

Stephen King: The Crate

ELECTRONIC VERSION 1.0 (Apr 06 00). If you find and correct errors in the text, please update the version number by 0.1 and redistribute.

Dexter Stanley was scared. More; he felt as if that central axle that binds us to the state we call sanity were under a greater strain than it had ever been under before. As he pulled up beside Henry Northrup's house on North Campus Avenue that August night, he felt that if he didn't talk to someone, he really, would go crazy.

There was no one to talk to but Henry Northrup. Dex Stanley was the head of the zoology department, and once might have been university president if he had been better at academic politics. His wife had died twenty years before, and they had been childless. What remained of his own family was all west of the Rockies. He was not good at making friends.

Northrup was an exception to that. In some ways, they were two of a kind; both had been disappointed in the mostly meaningless, but always vicious, game of university politics. Three years before, Northrup had made his run at the vacant English department chairmanship. He had lost, and one of the reasons had undoubtedly been his wife, Wilma, an abrasive and unpleasant woman. At the few cocktail parties Dex had attended where English people and zoology people could logically mix, it seemed he could always recall the harsh mule-bray of her voice, telling some new faculty wife to "call me Billie, dear everyone does!"

Dex made his way across the lawn to Northrup's door at a stumbling run. It was Thursday, and Northrup's unpleasant spouse took two classes on Thursday nights. Consequently, it was Dex and Henry's chess night. The two men had been playing chess together for the last eight years.

Dex rang the bell beside the door of his friend's house; leaned on it. The door opened at ast and Northrup was there.

"Dex," he said. I didn't expect you for another--"

Dex pushed in past him. "Wilma," he said. "Is she here?"

"No, she left fifteen minutes ago. I was just making myself some chow. Dex, you look awful."

They had walked under the hall light, and it illuminated the cheesy pallor of Dex's face and seemed to outline wrinkles as deep and dark as fissures in the earth. Dex was sixty-one, but on the hot August night, he looked more like ninety.

"I ought to." Dex wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Well, what is it?"

"I'm afraid I'm going crazy, Henry. Or that I've already gone."

"You want something to eat? Wilma left cold ham."

"I'd rather have a drink. A big one."

"All right."

"Two men dead, Henry," Dex said abruptly. "And I could be blamed. Yes, I can see how I could be blamed. But it wasn't me. It was the crate. And I don't even know what's in

there!" He uttered a wild laugh.

"Dead?" Northrup said. "What is this, Dex?"

"A janitor. I don't know his name. And Gereson. A graduate student. He just happened to be there. In the way of... whatever it was."

Henry studied Dex's face for a long moment and then said, "I'll get us both a drink."

He left. Dex wandered into the living room, past the low table where the chess table had already been set up, and stared out the graceful bow window. That thing in his mind, that axle or whatever it was, did not feel so much in danger of snapping now. Thank God for Henry.

Northrup came back with two pony glasses choked with ice. Ice from the fridge's automatic icemaker, Stanley thought randomly. Wilma "just call me Billie, everyone does" Northrup insisted on all the modern conveniences... and when Wilma insisted on a thing, she did so savagely.

Northrup filled both glasses with Cutty Sark. He handed one of them to Stanley, who slopped Scotch over his fingers, stinging a small cut he'd gotten in the lab a couple of days before. He hadn't realized until then that his hands were shaking. He emptied half the glass and the Scotch boomed in his stomach, first hot, then spreading a steadylng warmth.

"Sit down, man," Northrup said.

Dex sat, and drank again. Now it was a lot better. He looked at Northrup, who was looking levelly back over the rim of his own glass. Dex looked away, out at the bloody orb of moon sitting over the rim of the horizon, over the university, which was supposed to be the seat of rationality, the forebrain of the body politic. How did that jibe with the matter of the crate? With the screams? With the blood?

"Men are dead?" Northrup said at last.

"Are you sure they're dead?"

"Yes. The bodies are gone now. At least, I think they are. Even the bones... the teeth... but the blood... the blood, you know..."

"No, I don't know anything. You've got to start at the beginning." Stanley took another drink and set his glass down. "Of course I do," he said. "Yes. It begins just where it ends. With the crate. The janitor found the crate..."

Dexter Stanley had come into Amberson Hall, sometimes called the Old Zoology Building, that afternoon at three o'clock. It was a blaringly hot day, and the campus looked listless and dead, in spite of the twirling sprinklers in front of the fraternity houses and the Old Front dorms.

The Old Front went back to the turn of the century, but Amberson Hall was much older than that. It was one of the oldest buildings on a university campus that had celebrated its tricentennial two years previous. It was a tall brick building, shackled with ivy that seemed to spring out of the earth like green, clutching hands. Its narrow windows were more like gun slits than real windows, and Amberson seemed to frown at the newer buildings with their glass walls and curvy, unorthodox shapes.

The new zoology building, Cather Hall, had been completed eight months before, and the process of transition would probably go on for another eighteen months. No one was completely sure what would happen to Amberson then. If the bond issue to build the new

gym found favor with the voters, it would probably be demolished.

He paused a moment to watch two young men throwing a Frisbee back and forth. A dog ran back and forth between them, glumly chasing the spinning disc. Abruptly the mutt gave up and flopped in the shade of a poplar. A VW with a NO NUKES sticker on the back deck trundled slowly past, heading for the Upper Circle. Nothing else moved. A week before, the final summer session had ended and the campus lay still and fallow, dead ore on summer's anvil.

Dex had a number of files to pick up, part of the seemingly endless process of moving from Amberson to Cather. The old building seemed spectrally empty. His footfalls echoed back dreamily as he walked past closed doors with frosted glass panels, past bulletin boards with their yellowing notices and toward his office at the end of the first-floor corridor. The cloying smell of fresh paint hung in the air.

He was almost to his door, and jingling his keys in his pocket, when the janitor popped out of Room 6, the big lecture hall, startling him.

He grunted, then smiled a little shamefacedly, the way people will when they've gotten a mild zap. "You got me that time," he told the janitor.

The janitor smiled and twiddled the gigantic key ring clipped to his belt. "Sorry, Perfesser Stanley," he said. "I was hopin' it was you. Charlie said you'd be in this afternoon."

"Charlie Gereson is still here?" Dex frowned. Gereson was a grad student who was doing an involved--and possibly very important--paper on negative environmental factors in long-term animal migration. It was a subject that could have a strong impact on area farming practices and pest control. But Gereson was pulling almost fifty hours a week in the gigantic (and antiquated) basement lab. The new lab complex in Cather would have been exponentially better suited to his purposes, but the new labs would not be fully equipped for another two to four months... if then.

"Think he went over the Union for a burger," the janitor said. "I told him myself to quit a while and go get something to eat. He's been here since nine this morning. Told him myself. Said he ought to get some food. A man don't live on love alone."

The janitor smiled, a little tentatively, and Dex smiled back. The janitor was right; Gereson was embarked upon a labor of love. Dex had seen too many squadrons of students just grunting along and making grades not to appreciate that... and not to worry about Charlie Gereson's health and well-being from time to time.

"I would have told *him*, if he hadn't been so busy," the janitor said, and offered his tentative little smile again. "Also, I kinda wanted to show you myself."

