



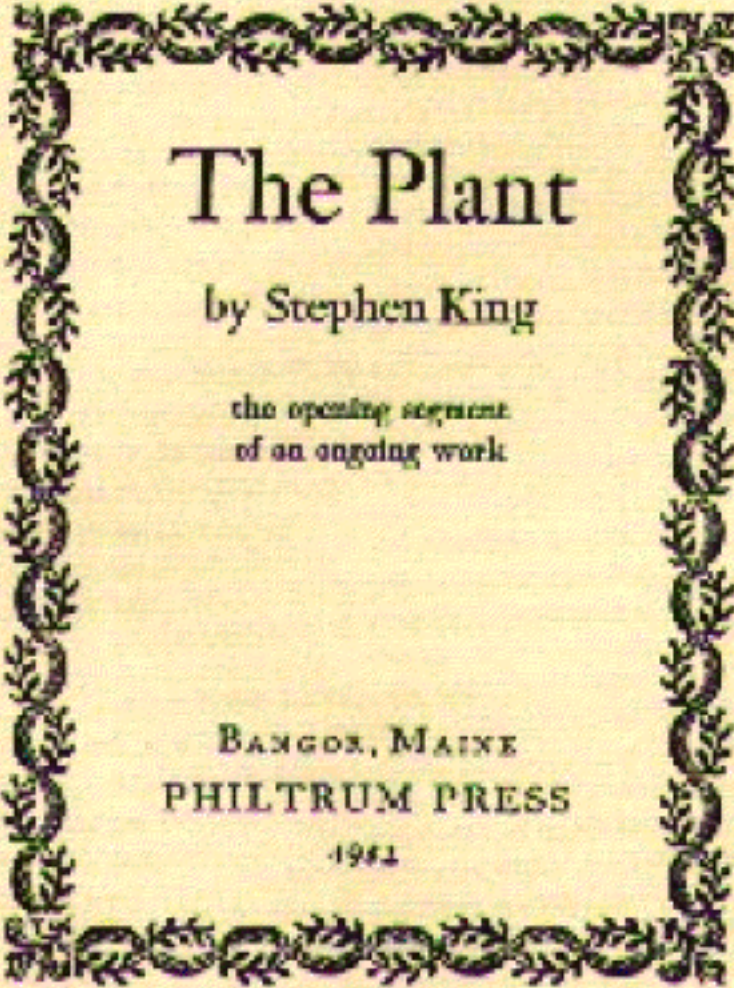
The Plant



by Stephen King

THREE PAGES

Sturges



The Plant

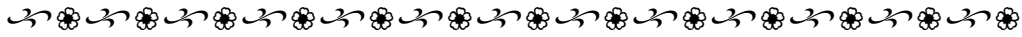
by Stephen King

the opening segment
of an ongoing work

BANGOR, MAINE
PHILTRUM PRESS

1981

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From the journals of Riddley Walker

3/25/81

After what seems like ten weeks of unadulterated excitement—all of it the unhealthiest variety—things at Zenith House seem to have finally settled back into their accustomed drone. Porter sneaks into Jackson's office and sniffs the seat of her office chair during the five-minute period which comes every morning between ten and ten-thirty when the seat is vacant (it is during this half-hour each morning that Ms. Jackson removes herself and a copy of either *Vogue* or *Better Homes and Gardens* to the ladies' bog, where she has her daily dump); Gelb has resumed his surreptitious visits to the Riddley Walker Casino and after a rash double-or-nothing proposal earlier this week now owes me \$192.50; Herb Porter, after his brief fugue, has once again mounted into the seat of the great political locomotive which he imagines only himself, of all the earth's billions, really capable of driving; and I have resumed these pages after a three-week hiatus in which I have peacefully swept dirt by day and spread narrative by night—and if that is not pomposity masquerading as eloquence, then nothing is.

But the accustomed drone is not quite the same as before, is it? There are two principal reasons for this. One is down the hall and one is right here in my little janitorial cubby...or perhaps it's only in my head. I would give a great deal to know which, and please believe me that my tongue is nowhere near my cheek when I say so. The change down the hall is, of course, John Kenton. The change in here (or in my head) is Zenith the Common Ivy.

Herb Porter doesn't realize that anything at all is wrong with Kenton. Bill Gelb has noticed but doesn't care. It was Sandra Jackson who asked me yesterday if I had any idea why John had suddenly decided to go through every old manuscript in that corner of the mailroom I think of as The Isle of Forgotten Novels.

"No ma'am!" I said. "I sho don't!"

"Well, I wish he'd stop," she said. She popped open her compact, peered into it, and began to poke at her hair with an afro comb. "I can't even go in there anymore without sneezing until I'm just about blue. Everything's covered with dust and all that dry creepy stuff that comes out when those cheap padded mailers tear open. You must hate it in there."

"It sho is pow'ful dusty, Miz Jackson, and that's a fack!"

"Is he mailing them back?"

"I doan' know if he is nor not."

"Well, you take care of the mail, don't you?" she asked, putting away her compact and producing a tube of lipstick. A twist of her fingers produced something the size and shape of a child's penis and the color of a hunter's cap. She began to apply this in great shiny plates. I caught a whiff and immediately understood why Porter sniffs her seat instead of her face.

"Yes ma'am, I sho do!"

"So if you haven't seen any of them going out, they aren't going out. Just as well. If he was sending them out I would have to complain to Roger and perhaps even send a memo on the subject to Mr. Enders." She gave her lipstick a twist, recapped it, dropped it into the maw of the huge shapeless trunk she calls her purse, and preened for a moment. "None of them were accompanied by return postage. That's why they're there. It's not our business to send them back—most of them or all of them—but he is doing it at his own expense, and it is thus none of La Jackson's business."

"I wish he'd stop it, even if he's dumping them down the incinerator," she said, now producing a plastic canister which, when opened, dis-

closed dusting powder and a rather discolored puff. Sandra Jackson then proceeded to disappear into a choking pink cloud that had much the same effect on me as the one she claimed Kenton's office produced on her. "He's making the rest of us look bad and there's no goddamned need of it," she finished from inside the cloud.

"No ma'am," I said, and sneezed.

"Are you growing marijuana in here, Riddley?" she asked. "It smells funny in here."

"No ma'am, I sho ain't!"

"Uh," she said, and put away the puff. She began to unbutton her blouse just as I'd begun to hope I was going to escape. She doffed it, revealing two small decorous white-lady breasts like uncooked muffins with a cherry poked into each one. She began to unzip her skirt and then paused in the act, giving me another moment of fleeting hope. "What else is wrong with him, Riddley?"

"Ah sho don't know, Miz Jackson," I said, but I know, all right, and Roger Wade knows as well—I think it's almost incredible that Wade somehow persuaded such a total romantic to stay on, but somehow he did. Porter doesn't know, Gelb doesn't care, and Jackson's too self-centered to see what's right in front of her slightly saggy little white-lady tits: his girl told him that he just dropped off the Top Forty of her life. And Kenton has responded (with a little help from Roger Wade, one must assume) in a way that seems both honorable and courageous to me—a way I like to think I myself would respond: he's working his fucking ass off.

Her skirt puddled around her feet and she stepped out of it.

"Want to play truckdriver and hitchhiker today, Riddley?" she asked.

"I sho do, Miz Jackson!" I said as her hands went to my belt-buckle and tugged it undone. At moments like this I have about four fantasies to fall back on that never fail. One, I regret to say, is of having my sister Deidre first diaper me and then accommodate me after I have made wee-wee in my didy. Ah, sex is the great comedy, all right. No doubt about that.

“Oh Mr. Truck-Driver, it is so big and hard!” Jackson exclaimed in a squeaky little-girl voice as she grasped me. And, thanks to Deidre and the diapers, it was.

“That there is my Hearst shifter, little Miz Hitchhikuh!” I growled, “and right now I’s gwine th’ow it into overdrive!”

“At least ten minutes, Mr. Truck-Driver,” she said, lying down. “I want at lest three and you know it takes me...” She sighed contentedly as I sank my drive-shaft into her universal joint. “...awhile to get up to cruising speed.”

Just before leaving (she had given her hair a few more good pokes with the afro comb before dropping it into her purse on top of her panties) she looked around sharply and asked me again if I wasn’t perhaps growing a little cannabis in here.

“No ma’am!” I said—I knew perfectly well by then that it was Zenith she was smelling, just as I know that Zenith the Common Ivy smells like no ivy I ever came in contact with in my life.

“Because if you are,” she said, “I want my share.”

“But Miz Jackson! I done already tole you—”

“I know. But just remember, if you are, I want my share.” And she left. As things turned out she got four instead of three, and with any luck she’ll be proof for a week or two before popping back to play Truck-Driver and Hitchhiker or Virgin and Chauffeur or possibly the Teensy White Editor and the Big Black Janitor, which is what all these games boil down to in the end.

But never mind; we have come to the other thing around here which has not lapsed back into dozy familiarity, and that is the ivy-plant sent by Kenton’s nemesis. It raises a question in my mind which I have never successfully answered for myself—perhaps because for a long time my life and my ambitions have rendered it unimportant. It is, I mean, a question I haven’t thought about as seriously or so constantly or with such a clear interest that I have a personal stake in the answer since I was—oh, eleven

or so, I reckon. The question is just this: Is there an invisible world or not? Are supernatural events possible in a world where everything seems either perfectly explained or perfectly explicable? Everything, that is, except for the Shroud of Turin...

...and, perhaps, Zenith, the Common Ivy.

I find myself thinking again and again about the feelings of deep foreboding that seemed to fall over me when I touched the box it—

No; no, that isn't right. For whatever it's worth, that is most definitely not right. The bad feelings I had about that box—dread, revulsion, a well-nigh ungovernable feeling of having stepped over a clearly marked border and onto taboo ground—did not come from outside. The chill I felt did not fall over me or smother me or steal up my spine on cold little cat's feet. That feeling came from inside, rising up like a spring rises out of the earth, a cold little circle in which you may glimpse your face, or the face of the moon. Or even better, it came the way Faulkner says the dark comes, not falling out of the sky but rising inexorably up out of the ground. Only in this case I believe the ground (Floyd would scoff) happens to be my own soul.

Never mind, though—pass it. Never mind feelings, vapors, megrimms...or “subjective phenomena,” if you want to be polite.

Let us look at some rather more empiric data.

First: After looking at the Ivy entries in both Grolier's and Collier's Encyclopedias, plus the photos in Floyd's college botany book, I am prepared to say that Zenith does not look like any of the ivies pictured there. I mean, it looks like them in the same way that Fords look like Bugattis—they are both gasoline-powered vehicles with four rubber tires—but that's as close as it comes.

Second: Although the little sign poked into the soil of Zenith's pot identified him as “Common Ivy,” there is apparently no such thing. There is poison ivy, and Virginia Creeper, and Ground Ivy, and Boston Ivy, and Japanese Ivy; there is also English Ivy, and I suppose that might be called

Common Ivy by some people, but Zenith looks more like a cross between Japanese Ivy and poison ivy than it does English Ivy. Sending Kenton a poison ivy plant sounds like something that would tickle the bejabbers out of a fellow like Carlos Detweiler, but I have handled it, felt its leaves and vines, and have no rash. Nor am I immune. I had some killer cases of poison ivy when Floyd and I were kids.

Third: As Jackson said, it smells like *cannibis sativa*. I dropped into a florist's on my way home tonight and smelled a Boston Ivy and a hybrid called a Marion Ivy. Neither smelled like pot. I asked the proprietor if he knew of any ivies that smelled like marijuana and he said no—he said the only plant he knew of which smelled much like growing *cannibis* is called dark columbine.

