



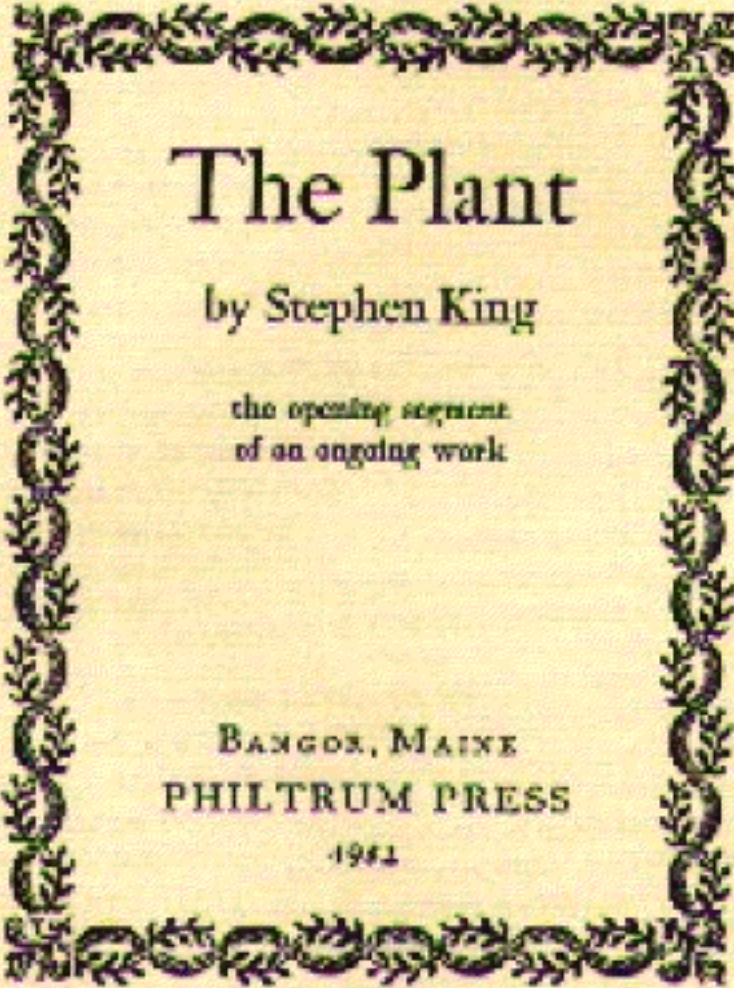
The Plant



by Stephen King

THREE PAGES

Sturges



The Plant

by Stephen King

the opening segment
of an ongoing work

BANGOR, MAINE
PHILTRUM PRESS

1981

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morning (i.e. Apr 6). Of course D.J. may come along before then but cowards travel in packs. Will do you no good D.J. In the end, your meat is mine, HA! "Beaches are sandy, some shores are rocky, I'm going to ventilate, A Designated Mockie." More dreams of CARLOS (code name DESIGNATED SPIC). I think he is close. Wish I had a picture. Must be crafty. Guitar & wig=good props. DAY OF THE GENERAL instead of DAY OF THE JACKAL, HA!! Guitar needs new strings. Still play pretty well & still sing "like a bird in a tree." Got suppositories. Dropped load. Can think more clearly in spite of brain-killing transmissions.

Must now play waiting game.

Not the first time.

Over and out.

COMMUTER CRASH KILLS 7 IN R.I.

By James Whitney
Special to The Times

CENTRAL FALLS, RHODE ISLAND: A Cessna 404 Titan commuter airplane owned and operated by Ocean State Airways crashed shortly after takeoff from Barker Field in this small Rhode Island city yesterday afternoon, killing both pilots and all five passengers. Ocean State Airways has been running shuttle flights to New York City's LaGuardia since 1977. OCA Flight 14 was airborne for less than two minutes when it crashed in a vacant lot only a quarter of a mile from its takeoff point. Witnesses said the aircraft banked low over a warehouse, narrowly missing the roof, just before going down.

"Whatever was wrong must have gone wrong right away," said Myron Howe, who was cutting weeds between Barker Field's two runways when the accident occurred. "He got upstairs and then he tried to come on back. I heard one engine cut out, then the other. I saw both props were dead. He missed the warehouse, and he missed the access road, but then he went in hard."

Preliminary reports indicate no maintenance problems with the C404, which is powered by two 375 horsepower turbo-charged

piston engines. The make has an excellent safety record overall, and the aircraft which crashed had less than 9000 hours on its clock, according to Ocean State Airways President George Ferguson. Officials from the Civil Aeronautics Board (CAB) and the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) have launched a joint investigation of the crash.

Killed in the accident, the first in Ocean State's four-year history, were John Chester-ton, the pilot, and Avery Goldstein, the co-pilot, both of Pawtucket. Robert Weiner, Tina Barfield, and Dallas Mayr have been identified as three of the downed aircraft's five passengers. The identities of the other two, thought to have been husband and wife, have been withheld pending notification of next of kin.

Ocean State Airways is most commonly used by passengers connecting with larger airlines operating out of LaGuardia Airport. According to Mr. Ferguson, OSA has suspended operations at least until the end of the week and perhaps longer. "I'm devastated by this," he said. "I've flown that particular craft many times, and would have sworn there wasn't a safer plane in the skies, large or small. I flew it down from Boston myself on Monday, and everything was fine with it then. I don't have any idea what could have caused both engines to shut down the way they did. One, possibly, but not both."

From John Kenton's diary

April 1, 1981

There's an old Chinese curse which goes, "May you live in interesting times." I think it must have been especially aimed at folks who keep diaries (and if they follow Roger's edict, that number will soon be increased by three: Bill Gelb, Sandra Jackson, and Herb "Give Me The World And Let Me Boss It" Porter). I sat here in my little home office—which is actually just a corner of the kitchen to which I have added a shelf and a bright light—pounding the keys of my typewriter for nearly five hours last night. Won't be that long tonight; among other things, I have a manuscript to read. And I *am* going to read it, I think. The dozen or so pages I got through on my way home have pretty well convinced me that this is the one I've been looking for all along, without even really knowing it.

But at least one person of my recent acquaintance won't be reading it. Not even if it's as great as *Great Expectations*. (Not that it will be; I have to keep reminding myself that I work at Zenith House, not Random House.) Poor woman. I don't know if she was telling the exact truth about wanting to do us a Good Turn, but even if she was lying through her teeth, no one should have to die like that, dropped out of the sky and crushed to death in a burning steel tube.

I arrived at work even earlier today, wanting to check the mail room. *OUIJA* says *stop wasting your time*, she told me. *The one you're looking for is in the purple box on the bottom shelf. Way in the corner.* I wanted to check that corner even before I put on the coffee. And to get another look at Zenith the ivy, while I was down there.

At first I thought I'd beaten Roger this time, because there was no clack-clack from his typewriter. But the light was on, and when I peeked in the

open door of his office, there he was, just sitting behind his desk and looking out at the street.

“Morning, boss,” I said. I thought he’d be ready and raring to go, but he just sat there in a semi-slump, pale and disheveled, as if he’d spent the whole night tossing and turning.

“I told you not to encourage her,” he said without turning from the window.

I walked over and looked out. The old lady with the guitar, the wild white hair, and the sign about letting Jesus grow in your heart was over there in front of Smiler’s again. I couldn’t hear what she was singing, at least. There was that much.

“You look like you had a tough night,” I said.

“Tougher morning. You seen the *Times*?”

I had, as a matter of fact—the front page, anyway. There was the usual report on Reagan’s condition, the usual stuff about unrest in the mideast, the usual corruption-in-government story, and the usual bottom-of-the-page command to support the Fresh Air Fund. Nothing that struck me as of any immediate concern. Nevertheless, I felt a little stirring of the hairs on the back of my neck.

The *Times* was sitting folded over in the OUT half of Roger’s IN/OUT basket. I took it.

“First page of the B section,” he said, still looking out the window. At the bum, presumably...or do you call a female of the species a bumette?

I turned to the National Report and saw a picture of an airplane—what was left of one, anyway—in a weedy field littered with cast-off engine parts. In the background, a bunch of people were standing behind a cyclone fence and gawking. I scanned the headline and knew at once.

“Barfield?” I asked.

“Barfield,” he agreed.

“Christ!”

“Christ had nothing to do with it.”

I scanned the piece without really reading it, just looking for her name.

And there she was: Tina Barfield of Central Falls, source of that old adage “if you play around the buzz-saw too long, sooner or later someone is gonna get cut.” Or burned alive in a Cessna Titan, she should have added.

“She said she’d be safe from Carlos if she did a genuine Good Turn,” Roger said. “That might lead some to deduce that what she did us was just the opposite.”

“I believed her about that,” I said. I think I was telling the truth, but whether I was or wasn’t, I didn’t want Roger deciding to uproot the ivy growing in Riddley’s closet because of what had happened to Tina Barfield. Shocked as I was, I didn’t want that. Then I saw—or maybe intuited—that Roger’s mind wasn’t running that way, and I relaxed a little.

“Actually, I did, too,” he said. “She was at least *trying* to do a Good Turn.”

“Maybe she just didn’t do it soon enough,” I said.

He nodded. “Maybe that was it. I read the short story she mentioned, by the way—the one by Jerome Bixby.”

“It’s a *Good Life*.”

“Right. By the time I’d read two pages, I recognized it as the basis of a famous *Twilight Zone* episode starring Billy Mumy. What the hell ever happened to Billy Mumy?”

I didn’t give Shit One about what happened to Billy Mumy, but thought it might be a bad idea to say so.

“The story’s about a little boy who’s a super-psychic. He destroys the whole world, apparently, except for his own little circle of friends and relatives. Those people he holds hostage, killing them if they dare to cross him in any way.”

I remembered the episode. The little kid hadn’t pulled out anyone’s heart or caused any planes to crash, but he’d turned one character—his big brother or maybe a neighbor—into a jack-in-the-box. And when he made a mess, he simply sent it away into the cornfield.

“Based on that, can you imagine what living with Carlos must have been like?” Roger asked me.

“What are we going to do, Roger?”

He turned from the window then and looked at me straight on. Frightened—I was, too—but determined. I respected him for that. And I respect myself, too.

I think.

“We’re going to make Zenith House into a profitable concern if we can,” he said, “and then we’re going to jam about nine gallons of black ink in Harlow Enders’s eye. I don’t know if that plant is really a modern-day version of Jack’s beanstalk or not, but if it is, we’re going to climb it and get the golden harp, the golden goose, and all the gold doubloons we can carry. Agreed?”

I stuck out my hand. “Agreed, boss.”

He shook it. I haven’t had many fine moments before nine in the morning, at least not as an adult, but that was one of them.

“We’re also going to be careful,” he said. “Agreed there?”

“Agreed.” It’s only tonight, dear diary, that I realize what you’re left with if you take the *a* out of *agreed*. I would be telling less than the truth if I didn’t say that sort of haunts me.

We talked a little more. I wanted to go down and check on Zenith; Roger suggested we wait for Bill, Herb, and Sandra, then do it together.

LaShonda Evans came in before they did, complaining that the reception area smelled funny. Roger sympathized, suggested it might be mildew in the carpet, and authorized a petty-cash expenditure for a can of Glade, which can be purchased in the Smiler’s across the street. He also suggested that she leave the editors pretty much alone for the next couple of months; they were all going to be working hard, he said, trying to live up to the parent company’s expectations. He didn’t say “unrealistic expectations,” but some people can convey a great deal with no more than a certain tone of voice, and Roger is one of them.

“It’s my policy not to go any further than right here, Mr. Wade,” she said, standing in the door of Roger’s office and speaking with great dignity. “You’re okay...and so are you, Mr. Kenton...most of the time...”

I thanked her. I’ve discovered that after your girl has dropped you for

some West Coast smoothie who probably knows Tai Chi and has been rolphed as est-ed to a nicety, even left-handed compliments sound pretty good.

“...but those other three are a little on the *weird* side.”

With that, LaShonda left. I imagine she had calls to make, a few of which might even have to do with the publishing business. Roger looked at me, amused, and further rumped his disarranged hair. “She didn’t know what the smell was,” he said.

“I don’t think LaShonda spends a lot of time in the kitchen.”

“When you look like LaShonda, I doubt if you need to,” Roger said. “The only time you smell garlic is when the waiter brings your Shrimp Mediterranean.”

“Meanwhile,” I said, “there’s Glade. And the garlic-smell will be gone before long, anyway. Unless, of course, you’re either a bloodhound or a supernatural houseplant.”

We looked at each other for a moment, then burst out laughing. Maybe just because Tina Barfield was dead and we were alive. Not very nice, I know, but the day brightened from that point on; that much, at least, I’m sure of.

Roger had left little notes on Herb’s, Sandra’s, and Bill’s desks. By ninety-three we were all gathered in Roger’s office, which doubles as our editorial conference room. Roger began by saying that he thought both Herb and Sandra had been aided in their inspirations, and with no more preamble than that, he told them the story of our trip to Rhode Island. I helped as much as I could. We both tried to express how strange our visit to the greenhouse had been, how otherworldly, and I believe all three of them understood most of that. When it came to Norville Keen, however, I don’t think either Roger or I really got the point across.

Bill and Herb were sitting side by side on the floor, as they often do during our editorial conferences, drinking coffee, and I saw them exchange a glance of the kind in which eyeballs rolling heavenward play a crucial part. I thought about trying to press the point, then didn’t. If I may misquote the wisdom of Norville Keen: “You can’t believe in a zombie unless you’ve seen that zombie.”

Roger finished the job by handing Bill that day's B section of *The New York Times*. We waited as it made the rounds.

"Oh, poor woman," Sandra said. She had dragged in her office chair and was sitting in it with her knees primly together. No sitting on the floor for Mr. and Mrs. Jackson's little girl. "I never fly unless I have to. It's *much* more dangerous than they let on."

"This is crap," Bill said. "I mean, I love you, Roger, but this really is crap. You've been under pressure—you too, John, especially since you got the gate from your girlfriend—and you guys've just...I don't know...let your imaginations run away with you."

Roger nodded as if he had expected no less. He turned to Herb. "What do you think?" he asked him.

Herb stood up and hitched his belt in that take-charge way of his. "I think we ought to go take a look at the famous ivy plant."

"Me too," Sandra said.

"You guys don't actually *believe* this, do you?" Bill Gelb asked. He sounded both amused and alarmed. "I mean, let's not dial 1-800-MASS-HYSTERIA just yet, okay?"

"I don't believe or disbelieve anything," Sandra said. "Not for sure. All I know for sure is that I got my idea about the joke-book *after* I was down there. *After* I smelled baking cookies. And why would the janitor's room smell like my grandma's kitchen, anyway?"

"Maybe for the same reason the reception area smells like garlic," Bill said. "Because these guys have been playing jokes." I opened my mouth to say that Sandra had smelled cookies and Herb toast and jam in Riddley's cubicle the day *before* Roger and I made our trip to Central Falls, but before I could, Bill said: "What about the plant, Sandy? Did you see an ivy growing all over the place in there?"

"No, but I didn't turn on the light," she said. "I just peeped my head in, and then...I don't know...I got a little scared. Like it was spooky, or something."

"It was spooky in spite of the smell of grandma's baking cookies, or

because of it?" Bill asked. Like a TV-show prosecutor hammering some hapless defense witness.

