

THE

BY  
STEPHEN KING



BOOK ONE  
ZENITH RISING





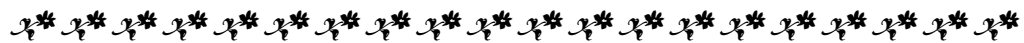
# T H E P L A N T

*by* Stephen King

part six of a novel in progress

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EDITOR'S NOTE

*Z* is almost certainly the most interesting document in the collection which makes up this story. Although remarkably coherent, the careful reader must certainly detect the work of various voices, most or all of them already encountered in the various memos, letters, and journals presented so far. In addition to this, the discovered manuscript (it would harm the unfolding story to say much about the circumstances of that discovery here) shows many different typefaces and editorial hands. About thirty per cent of it was typed on a portable Olivetti, which can be positively identified as John Kenton's by the flying d and the distinctive crack running through the capital S. Another thirty per cent is certainly the work of Riddley Walker's 1948 office-model Underwood, which was found on the desk of his study in Dobbs Ferry. The other typefaces are those produced by the sort of IBM Selectrics then in use at the Zenith House offices. Ten per cent of the manuscript was typed with the IBM type-ball "Script," which was favored by Sandra Jackson. Twenty per cent of the manuscript is in IBM's "Courier" format, which was favored by both Herb Porter and Roger Wade. The remaining work is in IBM's "Letter Gothic," which can be found on many (although not all) of Bill Gelb's business letters and in-house memos.

The most interesting thing about this collaboration, which is remarkably unified in spite of the stylistic interplay, is the fact that it is told in the third-person omniscient style. Information is conveyed by use of a shifting perspective, and include many incidents at which none of the narrators—Kenton, Wade, Jackson, Gelb, or Walker—were present. The reader may wonder if these passages (several of which are interwoven below) are informed speculation based on the available evidence, or if they are pure imagination, no more to be believed than the plots of Anthony LaScorbia's "big bug" books. To these possibilities, the editor would first like to remind the reader that there was a *sixth* participant at Zenith House during those months in 1981, and then to suggest that if what Kenton, Wade, *et. al.* suspected was true—that the ivy sent to them was telepathic and to some degree manipulative—then perhaps the true narrator of *Z* was Zenith the common ivy itself (or *himself*; to use Riddley Walker's most common pronounal reference).

Although insane by all normal standards of deduction, the idea has a certain persuasive charm when taken in context with other events of that year—many verifiable, such as the crash of the commuter plane on which Tina Barfield was a passenger—and offers at least one explanation for the manuscript. The idea that a telepathic ivy plant turned the typewriters of five previously normal editors into Ouija boards is an outrage to rational thought; with that much, no sane person could fail to agree. And yet there is a certain pull to the idea, at least for this reader, a sense that yes, this is how these things happened, and yes, this is how the truth of those days came to be written down.

S. K.

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*From Z, an unpublished manuscript*

April 4, 1981  
490 Park Avenue South  
New York City  
Skies fair, winds light, temperature 50 F.

9:16 A.M.

RainBo Soft Drinks has its New York offices on the third floor of the building which stands at 490 Park Avenue South. Although small (market share as of 3/1/81: 6.5%), RainBo is enthusiastic, a young and growing concern. In early April of 1981, the RainBo top brass certainly has something to be excited about: they have gotten the rights (for a price they can afford) to commercially exploit the classic Harold Arlen composition "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." They are tooling up a whole new PR campaign around the song.

On this Saturday morning, executive vice president George Patella ("I'm a knee man" is his favorite singles-bar pickup line...not that he is single) has driven in from his home in Westport because a brilliant concept has come to him in the middle of the night. He wants to memo it and lay it on his superior's desk before noon. And after noon, there's a certain new titty-bar over on 7th Avenue that he's been meaning to check out.

His head full of animated soda bottles dancing over the rainbow in cunning little red shoes, George Patella barely registers the man who follows him in, catching the door and murmuring "Thank you" after George has used his key. All he notices is an older gentleman, in his late sixties or early seventies, handsome in a haggard sort of way, and wearing a green military uniform.

If asked later to be more specific about this uniform, Mr. Patella would be unable to add much, although he is by nature a friendly and helpful man (albeit one with a tendency to put his wedding ring into a rear compartment of his wallet on certain occasions). If his head hadn't been so full of those

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dancing soda bottles, he might have seen that the elderly fellow with the steel gray brush-cut wore no insignia and no badges of rank. If chivvied into total recall (or hypnotized into it), Patella might have said this of the man who stepped into the elevator with him that Saturday morning: he was wearing a dark green shirt, a black tie held to the shirt with a plain gold bar, and dark green pants, sharply creased and cuffed, over brightly shined black shoes. An outfit of military *aspect*, in other words, but one that could have been purchased at the Army-Navy store a block over for a total cost of under forty dollars.

It is the *way* he wears what he has on that gives the impression of military dress; once the older gentleman has pushed the button for his floor (George Patella has no idea which one), he stands perfectly straight and perfectly still, with his hands clasped in front of him and his eyes on the lighted floor-indicator. He doesn't fidget or call attention to himself in any way, certainly not by attempting to chat. And there is nothing in his posture which suggests discomfort. This is a man who has stood so—not quite at attention, but certainly not at ease—many times before. His face communicates that. That, and the idea that he perhaps enjoys such a posture.

All and all no surprise that George Patella, preoccupied with his own concerns (he's too deep within them to even realize he's softly whistling "Somewhere Over the Rainbow"), does not question the man's right to be there. All else aside, the man in the green shirt and trousers radiates that sense of right place-right time. And certainly George Patella does not recognize the man sharing his elevator car as General Anthony "Iron-Guts" Hecksler (U.S. Army Ret.), madman, murderer, and fugitive from justice. Patella gets off on Three to write his memo about the dancing soda bottles. The man in the green pants and shirt stays aboard the elevator car. Patella the soft-drink seller has one last glimpse of the military fella as he (Patella) turns the corner toward the RainBo offices: an elderly gent standing quietly erect, looking straight ahead, hands clasped in front of him, the fingers of those hands slightly bunched by arthritis. Just standing there, just waiting for the elevator to go up, so he can get on with his own business.

Whatever that business might be.

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April 4, 1981

Coney Island

Skies fair, winds light, temperature 51 F.

9:40 A.M.

As soon as Sandra Jackson and Dina Andrews step off the train, eleven-year-old Dina expresses her desire to go on the Wonder Wheel, which has just resumed operation for another season.

On their way down there, they are huckstered cheerfully from both sides of the mostly empty midway. One cry makes Sandra smile: "Hey, pretty blonde lady! Hey, you little red-headed cutie! Come on over here and try your luck! Make my day!"

Sandra diverts to the Wheel of Chance and sizes the game up. It's a little like roulette, only with prizes instead of money if you win. Hit red or black, odd or even, and win a small prize. Hit one of the triples and win a bigger one. Hit a four-way and win a bigger one yet. And if you should pick a single number and hit, you win the prize of prizes—the big pink teddy bear. All this possibility for a quarter!

Sandra turns to Dina (who is indeed both a redhead and a cutie). "What are you going to name your new bear?" she asks her.

The guy running the Wheel of Chance grins. "Confidence!" he cries. "Sweetheart, that's the best thing in life!"

"I'll name him Rinaldo," Dina says promptly. "If you win him."

"Oh, I'll win him, all right," Sandra says. She takes a quarter from her purse and surveys the numbers, which run from one to thirty-four and include such ringers as FREE SPIN, BYE-BYE NICE TRY, and double zero. She looks at the concessionaire, who is checking out her bod in a way that is thorough without being creepy. "My friend," she says to him, "I want you to remember that I'm only putting a floor under you. From this point, your season is only going to get better."

"Gosh, you *are* confident," he says. "Well, pick your number and I'll let er rip."



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Sandra lays her quarter down on seventeen. Three minutes later the concessionaire is watching with wide eyes as the pretty lady and her pretty young friend continue to walk down toward the Wonder Wheel, the pretty young friend now in charge of a pink teddy-bear almost as big as she is.

“How’d you do it, Aunt Sandy?” Dina wants to know. She is all but bursting with excitement. “How’d you *do* it?”

Aunt Sandy taps her forehead and grins. “Psychic waves, sweetheart. Call it that. Come on, let’s see what the world looks like from way up high.”

Sometimes life exhibits (or seems to exhibit) an observable pattern. This is certainly one of those times. Because, as the two of them begin to skip hand in hand toward the Wonder Wheel, Sandra Jackson begins to sing “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” and Dina quickly joins in.

**April 4, 1981**  
**490 Park Avenue South**

**9:55 A.M.**

Gosh and fishes, gee whillikers, and Katie bar the door! What a time old Iron-Guts is having! Talk about making the best of your time! Talk about your gauzy moon-drenched madhouse dreams made real!

At first he felt some doubt. Disquiet, even. For a few moments there, after he picked the lock of the hallway door (no problem there, he could have done it in a doze) and stepped into the Zenith House reception area, something in the back of his brain actually tried to flash a Code Red. It was as if all those alligator instincts which served him so well in three wars and half a dozen brushfire skirmishes had sniffed something out and were trying to warn him. But a command officer didn’t call off a mission simply because of a little trench-fright. What a command officer did was remind himself of his objective.

“Designated Jew,” Hecksler murmured. *That* was his objective. The liar who had led him on and then stolen his best ideas.

Nonetheless he continued to feel that electric tickle of unease, that

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sense of being watched. Being watched by the very walls, it seemed.

He looked sharply along those walls, keeping his gaze above eye-level and peering with special penetrating attention into the corners. No surveillance cameras. So *that* was all right.

He sniffed sharply, spreading the wings of his nose, really flaring the old nostrils.

“Garlic,” he muttered. “No question. Known it and grown it. All my life. Ha! And...”

Something else, there was definitely something else, but he couldn’t get it. Not, at least, in the reception area.

“Damn garlic,” he said. “Like a bore at a party. A bore with a loud voice.”

At the portal which lead into the editorial offices, that interior warning voice spoke again. Only two words, but Hecksler heard them clearly: *GET OUT!*

“Not happening,” he said, and issued the Saturday-silent world of Zenith House a tight and unpleasant grin that likely would have turned Herb Porter’s blood if he’d seen it. “Screaming lone eagle. Suicide mission, if that’s what it takes. Nobody goes home.”

A step further and the smell of garlic was gone, as if someone had rubbed the stuff around the doorway. What replaced it was an entrancing odor Hecksler knew well and loved above all things: the tangy, bitter smell of burst gunpowder. The smell of battle.

The General, who had hunched over a bit without even realizing it (the first impulse when going into an unknown and possibly dangerous area, he knew, was to protect the family jewels), now straightened up. He looked around with a mad glare that would have done more than turn Herb’s blood; it would have sent him fleeing in a blind panic. After a moment he relaxed. And now, below the bulging eyes, the lips first parted and then began to draw up. They reached the point where you would have said lips must stop and still they continued, until the corners seemed to have reached the level of Hecksler’s bulging blue eyes. The smile became a grin; the grin became a bigger grin; the bigger grin became a grimace; the grimace became a canni-

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bal's leer; the cannibal's leer became an *insane* cannibal's leer.

"*Zenith House, I am here!*" he thundered into the empty corridor with its faded gray industrial strength rug and its framed book jackets of bosomy maidens and marching giant bugs on the walls. He struck his chest with a closed fist "*You house of mockers, I am here! You den of thieves, I am here! Designated Jew, I AM HERE!*"

His first impulse, curbed only with difficulty, was to remove his not inconsiderable penis from his pants and urinate everywhere: on the carpet, the walls, even the framed jacket covers if his admittedly aging piss-pump could fling the stream that high (twenty years before he could have washed the ceiling tiles, by God), like a dog marking its territory. Sanity didn't reassert itself because there was none left in the haunted belfry of his brush-cut-topped head, but there was still plenty of guile. Nothing must appear out of place here in the hallway. Chances that the D.J. would come in first on Monday were mighty slim.

"Goddam slacker is what he is," Hecksler said. "A goddam commissary cowboy. Ha! Seen a thousand of em!"

And so he walked down the main corridor as decorously as a nun, passing doors marked WADE EDITOR IN CHIEF, KENTON, and GELB (that one another Jew, undoubtedly, but not *the* Jew) before coming to one marked...PORTER.

"Yessss," Hecksler said, bringing the word out in a long and satisfying hiss, like steam.

There wasn't even any need to pick the lock; the D.J.'s door was open. The General stepped in. And now...now that he's in a place where he no longer has to be careful...gosh!

The urine which General Hecksler withheld in the hall goes into Herb Porter's desk drawers, starting with the lower and working to the upper. There is even a final squirt for the keyboard of typewriter.