"What's that?" Dex asked. He felt a little impatient. It was chess night with Henry; he wanted to get this taken care of and still have time for a leisurely meal at the Hancock House.

"Well, maybe it's nothin'," the janitor said. "But... well, this buildin is some old, and we keep turnin things up, don't we?"

Dex knew. It was like moving out of a house that has been lived in for generations. Halley, the bright young assistant professor who had been here for three years now, had found half a dozen antique clips with small brass balls on the ends. She'd had no idea what the clips, which looked a little bit like spring-loaded wishbones, could be. Dex had been able to tell her. Not so many years after the Civil War, those clips had been used to hold the heads of white mice, who were then operated on without anesthetic. Young Halley, with her Berkeley education and her bright spill of Farrah Fawcett-Majors golden hair, had looked quite revolted. "No anti-vivisectionists in those days," Dex had told

her jovially. "At least not around here." And Halley had responded with a blank look that probably disguised disgust or maybe even loathing. Dex had put his foot in it again. He had a positive talent for that, it seemed.

They had found sixty boxes of *The American Zoologist* in a crawlspace, and the attic had been a maze of old equipment and mouldering reports. Some of the impedimenta no one--not even Dexter Stanley--could identify.

In the closet of the old animal pens at the back of the building, Professor Viney had found a complicated gerbil-run with exquisite glass panels. It had been accepted for display at the Musuem of Natural Science in Washington.

But the finds had been tapering off this summer, and Dex thought Amberson Hall had given up the last of its secrets. "What have you found?" he asked the janitor.

"A crate. I found it tucked right under the basement stairs. I didn't open it. It's been nailed shut, anyway."

Stanly couldn't believe that anything very interesting could have escaped notice for long, just by being tucked under the stairs. Tens of thousands of people went up and down them every week during the academic year. Most likely the janitor's crate was full of department records dating back twenty-five years. Or even more prosaic, a box of *National Geographics*.

"I hardly think--"

"It's a real crate," the janitor broke in earnestly. "I mean, my father was a carpenter, and this crate is built tile way he was buildin 'em back in the twenties. And he learned from *his* father."

"I really doubt if--"

"Also, it's got about four inches of dust on it. I wiped some off and there's a date. Eighteen thirty-four."

That changed things. Stanley looked at his watch and decided he could spare half all hour.

In spite of the humid August heat outside, the smooth tile-faced throat of the stairway was almost cold. Above them, yellow frosted globes cast a dim and thoughtful light. The stair levels had once been red, but in the centers they shaded to a dead black where the feet of years had worn away layer after layer of resurfacing. The silence was smooth and nearly perfect.

The janitor reached the bottom first and pointed under the staircase. "Under here," he said.

Dex joined him in staring into a shadowy, triangular cavity under the wide staircase. He felt a small tremor of disgust as he saw where the janitor had brushed away a gossamer veil of cobwebs. He supposed it was possible that the man had found something a little older than postwar records under there, now that he acutally looked at the space. But 1834?

"Just a second," the janitor said, and left momentarily. Left alone, Dex hunkered down and peered in. He could make out nothing but a deeper patch of shadow in there. Then the janitor returned with a hefty four-cell flashlight. "This'll show it up."

"What were you doing under there anyway?" Dex asked.

The janitor grinned. "I was only standin here tryin to decide if I should buff that second-floor hallway first or wash the lab windows. I couldn't make up my mind, so I flipped a quarter. Only I dropped it and it rolled under there." He pointed to the shadowy, triangular cave. "I prob'ly would have let it go, except that was my only quarter for the Coke machine. So I got my flash and knocked down the cobwebs, and when I crawled under to get it, I saw that crate. Here, have a look."

The janitor shone his light into the hole. Motes of disturbed dust preened and swayed lazily in the beam. The light struck the far wall in a spotlight circle, rose to the zigzag undersides of the stairs briefly, picking out an ancient cobweb in which long-dead bugs hung mumified, and then the light dropped and centered on a crate about five feet long and two-and-a-half wide. It was perhaps three feet deep. As the janitor had said, it was no knocked-together affair made out of scrap-boards. It was neatly constructed of a smooth, dark heavy wood. A *coffin*, Dexter thought uneasily. *It looks like a child's coffin.*

The dark color of the wood showed only a fan-shaped swipe on the side. The rest of the crate was the uniform dull gray of dust. Something was written on the side-stenciled there.

Dex squinted but couldn't read it. He fumbled his glasses out of his breast pocket and still couldn't. Part of what had been stenciled on was obscured by the dust--not four inches of it, by any means, but an extraordinarily thick coating, all the same.

Not wanting to crawl and dirty his pants, Dex duck-walked under the stairway, stifling a sudden and amazingly strong feeling of claustrophobia. The spit dried in his mouth and was replaced by a dry, woolly taste, like an old mitten. He thought of the generations of students trooping up and down these stairs, all male until 1888, then in coeducational platoons, carrying their books and papers and anatomical drawings, their bright faces and clear eyes, each of them convinced that a useful and exciting future lay ahead ... and here, below their feet, the spider spun his eternal snare for the fly and the trundling beetle, and here this crate sat impassively, gathering dust, waiting...

A tendril of spidersilk brushed across his forehead and he swept it away with a small cry of loathing and an uncharacteristic inner cringe.

"Not very nice under there, is it?" the janitor asked sympathetically, holding his light centered on the crate. "God, I hate tight places."

Dex didn't reply. He had reached the crate. He looked at the letters that were stenciled there and then brushed the dust away from them. It rose in a cloud, intensifying that mitten taste, making him cough dryly. The dust hung in the beam of the janitor's light like old magic, and Dex Stanley read what some long-dead chief of lading had stenciled on this crate.

SHIP TO HORLICKS UNIVERSITY, the top line read. VIA JULIA CARPENTER, read the middle line. The third line read simply: ARCTIC EXPEDITION.

Below that, someone had written in heavy black charcoal strokes: JUNE 19, 1834. That was the one line the janitor's hand-swipe had completely cleared.

ARCTIC EXPEDITION, Dex read again. His heart began to thump. "So what do you think?" the janitor's voice floated in.

Dex grabbed one end and lifted it. Heavy. As he let it settle back with a mild thud, something shifted inside--he did not hear it but felt it through the palms of his hands, as if whatever it was had moved of its own volition. Stupid, of course. It had been an almost liquid feel, as if something not quite jelled had moved sluggishly.

ARCTIC EXPEDITION.

Dex felt the excitement of an antiques collector happening upon a neglected armoire with a twenty-five dollar price tag in the back room of some hick-town junk shop ... an armoire that just might be a Chippendale. "Help me get it out," he called to the janitor.

Working bent over to keep from slamming their heads on the underside of the stairway, sliding the crate along, they got it out and then picked it up by the bottom. Dex had gotten his pants dirty after all, and there were cobwebs in his hair.

As they carried it into the old-fashioned, train-terminal-sized lab, Dex felt that sensation of shift inside the crate again, and he could see by the expression on the janitor's face that he had felt it as well. They set it on one of the formica-topped lab tables. The next one over was littered with Charlie Gereson's stuff--notebooks, graph paper, contour maps, a Texas Instruments calculator.

