

# The Man Who Would Be King

by  
David C. Smith

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1.

The human being as a commodity is the disease of our age.

Max Lerner

“King is a whore!” Dan DeWitt said.

Cindy looked at him.

“Any whore can make a lot of money, and he just proves it. If he were really good, if he could really write—”

Cindy glanced aside self-consciously and caught a look from the waitress wiping the counter across the aisle from them.

“—you think he’d be on the bestseller list all the time? He would not. He doesn’t write novels; he manufactures products. It’s not writing; it’s typing. He got lucky. And just because he got lucky doesn’t mean he’s good. You see what I’m saying? You know what the problem is? People today have celebrity confused with accomplishment, is what it is. Peer pressure. Nobody thinks for themselves anymore. Read what everybody else is reading. Buy what everybody else is buying. Just go along with the crowd. Play safe. Pavlov’s dog. They’re all like Pavlov’s dog. ‘Gee, here comes Stephen King’s new book or here comes Danielle Steele’s new book, we’d better start salivating.’ So we get a few icons at the top of the heap and nobody else has a chance because that’s our system of royalty. They dole it out, only so many allowed at a time. Musical chairs. That’s what it is. You see what I’m saying? People have been trained not to know better. That’s what it is. So he just keeps going back to the well. He’s got it down. If it’s not broke, don’t fix it. It’s like being McDonald’s. Just keep being McDonald’s. Don’t be original. Deliver the product and smile because that’s all there is to it, there’s nothing more, don’t be original, don’t change, don’t innovate, just keep working that mother lode and people will love you for it, right? Keep turning out products and you become a product yourself.”

Cindy stared at him.

“You see what I’m saying. You see what I’m saying?”

“Gee,” Cindy said. “I didn’t know all that. I mean, I just read his books because I like them.”

Dan frowned and took a sip of his coffee and glanced across the aisle at the waitress behind the counter. “Sorry.”

“You haven’t changed a bit.”

1.

“I apologize.”  
“I could say that I miss it, but I don’t.”  
“Yeah, well, I can understand that.”  
“You know, Dan, the first sign of mental instability is when you start blaming everybody else for your own problems.”  
“I know that. I heard that.”  
“You have no right to feel bitter,” Cindy reminded him. “You’ve been successful.”  
“I suppose.” He didn’t want to talk about it.  
“Haven’t you?”  
“I suppose.” He didn’t want to talk about it.  
“It’s easy to play that why-him-and-not-me routine. But it gets old. You think some crippled man is ticked off with you because you’re not in a wheelchair or something? I mean, you’re the one who kept telling me that writing is a business.”  
“Cindy, truce, okay?”  
“It’s a business.”  
“Cindy, please. Okay?”  
She slowly smiled. It seemed genuine.  
Dan said to her, “Thank you.”  
“Are we a little touchy these days?”  
“I don’t know.” He shrugged.  
“All right. I apologize.”  
“I guess I’m just a little tired.”  
“Are you taking care of yourself?”  
“I guess.”  
“Seriously. You do look a little worn down, you know.”  
“I’m fine.”  
“I bet I know.”  
*Here it comes.*  
“You’re staying inside all the time, I just know it.”  
*Here it—*  
“Spending all your time cooped up, never getting any fresh air.”  
*And here it is.*  
“You’ll ruin your health, hunched over that typewriter all the time. I mean it.”  
All together, now. *You have to get out, Dan.*  
“Dan, you have to get out more.”  
*You have to take care of yourself.*  
“Take care of yourself more. I mean it.”  
*You should start exercising.*  
“Start taking exercise classes. Seriously.”  
He told Cindy, “I’ve been thinking about it.”  
She said, “I have been, and I feel much better.”  
“Really?”  
“Lost six pounds.”  
“Really? I was going to say that you’re looking better.”  
“Oh, God, a compliment.”  
“I was. You look slimmer.”

“Thank you, Dan.”

“Well,” he said, “you do.”

“God,” Cindy told him. “It’s like I still worry about you or something. Honestly . . . .”

She glanced at her coffee cup. It was empty.

Dan looked at her, really watched her, Cindy, his ex-wife, and wondered about her molecules. If he got small enough, down to where he was this tiny little photon or something, down to where Cindy was nothing more than a bunch of molecules, could he make sense of her then, would that explain it, give him a clue about her and him, and life, even, and the whole—

“So,” she asked him, “are you seeing anyone?”

“No.” Touch the ghost inside her, the spirit, anything, a hint, a promise, something, anything meaningful?

“Dan, that’s silly.”

“I’m taking my time.”

“That’s just an excuse.”

“I’m just being careful.”

“Yeah. Well, I guess it pays to be careful.”

“I guess.”

She looked at her coffee cup again, then started to scoot out of her seat. “Mind if I use the ladies’?”

“Back there.” He nodded toward the rear of the diner.

Cindy got up and walked away from him. She had her walk down and Dan thought to himself, watching her, *Jesus, I let that out of my life?*

The waitress came by. “Warm that up?”

“Oh, sure.”

*No, actually, it’s about as warm as it’s going to get.*

Cindy came back. Sliding into the booth again, she looked at her watch, then at the front door of the diner, behind Dan. She said, “I was hoping Daryl would make it here by now. I told him where I was going to be.”

“Oh?” Dan thought, *Daryl? We have a Daryl now?*

“That’s not a problem, is it?”

“Of course not.” *Who the fuck is Daryl?* He asked her, “So who’s Daryl?”

“Oh, you’ll like him. He’s a lot like you, he really is.”

“Does he write?”

“No. Kind of. He’s an engineer. He writes computer programming books or something.”

“He’s a computer programmer?”

“Yes.”

“No offense, Cin, but that’s not like me at all.”

“Oh, I know. But it’s kind of the same thing. You know what I mean. Anyhow, what I really want to know is, are you working on anything?”

“You mean, a book?”

“Of course I mean a book.”

“Kind of.” He felt defensive. “Kind of. It’s slow, it’s coming slowly.” He told her, “I really don’t want to talk about it.”

“So what’re you working on? What is it? You know what you should write is a romance.”

“I don’t think I’m that kind of writer.”

“Something romantic.”

“I tried it once. I’m not that kind of writer.”

“So what is it?”

“It’s coming along. I have a lot of notes.”

“What happened to that idea you were talking about . . . I don’t know, you know.”

“When?”

“At my sister’s.”

“I don’t know.”

“It was a science fiction one.”

“I don’t know. It’s old.”

“You always had a million ideas.”

“Well, the markets have changed. It’s tougher now. My agent says the markets are changing and everything’s tough to sell now except, like, true crime and romances, maybe.”

“And Stephen King.”

He made a face at her.

“Sounds to me like it’s not fun for you anymore.”

“It’s not.”

“What’re you, depressed?”

“I don’t know. I guess work is really boring.”

“You really don’t want to talk about it, do you?”

“No.”

Cindy looked at her watch again. “Damn. I really do have to get going.” She leaned back and reached for her purse.

Dan told her, “Cindy, come on, I can pay for the coffee, okay?”

“I’m sorry you’re not in a good mood.”

“Well, what can I say?”

“And I’m sorry you won’t get to meet Daryl today, either. I was kind of hoping you would.”

“Don’t you think it’d be a little uncomfortable?”

She gave him a kind of surprised look—“Why?”—as she stood and pulled on her raincoat.

Dan asked her then, “Cin, you ever go back?”

“What do you mean?”

“Replay it. You know. Try to figure it out in hindsight.”

She let out a dramatic sigh. Her expression was almost pitying. “Is that what’s been going through your mind?”

“I don’t know.”

“Stop beating yourself up, Dan. You’re fine. I’m fine.”

“I guess.”

“Poor Dan,” Cindy said. “You keep looking for the deep meaning in everything. Sweetie, it’s not there. Life is not that mysterious. There is nothing mysterious going on, okay? This is it. It’s not some big secret.”

He looked up at her.

“I’ll be back in town in a few weeks. You want me to call you?”

“Sure.”

“Good. I’m glad.” She grinned then and waited a moment. “Sometimes, yeah,” Cindy

admitted. “You were just so cocky and so sure of yourself. I just knew you were going to be a big success.”

“It did look promising for a while, there.”

“I’ll call you in a few weeks.”

“Have a safe trip.”

“You take care of yourself.”

She gave him a peck of a kiss on top of his head, and Dan listened to her footsteps as she went away. He heard the bell jangle above the door as she left.

In a minute, Dan moved out of the booth, finished the last of his coffee as he stood there, and pulled on his jacket. He looked at the clock behind the counter. Heading for four already.

He picked up the check for the coffee and walked over to the counter. The cashier was all forehead and red hair and big eyes. She set aside the paperback she was reading, propping it open upside-down. Dan glanced at the cover.

Of course it was the new Stephen King novel.

