

THE

BY
STEPHEN KING



T H E P L A N T

by Stephen King

part one of a novel in progress

PHILTRUM PRESS

Bangor, Maine 2000

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January 4, 1981

Zenith House, Publishers
490 Park Avenue South
New York, New York 10017

Gentlemen:

I have written a book that you might want to publish. It is very good. It is all scary and all *true*. It is called *True Tales of Demon Infestations*. I know all the things in it from first hand. Contents include stories from "The World of Voodoo," "The World of the Aether," and "The World of the Living Dead." I include recipes for some potions as well, but these could be "censored" if you felt they were too dangerous although for most people they won't work at all and in a chapter called "The World of Spells" I explain why.

I am offering this book for publication *now*. I am willing to sell *all rights* (except for movie rights; I will direct the film myself). There are photos if you want them. If you are interested in this book (no other publisher has seen it, I am sending it to you because you are the publishers of *Bloody Houses*, which was quite good), please answer with the "SASE" I have enclosed. I will send the manuscript with return postage in case you don't like it (or don't understand it). Please respond as soon as possible. I think "multiple submissions" are unethical, but I want to sell *True Tales of Demon Infestations* as soon as possible. In this book there is some "scary s**t!" If you know what I mean.

Yours sincerely,

Carlos Detweiler
147 E. 14th St., Apt. E
Central Falls, R.I. 40222

interoffice memo

TO: Roger
FROM: John
RE: Submissions / January 11-15th, 1981

A new year, and the slush in the slush pile grows ever deeper. I don't know how the rest of your toiling editorial minions are doing, but I continue to roll the existential rock of America's unpublished aspiring—at least my share of it. All of which is only to say that I read my share of crud this week (and no, I haven't been smoking what W. C. Fields called “the illicit spon-duix,” either—I'm just having a prolux day).

With your concurrence, I'm returning 15 book-length manuscripts which arrived unsolicited (see *Returns*, next page), 7 “outlines and sample chapters” and 4 unidentifiable blobs that look a bit like typescripts. One of them is a book of something called “gay event poetry” called *Suck My Big Black Cock*, and another, called *L'il Lolita*, is about a man in love with a first grader. I think. It's written in pencil and it's hard to tell for sure.

Also with your concurrence, I'm asking to see outline and sample chapters on 5 books, including the new bodice-ripper from that bad-tempered librarian in Minnesota (the authors never snoop in your files, do they, boss? Ordinarily it would be a flat submission, but the poor performance of *His Flaming Kisses* cannot be justified even by our horrible distribution set-up—any word on what's happening with United News Dealers, by the way?). Synopsis for your files (below).

Last, and probably least, I'm appending an odd little query letter from one Carlos Detweiller of Central Falls, Rhode Island. If I were back at Brown University, happily majoring in English, planning to write great novels, and laboring under the misapprehension that everyone who publishes must be brilliant or at least "real smart," I'd throw Mr. Detweiller's letter out at once. (Carlos Detweiller? I ask myself even now, as I rattle the keys of this ancient Royal—can that be a real name? Surely not!) Probably I'd use tongs to handle it, just in case the man's obvious dyslexia was catching.

But two years at Zenith House have changed me, Roger. The scales have fallen from my eyes. You don't really get heavyweights like Milton, Shakespeare, Lawrence, and Faulkner in perspective until you've lunched at Burger Heaven with the author of *Rats from Hell* or helped the creator of *Gash Me, My Darling* through her current writer's block. You come to realize that the great edifice of literature has one fuck of a lot more subbasements than you expected when you sneaked your first stroke-book up to your bedroom under your shirt (no I have *not* been smoking dope!).

So okay. This guy writes like a moderately bright third-grader (all declarative sentences—his letter has the panache of a heavysset guy walking downstairs in construction boots), but so does Olive Barker, and considering our creaky distribution system, her *Windhover* series has done quite well. The sentence in the first paragraph which says he knows all of these things "from first hand" suggests he's a ding-dong. You know that. His assertion that he's going to direct the movie suggests that he's a ding-dong with delusions of grandeur. I think we both know that. Further, I'd stake my last pair of skivvies (I'm wearing them, and mighty gray they are!) that, despite his disclaimer, every publisher in New York has seen *True Tales of Demon Infestations*. Loyalty to one's company can go only so far, chum; not even a moderately bright third-grader would *start* at Zenith House. I'd guess this letter has been patiently retyped and sent out by the indefatigable (and probably obsessed) Mr. Detweiller at least forty times, starting with Farrar, Straus & Giroux, or maybe even Alfred A. Knopf.

But I think there's a possibility—albeit an extremely thin one—that Mr.

Detweiller may have researched enough material to actually make a book. It would have to be rewritten, of course—his query letter makes that abundantly clear—and the title sucks, but we have several writers on our books who would be more than happy to do a little ghost-writing and pick up a quick \$600. (I saw you wince—make that \$400. Probably the indefatigable Olive Barker is the best of them. Also, I think Olive has a thing for Valium. Junkies work harder than normal people, boss, as I think you know. At least until they die, and Olive’s tough. She doesn’t look too good since her stroke—I hate the way the left side of her face just *hangs* there—but she *is* tough.)

As I say, the chances are thin, and it’s always a trifle risky to encourage an obvious crazy, because it is so difficult to get rid of them (remember General Hecksler and his book *Twenty Psychic Garden Flowers*? For a while I thought the man might be genuinely dangerous, and of course he was a large part of the reason poor old Bill Hammer quit). But actually, *Bloody Houses* did do pretty well, and the whole thing—blurry photos and all—came out of the New York Public Library. So you tell me: do we add ole Carlos to *Returns* or do we invite him to submit an outline and sample of chapters? Speak quickly, O great leader, for the fate of the universe hangs in the balance.

John

from the office of the editor-in-chief

TO: John Kenton

DATE: 1/15/81

MESSAGE: Dear Christ, Johnny! Do you *ever* shut up? That memo was *three pages long!* If you *weren't* stoned, you have no excuse. Reject the damn query letter, tell this Carlos What's-His-Face to send his manuscript, buy him a pony, whatever you want. But save me the mother-fucking thesis. I don't get them from Herb, Sandra, or Bill, and I don't want them from you. "Shovel the shit and shut up," how does that strike you as a motto?

Roger

P.S. Harlow Enders called again today—we're going to keep on drawing paychecks for another year at least, it seems. After that, who knows? He says there's going to be an "assessment of position" in June, and "a total review of Zenith's overall position in the market" next January—I construe those two fulsome phrases to mean we could be for sale next January unless our market position improves, and given our current distribution system, I don't see how it can. My head aches. I think I may have a brain tumor. Please don't send me any more long memos.

r.

P.P.S. *L'il Lolita* is actually a pretty good title, don't you think? We could commission it. I'm thinking maybe Mort Yeager, he's got a touch for that sort of thing. Remember *Teenage Lingerie Show*? The girl in *L'il Lolita* could be eleven, I think—wasn't the original Lolita twelve?

interoffice memo

TO: Roger
FROM: John
RE: Possible brain tumor

Sounds more like a tension headache to me. Take four Quaaludes and call me in the morning. By the way, Mort Yeager's in jail. Receiving stolen property, I think.

John

from the office of the editor-in-chief

TO: John Kenton
DATE: 1/16/81

MESSAGE: Don't you have any work to do?

Roger

interoffice memo

TO: Roger
FROM: John
RE: Merciless huckstering by insensitive superior

Yes, I'll write a letter to Carlos Detweiler, next year's National Book Award winner.

John

p.s.—Don't bother to thank me.

January 16, 1981

Mr. Carlos Detweiller
147 E. 14th Street, Apt. E
Central Falls, Rhode Island 40222

Dear Mr. Detweiller,

Thank you for your interesting letter of January 4th, with its brief but intriguing description of your book, *True Tales of Demon Infestations*. I would welcome a fuller synopsis of the book, and invite you to submit sample chapters (I would prefer chapters 1–3) with your synopsis. Both the synopsis and the sample chapters should be typed and double-spaced, on good quality white bond paper (*not* the erasable type; on erasable bond, whole chapters have a way of simply disappearing in the mail).

As you may know, Zenith is a small paperback house, and our lists currently match our size. Because we publish only originals, we look at a great many proposals; because we are small, the proposals we look at are, in most cases, returned because they do not seem to fit our current needs. All of which is my way of cautioning you not to construe this letter as a covenant to publish your book, because that is most definitely not the case. I would suggest you mail off the synopsis and sample chapters with the idea that we will ultimately reject your book. Then you will be prepared for the worst...or pleasantly surprised if we should find it is right for Zenith Books.

Finally, here are the standard *caveats* upon which our legal department (and the legal departments, so far as I know, of all publishing houses) insist: you must enclose adequate postage to ensure the return of your manuscript (but please do *not* send cash to cover postage), you should realize that

Zenith House accepts no responsibility for the safe return of your manuscript, although we'll take all reasonable care, and that, as I said above, our agreement to look is in no way a covenant to publish.

I look forward to hearing from you, and hope this finds you well.

Sincerely yours,

John Kenton
Associate Editor
Zenith House, Publishers
490 Park Avenue South
New York, New York 10017

interoffice memo

TO: Roger
FROM: John
RE: upon further study...

...I agree. I *do* write too much. Appended to this is a copy of my letter to Detweiller. Looks like a synopsis of *The Naked and the Dead*, doesn't it?

John

January 21, 1981

Mr. John Kenton, Editor
Zenith House, Publishers
490 Park Avenue South
New York, New York 10017

Dear Mr. Kenton,

Thank you for your letter of January 16th, in which I am of receipt of. I am sending off the entire manuscript of *True Tales of Demon Infestations* tomorrow. My money is low today, but my boss, Mrs. Barfield, owes me about five dollars from playing the lottery. Boy, she's a real sucker for those little cards you scratch off!

I would send you a "sinopsis proposal," as you say, but there is no sense of doing that when you can read it for yourself. As Mr. Keen in my building says, "Why describe a guest when you can see that guest." Mr. Keen does not really have any deep wisdom but he says something witty like that from time to time. I tried on one occasion to instruct him (Mr. Keen) in the "deeper mysteries" and he only said, "Each to his own, Carlos." I think you will probably agree that this is a silly comment which only *sounds* witty.

Because we don't have to worry about the "sinopsis proposal," I will spend my letter telling you something about me. I am twenty-three (although everyone says I look older). I work at the Central Falls House of Flowers for Mrs. Tina Barfield, who knew my mother when my mother was still alive. I was born on March 24th, which makes me an Aries. Aries people, as you know, are very psychic, but *wild*. Luckily for me, I am on the "cusp" of Pisces, which gives me the control I need to deal with the psychic universe. I have tried to explain all this to Mr. Keen, but he only says, "There's something *fishy* about you, Carlos," he is always joking like that and sometimes he can be very irritating.

But enough about me.

I have worked on *True Tales of Demon Infestations* for seven years (since age 16). Much of the information in it I got from the "OUIJA" board. I used to do the "OUIJA" with my mother, Mrs. Barfield, Don Barfield (he is now dead), and sometimes a friend of mine named Herb Hagstrom (also now dead, poor lad). Once in awhile others would join our little "circle" as well. Back in our Pawtucket days, my mother and I were quite "social!"

Some of the things we found out from “OUIJA” that are described in “blood-curdling detail” in *True Tales of Demon Infestations*: 1. The disappearance of Amelia Earhart was actually the work of *demons*! 2. Demonic forces at work on H.M.S. *Titanic*. 3. The “tulpa” that infested Richard Nixon. 4. There will be a President from ARKANSAS! 5. More.

Of course this is not “all.” “Don’t cool me off, I’m just gettin’ warmed up,” as Mr. Keen says. In many ways *True Tales of Demon Infestations* is like *The Necronomicon*, except that book was fictional (made up by H. P. Lovecraft, who also came from Rhode Island) and mine is *true*. I have amazing stories of black magic “covens” I have attended, by taking a potion and flying to these covens through the aether (I have recently been to covens in Omaha, Neb., Flagstaff, Ariz., and Fall River, Mass., without ever leaving “the comfort of my own home”). You are probably asking yourself, “Carlos, does this mean you are a student of the ‘black Arts’?” Yes, but don’t worry! After all, you are my “connection” to getting my book published, right?

As I told you in my last letter, there is also a chapter, “The World of Spells,” which most people will find very interesting. Working in a greenhouse and flower-shop has been especially good for working spells, as most require *fresh* herbs and plants. I am very good with plants, Mrs. Barfield would even tell you that, and I am now growing some very “strange” ones in the back of the greenhouse. It is probably too late to put them in this book, but as Mr. Keen sometimes tells me, “Carlos, the time to think about tomorrow is yesterday.” Maybe we could do a follow-up, *Strange Plants*. Let me have your thinking on this.

I will close now. Let me know when you get the manuscript (a postcard will do), and fill me in as soon as possible on royalty rates, etc. I can come to N.Y.C. any Wednesday on the train or Greyhound Bus if you want to have a “publishing luncheon” or come here and I will introduce you to Mrs. Barfield and Mr. Keen. I also have more photographs than the ones I am sending. I am happy to have you publish *True Tales of Demon Infestations*.

Your new author,

Carlos Detweiller
147 E. 14th St., Apt. E
Central Falls, R.I. 40222

interoffice memo

TO: Roger
FROM: John
RE: *True Tales of Demon Infestations*, by Carlos Detweiller

I just received a letter from Detweiller in regard to his book. I think that, in inviting him to submit, I made the biggest mistake of my editorial career. Oooh, my *skin* is starting to hurt...

from the office of the editor-in-chief

TO: John Kenton
DATE: 1/23/81

You made your bed. Now lie in it. After all, we can always get it ghost-written, right? Hee-hee.

Roger

January 25, 1981

Dear Ruth,

I feel almost as if I am in the middle of a goddam archetype—segments of the Sunday *New York Times* on the floor, an old Simon and Garfunkel album on the stereo, a Bloody Mary near at hand. Rain tapping on the glass, making it all the more cozy. Am I trying to make you homesick? Well... maybe a little. After all, the only thing the scene lacks is you, and you're probably paddling out beyond the line of breakers on a surfboard as I write these words (and wearing a bikini more non than existent).