There's an IN/OUT box filled with what look like submission letters, manuscript reports, and a personal letter (although typed) which begins *Dear Fergus*. Hecksler tears it all up and sprinkles the pieces on top of the desk like confetti.

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Next to the IN/OUT is an envelope marked GOTHAM COLLECTIBLES, addressed to Mr. Herbert Porter care of Zenith House, and marked CONFIDENTIAL. Inside, the General finds three items. One is a letter which says, in essence, that the folks at Gotham Collectibles were mighty glad they could find the enclosed rarity for such a valued customer. The rarity is a Honus Wagner baseball card in a glassine envelope. The last enclosure is a bill in the amount of two hundred and fifty American men. The General is astounded and outraged. Two hundred and fifty dollars for a yid baseball player? And of course he *is* a yid; Hecksler can pick them out anywhere. Look at that schnozzola, by the jacked-up Jesus! (Unaware that Honus Wagner's schnozzola is pretty much identical to Anthony Hecksler's own.) Iron-Guts takes the card out of its envelope, and soon the image of Honus Wagner has joined the other, considerably less valuable, confetti on Herb's desk.

Hecksler begins to sing softly, a beer jingle: "Here's to you...for all you do...you des-ig-NAYY-ted Jew..."

There are the file cabinets. He could tip them over, but what if someone below heard the thud? And it seems meaningless. If he opens them, he knows what he'll find: just more paper. He's ripped enough of that for one day, by God. Also, he's getting a little pooped. It's been a stressful morning (a stressful week, a stressful month, a stressful goddam *life*). If he could find one more thing...one more *meaningful* thing...

And there it is. Most of the stuff on the walls is uninteresting—covers of books the D.J. has edited, photos of the D.J. with a number of men (and one woman) who the General supposes are writers but look to him suspiciously like wankers—but there's one picture that's different. Not only is it set off from the others, in its own little space, but the Herb Porter in it has an actual *expression* on his face. In the others, the best he's managed is a sort of oh-fuck-I'm-getting-my-goddam-picture-taken-again squint, but in this one he's actually *smiling*, and it is a smile of unquestionable love. The woman he's smiling at is taller than the D.J. and looks about sixty. Held in front of her is the sort of large black satchel purse which by law only woman of sixty or over may carry.

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Hecksler croons, “I see me, I see you, I see the mother, of a designated Jew.”

He pulls the picture from the wall, turns it over, and sees the sort of cardboard backing he would have expected. Oh yes, he knows his man: sly tricks in front, cardboard backing behind. Yowza.

Hecksler pulls out the cardboard, then the picture of Herb and his beloved Marmar, which was taken at the twenty-fifth anniversary party Herb organized for his parents out on Montauk in 1978. Iron-Guts drops trou (they go down fast, perhaps because of the large fold-up knife in the right front pocket), grabs one skinny butt-cheek and gives it a brisk sideways yank, the better to present the back door, the tan track, the everloving dirt road. Then the former United States General, who was personally decorated by Dwight Eisenhower in 1954, rubs his ass briskly and thoroughly with this picture which Herb loves above all others.

Gosh, what a time we’re having!

But good times wear a person out, especially an *older* person, especially an older *bonkers* person. Enough be enough, as Amos might have said to Andy. The General hauls up his pants, squares himself away, then sits down in Herb’s office chair. He did not pee in this chair, mostly because it never occurred to him, so the seat is nice and dry.

He swivels slowly around and looks out Herb’s window. No view; just a few feet of empty space and then the windows of another office building. Most of those are covered with venetian blinds, and where the blinds aren’t drawn, the offices are perfectly still. No doubt somewhere in that building, as in this, executives are squeezing in a little overtime, but not in sight of Herb Porter’s window.

The sun comes slanting in on General Hecksler’s face, cruelly spotlighting his age-roughened skin and the burst veins at his temples; another vein, this one blue, pulses steadily in the middle of his deeply lined forehead. His eyelids are folded and wrinkled. More and more of them become visible as the General, who has dozed but not really slept in weeks, moves to the border which divides the land of wakefulness from that of Nod.

They close all the way...remain so, looking smoother now...and then

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they open again, disclosing faded blue eyes which are wary and crazy and most of all tired unto death. He has reached the border crossing—temporary peace lies beyond—but does he dare use it? Does he dare cross? There are so many enemies still, a world filled with scheming Jews, violent Italians, craven homosexuals, and theftly dance-footed Negroes; so many sworn enemies of both the General and the country he has sworn to uphold...and could they be here now? Even now?

For a moment his lids take on their former wrinkled aspect as the eyes they guard open all the way, shifting in their sockets, but this only lasts a moment. The voice that warned him in the reception area has fallen silent, but he can still smell a lingering effluvia of gunsmoke, as soothing as memory.

*Safe, that odor whispers. It is, of course, the odor and the voice of Zenith, the common ivy. You're safe. Home is the hunter, home from the hill, and you're safe for the next forty hours and more. Sleep, General. Sleep.*

General Hecksler knows good advice when he hears it. Sitting in his enemy's chair, turned away from his enemy's desk (into which he has poured the piss of righteousness), General Hecksler sleeps.

He cannot see the ivy which has already entered this room and grows invisibly around his shoes and up the walls. Smelling gunpowder and dreaming of ancient battles, General Hecksler begins to snore.

**April 4, 1981**

**490 Park Avenue South**

**New York City**

**Skies fair, winds light, temperature 55 F.**

**10:37 A.M.**

When Frank DeFelice arrives at 490 Park Avenue South, stepping out of a Checker Cab and tipping a perfectly precise ten per cent, he's not in the same buoyant mood as George Patella the soft-drink fella, but he's every bit as preoccupied. DeFelice works at Tallyrand Office Supply on the 7th floor,

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and he has forgotten some paperwork he needs in order to be ready for the pre-inventory meeting at 9 A.M. on Monday morning. His intention is to simply dash up, grab the inventory summaries, and head back to Grand Central. DeFelice lives in Croton-on-Hudson, and plans to spend the afternoon doing yard work. This Saturday trip down to the city is your basic PITA: pain in the ass.

He takes some vague notice of the man in the sand-colored business suit standing to the left of the door; the man is holding a large attache case and checking his watch. He is young for the suit, but good-looking and well-groomed: blond, blue-eyed. Certainly Carlos Detweiller, who has his mother's Nordic genes, doesn't look like anyone's idea of a spic, designated or otherwise.

As DeFelice opens the lobby door with his key, the young man with the attache case sighs and murmurs, "Hold it a sec, would you?"

Frank DeFelice obligingly holds the door and they cross the lobby together, heels clicking and echoing.

"People shouldn't be allowed to be late on Saturdays," the young man says, and DeFelice gives an agreeable, meaningless little smile. His mind is a million miles away...well, forty, at any rate, dwelling on various spring bulbs and fertilizers.

Perhaps this run of thought is why he notices a certain odd smell about the young man as they step into the elevator together—a certain *earthy* smell, almost like peat. Can that be some new aftershave? Something called Spring Garden or April Delight?

DeFelice pushes for seven.

"Hit five while you're at it, would you?" the young man in the sand-colored suit asks, and DeFelice notices an interesting thing: there's a combination lock on the guy's attache case. *That's sort of cool*, he thinks, and that thought leads to another: Father's Day isn't that far off. Hints dropped in the right location (to the mother of his children rather than the children themselves, in other words) might not go amiss. In fact—

"Five?" the young man in the sand-colored suit asks again, and DeFelice pushes five. He then points at the attache case.

"Abercrombie?" he asks.

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“Kmart,” the young man replies, and offers a smile that makes DeFelice slightly nervous. It has an emptiness that goes beyond daffy. The two men journey silently after that, rising in the faint smell of peat.

Carlos Detweiller steps out on five. He walks to the wall where there are arrows pointing the way to the various businesses: Barco Novel-Teaz, Crandall & Ovitz, Attorneys at Law, Zenith Publishing. He is examining these when the elevator doors slide shut. Frank DeFelice feels a momentary relief, then turns his mind to his own affairs.

### 10:38 A.M.

General Hecksler has sprung the lock instead of forcing it, and Carlos enters Zenith House without considering the unlocked main door suspicious—he’s a gardener, a writer, and a Psykik Savant, after all, not a detective. Also, he’s spent so many years getting what he wants that he’s come to expect it.

In the reception area he smells garlic and nods briskly, like a man whose suspicions have been confirmed. Although in truth, they are rather more than suspicions. He is in touch with certain Powers, after all, and they’ve kept him ahead of the curve (as mid-level executives such as Frank DeFelice and George Patella might say) in most respects. One of the respects in which they have been a trifle behind the curve has to do with Iron-Guts Hecksler’s current presence in the Zenith offices. Drawing conclusions in matters supernatural is always a risky business, but we might assume from this that the Powers of Darkness enjoy a giggle as much as the rest of us.

Yet does Carlos not smell something other than garlic out here? Certainly a frown clouds his blandly handsome face. Then it clears. He dismisses the faint whiff of the General’s insanity which his trained nose has picked up as no more than a lingering trace of the receptionist’s perfume. (What, one wonders, would such a perfume be called? *Paranoia in Paris?*)

Carlos moves across the room and pauses. Here the smell of garlic is stronger. *She told them how to keep it in its place*, he thinks, meaning the late Tina Barfield. Did she also tell them that, given a taste of the right blood, such precautions would be useless? Perhaps. In any case, it doesn’t matter. He could



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care less at this point. Zenith would likely take care of John Kenton given time, but “likely” isn’t good enough for Carlos Detweiller, and he doesn’t have time. There probably won’t be time to make John Kenton his zombie slave, either, but there should be enough time on Monday morning to cut Kenton’s lying, misleading, thieving heart out of his chest. Carlos has plenty of knives in his Sakred Case, not to mention a new brush-cutter from *American Gardener*. He hopes to use this to remove Mr. John “Poop-Shit” Kenton’s scalp. He can wear it like a hat while he snacks on “Poop-Shit’s” valves and ventricles.

Carlos steps into the hall beyond the reception area and pauses again. He stands exactly where Hecksler stood when he proclaimed his presence to the empty offices. He notes (not without admiration) the framed book jackets: a giant ant poised over a screaming, half-nude woman; a mercenary shooting down a squad of charging Oriental soldiers while a city that appears to be Miami flames in the background; a woman in a slip in the embrace of a bare-chested pirate who appears to have an erection the size of an industrial plumbing fixture inside his colorful pantaloons; a red-eyed lurker watching the approach of a young lady on a deserted street; two or three cookbooks, just for spice.

Carlos thinks with some longing that in a better world, where people were honest, the jacket of his own book might be up there, as well. *True Tales of Demon Infestations*, with a photo of the one and only Carlos Detweiller on the cover. Smoking a pipe, perhaps, and looking Lovecrafty. That is not to be...but they will pay. *Kenton*, at least, will pay.

The hall looks empty except for the framed covers and the doors to the editorial cubicles beyond them, but the newcomer knows better. “Carlos, you weren’t born yesterday or even the day before,” as Mr. Keen might have said in happier times, times when people didn’t forget who was supposed to win all the card games.

Looks, however, can be deceiving.

With the garlic-rubbed portal behind him, Carlos can easily smell the Tibetan *kadath* ivy he has sent John Kenton, and he smells its true aroma: not popcorn, chocolate, coffee, honeysuckle, or Shalimar perfume but a darker odor, strict and sharp. It isn’t oil of clove, but perhaps that comes closest. It

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is a smell Carlos has detected emanating from his own armpits when he has been being strenuously psykik.

He closes his eyes and murmurs, "*Talla. Demeter. Abbalab. Great Opoponax.*" He breathes deep and the smell intensifies, filling his head, making it swim with visions that are dark and full of gusty-cold flying. They are visions of the land to which he will soon be going, the place where he will make his transition from earthy mortal to *tulpa*, a creature of the invisible world fully capable of returning to this one and possessing the bodies of the still-living. Perhaps he will use this power; perhaps he will not. Right now, such things do not matter.

He opens his eyes again and yes, there is the *kadath*. It is growing all over the walls and the carpet, thinning as it advances toward the reception area, thick and luxuriant further down the corridor. Somewhere down there, Carlos knows, is the place where the original pot still resides, buried in billowing drifts of green which would be invisible to all those who don't believe in the plant's power. The far end of the corridor looks as impenetrable as a rainforest jungle, buried in growth right up to the fluorescents, but Carlos knows people could walk blithely up and down that corridor with absolutely no idea of what they were walking through...unless, of course, Zenith wanted them to know. In which case it would be the last thing they'd ever know. Basically, Zenith House is now a large green bear trap, spring-loaded.