He handed over a couple of bucks and asked, “Is it any good?”

“Oh, it’s wonderful. He’s just the best writer.”

“Is he?”

“Haven’t you ever read one of his books?”

“No.” He was lying. “He’s very popular, though.”

“Oh, he’s just the best writer.”

“They’re horror stories, he writes horror stories?”

“They’re—” The cashier squinted and her eyebrows came together. Dan could see that she was working very hard at something. He waited for her. “They’re— You know what he does? You know how when you feel like you’re, like everything should be fine but it’s not, and you don’t know why it’s not or where it’s coming from because it’s like it sneaks up on you?”

“I sure do,” Dan told her.

“That’s how he writes. He—” She held her hand out toward him, open, palm up, and sloooooowly pulled her fingers in as if she were clutching at something and made a fist. “It’s like he’s got you by the heart and then he just tightens up and he don’t let go. You know how that is?”

“I sure do,” Dan said.

\* \* \*

It was drizzling as he walked the three blocks to the parking deck and his car. There was a chill in the air, too. Cleveland in late October on a Saturday afternoon. Typical for Cleveland. Typical for Saturday.

Dan paid attention to the slow rain, the wind, the close gray sky covering it all like a hand cupped over the city, and the unsettling quiet. Very few people around. Modern Gothic: the abandoned core, the buildings and warehouses left to decay and rust, lifeless buildings and warehouses left for shadows and the silence to eat.

As he reached the parking deck, Dan thought of stopping by the office. Go up to the sixth floor and see if anyone was hanging around the advertising department. But he decided against it. It was getting late. Time to go home, fix some dinner, relax.

Write.

He took the stairwell up to his parking level. His feet hitting the metal steps sent hollow

echoes away from him, above and far below. Dreamy sounds. He came out to the parking area, all alone, and crossed the wide, nearly vacant concrete floor to his car. He got his keys out and opened his door, and he glanced up for a moment as he started to get into his car.

Dan smiled

It was perfect.

The cloudy day, the chill in the air, the quiet—and he was here to appreciate it. The cold parking deck, cement floor, gray cement walls, and the few haphazard cold metal cars hidden in the shadows, and a dark gray sky beyond, all perfectly natural, rain on the cement and the metal cars and on the city, on the silence. People had no appreciation of the enormity of it, the power of it to take you away, a moment like this moment, the reality of the great sky, the rain, the wind, the old city, complete.

Dan breathed it in, the mustiness of the parking deck and the dampness in the air, and for the moment, he felt good.

For one moment, he felt good.

2.

Ground not upon dreams; you know they are ever contrary.

Thomas Middleton

There is a door.

You can open the door.

Behind the door, all is darkness.

But there is a light.

As you move toward the door, the light grows stronger, a light that comes from you yourself, a blazing light.

Bathed by the light, the door can be opened. The wider you open the door, the brighter the light becomes, letting you see—

Letting you see—

All.

All that comes to life, all that awakens in the light, all that had been secret, waiting for the words to lift it free of the darkness.

\* \* \*

For Dan, the coming of the light was a mechanical act, like a movie projector turning on. It felt literally as if a shutter or a window opened and that the light came from his forehead, just above his eyes, maybe from his third eye. That's how it felt. When he began to write, a little above his face, a few inches away from his eyes, would be the door of light. Dan could watch it as if he were watching a movie or a stage play from far away. Characters would awaken. Their voices would speak (Dan could hear them in the back of his brain, where memory comes from). Their actions would occur silently and perfectly. Dan felt that he could nearly reach out and

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touch these distant people, not looking at them with his eyes but nevertheless knowing where they were, just a little in front of his forehead, as he was drifting above them. Time slowed, silence came, the world went away, and the moment, one prolonged present moment that might last for hours or even all night, was filled with writing what he saw, whatever occurred, as if it had happened already and he was merely observing and recording it.

Once, trying to explain it to Cindy, Dan had compared it to pulling a dream out of the air and holding it down while it squirmed like an animal, this dream, fought you until you could take a picture of it, get the proof. Picture taken, you'd release the dream and it would float away or dissolve, be gone, gone again into the light as the light itself closed down.

Afterward, exhausted, you might wonder if the vivid dream had ever really been there. But you had the story, you had the proof, the dream had been there, and the door, and the light. You had seen into that other place, caught part of it, and brought it back to show others.

*Here's what I found*, Dan could say to people and, emboldened by the light, he could push his fingers and then his hands through his ears and flip open the top of his head and pull out something bloody or strange or interesting or wise that he had thought of or had seen on the other side of the door.

*Very good*, people would say.

*Look at what I saw*, he could say, and push his eyeballs out of his head and put them in front of other people's eyes so that they could look through his eyes, too, to see what he had seen.

*We like it*, people would say.

*And there's more*, Dan could tell them. *There is much, much more to it than you've ever been told! Listen to this! Look at this! Do you have any idea? Listen to me, listen! There is a door . . . . .*

It's a door that can show you a parking deck on a rainy day, even a parking deck on a rainy day, and when you're there, when you feel it, sense it, you know that it's perfect, and you're there with it, completely alive, feeling everything around you as if you've never felt anything like this before. It glows. It's as if even a parking deck has a *soul*, and you're there with it. That's what it is. You wake up. You've been sleepwalking your whole life and now you look, you can feel it as if it were part of yourself, you see, you really *see* . . . .

\* \* \*

When he came home, Dan started supper, put some soup on the stove but, restless, didn't wait around to eat it. Instead, he went into the small second bedroom of his apartment, the spare room that he used as an office, and sat at his desk, clicked on the lamp, turned on his computer, put in a disk.

Fresh start.

*"So what're you working on? What is it?"*

*"It's coming along. I have a lot of notes."*

He looked at the monitor screen.

*Just do it*, he told himself. *Just start typing. You always had a million ideas.*

He stared at the screen, all bright, the light.

*Just do it.*

The light went dark.

Dan hit the space bar and the screen lit up again and he told himself that it was a door, the

monitor, and this was the light.  
He started typing.

The |

He couldn't do it.  
The cursor winked at him, mocking him.  
He couldn't do it.  
He stared at the screen.  
*Just—*

The cursor winked at him, mocking  
him. He could not write. I cannot  
write, he told himself. |

He couldn't do it. He didn't feel it. This wasn't writing. Writing is when you have  
somewhere to go. This was—  
Dan hit the Delete key.  
*Just type, just—*

Gorilla walks into a bar. Hits  
his head, bam. No. Asks how much  
for a shot of whiskey. Bartender  
says |

Delete.

He thought about the rain and his  
car and his ex-wife and the  
gorilla and the bar and |

Delete

Title  
by  
Daniel DeWitt

The sky was He turned at her  
reaction. The sky was up there.  
"Oh, look at the sky that is up  
there." she said, He truned at  
her |

Delete.  
Dan stopped.

Stared at the screen.  
Stared.

The Man Who Could Not Write  
By  
Daniel DimWit

"Duh, I cannot write," he said,  
looking at the sky that was up  
there |

He stopped.  
He couldn't do it.

\* \* \*

Dan remembered hearing on the radio once about an archaeological dig in the Carolinas. An early American fort from the period of Jamestown had been unearthed. Graves had been disinterred. The skeleton of a soldier had been removed for study. Forensic specialists had commented that the man's right wrist bones were far larger than those of his left and had concluded that he had been a cavalier, a swordsman, and right-handed. Years of using his sword had changed him; he had made himself into something he otherwise would not have been. That soldier's very bones had changed and with them, no doubt, his very spirit, mind, heart. His discipline and relentless belief in himself had made him into something that could not be unmade, and you could still see it, centuries later, in his bones.

That was the process, Dan realized.

That was what had happened to him.

When all is said and done, you look at what is left—a story, some wrist bones—and what is there cuts through to your heart, it speaks to your spirit. Create something and you recreate yourself, and you touch others with what has been made new.

That's the idea, anyhow.

And Dan had done that. He had recreated himself, but not in the way that he'd anticipated. He had changed, but he had not become what he wished to be. It was as though he had gone on a journey, which is all anything is in life, anyway, taken a one-way trip and left everyone else behind while he ventured farther and farther into new territory. Initially he had been excited to be in a place for which there were no maps, no guides, no signs, no directions. But he was alone. He had distanced himself from others by venturing into this strange novel territory, and now he wasn't sure where he was or in which direction to go and writing, of course, is when you know where you're going.

So here he was, sitting in this strange new territory, no longer able to guess the direction he should take, staring at his computer screen, and the sky was up there.

Dan held out his right hand, flexed and unflexed his fingers, looked at his wrist, looked at the monitor, then closed his hand and pushed his fist forward quickly, toward the computer screen, as if thrusting with a rapier.

