

FIVE SHORT STORIES BY JOE R. LANSDALE

The Job
The Pit
By Bizarre Hands
Tight Little Stitches in a Dead Man's Back
Hell Through a Windshield

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THE JOB
By Joe R. Lansdale

Bower pulled the sun visor down and looked in the mirror there and said, "You know, hadn't been for the travel, I'd have done all right. I could even shake my ass like him. I tell you, it drove the women wild. You should have seen 'em." "Don't shake it for me," Kelly said. "I don't want to see it. Things I got to do are tough enough without having to see that."

Bower pushed the visor back. The light turned green. Kelly put the gas to the car and they went up and over a hill and turned right on Melroy.

"Guess maybe you do look like him," Kelly said. "During his fatter days, when he was on the drugs and the peanut butter."

"Yeah, but these pocks on my cheeks messes it up some. When I was on stage I had makeup on 'em. I looked okay then."

They stopped at a stop sign and Kelly got out a cigarette and pushed in the lighter

"A nigger nearly tail-ended me here once," Kelly said. "Just come barreling down on me." He took the lighter and lit his smoke. "Scared the piss out of me. I got him out of his car and popped him some. I bet he was one careful nigger from then on." He pulled away from the stop sign and cruised.

"You done one like this before? I know you've done it, but like this?"

"Not just like this. Hut I done some things might surprise you. You getting nervous on me?"

"I'm all right. You know, thing made me quit the Elvis imitating was travel, cause one night on the road I was staying in this cheap motel, and it wasn't heated too good. I'd had those kinds of rooms before, and I always carried couple of space heaters in the trunk of the car with the rest of my junk, you know. I got them plugged in, and I was still cold, so I pulled the mattress on the floor by the heaters. I woke up and was on fire. I had been so worn out I'd gone to sleep in my Elvis outfit. That was the end of my best white jumpsuit, you know, like he wore with the gold glitter and all. I must have been funny on fire like that, hopping around the room beating it out. When I got that suit off I was burned like the way you get when you been out in the sun too long."

"You gonna be able to do this?" "Did I say I couldn't?"

"You're nervous. I can tell way you talk."

"A little. I always get nervous before I go on stage too, but I always come through. Crowd came to see Elvis, by god, they got Elvis. I used to sign autographs with his name. People wanted it like that. They wanted to pretend, see."

"Women mostly?"

"Uh huh."

"What were they, say, fifty-five?"

"They were all ages. Some of them were pretty young."

"Ever fuck any of 'em?"

"Sure, I got plenty. Sing a little 'Love Me Tender' to them in the bedroom and they'd do whatever I wanted."

"Was it the old ones you was fucking?"

"I didn't fuck no real old ones, no. Whose idea is it to do things this way, anyhow?"

"Boss, of course. You think he lets me plan this stuff? He don't want them chinks muscling in on the shrimping and all."

"I don't know, we fought for these guys. It seems a little funny."

"Reason we lost the war over there is not being able to tell one chink from another and all of them being the way they are. I think we should have nuked the whole goddamned place. Went over there when it cooled down and stopped glowing, put in a tucking Disneyland or something."

They were moving out of the city now, picking up speed.

"I don't see why we don't just whack this guy outright and not do it this way," Bower said. "This seems kind of funny."

"No one's asking you. You come on a job, you do it. Boss wants some chink to suffer, so he's gonna suffer. Not like he didn't get some warnings or nothing. Boss wants him to take it hard."

"Maybe this isn't a smart thing on account of it may not bother chinks like it'd bother us. They're different about stuff like this, all the things they've seen."

"It'll bother him," Kelly said. "And if it don't, that ain't our problem. We got a job to do and we're gonna do it. Whatever comes after comes after. Boss wants us to do different next time, we do different. Whatever he wants we do it. He's the one paying."

They were out of the city now and to the left of the highway they could see the glint of the sea through a line of scrubby trees.

"How're we gonna know?" Bower said. "One chink looks like another."

"I got a photograph. This one's got a burn scar on the face. Everything's timed. Boss has been planning this. He had some of the guys watch and take notes. It's all set up."

"Why us?"

"Me because I've done some things before. You because he wants to see what you're made of. I'm kind of here as your nurse maid."

"I don't need anybody to see that I do what I'm supposed to do."

They drove past a lot of boats pulled up to a dock. They drove into a small town called Wilborn. They turned a corner at Catlow Street.

"It's down here a ways," Kelly said. "You got your knife? You left your knife and brought your comb, I'm gonna whack you."

Bower got the knife out of his pocket. "Thing's got a lot of blades, some utility stuff. Even a comb."

"Christ, you're gonna do it with a Boy Scout knife?"

"Utility knife. The blade I want is plenty sharp, you'll see. Why couldn't we use a gun? That wouldn't be as messy. A lot easier."

"Boss wants it messy. He wants the chink to think about it some. He wants them to pack their stuff on their boats and sail back to chink land. Either that, or they can pay their percentages like everyone else. He lets the chinks get away with things, everyone'll want to get away with things."

They pulled over to the curb. Down the street was a school. Bower looked at his watch.

"Maybe if it was a nigger," Bower said.

"Chink, nigger, what's the difference?"

They could hear a bell ringing. After five minutes they saw kids going out to the curb to get on the buses parked there. A few kids came down the sidewalk toward them. One of them was a Vietnamese girl about eight years old. The left side of her face was scarred.

"Won't they remember me?" Bower said.

"Kids? Naw. Nobody knows you around here. Get rid of that Elvis look and you'll be okay."

"It don't seem right. In front of these kids and all. I think we ought to whack her father."

"No one's paying you to think, Elvis. Do what you're supposed to do. I have to do it and you'll wish you had."

Bower opened the utility knife and got out of the car. He held the knife by his leg and walked around front, leaned on the hood just as the Vietnamese girl came up. He said, "Hey, kid, come here a minute." His voice got thick. "Elvis wants to show you something."

(For Pat LoBrutto)

"The Pit" by Joe R. Lansdale

Six months earlier they had captured him. Tonight Harry went into the pit. He and Big George, right after the bull terriers got through tearing the guts out of one another. When that was over, he and George would go down and do the business. The loser would stay there and be fed to the dogs, each of which had been starved for the occasion.

When the dogs finished eating, the loser's head would go up on a pole. Already a dozen poles circled the pit. On each rested a head, or skull, depending on how long it had been exposed to the elements, ambitious pole-climbing ants and hungry birds. And of course how much flesh the terriers ripped off before it was erected.

Twelve poles. Twelve heads.

Tonight a new pole and a new head went up.

Harry looked about at the congregation. All sixty or so of them. They were a sight. Like mad creatures out of Lewis Carroll. Only they didn't have long rabbit ears or tall silly hats. They were just backwoods rednecks, not too unlike himself. With one major difference. They were as loony as waltzing mice. Or maybe they weren't crazy and he was. Sometimes he felt as if he had stepped into an alternate universe where the old laws of nature and what was right and wrong did not apply. Just like Alice plunging down the rabbit hole into Wonderland.

The crowd about the pit had been mumbling and talking, but now they grew silent. Out into the glow of the neon lamps stepped a man dressed in a black suit and hat. A massive rattlesnake was coiled about his right arm. It was wriggling from shoulder to wrist. About his left wrist a smaller snake was wrapped, a copperhead. The man held a Bible in his right hand. He was called Preacher. Draping the monstrous rattlesnake around his neck, Preacher let it hang there. It dangled that way as if drugged. Its tongue would flash out from time to time. It gave Harry the willies. He hated snakes. They always seemed to be smiling. Nothing was that fucking funny, not all the time.

Preacher opened his Bible and read:

"Behold, I give unto you the power to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy: and nothing will by any means hurt you."

Preacher paused and looked at the sky. "So God," he said, "we want to thank you for a pretty good potato crop, though you've done better, and we want to thank you for the terriers, even though we had to raise and feed them ourselves, and we want to thank you for sending these outsiders our way, thank you for Harry Joe Stinton and Big George, the nigger."

Preacher paused and looked about the congregation. He lifted the hand with the copperhead in it high above his head. Slowly he lowered it and pointed the snake-filled fist at George. "Three times this here nigger has gone into the pit, and three times he has come out victorious. Couple times against whites, once against another nigger. Some of us think he's cheating.

"Tonight, we bring you another white feller, one of your chosen people, though you might not know it on account of the way you been letting the nigger win here, and we're hoping for a good fight with the nigger being killed at the end. We hope this here business pleases you. We worship you and the snakes in the way we ought to. Amen.

Big George looked over at Harry. "Be ready, sucker. I'm gonna take you apart like a gingerbread man."

Harry didn't say anything. He couldn't understand it. George was a prisoner just as he was. A man degraded and made to lift huge rocks and pull carts and jog mile on miles every day. And just so they could get in shape for this--to go down into that pit and try and beat each other to death for the amusement of these crazies.

And it had to be worse for George. Being black, he was seldom called anything other than "the nigger" by these psychos. Furthermore, no secret had been made of the fact that they wanted George to lose, and for him to win. The idea of a black pit champion was eating their little honkey hearts out.

Yet, Big George had developed a sort of perverse pride in being the longest lived pit fighter yet.

"It's something I can do right," George had once said. "On the outside I wasn't nothing but a nigger, an uneducated nigger working in rose fields, mowing big lawns for rich white folks. Here I'm still the nigger, but I'm THE NIGGER, the bad ass nigger, and no matter what these peckerwoods call me, they know it, and they know I'm the best at what I do. I'm the king here. And they may hate me for it, keep me in a cell and make me run and lift stuff, but for that time in the pit, they know I'm the one that can do what they can't do, and they're afraid of me. I like it."

Glancing at George, Harry saw that the big man was not nervous. Or at least not showing it. He looked as if he were ready to go on holiday. Nothing to it. He was about to go down into that pit and try and beat a man to death with his fists and it was nothing. All in a day's work. A job well done for an odd sort of respect that beat what he had had on the outside.

The outside. It was strange how much he and Big George used that term. The outside. As if they were enclosed in some small bubble-like cosmos that perched on the edge of the world they had known; a cosmos invisible to the outsiders, a spectral place with new mathematics and nebulous laws of mind and physics. Maybe he was in hell. Perhaps he had been wiped out on the highway and had gone to the dark place. Just maybe his memory of how he had arrived here was a false dream inspired by demonic powers. The whole thing about him taking a wrong turn through Big Thicket country and having his truck break down just outside of Morganstown was an illusion, and stepping onto the Main Street of Morganstown, population 66, was his crossing the River Styx and landing smack dab in the middle of a hell designed for good old boys.

God, had it been six months ago?

He had been on his way to visit his mother in Woodville, and he had taken a shortcut through the Thicket. Or so he thought. But he soon realized that he had looked at the map wrong. The shortcut listed on the paper was not the one he had taken. He had mistaken that road for the one he wanted. This one had not been marked. And then he had reached Morganstown and his truck had broken down. He had been forced into six months hard labor alongside George, the champion pit fighter, and now the moment for which he had been groomed had arrived.

They were bringing the terriers out now. One, the champion, was named Old Codger. He was getting on in years. He had won many a pit fight. Tonight, win or lose, this would be his last battle. The other dog, Muncher, was young and inexperienced, but he was strong and eager for blood.

A ramp was lowered into the pit. Preacher and two men, the owners of the dogs, went down into the pit with Codger and Muncher. When they reached the bottom a dozen bright spotlights were thrown on them. They seemed to wade through the light.

The bleachers arranged about the pit began to fill. People mumbled and passed popcorn. Bets were placed and a little, fat man wearing a bowler hat copied them down in a note pad as fast as they were shouted. The ramp was removed.

In the pit, the men took hold of their dogs by the scruff of the neck and removed their collars. They turned the dogs so they were facing the walls of the pit and could not see one another. The terriers were about six feet apart, butts facing.

Preacher said, "A living dog is better than a dead lion."

Harry wasn't sure what that had to do with anything.

"Ready yourselves," Preacher said. "Gentlemen, face your dogs."

The owners slapped their dogs across the muzzle and whirled them to face one another. They immediately began to leap and strain at their masters' grips. "Gentlemen, release your dogs."

The dogs did not bark. For some reason, that was what Harry noted the most. They did not even growl. They were quick little engines of silence.

Their first lunge was a miss and they snapped air. But the second time they hit head on with the impact of .45 slugs. Codger was knocked on his back and Muncher dove for his throat. But the experienced dog popped up its head and grabbed Muncher by the nose. Codger's teeth met through Muncher's flesh.

Bets were called from the bleachers.

The little man in the bowler was writing furiously.

Muncher, the challenger, was dragging Codger, the champion, around the pit, trying to make the old dog let go of his nose. Finally, by shaking his head violently and relinquishing a hunk of his muzzle, he succeeded.

Codger rolled to his feet and jumped Muncher. Muncher turned his head just out of the path of Codger's jaws. The older dog's teeth snapped together like a spring-loaded bear trap, saliva popped out of his mouth in a fine spray.

Muncher grabbed Codger by the right ear. The grip was strong and Codger was shook like a used condom about to be fled and tossed. Muncher bit the champ's ear completely off.

Harry felt sick. He thought he was going to throw up. He saw that Big George was looking at him. "You think this is bad, motherfucker," George said, "this ain't nothing but a cake walk. Wait till I get you in that pit."

"You sure run hot and cold, don't you?" Harry said.

"Nothing personal," George said sharply and turned back to look at the fight in the pit.