Fourth: It is growing at a speed which I find just a bit frightening. I've carefully gone over my few references to the plant in this journal—and believe me when I say that if I had known how much it was going to prey on my mind there would have been more—and have noted the following: on February 23rd, when it arrived, I believed it would most probably die; on the 4th of this month I noted a healthier appearance, an improved smell, four open leaves and two more unfurling, plus a single tendril which reached to the edge of the pot. Now there are almost two dozen leaves, broad and dark green and oily looking. The tendril which had reached the lip of the pot has now attached itself to the wall and runs nearly six inches up toward the ceiling. It would look almost like an FM radio antenna except for the tightened curls of the new leaves along its length. Other tendrils have begun to crawl along the shelf where I put the plant, and they are attaching themselves in the best ivy tradition. I pulled one of these tendrils loose (had to stand on my overturned mop-bucket to get to Zenith's level) and it came...but with surprising reluctance. The tendrils have stuck themselves to the wooden shelf with surprising tightness. I could hear the minute ripping sound the tendril I chose made when it parted company from the wood, and I did not much care for the sound.

It left little marks in the paint. It has, near the pot, produced a single dark blue flower—not very pretty or remarkable. It is of the sort, I believe, produced by the type of ivy commonly called gill-over-the-ground. But...all of this in three weeks?

I have an unpleasant feeling about this plant. It's as much in the way I so easily and unconsciously refer to it as "him," I think, as in its extraordinary growth-spurt. I think I want to have a botanist look at it. Floyd will know one. There's one other thing but I don't even want to write it down. I th

(later)

That was my Aunt Olympia, calling from Babylon, Alabama. My mother is dead. It was very sudden, she said through her tears. A heart attack. During her nap. No pain, she said through her tears. How does anyone know. Oh bullshit, my mother. I loved her. Aunt O. said she's been trying Floyd but no one answers, oh I did love her my sweet fat uncomplaining mother who saw so much more than she said and knew so much more than she let on. Oh I did love her and love her.

Movement now is best. Floyd first then arrangements; family; burial. Oh mama I love you.

I've had whiskey. Two big gulps. Now I'll write it. That plant. Zenith. Zenith the Common Ivy. Can't be an ivy. Fucking thing's carnivorous. I saw two leaves that were open three days ago rolled up today. So I unrolled them. This is when I was standing on the mop-bucket, looking at it. Dead fly inside of one. What I think was a mostly decomposed baby spider inside the other. No time now. I'll deal with it another time.

Christ I wish I'd said goodbye to my mamma. Does anyone ever get a chance to say goodbye?

From *The New York Post*, page 1, March 27, 1981:

MAD GENERAL DIES IN MORTUARY HORROR!

(Special to the *Post*) The mingled ashes of a man and a woman were recovered from the floor outside the crematorium of the Shady Rest (L.I.) Mortuary yesterday afternoon, and the ashes and bones of a second man, believed to be Major General Anthony R. Hecksler (Ret.), who escaped from Oak Cove Asylum in upstate New York twenty-three days ago, were discovered inside the crematorium furnace itself.

The other two dead were Mr. And Mrs. Hubert D. Leekstodder, owners of the Shady Rest.

Sources close to the investigation told the *Post* yesterday that Hecksler had had business dealings with Mr. And Mrs. Leekstodder some years ago, and that they were on his “grudge-list.” A police official who asked not to be identified said that the madman left a note behind identifying the Leekstodders as “foremen of the antichrist” and “real all-around losers.”

The note was found pinned to the earlobe of a corpse in the Mortuary’s composing room.

“Losers or not, they are real crispy now,” said Police Lieutenant Rodney Marksland of the Long Island Police Department.

According to the *Post’s* police source, details of what is now believed to be a suicide and double murder are extremely grisly. “We think he killed the Leekstodders first and then stuffed the bodies into the crematorium, mostly because it is just too horrible to believe he could have stuffed them in there while they were still alive,” the source said. “But there’s

not much doubt about what he did then—raked out their ashes, turned on the gas, crawled in himself—although the temperature must have still be very high—and just flicked his Bic. Poof! 3,000 degrees of spot heat. The jets were still flaming when the heat alarms went off in the house across the street and the Leekstodders’ daughter-in-law came to see what was going on.”

It was not a Bic lighter that the mad General actually flicked, but a platinum-plated Zippo with the Army Emblem on it and engraved TO TONY FROM DOUG/AUG. 7th, 1945. The “Doug” referred to is believed to be Hecksler’s close friend General Douglas MacArthur.

“It was Iron-Guts, all right,” the *Post’s* source claimed, adding that in addition to the lighter, searchers found a number of items amid the bone-dotted clumps of ashes in the death oven that have been positively identified as belonging to Hecksler. Although he declined to name all of these items, our exclusive source revealed to the *Post* that two of them were gold teeth implanted following the end of World War II. Hecksler was briefly captured by the Germans during an intelligence operation in November of 1944, and two of his teeth were pulled during his interrogation. It was the replacements for those two teeth which investigators found in the crematorium furnace, according to the *Post’s* source.

Related stories: New Yorkers Breathe Sigh of Relief (4); Colorful career of Iron-Guts Hecksler Recalled (Centerfold).

FROM THE DISPATCHES OF IRON-GUTS HECKSLER

[Editor's note: These dispatches were written in a number of blank S & H Green Stamp books which the General apparently carried on his person at all times.]

Mar 29 81

1990 hrs

Location Classified

Operation Hot Foot completed successfully. Two more foremen of the Antichrist successfully dispatched back to the hell they came from. Also one bum. Sorry I had to give up the lighter. Hurt self plenty, but okay. Can take pain. Always could. HA!! Newspapers say I'm dead. Burn uniform. Behind enemy lines. Shot if caught. Been there before, HA!! Going gets tough. Tough get going. Never punt on 4th down. Must infiltrate city. Designated Jew undoubtedly lulled by reports of my death. Guard down. Will commence Operation Bookworm coming weekend. April Fool to the Designated Jew, HA!! Have had a dream. Someone named CARLOS is looking for me. Means me harm? Yes I think so. CARLOS=spic name. Spics damned good fighters. Crafty. City full of mongoloid-polyglot ruffians. Worse than ever. Air full of brain-killing transmissions. Was there a terrorist named CARLOS? Doesn't matter. Zenith House my objective. Infiltrate on weekend. Kill Designated Jew. Kill whole staff if poss. Kill CARLOS if CARLOS does indeed exist. All foremen of the Antichrist. I will be able to think about Antichrist & other things better after I get some suppositories.

A memo from HARL

DATE: 3/30/81

TO: Roger Wade, Editor in Chief, Zenith House

SUBJECT: Three Books!! The Principle of Gravity!!

Rog!

Listen, babes, I took a meeting last Fri with Teddy Graustark, the Apex veep in charge of Print Media. Main topic was mags: *Hot Tools*, *Raw Cycle*, *Third World Mercenary*, *Your Pregnancy*, and *Horny Babes*. We're dropping all of them except for *Third World Mercenary* and *Your Pregnancy*. Subj of Zenith House also came up. I bought you a little more time, babes, but forget the year I promised you (which would be down to nine months now anyway, want a sub to *Your Pregnancy*?—joke). Graustark will give you until June 30th to come up with three (3) books you *guaren-goddamn-tee* will hit *The New York Times* Bestseller List. If you can do this, I think your job might be safe until summer of 1982. If they actually *become* best-sellers, it'll be safe until the middle of the decade or even longer. Fail to do this, and the Zenith operation goes the way of *Hot Tools* and *Raw Cycle* by the end of October.

You may be pissed about this, Roger-babes, but Graustark hit me with his version of the Law of Gravity which struck me as TRUE TRUE TRUE!: *SHIT ROLLS DOWNHILL!* That's it in a nutshell. And altho sad, it's true. This particular ball o' shit started with the Number One Apex Big Chief & Head Honcho, Sherwyn Redbone, then rolled down to me. I am now rolling it down to you, Rog, and I assume you will roll it on down to your editorial staff, who just might be able to stop it before it gets all the way down to the bottom of the hill. If they *can't* stop it, your cozy little home at bottom of said hill is going to be buried beneath a huge & smelly ball of shit.

To recapitulate (that's not the one that means surrender, is it?), here is your mission, should you choose to accept it (joke). Three (3) books which you *guaran-goddamn-tee* to be bestsellers, delivered by June 30th. All three must hit the *Times* list *this year*, which means you better get them in production as soon as possible.

Sorry about the rush-rush, babes, but to quote The Chairman of the Board (Frank Sinatra, not Mr. Redbone), "That's life, that's how it goes."

Yours,

Harl Enders
Comptroller, Apex

from the office of the editor-in-chief

TO: John Kenton, Herb Porter, Bill Gelb, Sandra Jackson
DATE: 3/30/81

MESSAGE: Okay, fearless editorial staff, the balloon has gone up. You will want to read the attached Harlow Enders masterpiece for yourselves, but the challenge we have been given is clear: to put three paperbacks on the *Times* list, where no Zenith House product has ever gone before, on or before December 31st. This is absurd, of course—like challenging someone to climb Mount Everest in Bermuda shorts and tennis shoes—but that changes nothing. Editorial meeting later today, as always, but for now I'd like it in writing: do *any* of you have a book you consider to be bestseller material? I want memos by noon.

Memos, please, not calls. From now until the end, I want transcriptions of everything we do. If nothing else, I might want a large wad of paper to stuff up somebody's ass.

Roger

interoffice memo

TO: Roger
FROM: Bill Gelb
RE: Possible Bestseller???

You're kidding, of course. This is lunacy. I have a new Mort Yeager (he wrote it in the prison library—Attica) and it's publishable after we take out the bestiality (halfway through the book, I'm not shitting you on this, the villain has sex with his housecat), but that's about it. We also did succeed in getting rights to novelize *Lesbo Dracula* (see pictorial in this month's ish of *Horny Babes*), but now there seems to be some question if it will be released anywhere except the porno houses. Otherwise, the cupboard is bare.

B.G.

P.S. This memo from Enders is a joke, isn't it? A cruel joke.

P.P.S. When does Riddley get back from Alabama?

interoffice memo

TO: Roger
FROM: Herb Porter
RE: Possible Bestseller

The idea of this place producing one bestseller, let alone three, is ludicrous. Having said that, I have a wacky idea, and you can shoot it down if you want, but here goes. Let's get Olive Barker—still our best ghost writer, in my estimation—to write a quickie bio of Iron-Guts Hecksler, concentrating on his final rampage. Now that the guy is dead, we've got the whole tale—beginning, middle, fiery climax. I could even kick in a chapter about what went on here, maybe juice it up a little. What do you think?

Herb

P.S. I think you should hunt Enders down and kill him just for calling you “babes.” Bad news is bad enough. The man is patronizing.

P.P.S. Has anyone heard from our mailroom and janitorial staff? Riddley, in other words. Went by his cubby today. Something in there smells really good. Sort of like hot toast and jam.

interoffice memo

TO: Roger Wade
FROM: SANDRA JACKSON
RE: Totally silly request

Roger (or should I call you “Babes?”),

Zenith House has never published a bestseller and never WILL publish a bestseller. But I DO have a rather nutty idea. It has to do with Anthony L.K. LaScorbia, our Nasty Creatures from Hell writer. People have apparently been sending Tony *jokes*. For example: “What do you call 5 million marching Brazilian fire-ants?” Answer: Lunchtime in Rio. Or: “How many babies does it take to satisfy a pack of rampaging scorpions?” Answer: How many have you got? These may not strike you funny, but I laughed my butt off, and several people I’ve told them to have also laughed (some against their will, from the look on their faces). Why not let him loose on this? It can’t hurt. He wants to call it *Jokes from Hell*. He insists it’s a new kind of joke, he calls it the “Sick Joke.”

