

STEPHEN KING

THE TOMMYKNOCKERS

H
HODDER

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FOREWORD

Like many of the Mother Goose rhymes, the verse about the Tommyknockers is deceptively simple. The origin of the word is difficult to trace. *Webster's Unabridged* says Tommyknockers are either (a) tunneling ogres or (b) ghosts which haunt deserted mines or caves. Because 'tommy' is an archaic British slang term referring to army rations (leading to the term 'tommies' as a word used to identify British conscripts, as in Kipling – 'it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that . . .') the *Oxford Unabridged Dictionary*, while not identifying the term itself, at least suggests that Tommyknockers are the ghosts of miners who died of starvation, but still go knocking for food and rescue.

The first verse ('Late last night and the night before,' etc.) is common enough for my wife and myself to have heard it as children, although we were raised in different towns, different faiths, and came from different descendants – hers primarily French, mine Scots-Irish.

All other verses are products of the author's imagination.

That author – me, in other words – wishes to thank his spouse, Tabitha, who is an invaluable if sometimes maddening critic (if you get mad at critics, you almost

always can be sure they are right), the editor, Alan Williams, for his kind and careful attention, Phyllis Grann for her patience (this book was not so much written as gutted out), and, in particular, George Everett McCutcheon, who has read each of my novels and vetted it carefully – primarily for weapons and ballistics reasons, but also for his attention to continuity. Mac died while this book was in rewrite. In fact, I was obediently making corrections suggested by one of his notes when I learned he had finally succumbed to the leukemia he had battled for nearly two years. I miss him terribly, not because he helped me fix things but because he was part of my heart's neighborhood.

Thanks are due to others, more than I could name: pilots, dentists, geologists, fellow writers, even my kids, who listened to the book aloud. I'm also grateful to Stephen Jay Gould. Although he is a Yankee fan and thus not entirely to be trusted, his comments on the possibilities of what I'd call 'dumb evolution' helped to shape the redraft of this novel (e.g. *The Flamingo's Smile*).

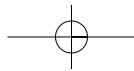
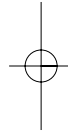
Haven is not real. The characters are not real. This is a work of fiction, with one exception:

The *Tommyknockers* are real.

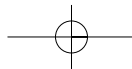
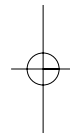
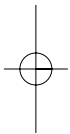
If you think I'm kidding, you missed the nightly news.

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For Tabitha King
'... promises to keep.'



Late last night and the night before,
Tommyknockers, Tommyknockers,
knocking at the door.
I want to go out, don't know if I can,
because I'm so afraid
of the Tommyknocker man.



BOOK 1

THE SHIP IN THE EARTH

Well we picked up Harry Truman, floating down
from Independence.

We said, 'What about the war?'

He said, 'Good riddance!'

We said, 'What about the bomb? Are you sorry
that you did it?'

He said, 'Pass me that bottle and mind your own
bidness.'

'Downstream'
The Rainmakers

CHAPTER ONE

ANDERSON STUMBLES

1

For want of a nail the kingdom was lost – that’s how the catechism goes when you boil it down. In the end, you can boil *everything* down to something similar – or so Roberta Anderson thought much later on. It’s either all an accident . . . or all fate. Anderson literally stumbled over her destiny in the small town of Haven, Maine, on June 21st, 1988. That stumble was the root of the matter; all the rest was nothing but history.

2

Anderson was out that afternoon with Peter, an aging beagle who was now blind in one eye. Peter had been given to her by Jim Gardener in 1976. Anderson had left college the year before with her degree only two months away to move onto her uncle’s place in Haven. She hadn’t realized how lonely she’d been until Gard brought the dog. He’d been a pup then, and Anderson sometimes found it difficult to believe he was now old – eighty-four in dog’s years. It was a way of measuring her own age. 1976

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had receded. Yes indeed. When you were twenty-five, you could still indulge in the luxury of believing that, in *your* case, at least, growing up was a clerical error which would eventually be rectified. When you woke up one day and discovered your dog was eighty-four and you yourself were thirty-seven, that was a view that had to be re-examined. Yes indeed.

