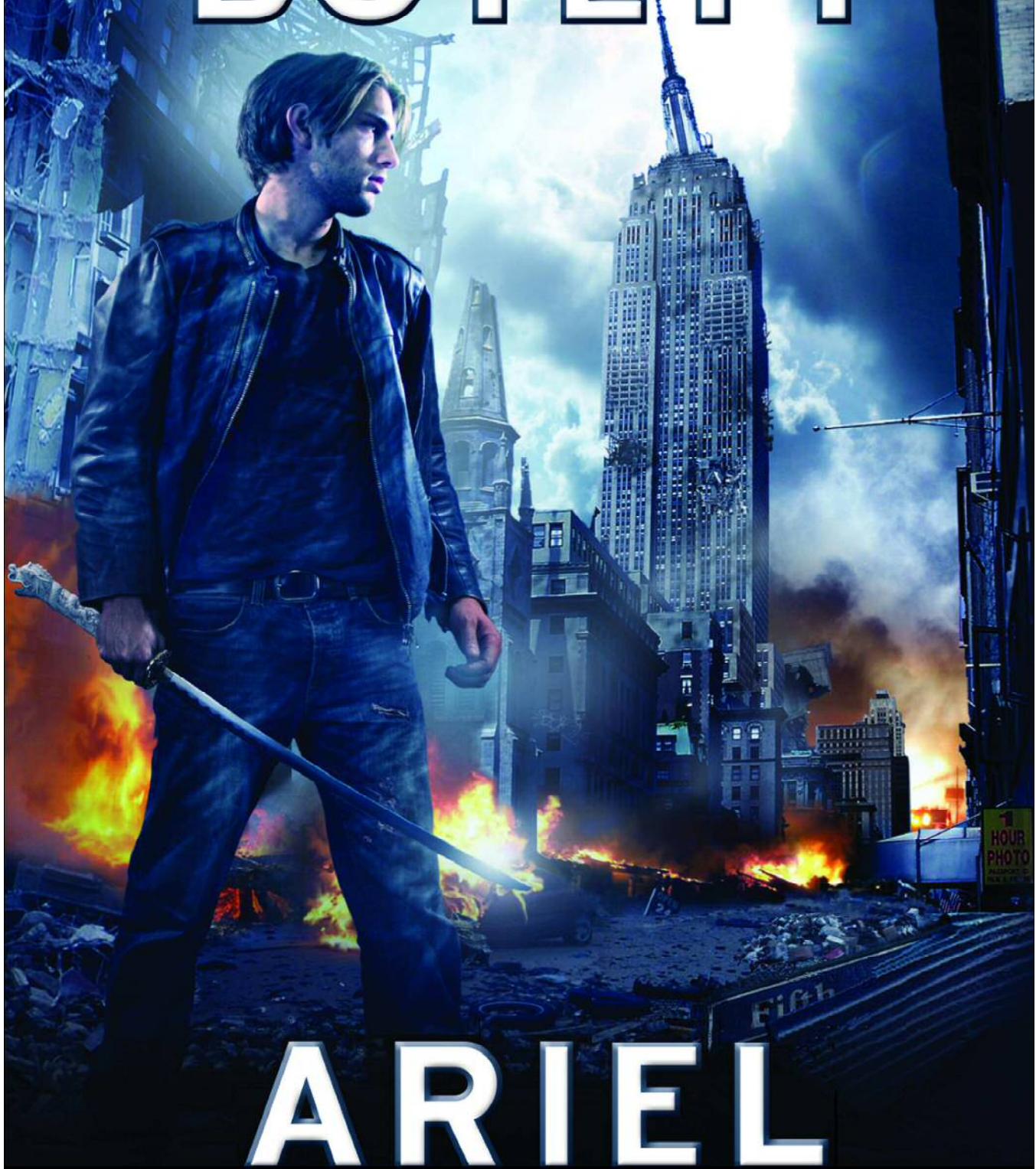


STEVEN R. BOYETT



ARIEL

The classic post-apocalyptic fantasy
is back in print at last.

WALK THE ROAD AT ARIELBOOK.COM

ONE

*What is your substance, whereof are you made
That millions of strange shadows on you tend?*

—SHAKESPEARE, “Sonnet LIII”

I was bathing in a lake when I saw the unicorn.

The water was cool and clear; the pollution had vanished years ago. I’m young, but I can remember the times before the Change when the filthy water would catch fire by itself. Now, though, I could leave my clothes next to my blowgun on the shore, grab a bar of Lifebuoy, and wade on in. It was clean enough to fill my drinking flask from.

I was scrubbing myself, enjoying the feel of slippery lather. It was a quiet day—as quiet as it ever gets, only the wind and the rustling of leaves, the accompanying insects. I usually sang when I bathed, to fill up the silence, but that day the silence was fitting and right, and I remained quiet.

I had just scrubbed my face, and I ducked under to wash off the soap. When I came back up, I brushed wet hair from my eyes and spat out a sparkling stream of water. I shook my head rapidly and rubbed my eyes.

There was a unicorn pawing at my clothes on the shore.

I had seen unicorns before, fleetingly. They were shy, cautious creatures that usually bolted when they sensed me, like quick flashes of sunlight on metal. In the five years since the Change I had become used to seeing fairy-tale things, living myths, but as I looked upon this creature I knew I had seen nothing to compare to it for sheer beauty. I felt as if some cold fish had slid across my belly as I marveled in the cool water.

It is an injustice to say merely that its coat was white. Oh, it was white, all right, but it was more than that. It was a white like I remember the best vanilla ice cream, but finer and smoother. Sometimes the sun hit it just right and bright rainbow crescents fanned out like light through a fine spray of water. The hooves were mirror-bright—platinum or silver, I couldn't tell. A distant lighthouse beacon on a lonely night, the spiral horn rose from the noble head: milky white, warm and welcoming.

I can't say how long I watched it. Seconds, minutes, hours. Its tail swished randomly. Its nose was pressed against my backpack, but suddenly the majestic head lifted and it regarded me with two paralyzingly black eyes. Eyes full of life and intelligence. Eyes I could fall into. Lover's eyes. As it moved, the mane shimmered on its muscular neck like a road on a hot day.

We looked at each other. Why did I suddenly have the feeling that I was the one who had no place in the world, that it was more real than I was? I was afraid to move, thinking I might frighten it away. Instead, I did the only thing I could think of to do:

"Hello," I said.

The silky ears pricked up, but otherwise it just stood there, reading my soul with those eyes.

I began walking cautiously toward the shore. Fear flashed in its eyes and I spoke to it in what I hoped was a reassuring voice.

"It's all right," I said. "I won't hurt you. It's all right." I said this over and over again as I inched closer. Soon I emerged, naked and dripping, from the water.