What do you think?

Sandi

P.S. When does Riddley get back? My wastebasket is absolutely *overflowing*! I peeped my head in his cubby today, and do you know what? It smells *good*. Sort of the way my grandmother’s kitchen used to smell when she was baking cookies. Maybe I’m losing it.

interoffice memo

TO: Roger

FROM: John

RE: Insane request

RE: Responses from Bill, Herb, and Sandra

Herb said it best, babes—the idea is ludicrous. Nevertheless, I keep working my way through the old manuscripts. Nothing even close so far, and I'm down to the last two shelves. If nothing else, we can all go on unemployment knowing that the mailroom is clean for the next company that moves in.

Having said that, let me tell you that I feel depressed (more than usual, that is) to realize I must count myself, along with Bill, among the goats instead of the sheep. I mean, Herb and Sandra at least came up with ideas, didn't they? Which leads me to the real purpose of this memo. You're the boss, not me, but I actually think both ideas have merit. A book about the General would sell, especially if we really hustled it out there. I know that we don't have the ability to produce an "instant book" like the ones which followed the release of the Watergate tapes, but Olive could work fast, especially if Herb worked on it with her. I'm sure he'd give himself a starring role, but even *that* might work.

The joke-book idea is more nebulous, but I have to tell you that when I read that, I felt some obscure circuit (probably one I should feel ashamed of) go hot. Possibly we could widen the scope, i.e. sick jokes on every subject? And stick a funny name on the author, something like Ima Sicko or I.B. Ill? I know how it sounds—in a word, sub-juvenile—and yet it seems to me something might be there.

My first reaction was *I wish I'd thought of that*. A sick joke in itself. Clearly we have reached the bottom of the barrel, but I think you should

give it a shot. Meanwhile, I'll continue with the last of the unreturned scripts. I'm in too deep to back out now.

John

P.S. A book of jokes would be an even faster turn than a factoid book on old Iron-Guts. Like a week. All we have to do is put our heads together and come up with the most scabrous jokes we can remember. Q. What do you call a kid with no arms and legs? A. Second base.

P.P.S. I really *was* president of the Literary Society at Brown, although all that seems like a dream to me now. In fact, this whole *year* seems like a dream.

P.P.S.S. Why is everyone so worried about Riddley? What's this about good smells coming from his closet? The last time I was down there in smelled like mold and Lysol. I might have to check this out. Also, I'm tempted to tell Sandra I know exactly where she can put her wastebasket. I'd be glad to help with the insertion procedure, too.

P.P.S.S.S. When *does* Riddley get back? I sho does miss dat man! Yassuh!

from the office of the editor-in-chief

TO: Herb

DATE: 3/30/81

MESSAGE: The book about Hecksler is green-lit. Tentative title: *The Devil's General*. Talk to Olive Barker at once. You're authorized to offer her \$2,500 plus expenses up to \$150 a week for four weeks. If we're going out, we might as well go out spending Apex's money just

as hard and fast as we can. We'll want photos for a middle-of-the-book section. You'll be working on her every step of the way, Herb. Tell her she's off downers for the duration.

Uppers are fine.

Roger

from the office of the editor-in-chief

TO: Sandra

DATE: 3/30/81

MESSAGE: The joke book is green-lit, but forget LaScorbia; let him concentrate on his wasps and flies. The five of us are going to write this scabrous little tome ourselves. Tentative title: *World's Sickest Jokes*. We'll have our first editorial session on this project this afternoon, at Flaherty's Pub down the street. This is the closest thing we've got to a winner, so let's take it seriously. We need to think about whether or not we want (or dare) to go ethnic, as in "How many Poles does it take" and "How many Mexicans does it take." My feeling is if we're going to go sewer-diving, we might as well go all the way to the bottom. And don't you or anyone else talk to me about sharing royalties on a book of jokes about dead babies and sodomy. We're saving our jobs here, or trying to.

Perhaps we should invite Riddley into our little brain-trust. He'll be back next week, and I hope you'll pass that along to your colleagues. We're dying here, and all anyone seems to care about is the goddamned janitor.

Roger

P.S. Also, stay out of his closet. I think he keeps his personal stuff in there.

P.P.S. Unless you want to wash some windows or wax some floors, of course. In that case, be my guest.

interoffice memo

TO: Roger
FROM: Bill Gelb
RE: Riddley Walker's possible contribution to insane and degrading joke-book

By all means let's get him in on the project when he gets back. Maybe he can contribute a few dead-mommy jokes.

from the office of the editor-in-chief

TO: Bill Gelb
DATE: 3/30/81

MESSAGE: As someone who hasn't even come up with a *dim* idea for a book of *any* kind, I suggest you keep your wisecracks to yourself. Or maybe go down to R.W.'s closet and sniff the air. It seems to have done wonders for Herb and Sandra. That is not a serious suggestion. As I told Sandra, the janitor's closet is strictly Riddley's domain.

From John Kenton's diary

March 30, 1981

I staggered into my apartment tonight half-drunk from the weirdest brainstorming session of my life (place, Flaherty's Pub; subject, what do you call a leper in a hot tub, etc., etc.). I'm drinking *far* too much lately, yet I would be a flat liar if I didn't say I felt a weird, shameful excitement. Nor is it just booze driving my emotions—at least I don't think so. I don't know if a joke-book can possibly hit *The New York Times* bestseller list—probably not—and yet I think we all felt that sense of something actually *happening*. Before we were done, half the people in the pub were contributing jokes, my favorite being the above-referenced about what you call a leper in a hot tub (Stu, of course). If it's any consolation, Sandra and Bill both finished up drunker than me, Roger perhaps a shade less so. Herb Porter doesn't drink. I believe he's got a problem with it, and goes to those meetings where you introduce yourself by your first name.

Weird, weird meeting. But not as weird as the letter I found waiting for me in my mailbox when I finally swam home. I'm too headachey to write much more tonight, all I want is to eat something non-contentious and go to bed, but I will clip Ms. Barfield's letter to this page of my diary, and take it in to the office tomorrow. Perhaps by then the nagging chill I feel running up my back will be gone.

Roger will know what to do. At least I hope so. And perhaps he'll know something else as well: how a woman who runs a flower shop and greenhouse in Central Falls, Rhode Island could have known my address. My *home* address.

And Kevin.

How in God's name could she had known about Kevin? Not *just* Kevin, either. Kevin Anthony, she writes.

Kevin Anthony, 7/7/67.

She also says she doesn't like Carlos Detweiller—that she's afraid of him—and there's that much to be grateful for, but I find I'm not much comforted.

After all, she could be lying.

Fuck this, I'm going to bed. With luck, they'll all stay out of my dreams. Ruth Tanaka most of all. Something odd: at one point during our time in Flaherty's, I went into the bathroom. While I was standing at the urinal, Ruth's name popped into my mind. Her name but not her face. For a couple of seconds there I couldn't see her face at all. What came instead was the last of the "sacrifice photos." Carlos Detweiller, his face in the shadows, holding up a dripping heart.

Christ.

LETTER TO JOHN KENTON FROM MS. TINA BARFIELD

Mar 28 '81

Dear Mr John Kenton,

You don't know me from Eve the First Mother but I know you. Also we have Carlos in common and you know exactly who I mean. I am Tina Barfield the prop of the Central Falls House of Flowers. You think you are thru with Carlos but Carlos is not thru with you. You are in danger. I am in danger. Everyone at the publishing house where you work is in danger. But also you have great opportunity. The Dark Powers must give before they can take. There are things I can tell you. Come and see me as soon as you get this letter. As soon as you get it. My time here must end soon. Some of the Tongues have begun to wag.

Do you think I am crazy. Answer is yes you do. But I can help you find the one you're looking for. It has been in that room all the time. Why do I do this. Partly because my soul, although mortgaged to the Goat, may still be redeemable. Mostly because I fear & loathe Carlos Detweiller. Hate that son of a bitch! Would do anything to see his plans brought to Wrack and Ruin. Believe me when I say reports of his death will be greatly exaggerated. Like the General.

Come Tuesday if you can. Bring the Water-Boy if you want. You can do

more than sidestep Carlos's revenge, Mr. John Kenton. With my help you can use him to achieve your dream. If you doubt me think of this: Kevin Anthony 7/7/67. I am sorry if this upsets you but there's no time to spend convincing you that I know what I know.

Sincerely yours,

Tina Barfield

From John Kenton's diary

March 31, 1981

This has been a long day—a terrible day—a wonderful day—an I-don't-know-what day. All I know for sure is that I'm shaken to my heels. To my very soul. You can blithely quote Hamlet—"more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy"—and never think about what the words mean. And then maybe shit happens, like the kind of shit that happened to Roger and me today. And the floor you have so confidently spent your life walking on suddenly turns transparent and you realize there's a horrible gulf below it. And the worst thing is *the gulf isn't empty*. There are *things* in it. I don't know what those things are, but I have an idea they're hungry. I'd like to be out of this. And yet there is something to what Roger says. I feel some of the crazy excitement I saw in his eyes. I—

Oh man, this is no good. I'm all over the map. Time to take a deep breath, settle down, and start from the beginning. I'll get this down even if it takes me all night. I have an idea that I wouldn't be able to sleep much, anyway. And do you know what haunts me? What keeps going through my head like some kind of crazy mantra? *The Dark Powers must give before they can take*. The possibilities in such a simple statement! If such a simple statement could ever be true!

Okay. From the beginning.

Usually it takes the alarm five minutes of uninterrupted braying to get me up, but this morning my eyes popped open all on their own at 6:58 AM, two minutes before I'd set it to go off. My head was clear, my stomach settled, not so much as a trace of a hangover, but when I got up I left my own dark silhouette behind me on the sheet; I must have sweat out a pint of mingled booze and salt water in the night. I had ugly, tangled dreams; in one of them I was chasing Ruth with some sort of poisonous plant, yelling after her that if she ate the leaves, she'd live forever.

"You know you want to, you bitch!" I was yelling at her. "Smell the leaves! Like cookies in your grandma's kitchen! How can something that smells like that be bad for you?"

I grabbed a quick shower, a few mouthfuls of juice right from the carton, and then out the door I went. Roger always gets in early, but this morning I meant to beat him.

On the bus I read through the Barfield woman's letter again. Last night, fuzzy with drink and about two thousand jokes concerning lesbians, black people, and deaf nuns, all I could see was my dead brother's name. In the flat gray light of an overcast New York morning, sitting amidst the last wave of blue-collars and the first wave of white- and pink-collars—strangely serene in that uneasy mixture of *Posts* and *Wall Street Journals*—I read the letter again, this time better able to appreciate its multi-layered weirdness. Yet it was my brother's name my eyes kept returning to.

I stepped off the elevator and onto the fifth floor of 409 Park Avenue South at 7:50 AM, sure I must have beaten Roger by at least half an hour...but the lights in his office were already on, and I could hear his IBM clacking away. He was transcribing jokes, it turned out. And although his eyes were a trifle bloodshot, he didn't look any more hungover than I felt. Looking at him sitting there, I felt a kind of dull hate for Harlow Enders and all the suits above him, guys who—I'd bet on it—have never read a single one of the books they publish. Their idea of a page-turner is a profit-heavy annual report.

"They don't deserve you," I said.

