

Stephen King - Chatterly Teeth

Chatterly Teeth  
by Stephen King

Looking into the display case was like looking through a dirty pane of glass into the middle third of his boyhood, those years from seven to fourteen when he had been fascinated by stuff like this. Hogan leaned closer, forgetting the rising whine of the wind outside and the gritty spick-spack sound of sand hitting the windows. The case was full of fabulous junk, most of it undoubtedly made in Taiwan and Korea, but there was no doubt at all about the pick of the litter. They were the largest Chatterly Teeth he'd ever seen. They were also the only ones he'd ever seen with feet -- big orange cartoon shoes with white spats. A real scream.

Hogan looked up at the fat woman behind the counter. She was wearing a tee-shirt that said NEVADA IS GOD'S COUNTRY on top (the words swelling and receding across her enormous breasts) and about an acre of jeans on the bottom. She was selling a pack of cigarettes to a pallid young man whose long blonde hair had been tied back in a ponytail with a sneaker shoelace. The young man, who had the face of an intelligent lab-rat, was paying in small change, counting it laboriously out of a grimy hand.

"Pardon me, ma'am?" Hogan asked.

She looked at him briefly, and then the back door banged open. A skinny man wearing a bandanna over his mouth and nose came in. The wind swirled desert grit around him in a cyclone and rattled the pin-up cutie on the Valvoline calendar thumb-tacked to the wall. The newcomer was pulling a handcart. Three wire-mesh cages were stacked on it. There was a tarantula in the one on top.

In the cages below it were a pair of rattlesnakes. They were coiling rapidly back and forth and shaking their rattles in agitation.

"Shut the damn door, Scooter, was you born in a barn?" the woman behind the counter bawled.

He glanced at her briefly, eyes red and irritated from the blowing sand. "Gimme a chance, woman! Can't you see I got my hands full here? Ain't you got eyes? Christ!" He reached over the dolly and slammed the door. The dancing sand fell dead to the floor and he pulled the dolly toward the storeroom at the back, still muttering.

"That the last of em?" the woman asked.

"All but wolf." He pronounced it woof. "I'm gonna stick him in the lean-to back of the gas-pumps."

"You ain't not!" the big woman retorted. "Wolfs our star attraction, in case you forgot. You get him in here. Radio says this is gonna get worse before it gets better. A lot worse."

"Just who do you think you're foolin'?" The skinny man (her husband, Hogan supposed) stood looking at her with a kind of weary truculence, his hands on his hips. "Damn thing ain't nothin but a Minnesota coydog, as anyone who took more'n half a look could plainly see."

The wind gusted, moaning along the eaves of Scooter's Grocery & Roadside Zoo, throwing sheaves of dry sand against the windows. It was getting worse, and Hogan could only hope he would be able to drive out of it. He had promised Lita and Jack he'd be home by seven, eight at the latest, and he was a man who liked to keep his promises.

"Just take care of him," the big woman said, and turned irritably back to the rat-faced boy.

"Ma'am?" Hogan said again.

"Just a minute, hold your water," Mrs. Scooter said. She spoke with the air of one who is all but drowning in impatient customers, although Hogan and the rat-faced boy were in fact the only ones present.

"You're a dime short, Sunny Jim," she told the blonde kid after a quick glance at the coins on the counter-top.

The boy regarded her with wide, innocent eyes. "I don't suppose you'd trust me for it?"

"I doubt if the Pope of Rome smokes Merit 100's, but if he did, I wouldn't trust him for it."

The look of wide-eyed innocence disappeared. The rat-faced boy looked at her with an expression of sullen dislike for a moment (this expression looked much more at home on the kid's face, Hogan thought), and then slowly began to investigate his pockets again.

Just forget it and get out of here, Hogan thought. You'll never make it to L.A. by

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eight if you don't get moving, windstorm or no windstorm. This is one of those places that have only two speeds -- slow and stop. You got your gas and paid for it, so just count yourself ahead of the game and get back on the road before the storm gets any worse.

He almost followed his left-brain's good advice... and then he looked at the Chatterly Teeth in the display case again, the Chatterly Teeth standing there on those big orange cartoon shoes. And white spats! They were the real killer. Jack would love them, his right brain told him. And tell the truth, Bill, old buddy; if it turns out Jack doesn't want them, you do. You may see another set of Jumbo Chatterly Teeth at some point in your life, any thing's possible, but ones that also walk on big orange feet? Huh-uh. I really doubt it.

It was the right brain he listened to that time... and everything else followed. The kid with the ponytail was still going through his pockets; the sullen expression on his face deepened each time he came up dry. Hogan was no fan of smoking -- his father, a two-pack-a-day man, had died of lung cancer -- but he had visions of still waiting to be waited on an hour from now. "Hey! Kid!"

The kid looked around and Hogan flipped him a quarter.

"Hey! Thanks, m'man!"

"Think nothing of it."

The kid concluded his transaction with the beefy Mrs. Scooter, put the cigarettes in one pocket, and dropped the remaining fifteen cents in another. He made no offer of the change to Hogan, who hadn't really expected it. Boys and girls like this were legion these days -- they cluttered the highways from coast to coast, blowing along like tumbleweeds. Perhaps they had always been there, but to Hogan the current breed seemed both unpleasant and a little scary, like the rattlers Scooter was now storing in the back room.

The snakes in piss-ant little roadside menageries like this one couldn't kill you; their venom was milked twice a week and sold to clinics that made drugs with it. You could count on that just as you could count on the winos to show up at the local plasma bank every Tuesday and Thursday. But the snakes could still give you one hell of a painful bite if you got too close and then made them mad. That. Hogan thought, was what the current breed of road-kids had in common with them.

Mrs. Scooter came drifting down the counter, the words on her tee-shirt drifting up and down and side to side as she did. "whatcha need?" she asked. Her tone was still truculent. The west had a reputation for friendliness, and during the twenty years he had spent selling there Hogan had come to feel the reputation was more often than not deserved, but this woman had all the charm of a Brooklyn shopkeeper who has been stuck up three times in the last two weeks. Hogan supposed that her kind was becoming as much a part of the scene in the New West as the road-kids. Sad but true. "How much are these?" Hogan asked, pointing through the dirty glass at what the sign identified as JUMBO CHATTERLY TEETH -- THEY WALK! The case was filled with novelty items

-- Chinese finger-pullers, Pepper Gum, Dr. Wacky's Sneezing Powder, cigarette loads (A Laff Riot! according to the package

-- Hogan guessed they were more likely a great way to get your teeth knocked out), X-ray glasses, plastic vomit (SoRealistic!), joy-buzzers.

"I dunno," Mrs. Scooter said. "where's the box, I wonder?"

The teeth were the only item in the case that wasn't packaged, but they certainly were jumbo, Hogan thought -- super-jumbo, in fact, five times the size of the sets of wind-up teeth which had so amused him as a kid growing up in Maine. Take away the joke feet and they would look like the teeth of some fallen Biblical giant -- the cuspids were big white blocks and the canine teeth looked like tentpegs sunk in the improbably red plastic gums. A key jutted from one gum. The teeth were held together in a clench by a thick rubber band.

Mrs. Scooter blew the dust from the Chatterly Teeth, then turned them over, looking on the soles of the orange shoes for a price sticker. She didn't find one. "I don't know," she said crossly, eyeing Hogan as if he might have taken the sticker off himself. "Only Scooter'd buy a piece of trash like this here. Been around since Noah got off the boat. I'll have to ask him."

Hogan was suddenly tired of the woman and of Scooter's Grocery & Roadside Zoo. They were great Chatterly Teeth, and Jack would undoubtedly love them, but he had promised -- eight at the latest.