I held out my hands: let's be friends. There was pain in the beautiful face, and my smile disappeared when I saw why. The right front leg was broken. Swollen and discolored, it was made even uglier because such a thing didn't belong on this perfect beast. No wonder it hadn't run away.

"Oh, you poor thing," I said, kneeling.

It backed away, half-dragging the broken leg.

"I want to help you," I said, and stood up.

It looked straight at me. Its eyes were level with mine. "Bwoke," it said in a little-girl voice.

"I know. Here—" I reached out slowly and stroked her shoulder. It felt like ... I don't know. Somewhere between cotton and silk.

It—she, rather—flinched at the touch, but I stroked her mane until she relaxed.

"Bwoke," she said again.

"Yeah, it's broken. Pretty bad, too. I've got to find something to use as a splint so I can set it, okay?"

"Kayyy," she agreed.

I put on my pants and shoes and picked up the blowgun, then slid a handful of darts into a rear pocket. "Don't go away, all right? You'll hurt your leg even worse."

"Bwoke."

"Right." I smiled and darted out to the road, followed it about fifty yards until I came to a driveway leading to abandoned house. I entered cautiously. I wasn't worried too much about squatters or vigilantes, but it never hurts to play it safe. I took a sheet from a musty bedroom, bundled it up, and walked into the garage.

The car parked there was an old Volkswagen. The tires were flat and the windows were caked with dust. I picked up a rag from a work bench and wiped at the front windshield.

There was a corpse sitting behind the wheel. It looked as if it had been there a long time. Years. There was a bottle beside it. The label read POTASSIUM CYANIDE in bright red, with a skull and crossbones beneath. I wondered why he—she? —had done it.

I shrugged. Suicide had never been a viable option to me. I liked life, crazy as it was.

I turned around and picked up two long, thin boards from a small pile against the wall. The eerie feeling that the corpse was watching me made me feel like a dozen mice had skittered down my back.

I hurried from the dead house and ran down the road.

The unicorn was nuzzling my backpack when I arrived.

"No, get away from there," I told her firmly. There were a couple of weapons in the pack, knives included, and I didn't want her nosing it open and cutting herself.

"Candy," she said.

"What?"

"Candy," she repeated plainly.

"Sorry, little one. I don't have any..." I trailed off and untied the pack flap to let her see. "Well, I'll be damned."

There was a small pack of peppermint candies nestled between a hunting knife and a foil packet of freeze-dried chili. I'd have sworn it hadn't been there before.

"Candy."

"Right." I fished out the packet. Brach's. Forty-nine cents. Shaking my head slowly, I tore open the plastic, untwisted one of the red and white wrappers, and held the peppermint out in my palm. She took it gently with her mouth and crunched. "Candy," she said again.

"Be good and I'll give you candy after I fix your leg."

"Bwoke."

I made a splint from strips of the sheet and the two boards. It must have hurt like hell as I bound it tight, but

she never flinched or made a sound.

Thinking about Androcles and the lion, I stood up and gave her another piece of candy.

I made a fire as it grew dark. Supper had been freeze-dried beef and rice and warm instant lemonade. She wouldn't eat anything I offered except peppermint candy.

I washed my utensils after supper and leaned back against a palm tree. It was a nice night. October in Florida is always nice. It's the first lessening of the summer heat, and the first taste of winter is in your mouth. By day the sky is a big blue bowl, and by night it is pure as crystal, stars shining and crickets humming.

I lit a cigarette and looked up at that wonderful sky. After a minute I noticed the unicorn was standing next to me, staring. "What's the matter with you?" I asked.

"Bad," she said in that innocent-girl voice.

"Bad? What's bad?"

She lowered her head and, almost faster than I could see it, flicked the cigarette from between my fingers with her horn.

"Bad," she insisted.

I started to protest, but stopped. Maybe the smoke bothered her. I shrugged and nodded. "Okay, sure. Bad. Gotcha. Smoking—bad."

She nodded approvingly and turned away.

"Schmuck," I added.

She snorted. It sounded playful.

I stood up, stretching. My cigarette was still burning on the ground. I stamped it out and got ready for bed.

My sleeping bag was snuggly warm. I lay in it, thinking, and from time to time I raised my head and looked at the pale form a few yards from me, silent and motionless.

I smiled and rolled over onto my side. Eventually I slept.

* * *

I awoke next morning to find myself staring into lovely black eyes—snowman's eyes.

She stood over me, lover's eyes regarding me patiently. The early morning sun caused an occasional pale orange glimmer on her left side.

"Well, good morning," I said, standing. "How's the leg?"

"Bwoke."

"Yeah, right. We're going to have to teach you a few more words."

She watched me carefully as I buried last night's garbage. "Feel like walking a little?" I asked her. "We'll take it slow and easy. There's a small town about five or six miles from here. I need some stuff—food and a couple other things. Sound okay to you?"

"Kayyy."

That voice was so sweet it gave me shivers. I gave her a piece of peppermint—the last one—and stroked her luxuriant mane.

We followed the road until we got into the town.

W OME TO ARCADIA! proclaimed the road sign, with a hole shot through the "welcome." It must have been that way before the Change; firearms didn't work anymore.

I left her outside while I went into a pharmacy. I had to smash a window to get in; it was locked and, surprisingly, the large front windows were still intact. I was lucky; looters hadn't found this place yet.

I unslung my pack and dragged it behind me, top flap open so I could toss in anything I wanted as I walked among the aisles. Ace bandages for the unicorn's leg. Cigarettes from behind the cash register. And—I smiled when I saw them—a half-dozen small bags of Brach's peppermint candy.

The pharmacy had a lunch counter to one side. Behind it I found a few canned goods I could use. Mostly beans and franks. I was sick to death of beans and franks. Most of the

cans were dented, and some had scratches on them that looked as if they might be teeth marks. Why would somebody be hungry enough to try to bite his way into a can, but pass up bags of peppermint candy?

The stockroom was mostly empty. The back door, which led to an alleyway formed by the back of the pharmacy and another store, had been pried open. So the place had been looted. Not a very thorough job, though.

I had just turned to leave when something smacked into the wall just above and behind my head. I dropped, rolled behind a stack of cardboard boxes, and snatched my blowgun from its sling. It was an Aero-mag break-down model, all aluminum with piano-wire darts.

A box just above my head thunked and slid back toward me a little. An arrowhead and half a shaft protruded upward from it.

Upward—that meant he was down low and firing high. His bow wasn't too powerful, either; the arrow hadn't gone through the box. I set the pack in front of me as protection, carefully slid two boxes a fraction of an inch apart, and risked a quick peek.