Anderson was looking for a place to cut some wood. She'd a cord and a half laid by, but wanted at least another three to take her through the winter. She had cut a lot since those early days when Peter had been a pup sharpening his teeth on an old slipper (and wetting all too often on the dining-room rug), but the place was still not short. The property (still, after thirteen years, referred to by the townspeople as Frank Garrick's farm) had only a hundred and eighty feet on Route 9, but the rock walls marking the north and south boundaries marched off at diverging angles. Another rock wall – this one so old it had degenerated into isolated rock middens furred with moss – marked the property's rear boundary about three miles into an unruly forest of first- and second-growth trees. The total acreage of this pie-shaped wedge was huge. Beyond the wall at the western edge of Bobbi Anderson's land were miles of wilderness owned by the New England Paper Company. Burning Woods on the map.

In truth, Anderson didn't really need to hunt a place to do her cutting. The land her mother's brother had left her was valuable because most of the trees on it were good hardwood relatively untouched by the gypsy-moth infestation. But this day was lovely and warm after a rainy spring, the garden was in the ground (where most of it

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would rot, thanks to the rains), and it wasn't yet time to start the new book. So she had covered the typewriter and here she was with faithful old one-eyed Peter, rambling.

There was an old logging road behind the farm, and she followed this almost a mile before striking off to the left. She was wearing a pack (a sandwich and a book in it for her, dog biscuits for Peter, and lots of orange ribbon to tie around the trunks of the trees she would want to cut as September's heat ebbed toward October) and a canteen. She had a Silva compass in her pocket. She had gotten lost on the property only once, and once was enough to last her forever. She had spent a terrible night in the woods, simultaneously unable to believe she had actually gotten lost on property she for Christ's sweet sake *owned* and sure she would die out here – a possibility in those days, because only Jim would know she was missing, and Jim only came when you weren't expecting him. In the morning, Peter had led her to a stream, and the stream had led her back to Route 9, where it bubbled cheerfully through a culvert under the tar only two miles from home. Nowadays she probably had enough woods savvy to find her way back to the road or to one of the rock walls bounding her land, but the key word was *probably*. So she carried a compass.

She found a good stand of maple around three o'clock. In fact, she had found several other good stands of wood, but this one was close to a path she knew, a path wide enough to accommodate the Tomcat. Come September 20th or so – if someone didn't blow the world up in the meantime – she would hook her sledge up to the Tomcat, drive in here, and do some cutting. Besides, she had walked enough for one day.

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‘Look good, Pete?’

Pete barked feebly, and Anderson looked at the beagle with a sadness so deep it surprised and disquieted her. Peter was done up. He seldom took after birds and squirrels and chipmunks and the occasional woodchuck these days; the thought of Peter running a deer was laughable. She would have to take a good many rest stops on the way back for him . . . and there had been a time, not that long ago (or so her mind stubbornly maintained), when Peter would always have been a quarter of a mile ahead of her, belling volleys of barks back through the woods. She thought there might come a day when she would decide enough was enough; she’d pat the seat on the passenger side of the Chevrolet pickup for the last time, and take Peter to the vet down in Augusta. But not this summer, please God. Or this fall or winter, please God. Or ever, please God.

Because without Peter, she would be alone. Except for Jim, and Jim Gardener had gotten just a trifle wiggy over the last three years or so. Still a friend, but . . . wiggy.

‘Glad you approve, Pete old man,’ she said, putting a ribbon or two around the trees, knowing perfectly well she might decide to cut another stand and the ribbons would rot here. ‘Your taste is only exceeded by your good looks.’

Peter, knowing what was expected of him (he was old, but not stupid), wagged his scraggy stub of a tail and barked.

‘Be a Viet Cong!’ Anderson ordered.

Peter obediently fell on his side – a little wheeze escaped him – and rolled on his back, legs splayed out. That almost always amused Anderson, but today the sight

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of her dog playing Viet Cong (Peter would also play dead at the words 'hooch' or 'My Lai') was too close to what she had been thinking about.

'Up, Pete.'

Pete got up slowly, panting below his muzzle. His white muzzle.

'Let's go back.' She tossed him a dog biscuit. Peter snapped at it and missed. He snuffed for it, missed it, then came back to it. He ate it slowly, without much relish. 'Right,' Anderson said. 'Move out.'

3

For want of a shoe, the kingdom was lost . . . for the choice of a path, the ship was found.

Anderson had been down here before in the thirteen years that the Garrick Farm hadn't become the Anderson Farm; she recognized the slope of land, a deadfall left by pulpers who had probably all died before the Korean war, a great pine with a split top. She had walked this land before and would have no trouble finding her way back to the path she would use with the Tomcat. She might have passed the spot where she stumbled once or twice or half a dozen times before, perhaps by yards, or feet, or bare inches.

