, cukes, and a jar of mayonnaise. She wanted bacon, but all the bacon was gone. I picked up some of the bologna as a substitute, although Ive never been able to eat the stuff with any real enthusiasm since the FDA reported that each package contained a small amount of insect filtha little something extra for your money. Look, Billy said as we rounded the corner into the fourth aisle. Theres some army guys. There were two of them, their dun uniforms standing out against the much brighter background of summer clothes and sportswear. We had gotten used to seeing a scattering of army personnel with the Arrowhead Project only thirty miles or so away. These two looked hardly old enough to shave yet. I glanced back down at Steffs list and saw that we had everything... no, almost but not quite. At the bottom, as an afterthought, she had scribbled: Bottle of Lancers? That sounded good to me. A couple of glasses of wine tonight after Billy had sacked out, then maybe a long slow bout of lovemaking before sleep. I left the cart and worked my way down to the wine and got a bottle. As I walked back I passed the big double doors leading to the storage area and heard the steady roar of a good-sized generator. I decided it was probably just big enough to keep the cold cases cold, but not large enough to power the doors and cash registers and all the other electrical equipment. It sounded like a motorcycle back there. Norton appeared just as we got into line, balancing two six-packs of Schlitz Light, a loaf of bread, and the kielbasa I had spotted a few minutes earlier. He got in line with Billy and me. It seemed very warm in the market with the air conditioning off, and I wondered why none of the stockboys had at least chocked the doors open. I had seen Buddy Eagleton in his red apron two aisles back, doing nothing and piling it up. The generator roared monotonously. I had the beginnings of a headache. Put your stuff in here before you drop something, I said. Thanks. The lines were up past the frozen food now; people had to cut through to get what they wanted and there was much excuse-me-ing and pardon-me-ing. This is going to be a cunt, Norton said morosely, and I frowned a little. That sort of language is rougher than Id like Billy to hear. The generators roar muted a little as the line shuffled forward. Norton and I made desultory conversation, skirting around the ugly property dispute that had landed us in district court and sticking with things like the Red Soxs chances and the weather. At last we exhausted our little store of small talk and fell silent. Billy fidgeted beside me. The line crawled along. Now we had frozen dinners on our right and the more expensive wines and champagnes on our left. As the line progressed down to the cheaper wines, I toyed briefly with the idea of picking up a bottle of Ripple, the wine of my flaming youth. I didnt do it. My youth never flamed that much anyway. Jeez, why

cant they hurry up, Dad? Billy asked. That pinched look was still on his face, and suddenly, briefly, the mist of disquiet that had settled over me rifted, and something terrible peered through from the other side the bright and metallic face of terror. Then it passed. Keep cool, champ, I said. We had made it up to the bread racksto the point where the double line bent to the left. We could see the checkout lanes now, the two that were open and the other four, deserted, each with a little sign on the stationary conveyor belt, signs that read PLEASE CHOOSE ANOTHER LANE and WINSTON. Beyond the lanes was the big sectioned plate-glass window which gave a view of the parking lot and the intersection of Routes 117 and 302 beyond. The view was partially obscured by the white-paper backs of signs advertising current specials and the latest giveaway, which happened to be a set of books called The Mother Nature Encyclopedia. We were in the line that would eventually lead us to the checkout where Bud Brown was standing. There were still maybe thirty people in front of us. The easiest one to pick out was Mrs. Carmody in her blazing-yellow pantsuit. She looked like an advertisement for yellow fever. Suddenly a shrieking noise began in the distance. It quickly built up in volume and resolved itself into the crazy warble of a police siren. A horn blared at the intersection and there was a shriek of brakes and burning rubber. I couldnt see the angle was all wrong but the siren reached its loudest as it approached the market and then began to fade as the police car went past. A few people broke out of line to look, but not many. They had waited too long to chance losing their places. Norton went; his stuff was tucked into my cart. After a few moments he came back and got into line again. Local fuzz, he said. Then the town fire whistle began to wail, slowly cranking up to a shriek of its own, falling off, then rising again. Billy grabbed my handclutched it. What is it, Daddy? he asked, and then, immediately: Is Mommy all right? Must be a fire on the Kansas Road, Norton said. Those damned live lines from the storm. The fire trucks will go through in a minute. That gave my disquiet something to crystallize on. There were live lines down in our yard. Bud Brown said something to the checker he was supervising; she had been craning around to see what was happening. She flushed and began to run her calculator again. I didnt want to be in this line. All of a sudden I very badly didnt want to be in it. But it was moving again, and it seemed foolish to leave now. We had gotten down by the cartons of cigarettes. Someone pushed through the IN door, some teenager. I think it was the kid we almost hit coming in, the one on the Yamaha with no helmet. The fog! he yelled. Youghta see the fog! Its rolling right up Kansas Road! People looked around at him. He was panting, as if he had run a long distance. Nobody said anything. Well, youghta see it, he repeated, sounding defensive this time. People eyed him and some of them shuffled, but no one wanted to lose his or her place in line. A few people who hadnt reached the lines yet left their carts and strolled through the empty checkout lanes to see if they could see what he was talking about. A big guy in a summer hat with a paisley band (the kind of hat you almost never see except in beer commercials with backyard barbecues as their settings) yanked open the OUT door and several people ten, maybe a dozen went out with him. The kid went along. Dont let out all the air conditioning, one of the army kids cracked, and there were a few chuckles. I wasnt chuckling. I had seen the mist coming across the lake. Billy, why dont you go have a look? Norton said. No, I said at once, for no concrete reason. The line moved forward again. People craned their necks, looking for the fog the kid had mentioned, but there was nothing on view except bright-blue sky. I heard someone say that the kid must have been joking. Someone else responded that he had seen a funny line of mist on Long Lake not an hour ago. The first whistle whooped and screamed. I didnt like it. It sounded like big-league doom blowing that way. More people went out. A few even left their places in line, which speeded up the proceedings a bit. Then grizzled old John Lee Frovin, who works as a mechanic at the Texaco station, came ducking in and yelled: Hey! Anybody got a camera? He looked around, then ducked back out again. That caused something of a rush. If it was worth taking a picture of, it was worth seeing. Suddenly Mrs. Carmody cried in her rusty but powerful old voice, Dont go out there! People turned around to look at her. The orderly shape of the lines had grown fuzzy as people left to get a look at the mist, or as they drew away from Mrs. Carmody, or as they milled around, seeking out their friends. A pretty young woman in a cranberry-colored sweatshirt and dark-green slacks was looking at Mrs. Carmody in a thoughtful, evaluating way. A few opportunists were taking advantage of whatever the situation was to move up a couple of places. The checker beside Bud Brown looked over her shoulder again, and Brown tapped her shoulder with a long finger. Keep your mind on what youre doing, Sally. Dont go out there! Mrs. Carmody yelled. Its death! I feel that its death out there! Bud and Ollie Weeks, who both knew her, just looked impatient and irritated, but any summer people around her stepped smartly away, never minding their places in line. The bag-ladies in big cities seem to have the same effect on people, as if they were carriers of some contagious disease. Who knows? Maybe they are. Things began to happen at an accelerating, confusing pace