Actually, I know you're working hard (probably not too hard) and I have every confidence that the PhD will be a world-beater. It's just that last week was a real horror show for me and I'm afraid there may be worse to come. Among other things, Roger accused me of prolixity (well, actually that was the week before, but you know what I mean), and I think I feel a real prolixity attack coming on. Try to bear with me, okay?

Basically, the problem is Carlos Detweiller (with a name like that he couldn't be anything *but* a problem, right?) He's going to be a short-term problem, is old Carlos, like poison ivy or a mouth sore, but as with those two things, *knowing* the problem is short-term doesn't ease the pain at all—it only keeps you from going insane.

Roger's right—I do tend toward prolixity, That's not the same as logorrhea, though. I'll try to avoid that.

The facts, then. As you know, every week we get thirty or forty “over the transom” submissions. An “over the transom” is anything addressed to “Gentlemen,” “Dear Sir,” or “To Whom It May Concern” —an unsolicited manuscript, in other words. Well...they're not *all* manuscripts; at least half of them are what us hip publishing guys call “query letters” (getting tired of

all these quotation marks yet? You should read Carlos's last letter—it would put you off them for life).

Anyway, they should *all* be query letters if this mudball lived up to its advance billing and really was the best of all possible worlds. Like 99% of the other publishers in New York, we no longer read unsolicited manuscripts—at least, that's our official policy. It says so in *Writer's Market*, *Writer's Yearbook*, *The Freelance*, and *The Pen Newsletter*. But apparently a lot of the aspiring Wolfes and Hemingways out there either don't read those things, don't believe them when they do read them, or simply ignore them—pick what sounds best to you.

In most cases we at least look at the slush, if it's typewritten (please don't breathe a word of this or we'll be inundated with manuscripts and Roger will probably shoot me—he's close now, I think). After all, *Ordinary People* came in over the transom and was first read by some editorial assistant who just happened to recognize that it was a hell of a story. But that, of course, was a million-to-one shot. I've never seen an unsolicited manuscript that looked like any more than the work of a bright fifth-grader. Of course Zenith House is hardly Alfred A. Knopf (our lead title for February is *Scorpions from Hell*, by Anthony L. K. LaScorbia, his follow-up to *Rats from Hell*), but still...you hope...

Detweiller, at least, followed protocol and sent a query letter. Herb Porter, Sandra Jackson, Bill Gelb, and I divvy those that came in the week before each Monday, and I had the misfortune to get this one. After reading it and mulling it over in my mind for all of twenty-five minutes (long enough to write Roger a long-winded memo on the subject that, under the circumstances, I'm probably never going to live down), I wrote Detweiller a letter asking him to submit a few sample chapters and an outline of the rest. And last Friday I got a letter that...well, short of sending it to you, I'm not sure how to describe it. He seems to be a twenty-three-year-old florist's assistant from Central Falls with a mother fixation and the conviction that he's attended witch's sabbats all over America while high on nutmeg, or something. I keep envisioning covens in Motel Six parking lots.

I thought ole Carlos's *True Tales of Demon Infestations* (I have gotten to the point where the title alone has the power to make me blanch and shudder in my shoes) might be some kid's adolescent research hobby—something that could be cut down and juiced up and sold to the *Amityville Horror* audience. His original letter was short, you see, and so full of these punchy little sentences—subject-predicate, subject-predicate, wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am—that one could believe that. And while I was never under any illusions that the man was a writer, I made an assumption of marginal literacy that turns out to be totally unfounded. In fact, just looking back at the original Detweiller letter makes me wonder how I ever could have scribbled the word *This has a certain half-baked charm* in the margin... and yet I see I did.

So what? You're saying. Big deal. Give the schmuck's manuscript a token look when it comes in and then send it back with a form letter—"Zenith House regrets," etc. That's right...but it's wrong, too. It's wrong because guys like Carlos Detweiller turn out all too often to be like a bad case of head-lice—easy to get, the very devil to get rid of. The worst of it is, I mentioned this very fact to Roger in my original overlong memo about the book, recalling General Hecksler and his *Twenty Psychic Garden Flowers*—you must remember me telling you how the General bombarded us with registered letters and phone calls after we rejected the book (you may not know, however, about the Mailgram Herb Porter got from him—in it Hecksler referred to Herb as "the designated Jew," a reference none of us has figured out to this day). It got steadily more abusive, and just before his sister had him committed to an asylum up-state, Sandra Jackson confessed to me that she was getting scared to go home alone—said she was afraid the General might jump out of a darkened doorway with a knife in one hand and a bouquet of psychic posies in the other. She said the hell of it was that none of us even knew what he *looked* like—we'd have needed a writing sample instead of a mug-shot to identify him.

And of course it all sounds funny now, but it *wasn't* funny when it happened—it was only after his sister wrote to us that we found out we were

actually one of his *lesser* obsessions, and of course he *did* turn out to be dangerous; just ask the Albany bus driver he stabbed.

I *knew* all that—even mentioned it to Roger—and still blithely went ahead and invited Detweiller to submit.

Of course, the other thing (and knowing me as you do, you’ve probably already guessed it) is simpler—it upsets me to have goofed in such grand style. If a gonzo illiterate like Carlos Detweiller could fool me this badly (I did think his book would have to be ghosted, true, but that is still no excuse), how much *good* stuff am I missing? Please don’t laugh; I’m serious. Roger is always ragging me about my “lit’ry aspirations,” and I suppose he has a right to (no progress on the novel this week if you’re interested—this Detweiller thing has depressed me too much), considering where the erstwhile head of the Brown University Milton Society ended up (he ended up encouraging Anthony LaScorbia to get right to work on his newest epic, *Wasps from Hell*, for one thing). But I think I would happily accept six months of hectoring letters from the obviously mad Carlos Detweiller, complete with veiled threats becoming a little less veiled with each missive, if I could only be assured that I hadn’t let something good slip by because of a totally deadened critical response.

I don’t know if this is more or less gloomy, but Roger mentioned in one of his Famous Memos that the Apex Corporation is going to give Zenith at least one more year to stop impersonating a dead dog and start showing some sales pizazz. He got the news from Harlow Enders, Apex’s chief New York comptroller, so presumably it’s accurate. I guess it’s good news when you consider that not everyone in publishing has got an office to go to these days, not even with a company whose biggest steady seller is the *Macho Man* series and whose biggest in-house problem isn’t spies making copies of manuscripts so that the movie studios can get an early look, but cockroaches in the water-cooler. It’s maybe not so good when you think of how little money we have to spend (maybe you *deserve* to get the Carlos Detweillers of the world when the most you can offer as an advance against royalties is \$1,800) and how shitty our distribution is. But no one at Apex understands

books or book marketing—I doubt if anyone there even knows why they picked up Zenith House last year in the first place, except that it happened to be for sale cheap. The chances that we can improve our position (2% of the paperback market, fifteenth in a field of fifteen) over the next year aren't very high. Maybe we'll end up getting married in California after all, huh, babe?

Well, enough doom and gloom—I'll mail this off and hopefully get back to work on my book tomorrow—and the next letter I write will be of the “chatty, newsy” variety. Shall I ask ole Carlos to send you flowers from Central Falls?

Forget I asked that.

My love,

John

p.s.—And tell your roommate that I don't believe manufacturing “the world's largest edible Frisbee” has any merit whatsoever, Guinness Book of Records or not. Why not ask her if she has any interest in trying for the world's record of sitting in a spaghetti-filled bathtub? First one to shatter it wins an all-expense-paid trip to Central Falls, Rhode Island...

J.

interoffice memo

TO: Roger
FROM: John
RE: *True Tales of Demon Infestations*, by Carlos Detweiller

Detweiller's manuscript came this morning, wrapped in shopping bags, secured with twine (much of it broken), and apparently typed by someone with terrible motor control problems. It is every bit as bad as I feared—abysmal, beyond hope.

That could and should be the end, but some of the photos he enclosed are *intensely* disturbing, Roger—and this is no joke, so please don't treat it as one. They are a weird conglomeration of black-and-white glossies (made with a Nikon, I would guess), color slides (ditto Nikon), and Polaroid SX-70 shots. *Most* of them are ridiculous—middle-aged men and women either got up in black bathrobes with cabalistic designs sewn on them or middle-aged men and women in nothing at all, displaying skinny shanks, dangling breasts, and pot bellies. They look exactly like what you'd guess the folks of Central Falls would imagine a Black Mass should look like (in some of them there is a much younger man who is probably Detweiller himself—this young man is always shot from the rear or with his face in deep shadow), and the locale appears, in most cases, to be a greenhouse—associated with the florist's where Detweiller told me he works, I imagine.

There's one packet of six photos labelled "The Sakred Seance" which show plasmic manifestations so obviously faked it's pitiful (what appears to be a balloon frosted with Day-Glo paint is floating from the medium's fingertips). A third packet of photos (all SX-70 shots) are textbook-style "exhibit" shots of various plants which purport to be deadly nightshade, belladonna, virgin's hair, etc. (impossible for me to tell if the labels are accurate—I can't tell a maple tree from a ponderosa pine without help; Ruth would probably know).

Okay, the disturbing part. Some of the photos (four, to be completely accurate) in the “Black Mass” scenes purport to show a human sacrifice—*and it looks to me as if maybe they really did kill someone*. The first photo shows an old man with an extremely realistic expression of terror on his face lying spread-eagled on a table in the greenhouse I mentioned. Several people in hokey robes are holding him down. The young man I presume to be Carlos Detweiller is standing on the left, naked, with what looks like a Bowie knife. The second shows the knife plunging into the old fellow’s chest; in the third, the man I presume to be Detweiller is reaching into the chest cavity; in the last he is holding up a dripping thing for the others to look at. The dripping thing looks very much like a human heart.

The pictures could be complete hokum, and I’d be the first to admit it—a half-decent special effects man could cobble up something like this, I suppose, especially in stills...but the efforts to mislead in the other photos are so painfully obvious that I wonder if that can be.

Just glancing at them is enough to make me want to whoops my cookies, Roger—what if we’ve stumbled onto a bunch of people who are really practicing human sacrifice? Mass murder, perhaps? I’m nauseated, but right now I’m more scared than anything else. I could have told you all of this in person, of course, but it seemed important to get this down in writing, just in case it does turn out to be a legal matter. Christ, I wish I’d never even heard of Carlos Fucking Detweiller.

Come down and take a look at these as soon as you possibly can, okay? I just don’t know if I should pick up the phone and call the police in Central Falls or not.

John

END OF THE PLANT, PART ONE



T H E P L A N T

by Stephen King

part two of a novel in progress

P H I L T R U M P R E S S

Bangor, Maine 2000



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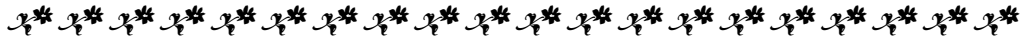
S Y N O P S I S

JOHN KENTON, who attended Brown University, majored in English, and was president of the Literary Society, has had a rude awakening in the real world: he is one of four editors at Zenith House, a down-at-the-heels paperback publisher in New York.

Zenith has 2% of the paperback market and is fifteenth in a field of fifteen paperback publishers. All of the Zenith House personnel are worried that Apex, the parent corporation, may decide to put the house on the market if there isn't a sales turnaround in the calendar year 1981...and due to Zenith's poor distribution network, that seems unlikely.

On January 4th of 1981, Kenton receives a query letter from CARLOS DETWEILLER, of Central Falls, Rhode Island. Detweiller, twenty-three, works in the Central Falls House of Flowers, and is hawking a book he has written called *True Tales of Demon Infestations*. It's obvious to Kenton that Detweiller has absolutely no talent as a writer...but then, neither do most of the writers on Zenith's roster (biggest seller: the *Macho Man* series). He encourages Detweiller to submit sample chapters and an outline. Instead, Detweiller submits the work entire, which is even more abysmal than Kenton—who thought that the book could perhaps be cut down, ghost-written, and juiced up for *The Amityville Horror* audience—would have believed in his worst nightmares. Yet the worst nightmare of all is in the photographs Detweiller encloses. Some are painfully faked pictures of a séance in progress, but a series of four show a gruesomely realistic human sacrifice, in which an old man's chest is cut open and a dripping human heart is pulled out of the incision.

The story, which is told in epistolary style, resumes with a letter from John Kenton to his fiancée, RUTH TANAKA, who is working on her PhD in California.



January 30, 1981

Dear Ruth,

Yes, it was good to talk to you last night, too. Even when you're on the other side of the country, I don't know what I'd do without you. I think this has been just about the worst month of my life, and without you to talk to and your warm support, I don't know how I could have gotten through it. The initial terror and revulsion of those pictures was bad, but I've discovered I can deal with terror—and Roger may be locked in his impersonation of some crusty editor in a Damon Runyon story (or maybe it's that Ben Hecht play I'm thinking of), but the funny thing is, he really does have a heart of gold. When all that shit came down, he was like a rock—his support never wavered.

Terror is bad, but the feeling that you've been a horse's ass is a lot worse, I've found. When you're afraid, you can fall back on your bravery. When you're humiliated, I guess you just have to call up your fiancée long distance and bawl on her shoulder. All I'm saying, I guess, is thanks—thanks for being there and thanks for not laughing...or calling me a hysterical old woman jumping at shadows.

I had one final phone-call last night after I'd talked to you—from Chief Barton Iverson of the Central Falls P.D. He was also remarkably forgiving, but before I give you the final gist of it, let me try to clarify the whole sequence of events following my reception of the Detweiller manuscript last Wednesday. Your confusion was justifiable—I think I can be a little clearer now that I've had a night's sleep (and without Ma Bell in my ear, chipping off the dollars from my malnourished paycheck!).

As I *think* I told you, Roger's reaction to the "Sacrifice Photos" was even stronger and more immediate than mine. He came down to my office as if he had rockets in his heels, leaving two distributors waiting in his outer office (and, as I believe Flannery O'Connor once pointed out, a good distributor is hard to find), and when I showed him the pictures, he turned pale, put his hand over his mouth, and made some extremely unlovely gagging sounds so I guess you'd have to say I was more right than wrong about the *quality* of the photos (considering the subject matter, "quality" is a strange word to use, but it's the only one that seems to fit).

He took a minute or two to think, then told me I'd better call the police in Central Falls—but not to say anything to anybody else.

"They could still be fakes," he said, "but it's best not to take any chances. Put 'em in an envelope and don't touch them anymore. There could be fingerprints."