Nothing personal, Harry thought. God, what could be more personal? Just yesterday, as they trained, jogged along together, a pickup loaded with gun bearing crazies driving alongside of them, he had felt close to George. They had shared many personal things these six months, and he knew that George liked him. But when it came to the pit, George was a different man. The concept of friendship became alien to him. When Harry had tried to talk to him about it yesterday, he had said much the same thing. "Ain't nothing personal, Harry my man, but when we get in that pit don't look to me for nothing besides pain, cause I got plenty of that to give you, a lifetime of it, and I'll just keep it coming."

Down in the pit Codger screamed. It could be described no other way. Muncher had him on his back and was biting him on the belly. Codger was trying to double forward and get hold of Muncher's head, but his tired jaws kept slipping off of the sweaty neck fur. Blood was starting to pump out of Codger's belly.

"Bite him, boy," someone yelled from the bleachers, "tear his ass up son."

Harry noted that every man, woman and child was leaning forward in their seat, straining for a view. Their faces full of lust, like lovers approaching vicious climax. For a few moments they were in that pit and they were the dogs.

Vicarious thrills without the pain.

Codger's leg began to flap.

"Kill him! Kill him!" the crowd began to chant.

Codger had quit moving. Muncher was burrowing his muzzle deeper into the old dog's guts. Preacher called for a pickup. Muncher's owner pried the dog's jaws loose of Codger's guts. Muncher's muzzle looked as if it had been dipped in red ink.

"This sonofabitch is still alive," Muncher's owner said to Codger.

Codger's owner walked over to the dog and said, "You little fucker!" He pulled a Saturday Night Special from his coat pocket and shot Codger twice in the head. Codger didn't even kick. He just evacuated his bowels right there.

Muncher came over and sniffed Codger's corpse, then, lifting his leg, he took a leak on the dead dog's head. The stream of piss was bright red.

The ramp was lowered. The dead dog was dragged out and tossed behind the bleachers. Muncher walked up the ramp beside his owner. The little dog strutted like he had just been crowned King of Creation. Codger's owner walked out last. He was not a happy man. Preacher stayed in the pit. A big man known as Sheriff Jimmy went down the ramp to join him. Sheriff Jimmy had a big pistol on his hip and a toy badge on his chest. The badge looked like the sort of thing that had come in a plastic bag with a capgun and whistle. But it was his sign of office and his word was iron.

A man next to Harry prodded him with the barrel of a shotgun. Walking close behind George, Harry went down the ramp and into the pit. The man with the shotgun went back up. In the bleachers the betting had started again, the little, fat man with the bowler was busy.

Preacher's rattlesnake was still lying serenely about his neck, and the little copperhead had been placed in Preacher's coat pocket. It poked its head out from time to time and looked around.

Harry glanced up. The heads and skulls on the poles-in spite of the fact they were all eyeless, and due to the strong light nothing but bulbous shapes on shafts-seemed to look down, taking as much amusement in the situation as the crowd on the bleachers.

Preacher had his Bible out again. He was reading a verse. "...when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee..."

Harry had no idea what that or the snake had to do with anything. Certainly he could not see the relationship with the pit. These people's minds seemed to click and grind to a different set of internal gears than those on the outside. The reality of the situation settled on Harry like a heavy, woolen coat. He was about to kill or be killed, right here in this dog-smelling pit, and there was nothing he could do that would change that.

He thought perhaps his life should flash before his eyes or something, but it did not. Maybe he should try to think of something wonderful, a last fine thought of what used to be. First he summoned up the image of his wife. That did nothing for him. Though his wife had once been pretty and bright, he could not remember her that way. The image that came to mind was quite different. A dumpy, lazy woman with constant back pains and her hair pulled up into an eternal topknot of greasy, brown hair. There was never a smile on her face or a word of encouragement for him. He always felt that she expected him to entertain her and that he was not doing a very good job of it. There was not even a moment of sexual ecstasy that he could recall. After their daughter had been born she had given up screwing as a wasted exercise. Why waste energy on sex when she could spend it complaining.

He flipped his mental card file to his daughter. What he saw was an ugly, potato-nosed girl of twelve. She had no personality. Her mother was Miss Congeniality compared to hen Potato Nose spent all of her time pining over thin, blond heartthrobs on television. It wasn't bad enough that they glared at Harry via the tube, they were also pinned to her walls and hiding in magazines she had cast throughout the house.

These were the last thoughts of a man about to face death?

There was just nothing there.

His job had sucked. His wife hadn't.

He clutched at straws. There had been Melva, a fine looking little cheerleader from high school. She had had the brain of a dried black-eyed pea, but God-All-Mighty, did she know how to hide a weenie. And there had always been that strange smell about her, like bananas. It was especially strong about her thatch, which was thick enough for a bald eagle to nest in.

But thinking about her didn't provide much pleasure either. She had gotten hit by a drunk in a Mack truck while parked offside of a dark road with that Pulver boy.

Damn that Pulver. At least he had died in ecstasy. Had never known what hit him. When that Mack went up his ass he probably thought for a split second he was having the greatest orgasm of his life.

Damn that Melva. What had she seen in Pulver anyway?

He was skinny and stupid and had a face like a peanut pattie.

God, he was beat at every turn. Frustrated at every corner. No good thoughts or beautiful visions before the moment of truth. Only blackness, a life of dull, planned movements as consistent and boring as a bran-conscious geriatric's bowel movement. For a moment he thought he might cry.

Sheriff Jimmy took out his revolver. Unlike the badge it was not a toy. "Find your corner, boys."

George turned and strode to one side of the pit, took off his shirt and leaned against the wall. His body shined like wet licorice in the spotlights.

After a moment, Harry made his legs work. He walked to a place opposite George and took off his shirt. He could feel the months of hard work rippling beneath his flesh. His mind was suddenly blank. There wasn't even a god he believed in. No one to pray to. Nothing to do but the inevitable.

Sheriff Jimmy walked to the middle of the pit. He yelled out for the crowd to shut up.

Silence reigned.

"In this corner," he said, waving the revolver at Harry, "we have Harry Joe Stinton, family man and pretty good feller for an outsider. He's six two and weighs two hundred and thirty-eight pounds, give or take a pound since my bathroom scales ain't exactly on the money. A cheer went up.

"Over here," Sheriff Jimmy said, waving the revolver at George, "standing six four tall and weighing two hundred and forty-two pounds, we got the nigger, present champion of this here sport."

No one cheered. Someone made a loud sound with his mouth that sounded like a fart, the greasy kind that goes on and on and on.

George appeared unfazed. He looked like a statue. He knew who he was and what he was. The Champion Of The Pit.

"First off," Sheriff Jimmy said, "you boys come forward and show your hands."

Harry and George walked to the center of the pit, held out their hands, fingers spread wide apart, so that the crowd could see that they were empty.

"Turn and walk to your corners and don't turn around," Sheriff Jimmy said.

George and Harry did as they were told. Sheriff Jimmy followed Harry and put an arm around his shoulders. "I got four hogs riding on you," he said. "And I'll tell you what, you beat the nigger and I'll do you a favor. Elvira, who works over at the cafe has already agreed. You win and you can have her. How's that sound?"

Harry was too numb with the insanity of it all to answer. Sheriff Jimmy was offering him a piece of ass if he won, as if dus would be greater incentive than coming out of the pit alive. With this bunch there was just no way to anticipate what might come next. Nothing was static.

"She can do more tricks with a six inch dick than a monkey can with a hundred foot of grapevine, boy. When the going gets rough in there, you remember that. Okay?"

Harry didn't answer. He just looked at the pit wall.

"You ain't gonna get nowhere in life being sullen like that," Sheriff Jimmy said. "Now, you go get him and plow a rut in his black ass."

Sheriff Jimmy grabbed Harry by the shoulders and whirled him around, slapped him hard across the face in the same way the dogs had been slapped. George had been done the same way by the preacher. Now George and Harry were facing one another. Harry thought George looked like an ebony gargoyle fresh escaped from hell. His

bald, bullet-like head gleamed in the harsh lights and his body looked as rough and ragged as stone.

Harry and George raised their hands in classic boxer stance and began to circle one another.

From above someone yelled, "Don't hit the nigger in the head, it'll break your hand. Go for the lips, they got soft lips."

The smell of sweat, dog blood and Old Codger's shit was thick in the air. The lust of the crowd seemed to have an aroma as well. Harry even thought he could smell Preacher's snakes. Once, when a boy, he had been fishing down by the creek bed and had smelled an odor like that, and a water moccasin had wriggled out beneath his legs and splashed in the water. It was as if everything he feared in the world had been put in this pit. The idea of being put deep down in the ground. Irrational people for whom logic did not exist. Rotting skulls on poles about the pit. living skulls attached to hunched-forward bodies that yelled for blood. Snakes. The stench of death-blood and shit. And every white man's fear, racist or not-a big, black man with a lifetime of hatred in his eyes.

The circle tightened. They could almost touch one another now.

Suddenly George's lips began to tremble. His eyes poked out of his head, seemed to be looking at something just behind and to the right of Harry.

"Sss. . . snake!" George screamed.

God, thought Harry, one of Preacher's snakes has escaped. Harry jerked his head for a look.

And George stepped in and knocked him on his ass and kicked him full in the chest. Harry began scuttling along the ground on his hands and knees, George following along kicking him in the ribs. Harry thought he felt something snap inside, a cracked rib maybe. He finally scuttled to his feet and bicycled around the pit. Goddamn, he thought, I fell for the oldest, silliest trick in the book. Here I am fighting for my life and I fell for it.

"Way to go, stupid fuck!" A voice screamed from the bleachers. "Hey nigger, why don't you try 'hey, your shoe's untied,' he'll go for it."

"Get off the goddamned bicycle," someone else yelled. "Fight."

"You better run," George said. "I catch you I'm gonna punch you so hard in the mouth, gonna knock your fucking teeth out your asshole

Harry felt dizzy. His head was like a yo-yo doing the Around the World trick. Blood ran down his forehead, dribbled off the tip of his nose and gathered on his upper lip. George was closing the gap again.

I'm going to die right here in this pit, thought Harry. I'm going to die just because my truck broke down outside of town and no one knows where I am. That's why I'm going to die. It's as simple as that.

Popcorn rained down on Harry and a tossed cup of ice hit him in the back.

"Wanted to see a fucking foot race," a voice called, "I'd have gone to the fucking racetrack."

"Ten on the nigger," another voice said.

"Five bucks the nigger kills him in five minutes."

When Harry backpedaled past Preacher, the snake man leaned forward and snapped, "You asshole, I got a sawbuck riding on you.

Preacher was holding the big rattler again. He had the snake gripped just below the head, and he was so upset over how the fight had gone so far, he was unconsciously squeezing the snake in a vice-like grip. The rattler was squirming and twisting and flapping about, but Preacher didn't seem to notice. The snake's forked tongue was outside its mouth and it was really working, slapping about like a thin strip of rubber come loose on a whirling tire. The copperhead in Preacher's pocket was still looking out, as if along with Preacher he might have a bet on the outcome of the fight as well. As Harry danced away the rattler opened its mouth so wide its jaws came unhinged. It looked as if it were trying to yell for help.

Harry and George came together again in the center of the pit. Fists like black ball bearings slammed the sides of Harry's head. The pit was like a whirlpool, the walls threatening to close in and suck Harry down into oblivion.

Kneeing with all his might, Harry caught George solidly in the groin. George grunted, stumbled back, half-bent over.

The crowd went wild.

Harry brought cupped hands down on George's neck, knocked him to his knees.

Harry used the opportunity to knock out one of the big man's teeth with the toe of his shoe.

He was about to kick him again when George reached up and clutched the crotch of Harry's khakis, taking a crushing grip on Harry's testicles.

"Got you by the balls," George growled.

Harry bellowed and began to hammer wildly on top of George's head with both fists. He realized with horror that George was pulling him forward. By God, George was going to bite him on the balls.

Jerking up his knee he caught George in the nose and broke his grip. He bounded free, skipped and whipped about the pit like an Indian dancing for rain.

He skipped and whooped by Preacher. Preacher's rattler had quit twisting. It hung loosely from Preacher's tight fist. Its eyes were bulging out of its head like the humped backs of grub worms. Its mouth was closed and its forked tongue hung limply from the edge of it.

The copperhead was still watching the show from the safety of Preacher's pocket, its tongue zipping out from time to time to taste the air. The little snake didn't seem to have a care in the world.

George was on his feet again, and Harry could tell that already he was feeling better. Feeling good enough to make Harry feel real bad.

Preacher abruptly realized that his rattler had gone limp.

"No, God no!" he cried. He stretched the huge rattler between his hands. "Baby, baby," he bawled, "breathe for me, Sapphire, breathe for me." Preacher shook the snake viciously, trying to jar some life into h, but the snake did not move.

The pain in Harry's groin had subsided and he could think again. George was moving in on him, and there just didn't seem any reason to run. George would catch him, and when he did, it would just be worse because he would be even more tired from all that running. It had to be done. The mating dance was over, now all that was left was the intercourse of violence.

A black fist turned the flesh and cartilage of Harry's nose into smouldering putty. Harry ducked his head and caught another blow to the chin. The stars he had not been able to see above him because of the lights, he could now see below him, spinning constellations on the floor of the pit.

It came to him again, the fact that he was going to die right here without one good, last thought. But then maybe there was one. He envisioned his wife, dumpy and sullen and denying him sex. George became her and she became George and Harry did what he had wanted to do for so long, he hit her in the mouth. Not once, but twice and a third time. He battered her nose and he pounded her ribs. And By God, but she could hit back. He felt something crack in the center of his chest and his left cheekbone collapsed into his face. But Harry did not stop battering her. He looped and punched and pounded her dumpy face until h was George's black face and George's black face turned back to her face and he thought of her now on the bed, naked, on her back, battered, and he was naked and mounted her, and the blows of his fists were the sexual thrusts of his cock and he was pounding her until-George screamed. He had fallen to his knees. His right eye was

hanging out on the tendons. One of Harry's straight rights had struck George's cheekbone with such power it had shattered it and pressured the eye out of its socket.