He looked up, startled, then smiled. "You're here early. But I'm glad. I've got something to show you, John."

"I've got something to show you, too."

"All right." He pushed back from the typewriter, then looked at it with distaste. "The book about General Hecksler is going to be unpleasant, but the joke-book...man, this stuff is ugly." He looked at his current copy and read: "How many starving Biafarans can you get in an elevator car?"

"All of them," I said. Now that we were out of the smoke and laughter and yelled drink orders and the blaring juke that combine to make Flaherty's Flaherty's, the joke really wasn't funny at all. It was sad and ugly and dangerous. The fact that people would laugh at it was the worst thing about it.

"All of them," he agreed softly. "Fucking all of them."

"We don't have to do the book," I said. "There's no paper on it yet except for a couple of memos, and those could disappear."

"If we don't do it, someone else will," Roger said. "It's an idea whose time has come. It is, in its own stinky way, brilliant. You know that?"

I nodded.

"You want to know something else? I think it *is* going to be a bestseller. And I think the dozen or so sequels we'll do are going to be bestsellers. I think that for the next two years, jokes about niggers, kikes, blindmen, and dying minorities are going to have a...a vogue." His mouth gave a revolted downward twitch...and then he laughed. It was horrible, that laugh. Outraged and yet greedy. Then I heard myself laughing, too, and that was even more horrible.

"What did you want to show me, John?"

"This." I handed him the letter. His eyes went to the signature first, then widened. He looked up at me and I nodded. "Carlos's boss in Central Falls. Maybe we're not through with him after all."

"How did she get your address?"

"I have no idea."

"Do you think she could have gotten it from Detweiller?"

"She says she hates him."

“Doesn’t mean she does. Who’s Kevin Anthony? Any idea?”

“Kevin Anthony was my brother. When he was ten, he started losing the sight in one eye. It was a tumor. They took the eye, but the cancer had already gotten into his brain. He was dead within six months. My mother and father never got over it.”

The color left Roger’s face. “God, I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

“No, you didn’t. No one in New York does, so far as I know. Let alone Central Falls. I hadn’t even gotten around to telling Ruth.”

“And the date? Was that—”

I nodded. “The day he died, right. Of course none of this is top secret. The woman *could* have found out. Mediums wow their marks by knowing stuff they’re not supposed to know, and in the end it turns out to have been nothing but research and legwork. But—”

“You don’t believe it. I don’t, either.” Roger tapped the letter. “Bring the Water-Boy if you want to.”

“I wondered about that,” I said.

“When I was in high school, I went out for the football team. I was serious about it, fool that I was. I only weighed a hundred and thirty pounds, but I had visions of...I don’t know...being the Reading High School version of Knute Rockne, I suppose. I was serious, but no one else was. They just about killed themselves laughing. The team, the cheerleaders, the whole student body. Coach along with the rest of them. I ended up being the team waterboy. It became my nickname. It’s even in the yearbook. Roger Wade, Class of ’68, Drama Club, Glee Club, Newspaper. Ambition, to write the Great American Novel. Nickname, Waterboy.”

For a moment neither of us said nothing. Then he picked up the letter again. “She seems to imply that Iron-Guts Hecksler is still alive. Do you think that’s possible?”

“I don’t see how he could be.” But I *did* see, at least sort of. It had been a fire, after all. Nothing left but ashes and a few teeth. It could have been done. It suggested a degree of cunning I didn’t much like to think of, but yes—it could have been done.

“She wants us in Central Falls,” Roger said, turning off his typewriter and standing up. “Let’s give her what she wants. Still plenty of time to shag ass over to Penn Station and catch *The Pilgrim*. We can be in Rhode Island by noon.”

“What about the joke book? What about *The Devil’s General*?”

“Let those three deadbeats do a little work for a change,” Roger said, cocking his thumb at the short corridor which opens on the editors’ cubicles.

“You’re serious?”

“As a heart attack.”

And he was. At 9:40 we were stepping onto Amtrak’s *Pilgrim* in the bowels of Penn Station, armed with magazines and bagels; at 12:15 we were stepping off in Central Falls; at one o’clock we were getting out of a taxi on Alden Street, in front of the Central Falls House of Flowers. The place is a rather shabby New England saltbox rising behind a dead lawn still dotted with clumps of melting snow. To the rear is an absolutely *huge* greenhouse which does indeed stretch all the way to the next street. Outside of the Botanical Gardens in D.C., it’s the biggest damned greenhouse I’ve ever seen. But unlike the Botanical in D.C., this one is filthy—the windows are grimy, some mended with tape. We could see little shimmers of heat rising off the top—the apex, if you’ll pardon the word. During the weird Mardi Gras of the original Detweiller craziness, someone referred to it as a jungle—I don’t remember who, probably one of the cops—and today Roger and I could see why. It wasn’t just the heat rising off the glass panels and into the gray March chill; mostly it was the dark bulk of the plants behind those panels. In the dull light they looked black rather than green.

“My uncle would go bonkers,” Roger said. “If he was still alive, that is. Uncle Ray. When I was a kid, he’d always greet me with ‘Hey, I’m Uncle Ray from Green Bay.’ To which it was my job to reply, ‘Hey, Ray, what do you say?’ And *he’d* come back with ‘Can ya stay, or do ya have to leave today?’”

I suffered this rather bizarre reminiscence in silence. The fact was, I couldn’t take my eyes from the dark, crowding bulk of all those plants.

“Anyway, he was an amateur horticulturist, and he had a greenhouse. A little one. Nothing like this. Come on, John.”

I thought, being in a rhyming mood, he might add a verbal flip of the hip like *Let's get it on*, but he just resumed walking up the path. The porch steps were stained with a winter's worth of salt. Beyond them, in a window by the door, was an FTD placard, the one with winged Mercury on it, and a sign reading COME IN, WE'RE OPEN! The words were flanked with roses.

When we reached the steps I stopped for a second. “I just remembered—you said you had something to show me, too. Back at the office. But you never did.”

“Just as well. I believe it may be better shown when we get back.”

“Does it have anything to do with Riddley's room?” I don't know where that came from, exactly, but once it was out I knew I was right.

“Why, yes. It does.” He looked at me closely. Standing there at the foot of the steps with the collar of his overcoat turned up, framing his face, and a little color in his cheeks, it occurred to me that Roger Wade's a pretty good-looking guy. Better-looking now, probably, than a lot of the fellows who made fun of him back in high school, calling him Waterboy and God knows what else. Roger might even know that, if he's been back to any of his class reunions...but those voices from high school never quite leave our heads, do they? Maybe if you make enough money and bed enough women (I wouldn't know about those things, being both poor and shy), but I doubt if they leave even then.

“John,” he said.

“What?”

“We're delaying.”

And because I knew it was true—neither of us wanted to go into Carlos Detweiller's erstwhile place of employment—I said, “Delay no more” and lead the way up the steps.

A little bell jingled over the door when we went in. The next thing to hit me was the smell of flowers...but not *just* flowers. The thought that

crossed my mind was *Funeral parlor. Funeral parlor in the deep south, during a heat wave*. And although I've never been in the deep south during a heat wave—have never been in the deep south at all—I knew that was about right. Because there was another smell under the heavy perfume of roses and orchids and carnations and God knows what else. It was meaty smell, bordering on rancid. Unpleasant. Roger's mouth twitched downward at the corners. He smelled it, too.

Probably back in the forties and fifties, when the place had been a private home, the room we stepped into had been two rooms: the entry and the small front parlor. At some point a wall had been knocked down, making a large retail area with a counter running across it about three-quarters of the way in. There was a pass-through panel in the counter, now raised, and beyond it an open door leading into the greenhouse. It was from there that the worst of the smell was coming. The room was very hot. Behind the counter was a glassed-in coldbox (I don't know if you call that kind of thing a refrigerator or not—I suppose you must). There were bouquets of cut flowers and floral arrangements in there, but the glass was so fogged up—from the temperature difference between the two environments, I suppose—that you could barely tell the lilies from the chrysanthemums. It was like looking through a heavy English mist (and no, I've never been there, either).

To the left behind the counter, sitting under a blackboard on which various prices had been marked, was a man with the *Providence Journal* held open in front of his face. We could just see a few wisps of white hair floating like milkweed over an otherwise bald skull. Of Ms. Tina Barfield there was no sign.

"Hello!" Roger said heartily.

No response from the man with the paper. He just sat there with the headline showing—REAGAN WILL PULL THROUGH, DOCTORS VOW.

"Hello? Sir?"

No movement. A queer idea came to me then: that he wasn't really a man but a mannequin posed with the newspaper upraised. To foil

shoplifters, perhaps. Not that shoplifters would frequent flower shops in any great numbers, I wouldn't think.

"Pardon?" Roger said, speaking even louder. "We're here to see Ms. Barfield?"

No response. The paper didn't so much as rattle.

Feeling a little like a creature in a dream (although I hadn't completely parted with reality yet—that part I'll be coming to shortly), I stepped forward to the counter, where there was a bell beside a card reading PLEASE RING FOR SERVICE. I banged it smartly with my palm, producing a single sharp *ding!* I had a crazy urge to call "Front, please!" in my best snooty-New-York-desk-clerk voice, and suppressed it.

Slowly, very slowly, the paper came down. When it did, I wished it had stayed up. The descending *Journal* disclosed a face I had seen before, in the "Sacrifice Photos." There it had been distorted with pain, horror, and incredulity. Now the face of Norville Keen, author of such pearls as "Why describe a guest when you can see that guest," was utterly blank.

No. That's not right.

Shit—

(later)

I've been sitting here in front of this lousy little Olivetti for almost five minutes, trying to think of what *le mot juste* might be, and the best I can do is slack. The man's face not just being devoid of expression, you understand, but seemingly devoid of muscle tension as well. It had probably always been a long face, but now it seemed absurdly long, almost like a face glimpsed in one of those trick carnival mirrors. It hung off his skull like dough hanging from the lip of a mixing bowl.

Beside me, I heard Roger draw his breath in. He told me later that at first he thought we were looking at a case of Alzheimer's, but I believe that was a lie. We are modern men, Roger and I, a couple of lapsed Christians in the big city who go through our days under the rule of law and the assumption of...how shall I put this? Of empirical reality. We don't believe that reality to be benign, but we don't find it actually malignant, either. Yet we have

our secret hearts, of course, and these are closely attuned to the organs of our brute instinct. Those adrenal-fed organs slumber most of the time, but they're there. Ours awoke in the office of the Central Falls House of Flowers and told us the same thing: that the man looking at us from those dusty black expressionless eyes was no longer alive. That he was, in fact, a corpse.

(later)

I haven't had any dinner and don't want any—perhaps appetite will come back when I've finished this. I did go around the corner just now for a double espresso, however, and it's perked me up. Put a little heart back in me. And yet—tell the truth, shame the devil—I found myself more or less scuttling from streetlight to streetlight, not liking the dark, feeling watched. Not by any one person (certainly I didn't sense Carlos Detweiller lurking, perhaps with a pair of nice, sharp pruning shears at the ready) but by the dark itself. Those organs of instinct I mentioned are now fully awake, you see, and above all things they don't like the dark. But now I'm back in my cozy kitchen, under plenty of bright fluorescent light, with half a cup of hot, strong coffee by my right hand and things are better.

Because, you know, there *is* a good side to all this. You'll see.

All right, where was I? Ah yes, I know. The lowered newspaper and the blank stare. The *slack* stare.