"Never mind," he said. "It was just an -- "

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"Them teeth was supposed to go for \$15.95, if you c'n believe it," Scooter said from behind them. "They ain't just plastic -- those're metal teeth painted white. They could give you a helluva bite if they worked... but she dropped 'em on the floor two-three years ago when she was dustm the inside of the case and they're busted." "Oh," Hogan said, disappointed. "That's too bad. I never saw a pair with, you know, feet."

"There are lots of 'em like that now," Scooter said. "They sell 'em at the novelty stores in Vegas and Dry Springs. But I never saw a set as big as those. It was funnier'n hell to watch 'em walk across the floor, snappin like a crocodile. Shame the old lady dropped 'em."

Scooter glanced at her, but his wife was looking out at the blowing sand. There was an expression on her face which Hogan couldn't quite decipher -- was it sadness, or disgust, or both?

Scooter looked back at Hogan. "I could let 'em go for three-fifty, if you wanted 'em. We're gettin rid of the novelties, anyway. Gonna put rental videotapes in that counter." He closed the storeroom door. The bandanna was now pulled down, lying on the dusty front of his shirt. His face was haggard and too thin. Hogan saw what might have been the shadow of serious illness lurking just beneath his desert tan. "You could do no such a thing, Scooter!" the big woman snapped, and turned toward him... almost turned on him.

"Shutcha head," Scooter replied. "You make my fillins ache."

"I told you to get wolf --"

"Myra, if you want him back there in the storeroom, go get him yourself." He began to advance on her, and Hogan was surprised -- almost wonder-struck, in fact -- when she gave ground. "Ain't nothm but a Minnesota coydog anyway. Three dollars even, friend, and those Chatterly Teeth are yours. Throw in another buck and you can take Myra's woof, too. If you got five, I'll deed the whole place to you. Ain't worth a dogfart since the turnpike went through, anyway."

The long-haired kid was standing by the door, tearing the top from the pack of cigarettes Hogan had helped buy and watching this small comic opera with an expression of mean amusement. His small gray-green eyes gleamed, flicking back and forth between Scooter and his wife.

"Hell with you," Myra said gruffly, and Hogan realized she was close to tears. "If you won't get my sweet baby, I will." She stalked past him, almost striking him with one boulder-sized breast. Hogan thought it would have knocked the little man flat if it had connected.

"Look," Hogan said, "I think I'll just shove along."

"Aw, hell," Scooter said. "Don't mind Myra. I got cancer and she's got the change, and it ain't my problem she's havin the most trouble livin with. Take the darn teeth. Bet you got a boy might like 'em. Besides, it's probably just a cog knocked a little off-track. I bet a man who was handy could get 'em walkin and chompin again." He looked around, his expression helpless and musing. Outside, the wind rose to a brief, thin shriek as the kid opened the door and slipped out. He had decided the show was over, apparently. A cloud of fine grit swirled down the middle aisle, between the canned goods and the dog food.

"I was pretty handy myself, at one time," Scooter confided.

Hogan did not reply for a long moment. He could not think of anything -- quite literally not one single thing -- to say. He looked down at the Jumbo Chatterly Teeth standing on the scratched and cloudy display case, nearly desperate to break the silence (now that Scooter was standing right in front of him, he could see that the man's eyes were huge and dark, glittering with pain and some heavy dope... Darvon, or perhaps morphine), and he spoke the first words that popped into his head: "Gee, they don't look broken."

He picked the teeth up. They were metal, all right -- too heavy to be anything else -- and when he looked through the slightly parted jaws, he was surprised at the size of the mainspring that ran the thing. He supposed it would take one that size to make the teeth not only chatter but walk, as well. What had Scooter said? They could give you a helluva bite if they worked. Hogan gave the thick rubber band an experimental tweak, then stripped it off. He was still looking at the teeth so he wouldn't have to look into Scooter's dark, pain-haunted eyes. He grasped the key and at last he risked a look up. He was relieved to see that now the thin man was smiling a little.

"Do you mind?" Hogan asked.

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"Not me, pilgrim -- let er rip."

Hogan grinned and turned the key. At first it was all right; there was a series of small, ratcheting clicks, and he could see the mainspring winding up. Then, on the third turn, there was a spronk! noise from inside, and the key simply slid bonelessly around in its hole.

"See?"

"Yes," Hogan said. He set the teeth down on the counter. They stood there on their unlikely orange feet and did nothing.

Scooter poked the clenched molars on the lefthand side with the tip of one horny finger. The jaws of the teeth opened. One orange foot rose and took a dreamy half-step forward. Then the teeth stopped moving and the whole rig fell sideways. The Chatterly Teeth came to rest on the wind-up key, a slanted, disembodied grin out here in the middle of no-man's-land. After a moment or two, the big teeth came together again with a slow click. That was all.

Hogan, who had never had a premonition in his life, was suddenly filled with a clear certainty that was both eerie and sickening. A year from now, this man will have been eight months in his grave, and if someone exhumed his coffin and pried off the lid, they'd see teeth just like these poking out of his dried-out dead face like an enamel trap.

He glanced up into Scooter's eyes, glittering like dark gems in tarnished settings, and suddenly it was no longer a question of wanting to get out of here; he had to get out of here.

"Well," he said (hoping frantically that Scooter would not stick out his hand to be shaken), "gotta go. Best of luck to you, sir."

Scooter did put his hand out, but not to be shaken. Instead, he snapped the rubber band back around the Chatterly Teeth (Hogan had no idea why, since they didn't work), set them on their funny cartoon feet, and pushed them across the scratched surface of the counter. "Thank you kindly," he said. "And take these teeth. No charge."

"Oh... well, thanks, but I couldn't..."

"Sure you can," Scooter said. "Take 'em and give 'em to your boy. He'll get a kick out of 'em standin on the shelf in his room even if they don't work. I know a little about boys. Raised up three of 'em."

"How did you know I had a son?" Hogan asked.

Scooter winked. The gesture was terrifying and pathetic at the same time. "Seen it in your face," he said. "Go on, take 'em."

The wind gusted again, this time hard enough to make the boards of the building moan. The sand hitting the windows sounded like fine snow. Hogan picked the teeth up by the plastic feet, surprised all over again by how heavy they were.

"Here." Scooter produced a paper bag, almost as wrinkled and crumpled about the edges as his own face, from beneath the counter. "Stick 'em in here. That's a real nice sportcoat you got there. If you carry them choppers in the pocket, it'll get pulled out of shape."

He put the bag on the counter as if he understood how little Hogan wanted to touch him.

"Thanks," Hogan said. He put the Chatterly Teeth in the bag and rolled down the top.

"Jack thanks you, too -- he's my son."

Scooter smiled, revealing a set of teeth just as false (but nowhere near as large) as the ones in the paper bag. "My pleasure, mister. You drive careful until you get out of the blow. You'll be fine once you get in the foothills."

"I know." Hogan cleared his throat. "Thanks again. I hope you... uh... recover soon."

"That'd be nice," Scooter said evenly, "but I don't think it's in the cards, do you?"

"Uh. well." Hogan realized with dismay that he didn't have the slightest idea how to conclude this encounter. "Take care of yourself."

Scooter nodded. "You too."

Hogan retreated toward the door, opened it, and had to hold on tight as the wind tried to rip it out of his hand and bang the wall. Fine sand scoured his face and he slitted his eyes against it.

He stepped out, closed the door behind him, and pulled the lapel of his real nice sportcoat over his mouth and nose as he crossed the porch, descended the steps, and headed toward the customized Dodge camper-van parked just beyond the gas-pumps. The wind pulled his hair and the sand stung his cheeks. He was going around to the

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driver's-side door when someone tugged his arm.

