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Cujo (English Edition)



Par Stephen King
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Par Stephen King : Cujo (English Edition) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Cujo (English Edition):

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Description : Description du produitThe #1 bestseller-for King's rabid fans. A family dog turns into a family killer in King's canine classic.

Prsentation de l'diteurThe #1 national bestseller for Stephen Kings rabid fans, Cujo hits the jugular (The New York Times) with the story of a friendly Saint Bernard that is bitten by a sick bat. Get ready to meet the most hideous menace ever to savage the flesh and devour the mind.Outside a peaceful town in central Maine, a monster is waiting. Cujo is a two-hundred-pound Saint Bernard, the best friend Brett Camber has ever had. One day, Cujo chases a rabbit into a cave inhabited by sick bats and emerges as something new altogether. Meanwhile, Vic and Donna Trenton, and their young son Tad, move to Maine. They are seeking peace and quiet, but life in this small town is not what it seems. As Tad tries to fend off the terror that comes to him at night from his bedroom closet, and as Vic and Donna face their own nightmare of a marriage on

the rocks, there is no way they can know that a monster, infinitely sinister, waits in the daylight. What happens to Cujo, how he becomes a horrifying vortex inescapably drawing in all the people around him, makes for one of the most heart-stopping novels Stephen King has ever written. A genuine page-turner that grabs you and holds you and wont let go (Chattanooga Times), Cujo will forever change how you view mans best friend..comCujo is so well-paced and scary that people tend to read it quickly, so they mostly remember the scene of the mother and son trapped in the hot Pinto and threatened by the rabid Cujo, forgetting the multifaceted story in which that scene is embedded. This is definitely a novel that rewards re-reading. When you read it again, you can pay more attention to the theme of country folk vs. city folk; the parallel marriage conflicts of the Cambers vs. the Trentons; the poignancy of the amiable St. Bernard (yes, the breed choice is just right) infected by a brain-destroying virus that makes it into a monster; and the way the "daylight burial" of the failed ad campaign is reflected in the sunlit Pinto that becomes a coffin. And how significant it is that this horror tale is not supernatural: it's as real as junk food, a failing marriage, a broken-down car, or a fatal virus.

ExtraitCujo not so long ago, a monster came to the small town of Castle Rock, Maine. He killed a waitress named Alma Frechette in 1970; a woman named Pauline Toothaker and a junior high school student named Cheryl Moody in 1971; a pretty girl named Carol Dunbarger in 1974; a teacher named Etta Ringgold in the fall of 1975; finally, a grade-schooler named Mary Kate Hendrasen in the early winter of that same year. He was not werewolf, vampire, ghoul, or unnameable creature from the enchanted forest or from the snowy wastes; he was only a cop named Frank Dodd with mental and sexual problems. A good man named John Smith uncovered his name by a kind of magic, but before he could be capturedperhaps it was just as wellFrank Dodd killed himself. There was some shock, of course, but mostly there was rejoicing in that small town, rejoicing because the monster which had haunted so many dreams was dead, dead at last. A towns nightmares were buried in Frank Dodds grave. Yet even in this enlightened age, when so many parents are aware of the psychological damage they may do to their children, surely there was one parent somewhere in Castle Rockor perhaps one grandmotherwho quieted the kids by telling them that Frank Dodd would get them if they didnt watch out, if they werent good. And surely a hush fell as children looked toward their dark windows and thought of Frank Dodd in his shiny black vinyl raincoat, Frank Dodd who had choked... and choked... and choked. Hes out there, I can hear the grandmother whispering as the wind whistles down the chimney pipe and snuffles around the old pot lid crammed in the stove hole. Hes out there, and if youre not good, it may be his face you see looking in your bedroom window after everyone in the house is asleep except you; it may be his smiling face you see peeking at you from the closet in the middle of the night, the STOP sign he held up when he crossed the little children in one hand, the razor he used to kill himself in the other... so shhh, children... shhh... shhhh. But for most, the ending was the ending. There were nightmares to be sure, and children who lay wakeful to be sure, and the empty Dodd house (for his mother had a stroke shortly afterwards and died) quickly gained a reputation as a haunted house and was avoided; but these were passing phenomenathe perhaps unavoidable side effects of a chain of senseless murders. But time passed. Five years of time. The monster was gone, the monster was dead. Frank Dodd moldered inside his coffin. Except that the monster never dies. Werewolf, vampire, ghoul, unnameable creature from the wastes. The monster never dies. It came to Castle Rock again in the summer of 1980. Tad Trenton, four years old, awoke one morning not long after midnight in May of that year, needing to go to the bathroom. He got out of bed and walked half asleep toward the white light thrown in a wedge through the half-open door, already lowering his pajama pants. He urinated forever, flushed, and went back to bed. He pulled the covers up, and that was when he saw the creature in his closet. Low to the ground it was, with huge shoulders bulking above its cocked head, its eyes amber-glowing pitsa thing that might have been half man, half wolf. And its eyes rolled to follow him as he sat up, his scrotum crawling, his hair standing on end, his breath a thin winter-whistle in his throat: mad eyes that laughed, eyes that promised horrible death and the music of screams that went unheard; something in the closet. He heard its purring growl; he smelled its sweet carrion breath. Tad Trenton clapped his hands to his eyes, hitched in breath, and screamed. A muttered exclamation in another roomhis father. A scared cry of What was that? from the same roomhis mother. Their footfalls, running. As they came in, he peered through his fingers and saw it there in the closet, snarling, promising dreadfully that they might come, but they would surely go, and that when they did The light went on. Vic and Donna Trenton came to his bed, exchanging a look of concern over his chalky face and his staring eyes, and his mother saidno, snapped, I told you three hot dogs was too many, Vic! And then his daddy was on the bed, Daddys arm around his back, asking him what was wrong. Tad dared to look into the mouth of his closet again. The monster was gone. Instead of whatever hungry beast he had seen, there were

two uneven piles of blankets, winter bedclothes which Donna had not yet gotten around to taking up to the cut-off third floor. These were stacked on the chair which Tad used to stand on when he needed something from the high closet shelf. Instead of the shaggy, triangular head, cocked sideways in a kind of predatory questioning gesture, he saw his teddybear on the taller of the two piles of blankets. Instead of pitted and baleful amber eyes, there were the friendly brown glass balls from which his Teddy observed the world. Whats wrong, Tadder? his daddy asked him again. There was a monster! Tad cried. In my closet! And he burst into tears. His mommy sat with him; they held him between them, soothed him as best they could. There followed the ritual of parents. They explained there were no monsters; that he had just had a bad dream. His mommy explained how shadows could sometimes look like the bad things they sometimes showed on TV or in the comic books, and Daddy told him everything was all right, fine, that nothing in their good house could hurt him. Tad nodded and agreed that it was so, although he knew it was not. His father explained to him how, in the dark, the two uneven piles of blankets had looked like hunched shoulders, how the teddybear had looked like a cocked head, and how the bathroom light, reflecting from Teddys glass eyes, had made them seem like the eyes of a real live animal. Now look, he said. Watch me close, Tadder. Tad watched. His father took the two piles of blankets and put them far back in Tads closet. Tad could hear the coathangers jingling softly, talking about Daddy in their coathanger language. That was funny, and he smiled a little. Mommy caught his smile and smiled back, relieved. His daddy came out of the closet, took Teddy, and put him in Tads arms. And last but not least, Daddy said with a flourish and a bow that made both Tad and Mommy giggle, ze chair. He closed the closet door firmly and then put the chair against the door. When he came back to Tads bed he was still smiling, but his eyes were serious. Okay, Tad? Yes, Tad said, and then forced himself to say it. But it was there, Daddy. I saw it. Really. Your mind saw something, Tad, Daddy said, and his big, warm hand stroked Tads hair. But you didnt see a monster in your closet, not a real one. There are no monsters, Tad. Only in stories, and in your mind. He looked from his father to his mother and back again their big, well-loved faces. Really? Really, his mommy said. Now I want you to get up and go pee, big guy. I did. Thats what woke me up. Well, she said, because parents never believed you, humor me then, what do you say? So he went in and she watched while he did four drops and she smiled and said, See? You did have to go. Resigned, Tad nodded. Went back to bed. Was tucked in. Accepted kisses. And as his mother and father went back to the door the fear settled on him again like a cold coat full of mist. Like a shroud stinking of hopeless death. Oh please, he thought, but there was no more, just that: Oh please oh please oh please. Perhaps his father caught his thought, because Vic turned back, one hand on the light switch, and repeated: No monsters, Tad. No, Daddy, Tad said, because in that instant his fathers eyes seemed shadowed and far, as if he needed to be convinced. No monsters. Except for the one in my closet. The light snapped off. Good night, Tad. His mothers voice trailed back to him lightly, softly, and in his mind he cried out, Be careful, Mommy, they eat the ladies! In all the movies they catch the ladies and carry them off and eat them! Oh please oh please oh please But they were gone. So Tad Trenton, four years old, lay in his bed, all wires and stiff Erector Set braces. He lay with the covers pulled up to his chin and one arm crushing Teddy against his chest, and there was Luke Skywalker on one wall; there was a chipmunk standing on a blender on another wall, grinning cheerily (IF LIFE HANDS YOU LEMONS, MAKE LEMONADE! the cheeky, grinning chipmunk was saying); there was the whole motley Sesame Street crew on a third: Big Bird, Ernie, Oscar, Grover. Good totems; good magic. But oh the wind outside, screaming over the roof and skating down black gutters! He would sleep no more this night. But little by little the wires unsnarled themselves and stiff Erector Set muscles relaxed. His mind began to drift.... And then a new screaming, this one closer than the night-wind outside, brought him back to staring wakefulness again. The hinges on the closet door. Creeeeeeeeeeee That thin sound, so high that perhaps only dogs and small boys awake in the night could have heard it. His closet door swung open slowly and steadily, a dead mouth opening on darkness inch by inch and foot by foot. The monster was in that darkness. It crouched where it had crouched before. It grinned at him, and its huge shoulders bulked above its cocked head, and its eyes glowed amber, alive with stupid cunning. I told you theyd go away, Tad, it whispered. They always do, in the end. And then I can come back. I like to come back. I like you, Tad. Ill come back every night now, I think, and every night Ill come a little closer to your bed... and a little closer... until one night, before you can scream for them, youll hear something growling, something growling right beside you, Tad, itll be me, and Ill pounce, and then Ill eat you and youll be in me. Tad stared at the creature in his closet with drugged, horrified fascination. There was something that... was almost familiar. Something he almost knew. And that was the worst, that almost knowing. Because Because Im crazy, Tad. Im here. Ive been here all along. My name was

Frank Dodd once, and I killed the ladies and maybe I ate them, too. I've been here all along, I stick around, I keep my ear to the ground. I'm the monster, Tad, the old monster, and I'll have you soon, Tad. Feel me getting closer... and closer.... Perhaps the thing in the closet spoke to him in its own hissing breath, or perhaps its voice was the wind's voice. Either way, neither way, it didn't matter. He listened to its words, drugged with terror, near fainting (but oh so wide awake); he looked upon its shadowed, snarling face, which he almost knew. He would sleep no more tonight; perhaps he would never sleep again. But sometime later, sometime between the striking of half past midnight and the hour of one, perhaps because he was small, Tad drifted away again. Thin sleep in which hulking, furred creatures with white teeth chased him deepened into dreamless slumber. The wind held long conversations with the gutters. A ring of white spring moon rose in the sky. Somewhere far away, in some still meadow of night or along some pine-edged corridor of forest, a dog barked furiously and then fell silent. And in Tad Trenton's closet, something with amber eyes held watch. Did you put the blankets back? Donna asked her husband the next morning. She was standing at the stove, cooking bacon. Tad was in the other room, watching *The New Zoo Revue* and eating a bowl of Twinkles. Twinkles was a Sharp cereal, and the Trentons got all their Sharp cereals free. Hmmm? Vic asked. He was buried deep in the sports pages. A transplanted New Yorker, he had so far successfully resisted Red Sox fever. But he was masochistically pleased to see that the Mets were off to another superlatively cruddy start. The blankets. In Tad's closet. They were back in there. The chair was back in there, too, and the door was open again. She brought the bacon, draining on a paper towel and still sizzling, to the table. Did you put them back on his chair? Not me, Vic said, turning a page. It smells like a mothball convention back there. That's funny. He must have put them back. He put the paper aside and looked up at her. What are you talking about, Donna? You remember the bad dream last night? Not apt to forget. I thought the kid was dying. Having a convulsion or something. She nodded. He thought the blankets were some kind of She shrugged. Boogeyman, Vic said, grinning. I guess so. And you gave him his teddybear and put those blankets in the back of the closet. But they were back on the chair when I went in to make his bed. She laughed. I looked in, and for just a second there I thought Now I know where he gets it, Vic said, picking up the newspaper again. He cocked a friendly eye at her. Three hot dogs, my ass. Later, after Vic had shot off to work. Donna asked Tad why he had put the chair back in the closet with the blankets on it if they had scared him in the night. Tad looked up at her, and his normally animated, lively face seemed pale and watchful too old. His Star Wars coloring book was open in front of him. He had been doing a picture from the interstellar cantina, using his green Crayola to color Greedo. I didn't, he said. But Tad, if you didn't, and Daddy didn't, and I didn't The monster did it, Tad said. The monster in my closet. He bent to his picture again. She stood looking at him, troubled, a little frightened. He was a bright boy, and perhaps too imaginative. This was not such good news. She would have to talk to Vic about it tonight. She would have to have a long talk with him about it. Tad, remember what your father said, she told him now. There aren't any such things as monsters. Not in the daytime, anyway, he said, and smiled at her so openly, so beautifully, that she was charmed out of her fears. She ruffled his hair and kissed his cheek. She meant to talk to Vic, and then Steve Kemp came while Tad was at nursery school, and she forgot, and Tad screamed that night too, screamed that it was in his closet, the monster, the monster! The closet door hung ajar, blankets on the chair. This time Vic took them up to the third floor and stacked them in the closet up there. Locked it up, Tadder, Vic said, kissing his son. You're all set now. Go back to sleep and have a good dream. But Tad did not sleep for a long time, and before he did the closet door swung clear of its latch with a sly little snicking sound, the dead mouth opened on the dead dark the dead dark where something furry and sharp-toothed and -clawed waited, something that smelled of sour blood and dark doom. Hello, Tad, it whispered in its rotting voice, and the moon peered in Tad's window like the white and slitted eye of a dead man. The oldest living person in Castle Rock that late spring was Evelyn Chalmers, known as Aunt Evvie by the town's older residents, known as that old loudmouth bitch by George Meara, who had to deliver her mail which mostly consisted of catalogues and offers from the Readers Digest and prayer folders from the Crusade of the Eternal Christ and listen to her endless monologues. The only thing that old loudmouth bitch is any good at is telling the weather, George had been known to allow when in his cups and in the company of his cronies down at the Mellow Tiger. It was one stupid name for a bar, but since it was the only one Castle Rock could boast, it looked like they were pretty much stuck with it. There was general agreement with George's opinion. As the oldest resident of Castle Rock, Aunt Evvie had held the Boston Post cane for the last two years, ever since Arnold Heebert, who had been one hundred and one and so far gone in senility that talking to him held all the intellectual challenge of talking to an empty catfood can, had doddered off the back patio of the Castle Acres Nursing Home and