The janitor stood back, wiping his hands on his double-pocket gray shirt, breathing hard. "Some heavy mother," he said. "That bastard must weigh two hunnert pounds. You okay, Perfesser Stanley?"

Dex barely heard him. He was looking at the end of the box, where there was yet another series of stencils: PAELLA/SANTIAGO/SAN FRANCISCO/CHICAGO/NEW YORK/HORLICKS

"Perfesser--"

"Paella," Dex muttered, and then said it again, slightly louder. He was seized with an unbelieving kind of excitement that was held in check only by the thought that it might be some sort of hoax. "Paella!"

"Paella, Dex?" Henry Northrup asked. The moon had risen in the sky, turning silver.

"Paella is a very small island south of Tierra del Fuego," Dex said. "Perhaps the smallest island ever inhabited by the race of man. A number of Easter Island-type monoliths were found there just after World War II. Not very interesting compared to their bigger brothers, but every bit as mysterious. The natives of Paella and Tierra del Fuego were Stone-Age people. Christian missionaries killed them with kindness."

"I beg your pardon?"

"It's extremely cold down there. Summer temperatures rarely range above the mid-forties. The missionaries gave them blankets, partly so they would be warm, mostly to cover their sinful nakedness. The blankets were crawling with fleas, and the natives of both islands were wiped out by European diseases for which they had developed no immunities. Mostly by smallpox."

Dex drank. The Scotch had lent his cheeks some color, but it was hectic and flaring--double spots of flush that sat above his cheekbones like rouge.

"But Tierra del Fuego--and this Paella--that's not the Arctic, Dex. It's the Antarctic."

"It wasn't in 1834," Dex said, setting his glass down, careful in spite of his distraction to put it on the coaster Henry had provided. If Wilma found a ring on one of her end tables, his friend would have hell to pay. "The terms subarctic, Antarctic and Antarctica weren't invented yet. In those days there was only the north arctic and the south arctic."

"Okay."

"Hell, I made the same kind of mistake. I couldn't figure out why Frisco was on the

itinerary as a port of call. Then I realized I was figuring on the Panama Canal, which wasn't built for another eighty years or so.

"An Arctic expedition? In 1834?" Henry asked doubtfully.

"I haven't had a chance to check the records yet," Dex said, picking up his drink again. "But I know from my history that there were 'Arctic expeditions' as early as Francis Drake. None of them made it, that was all. They were convinced they'd find gold, silver, jewels, lost civilizations, God knows what else. The Smithsonian Institution outfitted an attempted exploration of the North Pole in, I think it was 1881 or '82. They all died. A bunch of men from the Explorers' Club in London tried for the South Pole in the 1850's. Their ship was sunk by icebergs, but three or four of them survived. They stayed alive by sucking dew out of their clothes and eating the kelp that caught on their boat, until they were picked up. They lost their teeth. And they claimed to have seen sea monsters."

"What happened, Dex?" Henry asked softly.

Stanley looked up. "We opened the crate," he said dully. "God help us, Henry, we opened the crate."

He paused for a long time, it seemed, before beginning to speak again.

"Paella?" the janitor asked. "What's that?"

"An island off the tip of South America," Dex said. "Never mind. Let's get this open." He opened one of the lab drawers and began to rummage through it, looking for something to pry with.

"Never mind that stuff," the janitor said. He looked excited himself now. "I got a hammer and chisel in my closet upstairs. I'll get 'em. Just hang on."

He left. The crate sat on the table's formica top, squat and mute. *It sits squat and mute*, Dex thought, and shivered a little. Where had that thought come from? Some story? The words had a cadenced yet unpleasant sound. He dismissed them. He was good at dismissing the extraneous. He was a scientist.

He looked around the lab just to get his eyes off the crate. Except for Charlie's table, it was unnaturally neat and quiet--like the rest of the university. White-tiled, subway-station walls gleamed freshly under the overhead globes; the globes themselves seemed to be double--caught and submerged in the polished formica surfaces, like eerie lamps shining from deep quarry water. A huge, old-fashioned slate blackboard dominated the wall opposite the sinks. And cupboards, cupboards everywhere. It was easy enough--too easy, perhaps--to see the antique, sepia-toned ghosts of all those old zoology students, wearing their white coats with the green cuffs, their hairs marcelled or pomaded, doing their dissections and writing their reports...

Footfalls clattered on the stairs and Dex shivered, thinking again of the crate sitting there--yes, squat and mute--under the stairs for so many years, long after the men who had pushed it under there had died and gone back to dust.

Paella, he thought, and then the janitor came back in with a hammer and chisel.

"Let me do this for you, perfesser?" he asked, and Dex was about to refuse when he saw the pleading, hopeful look in the man's eyes.

"Of course," he said. After all, it was this man's find.

"Prob'ly nothin in here but a bunch of rocks and plants so old they'll turn to dust when you touch 'em. But it's funny; I'm pretty hot for it."

Dex smiled noncommittally. He had no idea what was in the crate, but he doubted if it was just plant and rock specimens. There was that slightly liquid shifting sensation when they had moved it.

"Here goes," the janitor said, and began to pound the chisel under the board with swift blows of the hammer. The board hiked up a bit, revealing a double row of nails that reminded Dex absurdly of teeth. The janitor levered the handle of his chisel down and the board pulled loose, the nails shrieking out of the wood. He did the same thing at the other end, and the board came free, clattering to the floor. Dex set it aside, noticing that even the nails looked different, somehow--thicker, squarer at the tip, and without that blue-steel sheen that is the mark of a sophisticated alloying process.

The janitor was peering into the crate through the long, narrow strip he had uncovered. "Can't see nothin," he said. "Where'd I leave my light?"

"Never mind," Dex said. "Go on and open it."

"Okay." He took off a second board, then a third. Six or seven had been nailed across the top of the box. He began on the fourth, reaching across the space he had already uncovered to place his chisel under the board, when the crate began to whistle.

It was a sound very much like the sound a teakettle makes when it has reached a rolling boil, Dex told Henry Northrup; no cheerful whistle this, but something like an ugly, hysterical shriek by a tantrumy child. And this suddenly dropped and thickened into a low, hoarse growling sound. It was not loud, but it had a primitive, savage sound that stood Dex Stanley's hair up on the slant. The janitor stared around at him, his eyes widening... and then his arm was seized. Dex did not see what grabbed it; his eyes had gone instinctively to the man's face.

The janitor screamed, and the sound drove a stiletto of panic into Dex's chest. The thought that came unbidden was: *This is the first time in my life that I've heard a grown man scream--what a sheltered life I've led!*

The janitor, a fairly big guy who weighed maybe two hundred pounds, was suddenly yanked powerfully to one side. Toward the crate. "Help me!" He screamed. "Oh help doc it's got me it's biting me it's biting meeeee--"

Dex told himself to run forward and grab the janitor's free arm, but his feet might as well have been bonded to the floor. The janitor had been pulled into the crate up to his shoulder. That crazed snarling went on and on. The crate slid backwards along the table for a foot or so and then came firmly to rest against a bolted instrument mount. It began to rock back and forth. The janitor screamed and gave a tremendous lunge away from the crate. The end of the box came up off the table and then smacked back down. Part of his arm came out of the crate, and Dex saw to his horror that the gray sleeve of his shirt was chewed and tattered and soaked with blood. Smiling crescent bites were punched into what he could see of the man's skin through the shredded flaps of cloth.