Sandra looked at him defiantly and said nothing. Herb tried to take her hand, but she shook it off.

I stood up. "Enough talk. Why describe a guest when you can see that guest?"

Bill looked at me as if I'd flipped my lid. "Say *what?*"

"I believe that in his own inimitable way, John is trying to express the idea that seeing is believing," Roger said. "Let's go have a look. And may I suggest you all keep your hands to yourselves? I don't think it bites—not us, anyway—but I do think we'd be wise to be careful."

It sounded like damned good advice to me. As Roger lead us down the hall past our offices in a little troop, I found myself remembering the last words of the rabbit general in Richard Adams's *Watership Down*: "Come back, you fools! Come back! Dogs aren't dangerous!"

When we got to the place where the hall jogs to the left, Bill said: "Hey, hold it, just a goddam minute." Sounding extremely suspicious. And a little bit spooked, maybe, as well.

"What is it, William?" Herb asked, all innocence. "Smelling something nice?"

"Popcorn," he said. His hands were clenched.

"Good smell, is it?" Roger asked gently.

Bill sighed. His hands opened...and all at once his eyes filled with tears. "It smells like The Nordica," he said. "The Nordica Theater, in Freeport, Maine. It's where we used to go to the show when I was a kid growing up in Gates Falls. It was only open on weekends, and it was always a double feature. There were great big wooden fans in the ceiling and they'd go around during the show...*whoosh, whoosh, whoosh*...and the popcorn was always fresh. Fresh popcorn with real butter on it in a plain brown bag. To me that's always been the smell of dreams. I just...*Is this a joke? Because if it is, tell me right now.*"

"No joke," I said. "I smell coffee. Five O'Clock brand, and stronger than ever. Sandra, do you still smell cookies?"

She looked at me with dreamy eyes, and right then I sort of understood why Herb is so totally gone on her (yes, we all know it; I think even Riddley and LaShonda know it; the only one who doesn't know it is Sandra herself). Because she was beautiful.

"No," she said, "I smell Shalimar. That was the first perfume I ever had. My Aunt Coretta gave it to me for my birthday, when I was twelve." Then she looked at Bill, and smiled warmly. "That was what dreams smelled like to me. Shalimar perfume."

"Herb?" I asked.

For a minute I didn't think he was going to say anything; he was cheesed at the way she was looking at Bill. But then he must have decided this was a little bit bigger than his crush on Sandra.

"Not toast and jam today," he said. "New car today. To me that's the best smell on earth. It was when I was seventeen and couldn't afford one, and I guess it still is now."

Sandra said, "You still can't afford one."

Herb sighed, shrugged. "Yeah, but...fresh wax...new leather..."

I turned to Roger. "What about—" Then I stopped. Bill was only brimming, but Roger Wade was outright weeping. Tears ran down his face in two silent streams.

"My mother's garden, when I was very small," he said in a thick, choked voice. "How I loved that smell. And how I loved her."

Sandra put an arm around him and gave him a little hug. Roger wiped his eyes with his sleeve and tried a smile. Did pretty well, too, for someone remembering his beloved dead mother.

Now Bill pushed ahead. I let him, too. We followed him around the corner to the door just left of the drinking fountain, the one marked JANITOR. He threw it open, started to say something smartass—it might have been *Come out, come out, wherever you are*—and then stopped. His hands went up in an involuntary warding-off gesture, then dropped again.

"Holy Jesus get-up-in-the-morning," he whispered, and the rest of us crowded around him.

Writing in this journal yesterday, I said that Riddley's closet had become a jungle, but yesterday I didn't understand what a jungle was. I know that must sound strange after my tour of Tina Barfield's greenhouse in Central Falls, but it's true. Riddley won't be shooting dice with Bill Gelb in there anymore, I can tell you that. The room is now a densely packed mass of shiny green leaves and tangled vines, rising from the floor to the ceiling. Within it you can still see a few gleams of metal and wood—the mop-bucket, the broom-handle—but that's it. The shelves are buried. The fluorescent lights overhead are barely visible. The smells that came out at us, although good, were almost overpowering.

And then there was a sigh. We all heard it. A kind of whispered, exhaled greeting.

An avalanche of leaves and stems fell out at our feet and sprawled across the floor. Several tendrils went snaking over the linoleum. The speed with which this happened was scary. If you'da blinked, you'da missed it, as my father might have said. Sandra screamed, and when Herb put his arms around her shoulders, she didn't seem to mind a bit.

Bill stepped forward and drew his leg back, apparently meaning to kick the rapidly snaking ivy-branches back into the janitor's closet. Or to try. Roger grabbed his shoulder. "Don't do that! Leave it be! It doesn't mean to hurt us! Can't you feel that? Don't you know from the smell?"

Bill stopped, so I guess he did. We watched as several tendrils of ivy climbed up the wall of the corridor. A few of these began to explore the gray steel sides of the water fountain, and when I left the office tonight, the fountain was pretty much buried. It looks as if those of us who like a drink of water every now and then during the course of the day are going to be buying Evian at Smiler's from now on.

Sandra squatted down and held out her hand, the way you might hold your hand out for a strange dog to sniff. I didn't like to see her that way, not while she was so close to the green avalanche we'd let out of the janitor's closet. In its shadow, so to speak. I reached out to pull her back, but Roger stopped me. He had a queer little smile on his face.

“Let her,” he said.

A tendril as thick as a branch detached itself from the nearly solid clump of green bulging through the doorway. It reached out to her, trembling, seeming almost to sniff its way to her. It slid around her wrist and she gasped. Herb started forward and Roger yanked him back. “Leave her alone! It’s all right!” he said.

“Do you swear?”

Roger’s lips were pressed together so tightly they were almost gone. “No,” he said in a small voice. “But I *think*.”

“It *is* all right,” Sandra said dreamily. She watched as the tendril slid delicately up her bare arm in a spiral of green and brown, seeming to caress her bare skin as it went. It looked like some exotic snake. “It says it’s a friend.”

“That’s what the Pilgrims told the Indians,” Bill said bleakly.

“It says it loves me,” she said, now sounding almost ecstatic. We watched as the tip of the moving tendril slipped under the short sleeve of her blouse. A small green leaf near the tip went under next, lifting the cloth a bit. It was like watching some new kind of Hindu *fakir* at work, a plant charmer instead of a snake charmer. “It says it loves all of us. And it says...” Another tendril snaked loosely around one of her knees, then slipped tenderly down her calf in a loose coil.

“It says one of us is missing,” Herb said. I looked around and saw that Herb’s shoes had disappeared. He was standing ankle-deep in ivy.

Roger and I walked to the closet’s doorway and stood there with the leaves brushing the fronts of our coats. I thought how easy it would be for that thing to grab us by the ties. A couple of long hard yanks and presto—a pair of editors strangled by their own cravats. Then several coils of ivy wrapped themselves around my wrists in loose bracelets, and all those paranoid, fearful thoughts dropped away.

Now, sitting at my apartment desk and pounding away at my old typewriter (also smoking like a furnace again, I’m sorry to say), I can’t remember exactly what came next...except that it was warm and comforting and

quite a bit more than pleasant. It was lovely, like a warm bath when your back aches, or chips of ice when your mouth is hot and your throat is sore.

What an outsider would have seen, I don't know. Probably not much, if Tina Barfield was telling the truth when she said no one could see it but us; probably just five slightly scruffy editors, four of them on the youngish side (and Herb, who's pushing fifty, would look young at a more respectable publisher's conference table, where the ages of most editors seem to range between sixty-five and dead), standing around the door of the janitor's closet.

What *we* saw was *it*. The plant. Zenith the common ivy. It had now expanded (and relaxed) all around us, feeling along the corridor with its tendrils and climbing the walls with its rhizomes, as eager and frisky as a colt let out of the stable on a warm May morning. It had both of Sandra's arms, it had my wrists, it had Bill and Herb by the feet. Roger had grown a loose green necklace, and didn't seem worried about it at all.

We saw it and we experienced it. The physical fact of it and the reassuring mental warmth of it. It experienced us in the same fashion, united us in a way that turned us into a small but perfect mental choir. And yes, I am saying exactly what I seem to be saying, that while we stood there in the grip of those many thin but tough tendrils, we shared a telepathic link. We saw into each others' hearts and minds. I don't know why I should find that so amazing after all the other stuff that's happened—the fact that yesterday I saw a dead man reading a newspaper, for instance—but I do.

Zenith had asked about Riddley. It seemed to have a special interest in the man who had taken it in, given it a place to grow, and enough water to allow it a fragile purchase on life. We assured it (him?) in our choir voice that Riddley was fine, Riddley was away but would be back soon. The plant seemed satisfied. The tendrils holding our arms and legs (not to mention Roger's neck) let go. Some dropped to the floor, some simply withdrew.

"Come on," Roger said quietly. "Let's go."

But for a moment we stood there, looking at it wonderingly. I thought of Tina Barfield telling us to just give it a DDT shower when we were done

with it, when we'd gotten what we needed from it, and for a moment I was actually glad she was dead. Coldhearted bitch *deserved* to be dead, I thought. To talk about killing something that was so powerful and yet so obviously tame and friendly...profit-motive aside, that was just sick.

"All right," Sandra said at last. "Come on, you guys."

"I don't believe it," Bill said. "I see it but I don't believe it."

Except we knew he did. We'd seen it and felt it in his mind.

"What about the door?" Herb asked. "Open or closed?"

"Don't you *dare* close it," Sandra said indignantly. "You'll cut off some of its little branches if you do."

Herb stepped back from the door and looked at Bill. "Are you convinced, O Doubting Thomas?"

"You know I am," Bill said. "Don't rub it in, okay?"

"Nobody is going to rub anything in," Roger said brusquely. "We've got more important things to do. Now come on."

He lead us back toward Editorial, smoothing his tie as he went and then tucking it into his belt. I paused just once, at the jog in the corridor, and looked back. I was convinced that it would be gone, that the whole thing had been some sort of wacky five-way hallucination, but it was still there, a green flood of leaves and a brownish tangle of limber vines, a good many now crawling up the wall.

"Amazing," Herb breathed beside me.

"Yes," I said.

"And all that stuff that happened in Rhode Island? All that's true?"

"It's all true," I agreed.

"Come on," Roger called. "We've got a lot to talk about."

I started moving, but then Herb caught my arm. "I almost wish old Iron-Guts wasn't dead," he said. "Can you imagine how something like this would blow his mind?"

I didn't respond to this, but I was thinking plenty, most of it having to do with Tina Barfield's note.

Back in Roger's office again, Roger behind his desk, me in the chair

beside it, Sandra in her chair, Bill and Herb once more sitting on the carpet with their legs stretched out and their backs to the wall.

“Any questions?” Roger asked, and we all shook our heads. Someone reading this diary—someone outside of these events, in other words—would no doubt find that incredible: how in God’s name could there be no questions? How could we have avoided spending at least the rest of the morning speculating about the invisible world? More likely the rest of the day?

The answer’s simple: it was because of the mind-meld. We had come to a mutual understanding few people are able to manage. And there’s also the small fact that we have a business to save—our meal-tickets, if you want to get down and dirty about it. Getting down and dirty seems easier for me since Ruth kissed me off—perhaps the proluxity will go next. I can hope, anyway. I’ll tell you something about the fabled meal-ticket, since I’m on the subject. You worry when you’re in danger of losing it, but you don’t become truly frantic until you’re in danger of losing it *and* you realize it could possibly be saved. If, that is, you move very quickly and don’t stumble. Fatalism is a crutch. I never knew that before, but I do now.

And one more thing about the “no questions” thing. People can get used to anything—quadriplegia, hair loss, cancer, even finding out your beloved only daughter just joined the Hare Krishnas and is currently spare-changing business travelers at Stapleton International in a pair of fetching orange pajamas. We adapt. An invisible, telepathy-inducing ivy is just one more thing to get used to. We’ll worry about the ramifications later, maybe. Right then we had a pair of books to work on: *World’s Sickest Jokes* and *The Devil’s General*.

The only one of us to have problems getting with the program was Herb Porter, and his distraction had nothing to do with Zenith the common ivy. At least not directly. He kept shooting reproachful, bewildered glances at Sandra, and thanks to the mind-meld, I knew why. Bill and Roger did, too. It seems that over the last half-year or so, Mr. Riddley Walker of Bug’s Anus, Alabama has been waxing more than the floors here at Zenith House.

“Herb?” Roger asked. “Are you with us or agin us?”

Herb kind of snapped around, like a man who's just been awakened from a doze. "Huh? Yeah! Of course!"

"I don't think you are, not entirely. And I *want* you with us. The good bark *Zenith* has sprung one hell of a nasty leak, in case you haven't noticed. If we're going to keep her from sinking, we need all hands at the pumps. No frigging in the rigging. Do you take my point?"

"I take it," Herb said sullenly.

Sandra, meanwhile, gave him a look which contained nothing but perplexity. I think she knows what Herb knows (and that we all know). She just can't understand why in God's name Herb would care. Men don't understand women, I know that's true...but women *deeply* don't understand men. And if they did, they probably wouldn't have much to do with us.

"All right," Roger said, "suppose you tell us what, if anything, is being done with the General Hecksler book."

To Roger's delight and amazement, a great deal has been done on the Iron-Guts bio, and in a very short time. While Roger and I were in Central Falls, Herb Porter was one busy little bee. Not only has he engaged Olive Barker as the ghost on *The Devil's General*, he's gotten her solemn promise to deliver a sixty thousand-word first draft in just three weeks.

To say that I was surprised by this quick action would be drawing it mild. In my previous experience, Herb Porter only moves fast when Riddley comes down the hall yelling, "Dey's doughnuts in de kitchenette, and dey sho are fine! Dey's doughnuts in de kitchenette, and dey sho are fine!"

"Three weeks, man, I don't know," Bill said dubiously. "Stroke aside, Olive's got this little problem." He mimed swallowing a handful of pills.

"That's the best part," Herb said. "Mademoiselle Barker is clean, at least for the time being. She's going to those meetings and everything. You know she was always the fastest on-demand writer we had when she was straight."

"Clean copy, too," I said. "At least it used to be."

"Can she stay clean for three weeks, do you think?"

"She'll stay clean," Herb said grimly. "For the next three weeks, I'm Olive Barker's personal sponsor. She gets calls three times a day. If I hear so

much as a single slurred s, and I'm over there with a stomach-pump. And an enema bag."

"Please," Sandra said, grimacing.

Herb ignored her. "But that's not all. Wait."

He darted out, crossed the hall to the glorified closet that's his office (on the wall is a poster-sized photo of General Anthony Hecksler which Herb throws darts at when he's bored), and came back with a sheaf of paper. He looked uncharacteristically shy as he put them in Roger's hands.

Instead of looking at the manuscript—because of course that was what it was—Roger looked at Herb, eyebrows raised.

For a moment I thought Herb was having an allergic reaction, perhaps as a result of some skin sensitivity to ivy leaves. Then I realized he was blushing. I saw this, but the idea still seems foreign to me, like the idea of Clint Eastwood blubbering into his mommy's lap.

"It's my account of the *Twenty Psychic Garden Flowers* business," Herb said. "I think it's pretty good, actually. Only about thirty per cent of it is actually true—I never tackled Iron-Guts and brought him to his knees when he showed up here waving a knife, for instance..."

