

Stephen King "Riding The Bullet", 2000

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I've never told anyone this story, and never thought I would - not because I was afraid of being disbelieved, exactly, but because I was ashamed . . . and because it was mine. I've always felt that telling it would cheapen both me and the story itself, make it smaller and more mundane, no more than a camp counselor's ghost story told before lights-out. I think I was also afraid that if I told it, heard it with my own ears, I might start to disbelieve it myself. But since my mother died I haven't been able to sleep very well. I doze off and then snap back again, wide awake and shivering. Leaving the bedside lamp on helps, but not as much as you might think. There are so many more shadows at night, have you ever noticed that? Even with a light on there are so many shadows. The long ones could be the shadows of anything, you think.

Anything at all.

I was a junior at the University of Maine when Mrs. McCurdy called about ma. My father died when I was too young to remember him and I was an only child, so it was just Alan and Jean Parker against the world. Mrs. McCurdy, who lived just up the road, called at the apartment I shared with three other guys. She had gotten the number off the magnetic minder-board ma kept on her fridge.

"'Twas a stroke," she said in that long and drawling Yankee accent of hers. "Happened at the restaurant. But don't you go flyin off all half-cocked. Doctor says it wa'ant too bad. She's awake and she's talkin."

"Yeah, but is she making sense?" I asked. I was trying to sound calm, even amused, but my heart was beating fast and the living room suddenly felt too warm. I had the apartment all to myself; it was Wednesday, and both my roomies had classes all day.

"Oh, ayuh. First thing she said was for me to call you but not to scare you. That's pretty sensible, wouldn't you say?"

"Yeah." But of course I was scared. When someone calls and tells you your mother's been taken from work to the hospital in an ambulance, how else are you supposed to feel?

"She said for you to stay right there and mind your schoolin until the weekend. She said you could come then, if you didn't have too much studyin t'do."

Sure, I thought. Fat chance. I'd just stay here in this ratty, beer-smelling apartment while my mother lay in a hospital bed a hundred miles south, maybe dying.

"She's still a young woman, your ma," Mrs. McCurdy said. "It's just that she's let herself get awful heavy these last few years, and she's got the hypertension. Plus the cigarettes. She's goin to have to give up the smokes."

I doubted if she would, though, stroke or no stroke, and about that I was right - my mother loved her smokes. I thanked Mrs. McCurdy for calling.

"First thing I did when I got home," she said. "So when are you coming, Alan? Sad'dy?" There was a sly note in her voice that suggested she knew better.

I looked out the window at a perfect afternoon in October:

bright blue New England sky over trees that were shaking down their yellow leaves onto Mill Street. Then I glanced at my watch. Twenty past three. I'd just been on my way out to my four o'clock philosophy seminar when the phone rang.

"You kidding?" I asked. "I'll be there tonight."

Her laughter was dry and a little cracked around the edges - Mrs. McCurdy was a great one to talk about giving up the cigarettes, her and her Winstons. "Good boy! You'll go straight to the hospital, won't you, then drive out to the house?"

"I guess so, yeah," I said. I saw no sense in telling Mrs. McCurdy that there was something wrong with the transmission of my old car, and it wasn't going anywhere but the driveway for the foreseeable future. I'd hitchhike down to Lewiston, then out to our little house in Harlow if it wasn't too late. If it was, I'd snooze in one of the hospital lounges. It wouldn't be the first time I'd ridden my thumb home from school. Or slept sitting up with my head leaning against a Coke machine, for that matter.

"I'll make sure the key's under the red wheelbarrow," she said.

"You know where I mean, don't you?"

"Sure." My mother kept an old red wheelbarrow by the door to the back shed; in the summer it foamed with flowers. Thinking of it for some reason brought Mrs. McCurdy's news home to me as a true fact: my mother was in the hospital, the little house in Harlow where I'd grown up was going to be dark tonight - there was no one there to turn on the lights after the sun went down. Mrs. McCurdy could say she was young, but when you're just twenty-one yourself, forty-eight seems ancient.

"Be careful, Alan. Don't speed."

My speed, of course, would be up to whoever I hooked a ride with, and I personally hoped that whoever it was would go like hell. As far as I was concerned, I couldn't get to Central Maine Medical Center fast enough. Still, there was no sense worrying Mrs. McCurdy.

"I won't. Thanks."

"Welcome," she said. "Your ma's going to be just fine. And won't she be some happy to see you."

I hung up, then scribbled a note saying what had happened and where I was going. I asked Hector Passmore, the more responsible of my roommates, to call my adviser and ask him to tell my instructors what was up so I wouldn't get whacked for cutting - two or three of my teachers were real bears about that. Then I stuffed a change of clothes into my backpack, added my dog-eared copy of Introduction to Philosophy, and headed out. I dropped the course the following week, although I had been doing quite well in it. The way I looked at the world changed that night, changed quite a lot, and nothing in my philosophy textbook seemed to fit the changes. I came to understand that there are things underneath, you see-underneath-and no book can explain what they are. I think that sometimes it's best to just forget those things are there. If you can, that is.

It's a hundred and twenty miles from the University of Maine in Orono to Lewiston in Androscoggin County, and the quickest way to get there is by I-95. The turnpike isn't such a good road to take if you're hitchhiking, though; the state police are apt to boot anyone they see off - even if you're just standing on the ramp they give you the boot - and if the same cop catches you twice, he's apt to write you a ticket, as well. So I took Route 68, which winds southwest from Bangor. It's a pretty well-traveled road, and if you don't look like an out-and-out psycho, you can usually do pretty well. The cops leave you alone, too, for the most part.

My first lift was with a morose insurance man and took me as far as Newport. I stood at the intersection of Route 68 and Route 2 for about twenty minutes, then got a ride with an elderly gentleman who was on his way to Bowdoinham. He kept grabbing at his crotch as he drove. It was as if he was trying to catch something that was running around in there.

"My wife allus told me I'd wind up in the ditch with a knife in my back if I kept on picking up hitchhikers," he said, "but when I see a young fella standin t'side of the rud, I allus remember my own younger days. Rode my thumb quite a bit, so I did. Rode the rods, too. And lookit this, her dead four year and me still a-goin, drivin this same old Dodge. I miss her somethin turrible." He snatched at his crotch. "Where you headed, son?"

I told him I was going to Lewiston, and why.

"That's turrrible," he said. "Your ma! I'm so sorry!"

His sympathy was so strong and spontaneous that it made the corners of my eyes prickle. I blinked the tears back. The last thing in the world I wanted was to burst out crying in this old man's old car, which rattled and wallowed and smelled quite strongly of pee.

"Mrs. McCurdy - the lady who called me - said it isn't that serious. My mother's still young, only forty-eight."

"Still! A stroke!" He was genuinely dismayed. He snatched at the baggy crotch of his green pants again, yanking with an old man's oversized, clawlike hand. "A stroke's allus serious! Son, I'd take you to the CMMC myself - drive you right up to the front door - if I hadn't promised my brother Ralph I'd take him up to the nursin home in Gates. His wife's there, she has that forgettin disease, I can't think what in the world they call it, Anderson's or Alvarez or somethin like that - "

"Alzheimer's," I said.

"Ayuh, prob'ly I'm gettin it myself. Hell, I'm tempted to take you anyway."

"You don't need to do that," I said. "I can get a ride from Gates easy."

"Still," he said. "Your mother! A stroke! Only forty-eight!" He grabbed at the baggy crotch of his pants. "Fucking truss!" he cried, then laughed - the sound was both desperate and amused. "Fucking rupture! If you stick around, son, all your works start fallin apart. God kicks your ass in the end, let me tell you. But you're a good boy to just drop everythin and go to her like you're doin."

"She's a good mom," I said, and once again I felt the tears bite. I never felt very homesick when I went away to school - a little bit the first week, that was all - but I felt homesick then. There was just me and her, no other close relatives. I couldn't imagine life without her. Wasn't too bad, Mrs. McCurdy had said; a stroke, but not too bad. Damn old lady better be telling the truth, I thought, she just better be.

We rode in silence for a little while. It wasn't the fast ride I'd hoped for - the old man maintained a steady forty-five miles an hour and sometimes wandered over the white line to sample the other lane - but it was a long ride, and that was really just as good. Highway 68 unrolled before us, turning its way through miles of woods and splitting the little towns that were there and gone in a slow blink, each one with its bar and its self-service gas station: New Sharon, Ophelia, West Ophelia, Ganistan (which had once been Afghantistan, strange but true), Mechanic Falls, Castle View, Castle Rock. The bright blue of the sky dimmed as the day drained out of it; the old man turned on first his parking lights and then his headlights. They were the high beams but he didn't seem to notice, not even when cars coming the other way flashed their own high beams at him.

"My sister'n-law don't even remember her own name," he said. "She don't know aye, yes, no, nor maybe. That's what that Anderson's Disease does to you, son. There's a look in her eyes . . . like she's sayin 'Let me out of here' . . . or would say it, if she could think of the words. Do you know what I mean?"

