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STEPHEN KING

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Author's Note

What follows is a work of fiction. All of the major characters are made up. Because it plays against the historical backdrop of the last decade, the reader may recognize certain actual figures who played their parts in the 1970s. It is my hope that none of these figures has been misrepresented. There is no third congressional district in New Hampshire and no town of Castle Rock in Maine. Chuck Chatsworth's reading lesson is drawn from *Fire Brain,* by Max Brand, originally published by Dodd, Mead and Company, Inc.

THIS IS FOR OWEN
I LOVE YOU, OLD BEAR

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Prologue

1

By the time he graduated from college, John Smith had forgotten all about the bad fall he took on the ice that January day in 1953. In fact, he would have been hard put to remember it by the time he graduated from grammar school. And his mother and father never knew about it at all.

They were skating on a cleared patch of Runaround Pond in Durham. The bigger boys were playing hockey with old taped sticks and using a couple of potato baskets for goals. The little kids were just farting around the way little kids have done since time immemorial—their ankles bowing comically in and out, their breath puffing in the frosty twenty-degree air. At one corner of the cleared ice two rubber tires burned sootily, and a few parents sat nearby, watching their children. The age of the snowmobile was still distant and winter fun still consisted of exercising your body rather than a gasoline engine.

Johnny had walked down from his house, just over the Pownal line, with his skates hung over his shoulder. At six, he was a pretty fair skater. Not good enough to join in the big kids' hockey games yet, but able to skate rings around most of the other first graders, who were always pinwheeling their arms for balance or sprawling on their butts.

Now he skated slowly around the outer edge of the clear patch, wishing he could go backward like Timmy Benedix, listening to the ice thud and crackle mysteriously under the snow cover farther out, also listening to the shouts of the hockey players, the rumble of a pulp truck crossing the bridge on its way to U.S. Gypsum in Lisbon Falls, the murmur of conversation from the adults. He was very glad to be alive on that cold, fair winter day. Nothing was wrong with him, nothing troubled his mind, he wanted nothing . . . except to be able to skate backward, like Timmy Benedix.

He skated past the fire and saw that two or three of the grown-ups were passing around a bottle of booze.

"Gimme some of that!" he shouted to Chuck Spier, who was bundled up in a big lumberjack shirt and green flannel snowpants.

Chuck grinned at him. "Get outta here, kid, I hear your mother callin you."

Grinning, six-year-old Johnny Smith skated on. And on the road side of the skating area, he saw Timmy Benedix himself coming down the slope, with his father behind him.

"Timmy!" he shouted. "Watch this!"

He turned around and began to skate clumsily backward. Without realizing it, he was skating into the area of the hockey game.

"Hey kid!" someone shouted. "Get out the way!"

Johnny didn't hear. He was *doing* it! He was skating backward! He had caught the rhythm—all at once. It was in a kind of sway of the legs . . .

He looked down, fascinated, to see what his legs were doing.

The big kids' hockey puck, old and scarred and

gouged around the edges, buzzed past him, unseen. One of the big kids, not a very good skater, was chasing it with what was almost a blind, headlong plunge.

Chuck Spier saw it coming. He rose to his feet and shouted, *"Johnny! Watch out!"*

John raised his head—and the next moment the clumsy skater, all one hundred and sixty pounds of him, crashed into little John Smith at full speed.

Johnny went flying, arms out. A bare moment later his head connected with the ice and he blacked out.

Blacked out . . . black ice . . . blacked out . . . black ice . . . black. Black.

They told him he had blacked out. All he was really sure of was that strange repeating thought and suddenly looking up at a circle of faces—scared hockey players, worried adults, curious little kids. Timmy Benedix smirking. Chuck Spier was holding him.

Black ice. Black.

"What?" Chuck asked. "Johnny . . . you okay? You took a hell of a knock."

"Black," Johnny said gutturally. "Black ice. Don't jump it no more, Chuck."

Chuck looked around, a little scared, then back at Johnny. He touched the large knot that was rising on the boy's forehead.

"I'm sorry," the clumsy hockey player said. "I never even saw him. Little kids are supposed to stay away from the hockey. It's the rules." He looked around uncertainly for support.

"Johnny?" Chuck said. He didn't like the look of Johnny's eyes. They were dark and faraway, distant and cold. "Are you okay?"

"Don't jump it no more," Johnny said, unaware of what he was saying, thinking only of ice—black ice. "The explosion. The acid."

"Think we ought to take him to the doctor?" Chuck asked Bill Gendron. "He don't know what he's sayin."

"Give him a minute," Bill advised.

They gave him a minute, and Johnny's head did clear. "I'm okay," he muttered. "Lemme up." Timmy Benedix was still smirking, damn him. Johnny decided he would show Timmy a thing or two. He would be skating rings around Timmy by the end of the week . . . backward *and* forward.

"You come on over and sit down by the fire for a while," Chuck said. "You took a hell of a knock."

Johnny let them help him over to the fire. The smell of melting rubber was strong and pungent, making him feel a little sick to his stomach. He had a headache. He felt the lump over his left eye curiously. It felt as though it stuck out a mile.

"Can you remember who you are and everything?" Bill asked.

"Sure. Sure I can. I'm okay."

"Who's your dad and mom?"

"Herb and Vera. Herb and Vera Smith."

Bill and Chuck looked at each other and shrugged.

"I think he's okay," Chuck said, and then, for the third time, "but he sure took a hell of a knock, didn't he? Wow."

"Kids," Bill said, looking fondly out at his eight-year-old twin girls, skating hand in hand, and then back at Johnny. "It probably would have killed a grown-up."

"Not a Polack," Chuck replied, and they both burst out laughing. The bottle of Bushmill's began making its rounds again.

Ten minutes later Johnny was back out on the ice, his headache already fading, the knotted bruise standing out on his forehead like a weird brand. By the time he went home for lunch, he had forgotten all about the fall, and blacking out, in the joy of having discovered how to skate backward.

"God's mercy!" Vera Smith said when she saw him. "How did you get that?"

"Fell down," he said, and began to slurp up Campbell's tomato soup.

"Are you all right, John?" she asked, touching it gently.

"Sure, Mom." He was, too—except for the occasional bad dreams that came over the course of the next month or so . . . the bad dreams and a tendency to sometimes get very dozy at times of the day when he had never been dozy before. And that stopped happening at about the same time the bad dreams stopped happening.

He was all right.

In mid-February, Chuck Spier got up one morning and found that the battery of his old '48 De Soto was dead. He tried to jump it from his farm truck. As he attached the second clamp to the De Soto's battery, it exploded in his face, showering him with fragments and corrosive battery acid. He lost an eye. Vera said it was God's own mercy he hadn't lost them both. Johnny thought it was a terrible tragedy and went with his father to visit Chuck in the Lewiston General Hospital a week after the accident. The sight of Big Chuck lying in that hospital bed, looking oddly wasted and small,

had shaken Johnny badly—and that night he had dreamed it was *him* lying there.

From time to time in the years afterward, Johnny had hunches—he would know what the next record on the radio was going to be before the DJ played it, that sort of thing—but he never connected these with his accident on the ice. By then he had forgotten it.

And the hunches were never that startling, or even very frequent. It was not until the night of the county fair and the mask that anything very startling happened. Before the second accident.

Later, he thought of that often.

The thing with the Wheel of Fortune had happened *before* the second accident.

Like a warning from his own childhood.