\* \* \*

He listened to the rain against the window. The drizzle had turned into a steady downpour and the sound of it was as comforting as a good memory of childhood. He listened to that rain and he thought about the first story he'd had published, when he was in college.

The story was autobiographic, as most writers' early stories are. It was about a man who changes dramatically because of terrible experiences, experiences he has brought upon himself. The man is so haunted by his past that he splits in two, half his soul at war with the other half. "Ghosts of Blood," by Daniel DeWitt. A frontiersman, a butcher of Indians, in old age is attacked by the ghosts of all the warriors and squaws he has killed. They have been cutting him apart piece by piece through the years, hurting him a little at a time just as he used to torture them, chopping them apart while they were still alive, and now that he is old and frail, they come at him every night, these ghosts, taking away a finger, a foot, a hand, an eyeball. At the conclusion of the story, two prospectors hear the old man shrieking in his cabin. Hurrying to investigate, they find the guilt-ridden murderer stabbing himself with his own Bowie knife, slicing himself to pieces. Get away! screams the old frontiersman. The ghosts are doing it, the ghosts! he howls before cutting his own throat. Where are the ghosts? one of the prospectors asks. Are there really ghosts? He expects to see ghost hands hovering like smoke to choke him, but the other one says, We're the ghosts. He's his own ghost. We're the ghosts. We bring it upon ourselves.

Dan listened to the rain.

We bring it upon ourselves.

\* \* \*

*"So what're you working on?"*

*"I really don't want to talk about it."*

*"What happened to that idea—"*

*"I don't know."*

*"You were just so cocky and sure of yourself."*

*"Oh, he's just the best writer. You know how that is?"*

\* \* \*

Now he was thinking about the door again and the light

and about how easily he had  
walked through that door in the  
past. |

He thought about the door and the light and about how perfect that had all been, not at all like what he'd been through since.

He stood, determined to open  
the door once again. He reached,  
his arms stiff, weighted down as  
they were by heavy chains, chains  
connected to something far behind  
him. |

He pushed back his chair and stood, walked to the closet doors behind him. They took up half the wall opposite Dan's desk. Tall, folding doors like the covers of a book.

Dan opened the doors.

The rain began to strike the window more strongly, as if mindful of him, as if dreaming him within its sound, just as it would in one of his stories.

3.

Soon hot, soon cold.

Anonymous proverb

The closet was packed full. Dan knelt down and started setting aside boxes and bags filled with hundreds of books that he had no room for on the shelves, and more boxes of old magazines, clothes, notebooks from college. He found his camera that no longer worked. All of his old lp's jammed into file boxes. His photo albums. Dan opened those and looked at the photos. Himself at ten, a total doofus, dressed up like the Phantom of the Opera for Halloween. His brother at fourteen, another complete doofus, flipping the bird just as the picture was being taken. His sister and her husband cooking on the grill on the patio. His mother and father on their fortieth wedding anniversary, before they'd moved to Arizona for their retirement. Cindy in her bathing suit. Another picture of Cindy in her bathing suit. Dan and Cindy in Chicago, visiting friends of his. *Another* picture of Cindy in her bathing suit.

Dan put the photo album away.

He pulled aside a few more boxes and looked in the back of the closet. More junk. He saw the small ceramic statue of King Kong he'd gotten for his birthday one year. Some old lamps. A boxful of assorted bookends for when he got more bookshelves for the books that were in all these other boxes. Movie posters, all rolled up. Oh, great. Here was the six-foot cardboard standup of Stephen King, one of those promotional things that a friend of his who worked at a Waldenbooks had gotten for him. Dan had planned on using it as a dartboard, but hadn't. Well, it wasn't really Stephen King's fault that Dan's so-called career had gone cold, was it?

And here were the seven file boxes full of his stories—manuscripts, carbon copies, outlines, letters to agents, first drafts, second drafts, third drafts, *fourth* drafts. And notes. Many notes. And his paperback novels, and the fanzines and magazines that had first printed his fantasy and horror stories, his Gotchas! That's how Dan thought of them, his short stories that started out high with the opening sentence and pulled you through a series of surprises and twists and turns to reach a climactic, breathless, unexpected Gotcha!

Sometimes Dan wondered what people would think if a tornado came through and leveled this apartment building and scattered him and his stuff for miles in all directions. What would people say, going through the litter, finding random pieces of his movie posters and old books and everything? "Found a old *Penthouse* here. All tore up, damn it." "Coin collection over here." "Part of a man over here." "What part?" "Looks like a upper torso—no . . . no . . . shit, it's just *his head*, and he's smiling!"

Yes, smiling. Dan would be smiling, just his head sliced through the neck, a big smile on his face, and then he would open his eyes and, like Kurtz at the end of the river, he would whisper, “The horror! The horror!” Smiling.

Gotcha.

Struggling to move more boxes to one side, Dan knocked over the Stephen King standup. He reached over and awkwardly set it aside, wishing now that his friend had worked at a drive-thru and that this were the Elvira standup, the one where she’s advertising the beer. He sure wouldn’t throw darts at Elvira.

Well, two, maybe.

As Dan opened one of the boxes filled with his old file folders, he heard a sudden noise from the back of the closet and looked up.

Stephen King had fallen sideways, and all Dan could see now was King’s head, just the head and part of one hand crossed over his heart, the fingers locked together. Luck. Just Stephen King’s head, propped up on a carton, looking at Dan with those eyes and wearing a moustached smile that seemed rather sinister.

Dan looked at Stephen King’s head.

The horror. The horror.

Behind it in the corner was the King Kong statue, just a shadow with eyes.

Stephen King . . . King Kong . . . .

Robert Armstrong in his white linen suit with that sly showman’s grin on his face, taking a slow half-turn on the bridge of the *Venture* and asking, “*Did you ever hear of . . . King?*”

“*Why, yes. Some native superstition, isn’t it?*”

“*Well, anyway, neither man nor beast. Something monstrous, all powerful. A baseball player who writes horror stories. Still writing . . . still holding this country in a grip of deadly fear.*”

Dan looked back down at the box of old file folders, looked up again.

Stephen King’s head was still there.

Smiling. Yes, smiling.

Gotcha.

\* \* \*

He found the file folder that contained his early ideas that had not been particularly successful. This one, for instance: his scheme for reworking *Moby-Dick* from the *whale’s* point of view. Dan had thought that concept particularly inspired, especially his opening line: “Call me Moby.” But he had not been able to develop it much beyond that.

Here was “The Plant Man,” another great idea that had fizzled in execution. “*Man is but a reed, the weakest in Nature, but he is a thinking reed.*” —Pascal “*The Plant Man*” by Daniel DeWitt. *Yes, I am the Plant Man, part plant, part man. True, I cannot speak in a way that you would understand, but this fact yields for me a rich inner life. I contemplate many things.* In what was supposed to be a horror story (as well as a sly indictment of humankind’s propensity for thoughtless cruelty), the brilliant plant man, whose genius could have saved us from ourselves if only we had learned how to communicate with it/him, is savagely destroyed so that a homeowner can grow a flower garden. “*You finished pulling out them weeds?*” *his wife called from the back porch. “Just about!” Wait, no, don’t yank me out and discard me! I am not a weed! Listen to me, can’t you hear me? I am not simply excess vegetation. I am the Plant Man— “There. Stupid*

*weeds! What good are they, anyway?"*

Gee, Dan thought, and it leaves the door open for a sequel, too. "Pasta Man." *Yes, I am the Pasta Man, part pasta, part man. To you, I am no more than a plate of spaghetti. But I am a plate of spaghetti with brains.*

Yeesh..

"Stand Up Comic." (He had deliberately left the title unpunctuated so that the phrasing could be read in more than one way, a shrewd, subtly creative, added dimension.) A stand-up comic, on stage doing his monologue, gradually moves from telling jokes to venting all the anger and frustration he's held in him for years, and he transforms in the process, shrinking in size before his audience until he is a ranting homunculus yelling at the world in a shrill, barely audible voice. Running from the stage in his shame and embarrassment, he escapes to the nightclub kitchen but accidentally falls into an ice cube tray freshly filled with water. The tray is put into the freezer and the comic is frozen to death inside an ice cube, which later in the evening is served to a guest in a gin-and-tonic. "*Hey, look! Isn't this that guy who shrunk a couple hours ago? Now this is funny!*"

"The Quest." A young man constantly asks, What's the meaning of life? Is this all there is? What's the meaning of life? He meets a wise old sage in a bar, and the wise old sage tells him, Why the questions? Relax. No one else has figured it out up to now, so work with what you have, that's best. You must learn to appreciate what you have. The young man is not impressed, so the old sage tells him, Okay, go home, sit on the floor, be very quiet, stare at your hand. Stare at my hand? Open up your hand, stare at your palm, look at your fingers, stare at your hand. The young man goes home and does it, sits there all night long, staring at his hand. At last he starts to nod off and enters a kind of dream world. Just before dawn, his hand takes on a life of its own, reaches up and tightens around his throat. The young man can't control it; he is strangled to death by his own hand. Just as he dies, at the last moment, he hears the voice of the old sage, like a memory or a spiritual vision, saying to him, "You mean you actually *did* it? What an asshole!"