Blood ran down Harry's knuckles. Some of it was George's. Much of it was his own. His knuckle bones showed through the rent flesh of his hands, but they did not hurt. They were past hurting.

George wobbled to his feet. The two men stood facing one another, neither moving. The crowd was silent. The only sound in the pit was the harsh breathing of the two fighters, and Preacher who had stretched Sapphire out on the ground on her back and was trying to blow air into her mouth. Occasionally he'd lift his head and say in tearful supplication, "Breathe for me, Sapphire, breathe for me."

Each time Preacher blew a blast into the snake, its white underbelly would swell and then settle down, like a leaky balloon that just wouldn't hold air.

George and Harry came together. Softly. They had their arms on each other's shoulders and they leaned against one another, breathed each other's breath. Above, the silence of the crowd was broken when a heckler yelled "Start some music, the fuckers want to dance."

"It's nothing personal," George said.

"Not at all," Harry said.

They managed to separate, reluctantly, like two lovers who had just copulated to the greatest orgasm of their lives.

George bent slightly and put up his hands. The eye dangling on his cheek looked like some kind of tentacled creature trying to crawl up and into George's socket. Harry knew that he would have to work on that eye.

Preacher screamed. Harry afforded him a sideways glance. Sapphire was awake. And now she was dangling from Preacher's face. She had bitten through his top lip and was hung there by her fangs. Preacher was saying something about the power to tread on serpents and stumbling about the pit. Finally his back struck the pit wall and he slid down to his butt and just sat there, legs sticking out in front of him, Sapphire dangling off his lip like some sort of malignant growth. Gradually, building momentum, the snake began to thrash.

Harry and George met again in the center of the pit. A second wind had washed in on them and they were ready. Harry hurt wonderfully. He was no longer afraid. Both men were smiling, showing the teeth they had left. They began to hit each other.

Harry worked on the eye. Twice he felt it beneath his fists, a grape-like thing that cushioned his knuckles and made them wet. Harry's entire body felt on fire--twin fires, ecstasy and pain.

George and Harry collapsed together, held each other, waltzed about.

"You done good," George said, "make it quick."

The black man's legs went out from under him and he fell to his knees, his head between. Harry took the man's head in his hands and kneed him in the face with all his might. George went limp. Harry grasped George's chin and the back of his head and gave a violent twist. The neck bone snapped and George fell back, dead. The copperhead, which had been poking its head out of Preacher's pocket, took this moment to slither away into a crack in the pit's wall.

Out of nowhere came weakness. Harry fell to his knees. He touched George's ruined face with his fingers.

Suddenly hands had him. The ramp was lowered. The crowd cheered. Preacher--Sapphire dislodged from his lip--came forward to help Sheriff Jimmy with him. They lifted him up.

Harry looked at Preacher. His lip was greenish. His head looked like a sun-swollen watermelon, yet, he seemed well enough. Sapphire was wrapped around his neck again. They were still buddies. The snake looked tired. Harry no longer felt afraid of it. He reached out and touched its head. It did not try to bite him. He felt its feathery tongue brush his bloody hand.

They carried him up the ramp and the crowd took him, lifted him up high above their heads. He could see the moon and the stars now. For some odd reason they did not look familiar. Even the nature of the sky seemed different.

He turned and looked down. The terriers were being herded into the pit. They ran down the ramp like rats. Below, he could hear them begin to feed, to fight for choice morsels. But there were so many dogs, and they were so hungry, this only went on for a few minutes. After a while they came back up the ramp followed by Sheriff Jimmy closing a big lock-bladed knife and by Preacher who held George's head in his outstretched hands. George's eyes were gone. Little of the face remained. Only that slick, bald pate had been left undamaged by the terriers. A pole came out of the crowd and the head was pushed onto its sharpened end and the pole was dropped into a deep hole in the ground. The pole, like a long neck, rocked its trophy for a moment, then went still. Dirt was kicked into the hole and George joined the others, all those beautiful, wonderful heads and skulls. They began to carry Harry away. Tomorrow he would have Elvira, who could do more tricks with a six inch dick than a monkey could with a hundred foot of grapevine, then he would heal and a new outsider would come through and they would train together and then they would mate in blood and sweat in the depths of the pit.

The crowd was moving toward the forest rail, toward town. The smell of pines was sweet in the air. And as they carried him away, Harry turned his head so he could look back and see the pit, its maw closing in shadow as the lights were cut, and just before the last one went out Harry saw the heads on the poles, and dead center of his vision, was the shiny, bald pate of his good friend George.

"By Bizarre Hands" by Joe R. Lansdale

When the traveling preacher heard about the Widow Case and her retarded girl, he set out in his black Dodge to get over there before Halloween night. Preacher Judd, as he called himself—though his name was really Billy Fred William—had this thing for retarded girls, due to the fact that his sister had been simple-headed, and his mama always said it was a shame she was probably going to burn in hell like a pan of biscuits forgot in the oven, just on account of not having a full set of brains.

This was a thing he had thought on considerable, and this considerable thinking made it so he couldn't pass up the idea of baptizing and giving some God-training to female retards. It was something he wanted to do in the worst way, though he had to admit there wasn't any burning desire in him to do the same for boys or men or women that were half-wits, but due to his sister having been one, he certainly had this thing for girl simples.

And he had this thing for Halloween, because that was the night the Lord took his sister to hell, and he might have taken her to glory had she had any bible-learning or God-sense. But she didn't have a drop, and it was partly his own fault, because he knew about God and could sing some hymns pretty good. But he'd never turned a word of benediction or gospel music in her direction. Not one word. Nor had his mama, and his papa wasn't around to do squat.

The old man ran off with a bucktoothed laundry woman that used to go house to house taking in wash and bringing it back the next day, but when she took in their wash, she took in Papa too, and she never brought either of them back. And if that wasn't bad enough, the laundry contained everything they had in the way of decent clothes, including a couple of pairs of nice dress pants and some pin-striped shirts like niggers wear to funerals. This left him with one old pair of faded overalls that he used to wear to slop the hogs before the critters killed and ate Granny and they had to get rid of them because they didn't want to eat nothing that had eaten somebody they knew. So, it wasn't bad enough Papa ran off with a beaver-toothed wash woman and his sister was a drooling retard, he now had only the one pair of ugly, old overalls to wear to school, and this gave the other kids three things to tease him about, and they never missed a chance to do it. Well, four things. He was kind of ugly too.

It got tiresome.

Preacher Judd could remember nights waking up with his sister crawled up in the bed alongside him, lying on her back, eyes wide open, her face bathed in cool moonlight, picking her nose and eating what she found, while he rested on one elbow and tried to figure out why she was that way.

He finally gave up figuring, decided that she ought to have some fun, and he could have some fun too. Come Halloween, he got him a bar of soap for marking up windows and a few rocks for knocking out some, and he made his sister and himself ghost-suits out of old sheets in which he cut mouth and eye holes.

This was her fifteenth year and she had never been trick-or-treating. He had designs that she should go this time, and they did, and later after they'd done it, he walked her back home, and later yet, they found her out back of the house in her ghost-suit, only the sheet had turned red because her head was bashed in with something and she had bled out like an ankle-hung hog. And someone had turned her trick-or-treat sack—the handle of which was still clutched in her fat grip—inside out and taken every bit of candy she'd gotten from the neighbors. The sheriff came out, pulled up the sheet and saw that she was naked under it, and he looked her over and said that she looked raped to him, and that she had been killed by bizarre hands.

Bizarre hands never did make sense to Preacher Judd, but he loved the sound of it, and never did let it slip away, and when he would tell about his poor sister, naked under the sheets, her brains smashed out and her trick-or-treat

bag turned inside out, he'd never miss ending the story with the sheriff's line about her having died by bizarre hands. It had a kind of ring to it.

He parked his Dodge by the roadside, got out and walked up to the Widow Case's, sipping on a Frosty Root Been But even though it was late October, the Southern sun was as hot as Satan's ass and the root beer was anything but frosty. Preacher Judd was decked out in his black suit, white shin and black loafers with black and white checked socks, and he had on his black hat, which was short-brimmed and made him look, he thought, exactly like a traveling preacher ought to look.

Widow Case was out at the well, cranking a bucket of water, and nearby, running hell out of a hill of ants with a stick she was wagging, was the retarded girl, and Preacher Judd thought she looked remarkably like his sister.

He came up, took off his hat and held it over his chest as though he were pressing his heart into proper place, and smiled at the widow with all his gold-backed teeth.

Widow Case put one hand on a bony hip, used the other to prop the bucket of water on the well-curbing. She looked like a shaved weasel, Preacher Judd thought, though her ankles weren't shaved a bit and were perfectly weasel-like. The hair there was thick and black enough to be mistaken for thin socks at a distance.

"Reckon you've come far enough," she said. "You look like one of them Jehovah Witnesses or such, or one of them kind that run around with snakes in their teeth and hop to nigger music."

"No ma'm, I don't hop to nothing, and last snake I seen I run over with my can. You here to take up money for missionaries to give to them starving African niggers? If you are, forget it. I don't give to the niggers around here, sure ain't giving to no hungry foreign niggers that can't even speak English."

"Ain't collecting money for nobody. Not even myself."

"Well, I ain't seen you around here before, and I don't know you from white rice. You might be one of them mash murderers for all I know."

"No ma'm, I ain't a mash murderer, and I ain't from around here. I'm from East Texas."

She gave him a hard look. "Lots of niggers there."

"Place is rotten with them. Can't throw a dog tick without you've hit a burr-head in the noggin'. That's one of the reasons I'm traveling through here, so I can talk to white folks about God. Talking to niggers is like," and he lifted a hand to point, "talking to that well-curbing there, only that well-curbing is smarter and a lot less likely to sass, since it ain't expecting no civil rights or a chance to crowd up with our young'ns in schools. It knows its place and it stays there, and that's something for that well-curbing, if it ain't nothing for niggers."

"Amen."

Preacher Judd was feeling pretty good now. He could see she was starting to eat out of his hand. He put on his hat and looked at the girl. She was on her elbows now, her head down and her butt up. The dress she was wearing was way too short and had broken open in back from her having outgrown it. Her panties were dirt-stained and there was gravel, like little BBs hanging off of them. He thought she had legs that looked strong enough to wrap around an alligator's neck and choke it to death.

"Cinderella there," the widow said, noticing he was watching, "ain't gonna have to worry about going to school with niggers. She ain't got the sense of a nigger. She ain't got no sense at all. A dead rabbit knows more than she knows. All she does is play around all day, eat bugs and such and drool. In case you haven't noticed, she's simple."

"Yes ma'm, I noticed. Had a sister the same way. She got killed on a Halloween night, was raped and murdered and had her trick-or-treat candy stolen, and it was done, the sheriff said, by bizarre hands."

"No kiddin'?"

Preacher Judd held up a hand. "No kiddin'. She went on to hell, I reckon, 'cause she didn't have any God talk in her. And retard or not, she deserved some so she wouldn't have to cook for eternity. I mean, think on it. How hot it must be down there, her boiling in her own sweat, and she didn't do nothing, and it's mostly my fault 'cause I didn't teach her a thing about The Lord Jesus and his daddy, God."

Widow Case thought that over. "Took her Halloween candy too, huh?"

"Whole kit and kaboodle. Rape, murder and candy theft, one fatal swoop. That's why I hate to see a young'n like yours who 'night not have no Word of God in her. . Is she without training?"

"She ain't even toilet trained. You couldn't perch her on the outdoor convenience if she was sick and her manage to hit the bole. She can't do nothing that don't make a mess. You can't teach her a thing. Half the time she don't even know her name." As if to prove this, Widow Case called, "Cindereller." Cinderella had one eye against the ant ill now and was trying to look down the hole. Her butt was way up and she was rocking forward on her knees.

"See," said Widow Case, throwing up her hands. "She's worse than any little ole baby, and it ain't no easy row to hoe with her here and me not having a man around to do the heavy work."

"I can see that . . . By the way, call me Preacher Judd . . . And can I help you tote that bucket up to the house there?"

"Well now," said Widow Case, looking all the more like a weasel, "I'd appreciate that kindly."

* * *

He got the bucket and they walked up to the house. Cinderella followed, and pretty soon she was circling around him like she was a shark closing in for the kill, the circles each time getting a mite smaller. She did this by running with her back bent and her knuckles almost touching the ground. Ropes of saliva dripped out of her mouth.

Watching her, Preacher Judd got a sort of warm feeling all over. She certainly reminded him of his sister. Only she had liked to scoop up dirt, dog mess and stuff as she ran, and toss it at him. It wasn't a thing he thought he'd missed until just that moment, but now the truth was out and he felt a little teary-eyed. He half-hoped Cinderella would pick up something and throw it on him. The house was a big, drafty thing circled by a wide flower bed that didn't look to have been worked in years. A narrow porch ran half-way around it, and the front porch had man4all windows on either side of the door.

Inside, Preacher Judd hung his hat on one of the foil wrapped rabbit ears perched on top of an old Sylvania TV set, and followed the widow and her child into the kitchen.

The kitchen had big iron frying pans hanging on wall pegs, and there was a framed embroidery that read GOD WATCHES OVER THIS HOUSE. It had been faded by sunlight coming through the window over the sink.

Preacher Judd sat the bucket on the ice box--the old sort that used real ice-- then they all went back to the living room. Widow Case told him to sit down and asked him if he'd like some iced tea.

