

A Kingdom by the Sea

by Gardner Dozois

Every day, Mason would stand with his hammer and kill cows. The place was big—a long, high-ceilinged room, one end open to daylight, the other end stretching back into the depths of the plant. It had white, featureless walls—painted concrete—that were swabbed down twice a day, once before lunch and once after work. The floor could be swabbed too—it was stone, and there was a faucet you could use to flood the floor with water. Then you used a stiff-bristled broom to swish the water around and get up the stains. That was known as Gling a floor in the Army. Mason had been in the Army. He called it Gling. So did the three or four other veterans who worked that shift, and they always got a laugh out of explaining to the college boys the plant hired as temporary help why the work they'd signed up to do was called that. The college boys never knew what Gling was until they'd been shown, and they never understood the joke either, or why it was called that. They were usually pretty dumb.

There was a drain in the floor to let all the water out after the place had been Gled. In spite of everything, though, the room would never scrub up quite clean; there'd always be some amount of blood left staining the walls and floor at the end of the day. About the best you could hope to do was grind it into the stone so it became unrecognizable. After a little of this, the white began to get dingy, dulling finally to a dirty, dishwater gray. Then they'd paint the room white again and start all over.

The cycle took a little longer than a year, and they were about halfway through it this time. The men who worked the shift didn't really give a shit whether the walls were white or not, but it was a company regulation. The regs insisted that the place be kept as clean as possible for health reasons, and also because that was supposed to make it a psychologically more attractive environment to function in. The workmen wouldn't have given a shit about their psychological environment either, even if they'd known what one was. It was inevitable that the place would get a little messy during a working day.

It was a slaughterhouse, although the company literature always referred to it as a meat-packing plant.

The man who did the actual killing was Mason: the focal point of the company, of all the meat lockers and trucks and canning sections and secretaries and stockholders; their lowest common denominator. It all started with him.

He would stand with his hammer at the open end of the room, right at the very beginning of the plant, and wait for the cows to come in from the train yard. He had a ten-pound sledgehammer, long and heavy, with serrated rubber around the handle to give him a better grip. He used it to hit the cows over the head. They would herd the cows in one at a time, into the chute, straight up to Mason, and Mason

would swing his hammer down and hit the cow between the eyes with tremendous force, driving the hammer completely through the bone and into the brain, killing the cow instantly in its tracks. There would be a gush of warm, sticky blood, and a spatter of purplish brain matter; the cow would go to its front knees, as if it were curtsying, then its hindquarters would collapse and drag the whole body over onto one side with a thunderous crash—all in an eyeblink. One moment the cow would be being prodded in terror into the chute that led to Mason, its flanks lathered, its muzzle flecked with foam, and then—almost too fast to watch, the lightning would strike, and it would be a twitching ruin on the stone floor, blood oozing sluggishly from the smashed head.

After the first cow of the day, Mason would be covered with globs and spatters of blood, and his arms would be drenched red past the elbows. It didn't bother him—it was a condition of his job, and he hardly noticed it. He took two showers a day, changed clothes before and after lunch; the company laundered his white working uniforms and smocks at no expense. He worked quickly and efficiently, and never needed more than one blow to kill. Once Mason had killed the cow, it was hoisted on a hook, had its throat cut, and was left for a few minutes to bleed dry. Then another man came up with a long, heavy knife and quartered it. Then the carcass was further sliced into various portions; each portion was impaled on a hook and carried away by a clanking overhead conveyor belt toward the meat lockers and packing processes that were the concerns of the rest of the plant.

The cows always seemed to know what was about to happen to them—they would begin to moan nervously and roll their eyes in apprehension as soon as they were herded from the stock car on the siding. After the first cow was slaughtered, their apprehension would change to terror. The smell of the blood would drive them mad. They would plunge and bellow and snort and buck; they would jerk mindlessly back and forth, trying to escape. Their eyes would roll up to show the whites, and they would spray foam, and their sides would begin to lather. At this point, Mason would work faster, trying to kill them all before any had a chance to sweat off fat. After a while, they would begin to scream. Then they would have to be prodded harshly toward Mason's hammer. At the end, after they had exhausted themselves, the last few cows would grow silent, shivering and moaning softly until Mason had a chance to get around to them, and then they would die easily, with little thrashing or convulsing. Often, just for something to do, Mason and the other workmen would sarcastically talk to the cows, make jokes about them, call them by pet names, tell them—after the fashion of a TV variety-skid doctor—that everything was going to be all right and that it would only hurt for a minute, tell them what dumb fucking bastards they were—"That's right, sweetheart. Come here, you big dumb bastard. Papa's got a surprise for you"—tell them that they'd known goddamn well what they were letting themselves in for when they'd enlisted. Sometimes they would bet on how hard Mason could hit a cow with his big hammer, how high into the air the brain matter would fly after the blow. Once Mason had won a buck from Kaplan by hitting a cow so hard that he had driven it to its knees. They were no more callous than ordinary men, but it was a basically dull, basically unpleasant job, and like all men with dull, unpleasant jobs, they needed something to spice it up, and to keep it far enough away. To Mason, it was just a job, no better or worse than any other. It was boring, but he'd never had a job that wasn't boring. And at least it paid well. He approached it with the same methodical uninterest he had brought to every other job he ever had. It was his job, it was what he did.

Every day, Mason would stand with his hammer and kill cows.