2

The traveling salesman crisscrossed Nebraska and Iowa tirelessly under the burning sun in that summer of 1955. He sat behind the wheel of a '53 Mercury sedan that already had better than seventy thousand miles on it. The Merc was developing a marked wheeze in the valves. He was a big man who still had the look of a cornfed midwestern boy on him; in that summer of 1955, only four months after his Omaha house-painting business had gone broke, Greg Stillson was only twenty-two years old.

The trunk and the back seat of the Mercury were filled with cartons, and the cartons were filled with books. Most of them were Bibles. They came in all shapes and sizes. There was your basic item, The

American TruthWay Bible, illustrated with sixteen color plates, bound with airplane glue, for $1.69 and sure to hold together for at least ten months; then for the poorer pocketbook there was The American TruthWay New Testament for sixty-five cents, with no color plates but with the words of Our Lord Jesus printed in red; and for the big spender there was The American TruthWay Deluxe Word of God for $19.95, bound in imitation white leather, the owner's name to be stenciled in gold leaf on the front cover, twenty-four color plates, and a section in the middle to note down births, marriages, and burials. And the Deluxe Word of God might remain in one piece for as long as two years. There was also a carton of paperbacks entitled *America the TruthWay: The Communist-Jewish Conspiracy Against Our United States.*

Greg did better with this paperback, printed on cheap pulp stock, than with all the Bibles put together. It told all about how the Rothschilds and the Roosevelts and the Greenblatts were taking over the U.S. economy and the U.S. government. There were graphs showing how the Jews related directly to the Communist-Marxist-Leninist-Trotskyite axis, and from there to the Antichrist Itself.

The days of McCarthyism were not long over in Washington; in the Midwest Joe McCarthy's star had not yet set, and Margaret Chase Smith of Maine was known as "that bitch" for her famous Declaration of Conscience. In addition to the stuff about Communism, Greg Stillson's rural farm constituency seemed to have a morbid interest in the idea that the Jews were running the world.

Now Greg turned into the dusty driveway of a

farmhouse some twenty miles west of Ames, Iowa. It had a deserted, shut-up look to it—the shades down and the barn doors closed—but you could never tell until you tried. That motto had served Greg Stillson well in the two years or so since he and his mother had moved up to Omaha from Oklahoma. The house-painting business had been no great shakes, but he had needed to get the taste of Jesus out of his mouth for a little while, you should pardon the small blasphemy. But now he had come back home—not on the pulpit or revival side this time, though, and it was something of a relief to be out of the miracle business at last.

He opened the car door and as he stepped out into the dust of the driveway a big mean farm dog advanced out of the barn, its ears laid back. It volleyed barks. "Hello, pooch," Greg said in his low, pleasant, but carrying voice—at twenty-two it was already the voice of a trained spellbinder.

The pooch didn't respond to the friendliness in his voice. It kept coming, big and mean, intent on an early lunch of traveling salesman. Greg sat back down in the car, closed the door, and honked the horn twice. Sweat rolled down his face and turned his white linen suit darker gray in circular patches under his arms and in a branching treeshape up his back. He honked again, but there was no response. The clodhoppers had loaded themselves into their International Harvester or their Studebaker and gone into town.

Greg smiled.

Instead of shifting into reverse and backing out of the driveway, he reached behind him and produced a Flit gun—only this one was loaded with ammonia instead of Flit.

Pulling back the plunger, Greg stepped out of the car again, smiling easily. The dog, which had settled down on its haunches, immediately got up again and began to advance on him, growling.

Greg kept smiling. "That's right, poochie," he said in that pleasant, carrying voice. "You just come on. Come on and get it." He hated these ugly farm dogs that ran their half-acre of dooryard like arrogant little Caesars: they told you something about their masters as well.

"Fucking bunch of clodhoppers," he said under his breath. He was still smiling. "Come on, doggie."

The dog came. It tensed its haunches down to spring at him. In the barn a cow mooed, and the wind rustled tenderly through the corn. As it leaped, Greg's smile turned to a hard and bitter grimace. He depressed the Flit plunger and sprayed a stinging cloud of ammonia droplets directly into the dog's eyes and nose.

Its angry barking turned immediately to short, agonized yips, and then, as the bite of ammonia really settled in, to howls of pain. It turned tail at once, a watchdog no longer but only a vanquished cur.

Greg Stillson's face had darkened. His eyes had drawn down to ugly slits. He stepped forward rapidly and administered a whistling kick to the dog's haunches with one of his Stride-King airtip shoes. The dog gave a high, wailing sound, and, driven by its pain and fear, it sealed its own doom by turning around to give battle to the author of its misery rather than running for the barn.

With a snarl, it struck out blindly, snagged the right cuff of Greg's white linen pants, and tore it.

"You sonofabitch!" he cried out in startled anger,

and kicked the dog again, this time hard enough to send it rolling in the dust. He advanced on the dog once more, kicked it again, still yelling. Now the dog, eyes watering, nose in fiery agony, one rib broken and another badly sprung, realized its danger from this madman, but it was too late.

Greg Stillson chased it across the dusty farmyard, panting and shouting, sweat rolling down his cheeks, and kicked the dog until it was screaming and barely able to drag itself along through the dust. It was bleeding in half a dozen places. It was dying.

"Shouldn't have bit me," Greg whispered. "You hear? You hear me? You shouldn't have bit me, you dipshit dog. No one gets in my way. You hear? No one." He delivered another kick with one blood-spattered airtip, but the dog could do no more than make a low choking sound. Not much satisfaction in that. Greg's head ached. It was the sun. Chasing the dog around in the hot sun. Be lucky not to pass out.

He closed his eyes for a moment, breathing rapidly, the sweat rolling down his face like tears and nestling in his crew-cut like gems, the broken dog dying at his feet. Colored specks of light, pulsing in rhythm with his heartbeat, floated across the darkness behind his lids.

His head ached.

Sometimes he wondered if he was going crazy. Like now. He had meant to give the dog a burst from the ammonia Flit gun, drive it back into the barn so he could leave his business card in the crack of the screen door. Come back some other time and make a sale. Now look. Look at this mess. Couldn't very well leave his card now, could he?

He opened his eyes. The dog lay at his feet, panting rapidly, drizzling blood from its snout. As Greg Stillson looked down, it licked his shoe humbly, as if to acknowledge that it had been bested, and then it went back to the business of dying.

"Shouldn't have torn my pants," he said to it. "Pants cost me five bucks, you shitpoke dog."

He had to get out of here. Wouldn't do him any good if Clem Kadiddlehopper and his wife and their six kids came back from town now in their Studebaker and saw Fido dying out here with the bad old salesman standing over him. He'd lose his job. The American TruthWay Company didn't hire salesmen who killed dogs that belonged to Christians.

Giggling nervously, Greg went back to the Mercury, got in, and backed rapidly out of the driveway. He turned east on the dirt road that ran straight as a string through the corn, and was soon cruising along at sixty-five, leaving a dust plume two miles long behind him.

He most assuredly didn't want to lose the job. Not yet. He was making good money—in addition to the wrinkles the American TruthWay Company knew about, Greg had added a few of his own that they didn't know about. He was making it now. Besides, traveling around, he got to meet a lot of people . . . a lot of girls. It was a good life, except—

Except he wasn't content.

He drove on, his head throbbing. No, he just wasn't content. He felt that he was meant for bigger things than driving around the Midwest and selling Bibles and doctoring the commission forms in order to make an extra two bucks a day. He felt that he was meant for . . . for . . .

For greatness.

Yes, that was it, that was surely it. A few weeks ago he had taken some girl up in the hayloft, her folks had been in Davenport selling a truckload of chickens, she had started off by asking if he would like a glass of lemonade and one thing had just led to another and after he'd had her she said it was almost like getting diddled by a preacher and he had slapped her, he didn't know why. He had slapped her and then left.