"Yes, this bottle of Frosty ain't so good." He took the bottle out of his coat pocket and gave it to her.

Widow Case held it up and squinted at the little line of liquid in the bottom.

"You gonna want this?"

"No, ma'm, just pour what's left out and you can have the deposit." He took his Bible from his other pocket and opened it. "You don't mind if I try and read a verse or two to your Cindy, do you?"

"You make an effort on that while I fix us some tea. And I'll bring some things for ham sandwiches, too."

"That would be right nice. I could use a bite."

Widow Case went to the kitchen and Preacher Judd smiled at Cinderella. "You know tonight's Halloween, Cindy?"

Cinderella pulled up her dress, picked a stray ant off her knee and ate it.

"Halloween is my favorite time of the year," he continued. "That may be strange for a preacher to say, considering it's a devil thing, but I've always loved it. It just does something to my blood. It's like a tonic for me, you know?"

She didn't know. Cinderella went over to the TV and turned it on.

Preacher Judd got up, turned it off. "Let's don't run the Sylvania right now, baby child," he said. "Let's you and me talk about God."

Cinderella squatted down in front of the set, not seeming to notice it had been cut off. She watched the dark screen like the White Rabbit considering a plunge down the rabbit hole.

Glancing out the window, Preacher Judd saw that the sun looked like a dripped cherry snowcone melting into the clay road that led out to Highway 80, and already the tumble bug of night was rolling in blue-black and heavy. A feeling of frustration went over him, because he knew he was losing time and he knew what he had to do.

Opening his Bible, he read a verse and Cinderella didn't so much as look up until he finished and said a prayer and ended it with "Amen."

"Uhman," she said suddenly.

Preacher Judd jumped with surprise, slammed the Bible shut and dunked it in his pocket. "Well, well now," he said with delight, "that does it. She's got some Bible training."

Widow Case came in with the tray of fixing. "What's that?"

"She said some of a prayer," Preacher Judd said. "That cinches it. God don't expect much from retards, and that ought to do for keeping her from burning in hell." He practically skipped over to the woman and her tray, stuck two fingers in a glass of tea, whirled and sprinkled the drops on Cinderella's head.

Cinderella held out a hand as if checking for rain.

Preacher Judd bellowed out, "I pronounce you baptized. In the name of God, The Son, and The Holy Ghost. Amen."

"Well, I'll swan," the widow said. "That there tea works for baptizing?" She sat the tray on the coffee table.

"It ain't the tea water, it's what's said and who says it that makes it take . . . Consider that gal legal baptized . . . Now, she ought to have some fun too, don't you think? Not having a full head of brains don't mean she shouldn't have some fun."

"She likes what she does with them ants," Widow Case said.

"I know, but I'm talking about something special. It's Halloween. Time for young folks to have fun, even if they are retards. In fact, retards like it better than anyone else. They love this stuff . . . A thing my sister enjoyed was dressing up like a ghost."

"Ghost?" Widow Case was seated on the couch, making the sandwiches. She had a big butcher knife and she was using it to spread mustard on bread and cut ham slices.

"We took this old sheet, you see, cut some mouth and eye holes in it, then we wore them and went trick-or-treating."

"I don't know that I've got an old sheet. And there ain't a house close enough for trick-or-treatin' at."

"I could take her around in my car. That would be fun, I think. I'd like to see her have fun, wouldn't you? She'd be real scary too under that sheet, big as she is and liking to run stooped down with her knuckles dragging.

To make his point, lie bent forward, humped his back, let his hands dangle and made a face he thought was an imitation of Cinderella.

"She would be scary, I admit that," Widow Case said. "Though that sheet over her head would take some away from it. Sometimes she scares me when I don't got my mind on her, you know? Like if I'm napping in there on the bed, and I sorta open my eyes, and there she is, looking at me like she looks at them ants. I declare, she looks like she'd like to take a stick and whirl it around on me."

"You need a sheet, a white one, for a ghost-snit."

"Now maybe it would be nice for Cinderella to go out and have some fun." She finished making the sandwiches and stood up. "I'll see what I can find."

"Good, good," Preacher Judd said rubbing his hands together. "You can let me make the outfit. I'm real good at it."

While Widow Case went to look for a sheet, Preacher Judd ate one of the sandwiches, took one and handed it down to Cinderella. Cinderella promptly took the bread off of it, ate the meat, and laid the mustard sides down on her knees. When the meat was chewed, she took to the mustard bread, cramming it into her mouth and smacking her lips loudly.

"Is that good, sugar?" Preacher Judd asked.

Cinderella smiled some mustard bread at him, and he couldn't help but think the mustard looked a lot like baby shit, and he had to turn his head away.

"This do?" Widow Case said, coming into the room with a slightly yellowed sheet and a pair of scissors.

"That's the thing," Preacher Judd said, taking a swig from his ice tea. He set the tea down and called to Cinderella."

"Come on, sugar, let's you and me go in the bedroom there and get you fixed up and surprise your mama."

It took a hit of coaxing, but he finally got her up and took her into the bedroom with the sheet and scissors. He half-closed the bedroom door and called out to the widow, "You're going to like this."

After a moment, Widow Case heard the scissors snipping away and Cinderella grunting like a hog to trough. When the scissor sound stopped, she heard Preacher Judd talking in a low voice, trying to coach Cinderella on something, but as she wanted it to be a surprise, she quit trying to hear. She went over to the couch and fiddled with a sandwich, but she didn't eat it. As soon as she'd gotten out of eyesight of Preacher Judd, she'd upended the last of his root beer and it was as bad as he said. It sort of made her stomach sick and didn't encourage her to add any food to it.

Suddenly the bedroom door was knocked back, and Cinderella, having a big time of it, charged into the room with her arms held out in front of her yelling,

"Woooo, woooo, goats."

Widow Case let out a laugh. Cinderella ran around the room yelling, "Woooo, woooo, goats," until she tripped over the coffee table and sent the sandwich makings and herself flying.

Preacher Judd, who'd followed her in after a second, went over and helped her up. The Widow Case, who had curled up on the couch in natural defense against the flying food and retarded girl, now uncurled when she saw something dangling on Preacher Judd's arm. She knew what it was, but she asked anyway. "What's that?"

"One of yer piller cases. For a trick-or-treat sack."

"Oh." Widow Case said stiffly, and she went to straightening up the coffee table and picking the ham and makings off the floor.

Preacher Judd saw that the sun was no longer visible. He walked over to a window and looked out. The tumble bug of night was even more blue-black now and the moon was out, big as a dinner plate, and looking like it had gravy stains on it. "I think we've got to go now," he said. "We'll be back in a few hours, just long enough to run the houses around here."

"Whoa, whoa," Widow Case said. "Trick-or-treatin' I can go for, but I can't let my daughter go off with n6 strange man."

"I ain't strange. I'm a preacher."

"You strike me as an all right fella that wants to do things right, but I still can't let you take my daughter off without me going. People would talk."

Preacher Judd started to sweat. "I'll pay you some money to let me take her on."

Widow Case stared at him. She had moved up close now and he could smell root beer on her breath. Right then he knew what she'd done and he didn't like it any. It wasn't that he'd wanted it, but somehow it seemed dishonest to him that she swigged it without asking him. He thought she was going to pour it out. He started to say as much when she spoke up.

"I don't like the sound of that none, you offering me money."

"I just want her for the night," he said, pulling Cinderella close to him.

"She'd have fun."

"I don't like the sound of that no better. Maybe you ain't as right thinking as I thought."

Widow Case took a step back and reached the butcher knife off the table and pushed it at him. "I reckon you better just let go of her and run on out to that car of yours and take your ownself trick-or-treatin'. And without my piller case."

"No ma'm, can't do that. I've come for Cindy and that's the thing God expects of me, and I'm going to do it. I got to do it. I didn't do my sister right and she's burning in hell. I'm doing Cindy right. She said some of a prayer and she's baptized. Anything happened to her, wouldn't be on my conscience."

Widow Case trembled a bit. Cinderella lifted up her ghost-suit with her free hand to look at herself, and Widow Case saw that she was naked as a jay-bird underneath.

"You let go of her arm right now, you pervert. And drop that piller case . . . Toss it on the couch would be better. It's clean."

He didn't do either.

Widow Case's teeth went together like a bear trap and made about as much noise, and she slashed at him with the knife.

He stepped back out of the way and let go of Cinderella, who suddenly let out a screech, broke and ran, started around the room yelling, "Wooooo, wooooo, goats."

Preacher Judd hadn't moved quick enough, and the knife had cut through the pillow case, his coat and shirt sleeve, but hadn't broke the skin.

When Widow Case saw the slashed pillow case fall to the floor, a fire went through her. The same fire that went through Preacher Judd when he realize his J.C. Penney's suit coat which had cost him, with the pants, \$39.95 on sale, was ruined.

They started circling one another, arms outstretched like wrestlers ready for the runtogether, and Widow Case had the advantage on account of having the knife.

But she fell for Preacher Judd holding up his left hand and wiggling two fingers like mule ears, and while she was looking at that, he hit her with a right cross and floored her. Her head hit the coffee table and the ham and fixings flew up again.

Preacher Judd jumped on top of her and held her knife hand down with one of his, while he picked up the ham with the other and hit her in the face with it, but the ham was so greasy it kept sliding off and he couldn't get a good blow in.

Finally he tossed the ham down and started wrestling the knife away from her with both hands while she chewed on one of his forearms until he screamed. Cinderella was still running about, going "Wooooo, wooooo, goats," and when she ran by the Sylvania, her arm hit the foil-wrapped rabbit ears and sent them flying.

Preacher Judd finally got the knife away from Widow Case, cutting his hand slightly in the process, and that made him mad. He stabbed her in the back as she rolled out from under him and tried to run off on all fours. He got on top of her again, knocking her flat, and he tried to pull the knife out. He pulled and tugged, but it wouldn't come free. She was as strong as a cow and was crawling across the floor and pulling him along as he hung tight to the thick, wooden butcher knife handle. Blood was boiling all over the place.

Out of the corner of his eye, Preacher Judd saw that his retard was going wild, flapping around in her ghost-suit like a fat dove, bouncing off walls and tumbling over furniture. She wasn't making the ghost sounds now. She knew something was up and she didn't like it.

"Now, now," he called to her as Widow Case dragged him across the floor, yelling all the while, "Bloody murder, I'm being kilt, bloody murder, bloody murder!"

"Shut up, goddamnit!" he yelled. Then, reflecting on his words, he turned his face heavenward. "Forgive me my language, God." Then he said sweetly to Cinderella, who was in complete bouncing distress, "Take it easy, honey. Ain't nothing wrong, not a thing."

"Oh Lordy mercy, I'm being kilt!" Widow Case yelled.

"Die, you stupid old cow."

But she didn't die. He couldn't believe it, but she was starting to stand. The knife he was clinging to pulled him to his feet, and when she was up, she whipped an elbow around, whacked him in the ribs and sent him flying.

About that time, Cinderella broke through a window, tumbled onto the porch, over the edge and into the empty flower bed.

Preacher Judd got up and ran at Widow Case, hitting her just above the knees and knocking her down, cracking her head a loud one on the Sylvania, but it still didn't send her out. She was strong enough to grab him by the throat with both hands and throttle him.

As she did, he turned his head slightly away from her digging fingers, and through the broken window he could see his retarded ghost. She was doing a kind Elf two step, first to the left, then to the right, going, "Unhhh, unhhh," and it reminded Preacher Judd of one of them dances sinners do in them places with lots of blinking lights and girls up on pedestals doing lashes with their hips. He made a fist and hit the widow a couple of times, and she let go of him and rolled away. She got up, staggered a second, then started running toward the kitchen, the knife still in her back, only deeper from having fallen on it. He ran after her and she staggered into the hall, her hands hitting out and knocking one of the big iron frying pans off its peg and down on her head. It made a loud BONG, and Widow Case went down.

Preacher Judd let out a sigh. He was glad for that. He was tired. He grabbed up the pan and whammed her a few times, then, still carrying the pan, he found his hat in the living room and went out on the porch to look for Cinderella.

She wasn't in sight.

He ran out in the front yard calling her, and saw her making the rear corner of the house, running wildly, hands close to the ground, her butt flashing in the moonlight every time the sheet popped up. She was heading for the woods out back.

He ran after her, but she made the woods well ahead of him. He followed in, but didn't see her. "Cindy," he called. "It's me. Ole Preacher Judd. I come to read you some Bible verses. You'd like that wouldn't you? Then he commenced to coo like he was talking to a baby, but still Cinderella did not appear.