broken his neck exactly twenty-five minutes after whizzing in his pants for the last time. Aunt Evvie was nowhere near as senile as Arnie Heebert had been, and nowhere near as old, but at ninety-three she was old enough, and, as she was fond of bawling at a resigned (and often hung-over) George Meara when he delivered the mail, she hadn't been stupid enough to lose her home the way Heebert had done. But she was good at the weather. The town consensus among the older people, who cared about such things was that Aunt Evvie was never wrong about three things: the week when the first hay-cutting would happen in the summertime, how good (or how bad) the blueberries would be, and what the weather would be like. One day early that June she shuffled out to the mailbox at the end of the driveway, leaning heavily on her Boston Post cane (which would go to Vin Marchant when the loudmouthed old bitch popped off, George Meara thought, and good riddance to you, Evvie) and smoking a Herbert Tareyton. She bellowed a greeting at Meara her deafness had apparently convinced her that everyone else in the world had gone deaf in sympathy and then shouted that they were going to have the hottest summer in thirty years. Hot early and hot late, Evvie bellowed leather-lunged into the drowsy eleven-o'clock quiet, and hot in the middle. That so? George asked. What? I said, Is that so? That was the other thing about Aunt Evvie; she got you shouting right along with her. A man could pop a blood vessel. I should hope to smile and kiss a pig if it aint! Aunt Evvie screamed. The ash of her cigarette fell on the shoulder of George Meara's uniform blouse, freshly dry-cleaned and just put on clean this morning; he brushed it off resignedly. Aunt Evvie leaned in the window of his car, all the better to bellow in his ear. Her breath smelled like sour cucumbers. Field mice has all gone outta the root cellars! Tommy Neadeau seen deer out by Moosuntic Pond rubbin' velvet off'n their antlers ere the first robin showed up! Grass under the snow when she melted! Green grass, Meara! That so, Evvie? George replied, since some reply seemed necessary. He was getting a headache. What? THAT SO, AUNT EVVIE? George Meara screamed. Saliva flew from his lips. Oh, ayuh! Aunt Evvie howled back contentedly. And I seen heat lightning last night late! Bad sign, Meara! Early heats a bad sign! Be people die of the heat this summer! Its gonna be a bad un! I got to go, Aunt Evvie! George yelled. Got a Special Delivery for Stringer Beaulieu! Aunt Evvie Chalmers threw her head back and cackled at the spring sky. She cackled until she was fit to choke and more cigarette ashes rolled down the front of her housedress. She spat the last quarter inch of cigarette out of her mouth, and it lay smoldering in the driveway by one of her old-lady shoes a shoe as black as a stove and as tight as a corset; a shoe for the ages. You got a Special Delivery for Frenchy Beaulieu? Why, he couldn't read the name on his own tombstone! I got to go, Aunt Evvie! George said hastily, and threw his car in gear. Frenchy Beaulieu is a stark natural-born fool if God ever made one! Aunt Evvie hollered, but by then she was hollering into George Meara's dust; he had made good his escape. She stood there by her mailbox for a minute, watching him go. There was no personal mail for her; these days there rarely was. Most of the people she knew who had been able to write were now dead. She would follow soon enough, she suspected. The oncoming summer gave her a bad feeling, a scary feeling. She could speak of the mice leaving the root cellars early, or of heat lightning in a spring sky, but she could not speak of the heat she sensed somewhere just over the horizon, crouched like a scrawny yet powerful beast with mangy fur and red, smoldering eyes; she could not speak of her dreams, which were hot and shadowless and thirsty; she could not speak of the morning when tears had come for no reason, tears that did not relieve but stung the eyes like August-mad sweat instead. She smelled lunacy in a wind that had not arrived. George Meara, you're an old fart, Aunt Evvie said, giving the word a juicy Maine resonance which built it into something that was both cataclysmic and ludicrous: faaaaaat. She began working her way back to the house, leaning on her Boston Post cane, which had been given her at a Town Hall ceremony for no more than the stupid accomplishment of growing old successfully. No wonder, she thought, the goddamned paper had gone broke. She paused on her stoop, looking at a sky which was still spring-pure and pastel soft. Oh, but she sensed it coming: something hot. Something foul. A year before that summer, when Vic Trenton's old Jaguar developed a distressing clunking sound somewhere inside the rear left wheel, it had been George Meara who recommended that he take it up to Joe Cambers Garage on the outskirts of Castle Rock. He's got a funny way of doing things for around here, George told Vic that day as Vic stood by his mailbox. Tells you what the jobs gonna cost, then he does the job, and then he charges you what he said it was gonna cost. Funny way to do business, huh? And he drove away, leaving Vic to wonder if the mailman had been serious or if he (Vic) had just been on the receiving end of some obscure Yankee joke. But he had called Camber, and one day in July (a much cooler July than the one which would follow a year later), he and Donna and Tad had driven out to Cambers place together. It really was far out; twice Vic had to stop and ask directions, and it was then that he began to call those farthest reaches of the township East Galoshes Corners. He pulled into the

Camber dooryard, the back wheel clunking louder than ever. Tad, then three, was sitting on Donna Trentons lap, laughing up at her; a ride in Daddys no-top always put him in a fine mood, and Donna was feeling pretty fine herself. A boy of eight or nine was standing in the yard, hitting an old baseball with an even older baseball bat. The ball would travel through the air, strike the side of the barn, which Vic assumed was also Mr. Cambers garage, and then roll most of the way back. Hi, the boy said. Are you Mr. Trenton? Thats right, Vic said. Ill get my dad, the boy said, and went into the barn. The three Trentons got out, and Vic walked around to the back of his Jag and squatted by the bad wheel, not feeling very confident. Perhaps he should have tried to nurse the car into Portland after all. The situation out here didnt look very promising; Camber didnt even have a sign hung out. His meditations were broken by Donna, calling his name nervously. And then: Oh my God, Vic He got up quickly and saw a huge dog emerging from the barn. For one absurd moment he wondered if it really was a dog, or maybe some strange and ugly species of pony. Then, as the dog padded out of the shadows of the barns mouth, he saw its sad eyes and realized it was a Saint Bernard. Donna had impulsively snatched up Tad and retreated toward the hood of the Jag, but Tad was struggling impatiently in her arms, trying to get down. Want to see the doggy, Mom... want to see the doggy! Donna cast a nervous glance at Vic, who shrugged, also uneasy. Then the boy came back and ruffled the dogs head as he approached Vic. The dog wagged a tail that was absolutely huge, and Tad redoubled his struggles. You can let him down, maam, the boy said politely. Cujo likes kids. He wont hurt him. And then, to Vic: My dads coming right out. Hes washing his hands. All right, Vic said. Thats one hell of a big dog, son. Are you sure hes safe? Hes safe, the boy agreed, but Vic found himself moving up beside his wife as his son, incredibly small, toddled toward the dog. Cujo stood with his head cocked, that great brush of a tail waving slowly back and forth. Vic Donna began. Its all right, Vic said, thinking, I hope. The dog looked big enough to swallow the Tadder in a single bite. Tad stopped for a moment, apparently doubtful. He and the dog looked at each other. Doggy? Tad said. Cujo, Cambers boy said, walking over to Tad. His names Cujo. Cujo, Tad said, and the dog came to him and began to lick his face in great, goodnatured, slobbery swipes that had Tad giggling and trying to fend him off. He turned back to his mother and father, laughing the way he did when one of them was tickling him. He took a step toward them and his feet tangled in each other. He fell down, and suddenly the dog was moving toward him, over him, and Vic, who had his arm around Donnas waist, felt his wifes gasp as well as heard it. He started to move forward... and then stopped. Cujos teeth had clamped on the back of Tads Spider-Man T-shirt. He pulled the boy upfor a moment Tad looked like a kitten in its mothers mouthand set the boy on his feet. Tad ran back to his mother and father. Like the doggy! Mom! Dad! I like the doggy! Cambers boy was watching this with mild amusement, his hands stuffed into the pockets of his jeans. Sure, its a great dog, Vic said. He was amused, but his heart was still beating fast. For just one moment there he had really believed that the dog was going to bite off Tads head like a lollipop. Its a Saint Bernard, Tad, he said. Saint... Bennart! Tad cried, and ran back toward Cujo, who was now sitting outside the mouth of the barn like a small mountain. Cujo! Coooojo! Donna tensed beside Vic again. Oh, Vic, do you think But now Tad was with Cujo again, first hugging him extravagantly and then looking closely at his face. With Cujo sitting down (his tail thumping on the gravel, his tongue lolling out pinkly), Tad could almost look into the dogs eyes by standing on tiptoe. I think theyre fine, Vic said. Tad had now put one of his small hands into Cujos mouth and was peering in like the worlds smallest dentist. That gave Vic another uneasy moment, but then Tad was running back to them again. Doggys got teeth, he told Vic. Yes, Vic said. Lots of teeth. He turned to the boy, meaning to ask him where he had come up with that name, but then Joe Camber was coming out of the barn, wiping his hands on a piece of waste so he could shake without getting Vic greasy. Vic was pleasantly surprised to find that Camber knew exactly what he was doing. He listened carefully to the clunking sound as he and Vic drove down to the house at the bottom of the hill and then back up to Cambers place. Wheel bearings going, Camber said briefly. Youre lucky it aint froze up on you already. Can you fix it? Vic asked. Oh, ayuh. Fix it right now if you dont mind hangin around for a couple of hours. Thatd be all right, I guess, Vic said. He looked toward Tad and the dog. Tad had gotten the baseball Cambers son had been hitting. He would throw it as far as he could (which wasnt very far), and the Cambers Saint Bernard would obediently get it and bring it back to Tad. The ball was looking decidedly slobbery. Your dog is keeping my son amused. Cujo likes kids, Camber agreed. You want to drive your car into the barn, Mr. Trenton? The doctor will see you now, Vic thought, amused, and drove the Jag in. As it turned out, the job only took an hour and a half and Cambers price was so reasonable it was startling. And Tad ran through that cool, overcast afternoon, calling the dogs name over and over again: Cujo... Coojo... heeere, Cujo.... Just before they left, Cambers boy, whose name was Brett, actually

lifted Tad onto Cujos back and held him around the waist while Cujo padded obediently up and down the gravel dooryard twice. As it passed Vic, the dog caught his eye... and Vic would have sworn it was laughing. Just three days after George Mearas bellowed conversation with Aunt Evvie Chalmers, a little girl who was exactly Tad Trentons age stood up from her place at the breakfast table said breakfast table being in the breakfast nook of a tidy little house in Iowa City, Iowa and announced: Oh, Mamma, I dont feel so good. I feel like Im going to be sick. Her mother looked around, not exactly surprised. Two days before, Marcys bigger brother had been sent from school with a raging case of stomach flu. Brock was all right now, but he had spent a lousy twenty-four hours, his body enthusiastically throwing off ballast from both ends. Are you sure, honey? Marcys mother said. Oh, I Marcy moaned loudly and lurched toward the downstairs hall, her hands laced over her stomach. Her mother followed her, saw Marcy buttonhook into the bathroom, and thought, Oh, boy, here we go again. If I dont catch this itll be a miracle. She heard the retching sounds begin and turned into the bathroom her mind already occupied with the details; clear liquids, bed rest, the chamber-pot, some books; Brock could take the portable TV up to her room when he got back from school and She looked, and these thoughts were driven from her mind with the force of a roundhouse slap. The toilet bowl where her four-year-old daughter had vomited was full of blood; blood splattered the white procelain lip of the bowl; blood beaded the tiles. Oh, Mommy, I dont feel good Her daughter turned, her daughter turned, turned, and there was blood all over her mouth, it was down her chin, it was matting her blue sailor dress, blood, oh dear God dear Jesus Joseph and Mary so much blood Mommy And her daughter did it again, a huge bloody mess flying from her mouth to patter down everywhere like sinister rain, and then Marcys mother gathered her up and ran with her, ran for the phone in the kitchen to dial the emergency unit. Cujo knew he was too old to chase rabbits. He wasnt old; no, not even for a dog. But at five, he was well past his puppyhood, when even a butterfly had been enough to set off an arduous chase through the woods and meadows behind the house and barn. He was five, and if he had been a human, he would have been entering the youngest stage of middle age. But it was the sixteenth of June, a beautiful early morning, the dew still on the grass. The heat Aunt Evvie had predicted to George Meara had indeed arrived it was the warmest early June in years and by two that afternoon Cujo would be lying in the dusty dooryard (or in the barn, if THE MAN would let him in, which he sometimes did when he was drinking, which was most of the time these days), panting under the hot sun. But that was later. And the rabbit, which was large, brown, and plump, didnt have the slightest idea Cujo was there, down near the end of the north field, a mile from the house. The wind was blowing the wrong way for Brer Rabbit. Cujo worked toward the rabbit, out for sport rather than meat. The rabbit munched happily away at new clover that would be baked and brown under the relentless sun a month later. If he had only covered half the original distance between himself and the rabbit when the rabbit saw him and bolted, Cujo would have let it go. But he had actually got to within fifteen yards of it when the rabbits head and ears came up. For a moment the rabbit did not move at all; it was a frozen rabbit sculpture with black walleyes bulging comically. Then it was off. Barking furiously, Cujo gave chase. The rabbit was very small and Cujo was very big, but the possibility of the thing put an extra ration of energy in Cujos legs. He actually got close enough to paw at the rabbit. The rabbit zigged. Cujo came around more ponderously, his claws digging black meadow dirt, losing some ground at first, making it up quickly. Birds took wing at his heavy, chopping bark; if it is possible for a dog to grin, Cujo was grinning then. The rabbit zagged, then made straight across the north field. Cujo pelted after it, already suspecting this was one race he wasnt going to win. But he tried hard, and he was gaining on the rabbit again when it dropped into a small hole in the side of a small and easy hill. The hole was overgrown by long grasses, and Cujo didnt hesitate. He lowered his big tawny body into a kind of furry projectile and let his forward motion carry him in... where he promptly stuck like a cork in a bottle. Joe Camber had owned Seven Oaks Farm out at the end of Town Road No. 3 for seventeen years, but he had no idea this hole was here. He surely would have discovered it if farming was his business, but it wasnt. There was no livestock in the big red barn; it was his garage and auto-body shop. His son Brett rambled the fields and woods behind the home place frequently, but he had never noticed the hole either, although on several occasions he had nearly put his foot in it, which might have earned him a broken ankle. On clear days the hole could pass for a shadow; on cloudy days, overgrown with grass as it was, it disappeared altogether. John Mousam, the farms previous owner, had known about the hole but had never thought to mention it to Joe Camber when Joe bought the place in 1963. He might have mentioned it, as a caution, when Joe and his wife, Charity, had their son in 1970, but by then the cancer had carried old John off. It was just as well Brett had never found it. Theres nothing in the world quite so interesting to a boy as a hole in the ground, and this one opened on a small natural limestone cave. It

was about twenty feet deep at its deepest, and it would have been quite possible for a small squirty boy to eel his way in, slide to the bottom, and then find it impossible to get out. It had happened to other small animals in the past. The caves limestone surface made a good slide but a bad climb, and its bottom was littered with bones: a woodchuck, a skunk, a couple of chipmunks, a couple of squirrels, and a housecat. The housecats name had been Mr. Clean. The Cambers had lost him two years before and assumed he had been hit by a car or had just run off. But here he was, along with the bones of the good-sized fieldmouse he had chased inside. Cujos rabbit had rolled and slid all the way to the bottom and now quivered there, ears up and nose vibrating like a tuning fork, as Cujos furious barking filled the place. The echoes made it sound as though there was a whole pack of dogs up there. The small cave had also attracted bats from time to timenever many, because the cave was only a small one, but its rough ceiling made a perfect place for them to roost upside down and snooze the daylight away. The bats were another good reason that Brett Camber had been lucky, especially this year. This year the brown insectivorous bats inhabiting the small cave were crawling with a particularly virulent strain of rabies. Cujo had stuck at the shoulders. He dug furiously with his back legs to no effect at all. He could have reversed and pulled himself back out, but for now he still wanted the rabbit. He sensed it was trapped, his for the taking. His eyes were not particularly keen, his large body blocked out almost all the light anyway, and he had no sense of the drop just beyond his front paws. He could smell damp, and he could smell bat guano, both old and fresh... but most important of all, he could smell rabbit. Hot and tasty. Dinner is served. His barking roused the bats. They were terrified. Something had invaded their home. They flew en masse toward the exit, squeaking. But their sonar recorded a puzzling and distressing fact: the entrance was no longer there. The predator was where the entrance had been. They wheeled and swooped in the darkness, their membranous wings sounding like small pieces of clothingdiapers, perhapsflapping from a line in a gusty wind. Below them, the rabbit cringed and hoped for the best. Cujo felt several of the bats flutter against the third of him that had managed to get into the hole, and he became frightened. He didnt like their scent or their sound; he didnt like the odd heat that seemed to emanate from them. He barked louder and snapped at the things that were wheeling and squeaking around his head. His snapping jaws closed on one brown-black wing. Bones thinner than those in a babys hand crunched. The bat slashed and bit at him, slicing open the skin of the dogs sensitive muzzle in a long, curving wound that was shaped like a question mark. A moment later it went skittering and cartwheeling down the limestone slope, already dying. But the damage had been done; a bite from a rabid animal is most serious around the head, for rabies is a disease of the central nervous system. Dogs, more susceptible than their human masters, cannot even hope for complete protection from the inactivated-virus vaccine which every veterinarian administers. And Cujo had never had a single rabies shot in his life. Not knowing this, but knowing that the unseen thing he had bitten had tasted foul and horrible, Cujo decided the game was not worth the candle. With a tremendous yank of his shoulders he pulled himself out of the hole, causing a little avalanche of dirt. He shook himself, and more dirt and smelly crumbled limestone flew from his pelt. Blood dripped from his muzzle. He sat down, tilted his head skyward, and uttered a single low howl. The bats exited their hole in a small brown cloud, whirled confusedly in the bright June sunshine for a couple of seconds, and then went back in to roost. They were brainless things, and within the course of two or three minutes they had forgotten all about the barking interloper and were sleeping again, hung from their heels with their wings wrapped around their ratty little bodies like the shawls of old women. Cujo trotted away. He shook himself again. He pawed helplessly at his muzzle. The blood was already clotting, drying to a cake, but it hurt. Dogs have a sense of self-consciousness that is far out of proportion to their intelligence, and Cujo was disgusted with himself. He didnt want to go home. If he went home, one of his trinityTHE MAN, THE WOMAN, or THE BOYwould see that he had done something to himself. It was possible that one of them might call him BADDOG. And at this particular moment he certainly considered himself to be a BADDOG. So instead of going home, Cujo went down to the stream that separated Camber land from the property of Gary Pervier, the Cambers nearest neighbor. He waded upstream; he drank deeply; he rolled over in the water, trying to get rid of the nasty taste in his mouth, trying to get rid of the dirt and the watery green stink of limestone, trying to get rid of that BADDOG feeling. Little by little, he began to feel better. He came out of the stream and shook himself, the spray of water forming a momentary rainbow of breathless clarity in the air. The BADDOG feeling was fading, and so was the pain in his nose. He started up toward the house to see if THE BOY might be around. He had gotten used to the big yellow schoolbus that came to pick THE BOY up every morning and which dropped him back off again in midafternoon, but this last week the schoolbus had not shown up with its flashing eyes and its yelling cargo of children. THE BOY was always at home. Usually he was out in the