"Yes," I said. I took a deep breath and wondered if the pee I smelled was the old man's or if he maybe had a dog that rode with him sometimes. I wondered if he'd be offended if I rolled down my window a little. Finally I did. He didn't seem to notice, any more than he noticed the oncoming cars flashing their highs at him.

Around seven o'clock we breasted a hill in West Gates and my chauffeur cried, "Lookit, son! The moon! Ain't she a corker?"

She was indeed a corker - a huge orange ball hoisting itself over the horizon. I thought there was nevertheless something terrible about it. It looked both pregnant and infected. Looking at the rising moon, a sudden and awful thought came to me: what if I got to the hospital and my ma didn't recognize me? What if her memory was gone, completely shot, and she didn't know aye, yes, no, nor maybe? What if the doctor told me she'd need someone to take care of her for

the rest of her life? That someone would have to be me, of course; there was no one else. Goodbye college. What about that, friends and neighbors?

"Make a wish on it, boyo!" the old man cried. In his excitement his voice grew sharp and unpleasant - it was like having shards of glass stuffed into your ear. He gave his crotch a terrific tug. Something in there made a snapping sound. I didn't see how you could yank on your crotch like that and not rip your balls right off at the stem, truss or no truss. "Wish you make on the ha'vest moon allus comes true, that's what my father said!"

So I wished that my mother would know me when I walked into her room, that her eyes would light up at once and she would say my name. I made that wish and immediately wished I could have it back again; I thought that no wish made in that fevery orange light could come to any good.

"Ah, son!" the old man said. "I wish my wife was here! I'd beg forgiveness for every sha'ap and unkind word I ever said to her!"

Twenty minutes later, with the last light of the day still in the air and the moon still hanging low and bloated in the sky, we arrived in Gates Falls. There's a yellow blinker at the intersection of Route 68 and Pleasant Street. Just before he reached it, the old man swerved to the side of the road, bumping the Dodge's right front wheel up over the curb and then back down again. It rattled my teeth. The old man looked at me with a kind of wild, defiant excitement - everything about him was wild, although I hadn't seen that at first; everything about him had that broken-glass feeling. And everything that came out of his mouth seemed to be an exclamation.

"I'll take you up there! I will, yessir! Never mind Ralph! Hell with him! You just say the word!"

I wanted to get to my mother, but the thought of another twenty miles with the smell of piss in the air and cars flashing their brights at us wasn't very pleasant. Neither was the image of the old fellow wandering and weaving across four lanes of Lisbon Street. Mostly, though, it was him. I couldn't stand another twenty miles of crotch- snatching and that excited broken-glass voice.

"Hey, no," I said, "that's okay. You go on and take care of your brother." I opened the door and what I'd feared happened - he reached out and took hold of my arm with his twisted old man's hand. It was the hand with which he kept tearing at his crotch.

"You just say the word!" he told me. His voice was hoarse, confidential. His fingers were pressing deep into the flesh just below my armpit. "I'll take you right to the hospital door! Ayuh! Don't matter if I never saw you before in my life nor you me! Don't matter aye, yes, no, nor maybe! I'll take you right . . . there!"

"It's okay," I repeated, and all at once I was fighting an urge to bolt out of the car, leaving my shirt behind in his grip if that was what it took to get free. It was as if he were drowning. I thought that when I moved, his grip would tighten, that he might even go for the nape of my neck, but he didn't. His fingers loosened, then slipped away entirely as I put my leg out. And I wondered, as we always do when an irrational moment of panic passes, what I had been so afraid of in the first place. He was just an elderly carbon-based life-form in an elderly Dodge's pee-smelling ecosystem, looking disappointed that his offer had been refused. Just an old man who couldn't get comfortable in his truss. What in God's name had I been afraid of?

"I thank you for the ride and even more for the offer," I said. "But I can go out that way - " I pointed at Pleasant Street. " - and I'll have a ride in no time."

He was quiet for a moment, then sighed and nodded. "Ayuh, that's the best way to go," he said. "Stay right out of town, nobody wants to give a fella ride in town, no one wants to slow down and get honked at."

He was right about that; hitchhiking in town, even a small one like Gates Falls, was futile. I guess he had spent some time riding his thumb.

"But, son, are you sure? You know what they say about a bird in the hand."

I hesitated again. He was right about a bird in the hand, too. Pleasant Street became Ridge Road a mile or so west of the blinker, and Ridge Road ran

through fifteen miles of woods before arriving at Route 196 on the outskirts of Lewiston. It was almost dark, and it's always harder to get a ride at night - when headlights pick you out on a country road, you look like an escapee from Wyndham Boys' Correctional even with your hair combed and your shirt tucked in. But I didn't want to ride with the old man anymore. Even now, when I was safely out of his car, I thought there was something creepy about him - maybe it was just the way his voice seemed full of exclamation points. Besides, I've always been lucky getting rides.

"I'm sure," I said. "And thanks again. Really."

"Any time, son. Any time. My wife . . ." He stopped, and I saw there were tears leaking from the corners of his eyes. I thanked him again, then slammed the door shut before he could say anything else.

I hurried across the street, my shadow appearing and disappearing in the light of the blinker. On the far side I turned and looked back. The Dodge was still there, parked beside Frank's Fountain & Fruits. By the light of the blinker and the streetlight twenty feet or so beyond the car, I could see him sitting slumped over the wheel. The thought came to me that he was dead, that I had killed him with my refusal to let him help.

Then a car came around the corner and the driver flashed his high beams at the Dodge. This time the old man dipped his own lights, and that was how I knew he was still alive. A moment later he pulled back into the street and piloted the Dodge slowly around the corner. I watched until he was gone, then looked up at the moon. It was starting to lose its orange bloat, but there was still something sinister about it. It occurred to me that I had never heard of wishing on the moon before - the evening star, yes, but not the moon. I wished again I could take my own wish back; as the dark drew down and I stood there at the crossroads, it was too easy to think of that story about the monkey's paw. I walked out Pleasant Street, waving my thumb at cars that went by without even slowing. At first there were shops and houses on both sides of the road, then the sidewalk ended and the trees closed in again, silently retaking the land. Each time the road flooded with light, pushing my shadow out ahead of me, I'd turn around, stick out my thumb, and put what I hoped was a reassuring smile on my face. And each time the oncoming car would swoosh by without slowing. Once, someone shouted out, "Get a job, monkeymeat!" and there was laughter.

I'm not afraid of the dark - or wasn't then - but I began to be afraid I'd made a mistake by not taking the old man up on his offer to drive me straight to the hospital. I could have made a sign reading NEED A RIDE, MOTHER SICK before starting out, but I doubted if it would have helped. Any psycho can make a sign, after all.

I walked along, sneakers scuffing the gravelly dirt of the soft shoulder, listening to the sounds of the gathering night: a dog, far away; an owl, much closer; the sigh of a rising wind. The sky was bright with the moonlight, but I couldn't see the moon itself just now - the trees were tall here and had blotted it out for the time being.

As I left Gates farther behind, fewer cars passed me. My decision not to take the old man up on his offer seemed more foolish with each passing minute. I began to imagine my mother in her hospital bed, mouth turned down in a frozen sneer, losing her grip on life but trying to hold on to that increasingly slippery bark for me, not knowing I wasn't going to make it simply because I hadn't liked an old man's shrill voice, or the pissy smell of his car.

I breasted a steep hill and stepped back into moonlight again at the top. The trees were gone on my right, replaced by a small country graveyard. The stones gleamed in the pale light. Something small and black was crouched beside one of them, watching me. I took a step closer, curious. The black thing moved and became a woodchuck. It spared me a single reproachful red-eyed glance and was gone into the high grass. All at once I became aware that I was very tired, in fact close to exhausted. I had been running on pure adrenaline since Mrs. McCurdy called five hours before, but now that was gone. That was the bad part. The good part was that the useless sense of frantic urgency left me, at least for the time being. I had made my choice, decided on Ridge Road instead of Route

68, and there was no sense beating myself up over it - fun is fun and done is done, my mother sometimes said. She was full of stuff like that, little Zen aphorisms that almost made sense. Sense or nonsense, this one comforted me now. If she was dead when I got to the hospital, that was that. Probably she wouldn't be. Doctor said it wasn't too bad, according to Mrs. McCurdy; Mrs. McCurdy had also said she was still a young woman. A bit on the heavy side, true, and a heavy smoker in the bargain, but still young.

Meantime, I was out here in the williwags and I was suddenly tired out - my feet felt as if they had been dipped in cement.

There was a stone wall running along the road side of the cemetery, with a break in it where two ruts ran through. I sat on the wall with my feet planted in one of these ruts. From this position I could see a good length of Ridge Road in both directions. When I saw headlights coming west, in the direction of Lewiston, I could walk back to the edge of the road and put my thumb out. In the meantime, I'd just sit here with my backpack in my lap and wait for some strength to come back into my legs.

