

6. Limos, Volvos, and Jalopies

Dexter Poindexter's coupe eased through the night. Its headlights knifed through the darkness, which swept behind him and grew whole again.

Dex finally felt like a grown-up. A man in charge of his own decisions. Protective of his wife-to-be. On his way unshackled.

Starting in the fall of his junior year, there had been inklings, stirrings of adulthood: his voice growing deeper and more confident; the soft brillo'ing of his pubic hair; an obligatory stint as a zit farmer; the wary way adults had of staring at you, prunish joes and biddy-janes whose youth had long gone sour and who tottered, a whole heap of 'em, on the lip of the grave.

But tonight was different.

Tonight Dex sat behind the wheel of his car, Tweed by his side. Upon the tips of her earlobes and no doubt between her breasts, she had dabbed a scent that drove him wild.

Once they had enjoyed and survived the prom, wedded bliss would be theirs. A third would come along to complete them—male or female, it didn't much matter.

Then a couple of jobs to sustain them, and some kids underfoot in there somewhere.

But what if they had been chosen?

"It's a beautiful night," Tweed said.

"The best," he said.

What if the designated slasher were staring at their photos right now, laying plans to be right behind where they were seated, removing screws in advance so that he could pop out in an instant and draw his blade across Dex's throat? My God, he would die gasping for a breath that never came, even as he watched Tweed suffer the same fate. In the slasher's eyes would shine a bead of hatred, its gleam the last thing Dex saw as his vision faded.

Grown-ups hate kids, thought Dex. They envy us our youth. They love to snuff two of us every year. And I'll be just like them, now that I'm nearly a man.

But he quickly nixed that thought, letting righteous rage at the adult world again assert itself.

They would not touch his Tweedie-bird.

They would not harm a hair on her head.



Nor would they hurt Dex. He had been working on his reflexes, visualizing alone in his basement against the wall where Mom and Dad couldn't make fun of him. There, he pictured over and over the abrupt appearance of the slasher. Dex would push Tweed out of harm's way, then seize the knife arm of the emerging teacher, even if it proved to be gum-chewing Coach Frink of the gorilla arms and the dumb blunt brow and the beady eyes, even that musclebound dolt—and with his miniature cleaver sever the man's jugular.

In his imaginings, Dex effortlessly disarmed the bastard, saw him struggle in his death throes, threw an arm around Tweed, and said, "We got him, honey. He's dying and we're free."

Now, in the car, Tweed nestled closer and put a hand on his right arm. "I love you, Dex."

"I love you too."

And he did. He loved Tweed with his entire heart. "His spleen 'n' liver too," as the song had it. "We're going to have a *great* time tonight, you and me and all of us. This prom's gonna kick some serious butt."

"No question," she said, laying her head against his arm. "It's such a dreamy night."

His instincts were honed. No need to fret. Just live each harrowing moment for all it was worth. Screw up his nerves and be on high alert during the twenty minutes' ordeal, as the seniors hurried off to their designated spots, sat beneath big black numbers, and waited.

Afterward, the survivors would return elated and relieved to the gym, eaten up with curiosity. Which couple, they'd be wondering, would shortly be laid in the lap of the Ice Ghoul to be hacked and fluttered at midnight?

It wouldn't be him and Tweed.

The odds *avored* them.

Then Dex's confidence hit the inevitable speed bump.

The odds *avored everyone*.

"I see it!" screamed Pim.

Altoona clucked. "Course you see it, dummy. 'Swhere it's been for a billion years."

"Yeah, I know. But it's the *prom* and it's *night time* and you and me've got one more hurdle to go before we're *free*."

"So?" Altoona stopped behind some car whose left blinker was flashing. She checked her watch. Twenty minutes before the doors closed, and three blocks to the parking lot. "It ain't like it's an exam or nothin', Pim, so don't crap your knickers, okay? It's more like, in fact it's *precisely* like, two luckless fuckers are forced to cash in their chips and the rest of us are allowed to breathe again finally. Who's in that rustbucket ahead of us?"

Pim craned forward. "Oh jeez!"

"What?"

Pim giggled and clapped her black-mitted hands. "One's the loser babe from butchery who almost lost a thumb."