barn, doing things with THE MAN. Maybe the yellow schoolbus had come again today. Maybe not. He would see. He had forgotten about the hole and the nasty taste of the batwing. His nose hardly hurt at all now. Cujo breasted his way easily through the high grass of the north field, driving up an occasional bird but not bothering to give chase. He had had his chase for the day, and his body remembered even if his brain did not. He was a Saint Bernard in his prime, five years old, nearly two hundred pounds in weight, and now, on the morning of June 16, 1980, he was pre-rabid. Seven days later and thirty miles from Seven Oaks Farm in Castle Rock, two men met in a downtown Portland restaurant called the Yellow Submarine. The Sub featured a large selection of hero sandwiches, pizzas, and Dagwoods in Lebanese pouches. There was a pinball machine in the back. There was a sign over the counter saying that if you could eat two Yellow Sub Nightmares, you ate free; below that, in parentheses, the codicil IF YOU PUKE YOU PAY had been added. Ordinarily there was nothing Vic Trenton would have liked better than one of the Yellow Subs meatball heroes, but he suspected he would get nothing from today's but a really good case of acid burn. Looks like were going to lose the ball, doesnt it? Vic said to the other man, who was regarding a Danish ham with a marked lack of enthusiasm. The other man was Roger Breakstone, and when he looked at food without enthusiasm, you knew that some sort of cataclysm was at hand. Roger weighed two hundred and seventy pounds and had no lap when he sat down. Once, when the two of them had been in bed with a kids-at-camp case of the giggles, Donna had told Vic she thought Rogers lap had been shot off in Vietnam. It looks piss-poor, Roger admitted. It looks so fucking piss-poor you wouldnt believe it, Victor old buddy. You really think making this trip will solve anything? Maybe not, Roger said, but were going to lose the Sharp account for sure if we dont go. Maybe we can salvage something. Work our way back in. He bit into his sandwich. Closing up for ten days is going to hurt us. You think were not hurting now? Sure, were hurting. But weve got those Book Folks spots to shoot down at Kennebunk Beach Lisa can handle that. Im not entirely convinced that Lisa can handle her own love-life, let alone the Book Folks spots, Vic said. But even supposing she can handle it, the Yor Choice Blueberries series is still hanging fire... Casco Bank and Trust... and youre supposed to meet with the head honcho from the Maine Realtors Association Huh-uh, thats yours. Fuck you its mine, Vic said. I break up every time I think of those red pants and white shoes. I kept wanting to look in the closet to see if I could find the guy a sandwich board. It doesnt matter, and you know it doesnt. None of them bills a tenth of what Sharp bills. What else can I say? You know Sharp and the kid are going to want to talk to both of us. Do I book you a seat or not? The thought of ten days, five in Boston and five in New York, gave Vic a mild case of the cold sweats. He and Roger had both worked for the Ellison Agency in New York for six years. Vic now had a home in Castle Rock. Roger and Althea Breakstone lived in neighboring Bridgton, about fifteen miles away. For Vic, it had been a case of never even wanting to look back. He felt he had never come fully alive, had never really known what he was for, until he and Donna moved to Maine. And now he had a morbid sense that New York had only been waiting these last three years to get him in its clutches again. The plane would skid off the runway coming in and be engulfed in a roaring firecloud of hi-test jet fuel. Or there would be a crash on the Triborough Bridge, their Checker crushed into a bleeding yellow accordion. A mugger would use his gun instead of just waving it. A gas main would explode and he would be decapitated by a manhole cover flying through the air like a deadly ninety-pound Frisbee. Something. If he went back, the city would kill him. Rog, he said, putting down his meatball sandwich after one small bite, have you ever thought that it might not be the end of the world if we did lose the Sharp account? The world will go on, Roger said, pouring a Busch down the side of a pilsner glass, but will we? Me, Ive got seventeen years left on a twenty- mortgage and twin girls who have their hearts set on Bridgton Academy. Youve got your own mortgage, your own kid, plus that old Jag sportster thats going to half-buck you to death. Yes, but the local economy The local economy sucks! Roger exclaimed violently, and set his pilsner glass down with a bang. A party of four at the next table, three in UMP tennis shirts and one wearing a faded T-shirt with the legend DARTH VADER IS GAY written across the front, began to applaud. Roger waved a hand at them impatiently and leaned toward Vic. Were not going to make it happen doing campaigns for Yor Choice Blueberries and the Maine Realtors, and you know it. If we lose the Sharp account, were going to go under without a ripple. On the other hand, if we can keep even a piece of Sharp over the next two years, well be in line for some of the Department of Tourism budget, maybe even a crack at the state lottery if they dont mismanage it into oblivion by then. Juicy pies, Vic. We can wave so long to Sharp and their crappy cereals and theres happy endings all around. The big bad wolf has to go somewhere else to get his dinner; these little piggies are home free. All contingent on us being able to save something, Vic said, which is about as likely as the Cleveland Indians winning the World Series this fall. I think we

better try, buddy. Vic sat silent, looking at his congealing sandwich and thinking. It was totally unfair, but he could live with unfairness. What really hurt was the whole situations crazed absurdity. It had blown up out of a clear sky like a killer tornado that lays a zigzagging trail of destruction and then disappears. He and Roger and Ad Worx itself were apt to be numbered among the fatalities no matter what they did; he could read it on Rogers round face, which had not looked so pallidly serious since he and Althea had lost their boy,

Timothy, to the crib-death syndrome when the infant was only nine days old. Three weeks after that happened, Roger had broken down and wept, his hands plastered to his fat face in a kind of terrible hopeless sorrow that had squeezed Vics heart into his throat. That had been bad. But the incipient panic he saw in Rogers eyes now was bad, too. Tornadoes blew out of nowhere in the advertising business from time to time. A big outfit like the Ellison Agency, which billed in the millions, could withstand them. A little one like Ad Worx just couldnt. They had been carrying one basket with a lot of little eggs in it and another basket with one big eggthe Sharp accountand it now remained to be seen whether the big egg had been lost entirely or if it could at least be scrambled. None of it had been their fault, but ad agencies make lovely whipping boys. Vic and Roger had teamed naturally together ever since their first joint effort at the Ellison Agency, six years ago. Vic, tall and skinny and rather quiet, had formed the perfect yin for Roger Breakstones fat, happy, and extroverted yang. They had clicked on a personal basis and on a professional one. That first assignment had been a minor one, to submit a magazine ad campaign for United Cerebral Palsy. They had come up with a stark black-and-white ad that showed a small boy in huge, cruel leg braces standing in foul territory by the first-base line of a Little League ballfield. A New York Mets cap was perched on his head, and his expressionRoger had always maintained that it had been the boys expression which sold the adwasnt sad at all; it was simply dreamy. Almost happy, in fact. The copy read simply: **BILLY BELLAMY IS NEVER GOING TO BAT CLEANUP.** Beneath: **BILLY HAS CEREBRAL PALSY.** Beneath that, smaller type: Give Us a Hand, Huh? CP donations had taken a noticeable leap. Good for them, good for Vic and Roger. The team of Trenton and Breakstone had been off and running. Half a dozen successful campaigns had followed, Vic dealing most commonly with broad-scope conception, Roger dealing with actual execution. For the Sony Corporation, a picture of a man sitting cross-legged on the median strip of a sixteen-lane superhighway in a business suit, a big Sony radio on his lap, a seraphic smile on his kisser. The copy read: **POLICE BAND, THE ROLLING STONES, VIVALDI, MIKE WALLACE, THE KINGSTON TRIO, PAUL HARVEY, PATTI SMITH, JERRY FALWELL.** And below that: **HELLO, LA!** For the Voit people, makers of swim equipment, an ad that showed a man who was the utter antithesis of the Miami beachboy. Standing arrogantly hipshot on the golden beach of some tropical paradise, the model was a fifty-year-old man with tattoos, a beer belly, slab-muscled arms and legs, and a puckered scar high across one thigh. In his arms this battered soldier of fortune was cradling a pair of Voit swimfins. **MISTER,** the copy for this one read, **I DIVE FOR A LIVING. I DONT MESS AROUND.** There was a lot more underneath, stuff Roger always referred to as the blah-blah, but the copy set in boldface was the real hooker. Vic and Roger had wanted it to read **I DONT SCREW AROUND,** but they hadnt been able to sell the Voit people on that. Pity, Vic was fond of saying over drinks. They could have sold a lot more swimfins.

Then there was Sharp. The Sharp Company of Cleveland had stood twelfth in the Great American Bakestakes when old man Sharp reluctantly came to the Ellison Agency in New York after more than twenty years with a hometown ad agency. Sharp had been bigger than Nabisco before World War II, the old man was fond of pointing out. His son was just as fond of pointing out that World War II had ended thirty years ago. The accounton a six-month trial basis at firsthad been handed over to Vic Trenton and Roger Breakstone. At the end of the trial period, Sharp had vaulted from twelfth in the cookies-cakes-and-cereals market to ninth. A year later, when Vic and Roger pulled up stakes and moved to Maine to open up their own business, the Sharp Company had climbed to seventh. Their campaign had been a sweeping one. For Sharp Cookies, Vic and Roger had developed the Cookie Sharpshooter, a bumbling Western peace officer whose six-guns shot cookies instead of bullets, courtesy of the special-effects peopleChockaChippers in some spots, Ginger Snappies in others, Oh Those Oatmeals in still others. The spots always ended with the Sharpshooter standing sadly in a pile of cookies with his guns out. Well, the bad guys got away, hed tell millions of Americans every day or so, but I got the cookies. Best cookies in the West... or anywhere else, I reckon. The Sharpshooter bites into a cookie. His expression suggests that he is experiencing the gastronomic equivalent of a boys first orgasm. Fadeout. For the prepared cakesixteen different varieties ranging from pound to crumb to cheesethere was what Vic called the George and Gracie spot. We fade in on George and Gracie leaving a posh dinner party where the buffet table groans with every possible delicacy.

We dissolve to a dingy little cold-water flat, starkly lighted. George is sitting at a plain kitchen table with a checked tablecloth. Gracie takes a Sharp Pound Cake (or Cheese Cake or Crumb Cake) from the freezer of their old refrigerator and sets it on the table. They are both still in their evening clothes. They smile into each others eyes with warmth and love and understanding, two people who are utterly in sync with each other. Fade to these words, on black: **SOMETIMES ALL YOU WANT IS A SHARP CAKE.** Not a word spoken in the entire spot. That one had won a Clio. As had the Sharp Cereal Professor, hailed in the trades as the most responsible advertisement ever produced for childrens programming. Vic and Roger had considered it their crowning achievement... but now it was the Sharp Cereal Professor who had come back to haunt them. Played by a character actor in late middle age, the Sharp Cereal Professor was a low-key and daringly adult advertisement in a sea of animated kiddie-vid ads selling bubble gum, adventure toys, dolls, action figures... and rival cereals. The ad faded in on a deserted fourth- or fifth-grade classroom, a scene Saturday-morning viewers of *The Bugs Bunny/Roadrunner Hour* and *The Drac Pack* could readily identify with. The Sharp Cereal Professor was wearing a suit, a V-necked sweater, and a shirt open at the collar. Both in looks and in speech he was mildly authoritarian; Vic and Roger had talked to some forty teachers and half a dozen child psychiatrists and had discovered that this was the sort of parental role model that the majority of kids feel most comfortable with, and the sort that so few actually have in their homes. The Cereal Professor was sitting on a teachers desk, hinting at some informalitythe soul of a real pal hidden somewhere beneath that gray-green tweed, the young viewer might assumebut he spoke slowly and gravely. He did not command. He did not talk down. He did not wheedle. He did not cajole or extol. He spoke to the millions of T-shirted, cereal-slurping, cartoon-watching Saturday-morning viewers as though they were real people. Good morning, children, the Professor said quietly. This is a commercial for cereal. Listen to me carefully, please. I know a lot about cereals, because Im the Sharp Cereal Professor. Sharp Cereals Twinkles, Cocoa Bears, Bran-16, and Sharp All-Grain Blend are the best-tasting cereals in America. And theyre good for you. A beat of silence, and then the Sharp Cereal Professor grinned... and when he grinned, you knew there was the soul of a real pal in there. Believe me, because I know. Your mom knows; I just thought youd like to know too. A young man came into the ad at that point, and he handed the Sharp Cereal Professor a bowl of Twinkles or Cocoa Bears or whatever. The Sharp Cereal Professor dug in, then looked straight into every living room in the country and said: Nope, nothing wrong here. Old man Sharp hadnt cared for that last line, or the idea that anything could be wrong with one of his cereals. Eventually Vic and Roger had worn him down, but not with rational arguments. Making ads was not a rational business. You often did what felt right, but that didnt mean you could understand why it felt right. Both Vic and Roger felt that the Professors final line had a power which was both simple and enormous. Coming from the Cereal Professor, it was the final, total comfort, a complete security blanket. Ill never hurt you, it implied. In a world where parents get divorced, where older kids sometimes beat the shit out of you for no rational reason, where the rival Little League team sometimes racks the crap out of your pitching, where the good guys dont always win like they do on TV, where you dont always get invited to the good birthday party, in a world where so much goes wrong, there will always be Twinkles and Cocoa Bears and All-Grain Blend, and theyll always taste good. Nope, nothing wrong here. With a little help from Sharps son (later on, Roger said, you would have believed the kid thought the ad up and wrote it himself), the Cereal Professor concept was approved and saturated Saturday-morning TV, plus such weekly syndicated programs as *Star Blazers*, *U.S. of Archie*, *Hogans Heroes*, and *Gilligans Island*. Sharp Cereals surged even more powerfully than the rest of the Sharp line, and the Cereal Professor became an American institution. His tag line, Nope, nothing wrong here, became one of those national catch phrases, meaning roughly the same thing as *Stay cool* and *No sweat*. When Vic and Roger decided to go their own way, they had observed strict protocol and had not gone to any of their previous clients until their connections with the Ellison Agency were formally and amicably severed. Their first six months in Portland had been a scary, pressure-cooker time for all of them. Vic and Donnas boy, Tad, was only a year old. Donna, who missed New York badly, was by turns sullen, petulant, and just plain scared. Roger had an old ulcera battle scar from his years in the Big Apple advertising wars and when he and Althea lost the baby the ulcer had flared up again, turning him into a closet Gelusil chugger. Althea bounced back as well as possible under the circumstances, Vic thought; it was Donna who pointed out to him that placid Altheas single weak drink before dinner had turned into two before and three after. The two couples had vacationed in Maine, separately and together, but neither Vic nor Roger had realized how many doors are initially closed to folks who have moved in, as Mainers say, from outta state. They would indeed have gone under, as Roger pointed out, if Sharp hadnt decided to stay with them. And at the companys Cleveland

headquarters, positions had done an ironic flip-flop. Now it was the old man who wanted to stick with Vic and Roger and it was the kid (by this time forty years old) who wanted to jettison them, arguing with some logic that it would be madness to hand their account over to a two-bit ad agency six hundred miles north of the New York pulsebeat. The fact that Ad Worx was affiliated with a New York market-analysis firm cut zero ice with the kid, as it had cut zero ice with the other firms for which they had put together campaigns in the past few years. If loyalty was toilet paper, Roger had said bitterly, wed be hard-pressed to wipe our asses, old buddy. But Sharp had come along, providing the margin they had so desperately needed. We made do with an ad agency here in town for forty years, old man Sharp said, and if those two boys want to move out of that Christless city, theyre just showing good old common sense. That was that. The old man had spoken.

The kid shut up. And for the last two and a half years, the Cookie Sharpshooter had gone on shooting, George and Gracie had gone on eating Sharp Cakes in their cold-water flat, and the Sharp Cereal Professor had gone on telling kids that there was nothing wrong here. Actual spot production was handled by a small independent studio in Boston, the New York market-analysis firm went on doing its thing competently, and three or four times a year either Vic or Roger flew to Cleveland to confer with Carroll Sharp and his kidsaid kid now going decidedly gray around the temples. All the rest of the client-agency intercourse was handled by the U.S. Post Office and Ma Bell. The process was perhaps strange, certainly cumbersome, but it seemed to work fine. Then along came Red Razberry Zingers. Vic and Roger had known about Zingers for some time, of course, although it had only gone on the general market some two months ago, in April of 1980. Most of the Sharp cereals were lightly sweetened or not sweetened at all. All-Grain Blend, Sharps entry in the natural cereal arena, had been quite successful. Red Razberry Zingers, however, was aimed at a segment of the market with a sweeter tooth: at those prepared-cereal eaters who bought such cereals as Count Chocula, Frankenberry, Lucky Charms, and similar presweetened breakfast foods which were somewhere in the twilight zone between cereal and candy. In the late summer and early fall of 1979, Zingers had been successfully test-marketed in Boise, Idaho, Scranton, Pennsylvania, and in Rogers adopted Maine hometown of Bridgton. Roger had told Vic with a shudder that he wouldnt let the twins near it with a ten-foot pole (although he had been pleased when Althea told him the kids had clamored for it when they saw it shelved at Gigeures Market). Its got more sugar than whole grain in it, and it looks like the side of a firebarn. Vic had nodded and replied innocently enough, with no sense of prophecy, The first time I looked in one of those boxes, I thought it was full of blood. So what do you think? Roger repeated. He had made it halfway through his sandwich as Vic reviewed the dismal train of events in his mind. He was becoming more and more sure that in Cleveland old man Sharp and his aging kid were looking again to shoot the messenger for the message. Guess we better try. Roger clapped him on the shoulder. My man, he said. Now eat up. But Vic wasnt hungry. The two of them had been invited to Cleveland to attend an emergency meeting that was to be held three weeks after the Fourth of Julya good many of the Sharp regional sales managers and executives were vacationing, and it would take at least that long to get them all together. One of the items on the agenda had to do directly with Ad Worx: an assessment of the association to this point, the letter had said. Which meant, Vic assumed, that the kid was using the Zingers debacle to dump them at last. About three weeks after Red Razberry Zingers went national, enthusiasticallyif gravelypitched by the Sharp Cereal Professor (Nope, nothing wrong here), the first mother had taken her little one to the hospital, nearly hysterical and sure the child was bleeding internally. The little girl, victim of nothing more serious than a low-grade virus, had thrown up what her mother had first believed to be a huge amount of blood. Nope, nothing wrong here.