A groundmist, fine and glowing, was rising out of the grass. The trees surrounding the cemetery on three sides rustled in the rising breeze. From beyond the graveyard came the sound of running water and the occasional plunk-plunk of a frog. The place was beautiful and oddly soothing, like a picture in a book of romantic poems.

I looked both ways along the road. Nothing coming, not so much as a glow on the horizon. Putting my pack down in the wheelrut where I'd been dangling my feet, I got up and walked into the cemetery. A lock of hair had fallen onto my brow; the wind blew it off. The mist roiled lazily around my shoes. The stones at the back were old; more than a few had fallen over. The ones at the front were much newer. I bent, hands planted on knees, to look at one which was surrounded by almost-fresh flowers. By moonlight the name was easy to read:

GEORGE STAUB. Below it were the dates marking the brief span of George Staub's life: JANUARY 19, 1977, at one end, OCTOBER 12, 1998, at the other. That explained the flowers which had only begun to wilt; October 12th was two days ago and 1998 was just two years ago. George's friends and relatives had stopped by to pay their respects. Below the name and dates was something else, a brief inscription. I leaned down farther to read it -

- and stumbled back, terrified and all too aware that I was by myself, visiting a graveyard by moonlight.

FUN IS FUN AND DONE IS DONE

was the inscription.

My mother was dead, had died perhaps at that very minute, and something had sent me a message. Something with a thoroughly unpleasant sense of humor.

I began to back slowly toward the road, listening to the wind in the trees, listening to the stream, listening to the frog, suddenly afraid I might hear another sound, the sound of rubbing earth and tearing roots as something not quite dead reached up, groping for one of my sneakers -

My feet tangled together and I fell down, thumping my elbow on a gravestone, barely missing another with the back of my head. I landed with a grassy thud, looking up at the moon which had just barely cleared the trees. It was white instead of orange now, and as bright as a polished bone.

Instead of panicking me further, the fall cleared my head. I didn't know what I'd seen, but it couldn't have been what I thought I'd seen; that kind of stuff might work in John Carpenter and Wes Craven movies, but it wasn't the stuff of real life.

Yes, okay, good, a voice whispered in my head. And if you just walk out of here now, you can go on believing that. You can go on believing it for the rest of your life.

"Fuck that," I said, and got up. The seat of my jeans was wet, and I plucked it away from my skin. It wasn't exactly easy to reapproach the stone marking George Staub's final resting place, but it wasn't as hard as I'd expected, either. The wind sighed through the trees, still rising, signaling a change in

the weather. Shadows danced unsteadily around me. Branches rubbed together, a creaky sound off in the woods. I bent over the tombstone and read:

GEORGE STAUB

JANUARY 19, 1977- OCTOBER 12, 1998

Well Begun, Too Soon Done.

I stood there, leaning down with my hands planted just above my knees, not aware of how fast my heart had been beating until it started to slow down. A nasty little coincidence, that was all, and was it any wonder that I'd misread what was beneath the name and dates? Even without being tired and under stress, I might have read it wrong - moonlight was a notorious misleader. Case closed.

Except I knew what I'd read: Fun Is Fun and Done Is Done.

My ma was dead.

"Fuck that," I repeated, and turned away. As I did, I realized the mist curling through the grass and around my ankles had begun to brighten. I could hear the mutter of an approaching motor. A car was coming.

I hurried back through the opening in the rock wall, snagging my pack on the way by. The lights of the approaching car were halfway up the hill. I stuck out my thumb just as they struck me, momentarily blinding me. I knew the guy was going to stop even before he started slowing down. It's funny how you can just know sometimes, but anyone who's spent a lot of time hitchhiking will tell you that it happens.

The car passed me, brake lights flaring, and swerved onto the soft shoulder near the end of the rock wall dividing the graveyard from Ridge Road. I ran to it with my backpack banging against the side of my knee. The car was a Mustang, one of the cool ones from the late sixties or early seventies. The motor rumbled loudly, the fat sound of it coming through a muffler that maybe wouldn't pass inspection the next time the sticker came due . . . but that wasn't my problem.

I swung the door open and slid inside. As I put my backpack between my feet, an odor struck me, something almost familiar and a trifle unpleasant. "Thank you," I said. "Thanks a lot."

The guy behind the wheel was wearing faded jeans and a black tee shirt with the arms cut off. His skin was tanned, the muscles heavy, and his right bicep was ringed with a blue barbwire tattoo. He was wearing a green John Deere cap turned around backwards. There was a button pinned near the round collar of his tee shirt, but I couldn't read it from my angle. "Not a problem," he said. "You headed up the city?"

"Yes," I said. In this part of the world "up the city" meant Lewiston, the only city of any size north of Portland. As I closed the door, I saw one of those pine-tree air fresheners hanging from the rearview mirror. That was what I'd smelled. It sure wasn't my night as far as odors went; first pee and now artificial pine. Still, it was a ride. I should have been relieved. And as the guy accelerated back onto Ridge Road, the big engine of his vintage Mustang growling, I tried to tell myself I was relieved.

"What's going on for you in the city?" the driver asked. I put him at about my age, some townie who maybe went to vocational-technical school in Auburn or maybe worked in one of the few remaining textile mills in the area. He'd probably fixed up this Mustang in his spare time, because that was what townie kids did:

drank beer, smoked a little rope, fixed up their cars. Or their motorcycles.

"My brother's getting married. I'm going to be his best man." I told this lie with absolutely no premeditation. I didn't want him to know about my mother, although I didn't know why. Something was wrong here. I didn't know what it was or why I should think such a thing in the first place, but I knew. I was positive. "The rehearsal's tomorrow. Plus a stag party tomorrow night."

"Yeah? That right?" He turned to look at me, wideset eyes and handsome face, full lips smiling slightly, the eyes unbelieving.

"Yeah," I said.

I was afraid. Just like that I was afraid again. Something was wrong, had maybe started being wrong when the old geezer in the Dodge had invited me to wish on the infected moon instead of on a star. Or maybe from the moment I'd

picked up the telephone and listened to Mrs. McCurdy saying she had some bad news for me, but 'twasn't s'bad as it could've been.

"Well that's good," said the young man in the turned-around cap. "A brother getting married, man, that's good. What's your name?"

I wasn't just afraid, I was terrified. Everything was wrong, everything, and I didn't know why or how it could possibly have happened so fast. I did know one thing, however: I wanted the driver of the Mustang to know my name no more than I wanted him to know my business in Lewiston. Not that I'd be getting to Lewiston. I was suddenly sure that I would never see Lewiston again. It was like knowing the car was going to stop. And there was the smell, I knew something about that, as well. It wasn't the air freshener; it was something beneath the air freshener.

"Hector," I said, giving him my roommate's name. "Hector Passmore, that's me." It came out of my dry mouth smooth and calm, and that was good. Something inside me insisted that I must not let the driver of the Mustang know that I sensed something wrong. It was my only chance.

He turned toward me a little, and I could read his button: I RODE THE BULLET AT THRILL VILLAGE, LACONIA. I knew the place; had been there, although not for a long time.

I could also see a heavy black line which circled his throat just as the barbwire tattoo circled his upper arm, only the line around the driver's throat wasn't a tattoo. Dozens of black marks crossed it vertically. They were the stitches put in by whoever had put his head back on his body.

"Nice to meet you, Hector," he said. "I'm George Staub."

My hand seemed to float out like a hand in a dream. I wish that it had been a dream, but it wasn't; it had all the sharp edges of reality. The smell on top was pine. The smell underneath was some chemical, probably formaldehyde. I was riding with a dead man. The Mustang rushed along Ridge Road at sixty miles an hour, chasing its high beams under the light of a polished button moon. To either side, the trees crowding the road danced and writhed in the wind. George Staub smiled at me with his empty eyes, then let go of my hand and returned his attention to the road. In high school I'd read Dracula, and now a line from it recurred, clanging in my head like a cracked bell: The dead drive fast.

Can't let him know I know. This also clanged in my head. It wasn't much, but it was all I had. Can't let him know, can't let him, can't. I wondered where the old man was now. Safe at his brother's? Or had the old man been in on it all along? Was he maybe right behind us, driving along in his old Dodge, hunched over the wheel and snapping at his truss? Was he dead, too? Probably not. The dead drive fast, according to Bram Stoker, but the old man had never gone a tick over forty-five. I felt demented laughter bubbling in the back of my throat and held it down. If I laughed he'd know. And he mustn't know, because that was my only hope.

"There's nothing like a wedding," he said.

"Yeah," I said, "everyone should do it at least twice."

My hands had settled on each other and were squeezing. I could feel the nails digging the backs of them just above the knuckles, but the sensation was distant, news from another country. I couldn't let him know, that was the thing. The woods were all around us, the only light was the heartless bone-glow of the moon, and I couldn't let him know that I knew he was dead. Because he wasn't a ghost, nothing so harmless. You might see a ghost, but what sort of thing stopped to give you a ride? What kind of creature was that? Zombie? Ghoul? Vampire? None of the above?