True enough, I thought, since Hecksler never showed up here at all, to the best of our knowledge.

"...but it makes good reading. I...I was inspired." Herb lowered his face for a moment, as if the idea of inspiration struck him as somehow shameful. Then he raised his head again and looked around at us defiantly. "Besides, the goddam loony's dead, and I don't expect any trouble from his sister, especially if we bring her into the tent to help with the book and slip her a couple of hundred for her...well, call it creative assistance."

Roger was looking through the pages Herb had handed him, pretty much ignoring this flood of verbiage. "Herb," he said. "There's...my goodness gracious, there's *thirty-eight pages* here. That's close to ten thousand words. When did you do it?"

"Last night," he said, looking down at the floor again. His cheeks were brighter than ever. "I told you, I was inspired."

Sandra and Bill looked impressed, but not as impressed as I felt. To the best of my knowledge, only Thomas Wolfe was a ten-thousand-a-day man. Certainly it overshadows my pitiful clackings on this Olivetti. And as Roger leafed through the pages again, I saw less than a dozen strikeouts and interlinings. God, he *must* have been inspired.

"This is terrific, Herb," Roger said, and there was no doubting the sincerity in his voice. "If the writing's okay—based on your memos and summaries I have every reason to think it will be—it's going to be the heart of the book." Herb flushed again, this time I think with pleasure.

Sandra was looking at his manuscript. "Herb, do you think writing that so fast...do you think it had anything to do with...you know..."

"Sure it did," Bill said. "Must have. Don't you think so, Herb?"

I could see Herb struggling, wanting to take credit for the ten thousand words that were going to form the dramatic heart of *The Devil's General*, and then (I swear this is true) I could sense his thoughts turning to the plant, to the spectacular richness of it when Bill Gelb yanked open the door and it came sprawling out of its closet.

"Of course it was the plant," he said. "I mean, it had to have been. I've never written anything that good in my life."

And I could guess who the hero of the piece would turn out to be, but I kept my mouth shut. On that subject, at least. On another one, I thought it prudent to open it.

"In Tina Barfield's letter to me," I said, "she told me that when we read about Carlos's death, not to believe it. Then she said, 'Like the General.' I repeat: '*Like the General.*'"

"That is utter and complete bullshit," Herb said, but he sounded uneasy, and a lot of the color faded out of his cheeks. "The guy crawled into a goddamned gas oven and gave himself a Viking funeral. The cops found his gold teeth, each engraved with the number 7, for 7th Army. And if that's not enough, they also found the lighter Douglas MacArthur gave him. He never would have given that up. *Never.*"

"So maybe he's dead," Bill said. "According to Roger and John, this guy

Keen was dead, too, but he was still lively enough to read the used-car ads in the newspaper.”

“Mr. Keen just had his heart torn out, though,” Herb said. He spoke almost nonchalantly, as if getting your heart torn out was roughly the same as ripping a hangnail off on the trunk-latch of your car. “There wasn’t anything left of Iron-Guts but ashes, teeth, and a few lumps of bone.”

“There is, however, that *tulpa* business,” Roger reminded him. All of us sitting around and discussing this stuff with perfect calmness, as though it were the plot of Anthony LaScorbia’s newest big-bug book.

“What exactly is a *tulpa*?” Bill asked.

“I don’t know,” Roger said, “but I will tomorrow.”

“You will?”

“Yes. Because you’re going to research the subject at the New York Public Library before you go home tonight.”

Bill groaned. “Roger, that’s not fair! If there’s a military-type *tulpa* out there, it’s *Herb’s tulpa*.”

“Nevertheless, this particular bit of research is your baby,” Roger said, and gave Bill a severe look. “Sandra’s got the joke book and Herb’s got the nut book. You owe me an inspiration. In the meantime, I expect you to check into the wonderful world of *tulpas*.”

“What about *him*?” Bill asked sulkily. The him he was looking at was yours truly.

“John also has a project,” Roger told him. “Don’t you, John?”

“That I do,” I replied, reminding myself again not to go home without diving back into the dusty atmosphere of the mailroom at least one more time. According to Tina, what I’d been looking for was in a purple box, on the bottom shelf, and way back in the corner.

No, not according to Tina.

According to OUIJA.

“It’s time to go to work,” Roger said, “but I want to make three suggestions before I turn you loose. The first is that you stay away from the janitor’s closet, no matter how drawn to it you may feel. If the urge gets really strong,

do what the alkies do: call someone else who may have the same problem and talk about it until the urge goes away. Okay?”

His eyes swept us: Sandra once more sitting as prim and neat as a freshman coed at her first sorority social, Herb and Bill side by side on the floor, Mr. Stout and Mr. Narrow. Roger’s baby blues touched me last. None of us said anything out loud, but Roger heard us just the same. That’s the way it is at Zenith House right now. It’s amazing, and most of the world would no doubt find it flat unbelievable, but that’s the way it is. For better or worse. And because what he heard was what he wanted, Roger nodded and sat back, relaxing a bit.

“Second thing. You may feel the urge to tell someone outside this office about what has happened here...what *is* happening. I urge you with all my heart not to do it.”

He doesn’t have to worry about it. We won’t, none of us. It’s ordinary human nature to want to confide a great and wonderful secret to which you have become privy, but not this time. I didn’t need telepathy to know that; I saw it in their eyes. And I remembered something rather unpleasant from my childhood. There was this kid who lived up the street from me, not the world’s nicest one by any means—Tommy Flannagan. He was skinny as a rail. He had a sister, maybe a year or two younger, who was much heavier. And sometimes he would chase her until she cried, yelling *Greedy-guts, greedy-guts, greedy-greedy-greedy-guts!* I don’t know if poor little Jenny Flannagan was a greedy-guts or not, but I know that’s what we looked like right then, the five of us: a bunch of greedy-guts editors sitting around in Roger Wade’s office.

That look haunts me, because I’m sure it was on my face, too. The plant feels good. It gives off good smells. Its touch isn’t slimy, not repulsive; it feels like a caress. A life-giving caress. Sitting here now, my eyes drooping after another long day (and I still have reading to do, if I can ever finish this entry), I wish I could feel it again. I know it would revive me, cheer me up and rev me up. And yet, some drugs also make you feel good, don’t they? Even while they’re killing you, they’re making you feel good. Maybe that’s

nonsense, a little Puritanical holdover like a race memory, or maybe it's not. I just don't know. And for the time being, I guess it doesn't matter. Still...

Greedy-guts, greedy-guts, greedy-greedy-greedy-guts.

There was a moment of silence in the office and then Sandra said, "No one's going to spill the beans, Roger."

Bill: "It's not just about saving our jobs in this lousy pulp-mill, either."

Herb: "We want to stick it to that prick Enders as bad as you do, Roger. Believe it."

"Okay," Roger said. "I do. Which brings me to the last thing. John has been keeping a diary."

I almost jumped out of my seat and started to ask how he knew that—I hadn't told him—then realized I didn't have to. Thanks to Zenith down there in Riddley Walker country, we know a lot about each other now. More than is healthy for us, probably.

"It's a good idea," Roger went on. "I suggest you all start keeping diaries."

"If we're really going to crash a bunch of new books into production, I don't expect to have time to wash my own hair," Sandra grumbled. As if she'd been put in charge of editing a newly discovered James Joyce manuscript instead of *World's Sickest Jokes*.

"Nevertheless, I strongly suggest you find time for this," Roger said. "Written journals might not be worth much if things turn out the way we hope, but they could be invaluable if things don't...well, let's just say that we don't have any clear idea of what forces we're playing with here."

"He who takes a tiger by the tail dares not let go," Bill said. He spoke in a kind of baleful mutter.

"Nonsense," Sandra said. "It's only a *plant*. And it's *good*. I felt that very strongly."

"A lot of people thought Adolf Hitler was just the bee's knees," I said, which earned me a sharp stare from the senorita.

"I keep going back to the thing Barfield said about the plant needing blood to really get rolling," Roger said. "The blood of evil or the blood of

insanity. I don't really understand that, and I don't like it. The idea that we're raising a vampire vine in the janitor's closet..."

"And no longer *just* in the janitor's closet," I added, earning myself dirty looks from Sandra and Herb, plus a puzzled, rather uneasy one from Bill.

"I'd just as soon it didn't sample blood of any kind, that's all," Roger said. "Things are rolling quite enough to suit our purposes right now." He cleared his throat. "I think we're playing with high explosives here, people, and in a case like that, record-keeping can come in handy. Notes and jottings are really all I'm asking for."

"If they were ever read in court, journals about this stuff would probably end us up in Oak Cove," Herb said. "That's the nut-farm old Iron-Guts broke out of, just in case any of you forgot."

"Better Oak Cove than Attica," I said.

"That's comforting, John," Sandra said. "That's very comforting."

"Don't worry, sweetheart," Bill said, reaching out and giving her ankle a pat. "I think they send the ladies to Ossining."

"Yes," she said. "Where I can discover the joys of Sapphic love with a three-hundred-pound biker chick."

"Stop it, all of you," Roger said impatiently. "It's a precaution, that's all. There's really no downside to this. Not if we're careful."

It wasn't until then that I realized just how desperately Roger wants to turn Zenith House around, now that he has the chance. How much he wants to save his reputation now that there's a real chance to save it. I thought again of that rabbit general yelling, "Come back, you fools! Dogs aren't dangerous!"

I believe that, in the days and weeks ahead, Roger Wade will bear watching. The others, too. And myself, of course.

Maybe myself most of all.

"I think I'm ready for a little vacation in Oak Cove, anyway," Bill said. "I feel as if I'm reading you guys' minds, and that's *got* to be crazy."

No one said anything. No one really needed to.

Dear diary, we're past that point.

I spent the rest of the day recovering my more-or-less normal existence. I removed a long, dull dinner-party scene from Olive's latest Windhover opus and, mindful of the late great Tina Barfield, left in a rough-sex scene that really *is* rough (at one point a blunt object is inserted in an unlikely place with unlikely, ecstatic results). I tracked down a culinary consultant through the New York Public Library, and she has agreed, for the sum of four hundred dollars (which we can barely afford) to go through the recipes in Janet Freestone-Love's *Your New Astral Cookbook* and try to assure me that there's nothing poisonous in there. Cookbooks are invariably money-makers, even the bad ones, but few people outside this crazy business realize they can also be dangerous; fuck up a few ingredients and people can die. Ludicrous, but it happens. I went to lunch with Jinky Carstairs, who is novelizing the lesbo-vampire piece of shit we're stuck with (burgers at Burger Heaven, how chi-chi) and had a drink after work with Rodney Slavinsky, who writes the Coldeye Denton westerns under the name of Bart I. Straight. The Coldeyes don't do diddly-dick in the U.S. market, but for some reason they've found an audience in France, Germany, and Japan. We share in those rights. Greedy-guts, greedy-guts.

Before meeting with Rodney—who is one gay cowpoke, pardner—I went back down to the mailroom, stepping over a twisted, twined mat of ivy branches and stems to get there. It's possible to do that without actually treading on any, for which I am grateful. The last thing I needed at three in the afternoon was the pained scream of a psychic ivy suffering a bad case of stompie-toes.

Mostly, Zenith appears to be growing up the wall on either side of the janitor's cubby, creating a complex pattern of green and brown, through which the cream-colored wallboard shows in pleasant geometric patterns. I didn't hear it sighing this time, but I could swear I heard it breathing, warm and deep and comforting, just within the range of audibility. And again there was a smell, this time not coffee but honeysuckle. I also have fond childhood memories of that smell; it surrounded the library where I spent a great many happy hours as a boy. And as I passed, one strand of ivy reached

out and touched my cheek. Not *just* a touch, either. It was a caress. One great thing I have discovered about keeping a diary: I can be honest here if nowhere else, honest enough in this case to say that that leafy touch made me think of Ruth, who used to touch me in just that way.

I stood perfectly quiet while that delicate bit of stem slipped up to my temple, traced my eyebrow, and then fell away. Before it did, I had a very clear thought, and I'm positive it came from Zenith rather than from my own mind:

Find the purple box.

Find it I did, exactly where the Barfield woman—or her Ouija board—said I would, way back in the corner on the bottom shelf, behind a pair of huge padded mailers oozing out flakes of stuffing. It is the sort of box that medium-grade typing paper comes in. The sender—one James Saltworthy of Queens—simply taped the box shut and slapped a mailing sticker over the RAGLAND BOND brand name and logo. His address is in the upper left-hand corner, on another sticker. I think it's sort of amazing that the post office accepted such a package and managed to get it here, but they did, and now it's all mine. Sitting on the floor of the mailroom, smelling dust and honeysuckle, I broke the tape and lifted the box-lid. Inside is about four hundred pages of copy, I should judge, under a title page which reads

THE LAST SURVIVOR

By James Saltworthy

And, down in the far corner:

Selling North American Rights

Literary Agent: Self

Approx 195,000 Words

There was also a letter, addressed this way: TO THE EDITOR—OR WHO-EVER SENDS THESE THINGS BACK WHERE THEY CAME FROM. As with the

Tina Barfield letter, I have attached it. I'm not going to critique or analyze it here, and there's probably no reason to do so at all. Writers who have been trying to get their books published over a long period of time—five years, sometimes ten years, and once in my experience a full fifteen years which encompassed ten unpublished novels, three of them very long—share a similar tone, which I would describe as a thin coat of self-pitying cynicism stretched over a well of growing despair and, in many cases, hysteria. In my imagination, which is probably too vivid, these people always seem like miners who have somehow survived a terrible cave-in, people trapped in the dark and screaming *Is there anyone out there? Please, is anyone out there? Can anyone hear me?*

What I thought as I folded the letter back into the envelope was that if ever there was a name that sounds as if it should belong to a writer, that name is James Saltworthy. My next thought was to just put the top back on the box and leave whatever was under the title page, good or bad, until I got home. But there's a little Pandora in most of us, I think, and I couldn't resist a look. And before I knew about it, I'd read the first eight or nine pages. It reads that easily, that naturally. It can't be as good as it seems to be, I know that, or it wouldn't be here. And yet a part of me whispers that that might not be true. He is serving as his own agent, and writers who do that are like self-defending lawyers: they have fools for clients.

The pages I read were good enough so I have burned to read the rest ever since leaving the office; my mind keeps going back to Tracy Nordstrom, the charming psycho who is apparently going to be Saltworthy's main character. There's a war going on in my head, the armies of Hope on one side, those of Cynicism on the other. This conflict, I feel, is going to be decided in the two hours between now and midnight, when I really must turn in. But before leaving the typewriter chair in the kitchen for my reading chair in the living room area of my apartment, I must add one more thing.

When I stood up with Saltworthy's purple box under my arm, I noticed that Zenith the common ivy has burst through the wall between the janitor's closet and the mailroom in at least three dozen places. There are ten steel

shelves mounted on that wall, plain gray utilitarian things which are now perfectly empty—in my post-Ruth orgy of work, I cleaned them out completely, without finding a single thing even remotely worth publishing. In most cases it's not even incompetency—boring narration and dull prose—but outright illiteracy. Not one but several of the manuscripts which filled those gray shelves were scrawled in pencil.