That had been in Iowa City, Iowa. The following day there had been seven more cases. The day after, twenty-four. In all cases the parents of children afflicted with vomiting or diarrhea had rushed the kids to the hospital, believing them to be suffering internal bleeding. After that, the cases had skyrocketedfirst into the hundreds, then into the thousands. In none of these cases had the vomiting and/or diarrhea been caused by the cereal, but that was generally overlooked in the growing furor. Nope, not a single thing wrong here. The cases had spread west to east. The problem was the food dye that gave Zingers its zingy red color. The dye itself was harmless, but that was also mostly overlooked. Something had gone wrong, and instead of assimilating the red dye, the human body simply passed it along. The goofed-up dye had only gotten into one batch of cereal, but it had been a whopper of a batch. A doctor told Vic that if a child who had just died after ingesting a big bowl of Red Razberry Zingers were the subject of an autopsy, the postmortem would reveal a digestive tract as red as a stop sign. The effect was strictly temporary, but that had been overlooked too. Roger wanted them to go down with all guns firing, if they were to go down. He had proposed marathon conferences with the Image-Eye people in Boston, who actually did the spots. He wanted to talk with the

Sharp Cereal Professor himself, who had gotten so involved with his role that he was mentally and emotionally torn up over what had happened. Then on to New York, to talk to the marketing people. Most important, it would be almost two weeks at Bostons Ritz-Carlton and at New Yorks UN Plaza, two weeks Vic and Roger would spend mostly in each others hip pockets, digesting the input and brainstorming as they had in the old days. What Roger hoped would come out of it was a rebound campaign that would blow the socks off both old man Sharp and the kid. Instead of going to Cleveland with their necks shaved for the drop of the guillotine blade, they would show up with battle plans drawn to reverse the effects of the Zingers snafu. That was the theory. In practice, they both realized that their chances were about as good as they were for a pitcher who deliberately sets out to throw a no-hitter. Vic had other problems. For the last eight months or so, he had sensed that he and his wife were drifting slowly apart. He still loved her, and he damn near idolized Tad, but things had gone from a little uneasy to bad, and he sensed that there were worse things and worse times waiting. Just over the horizon, maybe. This trip, a grand tour from Boston to New York to Cleveland, coming at what should have been their at-home season, their doing-things-together season, was maybe not such a hot idea. When he looked at her face lately he saw a stranger lurking just below its planes and angles and curves. And the question. It played over and over in his mind on nights when he wasnt able to sleep, and such nights had become more common lately. Had she taken a lover? They sure didnt sleep together much anymore. Had she done it? He hoped it wasnt so, but what did he think? Really? Tell the truth, Mr. Trenton, or youll be forced to pay the consequences. He wasnt sure. He didnt want to be sure. He was afraid that if he became sure, the marriage would end. He was still completely gone on her, had never so much as considered an extramarital fling, and he could forgive her much. But not being cuckolded in his own home. You dont want to wear those horns; they grow out of your ears, and kids laugh at the funny man on the street. He What? Vic said, emerging from his reverie. I missed it, Rog. I said, That goddam red cereal. Unquote. My exact words. Yeah, Vic said. Ill drink to that. Roger raised his pilsner glass. Do it, he said. Vic did. Gary Pervier sat out on his weedy front lawn at the bottom of Seven Oaks Hill on Town Road No. 3 about a week after Vic and Rogers depressing luncheon meeting at the Yellow Sub, drinking a screwdriver that was 25 percent Birds Eye frozen orange juice and 75 percent Popov vodka. He sat in the shade of an elm that was in the last stages of rampant Dutch elm disease, his bottom resting against the frayed straps of a Sears, Roebuck mail-order lawn chair that was in the last stages of useful service. He was drinking Popov because Popov was cheap. Gary had purchased a large supply of it in New Hampshire, where booze was cheaper, on his last liquor run. Popov was cheap in Maine, but it was dirt cheap in New Hampshire, a state which took its stand for the finer things in life a fat state lottery, cheap booze, cheap cigarettes, and tourist attractions like Santas Village and Six-Gun City. New Hampshire was a great old place. The lawn chair had slowly settled into his run-to-riot lawn, digging deep divots. The house behind the lawn had also run to riot; it was a gray, paint-peeling, roof-sagging shambles. Shutters hung. The chimney hooked at the sky like a drunk trying to get up from a tumble. Shingles blown off in the previous winters last big storm still hung limply from some of the branches of the dying elm. It aint the Taj Mahal, Gary sometimes said, but who gives a shit? Gary was, on this swelteringly hot late-June day, as drunk as a coot. This was not an uncommon state of affairs with him. He did not know Roger Breakstone from shit. He did not know Vic Trenton from shit. He didnt know Donna Trenton from shit, and if he had known her, he wouldnt have given a shit if the visiting team was throwing line drives into her catchers mitt. He did know the Cambers and their dog Cujo; the family lived up the hill, at the end of Town Road No. 3. He and Joe Camber did a good deal of drinking together, and in a rather foggy fashion Gary realized that Joe Camber was already a goodly way down the road to alcoholism. It was a road Gary himself had toured extensively. Just a good-for-nothing drunk and I dont give a shit! Gary told the birds and the shingles in the diseased elm. He tipped his glass. He farted. He swatted a bug. Sunlight and shadow dappled his face. Behind the house, a number of disemboweled cars had almost disappeared in the tall weeds. The ivy which grew on the west side of his house had gone absolutely apeshit, almost covering it. One window peeked out barely and on sunny days it glittered like a dirty diamond. Two years ago, in a drunken frenzy. Gary had uprooted a bureau from one of the upstairs rooms and had thrown it out a window he could not remember why now. He had reglazed the window himself because it had let in one crotch of a draft come winter, but the bureau rested exactly where it had fallen. One drawer was popped out like a tongue. In 1944, when Gary Pervier had been twenty, he had singlehandedly taken a German pillbox in France and, following that exploit, had led the remains of his squad ten miles farther before collapsing with the six bullet wounds he had suffered in his charge of the machine-gun emplacement. For this he had been awarded one of his grateful countrys highest honors, the

Distinguished Service Cross. In 1968 he had gotten Buddy Torgeson down in Castle Falls to turn the medal into an ashtray. Buddy had been shocked. Gary told Buddy he would have gotten him to make it into a toilet bowl so he could shit in it, but it wasn't big enough. Buddy spread the story, and maybe that had been Gary's intention, or maybe it hadn't. Either way, it had driven the local hippies crazy with admiration. In the summer of '68 most of these hippies were on vacation in the Lakes Region with their wealthy parents before returning to their colleges in September, where they were apparently studying up on Protest, Pot, and Pussy. After Gary had his DSC turned into an ashtray by Buddy Torgeson, who did custom welding in his spare time and who worked days down to the Castle Falls Esso (they were all Exxon stations now, and Gary Pervier didn't give a shit), a version of the story found its way into the Castle Rock Call. The story was written by a local-yokel reporter who construed the act as an antiwar gesture. That was when the hippies started to show up at Gary's place on Town Road No. 3. Most of them wanted to tell Gary he was far out. Some of them wanted to tell him he was some kind of heavy. A few wanted to tell him he was too fucking much. Gary showed them all the same thing, which was his Winchester .30-.06. He told them to get off his property. As far as he was concerned they were all a bunch of long-haired muff-diving crab-crawling asshole pinko fucksticks. He told them he didn't give a shit if he blew their guts from Castle Rock to Fryeburg. After a while they stopped coming, and that was the end of the DSC affair. One of those German bullets had taken Gary Pervier's right testicle off; a medic had found most of it splattered across the seat of his GI-issue underwear. Most of the other one survived, and sometimes he could still get a pretty respectable bone-on. Not, he had frequently told Joe Camber, that he gave much of a shit one way or the other. His grateful country had given him the Distinguished Service Cross. A grateful hospital staff in Paris had discharged him in February 1945 with an 80-percent disability pension and a gold-plated monkey on his back. A grateful hometown gave him a parade on the Fourth of July 1945 (by then he was twenty-one instead of twenty, able to vote, his hair graying around the temples, and he felt all of seven hundred, thank you very much). The grateful town selectmen had remanded the property taxes on the Pervier place in perpetuity. That was good, because he would have lost it twenty years ago otherwise. He had replaced the morphine he could no longer obtain with high-tension booze and had then proceeded to get about his life's work, which was killing himself as slowly and as pleasantly as he could. Now, in 1980, he was fifty-six years old, totally gray, and meaner than a bull with a jackhandle up its ass. About the only three living creatures he could stand were Joe Camber, his boy Brett, and Brett's big Saint Bernard, Cujo. He tilted back in the decaying lawn chair, almost went over on his back, and used up some more of his screwdriver. The screwdriver was in a glass he had gotten free from a McDonald's restaurant. There was some sort of purple animal on the glass. Something called a Grimace. Gary ate a lot of his meals at the Castle Rock McDonald's, where you could still get a cheap hamburger. Hamburgers were good. But as for the Grimace... and Mayor McCheese... and Monsieur Ronald Fucking McDonald... Gary Pervier didn't give a shit for any of them. A broad, tawny shape was moving through the high grass to his left, and a moment later Cujo, on one of his rambles, emerged into Gary's tattered front yard. He saw Gary and barked once, politely. Then he came over, wagging his tail. Cuje, you old sonofawhore, Gary said. He put his screwdriver down and began digging methodically through his pockets for dog biscuits. He always kept a few on hand for Cujo, who was one of your old-fashioned, dyed-in-the-wool good dogs. He found a couple in his shirt pocket and held them up. Sit, boy. Sit up. No matter how low or how mean he was feeling, the sight of that two-hundred-pound dog sitting up like a rabbit never failed to tickle him. Cujo sat up, and Gary saw a short but ugly-looking scratch healing on the dog's muzzle. Gary tossed him the biscuits, which were shaped like bones, and Cujo snapped them effortlessly out of the air. He dropped one between his forepaws and began to gnaw the other one. Good dog, Gary said, reaching out to pat Cujo's head. Good Cujo began to growl. Deep in his throat. It was a rumbling, almost reflective sound. He looked up at Gary, and there was something cold and speculative in the dog's eyes that gave Gary a chill. He took his hand back to himself quickly. A dog as big as Cujo was nothing to get screwing around with. Not unless you wanted to spend the rest of your life wiping your ass with a hook. What's got into you, boy? Gary asked. He had never heard Cujo growl, not in all the years the Cambers had had him. To tell the truth, he wouldn't have believed ole Cuje had a growl in him. Cujo wagged his tail a little bit and came over to Gary to be patted, as if ashamed of his momentary lapse. Hey, that's more like it, Gary said, ruffling the big dog's fur. It had been one scorcher of a week, and more coming, according to George Meara, who had heard it from Aunt Evvie Chalmers. He supposed that was it. Dogs felt the heat even more than people did, and he guessed there was no rule against a mutt getting testy once in a while. But it sure had been funny, hearing Cujo growl like that. If Joe Camber had told him, Gary wouldn't have believed it. Go get your other biscuit,

Gary said, and pointed. Cujo turned around, went to the biscuit, picked it up, mouthed it a long string of saliva depending from his mouth and then dropped it. He looked at Gary apologetically. You, turn in down chow? Gary said unbelievably. You? Cujo picked up the dog biscuit again and ate it. That's better, Gary said. A little heat ain't gonna killya. Ain't gonna kill me either, but it bitches the shit outta my hemorrhoids. Well, I don't give a shit if they get as big as fucking golfballs. You know it? He swatted a mosquito. Cujo lay down beside Gary's chair as Gary picked up his screwdriver again. It was almost time to go in and freshen it up, as the country-club cunts said. Freshen up my ass, Gary said. He gestured at the roof of his house, and a sticky mixture of orange juice and vodka trickled down his sunburned, scrawny arm. Look at that chimbley, Cujo ole guy. Fallin' right the fuck down. And you know what? I don't give a shit. The whole place could fall flat and I wouldn't fart sideways to a dime. You know that? Cujo thumped his tail a little. He didn't know what this MAN was saying, but the rhythms were familiar and the patterns were soothing. These polemics had gone on a dozen times a week since... well, as far as Cujo was concerned, since forever. Cujo liked this MAN, who always had food. Just lately Cujo didn't seem to want food, but if THE MAN wanted him to eat, he would. Then he could lie here as he was now and listen to the soothing talk. All in all, Cujo didn't feel very well. He hadn't growled at THE MAN because he was hot but simply because he didn't feel good. For a moment there just a moment he had felt like biting THE MAN. Got your nose in the brambles, looks like, Gary said. What was you after? Woodchuck? Rabbit? Cujo thumped his tail a little. Crickets sang in the rampant bushes. Behind the house, honeysuckle grew in a wild drift, calling the somnolent bees of a summer afternoon. Everything in Cujo's life should have been right, but somehow it wasn't. He just didn't feel good at all. I don't even give a shit if all that Georgia rednecks teeth fall out, and all of Ray-Guns teeth too, Gary said, and stood up unsteadily. The lawn chair fell over and collapsed itself. If you had guessed that Gary Pervier didn't give a shit, you would have been right. Scuse me, boy. He went inside and built himself another screwdriver. The kitchen was a buzzing, fly-blown horror of split-open green garbage bags, empty cans, and empty liquor bottles. When Gary came back out again, fresh drink in hand, Cujo had left. On the last day of June, Donna Trenton came back from downtown Castle Rock (the locals called it downstreet, but at least she hadn't picked up that particular Maine-ism yet), where she had dropped Tad off at his afternoon daycamp and picked up a few groceries at the Agway Market. She was hot and tired, and the sight of Steve Kemp's battered Ford Econoline van with the gaudy desert murals painted on the sides suddenly turned her furious. Anger had simmered all day. Vic had told her about the impending trip at breakfast, and when she had protested being left alone with Tad for what might be ten days or two weeks or God only knew, he made it clear to her exactly what the stakes were. He had thrown a scare into her, and she didn't like to be frightened. Up until this morning she had treated the Red Razberry Zingers affair as a joke a rather good one at Vic and Rogers expense. She had never dreamed that such an absurd thing could have such serious consequences. Then Tad had been scratchy about going off to the daycamp, complaining that a bigger boy had pushed him down last Friday. The bigger boy's name was Stanley Dobson, and Tad was afraid that Stanley Dobson might push him down again today. He had cried and clutched onto her when she got him to the American Legion field where the camp was held, and she had to pry his fingers loose from her blouse finger by finger, making her feel more like a Nazi than a mom: You will go to daycamp, ja? Ja, mein Mamma! Sometimes Tad seemed so young for his age, so vulnerable. Werent only children supposed to be precocious and resourceful? His fingers had been chocolatey and had left fingerprints on her blouse. They reminded her of the bloodstained handprints you sometimes saw in cheap detective magazines. To add to the fun, her Pinto had started to act funny on the way home from the market, jerking and hitching, as if it had an automotive case of hiccups. It had smoothed out after a bit, but what could happen once could happen again, and and, just to put a little icing on the cake, here was Steve Kemp. Well, no bullshit, she muttered, grabbed her bag of groceries, and got out, a pretty, dark-haired woman of twenty-nine, tall, gray-eyed. She somehow managed to look tolerably fresh in spite of the relentless heat, her Tad-printed blouse, and academy-gray shorts that felt pasted to her hips and fanny. She went up the steps quickly and into the house by the porch door. Steve was sitting in Vic's living-room chair. He was drinking one of Vic's beers. He was smoking a cigarette presumably one of his own. The TV was on, and the agonies of General Hospital played out there, in living color. The princess arrives, Steve said with the lopsided grin she had once found so charming and interestingly dangerous. I thought you were never going to I want you out of here, you son of a bitch, she said tonelessly, and went through into the kitchen. She put the grocery bag down on the counter and started putting things away. She could not remember when she had last been so angry, so furious that her stomach had tied itself in a gripping, groaning knot. One of the endless arguments with her mother, maybe. One of