Well, no.

Actually, he had slapped her three or four times. Until she had cried and screamed for someone to come and help her and then he had stopped and somehow—he had had to use every ounce of the charm God had given him—he had made it up with her. His head had been aching then, too, the pulsing specks of brightness shooting and caroming across his field of vision, and he tried to tell himself it was the heat, the explosive heat in the hayloft, but it wasn't just the heat that made his head ache. It was the same thing he had felt in the dooryard when the dog tore his pants, something dark and crazy.

"I'm not crazy," he said aloud in the car. He unrolled the window swiftly, letting in summer heat and the smell of dust and corn and manure. He turned on the radio loud and caught a Patti Page song. His headache went back a little bit.

It was all a matter of keeping yourself under control and—and keeping your record clean. If you did those things, they couldn't touch you. And he was getting better at both of those things. He no longer had the dreams about his father so often, the dreams where his father was standing above him

with his hard hat cocked back on his head, bellowing: *"You're no good, runt! You're no fucking good!"*

He didn't have the dreams so much because they just weren't true. He wasn't a runt anymore. Okay, he had been sick a lot as a kid, not much size, but he had gotten his growth, he was taking care of his mother—

And his father was dead. His father couldn't see. He couldn't make his father eat his words because he had died in an oil-derrick blowout and he was dead and once, just once, Greg would like to dig him up and scream into his moldering face *You were wrong, Dad, you were wrong about me!* and then give him a good kick the way—

The way he had kicked the dog.

The headache was back, lowering.

"I'm not crazy," he said again below the sound of the music. His mother had told him often that he was meant for something big, something great, and Greg believed it. It was just a matter of getting things—like slapping the girl or kicking the dog—under control and keeping his record clean.

Whatever his greatness was, he would know it when it came to him. Of that he felt quite sure.

He thought of the dog again, and this time the thought brought a bare crescent of a smile, without humor or compassion.

His greatness was on the way. It might still be years ahead—he was young, sure, nothing wrong with being young as long as you understood you couldn't have everything all at once. As long as you believed it would come eventually. He did believe that.

And God and Sonny Jesus help anyone that got in his way.

Greg Stillson cocked a sunburned elbow out the window and began to whistle along with the radio. He stepped on the go-pedal, walked that old Mercury up to seventy, and rolled down the straight Iowa farm road toward whatever future there might be.

1

The Wheel of Fortune

Chapter 1

1

The two things Sarah remembered about that night later were his run of luck at the Wheel of Fortune and the mask. But as time passed, years of it, it was the mask she thought about—when she could bring herself to think about that horrible night at all.

He lived in an apartment house in Cleaves Mills. Sarah got there at quarter to eight, parking around the corner, and buzzing up to be let in. They were taking her car tonight because Johnny's was laid up at Tibbets' Garage in Hampden with a frozen wheel-bearing or something like that. Something expensive, Johnny had told her over the phone, and then he had laughed a typical Johnny Smith laugh. Sarah would have been in tears if it had been her car—her *pocketbook.*

Sarah went through the foyer to the stairs, past the bulletin board that hung there. It was dotted with file cards advertising motorbikes, stereo components, typing services, and appeals from people who needed rides to Kansas or California, people who were driving to Florida and needed riders to share the driving and help pay for the gas. But tonight the board was dominated by a large placard showing a clenched fist against an angry red background suggesting fire. The one word on the poster was STRIKE! It was late October of 1970.

Johnny had the front apartment on the second floor—the penthouse, he called it—where you could stand in your tux like Ramon Navarro, a big slug of Ripple wine in a balloon glass, and look down upon the vast, beating heart of Cleaves Mills: its hurrying after-show crowds, its bustling taxis, its neon signs. There are almost seven thousand stories in the naked city. This has been one of them.

Actually Cleaves Mills was mostly a main street with a stop-and-go light at the intersection (it turned into a blinker after 6 P.M.), about two dozen stores, and a small moccasin factory. Like most of the towns surrounding Orono, where the University of Maine was, its real industry was supplying the things students consumed—beer, wine, gas, rock 'n' roll music, fast food, dope, groceries, housing, movies. The movie house was The Shade. It showed art films and '40's nostalgia flicks when school was in. In the summertime it reverted to Clint Eastwood spaghetti Westerns.

Johnny and Sarah were both out of school a year, and both were teaching at Cleaves Mills High, one of the few high schools in the area that had not consolidated into a three- or four-town district. University faculty and administration as well as university students used Cleaves as their bedroom, and the town had an enviable tax base. It also had a fine high school with a brand-new media wing. The townies might bitch about the university crowd with their smart talk and their Commie marches to end the war and their meddling in town politics, but they had never said no to the tax dollars that were paid annually on the gracious faculty homes and the apartment buildings in the area some students called Fudgey Acres and others called Sleaze Alley.

Sarah rapped on his door and Johnny's voice, oddly muffled, called, "It's open, Sarah!"

Frowning a little, she pushed the door open. Johnny's apartment was in total darkness except for the fitful yellow glow of the blinker half a block up the street. The furniture was so many humped black shadows.

"Johnny . . . ?"

Wondering if a fuse had blown or something, she took a tentative step forward—and then the face appeared before her, floating in the darkness, a horrible face out of a nightmare. It glowed a spectral, rotting green. One eye was wide open, seeming to stare at her in wounded fear. The other was squeezed shut in a sinister leer. The left half of the face, the half with the open eye, appeared to be normal. But the right half was the face of a monster, drawn and inhuman, the thick lips drawn back to reveal snaggle teeth that were also glowing.

Sarah uttered a strangled little shriek and took a stumble-step backward. Then the lights came on and it was just Johnny's apartment again instead of some black limbo, Nixon on the wall trying to sell used cars, the braided rug Johnny's mother had made on the floor, the wine bottles made into candle bases. The face stopped glowing and she saw it was a dime-store Halloween mask, nothing more. Johnny's blue eye was twinkling out of the open eyehole at her.

He stripped it off and stood smiling amiably at her, dressed in faded jeans and a brown sweater.

"Happy Halloween, Sarah," he said.

Her heart was still racing. He had really frightened her. "Very funny," she said, and turned to go. She didn't like being scared like that.

He caught her in the doorway. "Hey . . . I'm sorry."

"Well you ought to be." She looked at him coldly—or tried to. Her anger was already melting away. You just couldn't stay mad at Johnny, that was the thing. Whether she loved him or not—a thing she was still trying to puzzle out—it was impossible to be unhappy with him for very long, or to harbor a feeling of resentment. She wondered if anyone had ever succeeded in harboring a grudge against Johnny Smith, and the thought was so ridiculous she just had to smile.

"There, that's better. Man, I thought you were going to walk out on me."

"I'm not a man."

He cast his eyes upon her. "So I've noticed."

She was wearing a bulky fur coat—imitation raccoon or something vulgar like that—and his innocent lechery made her smile again. "In this thing you couldn't tell."

"Oh, yeah, I can tell," he said. He put an arm around her and kissed her. At first she wasn't going to kiss back, but of course she did.

"I'm sorry I scared you," he said, and rubbed her nose companionably with his own before letting her go. He held up the mask. "I thought you'd get a kick out of it. I'm gonna wear it in homeroom Friday."

"Oh, Johnny, that won't be very good for discipline."

"I'll muddle through somehow," he said with a grin. And the hell of it was, he would.

She came to school every day wearing big, schoolmarmish glasses, her hair drawn back into a bun so severe it seemed on the verge of a scream.