But all that's to the side. My point here is just that I could see that wall, because the stacks and jumbles of boxes, bags, and mailers are gone. The cream-colored sheetrock has now been pierced by a galaxy of green stars. In many cases the tips of the ivy's branches have only begun to penetrate, but in others, long and fragile snakelets have already slithered through. They are growing along the empty steel shelves, meeting, twining, climbing, descending. Staking out new territory, in other words. Most of the leaves are still tightly furled, like sleeping infants, but a few have already begun to open. I have a strong suspicion that within a week or two, a month at the outside, the mailroom is going to be as full of Zenith as Riddley's cubbyhole is now.

Which leads to an amusing but perfectly valid question: where are we going to put Riddley when he comes back? And what, exactly, will he be doing?

Enough. Time to see exactly what's in James Saltworthy's box.

April 2, 1981

Dear God. Oh my dear God. I feel like someone who has dipped his fishing line into a little country brook and has managed to hook Moby Dick. I had actually dialed the first five digits of Roger Wade's number before realizing that it's two o'clock in the fucking morning. It'll have to wait, but I don't know how I *can* wait. I feel like I'm going to explode. Names and book-titles keep dancing through my head. *The Naked and the Dead*, by Norman Mailer. *Raintree County*, by Ross Lockridge. *Peyton Place*, by Grace Metalious. *The Godfather*, by Mario Puzo. *The Exorcist*, by William Peter Blatty. *Jaws*, by Peter Benchley. Different kinds of books, different kinds of

writers, some good, some only competent, but all of them creating a kind of bottled lightning, stories that millions of people simply *had* to read. Saltworthy's *Last Survivor* fits very neatly into this group. No goddam doubt about it. I don't think I've found a Masterpiece, but I know I've found The Next Big Thing.

If we let this get away, I'll shoot myself.

No.

I'll walk into Riddley's closet and tell Zenith to strangle me.

My God, what an incredible book. What an incredible story.

February 19, 1981

Editorial Staff and/or Mailroom Crew
Zenith House
490 Park Avenue South
New York, NY 10017

TO THE EDITOR—OR WHOEVER SENDS THESE THINGS BACK WHERE
THEY COME FROM,

My name is James Saltworthy, and the attached albatross is a book I wrote. *Last Survivor* is a novel that was set five years in the future when I wrote it in 1977, and now by God that future's almost here! Looks like the joke's on me. This novel, which has been well-reviewed by both my wife and my department head (I teach 5th grade English at Our Lady of Hope in Queens), has been to a total of twenty-three publishers. I probably shouldn't be

telling you this, but since Zenith House is this manuscript's final stop on what has been a long and exceedingly dull train-ride to nowhere, I have decided to "let it all hang out," as we used to say back in the Sexy Sixties, when we all thought we had at least one major novel in us.

I would guess that at several of the publishing houses where *Last Survivor* visited—sort of like an unwelcome in-law that you get rid of as soon as possible—it was actually read (*partially* read might be a better way to put it). From Doubleday came the response "We are looking for more upbeat fiction." Cheers! From Lippincott: "The writing is good, the characters distasteful, the storyline frankly unbelievable." Mazel tov! From Putnam's came that old favorite: "We no longer look at unagented material." Hooray! Agents, schmagents. My first one died on me—he was eighty-one and senile. The second was a crook. The third told me he loved my novel, then offered to sell me some Amway.

I am enclosing \$5.00 for return postage. If you feel like using it to send my story back to me after you finish not reading it, that would be fine. If you want to use it to buy a couple of beers, all I can say is cheers! Mazel tov! Hooray! Meantime, I see that Rosemary Rogers, John Saul, and John Jakes are still selling well, so I guess American literature is doing fine and forging bravely forward toward the 21st century. Who needs Saltworthy?

I wonder if there's money in writing instruction manuals. There certainly isn't much in teaching fifth graders, some of whom carry switchblade knives and sell drugs around the corner. I suppose they wouldn't believe that at Doubleday, would they?

Cordially,

Jim Saltworthy
73 Aberdeen Road
Queens, New York 11432

From Roger Wade's Office Answering Machine, April 2, 1981

3:42 A.M.: Hello, you have reached Roger Wade at Zenith House. I can't take your call right now. If this is about billing or accounting, you need to call Andrew Lang at Apex Corporation of America. The number is 212-555-9191. Ask for the Publishing Division. If you want to leave a message for me, wait for the beep. Thanks.

Roger, this is John, your old Central Falls safari buddy. I'm calling at quarter of four in the morning, April 2nd. I won't be in today. I've just finished the most incredible fucking book of my life. Holy God, boss, I feel like someone put my brain on a damn rocket sled. We need to be extremely clever about this—the book needs hardcover pub, a real all-the-bells-and-whistles *launch*, and as you know, Apex has no hardcover house. Like most companies that get into the book biz, they don't have a clue. But we better. We just better have a damn clue. Who do you know at the better hardcover houses? And who do you trust? If we lose the paperback rights to this in the course of getting Saltworthy a hardcover publisher, I'll kill myself. I

3:45 A.M.: Hello, you have reached Roger Wade at Zenith House. I can't take your call right now. If this is about billing or accounting, you need to call Andrew Lang at Apex Corporation of America. The number is 212-555-9191. Ask for the Publishing Division. If you want to leave a message for me, wait for the beep. Thanks.

Motormouth John, even on the goddam answering machine, right, Roger? I can't even remember what I was talking about. I'm just giddy. I'm going to bed. I don't know if I can get to sleep or not. If I can't, maybe I'll come in to work, anyway. Probably in my fucking pajamas! *[Laughter]* If

not, I'll do a Manuscript Report first thing on Friday, okay? Please don't let us fuck this up, Roger. Please. Okay, I'm going to bed.

3:48 A.M.: Hello, you have reached Roger Wade at Zenith House. I can't take your call right now. If this is about billing or accounting, you need to call Andrew Lang at Apex Corporation of America. The number is 212-555-9191. Ask for the Publishing Division. If you want to leave a message for me, wait for the beep. Thanks.

Jesus, Roger. Wait til you read this fucker. Just you wait.

3:50 A.M. Hello, you have reached Roger Wade at Zenith House. I can't take your call right now. If this is about billing or accounting, you need to call Andrew Lang at Apex Corporation of America. The number is 212-555-9191. Ask for the Publishing Division. If you want to leave a message for me, wait for the beep. Thanks.

If anyone does anything to that plant, they're going to die. You got that? They will fucking...*die*.

ZENITH HOUSE MANUSCRIPT REPORT

EDITOR: John Kenton

DATE: April 3, 1981

MANUSCRIPT TITLE: *Last Survivor*

AUTHOR'S NAME: James Saltworthy

FICTION/NONFICTION: F

ILLUSTRATIONS: N

AGENT: None

RIGHTS OFFERED: Author offers North American but doesn't know what he's talking about, so TBD

SUMMARY: This novel is set in the year 1982, but was originally written in 1977. To keep to the writer's intention, the time would have to be changed to at least 1986, 1987, or five years from time of pub.

The basic premise is unique and exciting. A network fading in the ratings (auth calls it UBA, United Broadcasting of America, but it feels like CBS) comes up with a unique game show idea. Twenty-six people are stranded on a desert island, where they must survive for six months. Three trained camera operators are among the contestants. In fact each contestant has a "job" on the island, and the camera operators have to train several contestants in use of the equipment. Other contestants are "farmers," "fishers," "hunters," and so on. The idea is that each week for twenty-six weeks, the contestants *as a group* must vote one person off the island and into exile. First exile gets one dollar for his trouble. The second gets ten. The third gets one hundred. The fourth gets five hundred. And the last survivor gets a cool million. I know this idea sounds wonky, but Saltworthy actually makes us believe that such a program might find its way onto the air someday, if a network was desperate enough for ratings (and tasteless enough, but on network TV that has never been a problem).

What makes the story brilliant is Saltworthy's delineation of character. TV viewers see the contestants in very simple ways—the Good Young Mother, the Cheerful Athlete, the Rugged Old Fellow, the Tough But

Religious Widow. Underneath, however, they are extremely complex. And one of them, a personable young truck driver named Tracy Nordstrom, is actually a dangerous psychopath who will do anything to win the million dollars. In one breathlessly orchestrated scene early in the book, he induces food-poisoning in the Rugged Old Fellow, substituting hallucinogenic mushrooms for the harmless ones gathered by one of the farmers, a sweet ex-hippie who is heartbroken by her perceived mistake and actually attempts suicide (which the network covers up, as *Last Survivor* has become a monster hit). Ironically, Nordstrom is the most liked contestant, both by the others on the island and by the huge TV audience. (Saltworthy actually made this reader believe such a show could become a national obsession.)

Only one person, Sally Stamos (the Good Young Mother), suspects how evil Tracy Nordstrom really is. Eventually Nordstrom realizes she's onto him, and sets out to silence her. Will Sally be able to convince the others what's happening? Will she ever get back to her kids?

Saltworthy builds suspense like an old pro, and I simply couldn't put the book down...or turn the pages fast enough. The novel climaxes with a huge storm that accomplishes what until then has just been a cynical TV illusion: the contestants are cut off from everything, real castaways instead of pretend ones. What we've got here is a high concept hybrid between *And Then There Were None* and *Lord of the Flies*. I don't want to put the conclusion in this summary; it needs to be read and savored in the author's own vivid prose. Let me just say that it is so shocking that all the editors who have read it so far have dropped the book like a hot potato. But it works, and I think an American reading public that could accept the supernatural horrors of *Rosemary's Baby* and the criminous ones of *The Godfather* will embrace it, recommend it to their friends, and talk about it for years.

EDITORIAL RECOMMENDATION: We've got to publish this. It's the best and most commercial unpublished novel it has ever been my pleasure to read. If ever there was a book that could put a publisher on the map, this is the one.

John Kenton

from THE SAKRED BOOK OF CARLOS

SAKRED MONTH OF APRA (Entry #77)

Time has almost come. Stars and planets almost right, praise Demeter. GOOD, as my own time is short. The traitor bitch Barfield disposed of, spell worked and plane went down. No problem there, praise Abbalah, but in the end she double=crossed me just the same. Thieving bitch took my Talisman (it was an Owl's Beak actually). I have looked everywhere but my Beak is gone. I bet she had it in her pocket when the plane went down. Burned! Nothing but ASHES!! With my Protection gone, my Time is short. Never mind, am tired of being Carlos anyway. Time for next stage but first will rid myself of Poop=Shit Kenton. I'll teach you what rejection REALLY MEANS, you Judas! Let plant take care of rest of them when the Innocent Blood comes.

I have been all around the neighborhood where Kenton works. All office buildings except for small market across the street. Crazy old Bum outside. Woman with a Guitar. Plays almost as bad as Poop=Shit

Kenton edits books. Ha! Thought of using her, Innocent Blood, but also Crazy, so no good. "You can't work wood if the wood won't work" as Mr. Keen used to tell me. Wise Man in his way.

A few other "regulars" on the street it looks like. One fellow selling watches and etc. at a folding table. No problem but weekend would be best. I'll find a way to get inside, best would be to follow someone who's "pulling a little overtime." I'll sneak upstairs to their offices and just "lie low" as they say until Monday morning. Plan to cut Poop=Shit Kenton's throat myself with Sakred Sacrifice Knife. Take his heart if poss. When his blood flows down my hands I can die happy, praise Abbalah, praise Demeter. Only no death! Only move on to next level of existence.

COME DEMETER!

COME GREEN!

SAKRED MONTH OF APRA (Entry #78)

Must beware of one thing. I am still having dreams of "The General." Who is "The General." Why does he think about suppositories. Why does he think of Designated Juice. What is Designated Juice. Perhaps a holy drink like gooseberry bane or nutmeg milk. I don't know. Sense danger. Meantime have found a cheap hotel about 3 blocks from Z.H. Cannot hang around any longer. 1. Might attract wrong attention. 2. Can no longer stand Guitar=playing Woman Bum. Someone ought to wrap her guitar around her neck. Boy she plays like Shit. Maybe it's John Kenton in disguise! Haaaa haaaaa haaaa.

Weekend almost here. Trials & tribs almost over. Kenton you will pay for rejecting my book and then sikking the Police on me you Crap=Head.

Who is "The General." Who can he be.

Never mind. Weekend almost here.

COME GREEN!

From Sandra Jackson's Journal

April 3 1981

I haven't kept a journal since I was an eleven-year-old girl with mosquito-bumps for breasts and a love-life that consisted of moaning over Paul Newman and Robert Redford with my friends Elaine and Phyllis, but here goes. I'm going to skip writing about the plant, as I'm sure John and Roger will have covered that pretty completely (having read a few of John's memos, probably TOO completely). A lot of what I DO have to say, at least in this entry, is of a personal nature, not to say of a sexual nature. I am no longer that little girl, you see! I thought long and hard about whether I should write this down, and finally I decided "why not!" It will probably never be seen by anyone but me anyway, and even if it is, so what? Am I supposed to be ashamed of my sexuality in general, or my attraction to the killingly handsome Riddley Walker in particular? I think neither. I am a modern woman, hear me roar, and see no reason to be ashamed of a. my intellect b. my workplace ambitions (which go a lot higher than the shithole known as Zenith House, believe-you-me) or c. my sexuality. I'm not afraid of my sexuality, you see—not to talk about it, and certainly not to let it out for the more-than-occasional walk in the park. I said as much to Herb Porter when he confronted me yesterday. Just thinking about it makes me mad (it also makes me laugh, I'm relieved to say). As if he had the RIGHT to confront me. Me Tarzan, you Jane, this chastity belt.

Herb came into my office around quarter of ten without so much as a by-your-leave, closed the door, and just stood there glowering at me.

"Come on in, Herb," said I, "and why don't you close the door so we can talk in private."

Not so much as a hint of a smile. He just went on glowering. I think I was supposed to be terrified. Certainly Herb Porter is big enough to terrify; he must stand six-one and weigh two hundred and fifty, and given his high color (he was as red as the side of a fire truck yesterday morning, and I'm not exaggerating one little bit), I worry about his blood pressure and his heart. He also talks big, but I was around when the hate-mail started coming in from General Hecksler, and those letters made Herb small in a hurry. The way he looked on Wednesday, actually, when John suggested that, all evidence to the contrary, General Hecksler STILL might not be dead.

"You've been screwing Riddley," Herb said. This was probably supposed to come out sounding like the accusation of an Old Testament prophet, but it emerged in an unimpressive dry squawk. He was still standing just inside the door, his hands opening and closing. With his green leisure suit and red face, he looked like an advertisement for Christmas in hell. "You've been screwing the goddamned JANITOR!"

Last week that might have put me off my stride, but things around here have changed since last week. I think the New Order will take some getting used to. What I'm talking about is TELEPATHY, my dear little journal. Of course. ESP. Absolutely. MIND READING. No doubt about it. In other words, I knew what was on Herb's mind from the moment he stepped through my door, and that pretty well did away with the shock value.

"Why don't you say the rest of it?" I asked.

"I have no idea what you're talking about." Going into that patented Herb Porter bluster of his.

"Yeah, you do," I said. "That I'm fucking the janitor bothers you a lot less than the fact I'm fucking the BLACK janitor. The HANDSOME black janitor."

From the first *fuck*. I had him on the run. I should be ashamed to tell you how much I enjoyed it, but I'm not.