This time she followed Peter as the dog moved slightly to the left, and with the path in sight, one of her elderly hiking boots fetched up against something . . . fetched up hard.

'Hey!' she yelled, but it was too late, in spite of her pinwheeling arms. She fell to the ground. The branch of

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a low bush scratched her cheek hard enough to bring blood.

‘Shit!’ she cried, and a bluejay scolded her.

Peter returned, first sniffing and then licking her nose.

‘Christ, don’t do that, your breath stinks!’

Peter wagged his tail. Anderson sat up. She rubbed her left cheek and saw blood on her palm and fingers. She grunted.

‘Nice going,’ she said, and looked to see what she had tripped over – a fallen piece of tree, most likely, or a rock poking out of the ground. Lots of rock in Maine.

What she saw was a gleam of metal.

She touched it, running her finger along it and then blowing off black forest dirt.

‘What’s this?’ she asked Peter.

Peter approached it, sniffed at it, and then did a peculiar thing. The beagle backed off two dog-paces, sat down, and uttered a single low howl.

‘Who got on your case?’ Anderson asked, but Peter only sat there. Anderson hooked herself closer, still sitting down, sliding on the seat of her jeans. She examined the metal in the ground.

Roughly three inches stuck out of the mulchy earth – just enough to trip over. There was a slight rise here, and perhaps the runoff from the heavy spring rains had freed it. Anderson’s first thought was that the skidders who had logged this land in the twenties and thirties must have buried a bunch of their leavings here – the cast-off swill of a three-day cutting, which in those days had been called a ‘loggers’ weekend’.

A tin can, she thought – B & M Beans or Campbell’s

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soup. She wiggled it the way you'd wiggle a tin can out of the earth. Then it occurred to her that no one except a toddler would be apt to trip over the leading edge of a can. The metal in the earth didn't wiggle. It was as solid as mother-rock. A piece of old logging equipment, maybe?

Intrigued, Anderson examined it more closely, not seeing that Peter had gotten to his feet, backed away another four paces, and sat down again.

The metal was a dull gray – not the bright color of tin or iron at all. And it was thicker than a can, maybe a quarter-inch at its top. Anderson placed the pad of her right index finger on this edge and felt a momentary odd tingling, like a vibration.

She took her finger away and looked at it quizzically.

Put it back.

Nothing. No buzz.

Now she pinched it between her thumb and finger and tried to draw it from the earth like a loose tooth from a gum. It didn't come. She was gripping the protrusion in the rough center. It sank back into the earth – or that was the impression she had then – on either side at a width of less than two inches. She would later tell Jim Gardener that she could have walked past it three times a day for forty years and never stumbled over it.

She brushed away loose soil, exposing a little more of it. She dug a channel along it about two inches deep with her fingers – the soil gave easily enough, as forest soil does . . . at least until you hit the webwork of roots. It continued smoothly down into the ground. Anderson got up on her knees and dug down along either side. She tried wiggling it again. Still no go.

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She scraped away more soil with her fingers and quickly exposed more – now she saw six inches of gray metal, now nine, now a foot.

It's a car or a truck or a skidder, she thought suddenly. Buried out here in the middle of nowhere. Or maybe a Hooverville kind of stove. But why here?

No reason that she could think of: no reason at all. She found things in the woods from time to time – shell casings, beer cans (the oldest not with pop-tops but with triangle-shaped holes made by what they had called a 'churchkey' back in those dim dead days of the 1960s), candy wrappers, other stuff. Haven was not on either of Maine's two major tourist tracks, one of which runs through the lake and mountain region to the extreme west of the state and the other of which runs up the coast to the extreme east, but it had not been the forest primeval for a long, long time. Once (she had been over the decayed stone wall at the back of her land and actually trespassing on New England Paper Company's land at the time) she had found the rusted hulk of a late-forties Hudson Hornet standing in what had once been a woods road and what was now, over twenty years after the cutting had stopped, a tangle of second growth – what the locals called shit-wood. No reason that hulk of a car should have been there, either . . . but it was easier to explain than a stove or a refrigerator or any other damn thing actually buried in the ground.

She had dug twin trenches a foot long on either side of the object without finding its end. She got down almost a foot before scraping her fingers on rock. She might have been able to pull the rock out – *that* at least had some

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wiggle – but there was no reason to do it. The object in the earth continued down past it.

