

## **The Body**

by Stephen King

(Adapted book. Upper Intermediate level)

### **CHAPTER 1. The Hardest Things to Say**

The most important things are the hardest things to say. They are the things you get ashamed of, because words make them smaller. When they were in your head they were limitless; but when they come out they seem to be no bigger than normal things. But that's not all. The most important things he too close to wherever your secret heart is buried; they are clues that could guide your enemies to a prize they would love to steal. It's hard and painful for you to talk about these things ... and then people just look at you strangely. They haven't understood what you've said at all, or why you almost cried while you were saying it.

I was twelve, nearly thirteen, when I first saw a dead person. It happened in 1960, a long time ago ... although sometimes it doesn't seem very long to me. Especially on the nights when I wake up from dreams in which the hail falls into his open eyes.

### **CHAPTER 2. The Tree House Gang**

We had a tree house in a big tree which hung over some empty ground in Castle Rock. It was a kind of club, although it had no name. There were five or six regulars and some other pussies who came and went. We'd let them come up when we were playing cards for money and we needed some fresh blood.

The sides of the tree house were made out of wood, and the roof was metal we had taken from the dump, looking over our shoulders all the time because the manager of the dump had a dog which ate children for breakfast, or so people said. We found a screen door out there on the same day. It stopped the flies getting in, but it was really rusty. It didn't matter what time of day you looked out through that screen door: it always looked like sunset.

Besides playing cards, the club was a good place to go and smoke cigarettes and look at girlie books. We built a secret space under the floor to hide magazines and cigarette packets when somebody's father decided to do the Me And My Son Are Best Friends routine and visit us.

That summer had been the driest and hottest since 1907, the newspapers said, and on that Friday in September, a few days before school started again, the grass was dry and brown. Teddy and Chris and I were up in the club in the morning, complaining about school being so near and playing cards and telling the same jokes we'd told each other a hundred times before. Teddy was laughing his peculiar laugh at the jokes - Eeee-eee-eee, like a fingernail scratching on a board. He was strange; we

all knew it. Close to being thirteen like the rest of us, the thick glasses and his deafness made him seem like an old man sometimes.

In spite of the glasses Teddy couldn't see very well, and he often misunderstood the things people said to him. His eyesight was just naturally bad, but there was nothing natural about what had happened to his ears. Back in those days, when it was the fashion to get your hair cut really short, Teddy had Castle Rock's first Beatle haircut - four years before anyone in America had even heard of the Beatles. He kept his ears covered because they looked like two lumps of warm wax.

One day when Teddy was eight, his father had got angry with him for breaking a plate. His mother was out at work. Teddy's dad took him over to the big oven at the back of the kitchen and pushed the side of Teddy's head down against one of the burner plates. He held it down for about ten seconds. Then he pulled Teddy up by the hair and did the other side. Then he called the hospital and told them to come and fetch his boy. Then he sat down in front of the TV with his gun across his knees. When Mrs Burroughs from next door came to ask if Teddy was OK - she had heard the screaming- Teddy's dad pointed the gun at her. Mrs Burroughs left the Duchamp house at roughly the speed of light and called the police.

When the ambulance came for Teddy, his dad explained to the ambulancemen that although the captain said the area was clear, he knew there were still German soldiers around. Before long, Teddy's dad was in Togus, which was a special hospital where they sent soldiers who were mad from the war. He had been on the beaches in Normandy and had just got worse and worse ever since. In spite of what his dad had done to him, Teddy was proud of him and visited him in Togus every week.

Teddy was the stupidest boy in our gang, I suppose, and he was crazy. He used to take the craziest chances, like running out in front of lorries on the road and jumping out of the way at the very last moment. This made him laugh, but it frightened us because his eyesight was so bad. You had to be careful what you dared him because he liked to do anything for a dare.

In the middle of a game of cards we heard someone coming fast up the ladder which was fixed to the side of the tree. It was Vern Tessio, one of the other regulars. He was sweating hard.

'Wait till you hear this, guys,' he said.

'Hear what?' I asked.

'I've got to get my breath. I ran all the way from my house.'

'All the way?' Chris asked unbelievably. 'Man, you're crazy.' Vern's house was two miles away. 'It's too hot for that.'

'This is worth it,' Vern said. 'You won't believe this.'

'What?'

'Can you all camp out tonight?' Vern was looking at us in excitement. His eyes were dark and hard in his sweaty face. 'I mean, if you tell your families we're going to camp in my back field?'

'Yeah, I think so,' Chris said, picking up his cards and looking at them. 'But my dad's in an awful mood. Drinking ... you know.'

'You've got to, man,' Vern said. 'Sincerely. You won't believe this. Can you, Gordie?'

'Probably.'

I usually could do things like that; in fact, I had hardly been at home all summer. In April my older brother, Dennis, had died in a Jeep accident. He had just started training in the army. An army lorry hit the jeep he was in and he died immediately. He was a few days short of being twenty. My parents...

'So what's this all about, Vern?' Teddy asked. He and Chris were still playing cards; I was reaching for a detective magazine.

Vern Tessio said: 'You guys want to go and see a dead body?'

Everybody stopped.

### **CHAPTER 3. The Forests of Maine**

We'd all heard about it on the radio, of course. We had our old radio on all the time, listening to pop music - Elvis Presley, Roy Orbison and the rest. When the news came on we usually stopped listening, but the Ray Brower story was different: he was our age and from Chamberlain, a town about forty miles away from Castle Rock.

Three days before Vern burst into the clubhouse, Ray Brower had gone out with one of his mother's buckets to pick wild fruit. When night fell and he still hadn't returned, his mother called the police and the search started. But three days later no one had found him. We knew, from listening to the story on the radio, that they were never going to find him alive. Sooner or later they would just stop searching. They were already sending divers down into the pools and lakes.

Nothing like that could happen in south-west Maine today.

Suburbs have spread over most of the land. The forest is still there in places, but if you walk steadily in a single direction you'll find a road sooner or later. But in those days it was possible to walk into the forest and lose your direction there and die.

### **CHAPTER 4. A Jar of Pennies**

Vern Tessio had been under the front of his house digging. Before I go any further I'd better tell you why he was digging there. And even before I tell you that, I'd better tell you that Vern and Teddy were about equal in intelligence - in not having very much intelligence, that is. Vern's brother Billy was even more stupid, as you'll see.