then. A man staggered into the market, shoving the IN door open. His nose was bleeding. Something in the fog! he screamed, and Billy shrank against me whether because of the man's bloody nose or what he was saying, I don't know. Something in the fog! Something in the fog took John Lee! Something He staggered back against a display of lawn food stacked by the window and sat down there. Something in the fog took John Lee and I heard him screaming! The situation changed. Made nervous by the storm, by the police siren and the fire whistle, by the subtle dislocation any power outage causes in the American psyche, and by the steadily mounting atmosphere of unease as things somehow... somehow changed (I don't know how to put it any better than that), people began to move in a body. They didn't bolt. If I told you that, I would be giving you entirely the wrong impression. It wasn't exactly a panic. They didn't run at least, most of them didn't. But they went. Some of them just went to the big show window on the far side of the checkout lanes to look out. Others went out the IN door, some still carrying their intended purchases. Bud Brown, harried and officious, began yelling: Hey! You haven't paid for that! Hey, you! Come back here with those hot-dog rolls! Someone laughed at him, a crazy, yodeling sound that made other people smile. Even as they smiled they looked bewildered, confused, and nervous. Then someone else laughed and Brown flushed. He grabbed a box of mushrooms away from a lady who was crowding past him to look out the window the segments of glass were lined with people now, they were like the folks you see looking through loopholes into a building site and the lady screamed, Give me back my mushies! This bizarre term of affection caused two men standing nearby to break into crazy laughter and there was something of the old English Bedlam about all of it, now. Mrs. Carmody trumpeted again not to go out there. The fire whistle whooped breathlessly, a strong old woman who had scared up a prowler in the house. And Billy burst into tears. Daddy, what's that bloody man? Why is that bloody man? It's okay, Big Bill, it's his nose, he's okay. What did he mean, something in the fog? Norton asked. He was frowning ponderously, which was probably Norton's way of looking confused. Daddy, I'm scared, Billy said through his tears. Can we please go home? Someone bumped past me roughly, jolting me off my feet, and I picked Billy up. I was getting scared, too. The confusion was mounting. Sally, the checker by Bud Brown, started away and he grabbed her back by the collar of her red smock. It ripped. She slap-clawed out at him, her face twisting. Get your fucking hands off me! she screamed. Oh, shut up, you little bitch, Brown said, but he sounded totally astounded. He reached for her again and Ollie Weeks said sharply: Bud! Cool it! Someone else screamed. It hadn't been a panic before not quite but it was getting to be one. People streamed out of both doors. There was a crash of breaking glass and Coke fizzed suddenly across the floor. What the Christ is this? Norton exclaimed. That was when it started getting dark... but no, that's not exactly right. My thought at the time was not that it was getting dark but that the lights in the market had gone out. I looked up at the fluorescents in a quick reflex action, and I wasn't alone. And at first, until I remembered the power failure, it seemed that was it, that was what had changed the quality of the light. Then I remembered they had been out all the time we had been in the market and things hadn't seemed dark before. Then I knew, even before the people at the window started to yell and point. The mist was coming. *** It came from the Kansas Road entrance to the parking lot, and even this close it looked no different than it had when we first noticed it on the far side of the lake. It was white and bright but nonreflecting. It was moving fast, and it had blotted out most of the sun. Where the sun had been there was now a silver coin in the sky, like a full moon in winter seen through a thin scud of cloud. It came with lazy speed. Watching it reminded me somehow of last evening's waterspout. There are big forces in nature that you hardly ever see earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes I haven't seen them all but I've seen enough to guess that they all move with that lazy, hypnotizing speed. They hold you spellbound, the way Billy and Steffy had been in front of the picture window last night. It rolled impartially across the two-lane blacktop and erased it from view. The McKeons nice restored Dutch Colonial was swallowed whole. For a moment the second floor of the ramshackle apartment building next door jutted out of the whiteness, and then it went too. The KEEP RIGHT sign at the entrance and exit points to the Federal's parking lot disappeared, the black letters on the sign seeming to float for a moment in limbo after the sign's dirty-white background was gone. The cars in the parking lot began to disappear next. What the Christ is this? Norton asked again, and there was a catch in his voice. It came on, eating up the blue sky and the fresh black hot top with equal ease. Even twenty feet away the line of demarcation was perfectly clear. I had the nutty feeling that I was watching some extra-good piece of visual effects, something dreamed up by Willys O'Brien or Douglas Trumbull. It happened so quickly. The blue sky disappeared to a wide swipe, then to a stripe, then to a pencil line. Then it was gone. Blank white pressed against the glass of the wide show window. I could see as far as the litter barrel that stood maybe four feet away, but not much farther. I could see the front bumper of my Scout, but that was all.

A woman screamed, very loud and long. Billy pressed himself more tightly against me. His body was trembling like a loose bundle of wires with high voltage running through them. A man yelled and bolted through one of the deserted lanes toward the door. I think that was what finally started the stampede. People rushed pell-mell into the fog. Hey! Brown roared. I dont know if he was angry, scared, or both. His face was nearly purple. Veins stood out on his neck, looking almost as thick as battery cables. Hey you people, you cant take that stuff. Get back here with that stuff, youre shoplifting! They kept going, but some of them tossed their stuff aside. Some were laughing and excited, but they were a minority. They poured out into the fog, and none of us who stayed ever saw them again. There was a faint, acrid smell drifting in through the open door. People began to jam up there. Some pushing and shoving started. I was getting an ache in my shoulders from holding Billy. He was good-sized; Steff sometimes called him her young heifer. Norton started to wander off, his face preoccupied and rather bemused. He was heading for the door. I switched Billy to the other arm so I could grab Nortons arm before he drifted out of reach. No, man, I wouldnt, I said. He turned back. What? Better wait and see. See what? I dont know, I said. You dont think he began, and a shriek came out of the fog. Norton shut up. The tight jam at the OUT door loosened and then reversed itself. The babble of excited conversation, shouts and calls, subsided. The faces of the people by the door suddenly looked flat and pale and two dimensional. The shriek went on and on, competing with the fire whistle. It seemed impossible that any human pair of lungs could have enough air in them to sustain such a shriek. Norton muttered, Oh my God, and ran his hands through his hair. The shriek ended abruptly. It did not dwindle; it was cut off. One more man went outside, a beefy guy in chino workpants. I think he was set on rescuing the shrieker. For a moment he was out there, visible through the glass and the mist, like a figure seen through a milkscum on a tumbler. Then (and as far as I know, I was the only one to see this) something beyond him appeared to move, a gray shadow in all that white. And it seemed to me that instead of running into the fog, the man in the chino pants was jerked into it, his hands flailing upward as if in surprise. For a moment there was total silence in the market. A constellation of moons suddenly glowed into being outside. The parking-lot sodium lights, undoubtedly supplied by underground electrical cables, had just gone on. Dont go out there, Mrs. Carmody said in her best gore-crow voice. Its death to go out there. All at once, no one seemed disposed to argue or laugh. Another scream came from outside, this one muffled and rather distant-sounding. Billy tensed against me again. David, whats going on? Ollie Weeks asked. He had left his position. There were big beads of sweat on his round, smooth face. What is this? Ill be goddammed if I have any idea, I said. Ollie looked badly scared. He was a bachelor who lived in a nice little house up by Highland Lake and who liked to drink in the bar at Pleasant Mountain. On the pudgy little finger of his left hand was a star-sapphire ring. The February before, he won some money in the state lottery. He bought the ring out of his winnings. I always had the idea that Ollie was a little afraid of girls. I dont dig this, he said. No. Billy, I have to put you down. Ill hold your hand, but youre breaking my arms, okay? Mommy, he whispered. Shes okay, I told him. It was something to say. The old geezer who runs the secondhand shop near Jons Restaurant walked past us, bundled into the old collegiate letter-sweater he wears year-round. He said loudly: Its one of those pollution clouds. The mills at Rumford and South Paris. Chemicals. With that, he made off up the Aisle 4, past the patent medicines and toilet paper. Lets get out of here, David, Norton said with no conviction at all. What do you say we There was a thud. An odd, twisting thud that I felt mostly in my feet, as if the entire building had suddenly dropped three feet. Several people cried out in fear and surprise. There was a musical jingle of bottles leaning off their shelves and destroying themselves upon the tile floor. A chunk of glass shaped like a pie wedge fell out of one of the segments of the wide front window, and I saw that the wooden frames banding the heavy sections of glass had buckled and splintered in some places. The fire whistle stopped in mid-whoop. The quiet that followed was the bated silence of people waiting for something else, something more. I was shocked and numb, and my mind made a strange cross-patch connection with the past. Back when Bridgton was little more than a crossroads, my dad would take me in with him and stand talking at the counter while I looked through the glass at the penny candy and two-cent chews. It was January thaw. No sound but the drip of meltwater falling from the galvanized tin gutters to the rain barrels on either side of the store. Me looking at the jawbreakers and buttons and pinwheels. The mystic yellow globes of light overhead showing up the monstrous, projected shadows of last summers battalion of dead flies. A little boy named David Drayton with his father, the famous artist Andrew Drayton, whose painting Christine Standing Alone hung in the White House. A little boy named David Drayton looking at the candy and the Davy Crockett bubblegum cards and vaguely needing to go pee. And outside, the pressing, billowing yellow fog of January thaw. The memory passed, but very slowly. You people!