It is raining: a sooty, city rain that makes you dirty rather than wet. Mason is standing in the rain at the bus stop, waiting for the bus to come, as he does every day, as he has done every day for the past six years. He has his collar up against the wind, hands in pockets, no hat: his hair is damp, plastered to his forehead. He stands somewhat slouched, head slumped forward just the tiniest bit—he is tired, the muscles in his shoulders are knotted with strain, the back of his neck burns. He is puzzled by the excessive fatigue of his body; uneasy, he shifts his weight from foot to foot—standing here after a day spent on his feet is murder, it gets him in the thighs, the calves. He has forgotten his raincoat again. He is a big man, built thick through the chest and shoulders, huge arms, wide, thick-muscled wrists, heavy-featured, resigned face. He is showing the first traces of a future potbelly. His feet are beginning to splay. His personnel dossier (restricted) states that he is an unaggressive underachiever, energizing at low potential, anally oriented (plodding, painstaking, competent), highly compatible with his fellow workers, shirks decision-making but can be trusted with minor responsibility, functions best as part of a team, unlikely to cause trouble: a good worker. He often refers to himself as a slob, though he usually tempers it with laughter (as in: "Christ, don't ask a poor slob like me about stuff like that," or, "Shit, I'm only a dumb working slob"). He is beginning to slide into the downhill side of the middle thirties. He was born here, in an immigrant neighborhood, the only Protestant child in a sea of foreign Catholics—he had to walk two miles to Sunday school. He grew up in the gray factory city—sloughed through high school, the Army, drifted from job to job, town to town, dishwashing, waiting tables, working hardhat (jukeboxes, back-rooms, sawdust, sun, water from a tin pail), work four months, six, a year, take to the road, drift: back to his hometown again after eight years of this, to his old (pre-Army) job, full circle. This time when the restlessness comes, after a year, he gets all the way to the bus terminal (sitting in the station at three o'clock in the morning, colder than hell, the only other person in the huge, empty hall a drunk asleep on one of the benches) before he realizes that he has no place to go and nothing to do if he gets there. He does not leave. He stays: two years, three, four, six now, longer than he has ever stayed anywhere before. Six years, slipping up on him and past before he can realize it, suddenly gone (company picnics, Christmas, Christ—taxes again already?), time blurring into an oily gray knot, leaving only discarded calendars for fossils. He will never hit the road again; he is here to stay. His future has become his past without ever touching the present. He does not understand what has happened to him, but he is beginning to be afraid.

He gets on the bus for home.

In the cramped, sweaty interior of the bus, he admits for the first time that he may be getting old.

Mason's apartment was on the fringe of the heavily built-up district, in a row of dilapidated six-story brownstones. Not actually the slums, not like where the colored people lived (Mason doggedly said colored people, even when the boys at the plant talked of niggers), not like where the kids, the beatniks lived, but a low-rent district, yes. Laboring people, low salaries. The white poor had been hiding here since 1920, peering from behind thick faded drapes and cracked Venetian blinds. Some of them had never come out. The immigrants had disappeared into this neighborhood from the boats, were still here, were still immigrants after thirty years, but older and diminished, like a faded photograph. All the ones who had not pulled themselves up by their bootstraps to become crooked politicians or gangsters or dishonest lawyers—all forgotten: a gritty human residue. The mailboxes alternated names like Goldstein

and Kowalczyk and Ricciardi. It was a dark, hushed neighborhood, with few big stores, no movies, no real restaurants. A couple of bowling alleys. The closest civilization approached was a big concrete housing project for disabled war veterans a block or two away to the east, and a streamlined, chrome-plated, neon-flashing shopping center about half a mile to the west, on the edge of a major artery. City lights glowed to the north, high rises marched across the horizon south: H. G. Wells Martians, acres of windows flashing importantly.

Mason got off the bus. There was a puddle at the curb and he stepped in it. He felt water soak into his socks. The bus snapped its doors contemptuously shut behind him. It rumbled away, farting exhaust smoke into his face. Mason splashed toward his apartment, wrapped in rain mist, moisture beading on his lips and forehead. His shoes squelched. The wet air carried heavy cooking odors, spicy and foreign. Someone was banging garbage cans together somewhere. Cars hooted mournfully at him as they rushed by.

Mason ignored this, fumbling automatically for his keys as he came up to the outside door. He was trying to think up an excuse to stay home tonight. This was Tuesday, his bowling night; Kaplan would be calling in a while, and he'd have to tell him something. He just didn't feel like bowling; they could shuffle the league around, put Johnson in instead. He clashed the key against the lock. Go in, damn it. This would be the first bowling night he'd missed in six years, even last fall when he'd had the flu—Christ, how Emma had bitched about that, think he'd risen from his deathbed or something. She always used to worry about him too much. Still, after six years. Well, fuck it, he didn't feel like it, was all; it wasn't going to hurt anything; it was only a practice session anyway. He could afford to miss a week. And what the fuck was wrong with the lock? Mason sneered in the dark. How many years is it going to take to learn to use the right key for the front door, asshole? He found the proper key (the one with the deep groove) with his thumb and clicked the door open.

Course, he'd have to tell Kaplan something. Kaplan'd want to know why he couldn't come, try to argue him into it. (Up the stairwell, around and around.) Give him some line of shit. At least he didn't have to make up excuses for Emma anymore—she would've wanted to know why he wasn't going, if he felt good, if he was sick, and she'd be trying to feel his forehead for fever. A relief to have her off his back. She'd been gone almost a month. Now all he had to worry about was what to tell fucking Kaplan. (Old wood creaked under his shoes. It was stuffy. Muffled voices leaked from under doorways as he passed, pencil beams of light escaped from cracks. Dust motes danced in the fugitive light.)