"They don't *look* like fakes," I said. "Do they?"

"No."

He went back to the distributors and I called the cops in Central Falls—my *first* conversation with Iverson. He listened to the whole story and then took my telephone number. He said he'd call me back in five minutes, but he didn't tell me why.

He was actually back in about three minutes. He told me to take the photographs to the 31st Precinct at 140 Park Avenue South, and that the New York Police would wire the "Sacrifice Photos" to Central Falls.

"We should have them by three this afternoon," he said. "Maybe even sooner."

I asked him what he intended to do until then.

"Not much," he said. "I'm going to send a plainclothesman around to this House of Flowers and try to ascertain whether or not Detweiller is still working there. I hope to do that without arousing any suspicions. Until I see the pictures, Mr. Kenton, that's really all I can do."

I had to bite my tongue to keep from telling him that I thought there was a *lot more* he could do. I didn't want to be dismissed as a typical pushy

New Yorker, and I didn't want to have this fellow exasperated with me from the jump. And I reminded myself that Iverson hadn't seen the pictures. Under the circumstances I guess he was going as fast as he could on the basis of a call from a stranger—a stranger who might be a crank.

I got him to promise he'd call me back as soon as he got the photographs, and then I took them down to the 31st Precinct myself. They were expecting me; a Sergeant Tyndale met me in the reception area and took the envelope of photographs. He also made me promise I'd stay at the office until I'd heard from them.

"The Central Falls Chief of Police—"

"Not *him*," Tyndale said, as if I was talking about a trained monkey. "Us."

All the movies and novels are right, babe—it doesn't take long before you start feeling like a criminal yourself. You expect somebody to turn a bright light in your face, hook one leg over a beat-up old desk, lean down, blow cigarette smoke in your face, and say "Okay, Carmody, where did you put the bodies?" I can laugh about it now, but I sure wasn't laughing then.

I wanted Tyndale to take a look at the photos and tell me what he thought of them—whether or not they were authentic—but he just shooed me out with another reminder to "stick close," as he put it. It had started to rain and I couldn't get a cab and by the time I'd walked the seven blocks back to Zenith House I was soaked. I had also eaten half a roll of Tums.

Roger was in my office. I asked him if the distributors were gone, and he flapped a hand in their direction. "Sent one back to Queens and one back to Brooklyn," he said. "Inspired. They'll sell another fifty copies of *Ants from Hell* between them. Schmucks." He lit a cigarette. "What did the cops say?"

I told him what Tyndale had told me.

"Ominous," he said. "Very fooking ominous."

"They looked real to you, didn't they?"

He considered, then nodded. "Real as rain."

"Good."

“What do you mean, good? There’s nothing good about *any* of this.”

“I only meant—”

“Yeah, I know what you meant.” He got up, shook the legs of his pants the way he always does, and told me to call if I heard from anybody. “And don’t say anything to anyone else.”

“Herb’s looked in here a couple of times,” I said. “I think he thinks you’re going to fire me.”

“The idea has some merit. If he asks you right out—”

“Lie.”

“Right.”

“Always a pleasure to lie to Herb Porter.”

He stopped again at the door, started to say something, and then Riddley, the mailroom kid, came by pushing a basket of rejected manuscripts.

“You been in there most de mawnin, Mist’ Adler,” he said. “Is you gwine t’fire Mist’ Kenton?”

“Get out of here, Riddley,” Roger said, “and if you don’t stop insulting your entire race with that disgusting Rastus accent I’ll fire *you*.”

“Yassuh, Mist’ Adler!” Riddley said, and got his mail basket rolling again. “I’se goan! I’se goan!”

Roger looked at me and rolled his eyes despairingly. “As soon as you hear,” he repeated, and went out.

I heard from Chief Iverson early that afternoon. Their man had ascertained that Detweiller was at the House of Flowers, business as usual. He said that the House of Flowers is a neat long frame building on a street that’s “going downhill” (Iverson’s phrase). His man went in, got two red roses, and walked out again. Mrs. Tina Barfield, the proprietor of record according to the papers on file at City Hall, waited on him. The fellow who actually got the flowers, cut them, and wrapped them, was wearing a name tag with the word CARLOS on it. Iverson’s man described him as about twenty-five, dark, not bad looking, but portly. The man said he seemed very intense; didn’t smile much.

There's an exceptionally long greenhouse behind the shop. Iverson's man commented on it and Mrs. Barfield told him it was as deep as the block; she said they called it "the little jungle."

I asked Iverson if he'd gotten the wirephotos yet. He said he hadn't, but wanted to confirm for me that Detweiler *was* there. Just knowing he was brought me some relief—I don't mind telling you that, Ruth.

So here's Act III, Scene I, and the plot sickens, as us guys in the prose-biz like to say. I got a call from Sergeant Tyndale, at the 31st Precinct. He told me that Central Falls had gotten the pictures, that Iverson had taken one look, and had ordered Carlos Detweiler brought in for questioning. Tyndale wanted me down at the 31st right away to make a statement. I was to bring the *Demon Infestations* manuscript with me, and all my Detweiler correspondence. I told him I would be happy to come down to the 31st as soon as I talked to Iverson again; in fact, I'd be willing to catch The Pilgrim at Penn Station and train right up there to—

"Please don't call anyone," Tyndale said, "and don't go anywhere—*anywhere*, Mr. Kenton—until you've beat your feet down here and make a statement."

I'd spent the day feeling upset and on edge. My nervous condition was getting worse rather than better, and I suppose I snapped at the guy. "You sound as though I'm the one under suspicion."

"No," he said. "No, Mr. Kenton." A pause. "Not as of now." Another pause. "But he did send *you* the pictures, didn't he?"

For a moment I was so flabbergasted I could only flap my mouth like a fish. Then I said, "But I explained that."

"Yes, you did. Now come down here and explain it for the record, please." Tyndale hung up, leaving me feeling both angry and sort of existential—but I'd be lying, Ruth, if I didn't tell you that mostly what I felt was scared—I'd gotten in far over my head, and it hadn't taken long at all.

I popped into Roger's office, told him what was going on as quickly and sanely as I could, and then headed for the elevator. Riddley came out of the mailroom wheeling his Dandux cart—empty, this time.

“Is you in trouble wid de law, Mist Kenton?” he whispered hoarsely as I went past him—I tell you, Ruth, it did nothing at all to improve my peace of mind.

“No!” I said, so loudly that two people going up the hall looked around at me.

“Cause if you is, my cousin Eddie is sho one fine lawyer. Yassuh!”

“Riddley,” I said, “where did you go to college?”

“Co’nell, Mist Kenton, and it sho was fine!” Riddley grinned, showing teeth as white as piano keys (and just as numerous, one is tempted to believe).

“If you went to Cornell,” I said, “why in God’s name do you talk that way?”

“What way is dat, Mist Kenton?”

“Never mind,” I said, glancing at my watch. “It’s always fine to have one of these philosophical discussions with you, Riddley, but I’ve got an appointment and I ought to run.”

“Yassuh!” He said, flashing that obscene grin again. “And if you want my cousin Eddie’s phone numbah—”

But by then I had escaped into the hall. It’s always a relief to get free of Riddley. I suppose it’s terrible to say this, but I wish Roger would fire him—I look at that big piano-key grin and, God help me, I wonder if Riddley hasn’t made a pact to drink white man’s blood when the fire comes next time. Along with his cousin, Eddie, of course.

Well, forget all that—I’ve been tickling the typewriter keys for over an hour and a half, and this is starting to look like a novelette. I had better scamp through the rest. So...Act III, Scene II.

I arrived at the police station late and soaking wet all over again—no cabs and the rain had become a good steady downpour. Only a January rain in New York City can be that cold (California looks better to me every day, Ruth!).

Tyndale took a look at me, offered a thin smile with no noticeable humor in it, and said: “Central Falls just released your author. No cabs out there, huh? Never are when it rains.”

“They let Detweiller *go*?” I asked incredulously. “And he’s not our author. I wouldn’t touch him with a ten-foot-plague-pole.”

“Well, whatever he is, the whole thing’s nothing but a tempest in a teapot,” he said, handing me what may have been the vilest cup of coffee I have ever drunk in my life.

He took me into a vacant office, which was something of a mercy—that sense that the others in the squadroom were sneaking peeks at the prematurely balding editor in the drippy tweeds was probably paranoid, but it was pretty strong just the same.

To make a long story even longer, about forty-five minutes after the wirephotos had arrived, and about fifteen minutes after Detweiller had arrived (not handcuffed, but flanked by two burly men in blue-suits), the plainclothesman who had been dispatched to the House of Flowers after my original call arrived. He had been on the other side of town all afternoon.

They had left Detweiller alone in a small interrogation room, Tyndale told me, to soften him up—to get him thinking all sorts of nasty thoughts. The plainclothesman who had verified the fact that Detweiller was indeed still working at the House of Flowers was looking at the “Sacrifice Photos” when Chief Iverson came out of his office and headed for the interrogation room where Detweiller was being kept.

“Jesus,” the plainclothesman said to Iverson, “these look almost real, don’t they?”

Iverson stopped. “Do you have any reason to believe they aren’t?” he asked.

“Well, when I went into that flower-shop this morning to check on that guy Detweiller, this dude getting the informal heart-surgery was sitting off to one side behind the counter, playing solitaire and watching *Ryan’s Hope* on TV.”

“Are you *sure* of that?” Iverson demanded.

The plainclothesman tapped the first of the “Sacrifice Photos,” where the face of the “victim” was clearly shown. “No mistake,” he said. “This guy.”

“Well why in God’s name didn’t you *say* he was there?” Iverson demanded, no doubt with visions of Detweiller bringing charges of false and malicious detainment beginning to dance dolefully in his head.

“Because no one asked me about *this* guy,” the detective said, reasonably enough. “I was supposed to verify Detweiller, which I did. If somebody had asked me to verify this guy, I would have. No one did. See you.” And he walked away, leaving Iverson holding the bag.

So that was that.

I looked at Tyndale.

Tyndale looked back at me.

After a moment or two he softened. “For whatever it’s worth, Mr. Kenton, that particular photo *did* look real...real as hell. But so do the effects in some of these horror movies. There’s one guy—Tom Savini—and the effects he does—”

“So they let him go.” A dread was surfacing inside my head like one of those little Russian submarines the Swedes are never quite able to trap.

“For whatever else it’s worth, your ass is covered with three sets of skivvies and four sets of pants, the middle two sets iron-clad,” Tyndale said, and then added, with a sobriety that was positively Alexander Haigian: “I’m speaking legally-wise, you understand. You acted in good faith, as a citizen. If the guy could prove malice, that would be one thing...but hell, you didn’t even know him.”

The submarine came up a little more. Because I felt right then like I was *starting* to know him, Ruth, and my feelings about Carlos Detweiller were not then and are not now anything I would describe as jolly or benign.

“Besides, it’s never the informant they want to sue for false arrest anyway—it’s the cop who came and read them their rights and then took them downtown in a car with no doorhandles in the back doors.”

Informant. That was the source of the dread. The submarine was all the way up, floating on the surface like a dead fish in the moonlight. *Informant.* I didn’t know Carlos Detweiller from a psychic begonia...but *he* knew something about *me*. Not that I was the head of the Brown University literary soci-

ety, or that I'm prematurely balding, or that I'm engaged to marry a pretty miss from Pasadena named Ruth Tanaka...not any of those things (and please God, not my home address, *never* my home address), but he knows *I'm the editor who had him taken into custody for a murder he did not commit.*

"Do you know," I asked him, "if Iverson or anyone else at the Central Falls Police Department mentioned me to him by name?"

Tyndale lit a cigarette. "No," he said, "but I'm pretty sure no one there did."

"Why not?"

"It would have been unprofessional. When you're building a case—even one that dies as fast as this one did—every name the perp doesn't know or even *might* not know becomes a poker chip."

Any relief I might have felt was short-lived.

"But the guy would have to be pretty dumb *not* to know. Unless, that is, he mailed the photos to every publisher in New York. Think he might have done that?"

"No," I said dismally. "No other publisher in New York would have responded to his query letter in the first place."

"I see."

Tyndale was up, clearing away the styrofoam coffee cups, making those end-of-the-party gestures that meant he was hoping I'd put an egg in my shoe and beat it.

"One more question and I'll get out of your hair," I said. "The other photos were obvious fakes. Pitiful. How come they look so bad and these other fakes look so damn good?"

"Maybe Detweiller himself set up the 'Sakred Seance' photos and someone else—Central Fall's answer to Tom Savini, say—made up the 'sacrifice victim.' Or maybe Detweiller did them all and purposely made the other ones look bad so you'd take these more seriously."

"Why would he do that?"

"So you'd stub your toe just the way you have, maybe. Maybe that's how he gets off."

“But he got arrested in the process!”

He looked at me, almost pityingly. “Here’s a guy who’s in a bar, Mr. Kenton, and he’s got these cigarette loads. So just for a joke, he loads up one of his buddy’s cigarettes while his buddy’s in the john or picking out some tunes on the juke. Seems to him like the funniest idea in the world at the time, even though the buddy’s sense of humor only begins when a load explodes in someone *else’s* cigarette, and the guy doing the loading *now* should know it. So the buddy comes back, and pretty soon he gets to the loaded pill. Takes two puffs and *ka-bang!* Tobacco all over his face, powder-burns on his fingers, and he spills his beer in his lap. And his buddy—his *previous* buddy—is sitting there on the next stool, just about laughing himself into a hemorrhage. Do you see all that?”

“Yes,” I said reluctantly, because I did.

“Now the guy loading the cigarette was not a feeb, although I got to say that in my own personal estimation a guy who thinks loading another guy’s cigarette is funny is a little bit deficient in the *sensa-yuma* department. But even if his *sensa-yuma* starts with some guy getting the shit scared out of him and spilling his beer all over his balls, you’d think a guy who wasn’t a feeb would be at least interested enough in keeping his teeth inside his head not to do it. Yet they do. They do it all the fucking time. Now, being a literary man—”

(He obviously didn’t know about *Gash Me, My Darling, Ants from Hell*, and the forthcoming *Flies from Hell*, Ruth)

“—can you tell me *why* he goes ahead, and ends up picking his teeth up offa the bar on account of he might be able to hawk the fillings?”

“Because he has no sense of futurity,” I said dismally, and for the first time, Ruth, I felt as if I could really *see* Carlos Detweiler.