"Mister! Hey, mister!"

He turned. It was the blonde-haired boy with the pale, ratty face. He hunched against the wind and blowing sand, wearing nothing but a tee-shirt and a pair of faded 501 jeans. Behind him, Mrs. Scooter was dragging a mangy beast on a choke-chain toward the back door of the store. Wolf the Minnesota coydog looked like a half-starved German shepherd pup -- and the runt of the litter, at that

"What?" Hogan shouted, knowing very well what.

"Can I have a ride?" the kid shouted back over the wind.

Hogan did not ordinarily pick up hitchhikers -- not since one afternoon five years ago. He had stopped for a young girl on the outskirts of Tonopah. Standing by the side of the road, the girl had resembled one of those sad-eyed waifs in the UNICEF posters, a kid who looked like her mother and her last friend had both died in the same housefire about a week ago. Once she was in the car, however, Hogan had seen the bad skin and mad eyes of the long-time junkie. By then it was too late. She'd stuck a pistol in his face and demanded his wallet. The pistol was old and rusty. Its grip was wrapped in tattered electrician's tape. Hogan had doubted that it was loaded, or that it would fire if it was... but he had a wife and a kid back in L.A., and even if he had been single, was a hundred and forty bucks worth risking your life over? He hadn't thought so even then, when he had just been getting his feet under him in his new line of work and a hundred and forty bucks had seemed a lot more important than it did these days. He gave the girl his wallet. By then her boyfriend had been parked beside the van (in those days it had been a Ford Econoline, nowhere near as nice as the custom Dodge XRT) in a dirty blue Chevy Nova. Hogan asked the girl if she would leave him his driver's license, and the pictures of Lita and Jack. "Fuck you, sugar," she said, and slapped him across the face, hard, with his own wallet before getting out and running to the blue car.

Hitchhikers were trouble.

But the storm was getting worse, and the kid didn't even have a jacket. What was he supposed to tell him? Fuck you, sugar, crawl under a rock with the rest of the lizards until the wind drops?

"Okay," Hogan said.

"Thanks, man! Thanks a lot!"

The kid ran toward the passenger door, tried it, found it locked, and just stood there, waiting to be let in, hunching his shoulders up around his ears. The wind billowed out the back of his shirt like a sail, revealing glimpses of his thin, pimple-studded back.

Hogan glanced back at Scooter's Grocery & Roadside Zoo as he went around to the driver's door. Scooter was standing at the window, looking out at him. He raised his hand, solemnly, palm out. Hogan raised his own in return, then slipped his key into the lock and turned it. He opened the door, pushed the unlock button next to the power window switch, and motioned for the kid to get in.

He did, then had to use both hands to pull the door shut again. The wind howled around the van, actually making it rock a little from side to side.

"Wow!" the kid gasped, and rubbed his fingers briskly through his hair (he'd lost the sneaker lace and the hair now lay on his shoulders in lank clots). "Some storm, huh? Big-time!"

"Yeah," Hogan said. There was a console between the two front seats -- the kind of seats the brochures liked to call "captain's chairs" -- and Hogan placed the paper bag in one of the cup-holders. Then he turned the ignition key. The engine started at once with a good-tempered rumble.

The kid twisted around in his seat and looked appreciatively into the back of the van. There was a bed (now folded back into a couch), a small LP gas stove, and several storage compartments where Hogan kept his various sample cases, and a toilet cubicle at the rear.

"Not too tacky, m'man!" the kid said. "All the comforts." He glanced back at Hogan.

"Where you headed?"

"Los Angeles."

The kid grinned. "Hey, great! So'm I!" He took out his just-purchased pack of Merits and tapped one loose.

Hogan had put on his headlights and dropped the transmission into drive. Now he shoved the gearshift back into park and turned to the kid. "Let's get a couple of things straight," he said.

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The kid gave Hogan his wide-eyed innocent look. "Sure, dude -- no prob."

"First, I don't pick up hitchhikers as a rule. I had a bad experience with one a few years back. It vaccinated me, you might say. I'll take you through the Santa Clara foothills, but that's all. There's a truckstop on the other side -- Sammy's. It's close to the turnpike. That's where we part company. Okay?"

"Okay. Sure. You bet." Still with the wide-eyed look.

"Second, if you really have to smoke, we part company right now. That okay?"

For just a moment Hogan saw the kid's other look (and even on short acquaintance, Hogan was almost willing to bet he only had two): the mean, watchful look. Then he was all wide-eyed innocence again, just a harmless refugee from Wayne's world. He tucked the cigarette behind his ear and showed Hogan his empty hands. As he raised them, Hogan noticed the hand-lettered tattoo on the kid's left bicep: DEF LEPPARD 4-EVER.

"No cigs," the kid said. "I got it."

"Fine. Bill Hogan." He held out his hand.

"Bryan Adams," the kid said, and shook Hogan's hand briefly.

Hogan dropped the transmission into drive again and began to roll slowly toward Route 46. As he did, his eyes dropped briefly to a cassette box lying on the dashboard. It was Reckless, by Bryan Adams.

Sure, he thought. You're Bryan Adams and I'm really Don Henley. We just stopped by Scooter's Grocery & Roadside Zoo to get a little material for our next albums, right, dude?

As he pulled out onto the highway, already straining to see through the blowing dust, he found himself thinking of the girl again, the one outside of Tonopah who had slapped him across the face with his own wallet before fleeing. He was starting to get a very bad feeling about this.

Then a hard gust of wind tried to push him into the eastbound lane, and he concentrated on his driving.

They rode in silence for a while. When Hogan glanced once to his right he saw the kid was lying back with his eyes closed -- maybe asleep, maybe dozing, maybe just pretending because he didn't want to talk. That was okay; Hogan didn't want to talk, either. For one thing, he didn't know what he might have to say to Mr. Bryan Adams from Nowhere, U.S.A. It was a cinch young Mr. Adams wasn't in the market for labels or Universal Product Code readers, which was what Hogan sold. For another, just keeping the van on the road had become something of a challenge.

As Mrs. Scooter had warned, the storm was intensifying. The road was a dim phantom crossed at irregular intervals by tan ribs of sand. These drifts were like speed-bumps, and they forced Hogan to creep along at no' more than twenty-five. He could live with that. At some points, however, the sand had spread more evenly across the road's surface, camouflaging it, and then Hogan had to drop down to fifteen miles an hour, navigating by the dim bounceback of his headlights from the reflector-posts which marched along the side of the road.

Every now and then an approaching car or truck would loom out of the blowing sand like a prehistoric phantom with round blazing eyes. One of these, an old Lincoln Mark IV as big as a cabin cruiser, was driving straight down the center of 46. Hogan hit the horn and squeezed right, feeling the suck of the sand against his tires, feeling his lips peel away from his teeth in a helpless snarl. Just as he became sure the oncomer was going to force him into the ditch, the Lincoln swerved back onto its own side just enough for Hogan to make it by. He thought he heard the metallic click of his bumper kissing off the Mark TV's rear bumper, but given the steady shriek of the wind, that was almost certainly his own imagination. He did catch just a glimpse of the driver -- an old bald-headed man sitting bolt-upright behind the wheel, peering into the blowing sand with a concentrated glare that was almost maniacal. Hogan shook his fist at him, but the old codger did not so much as glance at him. Probably didn't even realize I was there, Hogan thought, let alone how close he came to hitting me.

For a few seconds he was very close to going off the road anyway. He could feel the sand sucking harder at the rightside wheels, felt the van trying to tip. His instinct was to twist the wheel hard to the left. Instead, he fed the van gas and only urged it in that direction, feeling sweat dampen his last good shirt at the armpits. At last the suck on the tires diminished and he began to feel in control of the van again. Hogan blew his breath out in a long sigh.