Four years ago, when he was eight, Vern buried a jar of pennies under the front of the house, in the dark space he called his cave. He was playing a game about robbers, and they were hiding the pennies from the police. He drew a map which showed where the jar was, put it in his room and forgot about it for nearly a month. Then, one day when he wanted to go and see a film and he didn't have enough

money, he remembered about the pennies and went to find the map. But his mother had tidied his room and taken away the map, along with old magazines and other rubbish. She had used them to start a fire in the kitchen the next morning, so Vern's map went up the kitchen chimney.

Ever since then Vern had looked for the jar of pennies. They added up to only about three dollars, but as the years passed, and Vern became more and more desperate about these pennies of his, the jar held sometimes as much as ten dollars. He never found the place where he had buried them.

Sometimes we tried to tell him what was obvious to us - that his big brother Billy had known about the jar and had dug it up himself. But Vern refused to believe this, although he hated Billy. He also refused to ask Billy about it. Probably he was afraid that Billy would laugh and say, 'Of course I took them, you stupid pussy, and there were twenty dollars in the jar and I spent it all.'

Anyway, he was digging there early that Friday morning when he heard the screen door open and shut above him. He kept very quiet. He heard Billy's friend Charlie Hogan say, 'Jesus Christ, Billy, what are we going to do?'

Now, Charlie was one of the hardest guys in town. He was in the same gang as Ace Merrill and Eyeball Chambers, so he had to be hard. So as soon as Vern heard him talk like that, he was very interested. Something big was happening.

'Nothing,' Billy said. 'That's what we're going to do. Nothing.'

'But didn't you see him?' Charlie said. 'It must be that boy in the news on the radio, the one called Brower or something. Christ, Billy, the train must have hit him.'

'Yeah, right,' Billy agreed. 'And you puked. It was lucky the girls didn't see him. They would tell everyone. Do you think they guessed something was wrong?'

'No,' said Charlie. 'Marie doesn't like to go down that Back Harlow Road, anyway. She thinks it's frightening out there. But it's a pity we stole that car, Billy. Now we can't tell the police, because they would ask us how we got to Harlow district without a car of our own. And I puked on my new shoes. The guy was just lying there - did you see him, man?'

They finished their cigarettes and went off to find Ace.

'Are we going to tell Ace, Billy?' Charlie asked as they walked away.

'Man, we aren't ever going to tell anyone,' said Billy.

As soon as Vern was sure that they were really gone, he ran all the way to our tree house with the news.

## **CHAPTER 5. Making Plans**

'You're really lucky,' I said. 'They'd kill you if they knew you had listened'

Teddy said, 'I know the Back Harlow Road. It ends at the river. I used to go fishing there.'

'Could he have walked all the way from Chamberlain to Harlow?' I asked. 'That's twenty or thirty miles.'

'I think so,' Chris said, 'if he was following the railway tracks. It's easy to walk on them, and he probably thought they would lead him out of the forest. And then in the dark along comes a train and ... bang.'

'Anyway, do you want to go and see it?' Vern asked. He was so excited that he could hardly keep still.

'Yes,' said Chris, throwing his cards on to the table. 'And you know what? I bet we get our pictures in the paper. We'll be famous.'

'What?' said Vern. Teddy grinned.

'Yeah,' Chris explained. 'We can find the body and report it.'

'I don't know,' said Vern. 'Billy would guess that I heard him and Charlie talking, and he'll beat me.'

'No, he won't,' I said. 'He won't have to worry any more about the stolen car and everything.'

'But what about our parents?' Teddy said. 'If we find the body, they'll know we weren't camping in Vern's back field.'

'We'll just tell them we got bored in the field,' I said, 'and decided to camp in the forest instead. And then everyone will be too excited about us finding the body to beat us.'

'OK,' Teddy said. 'Let's all meet here after lunch. What can we tell them about supper?'

Chris said, 'You and me and Gordie can say we're eating at Vern's.'

'And I'll tell my mother I'm eating over at Chris's,' Vern said.

That would work unless there was some emergency or unless any of the parents contacted each other. None of us came from rich families, and neither Vern's nor Chris's house had a telephone. A lot of people didn't in those days.

My dad had retired from work, Vern's dad worked at a factory in town. Teddy's mum hired out a room in her house when she could find someone to take it. Chris's dad was nearly always drunk and didn't have a job.

Chris didn't talk about his dad much, but we all knew he hated him like poison. His dad beat him often. Once, the year before, some milk-money had disappeared from school. Chris was accused of taking it. He swore he didn't steal it, but because he was one of those no-good Chambers he wasn't allowed back in school for two weeks. His father put him in the hospital that time, with a broken nose and wrist. It's true that he came from a bad family: his eldest brother Dave was in prison, and Richard (called Eyeball because he had a bad eye) went round with Ace Merrill and the other local hard men.

'I think that'll work,' I said. 'What about John and Marty?' John and Marty DeSpain were two other regular members of our gang.

'They're still away,' Chris said. 'They won't be back till Monday.'

We were too excited now to play cards. We all left the clubhouse and went home to get ready.

## CHAPTER 6. Brother Denny

When I got home, my mum was out. My dad was in the garden, hopelessly watering the dry plants.

'Hi, Dad,' I said brightly. 'Will it be all right if I camp out in Vern Tessio's back field tonight with some of the guys?'

'What guys?'

'Vern, Teddy Duchamp, Chris.'

Sometimes he took the opportunity to complain about the friends I chose, but today he didn't care. 'I suppose it's OK,' he said.

There was no argument in him that morning; he just looked sad and tired. He was sixty-three, old enough to be my grandfather. My mother was fifty-five. When she and Dad got married they tried to start a family straight away, but with no luck. A few years later a doctor told them they would never have a baby. But five years after that, Dennis was born.

The doctor said it was amazing, and that my parents should thank God and be happy with Denny because he would be the only child. Seven years later, I was born.

For my parents, one gift from God was enough. I won't say they were cruel to me or anything like that, but I certainly came as a surprise, and I guess when you're in your forties you don't enjoy surprises as much as you used to. They just acted as if I didn't exist most of the time. I was the invisible man, like in the book. At the supper table it was 'Denny, how did you do today at school?' and 'Denny, who are you taking to the dance?' and 'Denny, we'd better talk man to man about that car we saw'. If I said, 'Pass the butter,' Dad would say, 'Denny, are you sure the army is what you want?' If I repeated my request for the butter, Mum would say, 'Denny, do you want me to buy you one of those Pendleton shirts tomorrow?' One night when I was nine, I said, 'Jesus, these potatoes taste like garbage.' I wanted to see what would happen. And Mum said, 'Denny, Auntie Grace called today and asked about you and Gordon.'