“Huh? I don’t know that word.”

“He doesn’t know—isn’t able to see ahead to the outcome.”

“Yeah, you’re a literary man, all right. I couldn’t have said it that good in a thousand years.”

“And that’s my answer?”

“That’s your answer.” He clapped me on the shoulder and led me toward the door. “Go home, Mr. Kenton. Have a drink, a shower, and then another drink. Watch some TV. Get a night’s sleep. You did your duty as a citizen, for Christ’s sake. Most people would have just tossed those pictures aside...or saved them for their scrapbooks. That sounds weird, but I’m a police-type guy, not a literary-type guy, and I know that some people do that, too. Go home. Forget it. And content yourself with this—if the guy’s book is as bad as you said, you just sent him one hell of a rejection slip.”

So I did just what he said, m’darling—went home, had a drink, had a shower, had a meal, had another drink, watched TV, went to bed. Then after about three hours in the rack with no sleep—I kept seeing that picture, with the slit in the chest and the dripping heart—I got up, had about three more drinks, watched a John Wayne movie called *Wake of the Red Witch* on TV (John Wayne looks a lot better in a GI helmet than he does in a diving helmet, I want to tell you), went to bed again, and woke up with a hangover.

It’s been a couple of days since all of this went down, and I think—*think*—that things are beginning to return to normal, both at Zenith House and inside my head. I think (*think*) it’s over—but it’s going to be one of those Incidents that haunt me all my life, I guess, like the dreams I used to have as a kid in which I stood up to salute the flag and my pants fell down. Or, even better, there was the time Bill Gelb, my illustrious co-editor at Zenith, told me about. He said he told this joke to a guy at a cocktail party: *How do you stop five black guys from raping a white chick? Answer: give them a basketball.* “I thought the guy I told it to just had a good tan until he threw his drink in my face and walked away,” Bill said. That’s the kind of story I could never tell on myself, which may be one of the reasons I haven’t lost all of my respect for Bill, although he’s a bigoted, lazy, horse’s ass. All of which is to say I feel sort of like a horse’s ass...but at least it’s over. If all of this seems to make me a hysteric—someone who would eagerly testify at the Salem witch-trials—please write and break our engagement soonest...because if that’s the case, I wouldn’t marry me either.

As for me, I’m sort of clinging to what Tyndale said—that I acted in

good faith as a citizen. The one thing I'll not do is send you the photos, which were returned to me today. They might give you the sort of dreams I've been having—and those dreams are definitely ungood. I've come to the conclusion that all special effects wizards must be frustrated surgeons. In fact, if Roger gives me the okay, I'm going to burn them.

I love you, Ruth.

Your adoring horse's ass,

John

from the office of the editor-in-chief

TO: John Kenton

DATE: 2/2/81

MESSAGE: Go ahead and burn them. I never want to hear about Carlos Detweiller again.

Listen, John—a little excitement's fine, but if we don't start some action here at Zenith, we're all going to be looking for jobs. I've heard that Apex may be hunting buyers. Which is like looking for dodo birds or pterodactyls. We've *got* to have a book or books that will make some noise by this summer, and that means we better start looking yesterday. Start shaking the trees, okay?

Roger

interoffice memo

TO: Roger
FROM: John
RE: Tree-shaking

What trees? Zenith House exists on the Great Plains of American publishing, and you damned well know it.

John

from the office of the editor-in-chief

TO: John Kenton
DATE: 2/3/81

MESSAGE: Find a tree or find a job. That's all there is, sweets.

Roger

February 4, 1981

Mr. John "Judas Priest" Kenton
Zenith Asshole-House, Publishers of Kaka
490 Avenue of Dog-Shit
New York, New York 10017

Dear Judas,

This is the thanks I get for giving you my book. Okay, I understand. I should have known what to expect. You think you are SO SMART. Okay, I understand. You are really nothing but a dirty betraying bastard. How much have you stolen. Plenty, I would guess. You think you are SO SMART but you are nothing but a "Warped Plank" in "the GREAT FLOOR OF THE UNIVERSE." There are ways to deal with GUYS LIKE YOU. You probably think I am going to come and get you. But I am not. I would not "dirty my hands with your dirt," as Mr. Keen used to say. But I can fix you if I want. And I want! IWANT!!!!

Meantime you have spoiled everything here so I suppose you are satisfied. That doesn't matter. I have gone West. I would say "fuck you" but who would. Not me. I wouldn't even if I was a girl and you were Richard Gear. I wouldn't if you was some really neat girl with a good build.

Well I am going away but my material is copyright and I just hope you know what copyright is even if you don't know "shit" from "shoe-polish." So you just put that in your pipe and smoke it all the day long Mr. Judas Kenton. Goodbye.

I hate you,

Carlos Detweiller
In Transit
U.S. of A.

February 7, 1981

Dear Ruth,

I had sort of expected a “fuck-you” letter from Carlos Detweiller—it was in the back of my mind, anyway—and I got a dilly just the other day. I employed Zenith House’s creaky pre-World War I Xerox machine to make a copy, and have enclosed it with this letter. In his anger he is almost lyrical—I especially like the line about me being a warped plank in the floor of the universe...a phrase even Carlyle might admire. He misspelled Richard Gere’s name, but maybe that was artistic license. On the whole, I’d say I feel relieved—it’s over, at least. The guy has struck out for the Great American West, undoubtedly with his rose-cutting shears slung low on one hip (on one rose-hip? oh, forget it).

“Yeah, but is he really gone?” you ask. The answer is, yes he is.

I got the letter yesterday and rang up Barton Iverson of the Central Falls Police almost at once (after getting Roger’s grudging approval for the long distance, I might add). I thought Iverson would go along with my request to check matters out, and he did. Seems he too thought the “sacrifice photos” were too real for comfort, and the latest Detweiller communication *does* have a rather threatening tone. He sent a man named Riley—the same man who went before, I think—to check out Carlos, and he (Iverson, not Riley) called me back in ninety minutes. It seems that Detweiller served his notice almost right after being released from custody, and the Barfield woman has even advertised for a new florist’s assistant in the local newspapers.

One mildly interesting thing: Riley checked on the guy in the “sacrifice photos,” and came up with a name I know: It was Mr. Norville Keen, the same guy, I’m pretty sure, that Detweiller mentioned in his first two letters

(“Why describe a guest when you can see that guest,” and other pearls of wisdom). The cop asked her a few questions about the staging of those photos, and the Barfield woman clammed up, ka-bang, just like that. Asked him if it was an official investigation, or what. It isn’t, of course, so that was that...and in my mind, the whole subject is closed. Iverson told me that Riley can’t “make” the Barfield woman from *any* of the photos, so there was no handle to question her further...not that anyone there in Central Falls really wants to, I think. Iverson was very frank with me. “Let sleeping weirdos lay,” was what he actually said, and I agree two hundred per cent.

If the new Anthony LaScorbia novel turns out to be *Plants from Hell*, though, I’m quitting.

I’ll write you a more normal letter later in the week, I hope, but I thought you’d want to know how it all turned out. Meanwhile, I’m back to spending my nights on my novel and my days looking for a bestseller we can buy for \$2,500. As I believe President Lincoln once said, “Good fucking luck, turkey.”

Meantime, thanks for your phone call, and your last missive. And in answer to your question, yeah, I’m also H*O*R*N*Y.

My love,

John

February 19, 1981

Dear Mr. Kenton,

You don't know me, but I sort of know you. My name is Roberta Solrac, and I am an avid reader of Anthony LaScorbia's series of novels. Like Mr. LaScorbia, I feel that ecology is about to revolt!!! Anyway, I wrote Mr. LaScorbia a "fan letter" last month and he answered me! I was very excited and honored, so I sent him a dozen roses. He said he was excited and honored (to get the roses) as no one had ever sent him flowers before.

Anyway, in our correspondence, he mentioned your name and said you were responsible for his literary triumphs. I can't send you roses as I am "broke," but I am sending you a small plant for your office, via UPS. It is supposed to bring good luck.

Hope this finds you well, and keep up the good work!!!

*Yours most sincerely,
Roberta Solrac*

interoffice memo

TO: Roger
FROM: John
RE: Ongoing insanity

Take a look at the enclosed letter, Roger. Then spell "Solrac" backwards. I think I really am going crazy. What did I do to deserve this guy?

from the office of the editor-in-chief

TO: John Kenton

DATE: 2/23/81

MESSAGE: Maybe you're jumping at shadows. If not, what do you want to do about it? Re-open things with the Central Falls P.D.? Assuming this is Detweiller—and I admit the last name soars into the outer limits of the coincidental and the style bears a certain similarity, although it's obviously a different typewriter—it's just, if I may wax alliterative, a harmless helping of little-kid harassment. My advice is forget it. If "Roberta Solrac" sends you a plant in the mail, dump it down the incinerator chute. It's probably poison ivy. You're letting this get on your nerves, John. I tell you this seriously: *Forget it.*

Roger

interoffice memo

TO: Roger

FROM: John

RE: "Roberta Solrac"

Poison ivy, my ass. The guy worked in a greenhouse. It's probably deadly nightshade, or belladonna, or something like that.

John

from the office of the editor-in-chief

TO: John Kenton

DATE: 2/23/81

MESSAGE: I thought about shagging my butt down the hall to talk to you, but I'm expecting a call from Harlow "The Axeman Cometh" Enders in a few minutes, and don't want to be out of my office. But maybe it's better that I write this down anyway, because you don't seem to really believe anything unless it's in print.

John, let this go. The Detweiler thing is over. I know the whole business knocked you for a loop—hell, it did me, too—but you've got to let it go. We have got some serious problems here in-house, just in case you didn't know it. There's going to be a re-evaluation of what we're up to in June, and what were up to is not much. This means we could all be out on our asses in September. Our "year of grace" has begun to shrink. Quit worrying about Detweiler and for Christ's sake find something I can publish that will make money.

I can't make myself clearer. I love you, John, but let this go and get back to work, or I'm going to have to make some hard choices.

Roger

interoffice memo

TO: Riddley
FROM: John Kenton
RE: Possible incoming package

I have an idea that I may be receiving a UPS package from somewhere in the midwest during the next week to ten days. The sender's name is Roberta Solrac. If you see such a package, make sure I don't. In other words, dump it immediately down the nearest incinerator chute. I suspect you know most of what there is to know about the Detweiller business. This may be associated with that, and the contents of the package could be dangerous. Unlikely, but in the realm of possibility.

Thanking you,

John Kenton

interoffice memo

TO: John Kenton
FROM: Riddley
RE: Possible incoming package

Yassuh, Mist Kenton!

Riddley / Mail Room

from THE SAKRED BOOK OF CARLOS

SAKRED MONTH OF FEBBA (Entry #64)

I know how to get him. I have set things in motion, praise Abbalah. Praise Green Demeter. I'll get them all. Green Green "must be seen." Ha! You Judas! Little do you know! But I know! All about your girlfriend, too — only girlfriend is now girlFIEND, little do you know what she is up to! There is another mule kicking in your stall, Mr. Judas Big=Shot Editor! OUIJA says this mule's name is GARY! In my dreams I have seen them and GARY is HAIRY! Not like you, you wimpy little JUDAS! Soon I'm sending you a present! Everyone prospers! Every Judas safe in the arms of Abbalah! Come Abbalah! COME GREAT DEMETER!

COME GREEN!

END OF THE PLANT, PART TWO



T H E P L A N T

by Stephen King

part three of a novel in progress

PHILTRUM PRESS

Bangor, Maine 2000



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S Y N O P S I S

JOHN KENTON, who majored in English and was President of the Brown University Literary Society, has had a rude initiation into the real world as one of Zenith House's four editors. Zenith House, which captured only 2% of the total paperback market the year before (1980), is dying on the vine. All of its employees are worried that Apex, the parent corporation, may soon take extreme measures to stem the tide of red ink...and the most likely possibility is looking more and more like terminating Zenith House, with extreme sanction. The only hope is a drastic sales turnaround, but with Zenith's tiny advances and creaky distribution system, that seems unlikely.).

Enter CARLOS DETWEILLER, first in the form of a query letter received by John Kenton. Detweiller, twenty-three, works in the Central Falls House of Flowers, and is hawking a book he's written called *True Tales of Demon Infestations*. Kenton, with the vague idea that Detweiller may have some interesting stuff which can be rewritten by a staffer, encourages Detweiller to submit sample chapters and an outline. Detweiller instead submits the entire manuscript, along with a bundle of photographs. The mss is even more abysmal than Kenton—who thought the book could maybe be juiced up for *The Amityville Horror* audience—would have believed in his worst nightmares. Yet the worst nightmare of all is contained in the form of the enclosed photographs. Most are shots of painfully faked seance effects, but four of them show a gruesomely realistic human sacrifice, in which an old man's heart is being pulled from his gaping chest...and it seems very likely to Kenton that the fellow doing the pulling is none other than Carlos Detweiller himself.

ROGER WADE concurs with Kenton's feeling that they have stumbled into something which is probably a police matter—and a very nasty police matter at that. Kenton takes the photos to SGT. TYNDALE, who wires them to CHIEF IVERSON in Central Falls. Carlos Detweiller is arrested, then released when an officer assigned to surveillance sees the photos in question and remarks that he saw the so-called "sacrifice victim" sitting in the House of Flowers office that very day, playing solitaire and watching *Ryan's Hope* on TV.

Tyndale tries to comfort Kenton. Go home, he says, have a drink, forget it. You made a perfectly forgivable mistake in the course of trying to do your civic duty.

Kenton burns the “sacrifice photos,” but he can’t forget; he receives a letter from the obviously insane Carlos Detweiller, promising revenge. Two weeks later, he receives a letter from one “Roberta Solrac,” who purports to be a great fan of Zenith’s second-hottest author, Anthony La Scorbia (La Scorbia is responsible for a series of nature-run-amok novels such as *Rats from Hell*, *Ants from Hell*, and *Scorpions from Hell*). “She” claims to have sent La Scorbia roses, and wants to send Kenton, as La Scorbia’s editor, a small plant “as a token of esteem.”

Kenton, no fool, realizes at once that Solrac is Carlos spelled backward...and Detweiller, of course, worked in a greenhouse. Convinced that the “token of esteem” is apt to be something like deadly nightshade or belladonna, Kenton sends an interoffice memo to Riddley, instructing him to incinerate any package which comes to him from a “Roberta Solrac.”