Then something that must have been incredibly strong yanked him back down. The thing in the crate began to snarl and gobble. Every now and then there would be a breathless whistling sound in between.

At last Dex broke free of his paraiysis and lunged creakily forward. He grabbed the janitor's free arm. He yanked ... with no result at all. It was like trying to pull a man who has been handcuffed to the bumper of a trailer truck.

The janitor screamed again--a long, ululating sound that rolled back and forth between the lab's sparkling, white-tiled walls. Dex could see the gold glimmer of the fillings at the back of the man's mouth. He could see the yellow ghost of nicotine on his tongue.

The janitor's head slammed down against the edge of the board he had been about to remove

when the thing had grabbed him. And this time Dex did see something, although it happened with such mortal, savage speed that later he was unable to describe it adequately to Henry. Something as dry and brown and scaly as a desert reptile came out of the crate-- something with huge claws. It tore at the janitor's straining, knotted throat and severed his jugular vein. Blood began to pump across the table, pooling on the formica and jetting onto the white-tiled floor. For a moment, a mist of blood seemed to hang in the air.

Dex dropped the janitor's arm and blundered backward, hands clapped flat to his cheeks, eyes bulging.

The janitor's eyes rolled wildly at the ceiling. His mouth dropped open and then snapped closed. The click of his teeth was audible even below that hungry growling. His feet, clad in heavy black work shoes, did a short and jittery tap dance on the floor.

Then he seemed to lose interest. His eyes grew almost benign as they looked raptly at the overhead light globe, which was also blood-spattered. His feet splayed out in a loose V. His shirt pulled out of his pants, displaying his white and bulging belly.

"He's dead," Dex whispered. "Oh, Jesus."

The pump of the janitor's heart faltered and lost its rhythm. Now the blood that flowed from the deep, irregular gash in his neck lost its urgency and merely flowed down at the command of indifferent gravity. The crate was stained and splashed with blood. The snarling seemed to go on endlessly. The crate rocked back and forth a bit, but it was too well-braced against the instrument mount to go very far. The body of the janitor lolled grotesquely, still grasped firmly by whatever was in there. The small of his back was pressed against the lip of the lab table. His free hand dangled, sparse hair curling on the fingers between the first and second knuckles. His big key ring glimmered chrome in the light.

And now his body began to rock slowly this way and that. His shoes dragged back and forth, not tap dancing now but waltzing obscenely. And then they did not drag. They dangled an inch off the floor... then two inches..., then half a foot above the floor. Dex realized that the janitor was being dragged into the crate.

Tile nape of his neck came to rest against the board fronting the far side of the hole in the top of the crate. He looked like a man resting in some weird Zen position of contemplation. His dead eyes sparkled. And Dex heard, below the savage growling noises, a smacking, rending sound. And the crunch of a bone.

Dex ran.

He blundered his way across the lab and out the door and up the stairs. Halfway up, he fell down, clawed at the risers, got to his feet, and ran again. He gained the first floor hallway and sprinted down it, past the closed doors with their frosted-glass panels, past the bulletin boards. He was chased by his own footfalls. In his ears he could hear that damned whistling.

He ran right into Charlie Gereson's arms and almost knocked him over, and he spilled the milk shake Charlie had been drinking all over both of them.

"Holy hell, what's wrong?" Charlie asked, comic in his extreme surprise. He was short and compact, wearing cotton chinos and a white tee shirt. Thick spectacles sat grimly on his nose, meaning business, proclaiming that they were there for a long haul.

"Charlie," Dex said, panting harshly. "My boy... the janitor... the crate... it whistles... *it whistles when it's hungry and it whistles again when it's full*... my boy ... we have to ... campus security ... we We..."

"Slow down, Professor Stanley," Charlie said. He looked concerned and a little frightened. You don't expect to be seized by the senior professor in your department when you had nothing more aggressive in mind yourself than charting the continued outmigration of sandflies. "Slow down, I don't know what you're talking about."

Stanley, hardly aware of what he was saying, poured out a garbled version of what had happened to the janitor. Charlie Gereson looked more and more confused and doubtful. As upset as he was, Dex began to realize that Charlie didn't believe a word of it. He thought, with a new kind of horror, that soon Charlie would ask him if he had been working too hard, and that when he did, Stanley would burst into mad cackles of laughter.

But what Charlie said was, "That's pretty far out, Professor Stanley."

"It's true. We've got to get campus security over here. We--"

"No, that's no good. One of them would stick his hand in there, first thing." He saw Dex's stricken look and went on. "If *I'm* having trouble swallowing this, what are *they* going to think?"

"I don't know," Dex said. "I... I never thought..."

"They'd think you just came off a helluva toot and were seeing Tasmanian devils instead of pink elephants," Charlie Gereson said cheerfully, and pushed his glasses up on his pug nose. "Besides, from what you say, the responsibility has belonged with zo all along... like for a hundred and forty years."

"But..." He swallowed, and there was a click in his throat as he prepared to voice his worst fear. "But it may be out."

"I doubt that," Charlie said, but didn't elaborate. And in that, Dex saw two things: that Charlie didn't believe a word he had said, and that nothing he could say would dissuade Charlie from going back down there.

Henry Northrup glanced at his watch. They had been sitting in the study for a little over an hour; Wilma wouldn't be back for another two. Plenty of time. Unlike Charlie Gereson, he had passed no judgment at all on the factual basis of Dex's story. But he had known Dex for a longer time than young Gereson had, and he didn't believe his friend exhibited the signs of a man who has suddenly developed a psychosis. What he exhibited was a kind of bug-eyed fear, no more or

less than you'd expect to see a man who has had an extremely close call with... well, just an extremely close call.

"He went down, Dex?"

"Yes. He did."

"You went with him?"

"Yes."

Henry shifted position a little. "I can understand why he didn't want to get campus security until he had checked the situation himself. But Dex, you knew you were telling the flat-out truth, even if he didn't. Why didn't *you* call?"

"You believe me?" Dex asked. His voice trembled. "You believe me, don't you, Henry?"

Henry considered briefly. The story was mad, no question about that. The implication that there could be something in that box big enough and lively enough to kill a man after

some one hundred and forty years was mad. He didn't believe it. But this was Dex... and he didn't *disbelieve* it either.

"Yes," he said.

"Thank God for that," Dex said. He groped for his drink. "Thank God for that, Henry."

"It doesn't answer the question, though. Why didn't you call the campus cops?"

"I thought... as much as I did think... that it might not want to come out of the crate, into the bright light. It must have lived in the dark for so long... so very long... and ... grotesque as this sounds... I thought it might be pot-bound, or something. I thought ... well, he'll see it... he'll see the crate... the janitor's body... he'll see the *blood*... and then we'd call security. You see?" Stanley's eyes pleaded with him to see, and Henry did. He thought that, considering the fact that it had been a snap judgment in a pressure situation, that Dex had thought quite clearly. The blood. When the young graduate student saw the blood, he would have been happy to call in the cops.

"But it didn't work out that way."

"No." Dex ran a hand through his thinning hair.

"Why not?"

"Because when we got down there, the body was *gone*."

"It was gone?"