"Good piece of driving, man."

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His attention had been so focused he had forgotten his passenger, and in his surprise he almost twisted the wheel all the way to the left, which would have put them in trouble again. He looked around and saw the blonde kid watching him. His gray-green eyes were unsettlingly bright; there was no sign of sleepiness in them.

"It was really just luck," Hogan said. "If there was a place to pull over, I would... but I know this piece of road. It's Sammy's or bust. Once we're in the foothills, it'll get better."

He did not add that it might take them three hours to cover the seventy miles between here and there.

"You're a salesman, right?"

"As rain."

He wished the kid wouldn't talk. He wanted to concentrate on his driving. Up ahead, fog-lights loomed out of the murk like yellow ghosts. An Iroc Z with California plates followed them. The van and the Z crept past each other like old ladies in a nursing-home corridor. In the corner of his eye, Hogan saw the kid take the cigarette from behind his ear and begin to play with it. Bryan Adams indeed. Why had the kid given him a false name? It was like something out of an old Republic movie, the kind of thing you could still see on the late-late show, a black-and-white crime movie where the traveling salesman (probably played by Ray Milland) picks up the tough young con (played by Nick Adams, say) who has just broken out of jail in Gabbs or Deeth or some place like that --

"What do you sell, dude?"

"Labels."

"Labels?"

"That's right. The ones with the Universal Product Code on them. It's a little block with a pre-set number of black bars in it."

The kid surprised Hogan by nodding. "Sure -- they whip 'em over an electric-eye gadget in the supermarket and the price shows up on the cash register like magic, right?"

"Yes. Except it's not magic, and it's not an electric eye. It's a laser reader. I sell those, too. Both the big ones and the portables."

"Far out, dude-mar." The tinge of sarcasm in the kid's voice was faint... but it was there.

"Bryan?"

"Yeah?"

"The name's Bill, not m'man, not dude, and most certainly not dude-mar."

He found himself wishing more and more strongly that he could roll back in time to Scooter's, and just say no when the kid asked him for a ride. The Scooters weren't bad sorts; they would have let the kid stay until the storm blew itself out this evening. Maybe Mrs. Scooter would even have given him five bucks to babysit the tarantula, the rattlers, and woof, the Amazing Minnesota Coydog. Hogan found himself liking those gray-green eyes less and less. He could feel their weight on his face, like small stones.

"Yeah -- Bill. Bill the Label Dude."

Bill didn't reply. The kid laced his fingers together and bent his hands backward, cracking the knuckles.

"Well, it's like my old mamma used to say -- it may not be much, but it's a living. Right, Label Dude?"

Hogan grunted something noncommittal and concentrated on his driving. The feeling that he had made a mistake had grown to a certainty. When he'd picked up the girl that time, God had let him get away with it. Please, he prayed. One more time, okay, God? Better yet, let me be wrong about this kid -- let it just be paranoia brought on by low barometer, high winds, and the coincidence of a name that can't, after all, be that uncommon.

Here came a huge Mack truck from the other direction, the silver bulldog atop the grille seeming to peer into the flying grit. Hogan squeezed right until he felt the sand piled up along the edge of the road grabbing greedily at his tires again. The long silver box the Mack was pulling blotted out everything on Hogan's left side. It was six inches away -- maybe even less -- and it seemed to pass forever.

When it was finally gone, the blonde kid asked: "You look like you're doin pretty well, Bill -- rig like this must have set you back at least thirty big ones. So why --"

"It was a lot less than that." Hogan didn't know if "Bryan Adams" could hear the

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edgy note in his voice, but he sure could. "I did a lot of the work myself." "All the same, you sure ain't staggerin around hungry. So why aren't you up above all this shit, flyin' the friendly skies?"

It was a question Hogan sometimes asked himself in the long empty miles between Tempe and Tucson or Las Vegas and Los Angeles, the kind of question you had to ask yourself when you couldn't find anything on the radio but crappy synthpop or threadbare oldies and you'd listened to the last cassette of the current best-seller from Recorded Books, when there was nothing to look at but miles of gullywashes and scrubland, all of it owned by Uncle Sam.

He could say that he got a better feel for his customers and their needs by traveling through the country where they lived and sold their goods, and it was true, but it wasn't the reason. He could say that checking his sample cases, which were much too bulky to fit under an airline seat, was a pain in the ass and waiting for them to show up on the conveyor belt at the other end was always an adventure (he'd once had a packing case filled with five thousand soft-drink labels show up in Hilo, Hawaii, instead of Hillside, Arizona). That was also true, but it also wasn't the reason.

The reason was that in 1982 he had been on board a Western Pride commuter flight which had crashed in the high country seventeen miles north of Reno. Six of the nineteen passengers on board and both crew-members had been killed. Hogan had suffered a broken back. He had spent four months in bed and another ten in a heavy brace his wife Lita called the Iron Maiden. They (whoever they were) said that if you got thrown from a horse, you should get right back on. William I. Hogan said that was bullshit, and with the exception of a white-knuckle, two-valium flight to attend his father's funeral in New York, he had never been on a plane since. He came out of these thoughts all at once, realizing two things: he had had the road to himself since the passage of the Mack, and the kid was still looking at him with those unsettling eyes, waiting for him to answer the question.

"I had a bad experience on a commuter flight once," he said. "Since then, I've pretty much stuck to transport where you can coast into the breakdown lane if your engine quits."

"You sure have had a lot of bad experiences, Bill-dude," the kid said. A tone of bogus regret crept into his voice. "And now, so sorry, you're about to have another one." There was a sharp metallic click. Hogan looked over and was not very surprised to see the kid was holding a switchknife with a glittering eight-inch blade.

Oh shit, Hogan thought. Now that it was here, now that it was right in front of him, he didn't feel very scared. Only tired. Oh shit, and only four hundred miles from home. Goddam.

"Pull over, Bill-dude. Nice and slow."

"What do you want?"

"If you really don't know the answer to that one, you're even dumber than you look."

A little smile played around the corners of the kid's mouth. The homemade tattoo on the kid's arm rippled as the muscle beneath it twitched. "I want your dough, and I guess I want your rolling whorehouse too, at least for a while. But don't worry -- there's this little truck stop not too far from here. Sammy's. Close to the turnpike. Someone'll give you a ride. The people who don't stop will look at you like you're dog-shit they found on their shoes, of course, and you might have to beg a little, but I'm sure you'll get a ride in the end. Now pull over."

Hogan was a little surprised to find that he felt angry as well, as tired. Had he been angry that other time, when the road-girl, had stolen his wallet? He couldn't honestly remember.

"Don't pull that shit on me," he said, turning to the kid. "I jjjave you a ride when you needed one, and I didn't make you beg for it. If it weren't for me, you'd still be eating sand with your thumb out. So why don't you just put that thing away. We'll --"

The kid suddenly lashed forward with the knife, and Hogan felt a thread of burning pain across his right hand. The van swerved, then shuddered as it passed over another of those sandy speed-bumps.

"Pull over, I said. You're either walking, Label Dude, or you're lying in the nearest gully with your throat cut and one of your own price-reading gadgets jammed up your ass. And you wanna know something? I'm gonna chain-smoke all the way to Los Angeles, and every time I finish a cigarette I'm gonna butt it out on your fuckin dashboard."