It was a kid. He wore filthy blue jeans and nothing else. His black hair was shoulder length and grimy. His ribs protruded and his belly was distended. His eyes were dull and insane. He couldn't have been more than thirteen years old. As I watched he pulled another hunting arrow from the makeshift quiver strapped onto the back of his right thigh, fitted it, and drew. He barely had the strength to bring the string back to his cheek.

I ducked quickly and an arrowhead sprang into being through a cardboard box, inches to the left of my backpack.

"Kid!" I yelled at the top of my lungs. "Kid! You can have some of my food! Christ, you can have all of it; I don't care!"

Silence. Not even the thump of arrows striking boxes. That unnerved me even more. I ventured another peek and

caught motion out of the corner of my eye just in time to see him coming around the boxes at me, a feral gleam in his eyes as he drew back the bowstring.

There wasn't time to think. I grabbed the pack and threw it at him, raised the blowgun to my lips, and puffed *hard*, grunting as I launched the dart.

It hit him in the eye. He screamed and fell, and was still.

I just sat there, hands clamped around the aluminum shaft of the Aero-mag. I trembled. God, he'd been a kid, just a little kid, and I'd had to kill him...

I drew a shaky breath and stood. Hating myself, I walked over to him and pulled the dart from his eye. I had to. I might need it again.

I found where he had lived, behind some shelving in a corner of the stockroom. It was rank. Roaches crawled everywhere. There was shit on the floor and a small pile of cleanly picked bones on one side. Among them was a human skull.

He hadn't been after my pack.

The unicorn waited patiently outside the pharmacy. How to describe what she looked like in the bright sun? Neon milk? She looked at me strangely as I came out. I was probably pale. No doubt my walk was uncertain.

"Bad," she decided.

I tried to smile. It didn't work. "Yeah," I said. "Bad."

I shouldered my backpack and slung the Aero-mag. "Come on—let's find a library."

If the pharmacy had been undisturbed, the library was a veritable temple. It was untouched and unlocked: not very big, probably twenty or thirty thousand books, but at least there were a lot of high windows and it was well-lit inside. A fine layer of dust had coated everything. The electric clock on the wall had frozen at exactly four-thirty.

The unicorn looked over my shoulder as I thumbed through card-catalog drawers. I couldn't find anything between UNICEF and UNIFORMS, so I looked under MYTHOLOGY. There were about a dozen books listed; I found them, sat down on the floor, leaning against a bookshelf, and began reading.

I learned some damned interesting things—for instance: Unicorns are symbols of purity. The horn is supposed to have healing properties. They are generally meek and shy, but fight ferociously when cornered. They are traditionally pictured as being cloven-hoofed. My unicorn (*my unicorn!*) wasn't. No illustrations showed the prism effect of the light on the coat, nor did any have silver hooves. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* said the legend had originated in Greece about the time the Greeks began trading with the Egyptian Empire, and that it probably sprang from muddled accounts of the oryx or the rhinoceros.

I laughed, and the unicorn watched curiously.

You had to be a virgin to touch a unicorn...

A flush crept up my neck. Okay, so I'd touched her. Being a virgin had some advantages after all. Hooray.

I read until the light was too dim to see by, then set the book aside, rubbed my eyes, and made a small supper. The unicorn just wanted another piece of candy.

I was dying for a cigarette. Earlier in the day I had opened up the pack and found them gone.

"Hey," I'd said to the unicorn, "did you do something with my cigarettes?"

"Bad," was all she replied.

To vent the jitters I was getting from my nicotine fit, I decided to take a walk around the library. There was a browse-a-book section filled with art collections and paperbacks, and on one stand was a largish softcover that had a painting of a unicorn on the front. It was golden and quite beautiful, but nothing compared to the real thing. I picked it up and held it high, squinting in the dying light.

Ariel, proclaimed the title. *The Book of Fantasy*.

“Ariel.” I said it out loud, liking the sound. It was light and sounded like silver. What the hell. I couldn’t keep calling her “unicorn,” and Ariel was as good a name as any and better than most.

I carried the book to the unicorn. “Ariel,” I told her. “That’s your name, okay?”

She snorted.

“I’ll take one snort to mean yes and two for no.”

One more snort.

“Ariel it is, then.”

I set it atop some books on magic and witchcraft I had put aside to read while I walked the next day. Ariel seemed to know I was getting ready to go to sleep and began to pace restlessly around the library. She had tried to lie down earlier, but the splint was too uncomfortable.

I squirmed into my sleeping bag and sleep came quickly.

Just before I dozed off I thought, *I wonder if she’ll ever learn more than baby talk?*

TWO

*How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a
thankless child.*

—SHAKESPEARE, *King Lear*

Hey, Pete—get your ass in gear!”

Ariel and I traveled along the abandoned Interstate. We usually didn't say much as we walked; there didn't seem to be a need to. But today I was lagging behind somewhat. I was footsore and fatigued; she was eager and almost hyper. I got the feeling she was a bit apprehensive about going into Atlanta; she was in a hurry to get there and get out again.

I walked with my head bowed, watching the pavement seem to flow beneath my feet. Every so often one of Ariel's marvelous hooves slid along the asphalt and a stream of sparks scattered. The novelty of walking on paved road never seemed to wear thin on her.

A unicorn is a rare enough thing to see; burdened ones are unheard of. But she never complained about having to carry one of my packs and whatever weapons I happened to possess at the time. Today I carried the blowgun, broken down and slung onto the magnesium frame of my backpack where I could get to it quickly. Two bags were slung across

Ariel's back, and the handle of a pair of 'chuks dangled from a pocket. Poking from the top of her pack was a crossbow, which I'd use only if all else failed. It was powerful and good for long distances, but unwieldy and time-consuming to reload.

Ariel looked at me as I caught up to her. "What's the matter?" she asked. "Tired?"

I nodded.

"How much farther?"

I reached back and dug out the map from a side pocket, unrolled it, and traced a finger down a line marked *US 23/41*. "Let's see.... We left Macon when?"

"Two days ago."

"Right. We've been doing a little less than twenty miles a day, and it's about thirty miles as the crow flies. We ought to be in Atlanta sometime tomorrow afternoon."

"Shit—another night on the road." She had picked up many of my speaking habits. It's strange to hear a unicorn swear. Come to think of it, it's strange to hear a unicorn talk at all. "Hey, it's not so bad," I told her. "We could be spending the night in a city." Cities are where all the rejects hang out.

"Where, no doubt, you'd get us into another test of our defense capabilities."

She wouldn't leave me alone about Jacksonville, no matter how much I insisted it wasn't my fault. I'd gone to a trading bar to look over some equipment and weapons. I was always on the lookout for new things I might need.