the real horrorshows before she had gone away to school. When Steve came up behind her and slipped his tanned arms around her bare midriff, she acted with no thought at all; she brought her elbow back into his lower chest. Her temper was not cooled by the obvious fact that he had anticipated her. He played a lot of tennis, and her elbow felt as if it had struck a stone wall coated with a layer of hard rubber. She turned around and looked into his grinning, bearded face. She stood five-eleven and was an inch taller than Vic when she wore heels, but Steve was nearly six-five. Didnt you hear me? I want you out of here! Now, what for? he asked. The little one is off making beaded loincloths or shooting apples off the head of counselors with his little bow and arrow... or whatever they do... and hubby is busting heavies at the office... and now is the time for Castle Rocks prettiest hausfrau and Castle Rocks resident poet and tennis bum to make all the bells of sexual congress chime in lovely harmony. I see you parked out in the driveway, Donna said. Why not just tape a big sign to the side of your van? IM FUCKING DONNA TRENTON, or something witty like that? Ive got every reason to park in the driveway, Steve said, still grinning. Ive got that dresser in the back. Stripped clean. Even as I wish you were yourself, my dear. You can put it on the porch. Ill take care of it. While youre doing that, Ill write you a check. His smile faded a little. For the first time since she had come in, the surface charm slipped a little and she could see the real person underneath. It was a person she didnt like at all, a person that dismayed her when she thought of him in connection with herself. She had lied to Vic, gone behind his back, in order to go to bed with Steve Kemp. She wished that what she felt now could be something as simple as rediscovering herself, as after a nasty bout of fever. Or rediscovering herself as Vics mate. But when you took the bark off it, the simple fact was that Steve Kemp publishing poet, itinerant furniture stripper and refinisher, chair caner, fair amateur tennis player, excellent afternoon lover was a turd. Be serious, he said. Yeah, no one could reject handsome, sensitive Steven Kemp, she said. Its got to be a joke. Only its not. So what you do, handsome, sensitive Steven Kemp, is put the dresser on the porch, get your check, and blow. Dont talk to me like that, Donna. His hand moved to her breast and squeezed. It hurt. She began to feel a little scared as well as angry. (But hadnt she been a little scared all along? Hadnt that been part of the nasty, scuzzy little thrill of it?) She slapped his hand away. Dont you get on my case, Donna. He wasnt smiling now. Its too goddam hot. Me? On your case? You were here when I came in. Being frightened of him had made her angrier than ever. He wore a heavy black beard that climbed high on his cheekbones, and it occurred to her suddenly that although she had seen his penis close up had it in her mouth she had never really seen what his face looked like. What you mean, he said, is that you had a little itch and now its scratched, so fuck off. Right? Who gives a crap about how I feel? Youre breathing on me, she said, and pushed him away to take the milk to the refrigerator. He was not expecting it this time. Her shove caught him off balance, and he actually stumbled back a step. His forehead was suddenly divided by lines, and a dark flush flared high on his cheekbones. She had seen him look this way on the tennis courts behind the Bridgton Academy buildings, sometimes. When he blew an easy point. She had watched him play several times including two sets during which he had mopped up her panting, puffing husband with ease and on the few occasions she had seen him lose, his reaction had made her extremely uneasy about what she had gotten into with him. He had published poems in over two dozen little magazines, and a book, Chasing Sundown, had been published by an outfit in Baton Rouge called The Press over the Garage. He had graduated from Drew, in New Jersey; he held strong opinions on modern art, the upcoming nuclear referendum question in Maine, the films of Andy Warhol, and he took a double fault the way Tad took the news it was bedtime. Now he came after her, grabbed her shoulder, and spun her around to face him. The carton of milk fell from her hand and split open on the floor. There, look at that, Donna said. Nice going, hotshot. Listen, Im not going to be pushed around. Do you You get out of here! she screamed into his face. Her spittle sprayed his cheeks and his forehead. What do I have to do to convince you? Do you need a picture? Youre not welcome here! Go be Gods gift to some other woman! You cheap, cockteasing little bitch, he said. His voice was sullen, his face ugly. He didnt let go of her arm. And take the bureau with you. Pitch it in the dump. She pulled free of him and got the washrag from its place, hung over the sink faucet. Her hands were trembling, her stomach was upset, and she was starting to get a headache. She thought that soon she would vomit. She got down on her hands and knees and began wiping up the spilt milk. Yeah, you think youre something, he said. When did your crotch turn to gold? You loved it. You screamed for more. Youve got the right tense, anyway, champ, she said, not looking up. Her hair hung in her face and she liked it that way just fine. She didnt want him to see how pale and sick her face was. She felt as if someone had pushed her into a nightmare. She felt that if she looked at herself in a mirror at this moment she would see an ugly, capering witch. Get out, Steve. Im not going to tell you again. And what if I dont? You going to call

Sheriff Bannerman? Sure. Just say, Hi, there, George, this is Mr. Businessmans wife, and the guy Ive been screwing on the side wont leave. Would you please come on up here and roust him? That what youre going to say? The fright went deep now. Before marrying Vic, she had been a librarian in the Westchester school system, and her own private nightmare had always been telling the kids for the third time in her loudest speaking voice to quiet down at once, please. When she did that, they always had enough for her to get through the period, at least but what if they wouldnt? That was her nightmare. What if they absolutely wouldnt? What did that leave? The question scared her. It scared her that such a question should ever have to be asked, even to oneself, in the dark of night. She had been afraid to use her loudest voice, and had done so only when it became absolutely necessary. Because that was where civilization came to an abrupt, screeching halt. That was the place where the tar turned to dirt. If they wouldnt listen when you used your very loudest voice, a scream became your only recourse. This was the same sort of fear. The only answer to the mans question, of course, was that she would scream if he came near her. But would she? Go, she said in a lower voice. Please. Its over. What if I decide it isnt? What if I decide to just rape you there on the floor in that damned spilt milk? She looked up at him through the tangle of hair. Her face was still pale, and her eyes were too big, ringed with white flesh. Then youll have a fight on your hands. And if I get a chance to tear your balls off or put one of your eyes out, I wont hesitate. For just a moment, before his face closed up, she thought he looked uncertain. He knew she was quick, in pretty good shape. He could beat her at tennis, but she made him sweat to do it. His balls and his eyes were probably safe, but she might very well put some furrows in his face. It was a question of how far he wanted to go. She smelled something thick and unpleasant in the air of her kitchen, some whiff of the jungle, and realized with dismay that it was a mixture of her fear and his rage. It was coming out of their pores. Ill take the bureau back to my shop, he said. Why dont you send your handsome hubby down for it, Donna? He and I can have a nice talk. About stripping. He left then, pulling the door which communicated between the living room and the porch to behind him almost hard enough to break the glass. A moment later the engine of his van roared, settled into a ragged idle, and then dropped to a working pitch as he threw it in gear. He screeched his tires as he left. Donna finished wiping the milk up slowly, rising from time to time to wring out her rag in the stainless steel sink. She watched the threads of milk run down the drain. She was trembling all over, partly from reaction, partly from relief. She had barely heard Steves implied threat to tell Vic. She could only think, over and over again, about the chain of events that had led to such an ugly scene. She sincerely believed she had drifted into her affair with Steve Kemp almost inadvertently. It was like an explosion of sewage from a buried pipe. A similar sewer pipe, she believed, ran beneath the neatly tended lawns of almost every marriage in America. She hadnt wanted to come to Maine and had been appalled when Vic had sprung the idea on her. In spite of vacations there (and the vacations themselves might have reinforced the idea), she had thought of the state as a woody wasteland, a place where the snow drifted twenty feet high in the winters and people were virtually cut off. The thought of taking their baby into such an environment terrified her. She had pictured to herself and aloud to Vics sudden snowstorms blowing up, stranding him in Portland and her in Castle Rock. She thought and spoke of Tad swallowing pills in such a situation, or burning himself on the stove, or God knew what. And maybe part of her resistance had been a stubborn refusal to give up the excitement and hurry of New York. Well, face it the worst hadnt been any of those things. The worst had been a nagging conviction that Ad Worx would fail and they would have to go crawling back with their tails between their legs. That hadnt happened, because Vic and Roger had worked their butts off. But that had also meant that she was left with a growing-up child and too much time on her hands. She could count her lifes close friends on the fingers of one hand. She was confident that the ones she made would be her friends forever, come hell or high water, but she had never made friends quickly or easily. She had toyed with the idea of getting her Maine certification Maine and New York were reciprocal; it was mostly a matter of filling out some forms. Then she could go see the Superintendent of Schools and get her name put on the sub list for Castle Rock High. It was a ridiculous notion, and she shelved it after running some figures on her pocket calculator. Gasoline and sitters fees would eat up most of the twenty-eight bucks a day she might have made. Ive become the fabled Great American Housewife, she had thought dismally one day last winter, watching sleet spick and spack down against the porch storm windows. Sitting home, feeding Tad his franks and beans or his toasted cheese sandwiches and Campbells Soup for lunch, getting my slice of life from Lisa on As the World Turns and from Mike on The Young and the Restless. Every now and then we jive it up with a Wheel of Fortune session. She could go over and see Joanie Welsh, who had a little girl about Tads age, but Joanie always made her uneasy. She was three years older than Donna and ten pounds heavier. The extra ten

pounds did not seem to bother her. She said her husband liked her that way. Joanie was contented with things as they were in Castle Rock. A little at a time, the shit had started to back up in the pipe. She started to sharpshoot at Vic about little things, sublimating the big things because they were hard to define and even harder to articulate. Things like loss and fear and getting older. Things like being lonely and then getting terrified of being lonely. Things like hearing a song on the radio that you remembered from high school and bursting into tears for no reason. Feeling jealous of Vic because his life was a daily struggle to build something, he was a knight-errant with a family crest embossed on his shield, and her life was back here, getting Tad through the day, jollyng him when he was cranky, listening to his raps, fixing his meals and snacks. It was a life lived in the trenches. Too much of it was waiting and listening. And all along she had thought that things would begin to smooth out when Tad was older; the discovery that it wasn't true brought on a kind of low-level horror. This past year he had been out of the house three mornings a week, at Jack and Jill Nursery School; this summer it had been five afternoons a week at playcamp. When he was gone the house seemed shockingly empty. Doorways leaned and gaped with no Tad to fill them; the staircase yawned with no Tad halfway up, sitting there in his pajama bottoms before his nap, owlishly looking at one of his picture books. Doors were mouths, stairways throats. Empty rooms became traps. So she washed floors that didn't need to be washed. She watched the soaps. She thought about Steve Kemp, with whom she had had a little flirtation since he had rolled into town the previous fall with Virginia license plates on his van and had set up a small stripping and refinishing business. She had caught herself sitting in front of the TV with no idea what was going on because she had been thinking about the way his deep tan contrasted with his tennis whites, or the way his ass pumped when he moved fast. And finally she had done something. And today she felt her stomach knot up and she ran for the bathroom, her hands plastered to her mouth, her eyes wide and staring. She made it, barely, and tossed up everything. She looked at the mess she had made, and with a groan she did it again. When her stomach felt better (but her legs were all atremble again, something lost, something gained), she looked at herself in the bathroom mirror. Her face was thrown into hard and unflattering relief by the fluorescent bar. Her skin was too white, her eyes red-rimmed. Her hair was plastered to her skull in an unflattering helmet. She saw what she was going to look like when she was old, and the most terrifying thing of all was that right now, if Steve Kemp was here, she thought she would let him make love to her if he would only hold her and kiss her and say that she didn't have to be afraid, that time was a myth and death was a dream, that everything was okay. A sound came out of her, a screaming sob that could surely not have been born in her chest. It was the sound of a madwoman. She lowered her head and cried. Charity Camber sat on the double bed she shared with her husband, Joe, and looked down at something she held in her hands. She had just come back from the store, the same one Donna Trenton patronized. Now her hands and feet and cheeks felt numb and cold, as if she had been out with Joe on the snowmobile for too long. But tomorrow was the first of July; the snowmobile was put neatly away in the back shed with its tarp snugged down. It can't be. There's been some mistake. But there was no mistake. She had checked half a dozen times, and there was no mistake. After all, it has to happen to somebody, doesn't it? Yes, of course. To somebody. But to her? She could hear Joe pounding on something in his garage, a high, belling sound that beat its way into the hot afternoon like a hammer shaping thin metal. There was a pause, and then, faintly: Shit! The hammer struck once more and there was a longer pause. Then her husband hollered: Brett! She always cringed a little when he raised his voice that way and yelled for their boy. Brett loved his father very much, but Charity had never been sure just how Joe felt about his son. That was a dreadful thing to be thinking, but it was true. Once, about two years ago, she had had a horrible nightmare, one she didn't think she would ever forget. She dreamed that her husband drove a pitchfork directly into Brett's chest. The tines went right through him and poked out the back of Brett's T-shirt, holding it out the way tent poles hold a tent up in the air. Little sucker didn't come when I hollered him down, her dream husband said, and she had awakened with a jerk beside her real husband, who had been sleeping the sleep of beer beside her in his boxer shorts. The moonlight had been falling through the window and onto the bed where she now sat, moonlight in a cold and uncaring flood of light, and she had understood just how afraid a person could be, how fear was a monster with yellow teeth, set afoot by an angry God to eat the unwary and the unfit. Joe had used his hands on her a few times in the course of their marriage, and she had learned. She wasn't a genius, maybe, but her mother hadn't raised any fools. Now she did what Joe told her and rarely argued. She guessed Brett was that way too. But she feared for the boy sometimes. She went to the window in time to see Brett run across the yard and into the barn. Cujo trailed at Brett's heels, looking hot and dispirited. Faintly: Hold this for me, Brett. More faintly: Sure, Daddy. The hammering started again, that

merciless icepick sound: Whing! Whing! Whing! She imagined Brett holding something against something a coldchisel against a frozen bearing, maybe, or a square spike against a lockbolt. Her husband, a Pall Mall jittering in the corner of his thin mouth, his T-shirt sleeves rolled up, swinging a five-pound pony-hammer. And if he was drunk... if his aim was a little off... In her mind she could hear Bretts agonized howl as the hammer mashed his hand to a red, splintered pulp, and she crossed her arms over her bosom against the vision. She looked at the thing in her hand again and wondered if there was a way she could use it. More than anything in the world, she wanted to go to Connecticut to see her sister Holly. It had been six years now, in the summer of 1974she remembered well enough, because it had been a bad summer for her except for that one pleasant weekend. Seventy-four had been the year Bretts night problems had begunrestlessness, bad dreams, and, more and more frequently, incidents of sleepwalking. It was also the year Joe began drinking heavily. Bretts uneasy nights and his somnambulism had eventually gone away. Joes drinking had not. Brett had been four then; he was ten now and didnt even remember his Aunt Holly, who had been married for six years. She had a little boy, named after her husband, and a little girl. Charity had never seen either child, her own niece and nephew, except for the Kodachromes Holly occasionally sent in the mail. She had gotten scared of asking Joe. He was tired of hearing her talk about it, and if she asked him again he might hit her. It had been almost sixteen months since shed last asked him if maybe they couldnt take a little vacation down Connecticut way. Not much of a one for traveling was Mrs. Cambers son Joe. He liked it just fine in Castle Rock. Once a year he and that old tosspot Gary Perview and some of their cronies would go up north to Moosehead to shoot deer. Last November he had wanted to take Brett. She had put her foot down and it had stayed down, in spite of Joes sullen mutterings and Bretts wounded eyes. She was not going to have the boy out with that bunch of men for two weeks, listening to a lot of vulgar talk and jokes about sex and seeing what animals men could turn into when they got to drinking nonstop over a period of days and weeks. All of them with loaded guns, walking in the woods. Loaded guns, loaded men, somebody always got hurt sooner or later, fluorescent-orange hats and vests or not. It wasnt going to be Brett. Not her son. The hammer struck the steel steadily, rhythmically. It stopped. She relaxed a little. Then it started again. She supposed that sooner or later Brett would go with them, and that would be the end of him for her. He would join their club, and ever after she would be little more than a kitchen drudge that kept the clubhouse neat. Yes, that day would come, and she knew it, and she grieved for it. But at least she had been able to stave it off for another year. And this year? Would she be able to keep him home with her this November? Maybe not. Either way, it would be betternot all right but at least betterif she could take Brett down to Connecticut first. Take him down there and show him how some... .. some... Oh, say it, if only to yourself. (how some decent people lived) If Joe would let them go alone... but there was no sense thinking of that. Joe could go places alone or with his friends, but she couldnt, not even with Brett in tow. That was one of their marriages ground rules. Yet she couldnt help thinking about how much better it would be without himwithout him sitting in Hollys kitchen, swilling beer, looking Hollys Jim up and down with those insolent brown eyes. It would be better without him being impatient to be gone until Holly and Jim were also impatient for them to be gone.... She and Brett. Just the two of them. They could go on the bus. She thought: Last November, he wanted to take Brett hunting with him. She thought: Could a trade be worked out? Cold came to her, filling the hollows of her bones with spun glass. Would she actually agree to such a trade? He could take Brett to Moosehead with him in the fall if Joe in his turn would agree to let them go to Stratford on the bus? There was money enoughnow there wasbut money alone wouldnt do it. Hed take the money and that would be the last she would see of it. Unless she played her cards just right. Just... right. Her mind began to move faster.