Norton bellowed. All you people, listen to me! They looked around. Norton was holding up both hands, the fingers splayed like a political candidate accepting accolades. It may be dangerous to go outside! Norton yelled. Why? a woman screamed back. My kidsre at home! I got to get back to my kids! Its death to go out there! Mrs. Carmody came back smartly. She was standing by the twenty-five-pound sacks of fertilizer stacked below the window, and her face seemed to bulge somehow, as if she were swelling. A teenager gave her a sudden hard push and she sat down on the bags with a surprised grunt. Stop saying that, you old bag! Stop rappin that crazy bullshit! Please! Norton yelled. If we just wait a few moments until it blows over and we can see A babble of conflicting shouts greeted this. Hes right, I said, shouting to be heard over the noise. Lets just try to keep cool. I think that was an earthquake, a bespectacled man said. His voice was soft. In one hand he held a package of hamburger and a bag of buns. The other hand was holding the hand of a little girl, maybe a year younger than Billy. I really think that was an earthquake. They had one over in Naples four years ago, a fat local man said. That was in Casco, his wife contradicted immediately. She spoke in the unmistakable tones of a veteran contradictor. Naples, the fat local man said, but with less assurance. Casco, his wife said firmly, and he gave up. Somewhere a can that had been jostled to the very edge of its shelf by the thump, earthquake, whatever it had been, fell off with a delayed clatter. Billy burst into tears. I want to go home! I want my MOTHER! Cant you shut that kid up? Bud Brown asked. His eyes were darting rapidly but aimlessly from place to place. Would you like a shot in the teeth, motormouth? I asked him. Come on, Dave, thats not helping, Norton said distractedly. Im sorry, the woman who had screamed earlier said. Im sorry, but I cant stay here. Ive got to get home and see to my kids. She looked around at us, a blond woman with a tired, pretty face. Wandas looking after little Victor, you see. Wandas only eight and sometimes she forgets... forgets shes supposed to be... well, watching him, you know. And little Victor... he likes to turn on the stove burners to see the little red light come on... he likes that light... and sometimes he pulls out the plugs... little Victor does... and Wanda gets... bored watching him after a while... shes just eight... She stopped talking and just looked at us. I imagine that we must have looked like nothing but a bank of merciless eyes to her right then, not human beings at all, just eyes. Isnt anyone going to help me? she screamed. Her lips began to tremble. Wont... wont anybody here see a lady home? No one replied. People shuffled their feet. She looked from face to face with her own broken face. The fat local man took a hesitant half-step forward and his wife jerked him back with one quick tug, her hand clapped over his wrist like a manacle. You? the blond woman asked Ollie. He shook his head. You? she said to Bud. He put his hand over the Texas Instruments calculator on the counter and made no reply. You? she said to Norton, and Norton began to say something in his big lawyers voice, something about how no one should go off half-cocked, and... and she dismissed him and Norton just trailed off. You? she said to me, and I picked Billy up again and held him in my arms like a shield to ward off her terrible broken face. I hope you all rot in hell, she said. She didnt scream it. Her voice was dead tired. She went to the OUT door and pulled it open, using both hands. I wanted to say something to her, call her back, but my mouth was too dry. Aw, lady, listen the teenage kid who had shouted at Mrs. Carmody began. He held her arm. She looked down at his hand and he let her go, shamefaced. She slipped out into the fog. We watched her go and no one said anything. We watched the fog overlay her and make her insubstantial, not a human being anymore but a pencil-ink sketch of a human being done on the worlds whitest paper, and no one said anything. For a moment it was like the letters of the KEEP RIGHT sign that had seemed to float on nothingness; her arms and legs and pallid blond hair were all gone and only the misty remnants of her red summer dress remained, seeming to dance in white limbo. Then her dress was gone, too, and no one said anything. IV. The Storage Area. Problems with the Generators. What Happened to the Bag-Boy. Billy began to act hysterical and tantrummy, screaming for his mother in a hoarse, demanding way through his tears, instantly regressing to the age of two. Snot was lathered on his upper lip. I led him away, walking down one of the middle aisles with my arm around his shoulders, trying to soothe him. I took him back by the long white meat cabinet that ran the length of the store at the back. Mr. McVey, the butcher, was still there. We nodded at each other, the best we could do under the circumstances. I sat down on the floor and took Billy on my lap and held his face against my chest and rocked him and talked to him. I told him all the lies parents keep in reserve for bad situations, the ones that sound so damn plausible to a child, and I told them in a tone of perfect conviction. Thats not regular fog, Billy said. He looked up at me, his eyes dark-circled and tear-streaked. It isnt, is it, Daddy? No, I dont think so. I didnt want to lie about that. Kids dont fight shock the way adults do; they go with it, maybe because kids are in a semipermanent state of shock until theyre thirteen or so. Billy started to doze off. I held him, thinking he might snap awake again, but his doze deepened into a real sleep. Maybe he had been awake part