Trading bars are nasty places. They serve as a combination bar/whorehouse/trading post/news center, and are mainly frequented by inner-city dwellers and loners "just passing through." Some loners have "buddies"—animals held to them by loyalty spells. Occasionally you see somebody with a Familiar—a person with an almost symbiotic relationship with a magical animal—like Ariel and me. As Familiars will fight ferociously to protect each other, and

spellbound buddies will die to protect their masters, they aren't allowed in trading bars, so I had to leave Ariel outside. I didn't like it one bit and neither did she, but those were the rules and everybody abided by them—or else. She stood in front of a furniture store across the street, well away from a buddy-lion crouched beside the entrance to the trading bar. It watched us warily.

There were a few people inside, mostly loners, it seemed, looking at the weapons-display tables. Over to one side was the dark entranceway to the bar. I walked among supply aisles, looking for anything that struck my fancy. There were no prices on any items; you had to negotiate with one of the dealers. Haggling had become a fine art again.

At the end of the aisles was a guard shouldering a cocked crossbow, expressionlessly watching the customers. Nobody stole from trading bars.

At one aisle I reached for something—I think it was a small, folding camp stove—and picked it up to look it over. They'd want an arm and a leg for it, but it might be convenient sometimes. It was the only one on the shelf.

Somebody snatched it from my hand. I turned to see someone huge and hairy and looking like an almost human grizzly bear glaring down at me. "Hey, little fuck," he said, holding up the folding stove, "this mine. Saw first." His teeth were rotted. He stank. He wore a black leather vest, cut-off blue jeans, and combat boots.

"Sure, fine," I told him. "I was just looking at it. If you want it, go ahead."

"I want, I take anyhow, little fuck," he growled.

Since he already had it and I didn't really want it anyway, that should have been the end of it. But he just stood there like an oak tree, as if he expected me to say something.

I turned and walked into the bar.

It was lit by a few candles scattered here and there, and the air smelled heavy and pungent like a barn. I dropped

my pack beside a barstool and sat down. The bartender came over to me.

"Yeah?" he said.

"Uh—" I hadn't wanted anything; I'd just come in to get away from that gorilla. "Do you have any Coke?"

"Coke?" He smiled a left-sided smile and I felt stupid and started to tell him never mind, but he bent down behind the bar. I heard a rattling as he unlocked something.

"It'll cost you," he said, straightening back up. "This stuff don't grow on trees." He held a small cellophane packet of white powder between thumb and forefinger.

I flushed. Cocaine! I'd wanted a Coke, you know—Coca Cola.

"Where—where do you get this?"

"Guy comes in from New York twice a year, regular. Rides a griffin."

New York! I'd heard things about what New York was like now. They were horror stories.

He put his elbows down on the bar and leaned toward me "Just drops off these little bags and takes one of them." He nodded toward one of the three women sitting toward the rear of the bar. When she saw us looking her way she said something to her companions, stood, and walked toward us.

"You still want the coke?"

"I—well, no. I doubt I could afford it." I stood to leave and felt a light tap on my shoulder. It was the girl.

"You like me?" she asked.

I started to reply but she cut me off. "A half-pound of dried meat, any kind, in advance. Or if you don't have any, we could make a deal."

"No," I said, moving away.

"What's wrong? You queer or something?"

"No, just selective." I picked up my pack and walked out of the bar just as the big gorilla-type walked in. He stopped and started to say something to me, but I just kept walking through the trading area and out the door.

Ariel was across the street. She faced the buddy-lion, regarding it with what looked like tolerant amusement. She turned to me as I hurriedly approached her. "This lion is stupid. It can't communicate with me at all."

"Of course it's stupid. It's just an animal."

She blinked once and stared at me. If she could have smiled I'm sure she would have.

"You know what I mean—it's a dumb lion under a loyalty spell."

"Wonder who it belongs to."

"I don't even care. Look, let's get out of here."

"What's the matter? Trouble inside?"

I shook my head. "Not really. I just don't like cities. Creeps everywhere. Come on." We turned to leave just as the gorilla-type walked out the door, arm around the whore I'd turned down. She pointed at me. Shit.

He began walking across the street toward me, talking as he came. "Little fuck, I kill you. You and your horse, too, hah-hah-hah."

Ariel gave me a sidelong look as he lumbered toward us. "No trouble, huh?"

I shrugged out of my pack. "That's the reason I wanted to get out of here."

"Looks like a pretty good reason to me."

"Right." He had stopped in the middle of the road, expecting me to step out and meet him halfway. I had a better idea. "Let's run away," I suggested.

"Too late. Look."

The big yotz had turned to face the buddy-lion. He pulled something out of his leather vest, held it between thumb and forefinger, and pressed it. It was one of those cheap metal clackers that make an annoying noise like a cricket on speed. He clacked it three times and the lion rose.

"Come on, Rasputin," he said. The lion licked its chops, shook its mane, and blinked. We couldn't run away now; the lion would catch us before we got ten yards. Before I

could get ten yards, rather; I wouldn't put it past Ariel to outrun it.

Then they were both coming toward us and everything happened fast. The lion stopped in front of Ariel and gathered itself for the pounce, relaxing and looking lazily up into her eyes.

"Come on, come on," said Ariel impatiently. "You might as well pounce now; you're going to sooner or later."

Then I could no longer pay attention to them because this huge, hairy arm swung around like a shaggy club and broke my nose. I went down onto the sidewalk, eyes blinded by sudden tears. Warm wetness flowed onto my lips. I saw the blur as he bent down to finish me off and my right foot lashed out, heel hitting his kneecap. He yowled as it snapped. I got up as fast as I could and punched him in the throat. He went down choking.

I looked toward Ariel. Blood dripped down her horn and the lion lay in a pool of red at the curb. Her lover's eyes were black and soft. "You look awful," she said.

I tried to smile. "I thig by nothe ith broge," I said.

Remembering Jacksonville as we walked down the Interstate, I reached out and stroked Ariel's shimmering mane. She shivered. "Do you want to call it a day and set up camp, horny-horse? Leg still hurting?"

She gave a gentle laugh like wind chimes tinkling. "No, I'm all right. We'll camp at sundown, same as always."

I agreed and we continued walking. I thought about her slowly healing leg as we plodded on. It had been over a year, and it still bothered her. I'd asked her about it, when she'd learned enough words to answer, but she refused to talk about it.

"Sunset, Pete," she announced after a while, knowing how much I liked the sunset effect.

I looked up at the horizon. Sunsets were bright and dazzlingly beautiful since the vanished air pollution had taken with it all the dim reds and burnt cinnamons. I looked away, and melted at the sight of Ariel. The fading light sent rainbow ripples spreading everywhere on her body, sweeping prism-broken light from neck to flank. Her spiral horn caught the sunlight and her tail looked like my memory of a fiber-optics lamp. I watched until the sun disappeared and all that remained was the faint glow of her horn.