"Hairy-lobed Lulu?"

"Yeah. And look. Good old Futzy stuck her with that triple-bellied bozo with the corduroy pants who hangs over his lunch like pigs over a trough. The kid nobody in their right mind ever sits with." Pim glowered with ratlike malice. "I sincerely hope they're not the chosen ones, cuz no one I know would want to rush in and futter *them*. Too many goddamn cooties."

"Couple o' friggin' losers," said Altoona. "You wonder how they *live* with themselves. 'Course, if anybody had bullied either of these twits, we'd've held the bullies down and branded 'em. So go figure. Leave losers alone? Hey, we tolerate that. Cause 'em grief? We flog you to beat the band."

"Cuz we understand how it feels. The being mocked, I mean."

"Right."

Clouds scudded behind the school building as they approached the lot. Jacketed students directed with flashlights. Altoona saw Tweed Megrim's kid sister, Jenna, a peppery little junior, splitting cars off this way and that.

"Jesus fuck, it's the prom!" screamed Pim, jiggling fit to burst out of her dress.

What a love bunny, thought Altoona.

And what interesting times lay ahead later tonight, when they bared their nether parts for those yummy zippermouths, Condor and Blayne.

Altoona's lobes peppered and zinged like a string of pinched Christmas lights.

At the punchbowl, Jonquil Brindisi, teacher of the greater vices, ladled orange glop into the outheld cup of Claude Versailles, teacher of the lesser vices.

Jiminy Jones, ignored in a bow tie, roved on the risers, setting out thick binders of charts on the dance band's unsteady black stands. Poor sad Jiminy. Such a humorless stub of a fellow, short, bristle-browed, full of gray bland business grit in faculty meetings. His demeanor had surely had the effect of turning off potential mates, as now they turned off Jonquil.

Artificial fog drifted across the floor from that towering effrontery in the center of the gym, the Ice Ghoul.

"Thank you," said Claude. He took a sip of punch. "And yes, Jonquil, I concur. This year's crop of seniors showed execrable taste in choosing as the centerpiece of their prom the hoary old Ice Ghoul. He's not only a slap-in-the-face to a fine principal, our poor dear Futzy chum. But as much as, to the adolescents who while away a mere four years here the Ice Ghoul seems a source of endless merriment, to those of us logging our third decade and counting, he's dull, dull, dull."

Jonquil smiled. Wordy bugger, hair starting to thin. But Claude was tall, arguably handsome, all-in-all a not inconsiderably sexy man. "Maybe they took your lessons in Sloth to heart."

"Indeed," said Claude, licking orange foam from his upper lip. His suit was bright yellow with bold black stitching, his lobebag the same. "The Ice Ghoul *is* the easiest choice, isn't he, barring the inconsideration it shows for Futzy's feelings, which held back previous classes for twenty years but did not it seems hold back *this* class. A particularly vicious bunch this year, perhaps?"

"I try, Claude, I try."

Knock off a few years, ungray a few streaks at the temples, plunk him in a singles bar, and Jonquil would jump him in an instant. A pity she had stricken colleagues from her list of possible playmates. Pity too that the bar fodder, men and women both, came nowhere near Claude's quality and allure.

"In my lessons on Rage," she noted, "a full six *weeks* we dig and delve into that fine and unjustly maligned passion, I do my best to instill a love of the vicious."

"One would think it natural."

"One would think so."

Across the gym, Jonquil saw Adora Phipps nod her tight-bunned head and excuse herself from an early gaggle of seniors. She headed their way, young but dressed in a spiffed-up version of the granny clothes that marked her off as one of the oddest of the odd.

To Claude: "But men and women are vicious in so predictable and plastic a way, and they're no better as kids. In class, I work myself up—you know how I get—but they stare back, as dull as a crusted plate, these hormone-pumped wonders. Take *Notorious*, for example. Sure it's sexy to see someone fry on TV."

Miss Phipps nodded to them, listening as she poured herself some refreshment. A wormy seam, as she leaned, ran up the back of her stocking from fat-heeled black shoes. When she straightened, the seam was abruptly hidden, her long severe frock falling to cover it.

"Watching someone fry," continued Jonquil, "invariably gets me off."