"The fact is, Herbert," said I, "he's hung like a stallion. Such equipment is not the sole property of black men, racist canards to the contrary, but few men, white *or* black, know how to use what God and genetics have given them. Riddley does. And he's livened up many a dull day in this dump, believe me."

"You can't . . . I won't . . . he isn't . . ." Then he just spluttered. But, thanks, to the aforementioned New Order at good old Zenith House, there are no more ellipses around here. For better or worse, every thought is finished. What I could not hear with my ears I could hear in my mind.

You can't . . . DO THIS!

I won't . . . ALLOW IT!

He isn't . . . OUR KIND OF PERSON!

As if Herb Porter, the Ranting Republican, was MY type of person. (He is, of course, in some important ways: a. he's an editor b. he loves books c. he is sharing the bizarre experience of Life With Ivy.)

"Herb," I said.

"What if you catch a disease?" expostulated Herb. "What if he talks about

you to his friends, when they're sitting on their stoops and drinking their GIQs?"

"Herb," I said.

"What if he's got a drug habit? Friends who are criminals? What if . . ."

And there was something sweet at the end of that ellipsis, something that made my heart melt a little. For a racist blowhard Republican, Herb Porter really isn't a bad guy.

What if . . . HE'S MEAN TO YOU?

That was how the last ellipsis ended, and after that Herb just stood there with his shoulders slumped, looking at me.

"Come here," I said, and patted the chair behind my desk. I had about a billion rotten jokes about dead babies, nympho nuns, and stupid Europeans to go through ("Polish Public Service Announcement: It's ten o'clock! Do *you* know what time it is?"), but I felt very close to Herb just then. I know how strange that would sound to John, who probably thinks Herb Porter is from another world (Planet Reagan), but Herb isn't. Herb Porter is just one more fucked-up Earthling.

Know what I really think? I think telepathy changes everything.

Simply EVERYTHING.

"Listen to me," said I. "The first thing is that Riddley is more likely to catch something from me than me from him. He's the healthiest person in this office, that's my guess. Certainly he's in the best shape. The second thing is that he's more like us than you think. He's working on a book. I know because I saw one of his notebooks one day. It was on his desk, and I peeked."

"Impossible!" Herb snapped. "The idea of the JANITOR writing a BOOK . . . especially the janitor in THIS PLACE . . .!"

"The third thing is that I doubt very much if he sits on his stoop, drinking GIQs with his friends. Riddley has a wonderful little apartment in Dobbs Ferry, I had the privilege of being there once, and I don't think they're much for drinking on stoops in that neighborhood."

"I believe Riddley's Dobbs Ferry address is a convenient fiction," said Herb in his most pompous oh-dear-I-seem-to-have-a-stick-up-my-ass voice. "If he took you to a place up there, I doubt like hell it was HIS place. As for the supposed book, how would a novel by Riddley Walker start? 'Come on ovah heah, I'se gwineter tell y'all a story?'"

An extremely hateful thing to say, but with almost no sting in it. Thanks to Zenith, whose soothing atmosphere now absolutely pervades our offices, I knew that what Herb really felt just then was stunned surprise . . . and, inadequacy. I think that his subconscious mind has been aware for a long time that there's more to Riddley than meets the eye. I also have reason to believe that Herb and inadequacy go together like a horse and carriage, as the song says. At least until yesterday. That's the part I'm getting to.

"The last thing is this," said I (as gently as I could). "If Riddley is mean to me, I will have to deal with it. And I can. I have before. I'm not a child, Herb. I'm a grown woman." And then I added: "I also know that you've been coming in here when I'm elsewhere and sniffing the seat of my chair. I really think that ought to stop, don't you?"

All the color fell out of his face, and for one moment I thought he was going to faint. I have an idea the telepathy may have saved him. Just as I knew what he'd come in to accuse me of, *he* knew—if only a few seconds in advance—that I'm now aware of his little hobby. So what I said didn't come to him out of a *completely* clear blue sky.

He started to puff up again, a little of the color came back into his face . . . and then he just wilted. It made me feel bad for him. When guys like Herb Porter wilt, they are not a pretty sight. Think jellyfish washed up on the beach.

"I'm sorry," he said, and turned to go. "I'm very sorry. I've known for some time that I have . . . certain problems. I suppose it's time for me to seek professional help. I'll stay out of your way as much as possible in the meantime, and I'd thank you to stay out of mine."

"Herb," said I.

He had one hand on the doorknob. He didn't leave, but he didn't turn around, either. I sensed both hope and dread. God knows what he sensed coming from me.

"Herb," said I once more.

Nothing. Poor Herb just standing there with his shoulders hunched almost up to his ears and me knowing he was trying his hardest not to cry. People who make their living reading and writing are a lot of things, but immune to shame is not one of them.

"Turn around," said I.

Herb stood as he was a moment longer, gathering himself for the ordeal, and then he did as I asked. Instead of being flushed or pale all over his face, he had popped three spots as bright as rouge, one in each cheek and another running across his forehead in a thick line.

"We've got a lot of work to do around here," said I, "and it won't help to have this between us." I was speaking in my calmest, most reasonable voice, but I would be lying if I didn't say I also felt a pleasantly nasty tickle of excitement in my stomach. I have a pretty good idea of what Riddley thinks of me, and while he's not entirely right, he's not entirely wrong, either; I admit to certain rather low tastes. Well, so what? Some people eat tripe for breakfast. And all I can do here is stick to the facts. One of them is this: something about Sandra Georgette Jackson turned Herb on enough to inspire a number of covert seat-sniffing expeditions. And that has turned *me* on. Until yesterday I never thought of myself as the Eula Varner type, but . . .

"What are you talking about?" asked Herb gruffly, but those spots of red were spreading, flushing away his pallor. He knew perfectly well what I was talking about. We might as well have been wearing signs around our necks reading CAUTION! TELEPATHY AT WORK!

"I think we need to get beyond this," said I. "That's what I'm talking about. If having it off with me will do that, then I'm willing."

"Sort of like taking one for the team, eh?" said he. He was trying to sound nasty and sarcastic, but I wasn't fooled. And he *knew* I wasn't fooled.

All sort of delightful, in a weird way.

"Call it whatcha wanna," said I, "but if you're reading my mind as clearly as I'm reading yours, you know that's not all. I'm . . . let's say I'm interested. Feeling adventurous."

Still trying to be nasty, Herb said, "Let's say you have certain appetites, shall we? Playing truck-driver and hitchhiker with Riddley, for one. Boofing loudmouth co-worker Herb Porter, for another."

"Herb," said I, "do you want to stand there talking for the rest of the day, or do you want to do something?"

"It just so happens I have a certain problem," said Herb. He was nibbling away at his lower lip, and I saw he was breaking out in a sweat. I was enchanted. Is that terribly mean, do you think? "This is a problem that affects men of all ages and all walks of life. It—"

"Is it bigger than a breadbox, Herb?" said she in her best coy tone.

"Joke about it all you want," said Herb morosely. "Women can, because they just have to lie there and take it. Hemingway was right about that much"

"Yeah, when it comes to Limpdick Disease, a fair number of literary scholars seem to believe that Papa wrote the book," said she, now in her best nasty tone. Herb, however, paid no attention. I don't suppose he'd ever talked about impotency in his entire life (Real Men don't), and here it was, out of the closet and all dressed up for a night on the town.

"This little problem, which so many women seem to think is funny, has all but ruined my life," said Herb. "It wrecked my marriage, for one thing."

I thought, *I didn't know you were married*, and his thought came back right away, filling my head for just a moment: *It was a long time before I ended up in this shithole.*

We stared at each other, big-eyed.

"Wow," said he.

"Yeah," said she. "Go on, Herb. And while I can't speak for all women, this one has never laughed at impotency in her life."

Herb went on, a little more subdued. "Lisa left me when I was twenty-four, because I couldn't satisfy her as a woman. I never hated her for it; she gave it her best for two years. Couldn't have been easy. Since then, I think I've managed it . . . you know, *it* . . . maybe three times."

I thought about this and my mind boggled. Herb claims to be forty-three, but thanks to our ivy-induced ESP, I know he's forty-eight. His wife left him in search of greener pastures (and stiffer penises) half a lifetime ago. If he's only had successful sexual relations three times since then, that means he's gotten laid once every time Neptune circles the sun. Dear, dear, dear.

"There's a good medical reason for this," said he, with great earnestness. "From the age of ten to the age of fifteen—my sexually formative years—I was a paperboy, and—"

"Being a paperboy made you impotent?" I asked.

"Would you be quiet a minute?"

I mimed running a zipper shut across my lips and settled back in my chair. I like a good story as well as anyone; I just haven't seen many at Zenith House.

"I had a three-speed Raleigh bike," Herb said. "At first it was all right, and

then one day while it was parked behind the school, some asshole came along and knocked off the seat." Herb paused dramatically. "That asshole ruined my life."

Do tell, I thought.

"Although," continued Herb, "my cheapskate father must also bear part of the blame."

Plenty of blame to go around, thought I. *Everyone gets a helping but you.*

"I heard that," he said sharply.

"I'm sure you did," said I. "Just go on with your story."

"The bike was obviously ruined, but would that cheapskate get me a new one?"

"No," I said. "Instead of a new bike, the cheapskate got you a new seat."

"That's right," said Herb, by this point too deep into his own narrative to realize I was stealing all of his best lines right out of his head. The truth is, Herb has been telling himself this story for a lot of years. For him, *My Dad Wrecked My Sex Life* is right up there with *The Democrats Ruined the Economy* and *Let's Fry the Addicts and End America's Drug Problem*. "Only the bike-store didn't have a Raleigh seat, and could my father wait for one? Oh no. I had papers to deliver. Also, the no-brand seat the guy showed him was ten bucks cheaper than the replacement Raleigh seat in the catalogue. Of course it was also a lot *smaller*. In fact, it was a *pygmy* bicycle seat. This little vinyl-covered triangle that shoved right up . . . well . . ."

"Up *there*," I said, wanting to be helpful (also wanting to get back to work at some point before July Fourth).

"That's right," he said. "Up *there*. For almost five years I rode all over Danbury, Connecticut with that goddamn pygmy bicycle seat pushing up into the most delicate region of a young boy's body. And look at me now." Herb raised his arms and then dropped them, as if to indicate what a pitiful, wasted creature he has become. Which is quite funny, when you consider the size of him. "These days my idea of a meaningful physical experience with a woman is going down to The Landing Strip, where I might stuff a five dollar bill into some girl's g-string."

"Herb," I said. "Do you get a hardon when you do that?"

He drew himself up, and I saw an interesting thing: Herb had a pretty damned good one right *then*. Hubba, hubba!

"That's a damned personal question, Sandra," said he in a grave and heavy tone of voice. "Pretty gosh-damn personal."

"Do you get a hardon when you masturbate?"

"Let me tell you a little secret," he said. "There are basketball players who can shoot it from downtown all over the court, nothing but net until practice is over and the buzzer goes off. Then every toss is a brick."

"Herb," said I, "let me tell *you* a little secret. The bicycle seat story has been around since bicycles were invented. Before that it was the mumps, or maybe a cross-eyed look from the village witch. And I don't need telepathy to know the answer to the questions I've been asking. I've got eyes." And I dropped them to the area just below his belt. By then it looked like he had a pretty good-sized socket wrench hidden down there.

"Doesn't last," said he, and right then he looked so sad that I felt sad. Men are fragile creatures, when you get right down to it, the real animals in the glass menagerie. "Once the action starts, Mr. Johnson likes life a lot better in the rear echelon. Where nobody stands at attention and nobody salutes."

"You're caught in a Catch-22," said I. "All men suffering from chronic impotency are. You can't get it up because you're afraid you won't be able to, and you're afraid you won't be able to because—"

"Thank you, Betty Freidan," said Herb. "It just so happens that there are a great many physical causes of impotency. Some day there'll probably be a pill that will take care of the problem."

"Some day there'll probably be Holiday Inns on the moon," I said. "In the meantime, how would you like to do something a bit more interesting than sniffing the seat of my office chair?"

He looked at me unhappily. "Sandra," said he, with no trace of his usual bluster, "I can't. I just can't. I've done this enough—*tried* to do this enough, I should say—to know what happens."

Inspiration struck then . . . although I don't entirely believe I can take credit for it. Things have changed here. I never thought I'd be glad to get to the office, but I think that for the rest of this year I'll just about race into my clothes so I can get here early. Because things have changed. Lights have come on in my head (other places, as well) that I never even *suspected* until now.

"Herb," said I. "I want you to go down to Riddley's cubby. I want you to stand there and look at the plant. Most of all, I want you to take four or five

really deep breaths—pull them all the way down to the bottom of your lungs. Really smell those good smells. And then come right back here.”

He looked uneasily out through the window in my door. John and Bill were out there, talking in the hall. Bill saw Herb and gave him a little wave.

“Sandra, if we were to have sex, I hardly think your office would be a viable—”

“You let me worry about that,” I said. “Just go on up there and take a few deep breaths. Then come on back. Will you do that?”

He thought about it, then nodded reluctantly. He started to open the door, then looked back at me. “I appreciate you bothering with me,” said he, “especially when I was giving you such a hard time. I just wanted to tell you that.”

I thought of telling him that altruism does not form a large part of Sandra Jackson’s makeup—my motor was revving pretty hard by then—and decided he probably knew that.

“Just go on,” I said. “We don’t have all day.”

When he was gone, I took out my pad and scribbled a note on it: “The ladies’ room on six is usually deserted at this time of day. I expect to be there for the next twenty minutes or so with my skirt up and my knickers down. A man of stout heart (or stout *something*) might join me.” I paused, then added: “A man of moderate intelligence as well as stout heart might toss this note in the wastebasket before leaving for the sixth floor.”

I went up to six, where the ladies’ is almost *always* deserted (it has crossed my mind that perhaps there are currently no female employees on that floor of 490 Park Avenue South), went into the stall at the end, and removed certain garments. Then I waited, not sure what might happen next. And I mean that. Whatever telepathy there may be in the fifth-floor offices of Zenith House, its effective range is even shorter than that of a college FM radio station.

Five minutes went by, then seven. I’d made up my mind that he wasn’t coming, and then the door squeaked open and a very cautious, very un-Porterly voice whispered, “Sandra?”

“Trot down here to the end,” said I, “and make it quick.”

He came down and opened the stall door. To say he looked excited would be an understatement. And he no longer looked as if he had a socket-wrench stuffed down the front of his pants. By then it looked more like a good-sized Craftsman hammer.

"Gee," said I, reaching out to touch him, "I guess maybe the effect of that bicycle seat finally wore off."

He started fumbling at his belt. It kept sliding through his fingers. It was sort of funny, but also very sweet. I pushed his hands away and did it myself.

"Quick," he panted. "Oh, quick. Before it goes away."

"This guy isn't going anywhere," said I, although I did actually have a certain short-term storage site in mind. "Relax."

"It was the plant," he said. "The smell . . . oh my God, the smell . . . musky and *dark*, somehow . . . the way I'd always imagined the fields would smell in that county Faulkner wrote about, the one with the name no one can pronounce . . . oh Sandra, good Christ, I feel like I could *pole-vault* on this thing!"

"Shut up and change places with me," I said. "You sit down and then I'll—"

"To the devil with that," he said, and lifted me up. He's strong—a lot stronger than I ever would have guessed—and almost before I knew what was happening, we were off to the races.