"That's right. And the crate was gone, too."

When Charlie Gereson saw the blood, his round and good-natured face went very pale. His eyes, already magnified by his thick spectacles, grew even huger. Blood was puddled on the lab table. It had run down one of the table legs. It was pooled on the floor, and beads of it clung to the light globe and to the white tile wall. Yes, there was plenty of blood.

But no janitor. No crate.

Dex Stanley's jaw dropped. "What the *fuck*!" Charlie whispered. Dex saw something then, perhaps the only thing that allowed him to keep his sanity. Already he could feel that central axle trying to pull free. He grabbed Charlie's shoulder and said, "Look at the blood on the table!"

"I've seen enough," Charlie said.

His Adam's apple rose and fell like an express elevator as he struggled to keep his lunch down.

"For God's sake, get hold of yourself," Dex said harshly. "You're a zoology major. You've seen blood before."

It was the voice of authority, for that moment anyway. Charlie did get a hold of himself, and they walked a little closer. The random pools of blood on the table were not as random as they had first appeared. Each had been neatly straight-edged on one side.

"The crate sat there," Dex said. He felt a little better. The fact that the crate really *had* been there steadied him a good deal. "And look there." He pointed at the floor. Here the blood had been smeared into a wide, thin trail. It swept toward where the two of them

stood, a few paces inside the double doors. It faded and faded, petering out altogether about halfway between the lab table and the doors. It was crystal clear to Dex Stanley, and the nervous sweat on his skin went cold and clammy.

It had gotten out.

It had gotten out and pushed the crate off the table. And then it had pushed the crate... where? Under the stairs, of course. Back under the stairs. Where it had been safe for so long.

"Where's the... the..." Charlie couldn't finish.

"Under the stairs," Dex said numbly. "It's gone back to where it came from."

"No. The..." He jerked it out finally. "The body."

"I don't know," Dex said. But he thought he did know. His mind would simply not admit the truth.

Charlie turned abruptly and walked back through the doors. "Where are you going?" Dex called shrilly, and ran after him. Charlie stopped opposite the stairs. The triangular black hole beneath them gaped. The janitor's big four-cell flashlight still sat on the floor. And beside it was a bloody scrap of gray cloth, and one of the pens that had been clipped to the man's breast pocket.

"Don't go under there, Charlie! Don't." His heartbeat whammed savagely in his ears, frightening him even more.

"No," Charlie said. "But the body..."

Charlie hunkered down, grabbed the flashlight, and shone it under the stairs. And the crate was there, shoved up against the far wall, just as it had been before, squat and mute. Except that now it was free of dust and three boards had been pried off the top.

The light moved and centered on one of the janitor's big, sensible work shoes. Charlie drew breath in a low, harsh gasp. The thick leather of the shoe had been savagely gnawed and chewed. The laces hung, broken, from the eyelets. "It looks like somebody put it through a hay baler," he said hoarsely.

"Now do you believe me?" Dex asked.

Charlie didn't answer. Holding onto the stairs lightly with one hand, he leaned under the overhang--presumably to get the shoe. Later, sitting in Henry's study, Dex said he could think of only one reason why Charlie would have done that--to measure and perhaps categorize the bite of the thing in the crate. He was, after all, a zoologist, and a damned good one.

"Don't!" Dex screamed, and grabbed the back of Charlie's shirt. Suddenly there were two green gold eyes glaring over the top of the crate. They were almost exactly the color of owls' eyes, but smaller. There was a harsh, chattering growl of anger. Charlie recoiled, startled, and slammed the back of his head on the underside of the stairs. A shadow moved from the crate toward him at projectile speed. Charlie howled. Dex heard the dry purr of his shirt as it ripped open, the click as Charlie's glasses struck the floor and spun away. Once more Charlie tried to back away. The thing began to snarl--then the snarls suddenly stopped. And Charlie Gereson began to scream in agony.

Dex pulled on the back of his white tee shirt with all his might. For a moment Charlie came backwards and he caught a glimpse of a furry, writhing shape spread-eagled on the young man's chest, a shape that appeared to have not four but six legs and the flat

bullet head of a young lynx. The front of Charlie Gereson's shirt had been so quickly and completely tattered that it now looked like so many crepe streamers hung around his neck.

Then the thing raised its head and those small green gold eyes stared balefully into Dex's own. He had never seen or dreamed such savagery. His strength failed. His grip on the back of Charlie's shirt loosened momentarily.

A moment was all it took. Charlie Gereson's body was snapped under the stairs with grotesque, cartoonish speed. Silence for a moment. Then the growling, smacking sounds began again.

Charlie screamed once more, a long sound of terror and pain that was abruptly cut off... as if something had been clapped over his mouth.

Or stuffed into it.

Dex fell silent. The moon was high in the sky. Half of his third drink--an almost unheard-of phenomenon--was gone, and he felt the reaction setting in as sleepiness and extreme lassitude.

"What did you do then?" Henry asked. What he hadn't done, he knew, was to go to campus security; they wouldn't have listened to such a story and then released him so he could go and tell it again to his friend Henry.

"I just walked around, in utter shock, I suppose. I ran up the stairs again, just as I had after... after it took the janitor, only this time there was no Charlie Gereson to run into. I walked... miles, I suppose. I think I was mad. I kept thinking about Ryder's Quarry. You know that place?"

"Yes," Henry said.

"I kept thinking that would be deep enough. If... if there would be a way to get that crate out there. I kept... kept thinking..." He put his hands to his face. "I don't know. I don't know anymore. I think I'm going crazy."

"If the story you just told is true, I can understand that," Henry said quietly. He stood up suddenly. "Come on. I'm taking you home."

"Home?" Dex looked at this friend vacantly. "But--"

"I'll leave a note for Wilma telling her where we've gone and then we'll call... who do you suggest, Dex? Campus security or the state police?"

"You believe me, don't you? You believe me? Just say you do."

"Yes, I believe you," Henry said, and it was the truth. "I don't know what that thing could be or where it came from, but I believe you." Dex Stanley began to weep.

"Finish your drink while I write my wife," Henry said, apparently not noticing the tears. He even grinned a little. "And for Christ's sake, let's get out of here before she gets back."

Dex clutched at Henry's sleeve. "But we won't go anywhere near Amberson Hall, will we? Promise me, Henry! We'll stay away from there, won't we?"

"Does a bear shit in the woods?" Henry Northrup asked. It was a three-mile drive to Dex's house on the outskirts of town, and before they got there, he was half-asleep in the passenger seat.

"The state cops, I think," Henry said. His words seemed to come from a great distance. "I think Charlie Gereson's assessment of the campus cops was pretty accurate. The first one there would happily stick his arm into that box."

"Yes. All right." Through the drifting, lassitudinous aftermath of shock, Dex felt a dim but great gratitude that his friend had taken over with such efficiency. Yet a deeper part of him believed that Henry could not have done it if he had seen the things he had seen. "Just... the importance of caution ..."

"I'll see to that," Henry said grimly, and that was when Dex fell asleep.

He awoke the next morning with August sunshine making crisp patterns on the sheets of his bed. Just a dream, he thought with indescribable relief. All some crazy dream.