"Me too," said Claude. He waved to Miss Phipps, who gave him a fuck-off nod and stared over her cup at Jonquil in mid-peroration.

"My point, though, is that *Notorious*, for all its supposed in-your-face violence, finks out when it comes to the stunning arousal of a fully-sensed kill. True, you get the look and feel of it. You get the sizzle and the screams. Their holographic expertise can't be faulted, and the porno flicks they superimpose over the frying flesh are chosen for optimal build and climax. But the *smell* they give us!" Cluck of the tongue, roll of the eyes.

"Surely you don't want the real thing?"

"Of *course* I do! You've been to enough of these proms, you and Adora both, to know that the aroma of burnt pork—or whatever the frig it is the networks use—is nowhere *near* the amazing smell of a corpse. For heaven's sake, if you're going to get people off, you really shouldn't cheat the most critical sense of all with cheap cosmetic substitutes. For all the distaste TV viewers

claim, there's nothing like the aroma of victims, freshly butchered or fried, to bypass the veneer of civilization and go straight for the beast in the brain—nothing like it to snag one's lust and turn it positively ravenous."

Jiminy Jones bobbed a low sour blat out of his trumpet.

"I wonder," said Adora Phipps, taking another sip.

"Don't wonder," Jonquil said. "Believe it."

The lobebag Miss Phipps wore had that second-generation feel to it, as if it had been rummaged out of her grandmother's hope chest.

Her right lobe, thank goodness, was bare. A year ago, Jonquil and Ms. Foddereau had taken the English teacher aside, hoping to persuade her out of repression's past in *that* regard at least, and the resumption of school in September had seen Miss Phipps abandon the antiquated right bag that the rest of Demented States society had trashed so decisively in the mid-sixties.

Claude said in annoyance, "Where's Gerber Waddell when you need him?"

She followed his gaze to the wetness plashing down the papier-mache and chicken-wire face of the Ice Ghoul.

The creature half-knelt, half-crouched. It was daunting in its crudeness but so overdone as to be laughable: buttocks doughy and split apart, a thick spearhead erection beribboned and far too huge, bright red everywhere except where brush had missed newsprint.

Its musclebound arms lofted skyward—the knife, the torch, an obvious parody of the Statue of Liberty—and its massive head was bent to peer triumphantly at the dead couple soon to be laid before it.

Jonquil's gaze returned to the splash of drops, slow but predictable, that hit the concave crimp in its brow, sorrowed along its cheek, and dripped down the muscled chest before it passed out of view.

"Rained all night, didn't it?" she said.

"It woke me up," agreed Miss Phipps.

Jonquil took in the seething gush of dry-ice fog issuing from vents cut in the figure's broad pedestal.

"Yes it rained," said Claude. "But Futzy had the roof redone just last year. I told him—past experience ought to be trusted!—not to switch to Flashpoint & Sons based on bid alone. He ignored me. Now this."

"You think there's standing water up there? Perhaps a puddle?" Jonquil pictured a dark mirror of water rippled with night breezes, spread wide over ineptly tarred swatches of roof.

"More like a lagoon!" he answered. "As my favorite bumpersticker puts it, 'Life's a bitch, and then she whelps.' On this of all nights, the roof has chosen to fail. Water is trickling along crossbeams and onto the runways of the slasher's typically dry modes of access up there. Should he or she

have an occasion to employ them tonight, he or she will be in for a case, at the very least, of wet knee. Early onset of gout, arthritis, or chilblains is not out of the question. Where the devil is our esteemed head janitor?"

Another of Claude's rhetorical questions.

Maybe he would go in search of the janitor. Or he might stoically wait for him to wander in. More likely, he would gnaw on this new peeve all evening, spinning elaborate rhetorical flourishes to feed his upset. None of it would diminish him in Jonquil's sight.

At the far door, a threesome strode in: Brest Donner, arm in arm with her man Bix, and Trilby, their third, bringing up the rear.

"Brest!" Jonquil called out, waving her toward the refreshment table when she got her attention.

Clusters of early seniors looked up too. But with the lights on full and the dance band only beginning to assemble, it felt not yet as though the prom had quite begun.