I didn't hate Denny or think he was the greatest person in the world either. We rarely did things together. He was seven years older than me, and lived in a different world. So how could I have strong feelings about him? It was great when he took me to the park to watch him play ball with his friends, or when he read a story-book to me, but there weren't many times like that. Most of the time I was alone. I guess that's why I started reading a lot, and why I'm a writer now. Like all writers I sometimes try to put the places and people I knew when I was young into my stories.

After his death, my parents just went to pieces. Now it was five months, and I didn't know if they would ever be whole again. They left Denny's room exactly the same; they didn't touch a thing. That room frightened me. I expected dead Denny to be there, waiting for me in the clothes cupboard, with his brains spilling out of his head from the accident. I imagined his arms coming up, and him whispering: *Why wasn't it you, Gordie? Why wasn't it you who died?*

## CHAPTER 7. The Gun

My room was on the second floor, and it was really hot up there. I was glad I wasn't sleeping there that night, and the thought of where we were going made me excited again. I rolled up two blankets and tied an old belt around them. I collected all my money, which was less than a dollar. Then I was ready to go.

I went down the back stairs to avoid meeting my dad. I was walking up Carbine Street towards the clubhouse when Chris caught up with me. His eyes were shining.

'Gordie! You want to see something?'

'Sure. What?'

'Come down here first.' He pointed down an alley between two shops.

'What is it, Chris?'

'Come on, I said!'

He ran down the alley and I ran after him. At the bottom, the smell from the rubbish was terrible. 'Chris, sincerely, I'm going to puke, I'm -'

But I forgot about the smell when Chris put his hand into his backpack and pulled out an enormous handgun.

'Do you want to be the Lone Ranger or the Cisco Kid?' Chris asked with a grin, naming our two favourite TV heroes.

'Jesus, Chris, where did you get that?'

'From my dad's desk.'

'Man, your dad's going to beat you when he finds out.'

Chris's eyes just went on dancing. 'He isn't going to find out. He and his friends have got enough wine to keep them drunk for a week. I'll put it back before then.' Chris hated alcohol - he'd already seen too much of what it can do. He was the only one in our gang who didn't have a drink when the DeSpain twins brought some beer they'd stolen from their father.

'Have you got bullets for it?'

'Nine of them - all that was left in the box. He'll think he used them himself, shooting at bottles when he was drunk.'

'Any in it at the moment?'

'No, of course not. What do you think I am?'

I finally took the gun. I liked the heavy way it sat in my hand. I could see myself as someone out of an Ed McBain story or a John D. MacDonald novel. I pointed the gun at a large tin with smelly rubbish spilling out of it and squeezed.

KA - BLAM!

The gun jumped in my hand. Fire shot from the end. It felt as if my wrist was broken. My heart was in my mouth. A big hole appeared in the surface of the tin - it was the work of an evil magician.

'Jesus!' I screamed.

Chris was laughing wildly; I couldn't tell if he was amused or frightened. 'You did it, you did it! Gordie Lachance is shooting Castle Rock to pieces. Be careful, everyone! Here comes Gordie!'

'Shut up! Let's go!' I screamed, and grabbed him by the shirt.

I gave the gun to Chris and he pushed it into his backpack as we ran up the alley. When we reached Carbine Street we slowed to a walk, so that no one would notice us if they had heard the noise of the gun. Chris was still laughing.

'Man, it's a pity you couldn't see your face. Oh, man, that was really great.'

'You knew there was a bullet in it, didn't you? That was a rotten trick, Chris, really.'

'I didn't know, Gordie, honestly. I just took it out of my dad's desk. He always takes the bullets out of it. I suppose he was too drunk to remember last time.'

Chris looked as innocent as a baby, but when we got to the clubhouse we found Vern and Teddy waiting, and he started to laugh again. He told them the whole story, and after everyone had had a good laugh Teddy asked Chris what he thought they needed a gun for.

'Nothing, really,' Chris said. 'Except we might see a wild animal. Besides, it's frightening out in the forest at night.'

Everyone nodded at that. Chris was the strongest and bravest guy in our gang, and he could say things like that. If Teddy had said it, we'd all have laughed at him.

'Did you put your tent up in the field?' Teddy asked Vern.

'Yeah, and I put two lamps in it and turned them on, so it'll look as if we're there after dark.'

'Hey, man, great!' I said, and slapped Vern on the back. For him, that was real thinking. He grinned.

'So let's go,' Teddy said. 'It's nearly twelve already.'

Chris stood up and we gathered round him.

'We'll walk across Beeman's field,' he said, 'and then we'll meet the railway tracks by the dump and just walk across the bridge into Harlow.'

'How far is it, do you think?' Teddy asked.

'I don't know,' said Chris. 'Harlow's big. We're going to have to walk at least twenty miles. Does that sound right to you, Gordie?'

'Yeah. Maybe more - thirty miles.'

'Even if it's thirty we should be there by tomorrow afternoon, if no one turns into a pussy,' said Chris.

'No pussies here,' Teddy said straight away.

'Miaoww,' Vern said, and we all laughed.

'Come on, you guys,' Chris said, and picked up his backpack, blankets and water bottle.

## **CHAPTER 8. The Railway**

By the time we got across Beeman's field and had reached the tracks, we had all taken our shirts off and tied them around our waists. We were sweating like pigs. We climbed the bank up to the railway, and there we stood and looked down the tracks.

I'll never forget that moment, however old I get. The hands on my watch stood at twelve o'clock and the sun shone down with cruel heat. Behind us was Castle Rock, where we had all grown up, with its houses and its factories sending smoke into the sky and waste into the river. In front of us were the railway tracks, and the sun seemed to send us messages off the metal. The Castle River was to our left, and to our right some empty land, covered in small bushes.

We stood there for that one midday moment, and then Chris said, 'Come on, let's go.'

We walked beside the tracks and our feet sent up clouds of black dust at every step. Vern started singing, but soon stopped, which was better for our ears. Only Teddy and Chris had brought water bottles and we were all drinking from them a lot.

'We can fill the bottles again at the dump,' I said. 'There's a tap there with good water, my dad told me.'

'OK,' Chris said. 'That will be a good place to rest, anyway.'