We set up camp beside the Interstate. I unslung my sleeping bag and unrolled it on the grass. Ariel struck sparks on the road and I got a fire going. I opened a can and was soon eating hot beef stew. Ariel didn't eat anything. All I'd ever seen her eat was peppermint candy, and that only because she liked it. I don't think she needed to eat. I'd asked her, once, what kept her alive.

"I'm not sure," she'd answered. "The light from the stars. The music of crickets. Clean living."

"I'm serious. A creature can't live without some kind of sustenance."

"Those are the old rules, the ones that don't work the way they used to. Magic is what works now, and I'm a magical creature. You might as well ask why guns or electricity don't work anymore. You've told me that the world doesn't work like it did before. It's magic, and that's all there is to it."

The world doesn't work like it did before. Wasn't that the truth.

I lay on my sleeping bag, staring at the night sky and remembering. *The light from the stars.* When had there been so many stars in the sky? Before the Change the city glow pushed them back and the cities were cut off from the rest of the universe under their own domes of light. Now the Milky Way spread out above me like a band of chalk dust.

The ghostly form of Ariel stirred beside me. "Pete?"
"Yeah."

"Is there any special reason we're going into Atlanta?"

"We've gone over this before. I want to go to a library.
We haven't been to one since Jacksonville."

"Oh."

"What's the matter? You don't want to go into Atlanta?"

"Cities make me nervous. But whither thou goest...."

Silence for a while. Then:

"Hey, Pete?" Softly. "Mmm."

"Sing me that song. You know, The Song."

"Sure."

Music was something I missed with a quiet pain, and I tried to make up for it by singing. The lyrics of the songs I liked had stayed with me, and I would sing them as Ariel and I walked the roads from town to town. But there was one song—I'd forgotten where I'd first heard it, or even what it was called. I just called it The Song, and I sang it whenever I was afraid of what might be waiting at the end of the road. I sang it to Ariel:

*"So we'll go no more a-roving
So late into the night,
Though the heart be still as loving,
And the moon be still as bright.*

*For the sword outwears its sheath,
And the soul wears out the breast,
And the heart must pause to breathe,
And love itself must rest.*

*Though the night was made for loving,
And the day returns too soon,
Yet we'll go no more a-roving
By the light of the moon."*

A cry came from far overhead.

"Roc," I said. "Usually don't see them around here."

But Ariel was asleep.

I rolled onto my side and soon I was asleep, too.

We reached downtown Atlanta about five o'clock the next afternoon. The gold dome of the state capitol building gleamed from between the tall skyscrapers to my right. To the left was the squat, brooding shape of the Fulton County Stadium, where the Falcons and the Braves used to play. It reminded me of pictures of the Coliseum in Rome—a deserted, dead arena. I wondered who—or what—might be there now.

"Sure feels empty," observed Ariel, glancing around.

"Yeah." I smiled. "The whole world feels empty."

"We're being watched."

I looked at her. "From where?"

"Overpass. About a mile away, straight ahead. Three people. One of them is looking at us through—what do you call them? Bulky black things, make things far away look closer."

"Binoculars."

"Right. One of them's using binoculars. There's something perched on his shoulder—some kind of bird."

"A Familiar, maybe?"

"How would I know? Looks like a regular bird from here."

"Well, we're headed that way anyhow. We'll worry about it when we get there."

In ten minutes I could see them fairly well. One wore a shirt and blue jeans, one was decked out in a fancy assortment of knives, and the third wore a leather jacket on which the bird—a falcon, I now saw—was perched.

As we neared, the leatherjacketed one raised something to his lips and blew. I didn't hear anything, but Ariel's ears

twitched and the bird flew straight up and began circling.
“Buddy,” I said.

“They keep their bases covered.” This from a creature who hadn’t the vaguest notion fwhat baseball was.

“Yeah. Let me do the talking, okay? They may not have seen a unicorn before; we don’t want them knowing any more than they have to.”

We stopped, looking up at the three men on the overpass.

“What’s your business?” asked Leatherjacket in a mild Southern accent.

We seek the Holy Grail—it was tempting. “We’re trying to get to the public library,” I said.

“Public library. What’s there?”

“Books.”

He flared. “Smart guy.”

“No, really. I need to look at a road atlas and some maps.”

They stared at me. “Whyn’t you go to a gas station?”

“I want old maps. I’d like to make it to the library before dark, if you don’t mind.”

They were silent.

“Well?” I demanded.

“That yours?” He indicated Ariel.

“We’re Familiars, yes. Anything wrong with that?”

“Don’t be so defensive, son. We just like to keep track of what animals come and go in our fair city, both four- and two-legged.”

“Besides,” broke in the one wearing knives, “unicorns are pretty rare. They’re supposed to have a gift for healing. They say if you grind the horn into powder and mix it with—”

“That’s enough,” said Leatherjacket.

The man in the T-shirt and jeans tapped him on the shoulder and whispered into his ear. Leatherjacket’s eyes widened and he seemed to want to laugh. “That right?” he asked.

T-shirt nodded.

Leatherjacket looked at me. "Does your Familiar let you touch it?"

I flushed. Damn! "Yes," I admitted.

"You've never had a woman?"

Now it was my turn to stare.

"You'd best be careful around here," said T-shirt. "There's some awful mean women around, hide in dark places and grab you just like that." He snapped his fingers. The other two snickered.

"Well, I can't see any harm in letting them go to the library," said Leatherjacket. "Long as you don't wander around the streets. It'll be dark soon. Ain't safe."

"I'll remember." I took out the city map I had obtained from an abandoned gas station and unrolled it.

"Don't bother with that," he said. "Just take this exit. Turn left at the second red light and go on down the street until you see it on the right side. About a mile."

"Thanks."

We started to walk on, but he yelled for us to stop before I had taken two steps. I halted and looked up at him.

"Don't move until I call Asmodeus," he said, pointing toward the hunting falcon circling overhead. "She'll rip your eyes out otherwise."

"Don't bother." I looked at Ariel, who nodded. She snorted, tossed her head, and looked up.

The falcon settled gently onto her back.

Leatherjacket's jaw dropped. The other two looked at him wide-eyed, almost as if they were afraid for him.

"No one—I was told nobody could order that bird but me!"

I just smiled.

Leatherjacket's eyes formed two slits. He lifted the whistle to his mouth and blew. The bird didn't move from Ariel's back.

"Let her go, Ariel," I said.

Ariel tossed her head and snorted. The bird flew off and glided to Leatherjacket's shoulder. He was still glaring at me, and the other two looked on with their mouths pressed into angry lines.