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Hogan glanced down at his hand and saw a diagonal line of blood, which stretched from the last knuckle of his pinky to the base of his thumb. And here was the anger again... only now it was really rage, and if the tiredness was still there, it was buried somewhere in the middle of that irrational red eye. He tried to summon a mental picture of Lita and Jack to damp that feeling down before it got the better of him and made him do something crazy, but the images were fuzzy and out of focus. There was a clear image in his mind, but it was the wrong one -- it was the face of the girl outside of Tonopah, the girl with the snarling mouth below the sad poster-child eyes, the girl who had said Fuck you, sugar before slapping him across the face with his own wallet.

He stepped down on the gas-pedal and the van began to move faster. The red needle moved past thirty.

The kid looked surprised, then puzzled, then angry. "what are you doing? I told you to pull over! Do you want your guts in your lap, or what?"

"I don't know," Hogan said. He kept his foot on the gas. Now the needle was trembling just above forty. The van ran across a series of dunelets and shivered like a dog with a fever. "what do you want, kid? How about a broken neck? All it takes is one twist of the wheel. I fastened my seatbelt. I notice you forgot yours." The kid's gray-green eyes were huge now, glittering with a mixture of fear and fury. You're supposed to pull over, those eyes said. That's the way it's supposed to work when I'm holding a knife on you -- don't you know that?

"You won't wreck us," the kid said, but Hogan thought he was trying to convince himself.

"why not?" Hogan turned toward the kid again. "After all, I'm pretty sure I'll walk away, and the van's insured. You call the play, asshole. what about that?"

"You -- " the kid began, and then his eyes widened and he lost all interest in Hogan. "Look out!" he screamed.

Hogan snapped his eyes forward and saw four huge white headlamps bearing down on him through the flying wrack outside. It was a tanker truck, probably carrying gasoline or propane. An air-horn beat the air like the cry of a gigantic, enraged goose: WHONK! WHONK! WHONNNK!

The van had drifted while Hogan was trying to deal with the kid; now he was the one halfway across the road. He yanked the wheel hard to the right, knowing it would do no good, knowing it was already too late. But the approaching truck was also moving, squeezing over just as Hogan had tried to squeeze over in order to accommodate the Mark IV. The two vehicles danced past each other though the blowing sand with less than a gasp between them. Hogan felt his rightside wheels bite into the sand again and knew that this time he didn't have a chance in hell of holding the van on the road -- not at forty-plus miles an hour. As the dim shape of the big steel tank (CARTER'S FARM SUPPLIES & ORGANIC FERTILIZER was painted along the side) slid from view, he felt the steering wheel go mushy in his hands, dragging farther to the right. And from the corner of his eye, he saw the kid leaning forward with his knife.

what's the matter with you, are you crazy? He wanted to scream at the kid, but it would have been a stupid question even if he'd had time enough to articulate it. Sure the kid was crazy -- you only had to take a good look into those gray-green eyes to see it. Hogan must have been crazy himself to give the kid a ride in the first place, but none of that mattered now; he had a situation to cope with here, and if he allowed himself the luxury of believing this couldn't be happening to him -- if he allowed himself to think that for even a single second -- he would probably be found tomorrow or the next day with his throat cut and his eyes nibbled out of their sockets by the buzzards. This was really happening; it was a true thing.

The kid tried his level best to plant the blade in Hogan's neck, but the van had begun to tilt by then, running deeper and deeper into the sand-choked gully. Hogan recoiled back from the blade, letting go of the wheel entirely, and thought he had gotten clear until he felt the wet warmth of blood drench the side of his neck. The knife had unzipped his right cheek from jaw to temple. He flailed with his right hand, trying to get the kid's wrist, and then the van's left front wheel struck a rock the size of a pay telephone and the van flipped high and hard, like a stunt vehicle in one of those movies this rootless kid undoubtedly loved. It rolled in midair, all four wheels turning, still doing thirty miles an hour according to the speedometer, and Hogan felt his seatbelt lock painfully across his chest and belly. It was like reliving the plane-crash -- now, as then, he could not get it through

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his head that this was really happening.

The kid was thrown upward and forward, still holding onto the knife. His head bounced off the roof as the van's top and bottom swapped places. Hogan saw his left hand waving wildly, and realized with amazement that the kid was still trying to stab him. He was a rattler, all right, Hogan had been right about that, but no one had milked his poison sacs.

Then the van struck the desert hardpan, peeling off the luggage racks, and the kid's head connected with the roof again, much harder this time. The knife was jolted from his hand. The cabinets at the rear of the van sprang open, spraying sample-books and laser label-readers everywhere. Hogan was dimly aware of an inhuman screaming sound -- the long, drawn-out squall of the XRT's roof sliding across the gravelly desert surface on the far side of the gully -- and thought: So this is what it would be like to be inside a tin can when someone was using the opener.

The windshield shattered, blowing inward in a sagging shield clouded by a million zig-zagging cracks. Hogan shut his eyes and threw his hands up to shield his face as the van continued to roll, thumping down on Hogan's side long enough to shatter the driver's-side window and admit a rattle of rocks and dusty earth before staggering upright again. It rocked as if meaning to go over on the kid's side... and then came to rest.

Hogan sat where he was without moving for perhaps five seconds, eyes wide, hands gripping the armrests of his chair, feeling a little like Captain Kirk in the aftermath of a Klingon attack. He was aware there was a lot of dirt and crumbled glass in his lap, and something else as well, but not what the something else was. He was also aware of the wind, blowing more dirt through the van's broken windows. Then his vision was temporarily blocked by a swiftly moving object. The object was a mottle of white skin, brown dirt, raw knuckles, and red blood. It was a fist, and it struck Hogan squarely in the nose. The agony was immediate and intense, as if someone had fired a flare-gun directly into his brain. For a moment his vision was gone, swallowed in a vast white flash. It had just begun to come back when the kid's hands suddenly clamped around his neck and he could no longer breathe.

The kid, Mr. Bryan Adams from Nowhere, U.S.A., was leaning over the console between the front seats. Blood from perhaps half a dozen different scalp-wounds had flowed over his cheeks and forehead and nose like war paint. His gray-green eyes stared at Hogan with fixed, lunatic fury.

"Look what you did, you fuck!" the kid shouted. "Look what you did to me!"

Hogan tried to pull back, and got half a breath when the kid's hold slipped momentarily, but with his seatbelt still buckled -- and still locked down as well, from the feel -- there was really nowhere he could go. The kid's hands were back almost at once, and this time his thumbs were pressing into his windpipe, pinching it shut.

Hogan tried to bring his own hands up, but the kid's arms, as rigid as prison bars, blocked him. He tried to knock the kid's arms away, but they wouldn't budge. Now he could hear another wind -- a high, roaring wind inside his own head.

"Look what you did, you stupid shit! I'm bleedin!"

The kid's voice, but farther away than it had been.

He's killing me, Hogan thought, and a voice replied: Right -- fuck you, sugar.

That brought the anger back. He groped in his lap for whatever was there besides dirt and glass. It was a paper bag with some bulky object -- Hogan couldn't remember exactly what -- inside it. Hogan closed his hand around it and pistoned his fist upward toward the shelf of the kid's jaw. It connected with a heavy thud. The kid screamed in surprised pain, and his grip on Hogan's throat was suddenly gone as he fell over backward.

Hogan pulled in a deep, convulsive breath and heard a sound like a teakettle howling to be taken off the burner. Is that me, making that sound? My God, is that me?

He dragged in another breath. It was full of flying dust, it hurt his throat and made him cough, but it was heaven all the same. He looked down at his fist and saw the shape of the Chatterly Teeth clearly outlined against the brown bag.

And suddenly felt them move.

There was something so shockingly human in this movement that Hogan shrieked and dropped the bag at once; it was as if he had picked up a human jawbone, which had tried to speak to his hand.