Fuck Kaplan anyway; he didn't have to justify his actions to Kaplan. Just tell him he didn't want to, and the hell with him. The hell with all of them.

Into the apartment: one large room, partially divided by a low counter into kitchen and living room—sink, refrigerator, stove and small table in the kitchen; easy chair, coffee table and portable television in the living room; a small bedroom off the living room, and a bath. Shit, he'd have to tell Kaplan something after all, wouldn't he? Don't want the guys to start talking. And it is weird to miss a bowling night. Mason took off his wet clothes, threw them onto the easy chair for Emma to hang up and dry. Then he remembered that Emma was gone. Finally left him—he couldn't blame her much, he supposed. He was a bum, it was true. He supposed. Mason shrugged uneasily. Fredricks promoted over him,

suppose he didn't have much of a future—he didn't worry about it, but women were different, they fretted about stuff like that, it was important to them. And he wouldn't marry her. Too much of a drifter. But family stuff, that was important to a woman. Christ, he couldn't really blame her, the dumb cunt—she just couldn't understand. He folded his clothes himself, clumsily, getting the seam wrong in the pants. You miss people for the little things. Not that he really cared whether his pants were folded right or not. And, God knows, she probably missed him more than he did her; he was more independent—sure, he didn't really need anybody but him. Dumb cunt. Maybe he'd tell Kaplan that he had a woman up here, that he was getting laid tonight. Kaplan was dumb enough to believe it. He paused, hanger in hand, surprised at his sudden vehemence. Kaplan was no dumber than anybody else. And why couldn't he be getting laid up here? Was that so hard to believe, so surprising? Shit, was he supposed to curl up and fucking die because his girl'd left, even a longtime (three years) girl? Was that what Kaplan and the rest of those bastards were thinking? Well, then, call Kaplan and tell him you're sorry you can't make it, and then describe what a nice juicy piece of ass you're getting, make the fucker eat his liver with envy because he's stuck in that damn dingy bowling alley with those damn dingy people while you're out getting laid. Maybe it'll even get back to Emma. Kaplan will believe it. He's dumb enough.

Mason took a frozen pizza out of the refrigerator and put it into the oven for his supper. He rarely ate meat, didn't care for it. None of his family had. His father had worked in a meat-packing plant too—the same one, in fact. He had been one of the men who cut up the cow s carcass with knives and cleavers. "Down to the plant," he would say, pushing himself up from the table and away from his third cup of breakfast coffee, while Mason was standing near the open door of the gas oven for warmth and being wrapped in his furry hat for school, "I've got to go down to the plant."

Mason always referred to the place as a meat-packing plant. (Henderson had called it a slaughterhouse, but Henderson had quit.)

The package said fifteen minutes at 450, preheated. Maybe he shouldn't tell Kaplan that he was getting laid, after all. Then everybody'd be asking him questions tomorrow, wanting to know who the girl was, how she was in the sack, where he'd picked her up, and he'd have to spend the rest of the day making up imaginary details of the affair. And suppose they found out somehow that he hadn't had a woman up here after all? Then they'd think he was crazy, making up something like that. Lying. Maybe he should just tell Kaplan that he was coming down with the flu. Or a bad cold. He was tired tonight. Maybe he actually was getting the flu. From overwork, or standing around in the rain too long, or something. Maybe that was why he was so fucking tired—Christ, exhausted—why he didn't feel like going bowling. Sure, that was it. And he didn't have to be ashamed of being sick: he had a fine work record, only a couple of days missed in six years. Everybody gets sick sometime, that's the way it is. They'd understand.

Fuck them if they didn't.

Mason burned the pizza slightly. By the time he pulled it out with a washcloth, singeing himself in the process, it had begun to turn black around the edges, the crust and cheese charring. But not too bad. Salvageable. He cut it into slices with a roller. As usual, he forgot to eat it quickly enough, and the last pieces had cooled off when he got around to them—tasting now like cardboard with unheated spaghetti

sauce on it. He ate them anyway. He had some beer with the pizza, and some coffee later. After eating, he still felt vaguely unsatisfied, so he got a package of Fig Newtons from the cupboard and ate them too. Then he sat at the table and smoked a cigarette. No noise—nothing moved. Stasis.

The phone rang: Kaplan.

Mason jumped, then took a long, unsteady drag on his cigarette. He was trembling. He stared at his hand, amazed. Nerves. Christ. He was working too hard, worrying too much. Fuck Kaplan and all the rest of them. Don't tell them anything. You don't have to. Let them stew. The phone screamed again and again: three times, four times, six. Don't answer it, Mason told himself, whipping up bravura indignation to cover the sudden inexplicable panic, the fear, the horror. You don't have to account to them. Ring (scream), ring (scream), ring (scream). The flesh crawled on his stomach, short hair bristled along his back, his arms. Stop, dammit, stop, stop. "Shut up!" he shouted, raggedly, half rising from the chair.

The phone stopped ringing.

The silence was incredibly evil.

Mason lit another cigarette, dropping the first match, lighting another, finally getting it going. He concentrated on smoking, the taste of the smoke and the feel of it in his lungs, puffing with staccato intensity (Ithinklcanlthinklcanlthinklcanlthinklcan). Something was very wrong, but he suppressed that thought, pushed it deeper. A tangible blackness: avoid it. He was just tired, that's all. He'd had a really crummy, really rough day, and he was tired, and it was making him jumpy. Work seemed to get harder and harder as the weeks went by. Maybe he was getting old, losing his endurance. He supposed it had to happen sooner or later. But shit, he was only thirty-eight. He wouldn't have believed it, or even considered it, before today.