But there was a taste of Scotch in his mouth--Scotch and something else. He sat up, and a lance of pain bolted through his head. Not the sort of pain you got from a hangover, though; not even if you were the type to get a hangover from three Scotches, and he wasn't.

He sat up, and there was Henry, sitting across the room. His first thought was that Henry needed a shave. His second was that there was something in Henry's eyes that he had never seen before--something like chips of ice. A ridiculous thought came to Dex; it passed through his mind and was gone. *Sniper's eyes. Henry Northrup, whose specialty is the earlier English poets, has got sniper's eyes.*

"How are you feeling, Dex?"

"A slight headache," Dex said. "Henry... the police... what happened?"

"The police aren't coming," Northrup said calmly. "As for your head, I'm very sorry. I put one of Wilma's sleeping powders in your third drink. Be assured that it will pass."

"Henry, what are you saying?"

Henry took a sheet of notepaper from his breast pocket. "This is the note I left my wife. It will explain a lot, I think. I got it back after everything was over. I took a chance that she'd leave it on the table, and I got away with it."

"I don't know what you're--"

He took the note from Henry's fingers and read it, eyes widening.

Dear Billie,

I've just had a call from Dex Stanley. He's hysterical. Seems to have committed some sort of indiscretion with one of his female grad students. He's at Amberson Hall. So is the girl. For God's sake, come quickly. I'm not sure exactly what the situation is, but a woman's presence may be imperative, and under the circumstances, a nurse from the infirmary just won't do. I know you don't like Dex much, but a scandal like this could ruin his career. Please come.

Henry.

"What in God's name have you done?" Dex asked hoarsely.

Henry plucked the note from Dex's nerveless fingers, produced his Zippo, and set flame to the corner. When it was burning well, he dropped the charring sheet of paper into an ashtray on the windowsill.

"I've killed Wilma," he said in the same calm voice. "Ding-dong, the wicked bitch is dead." Dex tried to speak and could not. That central axle was trying to tear loose again. The abyss of utter insanity was below. "I've killed my wife, and now I've put myself into your hands."

Now Dex did find his voice. It had a sound that was rusty yet shrill. "The crate," he said. "What have you done with the crate?"

"That's the beauty of it," Henry said. "You put the final piece in the jigsaw yourself. The crate is at the bottom of Ryder's Quarry."

Dex groped at that while he looked into Henry's eyes. The eyes of his friend. Sniper's eyes. You can't knock off your own queen, that's not in anyone's rules of chess, he thought, and restrained an urge to roar out gales of rancid laughter. The quarry, he had said. Ryder's Quarry. It was over four hundred feet deep, some said. It was perhaps twelve miles east of the university. Over the thirty years that Dex had been here, a dozen people had drowned there, and three years ago the town had posted the place.

"I put you to bed," Henry said. "Had to carry you into your room. You were out like a light. Scotch, sleeping powder, shock. But you were breathing normally and well. Strong heart action. I checked those things. Whatever else you believe, never think I had any intention of hurting you, Dex."

"It was fifteen minutes before Wilma's last class ended, and it would take her another fifteen minutes to drive home and another fifteen minutes to get over to Amberson Hall. That gave me forty-five minutes. I got over to Amberson in ten. It was unlocked. That was enough to settle any doubts I had left."

"What do you mean?"

"The key ring on the janitor's belt. It went with the janitor."

Dex shuddered.

"If the door had been locked--forgive me, Dex, but if you're going to play for keeps, you ought to cover every base--there was still time enough to get back home ahead of Wilma and burn that note.

"I went downstairs--and I kept as close to the wall going down those stairs as I could, believe me..."

Henry stepped into the lab and glanced around. It was just as Dex had left it. He slicked his tongue over his dry lips and then wiped his face with his hand. His heart was thudding in his chest. *Get hold of yourself, man. One thing at a time. Don't look ahead.*

The boards the janitor had pried off the crate were still stacked on the lab table. One table over was the scatter of Charlie Gereson's lab notes, never to be completed now. Henry took it all in, and then pulled his own flashlight--the one he always kept in the glovebox of his car for emergencies--from his back pocket. If this didn't qualify as an emergency, nothing did.

He snapped it on and crossed the lab and went out the door. The light bobbed uneasily in the dark for a moment, and then he trained it on the floor. He didn't want to step on anything he shouldn't. Moving slowly and cautiously, Henry moved around to the side of the stairs and shone the light underneath. His breath paused, and then resumed again, more slowly. Suddenly the tension and fear were gone, and he only felt cold. The crate was under there, just as Dex had said it was. And the janitor's ballpoint pen. And his shoes. And Charlie Gereson's glasses.

Henry moved the light from one of these artifacts to the next slowly, spotlighting each. Then he glanced at his watch, snapped the flashlight off and jammed it back in his pocket. He had half an hour. There was no time to waste.

In the janitor's closet upstairs he found buckets, heavy-duty cleaner, rags... and gloves. No prints. He went back downstairs like the sorcerer's apprentice, a heavy plastic bucket full of hot water and foaming cleaner in each hand, rags draped over his shoulder. His footfalls clacked hollowly in the stillness. He thought of Dex saying, *It sits squat and mute*. And still he was cold.

He began to clean up.

"She came," Henry said. "Oh yes, she came. And she was... excited and happy."

"What?" Dex said.

"Excited," he repeated. "She was whining and carping the way she always did in that high, unpleasant voice, but that was just habit, I think. All those years, Dex, the only part of me she wasn't able to completely control, the only part she could never get completely under her thumb, was my friendship with you. Our two drinks while she was at class. Our chess. Our... companionship."

Dex nodded. Yes, companionship was the right word. A little light in the darkness of loneliness. It hadn't just been the chess or the drinks; it had been Henry's face over the board, Henry's voice recounting how things were in his department, a bit of harmless gossip, a laugh over something.

"So she was whining and bitching in her best 'just call me Billie' style, but I think it was just habit. She was excited and happy, Dex. Because she was finally going to be able to get control over the last ... little.., bit." He looked at Dex calmly. "I knew she'd come, you see. I knew she'd want to see what kind of mess you gotten yourself into, Dex."

"They're downstairs," Henry told Wilma. Wilma was wearing a bright yellow sleeveless blouse and green pants that were too tight for her. "Right downstairs." And he uttered a sudden, loud laugh.

Wilma's head whipped around and her narrow face darkened with suspicion. "What are you laughing about?" She asked in her loud, buzzing voice. "Your best friend gets in a scrape with a girl and you're laughing?"

No, he shouldn't be laughing. But he couldn't help it. It was sitting under the stairs, sitting there squat and mute, just try telling that thing in the crate to call you Billie, Wilma--and another loud laugh escaped him and went rolling down the dim first-floor hall like a depth charge.

"Well, there is a funny side to it," he said, hardly aware of what he was saying. "Wait'll you see. You'll think--"

Her eyes, always questing, never still, dropped to his front pocket, where he had stuffed the rubber gloves.

"What are those? Are those gloves?"

Henry began to spew words. At the same time he put his arm around Wilma's bony shoulders and led her toward the stairs. "Well, he's passed out, you know. He smells like a distillery. Can't guess how much he drank. Threw up all over everything. I've been cleaning up. Hell of an awful mess, Billie. I persuaded the girl to stay a bit. You'll help me, won't you? This is Dex, after all."