Carlos walks down the corridor, Sakred Sakrifice Case held at chest level. He steps over the first trailing strand of Zenith, then an entire clot of entwined branches and rhizomes. One stirs and touches his ankle. Carlos stands patiently, and after a moment the strand drops away. Here, on the left, is the office of WADE EDITOR IN CHIEF. Carlos glances in without much interest, then passes on to the next door. Here the ivy-growth is much thicker, the strands covering the lower part of the door in zigzag patterns and twining around the knob in a loose lover's knot. One strand clings to the upper panel, which is glass, and streaks across the name like a stroke of green lightning.

"Kenton," Carlos says in a low voice. "You mocker."

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**10:44 A.M.**

In Herb Porter's office, General Anthony Hecksler opens his eyes. The thought that he may have dreamed the voice never so much as crosses his mind. What he has heard is this: *Kenton, you mockie.*

Someone else is in the Zenith House offices.

Someone else on a Saturday morning.

Iron-Guts has a pretty good idea who the someone else must be.

"Tick-tick," he whispers, his lips barely moving. "Designated spic."

In his doze, Hecksler has slid down a bit in Porter's chair. Now he slides even farther, wanting to make absolutely sure that the top of his head won't show if the D.S. should wander a few yards farther down the hall. It's okay for "Carlos" to see the *mess* in here as long as he doesn't see the *man* in here.

Silent as a sigh, Hecksler eases his hand into the pocket of his pants and pulls out another of his Army-Navy store purchases: a bone-handled hunting knife with a seven-inch tungsten blade.

There is the faintest click as the General unfolds the blade and locks it into position. He holds it against his chest, the tip nearly touching the undershelf of his stringently shaved chin, and waits for whatever comes next.

**Central Park**

**Skies fair, winds light, temperature 60 F.**

**10:50 A.M.**

Bill Gelb is so excited about his planned excursion to Paramus that he hardly slept at all last night, and still he feels energized this Saturday morning, totally jazzed. He couldn't stay in the goddam apartment, just *couldn't*. The question was, where to go? Ordinarily he'd think movie, Bill loves the movies, but he couldn't sit still in one today. And then, in the shower, the answer came.

On a Saturday morning in Central Park, especially on a pretty spring

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morning like this one, there'll be a veritable Olympic games going on, everything from skateboarding and pick-up softball to chess and checkers.

There will also be a crap game going on at the edge of the Sheep Meadow; of this Bill is almost sure. It may have been closed down, but he can't imagine why the cops would bust such an innocuous game: low stakes, young white guys pretending to be cool dudes rolling the bones. Seven come eleven, baby needs a new pair of Adidas sneakers. A bottle or two of cheap wine will make the rounds, allowing the players to feel totally raffish, not to say decadent, shooting craps and drinking Night Train at eleven o'clock in the morning.

Bill has played in this game maybe half a dozen times over the last two years, always in warm weather. He likes to gamble, but shooting craps in Central Park when the temperature is below forty? No way. But today WINS radio says the mercury may shoot all the way up to an unseasonable seventy degrees, and besides...what better way to see if the force is still with him?

Which is why—as Riddley's train approaches Manhattan, as Sandra and her niece continue their whirlwind tour of Cony Island's early-season amusements, as Carlos Detweiller begins inspecting "Poop-Shit" Kenton's files, and General Hecksler sits slouched in Herb Porter's office chair, knife gleaming in the sunlight—we find Bill Gelb down on his knees in a circle of yelling, laughing white guys who are happy to fade his heat. Lucky son of a bitch got in the game, bet two guys to crap out (and won), then took the dice himself. Since then he's rolled five straight sevens. Now he's promising them a sixth, and *further* promising them it'll be sixty-one. Dude is crazy, so of course they're happy to fade him. And Bill is happy, as well. As happy as he's ever been in his life, it seems to him. He showed up here on the Meadow with just fifteen dollars in his pocket, deliberately leaving the rest of his cash at home; he's already tripled that. And this, by God, is just the warmup! Tonight, in Paramus, he will sit down to the main course.

"God bless that crazy houseplant," he murmurs, and rolls the dice onto the painted hopscotch grid that serves as the pit. They bounce, they roll, they tumble—

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—and the Saturday morning yuppie crap-artists groan in mingled disbelief, despair, and amazement.

It's six and one.

Bill snatches up the wad of currency lying on the HOME slot of the hopscotch grid, smacks it, and holds it up to the bright blue sky, laughing.

"You want to pass the dice, Mr. Lucky?" one of the other players asks.

"When I'm on a roll like this?" Bill Gelb leans forward and snatches the dice. "No fuckin way." The bones feel warm in his hand. Someone hands him a bottle of Boone's Farm and he takes a hit. "No fuckin way am I passing," he repeats. "Gents, I'm going to roll these bones until the spots fall off."

### 11:05 A.M.

The *kadath* has infiltrated Kenton's office right through the cracks at the edges of the door, growing exuberantly up the walls, but Carlos barely notices. The ivy is nothing to him, one way or the other. Not now. It might have been fun to sit back and watch it work if not for Tina Barfield, but the bitch stole his owl's beak and time has grown short. Let Zenith take care of the rest if it wants to; Kenton is his.

"You mocker," he says again. "You thief."

As in Herb's office, there are pictures on the walls of Kenton with various authors. Carlos cares nothing for the authors (they look like wankers to him, too), but he looks fixedly at the repetitions of Kenton himself, memorizing the lean face with its shock of too-long black hair. *What does he think he is?* Carlos asks himself indignantly. *A damned old rock star? A Beatle? A Rolling Stone?* The name of a rock and roll group Kenton *could* belong to occurs to him: Johnny and the Poop-Shits.

As always, Carlos is startled by his own wit. He is serious so much of the time that he's always shocked at what a good sense of humor he has. Now he barks laughter.

Still chuckling, he tries Kenton's desk drawers, but, unlike Herb's, they are locked. There is an IN/OUT box on top of the desk, but, also unlike

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Herb's, it is almost completely empty. The one sheet of paper has several lines jotted on it that Carlos doesn't understand in the slightest:

*Leper hockey game: face off in the corner*  
*7: 6 to carry the coffin, 1 to carry the boombox*  
*Never mind the jam on your mouth, what's that peanut butter doing on your forehead?*  
*"Fuck the mailman, give him a dollar and a sweet roll."*  
*Orange manhole cover in France=Howard Johnson's.*

What in the name of Demeter is all *that* crap about? Carlos doesn't know and decides he doesn't care, either.

He goes to Kenton's file cabinets, expecting them to be locked as well, but he has a long weekend ahead of him, and if he gets bored, he can open both the desk and the files. He has plenty of tools in the Sacrifice Case that will do the job. But the drawers of the file cabinets turn out to be unlocked—go figure.

Carlos begins searching the files with a high degree of interest that quickly fades. Poop-Shit's files are alphabetized, but after CURRAN, JAMES (author of four paperback originals in 1978 and '79, with titles like *Love's Strange Delight* and *Love's Strange Obsession*), comes DORCHESTER, ELLEN (six brief manuscript reports, each signed by Kenton and each attached to a rejection letter). There's no file marked DETWEILLER, CARLOS.\*

The one item of interest Carlos discovers is in the bottom drawer, lying behind the few hanging files marked W-Z. It's a framed photograph which undoubtedly graced Kenton's desk until recently. In it, Kenton and a pretty young Oriental woman are standing on the rink at Rockefeller Plaza with their arms around each other, laughing into the camera.

A smile of surpassing nastiness dawns on Carlos's face. The woman is in California, but for a genuine Psykik Savant, a few thousand miles presents

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\* Such a file by then existed, of course, and it contained material that might well have caused Detweiller to explode with rage, but it was in the publishing house safe, behind a picture in Roger Wade's office. Neither Hecksler nor Detweiller so much as entered that office. That file also contained material concerning the General and the company's new mascot.

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absolutely no problem. Miss Ruth Tanaka is already discovering that she has backed the wrong horse in the Romance Sweepstakes. Carlos knows she'll be back in New York before long, and thinks that she may stop by Zenith House shortly after she arrives. Kenton will be dead by then, but she will have questions, won't she? Yes. The ladies always have questions.

And when she comes...

"Innocent blood," Carlos murmurs. He tosses the framed photo back into the drawer and the glass front shatters. In the quiet office, the sound is satisfyingly loud. Across the hall, General Hecksler jumps slightly in Herb's chair, almost pricking himself with his own knife.

Carlos kicks the file-drawer shut, goes across to Kenton's desk, and sits down in Kenton's chair. He feels like Goldilocks, only with a pretty decent stiffy. He sits there for a little while, drumming the fingers of one hand on the Sacrifice Case and idly boinking his hardon with the fingers of the other. Later, he thinks, he'll probably masturbate—it is something he does often and well. Not knowing, of course, that his days of self-abuse are now gone.

In the office across the corridor, Iron-Guts has taken up a position against the wall to the left of Herb Porter's door. He can see a reflection of the office across the way in Herb's window—faint, but good enough. When "Carlos" comes out to further recon the area, as sooner or later he will, the General will be ready.

## 11:15 A.M.

It occurs to Carlos that he's hungry. It further occurs to him that he has forgotten to bring any food. There might be candy bars or something in Kenton's desk—gum, at least, everyone has a few sticks of gum lying around—but the jeezly bastardly thing is locked. Prying open the drawers in search of something that might not be there seems like too much work.

What about the other offices, though? Maybe there's even a canteen, with sodas and everything. Carlos decides to check. He has nothing but time, after all.

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He gets up, goes to the door, and steps out. Once again the ivy in the hall touches his shoes; one strand curls around his ankle. Once again Carlos stands patiently until the strand lets go. The words *pass, friend* whisper in his head.

Carlos goes to the next door down the hall, the one marked JACKSON. He doesn't hear Herb Porter's door as it opens squeaklessly behind him; doesn't sense the tall old man with the knife in his hand who's measuring distances with cold blue eyes and finding them acceptable.

As Carlos opens the door to Sandra's office, Iron-Guts springs. One forearm—old, scrawny, hideously strong—hooks around Carlos's throat and shuts off his air. Carlos has a moment to feel a new emotion: utter terror. Then a lightning-bright line of heat prints itself across his lower mid-section. He thinks he has been burned with something, perhaps even branded, and would have screamed if not for his closed windpipe. He hasn't the slightest idea that he's been partially disemboweled, and has only avoided the total deal by staggering to his left, bumping the General against the edge of Sandra Jackson's door, and causing him to slash a little high and nowhere near as deeply as he intended.

"You're one dead SOB." Hecksler whispers these words in Carlos's ear as tenderly as a lover. Carlos smells Roloids and madness. He throws himself to the right, against the other side of the door, but the General is ready for this trick and rides him as easily as a cowpoke on an old nag. He raises the knife again, meaning to open Carlos's throat for him. Then he hesitates.

"What kind of spic has blond hair and blue eyes?" he asks. "What—"

He feels the moth-flutter of Carlos's hand against his thigh an instant too late. Before he can draw back, the designated spic has grabbed his testicles and crushed them in the iron grip of one who is fighting for his life and knows it.

"YOWWWW!" Hecksler cries, and for just one moment the armlock on Carlos's throat weakens. It isn't the pain, enormous though it is, that causes the death-grip to weaken; Iron-Guts has devoted years to living with pain and through it. No, it's surprise. The D.S. is being choked, the D.S. has been slashed, and still he is fighting back.

Carlos throws himself to the left again, slamming the General's bony



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shoulder against the doorjamb. Hecksler's grip loosens a bit more, and before he can re-establish it, Zenith—more in the spirit of puckish good humor than anything else—takes a hand.

It's actually the General's *feet* the ivy takes, wrapping a loose green fist around both and yanking backward. Although the branches are still new and thin (some are pulled apart by Hecksler's weight), Z's grip is surprisingly strong. And surprise, of course, is the key word. If Iron-Guts had expected such a cowardly sneak attack, he almost certainly would have kept his feet. Instead, he thumps heavily to his knees.

Carlos whirls in the doorway, gasping and gagging and hacking for air. He still feels that band of heat across his belly, and it seems to be spreading. *The bastard shocked me*, he thinks. *He had one of those things, those illegal laser things.*

He has to get back to Kenton's office, where he has foolishly left the Sacrifice Case, but when he starts forward, the General slashes his knife through the air. Carlos recoils just fast enough to keep from losing his nose. The General bares his teeth at Carlos—those that have survived the Shady Rest Mortuary, at least. Bright color blazons his cheeks.

"Get out of my way!" Carlos squalls. "*Abbalab! Abbalab can tak! Demeter can tab! Gab! Gam!*"

"Save your spic gabble for someone who gives a rip," the General says. He makes no attempt to get off his knees, simply sways from side to side, looking as mystic (and as deadly) as any snake ever piped out of a *fakir's* basket. "You want to get past me, son? Then come on. Try for it."