More kids, lights gone low and colorful, the front entrance padlocked shut, a cymbal whisk as the first notes of an old classic sounded: such signals would mark the real start of the evening, when these dressy stragglers on strews of sawdust would shift from out-of-place to right-at-home.

Brest tugged Bix along and Trilby followed after. Here, thought Jonquil, is a marriage in trouble.

Out of the madhouse at last and on the road, thought Condor Plasch. His buddy Blayne had one fucked-up family. "You have one fucked-up family, Blayne-O," he said.

"The shit they don't eat, they are." Stoic, dark, an anodyne for Condor's worldly woes, Blayne glanced out the passenger side and dug idly into a coat pocket.

"One last hurdle, we head west."

No comment from Blayne.

Condor wove from street to street out of the housing development. His tongue barbell knocked against the inside edge of his zipper mouth. He pictured lightning jags over wet enamel. "Yep, that's where we be headed. Put in our time tonight, pack up, ride way the fuck over to San Fran, where the funny papers are sayin' all good zipheads congregate." Blayne nodded but said nothing. "What's up, my good bud?"

Blayne stared over: "Me and Altoona did the lip thing today." He fetched out a kerchief, blue and white checked, rubberbanded at the middle and pulled into rabbit ears at the top.

"She just another sneerfuck privately pining to kiss metal?"

Blayne reared back. "Get real. This is Altoona you're talking about."

"So did she spill? Whether her and Pim did it, I mean."

"She *implied*." Blayne unbanded the kerchief. "Real strong."

"They've been walking funny since Easter."

Once, thought Condor, those two chicks had been a stone-cold drag. Couple o' wannabes.

Lately, they'd started getting interesting.

First, Pim had sidled up to him outside the cafeteria and brazenly requested their piercer's phone number. That had been followed by obsessive stares and all, capped by rumors of what she and Altoona had done over Easter.

"Not too raunchy in the visual way neither, them two," said Condor. "Cute lobes, big swellers beneath their sweaters, killer curves that narrow down into a tight clench below."

Blayne dropped a compliment: "They'd be hot and finger-rocking good in the sack."

"But wait up," said Condor. "We had to go through whole heaping gobs of pain when we had our *mouths* done. No *way* them girls'd let that shit be perpetrated on them you-know-where. I can still smell that cream-white oval pan with the red drool and spit, me goggle-eyed over it with my wuttering head on wobbly like I was fit to pass out. And I can feel the crimp of that skin-punch as my blood sprayed out over Cabrille's fist."

Condor signaled a turn.

"And those were my *lips*, Blayne-O, just my fucking *lips*! You think I'd let anyone do that to my gens?"

Blayne shrugged. "Believe what you want. I think they did it. Anyway, we get to find out tonight."

Yeah, right. "What's with the pills?"

"Some heady stuff," Blayne replied. "Brain revealers, Altoona calls 'em. While they were in Topeka, before they drove to Cabrille's parlor, they met this guy in a bar whose brother used the university labs in Lawrence to make it pure. No shit, no cut, no speed. Just a smooth high hit."

Condor's stomach flexed. "I dunno. Last time, my gut took a turn, loops of *no-no-no* and a quick uncatchable ralph or two, floors to mop in a dead-dog stupor the next morning, and pain, pain, pain. So I'm gonna beg off."

"That was Cobra's street-scam crap, cut six ways from Sunday with baby powder and strychnine, more'n likely. This stuff's the genuine article. Altoona says she and Pim took hits, got naked, it went on forever. She told me, get this, she told me her pussy tingled like a fizzing sizzling hot tub and that her sexlobe felt like it had swelled up and stretched out near three feet long and that soft wet hot invisible slave-tongues were lapping and sucking every goddamn cubic inch of it, hour after hour of yummy sexy shit, and I ain't lyin'."

"Altoona said *that*?"

"In so many words."

What the fuck.

He and Blayne had gotten into black candles a year before. They had written bleak poetry to the loneliness, sharing the verses before they engaged in yet one more bout of fruitless suck and flay.

They had stood by one another in Kansas City twice while a well-paid felony-risker had taken a tattoo needle to their underaged skin.