You mean you actually wrote that story? Dan thought, and put the file folder away.

\* \* \*

Once he started selling novels and spending all his free time every day at the typewriter, especially in that stretch before he'd met Cindy, Dan would often walk around in a fog, living somewhere else, his consciousness operating on another level, tapping into wherever it was the stories came from. He went to work every day at a shipping warehouse and, later, at the advertising department downtown, yet mentally he would be somewhere else, in storyland, in the dreamworld.

He would become so preoccupied thinking about a story that he would forget where he was. Dan became absent-minded. He would get up in the morning, shave, shower, get dressed, eat breakfast, brush his teeth, and drive to work, all on automatic pilot. He'd wake up at a traffic light as though coming out of a trance. The ideas and scenes he visualized in this way were all rich and detailed, and Dan would hurry to jot down notes while the memory of them remained fresh. But he began to worry that, in his absent-mindedness, he might forget to do something important—walk away without turning off the coffeemaker, say, or forget to turn off a burner on the stove, or neglect to lock his apartment door. So he devised the very practical habit of reminding himself of what he had done by speaking it out loud as he did it. Recalling the sound of his own voice helped him to remember.

There Dan would be, off in dreamland, living out some storyline, meanwhile shaving, looking at himself in the bathroom mirror and incanting, "I am now SHAVING! I have now FINISHED SHAVING! I am now turning the water OFF!" In the kitchen, before leaving for work: "The coffeemaker has been turned OFF! The lights are OFF! The burners have ALL BEEN TURNED OFF!" He'd pull on his coat ("I am now PULLING ON MY COAT!"), get his car keys ("I DO have my CAR KEYS!"), and step out and lock his apartment door ("The apartment door is now LOCKED, Dan!").

Dan had read of gifted writers who had been driven insane by the perils of their trade, the isolation, the rejection. He was happy that, for now at least, he had found a way to avoid that handicap. He thought it a good sign that, although he was often preoccupied with his thoughts, he was not insane. ("I am often PREOCCUPIED. I am NOT, however, INSANE!") ("I am, however, a WRITER!")

He maintained this habit until early in his relationship with Cindy. One evening, as they were leaving to go to a movie, Dan closed his apartment door, locked it, and said very loudly to himself, "The door is now LOCKED, Dan!"

Cindy, waiting behind him in the hallway, had said, "Dan?"

"Yes?"

"You are very strange."

"I locked the door. The door's locked."

"So I heard."

"I do that so I won't forget that I locked the door."

"Ah."

"I find that it's a good idea."

"I've never had to resort to that particular strategy, myself. "

"Well, it works."

Cindy had reached over to test the knob. The door didn't budge. "I have to admit that the door's not moving."

"Look, are you ready to go?"

"I'm ready to GO, Dan! You want to go to a MOVIE, Dan? Are you sure the door is LOCKED, Dan? Writing all those books GETS TO YOU after a while, DOESN'T IT, DAN?"

"YES, I SUPPOSE SO!"

"WELL, DO YOU WANT TO GO NOW?"

"YES, I WANT TO GO NOW!"

"HERE WE GO!"

"WE ARE GOING DOWN THE STAIRS NOW!"

"WE ARE GOING TO THE MOVIE NOW!"

"CINDY, I DON'T THINK I'M THE ONLY ONE HERE WHO'S A LITTLE STRANGE!"

\* \* \*

Dan had warned her that he was somewhat unusual, that his friends thought he was a little eccentric although not frightening or anything. Strange but not dangerous was the way a friend from high school described him. Nevertheless, Dan was not everybody else, what he thought about, how he spent his time, confessing it to Cindy as a serial killer might or a child molester or some kind of freak.

“But I don’t want the usual kind of guy,” she’d told him. “They’re dull and boring. Who wants dull and boring?”

She claimed not to mind his spending most evenings by himself, typing. While they were living together and, later, when they were married, she’d pay the bills, do the shopping, watch television or, a voracious reader herself, curl up with a book while Dan typed every evening. Cindy did admit to being a little unnerved when she wound up talking to herself because Dan was present in body only, off in storyland somewhere. “Hello, Cindy to Dan, yoo-hoo. May I speak to the person inside Dan now, please? Would you tell Dan I need to speak with him?” But she admired his tenacity and was confident that within a few years his efforts would really begin paying off. In the meantime, the modest advances and royalties would build up their savings account and could be put toward a new car or a new bedroom suite, pay for a vacation or, down the road, the down payment on a house. The future looked bright. And neither was Cindy in the slightest self-conscious about some of the books Dan had written, the big fantasy novels with barbarian warriors and skulls and witch-women on their covers. Everyone had to start somewhere.

“Just keep writing. You’re good, Dan. There’s no reason why you can’t be as big as Stephen King some day.”

She urged him to go out to bookstores to sign copies of his novels. Meet the public. Build an audience. Dan, basically a shy man, reluctantly agreed to try it. He arranged with the manager of the Waldenbooks at the local mall to have a book signing when his latest fantasy novel, something like his eleventh or twelfth, was released. There he sat one rainy Saturday afternoon at a card table in the entrance of the bookstore, thirty copies of his opus lined up in front of him, standing like a row of dominoes waiting to be pushed over.

“You really write all these books?”

“Well, see, it’s just one book. They’re all the same book.”

“How many books you write?”

“About a dozen.”

“You been at it for a long time?”

“Oh, fifteen years, give or take.”

“You must be really rich, huh?”

“No, not really.”

“Okay, so let’s say you wrote all these books, then how come you aren’t rich?”

“It doesn’t work that way.”

“It don’t?”

“No. See, books are very expensive to produce. Only a few actually make any money. Bestsellers, books like that.”

“Stephen King.”

“Well, yeah.”

“You read him?”

“Oh, occasionally.”

“He writes real good, don’t he?”

“He’s been quite successful.”

“I read one a his books once.”

“Did you read it all the way through?”

“Oh, sure. I seen his show, too. He’s a millionaire, huh?”

“I suppose he is. Tell you what, why don’t you let me sign this woman’s book.”

“But you ain’t a millionaire.”  
“No, not yet. What’s your name, ma’m?”  
“Bet that makes you feel kinda silly, don’t it?”

\* \* \*

Gotcha.

\* \* \*

There is a door.  
You can open the door.  
Behind the door, all is darkness  
But there is a light.

\* \* \*

One morning in front of the bathroom mirror, shaving, he said to himself, to the face in the mirror, “Submitted for your approval. A young man no longer all that young. A talent that earns very few talents, dinars, pesos, dollar-ohs. A face in a mirror that stares back with wild, anguished eyes and asks, ‘Which one of us is alive, the face of flesh or the face of glass? Or are we both alive? Has this young man given birth to a new form of life, a life form that exists inside the mirror? It is a mirror to be found only in . . . The Bonehead Zone.’”

Chin white with Gillette Foamy, he had walked into the bedroom, where Cindy was buried under the covers. One eye, deep in a pillow, opened and looked at him.

“Yes?”

“Submitted for your approval,” Dan had said.

“What?”

“I’m in The Bonehead Zone, Cin.”

“I’d prefer the *bonehard* zone, but only after you get that stuff off your face.”

But she was becoming annoyed and running out of patience, too. What did it take to write successful novels, after all? Judging by the dull-normals who showed up on television talk shows to yap about what they’d just had published, obviously not all that much. Dan was doing something wrong and either he didn’t see it or he didn’t know what to do about it. Or maybe he didn’t care. He was going around in circles. He could be very stubborn.

\* \* \*

Nearly forty years old, Dan realized that in many ways he had retained the attitude of a child, a baby just learning to sit up, a baby discovering sunlight for the first time, delighted and gleefully reaching for the sunlight that streamed in through the bedroom window. Where did this attitude come from? Why was he this way and no one else? He could stare at wholly commonplace things as though seeing them for the first time, explore familiar ideas and consider them freshly. He wrote in his notes, *A paradox: art reveals the obvious*.

\* \* \*

When Dan decided to start writing horror novels, he gave serious thought to what was so appealing about being frightened and concluded that when you look at life for what it is, take off the blinders, stare at life whole and complete—you are staring into an abyss. The truth. Horror stories take you through elaborate rituals to break down the pretenses of convention, to bring you right to the edge of the abyss, let you look over the edge at the abyss, then shove you directly into the abyss, so that you are falling and gasping for air—and are pulled back to safety only at the last possible moment.