"I don't know," she said, as they began to descend the stairs to the basement lab. Her eyes snapped with dark glee. "I'll have to see what the situation is. You don't know anything, that's obvious. You're hysterical. Exactly what I would have expected."

"That's right," Henry said. They had reached the bottom of the stairs. "Right around here. Just step right around here."

"But the lab's that way--"

"Yes... but the girl..." And he began to laugh again in great, loonlike bursts.

"Henry, what is wrong with you?" And now that acidic contempt was mixed with something else--something that might have been fear.

That made Henry laugh harder. His laughter echoed and rebounded, filling the dark basement with a sound like laughing banshees or demons approving a particularly good jest. "The girl, Billie," Henry said between bursts of helpless laughter. "That's what's so funny, the girl, the girl has crawled under the stairs and won't come out, that what's so funny, *ah-heh-heh-hahahahaa--*"

And now the dark kerosene of joy lit in her eyes; her lips curled up like charring paper in what the denizens of hell might call a smile. And Wilma whispered, "What did he do to her?"

"You can get her out," Henry babbled, leading her to the dark. triangular, gaping maw. "I'm sure you can get her out, no trouble, no problem." He suddenly grabbed Wilma at the nape of the neck and the waist, forcing her down even as he pushed her into the space under the stairs.

"What are you doing?" she screamed querulously. "What are you doing, Henry?"

"What I should have done a long time ago," Henry said, laughing. "Get under there, Wilma. Just tell it to call you Billie, you bitch."

She tried to turn, tried to fight him. One hand clawed for his wrist--he saw her spade-shaped nails slice down, but they clawed only air. "Stop it, Henry!" She cried. "Stop it right now! Stop this foolishness! I--I'll scream!"

"Scream all you want!" he bellowed, still laughing. He raised one foot, planted it in the center of her narrow and joyless backside, and pushed. "I'll help you, Wilma! Come on out! Wake up, whatever you are! Wake up! Here's your dinner! Poison meat! Wake up! Wake up!"

Wilma screamed piercingly, an inarticulate sound that was still more rage than fear.

And then Henry heard it.

First a low whistle, the sound a man might make while working alone without even being aware of it. Then it rose in pitch, sliding up the scale to an earsplitting whine that was barely audible. Then it suddenly descended again and became a growl... and then a hoarse yammering. It was an utterly savage sound. All his married life Henry Northrup had gone in fear of his wife, but the thing in the crate made Wilma sound like a child doing a kindergarten tantrum. Henry had time to think: *Holy God, maybe it really is a Tasmanian devil... it's some kind of devil, anyway.*

Wilma began to scream again, but this time it was a sweeter tune--at least to the ear of Henry Northrup. It was a sound of utter terror. Her yellow blouse flashed in the dark under the stairs, a vague beacon. She lunged at the opening and Henry pushed her back, using all his strength.

"Henry!" She howled. "*Henreeeee!*"

She came again, head first this time, like a charging bull. Henry caught her head in both hands, feeling the tight, wiry cap of her curls squash under his palms. He Pushed. And then, over Wilma's shoulder, he saw something that might have been the gold-glinting eyes of a small owl. Eyes that were infinitely cold and hateful. The yammering became louder, reaching a crescendo. And when it struck at Wilma, the vibration running through her body was enough to knock him backwards.

He caught one glimpse of her face, her bulging eyes, and then she was dragged back into the darkness. She screamed once more. Only once.

"Just tell it to call you Billie," he whispered.

Henry Northrup drew a great, shuddering breath.

"It went on ... for quite a while," he said. After a long time, maybe twenty minutes, the growling and the... the sounds of its feeding... that stopped, too. And it started to whistle. Just like you said, Dex. As if it were a happy teakettle or something. It whistled for maybe five minutes, and then it stopped. I shone my light underneath again. The crate had been pulled out a little way. There was... fresh blood. And Wilma's purse had spilled everywhere. But it got both of her shoes. That was something, wasn't it?"

Dex didn't answer. The room basked in sunshine. Outside, a bird sang.

"I finished cleaning the lab," Henry resumed at last. "It took me another forty minutes, and I almost missed a drop of blood that was on the light globe ... saw it just as I was going out. But when I was done, the place was as neat as a pin. Then I went out to my car and drove across campus to the English department. It was getting late, but I didn't feel a bit tired. In fact, Dex, I don't think I ever felt more clear-headed in my life. There was a crate in the basement of the English department. I flashed on that very early in your story. Associating one monster with another, I suppose."

"What do you mean?"

"Last year when Badlinger was in England--you remember Badlinger, don't you?"

Dex nodded. Badlinger was the man who had beaten Henry out for the English department chair... partly because Badlinger's wife was bright, vivacious and sociable, while Henry's wife was a shrew. Had been a shrew.

"He was in England on sabbatical," Henry said. "Had all their things crated and shipped back. One of them was a giant stuffed animal. Nessie, they call it. For his kids. That bastard bought it for his kids. I always wanted children, you know. Wilma didn't. She said kids get in the way.

"Anyway, it came back in this gigantic wooden crate, and Badlinger dragged it down to the English department basement because there was no room in the garage at home, he said, but he didn't want to throw it out because it might come in handy someday. Meantime, our janitors were using it as a gigantic sort of wastebasket. When it was full of trash, they'd dump it into the back of the truck on trash day and then fill it up again.

"I think it was the crate Badlinger's damned stuffed monster came back from England in that put the idea in my head. I began to see how your Tasmanian devil could be gotten rid of. And that started me thinking about something else I wanted to be rid of. That I wanted so badly to be rid of.

"I had my keys, of course. I let myself in and went downstairs. The crate was there. It was a big, unwieldy thing, but the janitors' dolly was down there as well. I dumped out

the little bit of trash that was in it and got the crate onto the dolly by standing it on end. I pulled it upstairs and wheeled it straight across the mall and back to Amberson."

"You didn't take your car?"

"No, I left my car in my space in the English department parking lot. I couldn't have gotten the crate in there, anyway."

For Dex, new light began to break. Henry would have been driving his MG, of course--an elderly sportscar that Wilma had always called Henry's toy. And if Henry had the MG, then Wilma would have had the Scout--a jeep with a fold-down back seat. Plenty of storage space, as the ads said.

"I didn't meet anyone," Henry said. "At this time of year--and at no other--the campus is quite deserted. The whole thing was almost hellishly perfect. I didn't see so much as a pair of headlights. I got back to Amberson Hall and took Badlinger's crate downstairs. I left it sitting on the dolly with the open end facing under the stairs. Then I went back upstairs to the janitors' closet and got that long pole they use to open and close the windows. They only have those poles in the old buildings now. I went back down and got ready to hook the crate--your Paella crate--out from under the stairs. Then I had a bad moment. I realized the top of Badlinger's crate was gone, you see. I'd noticed it before, but now I *realized* it. In my guts."

"What did you do?"

"Decided to take the chance," Henry said. "I took the window pole and pulled the crate out. I *eased* it out, as if it were full of eggs. No ... as if it were full of Mason jars with nitroglycerine in them."

Dex sat up, staring at Henry. "What... what..."