At first neither Roger nor I could say anything. The man—Mr. Keen—didn't seem to mind; he just sat on his stool by the cash register and stared at us with the newspaper crumpled in his lap instead of in front of his face. The pages he was open to appeared to be a double-spread ad from a car dealership. I could see the words REFUSE TO BE UNDERSOLD.

Finally I managed, "Are you Mr. Keen? Mr. Norville Keen?"

Nothing. Just those staring eyes. To me they looked as dusty as stones in a dry ditch.

"You live in Carlos's building, right?" I asked. "Carlos Detweiller?"

Nothing.

Roger leaned forward and spoke very slowly and clearly, like someone addressing a man he believes to be deaf, mentally retarded, or both.

“We’re...looking...for...Tina...Barfield...Is...she...here?”

At first there was nothing in response to this, either. I was about to try my luck (all the time thinking somewhere in the bottom of my mind that it was no good trying to get information from the dead, people had been trying that for years without success), when, very slowly, Mr. Keen raised his hand. He was wearing a short-sleeved white shirt, and the muscles on his upper arm hung lax, sort of dangling off the bone. He pointed one long, yellow finger, and I thought of the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, pointing relentlessly at Ebenezer Scrooge’s forgotten grave. It wasn’t a grave Mr. Keen was pointing at, but the open door to the greenhouse.

“In there, is she?” Roger asked in an insanely hearty tone of voice; it was as if we’d all shared a mildly funny joke. Q. How many dead men does it take to run a greenhouse? A. Just Norv.

No response from Mr. Keen. Except for the pointing finger, that is. It’s impossible to convey how uncanny he was. I have asked myself again and again if he was breathing, *and I just don’t know*. It’s the pointing finger I remember best—the nail at the end of it was jagged and splintered, as if he had gnawed it. And his eyes. The dusty, expressionless stones of his eyes.

“Come on,” Roger said, and started for the raised pass-through.

I began, “Do you really think that’s a good...” but Roger obviously thought it *was* a good idea, because he kept on walking. Or maybe he’d just decided it was the only idea. And, not wanting to be left under Mr. Keen’s unblinking gaze, I followed him.

I hurried through the gap in the counter with my head slightly lowered, and as a result I ran right into Roger’s back and almost knocked him over. Something had stopped him cold about ten feet into the greenhouse, and when I raised my own head to look, I saw what it was.

And here, I find, John Kenton’s powers of description are totally inadequate to the task of reporting what we were looking at in that damned place. I got A’s in all my comp courses, I’ve published a good many sensitive stories in a good number of sensitive “little magazines” (none lately, however, as editing the Macho Man and Windhover series of books seems to have

blunted my own writing appetite considerably), and at Brown I was considered to be a leading contender for one of America's literary lion spots in the final years of the twentieth century (not least of all by yours truly). One can go on feeling that until one is tested. Today I was tested, and tonight I am found wanting (most of all by yours truly). Yet I think that if a Mailer or a Roth or a Bellow had been with us this afternoon when we stepped into the greenhouse which runs between Alden Steet and Isle Avenue (where it abuts on a high board fence covered with NO TRESPASSING signs), any of them would have found himself similarly daunted by the task of describing what lay on the other side of that door. Perhaps only a poet—a Wallace Stevens or a T.S. Eliot—would have really been up to the task. But since they're not here, I'll have to do my best.

The strongest sensation was of having stepped over the border into another world, a nightmarish ecosystem of gigantic ferns, prehistoric trees, and lush alien greenery. I'm not telling you that I didn't recognize any of the plants, because I did. Bordering the central aisle, for instance, crowding it so that walking in anything other than single-file would have been almost impossible, were what I took to be common ferns, although grown to uncommon size and height (Roger confirmed this, saying that they were overgrown Boston and maidenhair ferns, for the most part). Besides fringing the aisle at whose head we stood, their questing offshoots—rhizomes, if I remember the word Roger used—went snaking across the cracked and filthy orange tiles like hair-tufted tentacles of some sort.

Beyond them on both sides, towering in some cases all the way to the dirty glass panels at the peak of the greenhouse roof, were palm trees, banana trees (in some cases complete with tiny bunches of hanging green bananas that looked like insect cocoons), and great shouting bursts of rhododendron, mostly green but every here and there blooming out in convoluted clots of azalea. These huge clumps of growth were somehow frightening in their vitality; their packed greenery seemed to threaten, promising to awaken every winter-dormant allergy in your head and your sinuses...before enveloping you and crushing you to death, that was. And it was hot. It might

have been only eighty or so in the office, but out here it was ninety or maybe even a hundred. Steamy, too, the air oozing with humidity.

“Whoa,” Roger said in a tiny, almost breathless voice. He took off his overcoat with the slow motions of a sleepwalker, and I imitated him. “Good Christ, Johnny. Good Christ almighty.” He began to walk down the aisle, brushing the overhanging branches of the great ferns with his coat, which he’d draped over his arm, and looking around with wide, unbelieving eyes.

“Roger, maybe that’s not such a good idea,” I said. “Maybe we should just—” But he wasn’t paying any attention, so I hurried after him.

About thirty feet in, a new aisle crossed the one we’d started on. As if to add the final surreal touch, there was a street-sign planted in the dirt on our side of the intersection. An arrow pointing straight ahead was marked HERE. The ones pointing both ways along the crossing aisle were marked THERE and YONDER. It would have been nice to believe that someone had a sense of humor, perhaps inspired by Lewis Carroll, but I did not, indeed, believe that. The signs seemed somehow deadly serious. (Although I freely admit that this might have been just my perception—I wasn’t in a state of mind to appreciate wit.)

I caught up to Roger and again suggested we should go back. He again seemed not to hear me. “This is unreal,” he said. “Johnny, this is absolutely *unreal*.”

I couldn’t decide if I liked being called Johnny or not—it’s a nickname I haven’t heard much since junior high. As for the unreal quality of Ms. Barfield’s greenhouse, that seemed to me to require no remark. It was evident—not just before us, but now all around us. I’d already sweat through my shirt, and my heartbeat was booming in my own ears like a drum.

“Heliotrope there,” he said, pointing. “Hibiscus growing next to it and behind it. Absolutely *flourishing*, the whole works. Can you smell the ’biscus?”

I was getting hibiscus, all right, plus a dozen other floral and/or herbaceous scents, some as soft as dusk in Polynesia, some sharp and bitter. A squat hemlock and a large yew tree were growing catty-corner from where

we stood, seeming to reach for us with their stiff branches. But beneath all the mingled odors was that other one, that meaty mortuary smell.

Heatwave down south, I thought. First the train-wreck, then the power failure. Now there are forty bodies down there, mangled and beginning to stink. Even with all the flowers. Some of the corpses with their eyes open, dusty and blank, like stones in a dry ditch—

“Roger—”

I looked back from the tangle of yew and hemlock (I couldn’t imagine why anyone would want to grow such trees in a greenhouse, but there they were) and Roger was gone. I was alone.

Then I saw just a swirl of his overcoat down to my right, along the aisle marked THERE. I started to hurry after him, then stopped, reached into my pocket, and brought out a crumple of paper. It was, in fact, my copy of Harlow Enders’s memo, the one with the maniacal demand that we pull three *New York Times* bestsellers either out of thin air or from our own asses, whichever happened to be the more productive. I tore a piece from the bottom of it, crumpled it up, and tossed it into the center of the intersection of HERE, THERE, and YONDER. I watched it bounce to a stop on the dirty tiles, then hurried after Roger. I felt absurdly like Hansel forsaken by Gretel.

On THERE Street, the ferns and the Boston ivy crowded even closer; the leaves made an unpleasant whispering sound as they brushed the cloth of my increasingly damp shirt. Up ahead I saw another swirl of overcoat, and one of Roger’s shoes before he turned again, this time to the left.

“Roger!” I bawled. “*Will you for God’s sake wait for me?*”

I tore another piece of paper from the Enders memo, dropped it, and trotted along the new path in Roger’s wake. Here the way was flanked not by ferns but by overgrown cacti, bright green at their bases, fading to an unpleasant yellow shade at their tops, branching out in crooked arms, all of them armored with thick needles that ended in nasty blunt tips. Like the branches of the ferns, these seemed to reach into the path. Brushing the cactus arms wouldn’t just produce a nasty low whispering sound, though; if you brushed these, blood would flow. *If they grew any closer, a person couldn’t get through,*

I thought, and then it occurred to me that if Roger and I tried to return this way, we'd find the aisle barred. This place was a maze. A trap. And it was *alive*.

I realized I could hear more than just the beating of my heart. There was also a low, muted smacking sound, like someone without much in the way of manners sucking at soup. Only this sounded like a *lot* of someones.

Then another idea occurred to me: that wasn't Roger up ahead at all. Roger had been snatched into the jungle, and I was following someone who had stolen his topcoat and one of his loafers. I was being lured in, lured to the center, where some gigantic, flesh-eating plant awaited me, a venus fly-trap, a pitcher-plant, perhaps some species of homicidal vine.

But I came to the next corner (a sign marked this three-way intersection as OVER, BACK, and BEYOND) and Roger was standing there, coat now sagging from one hand, shirt plastered to his back in a dark tree-shape. I almost expected to see him standing on the bank of a jungle river, a sluggish tributary of the Amazon or the Orinoco running smack-dab through the middle of Central Falls, Rhode Island. There was no river, but the smells were denser and spicier, and that undersmell of spoiled flesh was even stronger. The combination was bitter enough to make my nose sting and my eyes water.

"Don't move to your right," Roger said, speaking almost absently. "Poison sumac, poison oak, and poison ivy. All growing together."

I looked and saw a massed bank of shiny leaves, most green, some a baleful scarlet, all seeming to almost drip their poisonous oils. *Touch that shit and you'd scratch for a year*, I thought.

"Johnny."

"We need to get out of here," I said. Then added: "If we can find our way, that is."

Why had we come in here to begin with? Why, when the fellow who had pointed our way had been so obviously dead? I had no idea. We must have been bewitched.

Certainly Roger Wade seemed bewitched. He spoke my name again — "Johnny" — as if I hadn't said anything.

“What?” I asked, looking mistrustfully at the shining mass of mingled poison oak, sumac, and ivy. That slobbery smacking sound was a good deal closer now. The man-eating plant, no doubt, anxious for its meal. New York Editors *tartare*, how yummy.

“These’re *all* poison,” he said in that same dreamy voice. “Poison or hallucinogenic or both. That’s datura, there, common name jimson weed—” Pointing to a nasty snarl of green growing from what looked like a pool of stagnant water. “—and darlingtonia...joe-pye weed...there’s nicotiana and nightshade...foxglove...euphorbia, the dangerous version of poinsettia... Christ, I think that one’s a night-blooming cereus.” He was pointing to a huge plant with its blooms tightly folded in against the dim gray light. Roger turned to me. “And stuff I don’t know. Lots of it.”

“You recognize the anthurium, of course,” said an amused voice from behind us.

We wheeled around and there stood a small woman with a mannish face and a stocky body beneath short, graying hair. She was wearing a gray suede beret and smoking a cigarette. She didn’t look hot at all.

“*That* one’s not dangerous, although of course the leaves of the rhubarb might interfere with your digestion— permanently, I wouldn’t be surprised—and the pods of the wisteria are also quite nasty. Which of you is John Kenton?”

“I am,” I said. “And you’re Ms. Barfield.”

“Miss,” she said. “I don’t buy that politically correct shit. I never did. You fellows shouldn’t be out here on your own.”

“I know that,” I said dismally.