'What about food?' Teddy asked suddenly. 'I bet nobody remembered to bring something to eat. I know I didn't.'

Chris stopped. 'God! I didn't either. Gordie?'

I shook my head, feeling really stupid.

'Vern?'

'Nothing,' Vern said. 'Sorry.'

'Let's see how much money we've got,' I said. I untied my shirt and laid it on the ground. We all put our money into it. We had about two and a half dollars.

'Not bad,' I said. 'There's a shop at the end of that little road that goes to the dump. One of us can get some hamburger meat and some Cokes there.'

'Who?' Vern asked.

'We'll, spin coins for it when we get to the dump. Come on.'

I put all the money into my pocket and was just tying my shirt around my waist again when Chris shouted, 'Train!'

I put my hand on to one of the tracks to feel it, although I could already hear it. The track was shaking like a living thing. Vern and Chris jumped down the bank. The train was really loud now. Instead of jumping, Teddy turned towards the train. The sun flashed off his thick glasses.

'Come on, Teddy,' I said.

'No, I'm going to wait till it's close and then jump.' He looked at me in excitement. 'Lorries are nothing, man. This is a train.'

'You're crazy, man. Do you want to get killed?'

'Just like on the beaches at Normandy!' Teddy shouted, and walked out into the middle of the tracks.

For a moment I was too surprised to move, unable to believe such amazing stupidity. Then I grabbed him, pulled him to the top of the bank and pushed him over the edge. I jumped after him and he hit me in the stomach as I landed. I got a knee into his chest at the same time and he fell down. Then we were locked together, rolling over and over, hitting and scratching each other.

'You little worm!' Teddy was screaming. 'Don't you act big with me! I'll kill you!'

'Teddy!' I shouted back. 'No one must know we're here. Don't you understand, you stupid pussy?'

Eventually Chris and Vern separated us. Chris held Teddy until he became calm and just stood there, his glasses bent and hanging off one ear.

'You're a pussy, Lachance,' Teddy said.

'He was just trying to do the right thing, man,' Chris said.

'Come on, you guys,' Vern said. 'Let's go.'

## **CHAPTER 9. The Dump**

We reached the dump around half past one and slid down the bank. The dump was surrounded by a high wire fence, and there were signs saying that the dump was open between four and eight in the afternoon - no entry at any other time under any circumstances. We climbed over the fence and jumped down to the ground.

We went straight to the tap. While Vern and Teddy argued about who would go next, I looked round. There was always so much stuff in the dump that my eyes hurt just looking at it. All of America was there - all the stuff for which America had no further use. There were plenty of wild animals too, but not the kinds you see in Disney films or in children's zoos where they let you stroke the animals. The town dogs came here too. They used to attack each other over a piece of rotten meat, but they never attacked Milo Pressman, the manager of the dump, because Milo always had Chopper with him.

Chopper was the most feared and the least seen dog in Castle Rock. Rumours and stories had made him enormous, cruel and ugly. It was said that Milo had trained him to go for particular parts of the body. He could take an ear, an eye, a foot, a leg or ... any part of the body. Even Teddy was afraid of Chopper.

There was no sign of Milo or Chopper today.

Chris and I watched Vern and Teddy at the tap. 'Teddy's crazy,' I said softly.

'I know it,' Chris said. 'He won't live to be twice the age he is now.'

'You remember that time in the tree?'

'Of course.'

The year before, Teddy and Chris had climbed a tall tree behind my house. Chris had stopped near the top because the rest of the branches looked dry and rotten. Teddy wanted to go on, and nothing Chris said made any difference. Teddy did it, though - he reached the top. But then the branch he was on broke and Teddy fell. Chris just managed to grab hold of Teddy's hair as he went past. Although his wrist hurt for a week afterwards, he held him until his feet found a branch to stand on. When they got down Chris was grey-faced and almost puking from fear. And Teddy was angry with him for pulling his hair!

'I dream about it sometimes,' Chris said. 'Except in the dream I miss him. I just grab a couple of hairs and Teddy goes screaming down through the branches to the ground. Strange, eh?'

'Right,' I said, and for a moment we looked in each other's eyes and saw some of the true things that made us friends.

After we had all had enough to drink and had thrown water at one another for a while, we sat in the shadow of the dump's only- tree.

'This is really a good time,' Vern said simply. He didn't mean just being here in the dump or going for a walk up the tracks. All that was only part of it. Everything was there and around us. We knew exactly who we were and exactly where we were going in life. It was great.

We sat under the tree until the shadows grew longer, and then we realized someone had to go and get some food.

'The dump opens at four,' Vern said. 'I don't want to be here when Milo and Chopper arrive.'

'OK,' I said. 'Odd man goes?'

'That's you, Gordie,' Chris said. 'You're odd all right.'

I grinned and gave them each a coin. 'Spin,' I said.

Four coins shone brightly as they turned in the sun. Four hands grabbed them from the air. Four flat slaps on four dirty wrists. We uncovered. Two heads and two tails. We spun again and this time all four of us had tails.

'Oh, Jesus, that's bad luck,' Vern said, not telling us anything we didn't know. Four heads meant really good luck, four tails the opposite.

'Nobody believes that garbage,' Teddy said. 'It's baby stuff. Come on, spin.'

This time the other three all had tails and I had heads. And I was suddenly frightened. They still had the bad luck. Then Teddy was laughing his crazy laugh and pointing at me, and the feeling disappeared.

'Go and get the food,' Teddy cried.

'Go on, Gordie,' said Chris. 'We'll wait by the tracks.'

'You guys had better not go on without me,' I said. And away I went.

I never had any friends later like the ones I had when I was twelve. Did you?

## **CHAPTER 10. Milo and Chopper**

Words mean different things to different people. To me summer is always going to mean running down the road to the Florida Market with coins jumping in my pocket and the sun flying my brains. The word brings a picture to my mind of railway tracks running off into the distance. There were also favourite songs and films, games to play, grass to cut, sports to play and teams to support.

And now I sit here trying to look through an IBM screen and see that time, and I can almost feel the thin, brown boy buried in this 34-year-old body, and I can almost hear the sounds I heard then. But all of that summer is contained in the picture

of Gordon Lachance running down the road to the Florida Market with the coins in his pocket and the sweat running down his back.