As races of this sort go, it was neither the longest nor the fastest in which I have ever run, but it wasn't bad, especially considering that Herb Porter was last laid around the time Nixon resigned, if he was telling me the truth. When he finally set me down, there were tears on his cheeks. Plus there's this: before leaving he a. thanked me and b. kissed me. I don't subscribe to many of the romantic ideals, I'm more of a Dorothy Parker type ("good girls go to heaven, bad girls go everywhere"), but sweet is nice. The man who left ahead of me (pausing at the door and checking both ways before going out) seemed a lot different from the man who came stalking into my office with a load in his balls and a chip on his shoulder. That's the kind of judgement only time can confirm, and I know very well that men after sex usually turn into exactly the same men they were before sex, but I have hopes for Herb. And I never wanted to change his life; all I wanted was to clear away as much of the crap between us as I could, so we can work as a team. I never knew how much I wanted this job until this week. How much I wanted to make a *success* of this job. If blowing all four of those guys in Times Square at high noon would help that happen, I'd run out to Game Day on 53rd and buy myself a pair of kneepads.

Spent the rest of the day working on the joke book. How foul in concept, how scabrous in execution...and what a success it is going to be in an

America that still longs for the death penalty and secretly believes (not everyone, but a goodly number of citizens, I'd bet) that Hitler had the right idea about eugenics. There is no shortage of these nasty, mean-spirited boogers, but the weird thing is how many I'm making up on my own.

What's red and white and has trouble turning corners? A baby with a javelin through its head.

What's small, brown, and spits? A baby in a frypan.

Little girl wakes up in the hospital and says, "Doctor! I can't feel my legs!" Doctor replies, "That's normal in cases where we have to amputate the arms."

I am grossed out by my own inventiveness. Question is, *is* it mine? Or am I getting these ideas from the same place Herb Porter got his new lease on sexual life?

Never mind. Weekend's almost here. Supposed to be warm, and if so I'm going to Cony Island with my favorite niece, our yearly rite of spring. A couple of days away from this place may help to put all questions in perspective. And Riddley's due back next week. I'll be hoping to comfort him in his time of sorrow as much as possible.

Keeping a journal reminds me of what old Doc Henries used to say after he gave me a tetanus shot when I was ten: "There, Sandra, that wasn't so bad, was it?"

Not at all. Not at all.

from the office of the editor-in-chief

TO: John

DATE 4/3/81

MESSAGE: I've made two calls since reading your Ms. Report. The first was to that astute business lad and all around prince of a guy, Harlow Enders. I lofted a trial balloon concerning a Zenith House hardcover, and despite dredging up a phrase which I thought would appeal to his presumed imagination (if you're wondering, it was "Event Publishing"), he shot it down at once. His stated reason is there is no h'cover infrastructure either at Zenith or in the larger world of Apex Corporation, but we both know better. The real issue is lack of confidence. All right, okay, fine.

Second call was to Alan Williams, a senior editor at Viking Press. Williams is one of the best in the business, and save your nasty ("Then how do *you* know him?") question. The answer is, from The New York Health Club racquetball tournament, where the gods of chance paired us three years ago. We have played off and on ever since. Alan says that if the Saltworthy is as good as you say it is, that we can probably swing a soft-to-hard deal, with Viking doing the h'cover and Zenith the pb. I know it isn't precisely what we wanted, John, but think of it this way: did you ever in your life believe there might come a day when *we* would be doing the pb edition of a Viking Press book? Little Zenith? And as for the cynical Mr. Saltworthy, I think you could say his luck has changed with a vengeance. We might have been able to swing \$20,000, and that much only if we'd been able to get Enders enthusiastically on board. With Viking as a partner, we may be able to score this guy a \$100,000 advance. That's my salary for almost four years.

Williams wants to see the ms. ASAP. You should take a copy over to their offices on Madison Avenue yourself. Put on a title page

that says something like LAST SEASON, by John Oceanby. Sorry about the cloak and dagger, but Williams thinks it's necessary, and so do I.

Roger

PS: Make me a copy that I can take home and read over the weekend, would you?

interoffice memo

TO: Roger

FROM: John

RE: "LAST SEASON," by "John Oceanby"

Are you saying you set all this in motion *without reading the book*? That takes my breath away.

John

from the office of the editor-in-chief

TO: John

DATE: 4/3/81

MESSAGE: You're my guy, John. We may have had our differences from time to time, but I've never doubted your editorial judgement for a single moment. If you say this is the one, this is the one. On that score, the ivy makes no difference. You're my guy. And while I probably don't need to tell you this, I will: no contact with James Saltworthy until we hear from Alan Williams. Okay?

Roger

interoffice memo

TO: Roger

FROM: John

RE: Vote of confidence

To say I'm touched by your confidence in me doesn't go far enough, boss. Especially after the Detweiller fuck-up. Fact is, I'm sitting here at my desk and damned near blubbing on my blotter. All will be as you say. My lips are sealed.

John

PS: You *do* know, don't you, that Saltworthy must have already sent the book to Viking?

from the office of the editor-in-chief

TO: John

DATE: 4/3/81

MESSAGE: First, no blubbering on the blotter—blotters cost money, and as you know, all expenses must now be forwarded to the parent company on a week by week basis (if we needed another sign that The End Is Near, surely that's it). Blubber in your wastebasket...or go on down to Riddley's former quarters and water the plant with your grateful tears.

(Yes, I know perfectly well that no one is paying the slightest attention to my strong recommendation that we all stay clear of the ivy. I could put it in writing, I suppose, but it would just be a waste of ink. Especially since I've been down there a time or two myself, breathing deep and drawing inspiration.)

Second, how can you call the Detweiller business a fuck-up, considering how it has turned out? Harlow Enders and Apex may not know we're ready to turn the corner into a glorious future, *but we do!*

Third, Alan Williams checked the files over there. *Last Survivor* was supposedly read (or scanned, or perhaps just shifted from the envelope it came in to the one it went back in) and rejected in November of 1978. The editor who signed off on it was one George Flynn, who left publishing to set up his own job-printing business in Brooklyn about a year ago. According to AW, and I quote, "George Flynn had the editorial antennae of a rutabaga."

Fourth, don't give the ms. to LaShonda. Make the copies yourself, *and remember the false title page.*

Fifth (I'm *ready* for a fifth, believe me), please no more memos until at least afternoon. I know I said "everything in writing" from here on out, but my head is starting to ache. I have one from Bill I haven't even looked at.

Roger

interoffice memo

TO: Roger
FROM: Bill Gelb
RE: Possible Bestseller

You asked for ideas, and I've had what might be a doozy, boss. I went over to Smiler's earlier in the day (warning: that idiotic woman with the guitar is still in front—if she gets picked up and institutionalized, I hope the judge sends her to music school) and checked out their paperback rack. It's a pretty good one (i.e., lots of Pocket Books, Signets, Avons, Bantams, no Zenith Houses except for one dusty Windhover that was published 2 years ago). I counted five so-called nonfiction books about aliens and/or flying saucers, and six on investing in the Reagan Era stock market. My idea is suppose we combined the two?

The core concept is this: a stockbroker is abducted by little gray men who first read his brainwaves, suck blood from his nasal cavities, and probe his anus — standard stuff, in other words, been-there done-that. But then, to make up for the inconvenience, they give him stock tips based on their certain market knowledge, obtained in faster-than-light trips to the future. Most of it would be zen stuff like "Never fill your barrow with old bricks" and "Ancient stars offer the best navigation." This crap would, however, be spiced with more practical advice like "Never sell short in a bull market" and "In the long run, power and light stocks always rise." We could call it *Alien Investing*. I know that at first blush the idea sounds crazy, but who would have figured a breakout bestseller called *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*?

I even have a writer in mind — Dawson Postlewaite, aka Nick Hardaway, the Macho Man himself. The stock market is Dawson's hobby (fuck, it's his mania, what keeps him poor and thus in our stable) and I think he'd almost do it gratis.

What do you think? And feel free to tell me I'm nuts, if that's what you think.

Bill

from the office of the editor-in-chief

TO: Bill Gelb

DATE: 4/3/81

MESSAGE: I don't think you're nuts. No more so than the rest of us, anyway. And it's a great title, almost a guaranteed pick-it-up-and-take-a-look on a rack of paperbacks. *Alien Investing* is hereby green-lit. On the cover I see a photo of the Stock Exchange with a space alien laid in, shooting cosmic rays (green, like the color of money) from his big black eyes. Get Postlewaite on it at once. I know he's got a deadline on *Fresno Firestorm*, but I'll see he gets the necessary extension.

R.

WHILE YOU WERE OUT!

Caller Riddley Walker

For Roger Wade

Date April 3rd 1981

Time 12:35 PM

Message He will be back Wednesday or Thursday of next week. Winding up mother's affairs taking longer than he thought, There are difficulties with his brother and sister. Mostly sister. Asks if you will water plant but not mention to J. Kenton that you are doing it. Says "hoodoo ivy make dat boy pow'ful nervous." Whatever that means.

Message taken by LaShonda

From Roger Wade's Audio Journal, Cassette 1

This is Friday the third of April. Afternoon. Bill Gelb has come up with an idea. It's a dandy, too. I'm not surprised. Given what's happening, brilliance around here is almost a foregone conclusion. When I returned from lunch...with Alan Williams...what a wonderful guy he is, not in the least because he treated at Onde's, a place that would collapse my meager expense account allowance for a month...anyway, when I got back I spied an amusing thing. Bill Gelb was sitting in his office and rolling dice on his desk. He was too absorbed to notice me noticing him. He'd roll, make a notation on one of those mini legal pads, then roll again, then make another notation. Of course we all know he shoots craps with Riddley every chance he gets, but Riddley's in Alabama and won't be back until the middle of next week. So what's this about? Staying in practice? Just can't get enough of dem bones? Some new system? All gamblers have systems, don't they? Who the hell knows. He's had a great idea...*Alien Investing*, forsooth...and that earns him a little eccentric-editor time.

Herb Porter has been going around all day with a big, silly smile on his chops. He is actually being *nice* to people. What in God's name can that be about? As if I didn't know, nyuck-nyuck-nyuck.

Never mind Bill and Herb. Never mind Sandra's hot thighs, either. I have another and more interesting thing to ponder. There was a pink WHILE YOU WERE OUT slip on my desk when I got back from lunch. Riddley called and LaShonda took the message. He says he won't be back until next Wednesday or so, because winding up his mother's affairs is taking longer than he thought. But that isn't the interesting part. LaShonda has written, and I quote, "There are difficulties with his brother and sister. Mostly sister." Did Riddley actually tell her that? They have never seemed particularly friendly, in fact I've always gotten the idea that LaShonda considers Riddley to be beneath her, maybe because she believes the Amos 'n Andy accent...although that's a little tough to swallow. Mostly I think it's

because he comes to work in gray fatigues from Dickey and she always shows up dressed to the nines...some days to the tens.

No, I don't think Riddley exactly *said* anything about having problems with his brother and sister. I think L. just sort of...*knew*. Zenith isn't out in the reception area, so far the garlic seems to be working and it's mostly growing in the other direction...toward the end of the hall and the window that looks out on the airshaft...but its *influence* may have reached the reception area.

I think LaShonda read his mind. Read it over fifteen hundred miles or so of long distance telephone line. And without even knowing it. Maybe I'm wrong but...

No, I'm not wrong.

Because I'm reading *her* mind, and I *know*.

[Five second pause on tape]

Whoo, Jesus.

Jesus Christ, this is big.

This is fucking *big*.

From Bill Gelb's Diary

4/3/81

I'm at my apartment tonight, but am thinking about Paramus, New Jersey, tomorrow night. There's an all-night poker game there on Saturdays, pretty high stakes and connected to the Italian Brotherhood, if you know what I mean. Ginelli's game, or so I've heard (he's the Mafia type who owns Four Fathers, two blocks from here). I've only gone there a couple of times and lost my shirt on both occasions (I paid up, too, you don't fuck with the Italian gentlemen), but I have a feeling that this time things might be different.

Today in my office, after R.W. okayed my book idea (*Alien Investing* is going to sell at least 3 million copies, don't ask me how I know that but I do), I took my dice out of the desk drawer where I keep them and started rolling. At first I was barely paying attention to what I was doing, then I took a closer look and holy shit, I couldn't believe what I was seeing. I got out a legal pad and recorded forty straight rolls.

Thirty-four sevens.

Six elevens.

No snake-eyes, no boxcars. Not even a single point.

I tried the same experiment here at home (as soon as I got in through the door, as a matter of fact), not sure it would work because the telepathy doesn't travel much beyond the fifth floor at 490 Park. The fact is, you can feel it fade each time you go down (or up) in the elevator. It drains away like water draining out of a sink, and it's a sad sensation.

Anyway, tonight, rolling forty times on my kitchen table produced twenty sevens, six elevens, and fourteen "points"—i.e. spot combos adding up to three, four, five, six, eight, nine, and ten. No snake-eyes. No boxcars. The luck isn't quite so strong away from the office, but twenty sevens and six elevens are pretty amazing. More amazing still, I didn't crap out *one single time*, not at 490, not even here at home.

Will I be as successful at five-card stud and jacks or better on the other side of the Hudson?

Only one way to find out, baby. Tomorrow night.

I can hardly believe what's happening, but there isn't the slightest doubt in my mind that it *is* happening. Roger suggested that we stay away from the plant, and what a joke *that* is. Might as well suggest the tide not to turn, or that Harlow Enders not be such an asshole. (Enders is a Robert Goulet fan. All you have to do to know that is to look at him.)

I found myself wandering down toward Riddley's closet once or twice an hour all day long, just to take a big brain-clearing whiff. Sometimes it smells like popcorn (the Nordica Theater, where I copped my first feel...I didn't tell the others that part, but given current conditions I'm sure they must know), sometimes like freshly cut grass, sometimes like Wildroot Crème Oil, which is what I always wanted the barber to put on my hair as the finishing touch when I was but a wee slip of a lad. On several occasions others were there when I arrived, and just

before quitting time we all turned up at once, standing side by side and breathing deep, storing up those good aromas—and good ideas, maybe—for the weekend. I suppose we would have looked hilarious to an outsider, like a *New Yorker* cartoon without a caption (would we even need one to be amusing? I think not), but believe me, there was nothing hilarious about it. Nothing scary, either. It was nice, that's all. Plain old nice.

Is breathing Zenith addictive? I suppose it must be, but it doesn't feel like a harsh, governing addiction ("governing" may be the wrong word, but it's the only one I can think of). Not like the cigarette habit, in other words, or the pot habit. People say pot isn't addictive, but after my junior year at Bates, I know better—that shit almost got me flunked out. But I repeat, this is not like that. I don't seem to miss it when I'm away from it, as I am now (at least not yet). And at work there is the indescribable feeling of being at one with your mates. I don't know if I'd call it telepathy, exactly (Herb and Sandra do, John and Roger seem a little less sure). It's more like singing in harmony, or walking together in a parade, matching strides. (Not marching, though, it doesn't feel that structured.) And although John, Roger, Sandra, and Herb have all gone their separate ways for the weekend and we're all far from the plant, I still feel in touch with them, as if I could reach out and connect if I really wanted to. Or needed to.