He trucked around through the woods with his frying pan for half an hour, but didn't see a sign of her. For a half-wit, she was a good hider. Preacher Judd was covered in sweat and the night was growing slightly cool and the old Halloween moon was climbing to the stars. He felt like just giving up. He sat down on the ground and started to cry. Nothing ever seemed to work out right. That night he'd taken his sister out hadn't gone fully right. They'd gotten the candy and he'd brought her home, but later, when he tried to get her in bed with him for a little bit of the thing animals do without sin, she wouldn't go for it, and she always had before. Now she was uppity over having a ghost-suit and going trick-or-treating. Worse yet, her wearing that sheet with nothing under it did something for him. He didn't know what it was, but the idea of it made him kind of crazy. But he couldn't talk or bribe her into a thing. She ran out back and he ran after her and tackled her, and when he started doing to her what he wanted to do, out beneath the Halloween moon, underneath the apple tree, she started screaming. She could scream real loud, and he'd had to choke her some and beat her in the head with a rock. After that, he felt he should make like some kind of theft was at the bottom of it all, so he took all her Halloween candy. He was sick thinking back on that night. Her dying without no God-training made him feel lousy. And he couldn't get those Tootsie Rolls out of his mind. There must have been three dozen of them. Later he got so sick from eating them all in one sitting that to this day he couldn't stand the smell of chocolate. He was thinking on these misfortunes when he saw through the limbs and brush a white sheet go by. Preacher Judd poked his head up and saw Cinderella running down a little path going, "Wooooo, wooooo, goats." She had already forgotten about him and had the ghost thing on her mind. He got up and crept after her with his frying pan. Pretty soon she disappeared over a dip in the trail and he followed her down. She was sitting at the bottom of the trail between two pines, and ahead of her was a clear lake with the moon shining its face in the water. Across the water the trees thinned, and he could see the glow of light from a house. She was looking at those lights and the big moon in the water and was saying over and over, "Oh, priddy, priddy." He walked up behind her and said. "It sure is, sugar." and he hit her in the head with the pan. It gave a real solid ring, kind of like the clap of a sweet church bell. He figured that one shot to the bean was sufficient, since it was a good overhand lick, but she was still sitting up and he didn't want to be no slacker about things, so he hit her a couple more times, and by the second time, her head didn't give a ring, just sort of a dull thump, like he was hitting a thick, rubber bag full of mud. She fell over on what was left of her head and her butt cocked up in the air, exposed as the sheet fell down her back. He took a long look at it, but found he wasn't interested in doing what animals do without sin anymore. All that hitting on the Widow Case and Cinderella had tuckered him out. He pulled his arm way back, tossed the frying pan with all his might toward the lake. It went in with a soft splash. He turned back toward the house and his car, and when he got out to the road, he cranked up the Dodge and drove away noticing that the Halloween sky was looking blacker. It was because the moon had slipped behind some dark clouds. He thought it looked like a suffering face behind a veil, and as he drove away from the Case's, he stuck his head out the window for a better look. By the time he made the hill that dipped down toward Highway 80, the clouds had passed along, and he'd come to see it more as a happy jack-o-lantern than a sad face, and he took that as a sign that he had done well.

(For Scott Cupp)

"Tight Little Stitches in a Dead Man's Back" by Joe R. Lansdale

From the Journal of Paul Marder

(Boom!)

That's a little scientist joke, and the proper way to begin this. As for the purpose of my notebook, I'm uncertain. Perhaps to organize my thoughts and not to go insane.

No. Probably so I can read it and feel as if I'm being spoken to. Maybe neither of those reasons. It doesn't matter. I just want to do it, and that is enough. What's new?

Well, Mr. Journal, after all these years I've taken up martial arts again--or at least the forms and calisthenics of Tae Kwon Do. There is no one to spar with here in the lighthouse, so the forms have to do.

There is Mary, of course, but she keeps all her sparring verbal. And as of late, there is not even that. I long for her to call me a sonofabitch. Anything. Her hatred of me has cured to 100% perfection and she no longer finds it necessary to speak. The tight lines around her eyes and mouth, the emotional heat that radiates from her body like a dreadful cold sore looking for a place to lie down is voice enough for her. She lives only for the moment when she (the cold sore) can attach herself to me with her needles, ink and thread. She lives only for the design on my back.

That's all I live for as well. Mary adds to it nightly and I enjoy the pain. The tattoo is of a great, blue mushroom cloud, and in the cloud, etched ghost-like, is the face of our daughter, Rae. Her lips are drawn tight, eyes are closed and there are stitches deeply pulled to simulate the lashes. When I move fast and hard they rip slightly and Rae cries bloody tears.

That's one reason for the martial arts. The hard practice of them helps me to tear the stitches so my daughter can cry. Tears are the only thing I can give her.

Each night I bare my back eagerly to Mary and her needles. She pokes deep and I moan in pain as she moans in ecstasy and hatred. She adds more color to the design, works with brutal precision to bring Rae's face out in sharper relief. After ten minutes she tires and will work no more. She puts the tools away and I go to the full-length mirror on the wall. The lantern on the shelf flickers like a jack-o-lantern in a high wind, but there is enough light for me to look over my shoulder and examine the tattoo. And it is beautiful. Better each night as Rae's face becomes more and more defined.

Rae.

Rae. God, can you forgive me, sweetheart?

But the pain of the needles, wonderful and cleansing as they are, is not enough. So I go sliding, kicking and punching along the walkway around the lighthouse, feeling Rae's red tears running down my spine, gathering in the waistband of my much-stained canvas pants.

Winded, unable to punch and kick anymore, I walk over to the railing and call down into the dark, "Hungry?"

In response to my voice a chorus of moans rises up to greet me.

Later, I lie on my pallet, hands behind my head, examine the ceiling and try to think of something worthy to write in you, Mr. Journal. So seldom is there anything. Nothing seems truly worthwhile.

Bored of this, I roll on my side and look at the great light that once shone out to the ships, but is now forever snuffed. Then I turn the other direction and look at my wife sleeping on her bunk, her naked ass turned toward me. I try to remember what it was like to make love to her, but it is difficult. I only remember that I miss it. For a long moment I stare at my wife's ass as if it is a mean mouth about to open and reveal teeth. Then I roll on my back again, stare at the ceiling, and continue this routine until daybreak.

Mornings I greet the flowers, their bright red and yellow blooms bursting from the heads of long-dead bodies that will not rot. The flowers open wide to reveal their little black brains and their feathery feelers, and they lift their blooms upward and moan. I get a wfl'd pleasure out of this. For one crazed moment I feel like a rock singer appearing before his starry-eyed audience.

When I tire of the game I get the binoculars, Mr. Journal, and examine the eastern plains with them, as if I expect a city to materialize there. The most interesting thing I have seen on those plains is a herd of large lizards thundering north. For a moment, I considered calling Mary to see them, but I didn't. The sound of my voice, the sight of my face, upsets her. She loves only the tattoo and is interested in nothing more.

When I finish looking at the plains, I walk to the other side. To the west, where the ocean was, there is now nothing but miles and miles of cracked, black sea bottom. Its only resemblances to a great body of water are the occasional dust storms that blow out of the west like dark tidal waves and wash the windows black at mid-day. And the creatures. Mostly mutated whales. Monstrously large, sluggish things. Abundant now where once they were near extinction. (Perhaps the whales should form some sort of GREENPEACE organization for humans now. What do you think, Mr. Journal? No need to answer just another one of those little scientist jokes.)

These whales crawl across the sea bottom near the lighthouse from time to time, and if the mood strikes them, they rise on their tails and push their heads near the tower and examine it. I keep expecting one to flop down on us, crushing us like bugs. But no such luck. For some unknown reason the whales never leave the cracked sea bed to venture onto what we formerly called the shore. It's as if they live in invisible water and are bound by it. A racial memory perhaps. Or maybe there's something in that cracked black soil they need. I don't know. Besides the whales I suppose I should mention I saw a shark once. It was slithering along at a great distance and the tip of its fin was winking in the sunlight. I've also seen some strange, legged fish and some things I could not put a name to. I'll just call them whale food since I saw one of the whales dragging his bottom jaw along the ground one day, scooping up the creatures as they tried to beat a hasty retreat.

Exciting, huh? Well, that's how I spend my day, Mr. Journal. Roaming about the tower with my glasses, coming in to write in you, waiting anxiously for Mary to take hold of that kit and give me the signal. The mere thought of it excites me to erection. I suppose you could call that our sex act together.

And what was I doing the day they dropped The Big One?

Glad you asked that Mr. Journal, really I am.

I was doing the usual. Up at six, did the shit, shower and shave routine. Had breakfast. Got dressed. Tied my tie. I remember doing the latter, and not very well, in front of the bedroom mirror, and noticing that I had shaved poorly. A hunk of dark beard decorated my chin like a bruise.

Rushing to the bathroom to remedy that, I opened the door as Rae, naked as the day of her birth, was stepping from the tub.

Surprised, she turned to look at me. An arm went over her breasts, and a hand, like a dove settling into a fiery bush, covered her pubic area.

Embarrassed, I closed the door with an "excuse me" and went about my business-unshaved. It was an innocent thing. An accident. Nothing sexual. But when I think of her now, more often than not, that is the first image that comes to mind. I guess it was the moment I realized my baby had grown into a beautiful woman.

That was also the day she went off to her first day of college and got to see, ever so briefly, the end of the world.

And it was the day the triangle-Mary, Rae and myself-shattered.

If my first memory of Rae alone is that day, naked in the bathroom, my foremost memory of us as a family is when Rae was six. We used to go to the park and she would ride the merry-go-round, swing, teeter-totter, and finally my back. ("I want to piggy Daddy.") We would gallop about until my legs were rubber, then we would stop at the bench where Mary sat waiting. I would turn my back to the bench so Mary could take Rae down, but always before she did, she would reach around from behind, caressing Rae, pushing her tight against my back, and Mary's hands would touch my chest.

God, but if I could describe those hands. She still has hands like that, after all these years. I feel them fluttering against my back when she works. They are long and sleek and artistic. Naturally soft, like the belly of a baby rabbit. And when she held Rae and me that way, I felt that no matter what happened in the world, we three could stand against it and conquer.

But now the triangle is broken and the geometry gone away.

So the day Rae went off to college and was fucked into oblivion by the dark, pelvic thrust of the bomb, Mary drove me to work. Me, Paul Marder, big shot with The Crew. One of the finest, brightest young minds in the industry. Always teaching, inventing and improving on our nuclear threat, because, as we often joke, "We cared enough to send only the very best."

When we arrived at the guard booth, I had out my pass, but there was no one to take it. Beyond the chain-link gate there was a wild melee of people running, screaming, falling down.

I got out of the car and ran to the gate. I called out to a man I knew as he ran by. When he turned his eyes were wild and his lips were flecked with foam. "The missiles are flying," he said, then he was gone, running madly.

I jumped in the car, pushed Mary aside and stomped the gas. The Buick leaped into the fence, knocking it asunder. The car spun, slammed into the edge of a building and went dead. I grabbed Mary's hand, pulled her from the car and we ran toward the great elevators.

We made one just in time. There were others running for it as the door closed, and the elevator went down. I still remember the echo of their fists on the metal just as it began to drop. It was like the rapid heartbeat of something dying.

And so the elevator took us to the world of Down Under and we locked it off. There we were in a five-mile layered city designed not only as a massive office and laboratory, but as an impenetrable shelter. It was our special reward for creating the poisons of war. There was food, water, medical supplies, films, books, you name it. Enough to last two thousand people for a hundred years. Of the two thousand it was designed for, perhaps eleven hundred made it. The others didn't run fast enough from the parking lot or the other buildings, or they were late for work, or maybe they had called in sick.

Perhaps they were the lucky ones. They might have died in their sleep. Or while they were having a morning quickie with the spouse. Or perhaps as they lingered over that last cup of coffee.

Because you see, Mr. Journal, Down Under was no paradise. Before long suicides were epidemic. I considered it myself from time to time. People slashed their throats, drank acid, took pills. It was not unusual to come out of your cubicle in the morning and find people dangling from pipes and rafters like ripe fruit. There were also the murders. Most of them performed by a crazed group who lived in the deeper recesses of the unit and called themselves the Slut Faces. From time to time they smeared dung on themselves and ran amok, clubbing me, women, and children born down under, to death. It was rumored they ate human flesh. We had a police force of sorts, but it didn't do much. It didn't have much sense of authority. Worse, we all viewed ourselves as deserving victims. Except for Mary, we had all helped to blow up the world.

Mary came to hate me. She came to the conclusion I had killed Rae. It was a realization that grew in her like a drip growing and growing until it became a

gushing flood of hate. She seldom talked to me. She tacked up a picture of Rae and looked at it most of the time.

Topside she had been an artist, and she took that up again. She rigged a kit of tools and inks and became a tattooist. Everyone came to her for a mark. And though each was different, they all seemed to indicate one thing: I fucked up. I blew up the world. Brand me.

Day in and day out she did her tattoos, having less and less to do with me, pushing herself more and more into this work until she was as skilled with skin and needles as she had been Topside with brush and canvas. And one night, as we lay on our separate pallets, feigning sleep, she said to me, "I just want you to know how much I hate you."

"I know," I said.

"You killed Rae."

"I know."

"You say you killed her, you bastard. Say it."

"I killed her," I said, and meant it.

Next day I asked for my tattoo. I told her of this dream that came to me nightly. There would be darkness, and out of this darkness would come a swirl of glowing clouds, and the clouds would melt into a mushroom shape, and out of that-torpedo-shaped, nose pointing skyward, striding on ridiculous cartoon legs-would step The Bomb.

There was a face painted on The Bomb, and it was my face. And suddenly the dream's point of view would change, and I would be looking out of the eyes of that painted face. Before me was my daughter. Naked. Lying on the ground. Her legs wide apart. Her sex glazed like a wet canyon.

And I/The Bomb, would dive into her, pulling those silly feet after me, and she would scream. I could hear it echo as I plunged through her belly, finally driving myself out of the top of her head, then blowing to terminal orgasm. And the dream would end where it began. A mushroom cloud. Darkness.

When I told Mary the dream and asked her to interpret it in her art, she said, "Bare your back," and that's how the design began. An inch of work at a time--a painful inch. She made sure of that.

Never once did I complain. She'd send the needles home as hard and deep as she could, and though I might moan or cry out, I never asked her to stop. I could feel those fine hands touching my back and I loved it. The needles. The hands. The needles. The hands.

And if that was so much fun, you ask, why did I come Topside?

You ask such probing questions, Mr. Journal. Really you do, and I'm glad you asked that. My telling will be like a laxative, I hope. Maybe if I just let the slut flow I'll wake up tomorrow and feel a lot better about myself.