George Staub laughed. "Do it twice! Yeah, man, that's my whole family!"

"Mine, too," I said. My voice sounded calm, just the voice of a hitchhiker passing the time of day - night, in this case - making agreeable conversation as some small payment for his ride. "There's really nothing like a funeral."

"Wedding," he said mildly. In the light from the dashboard, his face was waxy, the face of a corpse before the makeup went on. That turned-around cap was particularly horrible. It made you wonder how much was left beneath it. I had read somewhere that morticians sawed off the top of the skull and took out the

brains and put in some sort of chemically treated cotton. To keep the face from falling in, maybe.

"Wedding," I said through numb lips, and even laughed a little - a light little chuckle. "Wedding's what I meant to say."

"We always say what we mean to say, that's what I think," the driver said. He was still smiling.

Yes, Freud had believed that, too. I'd read it in Psych 101. I doubted if this fellow knew much about Freud, I didn't think many Freudian scholars wore sleeveless tee shirts and baseball caps turned around backwards, but he knew enough. Funeral, I'd said. Dear Christ, I'd said funeral. It came to me then that he was playing me. I didn't want to let him know I knew he was dead. He didn't want to let me know that he knew I knew he was dead. And so I couldn't let him know that I knew that he knew that . . .

The world began to swing in front of me. In a moment it would begin to spin, then to whirl, and I'd lose it. I closed my eyes for a moment. In the darkness, the afterimage of the moon hung, turning green.

"You feeling all right, man?" he asked. The concern in his voice was gruesome.

"Yes," I said, opening my eyes. Things had steadied again. The pain in the backs of my hands where my nails were digging into the skin was strong and real. And the smell. Not just pine air freshener, not just chemicals. There was a smell of earth, as well.

"You sure?" he asked.

"Just a little tired. Been hitchhiking a long time. And sometimes I get a little carsick." Inspiration suddenly struck. "You know what, I think you better let me out. If I get a little fresh air, my stomach will settle. Someone else will come along and - "

"I couldn't do that," he said. "Leave you out here? No way. It could be an hour before someone came along, and they might not pick you up when they did. I got to take care of you. What's that song? Get me to the church on time, right? No way I'm letting you out. Crack your window a little, that'll help. I know it doesn't smell exactly great in here. I hung up that air freshener, but those things don't work worth a shit. Of course, some smells are harder to get rid of than others."

I wanted to reach out for the window crank and turn it, let in the fresh air, but the muscles in my arm wouldn't seem to tighten. All I could do was sit there with my hands locked together, nails biting into the backs of them. One set of muscles wouldn't work; another wouldn't stop working. What a joke.

"It's like that story," he said. "The one about the kid who buys the almost new Cadillac for seven hundred and fifty dollars. You know that story, don't you?"

"Yeah," I said through my numb lips. I didn't know the story, but I knew perfectly well that I didn't want to hear it, didn't want to hear any story this man might have to tell. "That one's famous." Ahead of us the road leaped forward like a road in an old black-and-white movie.

"Yeah it is, fucking famous. So the kid's looking for a car and he sees an almost brand- new Cadillac on this guy's lawn."

"I said I - "

"Yeah, and there's a sign that SAYS FOR SALE BY OWNER in the window."

There was a cigarette parked behind his ear. He reached for it, and when he did, his shirt pulled up in the front. I could see another puckered black line there, more stitches. Then he leaned forward to punch in the cigarette lighter and his shirt dropped back into place.

"Kid knows he can't afford no Cadillac-car, can't get within a shout of a Caddy, but he's curious, you know? So he goes over to the guy and says, 'How much does something like that go for?' And the guy, he turns off the hose he's got - cause he's washin the car, you know - and he says, 'Kid, this is your lucky day. Seven hundred and fifty bucks and you drive it away. ' "

The cigarette lighter popped out. Staub pulled it free and pressed the coil to the end of his cigarette. He drew in smoke and I saw little tendrils come seeping out between the stitches holding the incision on his neck closed.

"The kid, he looks in through the driver's side window and sees there's only seventeen thou on the odometer. He says to the guy, 'Yeah, sure, that's as funny as a screen door in a submarine.' The guy says, 'No joke, kid, pony up the cash and it's yours. Hell, I'll even take a check, you got a honest face.' And the kid says . . ."

I looked out the window. I had heard the story before, years ago, probably while I was still in junior high. In the version I'd been told the car was a Thunderbird instead of a Caddy, but otherwise everything was the same. The kid says I may only be seventeen but I'm not an idiot, no one sells a car like this, especially one with low mileage, for only seven hundred and fifty bucks. And the guy tells him he's doing it because the car smells, you can't get the smell out, he's tried and tried and nothing will take it out. You see he was on a business trip, a fairly long one, gone for at least . . .

". . . a coupla weeks," the driver was saying. He was smiling the way people do when they're telling a joke that really slays them. "And when he comes back, he finds the car in the garage and his wife in the car, she's been dead practically the whole time he's been gone. I don't know if it was suicide or a heart attack or what, but she's all bloated up and the car, it's full of that smell and all he wants to do is sell it, you know." He laughed. "That's quite a story, huh?"

"Why wouldn't he call home?" It was my mouth, talking all by itself. My brain was frozen. "He's gone for two weeks on a business trip and he never calls home once to see how his wife's doing?"

"Well," the driver said, "that's sorta beside the point, wouldn't you say? I mean hey, what a bargain - that's the point. Who wouldn't be tempted? After all, you could always drive the car with the fuckin windows open, right? And it's basically just a story. Fiction. I thought of it because of the smell in this car. Which is fact."

Silence. And I thought: He's waiting for me to say something, waiting for me to end this. And I wanted to. I did. Except . . . what then? What would he do then?

He rubbed the ball of his thumb over the button on his shirt, the one reading I RODE THE BULLET AT THRILL VILLAGE, LACONIA. I saw there was dirt under his fingernails. "That's where I was today," he said. "Thrill Village. I did some work for a guy and he gave me an all-day pass. My girlfriend was gonna go with me, but she called and said she was sick, she gets these periods that really hurt sometimes, they make her sick as a dog. It's too bad, but I always think, hey, what's the alternative? No rag at all, right, and then I'm in trouble, we both are." He yapped, a humorless bark of sound. "So I went by myself. No sense wasting an all-day pass. You ever been to Thrill Village?"

"Yes," I said. "Once. When I was twelve."

"Who'd you go with?" he asked. "You didn't go alone, did you?"

Not if you were only twelve."

I hadn't told him that part, had I? No. He was playing with me, that was all, swatting me idly back and forth. I thought about opening the door and just rolling out into the night, trying to tuck my head into my arms before I hit, only I knew he'd reach over and pull me back before I could get away. And I couldn't raise my arms, anyway. The best I could do was clutch my hands together.

"No," I said. "I went with my dad. My dad took me."

"Did you ride the Bullet? I rode that fucker four times. Man!

It goes right upside down!" He looked at me and uttered another empty bark of laughter. The moonlight swam in his eyes, turning them into white circles, making them into the eyes of a statue. And I understood he was more than dead; he was crazy. "Did you ride that, Alan?"

I thought of telling him he had the wrong name, my name was Hector, but what was the use? We were coming to the end of it now.

"Yeah," I whispered. Not a single light out there except for the moon. The trees rushed by, writhing like spontaneous dancers at a tent-show revival. The road rushed under us. I looked at the speedometer and saw he was up to eighty miles an hour. We were riding the bullet right now, he and I; the dead drive fast. "Yeah, the Bullet. I rode it."

"Nah," he said. He drew on his cigarette, and once again I watched the little trickles of smoke escape from the stitched incision on his neck. "You never. Especially not with your father. You got into the line, all right, but you were with your ma. The line was long, the line for the Bullet always is, and she didn't want to stand out there in the hot sun. She was fat even then, and the heat bothered her. But you pestered her all day, pestered pestered pestered, and here's the joke of it, man - when you finally got to the head of the line, you chickened. Didn't you?"

I said nothing. My tongue was stuck to the roof of my mouth.

His hand stole out, the skin yellow in the light of the Mustang's dashboard lights, the nails filthy, and gripped my locked hands. The strength went out of them when he did and they fell apart like a knot that magically unties itself at the touch of the magician's wand. His skin was cold and somehow snaky.

"Didn't you?"

"Yes," I said. I couldn't get my voice much above a whisper.

"When we got close and I saw how high it was . . . how it turned over at the top and how they screamed inside when it did . . . I chickened out. She swatted me, and she wouldn't talk to me all the way home. I never rode the Bullet." Until now, at least.

"You should have, man. That's the best one. That's the one to ride. Nothin else is as good, at least not there. I stopped on the way home and got some beers at that store by the state line. I was gonna stop over my girlfriend's house, give her the button as a joke." He tapped the button on his chest, then unrolled his window and flicked his cigarette out into the windy night. "Only you probably know what happened."