She wore her skirts just above the knee in a season when most of the girls wore them just below the edges of their underpants (and my legs are better than any of theirs, Sarah thought resentfully). She maintained alphabetical seating charts which, by the law of averages, at least, should have kept the troublemakers away from each other, and she resolutely sent unruly pupils to the assistant principal, her reasoning being that he was getting an extra five hundred a year to act as ramrod and she wasn't. And still her days were a constant struggle with that freshman teacher demon. Discipline. More disturbing, she had begun to sense that there was a collective, unspoken jury—a kind of school consciousness, maybe—that went into deliberations over every new teacher, and that the verdict being returned on her was not so good.

Johnny, on the face of it, appeared to be the antithesis of everything a good teacher should be. He ambled from class to class in an agreeable sort of daze, often showing up tardy because he had stopped to chat with someone between bells. He let the kids sit where they wanted to so that the same face was never in the same seat from day to day (and the class thugs invariably gravitated to the back of the room). Sarah would not have been able to learn their names that way until March, but Johnny seemed to have them down pat already.

He was a tall man who had a tendency to slouch, and the kids called him Frankenstein. Johnny seemed amused rather than outraged by this. And yet his classes were mostly quiet and well-behaved, there were few skippers (Sarah had a constant problem with kids cutting class), and that same jury seemed to be coming back in his favor. He was the

sort of teacher who, in another ten years, would have the school yearbook dedicated to him. She just wasn't. And sometimes wondering why drove her crazy.

"You want a beer before we go? Glass of wine? Anything?"

"No, but I hope you're going well-heeled," she said, taking his arm and deciding not to be mad anymore. "I always eat at least three hot dogs. Especially when it's the last county fair of the year." They were going to Esty, twenty miles north of Cleaves Mills, a town whose only dubious claim to fame was that it held ABSOLUTELY THE LAST AGRICULTURAL FAIR OF THE YEAR IN NEW ENGLAND. The fair would close Friday night, on Halloween.

"Considering Friday's payday, I'm doing good. I got eight bucks."

"Oh . . . my . . . God," Sarah said, rolling her eyes. "I always knew if I kept myself pure I'd meet a sugar daddy someday."

He smiled and nodded. "Us pimps make biiig money, baby. Just let me get my coat and we're off."

She looked after him with exasperated affection, and the voice that had been surfacing in her mind more and more often—in the shower, while she was reading a book or prepping a class or making her supper for one—came up again, like one of those thirty-second public-service spots on TV. *He's a very nice man and all that, easy to get along with, fun, he never makes you cry. But is that love? I mean, is that all there is to it? Even when you learned to ride your two-wheeler, you had to fall off a few times and scrape both knees. Call it a rite of passage. And that was just a* little *thing.*

"Gonna use the bathroom," he called to her.

"Uh-huh." She smiled a little. Johnny was one of those people who invariably mentioned their nature calls—God knew why.

She went over to the window and looked out on Main Street. Kids were pulling into the parking lot next to O'Mike's, the local pizza-and-beer hangout. She suddenly wished she were back with them, one of them, with this confusing stuff behind her—or still ahead of her. The university was safe. It was a kind of never-never land where everybody, even the teachers, could be a part of Peter Pan's band and never grow up. And there would always be a Nixon or an Agnew to play Captain Hook.

She had met Johnny when they started teaching in September, but she had known his face from the Ed courses they had shared. She had been pinned to a Delta Tau Delta, and none of the judgments that applied to Johnny had applied to Dan. He had been almost flawlessly handsome, witty in a sharp and restless way that always made her a trifle uncomfortable, a heavy drinker, a passionate lover. Sometimes when he drank he turned mean. She remembered a night in Bangor's Brass Rail when that had happened. The man in the next booth had taken joking issue with something Dan had been saying about the UMO football team, and Dan had asked him if he would like to go home with his head on backward. The man had apologized, but Dan hadn't wanted an apology; he had wanted a fight. He began to make personal remarks about the woman with the other man. Sarah had put her hand on Dan's arm and asked him to stop. Dan had shaken her hand off and had looked at her with a queer flat light in his grayish eyes that made any

other words she might have spoken dry up in her throat. Eventually, Dan and the other guy went outside and Dan beat him up. Dan had beaten him until the other man, who was in his late thirties and getting a belly, had screamed. Sarah had never heard a man scream before—she never wanted to hear it again. They had to leave quickly because the bartender saw how it was going and called the police. She would have gone home alone that night (*Oh? are you sure?* her mind asked nastily), but it was twelve miles back to the campus and the buses had stopped running at six and she was afraid to hitch.

Dan didn't talk on the way back. He had a scratch on one cheek. Just one scratch. When they got back to Hart Hall, her dorm, she told him she didn't want to see him anymore. "Any way you want it, babe," he said with an indifference that had chilled her—and the second time he called after the Brass Rail incident she had gone out with him. Part of her had hated herself for that.

It had continued all that fall semester of her senior year. He had frightened and attracted her at the same time. He was her first real lover, and even now, two days shy of Halloween 1970, he had been her only real lover. She and Johnny had not been to bed.

Dan had been very good. He had used her, but he had been very good. He would not take any precautions and so she had been forced to go to the university infirmary, where she talked fumblingly about painful menstruation and got the pill. Sexually, Dan had dominated her all along. She did not have many orgasms with him, but his very roughness brought her some, and in the weeks before it

had ended she had begun to feel a mature woman's greediness for good sex, a desire that was bewilderingly intermixed with other feelings: dislike for both Dan and herself, a feeling that no sex that depended so much on humiliation and domination could really be called "good sex," and self-contempt for her own inability to call a halt to a relationship that seemed based on destructive feelings.

It had ended swiftly, early this year. He flunked out. "Where will you be going?" she asked him timidly, sitting on his roomie's bed as he threw things into two suitcases. She had wanted to ask other, more personal questions. Will you be near here? Will you take a job? Take night classes? Is there a place for me in your plans? That question, above all others, she had not been able to ask. Because she wasn't prepared for any answer. The answer he gave to her one neutral question was shocking enough.

"Vietnam, I guess."

"What?"

He reached onto a shelf, thumbed briefly through the papers there, and tossed her a letter. It was from the induction center in Bangor: an order to report for his physical exam.

"Can't you get out of it?"

"No. Maybe. I don't know." He lit a cigarette. "I don't think I even want to try." She had stared at him, shocked.

"I'm tired of this scene. College and get a job and find a little wifey. You've been applying for the little wifey spot, I guess. And don't think I haven't thought it over. It wouldn't work. You know it wouldn't and so do I. We don't fit, Sarah."

She had fled then, all her questions answered,

and she never saw him again. She saw his roommate a few times. He got three letters from Dan between January and June. He was inducted and sent down south somewhere for basic training. And that was the last the roommate had heard. It was the last Sarah Bracknell heard, too.

At first she thought she was going to be okay. All those sad, torchy songs, the ones you always seem to hear on the car radio after midnight, they didn't apply to her. Or the clichés about the end of the affair or the crying jags. She didn't pick up a guy on the rebound or start doing the bars. Most evenings that spring she spent studying quietly in her dorm room. It was a relief. It wasn't messy.

It was only after she met Johnny—at a freshman mixer dance last month; they were both chaperoning, purely by luck of the draw—that she realized what a horror her last semester at school had been. It was the kind of thing you couldn't see when you were in it, it was too much a part of you. Two donkeys meet at a hitching rail in a western town. One of them is a town donkey with nothing on his back but a saddle. The other is a prospector's donkey, loaded down with packs, camping and cooking gear, and four fifty-pound sacks of ore. His back is bent into a concertina shape from the weight. The town donkey says, That's quite a load you got there. And the prospector's donkey says, What load?