Carlos looks over the old man's shoulder and sees there are still green boughs of ivy looped around the old man's ankles.

"*Kadath!*" Carlos calls. "*Cam-ma! Can tak!*" These words mean nothing in themselves. They are invocatory in nature, Carlos Detweiller's way of shaping a telepathic command. He has told Zenith to yank the old man again, to pull him right down the hall into the main growth and crush him.

Instead, the knots around the General's ankles untie themselves and slither away.

"No!" Carlos bawls. He cannot believe that the Dark Powers have deserted him. "No, come back! *Kadath! Kadath can tak!*"

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“Better take a look at yourself, son,” General Hecksler advises slyly.

Carlos looks down and sees that his sand-colored suit has turned bright red from the coat pockets on down. There’s a long, tattered rip across his midsection; the end of his tie has actually been lopped off. He can see something shiny and purple in the slash and realizes with disbelieving dismay that those are his guts.

While he’s distracted, Hecksler lunges forward and swipes with his knife again. This time he opens Carlos’s shoulder down to the bone. “*Olay!*” Iron-Guts screams.

“*You crazy old fuck!*” Carlos screams back, and lashes out a foot. This sends a terrible dull cramp of pain through his belly and a freshet of blood down the front of his pants, but the shoe catches General Hecksler square in the skinny beak and breaks it. He goes flopping back. Carlos starts forward but the evil old bastard is up on his knees again in a goddamned flash, slashing everywhere. What is he made of, iron?

Carlos dodges back into Sandra’s office, panting, and slams the door just as Hecksler curls the fingers of his free hand around the jamb. Hecksler utters a howl as his fingers are crushed, and it is music to Carlos’s ears. But the old son of a bitch won’t stop. He’s like a robot with its selector switch frozen on KILL. Carlos hears the office door bang open behind him as he staggers across Sandra’s office with the left arm of his jacket turning crimson and one hand on his slashed midsection, trying to keep those purple things in where they belong. He hears a harsh, doglike panting as air rushes in and out of the madman’s old lungs. In a moment the robot will be on him again. The robot has a weapon; Carlos has none. Even if he had his Sakrifice Case, the robot would give him no time to work the combination.

*I’m going to die*, Carlos thinks wonderingly. *If I don’t do something right away, I’m actually going to die*. He has known that death was coming, of course, but until this minute it has been an academic concept. There is nothing academic about having a crazy robot after you while blood pours down your arm and legs, however.

Carlos looks at Sandra’s desk, which is a cluttery, paper-strewn mess. Scissors? A letter-opener? Even a damned nail-file? Anything—

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Good Demeter, what's that?

Lying beside her blotter, partly obscured by a framed photo of Sandra and Dina taken on their trip to Nova Scotia two years before, is a large silver object which looks like a gunshell. Sandra, her mind full of books and plants and manuscripts and tales of elderly Rhode Island zombies, has forgotten to put the gunshell in her purse when she left on Friday afternoon. Also, it's now easy for her to forget: the plant has given her a new sense of security and well-being. This object no longer seems so vital to her.

It's vital to Carlos, though.

Carlos has spotted Sandra's Rainy Night Friend.

11:27 A.M.

"What's the matter, Aunt Sandra?" Dina asks. A moment before they were been walking down the boardwalk together, eating the delicious grilled franks you can only get at Cony. Then Sandra stopped, gasped, and put a hand to her stomach. "Is your hotdog no good?"

"It's fine," Sandra said, although a sudden pain had, in fact, just ripped through her belly. It wasn't the kind of pain she associated with food-poisoning, but she turned and deposited the remainder of her dog in a trash barrel just the same. She was no longer hungry.

"Then what is it?"

It was a voice in her head, calling. But if she told Dina that, her niece would probably think she was crazy. Especially if she told her it was a *green* voice.

"I don't know," Sandra said, "but maybe I ought to take you home, hon. If I'm going to get sick, I don't want to get caught all the way out here."

11:27 A.M.

John Kenton has been scrambling eggs in his little kitchen, whistling "Chim-Chim-Chiree" from *Mary Poppins* as he stirs with his whisk. The pain comes

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like lightning out of a blue sky, ripping across his middle, there and gone.

He cries out and jerks backward, the whisk pulling the frypan off the stove and splattering half-congealed eggs on the linoleum. Both the eggs and the pan miss his bare feet, which could almost qualify as a miracle.

*The office*, he thinks. *I have to get to the office. Something's gone wrong.* And then his head suddenly fills with sound and he screams.

**11:28 A.M.**

Roger Wade is already headed for the door of his apartment when the unearthly yowl of Sandra's Rainy Day Friend fills his head, threatening to burst it open from the inside out. He drops to his knees like a man who's had a heart attack, holding his head and uttering screams he can't hear.

**11:28 A.M.**

On the edge of the Sheep's Meadow, the little cluster of Saturday morning gamblers watch the fleeing man with bemused surprise. He was cleaning them out, righteously and in record time. Then, suddenly, he gave a scream and lurched to his feet, first clutching his gut and then slamming the heels of his hands against his ears, as if assaulted by some monstrous sound. As if to confirm this, he had gasped "Oh God, *turn it off!*" Then he fled, staggering from side to side like a drunk.

"What's up with him?" one of the crap-artists asked.

"I don't know," said another, "but I know one thing: he left the gelt."

For a moment they simply look at the untidy pile of bills beside Bill Gelb's vacated spot. Then, quite spontaneously, the six of them begin to applaud.

**April 4, 1981**

**Somewhere in New Jersey**

**Aboard the Silver Meteor**

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11:28 A.M.

In his seat by the window, Riddley is asleep and dreaming of other, younger days. He is dreaming, in fact, of 1961. In his dream, he and Maddy are walking to school hand in hand beneath a brilliant November sky. Together they chant their old favorite, which they made up themselves: “Whammer-jammer-Alabammer! Beetle Bailey, Katzenjammer! Gi’me back my goddam hammer! Whammer-jammer-Alabammer!” Then they giggle.

It is a good day. The Cuban stuff, which scared everybody near bout to death, is over. Rid has drawn a pitcher, and he thinks Mrs. Ellis will ask him to show it to the rest of the kinnygarden. Mrs. Ellis likes his pitchers.

Then, suddenly, Maddy stops. From the north comes a rising rumble. She looks at him solemnly. “Those are the bombers,” she says. “Hit happened. Hit’s World War Three.”

“Naw,” Riddley says. “Hit’s over. The Roosians backed down. Kennedy scared em honest. Bald Roosian fella told his boats to turn around and go home. Mama said so.”

“Mama’s crazy,” Maddy replies. “She sleeps on the riverbank. She sleeps with the copperhairs.”

And as if to prove it, the Blackwater air-raid siren goes off, deafening him—

11:29 A.M.

Riddley straightens up and stares out at New Jersey: stares, in fact, at the exact swampy wasteland he will that night be visiting.

The man across the aisle looks up from his paperback book. “Are you all right, sir?” he asks.

Riddley cannot hear him. The air-raid siren has followed him out of his dream. It is filling his head, bursting his brains.

Then, suddenly, it cuts off. When the man across the aisle asks his question again, this time with real concern, Riddley hears him.

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“Yes, thanks,” he says in a voice that’s almost steady. In his head, the old rhyme beats: *Whammer-jammer-Alabammer*. “I’m fine.”

*But some folks are not, he thinks. Some folks most definitely are not.*

**490 Park Avenue South**

**5th floor**

**11:29 A.M.**

In 1970, a large number of American brass were celebrating at a Saigon bar and whorehouse called Haiphong Charlie’s. Word had come down from Washington that the war would certainly continue for at least another year, and these career soldiers, who had gotten the ass-kicking of their lives over the last twenty months or so and wanted payback more than they wanted life itself, were raising the roof. The miracle was that something in the bomb the anonymous waiter planted was defective, and instead of spraying the whole room with nails and screws, it only sprayed those soldiers who happened to be near the stage, where it had been hidden in a flower arrangement. One of those unfortunates was Anthony Hecksler’s aide-de-camp. Poor sonofabitch lost both hands and one eye while he was doing the frug or the Watusi or one of those.

Hecksler himself was on the edge of the room, talking with Westy Westmoreland, and although a number of nails flew between them—both men heard their whining passage—neither suffered so much as a nicked earlobe. But the sound of the explosion in that small room was enormous. Iron-Guts hadn’t minded being spared the screams of the wounded, but it had been nine full days before his hearing began to come back. He had about given that sensation up for dead when it finally returned home (and still for a week or so every conversation had been like a transatlantic phone call in the nineteen-twenties). His ears have been sensitive to loud noises ever since.

Which is why, when Carlos yanks the pull-ring in the center of the silver thing, setting off the high-decibel siren, Iron-Guts recoils with a harsh grunt of surprise and pain—“*AHHH?*”—and puts his hands to his ears.

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All at once the knife is pointing at the ceiling instead of at Carlos, and Carlos doesn't hesitate to take advantage. Badly hurt as he is, as *surprised* as he is, he's never gone more than half a step over the edge of panic. He knows there are only two ways out of this office, and that the five-story drop from the windows behind him is unacceptable. It must be the door, and that means he must deal with The General.

Near the top of the screaming gunshell, about eight inches beyond the pull-ring, is a promising red button. As The General lunges forward again, Carlos thrusts the gunshell gadget at him and pushes the button. He's hoping for acid.

A cloud of white stuff billows from the pinhole in the very tip of the gunshell and envelops the General. Hi-Pro gas isn't acid—not quite—but it isn't cotton candy, either. The General feels as if a swarm of biting insects (Gnats from Hell) had just settled on the wet and delicate surfaces of his eyes. These same insects pour up his nostrils, and the General suspends breathing at once.

Like Carlos, he keeps control. He knows he's been gassed. Even blinded, he can deal with that, has dealt with it before. It's the *siren* that's really screwing up his action. It's bludgeoning his brains.

He falls back toward the door, pressing his free hand against his left ear and waving the knife in front of him, creating what he hopes will be a zone of serious injury.

And then, oh praise God, the siren quits. Maybe its Taiwanese circuits are defective; maybe the nine-volt battery which powered it just ran out of juice. Hecksler doesn't give Shit One which it is. All he knows is that he can think again, and this fills his warrior's heart with gratitude.

With luck, however, the D.S. won't know he's got it back together. A little acting is in order. Hecksler staggers against the side of the door, still screaming. He allows the knife to drop. His eyes, he knows, are swelling shut. If Carlos buys his ruse—

Carlos does. The doorway is clear. The man sagging against one side of it is out of action, *must* be out of action after that. Carlos tries to give him another spray for good measure, but this time when he triggers the button

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there's nothing but an impotent *phut* sound and a little gasp of something like steam. No matter. Time to get while the getting is good. Carlos staggers for the office doorway, his blood-sodden pants sticking to his legs. He is already thinking, in a hysterical and unformed way, about emergency rooms and assumed names.

The General is blind and the General is deaf, but his nose hasn't swelled *entirely* shut and he catches that dark, peaty odor which Frank DeFelice noticed in the elevator. He straightens up and lashes out at the center of the smell. The Army-Navy hunting knife goes into Carlos's chest up to the hilt, skewering the Mad Florist's heart like a piece of beef on a shish kabob. If he had been at Cony Island with Sandra and Dina, Iron-Guts undoubtedly would have won a teddy bear.

Carlos takes two shuffling steps backward, tearing the knife out of the General's grip. He looks down at it unbelievably and utters a single incoherent word. It sounds like *Iggala* (not that the General can hear it), but it's probably *Abbalah*. He tries to pull the knife free and cannot. His legs fold up and he drops to his knees. He is still pulling feebly at the hilt when he falls forward, pushing the tip of the blade all the way out through the back of his jacket. His heart gives a final spasm around the knife that has outraged it and then quits. Carlos feels a sensation of flying as the stained and filthy piece of laundry which is his soul finally flies off the line of his life and into whatever world there comes next.

## 11:33 A.M.

Iron-Guts can't see, but he knows when his enemy dies—he feels the passage of the son of a bitch's soul, and good goddam riddance. He staggers in the doorway, lost in a world of black space and streaming white dots like galaxies.

"Now what?" he croaks.

The first thing is to get away from the gas the Designated Spic shot into his face. Hecksler backs into the hall, breathing as shallowly as possible, and then a voice speaks to him.

*This way, Tony, it says calmly. Turn portside. I'm going to lead you out.*



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“Doug?” Hecksler croaks.