I might have said something else, but before I could, Tina Barfield did an amazing thing. She raised one foot, shod in a sensible black shoe, snuffed her cigarette, and held it out to her side, where a branch heavy with pods of some sort overhung the path (I could no longer think of it as an aisle, even though it was floored with the cracked remains of orange tile; we were in the jungle, and when you’re there it’s paths you follow, not aisles...if, that is, you’re lucky enough to find one). One of the pods split open, becoming a

small, greedy mouth. It ate the still-smoldering cigarette butt out of her hand and then sealed itself shut again.

“Good God,” Roger said hoarsely.

“It’s a kind of catchfly,” the woman said indifferently. “Silly bugger will eat anything. You’d think it would choke, but nope. Now that you’re here, let me show you something.”

She brushed past us and strode on down the path, not even looking back to make sure we were following...which we were. She turned left, right, then right again. All the while those arrhythmic smacking sounds grew stronger. I noticed that she was dressed in a cranberry-colored pant suit, every bit as sensible as her shoes. She was dressed, I thought, like a woman who has places to go and things to do.

I can remember now how scared I was, but only in a vague fashion. How sure I was that we’d never get out of that horrible steamy place. Then she turned a final corner and stopped. We joined her.

“Holy...shit,” I whispered.

Ahead of us, the path ended. Or perhaps it had been overgrown. The plants blocking the way were a filthy grayish black, and from their branches flowers sprouted —I *think* they were flowers—the pinkish-red of infected wounds. They were long, like lilies on the verge of blooming, and they were opening and closing slowly, making those smacking sounds. Only now that we were upon them, it no longer sounded like smacking. It sounded like *talking*.

There comes a point where the mind either breaks or shuts itself down. I know that now. I was all at once filled with a species of surreal calm I’ve never felt before. On one level I knew that I was there, looking at those hideous, slow-talking blossoms. But on another, I rejected that completely. I was at home. In my bed. Had to be. I’d overslept the alarm, that was all. I wasn’t going to beat Roger to the office as I’d wanted to, but that was okay. *More* than okay. Because when I finally *did* wake up, all of this would be gone.

“What in God’s name are they?” Roger asked.

Tina Barfield looked at me with her eyebrows raised. It was the expression of a teacher calling on a student who should know the answer.

"They're the Tongues," I said. "Remember the letter? She said some of the Tongues had begun to wag."

"Good for you," the woman said. "You're maybe not as stupid as you acted when Carlos first got in touch with you."

For a moment no one said anything. The three of us simply looked at those blossoms opening and closing, their scarlet interiors winking. The soft, toothless whispering sound made me feel like clapping my hands over my ears. It was almost words, you see. Almost real talk.

Ah, fuck. Scratch that. It *was* real talk.

"Tongues?" Roger asked at last.

"They're widow's tongue," Tina Barfield replied. "Known in some European countries as witch's tongue or crone bane. Do you know what they're talking about, Mr. Kenton?"

"About us," I said. "Can we get out of here? I'm feeling sort of faint."

"Actually, I am too," Roger said.

"Leaving would be wise." She swept her arm around, as if to encompass that whole world of dank plants and powerful smells. "This is a thin place, always has been. Now it's thinner than ever. Quite dangerous, in fact. But you needed to see it in order to understand. The Dark Powers have been loosed. The fact that it was a brainless asshole like Carlos who loosed them makes no difference. He'll pay, of course. Meanwhile, it's unwise to tempt certain forces too far. Come on, boys."

I didn't like being called her boy, but I was willing enough to follow her, believe me. She lead us back quickly and with no hesitation. Once I clearly saw an earth-clotted root come snaking out of the foliage at the left side of THERE Street and slither around her shoe. She gave her foot an impatient jerk, snapping the root without even looking down. And all the time we could hear that low, whispering, smacking sound behind us. Tongues, wagging.

I looked down for the crumpled balls of paper I'd dropped, but they

were gone. Something had grabbed them just as the root had grabbed Tina Barfield's shoe and whisked my markers away into the undergrowth.

I wasn't surprised. At that point if John F. Kennedy had come strolling out of the bushes arm-in-arm with Adolf Hitler, I don't think I would have been surprised.

My espresso's gone. I promised myself I'd stay away from the booze tonight, but I've got a bottle of Scotch out in the kitchen and I need a little, after all. Right now. For medicinal purposes. If it does nothing else, perhaps it'll stop the shaking in my hands. I'd like to finish this before midnight.

(later)

There. Given the restorative powers of Dewers, I will finish by midnight. And there's no prolixity here, believe me. I'm writing as fast as I can, sticking to what feels like the absolute essentials...and writing it down feels oddly good, like recapturing some emotion you thought was gone forever. I'm still reeling from the events of the day, and there is a sense of having been torn free of a thousand things I always took for granted—a whole way of thinking and perceiving—but there's also an undeniable exhilaration. If nothing else, there's this to be grateful for: the thought of Ruth Tanaka has hardly crossed my mind. Tonight when I think of Ruth, she seems very small, like a person glimpsed through the wrong end of a telescope. That, I find, is a relief.

We were back in the office area in no time at all, following closely on Tina Barfield's heels. It felt warm in the office area after coming in from outside, but after returning from the greenhouse the office felt positively frigid. Roger slipped back into his overcoat, and I did the same.

The old man was sitting exactly where he had been, only with the paper once more raised in front of his face. Barfield lead us past him (I crabbed by in a kind of sideways scuttle, remembering that horror movie where the hand suddenly shoots out the grave and grabs one of the teenagers) and into a smaller office.

This room contained a desk, one metal folding chair, and a bulletin board. The top of the desk was empty except for a jar-top with a couple of mashed-out cigarette butts in it and an IN/OUT basket with nothing in

either tray. The bulletin board was empty except for a little cluster of thumb-tacks in the lower corner. There were a few picture-hooks spotted around, each located in a vaguely brighter square of cream-colored wallpaper. Sitting by the door were three smart suitcases of the same cranberry shade as the woman's suit, but I hardly needed to look at them to know that Tina Barfield was not long for the House of Flowers...or Central Falls, for the mater. I guess there's just something about old "Poop-Shit" Kenton that makes people want to put on their boogie shoes and get out of town. This is a trend that began with Ruth, now that I think of it.

Barfield sat down in the chair beside the desk and rummaged in the pocket of her jacket for her cigarettes. "I'd ask you boys to sit down," she said, "but as you can see, seating accommos are limited." As she tapped a cigarette out of the pack, she looked critically at Roger. "You look like shit, Mr...I didn't catch your name."

"Roger Wade. I feel like shit."

"Not really going to pass out, are you?"

"I don't think so. Could I have one of your cigarettes?"

She considered it, then held the pack out. Roger took one with a hand that was far from steady. She offered the pack to me. I started to decline it, then took one. I smoked like a chimney in college—it seemed to be the thing to do if you were creative, like growing your hair long and wearing jeans—but not since then. This seemed to be a good time to start again. As H.P. Lovecraft's *Necronomicon* might put it, When Tongues wag, behold, the lapsed smoker will return to his evil ways; even unto three packs a day will he return. And while I'm on this subject, I might as well confess that double espresso wasn't all I got at the little Korean deli around the corner; I scored a pack of Camels, as well. The unfiltered ones. Do not pass Go, do not collect two hundred dollars, go directly to Lung Cancer.

Carlos's former boss eased a book of matches from under the cigarette-pack cellophane, struck one, then lit John's cigarette and my own. That done, she shook the match out, dropped it in the jar-top, scratched another, and lit her own cigarette.

“Never three on a match,” she said. “Bad luck. Especially when you’re travelling. When you’re travelling, boys, you need all the luck you can get.”

I took a deep drag, expecting my head to swim. It didn’t. I didn’t even cough. It was as if I had never been away. That may say everything that needs to be said about my state of mind and emotion.

“Where are you going?” Roger asked her.

She looked at him coolly. “You don’t need to know that, my friend. What you do need to know I can tell you in five minutes or so. Which is good.” She glanced at her watch. “It’s quarter past one right now—”

Startled, I looked at my own watch. She was right. Only an hour since we’d stepped off *The Pilgrim*. A lot had happened since then. We were older and wiser men. Also more frightened men.

“—and I told the cab company to have someone here promptly at one-thirty. When that horn blows, boys, the conference is over.”

“You’re a witch, aren’t you?” I said. “You’re a witch, Carlos is a warlock, and there really *is* some sort of coven at work in Central Falls. This is like...” But the only thing I could think of was *Rosemary’s Baby*, and that sounded stupid.

She waved her hand impatiently, leaving a trail of blue-gray smoke behind. “We’re not going to waste our time bandying words, are we? That’d be *primo* stupid. If you want to call me a witch, fine, yeah, I’m a witch. And if you want to call a bunch of people who mostly got together to use the Ouija board and eat deviled ham sandwiches a coven, be my guest. But don’t make the mistake of calling Carlos a warlock. Carlos is an idiot. But he’s a *dangerous* idiot. A *powerful* idiot. Luckily for you boys, he’s also a kind of golden goose. Or could be. Carlos is like some of the stuff out there in the greenhouse. Foxglove, for instance. You eat it in the woods, it can stop your heart like a cheap pocket-watch. But if you process it and inject it—”

“Presto, digitalis,” Roger said.

“Give that boy the kewpie-doll,” she said, nodding. “I don’t have time to give you fellas a complete history of the Dark Arts and Powers, and wouldn’t even if I *did* have time. Except for geeks and dweebs, it’s as boring as anything else. Besides, you wouldn’t believe the half of it.”

“After what we saw in there, I’d believe anything,” Roger muttered.

She puffed her cigarette, flared her nostrils, and blew out twin jets of smoke. “Bolshevely! People always *say* stuff like that, but it ain’t true. Ain’t true a minute. Take it from me, big boy, you wouldn’t believe the half of it. But you believe enough right now, maybe, to pay attention to what I’m telling you. Which is why I brought you here, okay?”

She mashed her cigarette out in the jar-top and peered at us through the rising smoke.

“Lesson one, chilluns: whatever Carlos told you, take it as the literal truth. He’s too dumb to lie. Whatever you saw in those pictures he sent you, take that as the literal truth, too. As for the plant he sent...use it! Why the fuck not? You should have *something* out of this, if only for the inconvenience he’s caused you. Use it, be careful of it, and don’t let it get grow too far. Ouija says SAFE—I asked—so you’re okay for now. There’ll be bloodshed, that’s unavoidable, but unless they have help, the dark forces can only take their own. As long as your new houseplant doesn’t get any innocent blood, everything is jake...in the short run, at least. Ouija says SAFE. Of course if you play tag around the buzz-saw too long, sooner or later someone is gonna get cut. Just a fact of life. Point is this: when you’ve got what you need, give that plant a nice DDT shower. Don’t be greedy. *Adios* ivy. *Adios* Carlos.”

“There *is* no plant,” I said. “I mean, he wrote me a letter promising to send one, but he used a rather pitiful alias which I saw through at once. I sent Riddley, he’s our mail-room guy, a memo telling him to dump it down the incinerator, if it came. So far as I know, it never did.”

“It came,” Roger said quietly.

“It did? When? It must have been after Riddley left for his mother’s fu—”

“Nope,” Roger said. “It came before. Riddley’s got it set up in its own little pot, which it has almost entirely outgrown. Damn thing’s growing like a weed.” He glanced at Tina Barfield. “If you’ll pardon the term.”

“Why not? It *is* a weed. A rather special form of ivy imported from... well, from another place. Let’s leave it at that, boys, what do you say?”

“In the interest of speedy discourse, I guess Buttwhet say otay,” Roger replied, and I gave a hearty, surprised guffaw of laughter. A moment or two later, Tina Barfield joined in. It didn’t make us friends, good God no, but it eased the atmosphere a little bit. Restored a sense of rationality, no matter how false that sense might have been.