Peter whined.

Anderson glanced at the dog, then stood up. Both knees popped. Her left foot tingled with pins and needles. She fished her pocket watch out of her pants – old and tarnished, the Simon watch was another part of her legacy from Uncle Frank – and was astonished to see that she had been here a long time – an hour and a quarter at least. It was past four.

‘Come on, Pete,’ she said. ‘Let’s bug out.’

Peter whined again but still wouldn’t move. And now, with real concern, Anderson saw that her old beagle was shivering all over, as if with ague. She had no idea if dogs could catch ague, but thought old ones might. She did recollect that the only time she had ever seen Peter shiver like that was in the fall of 1975 (or maybe it had been ’76). There had been a catamount on the place. Over a series of perhaps nine nights it had screamed and squalled, very likely in unrequited heat. Each night Peter would go to the living-room window and jump up on the old church pew Anderson kept there, by her bookcase. He never barked. He only looked out into the dark toward that unearthly, womanish squealing, nostrils flaring, ears up. And he shivered.

Anderson stepped over her little excavation and went to Peter. She knelt down and ran her hands along the sides of Peter’s face, feeling the shiver in her palms.

‘What’s wrong, boy?’ she murmured, but she knew what was wrong. Peter’s good eye shifted past her, toward the thing in the earth, and then back to Anderson. The

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plea in the eye not veiled by the hateful, milky cataract was as clear as speech: *Let's get out of here, Bobbi, I like that thing almost as much as I like your sister.*

'Okay,' Anderson said uneasily. It suddenly occurred to her that she could not remember ever having lost track of time as she had today, out here.

Peter doesn't like it. I don't, either.

'Come on.' She started up the slope to the path. Peter followed with alacrity.

They were almost to the path when Anderson, like Lot's wife, looked back. If not for that last glance, she might actually have let the whole thing go. Since leaving college before finals – in spite of her mother's tearful pleas and her sister's furious diatribes and ultimatums – Anderson had gotten good at letting things go.

The look back from this middle distance showed her two things. First, the thing did not sink back into the earth as she had at first thought. The tongue of metal was sticking up in the middle of a fairly fresh declivity, not wide but fairly deep, and surely the result of late winter runoff and the heavy spring rains that had followed it. So the ground to either side of the protruding metal was higher, and the metal simply disappeared back into it. Her first impression, that the thing in the ground was the corner of something, wasn't true after all – or not necessarily true. Second, it looked like a plate – not a plate you'd eat from, but a dull metal plate, like metal siding or –

Peter barked.

'Okay,' Anderson said. 'I hear you talking. Let's go.'

Let's go . . . and let's let it go.

She walked up the center of the path, letting Peter

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lead them back toward the woods road at his own bumbling pace, enjoying the lush green of high summer . . . and this *was* the first day of summer, wasn't it? The solstice. Longest day of the year. She slapped a mosquito and grinned. Summer was a good time in Haven. The best of times. And if Haven wasn't the best of places, parked as it was well above Augusta in that central part of the state most tourists passed by – it was still a good place to come to rest. There had been a time when Anderson had honestly believed she would only be here a few years, long enough to recover from the traumas of adolescence, her sister, and her abrupt, confused withdrawal (surrender, Anne called it) from college, but a few years had become five, five had become ten, ten had become thirteen, and looky 'yere, Huck, Peter's old and you got a pretty good crop of gray coming up in what used to be hair as black as the River Styx (she'd tried cropping it close two years ago, almost a punk do, had been horrified to find it made the gray even more noticeable, and had let it grow ever since).

She now thought she might spend the rest of her life in Haven, with the sole exception of the duty trip she took to visit her publisher in New York every year or two. The town got you. The place got you. The *land* got you. And that wasn't so bad. It was as good as anything else, maybe.

Like a plate. A metal plate.

She broke off a short limber branch well plumed with fresh green leaves and waved it around her head. The mosquitoes had found her and seemed determined to have their high tea off her. Mosquitoes whirling around her head . . . and thoughts like mosquitoes inside her head. Those she couldn't wave off.

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It vibrated under my finger for a second. I felt it. Like a tuning fork. But when I touched it, it stopped. Is it possible for something to vibrate in the earth like that? Surely not. Maybe . . .