*Yep. It's me, General MacArthur says. You're not exactly looking squared away, Tony, but you're still standing at the end of the fight, and that's the important thing. Turn portside, now. Walk forty paces, and that's gonna take you to the elevator.*

Iron-Guts has lost his usually formidable sense of direction, but with that voice to guide him, he doesn't need it. He turns portside, which happens to be directly away from the reception area and the elevator. Blind, now facing toward the ivy-choked far end of the hallway, he begins to walk, trailing one hand along the wall. At first he thinks the soft touch slithering around his shoulders are Dougout Doug's guiding hands...but how can they be so thin? How can there be so many fingers? And what is that bitter smell?

Then Zenith is winding itself around his neck, shutting off his air, yanking him forward into its cannibal embrace. Hecksler tries to scream. Leaf-decked branches, slender but horribly strong, leap eagerly into his mouth. One wraps around the leathery meat of his tongue and yanks it out. Others thrust their way down his elderly gullet, anxious to sample the digestive stew of the General's last meal (two doughnuts, a cup of black coffee, and half a roll of antacids). Zenith loops bracelets of ivy around his arms and thighs. It fashions a new belt around his waist. It picks his pockets, spilling out a mostly nonsensical strew of litter: receipts, memoranda to himself, a guitar pick, twenty or thirty dollars in assorted change and currency, one of the S&H stamp-books in which he wrote his dispatches.

Anthony “Iron-Guts” Hecksler is pulled briskly into the jungle which now infests the rear of the fifth floor with his clothes shredding and his pockets turned out, feeding the plant the blood of insanity, bringing it to full life and consciousness, and here he passes out of our tale forever.

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*From John Kenton's diary*

April 4, 1981

It's 10:45 P.M., and I'm sitting here waiting for the phone to ring. I remember, not so long ago, sitting in this same chair and waiting for Ruth to call, thinking that nothing could be worse than being a man in love sending thought-waves at the telephone, trying to make it ring.

But this is worse.

This is much worse.

Because when the phone finally rings, what if it's not Bill or Riddley on the other end of the line? What if it's some New Jersey cop who wants to know—

No. I refuse to let my mind run in that direction. It'll ring and it *will* be one of them. Or maybe Roger, if they call him first and leave it to him to call me. But everything is going to be fine.

Because now we have protection.

Let me go back to when I yanked the frypan right off the stove (which turned out to be something of a blessing; when I got back to the apartment some hours later, I discovered I'd left the burner on). I grabbed the kitchen table and kept on my feet, and then that goddamned siren went off in the middle of my head.

I don't know how long it went on; pain really does negate the whole concept of time. Fortunately, the reverse also seems to be true: given time, even the most horrible pain loses its immediacy, and you can no longer remember exactly how it felt. This was bad, I know that much—like having the most delicate tissues of your body repeatedly raked by some sharp, barbed object.

When it finally did stop, I was cringing against the wall between the kitchen and my combination living room/study, shaking and sobbing, my cheeks wet with tears and my upper lip lathered with snot.

The pain was gone, but the sense of urgency wasn't. I needed to get to

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the office, and just as fast as I could. I was almost down to the lobby of my building when I checked to see if I'd put anything on my feet. As it happened, I'd found an old pair of moccasins. I must have gotten them out of the closet by the TV, although I'll be damned if I can remember that part. If my feet *had* been bare, I'm not sure I could have forced myself to go back up to the ninth floor. That's how strong that sense of urgency was.

Of course I knew what the siren in my head had been, even though I'd never been given an actual demonstration of Sandra's Rainy Day Friend, and I suppose I knew what was calling me, as well: our new mascot.

I caught a taxi with no trouble—thank God for Saturdays—and the run from my place to Zenith House was a quick one. Bill Gelb was standing out in front, pacing back and forth with one side of his shirt untucked and hanging down over his belt, running his hands back and forth through his hair, which was standing up in spikes and quills. He looked as nutty as the old lady in front of Smiler's, and

Funny thought to have. Because there *was* no lady in front of Smiler's, not really. We know that now.

I'm getting ahead of myself again, but it's hard to write scintillating prose when you can't stop looking at the phone, willing the damned thing to go off and put an end to the suspense, one way or the other. But I'll try. I think I must try.

Bill saw me and raced over to the cab. He started grabbing at my arm while I was still trying to pay the driver, pulling me onto the curb as if I'd fallen into a shark-infested pool. I dropped some coins and started to bend over.

"Leave em, for Christ sake, leave em!" he barked. "Have you got your office keys? I left mine on the bureau at home. I was out for a..." *Out for a walk* was what he meant to say, but instead of finishing he gave a kind of out-of-breath, screamy laugh. A woman passing us gave him a hard look and hurried on a little faster. "Oh shit, *you* know what I was doing."

Indeed I did. He'd been shooting craps in Central Park, but he'd left the majority of his cash on his bureau (along with his office keyring) because he

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had other plans for it. I could have gotten the other plans, too, if I'd wanted to look, but I didn't. One thing was obvious: the telepathic range of the plant has gotten stronger. *A lot.*

We started for the door, and just then another cab pulled up. Herb Porter got out, redder in the face than I'd ever seen him. The man looked like a stroke waiting to happen. I'd never seen him in bluejeans, either, or with his shirt misbuttoned so it bloused out on one side. Also, it was sticking to his body and his hair (what little of it there is; he keeps it cropped short) was wet.

"I was in the goddam shower, okay?" he said. "Come on."

We went to the door and I managed to get my key in the slot after three pokes. My hand was shaking so badly I had to grasp my wrist with the other one to hold it steady. At least there was no weekend security guy in the lobby to worry about. I suppose that particular paranoid virus will work its way down Park Avenue South eventually, but for the time being, building management still assumes that if you've got the right set of keys, you must be in the right place.

We got in through the door and then Herb stopped, holding my upper arm with one hand and Bill's with the other. A daffy, goony smile was surfacing on his face, where his complexion had begun to subside to a more normal pink.

"He's dead, you guys. He wasn't before, but he is now. Ding-dong, the General's dead!" And to my total amazement, Herb Porter, the Barry Goldwater of 490 Park Avenue South, actually raised his hands, began snapping his fingers, and did a little Mexican hat-dance step.

"You're sick, Herb," Bill said.

"He's also right," I said. "The General's dead and so's—"

There came a clattery, disorganized knocking on the street door. It made us all jump and clutch each other. We must have looked like Dorothy and her friends on the Yellow Brick Road, faced with some new danger.

"Let go of me, both of you," Bill said. "It's just the boss."

It was indeed Roger, hammering on the door and peering in at us, with

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the tip of his nose squished into a little white dime against the glass. Bill let him in. Roger joined us. He also looked as if someone had lit him on fire and then blown him out, but at least he was dressed, socks and all. Probably he was on his way out, anyway.

“Where’s Sandra?” was the first thing he asked.

“She was going to Cony Island,” Herb said. His color was coming back, and I realized he was blushing. It was sort of cute, in a ponderous way. “She might well turn up, though.” He paused. “If it carried that far. The telepathy thing, I mean.” He looked almost timid, an expression I never expected to see on Herb’s face. “What do you guys think?”

“I think it might have,” Roger said. “That was her gadget that went off in our heads, wasn’t it? The Dark and Stormy Night whatsit.”

I nodded. So did Bill and Herb.

Roger took a deep breath, held it, then let it out. “Come on, let’s see what kind of a mess we’re in.” He paused. “And whether or not we can get out of it.”

The elevator seemed to take forever. None of us said anything, not out loud, anyway, and when I discovered I could turn off the run of their thoughts, I did so. Hearing all those muttering voices twined together in the middle of your head is distressing. I suppose that now I know how schizophrenics must feel.

When the door opened on the fifth floor and the smell hit us, we all winced. Not in distaste, but in surprise. “Oh man,” Herb said. “All the way out here in the fucking *hall*. Do you suppose anyone else could smell it? I mean, anyone else but us?”

Roger shook his head and started toward the Zenith offices, walking with his hands rolled into fists. He stopped outside the office door. “Which of you has the key? Because I left mine at home.”

I was rummaging for them in my pocket when Bill stepped forward and tried the knob. It turned. He looked at us with his eyebrows raised, then went in.

I’d characterize what we’d smelled when the elevator door opened on Five as a scent. In the reception office it was much, much stronger—what

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you would have called a reek, if it had been unpleasant. It wasn't, so what does that leave? Pungent, I suppose; a pungent, earthy smell.

This is so hard. To this point I've been racing along, wanting to get to what we found (and what we didn't), but here I find myself moving much more slowly, searching for ways to describe what is, essentially, indescribable. And it occurs to me how infrequently we are called upon to write about smells and the powerful ways in which they affect us. The smell in the Central Falls House of Flowers was similar to this in its strength, but in other ways, *important* ways, entirely different. The greenhouse smell was threatening, sinister. This one was like...

Well, I might as well just say it. It was like coming home.

Roger looked around at Bill and me and gave us a forbidding District Attorney stare. "Toast and jam?" he asked. "Popcorn? Honeysuckle? New goddam car?"

We shook our heads. Zenith had put its various disguises aside, perhaps because it no longer needs them to entice us. I tuned into their thoughts again, just enough to know that Bill and Roger smelled what I did. There were variations, I'm sure, as no two sets of perception are alike (not to mention no two sets of olfactory receptors), but basically it was the same thing. Green...strong...friendly...*home*. I just hope and pray I'm not wrong about the friendly part.

"Come on," Roger said.

Herb grabbed his arm. "What if somebody—"

"Nobody's here," I said. "Carlos was and the General was, but they're...you know...gone."

"Don't gild the lily," Bill said. "They're dead."

"Come on," Roger repeated, and we followed him.

The reception area was clean as a whistle, the garlic still holding Zenith at bay, but the first green scouts had already gotten to within five feet of the pass-through to the editorial department (there's no door at the reception end of the hallway, only a square arch flanked by Macho Man posters). Fifteen or twenty feet down, where the door to Roger's office opens on the

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left, the growth has thickened considerably, covering most of the carpet and climbing up the walls. By the point where Herb's office and Sandra's face each other, it has covered the old gray carpet in a new carpet of fresh green, as well as most of the walls. It has gotten a start on the ceiling for good measure, hanging from the fluorescent lights in ropy swags. Beyond that, down toward Riddley's country, it has become a jungle. Yet I knew that if I walked down there, it would open to let me pass.

*Pass, friend, come home.* Yes, I could hear it whispering that to me.

"Ho...lee...shit," Bill said.

"We've created a monster," Herb said, and even in that moment of stress and wonder it occurred to me that he'd been reading too many Anthony LaScorbia novels for his own good.

Roger started down the hallway, moving slowly. We had all heard *pass, friend*, and we all felt that undeniable welcome, but we were all ready to run, just the same. It was just too new, too weird.

Although there's only one corridor in the office suite, it makes that little zigzag jog in the middle. We call the part running through the editorial offices "the front corridor." Beyond the jog are the mailroom, the janitor's cubby, and a utility room to which only the building's personnel are supposed to have access (although I suspect Riddley has a key). This part is called "the back corridor."

In the front corridor, there are three offices on the left: Roger's, Bill's, and Herb's. On the right there's a small office supply closet mostly taken up by our cranky Xerox machine, then my office, and finally Sandra's. The doors to Roger's office, Bill's, and the supply closet were all closed. My door, Herb's door, and Sandra's door were all open.

"*Fuu-uck*," Herb said in a horrified whisper. "Look on the side of her door."

"It's not Kool-Aid, I can tell you that much," Bill said.

"More on the carpet, too," Roger said. Herb used the f-word again, once more breaking it into two syllables.

There was no blood on the ivy-runners, I noticed, and although I did-

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n't want to think about that too much, I suppose I know why not. Our buddy gets hungry, and doesn't that make perfect sense? There's so much more of it to support now, so many new outposts and colonies, and our psychic vibrations can probably offer it only so much in the way of nourishment. There's an old blues tune on the subject. "Grits ain't groceries," the chorus goes. By the same token, friendly thoughts and supportive editors ain't...

Well, they ain't blood.

Are they?

Roger looked into Herb's office and I looked into mine. My place looked okay, but I knew damned well Carlos had been there, and not just because of the fancy-shmancy attache case sitting on top of the desk. I could almost smell him.

"Things are a trifle disarranged in your cubby, Herbert," Bill said in a really terrible English butler voice. Maybe it was his way of trying to lighten the tension. "In fact, I believe someone may have urinated a bit in theah."