"You're getting old," Mason said, aloud. The words echoed in the bare room.

He laughed uneasily, nervously, pretending scorn. The laughter seemed to be sucked into the walls. Silence blotted up the sound of his breathing.

He listened to the silence for a while, then called himself a stupid asshole for thinking about all this asshole crap, and decided that he'd better go to bed. He levered himself to his feet. Ordinarily he would watch television for a couple of hours before turning in, but tonight he was fucked up too exhausted and afraid. Afraid? What did he have to be scared of? It was all asshole crap. Mason stacked the dirty dishes in the sink and went into the bedroom, carefully switching off all the other lights behind him. Darkness followed him to the bedroom door.

Mason undressed, put his clothes away, sat on the bed. There was a dingy transient hotel on this side of the building, and its red neon sign blinked directly into Mason's bedroom window, impossible to block out with any thickness of curtain. Tonight he was too tired to be bothered by it. It had been a bad day. He would not think about it, any of it. He only wanted to sleep. Tomorrow would be different, tomorrow would be better. It would have to be. He switched off the light and lay back on top of the sheet. Neon shadows beat around the room, flooding it rhythmically with dull red.

Fretfully, he began to fall asleep in the hot room, in the dark.

Almost to sleep, he heard a woman weeping in his mind. The weeping scratched at the inside of his head, sliding randomly in and out of his brain. Not really the sound of weeping, not actually an audible sound at all, but rather a feeling, an essence of weeping, of unalterable sadness. Without waking, he groped for the elusive feelings, swimming down deeper and deeper into his mind—like diving below a storm-lashed ocean at night, swimming down to where it is always calm and no light goes, down where the deep currents run. He was only partially conscious, on the borderline of dream, where anything seems rational and miracles are commonplace. It seemed only reasonable, only fair, that, in his desolation, he should find a woman in his head. He did not question this, he did not find it peculiar. He moved toward her, propelled and guided only by the urge to be with her, an ivory feather drifting and twisting through vast empty darkness, floating on the wind, carried by the currents that wind through the regions under the earth, the tides that march in Night. He found her, wrapped in the underbelly of himself like a pearl: a tiny exquisite irritant. Encased in amber, he could not see, but he knew somehow that she was lovely, as perfect and delicate as the bud of a flower opening to the sun, as a baby's hand. He comforted her as he had comforted Emma on nights when she'd wake up crying: reaching through darkness toward sadness, wrapping it in warmth, leaching the fear away with presence, spreading the pain around between them to thin it down. She seemed startled to find that she was not alone at the heart of nothing, but she accepted him gratefully, and blended him into herself, blended them together, one stream into another, a mingling of secret waters in the dark places in the middle of the world, in Night, where shadows live. She was the thing itself, and not its wrapping, as Emma had been. She was ultimate grace—moving like silk around him, moving like warm rain within him. He merged with her forever.

And found himself staring at the ceiling.

Gritty light poured in through the window. The hotel sign had been turned off. It was morning.

He grinned at the ceiling, a harsh grin with no mirth in it: skin pulling back and back from the teeth, stretching to death's-head tautness.

It had been a dream.

He grinned his corpse grin at the morning.

Hello, morning. Hello, you goddamned son of a bitch.

He got up. He ached. He was lightheaded with fatigue: his head buzzed, his eyelids were lead. It felt like he had not slept at all.

He went to work.

It is still raining. Dawn is hidden behind bloated spider clouds. Here, in the factory town, miles of steel mills, coke refineries, leather-tanning plants, chemical scum running in the gutters, it will rain most of the year: airborne dirt forming the nucleus for moisture, an irritant to induce condensation, producing a

listless rain that fizzles down endlessly, a deity pissing. The bus creeps through the mists and drizzle like a slug, parking lights haloed by dampness. Raindrops inch down the windowpane, shimmering and flattening when the window buzzes, leaving long wet tracks behind them. Inside, the glass has been fogged by breath and body heat, making it hard to see anything clearly. The world outside has merged into an infinity of lumpy gray shapes, dinosaur shadows, here and there lights winking and diffusing wetly—it is a moving collage done in charcoal and watery neon. The men riding the bus do not notice it—already they seem tired. It is seven A.M. They sit and stare dully at the tips of their shoes, or the back of the seat in front of them. A few read newspapers. One or two talk. Some sleep. A younger man laughs—he stops almost immediately. If the windows were clear, the rain collage of light and shadow would be replaced by row after row of drab, crumbling buildings, gas stations decked with tiny plastic flags, used car lots with floodlights, hamburger stands, empty schoolyards with dead trees poking up through the pavement, cyclone-fenced recreation areas that children never use. No one ever bothers to look at that either. They know what it looks like.

Usually Mason prefers the aisle seat, but this morning, prompted by some obscure instinct, he sits by the window. He is trying to understand his compulsion to watch the blurred landscape, trying to verbalize what it makes him think of, how it makes him feel. He cannot. Sad—that's the closest he can come. Why should it make him sad? Sad, and there is something else, something he gropes for but it keeps slipping away. An echo of reawakening fear, in reaction to his groping. It felt like, it was kind of like— Uneasily, he presses his palm to the window, attempts to rub away some of the moisture obscuring the glass. (This makes him feel funny too. Why? He flounders, grasping at nothing—it is gone.) A patch of relatively clear glass appears as he rubs, a swath of sharper focus surrounded by the oozing myopia of the collage. Mason stares out at the world, through his patch of glass. Again he tries to grasp something—again he fails. It all looks wrong somehow. It makes him vaguely, murkily angry. Buildings crawl by outside. He shivers, touched by a septic breath of entropy. Maybe it's— If it was like— He cannot. Why is it wrong? What's wrong with it? That's the way it's always looked, hasn't it? Nothing's changed. What could you change it to? What the fuck is it supposed to be like? No words.