RIDDLEY WALKER, who respects Kenton more than Kenton himself would ever believe, agrees, but privately adopts a wait-and-see attitude. Near the end of February 1981, a package from “Roberta Solrac,” addressed to John Kenton, actually does arrive. Riddley opens the package in spite of a strong feeling that the sender—Detweiller—is a terribly evil man. If so, the contents of the package are hardly in keeping with such notions; it is nothing more than a sickly-looking Common Ivy with a little plastic sign stuck into the earth of its pot. The sign reads:

**HI!
MY NAME IS ZENITH
I AM A GIFT TO JOHN
FROM ROBERTA**

Riddley puts it on a high shelf of his janitor’s room and forgets it.
For the time being.



February 25

Dear Ruth,

I've got a case of the mean reds, so I thought I'd pass some of them on—see the enclosed Xeroxes, concluding with a typically impudent communication from Riddley, he of the coal-black skin and three hundred huge white teeth.

You'll notice that Roger kicked my ass good and hard—not much like Roger, and doubly sobering for that very reason. I don't think one has to be very paranoid to see that he's talking about the possibility of firing me. If I'd talked this out with him over martinis at Flaherty's after work, I doubt very much if he would have come down so hard, and of course I had no idea he was waiting on a call from Enders. I undoubtedly deserved the ass-kicking I got—I *haven't* really been doing my job—but he has no idea of the scare that letter threw into me when I realized it was Detweiller again. I'm too goddam thin-skinned for my own good, that's what Roger thinks...but Detweiller is scary for other, less easily grasped reasons. Being the *idée* that's gotten *fixe* in some crazy's head has got to be one of the most uncomfortable feelings in the world—if I knew Jody Foster, I think I'd give her a jingle and tell her I know exactly how she feels. There's an almost palpable texture of slime about Detweiller's communications, and oh boy, oh yeah, I wish I *could* get him out of my head, but I still have nightmares about those pictures.

Anyway, I have taken care of matters as well as I can, and no, I have no intention of calling Central Falls. We have an editorial meeting tomorrow.

I'll try to the best of my limited abilities to get back on the beam...except at Zenith House the beam is so narrow it almost doesn't exist.

I love you, I miss you, I long for your return. Maybe you being gone is part of the problem. Not to make you feel guilty.

All my love,

John

From the journals of Riddley Walker

2/23/81

Like a stone thrown into a large and stagnant pond, the Detweiller affair has caused any number of ripples at my place of employment. I thought that all of them had gone by; yet this afternoon one more rolled past, and who is to say even that one will be the last?

I have included a Xerox of an exceedingly curious memo I received from Kenton at 2:35 P.M. plus my own reply (the memo came just after Gelb left, in something of a huff; why he should have been in a huff eludes me since today he brought his own dice and I did him the courtesy of not even checking them, but Ah g'iss Ah woan *nevuh* understand dese white folks). I think I have covered the Detweiller affair to a nicety in these pages, but I should add that it never surprised me in the least that Kenton was the one to bring Detweiller, the rogue comet, into the erratic (and, I fear, degenerating) orbit of Zenith House. He is brighter than Sandra

Jackson; brighter than that crap-shooting, Ivy League tie-wearing devil William Gelb; *far* brighter than Herbert Porter (Porter, as previously noted, is not above wandering into Ms. Jackson's office after she has left for the day and sniffing the seat of her office chair—a strange man, but be it not for me to judge), and the only one of the staff who *might* be capable of recognizing a commercial book if it came within his purview. Right now he is eaten up with guilt and embarrassment over *l'affaire Detweiller*, and can see only that he made a rather comic *faux pas*. He would be incapable of seeing that his decision to even *look* at the Detweiller book demonstrated that his editorial ears are still open, and still attuned to that sweetest of all tones—the celestial notes of Sweda cash registers in drugstores and book emporia ringing up sales, even if it was pointed out to him.

Incapable of seeing that it proves he's still trying.

The others have given up.

Anyway, here is this enchanting memo—between its lines I hear a man whose nerve is temporarily shot, a man who *might* be capable of facing a lion but who now cannot even look at a mouse; a man who is, in consequence, shrieking “Eeeek! Get rid of it! Get rid of it!” and swatting at it with the handiest broom, which in *dis* case jus happen t’be Riddley, who dus’ de awfishes an wipe de windows an delivah de mail. Yassuh, Mist Kenton, I git rid of it fo you! I sholy goan get rid of dat hoodoo Solrac woman’s package if she sen one!

Maybe.

On the other hand, maybe John Kenton should have to face up to the consequences of his own actions—swat his own mouse. After all, if you don't swat your own, maybe you never really know what a harmless little thing a mouse is...and is it not possible that Kenton's useful days as an editor may be over if he cannot stare down such occasional crazies as Carlos “Roberta” Detweiller?

I shall ponder the matter. I think there is a very good chance no package will come, but I'll ponder it all the same.

2/27/81

Something from the mysterious “Roberta Solrac” actually came today! I didn’t know whether to be amused or disgusted by my own reaction, which was staring, elemental gut-terror followed by an almost insane urge to put the thing down the incinerator, exactly as Kenton’s note had instructed. The *physicality* of my reaction as soon as my eye fell on the return address and connected the name there with Kenton’s memo was striking. I had a sudden spasm of shudders. Goosebumps raced up my back. I heard a clear, ringing tone in my ears, and I could feel the hair stiffening on my head.

This symphony of physiological atavism lasted no more than five seconds and then it subsided—but it left me as shaken as a sudden deep lance of pain in the area of the heart. Floyd would sneer and call it “a nigger reaction,” but it was no such thing. It was a *human* reaction. Not to the thing itself—the contents of the package were something of an anticlimax after all the sound and fury—but, I am convinced, to the hands which placed the lid on the small white cardboard box in which the plant came; the hands which tied twine around that box and then cut a brown paper shopping bag in which to wrap the box for mailing, the hands which taped and labelled and carried. Detweiller’s hands.

Am I speaking of telepathy? Yes...and no. It might be fairer to say that I am speaking of a kind of passive psychokinesis. Dogs shy away from people with cancer; they smell it on them. So, at least, claims my dear old Aunt Olympia. In the same way I smelled Detweiller all over that box, and now I understand Kenton’s upset better and have a good deal more sympathy for him. I think Carlos Detweiller must be dangerously insane...but the plant itself is no deadly nightshade or belladonna or Adder Toadstool (although it may have been any or all of those things in Detweiller’s feverish mind, I suppose). It’s only a very small and very tired-looking common ivy in a red clay pot.

If not for the “nigger reaction” (Floyd Walker)—or the “human reaction” (his brother Riddley)—I might really have dumped the thing...but after that fit of the shakes, it seemed to me I had to go through with opening the package or deem myself less a man. I did so, in spite of any number of gruesome images—high explosive rigged to special pressure-tapes, noxious floods of black widow spiders, a litter of baby copperheads. And there it was, just a small ivy-plant with yellow-edged leaves (four of them) nodding from one tired, sagging stem. The soil itself is waxy brown. It smells swampy and unpleasant.

There was a little plastic sign stuck in the earth which read:

**HI!
MY NAME IS ZENITH
I AM A GIFT TO JOHN
FROM ROBERTA**

It was that flash of fear which drove me to open the package. Similarly, it's that same flash which has decided me against making sure that Kenton gets it after all, which would have been easy enough to do (“*Dat* plant, Mist Kenton? Oh, *drat!* I g’iss I fo’got whatchoo said. I am de mos *f’gitten’est* man!”). Let the ripples end; let him forget Detweiller, if that’s what he wants. I’ve put Zenith the Common Ivy on a shelf in my janitorial-cum-mailroom cubicle—a shelf well above Kenton’s eye-level (not that he stops in much anyway, unlike Gelb with his dice fixation). I’ll keep it until it dies, and then I really *will* dump it down the incinerator chute. That will be the end of Detweiller *fo sho*.

Got fifty pages done on the novel over the weekend.

Gelb now owes me \$75.40.

From *The New York Post*, page 1, March 4, 1981:

INSANE GENERAL ESCAPES OAK COVE ASYLUM,
KILLS THREE!!

(Special to the *Post*) Major General (ret.) Anthony R. Hecksler, known to the commandos and partisans who followed him across France during World War II as "Iron-Guts" Hecksler, escaped from Oak Cove Asylum late last night, stabbing two orderlies and a nurse to death in his bid for freedom.

General Hecksler was remanded to Oak Cove in the small upstate town of Cutlerville twenty-seven months ago, following his acquittal, by reason of insanity, on charges of assault with a deadly weapon and assault with intent to kill. His victim was Albany bus driver Herman T. Schneur, whom Hecksler claimed in a signed statement to be "one of the twelve North American foremen of the antichrist."

The Oak Cove dead have been identified as Norman Ableson, twenty-six; John Piet, forty; and Alicia Penbroke, thirty-four.

State Police Lieutenant Arthur P. Ford was surprisingly gloomy when asked if he expected to recapture General Hecksler quickly. "We hope for a quick arrest, naturally," he said, "but this is a man who trained guerilla units in World War II and in Korea, and who was consulted on more than one occasion by General Westmoreland in Viet Nam. He's seventy-two

now, but still strong and amazingly agile, as his escape from Oak Cove shows."

Ford indicated he was referring to Hecksler's probable method of escape—a leap from a second floor window in the Oak Cove Administration Wing to the garden below (see photographs on pages 2, 3, and Center Section).

Ford went on to caution everyone within the immediate area to be on the lookout for the mad General, whom he described as "extremely clever, extremely dangerous, and extremely paranoid."

In a brief press interview, Ellen K. Moors, the doctor in charge of Hecksler's case, agreed. "He had a great many enemies," she said, "or so he imagined. His paranoid delusions were extremely complex, but he never lost track of the score. He was, in his way, a model inmate...but he never lost track of the score."

A source close to the investigation says Hecksler may have stabbed Ableson, Piet, and Pembroke to death with a pair of barber's shears. The source told the *Post* that there was no outcry; all three were stabbed in the throat, commando-style.

(Related story p. 12)

From the journals of Riddley Walker

3/5/81

What a difference a day makes!

Yesterday Herb Porter was his usual self—fat, slovenly, smoking a cigar as he stood by the water-cooler, explaining to Kenton and Gelb how the great train of the world would run if he, Herbert Porter, were the engineer. The man is a walking *Reader's Digest* of rabbit-punch solutions, a compendium of declarative answers which are delivered amid the effluvia of cigar smoke and exquisitely bad breath. Close the borders and keep out the spies and wetbacks! End abortion on demand! Build more prisons! Upgrade possession of marijuana to a felony once again! Sell biochemical stocks! Buy cable-TV issues!

He is, in his way—or was, until today—a wonderful man: rounded and perfect in his assurances, plated with prejudices, caprisoned about with cant, and possessed of just enough native wit to hold a job in a place like this, Porter is an evocation of the Great American Median. Even his occasional surreptitious expeditions into Sandra Jackson's office to sniff the seat of her chair please me—an endearing little loophole in the walking castle of complacency that is Massa Po'tuh.

Oh, but today! What a different Herbert Porter crept into my janitorial cubbyhole today! The complacent, ruddy face had become pallid and trembling. The blue eyes shifted so regularly from side to side that Porter looked like a man watching a tennis match even when he was trying to stare right at me. His lips were so shiny with spittle that they looked almost varnished. And while he was of course still fat, he also looked as if he had somehow lost his surface tension—as if the essential Herb Porter had shrunk away from the borders of his skin, leaving that skin to sag in places where it had been previously stretched smooth.

“He's out,” Porter whispered.

“Who’s dat, Mist Po’tuh?” I asked. I was genuinely curious; I could not imagine what mighty sling or engine could have breached such a gap in Castle Herbert. Although I suppose I should have guessed.

He proffered me the paper—the *Post*, of course. He’s the only one around here who reads it. Kenton and Wade read the *Times*, Gelb and Jackson *bring* the *Times* but secretly read the *Daily News* (the hand that rocks the cradle may rule the world, but de han which empty de white folks’ wastebaskets know de *secrets* of de worl), but the *Post* was made for fellows such as Herb Porter. He plays Wingo religiously and says if he ever wins a bundle he is going to buy a Winnebago, paint the word WINGOBAGO on the side, and tour the country.

I took it, opened it, and read the headline.

“The General’s escaped,” he whispered. His eyes stopped bouncing back and forth for a moment and he stared at me in dismay and utter horror. “It’s as if that damned Detweiller cursed us. The General’s escaped *and I rejected his book!*”

“Now, now, Mist Po’tuh,” I said. “Ain’t no need to take on so. Man lak dis prob’ly got fo-five dozen scores to settle befo he git to you.”

“But I could be number one,” he whispered. “After all, I rejected his goddam *book.*”

It was true, and it is ironic how two such fundamentally different men as Kenton and Porter have managed to get themselves into exactly the same situation this late winter—each the target of a rejected author (Detweiller’s rejection a bit more dramatic than that of the Major-General, granted, but that was indubitably Detweiller’s own fault) who just happens to be insane. The difference—I know it, even if no one else does (and I believe Roger Wade might)—is that, while Kenton thought there might actually be the germ of a book in Detweiller’s obsession, Porter knew better concerning the General’s. But Porter is one of those men who has read omnivorously—and vicariously—about World War II, that Pickett’s Charge of western man (western *white* man) in the 20th century, and he

knew who Hecksler was...in a war filled with military celebrities Hecksler was, granted, of the Hollywood Squares type (if you see what I mean), but to Porter he was *somebody*. So he asked to see the completed manuscript of *Twenty Psychic Garden Flowers* in spite of the abysmal outline, thereby encouraging a man who was, by the quality and content of his own written words, a palpable psychotic. I felt that the result and his present terror, although unforeseen, were partly his own fault.

I allowed as how it was true that he could be number one on the General's hit list (if indeed the poor madman is doing anything other than cowering in drainage ditches or scouring alley garbage cans for offal at this point), but reiterated that I thought it unlikely. I added that he might well be caught before he could get within fifty miles of New York City even if he had decided to come after Porter, and finished by telling him that many psychotics released suddenly into an uncontrolled environment took their own lives...although I did not say so in exactly those words.