Herb glanced in, saw the destruction, and grunted an oath that sounded almost absent-minded before turning to Sandra's office. By then, I was getting a pretty clear picture. Two crazy men, both with grudges against different Zenith House editors. I didn't care how they got in or which of them had arrived first, but I *was* curious about how far apart in time they'd been. If they'd met in the lobby and had their lunatic shootout there, they could have saved us a lot of trouble. Only that probably wasn't the way Zenith wanted it. Aside from the fact that Carlos may have owed a rather large debt to something (or Something) in the Great Beyond, there's the fact that grits ain't groceries. Telepathic plants get more than lonely, it seems. Pore little fellers get hungry, too.

It's certainly something to think about.

"Roger?" Herb asked. He was still standing by his door, and he sounded timid again. "She...she's not in there, is she?"

"No," Roger said absently, "you know she's not. Sandra's on her way back from Cony Island. But our friend from Central Falls is finally present and accounted for."



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We gathered around the door and looked in.

Carlos Detweiller lay face-down in what Anthony LaScorbia would undoubtedly call “a gruesome pool of spreading blood.” The back of his suit-coat was pulled upward in a tent-shape, and the tip of a knife protruded through it. His hands were outstretched toward the desk. His feet, pointing toward the door, had already been partially covered by thin green bows of ivy. Zenith had actually pulled off one of his loafers and worked his way through the sock beneath. Maybe there was a hole in the sock to begin with, but somehow I don’t think so. Because there were broken strands of ivy, you see. As if it had tried to pull him out, out and down toward the main mass of the growth, and had been unable. You could almost feel the hunger. The longing to have his carcass the way it had undoubtedly already had the General’s.

“This is where they fought, of course,” Roger said, still in that absent tone of voice. He saw the Rainy Day Friend lying on the floor, picked it up, sniffed at the little hole on top, and winced. His eyes began to water at once.

“If you set off the siren in that thing again, I will be forced to kill you as dead as the asshole at your feet,” Bill said.

“I think the battery’s fried,” Roger said, but he set the thing down on Sandra’s desk very carefully, also being careful not to step on Detweiller’s outstretched hand.

Carlos had been in my office, because I was the one against whom he’d built his grudge. Then he left for something.

“I think it was food,” Bill said. “He got hungry and went looking for food. The General jumped him. Carlos got to Sandra’s gadget before Hecksler could give him the *coup de grace*, but it wasn’t enough. Do you see that part, John?”

I shook my head. Maybe I just didn’t *want* to see it.

“What’s this?” Bill was out in the hall. He dropped to one knee, moved aside a clump of ivy, and showed us a guitar pick. Like the leaves of Zenith himself, the pick was as clean as a whistle. No blood, I mean.

“Something printed on it,” Bill said, and squinted. “JUST A CLOSER WALK WITH THEE, it says.”

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Roger looked at me, finally startled out of his daze. “Good God, John,” he said, “that was him! He was *her!*”

“What are you talking about?” Bill asked, turning the pick over and over in his fingers. “What are you *thinking* about? Who’s Crazy Guitar Gertie?”

“The General,” I said hollowly, and wondered if he’d had the knife when I gave him the two dollars. If Herb had been there that day, he’d be dead now. There was absolutely no question about that in my mind. And I myself was lucky to be alive.

“Well, I *wasn’t* there, and you *are* alive,” Herb said. He spoke with his old don’t-trouble-me-with-the-details irritability, but his face was still pale and shocked, the face of a man who is running entirely on instinct. “And congratulations, Gelb, you just left your dabs on that guitar pick. Better wipe em off.”

I could see other stuff scattered amid the thickening greenery back down the hall: shredded bits of clothing, a few pieces of what looked like a pamphlet of some kind, paper money, coins.

“Fingerprints aren’t a problem because nobody’s ever going to see any of the old coot’s stuff,” Roger said. He took the pick from Bill, briefly examined the printing, then walked a little way down the corridor. The drifts and clumps of ivy drew back for him, just as I had known they would. Roger tossed the pick. A leaf folded over it and it was gone. Just like that.

Then, in my head, I heard Roger’s voice. *Zenith!* As if calling a dog. *Eat this crap up! Make it gone!*

And for the first time I heard it speak a coherent reply. *There isn’t anything I can do about the coins. Or these damn things.*

Halfway up the wall, just beyond Herb’s office door, a shiny green leaf almost the size of a dinner plate unrolled. Something bright dropped to the carpet with a clink. I walked down and picked up Iron-Guts’s Army ID tags on a silver beaded chain. Feeling very weird about it—you must believe me when I say words cannot begin to tell—I slipped them into my pants pocket. Meanwhile, Bill and Herb were picking up the General’s silver change.

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As this went on, there was a low rustling sound. The bits of clothing and shreds of paper were disappearing back into the jungle where the front corridor becomes the back one.

“And Detweiller?” Bill asked in a hushed voice. “Same deal?”

Roger’s eyes met mine for a moment, questioning. Then we shook our heads, both at the same time.

“Why not?” Herb asked.

“Too dangerous,” I said.

We waited for Zenith to speak again, to contradict the idea, perhaps, but there was nothing.

“Then what?” Herb asked plaintively. “*What* are we supposed to do with him? What are we supposed to do with his goddam briefcase? For that matter, what are we supposed to do with any little pieces of the General we come across in the back corridor? His belt-buckle, for instance?”

Before any of us could answer, a man’s voice called from the reception area. “Hello? Is anyone here?”

We looked at each other in utter surprise, in that first moment too shocked for panic.

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From the journals of Riddley Walker

4/5/81

When I got to the train station, I stuck my suitcase into the first unoccupied coin-op locker I came to, snatched the key with the big orange head out of the lock, and dropped it into my pocket, where it will undoubtedly stay at least until tomorrow. The worst is over—for now—but I can't even think about getting my luggage, or doing *any* sort of ordinary chore. Not yet. I'm too exhausted. Physically, yes, but I'll tell you what's worse: I'm *morally* exhausted. I think that is a result of returning to Zenith House so soon upon the heels of my nightmare falling-out with my sisters and brother. Any high moral ground I might have claimed when the train pulled out of Birmingham is all gone now, I can assure you. It's hard to feel moral after you've crossed the George Washington Bridge with a body in the back of a borrowed panel truck. Very hard indeed. And I can't get that goddamned whitebread John Denver song out of my head. "There's a fire softly burning, supper's on the stove, gee it's good to be back home again." *That's one wad I'm tard of chewin'*, Uncle Michael might have said.

But 490 Park Avenue did feel like home. *Does*. In spite of all the horror and strangeness, it feels like home. Kenton knows. The others, too, but Kenton knows it best of all. I've grown to like them all (in my own admittedly involuted way), but Kenton is the one I respect. And if this situation starts to spin out of control, I believe it's Kenton that I'd go to. Although I must say this before plunging back into narrative: I'm afraid of myself now. Afraid of my capacity to do ill, and to carry on doing ill until it's too late to turn around and make amends.

In other words, the situation may already be out of control, and me with it.

*Gee, it's good to be back home again.*

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Well, let it go. I'm tired and I still have a lot to tell, so that's best. I feel a moral tract itching to get out, but we'll just save it for another day, shall we?

I told the cab driver to take me to 490, then changed my mind and had him drop me at Park and Twenty-ninth, instead. I wanted to scout a little bit, I suppose. Get the lay of the land and creep up on the blind side. It's important to make one thing clear: the range of the telepathy generated from the plant, while wider, is still limited to the vicinity of the building...unless the situation is extreme, as it was during the death-struggle between Heckslar and the Mad Florist.

I don't know if I expected police, SWAT teams, or fire trucks, but all I saw was Sandra Jackson, pacing up and down in front of the building, looking half-distracted with worry and indecision. She didn't see me. I don't think she would have seen Robert Redford if he'd strolled by stark naked. As I walked toward her, she went to the building's door, hands cupped to the sides of her face, then seemed to come to a decision. She spun on her heels and started toward the street, clearly meaning to cross to the uptown side.

"Sandra!" I called, breaking into a trot. "Sandra, hold on!"

She turned, first startled, then relieved. I saw she was wearing a big pink button on her coat which read I LUV CONY ISLAND! She started running toward me, and I realized it was the first time I had ever seen her in a pair of sneakers. She threw herself into my arms so hard she almost knocked me onto the sidewalk.

"Riddley, Riddley, thank God you came back early," she babbled. "I took a cab all the way from Cony Island...cost a fortune...my niece thinks I'm either crazy or in love...I...what are you *doing* here?"

"Just think of me as the cavalry in a John Wayne movie," I said, and set her back on her feet. That much was easy. Getting her to let go, I thought, might not be. She clung like a barnacle.

"Tell me you've got your office keys," she said, and I could smell something sweet on her breath—cotton candy, maybe.

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“I’ve got them,” I said, “but I can’t get them unless you let go of me, honey child.” I called her that with no irony whatsoever. It’s what Mama always called us when we came in with scraped knees, or upset from being teased.

She let go and looked up at me solemnly, as big-eyed as a waif in one of those velvet paintings. “Something’s different about you, Riddley. What is it?”

I shrugged and shook my head. “Don’t know. Maybe we can discuss it at another time.”

“John’s enemy is dead. So is Herb’s. I think they killed each other.”

That wasn’t what she thought, not exactly, but I took her by the arm and lead her back toward the door. The only thing I wanted right then was to get her off the street. People were looking at us strangely, and not because she’s white and I’m black. And people who see a crying woman on a sunny Saturday afternoon are apt to remember her, even in a city where instant amnesia is the rule rather than the exception.

“The rest of them are up there,” she said, “but I forgot my damned *keys*. I’d just decided to go across to Smiler’s and try calling them when you showed up. Thank God you did.”

“Thank God I did,” I agreed, and used my keys to let us into the lobby.

We smelled it as soon as we got off on Five, and in the Zenith House reception area, it was strong enough to knock you down. A spicy aroma. And green. Sandra was clutching my hand hard enough to hurt.

“Hello?” I called. “Is anyone here?”

Nothing for a moment. Then I heard Wade say, “It’s Riddley.” To which Porter replied, “Don’t be an ass.” To which *Gelb* replied, “Yes. It is.”

“Are you guys all right?” Sandra asked. She still had me by my hand and was dragging me toward the hall. At first I didn’t want to go...and then I did.

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We got around LaShonda's desk and there they were. At first I hardly noticed them, though. The only thing I had eyes for was the plant. No more tired, bedraggled little ivy in a pot. The Brazilian rainforest has been transplanted to Park Avenue South. It was *everywhere*.

"Riddley," Kenton said with obvious relief. "Sandra."

"What are you doing here, Riddley?" Gelb asked. "I thought you weren't coming back until the middle of next week."

"My plans changed," I said. "I got in on the train less than an hour ago."

"What happened to your accent?" Porter asked. He was standing there with that crazy plant growing all around his feet, *caressing his ankles*, for God's sake, and looking at me with beetle-browed suspicion. At *me* with suspicion!

"*That's* it," Sandra breathed. "*That's* what's different."

I freed my hand from her grip, feeling that I might need my fingers in reasonable working order before the day was done. The picture (*a picture*, anyway) was coming clear in my head: a kind of silent movie, in fact. I was getting some of it from them and some of it from Zenith.

The suspicion had left Herb Porter's face. It was only my lack of accent which had bothered him, not me. What I felt as we stood there amid that green madness was a sense of family, a sense of all I had missed down in Alabama, and I embraced it. Away from the plant it is still possible to question, to mistrust. Within its range of influence? Never. These were my brothers, Sandra my sister (although the relationship between she and I is admittedly an incestuous one). And the plant? Our father, which art in Zenith. Color—white, black, green—was just then the least important thing about us. This afternoon it was us against the world.

"I wouldn't go in your office just this minute, Sandra," Roger said. "Mr. Detweiller is currently in residence. And he ain't pretty."

"The General?" she asked.

"The plant took him," John replied, and at that moment Zenith spat

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back the remaining bits of Hecksler it had decided it couldn't digest, perhaps conveying them all the way from the back of the office. The stuff hit the carpet in a rainy, metallic tinkle. There was a pocket watch, the chain it had been on (in three pieces), a belt buckle, a very small plastic box, and several tiny pieces of metal. Herb and Bill picked all this stuff up.

"Good Lord," Bill said, looking at the box. "It's his pacemaker."

"And these are surgical pins," Herb said. "The kind orthopedic surgeons use to hold bones together."

"All right," Wade said. "Let's assume that the plant is taking care of the General's corpse. I think it's clear we can dispose of his remaining...accessories...with no trouble, should we choose to. Detweiler's attache case, too."

"What do you think is in it?" Sandra asked.

"I don't want to know. The question is what to do with his *body*. I'm on record as saying we shouldn't feed it to the plant. I think it's had all the...all the nourishment it needs."

"All that's safe for it to have," John said.

"Maybe more," Bill added.