"Let's go, Ariel."

We went.

That was a damned stupid thing to do," observed Ariel once we were out of earshot.

"Sue me."

"I'm serious. Let me do the talking, you said. We don't want them knowing anything more than they have to, you said. So what do we do? We show off! Now there'll be talk, and if word gets around that we bypassed an obedience spell—even if it was just a bird—people will get curious."

I said nothing.

"It was a childish thing to do."

I glared at her but remained silent.

"Well? Why'd you want to show off like that?"

"I was embarrassed," I muttered.

"You were what?"

"I was embarrassed, dammit!"

"Why? What was there to be embarrassed about?"

"I'm a virgin."

"So am I."

"That's different. You're not a human. You aren't a man. See, human males have this ... this.... Oh, forget it."

"Pete, there is great virtue in being pure. If you weren't a virgin, you couldn't have me."

"Look, just drop it, okay?"

"All right." She fell silent, and neither of us said another word until we found the library.

The library was of ultramodern design—few windows and now-useless electric glass doors. I looked around for something I could break in with.

“Don’t bother,” said Ariel sullenly, and she ran for the glass front door, head down and horn aimed straight ahead. “No!”

But I was too late. She had already bolted up the steps, sparks streaming from her hooves, and leapt into the air. Her horn hit the glass and shattered it; her momentum carried her through.

“You idiot!” I ran up the steps to find her standing quietly amid the broken glass. “What are you trying to do, turn yourself into hamburger?”

“I got us in, didn’t I?”

“So what? You could have waited another two minutes while I found something to bust it open with, rather than jumping through like some comic-book hero. You could have cut yourself badly. I don’t have any way to treat you if you ever really hurt yourself, you know that? What if you snapped your horn?”

“It can’t snap. Not while I’m alive. Besides, unicorns avert harm. We rarely get injured, and when we do, we heal fast.”

“Oh? And how, may I ask, did you manage to get your leg broken nearly in two, despite all this ability to avert personal injury?”

Her nostrils flared. “I don’t want to talk about it.” Her coal eyes blazed.

“Why not?”

“Why don’t you want to talk about your virginity?”

“Oh, go to hell.”

She snorted and walked farther into the library.

SEVEN

May you live in interesting times.

—Ancient Chinese Curse

As I swallowed the last bite of Spaghetti-o's the phone rang and a car horn blared outside. I dashed to the door, stuck my head out, and yelled, "Be there in a second, Grace!" Behind the wheel of her Falcon—on its last legs, poor thing, but we still called it the *Millennium Falcon* with affection—Grace smiled and nodded. I ran back to the phone and lifted the receiver in mid-ring. "Hello?"

"Hey there."

"Hi, Mom. I hate to cut you short, but— "

"What time is your debate tournament?"

"Four, and it's three-thirty already. Grace just pulled up."

"Things would be a lot easier for you if you'd go to work and earn enough money to get yourself a car."

"Mom—"

"All right." Her voice warmed. "Do well at your tournament, hon."

I smiled. "Don't I always?"

"I wouldn't know. You've never brought home a trophy."

“Bye, Mom.”

“I’ll see you when I get home.”

I hung up, put on my ugly brown and green coat, and stuffed its non-matching tie into a pocket so I could carry the briefcase and card file outside. I hoped Grace wasn’t pissed off; she’d gone out of her way to pick me up as it was.

Accouterments dumped into the back seat, Grace put the car in gear and we headed out. “Where is everybody?” she asked, commenting on the empty driveway.

I ticked them off on my fingers. “My brother has a soccer game in Miami Springs. My parents—my mom, I mean—is at work. I’m going to a debate tournament. I think our dog’s out on the back porch. My father’s dead.”

“Not funny.”

“So solly.”

The rest of the drive to our high school was spent in silence. Grace parked in the senior parking lot because it made her feel superior; we were both freshmen.

At the cafeteria Grace and I spotted our school’s other three teams.

“Master debaters,” I announced, “we are here!”

Bill Thurgood looked up to regard me blandly with his pasty expression. “You’ll pardon us if we don’t stand up,” he said.

I gave him my best diabetes-inducing smile. “I thought you *were* standing up, Bill.” Bill was short.

Jim Allen, the club president, handed us a dittoed sheet still smelling faintly of alcohol. “We’ve got a bye in the third round.” I pointed out the shadowed box to Grace.

“You’ve also got a round right now in two thirty-six. You’re negative team.”

“Wonderful.”

The team was waiting for us when we got to 236. We set up quickly, shook hands all around, and got started.

The lights went out just as I concluded my rebuttal

speech. It was four-thirty. We opened the shades to brighten the room and resumed the debate.

We had an hour-long break between first and second rounds. Grace and I went out to her car, planning to grab dinner at Burger King.

The car wouldn't start.

"Did you check the tires?" I asked.

"Funny." She turned the key in the ignition once more, pumping the gas pedal with her high-heeled foot.

"Alas, poor *Falcon*," I said mournfully. "I knew it well."

She shot me a hateful look. "Don't you know anything about cars? I thought all guys were supposed to."

"Fortunately, I am not the typical high school male. This is everything I know about cars: you put the key in and turn it. Through some mystical process I'll never understand, the engine starts. If you want to go forward you press your foot down. If something goes wrong you fix it."

"And how do you fix it?"

I shrugged. "You call a mechanic."

"Gee, thanks." She pulled the key out of the ignition. "I suppose it hasn't occurred to you that this is your way home tonight, too."

"Yes, it has. Look, your engine's not even turning over. It's probably your battery. Maybe we could get a jump from somebody."

"Yeah, okay. Good idea." Her tone said that she didn't think it was such a good idea, but that she had no better one.

I got out and walked over to another car with two guys sitting in the front seat. They looked familiar; I think they were from Killian High. I explained our situation to the driver and asked if he could give us a jump. Grace had cables in her trunk.

"Sorry," he said. "I can't get mine to start, either."

I frowned. Looking over the roof of his car I saw three people trying to push-start a Volkswagen at the far end of the parking lot. "Have you looked under the hood yet?" I asked him.

"No. It's probably the same problem you've got, though. Dead battery."

"Or a missing one." I pointed at the Volkswagen. "I wouldn't put it past somebody to come by here and steal batteries out of some of the cars."

He got out and opened the hood. The battery was still there. "Well, that answers that. Let's try something." He opened his trunk and pulled out a set of jumper cables. After attaching them to the battery's terminals he held the loose ends and touched them together. "Nothing," he said. "No spark."

"Holy shit!" yelled his friend on the passenger's side. "Did you see that?"

"What?" the driver and I asked simultaneously.