The bag hit the kid's back and then tumbled to the van's carpeted floor as "Bryan Adams" pushed himself groggily to his knees. Hogan heard the rubber band snap... and

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then the unmistakable click-and-chutter of the teeth themselves, opening and closing.

It's probably just a cog knocked a little off-track, Scooter had said. I bet a man who was handy could get 'em walkin and chompin again.

Or maybe just a good knock would do it, Hogan thought. If I live through this and ever get back that way, I'll have to tell Scooter that all you have to do to fix a pair of malfunctioning Chatterly Teeth is roll your van over and then use them to hit a psychotic hitchhiker who's trying to strangle you: so simple even a child could do it.

The teeth clattered and smacked inside the torn brown bag; the sides fluttered, making it look like an amputated lung, which refused to die. The kid crawled away from the bag without even looking at it -- crawled toward the back of the van, shaking his head from side to side, trying to clear it. Blood flew from the clots of his hair in a fine spray.

Hogan found the clasp of his seatbelt and pushed the pop-release. Nothing happened. The square in the center of the buckle did not give even a little and the belt itself was still locked as tight as a cramp, cutting into the middle-aged roll of fat above the waistband of his trousers and pushing a hard diagonal across his chest. He tried rocking back and forth in the seat, hoping that would unlock the belt. The flow of blood from his face increased, and he could feel his cheek flapping back and forth like a strip of dried wallpaper, but that was all. He felt panic struggling to break through amazed shock, and twisted his head over his right shoulder to see what the kid was up to.

It turned out to be no good. He had spotted his knife at the far end of the van, lying atop a litter of instructional manuals and brochures. He grabbed it, flicked his hair away from his face, and peered back over his own shoulder at Hogan. He was grinning, and there was something in that grin that made Hogan's balls simultaneously tighten and shrivel until it felt as if someone had tucked a couple of peach-pits into his Jockey shorts.

Ah, here it is! The kid's grin said. For a minute or two there I was worried -- quite seriously worried -- but everything is going to come out all right after all. Things got a little improvisational there for a while, but now we're back to the script.

"You stuck, Label Dude?" the kid asked over the steady shriek of the wind. "You are, ain't you? Good thing you buckled your belt, right? Good thing for me."

The kid tried to get up, almost made it, and then his knees gave way. An expression of surprise so magnified it would have been comic under other circumstances crossed his face. Then he flicked his blood-greasy hair out of his face again and began to crawl toward Hogan, his left hand wrapped around the imitation-bone handle of the knife. The Def Leppard tattoo ebbed and flowed with each flex of his impoverished bleep, making Hogan think of the way the words on Myra's tee-shirt -- NEVADA IS GOD'S COUNTRY -- had rippled when she moved.

Hogan grasped the seatbelt buckle with both hands and drove his thumbs against the pop-release as enthusiastically as the kid had driven his into Hogan's windpipe. There was absolutely no response. The belt was frozen. He craned his neck to look at the kid again.

The kid had made it as far as the fold-up bed and then stopped. That expression of large, comic surprise had resurfaced on his face. He was staring straight ahead, which meant he was looking at something on the floor, and Hogan suddenly remembered the teeth. They were still chattering away.

He looked down in time to see the Jumbo Chatterly Teeth march from the open end of the torn paper bag on their funny orange shoes. The molars and the canines and the incisors chopped rapidly up and down, producing a sound like ice in a cocktail-shaker. The shoes, dressed up in their tony white spats, almost seemed to bounce along the gray carpet. Hogan found himself thinking of Fred Astaire tap-dancing his way across a stage and back again; Fred Astaire with a cane tucked under his arm and a straw boater tipped saucily forward over one eye.

"Oh shit!" the kid said, half-laughing. "Is that what you were dickerin for back there? Oh, man! I kill you, Label Dude, I'm gonna be doin the world a favor."

The key, Hogan thought. The key on the side of the teeth, the one you use to wind them up... it isn 't turning.

And he suddenly had another of those precognitive flashes; he understood exactly what was going to happen. The kid was going to reach for them.

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The teeth abruptly stopped walking and chattering. They simply stood there on the slightly tilted floor of the van, jaws slightly agape. Eyeless, they still seemed to peer quizzically up at the kid.

"Chatterly Teeth," Mr. Bryan Adams, from Nowhere, U.S.A., marveled. He reached out and curled his right hand around them, just as Hogan had known he would.

"Bite him!" Hogan shrieked. "Bite his fucking fingers right off!"

The kid's head snapped up, the gray-green eyes wide with startlement. He gaped at Hogan for a moment -- that big expression of totally dumb surprise -- and then he began to laugh. His laughter was high and shrieky, a perfect complement to the wind howling through the van and billowing the curtains like long ghost-hands.

"Bite me! Bite me! Biiiiite me!" the kid chanted, as if it were the punchline to the funniest joke he'd ever heard. "Hey, Label Dude! I thought I was the one who bumped my head!"

The kid clamped the handle of the switchblade in his own teeth and stuck the forefinger of his left hand between the Jumbo Chatterly Teeth. "Ite eel" he said around the knife. He giggled and wiggled his finger between the oversized jaws. "Ite eel Oh on, ite ee!"

The teeth didn't move. Neither did the orange feet. Hogan's premonition collapsed around him the way dreams do upon waking. The kid wiggled his finger between the Chatterly Teeth one more time, began to pull it out... then began screaming at the top of his lungs. "Oh shit! SHIT! Mother FUCKER!"

For a moment Hogan's heart leaped in his chest, and then he realized that, although the kid was still screaming, what he was really doing was laughing. Laughing at him. The teeth had remained perfectly still the whole time.

The kid lifted the teeth up for a closer look as he grasped his knife again. He shook the long blade at the Chatterly Teeth like a teacher shaking his pointer at a naughty student. "You shouldn't bite," he said. "That's very bad behav -- "

One of the orange feet took a sudden step forward on the grimy palm of the kid's hand. The jaws opened at the same time, and before Hogan was fully aware of what was happening, the Chatterly Teeth had closed on the kid's nose.

This time Bryan Adams's scream was real -- a thing of agony and ultimate surprise. He flailed at the teeth with his right hand, trying to bat them away, but they were locked on his nose as tightly as Hogan's seatbelt was locked around his middle.

Blood and filaments of torn gristle burst out between the canines in red strings. The kid jackknifed backward and for a moment Hogan could see only his flailing body, lashing elbows, and kicking feet. Then he saw the glitter of the knife.

The kid screamed again and bolted into a sitting position. His long hair had fallen over his face in a curtain; the clamped teeth stuck out like the rudder of some strange boat. The kid had somehow managed to insert the blade of his knife between the teeth and what remained of his nose.

"Kill him!" Hogan shouted hoarsely. He had lost his mind; on some level he understood that he must have lost his mind, but for the time being, that didn't matter. "Go on, kill him!"

The kid shrieked -- a long, piercing fire-whistle sound -- and twisted the knife. The blade snapped, but not before it had managed to pry the disembodied jaws at least partway open. The teeth fell off his face and into his lap. Most of the kid's nose fell off with them.

The kid shook his hair back. His gray-green eyes were crossed, trying to look down at the mangled stump in the middle of his face. His mouth was drawn down in a rictus of pain; the tendons in his neck stood out like pulley-wires.

The kid reached for the teeth. The teeth stepped nimbly backward on their orange cartoon feet. They were nodding up and down, marching in place, grinning at the kid, who was now sitting with his ass on his calves. Blood drenched the front of his tee-shirt.

The kid said something then that confirmed Hogan's belief that he, Hogan, had lost his mind; only in a fantasy born of delirium would such words be spoken.

"Give bme bag by dose, you sud-of-a-bidtch!"