In retrospect it was the emptiness that horrified her, it had been five months of Cheyne-Stokes respiration. Eight months if you counted this summer, when she took a small apartment on Flagg Street in Veazie and did nothing but apply for teaching jobs and read paperback novels. She got up, ate breakfast, went out to class or to whatever job interviews

she had scheduled, came home, ate, took a nap (the naps were sometimes four hours long), ate again, read until eleven-thirty or so, watched Cavett until she got sleepy, went to bed. She could not remember *thinking* during that period. Life was routine. Sometimes there was a vague sort of ache in her loins, an *unfulfilled ache,* she believed the lady novelists sometimes called it, and for this she would either take a cold shower or a douche. After a while the douches grew painful, and this gave her a bitter, absent sort of satisfaction.

During this period she would congratulate herself from time to time on how adult she was being about the whole thing. She hardly ever thought about Dan—Dan Who, ha-ha. Later she realized that for eight months she had thought of nothing or no one else. The whole country had gone through a spasm of shudders during those eight months, but she had hardly noticed. The marches, the cops in their crash helmets and gas masks, the mounting attacks on the press by Agnew, the Kent State shootings, the summer of violence as blacks and radical groups took to the streets—those things might have happened on some TV late show. Sarah was totally wrapped up in how wonderfully she had gotten over Dan, how well she was adjusting, and how relieved she was to find that everything was just fine. What load?

Then she had started at Cleaves Mills High, and that had been a personal upheaval, being on the other side of the desk after sixteen years as a professional student. Meeting Johnny Smith at that mixer (and with an absurd name like John Smith, could he be completely for real?). Coming out of herself enough to see the way he was looking at her,

not lecherously, but with a good healthy appreciation for the way she looked in the light-gray knitted dress she had worn.

He had asked her out to a movie—*Citizen Kane* was playing at The Shade—and she said okay. They had a good time and she was thinking to herself, *No fireworks.* She had enjoyed his kiss goodnight and had thought, *He's sure no Errol Flynn.* He had kept her smiling with his line of patter, which was outrageous, and she had thought, *He wants to be Henny Youngman when he grows up.*

Later that evening, sitting in the bedroom of her apartment and watching Bette Davis play a bitchy career woman on the late movie, some of these thoughts had come back to her and she paused with her teeth sunk into an apple, rather shocked at her own unfairness.

And a voice that had been silent for the best part of a year—not so much the voice of conscience as that of perspective—spoke up abruptly. *What you mean is, he sure isn't Dan. Isn't that it?*

No! she assured herself, not just *rather* shocked now. *I don't think about Dan at all anymore. That . . . was a long time ago.*

Diapers, the voice replied, *that was a long time ago. Dan left yesterday.*

She suddenly realized she was sitting in an apartment by herself late at night, eating an apple and watching a movie on TV that she cared nothing about, and doing it all because it was easier than thinking, thinking was so boring really, when all you had to think about was yourself and your lost love.

Very shocked now.

She had burst into tears.

She had gone out with Johnny the second and third time he asked, too, and that was also a revelation of exactly what she had become. She couldn't very well say that she had another date because it wasn't so. She was a smart, pretty girl, and she had been asked out a lot after the affair with Dan ended, but the only dates she had accepted were hamburger dates at the Den with Dan's roomie, and she realized now (her disgust tempered with rueful humor) that she had only gone on those completely innocuous dates in order to pump the poor guy about Dan. What load?

Most of her college girl friends had dropped over the horizon after graduation. Bettye Hackman was with the Peace Corps in Africa, to the utter dismay of her wealthy old-line-Bangor parents, and sometimes Sarah wondered what the Ugandans must make of Bettye with her white, impossible-to-tan skin and ash-blonde hair and cool, sorority good looks. Deenie Stubbs was at grad school in Houston. Rachel Jurgens had married her fella and was currently gestating somewhere in the wilds of western Massachusetts.

Slightly dazed, Sarah had been forced to the conclusion that Johnny Smith was the first new friend she had made in a long, long time—and she had been her senior high school class's Miss Popularity. She had accepted dates from a couple of the other Cleaves teachers, just to keep things in perspective. One of them was Gene Sedecki, the new math man—but obviously a veteran bore. The other, George Rounds, had immediately tried to make her. She had slapped his face—and the next day he'd had the gall to wink at her as they passed in the hall.

But Johnny was fun, easy to be with. And he

did attract her sexually—just how strongly she couldn't honestly say, at least not yet. A week ago, after the Friday they'd had off for the October teachers' convention in Waterville, he had invited her back to his apartment for a home-cooked spaghetti dinner. While the sauce simmered, he had dashed around the corner to get some wine and had come back with two bottles of Apple Zapple. Like announcing his bathroom calls, it was somehow Johnny's style.

After the meal they had watched TV and that had turned to necking and God knew what *that* might have turned into if a couple of his friends, instructors from the university, hadn't turned up with a faculty position paper on academic freedom. They wanted Johnny to look it over and see what he thought. He had done so, but with noticeably less good will than was usual with him. She had noticed that with a warm, secret delight, and the ache in her own loins—the *unfulfilled ache*—had also delighted her, and that night she hadn't killed it with a douche.

She turned away from the window and walked over to the sofa where Johnny had left the mask.

"Happy Halloween," she snorted, and laughed a little.

"What?" Johnny called out.

"I said if you don't come pretty quick I'm going without you."

"Be right out."

"Swell!"

She ran a finger over the Jekyll-and-Hyde mask, kindly Dr. Jekyll the left half, ferocious, subhuman Hyde the right half. Where will we be by Thanksgiving? she wondered. Or by Christmas?

The thought sent a funny, excited little thrill shooting through her.

She liked him. He was a perfectly ordinary, sweet man.

She looked down at the mask again, horrible Hyde growing out of Jekyll's face like a lumpy carcinoma. It had been treated with fluorescent paint so it would glow in the dark.

What's ordinary? Nothing, nobody. Not really. If he was so ordinary, how could he be planning to wear something like that into his homeroom and still be confident of keeping order? And how can the kids call him Frankenstein and still respect and like him? What's ordinary?

Johnny came out, brushing through the beaded curtain that divided the bedroom and bathroom off from the living room.

If he wants me to go to bed with him tonight, I think I'm going to say okay.

And it was a warm thought, like coming home.

"What are you grinning about?"

"Nothing," she said, tossing the mask back to the sofa.

"No, really. Was it something good?"

"Johnny," she said, putting a hand on his chest and standing on tiptoe to kiss him lightly, "some things will never be told. Come on, let's go."

2

They paused downstairs in the foyer while he buttoned his denim jacket, and she found her eyes drawn again to the STRIKE! poster with its clenched fist and flaming background.

"There'll be another student strike this year," he said, following her eyes.

"The war?"

"That's only going to be part of it this time. Vietnam and the fight over ROTC and Kent State have activated more students than ever before. I doubt if there's ever been a time when there were so few grunts taking up space at the university."

"What do you mean, grunts?"

"Kids just studying to make grades, with no interest in the system except that it provides them with a ten-thousand-dollar-a-year job when they get out. A grunt is a student who gives a shit about nothing except his sheepskin. That's over. Most of them are awake. There are going to be some big changes."

"Is that important to you? Even though you're out?"

He drew himself up. "Madam, I am an alumnus. Smith, class of '70. Fill the steins to dear old Maine."

She smiled. "Come on, let's go. I want a ride on the whip before they shut it down for the night."

"Very good," he said, taking her arm. "I just happen to have your car parked around the corner."