He pointed. "From out of the trees by the road there. It was . . . huge. Some kind of animal. Like a lion, but bigger. Lots bigger."

"Bear, maybe?"

I made a rude noise. "Our school might be out in the boonies, but it's not that far out." The guy who'd seen the animal got out from the car. "Where'd it go?" I asked.

"It just shot out from between the trees and ran around the corner, that way." He pointed west. I looked at the intersection where he was pointing. The red light was out. Below it were unmoving cars.

Grace came up beside me. "It looks like everything's stopped at once," she said.

Grace and I tried to call home for rides. The phones weren't working. Not even a dial tone.

Nobody else could give us a ride home either. Their cars

wouldn't work. Even watches had stopped.

"Come on," I said to Grace. "Let's go home."

"How?"

"Your legs still work, don't they?"

"It's at least a three-hour walk!"

I grabbed her arm. "Grace. Something's happened. I don't know what could have caused it, but nothing that uses electricity is working."

"Let go of my arm."

I took my hand away. "Sorry."

She rubbed her arm and looked around—taking the opportunity to back a step away from me. "Everything feels . . . different. I don't like this. It's too quiet."

I nodded. "No cars. No power hum. No planes in the sky."

She bit her lower lip, looking at the cars stopped beneath the dark traffic light. "It's like a scene from a movie I saw once. There was this flying saucer and a robot—"

"*The Day the Earth Stood Still*. The robot's name was Gort."

"Oh." She blinked. "The robot's name was Gort." She tried to smile and her lips quivered.

"Come on, let's go. It'll be dark soon and I don't want to spend most of my time on the road at night." I looked toward the trees where the huge animal had been seen.

"My debate stuff. I don't want to leave my debate stuff here. It'll get stolen."

I didn't argue. I found a janitor and explained to him that we were leaving and wanted to stow our things—could he possibly open our debate class? He could.

That accomplished, we hit the road.

We were silent most of the way, each wrapped in our own thoughts and one question underlying them all: *what had happened?*

It was completely dark before we were three-fourths of the way home. My feet were aching by the time we got

there. Hers couldn't have felt any better. I walked her to her house, which was some five miles from mine. I guessed it was a little after eight o'clock when we arrived. We'd seen no people on the road, only a few useless cars stopped in the act of turning or abandoned in the street.

Her house was empty. No lights, which I'd been expecting, but no candles burning either. No telltale flickering through the windows of neighboring houses. The front door was unlocked and we entered cautiously.

"Mom?" she called out. Her voice wasn't very loud. "Dad?"

Nothing.

"Dad's probably still at work," she told me, "but Mom should be here."

"Maybe she went shopping." The nearest shopping center was Cutler Ridge—fifteen miles away.

"Maybe." She was silent a minute. "Pete, can we go outside? I don't like it in here. I can't see my hand in front of my face."

"Sure." We went outside. The neighborhood was eerily quiet, the only sound the chirp of crickets and croak of frogs.

Grace sat down on the concrete front porch. She hugged her knees and looked at the ground. "What do I do?"

I sat wearily beside her. "You could stay here, but you don't know when your parents might be back. I'd offer to stay with you but I can't. My mother's at work in Miami—or was, at any rate—and my brother might even be home by now. It's still almost two hours' walk from here."

"I'll go with you."

"What about your parents?"

She shut her eyes. "I don't want to be alone here."

"Okay." I stood. "Let's get a move on then." I tried to smile.

"Hold on. I need to go to my room and get some socks and another pair of shoes." She started back into the house,

but paused at the doorway. "Now that I think of it, I'd better bring some clothes and things, too. I doubt I'll be back before tomorrow at least."

She came back in a few minutes with a small overnight bag in hand. "I left a note. Let's go."

We left. She didn't look back.

We took back roads toward my house. The farther we stayed from Krome Avenue and other main roads, the less paranoid I felt. If this thing continued people would panic, and I wanted no part of it.

Once we saw a small group of people in the distance. They carried torches and their shouts reached us clearly through the quiet. It looked like a scene from one of the old Universal horror movies: angry villagers march on Frankenstein's castle. We stayed clear.

About a mile from my house Grace saw something moving in the bushes. We stopped and I cocked my head to listen, but heard nothing except spooky wind through the trees. We resumed walking and then I heard it, too: a heavy sound, as if something that weighed an awful lot were stomping through the brush. Curiosity told me to wait and see what it was. Rationality told me to keep right on going. Rationality won.

In a little while we reached my neighborhood. It was sparsely populated and a bit spread out; everybody had built their houses at random there in the boondocks. Grace and I crossed the bridge over the dark canal and headed down the street toward my house. We were tired and our feet dragged. It was quiet except for the wind and the frogs, but there was nothing unusual about that. No lights were on in any houses, though; no cars passed us along the way. I was used to blackouts where we lived; heavy storms often brought lines down. But the thing that made it all seem wrong was the absence of the pale orange city glow of Miami to the north.

We stopped at the foot of the driveway. Wooden posts

holding up a pitifully sagging fence framed the entrance-way. A wooden sign, painted by my father years ago, read THE GAREYS. As I'd expected, no lights were on, no candles burned in the living-room windows. Mom's car wasn't in the driveway, either.

"What now?" Grace asked.

"We wait. See if my brother makes it home. Or my mother. If not I'll leave a note, and tomorrow we'll go back to your house and see if anybody showed up there."

"And after that?"

Any reply I could have made was stopped by shattering glass. I jerked my head toward the house. A living-room window was now broken. As I watched, the window to the left of it smashed as a portable television—my brother's—hurtled through to crash onto the front porch.

Grace started to say something but I motioned to her to stay quiet. The sound would carry far in the silence. I wanted to whisper to her but couldn't swallow the lump that had formed in my throat.

We squatted low by the mailbox, our voices tight hisses.

"Well?" demanded Grace. "Now what?"

I shook my head, looking at the grass at Grace's feet. It needed mowing. "I don't know."

"Could that be your brother in there? Could he be throwing things because he's mad, because he's afraid?"

"Yeah. Get serious."

"We need to find out. If it's him, we can't just leave him."

I let out a short laugh. "Sure. But who bells the cat?" I looked up at her. "I find it extremely likely that it's not my brother."

She blinked. "Well—there's one way to find out."

"Yeah, I guess so." I pulled a clump of grass from the dirt and tossed it aside. Standing, I brushed my hands against my slacks. "I'll be back in a few minutes. I hope."

"No way. I'm not standing here. I'd rather go with you

than wait here." She glanced around to indicate the silent neighborhood.

"Suit yourself. But we've got to be quiet. Understand?"

"I know how to be quiet. Even girls can do it, under pressure."