The pounding outside stopped. She saw Brett leave the barn, trotting, and was dimly grateful. Some premonitory part of her was convinced that if the boy ever came to serious harm, it would be in that dark place with the sawdust spread over the old grease on the plank floor. There was a way. There must be a way. If she was willing to gamble. In her fingers she held a lottery ticket. She turned it over and over in her hand as she stood at the window, thinking. When Steve Kemp got back to his shop, he was in a kind of furious ecstasy. His shop was on the western outskirts of Castle Rock, on Route 11. He had rented it from a farmer who had holdings in both Castle Rock and in neighboring Bridgton. The farmer was not just a nurd; he was a Super Nurd. The shop was dominated by Steves stripping vat, a corrugated iron pot that looked big enough to boil an entire congregation of missionaries at one time. Sitting around it like small satellites around a large planet was his work: bureaus, dressers, china cupboards, bookcases, tables. The air was aromatic with varnish, stripping compound, linseed oil. He had a fresh change of clothes in a battered TWA flightbag; he had planned to change after making love to the fancy cunt. Now he hurled the bag across the shop. It

bounced off the far wall and landed on top of a dresser. He walked across to it and batted it aside. He drop-kicked it as it came down, and it hit the ceiling before falling on its side like a dead woodchuck. Then he simply stood, breathing hard, inhaling the heavy smells, staring vacantly at three chairs he had promised to cane by the end of the week. His thumbs were jammed into his belt. His fingers were curled into fists. His lower lip was pooched out. He looked like a kid sulking after a bawling-out. Cheap-shit! he breathed, and went after the flightbag. He made as if to kick it again, then changed his mind and picked it up. He went through the shed and into the three-room house that adjoined the shop. If anything, it was hotter in the house. Crazy July heat. It got in your head. The kitchen was full of dirty dishes. Flies buzzed around a green plastic

Hefty bag filled with Beefaroni and tuna-fish cans. The living room was dominated by a big old Zenith black-and-white TV he had rescued from the Naples dump. A big spayed brindle cat, name of Bernie Carbo, slept on top of it like a dead thing. The bedroom was where he worked on his writing. The bed itself was a rollaway, not made, the sheets stiff with come. No matter how much he was getting (and over the last two weeks that had been zero), he masturbated a great deal. Masturbation, he believed, was a sign of creativity.

Across from the bed was his desk. A big old-fashioned Underwood sat on top of it. Manuscripts were stacked to both sides. More manuscripts, some in boxes, some secured with rubber bands, were piled up in one corner. He wrote a lot and he moved around a lot and his main luggage was his workmostly poems, a few stories, a surreal play in which the characters spoke a grand total of nine words, and a novel he had attacked badly from six different angles. It had been five years since he had lived in one place long enough to get completely unpacked. Last December, while shaving one day, he had discovered the first threads of gray in his beard. The discovery had thrown him into a savage depression, and he had stayed depressed for weeks. He hadnt touched a razor between then and now, as if it was the act of shaving that had somehow caused the gray to show up. He was thirty-eight. He refused to entertain the thought of being that old, but sometimes it crept up on his blind side and surprised him. To be that oldless than seven hundred days shy of fortyterrified him. He had really believed that forty was for other people. That bitch, he thought over and over again. That bitch. He had left dozens of women since he had first gotten laid by a vague, pretty, softly helpless French substitute when he was a high school junior, but he himself had only been dropped two or

three times. He was good at seeing the drop coming and opting out of the relationship first. It was a protective device, like bombing the queen of spades on someone else in a game of Hearts. You had to do it while you could still cover the bitch, or you got screwed. You covered yourself. That way you didnt think about your age. He had known Donna was cooling it, but she had struck him as a woman who could be manipulated with no great difficulty, at least for a while, by a combination of psychological and sexual factors. By fear, if you wanted to be crude. That it hadnt worked that way left him feeling hurt and furious, as if he had been whipped raw. He got out of his clothes, tossed his wallet and change onto his desk, went into the bathroom, showered. When he came out he felt a little better. He dressed again, pulling jeans and a faded chambray shirt from the flightbag. He picked his change up, put it in a front pocket, and paused, looking speculatively at his Lord Buxton. Some of the business cards had fallen out. They were always doing that, because there were so many of them. Steve Kemp had a packrat sort of wallet. One of the items he almost always picked up and tucked away were business cards. They made nice bookmarks, and the space on the blank flip side was just right for jotting an address, simple directions, or a phone number. He would sometimes take two or three if he happened to be in a plumbing shop or if an insurance salesman stopped by.

Steve would unfailingly ask the nine-to-fiver for his card with a big shiteating grin. When he and Donna were going at it hot and heavy, he had happened to notice one of her husbands business cards lying on top of the TV. Donna had been taking a shower or something. He had taken the business card. No big reason. Just the packrat thing. Now he opened his wallet and thumbed through the cards, cards from Prudential agents in

Virginia, realtors in Colorado, a dozen businesses in between. For a moment he thought he had lost Handsome Hubbys card, but it had just slipped down between a couple of dollar bills. He fished it out and looked at it. White card, blue lettering done in modish lower case, Mr. Businessman Triumphant. Quiet but impressive. Nothing flashy. roger breakstonead worxvictor trenton 1633 congress street telex:

ADWORXportland, maine04001 tel (207) 799-8600 Steve pulled a sheet of paper from a ream of cheap mimeo stuff and cleared a place in front of him. He looked briefly at his typewriter. No. Each machines typescript was as individual as a fingerprint. It was his crooked lower-case a that hung the blighter, Inspector. The jury was only out long enough to have tea. This would not be a police matter, nohow, no way, but caution came without even thinking. Cheap paper, available at any office supply store, no typewriter. He took a Pilot Razor Point from the coffee can on the corner of the desk and printed in large block letters:

Inspector. The jury was only out long enough to have tea. This would not be a police matter, nohow, no way, but caution came without even thinking. Cheap paper, available at any office supply store, no typewriter. He took a Pilot Razor Point from the coffee can on the corner of the desk and printed in large block letters:

Hello, Vic. Nice wife youve got there. I enjoyed fucking the shit out of her. He paused, tapping the pen against his teeth. He was starting to feel good again. On top. Of course, she was a good-looking woman, and he supposed there was always the possibility that Trenton might discount what he had written so far. Talk was cheap, and you could mail someone a letter for less than the price of a coffee. But there was something... always something. What might it be? He smiled suddenly; when he smiled that way his entire face lit up, and it was easy to see why he had never had much trouble with women since the evening with the vague, pretty French sub. He wrote: Whats that mole just above her pubic hair look like to you? To me It looks like a question mark. Do you have any questions? That was enough; a meal is as good as a feast, his mother had always said. He found an envelope and put the message inside. After a pause, he slipped the business card in, and addressed the envelope, also in block letters, to Vics office. After a moments thought, he decided to show the poor slob a little mercy and added PERSONAL below the address. He propped the letter on the windowsill and leaned back in his chair, feeling totally good again. He would be able to write tonight, he felt sure of it. Outside, a truck with out-of-state plates pulled into his driveway. A pickup with a great big Hoosier cabinet in the back. Someone had picked up a bargain at a barn sale. Lucky them. Steve strolled out. He would be glad to take their money and their Hoosier cabinet, but he really doubted if he would have time to do the work. Once that letter was mailed, a change of air might be in order. But not too big a change, at least not for a while. He felt he owed it to himself to stay in the area long enough to make at least one more visit to Little Miss Highpockets... when it could be ascertained that Handsome Hubby was definitely not around, of course. Steve had played tennis with the guy and he was no ball of firethin, heavy glasses, spaghetti backhandbut you never knew when a Handsome Hubby was going to go off his gourd and do something antisocial. A good many Handsome Hubbies kept guns around the house. So he would want to check out the scene carefully before popping in. He would allow himself the one single visit and then close this show entirely. He would maybe go to Ohio for a while. Or Pennsylvania. Or Taos, New Mexico. But like a practical joker who had stuffed a load into someones cigarette, he wanted to stick around (at a prudent distance, of course) and watch it blow up. The driver of the pickup and his wife were peering into the shop to see if he was there. Steve strolled out, hands in the pockets of his jeans, smiling. The woman smiled back immediately. Hi, folks, can I help you? he asked, and thought that he would mail the letter as soon as he could get rid of them. That evening, as the sun went down red and round and hot in the west, Vic Trenton, his shirt tied around his waist by the arms, was looking into the engine compartment of his wifes Pinto.

Donna was standing beside him, looking young and fresh in a pair of white shorts and a red-checked sleeveless blouse. Her feet were bare. Tad, dressed only in his bathing suit, was driving his trike madly up and down the driveway, playing some sort of mind game that apparently had Ponch and Jon from CHiPS pitted against Darth Vader. Drink your iced tea before it melts, Donna told Vic. Uh-huh. The glass was on the side of the engine compartment. Vic had a couple of swallows, put it back without looking, and it tumbled off into his wifes hand. Hey, he said. Nice catch. She smiled. I just know you when your minds somewhere else, thats all. Look. Didnt spill a drop. They smiled into each others eyes for a momenta good moment, Vic thought. Maybe it was just his imagination, or wishful thinking, but lately it seemed there were more of the good small moments. Less of the sharp words. Fewer silences which were cold, or maybe this was worsejust indifferent. He didnt know what the cause was, but he was grateful. Strictly Triple-A farm club, he said. You got a ways to go before you make the bigs, kid. So whats wrong with my car, coach? He had the air cleaner off; it was sitting in the driveway. Never saw a Frisbee like that before, Tad had said matter-of-factly a few moments ago, swerving his trike around it. Vic leaned back in and poked aimlessly at the carburetor with the head of his screwdriver. Its in the carb. I think the needle valves sticking. Thats bad? Not too bad, he said, but it can stop you cold if it decides to stick shut. The needle valve controls the flow of gas into the carb, and without gas you dont go. Its like a national law, babe. Daddy, will you push me on the swing? Yeah, in a minute. Good! Ill be in the back! Tad started around the house toward the swing-and-gym set Vic had built last summer, while lubricating himself well with gin and tonics, working from a set of plans, doing it after supper on week nights and on weekends with the voices of the Boston Red Sox announcers blaring from the transistor radio beside him. Tad, then three, sat solemnly on the cellar bulkhead or on the back steps, chin cupped in his hands, fetching things sometimes, mostly watching silently. Last summer. A good summer, not as beastly hot as this one. It had seemed then that Donna had finally adjusted and was seeing that Maine, Castle Rock, Ad Worxthose things could be good for all of them. Then the mystifying bad patch, the worst of it being that nagging, almost psychic feeling that things were even more wrong than he wanted to think about. Things in the house began to seem subtly out of place, as if unfamiliar

hands had been moving them around. He had gotten the crazy idea was it crazy? that Donna was changing the sheets too often. They were always clean, and one night that old fairy-tale question had popped into his mind, echoing unpleasantly: Whos been sleeping in my bed? Now things had loosened up, it seemed. If not for the crazy Razberry Zingers business and the rotten trip hanging over his head, he would feel that this could be a pretty good summer too. It might even turn out that way. You won, sometimes. Not all hopes were vain. He believed that, although his belief had never been seriously tested. Tad! Donna yelled, bringing the boy to a screeching halt. Put your trike in the garage. Mom-mee! Now, please, monsieur. Monsewer, Tad said, and laughed into his hands. You didnt put your car away, Mom. Daddy is working on my car. Yeah, but Mind your mom, Tadder, Vic said, picking up the air cleaner. Ill be around shortly. Tad mounted his trike and drove it into the garage, accompanying himself with a loud, ululating ambulance wail. Why are you putting it back on? Donna asked. Arent you going to fix it? Its a precision job, Vic said. I dont have the tools. Even if I did, Id probably make it worse instead of better. Damn, she said moresely, and kicked a tire. These things never happen until the warranty runs out, do they? The Pinto had just over 20,000 miles on it, and was still six months from being theirs, free and clear. Thats like a national law too, Vic said. He put the air cleaner back on its post and tightened the butterfly nut. I guess I can run it over to South Paris while Tads in his daycamp. Ill have to get a loaner, though, with you being gone. Will it get me to South Paris, Vic? Sure. But you dont have to do that. Take it out to Joe Cambers place. Thats only seven miles, and he does good work. Remember when that wheel bearing went on the Jag? He took it out with a chainfall made out of old lengths of telephone pole and charged ten bucks. Man, if Id gone to that place in Portland, they would have mounted my checkbook like a moosehead. That guy made me nervous, Donna said. Aside from the fact that he was about two and a half sheets to the wind, I mean. How did he make you nervous? Busy eyes. Vic laughed. Honey, with you, theres a lot to be busy about. Thank you, she said. A woman doesnt necessarily mind being looked at. Its being mentally undressed that makes you nervous. She paused, strangely, he thought, looking away at the grim red light in the west. Then she looked back at him. Some men give you the feeling that theres a little movie called The Rape of the Sabine Women going on in their heads all the time and you just got the... the starring role. He had that curious, unpleasant feeling that she was talking about several things at once again. But he didnt want to get into that tonight, not when he was finally crawling out from under a shitheap of a month. Babe, hes probably completely harmless. Hes got a wife, a kid Yes, probably he is. But she crossed her arms over her breasts and cupped her elbows in her palms, a characteristic gesture of nervousness with her. Look, he said. Ill run your Pinto up there this Saturday and leave it if I have to, okay? More likely hell be able to get right to it. Ill have a couple of beers with him and pat his dog. You remember that Saint Bernard? Donna grinned. I even remember his name. He practically knocked Tad over licking him. You remember? Vic nodded. The rest of the afternoon Tad goes around after him saying Coojo... heere, Coojo. They laughed together. I feel so damn stupid sometimes, Donna said. I could use a standard shift, I could just run the Jag while youre gone. Youre just as well off. The Jags eccentric. You gotta talk to it. He slammed the hood of the Pinto back down. Ooooh, you DUMMY! she moaned. Your iced tea glass was in there! And he looked so comically surprised that she went off into gales of laughter. After a minute he joined her. Finally it got so bad that they had to hang on to each other like a couple of drunks. Tad came back around the house to see what was going on, his eyes round. At last, convinced that they were mostly all right in spite of the nutty way they were acting, he joined them. This was about the same time that Steve Kemp mailed his letter less than two miles away. Later, as dusk settled down and the heat slacked off a little and the first fireflies started to stitch seams in the air across the back yard, Vic pushed his son on the swing. Higher, Daddy! Higher! If you go any higher, youre gonna loop the loop, kid. Gimme under, then, Dad! Gimme under! Vic gave Tad a huge push, propelling the swing toward a sky where the first stars were just beginning to appear, and ran all the way under the swing. Tad screamed joyfully, his head tilted back, his hair blowing. That was good, Daddy! Gimme under again! Vic gave his son under again, from the front this time, and Tad went soaring into the still, hot night. Aunt Evvie Chalmers lived close by, and Tads shouts of terrified glee were the last sounds she heard as she died; her heart gave out, one of its paper-thin walls breaching suddenly (and almost painlessly) as she sat in her kitchen chair, a cup of coffee by one hand and a straight-eight Herbert Tareyton by the other; she leaned back and her vision darkened and somewhere she heard a child crying, and for a moment it seemed that the cries were joyful, but as she went out, suddenly propelled as if by a hard but not unkind push from behind, it seemed to her that the child was screaming in fear, in agony; then she was gone, and her niece Abby would find her the following day, her coffee as cold as she was, her cigarette a perfect and delicate tube of ash, her lower plate protruding

from her wrinkled mouth like a slot filled with teeth. Just before Tads bedtime, he and Vic sat on the back stoop. Vic had beer. Tad had milk. Daddy? What? I wish you didnt have to go away next week. Ill be back.

Yeah, but Tad was looking down, struggling with tears. Vic put a hand on his neck. But what, big guy?

Whos gonna say the words that keep the monster out of the closet? Mommy doesnt know them! Only you know them! Now the tears spilled over and ran down Tads face. Is that all? Vic asked. The Monster Words (Vic had originally dubbed them the Monster Catechism, but Tad had trouble with that word, so it had been shortened) had come about in late spring, when Tad began to be afflicted with bad dreams and night fears.

There was something in his closet, he said; sometimes at night his closet door would swing open and he would see it in there, something with yellow eyes that wanted to eat him up. Donna had thought it might have been some fallout from Maurice Sendaks book Where the Wild Things Are. Vic had wondered aloud to Roger (but not to Donna) if maybe Tad had picked up a garbled account of the mass murders that had taken place in Castle Rock and had decided that the murdererwho had become a kind of town boogeymanwas alive and well in his closet. Roger said he supposed it was possible; with kids, anything was possible. And Donna herself had begun to get a little spooked after a couple of weeks of this; she told Vic one morning in a kind of laughing, nervous way that things in Tads closet sometimes appeared moved around. Well, Tad did it, Vic had responded. You dont understand, Donna said. He doesnt go back there anymore, Vic... never. Hes scared to. And she had added that sometimes it seemed to her that the closet actually smelled bad after Tads bouts of nightmare, followed by waking fear. Like an animal had been caged up in there. Disturbed, Vic had gone into the closet and sniffed. In his mind was a half-formed idea that perhaps Tad was sleepwalking; perhaps going into his closet and urinating in there as a part of some odd dream cycle. He had smelled nothing but mothballs. The closet, finished wall on one side and bare lathing on the other, stretched back some eight feet.

It was as narrow as a Pullman car. There was no boogeyman back in there, and Vic most certainly did not come out in Narnia. He got a few cobwebs in his hair. That was all. Donna had suggested first what she called good-dream thoughts to combat Tads night fears, then prayer. Tad responded to the former by saying that the thing in his closet stole his good-dream thoughts; he responded to the latter by saying that since God didnt believe in monsters, prayers were useless. Her temper had snappedperhaps partly because she had been spooked by Tads closet herself. Once, while hanging some of Tads shirts in there, the door had swung quietly shut behind her and shed had a bad forty seconds fumbling her way back to the door and getting out.