of the night before, when we had slept three-in-a-bed for the first time since Billy was an infant. And maybe I felt a cold eddy slip through me at the thought maybe he had sensed something coming. When I was sure he was solidly out, I laid him on the floor and went looking for something to cover him up with. Most of the people were still up front, looking out into the thick blanket of mist. Norton had gathered a little crowd of listeners, and was busy spellbinding or trying to. Bud Brown stood rigidly at his post, but Ollie Weeks had left his. There were a few people in the aisles, wandering like ghosts, their faces greasy with shock. I went into the storage area through the big double doors between the meat cabinet and the beer cooler. The generator roared steadily behind its plywood partition, but something had gone wrong. I could smell diesel fumes, and they were much too strong. I walked toward the partition, taking shallow breaths. At last I unbuttoned my shirt and put part of it over my mouth and nose. The storage area was long and narrow, feebly lit by two sets of emergency lights. Cartons were stacked everywhere bleach on one side, cases of soft drinks on the far side of the partition, stacked cases of Beefaroni and catsup. One of those had fallen over and the cardboard carton appeared to be bleeding. I unlatched the door in the generator partition and stepped through. The machine was obscured in drifting, oily clouds of blue smoke. The exhaust pipe ran out through a hole in the wall. Something must have blocked off the outside end of the pipe. There was a simple on/off switch and I flipped it. The generator hitched, belched, coughed, and died. Then it ran down in a diminishing series of popping sounds that reminded me of Nortons stubborn chainsaw. The emergency lights faded out and I was left in darkness. I got scared very quickly, and I got disoriented. My breathing sounded like a low wind rattling in straw. I bumped my nose on the flimsy plywood door going out and my heart lurched. There were windows in the double doors, but for some reason they had been painted black, and the darkness was nearly total. I got off course and ran into a stack of the bleach cartons. They tumbled and fell. One came close enough to my head to make me step backward, and I tripped over another carton that had landed behind me. I fell down, thumping my head hard enough to see bright stars in the darkness. Good show. I lay there cursing myself and rubbing my head, telling myself to just take it easy, just get up and get out of here, get back to Billy, telling myself nothing soft and slimy was going to close over my ankle or slip into one groping hand. I told myself not to lose control, or I would end up blundering around back here in a panic, knocking things over and creating a mad obstacle course for myself. I stood up carefully, looking for a pencil line of light between the double doors. I found it, a faint but unmistakable scratch on the darkness. I started toward it, and then stopped. There was a sound. A soft sliding sound. It stopped, then started again with a stealthy little bump. Everything inside me went loose. I regressed magically to four years of age. That sound wasnt coming from the market. It was coming from behind me. From outside. Where the mist was. Something that was slipping and sliding and scraping over the cinderblocks. And, maybe, looking for a way in. Or maybe it was already in, and it was looking for me. Maybe in a moment I would feel whatever was making that sound on my shoe. Or on my neck. It came again. I was positive it was outside. But that didnt make it any better. I told my legs to go and they refused the order. Then the quality of the noise changed. Something rasped across the darkness and my heart leaped in my chest and I lunged at that thin vertical line of light. I hit the doors straight-arm and burst through into the market. Three or four people were right outside the double doors Ollie Weeks was one of them and they all jumped back in surprise. Ollie grabbed at his chest. David! he said in a pinched voice. Jesus Christ, you want to take ten years off my He saw my face. Whats the matter with you? Did you hear it? I asked. My voice sounded strange in my own ears, high and squeaking. Did any of you hear it? They hadnt heard anything, of course. They had come up to see why the generator had gone off. As Ollie told me that, one of the bag-boys bustled up with an armload of flashlights. He looked from Ollie to me curiously. I turned the generator off, I said, and explained why. What did you hear? one of the other men asked. He worked for the town road department; his name was Jim something. I dont know. A scraping noise. Slithery. I dont want to hear it again. Nerves, the other fellow with Ollie said. No. It was not nerves. Did you hear it before the lights went out? No, only after. But... But nothing. I could see the way they were looking at me. They didnt want any more bad news, anything else frightening or off-kilter. There was enough of that already. Only Ollie looked as if he believed me. Lets go in and start her up again, the bag-boy said, handing out the flashlights. Ollie took his doubtfully. The bag-boy offered me one, a slightly contemptuous shine in his eyes. He was maybe eighteen. After a moments thought, I took the light. I still needed something to cover Billy with. Ollie opened the doors and chocked them, letting in some light. The bleach cartons lay scattered around the half-open door in the plywood partition. The fellow named Jim sniffed and said, Smells pretty rank, all right. Guess you was right to shut her down. The flashlight beams bobbed and danced across cartons of canned goods, toilet paper, dog food. The beams were smoky in the

drifting fumes the blocked exhaust had turned back into the storage area. The bag-boy trained his light briefly on the wide loading door at the extreme right. The two men and Ollie went inside the generator compartment. Their lights flashed uneasily back and forth, reminding me of something out of a boys adventure story and I illustrated a series of them while I was still in college. Pirates burying their bloody gold at midnight, or maybe the mad doctor and his assistant snatching a body. Shadows, made twisted and monstrous by the shifting, conflicting flashlight beams, bobbed on the walls. The generator ticked irregularly as it cooled. The bag-boy was walking toward the loading door, flashing his light ahead of him. I wouldn't go over there, I said. No, I know you wouldn't. Try it now, Ollie, one of the men said. The generator wheezed, then roared. Jesus! Shut her down! Holy crow, don't that stink! The generator died again. The bag-boy walked back from the loading door just as they came out. Somethings plugged that exhaust, all right, one of the men said. Ill tell you what, the bag-boy said. His eyes were shining in the glow of the flashlights, and there was a devil-may-care expression on his face that I had sketched too many times as part of the frontispieces for my boys adventure series. Get it running long enough for me to raise the loading door back there. Ill go around and clear away whatever it is. Norm, I don't think thats a very good idea, Ollie said doubtfully. Is it an electric door? the one called Jim asked. Sure, Ollie said. But I just don't think it would be wise for Thats okay, the other guy said. He tipped his baseball cap back on his head. Ill do it. No, you don't understand, Ollie began again. I really don't think anyone should Dont worry, he said indulgently to Ollie, dismissing him. Norm, the bag-boy, was indignant. Listen, it was my idea, he said. All at once, by some magic, they had gotten around to arguing about who was going to do it instead of whether or not it should be done at all. But of course, none of them had heard that nasty slithering sound. Stop it! I said loudly. They looked around at me. You don't seem to understand, or youre trying as hard as you can not to understand. This is no ordinary fog. Nobody has come into the market since it hit. If you open that loading door and something comes in Something like what? Norm said with perfect eighteen-year-old macho contempt. Whatever made the noise I heard. Mr. Drayton, Jim said. Pardon me, but Im not convinced you heard anything. I know youre a big-shot artist with connections in New York and Hollywood and all, but that doesnt make you any different from anyone else, in my book. Way I figure, you got in here in the dark and maybe you just... got a little confused. Maybe I did, I said. And maybe if you want to start screwing around outside, you ought to start by making sure that lady got home safe to her kids. His attitude and that of his buddy and of Norm the bag-boy was making me mad and scaring me more at the same time. They had the sort of light in their eyes that some men get when they go shooting rats at the town dump. Hey, Jims buddy said. When any of us here want your advice, well ask for it. Hesitantly, Ollie said: The generator really isnt that important, you know. The food in the cold cases will keep for twelve hours or more with absolutely no Okay, kid, youre it, Jim said brusquely. Ill start the motor, you raise the door so that the place doesnt stink up too bad. Me and Myron will be standing by the exhaust outflow. Give us a yell when its clear. Sure, Norm said, and bustled excitedly away. This is crazy, I said. You let that lady go by herself I didnt notice you breaking your ass to escort her, Jims buddy Myron said. A dull, brick-colored flush was creeping out of his collar. but youre going to let this kid risk his life over a generator that doesnt even matter? Why dont you just shut the fuck up! Norm yelled. Listen, Mr. Drayton, Jim said, and smiled at me coldly. Ill tell you what. If youve got anything else to say, I think you better count your teeth first, because Im tired of listening to your bullshit. Ollie looked at me, plainly frightened. I shrugged. They were crazy, that was all. Their sense of proportion was temporarily gone. Out there they had been confused and scared. In here was a straightforward mechanical problem: a balky generator. It was possible to solve this problem. Solving the problem would help make them feel less confused and helpless. Therefore they would solve it. Jim and his friend Myron decided I knew when I was licked and went back into the generator compartment. Ready, Norm? Jim asked. Norm nodded, then realized they couldnt hear a nod. Yeah, he said. Norm, I said. Dont be a fool. Its a mistake, Ollie added. He looked at us, and suddenly his face was much younger than eighteen. It was the face of a boy. His Adams apple bobbed convulsively, and I saw that he was scared green. He opened his mouth to say something I think he was going to call it off and then the generator roared into life again, and when it was running smoothly, Norm lunged at the button to the right of the door and it began to rattle upward on its dual steel tracks. The emergency lights had come back on when the generator started. Now they dimmed down as the motor which lifted the door sucked away the juice. The shadows ran backward and melted. The storage area began to fill with the mellow white light of an overcast late-winter day. I noticed that odd, acrid smell again. The loading door went up two feet, then four. Beyond I could see a square cement platform outlined around the edges with a yellow stripe. The yellow faded and washed out in just

three feet. The fog was incredibly thick. Ho up! Norm yelled. Tendrils of mist, as white and fine as floating lace, eddied inside. The air was cold. It had been noticeably cool all morning long, especially after the sticky heat of the last three weeks, but it had been a summery coolness. This was cold. It was like March. I shivered. And I thought of Steff. The generator died. Jim came out just as Norm ducked under the door. He saw it. So did I. So did Ollie. A tentacle came over the far lip of the concrete loading platform and grabbed Norm around the calf. My mouth dropped wide open. Ollie made a very short glottal sound of surpriseuk!