Roger turned to me, looking slightly apologetic. “That was what I was going to show you this morning,” he said. “The plant in Riddley’s cubicle. I got curious about Herb and Sandra’s memos...the good smells they reported coming from in there...and I walked down to take a look. I—”

“Maybe you boys could catch up on all that stuff going back to New York on the Metropolitan,” Barfield said. “I’m sure it will make the miles just fly by. Myself, I could care less. And *tempus* continues to *fugit*. Anyone want to freebase a little more nicotine?”

We both took a cigarette; so did she. There followed the ritual of the two matches.

“How’d you know we’re going back on the train?” I asked her. “OUIJA?”

“I read those Windhover books,” she said, apparently apropos nothing. “Romance is okay, but what I really like is the rough sex.” She surveyed us with gleaming eyes, perhaps trying to decide if either of us might be capable of rough sex. “Anyway, I don’t need the Ouija board to know a couple of guys working for the company that publishes *those* probably wouldn’t be flying.”

“Thanks a pantload, sweetheart,” Roger said. He didn’t sound amused; he sounded genuinely angry.

“What I want to know,” I said, “is why you’re giving us all this help.”

“Good point,” Roger said. “Beware of Greeks bearing gifts and all that. If anything, you should be pissed at us. After all...” He looked around the bare office. “...it looks like all of this has kind of changed your lifestyle.”

“Yep,” she agreed, and showed two rows of tiny but sharp-looking teeth in a smile. “Let me out of jail, that’s what you did. What *I’m* trying to do is to thank you. Also to try and make myself safe from Carlos. Whose obituary

you'll soon be reading, by the way. I'm surprised he's not dead already. He's stepped out of the protective circle. There are *things* out there—" She jabbed her cigarette toward the greenhouse... also, I suspect, to some horrible place beyond it. "—and they're all hungry. When Carlos sent you those pictures, and his idiotic manuscript, and finally the plant, he opened himself up to those things. But dead or alive, he can still get me. Unless, that is, I do a genuine Good Turn." I clearly heard the capital letters in her voice. So did Roger; I asked him later. "Which I'm trying to do."

She glanced at her watch again.

"Listen to me, boys, and don't ask questions. Carlos's power came to him from his mother, who *wasn't* an idiot...except in her blind love for her son, which finally got her killed. Since 1977, when that happened, the group here—the coven, if you like, although we never called ourselves that—has been in Carlos Detweiler's power. There's a story by a man named Jerome Bixby called 'It's a *Good* Life.' Read it. The situation in that story was our situation. Carlos killed his mother—by accident, I'm almost sure, but he killed her, all right. He killed Don, my husband, and that was no accident. Neither was what happened to Herb Hagstrom. Herb was supposedly Carlos's best friend, but he crossed him and there was a car accident. Herb was decapitated."

Roger winced. I could feel my face doing the same thing.

"The rest of us survived by kowtowing to Carlos...going along with his so-called sacred seances, although they were more and more dangerous...and we survived. But survival isn't the same thing as living, boys. Never was, never will be."

"The old fellow out there doesn't look like he's even surviving," Roger said.

"Norville," she agreed. "Carlos's last victim. Sounds like something out of the books you publish, don't it? He had the living heart torn right out of his chest, and do you know why? Do you know what his biggest sin against Carlos was? Norv had a little wine one night—this was around the turn of the year—and beat Carlos three times running at Crazy Eights. Carlos likes to win at Crazy Eights. He...took offense."

“Mr. Keen’s really dead,” I murmured. I mean, I knew he was, I think I knew it from the instant he lowered his newspaper and looked at us with those awful dusty eyes, but rationality dies hard. At least in the daytime. Now, after five hours at this Olivetti, I find I have no trouble believing it at all. When the sun comes up again that may change, but as for now I have no trouble whatsoever believing it.

“He’s *undead*,” she corrected. “He’s a zombie. What’s keeping him at least partly alive is my psychic force. When I’m gone, he’ll fall over. Not that he’ll know or care, God bless him.”

“And the plants in the greenhouse?” Roger asked. “What about them?”

“Rhode Island Electric will eventually turn off the electricity for non-payment. When the lights go, the heat goes. Everything out there will die, and good riddance. I’m tired of selling magic mushrooms to a bunch of bikers and aging hippes, anyway. Fuck them and the pink horses they ride in on.”

From outside came the long blat of a horn. Tina Barfield got up immediately, briskly butting the remains of her cigarette in the jar-top.

“I’m off!” she said. “The wide open spaces await. Just call me Buckaroo Banzai.”

“You can’t go yet!” Roger said. “We have questions—”

“Yeah-yeah-right-right,” she said. “If a tree falls in the forest and there’s no one around to hear it, does it make any noise? If God made the world, who made God? Did John Kennedy really fuck Marilyn Monroe? Help me with my bags and maybe you’ll get a few more answers.”

I took one and Roger took two. Tina Barfield opened the door and swept out into the office. Norville Keen, the Undead Florist of Central Falls, had lowered his newspaper again and was staring straight ahead. No, his chest wasn’t moving. Not at all. Looking at him hurt my mind in some deep place that has never been hurt before today, at least that I can remember.

“Norv,” she said, and when he didn’t look at her she said something short and guttural. *Uhlahg!* is what it sounded like. Whatever it was, it worked. He stared around. “Open your shirt, Norv.”

“No,” Roger said uneasily. “That’s okay, we don’t need to—”

“I think you do,” she said. “Going back on the train, your normal way of thinking is going to reassert itself and you’ll start doubting everything I just told you. This, though...this’ll stick to your ribs.” Then, even more sharply: “*Uhlahg!*”

Mr. Keen unbuttoned his shirt, slowly but steadily. He pulled it open, exposing his gray tideless chest. Running down the center of it was a horrifying bloodless wound like a long vertical mouth. In it we could see the gray and bony bar of his sternum.

Roger turned away, one hand raised to his mouth. From behind it came a dry coughing sound. As for me, I just looked. And believed everything.

“Button up,” Tina Barfield said, and Norville Keen began to comply, his long fingers moving just as slowly as they had before. The woman turned to Roger and said, with just a hint of malicious humor in her curiosity: “Now you’re going to pass out, yeah?”

Very slowly, Roger straightened up. He dropped his hand from his mouth. His face was white but composed. There was no tremble to his lips. I was proud of him just then. I had been stunned beyond such a reaction, you see; Roger hadn’t been, but had managed to hold onto his coffee and bagel just the same.

“I’m not,” he said, “but thank you for your concern.” He paused, then added: “Bitch.”

“The bitch is trying to be your fairy godmother,” she said. “Can you carry those, chum?”

Roger picked up the two suitcases, then staggered. I took one of them and he gave me a grateful, sickish smile. We followed her onto the porch. The air was damp and chilly—no more than forty-five degrees—but I never tasted air that was sweeter. I took great breaths of it, smelling only the usual odors of industrial pollution. After the greenhouse, a few hydrocarbons smelled wonderful. At the curb, a Red Top Cab was idling.

“Just a couple of other things,” Barfield said. She was every bit as sharp and pointed as a big executive—Sherwyn Redbone himself, perhaps—clos-

ing a business deal. As she talked she made her way first down the salt-stained steps and then along the cracked concrete path. “First, when you hear Carlos is dead, go on behaving as if he’s alive...because for awhile he will be. As a *tulpa*.”

“Like the one that infested Richard Nixon,” I said.

“Right, right—” She stopped at the head of the three steps leading down to the sidewalk and looked at me very sharply indeed. “How’d you know about that?” And before I could answer, she answered herself. “Carlos, of course. When he was alive, Norv used to tell him, ‘Carlos, you’ll talk yourself dead if you don’t watch out.’ Which is damned near what he’s done.

“Anyway, Carlos won’t hang around long; he won’t be able to. Two months, maybe three at the outside. Because he’s stupid. Brains tell, even on the Other Side.”

Once again I heard the capitals. She went down the steps to the sidewalk. The cab driver got out and opened his trunk. We stowed the bags inside next to several boxed VCRs that looked, to my admittedly inexperienced eye, as if they might have been stolen.

“Pop back into the car, big boy,” Tina told the cabbie. “I’ll be with you shortly.”

“Time’s money, lady.”

“No,” she said, “time ain’t nothin but time. Still, drop your flag if it makes you feel better.”

The cabbie retired to the driver’s seat of the Red Top. Tina turned once more to us—a neat little woman, small but broad in the hip and shoulder, dressed in her best travelling suit and her smart suede beret.

“Treat him like he’s still alive,” she said. “As for the plant, it will soon begin its work—”

“It’s already begun it,” I said, because now I understood a lot. I hadn’t even seen it, but I understood a lot. Herb gets a whiff of it and thinks up *The Devil’s General*. Sandra gets a whiff and comes up with the idea for a book of scabrous jokes.

Barfield cocked one carefully plucked eyebrow at me. “Like the man

said, ‘Son, you ain’t seen nothing yet.’ It needs blood to really get rolling, but don’t worry. The blood it will draw is the blood of evil or the blood of insanity. Unlike our fucked-up courts, the powers of darkness don’t distinguish between the two. And any *innocent* blood it drinks can only come from you guys. So don’t give it any.”

“What do you take us for?” Roger asked.

She gave him a cynical look but said nothing...on that subject, at least. Instead, she turned back to me.

“It’s going to grow like a sonofabitch. And it’s going to grow *everywhere*, but no one will see it except for those who are already in its circle. To anyone else, it’ll look like nothing but an innocent little ivy in a pot, not very healthy. You have to keep people away from it. If you have a reception area, rub garlic all over the door between there and the editorial offices. That should keep the damn thing where it belongs. People who want to go further into your offices than the reception area should be discouraged. Unless you don’t like ’em, of course; in that case invite ’em in and give ’em a beer.”

“An invisible plant,” Roger said. He seemed to be tasting it.

“An invisible *psychic* plant,” I said, thinking of General Hecksler.

“Right on both counts,” she said. “And now, boys, I’m going to put an egg in my shoe and beat it. Have a nice day, have a nice life and...oh, almost forgot.” She turned to me again. “OUIJA says stop wasting your time. The one you’re looking for is in the purple box on the bottom shelf. Way in the corner. Okay? Got it?”

She was around to the back door of the cab and opening it before either of us could say anything else. I don’t know about Roger, but I felt as if I had at least a thousand questions. I just didn’t know what any of them were.

She turned back one final time. “Listen, boys. Don’t fuck around with that thing. When you’ve got enough, *kill it*. And be careful. It can read minds. When you come for it, it’ll know.”

“How in God’s name are we supposed to know when we’ve got enough?” I blurted. “That’s not exactly something people are good at figuring out for themselves.”

“Good question,” she said. “I respect you for asking it. And you know what? I may actually have an answer for you. OUIJA says LISTEN RIDDLEY. That’s Riddley with two d’s. Maybe the spelling’s a mistake, but the board rarely—”

“It’s not a mistake,” I said, “he’s—”

“Riddley’s the janitor, Ms. Barfield,” Roger finished.

“I told you I hate that politically correct shit,” she told him. “Don’t you *listen*?” And then she was into the cab. She poked her head out the window and said, “I don’t care if he’s the janitor or Chester the Molester. When he tells you it’s time to quit, you boys do yourselves a big favor and *quit*.” Her head drew back inside. A moment later she was out of our lives. At least I think she is.

I’m going to take a bathroom break, have one more drink, and then try to put a button on this. With any luck, I’ll actually be able to sleep a little bit tonight.