The mailroom is now almost completely empty of manuscripts, which is a damned good thing, because it's now almost completely full of Zenith. Z has also overgrown the walls of the corridor, although much more densely in the southerly direction—i.e. toward the rear of the building and the airshaft. Going the other way it has curled its friendly (we assume they're friendly) tendrils around Sandra's door and John's facing hers, but that's as far as it had progressed as of four o'clock this afternoon, when I split. It seems reasonable to assume that the Barfield woman was right about the garlic and the smell—which we mere humans can no longer detect—is slowing it down, at least in that direction. South of the janitor's closet and the mailroom, however, the corridor is well on the way to becoming a jungle path. There's Z all over the walls (it's buried the framed book jacket blow-ups down that way, which is a *great* relief), and large hanging bunches of green Z-leaves. It has also produced several dark blue Z-flowers, which have their own

pleasant smell. Sort of like burnt wax (a smell I associate with candles in the Halloween jack-o-lanterns of my youth). Never seen flowers growing on an ivy, but what do I know about plants? The answer is not much.

There's a window reinforced with wire mesh overlooking the air-shaft, and Z has begun to overgrow this as well, all leaves (and flowers) turned out toward the sun. Herb Porter says he saw one of those leaves snatch up a fly that was crawling over a pane of that window. Madness? Undoubtedly! But: true madness or false? True, I think, which suggests some unpleasant possibilities to go with all those pleasant smells. But I don't want to deal with that this weekend.

Where I want to go this weekend is Paramus.

Maybe with a stop at my local OTB for good measure.

I probably shouldn't say it, but God! This is more fun than Studio 54!

From the journals of Riddley Walker

4/4/81

12:35 A.M.

Aboard the Silver Meteor

Question: Has Riddley Pearson Walker ever in his life been so confused, so disheartened, so shaken, so downright sad?

I don't think so.

Has Riddley Pearson Walker ever had a worse week in the twenty-six years of his life?

Absolutely not.

I am aboard Amtrak's Train 36, headed back to Manhattan at least three days early. No one knows I'm coming, but then, who would care? Roger Wade? Kenton, perhaps? My landlord?

I tried for a plane out of B'ham, but no seats available until Sunday. I could not bring myself to stay in Blackwater—or anywhere south of the Mason-Dixon line—that long. Hence the train. And so, to the sound of snores all around me, and in spite of the swaying motion of the car on the rails, I write in this diary. I can't sleep. Perhaps I will be able to when I get back to Dobbs Ferry sometime this afternoon, but the afternoon seems an eternity away. I remember the narrative intro to that old TV show, *The Fugitive*. "Richard Kimball looks out the window and sees only darkness," William Conrad would say each week. He went on, "But in that darkness, Fate moves its huge hand." Will that huge hand move for me? I think not. I fear not. Unless there is fate in John Kenton's ivy, and how can fate—or Fate—reside in such a small and anonymous plant? Crazy idea. God knows what put it in my head.

My reception in Blackwater was warm only from the McDowells—my Uncle Michael and Aunt Olympia. Sister Evelyn, sister Sophie, sister Madeline (always my favorite, which is what makes this hurt so much), and brother Floyd all cold, reserved. Until late Friday afternoon I put that down to the distractions of grief, no more. Certainly we got through the painful rituals of the burial all right. Mama Walker rests beside my father, in the town graveyard. In the *black* section of the town graveyard, for there the rule of segregation holds as firm as ever, not as a matter of law but due to the laws of family custom—unspoken, unwritten, but as strong as tears and love.

Out my window I see a full moon riding serenely in the still-southern sky, a silver dollar pancake of a moon. So my Mama called it, and tonight it has gone full without her. For the first time in sixty-two years it has gone full without her. I sit here writing and feel the tears sliding down my cheeks. Oh Mama, how I weep for you! How yo littlest chile, de one dem

white boys used to call little ole blueblack, how dat chile do weep! Tonight I is a Stephen Foster fiel' nigger fo sho! Yassuh! Mama in de col' col' groun'?! Yes ma'am!

Estranged from my sisters and my brother as well. Where will I be buried, I wonder? In what strange ground?

Anyway, it came out. All the bitterness. And the hate? Was it hate I saw in their eyes? In my dear Maddy's eyes? She who used to hold my hand when we went to school, and who used to comfort me when the others teased me and called me blueblack or bluegum or L'il Heinie on account of the time in first grade when my pants fell down? I want to say no and no and no, but my heart denies that no. My heart says it was. My heart says yes and yes and yes.

There was a family gathering at the house this afternoon, the last act of the sadly prosaic drama that began with Mama's heart attack on the 25th. Michael and Olympia were the nominal host and hostess. It began with coffee, but soon the wine was circulating in the parlor and something quite a bit stronger out on the back porch. I didn't see my brother or any of my sisters in the house, so checked the porch. Floyd was there, drinking a little glass of whiskey and "memorating" (Mama's word for reminiscence) with some of her cousins, and Orthina and Gertrude, from her book-circle (both ladies decorous but undoubtedly tiddly), and Jack Hance, Evvie's husband. No sign of Evvie herself, or Sophie, or Madeline.

I went looking for them, worried that they might not be all right. Upstairs, from the room at the end of the hall where Mama slept alone for the last dozen years since Pop died, I finally heard their voices. There was murmuring; there was also low laughter. I went down there, my footsteps muffled by the thick hall runner, doing a little memorating myself—on Mama's bitter complaints about that thick runner and how it used to show the dirt. Yet she never changed it. How I wish she had. If they had heard me coming—just the simple sound of approaching footfalls—everything might have been different. Not in reality, of course; dislike is dislike, hate

is hate, those things are at least quasi-empirical, I know. It is my illusions that I am talking about. The illusions of my family's regard, the illusions of what I myself had always believed they believed: brave Riddley, the Cornell graduate who has taken a series of menial jobs, work for the body while the mind remains free and uncluttered and able to continue work on the Great Book, a kind of *fin de siecle Invisible Man*. How often I have invoked the spirit of Ralph Ellison! I even dared to write him once, and received a kind, encouraging reply. It hangs framed on the wall of my apartment, over my typewriter. Whether I will be able to continue on after this is anybody's guess...and yet I think I must. Because without the book, what else is there? Why dere's de broomhandle! De can o' Johnson's flo' wax! De squeegee for de windows and de brush for de tawl-its! Yassuh!

No, there must be the book. In spite of everything, *because* of everything, there must be this book. In a very real sense, it's all I have left.

All right. Enough crybaby stuff. Let's get down to it.

I've already written here about the reading of my Mama's last will and testament on the day between her wake and her burial, and how Law Tidyman, her lifelong friend, allowed most of it to stand in her own words. It struck me passing strange then (although I did not put it down, being tired and grief-struck, states of remarkable similarity) that Mama would have asked Law to do it, old friend or not, rather than her own son, who is now considered one of the best lawyers of any color, at least on this side of Birmingham. Now perhaps I understand that a little bit better.

In her will, Mama wrote that she wanted "all cash, of which I do have a little, to go to the Blackwater Library Fund. All negotiable items, of which I do have yet a few, should be sold by my executor at top price available within the twelvemonth following my death, and all proceeds donated to the Blackwater High School Scholarship Fund, with the understanding that any such resulting scholarships, which may be called Fortuna Walker Scholarships if the Committee would so honor me,

should be given without regard to race or religion, as all during my life I, Fortuna Walker, have believed Whites to be every bit as good as Blacks, and Catholics *almost* as good as Southern Baptists.”

How we chuckled at that nearly perfect microcosm of all her wit. But there was no chuckling this afternoon. At least, not after my sisters looked up from where they sat on her bed and saw me standing shocked in the doorway.

By then I had seen all I needed to see. “Anyone a step over puffick idiot’d know what *that* was about,” Mama herself no doubt would have said—more memoration. And what I saw in my dead mother’s bedroom will be printed on my memory until memoration itself ceases.

Her dresser drawers were open, all of them. Her things were still in the top ones, although many of her blouses and scarves slopped over the edges, and it was clear that everything had been stirred about and pawed through—a puffick idiot could have seen that. But the things which had been in the two bottom drawers had been pulled out and lay scattered in drifts across her rose-colored rug, the one which had never shown dirt because nothing dirty was allowed in that quiet room. At least not until last evening, that is, when she was dead and unable to stop it. What made it worse, what made them seem to me so much like pirates and plunderers, was the fact that it was her unmentionables lying there. My dead mother’s underwear, scattered hell to breakfast by her daughters, who in my eyes made Lear’s look kind by comparison.

Am *I* unkind? Self-righteous? I no longer know. All I know is that my heart hurts and my head is roaring with confusion. And I know what I saw: her drawers opened, her slips and underpants and righteous Playtex girdles spread across the floor. And they on the bed, laughing, with a red tin box on the coverlet in the middle of their circle; a red box with its Sweetheart Girl cover taken off and laid aside. It had been full of cash and jewelry. Now it was empty and it was their hands that were full of her greenbacks and heirlooms. How much might their trove have been

worth? Not a huge amount, but by no means paltry; some of the pins and broaches could have been costume stuff, but I saw two rings whose stones were, according to Mama herself, diamonds. And Mama didn't lie. One of them was her engagement ring.

It was perhaps a minute before they saw me. I said nothing myself; I was literally struck dumb.

Evelyn, the oldest, looking young in spite of the gray in her hair, with her hands full of old tens and fives, put aside by my mother over the years.

Sophie, counting through official-looking papers that might have been stock certificates or perhaps treasury bonds, her fingers speeding along like a bank-teller ready to cash out her drawer for the weekend.

And my youngest sister, Maddy. My schoolyard guardian angel. Sitting with her palms full of pearls (probably cultured, I grant you) and earrings and necklaces, sorting through them, as absorbed as an archeologist. That was what hurt the worst. She hugged me when I got off the plane, and wept against my neck. Now she picked through her dead mother's things, the good stuff and the trumpery, grinning like a jewel thief after a successful heist.

All of them grinning. All of them laughing.

Evvie held up the cash money and said, "There's over eight thousand right here! Won't Jack yell when I tell him! And I bet this isn't all. I bet—"

Then she saw Sophie was no longer looking at her, and no longer smiling. Evvie turned her head, and Madeline did, too. The color left Maddy's cheeks, turning her rich complexion dull.

"And how were you going to split it?" I heard myself ask in a voice that did not sound like my own at all. "Three ways? Or is Floyd in on this, too?"

And from behind me, as if he'd only been waiting for his cue, Floyd himself said: "Floyd's in on it, little brother. Oh yes indeed. Was Floyd told the ladies what that box looked like and where it was apt to be. I saw

it last winter. She left it out when she was having one of her spells. But you don't know about her spells, do you?"

I turned, startled. From the smell of the whiskey on Floyd's breath and the dark tinge of red in the corners of his eyes, the tot I'd seen him drinking on the porch hadn't been his first of the day. Or his third, for that matter. He pushed by me into the room, and said to Sophie (always *his* favorite): "Evvie's right—there'll be more. That box is the most of it, I think, but a long way from the all of it."

He turned to me and said, "She was a packrat. That's what she turned into over the last few years. One of the things she turned into, anyhow."

"Her will—" I began.

"Her will, what about it?" Sophie asked. She dropped the papers she'd been studying to the coverlet and made a shooing gesture with her slim brown hands, as if dismissing the whole subject. "Do you think we had a chance to talk to her about it? She shut us out. Look who she got to draw up her death-letter. Law Tidyman! That old Uncle Tom!"

The contempt with which she spoke struck me deep, not because of the sentiment but because of the simple fact that I'd seen Sophie and Evelyn and Evvie's Jack laughing and talking with Law Tidyman and Law's wife Sulla not half an hour before. Best of friends, they'd looked like.

"You don't know how she got these last few years, Rid," Madeline said. She sat there, her lap all but overflowing with her mother's keepsakes and gracenotes, sat there defending what she was doing—what *they* were doing. "She—"

"I might not know how she *got*," I said, "but I know pretty damned well what she *wanted*. Wasn't I there with the rest of you when Law read her will? Didn't we all sit around in a circle, like at a goddamned séance? And isn't that what it was, with Mama talking to us from the other side of her grave? Didn't I hear her say in Law Tidyman's voice that she wanted that there—" I pointed to the plunder on the bed. "—to go to the town

library and to the high school scholarship fund? In her name, if they'd have it that way?"

My voice was rising, I couldn't help it. Because now Floyd was sitting on the bed with them, one arm around Sophie's shoulders, as if to comfort her. And when Maddy's hand crept into his, he took it the way you take the hand of a frightened child. To comfort her, too. It was them on the bed and me in the doorway and I saw their eyes and knew they were against me. Even Maddy was against me. *Especially* Maddy, it seems. My schoolyard angel.

"Didn't you see me there, nodding my head because I understood what she wanted? I know I saw you-all nodding the same way. It's now I must be dreaming. Because it can't be that the folks I grew up with down here in this godforsaken map-splat of the world could have turned into graveyard ghouls."

Maddy's face sagged at that and she began to cry. And I was glad I had made her cry. That's how angry I was, how angry I still am when I think of them sitting there in the lamplight. When I think of the tin box with its Sweetheart Girl cover set aside, its insides all turned out. Their hands and laps full of her things. Their *eyes* full of her things. Their hearts, too. Not *her*, but her *things*. Her remainder.

"Oh you self-righteous little *prig*," Evelyn said. "And weren't you *always*!"

She stood up and swept her hands back along her cheeks, as if to wipe away her tears...but there were no tears in those flaming eyes of hers. Not this evening. This evening I saw my brother and three sisters with their masks laid aside.

"Save your accusations," I said. I have never liked her—regal Evelyn, whose eyes were so firmly fixed on the prize that she never had time for her littlest brother...or for anyone who did not think the stars pretty much changed their courses to watch Evelyn Walker Hance in her enchanted walk through life. "It's hard to point fingers successfully when your hands

are full of stolen goods. You might drop your loot.”

“But she’s right,” Madeline said. “You *are* self-righteous. You *are* a prig.”

“Maddy, how can you say that?” I asked. The others could not have hurt me, I don’t think, at least not one by one; only she.

“Because it’s true.” She let go of Floyd’s hand, stood up, and faced me. I don’t believe I will ever forget a single word of what she said. More memorating, God help me.

“You were here for the wake, you were here for the reading of a dead-letter her own son wasn’t good enough to write, you were here for the burying, you were here for the after-burying, and you’re here now, looking at things you don’t understand and passing a fool’s judgement on them because of all the things you don’t know. Things that went on while you were up in New York, chasing the Pulitzer Prize with a broom in your hand. Up in New York, playing the nigger and telling yourself whatever different it takes for you to get to sleep at night.”

“Amen! Tell it!” Sophie said. Her eyes were blazing, too. They were a demon’s eyes, almost. And I? I was silent. Stunned to silence. Filled with that horrible, deathlike emotion that comes when someone finally spills out the home truths. When you finally understand that the person you see in the mirror is not the one others see.

“Where were you when she died, though? Where were you when she had the six or seven little heart attacks leading up to the big ones? Where were you when she had all those little strokes and got so funny in her head?”

“Oh, he was in New York,” Floyd said cheerily. “He was employing his fine arts degree scrubbing floors in some white man’s book-publishing office.”

“It’s research,” I said in a voice so low I could barely hear it. I felt all at once as though I might faint. “Research for the book.”