The tentacle tapered from a thickness of a foot the size of a grass snake at the point where it had wrapped itself around Norms lower leg to a thickness of maybe four or five feet where it disappeared into the mist. It was slate gray on top, shading to a fleshy pink underneath. And there were rows of suckers on the underside.

They were moving and writhing like hundreds of small, puckering mouths. Norm looked down. He saw what had him. His eyes bulged. Get it off me! Hey, get it off me! Christ Jesus, get this frigging thing off me!

Oh my God, Jim whimpered. Norm grabbed the bottom edge of the loading door and yanked himself back in. The tentacle seemed to bulge, the way your arm will when you flex it. Norm was yanked back against the corrugated steel door his head clanged against it. The tentacle bulged more, and Norms legs and torso began to slip back out. The bottom edge of the loading door scraped the shirttail out of his pants. He yanked savagely and pulled himself back in like a man doing a chin-up. Help me, he was sobbing. Help me, you guys, please, please. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, Myron said. He had come out of the generator compartment to see what was going on. I was the closest, and I grabbed Norm around the waist and yanked as hard as I could, rocking back on my heels. For a moment we moved backward, but only for a moment. It was like stretching a rubber band or pulling taffy. The tentacle yielded but gave up its basic grip not at all. Then three more tentacles floated out of the mist toward us. One curled around Norms flapping red Federal apron and tore it away. It disappeared back into the mist with the red cloth curled in its grip and I thought of something my mother used to say when my brother and I would beg for something she didnt want us to have candy, a comic book, some toy. You need that like a hen needs a flag, shed say. I thought of that, and I thought of that tentacle waving Norms red apron around, and I got laughing. I got laughing, except my laughter and Norms screams sounded about the same. Maybe no one even knew I was laughing except me. The other two tentacles slithered aimlessly back and forth on the loading platform for a moment, making those low scraping sounds I had heard earlier. Then one of them slapped against Norms left hip and slipped around it. I felt it touch my arm. It was warm and pulsing and smooth. I think now that if it had gripped me with those suckers, I would have gone out into the mist too. But it didnt. It grabbed Norm. And the third tentacle ringleted his other ankle. Now he was being pulled away from me. Help me! I shouted. Ollie! Someone!

Give me a hand here! But they didnt come. I dont know what they were doing, but they didnt come. I looked down and saw the tentacle around Norms waist working into his skin. The suckers were eating him where his shirt had pulled out of his pants. Blood, as red as his missing apron, began to seep out of the trench the pulsing tentacle had made for itself. I banged my head on the lower edge of the partly raised door. Norms legs were outside again. One of his loafers had fallen off. A new tentacle came out of the mist, wrapped its tip firmly around the shoe, and made off with it. Norms fingers clutched at the doors lower edge. He had it in a death grip. His fingers were livid. He was not screaming anymore; he was beyond that. His head whipped back and forth in an endless gesture of negation, and his long black hair flew wildly. I looked over his shoulder and saw more tentacles coming, dozens of them, a forest of them. Most were small but a few were gigantic, as thick as the moss-corseted tree that had been lying across our driveway that morning. The big ones had candy-pink suckers that seemed the size of manhole covers. One of these big ones struck the concrete loading platform with a loud and rolling thrrrrap! sound and moved sluggishly toward us like a great blind earthworm. I gave one gigantic tug, and the tentacle holding Norms right calf slipped a little.

That was all. But before it reestablished its grip, I saw that the thing was eating him away. One of the tentacles brushed delicately past my cheek and then wavered in the air, as if debating. I thought of Billy then. Billy was lying asleep in the market by Mr. McVeys long white meat cooler. I had come in here to find something to cover him up with. If one of those things got hold of me, there would be no one to watch out for him except maybe Norton. So I let go of Norm and dropped to my hands and knees. I was half in and half out, directly under the raised door. A tentacle passed by on my left, seeming to walk on its suckers. It attached itself to one of Norms bulging upper arms, paused for a second, and then slid around it in coils. Now Norm looked like something out of a madmans dream of snake charming. Tentacles twisted over him uneasily almost everywhere... and they were all around me, as well. I made a clumsy leapfrog jump back inside, landed on my shoulder, and rolled. Jim, Ollie and Myron were still there. They stood like a tableau of

waxworks in Madame Tussauds, their faces pale, their eyes too bright. Jim and Myron flanked the door to the generator compartment. Start the generator! I yelled at them. Neither moved. They were staring with a drugged, thanatotic avidity at the loading bay. I groped on the floor, picked up the first thing that came to hand—a box of Snowy bleach—and chucked it at Jim. It hit him in the gut, just above the belt buckle. He grunted and grabbed at himself. His eyes flickered back into some semblance of normality. Go start that fucking generator! I screamed so loudly it hurt my throat. He didn't move; instead he began to defend himself, apparently having decided that, with Norm being eaten alive by some insane horror from the mist, the time had come for rebuttals. I'm sorry, he whined. I didn't know, how the hell was I supposed to know? You said you heard something but I didn't know what you meant, you should have said what you meant better. I thought, I dunno, maybe a bird, or something. So then Ollie moved, bunting him aside with one thick shoulder and blundering into the generator room. Jim stumbled over one of the bleach cartons and fell down, just as I had done in the dark. I'm sorry, he said again. His red hair had tumbled over his brow. His cheeks were cheese-white. His eyes were those of a horrified little boy. Seconds later the generator coughed and rumbled into life. I turned back to the loading door. Norm was almost gone, yet he clung grimly with one hand. His body boiled with tentacles, and blood pattered serenely down on the concrete in dime-size droplets. His head whipped back and forth and his eyes bulged with terror as they stared off into the mist. Other tentacles now crept and crawled over the floor inside. There were too many near the button that controlled the loading door to even think of approaching it. One of them closed around a half-liter bottle of Pepsi and carried it off. Another slipped around a cardboard carton and squeezed. The carton ruptured and rolls of toilet paper, two-packs of Delsey wrapped in cellophane, geysered upward, came down, and rolled everywhere. Tentacles seized them eagerly. One of the big ones slipped in. Its tip rose from the floor and it seemed to sniff the air. It began to advance toward Myron and he stepped mincingly away from it, his eyes rolling madly in their sockets. A high-pitched little moan escaped his slack lips. I looked around for something, anything at all long enough to reach over the questing tentacles and punch the SHUT button on the wall. I saw a janitor's push broom leaning against a stack-up of beer cases and grabbed it. Norm's good hand was ripped loose. He thudded down onto the concrete loading platform and scrabbled madly for a grip with his one free hand. His eyes met mine for a moment. They were hellishly bright and aware. He knew what was happening to him. Then he was pulled, bumping and rolling, into the mist. There was another scream, choked off. Norm was gone. I pushed the tip of the broom handle onto the button and the motor whined. The door began to slide back down. It touched the thickest of the tentacles first, the one that had been investigating in Myron's direction. It indented its hideskin, whatever, and then pierced it. A black goo began to spurt from it. It writhed madly, whipping across the concrete storage-area floor like an obscene bullwhip, and then it seemed to flatten out. A moment later it was gone. The others began to withdraw. One of them had a five-pound bag of Gaines dog food, and it wouldn't let go. The descending door cut it in two before thumping home in its grooved slot. The severed chunk of tentacle squeezed convulsively tighter, splitting the bag open and sending brown nuggets of dog food everywhere. Then it began to flop on the floor like a fish out of water, curling and uncurling, but ever more slowly, until it lay still. I prodded it with the tip of the broom. The piece of tentacle, maybe three feet long, closed on it savagely for a moment, then loosened and lay limp again in the confused litter of toilet paper, dog food, and bleach cartons. There was no sound except the roar of the generator and Ollie, crying inside the plywood compartment. I could see him sitting on a stool in there with his face clutched in his hands. Then I became aware of another sound. The soft, slithery sound I had heard in the dark. Only now the sound was multiplied tenfold. It was the sound of tentacles squirming over the outside of the loading door, trying to find a way in. Myron took a couple of steps toward me. Look, he said. You got to understand I looped a fist at his face. He was too surprised to even try to block it. It landed just below his nose and mashed his upper lip into his teeth. Blood flowed into his mouth. You got him killed! I shouted. Did you get a good look at it? Did you get a good look at what you did? I started to pummel him, throwing wild rights and lefts, not punching the way I had been taught in my college boxing classes but only hitting out. He stepped back, shaking some of them off, taking others with a numbness that seemed like a kind of resignation or penance. That made me angrier. I bloodied his nose. I raised a mouse under one of his eyes that was going to black just beautifully. I clipped him a hard one on the chin. After that one, his eyes went cloudy and semi-vacant. Look, he kept saying, look, look, and then I punched him low in the stomach and the air went out of him and he didn't say look, look anymore. I don't know how long I would have gone on punching him, but someone grabbed my arms. I jerked free and turned around. I was hoping it was Jim. I wanted to punch Jim out, too. But it wasn't Jim. It was Ollie, his round