11:45 P.M.

Okay, it was *two* drinks, so sue me. And now it’s time for that fabled finishing burst.

Roger and I didn’t talk much about what had happened on the way back. I don’t know if that would sound strange to someone reading these pages (now that Ruth’s out of my life, I can’t imagine who that someone would be), but it seemed perfectly comfortable to me, the most normal of all reactions. I’ve never been in a shooting war, but I imagine people who’ve been in a terrible battle and come out unscathed probably behave a lot like Roger and I did while returning to the city on the Metropolitan. We talked mostly about things that didn’t concern us personally. Roger said something about the loony-tune who’d shot Ronald Reagan and I mentioned that I’d read a galley of the new Peter Benchley and hadn’t cared for it much. We talked a bit about the weather. Mostly, though, we were silent. We did not compare notes; we made no effort to deconstruct or rationalize our visit to the House of Flowers. In fact, I believe we only mentioned our mad field-

trip to Central Falls once during the entire two-hour train ride. Roger came back from the club car with sandwiches and Cokes. He passed me my share and I thanked him. I also offered to pay him. Roger laughed and said we were on expense account today—“visiting a potential author” was how he intended to write it up. And then he said in a casual just-asking voice, “That old man was really dead, wasn’t he?”

“No,” I said. “He was *undead*.”

“A zombie.”

“Right.”

“Like in *Macumba Love*.”

“I don’t know what that is.”

“A movie,” he said. “The sort of thing Zenith House undoubtedly would have novelized if we’d been around in the fifties.”

And that was it.

We took a cab from Penn Station to 409 Park Avenue South, Roger once more getting a receipt and putting it carefully into his wallet. I was impressed, believe me.

The cabbie let us out across the street, in front of Smiler’s. There’s a new bum there—an old lady with wild white hair, the usual two plastic bags filled with unlikely possessions, a cup for passersby to put change into, and a guitar that looked a thousand years old. Around her neck she wore a sign reading LET JESUS GROW IN YOUR HEART. I shuddered at the sight of it. I remember thinking, *I hope one lousy zombie hasn’t made me superstitious*, and then turning away to hide a smile. Roger had gone into the grocery, and I didn’t want the homeless lady to think I was laughing at her. It might make waiting for Roger uncomfortable. They don’t mind getting into your face, those homeless people. In fact, I think they like it.

“Hey-you,” she said in a raspy, almost mannish voice. “Gimme-buck-I’ll-play-ya-tune.”

“Tell you what,” I said. “I’ll give you two if you won’t.”

“Fuck-yeah-gotta-deal,” she said, which was why Roger caught me stuffing two hard-earned dollars into a crazy lady’s tin cup just as he was coming

out of the store. He had a brown bag in one hand and an aspirin tin in the other. As he approached the corner, he popped the tin open and shook several tablets out. He tossed these into his mouth and began crunching them up. The thought of that taste made my eyes ache.

"You really shouldn't give them money," he said as we waited for the WALK light. "It encourages them."

"You really shouldn't chew aspirin, either, but you're doing it," I said. I was in no mood for a lecture.

"True," he said, and offered me the tin as we crossed to our side of the street. "Want to try it?"

The odd thing was, I did. I took a couple and tossed them into my mouth, hating and relishing the bitter taste of the dissolving pills in equal measure. From behind us came a discordant jangle of guitar strings followed by a high and presumably female voice beginning to shriek "Just A Closer Walk With Thee."

"Inside, quick," Roger said, holding the lobby door for me. "Before my ears start to bleed."

The Metropolitan left Central Falls late and arrived at Penn Station late—it's an Amtrak thing—and the lobby of our building was almost deserted. When I glanced at my watch in the elevator, I saw that it was pressing quarter of six. "Bill, Sandra, and Herb," I said. "What are you going to tell them?"

Roger looked at me as though I were nuts. "Everything," he said. "It's the only thing I *can* do. The plant in Riddley's closet ain't exactly Sweet William. Which reminds me—along with everything else, we've got to get a locksmith in tomorrow to change the lock on that door. Want to know my nightmare? Riddley comes back from Sweet Home Alabama, all unsuspecting, drops by on Sunday afternoon—"

"Why would he do that?" I asked.

"I have no idea," Roger said testily. "It's a *nightmare*, didn't I say that? And nightmares rarely make sense. That's part of what makes them scary. Maybe he wants to check that the wastebaskets got emptied while he was

gone, or something. Anyhow, he goes into his cubby, and while he's feeling around for the light-switch, something slithers around his neck."

I didn't have to ask him what sort of thing. All I had to do was remember the root that had slid its slim, earth-clotted length around Tina Barfield's shoe.

The elevator doors opened on five and we walked down the hall, past BARCO NOVEL-TEAZ and CRANDALL & OVITZ (a couple of elderly but still cannibalistic lawyers specializing in litigation and liability) and my own personal favorite, Gimme The World Travel Agency. At the far end, guarded by a pair of blessedly plastic ferns, were our double doors with ZENITH HOUSE and AN APEX COMPANY on them in gold letters, the gold as fake as the ferns.

Roger shook out his keys and opened the door. Inside was a receptionist's office with a desk, a gray carpet that at least tried not to look industrial, and walls with travel posters on them which Sandra had promoted from Rita Durst in Gimme The World. Other publishers no doubt decorate their reception areas with covers of their books blown up to poster-size, but an office decorated with oversized jacket art from *Macho Man: Hanoi Firestorm*, *Ravisher's Moon*, and *Rats from Hell* probably wouldn't have elevated anyone's mood.

"Tomorrow's one of LaShonda's days," I reminded Roger. LaShonda McHue comes in three days a week: Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. She rarely ventures beyond her desk (where she mostly does her nails, calls her friends, and prinks at her hair with an Afro comb), and when Tina Barfield talked about "the circle," I don't think she meant our part-time receptionist.

"I know," Roger said. "Luckily, the ladies' room is down the hall past Novel-Teaz, and that's the only place she ever goes."

"But whatever can go wrong—"

"—will go wrong," he finished. "Yeah, yeah. I know." He fetched a deep sigh.

"So are you going to show me our new mascot?"

"I suppose I better, hadn't I?"

He lead me down the hall past his office and the other editorial offices.

We made the little left-hand jog around the corner, where there were two more doors with the water-fountain between them. One of these doors was marked JANITOR; the other MAIL AND STORAGE. Roger picked through his keys again and put the right one in the lock of Riddley's cubby. "I locked it this morning before we left," he explained.

"Under the circumstances, that was a pretty good call," I said.

"I thought so," he agreed. I was peripherally aware of him looking at me curiously as he pushed the door open. Then I was aware of nothing but the smell. That heavenly smell.

My grandmother used to take me to the store with her when she did her shopping—this was back in Green Bay—and what I liked the best was to push the button which operated the coffee-grinder in aisle three. What I smelled now was the wonderful aroma of fresh Five O'Clock Dark Roast. I could nearly see the bag with its red label, and I had a memory, so clear it was almost reality, of a small boy poking his nose into that bag for one final deep whiff before rolling the bag closed.

"Oh, wonderful," I said in a small voice that was close to tears. My Gram has been dead for almost twenty years, but for that one moment she was alive again.

"What is it for you?" Roger asked. He sounded almost greedy. "I got strawberry shortcake, fresh out of the oven. Still hot enough to melt the whipped cream."

"It's coffee," I said, stepping in. "Fresh-ground coffee." I could even see the machine with its chrome chute and its three settings: Fine, Extra-Fine, and Coarse.

Then I saw the cubbyhole, and could say no more.

Like the greenhouse in Central Falls, it had become a jungle. But whereas in Tina Barfield's jungle there had been plants of many kinds, here there was just ivy, ivy, and more ivy. It grew everywhere, twining over the handles of Riddley's broom and window-washer, climbing along the shelves, running up the walls to the ceiling, where it grew along the tiles in tough, zig-zagging strands from which brilliant green leaves hung, some still open-

ing. Riddley's mop-bucket has itself become a large steel plant-pot from which a huge bush of ivy rises in a tangle of tendrils, leaves, and...

"What are those flowers?" I asked. "Those blue flowers? Never seen anything like those before, especially not on an ivy plant."

"You've never seen anything like any of this before, period," he said.

I had to admit I had not. On one of the shelves, just below several tins of floor-wax which had been almost buried in an avalanche of green leaves, was a tiny red clay pot. That was what the plant had originally come in. I was sure of it. There was a tiny plastic tag propped against it. I leaned closer and read what was written there through a convenient gap in the leaves:

**HI!
MY NAME IS ZENITH
I AM A GIFT TO JOHN
FROM ROBERTA**

"That bastard Riddley," I said. "And just by the way, are we really supposed to believe that anyone coming in here would see nothing but one modest little ivy-plant? None of the rest of this..." I waved my arm.

"I can't answer that question for sure, but it's certainly what the lady said, isn't it? And the lady also said that anyone coming in here might not get out again."

I saw that one tendril had already grown out the door.

"You better get some garlic," I breathed. "And quick."

Roger opened the bag he'd brought out of Smiler's. I looked in and was not exactly surprised to see that it was full of garlic buds.

"You're on top of things," I said. "I have to give it to you, Roger—you're on top."

"It's why I'm the boss," he said solemnly. We stared at each other for a moment, then began to giggle. It was a supremely weird moment...but not *the* supremely weird moment. I suddenly realized I had an idea for a novel. This came to me, it seemed, out of a clear blue sky. *That* was the supremely weird moment.

And I take that clear-blue-sky thing back. The idea wafted to me on the

scent of Five O’Clock Coffee, the kind I used to grind for my grandmother in Price’s All-Purpose Grocery, back in Green Bay when the world was young...or when I was. I’m certainly not going to summarize my Grand Idea here—not at five past midnight—but take it from me when I say it’s a *good* idea, one that makes *Maymonth* look like what it really was: a dry-wind graduate thesis masquerading as a novel.

“Holy shit,” I breathed.

Roger looked at me, almost slyly. “Getting a few interesting notions, are you?”

“You know it.”

“Yes,” he said, “I do. I knew we had to go to Central Falls and see the Barfield woman even before you showed me that letter, Johnny. I got the idea in here. Last night. Come on, let’s get out of here. Let’s...” His eyes sparkled in a funny way. I’d seen it before, but couldn’t remember quite where. “Let’s let it grow in peace.”

We spent the next fifteen minutes busting garlic buds and rubbing them up the sides of the door between Reception and Editorial. Over the lintel and the jamb, as well. The smell made my eyes water, but I suppose it’ll be a little better by tomorrow. At least I hope so. By the time we finished, the place smelled as I imagine a turn-of-the-century tenement in Little Italy might, with all the women making spaghetti sauce.

“You know,” I said as we finished, “we’re nuts to be marking the boundary out here. What we *should* be doing is putting garlic on the door to Riddley’s janitor-closet. Keeping it in there.”

“I don’t think that’s the way it’s supposed to work,” he said. “I think we’re supposed to more or less let it loose in Editorial.”

“Watch us grow,” I said. I should have been afraid—I’m afraid now, God knows—but I wasn’t then. And I had placed that look in his eyes, too, that feverish sparkle. My best friend in the fifth grade was a kid named Randy Wettermark. And one day, when we stopped in the candy store after school for Pez or something, Randy hawked a Spiderman comic-book. Just put it under his jacket and walked out. Roger had that same look on his face.

Christ, what a day. What an amazing day. My brain feels the way your gut does when you eat not just too much but *much* too much. I'm going to bed. Hope to heaven I sleep.

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.