Raindrops pile up on the window again and wash away the world.

At work, the dream continued to bother Mason throughout the day. He found that he couldn't put it out of his mind for long—somehow his thoughts always came back to it, circling constantly like the flies that buzzed around the pools of blood on the concrete floor.

Mason became annoyed, and slightly uneasy. It wasn't healthy to be so wrapped up in a fucking dream. It was sick, and you had to be sick in the head to fool around with it. It was sick—it made him angry to think about the slime and sickness of it, and faintly nauseous. He didn't have that slime in his head. No, the dream had bothered him because Emma was gone. It was rough on a guy to be alone again after living with somebody for so long. He should go out and actually pick up some broad instead of just thinking about it—should've had one last night so he wouldn't've had to worry about what to tell Kaplan. Sweep the cobwebs out of his brain. Sitting around that damn house night after night, never doing anything—no wonder he felt funny, had crazy dreams.

At lunch—sitting at the concrete, formica-topped table, next to the finger-smudged plastic faces of the

coffee machine, the soft-drink machine, the sandwich machine, the ice-cream machine (OUT OF ORDER) and the candy-bar machine—he toyed with the idea of telling Russo about the dream, playing it lightly, maybe getting a few laughs out of it. He found the idea amazingly unpleasant. He was reluctant to tell anybody anything about the dream. To his amazement, he found himself getting angry at the thought. Russo was a son of a bitch anyway. They were all son of a bitches. He snapped at Russo when the Italian tried to draw him into a discussion he and Kaplan were having about cars. Russo looked hurt.

Mason mumbled something about a hangover in apology and gulped half of his steaming coffee without feeling it. His tuna-salad sandwich tasted like sawdust, went down like lead. A desolate, inexplicable sense of loss had been growing in him throughout the morning as he became more preoccupied with the dream. He couldn't have been this affected by a dream, that was crazy—there had to be more to it than that, it had to be more than just a dream, and he wasn't crazy. So it couldn't have been a dream completely, somehow. He missed the girl in the dream. How could he miss someone who didn't exist? That was crazy. But he did miss her. So maybe the girl wasn't completely a dream somehow, or he wouldn't miss her like that, would he? That was crazy too. He turned his face away and played distractedly with crumbs on the formica tabletop. No more of this: it was slimy, and it made his head hurt to think about it. He wouldn't think about it anymore.

That afternoon he took to listening while he worked. He caught himself at it several times. He was listening intently, for nothing. No, not for nothing. He was listening for her.

On the bus, going home, Mason is restless, as if he were being carried into some strange danger, some foreign battlefield. His eyes gleam slightly in the dark. The glare of oncoming car headlights sweeps over him in oscillating waves. Straps swing back and forth like scythes. All around him, the other passengers sit silently, not moving, careful not to touch or jostle the man next to them. Each in his own space: semivisible lumps of flesh and shadow. Their heads bob slightly with the motion of the bus, like dashboard ornaments.

When Mason got home, he had frozen pizza for supper again, though he'd been intending to have an omelet. He also ate some more Fig Newtons. It was as though he were half-consciously trying to reproduce the previous night, superstitiously repeating all the details of the evening in hopes of producing the same result. So he ate pizza, shaking his head at his own stupidity and swearing bitterly under his breath. He ate it nevertheless. And as he ate, he listened for the scratching—hating himself for listening, but listening—only partially believing that such a thing as the scratching even existed, or ever had, but listening. Half of him was afraid that it would not come; half was afraid that it would. But nothing happened.

When the scratching at his mind did come again it was hours later, while he was watching an old movie on The Late Show, when he had almost managed to forget. He stiffened, feeling a surge of terror (and feeling something else that he was unable to verbalize), even the half of his mind that had wanted it to come screaming in horror of the unknown now that the impossible had actually happened. He fought down terror, breathing harshly. This couldn't be happening. Maybe he was crazy. A flicker of abysmal fear. Sweat started on his forehead, armpits, crotch.

Again, the scratching: bright feelings sliding tentatively into his head, failing to catch and slipping out, coming back again—like focusing a split-image lens. He sat back in the easy chair; old springs groaned, the cracked leather felt hot and sticky against his T-shirted back. He squeezed the empty beer can, crumpling it. Automatically he put the empty into the six-pack at the foot of the chair. He picked up another can and sat with it unopened in his lap. The sliding in his head made him dizzy and faintly nauseous—he squirmed uneasily, trying to find a position that would lessen the vertigo. The cushion made a wet sucking noise as he pulled free of it: the dent made by his back in the leather began to work itself back to level, creaking and groaning, only to re-form when he let his weight down again. Jarred by motion, the ashtray he'd been balancing on his knee slipped and crashed face-down to the rug in an explosion of ashes.

Mason leaned forward to pick it up, stopped, his attention suddenly caught and fixed by the television again. He blinked at the grainy, flickering black-and-white images; again he felt something that he didn't know how to say, so strongly that the sliding in his head was momentarily ignored.