Of course I knew. It was every ghost story you'd ever heard, wasn't it? He crashed his Mustang and when the cops got there he'd been sitting dead in the crumpled remains with his body behind the wheel and his head in the backseat, his cap turned around backwards and his dead eyes staring up at the roof, and ever since you see him on Ridge Road when the moon is full and the wind is high, wheee-oooo, we will return after this brief word from our sponsor. I know something now that I didn't before - the worst stories are the ones you've heard your whole life. Those are the real nightmares.

"Nothing like a funeral," he said, and laughed. "Isn't that what you said? You slipped there, Al. No doubt about it. Slipped, tripped, and fell."

"Let me out," I whispered. "Please."

"Well," he said, turning toward me, "we have to talk about that, don't we? Do you know who I am, Alan?"

"You're a ghost," I said.

He gave an impatient little snort, and in the glow of the speedometer the corners of his mouth turned down. "Come on, man, you can do better than that. Fuckin Casper's a ghost. Do I float in the air? Can you see through me?" He held up one of his hands, opened and closed it in front of me. I could hear the dry, unlubricated sound of his tendons creaking.

I tried to say something. I don't know what, and it doesn't really matter, because nothing came out.

"I'm a kind of messenger," Staub said. "Fuckin FedEx from beyond the grave, you like that? Guys like me actually come out pretty often whenever the circumstances are just right. You know what I think? I think that whoever runs things - God or whatever - must like to be entertained. He always wants to see if you'll keep what you already got or if he can talk you into goin for what's behind the curtain. Things have to be just right, though. Tonight they were. You out all by yourself . . . mother sick . . . needin a ride . . ."

"If I'd stayed with the old man, none of this would have happened," I said. "Would it?" I could smell Staub clearly now, the needle-sharp smell of the

chemicals and the duller, blunter stink of decaying meat, and wondered how I ever could have missed it, or mistaken it for something else.

"Hard to say," Staub replied. "Maybe this old man you're talking about was dead, too."

I thought of old man's shrill handful-of-glass voice, the snap of his truss. No, he hadn't been dead, and I had traded the smell of piss in his old Dodge for some-thing a lot worse.

"Anyway, man, we don't have time to talk about all that. Five more miles and we'll start seeing houses again. Seven more and we're at the Lewiston city line. Which means you have to decide now."

"Decide what?" Only I thought I knew.

"Who rides the Bullet and who stays on the ground. You or your mother." He turned and looked at me with his drowning moonlight eyes. He smiled more fully and I saw most of his teeth were gone, knocked out in the crash. He patted the steering wheel. "I'm taking one of you with me, man. And since you're here, you get to choose. What do you say?"

You can't be serious rose to my lips, but what would be the point of saying that, or anything like it? Of course he was serious. Dead serious.

I thought of all the years she and I had spent together, Alan and Jean Parker against the world. A lot of good times and more than a few really bad ones. Patches on my pants and casserole suppers. Most of the other kids took a quarter a week to buy the hot lunch; I always got a peanut-butter sandwich or a piece of bologna rolled up in day-old bread, like a kid in one of those dopey rags-to-riches stories. Her working in God knew how many different restaurants and cocktail lounges to support us. The time she took the day off work to talk to the ADC man, her dressed in her best pants suit, him sitting in our kitchen rocker in a suit of his own, one even a nine-year-old kid like me could tell was a lot better than hers, with a clipboard in his lap and a fat, shiny pen in his fingers. Her answering the insulting, embarrassing questions he asked with a fixed smile on her mouth, even offering him more coffee, because if he turned in the right report she'd get an extra fifty dollars a month, a lousy fifty bucks. Lying on her bed after he'd gone, crying, and when I came in to sit beside her she had tried to smile and said ADC didn't stand for Aid to Dependent Children but Awful Damn Crapheads. I had laughed and then she laughed, too, because you had to laugh, we'd found that out. When it was just you and your fat chain-smoking ma against the world, laughing was quite often the only way you could get through without going insane and beating your fists on the walls. But there was more to it than that, you know. For people like us, little people who went scurrying through the world like mice in a cartoon, sometimes laughing at the assholes was the only revenge you could ever get. Her working all those jobs and taking the overtime and taping her ankles when they swelled and putting her tips away in a jar marked ALAN'S COLLEGE FUND - just like one of those dopey rags-to-riches stories, yeah, yeah - and telling me again and again that I had to work hard, other kids could maybe afford to play Freddy Fuckaround at school but I couldn't because she could put away her tips until doomsday cracked and there still wouldn't be enough; in the end it was going to come down to scholarships and loans if I was going to go to college and I had to go to college because it was the only way out for me . . . and for her. So I had worked hard, you want to believe I did, because I wasn't blind - I saw how heavy she was, I saw how much she smoked (it was her only private pleasure . . . her only vice, if you're one of those who must take that view), and I knew that some day our positions would reverse and I'd be the one taking care of her. With a college education and a good job, maybe I could do that. I wanted to do that. I loved her. She had a fierce temper and an ugly mouth on her - that day we waited for the Bullet and then I chickened out wasn't the only time she ever yelled at me and then swatted me - but I loved her in spite of it. Partly even because of it. I loved her when she hit me as much as when she kissed me. Do you understand that? Me either. And that's all right. I don't think you can sum up lives or explain families, and we were a family, she and I, the smallest family there is, a tight little family of two, a shared secret. If you had asked, I would have said I'd do anything for

her. And now that was exactly what I was being asked to do. I was being asked to die for her, to die in her place, even though she had lived half her life, probably a lot more. I had hardly begun mine.

"What say, Al?" George Staub asked. "Time's wasting."

"I can't decide something like that," I said hoarsely. The moon sailed above the road, swift and brilliant. "It's not fair to ask me."

"I know, and believe me, that's what they all say." Then he lowered his voice. "But I gotta tell you something - if you don't decide by the time we get back to the first house lights, I'll have to take you both." He frowned, then brightened again, as if remembering there was good news as well as bad. "You could ride together in the backseat if I took you both, talk over old times, there's that."

"Ride to where?"

He didn't reply. Perhaps he didn't know.

The trees blurred by like black ink. The headlights rushed and the road rolled. I was twenty-one. I wasn't a virgin but I'd only been with a girl once and I'd been drunk and couldn't remember much of what it had been like. There were a thousand places I wanted to go - Los Angeles, Tahiti, maybe Luchenbach, Texas - and a thousand things I wanted to do. My mother was forty-eight and that was old, goddammit. Mrs. McCurdy wouldn't say so but Mrs. McCurdy was old herself. My mother had done right by me, worked all those long hours and taken care of me, but had I chosen her life for her? Asked to be born and then demanded that she live for me? She was forty-eight. I was twenty-one. I had, as they said, my whole life before me. But was that the way you judged? How did you decide a thing like this? How could you decide a thing like this?

The woods bolting by. The moon looking down like a bright and deadly eye.

"Better hurry up, man," George Staub said. "We're running out of wilderness."

I opened my mouth and tried to speak. Nothing came out but an arid sigh.

"Here, got just the thing," he said, and reached behind him. His shirt pulled up again and I got another look (I could have done without it) at the stitched black line on his belly. Were there still guts behind that line or just packing soaked in chemicals? When he brought his hand back, he had a can of beer in it - one of those he'd bought at the state line store on his last ride, presumably.

"I know how it is," he said. "Stress gets you dry in the mouth. Here."

He handed me the can. I took it, pulled the ringtab, and drank deeply. The taste of the beer going down was cold and bitter. I've never had a beer since. I just can't drink it. I can barely stand to watch the commercials on TV.

Ahead of us in the blowing dark, a yellow light glimmered. "Hurry up, Al - got to speed it up. That's the first house, right up at the top of this hill. If you got something to say to me, you better say it now."

The light disappeared, then came back again, only now it was several lights. They were windows. Behind them were ordinary people doing ordinary things - watching TV, feeding the cat, maybe beating off in the bathroom.

I thought of us standing in line at Thrill Village, Jean and Alan Parker, a big woman with dark patches of sweat around the armpits of her sundress and her little boy. She hadn't wanted to stand in that line, Staub was right about that . . . but I had pestered pestered pestered. He had been right about that, too. She had swatted me, but she had stood in line with me, too. She had stood with me in a lot of lines, and I could go over all of it again, all the arguments pro and con, but there was no time.

"Take her," I said as the lights of the first house swept toward the Mustang. My voice was hoarse and raw and loud. "Take her, take my ma, don't take me."

I threw the can of beer down on the floor of the car and put my hands up to my face. He touched me then, touched the front of my shirt, his fingers fumbling, and I thought - with sudden brilliant clarity - that it had all been a test. I had failed and now he was going to rip my beating heart right out of my chest, like an evil djinn in one of those cruel Arabian fairy tales. I screamed.

Then his fingers let go - it was as if he'd changed his mind at the last second - and he reached past me. For one moment my nose and lungs were so full of his deathly smell that I felt positive I was dead myself. Then there was the click of the door opening and cold fresh air came streaming in, washing the death smell away.