Sure. And it will be the dawning of a new Pepsi generation as well. It will have all been a bad dream. The alarm clock will ring. I'll get up, have my bowl of Rice Krispies and tie my tie.

Okay, Mr. Journal. The answer. Twenty years or so after we went Down Under, a fistful of us decided it couldn't be any worse Topside than it was below. We made plans to go see. Simple as that. Mary and I even talked a little. We both entertained the crazed belief Rae might have survived. She would be thirty-eight. We might have been hiding below like vermin for no reason. It could be a brave new world up there.

I remember thinking these things, Mr. Journal, and half-believing them.

We outfitted two sixty-foot crafts that were used as part of our transportation system Down Under, plugged in the half-remembered codes that opened the elevators, and drove the vehicles inside. The elevator lasers cut through the debris above them and before long we were Topside. The doors opened to sunlight muted by grey-green clouds and a desert-like landscape. Immediately I knew there was no brave new world over the horizon. It had all gone to hell in a fiery

handbasket, and all that was left of man's millions of years of development were a few pathetic humans living Down Under like worms, and a few others crawling Topside like the same.

We cruised about a week and finally came to what had once been the Pacific Ocean. Only there wasn't any water now, just that cracked blackness.

We drove along the shore for another week and finally saw life. A whale. Jacobs immediately got the idea to shoot one and taste its meat.

Using a high-powered rifle he killed it, and he and seven others cut slabs off it, brought the meat back to cook. They invited all of us to eat, but the meat looked greenish and there wasn't much blood and we warned him against it. But Jacobs and the others ate it anyway. As Jacobs said, "It's something to do." A little later on Jacobs threw up blood and his intestines boiled out of his mouth, and not long after those who had shared the meat had the same thing happen to them. They died crawling on their bellies like gutted dogs. There wasn't a thing we could do for them. We couldn't even bury them. The ground was too hard. We stacked them like cordwood along the shoreline and moved camp down a way, tried to remember how remorse felt.

And that night, while we slept as best we could, the roses came.

Now, let me admit, Mr. Journal, I do not actually know how the roses survived, but I have an idea. And since you've agreed to hear my story-and even if you haven't, you're going to anyway-I'm going to put logic and fantasy together and hope to arrive at the truth.

These roses lived in the ocean bed, underground, and at night they came out. Up until then they had survived as parasites of reptiles and animals, but a new food had arrived from Down Under. Humans. Their creators actually. Looking at it that way, you might say we were the gods who conceived them, and their partaking of our flesh and blood was but a new version of wine and wafer.

I can imagine the pulsating brains pushing up through the sea bottom on thick stalks, extending feathery feelers and tasting the air out there beneath the light of the moon-which through those odd clouds gave the impression of a pus-filled boil-and I can imagine them uprooting and dragging their vines across the ground toward the shore where the corpses lay.

Thick vines sprouted little, thorny vines, and these moved up the bank and touched the corpses. Then, with a lashing motion, the thorns tore into the flesh, and the vines, like snakes, slithered through the wounds and inside. Secreting a dissolving fluid that turned the innards to the consistency of watery oatmeal, they slurped up the mess, and the vines grew and grew at amazing speed, moved and coiled throughout the bodies, replacing nerves and shaping into the symmetry of the muscles they had devoured, and lastly they pushed up through the necks, into the skulls, ate tongues and eyeballs and sucked up the mouse-grey brains like soggy gruel. With an explosion of skull shrapnel, the roses bloomed, their tooth-hard petals expanding into beautiful red and yellow flowers, hunks of human heads dangling from them like shattered watermelon rinds.

In the center of these blooms a fresh, black brain pulsed and feathery feelers once again tasted air for food and breeding grounds. Energy waves from the floral brains shot through the miles and miles of vines that were knotted inside the bodies, and as they had replaced nerves, muscles and vital organs, they made the bodies stand. Then those corpses turned their flowered heads toward the tents where we slept, and the blooming corpses (another little scientist joke there if you're into English idiom, Mr. Journal) walked, eager to add the rest of us to their animated bouquet.

I saw my first rose-head while I was taking a leak.

I had left the tent and gone down by the shore line to relieve myself, when I caught sight of it out of the corner of my eye. Because of the bloom I first thought it was Susan Myers. She wore a thick, wooly Afro that surrounded her

head like a lion's mane, and the shape of the thing struck me as her silhouette. But when I zipped and turned, it wasn't an Afro. It was a flower blooming out of Jacobs. I recognized him by his clothes and the hunk of his face that hung off one of the petals like a worn-out hat on a peg.

In the center of the blood-red flower was a pulsating sack, and all around it little wormy things squirmed. Directly below the brain was a thin proboscis. It extended toward me like an erect penis. At its tip, just inside the opening, were a number of large thorns.

A sound like a moan came out of that proboscis, and I stumbled back. Jacobs' body quivered briefly, as if he had been besieged by a sudden chill, and ripping through his flesh and clothes, from neck to foot, was a mass of thorny, wagging vines that shot out to five feet in length.

With an almost invisible motion, they waded from west to east, slashed my clothes, tore my hide, knocked my feet out from beneath me. It was like being hit by a cat-o-nine-tails.

Dazed, I rolled onto my hands and knees, bear-walked away from it. The vines whipped against my back and butt, cut deep.

Every time I got to my feet, they tripped me. The thorns not only cut, they burned like hot ice picks. I finally twisted away from a net of vines, slammed through one last shoot, and made a break for it.

Without realizing it, I was running back to the tent. My body felt as if I had been lying on a bed of nails and razor blades. My forearm hurt something terrible where I had used it to lash the thorns away from me. I glanced down at it as I ran. It was covered in blood. A strand of vine about two feet in length was coiled around it like a garter snake. A thorn had torn a deep wound in my arm, and the vine was sliding an end into the wound.

Screaming, I held my forearm in front of me like I had just discovered it. The flesh, where the vine had entered, rippled and made a bulge that looked like a junkie's favorite vein. The pain was nauseating. I snatched at the vine, ripped it free. The thorns turned against me like fishhooks.

The pain was so much I fell to my knees, but I had the vine out of me. It squirmed in my hand, and I felt a thorn gouge my palm. I threw the vine into the dark. Then I was up and running for the tent again.

The roses must have been at work for quite some time before I saw Jacobs, because when I broke back into camp yelling, I saw Susan, Ralph, Casey and some others, and already their heads were blooming, skulls cracking away like broken model kits.

Jane Calloway was facing a rose-possessed corpse, and the dead body had its hands on her shoulders, and the vines were jetting out of the corpse, weaving around her like a web, tearing, sliding inside her, breaking off. The proboscis poked into her mouth and extended down her throat, forced her head back. The scream she started came out a gurgle.

I tried to help her, but when I got close, the vines whipped at me and I had to jump back. I looked for something to grab, to hit the damn thing with, but there was nothing. When next I looked at Jane, vines were stabbing out of her eyes and her tongue, now nothing more than lava-thick blood, was dripping out of her mouth onto her breasts, which like the rest of her body, were riddled with stabbing vines.

I ran away then. There was nothing I could do for Jane. I saw others embraced by corpse hands and tangles of vines, but now my only thought was Mary. Our tent was to the rear of the campsite, and I ran there as fast as I could.

She was lumbering out of our tent when I arrived. The sound of screams had awakened her. When she saw me running she froze. By the time I got to her, two vine-riddled corpses were coming up on the tent from the left side. Grabbing her hand I half-pulled, half-dragged her away from there. I got to one of the vehicles and pushed her inside.

I locked the doors just as Jacobs, Susan, Jane, and others appeared at the windshield, leaning over the rocket-nose hood, the feelers around the brain sacks vibrating like streamers in a high wind. Hands slid greasily down the windshield. Vines flopped and scratched and cracked against it like thin bicycle chains.

I got the vehicle started, stomped the accelerator, and the rose-heads went flying. One of them, Jacobs, bounced over the hood and splattered into a spray of flesh, ichor and petals.

I had never driven the vehicle, so my maneuvering was rusty. But it didn't matter. There wasn't exactly a traffic rush to worry about.

After an hour or so, I turned to look at Mary. She was staring at me, her eyes like the twin barrels of a double-barreled shotgun. They seemed to say, "More of your doing," and in a way she was right. I drove on.

Daybreak we came to the lighthouse. I don't know how it survived. One of those quirks. Even the glass was unbroken. It looked like a great stone finger shooting us the bird.

The vehicle's tank was near empty, so I assumed here was as good a place to stop as any. At least there was shelter, something we could fortify. Going on until the vehicle was empty of fuel didn't make much sense. There wouldn't be any more fill-ups, and there might not be any more shelter like this.

Mary and I (in our usual silence) unloaded the supplies from the vehicle and put them in the lighthouse. There was enough food, water, chemicals for the chemical toilet, odds and ends, extra clothes, to last us a year. There were also some guns. A Colt .45 revolver, two twelve-gauge shotguns and a .38, and enough shells to fight a small war.

When everything was unloaded, I found some old furniture downstairs, and using tools from the vehicle, tried to barricade the bottom door and the one at the top of the stairs. When I finished, I thought of a line from a story I had once read, a line that always disturbed me. It went something like, "Now we're shut in for the night."

Days. Nights. All the same. Shut in with one another, our memories and the fine tattoo.

A few days later I spotted the roses. It was as if they had smelled us out. And maybe they had. From a distance, through the binoculars, they reminded me of old women in bright sun hats.

It took them the rest of the day to reach the lighthouse, and they immediately surrounded it, and when I appeared at the railing they would lift their heads and moan.

And that, Mr. Journal, brings us up to now.

I thought I had written myself out, Mr. Journal. Told the only part of my life story I would ever tell, but now I'm back. You can't keep a good world destroyer down.

I saw my daughter last night and she's been dead for years. But I saw her, I did, naked, smiling at me, calling to ride piggyback. Here's what happened.

It was cold last night. Must be getting along winter. I had rolled off my pallet onto the cold floor. Maybe that's what brought me awake. The cold. Or maybe it was just gut instinct.

It had been a particularly wonderful night with the tattoo. The face had been made so clear it seemed to stand out from my back. It had finally become more defined than the mushroom cloud. The needles went in hard and deep, but I've had them in me so much now I barely feel the pain. After looking in the mirror at the beauty of the design, I went to bed happy, or as happy as I can get.

During the night the eyes ripped open. The stitches came out and I didn't know it until I tried to rise from the cold, stone floor and my back puckered against it where the blood had dried.

I pulled myself free and got up. It was dark, but we had a good moonspill that night and I went to the mirror to look. It was bright enough that I could see Rae's reflection clearly, the color of her face, the color of the cloud. The stitches had fallen away and now the wounds were spread wide, and inside the wounds were eyes. Oh God, Rae's blue eyes. Her month smiled at me and her teeth were very white.

Oh, I hear you, Mr. Journal. I hear what you're saying. And I thought of that. My first impression was that I was about six bricks shy a load, gone around the old bend. But I know better now. You see, I lit a candle and held it over my shoulder, and with the candle and the moonlight, I could see even more clearly. It was Rae all right, not just a tattoo.

I looked over at my wife on the bunk, her hack to me, as always. She had not moved.

I turned back to the reflection. I could hardly see the outline of myself, just Rae's face smiling out of that cloud.

"Rae," I whispered, "is that you?"

"Come on, Daddy," said the mouth in the mirror, "that's a stupid question. Of course, it's me."

"But. . . You're. . . you're. . ."

"Dead?"

"Yes... Did... did it hurt much?"

She cackled so loudly the mirror shook. I could feel the hairs on my neck rising. I thought for sure Mary would wake up, but she slept on.

"It was instantaneous, Daddy, and even then, it was the greatest pain imaginable. Let me show you how it hurt."

The candle blew out and I dropped it. I didn't need it anyway. The mirror grew bright and Rae's smile went from ear to ear-literally-and the flesh on her bones seemed like crepe paper before a powerful fan, and that fan blew the hair off her head, the skin off her skull and melted those beautiful, blue eyes and those shiny white teeth of hers to a putrescent goo the color and consistency of fresh bird shit. Then there was only the skull, and it heaved in half and flew backwards into the dark world of the mirror and there was no reflection now, only the hurtling fragments of a life that once was and was now nothing more than swirling cosmic dust.

I closed my eyes and looked away.

"Daddy?"

I opened them, looked over my shoulder into the mirror. There was Rae again, smiling out of my back.

"Darling," I said, "I'm so sorry."

"So are we," she said, and there were faces floating past her in the mirror Teenagers, children, men and women, babies, little embryos swirling around her head like planets around the sun. I closed my eyes again, but I could not keep them closed. When I opened them the multitudes of swirling dead, and those who had never had a chance to live, were gone. Only Rae was there.

"Come close to the mirror, Daddy."

I backed up to it. I backed until the hot wounds that were Rae's eyes touched the cold glass and the wounds became hotter and hotter and Rae called out, "Ride me piggy, Daddy," and then I felt her weight on my back, not the weight of a six-year-old child or a teenage girl, but a great weight, like the world was on my shoulders and bearing down.

Leaping away from the mirror I went hopping and whooping about the room, same as I used to in the park. Around and around I went, and as I did, I glanced in the mirror. Astride me was Rae, lithe and naked, her red hair fanning around her as I spun. And when I whirled by the mirror again, I saw that she was six years old. Another spin and there was a skeleton with red hair, one hand held high, the jaws open and yelling, "Ride 'em, cowboy."

"How?" I managed, still bucking and leaping, giving Rae the ride of her life. She bent to my ear and I could feel her warm breath. "You want to know how I'm here, Daddy-dear? I'm here because you created me. Once you laid between Mother's legs and thrust me into existence, the two of you, with all the love there was in you. This time you thrust me into existence with your guilt and Mother's hate . Her thrusting needles, your arching back. And now I've come back for one last ride, Daddy-o. Ride, you bastard, ride."