For Dan, all horror stories or elements of horror in any story went straight back to the earliest religious rituals and dramas, human consciousness fabricating ways of dealing with profoundly disturbing facts of life. And that was the essence of enjoying horror stories, that they create a visceral response. We're biological creatures. Many people claimed to dislike horror stories on moral or aesthetic grounds, but those are pretexts, shallow misjudgment. .

"It's the reptile stem," Dan had told Cindy.

"I'm sorry?"

"The reptile stem."

"I don't think women have reptile stems."

"Cin, it's in the brain. It's the oldest part of the brain. It's where all our basic instincts come from, including fear. It's neurotransmitters. Acetylcholine and dopamine and endorphins and substance P—"

"What on earth is substance P?"

"I don't know. It's a neurotransmitter."

"Sounds like the reptile stem to me. I think all men are just a bunch of substance P. That would explain a lot."

Look, Dan told her. Your pulse quickens, you've got your adrenalin going, and you feel very alive when you're most scared, it's the peak moment. I can think of another peak moment that gets my adrenalin going, Cindy had told him. Yeah, but see, horror is not about sex, although it can be, but it's not just that. It's, it's about the grim, soul-baiting fear that comes from peering over the edge into the abyss and seeing the heart of darkness. Two things, Dan told her: You are helpless, and you have time to understand what is going to occur. You're looking into the abyss and you're not just going to die; your soul is going to be poisoned. You're not just going to die; you're going to betray yourself or you're going to be trapped, or abandoned, or left with some terrible truth you can't communicate. Death is the least of it. You're helpless and you're sliding into it, you're going to be eradicated and you have time to realize it and you see the abyss coming and you are amazed, it's awesome, it's more than you ever thought anything could be, something you never even considered before, but it knows who you are, and it takes you, you know it—

—and then you are gone.

"Dan?"

"Yeah, Cin."

"Please, let's get out more."

"Cin-dy . . ."

"Dan— Dan, look at me. Look at me. Sweetheart, listen to me."

"What?"

"Are you listening?"

"Yes."

“Dan?”  
“I’m listening.”  
“Romance novels.”

\* \* \*

One warm evening the previous summer, while Dan was going through the divorce, a man in a coffee shop, making conversation, had commented to him, “I seen a two-headed rabbit once.”

“I know what that’s like,” Dad had said, meaning that he had experienced something just as upsetting and startling, his feeling like a two-headed rabbit himself.

“It didn’t live long, though,” the man had told him.

“I suppose not,” Dan had replied.

“Your freaks of nature, you know,” the man had said, “there don’t seem to be a place for them along with everything else.”

\* \* \*

Dan put the boxes away. He didn’t want to look at his novels. He didn’t want to look at any more short stories or notes. He was tired, and the evening was gone, darkness had come down without his even realizing it.

Rain continued to fall outside.

Wearily he left his office, not even turning off his computer, and went into his bedroom, lay back on his bed and thought.

King.

*“Did you ever hear of... DeWitt?”*

While Dan had been in freefall, blindly pounding away on his keyboard, turning out *Deathsword* and *The Iron Crown* and a dozen other enjoyable, bloodthirsty romps written in the way such stories always had been written and that sold, perhaps, forty or fifty thousand copies in a good year, another author, one single person, and he wasn’t Dan, had started a chain reaction by writing books the way books would be written from now on and forevermore.

King.

The godlike Stephen King.

The King who was idolized out there in the heartland as if he were Elvis Christ himself.

The King whose stratospheric career had coincided with the most fundamental change in book publishing and bookselling and book distribution in fifty years. Books as products. Writers as brand names. Chain bookstores promoting King as if he were Campbell’s soup. And King happily obliging, knowing that artists and poets and writers have always led very perishable existences so he had better, like the skalds of old, tell a tale that pleases his audience and he had better not, like some romantic artist starving in a loft, write whatever he felt like writing.

Dan had been putting out books about high-achiever barbarian kings building empires for themselves.

But high-achiever King had been out there doing it, building an empire of his own, keeping hundreds of people employed, making his agent and his accountants into jillionaires, and movie producers, and book club operators, meanwhile stoking the fires of imagination for thousands of King-wannabes in fanzine land.

The process. King had done it in ways that Dan had never imagined. All Dan had wanted to do was get into dreamland and find out what all the whys were for and come back with some clues. King had brought it all back down to earth and turned it into machinery that chugged out thousands of shrieking dreams and nightmares for the millions.

And Dan had been there from the beginning, walking right alongside it and not recognizing it, looking at it and not seeing it, writing barbarian stories while King wrote "*Carrie*" and '*Salem's Lot* and then all the rest of them.

"Damn you," Dan said out loud, lying on his bed, brooding on this as he had innumerable times. "Damn you, King, anyway. How come I did everything right and it turned out to be wrong? And how come everything you did turned out right? Damn you, damn you, damn you . . ."

\* \* \*

Somewhere in the deep snowy woods of Maine, a tall bearded man, walking, enjoying the chilly night, stopped, lifted his head, listened, and heard.

4.

He talked, and as he talked  
Wallpaper came alive;  
Suddenly ghosts walked  
And four doors were five.

Mark Van Doren  
"The Story Teller"

In the distance stood the silhouette of a man framed by tall dark trees. The naked branches of the trees, twisted fingers, filled the sky, a mesh net that covered everything like a hood. There were no birds anywhere, no animals, but a full moon, brilliant and round, had risen high, far beyond the locked finger-branches of the trees.

"Hello?" the silhouette hesitantly asked.

King walked ahead, his boots crunching on the stiff snow. He said, "Hello. I'm over here."

The silhouette moved forward, making noise, even here, and, coming out from under the trees, stepped into the moonlight. It was Dan, Dan was the silhouette, and he was not sure where he was or how he'd gotten here.

He stopped.

King approached him and threw out a hand. "I'm Stephen King."

"Oh, shit."

King chuckled.

"What is this, like . . . a dream?"

"Something like that."

“This is a dream.”

“Dan? Is that your name?”

“Yeah . . . .”

King still had his hand out.

Dan took it. King was much taller than he was. “Hello.”

“Hello, Dan.”

He looked around. “This is, uh, a little different. What is this, Maine?”

“Well, it’s right where you are.”

“Because you have snow here already, but I’m not cold. It’s because it’s a dream, right?”

“Come over here. Sit down.”

King led him to a log half-buried in the snow and they sat on it, just as though they were sitting on a bench in the park.

Dan looked around. The woods were very still and quiet but felt alive, like a mind. The trees surrounding them, shuddering even though there was no breeze, moved back, moved away into the darkness. Dan could hear, farther off, a light rain falling, as it had been falling outside his bedroom window. Maybe he wasn’t that far from home, after all.

“So what do you want to talk about?” King asked him.

“Is that why you’re here?”

“Sure.”

“Or why I’m here?”

“That’s it.”

Dan said, “You heard me, huh?”

King nodded.

“Well, I apologize. It’s nothing personal.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Yeah, well, anyway, I think I should tell you that I’m sorry I called you, you know, what I said when I called you a whore.”

King laughed. “I’ve been called worse!”

“I didn’t think you could hear me, for crying out loud.”

“Well, maybe you said, ‘King is a horror.’ As in ‘horror writer.’”

“I’m sure that’s probably what I meant, only it came out wrong.”

“I’m sure that’s what it was.”

“I’ve been under some stress,” Dan admitted.

“Well, don’t worry about it.”

Dan looked around. The woods were so still, as if waiting for something or remembering something. He sensed things within the woods, too, hidden beyond the trees, but these things did not come forth to express themselves. It was all quite alive, Dan felt. The woods, the sky, everything around him, alive, present.

King said, “So you really don’t know where you are?”

“I’m having a dream.”

“Dan, this is it. Dreamland. Eternity. Mythworld. Storyville. This is it. Where the stories come from. What you tap into.”

“Really?”

“This is where the shamans visit. This is where all the shadows go when things die. Where all the dreams come from and where they go when you wake up. Nightmares, too, of course. Everything that could ever affect human beings is here.”

“Are you kidding?”

“This is it.”

“Then why don’t— Wait a minute. How come everybody doesn’t know about this?”

“Well, everyone does, in a way, but it’s not that easy for most people to pick up on. Creative types, people who meditate, a few geniuses and crazy buggers. But even they don’t think it’s really a *place*. Birds pick it up, whales and dolphins, cats and dogs. Ever since the Enlightenment, though, more and more people have lost touch with it. Always turns out to be a big surprise for them. They think it’s heaven. Maybe it is.”

“This is remarkable,” Dan said. “But it looks pretty dreary.”

“Well, it changes according to your mood, sometimes. And there are different areas. I think it actually goes on forever, probably, just like the human imagination, I guess. So, anyway, you’re full of questions, aren’t you? If I can help you out, I want to. Take advantage of this, Dan. Not everybody gets a chance like this, you know.”