"Pleasant dreams, Al," he grunted in my ear and then pushed. I went rolling out into the windy October darkness with my eyes closed and my hands raised and my body tensed for the bone-breaking smashdown. I might have been screaming, I don't remember for sure.

The smashdown didn't come and after an endless moment I realized I was already down - I could feel the ground under me. I opened my eyes, then squeezed them shut almost at once. The glare of the moon was blinding. It sent a bolt of pain through my head, one that settled not behind my eyes, where you usually feel pain after staring into an unexpectedly bright light, but in the back, way down low just above the nape of my neck. I became aware that my legs and bottom were cold and wet. I didn't care. I was on the ground, and that was all I cared about.

I pushed up on my elbows and opened my eyes again, more cautiously this time. I think I already knew where I was, and one look around was enough to confirm it: lying on my back in the little graveyard at the top of the hill on Ridge Road. The moon was almost directly overhead now, fiercely bright but much smaller than it had been only a few moments before. The mist was deeper as well, lying over the cemetery like a blanket. A few markers poked up through it like stone islands. I tried getting to my feet and another bolt of pain went through the back of my head. I put my hand there and felt a lump. There was sticky wetness, as well. I looked at my hand. In the moonlight, the blood streaked across my palm looked black.

On my second try I succeeded in getting up, and stood there swaying among the tombstones, knee-deep in mist. I turned around, saw the break in the rock wall and Ridge Road beyond it. I couldn't see my pack because the mist had overlaid it, but I knew it was there. If I walked out to the road in the lefthand wheelrut of the lane, I'd find it. Hell, would likely stumble over it.

So here was my story, all neatly packaged and tied up with a bow: I had stopped for a rest at the top of this hill, had gone inside the cemetery to have a little look around, and while backing away from the grave of one George Staub had tripped over my own large and stupid feet. Fell down, banged my head on a marker. How long had I been unconscious? I wasn't savvy enough to tell time by the changing position of the moon with to-the-minute accuracy, but it had to have been at least an hour. Long enough to have a dream that I'd gotten a ride with a dead man. What dead man? George Staub, of course, the name I'd read on a grave-marker just before the lights went out. It was the classic ending, wasn't it? Gosh-What-an-Awful-Dream-I-Had. And when I got to Lewiston and found my mother had died? Just a little touch of precognition in the night, put it down to that. It was the sort of story you might tell years later, near the end of a party, and people would nod their heads thoughtfully and look solemn and some dinkleberry with leather patches on the elbows of his tweed jacket would say there were more things in heaven and earth than were dreamed of in our philosophy and then - "Then shit," I croaked. The top of the mist was moving slowly, like mist on a clouded mirror. "I'm never talking about this. Never, not in my whole life, not even on my deathbed."

But it had all happened just the way I remembered it, of that I was sure. George Staub had come along and picked me up in his Mustang, Ichabod Crane's old pal with his head stitched on instead of under his arm, demanding that I choose. And I had chosen - faced with the oncoming lights of the first house, I had bartered away my mother's life with hardly a pause. It might be understandable, but that didn't make the guilt of it any less. No one had to know, however; that was the good part. Her death would look natural - hell, would be natural - and that's the way I intended to leave it.

I walked out of the graveyard in the lefthand rut, and when my foot struck my pack, I picked it up and slung it back over my shoulders. Lights appeared at

the bottom of the hill as if someone had given them the cue. I stuck out my thumb, oddly sure it was the old man in the Dodge - he'd come back this way looking for me, of course he had, it gave the story that final finishing roundness.

Only it wasn't the old guy. It was a tobacco-chewing farmer in a Ford pick-up truck filled with apple baskets, a perfectly ordinary fellow: not old and not dead.

"Where you goin, son?" he asked, and when I told him he said, "That works for both of us." Less than forty minutes later, at twenty minutes after nine, he pulled up in front of the Central Maine Medical Center. "Good luck. Hope your ma's on the mend."

"Thank you," I said, and opened the door.

"I see you been pretty nervous about it, but she'll most likely be fine. Ought to get some disinfectant on those, though." He pointed at my hands.

I looked down at them and saw the deep, purpling crescents on the backs. I remembered clutching them together, digging in with my nails, feeling it but unable to stop. And I remembered Staub's eyes, filled up with moonlight like radiant water. Did you ride the Bullet? he'd asked me. I rode that fucker four times.

"Son?" the man driving the pick-up asked. "You all right?"

"Huh?"

"You come over all shivery."

"I'm okay," I said. "Thanks again." I slammed the door of the pickup and went up the wide walk past the line of parked wheelchairs gleaming in the moonlight.

I walked to the information desk, reminding myself that I had to look surprised when they told me she was dead, had to look surprised, they'd think it was funny if I didn't . . . or maybe they'd just think I was in shock . . . or that we didn't get along . . . or . . .

I was so deep in these thoughts that I didn't at first grasp what the woman behind the desk had told me. I had to ask her to repeat it.

"I said that she's in room 487, but you can't go up just now.

Visiting hours end at nine."

"But . . ." I felt suddenly woozy. I gripped the edge of the desk. The lobby was lit by fluorescents, and in that bright even glare the cuts on the backs of my hands stood out boldly - eight small purple crescents like grins, just above the knuckles. The man in the pick-up was right, I ought to get some disinfectant on those.

The woman behind the desk was looking at me patiently. The plaque in front of her said she was YVONNE EDERLE.

"But is she all right?"

She looked at her computer. "What I have here is S. Stands for satisfactory. And four is a general population floor. If your mother had taken a turn for the worse, she'd be in ICU. That's on three. I'm sure if you come back tomorrow, you'll find her just fine.

Visiting hours begin at - "

"She's my ma," I said. "I hitchhiked all the way down from the University of Maine to see her. Don't you think I could go up, just for a few minutes?"

"Exceptions are sometimes made for immediate family," she said, and gave me a smile. "You just hang on a second. Let me see what I can do." She picked up the phone and punched a couple of buttons, no doubt calling the nurse's station on the fourth floor, and I could see the course of the next two minutes as if I really did have second sight. Yvonne the Information Lady would ask if the son of Jean Parker in 487 could come up for a minute or two-just long enough to give his mother a kiss and an encouraging word - and the nurse would say oh God, Mrs. Parker died not fifteen minutes ago, we just sent her down to the morgue, we haven't had a chance to update the computer, this is so terrible.

The woman at the desk said, "Muriel? It's Yvonne. I have a young man here down here at the desk, his name is - " She looked at me, eyebrows raised, and I

gave her my name. "- Alan Parker. His mother is Jean Parker, in 487? He wonders if he could just . . ."

She stopped. Listened. On the other end the nurse on the fourth floor was no doubt telling her that Jean Parker was dead.

"All right," Yvonne said. "Yes, I understand." She sat quietly for a moment, looking off into space, then put the mouthpiece of the telephone against her shoulder and said, "She's sending Anne Corrigan down to peek in on her. It will only be a second."

"It never ends," I said.

Yvonne frowned. "I beg pardon?"

"Nothing," I said. "It's been a long night and - "

"- and you're worried about your mom. Of course. I think you're a very good son to drop everything the way you did and come on the run."

I suspected Yvonne Ederle's opinion of me would have taken a drastic drop if she'd heard my conversation with the young man behind the wheel of the Mustang, but of course she hadn't. That was a little secret, just between George and me.

It seemed that hours passed as I stood there under the bright fluorescents, waiting for the nurse on the fourth floor to come back on the line. Yvonne had some papers in front of her. She trailed her pen down one of them, putting neat little check marks beside some of the names, and it occurred to me that if there really was an Angel of Death, he or she was probably just like this woman, a slightly overworked functionary with a desk, a computer, and too much paperwork. Yvonne kept the phone pinched between her ear and one raised shoulder. The loudspeaker said that Dr. Farquahr was wanted in radiology, Dr. Farquahr. On the fourth floor a nurse named Anne Corrigan would now be looking at my mother, lying dead in her bed with her eyes open, the stroke-induced sneer of her mouth finally relaxing.

Yvonne straightened as a voice came back on the line. She listened, then said: "All right, yes, I understand. I will. Of course I will. Thank you, Muriel." She hung up the telephone and looked at me solemnly. "Muriel says you can come up, but you can only visit for five minutes. Your mother's had her evening meds, and she's very soupy."

I stood there, gapping at her.

Her smile faded a little bit. "Are you sure you're all right, Mr. Parker?"

"Yes," I said. "I guess I just thought - "

Her smile came back. It was sympathetic this time. "Lots of people think that," she said. "It's understandable. You get a call out of the blue, you rush to get here . . . it's understandable to think the worst. But Muriel wouldn't let you up on her floor if your mother wasn't fine. Trust me on that."

"Thanks," I said. "Thank you so much."

As I started to turn away, she said: "Mr. Parker? If you came from the University of Maine up north, may I ask why you're wearing that button? Thrill Village is in New Hampshire, isn't it?"