And they had gone together through the pain of zipper installation, a Christmas break Condor would never forget, the unending stairstep of hurt across his mouth and back again, the blood, the swelling, somehow managing to coax Blayne through the same.

The other kids' taunts thereafter were as nothing. They were as the *bip-bip-bip* of the zipper handle against his right chin-flesh as he walked, a tickle soon become custom.

Now his buddy and lover (the one kid in the world who likewise had his ear attuned to the suck-tunnel of emptiness, who grokked that the probability of truly sharing anything with anyone anywhere *ever* was zip zero zilch) held forth a pill to pixie-dust the next several hours away.

Prom shit would unfold its truth, the lows lower, the highs higher.

And possibly in there, he and Blayne would get to gawk at two stripped chicks, blend flesh, Pim's unbagged sexlobe inside his mouth, her letting out little girlish gasps as his steel barbell brushed her forbidden lobe and his greedy fingers parted her zipper-teeth below and snugged their way into her moist hot clench.

"Well okay, give it here," he said. "Will we make it to the lot before buzz-time?"

"Five minutes after gulpdawn, it kicks in."

"Works for me."

The pale yellow pill lay bitter on Condor's tongue. It took two hard swallows. Even then, the damned thing stuck in his throatpipe. But its bitter taste finally melted away, and Condor asked Blayne where they were supposed to do the girls.

"In the costume shop, during the search for the stiffs. She and Pim'll be pilling out too. Oughta be dropping it right about now."

Four minutes later, when Condor steered into the parking lot entrance, he felt a giggle bubble up out of his gut. "Oh jeez." It was a wavelet, yep, and he could see *huge* waves, shiny blue, way far out but edging closer.

"Yeah, I know," said Blayne. "But keep it tamped down till we get past Tweed's tight little kid sister and flash our passes at ol' Dunsmore. Once we're past the front table and into the gym, we can giggle as much as we freakin' feel like it, 'midst the dimness and death-terror and the whole dad-blamed fucked-up mess of a world."

"Blayne?" Condor said.

"Yeah?" The dark blue niobium in Blayne's puffy lips gleamed like a blueberry blintz.

"Tonight," he laughed, then bottled it up and jammed in a stopper. "I have a super-strong feeling that we're going to have the best goddamn time of our whole entire friggin' motherfuckin' lives!"

"Could be, buddy. Could be."

"Blayne?"

"Yeah?"

"I love you, Blayne."

The smile vanished. "Yeah. Love."

Blayne looked out the windshield. "Come on, my man, she's waving you on. Don't blow it."

Zane Fronemeyer'd been a warmup. Offing him and his wives had simply swept obtrusive clutter into the dustbin, which made for clearer lines of action ahead.

But they were peripheral victims.

Sheriff Blackburn, revived to offer up his voice for capture on tape, had given a foretaste of the main event. He, after all, had made the ultimate sacrifice in the school building, and roping him into place had led to a perfect and tasty omniscience.

But even Blackburn was mere prologue.

Now, to watch them arrive, to peer from the heart of concealment, an architectural honeycomb entwined above, beneath, around, and through the school proper—this sanctioned voyeurism drew *then* and *now* together.

It pointed the way toward healing.

How natural it was to identify with this building, a caretaker of the young and a presider over their slaughter. But tonight, this place of brick and mortar seethed with resentment at the pinch and crimp of the law.

One couple and no more?

Too strict.

Healing demanded free rein, and tonight that demand would be met.

Beyond a shelf of trophies, the seated shop teacher's hair shone. Opposite him, kids spiffed in tuxedo satins or fluffed in corsaged ball gowns flashed their pinned-on passes to the teacher and his junior helper and accepted the sealed envelope that bore their names.

At their waists dangled the mini-cleavers awarded them by Lily Foddereau upon successful completion of butchery class, these and the cloudy pastel-lidded Futterware containers.

But above the finery, between each dazzling lobebag and its companion earlobe on the right, their fresh-scrubbed faces wore the same devilish looks that mischievized the hallways, day in, day out. Mayhem directed outward, sex thoughts abuzz inside, as their jaws vacantly snapped gum.

Cobra passed by with Peach Popkin, owning her with a few fingers at the neck, his eyes dead with hatred.