face dead pale, except for the dark circles around his eyes that were still shiny from his tears. Dont, David, he said. Dont hit him anymore. It doesnt solve anything. Jim was standing off to one side, his face a bewildered blank. I kicked a carton of something at him. It struck one of his Dingo boots and bounced away. You and your buddy are a couple of stupid assholes, I said. Come on, David, Ollie said unhappily. Quit it. You two assholes got that kid killed. Jim looked down at his Dingo boots. Myron sat on the floor and held his beer belly. I was breathing hard. The blood was roaring in my ears and I was trembling all over. I sat down on a couple of cartons and put my head down between my knees and gripped my legs hard just above the ankles. I sat that way for a while with my hair in my face, waiting to see if I was going to black out or puke or what. After a bit the feeling began to pass and I looked up at Ollie. His pinky ring flashed subdued fire in the glow of the emergency lights. Okay, I said dully. Im done. Good, Ollie said. Weve got to think what to do next. The storage area was beginning to stink of exhaust again. Shut the generator down. Thats the first thing. Yeah, lets get out of here, Myron said. His eyes appealed to me. Im sorry about the kid. But you got to understand I dont got to understand anything. You and your buddy go back into the market, but you wait right there by the beer cooler. And dont say a word to anybody. Not yet. They went willingly enough, huddling together as they passed through the swinging doors. Ollie killed the generator, and just as the lights started to fail, I saw a quilted rug the sort of thing movers use to pad breakable things flopped over a stack of returnable soda bottles. I reached up and grabbed it for Billy. There was the shuffling, blundering sound of Ollie coming out of the generator compartment. Like a great many overweight men, his breathing had a slightly heavy wheezing sound. David? His voice wavered a little. You still here? Right here, Ollie. You want to watch out for all those bleach cartons. Yeah. I guided him with my voice and in thirty seconds or so he reached out of the dark and gripped my shoulder. He gave a long, trembling sigh. Christ, lets get out of here. I could smell the Roloids he always chewed on his breath. This dark is... is bad. It is, I said. But hang tight a minute, Ollie. I wanted to talk to you and I didnt want those other two fuckheads listening. Dave... they didnt twist Norms arm. You ought to remember that. Norm was a kid, and they werent. But never mind, thats over. Weve got to tell them, Ollie. The people in the market. If they panic Ollies voice was doubtful. Maybe they will and maybe they wont. But it will make them think twice about going out, which is what most of them want to do. Why shouldnt they? Most of them will have people they left at home. I do myself. We have to make them understand what theyre risking if they go out there. His hand was gripping my arm hard. All right, he said. Yes, I just keep asking myself... all those tentacles... like a squid or something... David, what were they hooked to? What were those tentacles hooked to? I dont know. But I dont want those two telling people on their own. That would start a panic. Lets go. I looked around, and after a moment or two located the thin line of vertical light between the swing doors. We started to shuffle toward it, wary of scattered cartons, one of Ollies pudgy hands clamped over my forearm. It occurred to me that all of us had lost our flashlights. As we reached the doors, Ollie said flatly: What we saw... its impossible, David. You know that, dont you? Even if a van from the Boston Seaquarium drove out back and dumped out one of those gigantic squids like in Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea, it would die. It would just die. Yes, I said. Thats right. So what happened? Huh? What happened? What is that damned mist? Ollie, I dont know. We went out. V. An Argument with Norton. A Discussion Near the Beer Cooler. Verification. Jim and his good buddy Myron were just outside the doors, each with a Budweiser in his fist. I looked at Billy, saw he was still asleep, and covered him with the ruglike movers pad. He moved a little, muttered something, and then lay still again. I looked at my watch. It was 12:15 P.M. That seemed utterly impossible; it felt as if at least five hours had passed since I had first gone in there to look for something to cover him with. But the whole thing, from first to last, had taken only about thirty-five minutes. I went back to where Ollie stood with Jim and Myron. Ollie had taken a beer and he offered me one. I took it and gulped down half the can at once, as I had that morning cutting wood. It bucked me up a little. Jim was Jim Grondin. Myrons last name was LaFleur that had its comic side, all right. Myron the flower had drying blood on his lips, chin, and cheek. The eye with the mouse under it was already swelling up. The girl in the cranberry-colored sweatshirt walked by aimlessly and gave Myron a cautious look. I could have told her that Myron was only dangerous to teenage boys intent on proving their manhood, but saved my breath. After all, Ollie was right they had only been doing what they thought was best, although in a blind, fearful way rather than in any real common interest. And now I needed them to do what I thought was best. I didnt think that would be a problem. They had both had the stuffing knocked out of them. Neither especially Myron the flower was going to be good for anything for some time to come. Something that had been in their eyes when they were fixing to send Norm out to unplug the exhaust vent had gone now. Their peckers were no longer up. Were