“Research, that explains it,” Evelyn said with a sage nod, and put the

cash money carefully back into the tin box. "That's why she went without lunches for four years in order to pay for your schoolbooks. So you could research the wonderful world of custodial science."

"Oh, ain't you a bitch," I said...just as though I had not written many of those same things about my job at Zenith House, not once but several times, in the pages of this journal.

"Shut up," Maddy said. "Just shut up and listen to me, you self-righteous, judgmental prig." She spoke in a low, furious voice that I had never heard before, had never imagined might come from her. "You, the only one of us not married and with children. The only one with the luxury of seeing family through this...this...I don't know..."

"This golden haze of memory," Floyd suggested. He had a little silver bottle in his pants pocket. He drew it out then and had himself a nip.

Maddy nodded. "You don't have the slightest idea of what we need, do you? Of where we are. Floyd and Sophie have got kids getting ready to go to college. Evvie's have gone through, and she's got the unpaid bills to prove it. Mine are coming along. Only you—"

"Why not ask Floyd to help you?" I asked her. "Mama wrote me a letter and said he cleared a quarter of a million last year. Don't you see...don't any of you see what this is? This is robbing pennies off a dead woman's eyes! She—"

Floyd stepped up. His eyes were deadly flat. He held up a clenched fist. "You say another word like that, Riddie, and I'm going to break your nose."

There was a moment of tense silence, and then from down below Aunt Olympia called up, her voice high and jolly and nervous. "Boys and girls? Everything all right up there?"

"Fine, Aunt Olly," Evelyn called back. Her voice was light and care-free; her eyes, which never left mine, were murderous. "Talking over the old times. We'll be down in a wink. Y'all stay close, all right?"

"You're sure everything is okay?"

And I, God help me, felt an insane urge to scream: *No! It's not okay! Get up here! You and Uncle Michael both get up here! Get up here and rescue me! Save me from the pecking of the carrion birds!*

But I kept my mouth shut, and Evvie shut the door.

Sophie said, "Mama wrote you all the time, we knew that, Rid. You were always her favorite, she spoiled you rotten, especially after Pop died and there was no more holding her back. You got plenty of how she saw it."

"That's not true," I said.

"But it is," Maddy said. "And do you know what? The way Mama saw things was pretty selective. She told you about all the money Floyd made last year, I've no doubt of it, but I doubt if she told you about how Floyd's partner stole everything he could get his hands on. Hi-ho, it's Oren Anderson, off to the Bahamas with his chippy of the month."

I felt as if I'd been sucker-punched. I looked at Floyd. "Is that true?"

Floyd took another little nip at the silver flask that had been Pop's before it was his and grinned at me. It was a ghastly grin. His eyes were redder than ever and there was spit on his lips. He looked like a man at the end of a month-long binge. Or at the beginning of one.

"True as can be, little brother," he said. "I was rooked like an amateur. I think I'm going to be able to sail through without getting in the papers, but it's still not a sure thing. I came to her for help and she told me how she was broke. Never got over putting you through Cornell is what she said. How broke does that on the bed look to you, little brother? Eight thousand in cash...at least...and twice that in jewelry. Thirty thousand in stocks, maybe. And she wanted to give it to the *library*." A glare of contempt closed his face like a cramp. "Jesus please us."

I looked to Evvie. "Your husband Jack...the construction business..."

"Jack's had a hard two years," she said. "He's in trouble. Every bank within fifty miles is carrying his paper. How much he owes is all that's propping him up." She laughed, but her eyes were frightened. "Just something else you didn't know. Sophie's Randall is a little better off—"

“We keep even, but get ahead?” Sophie also laughed. “Not likely. Floyd helped all of us along when he could, but since Oren double-crossed him...”

“That *snake*,” Maddy said. “That fucking *snake*.”

I turned to Floyd, and nodded at the little flask. “Maybe you’ve been taking a little too much of that. Maybe that’s why you didn’t mind your business a little better when you had a little more business to mind.”

Floyd’s fist came slowly up again. This time I stuck out my chin. You get to a point when you just don’t care anymore. I know that now.

“Go ahead, Floyd. If it’ll make you feel better, go on ahead. And if you think twenty or even forty thousand dollars is going to bail y’all out, then go ahead with that, too. More fools you be.”

Floyd drew his fist back. He would have hit me, too, but Maddy stepped between us. She looked at me, and I looked away. I couldn’t bear what I saw in her eyes.

“You with the quotes,” she said softly. “Always with the quotable quotes. Well, here’s one for you, Mr. Uppity: ‘He that hath a wife and children hath given hostages to fortune.’ Francis Bacon said that almost three hundred years ago, and it was folks like us he was talking about, not folks like you. Not folks that take twenty or thirty thousand dollars to get educated, then have to do research in floor-polishing. How much have you given back to your family? I’ll tell you how much! *Nothing!* And *nothing!* And *nothing!*”

She was standing so close and spat each *nothing* so hard that spit flew from her lips to mine.

“Maddy, I—”

“Shut up,” she said. “*I’m* talking now.”

“Tell it!” Sophie said happily. It was a nightmare, I tell you. A nightmare.

“I’m getting out of here,” I said, and started to turn away.

They wouldn’t let me. That’s like nightmares, too; they won’t let you

get away. Evelyn grabbed me on one side, Floyd on the other.

“No,” Evvie said, and I could smell booze on her breath, too. The wine they were drinking downstairs. “You listen. For once in your stuck-up life, you just listen.”

“You weren’t here when she got funny, but *we* were,” Maddy said. “The strokes she had affected her mind. Sometimes she went wandering, and we had to go find her and bring her back. Once she did it at night and we had half the town out looking for her with flashlights. So far as I could tell, you weren’t there when we finally found her at two in the morning, curled up on the riverbank fast asleep with half a dozen fat copperheads down there not four yards from her bare feet. So far as I know, you were up there in your New York apartment when that happened, fast asleep yourself.”

“Tell it,” Floyd said grimly. All of them acting as though I live in the Dakota, in a penthouse, instead of my little place in Dobbs Ferry...and yet my little place is nice enough, isn’t it? Perfectly affordable, even on a janitor’s salary, for a man with no vices and no hostages to fortune.

“Sometimes she messed herself,” Maddy said. “Sometimes she talked crazy in church. She’d go to her book-circle and rave half an hour about some book she’d read twenty years ago. She’d be all right for awhile...she had plenty of good days until the last few months...but sooner or later the nutty stuff would start in again, each time a little worse, a little longer. And you didn’t know about any of it, did you?”

“How could I?” I asked. “How could I, when none of you wrote and told me? Not so much as a word?”

That was the one shot of mine that went home. Maddy flushed. Sophie and Evvie looked away, saw the treasure scattered on the bed, and then looked away from that, too.

“Would you have come?” Floyd asked quietly. “If we’d written you, Riddie, would you have come?”

“Of course,” I said, and heard the terrible stiff falsity in my voice. So, of course, did they...and the moral advantage passed away from me. For

tonight, most likely for good, as far as they are concerned. That their own moral stance was at least partly an excuse for reprehensible behavior I do not doubt. But their anger at me was genuine, and at least partly justified—I don’t doubt that, either.

“Of course,” he said, nodding and grinning his red-eyed grin. “Of course.”

“We took care of her,” Maddy said. “We banded together and we took care of her. There was no hospital and no nursing home, even after she started to wander. After the riverbank adventure I slept here some nights; so did Sophie; so did Evelyn and Floyd. Everyone but you, Rid. And how did she thank us? By leaving us a worthless house and a worthless barn and four acres of nearly worthless land. The things that *were* worth something—money that could pay off the credit cards Floyd uses for his business and give Jack a little more breathing-space—those she denied us. So we took them. And you come in, Mr. Smart Northern Nigger comes in, and tells us we’re ghouls stealing the pennies off a dead woman’s eyes.”

“But Maddy...don’t you see that if what you take isn’t what she wanted to give, no matter how much of a tight place you’re in or how bad you need it, that’s stealing? Stealing from your own mother?”

“*My own mother was crazy!*” she cried at me in a whispered shriek. She pistoned her tiny fists in the air, I think expressing her frustration that I should continue to balk over a point that was so clear to her...perhaps because she had been there, she had seen Mama’s craziness at its fruitiest, and I had not. “*She lived the last part of her life crazy and she died crazy! That will was crazy!*”

“We *earned* this here,” Sophie said, first patting Maddy’s back and then drawing her gently away from me, “so never mind your talk about stealing. She tried to give away what was ours. I don’t blame her for it, she *was* crazy, but it’s not going to stand. Riddie, you just want to take all your Boy Scout ideas on out of here and let us finish our business.”

“That’s right,” Evvie said. “Go on down and get a glass of wine. If Boy Scouts drink wine, that is. Tell them we’ll be down directly.”

I looked at Floyd. He nodded, not smiling now. By then none of them were smiling. Smiling was done. “That’s it, little brother. And never mind that oh-poor-me look on your face. You stuck your nose in where it didn’t belong. If you got bee-stung, it’s nobody’s fault but your own.”

At the last I looked at Maddy. Just hoping. Well, hope in one hand and shit in the other; even a puffick idiot knows how that one turns out.

“Go on,” she said. “I can’t bear to look at you.”

I went back down the stairs like a man in a dream, and when Aunt Olympia laid her hand on my arm and asked what was wrong up there, I smiled and said nothing, we were just talking over old times and got a little hot under the collar. The Southern family at its finest; paging Tennessee Williams. I said I was going into town to get a few things, and when Aunt Olly asked me what things—meaning what had she forgotten when she stocked for Mama’s last party—I didn’t answer her. I just went on out, marching straight ahead with that meaningless little smile on my face, and got into my rental car. Basically what I’ve done since is just keep going. I left a few clothes and a paperback book, and they can stay there until the end of the age, as far as it concerns me. And all the while I’ve been moving I’ve also been replaying what I saw as I stood unnoticed in her doorway: drawers pulled out and underwear scattered and them on the bed with their hands full of her things and the cover of her tin box set aside. And everything they said may have been true, or partially true (I think the most convincing lies *are* almost always partially true), but what I remember most clearly is their overheard laughter, which had nothing in it of absconding partners or husbands teetering on the edge of insolvency or credit card bills long past due and stamped with those ugly red-ink warnings. Nothing to do with kids needing money for college, either. The rue count, in other words, was zero. The laughter I overheard was that of pirates or trolls who have found buried treasure and are dividing it up,

perchance by the light of a silver dollar pancake moon. I went down the stairs and down the back porch steps and away from that place like a man in a dream, and I am still that dreamer, sitting in a train with ink splattered all the way up my hand to the wrist and several pages of scribbling, probably indecipherable, now behind me. How foolish it is to write, what a pitiful bulwark against this world's hard realities and bitter home truths. How terrible to say, "This is all I have." Everything aches: hand, wrist, arm, head, heart. I am going to close my eyes and try to sleep...at least to doze.

It's Maddy's face that terrifies me. Greed has made her a stranger to me. A terrible stranger, like one of those female monsters in the Greek fairy-tales. No doubt I *am* a prig, just as they said, a self-righteous prig, but nothing will change what I saw in their eyes when they didn't know I was seeing them.

Nothing.

More than my book, I find it's the simplicities of work that I long for—Kenton's endless self-analysis and agonizing, Gelb's amusing fixation with the dice, Porter's even more amusing fixation with the seat of Sandra Jackson's office chair. I wouldn't even mind having it off with her again, starring in one of her fantasies. I want the simplicity of my janitor's cubby, where all things are known, normal, unsurprising. I want to see if that pitiful little ivy is maintaining its toehold on life.

Around moonset, the Silver Meteor crossed the Mason-Dixon line. My sisters and my brother are on the other side of that line now, and I'm glad.

I can't wait to get back to New York.

Later/8 A.M.

Slept for almost five hours. My neck is stiff and my back feels like a mule kicked me, but on the whole I feel a little better. At least I was able to eat

a little breakfast. I thought the idea I woke with might go away in the dining car, but it has remained clear. The idea—the intuition—is that if I were to go into the office instead of switching trains for Dobbs Ferry, I might feel better yet. I feel drawn there. It's as though I had a dream about the place, one I can't quite remember.

Maybe it's the plant—Zenith the ivy. My subconscious telling me to go in and water the poor little thing before it dies of thirst.

Well...why not?

FROM THE DISPATCHES OF IRON-GUTS HECKSLER

Apr 4 81

0600 hrs

Pk Ave So NYC

Zero hour approaching. I plan to make my entry into the Publishing House of Satan across the street in 2-3 hours. "Crazy Guitar Gertie" disguise put away. Respectable businessman in weekend clothes now, HA!

Look out, you Designated Jew. I will be in your office by noon, waiting

On Monday morning your ass is mine.

No more dreams of CARLOS. He may be gone. Good. One less thing to worry about.

from THE SAKRED BOOK OF CARLOS

SAKRED MONTH OFAPRA (Entry #79)

Saturday morning. As soon as I finish this entry, I leave for Zenith House of Kaka=Poop. Have my "special suitcase" with all sakred sacrifice knives. They are "plenty sharp," too! I am dressed nice, like a business=man on his Saturday in the city. I should have no problems penetrating into that house of thiefs and mockers.

Wonder if Kenton got my "little present."

Wonder if he knows what's happening with his girl=friend or should I say ex girlfriend. Too bad he'll be dead before she can give him anymore "pussy." Innocent blood! Innocent blood from her if no other first!

Myself I will die a virgin and I am glad.

I hope and expect to be locked away in Kenton's office by noon today. I have plenty of snacks and two sodas in with my knives and I will be able to "hold out" until Monday just fine.

No more dreams of "The General" and his Designated Juice. That's a load off my mind.

And now for you, John Kenton. Betrayer of my dreams, thief of my book. Why wait for the abbalah to do what I can do myself?

COME DEMETER!

COME GREEN!

END OF THE PLANT, PART FIVE

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Following next month's installment of this story--next month's very long installment of this story--The Plant will be going back into hibernation so that I can continue work on Black House (the sequel to The Talisman, written in collaboration with Peter Straub). I also need to complete work on two new novels (the first, Dreamcatcher, will be available from Scribner's next March) and see if I can't get going on The Dark Tower again. And my agent insists I need to take a breather so that foreign translation and publication of The Plant--also in installments, also on the Net--can catch up with American publication. Yet don't despair. The last time The Plant furlled its leaves, the story remained dormant for nineteen years. If it could survive that, I'm sure it can survive a year or two while I work on other projects.

Part 6 is the most logical stopping point. In a traditional print book, it would be the end of the first long section (which I would probably call "Zenith Rising"). You will find a climax of sorts, and while not all of your questions will be answered--not yet, at least--the fates of several characters will be resolved.

Nastily

Permanently.

As a way of thanking those readers (somewhere between 75 and 80 per cent) who came along for the ride and paid their dues, Part 6 of The Plant will be available free of charge. Enjoy...but don't relax too much. When The Plant returns, it will once more be on a pay-as-you-go basis.

In the meantime, get ready for Part 6. I think you're going to be surprised. Perhaps even shocked.

Best regards (and happy holidays),

Stephen King

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xxXsTmXxx

06/2000



Horror author Stephen King says he and his readers could become 'Big Publishing's worst nightmare' and help 'midlist writers' by downloading this new novel from his Web site at a cost of \$1 an installment.