The kid reached for the teeth again and this time they ran forward, under his snatching hand, between his spread legs, and there was a meaty chump! sound as they closed on the bulge of faded blue denim just below the place where the zipper of the kid's jeans ended.

Bryan Adams's eyes flew wide open. So did his mouth. His hands rose to the level of his shoulders, springing wide open, and for a moment he looked like some strange Al

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Jolson imitator preparing to sing "Mammy." The switchknife flew over his shoulder to the back of the van.

"Jesus! Jesus! Jeeeeeee -- "

The orange feet were pumping rapidly, as if doing a Highland Fling. The pink jaws of the Jumbo Chatterly Teeth nodded rapidly up and down, as if saying yes! yes! yes! and then shook back and forth, just as rapidly, as if saying no! no! no!

" -- eeeeeeeEEEEEEEE -- ''

As the cloth of the kid's jeans began to rip -- and that was not all that was ripping, by the sound -- Bill Hogan passed out.

He came to twice. The first time must have been only a short while later, because the storm was still howling through and around the van, and the light was about the same. He started to turn around, but a monstrous bolt of pain shot up his neck. Whiplash, of course, and probably not as bad as it could have been... or would be tomorrow, for that matter.

Always supposing he lived until tomorrow.

The kid. I have to look and make sure he's dead.

No, you don't. Of course he's dead. If he wasn't, you would be.

Now he began to hear a new sound from behind him -- the steady chutter-click-chutter of the teeth.

They're coming for me. They've finished with the kid, but they're still hungry, so they're coming for me.

He placed his hands on the seatbelt buckle again, but the pop-release was still hopelessly jammed, and his hands seemed to have no strength, anyway.

The teeth grew steadily closer -- they were right in back of his seat, now, from the sound -- and Hogan's confused mind read a rhyme into their ceaseless chomping: Clickety-dickety-clickety-clack! We are the teeth, and we're coming back! Watch us walk, watch us chew, we ate him, now we 'II eat you!

Hogan closed his eyes.

The clittering sound stopped.

Now there was only the ceaseless whine of the wind and the spick-spock of sand striking the dented side of the XRT van.

Hogan waited. After a long, long time, he heard a single click, followed by the minute sound of tearing fibers. There was a pause, then the click and the tearing sound was repeated.

What's it doing?

The third time the click and the small tearing sound came, he felt the back of his seat moving a little and understood. The teeth were pulling themselves up to where he was. Somehow they were pulling themselves up to him.

Hogan thought of the teeth closing on the bulge below the zipper of the kid's jeans and willed himself to pass out again. Sand flew in through the broken windshield, tickled his cheeks and forehead.

Click... rip. Click... rip. Click... rip.

The last one was very close. Hogan didn't want to look down, but he was unable to help himself. And beyond his right hip, where the seat-cushion met the seat's back, he saw a wide white grin. It moved upward with agonizing slowness, pushing with the as-yet-unseen orange feet as it nipped a small fold of gray seat-cover between its incisors... then the jaws let go and it lurched convulsively upward.

This time what the teeth fastened on was the pocket of Hogan's slacks, and he passed out again.

When he came to the second time, the wind had dropped and it was almost dark; the air had taken on a queer purple shade Hogan could not remember ever having seen in the desert before. The skirls of sand running across the desert floor beyond the sagging ruin of the windshield looked like fleeing ghost-children.

For a moment he could remember nothing at all of what had happened to land him here; the last clear memory he could touch was of looking at his gas-gauge, seeing it was down to an eighth, then looking up and seeing a sign at the side of the road which said:

SCOOTER'S GROCERY & ROADSIDE

• ZOO • GAS • SNAX • COLD BEER •

SEE LIVE RATLLESNAKE'S!

He understood that he could hold onto this amnesia for a while, if he wanted to; given a little time, his subconscious might even be able to wall off certain dangerous memories permanently. But it could also be dangerous not to remember. Very

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dangerous. Because --

The wind gusted. Sand rattled against the badly dented driver's side of the van. It sounded almost like  
(teeth! teeth! teeth!)

The fragile surface of his amnesia shattered, letting everything pour through, and all the heat fell from the surface of Hogan's skin. He uttered a rusty squawk as he remembered the sound  
(chump!)

the Chatterly Teeth had made as they closed on the kid's balls, and he closed his hands over his own crotch, eyes rolling fearfully in their sockets as he looked for the runaway teeth.

He didn't see them, but the ease with which his shoulders followed the movement of his hands was new. He looked down at his lap and slowly removed his hands from his crotch. His seatbelt was no longer holding him prisoner. It lay on the gray carpet in two pieces. The metal tongue of the pull-up section was still buried inside the buckle, but beyond it there was only ragged red fabric. The belt had not been cut; it had been gnawed through.

He looked up into the rear-view mirror and saw something else: the back doors of the van were standing open, and there was only a vague, man-shaped red outline on the gray carpet where the kid had been. Mr. Bryan Adams, from Nowhere, U.S.A., was gone. So were the Chatterly Teeth. They look like hicks from Fargo, North Dakota, standing there in the electric purple light, which had overspread these empty lands west of Las Vegas. They were clamped shut on a thick wad of the kid's long blonde hair.

The Chatterly Teeth were backing up.

The Chatterly Teeth were dragging Mr. Bryan Adams away to Nowhere, U.S.A.

Hogan turned in the other direction and walked slowly toward the road, holding his nitro head straight and steady on top of his neck. It took him five minutes to negotiate the ditch and another fifteen to flag a ride, but he eventually managed both things. And during that time, he never looked back once.

Hogan got out of the van slowly, like an old man afflicted with a terrible case of arthritis. He found that if he held his head perfectly level, it wasn't too bad... but if he forgot and moved it in any direction, a series of exploding bolts went off in his neck, shoulders, and upper back. Even the thought of allowing his head to roll backward was unbearable.

He walked slowly to the rear of the van, running his hand lightly over the dented, paint-peeled surface, hearing and feeling the glass as it crunched under his feet. He stood at the far end of the driver's side for a long time. He was afraid to turn the corner. He was afraid that, when he did, he would see the kid squatting on his hunkers, holding the knife in his left hand and grinning that empty grin. But he couldn't just stand here, holding his head on top of his strained neck like a big bottle of nitroglycerine, while it got dark around him, so at last Hogan went around.

Nobody. The kid was really gone. Or so it seemed at first.

The wind gusted, blowing Hogan's hair around his bruised face, then dropped away completely. When it did, he heard a harsh scraping noise coming from about twenty yards beyond the van. He looked in that direction and saw the soles of the kid's sneakers just disappearing over the top of a dry-wash. The sneakers were spread in a limp V. They stopped moving for a moment, as if whatever was hauling the kid's body needed a few moments' rest to recoup its strength, and then they began to move again in little jerks.

A picture of terrible, unendurable clarity suddenly rose in Hogan's mind. He saw the Jumbo Chatterly Teeth standing on their funny orange feet just over the edge of that wash, standing there in spats so cool they made the coolest of the California Raisins.

Nine months later, on a clear hot summer day in June, Bill Hogan happened by Scooter's Grocery & Roadside Zoo again... except the place had been renamed. MYRA'S PLACE, the sign now said. GAS • COLD BEER • VIDEO'S. Below the words was a picture of a wolf -- or maybe just a woof -- snarling at the moon. Wolf himself, the Amazing Minnesota Coydog, was lying in a cage in the shade of the porch overhang. His back legs were sprawled extravagantly, and his muzzle was on his paws. He did not get up when Hogan got out of his car to fill the tank. Of the rattlesnakes and the tarantula there was no sign.

"Hi, woof," he said as he went up the steps. The cage's inmate rolled over onto his

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back and allowed his long red tongue to dangle enticingly from the side of his mouth as he stared up at Hogan.