going to have to tell these people something, I said. Jim opened his mouth to protest. Ollie and I will leave out any part you and Myron had in sending Norm out there if you'll back up what he and I say about... well, about what got him. Sure, Jim said, pitifully eager. Sure, if we don't tell, people might go out there... like that woman... that woman who... He wiped his hand across his mouth and then drank more beer quickly. Christ, what a mess. David, Ollie said. What He stopped, then made himself go on. What if they get in? The tentacles? How could they? Jim asked. You guys shut the door. Sure, Ollie said. But the whole front wall of this place is plate glass. An elevator shot my stomach down about twenty floors. I had known that, but had somehow been successfully ignoring it. I looked over at where Billy lay asleep. I thought of those tentacles swarming over Norm. I thought about that happening to Billy. Plate glass, Myron LaFleur whispered. Jesus Christ in a chariot-driven sidecar. I left the three of them standing by the cooler, each working a second can of beer, and went looking for Brent Norton. I found him in sober-sided conversation with Bud Brown at Register 2. The pair of them Norton with his styled gray hair and his elderly-stud good looks, Brown with his dour New England phiz looked like something out of a New Yorker cartoon. As many as two dozen people milled restlessly in the space between the end of the checkout lanes and the long show window. A lot of them were lined up at the glass, looking out into the mist. I was again reminded of the people that congregate at a building site. Mrs. Carmody was seated on the stationary conveyor belt of one of the checkout lanes, smoking a Parliament in a One Step at a Time filter. Her eyes measured me, found me wanting, and passed on. She looked as if she might be dreaming awake. Brent, I said. David! Where did you get off to? That's what I'd like to talk to you about. There are people back at the cooler drinking beer, Brown said grimly. He sounded like a man announcing that X-rated movies had been shown at the deacons party. I can see them in the security mirror. This has simply got to stop. Brent? Excuse me for a minute, would you, Mr. Brown? Certainly. He folded his arms across his chest and stared grimly up into the convex mirror. It is going to stop, I can promise you that. Norton and I headed toward the beer cooler in the far corner of the store, walking past the housewares and notions. I glanced back over my shoulder, noticing uneasily how the wooden beams framing the tall, rectangular sections of glass had buckled and twisted and splintered. And one of the windows wasn't even whole, I remembered. A pie-shaped chunk of glass had fallen out of the upper corner at the instant of that queer thump. Perhaps we could stuff it with cloth or something maybe a bunch of those \$3.59 ladies tops I had noticed near the wine. My thoughts broke off abruptly, and I had to put the back of my hand over my mouth, as if stifling a burp. What I was really stifling was the rancid flood of horrified giggles that wanted to escape me at the thought of stuffing a bunch of shirts into a hole to keep out those tentacles that had carried Norm away. I had seen one of those tentacles a small one squeeze a bag of dog food until it simply ruptured. David? Are you okay? Huh? Your face you looked like you just had a good idea or a bloody awful one. Something hit me then. Brent, what happened to that man who came in raving about something in the mist getting John Lee Frovin? The guy with the nosebleed? Yes, him. He passed out and Mr. Brown brought him around with some smelling salts from the first-aid kit. Why? Did he say anything else when he woke up? He started in on that hallucination. Mr. Brown conducted him up to the office. He was frightening some of the women. He seemed happy enough to go. Something about the glass. When Mr. Brown said there was only one small window in the manager's office, and that that one was reinforced with wire, he seemed happy enough to go. I presume he's still there. What he was talking about is no hallucination. No, of course it isn't. And that thud we felt? No, but, David he's scared, I kept reminding myself. Don't blow up at him, you've treated yourself to one blowup this morning and that's enough. Don't blow up at him just because this is the way he was during that stupid property-line dispute... first patronizing, then sarcastic, and finally, when it became clear he was going to lose, ugly. Don't blow up at him because you're going to need him. He may not be able to start his own chainsaw, but he looks like the father figure of the Western world, and if he tells people not to panic, they won't. So don't blow up at him. You see those double doors up there beyond the beer cooler? He looked, frowning. Isn't one of those men drinking beer the other assistant manager? Weeks? If Brown sees that, I can promise you that man will be looking for a job very soon. Brent, will you listen to me? He glanced back at me absently. What were you saying, Dave? I'm sorry. Not as sorry as he was going to be. Do you see those doors? Yes, of course I do. What about them? They give on the storage area that runs all the way along the west face of the building. Billy fell asleep and I went back there to see if I could find something to cover him up with... I told him everything, only leaving out the argument about whether or not Norm should have gone out at all. I told him what had come in... and finally, what had gone out, screaming. Brent Norton refused to believe it. No he refused to even entertain it. I took him over to Jim, Ollie, and Myron. All three of them verified the story,

although Jim and Myron the flower were well on their way to getting drunk. Again, Norton refused to believe or even to entertain it. He simply balked. No, he said. No, no, no. Forgive me, gentlemen, but its completely ridiculous. Either youre having me onhe patronized us with his gleaming smile to show that he could take a joke as well as the next fellowor youre suffering from some form of group hypnosis. My temper rose again, and I controlled itwith difficulty. I dont think that Im ordinarily a quick-tempered man, but these werent ordinary circumstances. I had Billy to think about, and what was happeningor what had already happenedto Stephanie. Those things were constantly gnawing at the back of my mind. All right, I said. Lets go back there. Theres a chunk of tentacle on the floor. The door cut it off when it came down. And you can hear them. Theyre rustling all over that door. It sounds like the wind in ivy. No, he said calmly. What? I really did believe I had misheard him. What did you say? I said no, Im not going back there. The joke has gone far enough. Brent, I swear to you its no joke. Of course it is, he snapped. His eyes ran over Jim, Myron, rested briefly on Ollie Weekswho held his glance with calm impassivityand at last came back to me. Its what you locals probably call a real belly-buster. Right, David? Brent... look No, you look! His voice began to rise toward a courtroom shout. It carried very, very well, and several of the people who were wandering around, edgy and aimless, looked over to see what was going on. Norton jabbed his finger at me as he spoke. Its a joke. Its a banana skin and Im the guy thats supposed to slip on it. None of you people are exactly crazy about out-of-towners, am I right? You all pretty much stick together. The way it happened when I hauled you into court to get what was rightfully mine. You won that one, all right. Why not? Your father was the famous artist, and its your town. I only pay my taxes and spend my money here! He was no longer performing, hectoring us with the trained courtroom shout; he was nearly screaming and on the verge of losing all control. Ollie Weeks turned and walked away, clutching his beer. Myron and his friend Jim were staring at Norton with frank amazement. Am I supposed to go back there and look at some ninety-eight-cent rubber-joke novelty while these two hicks stand around and laugh their asses off? Hey, you want to watch who youre calling a hick, Myron said. Im glad that tree fell on your boathouse, if you want to know the truth. Glad. Norton was grinning savagely at me. Stove it in pretty well, didnt it? Fantastic. Now get out of my way. He tried to push past me. I grabbed him by the arm and threw him against the beer cooler. A woman cawed in surprise. Two six-packs of Bud fell over. You dig out your ears and listen, Brent. There are lives at stake here. My kids is not the least of them. So you listen, or I swear Ill knock the shit out of you. Go ahead, Norton said, still grinning with a kind of insane palsied bravado. His eyes, bloodshot and wide, bulged from their sockets. Show everyone how big and brave you are, beating up a man with a heart condition who is old enough to be your father. Sock him anyway! Jim exclaimed. Fuck his heart condition. I dont even think a cheap New York shyster like him has got a heart. You keep out of it, I said to Jim, and then put my face down to Nortons. I was kissing distance, if that had been what I had in mind. The cooler was off, but it was still radiating a chill. Stop throwing up sand. You know damn well Im telling the truth. I know... no... such thing, he panted. If it was another time and place, Id let you get away with it. I dont care how scared you are, and Im not keeping score. Im scared, too. But I need you, goddammit! Does that get through? I need you! Let me go! I grabbed him by the shirt and shook him. Dont you understand anything? People are going to start leaving and walk right into that thing out there! For Christs sake, dont you understand? Let me go! Not until you come back there with me and see for yourself. I told you, no! Its all a trick, a joke, Im not as stupid as you take me for Then Ill haul you back there myself. I grabbed him by the shoulder and the scruff of his neck. The seam of his shirt under one arm tore with a soft purring sound. I dragged him toward the double doors. Norton let out a wretched scream. A knot of people, fifteen or eighteen, had gathered, but they kept their distance. None showed any signs of wanting to interfere. Help me! Norton cried. His eyes bulged behind his glasses. His styled hair had gone awry again, sticking up in the same two little tufts behind his ears. People shuffled their feet and watched. What are you screaming for? I said in his ear. Its just a joke, right? Thats why I took you to town when you asked to come and why I trusted you to cross Billy in the parking lotbecause I had this handy fog all manufactured, I rented a fog machine from Hollywood, it cost me fifteen thousand dollars and another eight thousand dollars to ship it, all so I could play a joke on you. Stop bullshitting yourself and open your eyes! Let... me... go! Norton bawled. We were almost at the doors. Here, here! What is this? What are you doing? It was Brown. He hustled and elbowed his way through the crowd of watchers. Make him let me go, Norton said hoarsely. Hes crazy. No. Hes not crazy. I wish he were, but he isnt. That was Ollie, and I could have blessed him. He came around the aisle behind us and stood there facing Brown. Browns eyes dropped to the beer Ollie was holding. Youre drinking! he said, and his voice was surprised but not totally devoid of pleasure. Youll lose your job for this.

