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FICTION

Carrie
'Salem's Lot
The Shining
Night Shift
The Stand
The Dead Zone
Firestarter
Cujo
Creepshow
Different Seasons
Rita Hayworth and
Shawsbank Redemption
The Body
Cycle of the Werewolf
Christine
Pet Sematary
IT
Skeleton Crew
The Mist
The Eyes of the Dragon
Misery
The Tommyknockers
The Dark Half
Four Past Midnight
The Langoliers
Needful Things
Gerald's Game
Dolores Claiborne
Nightmares & Dreamscapes
Insomnia
Rose Madder
The Green Mile
Desperation
Bag of Bones
The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon
Hearts in Atlantis
Dreamcatcher
Everything's Eventual
From a Buick 8
The Colorado Kid
Cell
Lisey's Story
Duma Key
Just After Sunset
Stephen King Goes to the Movies
Under the Dome
Full Dark, No Stars
1922
11/22/63
Doctor Sleep

Mr. Mercedes
Revival
Finders Keepers
The Bazaar of Bad Dreams
End of Watch
The Outsider
Elevation
The Institute
If It Bleeds
Billy Summers
Fairy Tale
Holly
You Like It Darker
Never Flinch

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The Dark Tower VI: Song of Susannah
The Dark Tower VII: The Dark Tower
The Wind Through the Keyhole:
A Dark Tower Novel

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The Long Walk
Roadwork
The Regulators
Blaze

WITH OWEN KING

Sleeping Beauties

WITH PETER STRAUB

The Talisman
Black House

WITH RICHARD CHIZMAR

Gwendy's Button Box
Gwendy's Final Task

NONFICTION

Danse Macabre
On Writing (A Memoir of the Craft)

STEPHEN
KING

THE BODY

A NOVELLA

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For George McLeod

The most important things are the hardest things to say. They are the things you get ashamed of, because words diminish them—words shrink things that seemed limitless when they were in your head to no more than living size when they're brought out. But it's more than that, isn't it? The most important things lie too close to wherever your secret heart is buried, like landmarks to a treasure your enemies would love to steal away. And you may make revelations that cost you dearly only to have people look at you in a funny way, not understanding what you've said at all, or why you thought it was so important that you almost cried while you were saying it. That's the worst, I think. When the secret stays locked within not for want of a teller but for want of an understanding ear.

I was twelve going on thirteen when I first saw a dead human being. It happened in 1960, a long time ago . . . although sometimes it doesn't seem that long to me. Especially on the nights I wake up from dreams where the bail falls into his open eyes.

We had a treehouse in a big elm which overhung a vacant lot in Castle Rock. There's a moving company on that lot today, and the elm is gone. Progress. It was a sort of social club,

STEPHEN KING

although it had no name. There were five, maybe six steady guys and some other wet ends who just hung around. We'd let them come up when there was a card game and we needed some fresh blood. The game was usually blackjack and we played for pennies, nickel limit. But you got double money on blackjack and five-card-under . . . *triple* money on six-card-under, although Teddy was the only guy crazy enough to go for that.

The sides of the treehouse were planks scavenged from the shitpile behind Mackey Lumber & Building Supply on Carbine Road—they were splintery and full of knotholes we plugged with either toilet paper or paper towels. The roof was a corrugated tin sheet we hawked from the dump, looking over our shoulders all the time we were hustling it out of there, because the dump custodian's dog was supposed to be a real kid-eating monster. We found a screen door out there on the same day. It was flyproof but really rusty—I mean, that rust was *extreme*. No matter what time of day you looked out that screen door, it looked like sunset.

Besides playing cards, the club was a good place to go and smoke cigarettes and look at girly books. There were half a dozen battered tin ashtrays that said camels on the bottom, a lot of centerfolds tacked to the splintery walls, twenty or thirty dog-eared packs of Bike cards (Teddy got them from his uncle, who ran the Castle Rock Stationery Shoppe—when Teddy's uncle asked him one day what kind of cards we played, Teddy said we had cribbage tournaments and Teddy's uncle thought that was just fine), a set of plastic poker chips, and a pile of ancient *Master Detective* murder magazines to leaf through if there was nothing else shaking. We also built a 12" x 10" secret compartment under the floor to hide most of this stuff in on the rare occasions when some kid's father decided it was time to do the we're-really-good-pals routine. When it rained, being in

THE BODY

the club was like being inside a Jamaican steel drum . . . but that summer there had been no rain.