"And eight dollars. The evening fairly glitters before us."

The night was overcast but not rainy, mild for late October. Overhead, a quarter moon was struggling to make it through the cloud cover. Johnny slipped an arm around her and she moved closer to him.

"You know, I think an awful lot of you, Sarah." His tone was almost offhand, but only almost. Her heart slowed a little and then made speed for a dozen beats or so.

"Really?"

"I guess this Dan guy, he hurt you, didn't he?"

"I don't know what he did to me," she said truthfully. The yellow blinker, a block behind them now, made their shadows appear and disappear on the concrete in front of them.

Johnny appeared to think this over. "I wouldn't want to do that," he said finally.

"No, I know that. But Johnny . . . give it time."

"Yeah," he said. "Time. We've got that, I guess."

And that would come back to her, awake and even more strongly in her dreams, in tones of inexpressible bitterness and loss.

They went around the corner and Johnny opened the passenger door for her. He went around and got in behind the wheel. "You cold?"

"No," she said. "It's a great night for it."

"It is," he agreed, and pulled away from the curb. Her thoughts went back to that ridiculous mask. Half Jekyll with Johnny's blue eye visible behind the widened-O eyesocket of the surprised doctor—*Say, that's some cocktail I invented last night, but I don't think they'll be able to move it in the bars*—and that side was all right because you could see a bit of Johnny inside. It was the Hyde part that had scared her silly, because that eye was closed down to a slit. It could have been anybody. Anybody at all. Dan, for instance.

But by the time they reached the Esty fairgrounds, where the naked bulbs of the midway twinkled in the darkness and the long spokes of the Ferris wheel neon revolved up and down, she had forgotten the mask. She was with her guy, and they were going to have a good time.

3

They walked up the midway hand in hand, not talking much, and Sarah found herself reliving the county fairs of her youth. She had grown up in South Paris, a paper town in western Maine, and the big fair had been the one in Fryeburg. For Johnny, a Pownal boy, it probably would have been Topsham. But they were all the same, really, and they hadn't changed much over the years. You parked your car in a dirt parking lot and paid your two bucks at the gate, and when you were barely inside the fairgrounds you could smell hot dogs, frying peppers and onions, bacon, cotton candy, sawdust, and sweet, aromatic horseshit. You heard the heavy, chain-driven rumble of the baby roller coaster, the one they called The Wild Mouse. You heard the popping of .22s in the shooting galleries, the tinny blare of the Bingo caller from the PA system strung around the big tent filled with long tables and folding chairs from the local mortuary. Rock 'n' roll music vied with the calliope for supremacy. You heard the steady cry of the barkers—two shots for two bits, win one of these stuffed doggies for your baby, hey-hey-over-here, pitch till you win. It didn't change. It turned you into a kid again, willing and eager to be suckered.

"Here!" she said, stopping him. "The whip! The whip!"

"Of course," Johnny said comfortingly. He passed the woman in the ticket cage a dollar bill, and she pushed back two red tickets and two dimes with barely a glance up from her *Photoplay.*

"What do you mean, 'of course'? Why are you 'of coursing' me in that tone of voice?"

He shrugged. His face was much too innocent.

"It wasn't what you said, John Smith. It was how you said it."

The ride had stopped. Passengers were getting off and streaming past them, mostly teenagers in blue melton CPO shirts or open parkas. Johnny led her up the wooden ramp and surrendered their tickets to the whip's starter, who looked like the most bored sentient creature in the universe.

"Nothing," he said as the starter settled them into one of the little round shells and snapped the safety bar into place. "It's just that these cars are on little circular tracks, right?"

"Right."

"And the little circular tracks are embedded on a large circular dish that spins around and around, right?"

"Right."

"Well, when this ride is going full steam, the little car we're sitting in whips around on its little circular track and sometimes develops up to seven g, which is only five less than the astronauts get when they lift off from Cape Kennedy. And I knew this kid . . ." Johnny was leaning solemnly over her now.

"Oh, here comes one of your big lies," Sarah said uneasily.

"When this kid was five he fell down the front steps and put a tiny hairline fracture in his spine at the top of his neck. Then—*ten years later*—he went on the whip at Topsham Fair . . . and . . ." He shrugged and then patted her hand sympathetically. "But you'll probably be okay, Sarah."

"Ohhh . . . I want to get *offfff* . . ."

And the whip whirled them away, slamming the

fair and the midway into a tilted blur of lights and faces, and she shrieked and laughed and began to pummel him.

"Hairline fracture!" She shouted at him. "I'll give *you* a hairline fracture when we get off this, you liar!"

"Do you feel anything giving in your neck yet?" he inquired sweetly.

"Oh, you liar!"

They whirled around, faster and faster, and as they snapped past the ride starter for the—tenth? fifteenth?—time, he leaned over and kissed her, and the car whistled around on its track, pressing their lips together in something that was hot and exciting and skintight. Then the ride was slowing down, their car clacked around on its track more reluctantly, and finally came to a swaying, swinging stop.

They got out, and Sarah squeezed his neck. "Hairline fracture, you ass!" she whispered.

A fat lady in blue slacks and penny loafers was passing them. Johnny spoke to her, jerking a thumb back toward Sarah. "That girl is bothering me, ma'am. If you see a policeman would you tell him?"

"You young people think you're smart," the fat lady said disdainfully. She waddled away toward the bingo tent, holding her purse more tightly under her arm. Sarah was giggling helplessly.

"You're impossible."

"I'll come to a bad end," Johnny agreed. "My mother always said so."

They walked up the midway side by side again, waiting for the world to stop making unstable motions before their eyes and under their feet.

"She's pretty religious, your mom, isn't she?" Sarah asked.

"She's as Baptist as you can get," Johnny agreed. "But she's okay. She keeps it under control. She can't resist passing me a few tracts when I'm at home, but that's her thing. Daddy and I put up with it. I used to try to get on her case about it—I'd ask her who the heck was in Nod for Cain to go live with if his dad and mom were the first people on earth, stuff like that—but I decided it was sort of mean and quit it. Two years ago I thought Eugene McCarthy could save the world, and at least the Baptists don't have Jesus running for president."

"Your father's not religious?"

Johnny laughed. "I don't know about that, but he's sure no Baptist." After a moment's thought he added, "Dad's a carpenter," as if that explained it. She smiled.

"What would our mother think if she knew you were seeing a lapsed Catholic?"

"Ask me to bring you home," Johnny said promptly, "so she could slip you a few tracts."

She stopped, still holding his hand. "Would you like to bring me to your house?" she asked, looking at him closely.

Johnny's long, pleasant face became serious. "Yeah," he said. "I'd like you to meet them . . . and vice-versa."

"Why?"

"Don't you know why?" he asked her gently, and suddenly her throat closed and her head throbbed as if she might cry and she squeezed his hand tightly.

"Oh Johnny, I do like you."

"I like you even more than that," he said seriously.

"Take me on the Ferris wheel," she demanded suddenly, smiling. No more talk like this until she had a chance to consider it, to think where it might be leading. "I want to go up high where we can see everything."

"Can I kiss you at the top?"

"Twice, if you're quick."

He allowed her to lead him to the ticket booth, where he surrendered another dollar bill. As he paid he told her, "When I was in high school, I knew this kid who worked at the fair, and he said most of the guys who put these rides together are dead drunk and they leave off all sorts of . . ."

"Go to hell," she said merrily, "nobody lives forever."

"But everybody tries, you ever notice that?" he said, following her into one of the swaying gondolas.

As a matter of fact he got to kiss her several times at the top, with the October wind ruffling their hair and the midway spread out below them like a glowing clockface in the dark.