It was one of those movies they'd made in the late twenties or early thirties, where everything was perfect. The hero was handsome, suave, impeccably dressed; he had courage, he had style, he could fit in anywhere, he could solve any problem—he never faltered, he never stepped on his own dick. He was Quality. The heroine matched him: she was sophisticated, refined, self possessed—a slender, aristocratic sculpture in ice and moonlight. She was unspeakably lovely. They were both class people, posh people: the ones who ran things, the ones who mattered. They had been born into the right families on the right side of town, gone to the right schools, known the right people—got the right jobs. Unquestioned superiority showed in the way they moved, walked, planted their feet, turned their heads. It was all cool, planned and poised, like a dancer. They knew that they were the best people, knew it without having to think about it or even knowing that they knew it. It was a thing assumed at birth. It was a thing you couldn't fake, couldn't put on: something would trip you up every time, and the other ones on top would look through you and see what you really were and draw a circle that excluded you (never actually saying anything, which would make it worse), and you would be left standing there with your dick hanging out, flushed, embarrassed, sweating—too coarse, doughy, unfinished—twisting your hat nervously between knobby, clumsy hands. But that would never happen to the man and woman on television.

Mason found himself trembling with rage, blind with it, shaking as if he were going to tear himself to pieces, falling apart and not knowing why, amazed and awed by his own fury, his guts knotting, his big horny hands clenching and unclenching at the injustice, the monstrosity, the slime, the millions of lives pissed away, turning his anger over and over, churning it like a murky liquid, pounding it into froth.

They never paid any dues. They never sweated, or defecated. Their bodies never smelled bad, never got dirty. They never had crud under their fingernails, blisters on their palms, blood staining their arms to the elbows. The man never had five o'clock shadow, the woman never wore her hair in rollers like Emma, or had sour breath, or told her lover to take out the garbage. They never farted. Or belched. They did not have sex—they made love, and it was all transcendental pleasure: no indignity of thrashing bodies, clumsily intertwining limbs, fumbling and straining, incoherent words and coarse animal sounds;

and afterward he would be breathing easily, her hair would be in place, there would be no body fluids, the sheets would not be rumpled or stained. And the world they moved through all their lives reflected their own perfection: it was beautiful, tidy, ordered. Mansions. Vast lawns. Neatly painted, tree-lined streets. And style brought luck too. The gods smiled on them, a benign fate rolled dice that always came up sevens, sevens, sevens. They skated through life without having to move their feet, smiling, untouched, gorgeous, like a parade float: towed by others. They broke the bank of every game in town. Everything went their way. Coincidence became a contortionist to finish in their favor.

Because they had class. Because they were on top.

Mason sat up, gasping. He had left the ashtray on the floor. Numbly, he set the beer can down beside it. His hand was trembling. He felt like he had been kicked in the stomach. They had quality. He had nothing. He could see everything now: everything he'd been running from all his life. He was shit. No way to deny it. He lived in a shithouse, he worked in a shithouse. His whole world was a vast shithouse: dirty black liquid bubbling prehistorically; rich feisty odors of decay. He was surrounded by shit, he wallowed in it. He was shit. Already, he realized, it made no difference that he had ever lived. You're nothing, he told himself, you're shit. You ain't never been anything but shit. You ain't never going to be anything but shit. Your whole life's been nothing but shit.

No.

He shook his head blindly.

No.

There was only one thing in his life that was out of the ordinary, and he snatched at it with the desperation of a drowning man.

The sliding, the scratching in his head that was even now becoming more insistent, that became almost overwhelming as he shifted his attention back to it. That was strange, wasn't it? That was unusual. And it had come to him, hadn't it? There were millions and millions of other people in the world, but it had picked him—it had come to him. And it was real, it wasn't a dream. He wasn't crazy, and if it was just a dream he'd have to be. So it was real, and the girl was real. He had somebody else inside his head. And if that was real, then that was something that had never happened to anybody else in the world before—something he'd never even heard about before other than some dumb sci-fi movies on TV. It was something that even they had never done, something that made him different from every man in the world, from every man who had ever lived. It was his own personal miracle.

Trembling, he leaned back in the chair. Leather creaked. This was his miracle, he told himself, it was good, it wouldn't harm him. The bright feelings themselves were good: somehow they reminded him of childhood, of quiet gardens, of dust motes spinning in sunlight, of the sea. He struggled for calm. Blood pounded at his throat, throbbed in his wrists. He felt (the memory flooding, incredibly vivid—ebbing) the way he had the first time Sally Rogers had let him spread her meaty, fragrant thighs behind the hill during noon class in the seventh grade: light-headed, scared, shaking with tension, madly impatient. He

swallowed, hesitating, gathering courage. The television babbled unnoticed in the background. He closed his eyes and let go.

Colors swallowed him in a rush.

She waited for him there, a there that became here as his knowledge of his physical environment faded, as his body ceased to exist, the soothing blackness broken only by random afterimages and pastel colors scurrying in abstract, friendly patterns.

She was here—simultaneously here and very far away. Like him, she both filled all of here and took up no space at all—both statements were equally absurd. Her presence was nothing but that: no pictures, no images, nothing to see, hear, touch, or smell. That had all been left in the world of duration. Yet somehow she radiated an ultimate and catholic femininity, an archetypal essence, a quicksilver mixture of demanding fire and an ancient racial purpose as unshakable and patient as ice—and he knew it was the (girl? woman? angel?) of his previous "dream," and no other.