Fido Jenner and Bowser McPhee hove next into view, Bowser's eager eyes glued to Peach's twitch of a rump.

Then the huge bulk of Kyla Gorg and Patrice Menuci, an item since eighth grade, blocked out the twosome waiting behind.

It didn't matter who they were, some of them victims, some victimizers. Every one of them had the play of holes on the brain. Mouth hole over lobe, pussy hole over prick, shove it in, yank it out.

Diversion from deadmarch.

Ah but tonight, how pleasing it would be to taste their fear, see it unclench, seize it right back up, and dole out death—enough to free their minds, those that survived, enough to salve the wounds that every prom night reopened, heal them at last, and find release.

When Kyla and Patrice were gone, a white limo drove away outside. Rocky Stark waved to it, and Sandy Gunderloy tugged at his sleeve. He turned, grinned at the shop teacher, and offered his hand.

Top jock.

Head cheerleader.

The momentary flash of a fuck. Imaginary. But every damned bitch-bastard in school flashed likewise whenever these two walked by.

Tonight's places of slaughter had been firmed up. But Jesus Fucking God it'd be such a pleasure to trash Rocky Stark and Sandy Gunderloy, even if meant veering off-plan in order to do it.

They were finalists for prom king and queen, as indeed were Brandy Crowe and Flann Beckwith. Most prom nights, that brought immunity. Broad, fearless grins.

Not tonight.

In a pig's eye were they safe tonight.

Time to move on. Doors would be locked soon. Lights would dim. Music would play.

The sort of music the little shits danced to.

The sort of music they faced.

Jenna Megrim waved another car left.

The breeze against Jenna's face was cool but not chilly. Armed with instructions and flashlights, she and the other volunteers had fanned out across the parking lot to direct arriving seniors.

Her father would be home, stepping out of the shower and preparing to sit before the tube.

Gravel scrunched at her back, a low motor, as some parent's car moved off down the blacktop, guided by the next flashlight-wielding junior. Moonlight caught its bumpersticker: "Have you kissed your child's friendship lobe today?"

Jenna had thought she might be bored. But simply knowing that the designated slasher was roaming the secret byways *right now* thrilled her.

The slasher *knew!*

It might be her Spanish teacher, Senora Westmore. Or Lily Foddereau. Or that handsome choir director with the killer eyes and the thick tanned lobes.

Whoever it was knew where the doomed couple would be sitting *and who they were*.

Even now, as she signaled them on, this pair of tuxedo'd boys blowing kisses at her might, in a little while, be lying, gutted open, at the base of the towering fiend she had helped construct.

Jenna knew she should feel frightened.

But she didn't.

Not even for Dex and her sister. They'd be safe. And her own prom night was an entire year away.

Besides, maybe she'd be a finalist for prom queen. Sure, she wasn't the best looking girl in the junior class. She wasn't claiming she was.

But Rocky Stark had flirted with her once, a smile and a smart slap across the face. As flirts go, it wasn't much. But it was enough of one that Sandy—who had let it be known that their twosome would be looking for male completion only—felt compelled to give Jenna a public dressing-down.

Even if a nomination wasn't in the cards, her birthdate would make her a tender on prom night. For three days on either side of one's birthdate each month (in Jenna's case, the twenty-third), any sort of physical harm was strictly forbidden.

Well, okay, except for *half* the high school seniors in that category on prom night. Grown-ups weren't *about* to give anybody a free ride from birth. Still, she had a fifty-fifty chance of being sent by lottery to the girl's gym, thereby escaping all possibility of slaughter.

If that were true, Pish Balthasar, the brainy beauty with the smoky eyes and a growing interest in her, would almost surely want to be her date.

Horn blips from the street.

Dexter drove, Tweed in mid-wave beside him.

Jenna's coat rustled as her arm shot up. She waved them on, blowing a kiss.

Dex stopped, roll down. "Don't let the Ice Ghoul get you!"

Roll up as Jenna's big sister said, "And have a good time at—" The window cut Tweed off, but Jenna saw her lips form *Pumper's house*.

"I will," she yelled, "and *you* keep away from the Ice Ghoul too!" Tweed looked grand in pink, and Dex would make a darling brother-in-law.