She had smelled something in there that timesomething hot and close and violent. A matted smell. It reminded her a little of Steve Kemps sweat after they finished making love. The upshot was her curt suggestion that since there were no such things as monsters, Tad should put the whole thing out of his mind, hug his Teddy, and go to sleep. Vic either saw more deeply or remembered more clearly about the closet door that turned into an unhinged idiot mouth in the dark of night, a place where strange things sometimes rustled, a place where hanging clothes sometimes turned into hanging men. He remembered vaguely about the shadows the streetlight could throw on the wall in the endless four hours that follow the turn of the day, and the creaking sounds that might have been the house settling or that mightjust mightbe something creeping up. His solution had been the Monster Catechism, or just the Monster Words if you were four and not much into semantics. Either way, it was nothing more (nor less) than a primitive incantation to keep evil at bay. Vic had invented it one day on his lunch hour, and to Donnas mixed relief and chagrin, it worked when her own efforts to use psychology, Parent Effectiveness Training, and, finally, blunt discipline had failed. Vic spoke it over Tads bed every night like a benediction as Tad lay there naked under a single sheet in the sweltering dark. Do you think thats going to do him any good in the long run? Donna asked. Her voice held both amusement and irritation. This had been in mid-May, when the tensions between them had been running high. Admen dont care about the long run, Vic had answered. They care about fast, fast, fast relief. And Im good at my job. Yeah, nobody to say the Monster Words, thats the matter, thats a lot the matter, Tad answered now, wiping the tears off his cheeks in disgust and embarrassment. Well, listen, Vic said. Theyre written down. Thats how I can say them the same every night. Ill print them on a piece of paper and tack them to your wall. And Mommy can read them to you every night Im gone. Yeah? Will you? Sure. Said I would. You wont forget? No way, man. Ill do it tonight. Tad put his arms around his father, and Vic hugged him tight. That night, after Tad slept, Vic went quietly into the boys room and tacked a sheet of paper to the wall with a pushpin. He put it right next to Tads Mighty Marvel Calendar, where the kid couldnt miss it. Printed in large, clear letters on this sheet of paper was: **THE MONSTER WORDS** For Tad Monsters, stay out of this room! You have no business here. No monsters under Tads bed! You cant fit under there. No monsters hiding in Tads closet! Its too small in there. No monsters outside of Tads window! You cant hold

on out there. No vampires, no werewolves, no things that bite. You have no business here. Nothing will touch Tad, or hurt Tad, all this night. You have no business here. Vic looked at this for a long time and reminded himself to tell Donna at least twice more before he left to read it to the kid every night. To impress on her how important the Monster Words were to Tad. On his way out, he saw the closet door was open. Just a crack. He closed the door firmly and left his sons room. Sometime much later that evening, the door swung open again. Heat lightning flickered sporadically, tattooing crazy shadows in there. But Tad did not wake. The next day, at quarter past seven in the morning, Steve Kemp's van backed out onto Route 11. Steve made miles, heading for Route 302. There he would turn left and drive southeast, crossing the state to Portland. He intended to flop at the Portland YMCA for a while. On the van's dashboard was a neat pile of addressed mail not printed in block letters this time but typed on his own machine. The typewriter was now in the back of the van, along with the rest of his stuff. It had taken him only an hour and a half to pack in his Castle Rock operation, including Bernie Carbo, who was now snoozing in his box by the rear doors. He and Bernie traveled light. The typing job on the envelopes was a professional one. Sixteen years of creative writing had turned him into an excellent typist, if nothing else. He pulled over to the same box from which he had posted the anonymous note to Vic Trenton the night before and dropped the letters in. It would not have bothered him in the least to run out owing rent on the shop and the house if he had intended to leave the state, but since he was only going as far as Portland, it seemed prudent to do everything legally. This time he could afford not to cut corners; there was better than six hundred dollars in cash tucked into the small bolthole behind the van's glove compartment. In addition to a check covering the rent he owed, he was returning deposits to several people who had made them on bigger jobs. Accompanying each check was a polite note saying he was very sorry to have caused any inconvenience, but his mother had been taken suddenly and seriously ill (every red-blooded American was a sucker for a mom-story). Those for whom he had contracted to do work could pick up their furniture at the shop; the key was on the ledge above the door, just to the right, and would they kindly return the key to the same place after they had made their pickup. Thank you, thank you, blahdeblah, bullshit-bullshit. There would be some inconvenience, but no real hassle. Steve dropped the letters into the mailbox. There was that satisfied feeling of having his ass well covered. He drove away toward Portland, singing along with the Grateful Dead, who were delivering Sugaree. He pushed the van up to fifty-five, hoping traffic would stay light so he could get to Portland early enough to grab a court at Tennis of Maine. All in all, it looked like a good day. If Mr. Businessman hadn't received his little letter bomb yet, he surely would today. Nifty, Steve thought, and burst out laughing. At half past seven, as Steve Kemp was thinking tennis and Vic Trenton was reminding himself to call Joe Camber about his wife's balky Pinto, Charity Camber was fixing her son's breakfast. Joe had left for Lewiston half an hour ago, hoping to find a '72 Camaro windshield at one of the city's automobile junkyards or used-parts outfits. This jibed well with Charity's plans, which she had made slowly and carefully. She put Brett's plate of scrambled eggs and bacon in front of him and then sat down next to the boy. Brett glanced up from the book he was reading in mild surprise. After fixing his breakfast, his mother usually started on her round of morning chores. If you spoke to her too much before she got herself around a second cup of coffee, she was apt to show you the rough side of her tongue. Can I talk to you a minute, Brett? Mild surprise turned to something like amazement. Looking at her, he saw something utterly foreign to his mother's taciturn nature. She was nervous. He closed his book and said, Sure, Mom. Would you like? She cleared her throat and began again. How would you like to go down to Stratford, Connecticut, and see your Aunt Holly and your Uncle Jim? And your cousins? Brett grinned. He had only been out of Maine twice in his life, most recently with his father on a trip to Portsmouth, New Hampshire. They had gone to a used-car auction where Joe had picked up a '58 Ford with a hemi engine. Sure! he said. When? I was thinking of Monday, she said. After the weekend of the Fourth. Wednesday'll be gone a week. Could you do that? I guess! Jeez, I thought Dad had a lot of work lined up for next week. He must have. I haven't mentioned this to your father yet. Brett's grin fell apart. He picked up a piece of bacon and began to eat it. Well, I know he promised Richie Simms he'd pull the motor on his International Harvester. And Mr. Miller from the school was gonna bring over his Ford because the tranny's shot. And I thought just the two of us would go, Charity said. On the Greyhound from Portland. Brett looked doubtful. Outside the back-porch screen, Cujo padded slowly up the steps and collapsed onto the boards in the shade with a grunt. He looked in at THE BOY and THE WOMAN with weary, red-rimmed eyes. He was feeling very bad now, very bad indeed. Jeez, Mom, I don't know. Don't say jeez. It's just the same as swearing. Sorry. Would you like to go? If your father said it was all right? Yeah, really! Do you really think we could? Maybe. She was looking out through the window over the sink thoughtfully. How far

is it to Stratford, Mom? About three hundred and fifty miles, I guess. Jee I mean, boy, thats a long way. Is it Brett. He looked at her attentively. That curious intense quality was back in her voice and on her face. That nervousness. What, Mom? Can you think of anything your father needs out in the shop? Any one thing hes been looking to get? The light dawned in Bretts eyes a little. Well, he always needs adjustable wrenches... and hes been wanting a new set of ball-and-sockets... and he could use a new welders helmet since the old one got a crack in the faceplate No, I mean anything big. Expensive. Brett thought awhile, then smiled. Well, what hed really like to have is a new Jrgen chainfall, I guess. Rip that old motor out of Richie Simmss International just as slick as shwell, slick. He blushed and hurried on. But you couldnt get him nothing like that, Mom. Thats really dear. Dear. Joes word for expensive. She hated it. How much? Well, the one in the catalogue says seventeen hundred dollars, but Dad could probably get it from Mr. Belasco at Portland Machine for wholesale, Dad says Mr. Belascos scared of him. Do you think theres something smart about that? she asked sharply. Brett sat back in his chair, a little frightened by her fierceness. He couldnt remember his mother ever acting quite like this. Even Cujo, out on the porch, pricked his ears a little. Well? Do you? No, Mom, he said, but Charity knew in a despairing way that he was lying. If you could scare somebody into giving you wholesale, you were trading a right smart. She had heard the admiration in Bretts voice, even if the boy himself had not. Wants to be just like him. Thinks his daddy is just standing tall when he scares someone. Oh my God. Theres nothing smart about being able to scare people, Charity said. All it takes is a big voice and a mean disposition. Theres no smart to it. She lowered her voice and flapped a hand at him. Go on and eat your eggs. Im not going to shout at you. I guess its the heat. He ate, but quietly and carefully, looking at her now and then. There were hidden mines around this morning. What would wholesale be, I wonder? Thirteen hundred dollars? A thousand? I dont know, Mamma. Would this Belasco deliver? On a big order like that? Ayuh, I guess he would. If we had that kind of money. Her hand went to the pocket of her housedress. The lottery ticket was there. The green number on her ticket, 76, and the red number, 434, matched the numbers drawn by the State Lottery Commission two weeks before. She had checked it dozens of times, unable to believe it. She had invested fifty cents that week, as she had done every week since the lottery began in 1975, and this time she had won five thousand dollars. She hadnt cashed the ticket in yet, but neither had she let it out of her sight or her reach since she found out. We do have that kind of money, she said. Brett goggled at her. At quarter past ten, Vic slipped out of his Ad Worx office and went around to Bentleys for his morning coffee, unable to face the bitches brew that was available at the office. He had spent the morning writing ads for Decoster Egg Farms. It was hard going. He had hated eggs since his boyhood, when his mother grimly forced one down his throat four days a week. The best he had been able to come up with so far was EGGs SAY LOVE... SEAMLESSLY. Not very good. Seamlessly had given him the idea of a trick photo which would show an egg with a zipper running around its middle. It was a good image, but where did it lead? No place that he had been able to discover. Ought to ask the Tadder, he thought, as the waitress brought him coffee and a blueberry muffin. Tad liked eggs. It wasnt really the egg ad that was bringing him down, of course. It was having to take off for twelve days. Well, it had to be. Roger had convinced him of that. They would have to get in there and pitch like hell. Good old garrulous Roger, whom Vic loved almost like a brother. Roger would have been more than glad to cruise down here to Bentleys with him, to have a coffee with him, and to talk his ear off. But this one time, Vic needed to be alone. To think. The two of them would be spending most of two weeks together starting Monday, sweating it out, and that was quite enough, even for soul brothers. His mind turned toward the Red Razberry Zingers fiasco again, and he let it, knowing that sometimes a no-pressure, almost idle review of a bad situation couldfor him, at least result in some new insight, a fresh angle. What had happened was bad enough, and Zingers had been withdrawn from the market. Bad enough, but not terrible. It wasnt like that canned mushroom thing; no one had gotten sick or died, and even consumers realized that a company could take a pratfall now and then. Look at that McDonalds glass giveaway a couple-three years ago. The paint on the glasses had been found to contain an unacceptably high lead content. The glasses had been withdrawn quickly, consigned to that promotional limbo inhabited by creatures such as Speedy Alka-Seltzer and Vics own personal favorite, Big Dick Chewing Gum. The glasses had been bad for the McDonalds Corporation, but no one had accused Ronald McDonald of trying to poison his pre-teen constituency. And no one had actually accused the Sharp Cereal Professor either, although comedians from Bob Hope to Steve Martin had taken potshots at him and Johnny Carson had run off an entire monologue couched in careful double entendre about the Red Razberry Zingers affair one evening during his opening spot on The Tonight Show. Needless to say, the Sharp Cereal Professor ads had been jerked from the tube. Also needless to say, the character actor who played the

Professor was wild at the way events had turned on him. I could imagine a worse situation, Roger had said after the first shock waves had subsided a bit and the thrice-daily long-distance calls between Portland and Cleveland were no longer flying. What? Vic had asked. Well, Roger had answered, straight-faced, we could be working on the Bon Vivant Vichyssoise account. More coffee, sir? Vic glanced up at the waitress. He started to say no, then nodded. Half a cup, please, he said. She poured it and left. Vic stirred it randomly, not drinking it. There had been a mercifully brief health scare before a number of doctors spoke up on TV and in the papers, all of them saying the coloration was harmless. There had been something like it once before; the stews on a commercial airline had been struck down with weird orange skin discolorations which finally proved to be nothing more serious than a rub-off of the orange dye on the life jackets they demonstrated for their passengers before takeoff. Years before that, the food dye in a certain brand of frankfurters had produced an internal effect similar to that of Red Raspberry Zingers. Old man Sharps lawyers had lodged a multimillion-dollar damage suit against the dye manufacturer, a case that would probably drag on for three years and then be settled out of court. No matter; the suit provided a forum from which to make the public aware that the fault—the totally temporary fault, the completely harmless fault—had not been that of the Sharp Company. Nonetheless, Sharp stock had tumbled sharply on the Big Board. It had since made up less than half the original drop. The cereals themselves had shown a sudden dip in sales but had since made up most of the ground that had been lost after Zingers showed its treacherous red face. Sharps All-Grain Blend, in fact, was doing better than ever before. So there was nothing wrong here, right? Wrong. So wrong. The Sharp Cereal Professor was what was wrong. The poor guy would never be able to make a comeback. After the scare come the laughs, and the Professor, with his sober mien and his schoolroom surroundings, had been literally laughed to death. George Carlin, in his nightclub routine: Yeah, it's a crazy world. Crazy world. Carlin bends his head over his mike for a moment, meditating, and then looks up again. The Reagan guys are doing their campaign shit on TV, right? Russians are getting ahead of us in the arms race. The Russians are turning out missiles by the thousands, right? So Jimmy gets on TV to do one of his spots, and he says, My fellow Americans, the day the Russians get ahead of us in the arms race will be the day the youth of America shits red. Big laugh from the audience. So Ronnie gets on the phone to Jimmy, and he says, Mr. President, what did Amy have for breakfast? A gigantic laugh from the audience. Carlin pauses. The real punchline is then delivered in a low, insinuating tone: Nooope... nothing wrong here. The audience roars its approval, applauds wildly. Carlin shakes his head sadly. Red shit, man. Wow. Dig on it awhile. That was the problem. George Carlin was the problem. Bob Hope was the problem. Johnny Carson was the problem. Steve Martin was the problem. Every barbershop wit in America was the problem. And then, consider this: Sharp stock had gone down nine and had only rebounded four and a quarter. The shareholders were going to be hollering for somebody's head. Lets see... whose do we give them? Who had the bright idea of the Sharp Cereal Professor in the first place? How about those guys as the most eligible? Never mind the fact that the Professor had been on for four years before the Zingers debacle. Never mind the fact that when the Sharp Cereal Professor (and his cohorts the Cookie Sharpshooter and George and Gracie) had come on the scene, Sharp stock had been three and a quarter points lower than it was now. Never mind all that. Mind this instead: Just the fact, just the public announcement in the trades that Ad Worx had lost the Sharp account—just that would probably cause shares to bob up another point and a half to two points. And when a new ad campaign actually began, investors would take it as a sign that the old woes were finally behind the company, and the stock might creep up another point. Of course, Vic thought, stirring Sweet n Low into his coffee, that was only theory. And even if the theory turned out to be true, both he and Roger believed that a short-run gain for Sharp would be more than offset if a new ad campaign, hastily thrown together by people who didn't know the Sharp Company as he and Roger did, or the competitive cereal market in general, didn't do the job. And suddenly that new slant, that fresh angle, popped into his mind. It came unbidden and unexpected. His coffee cup paused halfway to his mouth and his eyes widened. In his mind he saw two men—perhaps him and Roger, perhaps old man Sharp and his ageing kid—filling in a grave. Their spades were flying. A lantern flickered fitfully in the windy night. Rain was drizzling down. These corporate sextons threw an occasional furtive glance behind them. It was a burial by night, a covert act performed in the darkness. They were burying the Sharp Cereal Professor in secret, and that was wrong. Wrong, he muttered aloud. Sure it was. Because if they buried him in the dead of night, he could never say what he had to say: that he was sorry. He took his Pentel pen from his inner coat pocket, took a napkin from the holder, and wrote swiftly across it: The Sharp Cereal Professor needs to apologize. He looked at it. The letters were getting larger, fuzzing as the ink sank into the napkin. Below that first sentence he added: Decent burial. And

below that: DAYLIGHT burial. He still wasn't sure what it meant; it was more metaphor than sense, but that was how his best ideas came to him. And there was something there. He felt sure of it. Cujo lay on the floor of the garage, in semi-gloom. It was hot in here but it was even worse outside... and the daylight outside was too bright. It never had been before; in fact, he had never even really noticed the quality of the light before.