There were no words here, but they were no longer needed. He understood her by empathy, by the clear perception of emotion that lies behind all language. There was fear in her mind—a rasp like hot iron—and a feeling of hurtling endlessly and forlornly through vast, empty desolation, surrounded by cold and by echoing, roaring darkness. She seemed closer tonight, though still unimaginably far away. He felt that she was still moving slowly toward him, even as they met and mingled here, that her body was careening toward him down the path blazed by her mind.

She was zeroing in on him: this was the theory his mind immediately formed, instantly and gratefully accepted. He had thought of her from the beginning as an angel—now he conceived of her as a lost angel wandering alone through Night for ages, suddenly touched by his presence, drawn like an iron filing to a magnet, pulled from exile into the realms of light and life.

He soothed her. He would wait for her, he would be a beacon—he would not leave her alone in the dark, he would love her and pull her to the light. She quieted, and they moved together, through each other, became one.

He sank deeper into Night.

He floated in himself: a Mobius band.

In the morning, he woke in the chair. A test pattern hummed on the television. The inside of his pants was sticky with semen.

Habit drives him to work. Automatically he gets up, takes a shower, puts on fresh clothes. He eats no breakfast; he isn't hungry—he wonders, idly, if he will ever be hungry again. He lets his feet take him to the bus stop, and waits without fretting about whether or not he'd remembered to lock the door. He waits without thinking about anything. The sun is out; birds are humming in the concrete eaves of the housing project. Mason hums too, quite unconsciously. He boards the bus for work, lets the driver punch his trip ticket, and docilely allows the incoming crowd to push and jostle him to an uncomfortable seat in the

back, over the wheel. There, sitting with his knees doubled up in the tiny seat and peering around with an unusual curiosity, the other passengers give him the first bad feeling of the day. They sit in orderly rows, not talking, not moving, not even looking out the window. They look like department store dummies on their way to a new display. They are not there at all.

Mason decided to call her Lilith—provisionally at least, until the day, soon now, when he could learn her real name from her own lips. The name drifted up from his subconscious, from the residue of long, forgotten years of Sunday school—not so much because of the associations of primeval love carried by the name (although those rang on a deeper level), but because as a restless child suffering through afternoons of watered-down theology he'd always imagined Lilith to be rather pretty and sympathetic, the kind who might wink conspiratorially at him behind the back of the pious, pompous instructor: a girl with a hint of illicit humor and style, unlike the dumpy, clay-faced ladies in the Bible illustrations. So she became Lilith. He wondered if he would be able to explain the name to her when they met, make her laugh with it.

He fussed with these and other details throughout the day, turning it over in his mind—he wasn't crazy, the dream was real, Lilith was real, she was his—the same thoughts cycling constantly. He was happy in his preoccupation, self-sufficient, only partly aware of the external reality through which he moved. He contributed only monosyllabic grunts to the usual locker-room conversations about sports and politics and pussy, he answered questions with careless shrugs or nods, he completely ignored the daily gauntlet of hellos, good-byes, how're they hangings and other ritual sounds. During lunch he ate very little and let Russo finish his sandwich without any of the traditional exclamations of amazement about the wop's insatiable appetite—which made Russo so uneasy that he was unable to finish it after all. Kaplan came in and told Russo and Mason in hushed, delighted tones that old Hamilton had finally caught the clap from that hooker he'd been running around with down at Saluzzio's. Russo exploded into the expected laughter, said no shit? in a shrill voice, pounded the table, grinned in jovial disgust at the thought of that old bastard Hamilton with VD. Mason grunted.

Kaplan and Russo exchanged a look over his head—their eyes were filled with the beginnings of a reasonless, instinctive fear: the kind of unease that pistons in a car's engine might feel when one of the cylinders begins to misfire. Mason ignored them; they did not exist; they never had. He sat at the stone table and chain-smoked with detached ferocity, smoking barely half of each cigarette before using it to light another and dumping the butt into his untouched coffee to sizzle and drown. The Dixie cup was filled with floating, jostling cigarette butts, growing fat and mud-colored as they sucked up coffee: a nicotine logjam. Kaplan and Russo mumbled excuses and moved away to find another table; today Mason made them feel uneasy and insignificant.

Mason did not notice that they had gone. He sat and smoked until the whistle blew, and then got up and walked calmly in to work. He worked mechanically, raising the hammer and bringing it down, his hands knowing their job and doing it without any need of volition, the big muscles in his arms and shoulders straining, his legs braced wide apart, sweat gleaming—an automaton, a clockwork golem. His face was puckered and preoccupied, as if he were constipated. He did not see the blood; his brain danced with thoughts of Lilith.

Twice that day he thought he felt her brush at his mind, the faintest of gossamer touches, but there were too many distractions—he couldn't concentrate enough. As he washed up after work, he felt the touch again: a hesitant, delicate, exploratory touch, as if someone were groping through his mind with feather fingers.

Mason trembled, and his eyes glazed. He stood, head tilted, unaware of the stream of hot water against his back and hips, the wet stone underfoot, the beaded metal walls; the soap drying on his arms and chest, the smell of heat and wet flesh, the sharp hiss of the shower jets and the gargle of water down the drain; the slap of thongs and rasp of towels, the jumbled crisscross of wet footprints left by men moving from the showers to the lockers, the stuffiness of steam and sweat disturbed by an eddy of colder air as someone opened the outer door; the rows of metal lockers beyond the showers with *Playboy* gatefolds and Tijuana pornography and family snapshots pinned to the doors, the discolored wooden benches and the boxes of foot powder, the green and white walls of the dressing room covered with company bulletins and joke-shop signs ... Everything that went into the making of that moment, of his reality, of his life. It all faded, became a ghost, the shadow of a shadow, disappeared completely, did not exist. There was only here, and Lilith here. And their touch, infinitely closer than joined fingers. Then the world dragged him away.