The store looked bigger and cleaner inside. Hogan guessed this was partly because the day outside was not so threatening, but that wasn't all; the windows had been washed, for one thing, and that made a big difference. The board walls had been replaced with pine-panelling that still smelled fresh and sappy. A snackbar with five stools had been added at the back. The novelty case was still there, but the cigarette loads, the joy-buzzers, and Dr. Wacky's Sneezing Powder were gone. The case was filled with videotape boxes. A hand-lettered sign read X-RATED IN BACK ROOM • "B 18 OR B GONE."

The woman at the cash register was standing in profile to Hogan, looking down at a calculator and running numbers on it. For a moment Hogan was sure this was Mr. and Mrs. Scooter's daughter -- the female complement to those three boys Scooter had talked about raising. Then she lifted her head and Hogan saw it was Mrs. Scooter herself. It was hard to believe this could be the woman whose mammoth bosom had almost burst the seams of her NEVADA IS GOD'S COUNTRY tee-shirt, but it was. Mrs. Scooter had lost at least fifty pounds and dyed her hair a sleek and shiny walnut-brown. Only the sun-wrinkles around the eyes and mouth were the same.

"Getcha gas?" she asked.

"Yep. Fifteen dollars' worth." He handed her a twenty and she rang it up. "Place looks a lot different from the last time I was in."

"Been a lot of changes since Scooter died, all right," she agreed, and pulled a five out of the register. She started to hand it over, really looked at him for the first time, and hesitated. "Say... ain't you the guy who almost got killed the day we had that storm last year?"

He nodded and stuck out his hand. "Bill Hogan."

She didn't hesitate; simply reached over the counter and gave his hand a single strong pump. The death of her husband seemed to have improved her disposition... or maybe it was just that her change of life was finally over.

"I'm sorry about your husband. He seemed like a good sort."

"Scoot? Yeah, he was a fine fella before he took ill," she agreed. "And what about you? You all recovered?"

Hogan nodded. "I wore a neck-brace for about six weeks -- not for the first time, either -- but I'm okay."

She was looking at the scar, which twisted down his right cheek. "He do that? That kid?"

"Yeah."

"Stuck you pretty bad."

"Yeah."

"I heard he got busted up in the crash, then crawled into the desert to die." She was looking at Hogan shrewdly. "That about right?"

Hogan smiled a little. "Near enough, I guess."

"J.T. -- he's the State Bear around these parts -- said the animals worked him over pretty good. Desert rats are awful impolite that way."

"I don't know anything about that part."

"J.T. said the kid's own mother wouldn't have reckanized him." She put a hand on her reduced bosom and looked at him earnestly. "If I'm lyin, I'm dyin."

Hogan laughed out loud. In the weeks and months since the day of the storm, this was something he found himself doing more often. He had come, it sometimes seemed to him, to a slightly different arrangement with life since that day.

"Lucky he didn't kill you," Mrs. Scooter said. "You had a helluva narrow escape. God musta been with you."

"That's right," Hogan agreed. He looked down at the video case. "I see you took out the novelties."

"Them nasty old things? You bet! That was the first thing I did after -- " Her eyes suddenly widened. "Oh, say! Jeepers! I got sumpin belongs to you! If I was to forget, I reckon Scooter'd come back and haunt me!"

Hogan frowned, puzzled, but the woman was already going behind the counter. She stood on tiptoe and brought something down from a high shelf above the rack of cigarettes. It was, Hogan saw with absolutely no surprise at all, the Jumbo Chatterly Teeth. The woman set them down beside the cash register.

Hogan stared at that frozen, insouciant grin with a deep sense of déjà vu. There they were, the world's biggest set of Chatterly Teeth, standing on their funny orange

Stephen King - Chatterly Teeth

shoes beside the Slim Jim display, cool as a mountain breeze, grinning up at him as if to say, Hello, there! Did you forget me? I didn't forget YOU, my friend. Not at all.

"I found 'em on the porch the next day, after the storm blew itself out," Mrs. Scooter said. She laughed. "Just like old Scoot to give you somethin for free, then stick it in a bag with a hole in the bottom. I was gonna throw 'em out, but he said he give 'em to you, and I should stick 'em on a shelf someplace. He said a traveling man who came in once'd most likely come in again... and here you are."

"Yes," Hogan agreed. "Here I am."

He picked up the teeth and slipped his finger between the slightly gaping jaws. He ran the pad of the finger along the molars at the back, and in his mind he heard the kid, Mr. Bryan Adams from Nowhere, U.S.A., chanting Bite me! Bite me! Biiiiite me! Were the back teeth still streaked with the dull rust of the boy's blood? Hogan thought he could see something way back in there, but perhaps it was only a shadow. "I saved it because Scooter said you had a boy."

Hogan nodded. "I do." And, he thought, the boy still has a father. I'm holding the reason why. The question is, did they walk all the way back here on their little orange feet because this was home... or because they somehow knew what Scooter knew? That sooner or later, a traveling man always comes back to where he's been, the way a murderer is supposed to revisit the scene of his crime?

"Well, if you still want 'em, they're still yours," she said. For a moment she looked solemn... and then she laughed. "Shit, I probably would have throwed 'em out anyway, except I forgot about 'em. Course, they're still broken."

Hogan turned the key jutting out of the gum. It went around twice, making little wind-up clicks, then simply turned uselessly in its socket. Broken. Of course they were. And would be until they decided they didn't want to be broken for a while. And the question wasn't how they had gotten back here, and the question wasn't even why. The question was this: what did they want?

He poked his finger into the white steel grin again and whispered, "Bite me -- do you want to?"

The teeth only stood there on their super-cool orange feet and grinned.

"They ain't talking, seems like," Mrs. Scooter said.

"No," Hogan said, and suddenly he found himself thinking of the kid. Mr. Bryan Adams, from Nowhere, U.S.A. A lot of kids like him now. A lot of grownups, too, blowing along the highways like tumbleweed, always ready to take your wallet, say Fuck you, sugar, and run. You could stop picking up hitchhikers (he had), and you could put a burglar-alarm system in your home (he'd done that, too), but it was still a hard world where planes sometimes fell out of the sky and the crazies were apt to turn up anyplace and there was always room for a little more insurance. He had a wife, after all.

And a son.

It might be nice if Jack had a set of Jumbo Chatterly Teeth sitting on his desk. Just in case something happened.

Just in case.

"Thank you for saving them," he said, picking the Chatterly Teeth up carefully by the feet. "I think my kid will get a kick out of them even if they are broken."

"Thank Scoot, not me. You want a bag?" She grinned. "I got a plastic one -- no holes, guaranteed."

Hogan shook his head and slipped the Chatterly Teeth into his sportcoat pocket. "I'll carry them this way," he said, and grinned right back at her. "Keep them handy."

"Suit yourself." As he started for the door, she called after him: "Stop back again! I make a damn good chicken salad sandwich!"

"I'll bet you do, and I will," Hogan said. He went out, down the steps, and stood for a moment in the hot desert sunshine, smiling. He felt good -- he felt good a lot these days. He had come to think that was just the way to be.

To his left, woof the Amazing Minnesota Coydog got to his feet, poked his snout through the crisscross of wire on the side of his cage, and barked. In Hogan's pocket, the Chatterly Teeth clicked together once. The sound was soft, but Hogan heard it... and felt them move. He patted his pocket. "Easy, big fella," he said softly.

He walked briskly across the yard, climbed behind the wheel of his new Chevrolet van, and drove away toward Los Angeles. He had promised Lita and Jack he would be home by seven, eight at the latest, and he was a man who liked to keep his promises.