All the while I had been spinning, and now as I glimpsed the mirror, I saw wall to wall faces, weaving in, weaving out, like smiling stars, and all those smiles opened wide and words came out in chorus, "Where were you when they dropped The Big One?"

Each time I spun and saw the mirror again, it was a new scene. Great flaming winds scorching across the world, babies turning to fleshy jello, heaps of charred bones, brains boiling out of the heads of men and women like backed-up toilets overflowing, The Almighty, Glory Hallelujah, Ours Is Bigger Than Yours Bomb hurtling forward, the mirror going mushroom white, then clear, and me, spinning, Rae pressed tight against my back, melting like butter on a griddle, evaporating into the eye wounds on my back, and finally me alone, collapsing to the floor beneath the weight of the world.

Mary never awoke.

The vines outsmarted me.

A single strand found a crack downstairs somewhere and wound up the steps and slipped beneath the door that led into the tower. Mary's bunk was not far from the door, and in the night, while I slept and later while I spun in front of the mirror and lay on the floor before it, it made its way to Mary's bunk, up between her legs, and entered her sex effortlessly.

I suppose I should give the vine credit for doing what I had not been able to do in years, Mr. Journal, and that's enter Mary. Oh God, that's a funny one, Mr. Journal. Real funny. Another little scientist joke. Let's make that a mad scientist joke, what say? Who but a madman would play with the lives of human beings by constantly trying to build the bigger and better boom machine? So what of Rae, you ask?

I'll tell you. She is inside me. My back feels the weight. She twists in my guts like a corkscrew. I went to the mirror a moment ago, and the tattoo no longer looks like it did. They eyes have turned to crusty sores and the entire face looks like a scab. It's as if the bile that made up my soul, the unthinking, nearsightedness, the guilt that I am, has festered from inside and spoiled the picture with pustule bumps, knots and scabs.

To put it in layman's terms, Mr. Journal, my back is infected. Infected with what I am. A blind, senseless fool.

The wife?

Ah, the wife. God, how I loved that woman. I have not really touched her in years, merely felt those wonderful hands on my back as she jabbed the needles home, but I never stopped loving her. It was not a love that glowed anymore, but it was there, though hers for me was long gone and wasted.

This morning when I got up from the floor, the weight of Rae and the world on my back, I saw the vine coming up from beneath the door and stretching over to her. I yelled her name. She did not move. I ran to her and saw it was too late. Before I could put a hand on her, I saw her flesh ripple and bump up, like a den of mice were nesting under a quilt. The vines were at work. (Out goes the old guts, in goes the new vines.)

There was nothing I could do for her.

I made a torch out of a chair leg and old quilt, set fire to it, burned the vine from between her legs, watched it retreat, smoking, under the door. Then I got a board, nailed it along the bottom, hoping it would keep others out for at least a little while. I got one of the twelve-gauges and loaded it. It's on the desk

beside me, Mr. Journal, but even I know I'll never use it. It was just something to do, as Jacobs said when he killed and ate the whale. Something to do. I can hardly write anymore. My back and shoulders hurt so bad. It's the weight of Rae and the world.

I've just come back from the mirror and there is very little left of the tattoo. Some blue and black ink, a touch of red that was Rae's hair. It looks like an abstract painting now. Collapsed design, running colors. It's real swollen. I look like the hunchback of Notre Dame.

What am I going to do, Mr. Journal?

Well, as always, I'm glad you asked that. You see, I've thought this out.

I could throw Mary's body over the railing before it blooms. I could do that.

Then I could doctor my back. It might even heal, though I doubt it. Rae wouldn't let that happen, I can tell you now. And I don't blame her. I'm on her side. I'm just a walking dead man and have been for years.

I could put the shotgun under my chin and work the trigger with my toes, or maybe push it with the very pen I'm using to create you, Mr. Journal. Wouldn't that be neat? Blow my brains to the ceiling and sprinkle you with my blood. But as I said, I loaded the gun because it was something to do. I'd never use it on myself or Mary.

You see, I want Mary. I want her to hold Rae and me one last time like she used to in the park. And she can. There's a way.

I've drawn all the curtains and made curtains out of blankets for those spots where there aren't any. It'll be sunup soon and I don't want that kind of light in here. I'm writing this by candlelight and it gives the entire room a warm glow. I wish I had wine. I want the atmosphere to be just right.

Over on Mary's bunk she's starting to twitch. Her neck is swollen where the vines have congested and are writhing toward their favorite morsel, the brain.

Pretty soon the rose will bloom (I hope she's one of the bright yellow ones ' yellow was her favorite color and she wore it well) and Mary will come for me.

When she does, I'll stand with my naked back to her. The vines will whip out and cut me before she reaches me, but I can stand it. I'm used to pain. I'll pretend the thorns are Mary's needles. I'll stand that way until she folds her dead arms around me and her body pushes up against the wound she made in my back, the wound that is our daughter Rae. She'll hold me so the vines and the proboscis can do their work. And while she holds me, I'll grab her fine hands and push them against my chest, and it will be we three again, standing against the world, and I'll close my eyes and delight in her soft, soft hands one last time.

(For Ardath Mayhar)

"Hell Through A Windshield" by Joe R. Lansdale

We are drive-in mutants.
We are not like other people.
We are sick.
We are disgusting.
We believe in blood.
In breasts.
And in beasts.
We believe in Kung Fu City.
If life had a vomit meter.
We'd be off the scale.
As long as one single drive-in remains
On the planet Earth.
We will party like jungle animals.
We will boogie till we puke.
Heads will roll.
The drive-in will never die.
Amen.

--(The Drive-In Oath, by Joe Bob Briggs)

The drive-in theater may have been born in New Jersey, but it had the good sense to come to Texas to live. Throughout the fifties and sixties it thrived here like a fungus on teenage lusts and families enticed by the legendary DOLLAR NIGHT or Two DOLLARS A CARLOAD.

And even now--though some say the drive-in has seen its heyday in the more populated areas, you can drive on in there any night of the week-particularly Special Nights and Saturday-and witness a sight that sometimes makes the one on the screen boring on comparison.

You'll see lawn chairs planted in the backs of pickups, or next to speakers, with cowboys and cowgirls planted in the chairs, beer cans growing out of their fists, and there'll be the sputterings of barbecue pits and the aromas of cooking meats rising up in billows of smoke that slowly melts into the clear Texas sky.

Sometimes there'll be folks with tape decks whining away, even as the movie flickers across the three-story screen and their neighbors struggle to hear the crackling speaker dialogue over ZZ Top doing "The Tube Snake Boogie." There'll be lovers sprawled out on blankets spread between two speaker posts, going at it so hot and heavy they ought to just go on and charge admission. And there's plenty of action in the cars too. En route to the concession stand a discerning eye can spot the white moons of un-Levied butts rising and falling to a steady, rocking rhythm just barely contained by well-greased shocks and four-ply tires. What you're witnessing is a bizarre subculture in action. One that may in fact be riding the crest of a new wave.

Or to put it another way: Drive-ins are crazy, but they sure are fun.

The drive-in theater is over fifty years old, having been spawned on Camden, New Jersey June 6th, 1933 by a true visionary--Richard Milton Hollingshead. Camden, as you may know, was the last home of Walt Whitman, and when one considers it was the death place of so prestigious an American poet, it is only fitting that it be the birthplace of such a poetic and all-American institution as the drive-in theater Or as my dad used to call them, "the outdoor picture show."

Once there was over 4,000 drive-ins in the United States, now there are about 3,000, and according to some experts, they are dropping off fast. However, in Texas there is a re-emergence and new interest in the passion pits of old. They have become nearly as sacred as the armadillo.

The Lone Star State alone has some 209 outdoor theaters in operation, and many of these are multi-screen jobs with different movies running concurrently alongside one another. Not long ago, Gordon McLendon, "The Drive-in Business King," erected the 145 in Houston, a drive-in capable of holding up to three thousand automobiles. In fact, it claims to be the biggest drive-in in existence.

Why does the drive-in thrive in Texas when it's falling off elsewhere? Three reasons.

(1) Climate. Generally speaking, Texas has a pretty comfortable climate year round. (2) A car culture. Texas is the champion state for automobile registration, and Texans have this thing about their cars.

The automobile has replaced the horse not only as a mode of transportation, but as a source of mythology. If the Texan of old was supposedly half-human and half-horse, the modern Texan is half-human and half-automobile. Try and separate a Texan from his car, or mass transit that sucker against his will, and you're likely to end up kissing his grillwork at sixty-five miles an hour. (3) Joe Bob Briggs.

Okay, start the background music. Softly please, a humming version of "The Eyes of Texas." And will all true Texans please remove your hats while we have 5 short discussion of Joe Bob Briggs, The Patron Saint of Texas Drive-Ins, He Who Drives Behind The Speaker Rows, and columnist for The Dallas Times Herald. In fact, his column, "Joe Bob Goes to the Drive-in," is the most popular feature in the paper. As it should be, because Joe Bob--who may be the pseudonym for the Herald's regular film critic John Bloom--don't talk no bullcorn, and he don't bother with "hardtop" movie reviews. He's purely a drive-in kind of guy, and boy does he have style.

Here's an example, part of a review for The Evil Dead: "Five teenagers become Spam-in-a-cabin when they head for the woods and start turning into flesh-eating zombies. Asks a lot of moral questions, like 'If your girlfriend turns zombie on you, what do you do? Carve her into itty-bitty pieces or look the other way?' One girl gets raped by the woods. Not in the woods. By the woods. The only way to kill zombies:

Total dismemberment. This one could make Saw eligible for the Disney Channel." Single-handedly, with that wild column of his--which not only reports on movies, but on the good times and bad times of Joe Bob himself--he has given the drive-in a new mystique. Or to be more exact, made the non-drive-in goers aware of it, and reminded the rest of us just how much fun the outdoor picture show can be. Joe Bob's popularity has even birthed a yearly Drive-in Movie Festival--somewhat sacrilegiously held indoors this year--that has been attended in the past by such guests as Roger Corman, King Of The B's, and this year by "Big Steve," known to some as Stephen King. (If you movie watchers don't recognize the name, he's a writer-feller) "Big Steve" was given the solemn honor of leading off the 1984 ceremonies with Joe Bob's "drive-in oath" and arrived wearing his JOE BOB BRIGGS IS A PERSONAL FRIEND OF MINE T-shirt.

The festival has also sported such features as The Custom Car Rally, Ralph the Diving Pig (sure hate I missed the boy's act), the stars of The Texas Chainsaw Massacre, Miss Custom Body of 1983, "unofficial custom bodies" and Joe Bob his own self. And last, but certainly not least, along with this chic gathering, a number of new movies like Bloodsuckers From Outer Space and Future-Kill made their world premieres.

What more could you ask from Joe Bob?

Kill the music. Hats on.

The drive-ins I grew up with went by a number of names: THE APACHE, THE rim PINES, THE RIVERROAD being a few examples. And though they varied somewhat in appearance, basically they were large lots filled with speaker posts--many of which were minus their speakers, due to absent-minded patrons driving off while they were still hooked to their windows, or vandals--a concession stand, a screen at least three stories high (sometimes six), a swing, see-saw and merry-go-round up front for the kiddies, all this surrounded by an ugly six-foot moon-shimmering tin fence.

They all had the same bad food at the concessions. Hot dogs that tasted like rubber hoses covered in watery mustard, popcorn indistinguishable from the cardboard containers that held it, drinks that were mostly water and ice, and candy so old the worms inside were dead either of old age or sugar diabetes. And they all came with the same restroom. It was as if THE APACHE, RIVERROAD and TWIN PINES were equipped with warping devices that activated the moment you stepped behind the wooden "modesty fence." Suddenly, at the speed of thought, you were whisked away to a concrete bunker with floors either so tacky your shoes stuck to it like cat hairs to honey, or so flooded in water you needed skis to make it to the urinals or the john, the latter of which was forever doorless, the hinges hanging like frayed tendons. And both of these public conveniences were invariably stuffed full of floating cigarette butts, candy wrappers and used prophylactics.

Rather than take my life into my own hands in these rather seedy enclosures, I often took my chances battling constipation or urinating into a Coke cup and pouring the prize out the window. The idea of standing over one of those odoriferous urinals--and there was always this item of crayoned wisdom above them: REMEMBER, CRABS CAN POLE VAULT--and having some ugly, fuzzy, multi-legged and ravenous leap out on me was forever foremost in my mind. Nor did I find those initialed and graffiti-carved seats--when there were seats at all--the more inviting. I figured that no matter how precariously I might perch myself, some nameless horror from the pits of sewerdom would find access to that part of my anatomy I most prized.

In spite of these unpleasantries, come Saturday night, a bunch of us guys--the ones who couldn't get dates--would cruise over there, stopping a quarter mile outside the place to stuff one member of our party in the trunk, this always the fellow who had the least money to pool toward entrance fees, having blown it on beer, Playboy magazines and prophylactics that would certainly rot in his wallet. Then we would drive up to the pay booth and promptly be asked, "Got anybody in the trunk?"

Obviously we were a suspicious-looking lot, but we never admitted to a body in the trunk, and for the same reason we were never forced to open up. After we had emphatically denied that we would even consider it, and the ticket seller had eyed us over for a while, trying to break our resolve, he would take our money and we would drive inside.

My Plymouth Savoy was rigged so that the man in the trunk could push the back seat from the inside, and it would fold down, allowing our unthrifty, and generally greasy, contortionist to join our party.