He opened his eyes. Reality came back: in a babble, in a rush, mildly nauseating. He ignored it, dazed and incandescent with the promise of the night ahead. The world steadied. He stepped back into the shower stream to wash the soap from his body. He had an enormous erection. Clumsily, he tried to hide it with a towel.

Mason takes a taxi home from work. The first time.

That night he is transformed, ripped out of himself, turned inside out. It is pleasure so intense that, like pain, it cannot be remembered clearly afterward—only recollected as a severe shock: sensation translated into a burst of fierce white light. It is pleasure completely beyond his conception—his most extreme fantasy not only fulfilled but intensified. And yet for all the intensity of feeling, it is a gentle thing, a knowing, a complete sharing of emotion, a transcendental empathy. And afterward there is only peace: a silence deeper than death, but not alone. I love you, he tells her, really believing it for the first time with anyone, realizing that words have no meaning, but knowing that she will understand, I love you.

When he woke up in the morning, he knew that this would be the day.

Today she would come. The certainty pulsed through him, he breathed it like air, it beat in his blood. The knowledge of it oozed in through every pore, only to meet the same knowledge seeping out. It was something felt on a cellular level, a biological assurance. Today they would be together.

He looked at the ceiling. It was pocked with water stains; a deep crack zigzagged across flaking plaster. It was beautiful. He watched it for a half hour without moving, without being aware of the passage of time; without being aware that what he was watching was a "ceiling." Then, sluggishly, something came together in his head, and he recognized it. Today he didn't begrudge it, as he had Wednesday morning. It

was a transient condition. It was of no more intrinsic importance than the wall of a butterfly's cocoon after metamorphosis.

Mason rolled to his feet. Fatigue and age had vanished. He was filled with bristly, crackling vitality, every organ, every cell seeming to work at maximum efficiency: so healthy that "healthy" became an inadequate word. This was a newer, higher state.

Mason accepted it calmly, without question. His movements were leisurely and deliberate, almost slow motion, as if he were swimming through syrup. He knew where he was going, that they would find each other today—that was predestined. He was in no hurry. The same inevitability colored his thoughts. There was no need to do much thinking now, it was all arranged. His mind was nearly blank, only deep currents running. Her nearness dazzled him. Walking, he dreamed of her, of time past, of time to come.

He drifted to the window, lazily admiring the prism sprays sunlight made around the edges of the glass. The streets outside were empty, hushed as a cathedral. Not even birds to break the holy silence. Papers dervished down the center of the road. The sun was just floating clear of the brick horizon: a bloated red ball, still hazed with nearness to the earth.

He stared at the sun.

Mason became aware of his surroundings again while he was dressing. Dimly, he realized that he was buckling his belt, slipping his feet into shoes, tying knots in the shoelaces. His attention was caught by a crisscross pattern of light and shadow on the kitchen wall.

He was standing in front of the slaughterhouse. Mason blinked at the building's filigreed iron gates. Somewhere in there, he must have caught the bus and ridden it to work. He couldn't remember. He didn't care.

Walking down a corridor. A machine booms far away.

He was in an elevator. People. Going down.

Time clock.

A door. The dressing room, deep in the plant. Mason hesitated. Should he go to work today? With Lilith so close? It didn't matter—when she came, Lilith would find him no matter where he was. It was easier meanwhile not to fight his body's trained responses; much easier to just go along with them, let them carry him where they would, do what they wanted him to do.

Buttoning his work uniform. He didn't remember opening the door, or the locker. He told himself that he'd have to watch that.

A montage of surprised faces, bobbing like balloons, very far away. Mason brushed by without looking at them. Their lips moved as he passed, but he could not hear their words.

Don't look back. They can turn you to salt, all the hollow men.

The hammer was solid and heavy in his hand. Its familiar weight helped to clear his head, to anchor him to the world. Mason moved forward more quickly. A surviving fragment of his former personality was eager to get to work, to demonstrate his regained strength and vigor for the other men. He felt the emotion through an ocean of glass, like ghost pain in an amputated limb. He tolerated it, humored it; after today, it wouldn't matter.

Mason walked to the far end of the long white room. Lilith seemed very close now—her nearness made his head buzz intolerably. He stumbled ahead, walking jerkily, as if he were forcing his way against waves of pressure. She would arrive any second. He could not imagine how she would come, or from where. He could not imagine what would happen to him, to them. He tried to visualize her arrival, but his mind, having only Disney, sci-fi, and religion to work with, could only picture an ethereally beautiful woman made of stained glass descending from the sky in a column of golden light while organ music roared: the light shining all around her and from her, spraying into unknown colors as it passed through her clear body. He wasn't sure if she would have wings.

Raw daylight through the open end of the room. The nervous lowing of cattle. Smell of dung and sweat, undertang of old, lingering blood. The other men, looking curiously at him. They had masks for faces, viper eyes. Viper eyes followed him through the room. Hooves scuffed gravel outside.

Heavy-lidded, trembling, he took his place.

They herded in the first cow of the day, straight up to Mason. He lifted the hammer.

The cow approached calmly. Tranquilly she walked before the prods, her head high. She stared intently at Mason. Her eyes were wide and deep—serene, beautiful, and trusting.

Lilith, he named her, and then the hammer crashed home between her eyes.

The End

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