I should step in here just long enough to say that, although I am presenting all of this as spoken conversation, a good part of it was mind to mind. I can't remember which was which, and wouldn't know how to express the difference, anyway. I'm not sure it even matters. What I remember most clearly was a sense of absurd happiness. After nine months of pushing a broom or the mail-cart, I was attending my first editorial meeting. Because isn't that what we were doing? Editing the situation, or preparing to?

"We *could* call the cops," Roger said, and when Bill and John both started to protest, he raised his hand to stop them. "I'm just articulating the idea. They wouldn't see the plant, we know that."

"But they might *feel* it," Sandra said, clearly dismayed. "And Roger—"

"Zenith might decide to lunch on one of them," I finished for her.



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“*Filet de flic*, the special of the day. He might not be able to help himself. Or itself. Zenith may or may not be our true friend, but it’s essentially a man-eater. It would behoove us to remember that.”

I have to admit I found the way Herb Porter was looking at me rather delicious. It was as if, while visiting the zoo, he’d heard one of the monkeys begin to recite Shakespeare.

“Let’s cut to the chase,” John said. “Roger, may I?”

Roger nodded assent.

“We’ve gotten this raggedy-ass publishing company to the edge of something,” John said, “and I’m not talking about mere financial solvency. I’m talking about financial success. With *Last Survivor*, the joke book, and the General book, we’re not just going to make a noise in the publishing industry; we’re going to create a goddam sonic boom that’ll startle the shit out of everyone. A lot of people are going to turn around and take notice. And for me, that’s not even the best of it. The best is that we’re going to stick it to those assholes at Apex.”

“Tell it!” Bill cried savagely, and that gave me a shiver. It was what Sophie had said to my sister Maddy, when Maddy accused me of playing nigger up in New York. Like hearing a ghost, in other words. Because that’s what my family is to me now, all of them. Ghosts.

“It took magic to make the turnaround possible,” John continued, “and I admit that. But all of publishing is a kind of magic, isn’t it? And not just publishing. Any company that successfully brokers the creative arts to the public is magic. It’s spinning straw into gold. Look at us, for Christ’s sake! Accountants by day, dreamers by night—”

“And bullshitters in the afternoon,” Herb put in. “Don’t forget that.”

“Maybe you *could* get back to the point, John,” Roger agreed.

“The point is no cops,” John said harshly. And, I felt, with admirable brevity. “No outsiders. That ivy is helping us clean up *our* mess, and we’re going to clean up *its* mess.”

“Dead people, though,” Sandra said. She looked quite pale, and

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when she reached out for my hand again, I let her take it. I was glad for the touch myself. “We’re talking about dead people.”

“We’re talking about a couple of dead loonies who killed each other,” Herb said. “Besides, only one corpse.”

There was a moment of silence as we dealt with that. I think it was the crucial moment. Because, down deep, we all knew that, while the General might have killed Carlos, *Zenith* had taken care of Hecksler.

“Nothing bad happened here,” Bill said, as if to himself.

“You got *that* right,” Herb said. “Anyone want to defend the position that the world is worse off because those two jagoffs are no longer in it?”

A moment’s silence, and then John Kenton said: “If we’re not going to feed Detweiler to the plant, how *are* we going to get rid of him?”

Bill Gelb said: “I have an idea.”

“If that’s true,” Roger said, “then this might be a good time to spill it.”

*From Bill Gelb’s Diary*

4/5/81

There were some doubts at first, but I’ll tell you one thing: mind-reading cuts through a lot of bullshit, the emotional as well as the plain old everyday problems people have trying to communicate by word of mouth. I’m pretty sure that what got through to them was my *confidence*, my sense that I had the right idea and that we could carry it off. It was the way I felt in the park, shooting dice with the rest of the yuppie scum. I only wish I’d gotten to the poker game. Oh well, there’ll be another time.

Besides, I *did* get to Paramus.

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From the journals of Riddley Walker

4/5/81 (continued)

The truck was an old rattletrap, the windshield milky around the edges; the heater didn't work and the springs were shot; the seats were lumpy and the stink of cooking exhaust came up through the floorboards, presumably from a defective exhaust-pipe or manifold. But the toll-taker on the GW never even looked at us twice, so I considered it a beautiful thing. Also, the radio worked. When I turned it on, the first thing I got was John Denver: "*Gee it's great to be back home again! Sometimes this old farm seems like a long-lost friend...*"

"Please," Bill said. "Do you have to?"

"I like it," I said, and began tapping my feet. Between us was a medium-sized paper bag with the Smiler's logo on it. Inside it were those few of the General's effects which Zenith found indigestible. The Mad Florist's briefcase was under the seat, giving off some very nasty vibrations. And no, I do *not* believe that was just my imagination.

"You like *this*? Riddley, I don't make reference to your color lightly, but don't Afro-American gentlemen such as yourself usually enjoy folks like Marvin Gaye? The Temptations? The Stylistics? James Brown? Arthur Conley? Otis Redding?"

I thought of telling him that Otis Redding was as dead as the fellow in the back of the rattly old panel truck in which we were currently crossing the Hudson River, then decided to keep my mouth shut on that score.

"I happen to enjoy this particular tune." In fact, I did. "Look outside, Bill. The moon's coming up on one side and the sun's going down on the other. It's what my Mama used to call double delight."

"I was very sorry to hear about your Mama, Riddley," he said, and I blessed him for that. Inside my head, however, where he could no longer

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hear the blessing. Not once we got away from the building where Zenith the common ivy now holds court.

“Thank you, Bill.”

“Did she...you know, did she suffer?”

“No. I don’t believe she did.”

“Good. That’s good.”

“Yes,” I said.

The John Denver song ended and was replaced by something infinitely worse: Sammy Davis Jr. singing about the candyman. Who can take a rainbow, dip it in a dream? Shuddering, I turned the radio off again. But the John Denver song lingered in my head: *Gee it’s good to be back home again.*

We alit on the Jersey side, me in the passenger seat and Bill behind the wheel of the old truck with the fading Holsum Bread stickers on the sides. He had borrowed it from a friend, who hopefully has no idea of what we were transporting, rolled up in an old rug-remnant which Herb Porter found in the supply closet.

When, some hours before, Bill finished outlining his plan, Roger asked: “Who’s going to go with you, Bill? You can’t do it alone.”

“I will,” I said.

“You?” John asked. “But you’re—” He stopped there, but we were still on the fifth floor, still in Zenith’s presence, and we all heard the continuation of his thought: —*only the janitor!*

“Not any more, he’s not,” Roger said. “I’m hereby hiring you in an executive capacity, Riddley. If you want it, that is.”

I gave him my Number One Nigger Jim smile, the one which features roughly two thousand huge white teeth. “I’se gwine to be an edituh in dis heah fine cump’ny? Why, sho! *Sho!* Dat’d be purty good!”

“But not if you talk like that,” John said.

“I’se gwine try to do bettah! Try to improve mah dictive qualities, as well!”

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“This smells like bribery to me,” Sandra said. She squeezed my hand and looked at Roger with mistrusting eyes.

“You know better,” Roger said, and of course she did. That sense of family was too strong to deny. God only knows what’s ahead of us, but we’re in it together. Of that there can no longer be any doubt.

“What are you going to pay him with?” Herb wanted to know. “Smiler’s Extra Value coupons? Enders will never approve another editor’s salary. And if he finds out you’re promoting the janitor, he’ll shit.”

“For payroll purposes, Riddley will continue in his janitorial capacity for the time being,” Roger said. He sounded perfectly serene, perfectly sure of himself. “Later, we’re going to have all the money we need to pay him a full salary. Riddley, how does \$35,000 a year sound to you? Retroactive to today, April 4, 1981?”

“Goodness-gracious-*me!* I be de flashies’ nigga in de Cotton Club!”

“It sounds fine to me, too,” John said, “since it’s five a year more than I am currently making.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” Roger said. “You, Herb, Bill, and Sandra are being raised to...let’s see...forty-five a year.”

“Forty-five *thousand?*” Herb whispered. His eyes had a suspicious gleam to them, as if he were about to break down and cry. “Forty-five thousand *dollars?*”

“Retroactive to April 4th, same as Rid.” He turned to me. “And seriously, Rid—ditch the Rastus.”

“It’s gone for good as of now,” I said.

He nodded. “As for me,” he said, “what does the Bible say? ‘The laborer is worthy of his hire.’ I’m now making forty. How much should I get for steering the good ship *Zenith* away from the rocks of the lee shore and into the open sea, where the trade winds blow?”

“How about sixty?” Bill asked.

“Make it sixty-five,” Sandra proposed giddily. After all, it was Sherwyn Redbone’s money Roger was spending.

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“No,” Roger said, “no need to be vulgar, not the first year, anyway. I think fifty thousand will be fine.”

“Not bad for any of us, considering the plant’s doing it all,” Bill said.

“That’s not true,” John said, a little sharply. “We’ve always had the skills to do this job, all of us. The plant is just giving us the opportunity.”

“Besides,” Herb said, “it’s getting room and board. What more does it require? An ivy doesn’t exactly need a new car, does it?” He looked at Bill. “Are you sure you don’t want me to join the disposal crew? I will, if you want me.”

Bill Gelb thought it over, then shook his head. “Two of us should do just fine. But we ought to put the...you know, the remains...in something. I wonder what there is?”

Which was when Herb went into the supply closet, rummaged awhile, then came back out dragging the rug remnant behind him.

It turned out to be just the right size. Bill and I were exempted from the task of gift-wrapping Carlos Detweiller, and I thought Sandra would stay with us out in the hall (exempting herself, as it were, by virtue of her sex), but she pitched in with a will. And all around us Zenith hummed contentedly, putting a floor under us, sending out what the Beach Boys (another whitebread favorite of mine) would probably call “good vibrations.”

“Telepathy seems to improve teamwork,” Bill commented, and I had to admit it was true. Sandra and Herb spread out the rug beside Sandra’s desk. Roger and John lifted Detweiller and deposited him face-down at one end of the rug. Then, working together, they simply rolled him up like a Devil Dog pastry, securing the whole with the heaviest twine the supply closet could provide.

“Man, he bled a lot,” Bill said. “That rug’s a mess.”

“The plant will suck up most of it today and Sunday,” I said.

“You really think so?”

I really did. I also thought that I could get up most of the residue with a good application of Genie Rug Cleaner. The final result might not fool

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a police forensics specialist, but if the police wind up in here, our butts are probably going to be baked, anyway. To an ordinary outsider, the remaining stain on Sandra's carpet will look as if someone spilled a pot of coffee there a few months ago. Maybe the only real question is whether or not Sandra can live with that manta-ray shadow in the place where she earns her daily bread. If she can't, I suppose I can replace that particular piece of carpet. Because it's as Roger says: such minimal expenses will soon no longer annoy us.

"You're sure you can get this truck?" Roger called out from Sandra's office. He was sitting back on his heels and wiping his forehead with his sleeve. "What if the guy's gone for the weekend?"

"He's home," Bill said, "or at least he was an hour and a half ago. I saw him on my way out. And for fifty dollars, he'd rent me his grandmother. He's a nice enough guy, but he's got this little problem." He mimed sniffing, first closing one nostril and then the other.

"Make sure he's there," Roger said, then turned to John. "Body disposal bonuses at Christmas for all of us. Make a note."

"Sure, just don't put it in your monthly report," John said, and we all laughed. I suppose that must sound gruesome, but it was the cheeriest, most collegial laughter you ever heard. I believe that Sandra, with a tiny smear of Carlos Detweiller's blood on her forearm and another on her right palm, laughed hardest of all.

Bill went in his office and got on the phone. Roger and John moved Carlos, now wrapped in the brown rug remnant, down to the reception area, behind LaShonda's desk.

"I can see his shoes," Sandra said. "They're sticking out a little."

"Don't worry, it'll be okay," Herb said, and just like that I knew that he's been doing the horizontal bop with the lady fair. Well, mo powah to him, is all dis fella kin say. Might be no mo playin truck-drivah and l'il girl hitchhikah, praise de Lawd.

"Nothing's going to be okay until that homicidal idiot's taken care

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of,” Sandra said. She started to brush her hair back, saw the blood on her hand, and grimaced.

Bill came out of his office, smiling. “One old but serviceable panel truck, at our service,” he said. “Bread company advertising logos on the sides, very faded. Riddley, we take it away this afternoon at four—in less than three hours, in other words—and I bring it back later tonight. No questions asked, although I had to agree to mileage, as well. Two bits per. That okay, boss?”

Roger nodded. “This guy lives downstairs from you, right?”

“Right. He’s a stockbroker. Buying vehicles at auction and turning them over is just a sideline. I think he scams the insurance companies when he can, as well. I could have gotten a hearse, actually, but that seemed...I don’t know... ostentatious.”