Come on, Bud, I said, letting Norton go. This is no ordinary situation. Regulations dont change, Brown said smugly. Ill see that the company hears of it. Thats my responsibility. Norton, meanwhile, had skittered away and stood at some distance, trying to straighten his shirt and smooth back his hair. His eyes darted between Brown and me nervously. Hey! Ollie cried suddenly, raising his voice and producing a bass thunder I never would have suspected from this large but soft and unassuming man. Hey! Everybody in the store! You want to come up back and hear this! It concerns all of you! He looked at me levelly, ignoring Brown altogether.

Am I doing all right? Fine. People began to gather. The original knot of spectators to my argument with Norton doubled, then trebled. Theres something you all had better know Ollie began. You put that beer down right now, Brown said. You shut up right now, I said, and took a step toward him. Brown took a compensatory step back. I dont know what some of you think you are doing, he said, but I can tell you its going to be reported to the Federal Foods Company! All of it! And I want you to understandthere may be charges! His lips drew nervously back from his yellowed teeth, and I could feel sympathy for him. Just trying to cope; that was all he was doing. As Norton was by imposing a mental gag order on himself. Myron and Jim had tried by turning the whole thing into a macho charadeif the generator could be fixed, the mist would blow over. This was Browns way. He was... Protecting the Store. Then you go ahead and take down the names, I said. But please dont talk. Ill take down plenty of names, he responded. Yours will be head on the list, you... you bohemian. Mr. David Drayton has got something to tell you, Ollie said, and I think you had better all listen up, in case you were planning on going home. So I told them what had happened, pretty much as I told Norton. There was some laughter at first, then a deepening uneasiness as I finished. Its a lie, you know, Norton said. His voice tried for hard emphasis and overshot into stridency. This was the man Id told first, hoping to enlist his credibility. What a balls-up. Of course its a lie, Brown agreed. Its lunacy.

Where do you suppose those tentacles came from, Mr. Drayton? I dont know, and at this point, thats not even a very important question. Theyre here. Theres I suspect they came out of a few of those beer cans. Thats what I suspect. This got some appreciative laughter. It was silenced by the strong, rusty-hinge voice of Mrs. Carmody. Death! she cried, and those who had been laughing quickly sobered. She marched into the center of the rough circle that had formed, her canary pants seeming to give off a light of their own, her huge purse swinging against one elephantine thigh. Her black eyes glanced arrogantly around, as sharp and balefully sparkling as a magpies. Two good-looking girls of about sixteen with CAMP WOODLANDS written on the back of their white rayon shirts shrank away from her. You listen but you dont hear! You hear but you dont believe! Which one of you wants to go outside and see for himself? Her eyes swept them, and then fell on me. And just what do you propose to do about it, Mr. David Drayton? What do you think you can do about it? She grinned, skull-like above her canary outfit. Its the end, I tell you. The end of everything.

Its the Last Times. The moving finger has writ, not in fire, but in lines of mist. The earth has opened and spewed forth its abominations Cant you make her shut up? one of the teenage girls burst out. She was beginning to cry. Shes scaring me! Are you scared, dearie? Mrs. Carmody asked, and turned on her. You arent scared now, no. But when the foul creatures the Imp has loosed upon the face of the earth come for you Thats enough now, Mrs. Carmody, Ollie said, taking her arm. Thats just fine. You let go of me! Its the end, I tell you! Its death! Death! Its a pile of shit, a man in a fishing hat and glasses said disgustedly. No, sir, Myron spoke up. I know it sounds like something out of a dope-dream, but its the flat-out truth. I saw it myself. I did, too, Jim said. And me, Ollie chipped in. He had succeeded in quieting Mrs. Carmody, at least for the time being. But she stood close by, clutching her big purse and grinning her crazy grin. No one wanted to stand too close to herthey muttered among themselves, not liking the corroboration. Several of them looked back at the big plate-glass windows in an uneasy, speculative way. I was glad to see it. Lies, Norton said. You people all lie each other up. Thats all. What youre suggesting is totally beyond belief, Brown said. We dont have to stand here chewing it over, I told him. Come back into the storage area with me. Take a look. And a listen. Customers are not allowed in the Bud, Ollie said, go with him. Lets settle this. All right, Brown said. Mr. Drayton? Lets get this foolishness over with. We pushed through the double doors into the darkness. The sound was unpleasantperhaps evil. Brown felt it, too, for all his hardheaded Yankee manner; his hand clutched my arm immediately, his breath caught for a moment and then resumed more harshly. It was a low whispering sound from the direction of the loading dooran almost caressing sound. I swept around gently with one foot and finally struck one of the flashlights. I bent down, got it, and turned it on. Browns face was tightly drawn, and he hadnt even seen themhe was only hearing them. But I had seen, and I could imagine them twisting and climbing over the corrugated steel surface of the door like living vines. What do you think now? Totally beyond belief? Brown licked his lips and looked at the littered

confusion of boxes and bags. They did this? Some of it. Most of it. Come over here. He came reluctantly. I spotted the flashlight on the shriveled and curled section of tentacle, still lying by the push broom. Brown bent toward it. Dont touch that, I said. It may still be alive. He straightened up quickly. I picked up the broom by the bristles and prodded the tentacle. The third or fourth poke caused it to unclench sluggishly and reveal two whole suckers and a ragged segment of a third. Then the fragment coiled again with muscular speed and lay still. Brown made a gagging, disgusted sound. Seen enough? Yes, he said. Lets get out of here.

We followed the bobbing light back to the double doors and pushed through them. All the faces turned toward us, and the hum of conversation died. Nortons face was like old cheese. Mrs. Carmodys black eyes glinted. Ollie was drinking beer; his face was still running with trickles of perspiration, although it had gotten rather chilly in the market. The two girls with CAMP WOODLANDS on their shirts were huddled together like young horses before a thunderstorm. Eyes. So many eyes. I could paint them, I thought with a chill. No faces, only eyes in the gloom. I could paint them but no one would believe they were real. Bud Brown folded his long-fingered hands primly in front of him. People, he said. It appears we have a problem of some magnitude here.