After I had bought the food I walked fast back to the dump. I put the bag of food inside my shirt and climbed over the gate. I was halfway through the dump, towards the back where I had left the others, when I saw something I didn't like: Milo Pressman's car was parked beside his office building. If Milo saw me, I was going to be in a world of pain. Suddenly the other side of the dump seemed very far away. Why hadn't I gone round the outside of the fence? But I was too far into the dump now to want to turn round and go back.

I kept putting one foot in front of the other, trying to look calm, trying to look as if I belonged here, with a paper bag down the front of my shirt, walking towards the fence between the dump and the railway tracks.

I was about fifty feet from the fence and just beginning to think that everything was going to be all right when I heard Milo shout, 'Hey, you! Get away from that fence! Get out of here!'

I started running for the fence with a wild shout. Vern, Teddy and Chris appeared on the other side of the fence and stared through it.

'You come back here!' Milo screamed. 'Come back here or I'll send my dog after you!'

That only made me run even faster for the fence. Teddy started to laugh his crazy laugh - eee-eee-eee.

'Go, Gordie! Go!' Vern shouted.

And Milo screamed: 'Get him, Chopper! Go and get him!'

I threw the bag over the fence and Vern caught it. Behind me, I could hear Chopper coming, shaking the earth, breathing fire and ice from his nose. I threw myself halfway up the fence with one jump, screaming. I reached the top in about three seconds and simply leapt off, without looking down to see what I might land on. What I almost landed on was Teddy, who was bent over with laughter. His glasses had fallen off and tears were streaming from his eyes. I turned round and got my first look at the famous Chopper.

Instead of some enormous creature from hell with red eyes and cruel teeth, I was looking at an ordinary, black and white, middle-sized dog. He was jumping up at the fence and trying to reach us. Teddy was walking up and down outside the fence, making Chopper even more angry.

'Kiss my ass, Chopper!' Teddy invited, and turned round to hit the fence with his ass. Chopper went crazy and leapt at the fence to accept Teddy's invitation, but Teddy moved away and all Chopper got was a hurt nose. Chris and Vern were lying on the bank, laughing so hard they could scarcely move.

And here came Milo Pressman. 'You boys stop being horrible to my dog! Stop it this second!'

'Bite it, Chopper! Bite it! Come and get me!' Teddy continued from the other side of the fence.

Chopper went mad. He ran around in a big circle three times - perhaps giving himself courage - and then threw himself with full force at the fence. He was doing

maybe thirty miles an hour when he hit the fence. The fence seemed to stretch, and then Chopper fell back to the ground in a cloud of dust. He lay there for a moment before walking away with his tongue hanging out of one side of his mouth.

Milo was now really angry. His face turned dark red.

'I know you!' he shouted. 'You're Teddy Duchamp! I know all of you! I'll beat your ass for being cruel to my dog!'

'I'd like to see you try!' Teddy shouted back. 'Let's see you climb over this fence and get me, fat-ass!'

WHAT? WHAT DID YOU CALL ME?'

'FAT-ASS!' Teddy screamed happily. 'You and your stupid dog!'

'You little madman's son! I'll talk to your mother!'

'What did you call me?' It was Teddy's turn now. He had stopped jumping up and down and was looking at Milo strangely.

Milo realized that he had found the right button and he pushed hard down on it. 'Your dad is crazy,' he said, grinning. 'Mad and up in Togus, that's what. Crazier than a rat in a pile of garbage. Crazy. It's not surprising you're behaving the way you are, with a madman for a father.'

Teddy and Milo were nose to nose at the fence now. Vern and Chris had almost stopped laughing and begun to see the seriousness of the situation.

'Don't you say anything else about my dad. My dad was on the beaches at Normandy, you fat pussy.'

'Yes, but where is he now, you ugly little four-eyed lump of puke. Up in Togus, isn't he?'

'OK, that's enough,' said Teddy. 'Now I'm going to kill you.' He started to climb the fence.

'Come on and try, you dirty little rat.' Milo stepped back and stood there, waiting and grinning.

'No!' I shouted. I got to my feet, grabbed Teddy by his jeans and pulled him off the fence.

'Let me go!' Teddy shouted. 'Let me get him!'

'No, that's just what he wants,' I shouted in his ear. 'He wants to get you over there and beat you and take you to the police.'

'What?' Teddy turned his head round to look at me.

'You think you're so clever,' Milo said, approaching the fence again with his hands curled. 'Why don't you let him fight his own battles?'

'Sure,' I said. 'A grown man against a boy!'

'I know you' Milo said. 'Your name's Lachance. And those guys are Chris Chambers and one of those stupid Tessio boys. I'm going to talk to your fathers.' He stood and waited for us to cry and say we were sorry or something.

Chris made an O with his thumb and finger and pushed his tongue through it.

Vern looked up at the sky.

Teddy said, 'Come on, Gordie. Let's go before this guy makes me puke.'

'I'll get you, you dirty-mouthed little rat. Wait till I get you to the police.'

'We heard what you said about his father,' I told him. 'We're all witnesses. And you sent your dog after me. That's against the law.' Milo looked uncertain. Before he could see how weak my argument was, I said, 'Come on, you guys. Let's go. Something smells bad around here.'

'I can't wait to tell the police how you called a war hero a madman,' Chris called back over his shoulder as we left. 'What did you do in the war, Mr Pressman?'

'That's none of your business,' Milo shouted back. 'You hurt my dog! Come back here!' But his voice was lower now and he seemed to be losing interest.

I looked back when we reached the top of the bank. Milo was standing there behind the fence, a big man with a dog sitting beside him. His fingers were holding the fence and I suddenly felt sorry for him. He looked exactly like a schoolboy locked in the school playground by mistake, calling for someone to let him out.

## **CHAPTER 11. Night-Sweats**

'We showed old Milo that we're no pussies,' Vern said.

'Right,' agreed Teddy 'You bet we did.'

Although I enjoyed the victory too, I was worried. Perhaps Milo would go to the police. Perhaps those four tails on the coins were a sign of bad luck. What were we doing anyway, going to look at the broken body of some poor guy that a train had hit?

But we were doing it, and none of us wanted to stop.

We had almost reached the bridge which carried the tracks across the river when Teddy suddenly burst into tears. He fell to the ground, shaking with the violence of the storm that had come on him. None of us knew what to do. This wasn't the kind of crying we were used to, when you fell off your bike or something.

'Hey, man...' Vern said in a very thin voice. Chris and I looked at Vern hopefully. 'Hey, man' was always a good start. But Vern couldn't go on.