I looked down at the front of my shirt and saw the button pinned to the breast pocket: I RODE THE BULLET AT THRILL VILLAGE, LACONIA. I remembered thinking he intended to rip my heart out. Now I understood: he had pinned his button on my shirt just before pushing me into the night. It was his way of marking me, of making our encounter impossible not to believe. The cuts on the backs of my hands said so, the button on my shirt said so, too. He had asked me to choose and I had chosen.

So how could my mother still be alive?

"This?" I touched it with the ball of my thumb, even polished it a little.

"It's my good luck charm." The lie was so horrible that it had a kind of splendor. "I got it when I was there with my mother, a long time ago. She took me on the Bullet."

Yvonne the Information Lady smiled as if this were the sweetest thing she had ever heard. "Give her a nice hug and kiss," she said. "Seeing you will send her off to sleep better than any of the pills the doctors have." She pointed. "The elevators are over there, around the corner."

With visiting hours over, I was the only one waiting for a car. There was a litter basket off to the left, by the door to the newsstand, which was closed and dark. I tore the button off my shirt and threw it in the basket. Then I rubbed my hand on my pants. I was still rubbing it when one of the elevator doors opened. I got in and pushed for four. The car began to rise. Above the floor buttons was a poster announcing a blood drive for the following week. As I read it, an idea came to me . . . except it wasn't so much an idea as a certainty. My mother was dying now, at this very second, while I rode up to her floor in this slow industrial elevator. I had made the choice; it therefore fell to me to find her. It made perfect sense.

The elevator door opened on another poster. This one showed a cartoon finger pressed to big red cartoon lips. Beneath it was a line reading OUR PATIENTS APPRECIATE YOUR QUIET! Beyond the elevator lobby was a corridor going right and left. The odd-numbered rooms were to the left. I walked down that way, my sneakers seeming to gain weight with every step. I slowed in the four-seventies, then stopped entirely between 481 and 483. I couldn't do this. Sweat as cold and sticky as half-frozen syrup crept out of my hair in little trickles. My stomach was knotted up like a fist inside a slick glove. No, I couldn't do it. Best to turn around and skedaddle like the cowardly chickenshit I was. I'd hitchhike out to Harlow and call Mrs. McCurdy in the morning. Things would be easier to face in the morning.

I started to turn, and then a nurse poked her head out of the room two doors up . . . my mother's room. "Mr. Parker?" she asked in a low voice.

For a wild moment I almost denied it. Then I nodded.

"Come in. Hurry. She's going."

They were the words I'd expected, but they still sent a cramp of terror through me and buckled my knees.

The nurse saw this and came hurrying toward me, her skirt rustling, her face alarmed. The little gold pin on her breast read ANNE CORRIGAN. "No, no, I just meant the sedative . . . She's going to sleep. Oh my God, I'm so stupid. She's fine, Mr. Parker, I gave her her Ambien and she's going, to sleep, that's all I meant. You aren't going to faint, are you?" She took my arm.

"No," I said, not knowing if I was going to faint or not. The world was swooping and there was a buzzing in my ears. I thought of how the road had leaped toward the car, a black-and-white movie road in all that silver moonlight. Did you ride the Bullet? Man, I rode that fucker four times.

Anne Corrigan lead me into the room and I saw my mother. She had always been a big woman, and the hospital bed was small and narrow, but she still looked almost lost in it. Her hair, now more gray than black, was spilled across the pillow. Her hands lay on top of the sheet like a child's hands, or even a doll's. There was no frozen stroke-sneer such as the one I'd imagined on her face, but her complexion was yellow. Her eyes were closed, but when the nurse beside me murmured her name, they opened. They were a deep and iridescent blue, the youngest part of her, and perfectly alive. For a moment they looked nowhere, and then they found me. She smiled and tried to hold out her arms. One of them came up. The other trembled, rose a little bit, then fell back. "Al," she whispered.

I went to her, starting to cry. There was a chair by the wall, but I didn't bother with it. I knelt on the floor and put my arms around her. She smelled warm and clean. I kissed her temple, her cheek, the corner of her mouth. She raised her good hand and patted her fingers under one of my eyes.

"Don't cry," she whispered. "No need of that."

"I came as soon as I heard," I said. "Betsy McCurdy called."

"Told her . . . weekend," she said. "Said the weekend would be fine."

"Yeah, and to hell with that," I said, and hugged her.

"Car fixed?"

"No," I said. "I hitchhiked."

"Oh gorry," she said. Each word was clearly an effort for her, but they weren't slurred, and I sensed no bewilderment or disorientation. She knew who she was, who I was, where we were, why we were here. The only sign of anything

wrong was her weak left arm. I felt an enormous sense of relief. It had all been a cruel practical joke on Staub's part . . . or perhaps there had been no Staub, perhaps it had all been a dream after all, corny as that might be. Now that I was here, kneeling by her bed with my arms around her, smelling a faint remnant of her Lanvin perfume, the dream idea seemed a lot more plausible.

"Al? There's blood on your collar." Her eyes rolled closed, then came slowly open again. I imagined her lids must feel as heavy to her as my sneakers had to me, out in the hall.

"I bumped my head, ma, it's nothing."

"Good. Have to . . . take care of yourself." The lids came down again; rose even more slowly.

"Mr. Parker, I think we'd better let her sleep now," the nurse said from behind me. "She's had an extremely difficult day."

"I know." I kissed her on the corner of the mouth again. "I'm going, ma, but I'll be back tomorrow."

"Don't . . . hitchhike . . . dangerous."

"I won't. I'll catch a ride in with Mrs. McCurdy. You get some sleep."

"Sleep . . . all I do," she said. "I was at work, unloading the dishwasher. I came over all headachey. Fell down. Woke up . . . here." She looked up at me. "Was a stroke. Doctor says . . . not too bad."

"You're fine," I said. I got up, then took her hand. The skin was fine, as smooth as watered silk. An old person's hand.

"I dreamed we were at that amusement park in New Hampshire," she said.

I looked down at her, feeling my skin go cold all over. "Did you?"

"Ayuh. Waiting in line for the one that goes . . . way up high.

Do you remember that one?"

"The Bullet," I said. "I remember it, ma."

"You were afraid and I shouted. Shouted at you."

"No, ma, you - "

Her hand squeezed down on mine and the corners of her mouth deepened into near dimples. It was a ghost of her old impatient expression.

"Yes," she said. "Shouted and swatted you. Back . . . of the neck, wasn't it?"

"Probably, yeah," I said, giving up. "That's mostly where you gave it to me."

"Shouldn't have," she said. "It was hot and I was tired, but still . . . shouldn't have. Wanted to tell you I was sorry."

My eyes started leaking again. "It's all right, ma. That was a long time ago."

"You never got your ride," she whispered.

"I did, though," I said. "In the end I did."

She smiled up at me. She looked small and weak, miles from the angry, sweaty, muscular woman who had yelled at me when we finally got to the head of the line, yelled and then whacked me across the nape of the neck. She must have seen something on someone's face - one of the other people waiting to ride the Bullet - because I remember her saying What are you looking at, beautiful? as she lead me away by the hand, me snivelling under the hot summer sun, rubbing the back of my neck . . . only it didn't really hurt, she hadn't swatted me that hard; mostly what I remember was being grateful to get away from that high, twirling construction with the capsules at either end, that revolving scream machine.

"Mr. Parker, it really is time to go," the nurse said.

I raised my mother's hand and kissed the knuckles. "I'll see you tomorrow," I said. "I love you, ma."

"Love you, too. Alan . . . sorry for all the times I swatted you. That was no way to be.

"But it had been; it had been her way to be. I didn't know how to tell her I knew that, accepted it. It was part of our family secret, something whispered along the nerve endings.

"I'll see you tomorrow, ma. Okay?"

She didn't answer. Her eyes had rolled shut again, and this time the lids didn't come back up. Her chest rose and fell slowly and regularly. I backed away from the bed, never taking my eyes off her.

In the hall I said to the nurse, "Is she going to be all right? Really all right?"

"No one can say that for sure, Mr. Parker. She's Dr. Nunnally's patient. He's very good. He'll be on the floor tomorrow afternoon and you can ask him - "

"Tell me what you think." "I think she's going to be fine," the nurse said, leading me back down the hall toward the elevator lobby. "Her vital signs are strong, and all the residual effects suggest a very light stroke." She frowned a little. "She's going to have to make some changes, of course. In her diet . . . her lifestyle . . ."

"Her smoking, you mean."

"Oh yes. That has to go." She said it as if my mother quitting her lifetime habit would be no more difficult than moving a vase from a table in the living room to one in the hall. I pushed the button for the elevators, and the door of the car I'd ridden up in opened at once. Things clearly slowed down a lot at CMMC once visiting hours were over.

"Thanks for everything," I said.

"Not at all. I'm sorry I scared you. What I said was incredibly stupid."

"Not at all," I said, although I agreed with her. "Don't mention it."