It wouldn't be long now.

Another quarter hour, and Mrs. Gosler or one of her husbands would drive Jenna and Pumper home for a sleepover. Jenna waved at Pumper across the lot, fingers captured by her flashlight beams, and Pumper waved back.

Later in Pumper's bedroom, they would listen, mock shock on their faces, to the Goslers watching the electrocution on *Notorious*. All the while, the two girls would keep the radio low, listening intently to the Midwest returns, heaving sighs of relief and bursting into giggles as Corundum High's victims were announced and it became clear that their older siblings had been spared.

Another car arced in.

An increase in frantic frowns meant the eight o'clock deadline must be drawing near.

Stay on the ball, Jenna told herself.

She had to concentrate, these last minutes, lest her fumbling lose someone their lobes.

Where before had been free highway, cars clogged in backup. Tough times ahead. Behind her, the ten minute bell sounded.

A wrench in her gut.

Get it on, she thought, relax the wrist, stay alert, give Tweed's classmates every fair chance.

Over driveway and blacktop, Jenna's fragile cone of light moved in deadly earnest.

Tweed walked arm in arm with Dex to the band room. In the empty hallways, her dress rustled an unbearable rustle.

Silent lockers serried by.

In her free hand she held the sealed envelope Wattle Murch's brother Daub had given Dex at the front table. It had grown sticky with palm-sweat.

The band room door wasn't locked.

They ventured in.

No one there.

A dim bulb on a lamp pole with a pullchain struggled to throw light over the wooden risers where the French horn section sat. Dark shadows choked the rest of the fan-shaped room, and Tweed had to trust to sense memory to know when to step up and when not.

"You see okay?" asked Dex. He had reached the cache of saxophones in back, set midway in the tall gray doors angled polygonally about the outer edge of the room.

He fumbled out his key.

"Yes, if I don't look at the lightbulb."

Tweed threaded through a tangled forest of stands, shoving the black nuisances aside. She touched the leather thong of her key, unpursed it, and felt for the right orientation.

The trombone closet unlocked.

Musty odor inside always, like the inside of a ventriloquist's dummy's mouth. There stood her trombone case.

Tweed hesitated, an irrational fear gripping her that someone was hiding a few feet inside the closet. She and Dex had once knocked on its back wall. Knowing that the slasher's secret byways wrapped around the band room, they had heard then the hollow reverb and wondered if this very panel had ever afforded him entry for the kill.

Eight years past, a couple had been butchered by Mr. Dunsmore right where the trombone players sat. Just yesterday, Tweed had emptied her spit valve upon a painted-over blood patch.

But fear was absurd.

It wasn't yet time for the kill, nor was it likely that she and Dex had been assigned to sit in the band room. Still, this *might* be the place again. Preparations may have been underway before they had interrupted them.

Something touched the back of her hand. A sound strained in her throat.

"Hey, it's okay, it's just me." Dex squeezed her hand.

"Don't scare me like that," she said.

"Sorry," he said. "Here." He lay down his alto sax case and snapped it open, *flan flan*, right-angling the lid. "I'll put the envelope in my case. Get your axe and let's go. Mr. Jones will start worrying about us."

Swooping her instrument out of the closet, Tweed walked cautiously with Dex to the band room door, breathing easier when it had swung-to behind them.

Rather than circle back past the front table to get to the gym, they continued counterclockwise along the first floor corridor.

On the left, science labs gloomed by, site of the hillside creep and the polar creep in geology, memorable goads-to-learning, and the place as well where chem, bio, and physics had been crammed into their skulls.

On the right, thick glass doors to the barn and the slaughterhouse areas made a valiant effort to hold in the stench. Not so long ago, that area of the school had terrified Tweed, despite the gradual progression from primary school petting zoo, to junior high's dissection of frogs and pig embryos, to high school's more demanding course of instruction in slaughter, rendering, meat-packing, tanning, butchery, and taxidermy. But now these skills were old hat. She felt as if part of her life was over. She would miss the down-to-earth Lily Foddereau, her loamy wisdom, her steady hand, her lethal axe-blade.

They turned left at the water fountain.