At last, when the force of his crying had lessened a bit, it was Chris who went to him. Chris was the hardest guy in our gang, but he was also the guy who made the best peace. He was good at it. I've seen him sit down on the pavement next to a small boy he didn't even know, who had hurt his knee, and get him talking about something until the boy forgot his pain.

'Listen, Teddy, does it matter what a fat old bag of puke like him said about your father? It doesn't change anything, does it? Does it?'

Teddy shook his head. No, it didn't change anything. But this was something he had thought about on those long, lonely nights when he couldn't sleep, and hearing it spoken aloud in the daytime ... realizing in the clear light of day that everyone else in the world considers your father a madman ... that had shaken him.

'He still fought on the beaches at Normandy, didn't he?' Chris went on. He took one of Teddy's hands. Teddy nodded fiercely.

'Do you think that pile of garbage was at Normandy?'

Teddy shook his head violently. 'No!'

'Do you think that guy knows your father?'

'No.'

'Talk is cheap.'

Teddy nodded but still didn't look up.

'And whatever there is between you and your father, talk can't change that. He was just trying to get you to climb back over the fence, man. He doesn't know anything about your father. He's only heard stuff from people he drinks with, that's all.'

Teddy had nearly stopped crying now. He wiped his eyes and sat up. 'I'm OK,' he said, and the sound of his own voice seemed to persuade him he was right. 'Yes, I'm OK.' He stood up and put his glasses back on. He laughed thinly and wiped his bare arm across his nose. 'I'm a cry-baby, right?'

'No, man,' Vern said uncomfortably. 'If anyone said those kinds of things about my father -'

'Then you have to kill them,' Teddy said. 'Right, Chris?'

'Right,' said Chris, and slapped Teddy on the back.

'Right, Gordie?'

'Yeah, right,' I said wondering how Teddy could care so much for his dad, who had almost killed him, and how I didn't either love or hate my father, who had never even beaten me, as far as I could remember.

We walked on down the tracks for another two hundred yards and then Teddy said in a quieter voice, 'If I spoiled your good time, I'm sorry.'

'I'm not sure I want it to be a good time,' Vern said suddenly.

Chris looked at him. 'Are you saying you want to go back?'

'No.' Vern's face showed that he was trying to work out how to say what he was thinking. 'But we're going to see a dead guy. That shouldn't be like going to a party. I mean, I could even get a little frightened, if you know what I mean.'

Nobody said anything and Vern went on.

'I mean, sometimes I'm in bed at night, and maybe I've been reading a frightening magazine or something, and I start wondering whether there's anything under my bed, you know? Something with a green face and blood on its hands, which might reach up and grab me...'

We all began to nod. We all knew about the night-sweats. I certainly didn't imagine then that in about a dozen years I'd turn a simple example of the night-sweats into about a million dollars.

'So you see, if this body we're going to see is really bad, maybe I'll start dreaming and imagining him under my bed. But I feel as if we still have to see him ... but maybe it shouldn't be a good time.'

'Right,' Chris said softly. 'Maybe it shouldn't.'

'You won't tell anyone else what I said, will you?' Vern said. 'The other guys wouldn't understand.'

We all said we wouldn't. We walked on in thoughtful silence. It wasn't yet three o'clock, but it seemed much later. We hadn't even reached Harlow yet. We were

going to have to move faster. Around half past three we arrived at the Castle River and the bridge which crossed it.

## **CHAPTER 12. The Bridge**

The bridge was made of wood and had spaces all the way across, through which you could look straight down into the river. There was a narrow walkway on either side of the tracks - wide enough so that you wouldn't actually get hit by any train, but so narrow that the wind of a passing train would blow you off the bridge. And it was a long way down to the river, and the river was shallow and fast. In fact, this bridge wasn't for walking across.

Looking at the bridge, we all felt fear start to move in our stomachs, but mixing with the fear was the excitement of a really big dare, something you could be proud to tell your friends about after you got home ... if you got home. Teddy's eyes were shining: this was better than lorries.

'Man,' Chris said softly.

'Come on,' Teddy said. 'Let's go.' He was already at the start of the bridge, where the wooden supports were built out over the land.

'Does anybody know when the next train's due?' Vern asked uneasily.

Nobody knew.

I said, 'There's the Route 136 bridge...'

'No, man!' Teddy cried. 'That means walking five miles down the river on this side and then five miles back on the other side. It'll take hours. We can cross the bridge and get to the same place in ten minutes.'

'But if a train comes, there's nowhere to go,' Vern said. He wasn't looking at Teddy; he was looking down at the river.

'Of course there is,' Teddy said. He climbed over the edge of the bridge and held on to one of the wooden supports between the tracks. He was still hanging over the land, but the thought of doing that in the middle of the bridge, with the river fifty feet below and a train thundering by overhead, made me feel sick.

'See how easy it is?' Teddy said. He dropped to the ground, wiped his hands and climbed back up beside us.

'What if it's a 200-car train?' Chris asked. 'Are you going to hang there for five or ten minutes?'

'Are you afraid?' Teddy asked. 'You can go the long way round if you want to, but I'm going across the bridge. I'll wait for you on the other side!'

'There are probably only one or two trains a day here,' I said, 'and one has passed us already. Look at all the grass growing in the middle of the tracks.'

'See?' Teddy was delighted at his victory.

'There's still a chance of a train,' I added.

'Yes,' Chris said. He was looking only at me, his eyes shining. 'I dare you, Lachance.'

'Darers go first.'

'All right,' Chris said. He looked at the others as well. 'Any pussies here?'

'NO!' Teddy shouted.

Vern cleared his throat and said 'no' in a small voice. He smiled a weak, sickly smile.

'OK,' Chris said ... but we hesitated for a moment and looked up and down the tracks. I knelt down and touched the steel. Nothing.

'OK,' I said.

We went out on to the bridge one by one: Chris first, then Teddy, then Vern, and me last because I was the one who said that darers go first.

You had to walk looking down, to make sure you put your feet down on wood rather than thin air. When I saw river instead of rocks below me, I stopped to look up. Chris and Teddy were a long way in front, almost halfway across the bridge. Vern was between them and me. I had to go on. If I turned back, I'd be a pussy for life.

When I was nearly halfway across I stopped again and looked up. I had almost caught up with Vern, who was being very cautious. Chris and Teddy had nearly reached the other side. And although I've written seven books about people who can do strange things like read other people's minds and see into the future, that was when I had my first and last experience of it myself. I bent down and touched the track. It was shaking hard, although it hadn't made a sound.