It had been the driest and hottest since 1907—or so the newspapers said, and on that Friday preceding the Labor Day weekend and the start of another school year, even the golden-rod in the fields and the ditches beside the backroads looked parched and poorly. Nobody's garden had done doodly-squat that year, and the big displays of canning stuff in the Castle Rock Red & White were still there, gathering dust. No one had anything to put up that summer, except maybe dandelion wine.

Teddy and Chris and I were up in the club on that Friday morning, glooming to each other about school being so near and playing cards and swapping the same old traveling salesman jokes and frenchman jokes. How do you know when a frenchman's been in your back yard? Well, your garbage cans are empty and your dog is pregnant. Teddy would try to look offended, but he was the first one to bring in a joke as soon as he heard it, only switching frenchman to polack.

The elm gave good shade, but we already had our shirts off so we wouldn't sweat them up too bad. We were playing three-penny-scat, the dullest card-game ever invented, but it was too hot to think about anything more complicated. We'd had a pretty fair scratch ballteam until the middle of August and then a lot of kids just drifted away. Too hot.

I was down to my ride and building spades. I'd started with thirteen, gotten an eight to make twenty-one, and nothing had happened since then. Chris knocked. I took my last draw and got nothing helpful.

"Twenty-nine," Chris said, laying down diamonds.

"Twenty-two," Teddy said, looking disgusted.

"Piss up a rope," I said, and tossed my cards onto the table face down.

"Gordie's out, ole Gordie just bit the bag and stepped out

STEPHEN KING

the door,” Teddy bugled, and then gave out with his patented Teddy Duchamp laugh—*Eeee-eee-eee*, like a rusty nail being slowly hauled out of a rotten board. Well, he was weird; we all knew it. He was close to being thirteen like the rest of us, but the thick glasses and the hearing aid he wore sometimes made him look like an old man. Kids were always trying to cadge smokes off him on the street, but the bugle in his shirt was just his hearing-aid battery.

In spite of the glasses and the flesh-colored button always screwed into his ear, Teddy couldn’t see very well and often misunderstood the things people said to him. In baseball you had to have him play the fences, way beyond Chris in left field and Billy Greer in right. You just hoped no one would hit one that far because Teddy would go grimly after it, see it or not. Every now and then he got bonked a good one, and once he went out cold when he ran full-tilt-boogie into the fence by the tree-house. He lay there on his back with his eyes showing whites for almost five minutes, and I got scared. Then he woke up and walked around with a bloody nose and a huge purple lump rising on his forehead, trying to claim that the ball was foul.

His eyesight was just naturally bad, but there was nothing natural about what had happened to his ears. Back in those days, when it was cool to get your hair cut so that your ears stuck out like a couple of jug-handles, Teddy had Castle Rock’s first Beatle haircut—four years before anyone in America had ever heard of the Beatles. He kept his ears covered because they looked like two lumps of warm wax.

One day when he was eight, Teddy’s father got pissed at him for breaking a plate. His mother was working at the shoe factory in South Paris when it happened and by the time she found out about it, it was all over.

Teddy’s dad took Teddy over to the big woodstove at the back of the kitchen and shoved the side of Teddy’s head down

THE BODY

against one of the cast-iron burner plates. He held it down there for about ten seconds. Then he yanked Teddy up by the hair of the head and did the other side. Then he called the Central Main General Emergency unit and told them to come get his boy. Then he hung up the phone, went into the closet, got his .410, and sat down to watch the daytime stories on TV with the shotgun laid across his knees. When Mrs. Burroughs from next door came over to ask if Teddy was all right—she'd heard the screaming—Teddy's dad pointed the shotgun at her. Mrs. Burroughs went out of the Duchamp house at roughly the speed of light, locked herself into her own house, and called the police. When the ambulance came, Mr. Duchamp let the orderlies in and then went out on the back porch to stand guard while they wheeled Teddy to the old portholed Buick ambulance on a stretcher.

Teddy's dad explained to the orderlies that while the fucking brass hats said the area was clear, there were still kraut snipers everywhere. One of the orderlies asked Teddy's dad if he thought he could hold on. Teddy's dad smiled tightly and told the orderly he'd hold until hell was a Frigidaire dealership, if that's what it took. The orderly saluted, and Teddy's dad snapped it right back at him. A few minutes after the ambulance left, the state police arrived and relieved Norman Duchamp of duty.