Henry looked back somberly. "It was my first good look at it, remember. It was horrible." He paused deliberately and then said it again: "It was horrible, Dex. It was splattered with blood, some of it seemingly grimed right into tile wood. It made me think of... do you remember those joke boxes they used to sell? You'd push a little lever and tile box would grind and shake, and then a pale green hand would come out of the top and push the lever back and snap inside again. It made me think of that.

"I pulled it out--oh, so carefully--and I said I wouldn't look down inside, no matter what. But I did, of course. And I saw..." His voice dropped helplessly, seeming to lose all strength. "I saw Wilma's face, Dex. Her *face*."

"Henry, don't--"

"I saw her eyes, looking up at me from that box. Her glazed eyes. I saw something else, too. Something white. A bone, I think. And a black something. Furry. Curled up. Whistling, too. A very low whistle. I think it was sleeping."

"I hooked it out as far as I could, and then I just stood there looking at it, realizing that I couldn't drive knowing that thing could come out at any time... come out and land on the back of my neck. So I started to look around for something--anything--to cover the top of Badlinger's crate.

"I went into the animal husbandry room, and there were a couple of cages big enough to hold the Paella crate, but I couldn't find the goddamned keys. So I went upstairs and I still couldn't find anything. I don't know how long I hunted, but there was this continual feeling of time... slipping away. I was getting a little crazy. Then I happened to poke into that big lecture room at the far end of the hall--"

"Room 6?"

"Yes, I think so. They had been painting the walls. There was a big canvas dropcloth on the floor to catch the splatters. I took it, and then I went back downstairs, and I pushed the Paella crate into Badlinger's crate. Carefully!... you wouldn't believe how carefully I did it, Dex."

When the smaller crate was nested inside the larger, Henry uncinched the straps on the English department dolly and grabbed the end of the dropcloth. It rustled stiffly in the stillness of Amberson Hall's basement. His breathing rustled stiffly as well. And there was that low whistle. He kept waiting for it to pause, to change. It didn't. He had sweated his shirt through; it was plastered to his chest and back.

Moving carefully, refusing to hurry, he wrapped the dropcloth around Badlinger's crate three times, then four, then five. In the dim light shining through from the lab, Badlinger's crate now looked mummified. Holding the seam with one splayed hand, he wrapped first one strap around it, then the other. He cinched them tight and then stood back a moment. He glanced at his watch. It was just past one o'clock. A pulse beat rhythmically at his throat.

Moving forward again, wishing absurdly for a cigarette (he had given them up sixteen years before), he grabbed the dolly, tilted it back, and began pulling it slowly up the stairs.

Outside, the moon watched coldly as he lifted the entire load, dolly and all, into the back of what he had come to think of as Wilma's Jeep--although Wilma had not earned a dime since the day he had married her. It was the biggest lift he had done since he had worked with a moving company in Westbrook as an undergraduate. At the highest point of the lift, a lance of pain seemed to dig into his lower back. And still he slipped it into the back of the Scout as gently as a sleeping baby.

He tried to close the back, but it wouldn't go up; the handle of the dolly stuck out four inches too far. He drove with the tailgate down, and at every bump and pothole, his heart seemed to stutter. His ears felt for the whistle, waiting for it to escalate into a shrill scream and then descend to a guttural howl of fury waiting for the hoarse rip of canvas as teeth and claws pulled their way through it.

And overhead the moon, a mystic silver disc, rode the sky.

"I drove out to Ryder's Quarry," Henry went on. "There was a chain across the head of the road, but I geared the Scout down and got around. I backed right up to the edge of the water. The moon was still up and I could see its reflection way down in the blackness, like a drowned silver dollar. I went around, but it was a long time before I could bring myself to grab the thing. In a very real way, Dex, it was three bodies... the remains of three human beings. And I started wondering...where did they go? I saw Wilma's face, but it looked ... God help me, it looked all *flat*, like a Halloween mask. How much of them did it eat, Dex? How much *could* it eat? And I started to understand what you meant about that central axle pulling loose."

"It was still whistling. I could hear it, muffled and faint, through that canvas dropcloth. Then I grabbed it and I *heaved*... I really believe it was do it then or do it never. It came sliding out... and I think maybe it suspected, Dex... because, as the dolly started to tilt down toward the water it started to growl and yammer again ... and the canvas started to ripple and bulge ... and I yanked it again. I gave it all I had ... so much that I almost fell into the damned quarry myself. And it went in. There was a splash ... and then it was gone. Except for a few ripples, it was gone. And then the ripples were gone, too."

He fell silent, looking at his hands.

"And you came here," Dex said.

"First I went back to Amberson Hall. Cleaned under the stairs. Picked up all of Wilma's things and put them in her purse again. Picked up the janitor's shoe and his pen and your grad student's glasses. Wilma's purse is still on the seat. I parked the car in our--in my--driveway. On the way there I threw the rest of the stuff in the river."

"And then did what? Walked here?"

"Yes."

"Henry, what if I'd waked up before you got here? Called the police?"

Henry Northrup said simply: "You didn't."

They stared at each other, Dex from his bed, Henry from the chair by the window.

Speaking in tones so soft as to be nearly inaudible, Henry said, "The question is, what happens now? Three people are going to be reported missing soon. There is no one element to connect all three. There are no signs of foul play; I saw to that. Badlinger's crate, the dolly, the painters' dropcloth--those things will be reported missing too, presumably. There will be a search. But the weight of the dolly will carry the crate to the bottom of the quarry, and ... there are really no bodies, are there, Dex?"

"No," Dexter Stanley said. "No, I suppose there aren't."

"But what are you going to do, Dex? What are you going to say?"

"Oh, I could tell a tale," Dex said. "And if I told it, I suspect I'd end up in the state mental hospital. Perhaps accused of murdering the janitor and Gereson, if not your wife. No matter how good your cleanup was, a state police forensic unit could find traces of blood on the floor and walls of that laboratory. I believe I'll keep my mouth shut."

"Thank you," Henry said. "Thank you, Dex."

Dex thought of that elusive thing Henry had mentioned companionship. A little light in the darkness. He thought of playing chess perhaps twice a week instead of once. Perhaps even three times a week... and if the game was not finished by ten, perhaps playing until midnight if neither of them had any early morning classes, instead of having to put the board away (and, as likely as not, Wilma would just "accidentally" knock over the pieces "while dusting," so that the game would have to be started all over again the following Thursday evening). He thought of his friend, at last free of that other species of Tasmanian devil that killed more slowly but just as surely--by heart attack, by stroke, by ulcer, by high blood pressure, yammering and whistling in the ear all the while.

Last of all, he thought of the janitor, casually flicking his quarter, and of the quarter coming down and rolling under the stairs, where a very old horror sat squat and mute, covered with dust and cobwebs, waiting... biding its time...

What had Henry said? The whole thing was almost hellishly perfect.

"No need to thank me, Henry," he said.

Henry stood up. "If you got dressed," he said, "you could run me down to the campus. I could get my MG and go back home and report Wilma missing."

Dex thought about it. Henry was inviting him to cross a nearly invisible line, it seemed, from bystander to accomplice. Did he want to cross that line?

At last he swung his legs out of bed. "All right, Henry."

"Thank you, Dexter."

Dex smiled slowly. "That's all right," he said. "After all, what are friends for?"