4

After the Ferris wheel they did the carousel, even though he told her quite honestly that he felt like a horse's ass. His legs were so long that he could have stood astride one of the plaster horses. She told him maliciously that she had known a girl in high school who had had a weak heart, except nobody *knew* she had a weak heart and she had gotten on the carousel with her boyfriend and . . .

"Someday you'll be sorry," he told her with quiet

sincerity. "A relationship based on lies is no good, Sarah."

She gave him a very moist raspberry.

After the carousel came the mirror maze, a very good mirror maze as a matter of fact, it made her think of the one in Bradbury's *Something Wicked This Way Comes,* where the little-old-lady schoolteacher almost got lost forever. She could see Johnny in another part of it, fumbling around, waving to her. Dozens of Johnnies, dozens of Sarahs. They bypassed each other, flickered around non-Euclidian angles, and seemed to disappear. She made left turns, right turns, bumped her nose on panes of clear glass, and got giggling helplessly, partly in a nervous claustrophobic reaction. One of the mirrors turned her into a squat Tolkien dwarf. Another created the apotheosis of teenage gangliness with shins a quarter of a mile long.

At last they escaped and he got them a couple of fried hot dogs and a Dixie cup filled with greasy french fries that tasted the way french fries hardly ever do once you've gotten past your fifteenth year.

They passed a kooch joint. Three girls stood out front in sequined skirts and bras. They were shimmying to an old Jerry Lee Lewis tune while the barker hawked them through a microphone. "Come on over baby," Jerry Lee blared, his piano boogying frankly across the sawdust-sprinkled arcades. "Come on over baby, baby got the bull by the horns . . . we ain't fakin . . . whole lotta shakin goin on . . ."

"Club Playboy," Johnny marveled, and laughed. "There used to be a place like this down at Harrison Beach. The barker used to swear the girls could

take the glasses right off your nose with their hands tied behind their backs."

"It sounds like an interesting way to get a social disease," Sarah said, and Johnny roared with laughter.

Behind them the barker's amplified voice grew hollow with distance, counterpointed by Jerry Lee's pumping piano, music like some mad, dented hot rod that was too tough to die, rumbling out of the dead and silent fifties like an omen. "Come on, men, come on over, don't be shy because these girls sure aren't, not in the least little bit! It's all on the inside . . . your education isn't complete until you've seen the Club Playboy show . . ."

"Don't you want to go on back and finish your education?" she asked.

He smiled. "I finished my basic course work on that subject some time ago. I guess I can wait a while to get my Ph.D."

She glanced at her watch. "Hey, it's getting late, Johnny. And tomorrow's a school day."

"Yeah. But at least it's Friday."

She sighed, thinking of her fifth-period study hall and her seventh-period New Fiction class, both of them impossibly rowdy.

They had worked their way back to the main part of the midway. The crowd was thinning. The Tilt-A-Whirl had shut down for the evening. Two workmen with unfiltered cigarettes jutting from the corners of their mouths were covering the Wild Mouse with a tarpaulin. The man in the Pitch-Til-U-Win was turning off his lights.

"You doing anything Saturday?" he asked, suddenly diffident. "I know it's short notice, but . . ."

"I have plans," she said.

"Oh."

And she couldn't bear his crestfallen expression, it was really too mean to tease him about that. "I'm doing something with you."

"You are? . . . Oh, you are. Say, that's good." He grinned at her and she grinned back. The voice in her mind, which was sometimes as real to her as the voice of another human being, suddenly spoke up.

You're feeling good again, Sarah. Feeling happy. Isn't it fine?

"Yes, it is," she said. She went up on tiptoe and kissed him quickly. She made herself go on before she could chicken out. "It gets pretty lonely down there in Veazie sometimes, you know. Maybe I could . . . sort of spend the night with you."

He looked at her with warm thoughtfulness, and with a speculation that made her tingle deep inside. "Would that be what you want, Sarah?"

She nodded. "Very much what I want."

"All right," he said, and put an arm around her.

"Are you sure?" Sarah asked a little shyly.

"I'm just afraid you'll change your mind."

"I won't, Johnny."

He hugged her tighter against him. "Then it's my lucky night."

They were passing the Wheel of Fortune as he said it, and Sarah would later remember that it was the only booth still open on that side of the midway for thirty yards in either direction. The man behind the counter had just finished sweeping the packed dirt inside for any spare dimes that might have fallen from the playing board during the night's action. Probably his last chore before closing up, she thought. Behind him was his large spoked wheel, outlined by tiny electric bulbs. He

must have heard Johnny's remark, because he went into his pitch more or less automatically, his eyes still searching the dirt floor of his booth for the gleam of silver.

"Hey-hey-hey, if you feel lucky, mister, spin the Wheel of Fortune, turn dimes into dollars. It's all in the Wheel, try your luck, one thin dime sets this Wheel of Fortune in motion."

Johnny swung back toward the sound of his voice.

"Johnny?"

"I feel lucky, just like the man said." He smiled down at her. "Unless you mind . . .?"

"No, go ahead. Just don't take too long."

He looked at her again in that frankly speculative way that made her feel a little weak, wondering how it would be with him. Her stomach did a slow roll-over that made her feel a bit nauseated with sudden sexual longing.

"No, not long." He looked at the pitchman. The midway behind them was almost completely empty now, and as the overcast had melted off above them it had turned chilly. The three of them were puffing white vapor as they breathed.

"Try your luck, young man?"

"Yes."

He had switched all his cash to his front pocket when they arrived at the fair, and now he pulled out the remains of his eight dollars. It came to a dollar eighty-five.

The playing board was a strip of yellow plastic with numbers and odds painted on it in squares. It looked a bit like a roulette board, but Johnny saw immediately that the odds here would have turned a Las Vegas roulette player gray. A trip combina-

tion paid off at only two to one. There were two house numbers, zero and double zero. He pointed this out to the pitchman who only shrugged.

"You want Vegas, go to Vegas. What can I say?"

But Johnny's good humor tonight was unshakable. Things had gotten off to a poor start with that mask, but it had been all upbeat from there. In fact, it was the best night he could remember in years, maybe the best night ever. He looked at Sarah. Her color was high, her eyes sparkling. "What do you say, Sarah?"

She shook her head. "It's Greek to me. What do you do?"

"Play a number. Or red/black. Or odd/even. Or a ten-number series. They all pay differently." He gazed at the pitchman, who gazed back blandly. "At least, they should."

"Play black," she said. "It is sort of exciting, isn't it?"

"Black," he said and dropped his odd dime on the black square.

The pitchman stared at the single dime on his expanse of playboard and sighed. "Heavy plunger." He turned to the Wheel.

Johnny's hand wandered absently to his forehead and touched it. "Wait," he said abruptly. He pushed one of his quarters onto the square reading 11-20.

"That it?"

"Sure," Johnny said.

The pitchman gave the Wheel a twist and it spun inside its circle of lights, red and black merging. Johnny absently rubbed at his forehead. The Wheel began to slow and now they could hear the metronomelike tick-tock of the small wooden clap-

per sliding past the pins that divided the numbers. It reached 8, 9, seemed about to stop on 10, and slipped into the 11 slot with a final click and came to rest.

"The lady loses, the gentleman wins," the pitchman said.

"You won, Johnny?"

"Seems like it," Johnny said as the pitchman added two quarters to his original one. Sarah gave a little squeal, barely noticing as the pitchman swept the dime away.

"Told you, my lucky night," Johnny said.

"Twice is luck, once is just a fluke," the pitchman remarked. "Hey-hey-hey."