He'd been doing odd things like shooting cats and lighting fires in mailboxes for over a year, and after the atrocity he had visited upon his son, they had a quick hearing and sent him to Togus, which is a VA hospital. Togus is where you have to go if you're a section eight. Teddy's dad had stormed the beach at Normandy, and that's just the way Teddy always put it. Teddy was proud of his old man in spite of what his old man had done to him, and Teddy went with his mom to visit him every week.

He was the dumbest guy we hung around with, I guess, and

STEPHEN KING

he was crazy. He'd take the craziest chances you can imagine, and get away with them. His big thing was what he called "truck-dodging." He'd run out in front of them on 196 and sometimes they'd miss him by bare inches. God knew how many heart attacks he'd caused, and he'd be laughing while the windblast from the passing truck rippled his clothes. It scared us because his vision was so lousy, Coke-bottle glasses or not. It seemed like only a matter of time before he misjudged one of those trucks. And you had to be careful what you dared him, because Teddy would do anything on a dare.

"Gordie's out, eeeeeee-eee-eee!"

"Screw," I said, and picked up a *Master Detective* to read while they played it out. I turned to "He Stomped the Pretty Co-Ed to Death in a Stalled Elevator" and got right into it.

Teddy picked up his cards, gave them one brief look, and said: "I knock."

"You four-eyed pile of shit!" Chris cried.

"The pile of shit has a thousand eyes," Teddy said gravely, and both Chris and I cracked up. Teddy stared at us with a slight frown, as if wondering what had gotten us laughing. That was another thing about the cat—he was always coming out with weird stuff like "The pile of shit has a thousand eyes," and you could never be sure if he *meant* it to be funny or if it just happened that way. He'd look at the people who were laughing with that slight frown on his face, as if to say: *O Lord what is it this time?*

Teddy had a natural thirty—jack, queen, and king of clubs. Chris had only sixteen and went down to his ride.

Teddy was shuffling the cards in his clumsy way and I was just getting to the gooshy part of the murder story, where this deranged sailor from New Orleans was doing the Bristol Stomp all over this college girl from Bryn Mawr because he couldn't stand being in closed-in places, when we heard some-

THE BODY

one coming fast up the ladder nailed to the side of the elm. A fist rapped on the underside of the trapdoor.

“Who goes?” Chris yelled.

“Vern!” He sounded excited and out of breath.

I went to the trapdoor and pulled the bolt. The trapdoor banged up and Vern Tessio, one of the other regulars, pulled himself into the clubhouse. He was sweating buckets and his hair, which he usually kept combed in a perfect imitation of his rock and roll idol, Bobby Rydell, was plastered to his bullet head in chunks and strings.

“Wow, man,” he panted. “Wait’ll you hear this.”

“Hear what?” I asked.

“Lemme get my breath. I ran all the way from my house.”

“*I ran all the way home,*” Teddy wavered in a dreadful Little Anthony falsetto, “*just to say I’m sob-ree—*”

“Fuck your hand, man,” Vern said.

“Drop dead in a shed, Fred,” Teddy returned smartly.

“You ran all the way from your place?” Chris asked unbelievably. “Man, you’re crazy.” Vern’s house was two miles down Grand Street. “It must be ninety out there.”

“This is worth it,” Vern said. “Holy Jeezum. You won’t believe this. Sincerely.” He slapped his sweaty forehead to show us how sincere he was.

“Okay, what?” Chris asked.

“Can you guys camp out tonight?” Vern was looking at us earnestly, excitedly. His eyes looked like raisins pushed into dark circles of sweat. “I mean, if you tell your folks we’re gonna tent out in my back field?”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Chris said, picking up his new hand and looking at it. “But my dad’s on a mean streak. Drinkin, y’know.”

“You got to, man,” Vern said. “Sincerely. You won’t *believe* this. Can you, Gordie?”

STEPHEN KING

“Probably.”

I was able to do most stuff like that—in fact, I’d been like the Invisible Boy that whole summer. In April my older brother, Dennis, had been killed in a Jeep accident. That was at Fort Benning, Georgia, where he was in Basic. He and another guy were on their way to the PX and an Army truck hit them broadside. Dennis was killed instantly and his passenger had been in a coma ever since. Dennis would have been twenty-two later that week. I’d already picked out a birthday card for him at Dahlie’s over in Castle Green.