Porter regarded me suspiciously for a moment and then said, "Riddley—don't take offense at this—"

"Nawsah!"

"Have you *really* been to college?"

"*Yassah!*"

"And you took psychology courses?"

"Yassah, I sho did."

"*Abnormal* psychology?"

"Yassah, and I'se pow'ful familier wid de suicidal syndrome associated wid de paranoid-psychotic personality! Why, dat Gen'l Hecksler could be slittin' his wrists or garglin' wid a lightbulb even while we's heah talkin, Mist Po'tuh!"

He looked at me for a long time and then said, "If you've been to college, Riddley, why do you talk that way?"

"What way is dat, Mist Po-tuh?"

He regarded me for a moment longer and then said, "Never mind."

He leaned close—close enough so I could smell cheap cigars, hair tonic, and the graywater stench of fear. “Can you get me a gun?”

For a moment I was literally without a response—which is like saying (Floyd would, anyway) that China was for a moment without manpower. I had an idea that he had changed the subject completely, and that what I had heard as *Can you get me a gun?* had actually been *Can you get me some fun*, as in ho. Definition of a ho: dahk-skin woman who do it fo money on account of de food-stamps is gone and de las fix be cookin in de spoon. My response was to either fall down, shrieking wildly with laughter, or to throttle him until his face was as purple as his tie. Then, belatedly, I began to understand he really *had* said gun...but in the meantime he had taken the overload in my mental switchboard for refusal. His face fell.

“You’re sure?” he asked. “I thought that up there in Harlem—”

“Ah lives in Dobbs Ferry, Mist’ Po’tuh!”

He merely waved this aside, as if we both knew my Dobbs Ferry address was just a convenient fiction I maintained—that I might even actually go there after work, but of course was drawn back to the velvety reaches beyond 110th as soon as the sun went down.

“Ah g’iss I could git you a gun, Mist’ Po’tuh, suh,” I said, “but it wouldn’t be no better or wuss’n one you could git yo’sef—a .32...maybe a .38...” I winked at him. “And a gun you buy under de countuh in a bah, cain’t never tell it ain’t goan blow up in yo face fust time you pulls de trig-gah!”

“I don’t want anything like that, anyway,” Porter said morosely. “I want something with a laser sight. And exploding bullets. Did you ever see *Day of the Jackal*, Riddley?”

“Yassah, and it sho was fine!”

“When he shot the watermelon...*plowch!*” Porter tossed his arms wide to indicate how the watermelon had exploded when the assassin tried an exploding bullet on it in *The Day of the Jackal*, and one of his hands struck the ivy sent to Kenton by the mysterious Roberta Solrac. I

had all but forgotten it, although it's been less than two weeks since I put it up there.

I tried to assure Porter again that he was probably far from the top of Hecksler's perhaps infinite list of pet paranoias, and that the man was, after all, seventy-two.

"You don't know some of the stuff he did in Big Two," Porter said, his eyes beginning to move hauntedly from side to side again. "If those guys who hired the Jackal had hired Hecksler instead, DeGaulle never would have died in the rack."

He wandered off then, and I was glad to see him go. The smell of cigars was beginning to make me feel mildly ill. I took down Zenith the Common Ivy and looked at him (it is ridiculous to assign a male pronoun to an ivy, and yet I did it automatically—I, who usually write with the shrewish care of a French *petit bourgeoise* housewife picking over fruit in the marketplace). I began this entry by saying what a difference a day makes. In the case of Zenith the Common Ivy, what a difference *five* days has made. The sagging stem has straightened and thickened, the four yellowish leaves have become almost wholly green, and two new ones have begun to unfurl. All of this with absolutely no help from me at all. I watered it and noticed two other things about my good old buddy Zenith—first, it's even put out its first tendril—it barely reaches to the lip of the cheap plastic pot, but it's there—and second, that swampy, unpleasant smell seems to have disappeared. In fact both the plant and the soil in which he is potted smell quite sweet.

Perhaps it's a psychic ivy. If General Hecksler shows up here at good old 490 Park, I must be sure to ask him, hee-hee!

Got twenty pages done on the novel this week—not much, but think (hope!) I am approaching the halfway point.

Gelb, who had a modest run of luck yesterday, tried to push it today—this was about an hour before Porter hopped in, looking for armaments. Gelb now owes me \$81.50.

March 8, 1981

Dear Ruth,

Just lately you've been harder to reach on the phone than the President of the United States—I swear to God I'm getting to hate your answering machine! I must confess that tonight—the third night of “Hi, this is Ruth and I can't come to the phone right now, but...”—I got a little nervous and called the other number you gave me—the super. If he hadn't told me he'd seen you going out around five with a big load of books under your arm, I think I might have asked him to check and make sure you were okay. I know, I know, it's just the time difference, but things have gotten so paranoid here lately that you wouldn't believe it. Paranoid? *Weird* is a better word, maybe. We'll probably talk before you receive this, making ninety per cent of this letter obsolete (unless I send it Federal Express, which makes long distance look like an austerity measure), but if I don't narrate it by some means or other I think I may explode. I understand from Herb Porter, who is nearly apoplectic (a condition I sympathize with more than I would heretofore have believed, following *l'affair* Detweiller), that General Heckler's escape and the murders which attended it have made the national news the last two nights, but I assume you haven't seen it—or didn't make the connection—or I would have heard from you via Ma Tinkerbelle ere now (prolix as ever, you see—would that I could be as succinct as Zenith's faithful custodian Riddley!). If you *haven't* heard, the enclosed *Post* clipping (I didn't bother to include the centerfold photo of the asylum with the obligatory dotted line marking the dotty General's likely route of escape and the obligatory X's marking the locations of his victims) will bring you up to date as quickly and luridly as possible.

You may remember that I mentioned Hecksler to you in a letter only six weeks ago—something like that, anyway. Herb rejected his book, *Twenty Psychic Garden Flowers*, and provoked a barrage of paranoid hate-mail. Joking aside, his bloody escape has created a real atmosphere of unease here at Z.H. I had a drink with Roger Wade after work tonight in Four Fathers (Roger claims that the owner, a genial man named Ginelli with a soft voice and these odd, gleeful eyes, is a *mafioso*) and told him about Herb's visit to me that afternoon. I pointed out to Herb that it was ridiculous for him to be as frightened as he obviously is (it's sort of funny—under his steely Joe Pyne Exterior, the resident Neanderthal turns out to be Walter Mitty after all) and Herb agreed. Then, after a certain amount of patently artificial small talk, he asked me if I knew where he could get a gun. Mystified—sometimes your ob'dt correspondent is amazingly slow in making the obvious connections, m'dear—I mentioned the sporting goods store five blocks from here, at Park and 32nd.

“No,” he said impatiently. “I don't want a shotgun or anything like that.” Here he lowered his voice. “I want something I can carry around with me.”

Roger nodded and said Herb had been into his office around two, feeling him out on the same subject.

“What did you say?” I asked him.

“I reminded him that the penalties for carrying concealed weapons without a permit in this state are damned severe,” Roger said. “At which point Herb drew himself up to his full height (which is, Ruth, about five-seven) and said, ‘A man doesn't need a permit to protect himself, Roger.’”

“And then?”

“Then he walked out. And tried you. Probably tried Bill Gelb as well.”

“Don't forget Riddley,” I said.

“Ah, yes—and Riddley.”

“Who might just be able to help him.”

Roger ordered another bourbon, and I was thinking how much older than his actual forty-five he is coming to look when he suddenly grinned

that boyish, winning grin that so charmed you when you first met him at that cocktail party in June of '80—the one at Gahan and Nancy Wilson's place in Connecticut, do you remember? "Have you seen Sandra Jackson's new toy?" he asked. "*She's* the one Herb should have gone to for black market munitions." Roger actually laughed out loud, a sound I have heard from him very seldom in the last eight months or so. Hearing it made me realize again, Ruth, how much I like and respect him—he could have been a really great editor somewhere—perhaps even in the Maxwell Perkins league. It seems a shame that he's ended up piloting such a leaky craft as Zenith House.

"She's got something called the Rainy Night Friend," he said, still laughing. "It's silver-plated, and almost the size of a mortar shell. Fucking thing fills her whole purse. There's a flashlight set into the blunt end. The tapered end emits a cloud of tear-gas when you press a button—only Sandra says that she spent an extra ten bucks to have the tear-gas canister replaced with Hi-Pro-Gas, which is a hopped-up version of Mace. In the middle of this device, Johnny boy, is a pull-ring that sets off a high-decibel siren. I did not ask for a demonstration. They would have evacuated the building."

"The way you describe it, it sounds as if she could use it as a dildo when there were no muggers around," I said.

He went off into gales of half-hysterical laughter. I joined him—it would have been impossible not to—but I was concerned for him, as well. He's very tired and very close to the edge of his endurance, I think—the parent corporation's steadily eroding support for the house has really started to get to him.

I asked him if something like the Rainy Night Friend was legal.

"I'm not a lawyer so I couldn't tell you for sure," Roger said. "My impression is that a woman who uses a tear-gas pen on a potential mugger or rapist is in a gray area. But Sandra's toy, loaded up with a Mace hybrid... no, I don't think something like that can be kosher."

"But she's got it, and she's carrying it," I said.

"Not only that, but she seems fairly calm about it all," Roger agreed.

“Funny—she was the one who was so scared when the General was sending his poison pen letters, and Herb hardly seemed aware any of it was going on...at least until the bus driver got stabbed. I think what freaked Sandra out before was that she’d never seen him.”

“Yes,” I said. “She even told me that once.”

He paid the tab, waving away my offer to pay my half. “It’s the revenge of the flower-people,” he said. “First Detweiller, the mad gardener from Central Falls, and then Heckler, the mad gardener from Oak Cove.”

That gave me what the British mystery writers like to call a nasty start—talk about not making obvious connections! Roger, who is far from being anyone’s fool, saw my expression and smiled.

“Didn’t think of that, did you?” he asked. “It’s just a coincidence, of course, but I guess it was enough to set off a little paranoid chime in Herb Porter’s head—I can’t imagine him getting so fashed otherwise. We could have the basis of a good Robert Ludlum novel here. *The Horticultural Something-or-Other*. Come on, let’s get out of here.”

“*Convergence*,” I said as we hit the street.

“Huh?” Roger looked like someone coming back from a million miles away.

“*The Horticultural Convergence*,” I said. “The perfect Ludlum title. Even the perfect Ludlum plot. It turns out, see, that Detweiller and Heckler are actually brothers—no, considering the ages, I guess father and son would be better—in the pay of the NKVD. And—”

“I’ve got to catch my bus, John,” he said, not unkindly.

Well, I have my problems, dear Ruth (who knows better than you?), but realizing when I’m being a bore has never been one of them (except when I’m drunk). I saw him down to the bus stop and headed home.

The last thing he said was that the next we heard of General Heckler would probably be a report of his capture...or his suicide. And Herb Porter would be disappointed as well as relieved.

“It isn’t General Heckler Herb and the rest of us have to be worried about,” he said—his little burst of good humor had left him and he looked

slumped and small, standing there at the bus stop with his hands jammed into the pockets of his trenchcoat. “It’s Harlow Enders and the rest of the accountants who are going to get us. They’ll stab us with their red pencils. When I think about Enders, I almost wish I had Sandra Jackson’s Rainy Night Friend.”

No progress on my novel this week—looking back over this epistle I see why—all this narrative that should have gone into *Maymonth* tonight went ended up here instead. But if I went on too long and in too much novelistic detail, don’t chalk it *all* up to prolixity, my dear—over the last six months or so I have become a genuine Lonely Guy. Writing to you isn’t as good as talking to you, and talking to you isn’t as good as seeing you, and seeing you isn’t as good as touching you and being with you (steam-steam! pant-pant!), but a person has to make do with what he has. I know you’re busy, studying hard, but going so long without talking to you has got me sorta crazy (and on top of Detweiller and Hecksler, more crazy I do not need to be). I love you, my dear.

Missing you, needing you,

John

March 9, 1981

Mr. Herbert Porter
Designated Jew
Zenith House
490 Park Avenue
New York, NY 10017

Dear Designated Jew,

Did you think I had forgotten you? I bet you did. Well, I didn't. A man doesn't forget the thief who rejected his book after stealing all of the good parts. And how you tried to discredit me. I wonder how you will look with your *penis* in your *ear*. Ha-ha. (But not a joke)

I am coming for you, "big boy."

Major General Anthony R.
Hecksler (Ret.)

P.S. Roses are red.

Violets are blue.

I am coming to castrate.

A Designated Jew.

M.G.A.R.H. (Ret.)

MAILGRAM FROM MR. JOHN KENTON TO RUTH TANAKA

MS. RUTH TANAKA
10411 CRESCENT BOULEVARD
LOS ANGELES, CA 90024

MARCH 10, 1981

DEAR RUTH

THIS IS PROBABLY PRIMO STUPIDO BUT PARANOIA BEGETS PARANOIA AND I STILL CAN'T RAISE YOU. FINALLY GOT PAST THAT BLANK-BLANK ANSWERING MACHINE THIS MORNING TO YOUR ROOMMATE WHO SAID SHE HADN'T SEEN YOU LAST TWO DAYS. SHE SOUNDED FUNNY. I HOPE ONLY STONED. CALL ME SOONEST OR I'LL BE KNOCKING ON YOUR DOOR THIS WEEKEND. LOVE YOU.

JOHN

March 10, 1981

Dear John,

I imagine — no, I know — you must be wondering why you haven't heard from me much over the last three weeks. The reason is simple enough; I've been feeling guilty. And the reason I am writing now instead of calling is that I am a coward. Also I think, although you may not believe me when you read the rest of this, which is the hardest letter I've ever had to write, because I love you very much and want so much not to hurt you. All the same I suppose this will hurt and knowing I can't help it makes me cry.

John, I've met a man named Toby Anderson and have fallen head over heels in love with him. If it matters to you — and it probably won't — I met him in one of the two English Restoration drama courses I'm taking. I held him off as best as I could for a long time — I very much want and need you to believe that — but by mid-February I just couldn't hold him off any longer. My arms got tired.

The last three weeks or so have been a nightmare for me. I don't really expect you to sympathize with my position, but I hope you'll believe I am telling the truth. Although you're on the east coast and I'm three thousand miles away on the west, I felt as if I were sneaking around on you. And I was. I was! Oh, I don't mean in the sense that you might come home early from work one night and find me with Toby, but I felt terrible all the same. I couldn't sleep, couldn't eat, couldn't do my yoga positions or the Jane Fonda Workout. My grades were slipping, but to hell with the grades — my heart was slipping.