I raised an eyebrow at her, then turned toward the house.

The house sat in the middle of a two-acre lot. Grace and I stayed off the U-shaped driveway; we would have been black shadows against the light gray concrete. Instead we crawled on the grass beside the driveway until we were even with the front porch, then I crawled left until I was against the garage wall. I found all this surreal. I felt as if I were playing Army, as if I were leading a commando raid against my own house. I waited until Grace caught up to me and put my lips to her ear. "Wait here," I breathed. "I'm going to see if I can get a good look through the window." She started to protest but I clenched her arm. "One of us has less chance of being seen than both of us." I turned away from her.

I crept along the grass the length of the garage wall until I reached the front porch, where I stopped and tried to calm my breathing and slow my heart, which was trying to hammer its way out of my chest. Shards from the broken window flashed on the front porch, my brother's television in their midst. By the front door was something white and shapeless, like a towel that had been tossed there and forgotten.

I inched forward on hands and knees until I was beneath the nearest window. I stopped under it and held my breath. Voices came from inside. I made out at least three, all male. I glanced behind me. Good—the road made a dark backdrop. When I looked through the window I didn't want my head showing as a black silhouette against a light background.

Placing my hands on the windowsill, I raised myself slowly. The curtains were drawn; I couldn't see a thing.

Next window, then. I went back to hands and knees and crawled four feet to the next window, our big picture window. I cut my palm on a piece of glass, but not badly. I wiped it against my pants.

As I got under the window and prepared to look in, I glanced toward the front door and was shocked to recognize the shapeless white towel. It was Snoopy. She lay on the doormat with her head bashed in. I sat there, looking at her, for a long time.

Grace's scream brought me out of it. I jumped up and turned toward her. *Fuck—if anybody was looking toward the front windows they know you're here now, idiot.*

A man was holding Grace in a bear hug. She struggled futilely, kicking his shins. As I ran for them I heard the front door open behind me, but I didn't look back.

I'm sure I looked ludicrous when I reached Grace. I stopped dead in front of her because she was between me and her attacker. I ran around them so I could hit him from behind, but they whirled as they struggled, so that she faced me again. Her fingernails left bloody trails on his arms. I only hesitated a moment, then ran in, pushed Grace's head out of the way, and hit him full on the jaw. He let go of Grace and staggered back. I recognized him then. Mr. Hess, from up the block. What the hell was he doing here? He was a *cop*, for God's sake.

I should have moved in and finished him off while he was still dazed, but the moment of recognition had caused me to hesitate yet again. Good ol' Pistol-Packin' Pete, always quick on the draw. That hesitation probably cost me everything—I was hit hard from behind. If I'd been on concrete I'd have come away with at least a fractured skull. As it was, I got the wind knocked out of me as I pitched forward onto the grass with two of them on top of me. They turned me over and held me down. I didn't struggle; it would have been stupid. One of them bent over and punched me in the jaw. I didn't go out, but bright blue-white

sheeted across my vision. One of them kicked me in the crotch. Nauseating fire spread in waves. I'd been hit there before, but not like that, never full out like that. All I remember from then on is fists blurring into one another, over and over again until I couldn't feel them anymore.

I woke up in a ditch. Sunlight lanced my eyes. My mouth was a puffy mass somebody had taken an electric sander to. A dull, heavy ache in my groin. Ribs seemed bruised but not broken. Beside me was an upside-down wheelbarrow. I recognized it; it was from our garage. They must have wheeled me out here and dumped me. Maybe they'd left me for dead. I think they came close.

I found I could move well enough to get out of the ditch, albeit painfully. I counted my blessings and dragged myself to the side of the road and lay there, eyes closed. I was tired, so tired. . . .

When I opened my eyes again the sun had just set. I got up—I won't say what it felt like. The ground kept slanting and I saw double. That went away soon but my vision was still blurry and my head rang.

Looking around, I realized I was less than two hundred yards from my house. My feet began moving automatically; I stood before the front door before I realized what I was doing. I looked down. Snoopy was still there. Two windows were shattered. The television rested in the glass. It took two hands and all my strength to press down the latch and open the door. I found Grace inside.

Next day: in the kitchen I stuffed the last of what food I could take into the green, magnesium-framed backpack my parents had given me one Christmas. I closed the flaps, secured the cords with tight knots, and put my arms through the shoulder straps. I fastened the waistband and

walked into the living room, looking around grimly once more before going out the front door for the last time in my life. A cloud of flies buzzed away when I stepped over Snoopy. I walked down the driveway and onto the first of many long roads I would take from then on.

I stopped at the canal a half-mile away. The water was crystal clear. The weeds, or whatever the hell you call them, swayed languidly on the bottom. I set my pack down and sat on the edge of the bridge, looking into the water for a long time.

That canal used to be filthy. Neighborhood kids swam in it; I never understood how they could stand it. The water had been brown, the edges of the bank lined with dark green scum. Now it was clear. No scum, no floating beer cans. No rusted shopping cart, pushed in by Jeff Simmons a year ago. I shook my head, not understanding, and shouldered my pack. I turned to go and stopped cold.

Something stood on the road ahead of me. It was the size of a mobile home. I'd never seen anything like it, not outside a theater or an H.P. Lovecraft story. Superficially it looked like a lion; at least, it had a lion's body. It was shaggy and the hair was darker and much coarser than a lion's, almost like a Brillo pad. It had a disturbingly human face. The features were almost caricatured: practically no lip, a large, wide, and vaguely Negroid nose, bushy eyebrows, and smoldering red eyes. The face was framed by a thick, brown mane. On its rear end, where a lion's tail should have been, was the tail of a scorpion. It was long and segmented, and poised with the contained power of a cobra's neck. It ended in a needle-like stinger a foot long. The tail waved back and forth in the air.

It was motionless and silent, regarding me with hot, red eyes.

(A year later I would be in a library, leafing through a

text on mythological animals, and I would stop when I came across a picture resembling this creature. I would remember the name underneath: *manticore*.)

It headed for me, slowly at first, but gradually gathering speed. There was nowhere to run, no way on earth to get away from this thing. It left the road, ran a short space on the grass by the canal bank, and jumped when it reached the bridge. It sailed over my head and landed on the other side of the canal. The force of its landing vibrated through the soles of my shoes. I almost wet my pants. The thing didn't even look at me as it hit; it just began running at terrific speed down the road. I watched until it disappeared in the distance down the long, straight road, and then for a long time watched the space where it had vanished.

Somehow the world had changed. Just looking at that space where this impossible thing had been a few minutes before, I knew that. There'd been a Change, and the world would never again be the same.

I never found my mother or my brother. I left behind me the house I'd grown up in, empty except for the stiffening corpse that had been Grace.