That Savoy, what a car, what a drive-in machine. What a death trap. It took a two man crew to drive it. The gas pedal always stuck to the floor, and when you came whizzing up to a red light you had to jerk your foot off the gas, go for the brake and yell "Pedal." Then your copilot would dive for the floorboards, grab the pedal and yank it up just in time to keep us from plowing broadside into an unsuspecting motorist. However, that folding back seat made the sticking pedal seem like a minor liability, and the Savoy was a popular auto with the drive-in set.

The drive-in gave me many firsts. The first sexual action I ever witnessed was there, and I don't mean on the screen. At the APACHE the front row was somewhat

on an incline, and if the car in front of you was parked just right, and you were lying on the roof of your car, any activity going on in the back seat of the front row car was quite visible to you, providing it was a moonlit night and the movie playing was a particularly bright one.

The first sexual activity that included me, also occurred at a drive-in, but that is a personal matter, and enough said.

The first truly vicious fight I ever saw was at the RIVERROAD A fellow wearing a cowboy hat got into some kind of a shindig with a hatless fellow right in front of my Savoy. I've no idea what started the fight, but it was a good one, matched only by a live Championship Wrestling match at the Cottonbowl.

Whatever the beef, the fellow with the hat was the sharper of the two, as he had him a three foot length of two-by-four, and all the other fellow had was a bag of popcorn. Even as the zombies of The Night of the Living Dead shuffled across the screen, The Hat laid a lick on Hatless's noggin that sounded like a beaver's tail slapping water. Popcorn flew and the fight was on.

The Hat got Hatless by the lapel and proceeded to knock knots on his head faster than you could count them, and though Hatless was game as all-get-out, he couldn't fight worth a damn. His arms flew over The Hat's shoulders and slapped his back like useless whips of spaghetti, and all the while he just kept making The Hat madder by calling him names and making rude accusations about the man's family tree and what members of it did to one another when the lights were out. For a while there, The Hat was as busy as the lead in a samurai movie, but finally the rhythm of his blows--originally akin to a Ginger Baker drum solo--died down, and this indicated to me that he was getting tired, and had I been Hatless, that would have been my cue to scream sharply once, then flop at The Hat's feet like a dying fish, and finally pretend to go belly up right there in the lot. But his boy either had the I.Q. of a can of green beans, or was in such a near-comatose state from the beating, he didn't have the good sense to shut up. In fact his language became so vivid, The Hat found renewed strength and delivered his blows in such close proximity that the sound of wood to skull resembled the angry rattling of a diamond back snake.

Finally, Hatless tried to wrestle The Hat to the ground and then went tumbling over my hood, shamelessly knocking loose my prized hood ornament, a large, in-flight swan that lit up when the lights were on, and ripping off half of The Hat's cowboy shirt in the process.

A bunch of drive-in personnel showed up then and tried to separate the boys. That's when the chili really hit the fan. There were bodies flying all over that lot as relatives and friends of the original brawlers suddenly dealt themselves in. One guy got crazy and ripped a speaker and wire smooth off a post and went at anyone and everybody with it. And he was good too. Way he whipped that baby about made Bruce Lee and his nunchukas look like a third grade carnival act. While this went on, a fellow in the car to the right of us, oblivious to the action on the lot, wrapped up in Night of the Living Dead, and probably polluted on Thunderbird wine, was yelling in favor of the zombie, "Eat 'em, eat 'em!" Finally the fight moved on down the lot and eventually dissipated. About half an hour later I looked down the row and saw Hatless crawling out from under a white Cadillac festooned with enough curb feelers to make it look like a centipede. He sort of went on his hands and knees for a few yards, rose to a squatting run, and disappeared into a winding maze of automobiles. Them drive-in folks, what kidders.

The drive-in is also the source for my darkest fantasy--I refrain from calling it a nightmare, because after all these years it has become quite familiar, a sort of grim friend. For years now I've been waiting for this particular dream to continue, take up a new installment, but it always ends on the same enigmatic notes.

Picture this: a crisp summer night in Texas. A line of cars winding from the pay booth of a drive-in out to the highway, then alongside it for a quarter mile or better. Horns are honking, children are shouting, mosquitoes are buzzing. I'm in a pickup with two friends who we'll call Dave and Bob. Bob is driving. On the rack behind us is a twelve gauge shotgun and a baseball bat, "a badass persuader." A camper is attached to the truck bed, and in the camper we've got lawn chairs, coolers of soft drinks and beer, enough junk food to send a hypoglycemic to the stars.

What a night this is. Dusk to Dawn features, two dollars a carload. Great movies like The Tool Box Murders, Night of the Living Dead, Day of the Dead, Zombies and I Dismember Mama.

We finally inch our way past the pay booth and dart inside. It's a magnificent drive-in, like the 145, big enough for 3,000 cars or better. Empty paper cups, popcorn boxes, chili and mustard-stained hot dog wrappers blow gently across the lot like paper tumbleweeds. And there, standing stark-white against a jet-black sky is a portal into another dimension; the six story screen.

We settle back on a place near the front, about five rows back. Out come the lawn chairs, the coolers and the eats. Before the first flick sputters on and Cameron Mitchell opens that ominous box of tools, we're through an economy size bag of "tater" chips, a quart of Coke and a half a sack of chocolate cookies. The movie starts, time is lost as we become absorbed in the horrifyingly campy delights of Tool Box. We get to the part where Mitchell is about to use the industrial nailer on a young lady he's been watching shower, and suddenly--there is a light, so red and bright the images on the screen fade. Looking up, we see a great, crimson comet hurtling towards us. Collision with the drive-in is imminent. Or so it seems, then, abruptly the comet smiles. Just splits down the middle to show a mouth full of grinning, jagged teeth not too unlike a power saw blade. It seems that instead of going out of life with a bang, we may go out with a crunch. The mouth gets wider, and the comet surprises us by whipping up, dragging behind it a fiery tail that momentarily blinds us.

When the crimson washes from our eyeballs and we look around, all is as before. At first glance anyway. Because closer observation reveals that everything outside the drive-in, the highway, the trees, the tops of houses and buildings that had been visible above the surrounding tin fence, are gone. There is only blackness, and we're talking BLACKNESS here, the kind of dark that makes fudge pudding look pale. It's as if the drive-in has been ripped up by the roots and miraculously stashed in limbo somewhere. But if so, we are not injured in any way, and the electricity still works. There are lights from the concession stand, and the projector continues to throw the image of Tool Box on the screen. About this time a guy in a station wagon, fat wife beside him, three kids in the back, panics, guns the car to life and darts for the EXIT. His lights do not penetrate the blackness, and as the car hits it, inch by inch it is consumed by the void. A moment later nothing.

A cowboy with a hatful of toothpicks and feathers gets out of his pickup and goes over there. He stands on the tire-burst spears, extends his arm . . . And never in the history of motion pictures or real life have I heard such a scream. He flops back, his arm gone from the hand to elbow. He rolls on the ground. By the time we get over there the rest of his arm is collapsing, as if bone and tissue have gone to mush. His hat settles down on a floppy mess that a moment before was his head. His whole body folds in and oozes out of his clothes in what looks like sloppy vomit. I carefully reach out and take hold of one of his boots, upend it, a loathsome mess pours out and strikes the ground with a plopping sound.

We are trapped in the drive-in.

Time goes by, no one knows how much. It's like the Edgar Rice Burroughs stories about Pellucidar. Without the sun or moon to judge by, time does not exist.

Watches don't help either. They've all stopped. We sleep when sleepy, eat when

hungry. And the movies flicker on. No one even suggests cutting them off. Their light and those of the concession stand are the only lights, and should we extinguish them, we might be lost forever in a void to match the one outside of the drive-in fence.

At first people are great. The concession folks bring out food. Those of us who have brought food, share it. Everyone is fed.

But as time passes, people are not so great. The concession stand people lock up and post guards. My friends and I are down to our last kernels of popcorn and we're drinking the ice and water slush left in the coolers. The place smells of human waste, as the restrooms have ceased to function altogether. Gangs are forming, even cults based on the movies. There is a Zombie Cult that stumbles and staggers in religious mockery of the "dead" on the screen. And with the lack of food an acute problem, they have taken to human sacrifice and cannibalism. Bob takes down the shotgun. I take down the baseball bat. Dave has taken to wearing a hunting knife he got out of the glove box.

Rape and murder are wholesale, and even if you've a mind to, there's not much you can do about it. You've got to protect your little stretch of ground, your automobile, your universe. But against our will we are forced into the role of saviours when a young girl runs against our truck while fleeing her mother, father and older brother. Bob jerks her inside the truck, holds the family—who are a part of the Zombie Cult and run as if they are cursed with a case of the rickets—at bay with the shotgun. They start to explain that as the youngest member of the family, it's only right that she give herself up to them to provide sustenance. A chill runs up my hack. Not so much because it is a horrible thing they suggest, but because I too am hungry, and for a moment they seem to make good sense.

Hunger devours the family's common sense, and the father leaps forward. The shotgun rocks against Bob's shoulder and the man goes down, hit in the head, the way you have to kill zombies. Then the mother is on me, teeth and nails. I swing the bat and down she goes, thrashing at my feet like a headless chicken. Trembling, I hold the bat before me. It is caked with blood and brains. I fall back against the truck and throw up. On the screen the zombies are feasting on bodies from an exploded pickup.

Rough for the home team. Time creeps by. We are weak. No food. No water. We find ourselves looking at the rotting corpses outside our pickup far too long. We catch the young girl eating their remains, but we do nothing. Somehow, it doesn't seem so bad. In fact, it looks inviting. Food right outside the truck, on the ground, ready for the taking.

But when it seems we are going to join her, there is a red light in the sky. The comet is back, and once again it swoops down, collision looks unavoidable, it smiles with its jagged teeth, peels up and whips its bright tail. And when the glow burns away from our eyes, it is daylight and there is a world outside the drive-in.

A sort of normalcy returns. Engines are tried. Batteries have been unaffected by the wait. Automobiles start up and begin moving toward the EXIT in single file, as if nothing has ever happened.

Outside, the highway we come to is the same, except the yellow line has faded and the concrete has buckled in spots. But nothing else is the same. On either side of the highway is a great, dark jungle. It looks like something out of a lost world movie.

As we drive along--we're about the fifth automobile in line--we see something move up ahead, to the right. A massive shape steps out of the foliage and onto the highway. It is a Tyrannosaurus Rex covered in bat-like parasites, their wings opening and closing slowly, like contented butterflies sipping nectar from a flower.

The dinosaur does nothing. It gives our line of metal bugs the once over, crosses the highway and is enveloped by the jungle again.

The caravan starts up once more. We drive onward into this prehistoric world split by a highway out of our memories.

I'm riding shotgun and I glance in the wing-mirror on my side. In it I can see the drive-in screen, and though the last movie should still be running, I can't make out any movement there. It looks like nothing more than an oversized slice of Wonder Bread.

Fade out.

That's the dream. And even now when I go to a drive-in, be it the beat up LUMBERJACK here with its cheap, tin screen, or anywhere else, I find myself occasionally glancing at the night sky, momentarily fearing that out of the depths of space there will come a great, red comet that will smile at me with a mouthful of sawblade teeth and whip its flaming tail.

Postscript

The part of this article dealing with my continuing dream, eventually became my novel, *The Drive-In: A B Movie with Blood and Popcorn*, and later led to a sequel, *The Drive-In 2: Not Just One of Them Sequels*, and a third is in the mill, due whenever I get around to finishing it.

As to another matter, I have to reveal how poor a prophet I was concerning matters pertaining to the drive-in.

Almost immediately after I wrote my article, Joe Bob Briggs (John Bloom), was fired from *The Dallas Times Herald*. This was due to a scathing bit of inspired satire he wrote in his column. Satire that was taken literally, and led to him branching out on his own to become even more popular and successful than ever before, not only column-wise, but in books, and as a film-host. He also got a few bit acting parts out of it. So, sometimes, there is justice.

But for the drive-in, alas, there was no justice. Not even in Texas.

It wasn't making a comeback after all. It was merely screaming a death scream so loud I thought it was the voice of triumph. Video and cable gave it the coup de grace, and I have not driven past a drive-in m years that isn't closed or has been turned into some other enterprise, like *THE REDLAND DRIVE-IN* near me. It tried to hang on by showing porno movies, then finally, just said "the hell with it," and became a metal scrap yard. Probably best. It lost the spirit of the drive-in long before it ceased being one.

THE LUABEEJACK, formerly down the road from me, is also gone, and a new jail stan4s on the spot where many a lover got their first dose of wet romance, or perhaps their first dose of clap. Where once cars rocked, cons now pull their meat come late at night, or spend their time trying to figure on that big jail break.

The pole and sign that once held the humble LUMBERJACK drive-in marquee is still there, but instead of reading *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *Night of the Living Dead*, it announces that this is the local jail, and buddy, ain't nothing show'n.

Kida sad, really.

But hey, the spirit of the drive-in is still with us. Even if it is in video boxes, or weekends at festivals celebrating the drive-in.

Joe Bob was right. "The drive-in will never die." Not really.

So, rent a low-budget gem. Turn out the lights. Get some popcorn. Get your best girl or guy, and one of you sit on the left side of the couch like you would if you were in the car, and the other, well, slide on over there close, and when you get to the slow part, like where the scientist is talking some bull about how the Z-ray works, maybe you could neck a little or do something a little more ambitious. Because, hell, even if you are indoors, if you've got the right movie on the tube, got the right state of mind about you, you're at the goddamned drive-in.

Enjoy.

And remember, when it comes to prophecy, Nostradamus, I'm not.

(For T.E.D. Klein)