I've been ducking your calls because I couldn't bear to hear your voice — it seemed to bring it all home to me — how I was lying and cheating and leading you on.

It all came to a head two nights ago when Toby showed me the lovely diamond engagement ring he had bought for me. He said he wanted me to have it and he hoped I wanted to take it, but he said he couldn't give it to me even if I did until I talked or wrote to you. He's such an honorable man, John, and the irony is that under different circumstances I am sure you would like him very much.

I broke down and cried in his arms and before long his tears were mingled with mine. The upshot of it all was me saying I would be ready for him to slip that gorgeous love-ring on my finger by the end of the week. I think we are going to be married in June.

You see that in the end I took the coward's way out, writing instead of phoning, and it's still taken me the last two days to get this much down—I've cut every class and have practically put down roots in the library kareel where I should be studying for a Transformational Grammar prelim. But to hell with Noam Chomsky and deep structure! And although you may not believe this either, each word of the letter you're reading has been like a lash across my heart.

If you want to talk to me, John—I'd understand if you didn't but you may—you could call me in a week...after you've had a chance to think all this over and get it into some kind of perspective. I am so used to your sweetness and charm and kindness, and so afraid you'll be angry and accusatory—but that is up to you and I'll just have to "take you as you are," I suppose. But you need that time to cool off and settle down, and I need some time, too. You should receive this on the eleventh. I'll be in my apartment from seven to nine-thirty on the nights of the eighteenth through the twenty-second, both expecting your call and dreading it. I won't want to speak to you before then, and I hope you understand—and I think maybe you will, you who were always the most understanding of men in spite of your constant self-deprecation.

One other thing — both Toby and I are in agreement about this: don't take it in your head to just suddenly jump on a plane and "wing your way into the golden west" — I wouldn't see you if you did. I'm not ready to see you face to face, John — my feelings are still too much in flux and my self-image too much in a state of transition. We will meet again, yes. And dare I say that I even hope you will come to our wedding? I must dare, as I see I have written it down!

Oh, John, I do love you, and I hope this letter has not caused you too much pain — I even hope God has been good and you may have found your own "somebody" in the last couple of weeks — in the meantime, please know that you will always (always!) be somebody to me.

My love,

Ruth

PS — And although it is trite, it is also true: I hope we can always be friends.

interoffice memo

TO: Roger Wade
FROM: John Kenton
RE: Resignation

I've been a trifle formal here because this really is a letter of resignation, Roger, memo form or no. I'll be leaving at the end of the day—will, in fact, begin cleaning out my desk as soon as I've finished this. I'd rather not go into my reasons—they are personal. I realize, of course, that leaving with no prior notice is very bad form. Should you choose to take the matter up with the Apex Corporation, I would be happy to pay a reasonable assessment. I'm sorry about this, Roger. I like and respect you a great deal, but this simply has to be.

From John Kenton's diary

March 16, 1981

I haven't tried to keep a diary since I was eleven years old, when my Aunt Susan—dead lo these many years—gave me a small pocket diary for my birthday. It was just a cheap little thing; like Aunt Susan herself, now that I think about it.

I kept that diary, off and on (mostly off) for almost three weeks. I might not get even that far this time, but it doesn't really matter. This was Roger's idea, and Roger's ideas are sometimes good.

I've junked the novel—oh, don't think I did anything melodramatic like casting it into the fire to commemorate the spontaneous combustion of My First Serious Love; I'm actually writing this first (and maybe last) entry in my diary on the backs of the manuscript pages. But junking a novel doesn't have anything to do with the actual pages, anyway; what's on the pages is just so much dead skin. The novel actually falls apart inside your head, it seems, like the parson's wonderful one-hoss shay. Maybe the only good thing about Ruth's cataclysmic letter is that it's put paid to my grandiose literary aspirations. *Maymonth*, by John Edward Kenton, sucked that fabled hairy bird.

Does one need to begin a diary with background information? This was not a question which crossed my mind when I was eleven—at least not that I recall. And in spite of the great shitload of English courses I've taken in my time, I don't recall ever attending one which covered the Protocol of Journals. Footnotes, synopses, outlines, the proper placement of modifiers, the correct form of the business letter—these were all things in which I took instruction. But on how to start a diary I am as blank as I am, say, on how to continue your life after its light just went out.

Here is my decision, after a full thirty seconds of weighty consideration: a little background information wouldn't hurt. My name, as mentioned above, is John Edward Kenton; I am twenty-six years of age; I attended Brown University, where I majored in English, served as President of the Milton Society, and was exceedingly full of myself; I believed that everything in my life would eventually turn out just fine; I have since learned better. My father is dead, my mother alive and well and living in Sanford, Maine. I have three sisters. Two are married; the third is living at home and will finish her senior year at Sanford High this June.

I live in a two-room Soho apartment which I thought quite pleasant until the last few days; now it seems drab. I work for a seedy book company which publishes paperback originals, most of them about giant bugs and Viet Nam veterans out to reform the world with automatic weapons. Three days ago I found out my girl has left me for another man. Some response to this seemed to be required, so I tried to quit my job. No sense trying to go

into my mental state either then or now. It was none too calm to begin with, due to an outbreak of what I can only call Crazy Fever at work. I may elaborate on *that* business at some later date, but for the time being the importance of Detweiller and Heckslar seems to have receded far into the background.

If you have ever been abruptly left by someone you did and do love deeply, you'll know the sort of fugue I have been experiencing. If you haven't, you can't. Simple as that.

I keep wanting to say *I feel the way I did when my father died*, but I don't. Part of me (the part that, writer or not, constantly wants to make metaphors) would like to make it into a bereavement, and I believe Roger was partly right when he made that comparison at the mostly liquid dinner we had the night of my resignation, but there are other elements, too. It is a separation—as if someone told you that you could no longer have your favorite food, or use a drug to which you had become addicted. And there's something worse. However you define the thing, I find that my own sense of self-esteem and self-worth have somehow gotten mixed up in it, and it hurts. It hurts a lot. And it seems to hurt all the time. I always used to be able to escape mental pain and psychic distress in my sleep, but that's no good this time. It hurts there, too.

Ruth's letter (question: how many Dear John letters have actually been sent to Johns? Should we form a club, like the Jim Smith Society?) came on the eleventh—it was waiting in my mailbox like a time-bomb when I got home. I scribbled my resignation on a memo form the next morning and sent it down to Roger Wade's office via Riddley, who is our janitor *cum* mail-clerk at Zenith House. Roger came down to my office as if he had rockets on his heels. In spite of the pain I'm feeling and the daze I seem to be living in I was absurdly touched. After a short, intense conversation (to my shame I broke down and wept, and although I managed to refrain from telling him specifically what the problem was/is, I think he guessed) I agreed to defer my resignation, at least until that evening, when Roger suggested we get together and talk the situation over.

“A couple of drinks and a medium-rare steak may help to put the situation in perspective,” was the way he put it, but I think it actually turned out to be more like a dozen drinks...each, maybe. I lost count. And it was to be Four Fathers again, naturally. At least a place for which I have no associations with Ruth.

After agreeing to Roger’s dinner suggestion, I went home, slept for the rest of the day, and woke up feeling thick and dazed and headachey—that feeling of mild hangover I am left with whenever I get too much sleep I don’t really need. It was 5:30, almost dark, and in the unlovely light of a late winter dusk I couldn’t imagine why in God’s name I had allowed Roger to talk me into the compromise measure of making my resignation provisional for even twelve hours. I felt like an ear of corn on which someone has performed a fabulous magic trick. Taken the corn and the cob and left the green shield of leaves and the fine yellow-white poll of tassel intact.

I am aware—God knows I have read enough to be—of how Byronic-Keatsian-Sorrows-of-Young-Werther that sounds, but one of the diary joys I discovered at eleven and may be rediscovering now is that you write with no audience—real or imagined—in mind. You can say whatever you fucking well want.

I took a very long shower, mostly just standing dazedly under the spray with a bar of soap in one hand, and then I dried off and dressed and sat in front of the TV until quarter of seven or so, when it was time to go off and meet Roger. I took Ruth’s letter off my desk and stuffed it into my pocket just before I left, deciding that Roger ought to know just what had derailed me. Was I looking for sympathy? A tender ear, as the poet says? I don’t know. But mostly I think I wanted him to be sure—really, really sure—that I wasn’t just a rat deserting a sinking ship. Because I really like Roger, and I’m sorry for the jam he’s in.

I could describe him—and if he were a character in one of my fictions I suppose I would do so lovingly, in too much detail—but since this diary is for me alone and I know perfectly well what Roger looks like, having trod the metaphoric grapes just down the hall from him for the last seventeen

months, there is really no need to. I find that fact unaccountably liberating. The only salient points about Roger are that he is forty-five, looks eight to ten years older, smokes too much, is three-times divorced...and that I like him very much.

When we were settled at a table in the back of Fathers with drinks in front of us, he asked me what was wrong besides the obvious unfortunacies of this evil year. I took Ruth's letter out of my pocket and tossed it wordlessly across the table to him. While he read it I finished my drink and ordered another. When the waiter came with it Roger finished his own drink at a gulp, ordered another, and laid Ruth's letter beside his plate. His eyes were still going over it.

"Before long his tears were mingled with mine?" he said in a low just-talking-to-myself voice. "Each word has been like a lash across my heart? Jesus, I wonder if she's ever considered writing bodice-rippers. There just might be something there."

"Cut it out, Roger. That isn't funny."

"No, I suppose not," he said, and looked at me with an expression of sympathy that was at the same time deeply comforting and deeply embarrassing. "I doubt if much of anything seems very funny to you now."

"Not even slightly," I agreed.

"I know how much you love her."

"You couldn't."

"Yeah, I could. It's on your face, John."

We drank without saying anything for a little while. The *maitre d'* came bearing menus and Roger waved him away with barely a look.

"I have been married three times and divorced three times," he said. "It didn't get better, or easier. It actually seemed to get worse, like bumping the same sore place time after time. The J. Geils Band was right. Love stinks." His new drink came and he sipped it. I half-expected him to say *Women! Can't live with 'em, can't live without 'em!*, but he didn't.

"Women," I said, beginning to feel like a figment of my own imagination. "Can't live with 'em, can't live without 'em."

“Oh yes you can,” he said, and although his eyes were on me he was quite clearly looking somewhere else. “You can live without ’em quite easily. But life without a woman, even if she’s a shrew and a nag, sours a man. It turns an essential part of his soul into a pimple.”

“Roger—”

He held up one hand. “You may not believe it, but we’re almost done talking about this,” he said. “We may get drunk and maudlin and run our gums on the subject, but we’ll only be talking about how we’ve got a skinful, which is the only subject drunks ever talk about, really. I just want to tell you that I’m sincerely sorry Ruth has left you, and I am sorry for your pain. I’d share it if I could.”

“Thanks, Roger,” I said, my voice a little hoarse. For a second there were three or four Rogers sitting across the table from me and I had to wipe my eyes. “Thanks a lot.”

“You’re welcome.” He took a sip of his drink. “For the moment let us leave what I’m helpless to reverse or alleviate and talk about your future. John, I want you to stay with Zenith House, at least until June. Maybe until the end of the year, but at least until June.”

“I can’t,” I said. “If I stayed I’d just be another millstone around your neck, and I think you’ve got enough of those already.”

“I wouldn’t be happy to see you go either time,” he said as if he hadn’t heard. He had taken the cigarette case he carried—it was too old and scratched and beaten to seem like an affectation—from his inside jacket pocket and was selecting a Kent from among what appeared to be several plump joints. “But I could let you go in June if we look like we’re getting on our feet. If Enders swings the axe, I’d like you to stay on until the end of the year and help me wind things up in orderly fashion.” He looked at me with something in his eyes that was very close to naked pleading. “Except for me, you’re the only sane person *at* Zenith House. Oh, I guess none of them are as crazy as General Hecksler—although sometimes I wonder about Riddley—but it’s only a matter of degree. I’m asking you not to leave me alone in this purgatory, and that’s what Zenith House is this year.”

“Roger, if I could—if I—”

“Have you made plans, then?”

“No...not exactly...but—”

“Not planning to go out and confront her, in spite of what this letter says?” He tapped it with a fingernail and then lighted his cigarette.

“No.” The idea had certainly crossed my mind, but I didn’t need Ruth to tell me it was a bad idea. In a movie the girl might suddenly realize her mistake when she saw the hero of her life standing before her, one hastily packed bag in his hand, shoulders drooping and his face tired from the transcontinental flight on the redeye, but in real life I would only turn her against me completely and forever or provoke some sort of extreme guilt reaction. And I might very well provoke an extreme pugilistic reaction in Mr. Toby Anderson, whose name I have already come to cordially hate. And although I have never seen him (the only thing she forgot to include, the jilted lover said bitterly, was a picture of my replacement), I keep picturing a young cleft-chinned man, very big, who looks, in my imagination at least, as if he belongs in a Los Angeles Rams uniform. I have no problem with landing in traction for my beloved—there is, in fact, a masochistic part of me which would probably welcome it—but I would be embarrassed, and I might cry. It disgusts me to admit it, but I cry rather easily.

Roger was watching me closely but not saying anything, merely twiddling the stem of his drink glass.

And there was something else, wasn’t there? Or maybe it was really the only thing, and the others are just rationalizations. In the last couple of months I’ve gotten a big dose of craziness. Not just the occasional bag-lady who rails at you on the street or the drunks in bars who want to tell you all about the nifty new betting systems with which they mean to take Atlantic City by storm, but real sicko craziness. And being exposed to that is like standing in front of the open door of a furnace in which a lot of very smelly garbage is being burned.

Could I be driven into a rage at seeing them together, her new fella—he of the odious football-player name—maybe stroking her ass with the

blasé unconcern of acknowledged ownership? Me, John Kenton, graduate of Brown and president of the blah-blah-blah? Bespectacled John Kenton? Could I perhaps even be driven to some really irrevocable act—an act that might be more likely if he did in fact turn out to be as big as his odious name suggests? Shrieky old John Kenton, who mistook a bunch of special effects for genuine snuff photos?