“I suppose not. Were you listening to everything I said?”

“Kind of.”

“What, you know how to read minds or you just know everything?”

King laughed again. “No, no. I’m a visitor here, myself.”

“Well, I’m afraid that I’m very envious of you. You’ve been quite successful and I haven’t been.”

“Oh, you’ve done fine, Dan. Maybe you’re not wealthy, but you’ve done pretty well. I’ve read a couple of your books.”

“Have you?”

“Sure. I read *The Iron Crown* and *Deathsword* and your horror stories. I liked *The Iron Crown*.”

“Really?”

“Sure. You’re a good writer. I know how frustrating it can be. You have to remember that you’re talking to people, and you have to talk their language. Your numbers may not be way up there, but that doesn’t mean that what you do isn’t good. You’re read. Don’t worry. You’re the real stuff.”

“I’ve been very disappointed, though. I worked so hard. Every night, every day. I hated to go to sleep at night because it felt like giving up. I mean, all these people writing books, and it’s like they do it just to show off, like it doesn’t cost them anything, it’s painless for them. You know what I mean?”

“I sure do.”

“But a writer should have a voice, you know? A writer should be unique, earn respect, get respected for being, you know, the one person who did it just this way. So it’s been a real letdown.”

“Well, I’ve been disappointed, too. I like to do different things. It was strange for a while, being so popular. It’s a business. A lot of people love it when I fall on my face in public if I don’t write a masterpiece every time. All I can do is what I do, and I keep on doing it. I can’t worry about the rest of it.”

“But you’ve made so much money. You’re a one-man industry. It’s phenomenal.”

“Yeah, but think back. So was Alexander Dumas. Max Brand. So’re Neil Simon, Charles Schulz. Who’s this British woman? Barbara Cartland. The Stones. Look at Danielle Steele. I can’t explain it. Some artists are always right for their times. Only don’t confuse popularity with quality. There’s a lot of great stuff that only a handful of people are savvy enough to appreciate.”

“I guess.” Dan was grateful for the comment; it didn’t sound patronizing. He asked King, “Do you get, are you ever frightened by some of the stuff you write? Do you scare yourself?”

“I’ve said this a lot but it’s true. I truly try to terrorize my readers. But if I can’t, then I go for horror, and if I can’t do that, I go for the gross-out.”

“I know that, I heard that. But—do you scare *yourself*?”

“Sometimes. I see what you mean. The concept, or when I’m writing it I get into it and I live it and get scared.”

“That’s what I mean.”

“Sure, sometimes. Come on, you write, Dan. You’ve been there.”

“I know. I’m just— What really frightens you?”

“Everything, I think, sometimes.”

“Me, too. You open the door, you take a good look— Brrr.” He made a chilly sound effect and shook his shoulders.

“The really scary shit,” King said, “is the stuff we bring down on ourselves.”

Dan looked at him, surprised. He’d said the same thing himself.

“We do it to ourselves and sometimes we know it, sometimes we don’t, but when we wake up and realize it . . .” King said, “Dan, you have to remember that we’re doing something very important for people. We’re giving them something they don’t recognize within themselves. That’s a good thing to do.”

“I hadn’t thought about it that way.”

“Oh, absolutely. Living, life itself, for human beings, is emotional life, isn’t it? We live inside our heads and inside our hearts. Life is a story for us. But nature sure doesn’t tidy things up into stories. As far as nature is concerned, life just happens, individual lives happen, and then they stop. So we’re helping people see beyond that.”

Here it was again, King saying things that Dan could have said himself, word for word. It was unsettling.

“Horror stories, fantastic stories,” King continued, “don’t you know why we do it? Don’t you see what it is we’re letting them in on, the people who read our books? What we’re giving them?”

“You tell me.”

“Creativity is looking death right in the face. It’s an act of defiance, an outright act of defiance. Whatever we’re doing here, we’re here, and we may not understand all of it, but we understand enough to be offended by the fact that we’re perishable. So we persist. That’s a very courageous thing to do. And you and I and other artists take it one step further. We really push the questions and we act it out for people. Maybe we can’t explain it all, but we can do *something*, for a little while, anyway. We can stand here and we can say, ‘You fucker, you may get me in the end, but right now you’re listening to what I have to say.’ We can do that. What’s the matter, Dan?”

“I don’t know. I, I agree with you.”

“It’s a ritual,” King said, “like religion or sports or Greek drama, right? People come with expectations, and you give them what they pay for. It’s the borders of human expression. You can’t go beyond the border, or at least not for too long. You add some spice, some new twists, but you have to be careful. There are limits.”

“There are limits,” Dan repeated, his mind starting to move on its own, like the trees over there.

“There are limits to everything, Dan. People can only take so much.”

Dan was prowling the woods with his eyes. Something . . . .

“What,” King asked him, “is it, Dan?”

Damn it, this was just a little too easy, Stephen King showing up like this, sitting here with him, chatting. Dan didn’t trust it. He glanced over at King and for a moment didn’t see him but saw someone, or something, else.

“Oh, shit,” Dan said.

“What?”

“What was that?”

“What was what?”

“You! It! That! That—whatever it was!”

“I don’t follow.”

“Is this a trick?” Dan asked him. “Are you really here?”

“Yes. Are you?”

“Jesus, I don’t know.”

“What did you see?” King asked him.

“I don’t know. Only it was you. It was where you’re sitting, it was—” He was very suspicious now. “Is it getting darker around here?”

“Yeah. I know. Helps the imagination, doesn’t it?” King smiled.

Dan was silent.

“You know,” King told him, “you wrote something once that I admire.”

“Which one was it?”

“It wasn’t a book. It’s in your notes.”

“So you read my notes, too,” Dan said gloomily.

“Dan, remember where we are.”

“What did I say?”

“You said that horror comes from the same place humor does, and science, too. They’re all reductionist. Follow something to its logical conclusion or go back to the very beginning of it, the essence of it, and you get to atoms or something so mysterious that it can be scary or even funny in a weird way.”

“That’s true,” Dan said. “I remember thinking about that. Most people don’t follow a series of questions back to the ultimate cause. They accept what things seem to be. Maybe they know that what they’d find is absurd. I cut my finger last spring, and I’m looking at my finger. How does the body heal itself? You find out, there are names for it, but if you keep asking why and get past what people claim to know, why, where, how come, pretty soon you’re so deep in there you feel like you’ve been sucked down the drain or just swallowed up by it. But people don’t do this,” Dan complained, “so it makes me feel weird because I do.”

“It’s a gift,” King told him. “But it’s scary. I think about scary stuff all the time. It’s part of being conscious, being aware. You ever think about time?”

“All the time.”

“It’s terrible,” King lamented. “Time moves forward in a straight line. You can’t go back. We’re stuck with whatever happened. I mean, there’s no way around it, no way out.”

“Yeah. Something terrible happens and people say, ‘Is this really *me*? What happened to *me*? This can’t be *me*. This is happening to someone else. The real me must be somewhere else, not going through this. This is ridiculous. How can I get out of this and go back to what I was doing?’”

“It’s stasis, Dan.”

“Stasis.”

“People want things to be just one way, just the way they think of it, and they resist change. They use their memories to hold it back, keep everything with them, right here, right now. But change is it. We wouldn’t even be here, there wouldn’t be an us, if things didn’t change.”

“One time,” Dan said, “I tried to imagine what it was like or picture myself when I was nothing but molecules inside my mother before I was born, and then I tried to imagine her just being molecules, and her mother, and I tried to go back like that as far as I could.”

“It’s the sense of wonder, Dan,” King told him. “Just like when you were a kid. And most people lose it. You and I are fortunate because we’ve held onto it. We remember and we can *feel* it, too. Free as a kid to go in any direction we want to. And the fears we had as kids, too. All these enormous terrors, arms coming out of the wall in the middle of the night, monsters in the woods, all that ridiculous stuff kids get lost in.”

“People think it’s foolish,” Dan said sadly.

“Critics, most people,” King agreed, “it’s like they’re still in a hurry to grow up, act like big people, so they have to pass judgment, get out front, pose. It’s such a trap.”

“They’re all still scared,” Dan said, “but they have it so rationalized and so wrapped inside all the other shit they have to do that they think, they betray what’s really deepest inside them. I think something kicks in at puberty and fucks us up.”

“That’s where we come in,” King said.. “That’s where we’re doing them a service. We have a gift, Dan. We have the talent. Most people can’t let too much in at once. It’s like an automatic reflex for them. The mind has to build all this shit like a wall to keep out the raw truth. They just want to go around in circles. When you’re a kid, you can have this sense of awe, you’re right there with it, but when you’re an adult, if you let it in too fast, it makes you feel like you’re losing your grip. Grown-ups really have to keep those blinders up. Consciousness is very frightening; your head can take you to an awful lot of places if you’re not careful.”