I got into the elevator and pushed for the lobby. The nurse raised her hand and twiddled her fingers. I twiddled my own in return, and then the door slid between us. The car started down. I looked at the fingernail marks on the backs of my hands and thought that I was an awful creature, the lowest of the low. Even if it had only been a dream, I was the lowest of the goddam low. Take her, I'd said. She was my mother but I had said it just the same: Take my ma, don't take me. She had raised me, worked overtime for me, waited in line with me under the hot summer sun in a dusty little New Hampshire amusement park, and in the end I had hardly hesitated. Take her, don't take me. Chickenshit, chickenshit, you fucking chickenshit.

When the elevator door opened I stepped out, took the lid off the litter basket, and there it was, lying in someone's almost-empty paper coffee cup: I RODE THE BULLET AT THRILL VILLAGE, LACONIA. I bent, plucked the button out of the cold puddle of coffee it was lying in, wiped it on my jeans, put it in my pocket. Throwing it away had been the wrong idea. It was my button now - good luck charm or bad luck charm, it was mine. I left the hospital, giving Yvonne a little wave on my way by. Outside, the moon rode the roof of the sky, flooding the world with its strange and perfectly dreamy light. I had never felt so tired or so dispirited in my whole life. I wished I had the choice to make again. I would have made a different one. Which was funny - if I'd found her dead, as I'd expected to, I think I could have lived with it. After all, wasn't that the way stories like this one were supposed to end?

Nobody wants to give a fella a ride in town, the old man with the truss had said, and how true that was. I walked all the way across Lewiston - three dozen blocks of Lisbon Street and nine blocks of Canal Street, past all the bottle clubs with the jukeboxes playing old songs by Foreigner and Led Zeppelin and AC/DC in French - without putting my thumb out a single time. It would have done no good. It was well past eleven before I reached the DeMuth Bridge. Once I was on the Harlow side, the first car I raised my thumb to stopped. Forty minutes later I was fishing the key out from under the red wheelbarrow by the door to the back shed, and ten minutes after that I was in bed. It occurred to me as I dropped off that it was the first time in my life I'd slept in that house all by myself.

It was the phone that woke me up at quarter past noon. I thought it

would be the hospital, someone from the hospital saying my mother had taken a sudden turn for the worse and had passed away only a few minutes ago, so sorry. But it was only Mrs. McCurdy, wanting to be sure I'd gotten home all right, wanting to know all the details of my visit the night before (she took me through it three times, and by the end of the third recitation I had begun to feel like a criminal being interrogated on a murder charge), also wanting to

know if I'd like to ride up to the hospital with her that afternoon. I told her that would be great.

When I hung up, I crossed the room to the bedroom door. Here was a full-length mirror. In it was a tall, unshaven young man with a small potbelly, dressed only in baggy undershorts. "You have to get it together, big boy," I told my reflection. "Can't go through the rest of your life thinking that every time the phone rings it's someone calling to tell you your mother's dead."

Not that I would. Time would dull the memory, time always did . . . but it was amazing how real and immediate the night before still seemed. Every edge and corner was sharp and clear. I could still see Staub's good-looking young face beneath his turned-around cap, and the cigarette behind his ear, and the way the smoke had seeped out of the incision on his neck when he inhaled. I could still hear him telling the story of the Cadillac that was selling cheap. Time would blunt the edges and round the corners, but not for awhile. After all, I had the button, it was on the dresser by the bathroom door. The button was my souvenir. Didn't the hero of every ghost story come away with a souvenir, something that proved it had all really happened?

There was an ancient stereo system in the corner of the room, and I shuffled through my old tapes, hunting for something to listen to while I shaved. I found one marked FOLK MIX and put it in the tape player. I'd made it in high school and could barely remember what was on it. Bob Dylan sang about the lonesome death of Hattie Carroll, Tom Paxton sang about his old ramblin' pal, and then Dave Van Ronk started to sing about the cocaine blues. Halfway through the third verse I paused with my razor by my cheek. Got a headful of whiskey and a bellyful of gin, Dave sang in his rasping voice. Doctor say it kill me but he don't say when. And that was the answer, of course. A guilty conscience had lead me to assume that my mother would die immediately, and Staub had never corrected that assumption - how could he, when I had never even asked? - but it clearly wasn't true.

Doctor say it kill me but he don't say when.

What in God's name was I beating myself up about? Didn't my choice amount to no more than the natural order of things? Didn't children usually outlive their parents? The son of a bitch had tried to scare me - to guilt-trip me - but I didn't have to buy what he was selling, did I? Didn't we all ride the Bullet in the end?

You're just trying to let yourself off. Trying to find a way to make it okay. Maybe what you're thinking is true . . . but when he asked you to choose, you chose her. There's no way to think your way around that, buddy - you chose her.

I opened my eyes and looked at my face in the mirror. "I did what I had to," I said. I didn't quite believe it, but in time I supposed I would.

Mrs. McCurdy and I went up to see my mother and my mother was a little better. I asked her if she remembered her dream about Thrill Village, in Laconia. She shook her head. "I barely remember you coming in last night, she said. "I was awful sleepy. Does it matter?"

"Nope," I said, and kissed her temple. "Not a bit." My ma got out of the hospital five days later. She walked with a limp for a little while, but that went away and a month later she was back at work again - only half shifts at first but then full time, just as if nothing had happened. I returned to school and got a job at Pat's Pizza in downtown Orono. The money wasn't great, but it was enough to get my car fixed. That was good; I'd lost what little taste for hitchhiking I'd ever had.

My mother tried to quit smoking and for a little while she did. Then I came back from school for April vacation a day early, and the kitchen was just as smoky as it had ever been. She looked at me with eyes that were both ashamed and defiant. "I can't," she said. "I'm sorry, Al - I know you want me to and I know I should, but there's such a hole in my life with-out it. Nothin fills it. The best I can do is wish I'd never started in the first place." Two weeks after I graduated from college, my ma had another stroke - just a little one. She tried to quit smoking again when the doctor scolded her, then put on fifty pounds and

went back to the tobacco. "As a dog returneth to its vomit," the Bible says; I've always liked that one. I got a pretty good job in Portland on my first try - lucky, I guess, and started the work of convincing her to quit her own job. It was a tough sled at first.

I might have given up in disgust, but I had a certain memory that kept me digging away at her Yankee defenses.

"You ought to be saving for your own life, not tak-ing care of me," she said. "You'll want to get married someday, Al, and what you spend on me you won't have for that. For your real life."

"You're my real life," I said, and kissed her. "You can like it or lump it, but that's just the way it is."

And finally she threw in the towel.

We had some pretty good years after that - seven of them in all.

I didn't live with her, but I visited her almost every day. We played a lot of gin rummy and watched a lot of movies on the video recorder I bought her. Had a bucketload of laughs, as she liked to say. I don't know if I owe those years to George Staub or not, but they were good years. And my memory of the night I met Staub never faded and grew dreamlike, as I always expected it would; every incident, from the old man telling me to wish on the harvest moon to the fingers fumbling at my shirt as Staub passed his button on to me remained perfectly clear. And there came a day when I could no longer find that button. I knew I'd had it when I moved into my little apartment in Falmouth - I kept it in the top drawer of my bedside table, along with a couple of combs, my two sets of cuff links, and an old political button that SAID BILL CLINTON, THE SAFE SAX PRESIDENT - but then it came up missing. And when the telephone rang a day or two later, I knew why Mrs. McCurdy was crying. It was the bad news I'd never quite stopped expecting; fun is fun and done is done.

When the funeral was over, and the wake, and the seemingly endless line of mourners had finally come to its end, I went back to the little house in Harlow where my mother had spent her final few years, smoking and eating powdered doughnuts. It had been Jean and Alan Parker against the world; now it was just me.

I went through her personal effects, putting aside the few papers that would have to be dealt with later, boxing up the things I'd want to keep on one side of the room and the things I'd want to give away to the Goodwill on the other. Near the end of the job I got down on my knees and looked under her bed and there it was, what I'd been looking for all along with-out quite admitting it to myself: a dusty button reading I RODE THE BULLET AT THRILL VILLAGE, LACONIA. I curled my fist tight around it. The pin dug into my flesh and I squeezed my hand even tighter, taking a bitter pleasure in the pain. When I rolled my fingers open again, my eyes had filled with tears and the words on the button had doubled, overlaying each other in a shimmer. It was like looking at a 3-D movie without the glasses.

"Are you satisfied?" I asked the silent room. "Is it enough?" There was no answer, of course. "Why did you even bother? What was the goddamn point?"

Still no answer, and why would there be? You wait in line, that's all. You wait in line beneath the moon and make your wishes by its infected light. You wait in line and listen to them screaming - they pay to be terrified, and on the Bullet they always get their money's worth. Maybe when it's your turn you ride; maybe you run. Either way it comes to the same, I think. There ought to be more to it, but there's really not - fun is fun and done is done.

Take your button and get out of here.