The answer is, I don't know. But I know this: I awoke from a terrible dream last night, a dream in which I had just thrown battery acid into her face. That was what really scared me, scared me so badly I had to sleep the rest of the night with the light on.

Not his.

Hers.

Ruth's face.

"No," I said again, and then poured the rest of my drink over the dryness I heard in my voice. "No, I think that would be very unwise."

"Then you *could* stay on."

"Yes, but I couldn't *work*." I looked at him with some exasperation. My head was starting to buzz. It wasn't a very cheerful buzz, but all the same I signaled the waiter, who had been lurking nearby, for another. "Right now I'm having trouble remembering how to tie my own shoelaces." No. Wrong. That was hip and it sounded good, but it wasn't the truth—my shoelaces had nothing to do with it. "Roger, I'm depressed."

"Bereaved people shouldn't sell the house after the funeral," Roger said, and in my state of buzziness that seemed extremely witty—worthy of H. L. Mencken, in fact. I laughed.

Roger smiled, but I could tell he was serious. "It's true," he said. "One of the few interesting courses I ever took in college was called the Psychology of Human Stress—one of these nifty little blocks they give you to fill up the final eight weeks of your senior year after you're done student teaching—"

"*You* were going to be a teacher?" I asked startled. I couldn't see Roger teaching—and then, all of a sudden I could.

“I *did* teach for six years,” Roger said. “Four in high school and two in elementary. But that’s beside the point. This course took up human stress situations like marriage, divorce, imprisonment, and bereavement. The course wasn’t really a Signposts for Better Living sort of deal, but if you kept your eyes open you couldn’t help but notice a few. One was this thing about living out at least the first six months of a really deep bereavement in the house where you and your loved one were living when the death occurred.”

“Roger, this is not the same thing.” I sipped my new drink, which tasted just like my old drink. It occurred to me that I was getting fried. It also occurred to me that I didn’t care in the slightest.

“But it *is*,” He said, leaning solemnly toward me. “In a queer way Ruth is dead to you now. You may see her from time to time over the years, but if the break is as final and complete as that letter sounds, the Ruth we could call your Lover-Ruth is dead to you. And you are grieving.”

I opened my mouth to tell him he was full of shit, and then I closed it again because he was at least partly right. That’s what carrying a torch really means, isn’t it? You’re grieving for the lover who died—the lover who is dead to you, anyway.

“People tend to think of ‘grief’ and ‘depression’ as interchangeable terms,” Roger said. His tone was a good deal more pedantic than usual, and his eyes were rimmed with red. It occurred to me that Roger was getting fried, too. “They’re really not. There’s an element of depression in grief, of course, but there are a whole slew of other feelings as well, ranging from guilt and sadness to anger and relief. A person who runs from the scene of those feelings is a person in retreat from the inevitable. He arrives in a new place and discovers he feels exactly the same mixture of emotions we call grief—except now he feels homesickness as well, and a feeling of having lost the essential linkage which eventually turn grief into remembrance.”

“You remember all of that from an eight-week psychology block course you took eighteen years ago?”

Roger sipped modestly at his drink. “Sure,” he said. “I got an A.”

“Bullshit you do.”

“I also banged the grad student who taught the course. What a piece of ass *she* was.”

“It’s not my *apartment* I was planning to leave,” I said, although I had no idea if I intended to leave it or not...and I know that wasn’t his point anyway.

“It wouldn’t matter whether you left that two-room cockroach condo or not,” he said. “You know what I’m talking about here. Your *job* is your house.”

“Yeah? Well the roof is sure leaking,” I said, and even *that* seemed sort of witty to me. I was getting fried, all right.

“I want you to help me fix the leak, John,” he said, leaning forward earnestly. “That’s what I’m saying. That’s why I asked you out tonight. And your agreement is the only thing capable of mitigating what is undoubtedly going to be one of the most beastly hangovers of my life. Help us both. Stay on.”

“You’ll pardon me if all of this sounds just a little bit self-serving and fortuitous.”

He sat back. “I respect you,” he said a trifle coldly, “but I also like you, John. If I didn’t I wouldn’t be breaking my ass to keep you on.” He hesitated, seemed on the point of saying something more, then didn’t. His eyes said it for him: *And humiliating myself by damn’ near begging.*

“I just don’t understand why you’re trying so hard,” I said. “I mean, I’m flattered, but—”

“Because if anyone can bring in a book or create an idea that will keep Zenith from going belly-up, it’s you,” he said. There was an intensity in his eyes I found almost frightening. “I know how fucking embarrassed you were by the whole Detweiller business, but—”

“Please,” I said. “Let’s not add insult to injury.”

“I had no intention of even bringing it up,” he said. “It’s just that your very openness to such an off-the-wall proposition—”

“It was off the wall, all right—”

“Will you shut up and *listen*? Your response to the Detweiller query

showed you're still alive to a potentially commercial idea. Herb or Bill would simply have dropped his letter in the circular file."

"And we all would have been a lot better off," I said, but I saw where he was going and would be lying if I didn't say I was flattered...and that I felt a little better about the Detweiller affair for the first time since my humiliation at the police station.

"*This* time," he agreed. "But those guys *also* would have turned down V. C. Andrews with her *Toys in the Attic* series, or some brand new idea. Boom, into the circular file and then back to contemplating their navels." He paused. "I need you, Johnny, and I think it would be good if you stayed—for you, for me, for Zenith. There's no other way I can put it. Think it over and give me your answer. I'll accept it either way."

"You'd be paying me for the equivalent of cutting out paper dolls, Roger."

"That's a chance I'm willing to take."

I thought about it. I'd started to clean out my desk that day and hadn't gotten very far—to paraphrase Poe, who would have thought the old desk could have had so much crap in it? Or maybe it was just me, and that crack about not even being able to tie my own shoelaces wasn't so wrong, after all. I'd gotten two empty cardboard cartons from Riddley's room (which smells oddly green lately, like fresh marijuana—and no, I didn't see any) and did nothing but stare from one to the other. Maybe with a little more time I could at least complete the elementary job of cleaning up my old life before starting some unimaginable new one. It's just that I've felt so fucking *dreary*.

"Suppose we table the resignation until the end of the month," I said. "would that ease your mind?"

He smiled. "It's not the best I'd hoped for," he said, "but it's not the worst I was afraid of, either. I'll take it. And now I think we better order while we can still sit up straight."

We ordered steaks, and ate them, but by then my mouth was too numb to taste much. I suppose I just ought to be grateful that no one had to perform the Heimlich Maneuver on either of us.

As we were leaving—holding onto each other, assisted by the anxious *maitre d'* (who no doubt only wanted to get us the fuck out of there before we broke something), Roger told me: “Something else I learned in that psychology course—”

“What did you say they called it? The Psychology of Damaged Souls?”

We were outside by then, and his cackles drifted away in little frosty plumes of vapor. “It was the Psychology of Human Stress, but I actually like yours better.” Roger energetically flagged down a cab, whose driver would shortly be very sorry he picked us up. “It also said that it helps to keep a diary.”

“Shit,” I said. “I haven’t kept a diary since I was eleven.”

“Well what the hell,” he said. “*look* for it, John. Maybe it’s still around somewhere.” And he went off into another wild run of cackles which only ended when he leaned over and puked nonchalantly on his own shoes.

He did it twice more on the way to his apartment building at 20th and Park Avenue South, leaning as far out the window as he could (which wasn’t too far since it was one of those Plymouths where the rear windows will only roll down about halfway and there’s a grim little yellow and black sign that says DO NOT FORCE THE WINDOW!) and just sort of blowing it into the slipstream and then settling back with that same nonchalant expression on his face. Our driver, a Nigerian or Somalian by his accent, was horrified. He pulled over to the curb and ordered us out. I was willing, but Roger sat tight.

“My friend,” he said, “I would get out if I could walk. Since I cannot, you must convey us hence.”

“I want you out my caib, good sah.”

“So far I have done you the courtesy of vomiting out the window,” Roger said with that same nonchalant and rather pleasant expression on his face. “It hasn’t been easy because of the angle, but I have done it. I think in another few seconds I am going to vomit again. If you don’t convey us hence, I am going to do it in your ashtray.”

At Roger’s building I assisted him into the lobby and saw him into the elevator with his apartment key in his hand. Then I wove my way back to the cab.

“You git annoder cab, mon,” the driver said. “You just pay me and git annoder. I don’t want to no mo convey you hence.”

“It’s just down to Soho,” I said, “and I’ll give you a hell of a tip. Also, I don’t feel like puking.” This was a bit of a lie, I’m afraid.

He took me, and from the look of my wallet the next day I did indeed give him a hell of a tip. And I actually managed to make it upstairs before throwing up. Although once I started I didn’t stop for quite awhile.

I didn’t go in the next day—it was all I could do to get out of bed. My head felt monstrous, bloated. I called in around three and got Bill Gelb, who told me Roger hadn’t shown, either.

Since then I have done a lot of crying and have had mostly sleepless nights, but perhaps Roger wasn’t so wrong—the only hours that I feel even halfway myself are the ones spent on the 9th floor at 490 Park. Riddley has just about had to sweep me out the door along with his red sawdust the last two nights. Maybe there is something to that old “he threw himself into his work” crap after all. Even this diary idea feels right...although it may only be the relief of finally being done with my dreadful pastoral novel.

Maybe I’ll stay on after all. Onward and upward...if there is any upward left for me. Man, I still can’t believe she’s gone.

And I still haven’t lost hope that she may change her mind.

March 21, 1981

Mr. John "Poop-Shit" Kenton
Zenith House Publishers, Home of the Pus-Bags
490 Kaka Avenue South
New York, New York 10017

Dear Poop-Shit,

Did you think I had forgotten you? My plans for revenge will go forward no matter WHAT! happens to me! You and all your fellow "*Pus-Bags*" will soon feel the WRATH! of CARLOS!!

I have covenen the powers of Hell,

Carlos Detweiller

In Transit, U.S.A.

P S—Smell anything "*green*" yet, Mr. Poop-Shit Kenton?

From John Kenton's diary.

March 22, 1981

Had a letter from Carlos today. I laughed until I shrieked. Herb Porter came on the run, wanted to know if I was dying or what. I showed it to him. He read it and only frowned. He wanted to know what I was laughing about—didn't I take this Detweiller fellow seriously?

“Oh, I take him seriously...sort of,” I said.

“Then why in hell are you laughing?”

“I guess I just must be a warped plank in the great floor of the universe,” I said, and then went off into even madder gales of laughter.

Frowning so deeply now that the lines in his face had become crevasses, Herb laid the letter on the corner of my desk and then backed into the doorway, as if whatever I had might be catching. “I don't know why you're so weird lately,” he said, “but I'll give you some good advice anyway. Get yourself some personal protection. And if you need psychiatric help, John—”

I just kept laughing—by then I'd worked myself into a semi-hysterical frenzy. Herb stared at me a moment longer, then slammed the door and walked away. Just as well, really, as I finished by crying.

I expect to speak to Ruth tonight. By exercising all of my willpower I have managed to hold off on calling her, expecting each day that she must call me. Maddening images of her and the odious Toby Anderson cavorting together—the locale which keeps recurring is a hot-tub. So I'll call her. So much for willpower.

If I had a return address for Carlos Detweiller I think I'd drop him a postcard: “Dear Carlos—I know all about covening the powers of Hell. Your Ob'd Servant, Poop-Shit Kenton.”

Why I bother to write all this crud down, or why I keep plowing through the stacks of old unreturned manuscripts in the mailroom next to Riddley's janitorial closet, are both mysteries to me.

March 23, 1981

My call to Ruth was an utter disaster. Why I should be sitting here and writing about it when I don't even want to *think* about it defies reason. Perversity upon perversity. Actually, I *do* know—I have some dim idea that if I write it down it will lose some of its power over me...so let me by all means confess, but the less said, the better.

Have I written here that I cry very easily? I think so, but I haven't the heart to actually look back and see. Well, I cried. Maybe that says it all. Or maybe it doesn't. I guess it doesn't. I had spent the day—the last two or three days, actually—telling myself that I would not *a.)* cry, or *b.)* beg her to come back. I ended up doing *c.)* both. I've had a lot of gruff locker room chats with myself over the last couple of days (and mostly sleepless nights) on the subject of *Pride*. As in, "Even after everything else is gone, a man's got his *Pride*." I would draw some lonely comfort from this thought and fantasize myself as Paul Newman—that scene in *Cool Hand Luke* where he sits in his cell after his mother's death, playing his banjo and crying soundlessly. Heart-rending, but cool, definitely cool.

Well, my cool lasted just about four minutes after hearing her voice and having a sudden total remembrance of Ruth—something like an imagistic tattoo. What I'm saying is that I didn't know how gone she was until I heard her say "Hello? John?"—just those two words—and had this searing 360 degree memory of Ruth—God, how here she was when she was here!

Even after everything else is gone, a man's got his *Pride*? Samson might have had similar sentiments about his hair.

Anyway, I cried and I begged and after a little while *she* cried and in the end she had to hang up to get rid of me. Or maybe the odious Toby—I never heard him but am somehow sure he was in the room with her; I could almost smell his Brut cologne—picked the phone out of her hand and did her hanging up for her. So they could discuss his love-ring, or their June wedding, or perhaps so he could mingle his tears with hers. Bitter—bitter—I know. But I've discovered that even after *Pride* has gone, a man's got his *Bitterness*.

Did I discover anything else this evening? Yes, I think so. That it is over—genuinely and completely over. Will this stop me from calling her again and debasing myself even further (if that is possible)? I don't know. I hope so—God, I do. And there's always the possibility that she'll change her phone number. In fact, I think that's even a probability, given tonight's festivities.

So what is there for me now? Work, I guess—work, work, and more work. I'm tunneling my way steadily into the logjam of manuscripts in the mailroom—unsolicited scripts which were never returned, for one reason or another (after all, it says right in the boiler-plate that we accept no responsibility for such orphan children). I don't really expect to find the next *Flowers in the Attic* in there, or a budding John Saul or Rosemary Rogers, but if Roger was wrong about that, he was sublimely right about something much more important—the work is keeping me sane.

Pride...then Bitterness...then Work.

Oh, fuck it. I'm going to go out, buy myself a bottle of bourbon, and get shitty-ass drunk. This is John Kenton, signing off and going for the long bomb.

END OF THE PLANT, PART THREE