"Go again, Johnny," she said.

"All right. Just as it is for me."

"Let it ride?"

"Yes."

The pitchman spun the Wheel again, and as it slid around, Sarah murmured quietly to him, "Aren't all these carnival wheels supposed to be fixed?"

"They used to be. Now the state inspects them and they just rely on their outrageous odds system."

The Wheel had slowed to its final unwinding tick-tock. The pointer passed 10 and entered Johnny's trip, still slowing.

"Come on, come *on*!" Sarah cried. A couple of teenagers on their way out paused to watch.

The wooden clapper, moving very slowly now, passed 16 and 17, then came to a stop on 18.

"Gentleman wins again." The pitchman added six more quarters to Johnny's pile.

"You're rich!" Sarah gloated, and kissed him on the cheek.

"You're streaking, fella," the pitchman agreed enthusiastically. "Nobody quits a hot stick. Hey-hey-hey."

"Should I go again?" Johnny asked her.

"Why not?"

"Yeah, go ahead, man," one of the teenagers said. A button on his jacket bore the face of Jimi Hendrix. "That guy took me for four bucks tonight. I love to see him take a beatin."

"You too then," Johnny told Sarah. He gave her the odd quarter off his stack of nine. After a moment's hesitation she laid it down on 21. Single numbers paid off ten to one on a hit, the board announced.

"You're riding the middle trip, right, fella?"

Johnny looked down at the eight quarters stacked on the board, and then he began to rub his forehead again, as if he felt the beginnings of a headache. Suddenly he swept the quarters off the board and jingled them in his two cupped hands.

"No. Spin for the lady. I'll watch this one."

She looked at him, puzzled. "Johnny?"

He shrugged. "Just a feeling."

The pitchman rolled his eyes in a heaven-give-me-strength-to-bear-these-fools gesture and set his Wheel going again. It spun, slowed, and stopped. On double zero. "House numbah, house numbah," the pitchman chanted, and Sarah's quarter disappeared into his apron.

"Is that fair, Johnny?" Sarah asked, hurt.

"Zero and double zero only pay the house," he said.

"Then you were smart to take your money off the board."

"I guess I was."

"You want me to spin this Wheel or go for coffee?" the pitchman asked.

"Spin it," Johnny said, and put his quarters down in two stacks of four on the third trip.

As the Wheel buzzed around in its cage of lights, Sarah asked Johnny, never taking her eyes from the spin, "How much can a place like this take in on one night?"

The teenagers had been joined by a quartet of older people, two men and two women. A man with the build of a construction worker said, "Anywheres from five to seven hundred dollars."

The pitchman rolled his eyes again. "Oh, man, I wish you was right," he said.

"Hey, don't give me that poor mouth," the man who looked like a construction worker said. "I used to work this scam twenty years ago. Five to seven hundred a night, two grand on a Saturday, easy. And that's running a straight Wheel."

Johnny kept his eyes on the Wheel, which was now spinning slowly enough to read the individual numbers as they flashed past. It flashed past 0 and 00, through the first trip, slowing, through the second trip, still slowing.

"Too much legs, man," one of the teenagers said.

"Wait," Johnny said, in a peculiar tone of voice. Sarah glanced at him, and his long, pleasant face looked oddly strained, his blue eyes darker than usual, far away, distant.

The pointer stopped on 30 and came to rest.

"Hot stick, hot stick," the pitchman chanted resignedly as the little crowd behind Johnny and Sarah uttered a cheer. The man who looked like a construction worker clapped Johnny on the back hard enough to make him stagger a bit. The pitch-

man reached into the Roi-Tan box under the counter and dropped four singles beside Johnny's eight quarters.

"Enough?" Sarah asked.

"One more," Johnny said. "If I win, this guy paid for our fair and your gas. If I lose, we're out half a buck or so."

"Hey-hey-hey," the pitchman chanted. He was brightening up now, getting his rhythm back. "Get it down where you want it down. Step right up, you other folks. This ain't no spectator sport. Round and round she's gonna go and where she's gonna stop ain't nobody knows."

The man who looked like a construction worker and the two teenagers stepped up beside Johnny and Sarah. After a moment's consultation, the teenagers produced half a buck in change between them and dropped it on the middle trip. The man who looked like a construction worker, who introduced himself as Steve Bernhardt, put a dollar on the square marked EVEN.

"What about you, buddy?" the pitchman asked Johnny. "You gonna play it as it lays?"

"Yes," Johnny said.

"Oh man," one of the teenagers said, "that's tempting fate."

"I guess," Johnny said, and Sarah smiled at him.

Bernhardt gave Johnny a speculative glance and suddenly switched his dollar to his third trip. "What the hell," sighed the teenager who had told Johnny he was tempting fate. He switched the fifty cents he and his friend had come up with to the same trip.

"All the eggs in one basket," the pitchman chanted. "That how you want it?"

The players stood silent and affirmative. A couple of roustabouts had drifted over to watch, one of them with a lady friend; there was now quite a respectable little knot of people in front of the Wheel of Fortune concession in the darkening arcade. The pitchman gave the Wheel a mighty spin. Twelve pairs of eyes watched it revolve. Sarah found herself looking at Johnny again, thinking how strange his face was in this bold yet somehow furtive lighting. She thought of the mask again—Jekyll and Hyde, odd and even. Her stomach turned over again, making her feel a little weak. The Wheel slowed, began to tick. The teenagers began to shout at it, urging it onward.

"Little more, baby," Steve Bernhardt cajoled it. "Little more, honey."

The Wheel ticked into the third trip and came to a stop on 24. A cheer went up from the crowd again.

"Johnny, you did it, you did it!" Sarah cried.

The pitchman whistled through his teeth in disgust and paid off. A dollar for the teenagers, two for Bernhardt, a ten and two ones for Johnny. He now had eighteen dollars in front of him on the board.

"Hot stick, hot stick, hey-hey-hey. One more, buddy? This Wheel's your friend tonight."

Johnny looked at Sarah.

"Up to you, Johnny." But she felt suddenly uneasy.

"Go on, man," the teenager with the Jimi Hendrix button urged. "I *love* to see this guy get a beatin."

"Okay," Johnny said, "last time."

"Get it down where you want it down."

They all looked at Johnny, who stood thought-

ful for a moment, rubbing his forehead. His usually good-humored face was still and serious and composed. He was looking at the Wheel in its cage of lights and his fingers worked steadily at the smooth skin over his right eye.

"As is," he said finally.

A little speculative murmur from the crowd.

"Oh man, that is *really* tempting it."

"He's hot," Bernhardt said doubtfully. He glanced back at his wife, who shrugged to show her complete mystification. "I'll tag along with you, long, tall, and ugly."

The teenager with the button glanced at his friend, who shrugged and nodded. "Okay," he said, turning back to the pitchman. "We'll stick, too."

The Wheel spun. Behind them Sarah heard one of the roustabouts bet the other five dollars against the third trip coming up again. Her stomach did another forward roll but this time it didn't stop; it just went on somersaulting over and over and she became aware that she was getting sick. Cold sweat stood out on her face.

The Wheel began to slow in the first trip, and one of the teenagers flapped his hands in disgust. But he didn't move away. It ticked past 11, 12, 13. The pitchman looked happy at last. Tick-tock-tick, 14, 15, 16.

"It's going through," Bernhardt said. There was awe in his voice. The pitchman looked at his Wheel as if he wished he could just reach out and stop it. It clicked past 20, 21, and settled to a stop in the slot marked 22.

There was another shout of triumph from the crowd, which had now grown almost to twenty. All the people left at the fair were gathered here,