To me, the idea of taking Detweiler to a Jersey landfill in a hurry-up wagon seemed not ostentatious but downright creepy. I kept my mouth shut on the subject, however.

“And this place in Paramus?” John asked. “It’s safe? Relatively safe?”

“According to some of the talk I’ve heard at Ginelli’s game, it’s as safe as the grave.” Bill saw our faces and grimaced. “To coin a phrase.”

“All right,” Roger said heavily. “Sandra’s office looks more or less okay. Let’s clean up Herb’s and John’s and then get the hell out of here.”

We did it, then adjourned to the cafeteria a block over to get something to eat. None of us had much in the way of appetite, and Bill left early to conclude negotiations with the fellow downstairs.

Outside the cafeteria, on the curb, John took my arm. He looked tired but composed. In better shape than before I left for home, actually. “Riddley, are you okay with this?”

“Fine with it,” I said.

“Want me to ride along?”

I thought it over, then shook my head. “Three’s a crowd. I’ll call you when it’s taken care of. But it may be late.”



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He nodded, started away, then turned back and grinned. There was something heartbreakingly sweet about it. “Welcome to the Green Thumb Editorial Society,” he said.

I sketched him a little salute. “Good to be here.”

As it was. And when I got to Bill’s place shortly thereafter, the old panel truck was already parked at the curb. Bill was standing next to it, smoking a cigarette and looking entirely at peace.

“Let’s pick up some cargo and take it to Jersey,” he said.

I clapped him on the shoulder. “I’m your man,” I said.

We arrived back at 490 around quarter to five. At that hour on a Saturday afternoon, the building was as quiet as it ever gets. Absolutely dead, to coin another phrase. John’s nemesis lay where we had left him, neatly tied into his bundle of rug.

“Look at the plant, Riddley,” Bill said, but I already had. Runners had worked their way to the end of the corridor. There they clustered, barely held back by the garlic John and Roger had rubbed on the sides of the door. The tips were raised, and I could see them quivering. I thought of hungry diners looking in a restaurant window, and shivered a little. If not for the garlic, those advance feelers would already have worked their way into the carpet and around the corpse’s feet. Zenith is on our side, I feel quite sure of that, but neither a stiff dick nor a hungry belly has much in the way of conscience, I’m afraid.

“Let’s get him out of here,” I said.

Bill agreed. “And make a note to refresh the garlic on that door. Tomorrow, maybe.”

“I don’t think garlic will hold it forever,” I said.

“What do you mean?”

Because we were back under Zenith’s telepathic umbrella, I thought my response at him rather than saying it out loud: *It’s got to grow. If it can’t grow, it’ll die. But before it dies, it might—*

*Get mean?* Bill finished for me.

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I nodded. Yes, it might get mean. I'm sure that Detweiller and General Hecksler would say it had gotten fairly mean already.

We carried the rolled-up length of rug down the hall to the elevator, which opened at the touch of a button. There was no one else in the building to divert it to another location, of that I was positive. We would have heard their thoughts.

"We're not going to have any problems at all, are we?" I asked Bill as we rode down. Mr. Detweiller lay between us, a troublesome fellow soon to take up permanent residence in New Jersey. "No little unexpected Hitchcock touches."

Bill smiled. "I don't think so, Riddley. We're going to roll all sevens. Because the force is with us."

And so it has been.

By the time the truck's headlights picked out the sign on the edge of Route 27—PETERBOROUGH DISPOSAL CO. LANDFILL **ABSOLUTELY NO TRESPASSING**—it was full dark and the moon was riding high in the sky. High and dreamy. It crossed my mind that the same moon was looking down on my Mama's fresh grave in Blackwater.

There was a chain across the dirt road leading to the landfill, but it appeared to be looped over the posts to either side, not locked. I got out, slipped one of the loops free, and then motioned Bill to drive through. Once he was on the other side, I re-fixed the chain and got back in.

"The mob uses this place, I take it?" I asked.

"That's the rumor." Bill lowered his voice a little. "I heard one of Richie Ginelli's pals say that Jimmy Hoffa is taking an extended vacation out this way."

"Bill," I said, "far be it for Zenith House's most junior editor to tell you what to do—"

"Lay on, MacDuff," he said, smiling.

"—but a poker game where one hears such odd bits of trivia might

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not be the place for an inoffensive editor of paperback originals.”

“Speak for yourself,” he said, and although he was still smiling, I don’t believe that what came next was a joke. “If the bad boys cross me, I’ll just sic my plant on them.”

“That’s what Carlos Detweiler thought, and *he’s* making his final pilgrimage in the back of a bread truck,” I said.

He looked at me, the smile fading a little. “You might have a point there, partner.”

I *did* have a point there, but I doubt it will stop Bill from his weekend poker forays. Just as I doubt that successfully having it off with Sandra Jackson will stop Herb Porter from the occasional clandestine seat-sniffing expedition. We say “so-and-so should have known better” when so-and-so comes to grief, but there is a world of difference between *knowing* better and *doing* better. To misquote the Bible, we return to our vices like a dog to its vomit, and when one thinks in such terms, I wonder at our apparent determination to co-exist with Zenith the common ivy. To think that he—or it—can make either our situation or ourselves any better.

After considering what I’ve just written, I must laugh. I’m like a junkie between fixes, temporarily sober and pontificating on the evils of dope. Once I’m back in range of those humming good vibrations, everything will change. I know it as well as I know my own name.

Knowing better...and *doing* better. Between them is the chasm.

The dirt road ran through scruffy pine woods for a quarter of a mile and then brought us out into a vast dirt circle filled with trash, discarded appliances, and a stacked wall of junked cars. By the light of a full moon, it looked like the death of all civilization. On the far side was a dropoff, its steep sides covered with more trash. At the bottom, the bulldozers and backhoes looked the size of a child’s toys.

“They bulldoze the crap down there, then cover it,” Bill said. “We’ll take him twenty or thirty feet down the slope, then bury him. I’ve got shovels. I’ve also got gloves. I’m told there are rats in there as big as terriers.”

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But all that proved to be unnecessary; as Bill had said, the force was with us and we were rolling all sevens. As he drove slowly toward the dropoff and the actual landfill, weaving between those rusty cenotaphs of junk, I saw a cluster of blue objects off to the left. They looked like man-sized plastic capsules standing on end.

“Go over there,” I said, pointing.

“Why?”

“Just a feeling. Please, Bill.”

He shrugged and headed the panel truck that way. As we got closer, a big grin began to dawn on his face. They were the Port-a-Pottys you see at construction sites and in some roadside rest areas, but all these had had the hell beaten out of them: dented roofs, broken doors, gaping holes in some of the sides. They were standing about forty feet from the maw of a silent machine that could only be a crusher.

“Think we hit the jackpot, Rid?” Bill asked, grinning. “I think we hit the jackpot. In fact, I think you’re a fucking genius.”

There was a length of yellow tape strung around the cluster of blue capsules, with KEEP OUT KEEP OUT KEEP OUT repeating endlessly in big black letters. Stuck to it with a lick of electrical tape was a note written on a piece of cardboard in big hasty letters. I got out and read it by the glow of the panel truck’s weak headlights:

**TURK! These are the ones I told  
you about, City of Para. Please get that  
damn Mintz off my back and CRUSH  
THESE SOME-BITCHES MONDAY  
1st thing! Thanks Buddy, “I owe you 1.”  
FELIX**

Bill had joined me and was also reading the note. “What do you think?” he asked.

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“I think Carlos Detweiller is going to rejoin the universe as part of a City of Paramus Port-a-Potty reject,” I said. “Early Monday morning. Come on, let’s get it done. This place gives me a severe case of the creeps.”

A gust of wind blew through, rattling trash and sending cans rolling with a sound like rusty laughter. Bill looked around nervously. “Yeah,” he said. “Me too. Hang on while I kill the truck headlights.”

He popped the lights off and then we went around to the back of the truck and pulled out the rolled-up rug with our *compadre* Carlos inside. The moon had dived behind a cloud and as we ducked under the yellow KEEP OUT tape it re-emerged, once more flooding the wasteland. I felt like a pirate in a Robert Louis Stevenson novel. But instead of “Yo-ho-ho and a bottle of rum,” the tune knocking around in my head was that damned John Denver thing about how good it was to be back home again. In this moonlit memorial to the gods of conspicuous consumption, I heard new words, my own words: *There’s a crusher softly rumblin, rats are in the trash; gee it’s good to be back home again.*

“Hang on, hang on,” Bill said, reaching behind him with one hand and propping the rug up with a raised knee. He looked like some bizarre species of stork.

At last he got the door of a Port-a-Potty open. We muscled our burden inside and propped it up between the gray plastic urinal and the toilet seat. The place still held the vague smell of urine and the ghost of old farts. In one high corner was a cobweb with the corpse of an ancient fly dangling from it. On the wall, by moonlight, I read two scrawlings. “*For X-CELLENT BLOJOB BE HERE 10 PM SHOW HARD I SWALLOW,*” read one. The other, infinitely more disturbing, said: “*I WILL DO IT AGAIN & AGAIN & AGAIN. UNTIL I AM CAUGHT.*”

Suddenly I wanted to be miles from that place.

“Come on,” I said to Bill. “Please, man. Come on.”

“Just one more second.”

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He went back to the truck and got the bag with the General's final effects in it—buckle, pacemaker, osteopathic pins. He raised the lid on the toilet, then shook his head.

“Collection bin's gone. It'll just fall on the ground.”

“You don't have the damn briefcase, either,” I said.

“We can't leave that here,” Bill said. “Something in it might identify him.”

“Hell, his *fingerprints* will identify him, if anyone finds him in there.”

“Maybe. But we don't know what's in the case, do we? Best we drop it in the Hudson on our way back. Safer.”

That made sense. “Give me the bag,” I said, but before he could I snatched the Smiler's bag from him. I jogged to the edge of the drop-off and threw it as far out as I could. I watched it turn over and over in the moonlight. I even imagined I could hear the pins which had held the old warrior's bones together rattling. Then it was gone.

I jogged back to Bill, who had re-latched the Port-a-Potty door. For a wonder, it was one of the less battered ones. It would keep the secret we needed it to keep.

“It's all going to work, isn't it?” Bill asked.

I nodded. Had no doubts then and no doubts now. We are being protected. All we need to do us to take reasonable precautions ourselves. And take care of our new friend, as well.

The moon sank back into the clouds. Bill's eyes glittered in the sudden gloom like the eyes of an animal. Which is, of course, what we were. Two junkyard dogs, one with a white hide and one with a brown hide, skulking in the trash. A couple of junkyard dogs who had successfully buried their bones.

I had a moment of clarity then. A moment of sanity. I'm a Cornell graduate, aspiring novelist, fledgling editor (I can do the job to which Roger Wade has promoted me, of that I have no doubt). Bill Gelb is a graduate of William and Mary, a Red Cross blood-donor, a reader to the

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blind once a week at The Lighthouse. Yet we had just deposited the body of a murdered man in an acknowledged mafia graveyard. The General stabbed him, but are we not all accessories, in some measure?

Perhaps only John Kenton escapes blame on that score. He *did* tell me to throw the ivy away, after all. I even have the memo somewhere.

“We’re mad,” I whispered to Bill.

His whisper back was soft and deadly. “I don’t give a shit.”

We looked at each other for a moment, not speaking. Then the moon came out again, and we both dropped our eyes.

“Come on,” he said. “Let’s get the hell out of here.”

And so we did. Back to Route 27, then back to the turnpike, then back to the George Washington Bridge. No one was behind us at that hour, and Carlos Detweiller’s case with the combination lock on it sailed away into the drink. No problems; smooth sailing. Saturday night and we didn’t even see a cop. And all the way, that song went running through my head: Gee it’s good to be back home again.

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*From John Kenton's diary*

April 5, 1981  
1:30 A.M.

Riddley just called. Mission accomplished. The General is gone, and now the Mad Florist and his attache case are gone, as well.

Or maybe he's not.

I just leafed back through these pages to the conversation Roger and I had with Tina Barfield, and what I read there, while not completely accurate, is hardly encouraging. She said we'd be reading Carlos's obituary; what she neglected to tell me (probably because she didn't know) was that I'd be writing it myself. She also told us to go on behaving as if Carlos were alive even after we knew he was dead. Because, she said, he'll be back.

As a *tulpa*.

Even now I don't know exactly what that is, but I tell you this with absolute certainty, utter conviction, and complete clarity of mind: the six of us haven't gone through all of this to be stopped by anyone living, let alone anyone dead. We are going to make Zenith House the talk of New York, not to mention all the publishing world beyond.

And God help anyone who tries to get in our way.



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END OF THE PLANT, PART SIX

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