I cried when I heard, and I cried more at the funeral, and I couldn’t believe that Dennis was gone, that anyone that used to knuckle my head or scare me with a rubber spider until I cried or give me a kiss when I fell down and scraped both knees bloody and whisper in my ear, “Now stop cryin, ya baby!”—that a person who had *touched* me could be dead. It hurt me and it scared me that he could be dead . . . but it seemed to have taken all the heart out of my parents. For me, Dennis was hardly more than an acquaintance. He was ten years older than me if you can dig it, and he had his own friends and classmates. We ate at the same table for a lot of years, and sometimes he was my friend and sometimes my tormentor, but mostly he was, you know, just a guy. When he died he’d been gone for a year except for a couple of furloughs. We didn’t even look alike. It took me a long time after that summer to realize that most of the tears I cried were for my mom and dad. Fat lot of good it did them, or me.

“So what are you pissing and moaning about, Vern-O?” Teddy asked.

“I knock,” Chris said.

“*What?*” Teddy screamed, immediately forgetting all about Vern. “You friggin liar! You ain’t got no pat hand. I didn’t deal you no pat hand.”

THE BODY

Chris smirked. "Make your draw, shitheap."

Teddy reached for the top card on the pile of Bikes. Chris reached for the Winstons on the ledge behind him. I bent over to pick up my detective magazine.

Vern Tessio said: "You guys want to go see a dead body?"

Everybody stopped.

3

We'd all heard about it on the radio, of course. The radio, a Philco with a cracked case which had also been scavenged from the dump, played all the time. We kept it tuned to WALM in Lewiston, which churned out the super-hits and the boss oldies: "What in the World's Come Over You" by Jack Scott and "This Time" by Troy Shondell and "King Creole" by Elvis and "Only the Lonely" by Roy Orbison. When the news came on we usually switched some mental dial over to Mute. The news was a lot of happy horseshit about Kennedy and Nixon and Quemoy and Matsu and the missile gap and what a shit that Castro was turning out to be after all. But we had all listened to the Ray Brower story a little more closely, because he was a kid our age.

He was from Chamberlain, a town forty miles or so east of Castle Rock. Three days before Vern came busting into the clubhouse after a two-mile run up Grand Street, Ray Brower had gone out with one of his mother's pots to pick blueberries. When dark came and he still wasn't back, the Browsers called the county sheriff and a search started—first just around the kid's house and then spreading to the surrounding towns of Motton and Durham and Pownal. Everybody got into the act—cops, deputies, game wardens, volunteers. But three days later the kid was still missing. You could tell, hearing about

9

STEPHEN KING

it on the radio, that they were never going to find that poor sucker alive; eventually the search would just peter away into nothing. He might have gotten smothered in a gravel pit slide or drowned in a brook, and ten years from now some hunter would find his bones. They were already dragging the ponds in Chamberlain, and the Motton Reservoir.

Nothing like that could happen in southwestern Maine today; most of the area has become suburbanized, and the bedroom communities surrounding Portland and Lewiston have spread out like the tentacles of a giant squid. The woods are still there, and they get heavier as you work your way west toward the White Mountains, but these days if you can keep your head long enough to walk five miles in one consistent direction, you're certain to cross two-lane blacktop. But in 1960 the whole area between Chamberlain and Castle Rock was undeveloped, and there were places that hadn't even been logged since before World War II. In those days it was still possible to walk into the woods and lose your direction there and die there.

4

Vern Tessio had been under his porch that morning, digging.

We all understood that right away, but maybe I should take just a minute to explain it to you. Teddy Duchamp was only about half-bright, but Vern Tessio would never be spending any of his spare time on *College Bowl* either. Still his brother Billy was even dumber, as you will see. But first I have to tell you why Vern was digging under the porch.

Four years ago, when he was eight, Vern buried a quart jar of pennies under the long Tessio front porch. Vern called the dark space under the porch his "cave." He was playing a pirate

THE BODY

sort of game, and the pennies were buried treasure—only if you were playing pirate with Vern, you couldn't call it buried treasure, you had to call it "booty." So he buried the jar of pennies deep, filled in the hole, and covered the fresh dirt with some of the old leaves that had drifted under there over the years. He drew a treasure map which he put up in his room with the rest of his junk. He forgot all about it for a month or so. Then, being low on cash for a movie or something, he remembered the pennies and went to get his map. But his mom had been in to clean two or three times since then, and had collected all the old homework papers and candy wrappers and comic magazines and joke books. She burned them in the stove to start the cook-fire one morning, and Vern's treasure map went right up the kitchen chimney.