Maybe it had been a *psychic* vibration. She did not absolutely disbelieve in such things. Maybe her mind had sensed something about that buried object and had told her about it in the only way it could, by giving her a tactile impression: one of vibration. Peter had certainly sensed something about it; the old beagle hadn't wanted to go near it.

Forget it. She did.

For a little while.

4

That night a high, mild wind arose and Anderson went out on her front porch to smoke and listen to the wind walk and talk. At one time – even a year earlier – Peter would have come out with her, but now he remained in the parlor, curled up on his small hooked rug by the stove, nose to tail.

Anderson found her mind replaying that last look back at the plate sticking out of the earth, and she later came to believe that there was a moment – perhaps when she flicked the cigarette into the gravel drive – when she decided she would have to dig it up and see what it was . . . although she didn't consciously recognize the decision then.

Her mind worried restlessly at what it might be, and this time she allowed it to run – she had learned that if your mind insisted on returning to a topic no matter how you tried to divert it, it was best to let it return. Only obsessives worried about obsession.

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Part of some building, her mind hazarded, a pre-fab. But no one built Quonset huts out in the woods – why drag all that metal in when three men could throw up a cutter's lean-to with saws, axes, and a two-handed buck-saw in six hours? Not a car, either, or the protruding metal would have been flaked with rust. An engine-block seemed slightly more likely, but why?

And now, with dark drawing down, that memory of vibration returned with unarguable certainty. It *must* have been a psychic vibration, if she had felt it at all. It—

Suddenly a cold and terrible certainty rose in her: someone was buried there. Maybe she had uncovered the leading edge of a car or an old refrigerator or even some sort of steel trunk, but whatever it had been in its above-ground life, it was now a coffin. A murder victim? Who else would be buried in such a way, in such a box? Guys who happened to wander into the woods during hunting season and got lost there and died there didn't carry along metal caskets to pop themselves into when they died . . . and even given such an idiotic idea, who would shovel the dirt back in? Cut me a break, folks, as we used to say back in the glorious days of our youth.

The vibration. It had been the call of human bones.

Come on, Bobbi – don't be so fucking stupid.

A shudder worked through her nevertheless. The idea had a certain weird persuasiveness, like a Victorian ghost story that had no business working as the world hurtled down Microchip Alley toward the unknown wonders and horrors of the twenty-first century – but somehow produced the gooseflesh just the same. She could hear Anne laughing and saying *You're getting as funny in the head*

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as *Uncle Frank, Bobbi, and it's just what you deserve, living out there alone with your smelly dog*. Sure. Cabin fever. The hermit complex. Call the doctor, call the nurse, Bobbi's bad . . . and getting worse.

All the same, she suddenly wanted to talk to Jim Gardener – *needed* to talk to him. She went in to call his place up the road in Unity. She had dialed four numbers when she remembered he was off doing readings – those and the poetry workshops were the way he supported himself. For itinerant artists summer was prime time. *All those stupid menopausal matrons have to do something with their summers*, she could hear Jim saying ironically, *and I have to eat in the winter. One hand washes the other. You ought to thank God you're saved the reading circuit, anyway, Bobbi*.

Yes, she was saved that – although she thought Jim liked it more than he let on. Certainly did get laid enough.

Anderson put the phone back in the cradle and looked at the bookcase to the left of the stove. It wasn't a handsome bookcase – she was no one's carpenter, nor ever would be – but it served the purpose. The bottom two shelves were taken up by the Time-Life series of volumes on the old west. The two shelves above were filled with a mixture of fiction and fact on that same subject; Brian Garfield's early westerns jostled for place with Hubert Hampton's massive *Western Territories Examined*. Louis L'Amour's Sackett saga lay cheek by jowl with Richard Marius's wonderful two novels, *The Coming of Rain and Bound for the Promised Land*. Jay R. Nash's *Bloodletters and Badmen* and Richard F. K. Mudgett's *Westward Expansion* bracketed a riot of paperback westerns by Ray Hogan, Archie Joceylen, Max Brand, Ernest Haycox, and, of course,

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Zane Grey – Anderson’s copy of *Riders of the Purple Sage* had been read nearly to tatters.