Dan *was* being careful right now, listening, because there it was again, King telling him exactly what Dan himself had thought and said and written in notes, giving it back to him.

“When you go that deep,” King continued, “see all those fragments and pieces, if you take it personally, if you don’t have some box to put it all in, you’ll really fuck yourself up. Look into the light too long, you go blind.”

“A belief system.”

“Right. Doesn’t matter what it is. Anything conventional will do, a sense of humor, trusting yourself. A context. A perspective. You have to be grounded. See, Dan, you ask a lot of questions, but what most people need and want isn’t more questions; they want the same old comfortable answers. If you can keep it close to home, you’ll be okay. It’s that simple. What they know has already been tried and tested and it’s very safe. The past is very safe. What you already know is very safe. So people get on the same old ride and take it around and around. Very safe.”

“Safe. Yeah.”

King told him, “I mean you personally, Dan. You need to get your mind right. Settle down. Take it easy. Ease up on yourself.”

Dan looked away from him. He stared out at the woods, dark and moving with the breeze Dan didn’t feel, and it occurred to him once more how subtly alive everything here was.

“That’s true,” King said.

“What is?”

“That everything here is so alive.”

Dan chilled. King *had* read his mind.

“In a way, yes,” King told him.

“Jesus Christ, you really can—”

“It’s *your* dream, Dan.”

“Is it?” He was perplexed and becoming frightened.

“I’m simply in it. Your choice. You want me to read your mind, I read your mind.”

“*Is* it my dream?”

“It’s all a dream,” King told him. “It’s all one big dream. Always has been.” His tone was melancholy, full of hurt, the hurt that comes from painful awareness, from knowledge deeply learned at great cost.

Dan looked at him. He had a question, but it seemed—

“Go ahead,” King told him. “Ask.”

“You read my mind, you’re here, it’s like you know everything—”

King kind of shrugged.

“I want to know one thing.”

“Ask.”

“Did my wife have an affair and cheat on me? Is that why she left?”

King smiled in a sad way and said, “Look, Dan, relax. We have lots more to talk about.”

But Dan was very upset. He felt ashamed now, too. He didn’t know where he was, and he was sure that he didn’t trust this King, if indeed he were Stephen King.

Dan moved. He stood quickly, needing to do something, just move. The moment he did so, the woods were gone, and the moon and the snow and King. He was back in his room, out of bed, on his feet.

“*Where are you, Dan?*”

“What?”

His room changed, and he was back in the woods.

King, behind him, said something.

Dan turned, around, perhaps more quickly than King had anticipated, because in that moment as Dan, turning, saw him out of the corner of his eye, King was no longer King. He was—or it was—a beast, a carnivore, chewing on some freshly killed large animal, pulling at the corpse with his red teeth. Dan looked at the dead animal. Its brown eyes were open and still moist with life. It was staring at Dan. It wasn’t dead yet, and Dan realized then that the shivering body washed with blood was a human being, a woman. King, or the carnivore, devoured the woman’s heart, then dug its face into the belly and pulled up a long trail of—

“Oh, God!” Holding his stomach, Dan turned away.

It was Cindy.

“—yourself as something unique.”

Dan spun around. King was there; it was King again. No blood, no brown eyes, no Cindy, only steam, King’s warm breath surrounding his face, and King was smiling at him, yes, smiling.

“*What? What* did you say?”

“I said, *causa sui*, Dan. Create yourself as something unique. That’s what we want. Creative people create themselves as something unique. We’re always changing, aren’t we? even though people love the status quo, this safe little—”

“I want to go now,” Dan told him.

King gave no indication that he had changed for a moment into a werewolf or animal or

whatever it was that he had been. Not a hint, not a smile, nothing.

Maybe something around the eyes.

Or maybe it was just shadows.

“Go?”

“Yes. I think I should be going now.” Dan’s voice quavered, although he didn’t mean for it to. “Just tell me how I get out of here. “

“I can’t let you go, Dan.”

“What?”

“You’re here now. I can’t let you go.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re *here* now, Dan. This is it. The door, the light. I can’t let you go.”

He was frightened. He wasn’t sure what to do. Just walk off, walk away? He smiled. “Oh, I get it,” Dan said.

“Do you?”

“Yeah, sure. Ha ha. But I really do want to leave. I want to, you know, get back. I’m a writer. Write this down.”

“Put down some notes, huh?”

“Yeah, sure.”

King continued to smile at him but did not move. He had been so congenial and helpful up to now that this was unnerving.

“Now,” Dan said strongly.

“Oh, *now*,” King said, as if it had just sunk in.

Dan swore. He turned his back on King and started off, he didn’t know in which direction.

“Not that way,” King called from behind him.

Dan turned, very slowly this time, giving King, or it, whatever it was, time to change if it needed to. “Which way, then?”

“Well, over there.” King nodded. “I guess it doesn’t matter. Dan, you’ll probably wind up going in circles, it’s only fair to tell you that.”

“Just tell me which direction to take!”

“The way you’re going now, then,” King said sadly. “I guess that’ll do it for you.”

“Thanks.”

“No problem.”

He started off. Very soon, the landscape changed dramatically. The woods disappeared—Dan left them behind when he topped a small hill of grass that, interestingly, reminded him of his childhood—and he was in a desert, nothing but dirt and rock and scrub for as far as he could, see.

Well, why not? he thought. This is a dream, right? It’s all inside my head.

But he wasn’t hot in this desert. He hadn’t been cold when he’d been in the Maine woods with King, and he wasn’t overheated now that he was in the desert.

He listened for the rain but could no longer hear it, so he must have left it behind.

He walked along looking for a way out, somewhat embittered because he had been enjoying the conversation before King had changed into a werewolf or whatever he was. Dan tried to remember some of what King had said, hoping that the words held a clue to his escape. But he was really on edge, and everything was a jumble, bouncing around in there, as though his thoughts were playing hide-and-seek with him and laughing at him while Dan tried to get at them, hopelessly running around in—

Circles.

Desert, scrub, rocks.

*Was* he going around in circles?

Dan kept walking and stopped again.

Shit, I *am* going around in circles, he thought.

No, no, there was something ahead of him.

Dan headed for it.

The sky above was orange and yellow and milky, hot and milky, hot and pulsing, like skin seen from the inside, warm and alive. Meanwhile, the monotony was broken by what appeared to be a large building in the middle of the wasteland. Tireless, Dan walked in that direction.

It was indeed a large building, and it was in the shape of a brain. It was a large dome. There was a door in front, and the door was open. Dan approached. Above him, the huge domelike building or brain was so high that he entered the shadow of it, the bright sky hidden from him, for a long time before reaching the open door.

He walked in.

It was cool inside. The place was vast and nearly vacant. Dan saw large rooms or chambers everywhere and wasn't sure which way to go.

"Hello!" a voice boomed.

"Is that you, King?"

"Yes!"

Dan recognized the voice although he couldn't see King anywhere. The voice echoed and bounced in all directions.

"Okay, where am I?"

"You'll see. Keep walking."

"Where?"

"Straight ahead. Anywhere. Doesn't matter. It all leads to the same place."

Dan grumbled but moved forward. "I thought this was supposed to be *my* dream," he grouched. "Who put *him* in charge?"

"I heard that!"

"Well, if I didn't *say* it, you'd read my mind anyway!"

The darkness moved away from him or his eyes adjusted to the dim light, and Dan came to a wall or partition with an opening in it. He walked through.

There was a great deal more light now. The light came from candles, millions of them, maybe billions of them, candles everywhere, on the floor, on the walls, hanging from the very high ceiling. Dan made his way down a narrow path. Oceans of candles stretched away on both sides of him.

The chamber was a storeroom of some kind. Beyond the brightness of the candles Dan could see, on shelves that rose high into the darkness, faces or masks, maybe heads, just the heads, everywhere. They looked like wax death masks or plastic Halloween masks. Some of the faces were very bright. Dan recognized Marilyn Monroe and John F. Kennedy and Humphrey Bogart and Charlie Chaplin and Elvis Presley. Madonna's face was there, too, although not shining as brightly as Marilyn Monroe's. Shakespeare's was so bright you almost couldn't make out the features. Some of the faces, however, glowed with less brilliance. James Dean's was losing some of its luster, and so were Orson Welles's and H. P. Lovecraft's and Jimmy Page's, sadly, and John Belushi's. But Tom Hanks's and Ron Howard's shone very strongly, and Sandra Bullock's, too.

"I don't see too many writers," Dan said.

"John Gardner's here somewhere," King commented from wherever he was. "And Andre Dubus. Raymond Carver. But writers aren't especially recognized by their faces."

"You are."

"Yeah. I'm over there."