Or so he figured it.

He tried to find the spot from memory and dug there. No luck. To the right and the left of that spot. Still no luck. He gave up for the day but had tried off and on ever since. Four years, man. Four *years*. Isn't that a pisser? You didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

It had gotten to be sort of an obsession with him. The Tessio front porch ran the length of the house, probably forty feet long and seven feet wide. He had dug through damn near every inch of that area two, maybe three times and no pennies. The *number* of pennies began to grow in his mind. When it first happened he told Chris and me that there had been maybe three dollars' worth. A year later he was up to five and just lately it was running around ten, more or less, depending on how broke he was.

Every so often we tried to tell him what was so clear to us—that Billy had known about the jar and dug it up himself. Vern refused to believe it, although he hated Billy like the Arabs hate the Jews and probably would have cheerfully voted the death-penalty on his brother for shoplifting, if the

STEPHEN KING

opportunity had ever presented itself. He also refused to ask Billy point blank. Probably he was afraid Billy would laugh and say *Course I got them, you stupid pussy, and there was twenty bucks' worth of pennies in that jar and I spent every fuckin cent of it*. Instead, Vern went out and dug for the pennies whenever the spirit moved him (and whenever Billy wasn't around). He always crawled out from under the porch with his jeans dirty and his hair leafy and his hands empty. We ragged him about it something wicked, and his nickname was Penny—Penny Tessio. I think he came up to the club with his news as quick as he did not just to get it out but to show us that some good had finally come of his penny-hunt.

He had been up that morning before anybody, ate his corn-flakes, and was out in the driveway shooting baskets through the old hoop nailed up on the garage, nothing much to do, no one to play Ghost with or anything, and he decided to have another dig for his pennies. He was under the porch when the screen door slammed up above. He froze, not making a sound. If it was his dad, he would crawl out; if it was Billy, he'd stay put until Billy and his j.d. friend Charlie Hogan had taken off.

Two pairs of footsteps crossed the porch, and then Charlie Hogan himself said in a trembling, crybaby voice: "Jesus Christ, Billy, what are we gonna do?"

Vern said that just hearing Charlie Hogan talk like that—Charlie, who was one of the toughest kids in town—made him prick up his ears. Charlie, after all, hung out with Ace Merrill and Eyeball Chambers, and if you hung out with cats like that, you had to be tough.

"Nuthin," Billy said. "That's all we're gonna do. Nuthin."

"We gotta do *somethin*," Charlie said, and they sat down on the porch close to where Vern was hunkered down. "Didn't you *see* him?"

Vern took a chance and crept a little closer to the steps,

THE BODY

practically slavering. At that point he thought that maybe Billy and Charlie had been really drunked up and had run somebody down. Vern was careful not to crackle any of the old leaves as he moved. If the two of them found out he was under the porch and had overheard them, you could have put what was left of him in a Ken-L Ration dogfood can.

"It's nuthin to us," Billy Tessio said. "The kid's dead so it's nuthin to him, neither. Who gives a fuck if they ever find him? I don't."

"It was that kid they been talkin about on the radio," Charlie said. "It was, sure as shit. Brocker, Brower, Flowers, whatever his name is. Fuckin train must have hit him."

"Yeah," Billy said. Sound of a scratched match. Vern saw it flicked into the gravel driveway and then smelled cigarette smoke. "It sure did. And you puked."

No words, but Vern sensed emotional waves of shame radiating off Charlie Hogan.

"Well, the girls didn't see it," Billy said after awhile. "Lucky break." From the sound, he clapped Charlie on the back to buck him up. "They'd blab it from here to Portland. We tore out of there fast, though. You think they knew there was something wrong?"

"No," Charlie said. "Marie don't like to go down that Back Harlow Road past the cemetery, anyway. She's afraid of ghosts." Then again in that scared crybaby voice: "Jesus, I wish we'd never boosted no car last night! Just gone to the show like we was gonna!"

Charlie and Billy went with a couple of scags named Marie Dougherty and Beverly Thomas; you never saw such gross-looking broads outside of a carnival show—pimples, moustaches, the whole works. Sometimes the four of them—or maybe six or eight if Fuzzy Bracowicz or Ace Merrill were along with their girls—would boost a car from a Lewiston