On the top shelf were her own books, thirteen of them. Twelve were westerns, beginning with *Hangtown*, published in 1975, and ending with *The Long Ride Back*, published in ’87. *Massacre Canyon*, the new one, would be published in September, as all of her westerns had been since the beginning. It occurred to her now that she had been here, in Haven, when she had received her first copy of *Hangtown*, although she’d begun the novel in the room of a scuzzy Cleaves Mills apartment, on a thirties-vintage Underwood dying of old age. Still, she’d finished here, and it was here that she’d held the first actual copy of the book in her hands.

Here, in Haven. Her entire career as a publishing writer was here . . . except for the first book.

She took that down now and looked at it curiously, realizing it had been perhaps five years since she had last held this slim volume in her hands. It was not only depressing to realize how fast time got by; it was depressing to think of how often she thought about that lately.

This volume was a total contrast to the others, with their jackets showing mesas and buttes, riders and cows and dusty trail-drive towns. This jacket was a nineteenth-century woodcut of a clipper-ship quartering toward land. Its uncompromising blacks and whites were startling, almost shocking. *Boxing the Compass* was the title printed above the woodcut. And below it: *Poems by Roberta Anderson*.

She opened the book, paging past the title, musing for a moment over the copyright date, 1968, then pausing at the dedication page. It was as stark as the woodcut. *This*

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book is for James Gardener. The man she had been trying to call. The second of the only three men she had ever had sex with, and the only one who had ever been able to bring her to orgasm. Not that she attached any special importance to *that*. Or not much, anyway. Or so she thought. Or *thought* she thought. Or something. And it didn't matter anyway; those days were also old days.

She sighed and put the book back on the shelf without looking at the poems. Only one of them was much good. That one had been written in March of 1967, a month after her grandfather died of cancer. The rest of them were crap – the casual reader might have been fooled, because she *was* a talented writer . . . but the heart of her talent had been somewhere else. When she had published *Hangtown*, the circle of writers she had known had all denied her. All except Jim, who had published *Boxing the Compass* in the first place.

She had dropped Sherry Fenderson a long chatty letter not long after coming to Haven, and had received a curt postcard in return: *Please don't write me anymore. I don't know you.* Signed with a single slashed S. as curt as the message. She had been sitting on the porch, crying over that card, when Jim showed up. *Why are you crying over what that silly woman thinks?* he had asked her. *Do you really want to trust the judgment of a woman who goes around yelling 'Power to the people' and smelling of Chanel Number Five?*

She just happens to be a very good poet, she had sniffed.

Jim gestured impatiently. *That doesn't make her any older,* he had said, *or any more able to recant the cant she's been taught and then taught herself. Get your mind right, Bobbi. If you want to go on doing what you like, get your fucking mind*

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right and stop that fucking crying. That fucking crying makes me sick. That fucking crying makes me want to puke. You're not weak. I know weak when I'm with it. Why do you want to be something you're not? Your sister? Is that why? She's not here, and she's not you, and you don't have to let her in if you don't want to. Don't whine to me about your sister any more. Grow up. Stop bitching.

She'd looked at him, she remembered now, amazed.

There's a big difference between being good at what you DO and being smart about what you KNOW, he said. Give Sherry some time to grow up. Give yourself some time to grow up. And stop being your own jury. It's boring. I don't want to listen to you snivel. Snivelling is for jerks. Quit being a jerk.

She had felt herself hating him, loving him, wanting all of him and none of him. Did he say he knew weak when he was with it? Boy, he ought to. He was bent. She knew it even then.

Now, he had said, you want to lay an ex-publisher or do you want to cry all over that stupid postcard?

She had laid him. She didn't know now and hadn't known then if she *wanted* to lay him, but she had. And screamed when she came.

That had been near the end.

She remembered that, too – how it had been near the end. He had gotten married not long after, but it would have been near the end anyway. He was weak, and he was bent.

Doesn't matter anyway, she thought, and gave herself the old, good advice: Let it go.

Advice easier given than followed. It was a long time before Anderson got over into sleep that night. Old ghosts

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had stirred when she moved her book of undergraduate poems . . . or perhaps it was that high, mild wind, hooting the eaves and whistling the trees.

She had almost made it when Peter woke her up. Peter was howling in his sleep.

Anderson got up in a hurry, scared – Peter had made a lot of noises in his sleep before this (not to mention some unbelievably noxious dogfarts), but he had never howled. It was like waking to the sound of a child screaming in the grip of a nightmare.

She went into the living room naked except for her socks and knelt by Peter, who was still on the rug by the stove.

‘Pete,’ she muttered. ‘Hey, Pete, cool it.’