I have never been as frightened as I was at that moment, holding that live track. My whole body just stopped working. My legs felt like water. My mouth opened - I didn't open it, it opened by itself. I couldn't move, but I could hear and see and sense everything inside me and for miles around me. I thought of Ray Brower, and I thought that Vern and I would soon be joining him.

That thought unlocked my body. I jumped to my feet. At least, I suppose I jumped; to me it felt as if I was moving slowly up through five hundred feet of water.

I screamed, 'TRAIN!' and began to run.

Vern looked back over his shoulder. He saw my attempt at running and knew straight away that I wasn't joking. He began to run himself.

Far in front I could see Chris stepping off the bridge and on to solid ground. He was safe. I was glad for him, but I was also jealous as hell. I watched him drop to his knees and touch a track.

My left foot almost slipped, but I recovered and ran on. Now I was just behind Vern. We were more than halfway across, and for the first time I heard the train. It was coming from behind us, from the Castle Rock side of the river.

'Ooooooh, Jesus!' Vern screamed.

'Run, you pussy!' I shouted, and hit him on his back with my hand.

'I can't! I'll fall!'

'Run faster!'

'Gordie! I can't!'

'YOU CAN! RUN FASTER, PUKE-FACE!' I shouted at the top of my voice ... and was I enjoying this?

The train was very loud now. I kept expecting the bridge to start shaking under my feet. When that happened the train would be right behind us.

GO FASTER, VERN! FAAASTER!'

'Oh God Gordie oh Gordie God ooooooh, heeeell!'

The noise of the train filled the air now. There was no other sound in the world. It tore the air and it was the sound of death. I could see Chris below us and to the right, and Teddy behind him. They were both mouthing a single word and the word was jump! But the train had taken all the blood out of the word, leaving only its shape in their mouths. The bridge began to shake as the train charged across it. We jumped.

Vern landed in the dust and the stones, and I landed beside him, almost on top of him. I never saw the train and I don't know if the engineer saw us. I clapped my hands over my ears and dug my face into the hot dirt as the train went by, metal screaming against metal, the air blowing over us. I had no wish to look at it. Before it had passed completely I felt a warm hand on my neck and I knew it was Chris's-

When it was gone - when I was sure it was gone - I lifted my head. Vern was still lying face down in the dirt. Chris was sitting between us, one hand on Vern's sweaty neck, the other still on mine.

When Vern finally sat up, shaking all over and wetting his lips.

Chris said, 'Maybe we should have those Cokes? What do you guys think? Could anybody use one besides me?'

We all thought we could use one.

### **CHAPTER 13. The Loser's Life**

About a quarter of a mile further on, the tracks ran into the forest and the land ran down to a bog. The air was full of biting insects which were about the size of aeroplanes, but it was cool ... wonderfully cool.

We sat in the shadows of the trees to drink our Cokes. We hadn't been there five minutes when Vern had to go off into the bushes, which caused a lot of joking when he came back.

'Train frighten you much, Vern?'

'No, man. I was going to go when we got across, anyway. I had to, you know.'

'Are you sure, Vern?'

'Come on, you guys. I did. Sincerely.'

Chris turned to me. 'What about you, Gordie? Were you frightened?'

'No way,' I said, and had a drink of my Coke.

'Sincerely?'

'Sincerely, man. I wasn't frightened at all.'

'No? You weren't frightened?' Teddy was looking at me carefully.

'No. I was a long way past fright - I was into terror.'

They laughed for a long time at that. Then we lay back, not joking any more, just drinking our Cokes and being quiet. My body felt warm and peaceful. I was alive and glad to be. I felt affectionate towards everyone and everything around me. It was a very special feeling.

After a while Chris stood up. 'Let's do some walking,' he said. It was still bright daylight and the sky was a hot, steely blue, but our shadows were beginning to grow longer. I remember that, when I was young, September days always seemed to end much too soon and catch me by surprise. It was as if something inside my heart expected it always to be June, with daylight hanging softly in the sky until almost half past nine. 'What time is it, Gordie?' Chris asked.

I looked at my watch and said, 'After five.'

'Yeah, let's go,' Teddy said. 'But let's make camp before dark so that we can see to get wood and stuff. I'm getting hungry, too.'

'We'll stop at half past six,' Chris promised. 'OK with you guys?'

It was. We started to walk again, along the stones beside the tracks. Soon the river was so far behind us that we couldn't even hear its sound. We were slapping insects off our backs and necks. Vern and Teddy were up in front, deep in conversation about TV shows. Chris was next to me, hands in his pockets, shirt slapping against his knees.

'I've got some Winstons,' he said. 'One each, for after supper.'

'Yeah? That's great.'

'That's when a cigarette tastes best,' Chris said. 'After supper.'

'Right.'

'We walked in silence for a while, and then he asked, 'Are you ready for school?'

'I guess so.' But who ever was ready? You got a little excited about going back and seeing your friends; you were curious about your new teachers and what they would be like. In a strange way you could even get excited about the long, boring lessons, because by the time the summer holidays were nearly over you sometimes got bored enough to believe you could learn something at school. But summer boredom was nothing like the school boredom that always started by the end of the second week, and by the beginning of the third week you were busy with the really important stuff: Could you hit Stinky Fiske in the back of the head with a paper bullet while the teacher was writing the capital cities of South America on the blackboard? Could you get a good loud noise off the surface of your desk if your hands were really sweaty? How many girls would let you feel their asses during lunch-hour? This is higher education, man.

'You know what, Gordie?' Chris went on. 'By next June it'll be all over between us.'

'What are you talking about? Why would that happen?'

'Because me and Teddy and Vern will be doing different courses from you. You'll be on the college courses, we'll be on the shop courses, making bird houses and pots and stuff like that. You'll meet a lot of new guys - clever guys, like you. That's just the way it goes, Gordie.'

'I'll meet a lot of pussies, you mean,' I said.

He held my arm. 'No, man. Don't say that. Don't even think that. You know how you tell us stories sometimes? You've got a million stories inside you, and you

can just sit there and tell one to us. Vern and Teddy may not always understand your stories. But those guys on the college courses will understand them.'

'It doesn't matter about the stories. I'm not taking courses with a lot of pussies.'

'If you don't, you're a fool.'

'Why is it foolish to want to be with your friends?'