"Jesus!" Dan said. King's features looked white hot.

"Impressive, huh? You're here, too, somewhere," King told him.

"Yeah, like where? In the basement?"

"I'm afraid that yours doesn't shine too brightly," King admitted. "It's— Well, by comparison, if I may, right now I'm a brilliant, blazing, fiercely hot sun, a powerful solar furnace lighting the world, and you, Dan, are, oh, a little plastic nightlight, or, no, a refrigerator bulb."

"Thanks a lot."

"Or one of those really dim, faint lights you put in aquariums so the fish—"

"I *heard* you!"

"Look, I don't make the news, I just report it, okay? This simply reflects what people everywhere are thinking about. It changes with time. Try to find Douglas Fairbanks or H. G. Wells. Nowhere near as bright as they were a few years ago."

"So what is this place?"

"It's kind of a museum of the collective unconscious. Part of it, anyway. I thought you might like to see it. This is part of what you tap into."

"Well, fine. But I still want to get back, and this isn't helping."

"Keep walking."

"This is very frustrating, King."

"*Life* is frustrating, Dan."

"Tell me about it."

At last he came to another door and entered an enormous, empty chamber. No lights. Back to the shadows and gloom. He could still hear King's voice, but it had changed.

"Where are you?" Dan asked.

"Over here." King sounded weak and whimpering, like a small, frightened child.

"What's the matter, King?"

No answer. Dan kept walking, trying to push aside the dimness as if it were a curtain of cobwebs. Against a wall, way over there, he saw a tiny figure sitting on the floor. It acted as if it wanted to curl up in a corner and die, but there were no corners here, only the huge inside walls of the dome.

As Dan came close, he saw that it was indeed King. He was tiny, no larger than a doll, a very small doll. And he was crying.

"What is this?" Dan asked him. "What's going on?" He scrunched down, balancing on the balls of his feet, but he still towered over King like a giant.

The diminutive King, all curled up, wiped his eyes with his fists and sniffled and looked up at him. "I'm so scared," he whimpered.

"What?"

"I'm just, I'm just so, so *scared* of everything!"

Dan laughed loudly. What a hoot! The secret was out. Stephen King, the great horror writer! This was almost scary, it was so weird.

The light changed suddenly, and the ground rumbled. Dan was thrown back by the force of something happening. Knocked off his feet, he fell onto his back, arms thrown wide.

Something dark slid over him. He shook his head to clear his senses and looked up—up—up—  
Uh-oh.

The tiny, whimpering King was tiny and whimpering no longer. He had grown to a very great size in no time, he was as big as King Kong now, and he looked down at Dan the way Dan had looked down at him only a moment ago. Things sure changed fast here. Now it was King's turn to laugh.

"You know what's scary?" King asked him. ,

His voice was so loud, reverberating in the huge chamber, that Dan, still on his back, had to cup his hands over his ears. "What? *What?*"

"Not being able to find your way back!"

"*What?*"

"Knowing that you brought it upon yourself! Pretty scary!"

"I don't think this is the time or the place!" Dan yelled back, starting to get to his feet.

"Scary, huh?" King said. "What scares you, Dan?"

He started to back away. King was gigantic, so tall that even when he bent over to look at Dan, Dan could hardly see the large bearded face in the darkness. But he could see the teeth shining in the wide smile.

Dan turned to run—and knocked smack into another wall.

No, not a wall. It was King's hand.

"Oh, shit!"

The fingers, each one twice as long as Dan was tall, closed around him and pressed the breath out of him. Dan felt himself lifted steeply up, and his stomach jumped. A huge wind blew on him. He tried to look down but couldn't see anything except the vast expanse of King's hand, all big pores and hairs. The wrist was huge. Dan kept kicking with his legs, knowing that the ground now was very far below him. He was hanging over the abyss.

King was still smiling. Dan looked into the giant's billboard-sized face.

"Gotcha!" King said.

"Let me—I can't—let me d—"

"Neurotransmitters, Dan! Think about those neurotransmitters! You're helpless and you definitely have time to understand what is going to occur!"

"Let me—"

"Maybe you should have tried writing romance novels!"

"Damn it, let—"

"I know what you're thinking! You're thinking, 'Is this really *me*? This can't be *me*!'"

"Let me—"

"'You read Stephen King? He writes real good, don't he? I seen his show, too.' Ah ha ha ha!"

"Let! Me! D—"

"You fool," King said to him, pulling Dan close, the force of his breath blowing his hair back. "Do you really think this is about *money*?"

"*Let me d—*"

"Where are you, Dan?" King laughed, staring at him with a colossal eye the size of a picture window.

Trying to wake himself up and come out of it, Dan yelled loudly, "I am ALL RIGHT now!"

"May I speak to the person inside Dan now, please? You're here now, Dan. This is it."

King opened his enormous mouth. “What scares you, Dan? Monsters? Monsters, you think?”

King changed. His face turned into a huge maw lined with enormous teeth, and millions, billions of eyes erupted from his tough, now reptilian skin. The hand gripping Dan transformed into a snakelike tentacle.

Dan shrieked, staring into the vast red mouth. “I am ALL RIGHT now!” he screamed, pumping his legs back and forth helplessly. “I am, I am, however, a WRITER!”

The King-thing laughed at him. “The door is LOCKED, Dan!” He pulled him nearer his enormous, primeval mouth.

“Why are you doing this?” Dan screamed at him. “Why?”

The King-thing, gigantic, said to him, “What makes you think I have a choice?”

Dan continued to shriek and kick his legs as he was drawn into the slaving mouth, all teeth, another room, another chamber, and another and another, and he yelled as the darkness came down around him and swallowed him, “I am ALL RIGHT now! I am, however, a WRITER! The lights are OFF! The burners have ALL BEEN TURNED OFF! I am often PREOCCUPIED, but I am NOT INSANE! I am—”

And he was gone.

The lights are OFF, Dan.

\* \* \*

When John, the apartment manager, found him, Dan was standing in his bedroom, eyes tightly closed, head bent, waving his arms in every direction and yelling loudly to himself.

John thought at first that it was comical. He yelled to Dan to wake him up, thinking that he was having a nightmare. Your kitchen caught on fire, John yelled at him. What happened, Dan? Where were you? You left the burners on! Mrs. Baker called me, she saw smoke!

No answer. Dan didn't wake up.

John wasn't sure what to do, and he became frightened. This was quite a spectacle, Dan standing there, asleep or at least with his eyes closed, head bent, arms waving, yelling to himself.

“I am ALL RIGHT! I am, however, a WRITER!”

The fire department crew, finished in the kitchen, came in, and one of the men whistled. “What is he, nuts?”

“I don't know.”

“I am not merely excess vegetation! I am the Plant Man!”

One of the fire crew said, “Can we touch him?”

John told him, “I don't think we should.”

“The door is LOCKED, Dan! I am now SHAVING! I have now FINISHED SHAVING!”

They stood there looking at him.

“Is this really *me*? What happened to *me*?”

“Jesus,” one of the firefighters said. “You better get somebody fast.”

“I am often PREOCCUPIED!”

John did so. He phoned the paramedics and didn't go back into the bedroom. He didn't know what to do.

“Get away!” Dan yelled. “The ghosts are doing it!”

The fire crew left.

From the bedroom, Dan laughed. “You fool! What makes you think I have a choice?”

The paramedics came. Dan didn't resist. He went along with them, helpless. They walked

him out of the apartment and down the stairs.

“WELL, DO YOU WANT TO GO NOW? YES, I WANT TO GO NOW! HERE WE GO! WE ARE GOING DOWN THE STAIRS NOW!”

John felt very bad about this. He'd have to phone someone, but he'd need to check the files first, find out who Dan's nearest relatives were. He knew that Dan had gone through a divorce. John had been through a bad divorce himself, years ago. That can change you, really do things to you, he knew.

Thinking that he might find something that would help, he poked around and went into the spare room, Dan's office. He saw the computer, which was still on. John hit the space bar, and the monitor lit up with lines of type. John understood that Dan was a writer, so this must have something to do with a story he'd been working on. Looked like a lot of notes.

John had never read any of Dan's books, but he had read a few Stephen King novels. He liked them. Stephen King knew how to pull you into his world and really make you feel like you were right there, part of what was happening.

“The lights are OFF! The door is LOCKED, Dan!” Dan, outside, distant, yelling.  
“WELL, DO YOU WANT TO GO NOW? YES, I WANT TO GO NOW!”

John turned around and saw the open closet. Just a lot of boxes, some old lamps, a statue of King Kong. Lots of old books and magazines. A *Penthouse*, here. One of those cardboard stand-up things of Stephen King. John preferred the one of Elvira, the one where she's advertising the beer.

Ah, well. He closed the doors.

Stephen King was smiling.

Yes, smiling.

*Gotcha.*