She stroked the dog. Peter was shivering and jerked away when Anderson touched him, baring the eroded remains of his teeth. Then his eyes opened – the bad one and the good one – and he seemed to come back to himself. He whined weakly and thumped his tail against the floor.

‘You all right?’ Anderson asked.

Peter licked her hand.

‘Then lie down again. Stop whining. It’s boring. Stop fucking off.’

Peter lay down and closed his eyes. Anderson knelt, looking at him, troubled.

He’s dreaming of that thing.

Her rational mind rejected that, but the night insisted on its own imperative – it was true, and she knew it.

She went to bed at last, and sleep came sometime after two in the morning. She had a peculiar dream. In it

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she was groping in the dark . . . not trying to find something but to get away from something. She was in the woods. Branches whipped into her face and poked her arms. Sometimes she stumbled over roots and fallen trees. And then, ahead of her, a terrible green light shone out in a single pencil-like ray. In her dream she thought of Poe's 'The Tell-Tale Heart,' the mad narrator's lantern, muffled up except for one tiny hole, which he used to direct a beam of light onto the evil eye he fancied his elderly benefactor possessed.

Bobbi Anderson felt her teeth fall out.

They went painlessly, all of them. The bottom ones tumbled, some outward, some back into her mouth where they lay on her tongue or under it in hard little lumps. The top ones simply dropped down the front of her blouse. She felt one catch in her bra, which clasped in front, poking her skin.

The light. The green light. The light –

5

– *was wrong.*

It wasn't just that it was gray and pearly, that light; it was expected that such a wind as had blown up the night before would bring a change in the weather. But Anderson knew there was something more than that wrong even before she looked at the clock on the nightstand. She picked it up in both hands and drew it close to her face, although her vision was a perfect 20/20. It was quarter past three in the afternoon. She had gone to sleep late, given. But no matter how late she slept, either habit or the need to urinate

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always woke her up by nine o'clock, ten at the latest. But she had slept a full twelve hours . . . and she was ravenous.

She shuffled out into the living room, still wearing only her socks, and saw that Peter was lying limply on his side, head back, yellow stubs of teeth showing, legs splayed out.

Dead, she thought with a cold and absolute certainty. Peter's dead. Died in the night.

She went to her dog, already anticipating the feel of cold flesh and lifeless fur. Then Peter uttered a muzzy, lip-flapping sound – a blurry dog-snore. Anderson felt huge relief course through her. She spoke the dog's name aloud and Peter started up, almost guiltily, as if he was also aware of oversleeping. Anderson supposed he was – dogs seemed to have an acutely developed sense of time.

'We slept late, fella,' she said.

Peter got up and stretched first one hind leg and then the other. He looked around, almost comically perplexed, and then went to the door. Anderson opened it. Peter stood there for a moment, not liking the rain. Then he went out to do his business.

Anderson stood in the living room a moment longer, still marveling over her certainty that Peter had been dead. Just what in hell was wrong with her lately? Everything was doom and gloom. Then she headed for the kitchen to fix a meal . . . whatever you called breakfast at three in the afternoon.

On the way she diverted into the bathroom to do her own business. Then she paused in front of her reflection in the toothpaste-spotted mirror. A woman pushing forty. Graying hair, otherwise not too bad – she didn't drink

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much, didn't smoke much, spent most of her time outside when she wasn't writing. Irish black hair – no romance-novel blaze of red for her – rather too long. Gray-blue eyes. Abruptly, she bared her teeth, expecting for just a moment to see only smooth pink gums.

But her teeth were there – all of them. Thank the fluoridated water in Utica, New York, for that. She touched them, let her fingers prove their bony reality to her brain.

But something wasn't right.

Wetness.

There was wetness on her upper thighs.

Oh no, oh shit, this is almost a week early, I just put clean sheets on the bed yesterday—

But after she had showered, put a pad in a fresh pair of cotton panties and pulled the whole works snug, she checked the sheets and saw them unmarked. Her period was early, but it had at least had the consideration to wait until she was almost awake. And there was no cause for alarm; she was fairly regular, but she had been both early and late from time to time; maybe diet, maybe subconscious stress, maybe some internal clock slipping a cog or two. She had no urge to grow old fast, but she often thought that having the whole inconvenient business of menstruation behind her would be a relief.

The last of her nightmare slipped away, and Bobbi Anderson went in to fix herself a very late breakfast.