But he was noticing now. Cujos head hurt. His muscles hurt. The bright light made his eyes hurt. He was hot. And his muzzle still ached where he had been scratched. Ached and festered. THE MAN was gone somewhere. Not long after he left, THE BOY and THE WOMAN had gone somewhere, leaving him alone. THE BOY had put a big dish of food out for Cujo, and Cujo had eaten a little bit. The food made him feel worse instead of better, and he left the rest of it alone. Now there was the growl of a truck turning into the driveway. Cujo got up and went to the barn door, knowing already it was a stranger. He knew the sound of both THE MANs truck and the family car. He stood in the doorway, head poking out into the bright glare that hurt his eyes. The truck backed up the driveway and then stopped. Two men got down from the cab and came around to the back. One of them ran up the trucks sliding back door. The rattling, banging noise hurt Cujos ears. He whined and retreated back into the comforting gloom. The truck was from Portland Machine. Three hours ago, Charity Camber and her still-dazzled son had gone into Portland Machines main office on Brighton Avenue and she had written a personal check for a new Jrgen chainfallwholesale had turned out to be exactly \$1,241.71, tax included. Before going to Portland Machine she had gone into the State Liquor Store on Congress Street to fill out a lottery claim form. Brett, forbidden absolutely to come inside with her, stood on the sidewalk with his hands in his pockets. The clerk told Charity she would get a Lottery Commission check in the mail. How long? Two weeks at the very outside. It would come minus a deduction of roughly eight hundred dollars for taxes. This sum was based on her declaration of Joes yearly income. The deduction for taxes before the fact did not anger Charity at all. Up until the moment when the clerk had checked her number against his sheet, she had been holding her breath, still unable to believe this had really happened to her. Then the clerk had nodded, congratulated her, and even called the manager out of his office to meet her. None of that mattered. What mattered was that now she could breathe again, and the ticket was no longer her responsibility. It had returned to the bowels of the Lottery Commission. Her Check Would Be in the Mailwonderful, mystical, talismanic phrase. And still she felt a small pang as she watched the dog-eared ticket, limp with her own nervous perspiration, clipped to the form she had filled out and then stored away. Lady Luck had singled her out. For the first time in her life, maybe for the only time, that heavy muslin drape of the everyday had been twitched a little, showing her a bright and shining world beyond. She was a practical woman, and in her heart she knew that she hated her husband more than a little, and feared him more than a little, but that they would grow old together, and he would die, leaving her with his debts and this she would not admit for sure even in her secret heart, but now she feared it! perhaps with his spoilt son. If her name had been plucked from the big drum in the twice-yearly Super Drawing, if she had won ten times the five thousand dollars she had won, she might have entertained notions of pushing aside that dull muslin curtain, taking her son by the hand, and leading them both out into whatever was beyond Town Road No. 3 and Cambers Garage, Foreign Cars Our Specialty, and Castle Rock. She might have taken Brett to Connecticut with the express purpose of asking her sister how much a small apartment in Stratford would cost. But it had only been a twitch of the curtain. That was all. She had seen Lady Luck for a bare, brief moment, as wonderful, puzzling, and inexplicable as a bright fairy dancing under mushrooms in the dewy light of dawn... seen once, never again. So she felt a pang when the ticket disappeared from her view, even though it had robbed her sleep. She understood that she would buy a lottery ticket a week for the rest of her life and never win more than two dollars all at once. Never mind. You don't count teeth in a gifthorse. Not if you were smart. They went out to Portland Machine and she had written the check, reminding herself to stop at the bank on their way home and transfer enough money from savings to checking so that the check wouldnt bounce. She and Joe had a little over four thousand dollars in their savings account after fifteen years. Just about enough to cover three quarters of their outstanding debts, if you excluded the mortgage on the farm. She had no right to exclude that, of course, but she always did. She could not bring herself to think about the mortgage except payment by payment. But they could dent the savings all they wanted to now, and then deposit the Lottery Commission check in that account when it came. All they would be losing was two weeks interest. The man from Portland Machine, Lewis Belasco, said he would have the chainfall delivered that very afternoon, and he was as good as his word. Joe Magruder and Ronnie DuBay got the chainfall on the trucks pneumatic Step-Loader, and it whooshed gently down to the dirt driveway on a sigh of air. Pretty big order for ole Joe Camber, Ronnie said. Magruder nodded. Put it in the barn, his wife said. Thats his

garage. Better get a good hold, Ronnie. This is a heavy whore. Joe Magruder got his hold, Ronnie got his, and, puffing and grunting, the two of them half walked it, half carried it into the barn. Lets set it down a minute, Ronnie managed. I cant see where the hell Im goin. Lets get used to the dark before we go ass over cowcatcher. They set the chainfall down with a thump. After the bright afternoon glare outside, Joe was mostly blinded. He could only make out the vague shapes of things a car up on jacks, a workbench, a sense of beams going up to a loft. This thing ought Rennie began, and then stopped abruptly. Coming out of the darkness from beyond the front end of the jacked-up car was a low, guttural growling. Ronnie felt the sweat he had worked up suddenly turn clammy. The hairs on the back of his neck stirred. Holy crow, you hear that? Magruder whispered. Ronnie could see Joe now. Joes eyes were big and scared-looking. I hear it. It was a sound as low as a powerful outboard engine idling. Ronnie knew it took a big dog to make a sound like that. And when a big dog did, it more often than not meant business. He hadnt seen a BEWARE OF DOG sign when they drove up, but sometimes these bumpkins from the boonies didnt bother with one. He knew one thing. He hoped to God that the dog making that sound was chained up. Joe? You ever been out here before? Once. Its a Saint Bernard. Big as a fucking house. He didnt do that before. Joe gulped. Ronnie heard something in his throat click. Oh, God. Lookit there, Ronnie. Ronnies eyes had come partway to adjusting, and his half-sight lent what he was seeing a spectral, almost supernatural cast. He knew you never showed a mean dog your fear they could smell it coming off you but he began to shudder helplessly anyway. He couldnt help it. The dog was a monster. It was standing deep in the barn, beyond the jacked-up car. It was a Saint Bernard for sure; there was no mistaking the heavy coat, tawny even in the shadows, the breadth of shoulder. Its head was down. Its eyes glared at them with steady, sunken animosity. It wasnt on a chain. Back up slow, Joe said. Dont run, for Christs sake. They began to back up, and as they did, the dog began to walk slowly forward. It was a stiff walk; not really a walk at all, Ronnie thought. It was a stalk. That dog wasnt fucking around. Its engine was running and it was ready to go. Its head remained low. That growl never changed pitch. It took a step forward for every step they took back. For Joe Magruder the worst moment came when they backed into the bright sunlight again. It dazzled him, blinded him. He could no longer see the dog. If it came for him now Reaching behind him, he felt the side of the truck. That was enough to break his nerve. He bolted for the cab. On the other side, Ronnie DuBay did the same. He reached the passenger door and fumbled at the latch for an endless moment. He clawed at it. He could still hear that low growling, so much like an idling Evinrude 80 hp motor. The door wouldnt open. He waited for the dog to pull a chunk of his ass off. At last his thumb found the button, the door opened, and he scrambled into the cab, panting. He looked in the rearview mirror bolted outside his window and saw the dog standing in the open barn door, motionless. He looked over at Joe, who was sitting behind the wheel and grinning at him sheepishly. Ronnie offered his own shaky grin in return. Just a dog, Ronnie said. Yeah. Barks worsen his bite. Right. Lets go back in there and screw around with that chainfall some more. Fuck you, Joe said. And the horse you rode in on. They laughed together. Ronnie passed him a smoke. What do you say we get going? Im your guy, Joe said, and started the truck. Halfway back to Portland, Ronnie said, almost to himself: That dogs going bad. Joe was driving with his elbow cocked out the window. He glanced over at Ronnie. I was scared, and I dont mind saying so. One of those little dogs gives me shit in a situation like that, with nobody home, Id just as soon kick it in the balls, you know? I mean, if people dont chain up a dog that bites, they deserve what they get, you know? That thing... did you see it? I bet that motherhumper went two hundred pounds. Maybe I ought to give Joe Camber a call, Ronnie said. Tell him what happened. Might save him gettin his arm chewed off. What do you think? Whats Joe Camber done for you lately? Joe Magruder asked with a grin. Ronnie nodded thoughtfully. He dont blow me like you do, thats true. Last blowjob I had was from your wife. Wasnt half bad, either. Get bent, you fairy. They laughed together. Nobody called Joe Camber. When they got back to Portland Machine, it was near knocking-off time. Screwing-around time. They took fifteen minutes writing the trip up. Belasco came out back and asked them if Camber had been there to take delivery. Ronnie DuBay said sure. Belasco, who was a prick of the highest order, went away. Joe Magruder told Ronnie to have a nice weekend and a happy fucking Fourth. Ronnie said he planned to get in the bag and stay that way until Sunday night. They clocked out. Neither of them thought about Cujo again until they read about him in the paper. Vic spent most of that afternoon before the long weekend going over the details of the trip with Roger. Roger was so careful about details that he was almost paranoid. He had made the plane and hotel reservations through an agency. Their flight to Boston would leave Portland Jetport at 7:10 A.M. Monday. Vic said he would pick Roger up in the Jag at 5:30. He thought that was unnecessarily early, but he knew Roger and Rogers little tics. They talked generally about

the trip, consciously avoiding specifics. Vic kept his coffee-break ideas to himself and the napkin stowed safely away in his sport-jacket pocket. Roger would be more receptive when they were away. Vic thought about leaving early and decided to go back and check the afternoon mail first. Lisa, their secretary, had already left for the day, getting a jump on the holiday weekend. Hell, you couldn't get a secretary to stay until the stroke of five anymore, holiday weekend or not. As far as Vic was concerned, it was just another sign of the continuing decay of Western Civ. Probably at this very moment Lisa, who was beautiful, just twenty-one, and almost totally breastless, was entering the Interstate flow of traffic, bound south to Old Orchard or the Hamptons, dressed in tight jeans and a nothing halter. Get down, disco Lisa, Vic thought, and grinned a little. There was a single unopened letter on his desk blotter. He picked it up curiously, noting first the word PERSONAL printed below the address, and second the fact that his address had been printed in solid caps. He held it, turning it over in his hands, feeling a vague thread of disquiet slip into what was a general mood of tired well-being. Far back in his mind, hardly even acknowledged, was a sudden urge to rip the letter into halves, fourths, eighths, and then toss the pieces into the wastebasket. Instead, he tore it open and pulled out a single sheet of paper. More block letters. The simple messagesix sentenceshit him like a straight shot just below the heart. He did not so much sit in his chair as collapse into it. A little grunt escaped him, the sound of a man who has suddenly lost all his wind. His mind roared with nothing but white noise for a length of time he didntcouldntunderstand or comprehend. If Roger had come in just then, he likely would have thought Vic was having a heart attack. In a way, he was. His face was paper-white. His mouth hung open. Bluish half-moons had appeared under his eyes. He read the message again. And then again. At first his eyes were drawn to the first interrogative: WHATS THAT MOLE JUST ABOVE HER PUBIC HAIR LOOK LIKE TO YOU? Its a mistake, he thought confusedly. No one knows about that but me... well, her mother. And her father. Then, hurt, he felt the first splinters of jealousy: Even her bikini covers that... her little bikini..... He ran a hand through his hair. He put the letter down and ran both hands through his hair. That punched, gasping feeling was still there in his chest. The feeling that his heart was pumping air instead of blood. He felt fright and pain and confusion. But of the three, the dominant feeling, the overriding emotion, was terrible fright. The letter glared up at him and shouted: I ENJOYED FUCKING THE SHIT OUT OF HER. Now it was this line his eyes fixed upon, not wanting to leave. He could hear the drone of a plane in the sky outside, leaving the Jetport, heading up, heading out, making for points unknown, and he thought, I ENJOYED FUCKING THE SHIT OUT OF HER. Crude, thats crude. Yes sir and yes maam, yes indeedy. It was the hack of a blunt knife. FUCKING THE SHIT OUT OF HER, what an image that made. Nothing fancy about it. It was like getting a splash in the eyes from a squirt-gun loaded up with battery acid. He tried hard to think coherently and (I ENJOYED) just couldnt (FUCKING THE SHIT OUT OF HER) do it. Now his eyes went to the last line and that was the one he read over and over again, as if trying to cram the sense of it somehow into his brain. That huge feeling of fright kept getting in the way. DO YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS? Yes. All of a sudden he had all kinds of questions. The only thing was, he didnt seem to want answers to any of them. A new thought crossed his mind. What if Roger hadnt gone home? Often he poked his head into Vics office before leaving if there was a light on. He might be even more likely to do so tonight, with the trip pending. The thought made Vic feel panicky, and an absurd memory surfaced: all those times he had spent masturbating in the bathroom as a teenager, unable to help himself but terribly afraid everyone must know exactly what he was up to in there. If Roger came in, he would see something was wrong. He didnt want that. He got up and went to the window, which looked down six stories to the parking lot which served the building. Rogers bright-yellow Honda Civic was gone from its space. He had gone home. Pulled out of himself, Vic listened. The offices of Ad Worx were totally silent. There was that resonating quiet that seems the sole property of business quarters after hours. There was not even the sound of old Mr. Steigmeyer, the custodian, rattling around. He would have to sign out in the lobby. He would have to Now there was a sound. At first he didnt know what it was. It came to him in a moment. It was whimpering. The sound of an animal with a smashed foot. Still looking out the window, he saw the cars left in the parking lot double, then treble, through a film of tears. Why couldnt he get mad? Why did he have to be so fucking scared? An absurd, antique word came to mind. Jilted, he thought. Ive been jilted. The whimpering sounds kept coming. He tried to lock his throat, and it did no good. He lowered his head and gripped the convector grille that ran below the window at waist height. Gripped it until his fingers hurt, until the metal creaked and protested. How long had it been since he had cried? He had cried the night Tad was born, but that had been relief. He had cried when his dad died after fighting grimly for his life for three days after a massive heart attack struck him, and those tears, shed at seventeen, had been like these, burning, not

wanting to come; it was more like bleeding than crying. But at seventeen it was easier to cry, easier to bleed. When you were seventeen you still expected to have to do your share of both. He stopped whimpering. He thought it was done. And then a low cry came out of him, a harsh, wavering sound, and he thought: Was that me? God, was it me that made that sound? The tears began to slide down his cheeks. There was another harsh sound, then another. He gripped the convector grille and cried. Forty minutes later he was sitting in Deering Oaks Park. He had called home and told Donna he would be late. She started to ask why, and why he sounded so strange. He told her he would be home before dark. He told her to go ahead and feed Tad. Then he hung up before she could say anything else. Now he was sitting in the park. The tears had burned off most of the fear. What was left was an ugly slag of anger. That was the next level in this geological column of knowledge. But anger wasn't the right word. He was enraged. He was infuriated. It was as if he had been stung by something. A part of him had recognized that it would be dangerous for him to go home now... dangerous for all three of them. It would be so pleasurable to hide the wreckage by making more; it would (lets face it) be so mindlessly pleasurable to punch her cheating face in. He was sitting beside the duckpond. On the other side, a spirited Frisbee game was going on. He noticed that all four of the girls playing and two of the boys were on roller skates. Roller skates were big this summer. He saw a young girl in a tube top pushing a cart of pretzels, peanuts, and canned soft drinks. Her face was soft and fresh and innocent. One of the guys playing Frisbee flipped her the disk; she caught it deftly and flipped it back. In the sixties, Vic thought, she would have been in a commune, diligently picking bugs off tomato plants. Now she was probably a member in good standing of the Small Business Administration. He and Roger used to come down here to eat their lunches sometimes. That had been in the first year. Then Roger noticed that, although the pond looked lovely, there was a faint but definite odor of putridity hanging around it... and the small house on the rock in the center of the pond was whitewashed not with paint but with gullshit. A few weeks later, Vic had noted a decaying rat floating amid the condoms and gum wrappers at the edge of the pond. He didn't think they had been back since then. The Frisbee, a bright red, floated across the sky. The image that had provoked his anger kept recurring. He couldn't keep it away. It was as crude as his anonymous correspondent's choice of words had been, but he couldn't ditch it. He saw them screwing in his and Donna's bedroom. Screwed in their bed. What he saw in this mind-movie was every bit as explicit as one of those grainy X-rated pictures you could see at the State Theater on Congress Street. She was groaning, sheened lightly with perspiration, beautiful. Every muscle pulled taut. Her eyes had that hungry look they got when the sex was good, their color darker. He knew the expression, he knew the posture, he knew the sounds. He had thought though she was the only one who did. Not even her mother and father would know about that. Then he would think of the man's penis in her. In the saddle; that phrase came and clanged in his mind idiotically, refusing to die away. He saw them screwing to a Gene Autry soundtrack: Im back in the saddle again, out where a friend is a friend.... It made him feel creepy. It made him feel outraged. It made him feel infuriated. The Frisbee soared and came down. Vic followed its course. He had suspected something, yes. But suspecting was not like knowing; he knew that now, if nothing else. He could write an essay on the difference between suspecting and knowing. What made it doubly cruel was the fact that he had really begun to believe that the suspicions were groundless. And even if they weren't, what you didn't know couldn't hurt you. Wasn't that right? If a man is crossing a darkened room with a deep, open hole in the middle of it, and if he passes within inches of it, he doesn't need to know he almost fell in. There is no need for fear. Not if the lights are off. Well, he hadn't fallen in. He had been pushed. The question was, What was he going to do about it? The angry part of him, hurt, bruised, and bellowing, was not in the slightest inclined to be adult, to acknowledge that there were slips on one or both sides in a great many marriages. Fuck the Penthouse Forum, or Variations, or whatever they're calling it these days, that's my wife were talking about, she was screwing someone