Far ahead, by the gym door nearest the front of the school, a clump of seniors congregated, the boys high-fiving and lobe-tugging as though they were wearing jeans and jerseys and topsiders, not tuxes and ruffed shirts.

No reason not to go in. They were waiting, it seemed, for the lights and the music to draw them out of the hallway.

That's us, she thought.

"My God, Tweed, look at it!" said Dex as they reached the entrance to the gym.

She paused beside him, her eyes at once drawn to the Ice Ghoul. Even with the lights not yet low, he seemed suddenly larger and more menacing. Fog swirled about him from pedestal vents, a low white roll of guile and menace.

"Jenna told me over dinner that they'd filled in detail." The vast gymnasium seemed to swallow her voice.

"Yeah I know. You mentioned it," Dex said. "Some brushwielder, some real sicko, understands what high school is all about. That face really captures the feeling."

It made her shiver. She wondered, once they survived the stalking, whether it would seem less horrific. "Why's it . . . oh look, Dex, the roof must be leaking."

"Too bad," he said. "But when the lights change, it'll look like just another effect."

A voice called to them from the bandstand, off to the right. Festus Targer at his drumset softened a cymbal and twirled a brush at them. The bass drum thumped.

Farther along the same top riser, Butch and Zinc were de-belling low furious arpeggios from their down-directed trumpets. They were seniors, a couple in the throes of breaking up on account of being college-bound in different directions, Butch to the east coast, Zinc to the west.

Zinc had the blush-pink look of a tender, unflogged for days, and it was clear, had been clear since last week's lottery, that Butch felt guilty piggybacking his salvation on his lover's monthly reprieve from beatings and the luck of the draw. Some students resented those who escaped the slasher's knife that way, but Butch was much harsher on *himself* than were any of Tweed's friends.

Tweed took her seat on the middle riser. Dex sat below and to the left, next to Wyche Fowler, ego insufferable, but man could he blow Dex out of the water on the sax.

Tweed snapped open the case and threaded her horn together. Colored lights toggled at random. As she sprayed mist along the length of her cold-creamed slide, Tweed glanced up and saw, at the far end of the gym, Gerber Waddell by the light bank struggling to recall, with his genial feeble half-mind, the precise combination intended for this part of prom night.

"Where the fuck's Buttweiler?" Bongo asked in her right ear, an unruly low F struggling to speak at the end of his arm.

"Um." Tweed looked around. No sign of their principal. Not at the punch bowl where the other chaperones clustered. Not at the longer stretch of table near the janitor, where the seniors would pig out and glug down.

A blue vision crossed the gym on a diagonal.

Nurse Gaskin.

She stopped on the sawdust to stare up at the Ice Ghoul bore continuing toward the other chaperones.

Tweed and Dex had a crush on Delia Gaskin. If only she weren't so old.

"I don't see him yet," said Tweed. "Maybe he's doing paperwork in his office."

"Yeah, or in the bafroom." Dimbulb Bongo. Still some years of growing to do, and he was nobody's genius.

"Tweed." Dex caught her eye, his neckband a shiny black against the white tux. He glanced at the nurse, then back at Tweed.

Tweed nodded, resigned.

The lights took on harsh red and green casts. At the far door, fluff and fine lines of clothing began to drift in.

Warming the mouthpiece with her hand, Tweed set it into the horn, tried for saliva she seemed not to have, bobbed a few notes, licked her lips and the rim of the mouthpiece cup, woodshedded the opening riff for "I'll Be Around," opened the spit valve, and shook out not a drop.

She was scared out of her wits. Half the band was a wreck pretending not to be. They would try to lose themselves in the charts, and maybe they would succeed.

But maybe they'd just have to wait for the prom kill to be over before they would find any kind of groove tonight.

Jiminy Jones glanced this way and that.

The lights at play in his thinning hair lent him weirdly shifting coronas. He held the light-tipped baton tight in one chubby hand.

A last look at the score, smiles darting into the band, a "Hi there Dex, easy on the triplets," his bowtie blue-sequined like his suitcoat edging, like his lobebag, his head raised to the air like a

bull sensing slaughter as the eight o'clock bell sounded, the lights clicked precisely into place, and Jiminy Jones' baton came down upon the first terrified note of the evening.



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