He looked at me thoughtfully, as if deciding whether to tell me something. We had slowed down; Vern and Teddy were almost half a mile in front. The sun, which was lower now, came at us through the trees overhead in broken columns of light and turned everything gold.

'It's foolish if your friends can drag you down,' Chris said finally. 'I know about you and your parents. They don't care about you. Your big brother was the one they cared about. It's like my dad. It was when Dave went to prison that he started hitting us and all. Your dad doesn't hit you, but maybe that's even worse. He's put you to sleep. If you told him you were joining the shop course, do you know what he'd do? He'd turn to the next page in his newspaper and say, "That's nice, Gordon. Would you ask your mother what's for dinner?" And don't try to tell me I'm wrong. I've met him.'

I didn't try to tell him he was wrong. It's a bit frightening to find out that someone else, even a friend, knows just how things are with you.

'You're still young, Gordie-'

'Thanks, Dad.'

'I wish I was your dad,' he said angrily. 'If I was, you wouldn't talk about taking stupid shop courses. It's as if God gave you something-all those stories - and said, "Here you are. Try not to lose it." But children lose everything unless somebody is there to help them, and if your parents are too stupid to do it, maybe I ought to.'

He looked like he was expecting me to try to hit him. His face was unhappy in the late afternoon light. He had broken the unwritten rule. You could say what you liked to a guy about himself, but never say a bad word about his parents.

'If you stay with us just because you don't want to lose the gang,' Chris went on, 'you'll turn into just another guy with no good use for his brains, except to make clever, cruel remarks about other people. You'll never escape Castle Rock. You'll think it's important to have the right kind of car and then the right girl. And then you'll get married and work in the factory or some shoe shop for ever. Is that what you want?'

Chris Chambers was twelve when he said all that to me, but something in his face as he spoke was older, ageless. It was as if he had lived that whole life already, and his words made me frightened. He understood the loser's life so well. He seemed to know what I was thinking.

'I know what people think of my family in this town. Nobody even asked me if I took the milk-money that time.'

'Did you take it?' I asked. I had never asked him before, and if you had told me I ever would I'd have called you crazy. The words came out like a dry bullet:

'Yeah,' he said tiredly. 'Yeah, I took it.' He was silent for a moment. 'You knew I took it, Teddy knew, everybody knew. Even Vern knew, I think.'

I started to deny it and then closed my mouth. He was right. I had argued with my parents that a person was innocent until proved guilty... but deep inside I had known the truth.

'Then maybe I was sorry and tried to give it back,' Chris said.

I stared at him. 'You tried to give it back?'

'Maybe, I said. Just maybe. And maybe I took it to old Mrs Simons and told her, and gave her all the money; and maybe I wasn't allowed back at school for two weeks anyway, because the money still never appeared; and maybe the next week Mrs Simons had this new skirt on when she came to school.'

I stared at Chris, speechless with horror. He smiled at me, but it was a tight, terrible smile which never touched his eyes.

'Just maybe,' he said, but I remembered the new skirt.

'Chris, how much was that money?'

'Almost seven dollars.'

'Christ,' I whispered.

'But if I stole the money and then Mrs Simons stole it from me, and if I told anyone, what do you think would happen? Who would believe me? Me, Chris Chambers. Younger brother of Dave Chambers and Eyeball Chambers.'

'No one would believe it,' I whispered. 'Jesus, Chris!'

'I never thought that a teacher ... Oh, hell. Who cares, anyway? Why am I even talking about it?' He wiped an arm angrily across his eyes and I realized he was almost crying.

'Chris,' I said, 'why don't you go into the college courses? You're clever enough.'

'The teachers decide all that in the school office. All they care about is whether you've behaved yourself in school and what the town thinks of your family. They don't want you to infect their top college-course pupils, the ones from the big houses on the hill. I don't know if I could do it, but I might try, because I want to get out of Castle Rock and go to college and never see my father or my brothers again. I want to go somewhere where nobody knows me and people don't have bad ideas about me before I've even done anything. But I don't know if I can do it.'

'Why not?'

'People. People drag you down.'

'Who?' I asked, thinking he must mean the teachers, or his brother Eyeball, or maybe his parents.

But he said, 'Your friends drag you down, Gordie. Don't you know that?' He pointed at Vern and Teddy, who were standing and waiting for us to catch up. They were laughing about something. 'Your friends do. They're like drowning guys who are holding on to your legs. You can't save them. You can only drown with them.'

'Come on, guys,' Vern shouted. 'Don't be so slow!'

'Yes, coming,' Chris called, and before I could say anything else he began to run, but he caught up to them before I could catch up to him.

## CHAPTER 14. Darkness in the Forest

We went another mile and then decided to camp for the night. There was still some daylight left, but nobody really wanted to use it. We were exhausted from what had happened at the dump and on the bridge, but it was more than that. We were in Harlow now, in the forest. Somewhere was a dead child, who probably had a broken body and was covered with flies. Nobody wanted to get too close to him with night approaching. By stopping here, we thought there had to be at least ten miles between us and him, and of course all four of us knew there were no such things as ghosts, but ten miles seemed about far enough if we were wrong.

Vern, Chris and Teddy gathered wood and started a campfire. Chris laid it on stones and made a clear space around it because the forest was very dry and he didn't want to take any risks. While they were doing that, I sharpened some green sticks and pushed lumps of hamburger meat on to them. When the flames were low and the fire was good and hot, we cooked the meat, but we were too hungry to wait. We pulled the lumps off their sticks early. They were black on the outside, red on the inside and completely delicious.

Afterwards Chris opened his backpack. He took out a packet of cigarettes and gave us one each. We lay back on the ground or against trees and smoked our cigarettes, as if we were grown men. We were feeling good.

'There's nothing like a smoke after a meal,' Teddy said.

'Absolutely,' Vern agreed.

We laid our blankets out on the ground and lay down on them. Then for about an hour we fed the fire and talked - the kind of talk you can never quite remember when you get past fifteen and discover girls. We talked about fishing and sport, and about the summer that was now ending. Teddy told about the time he had been at White's Beach in Brunswick and some guy had hit his head while diving and had almost drowned. We had a long discussion about our teachers at school.

We didn't talk about Ray Brower, but I was thinking about him. There's something horrible about the way darkness comes to the forest. There are no car lights to make it softer or less sudden; there are no mothers' voices calling for their children to come in now. If you're used to the town, the coming of the dark in the forest seems unnatural.

And as I thought about the body of Ray Brower, I didn't feel frightened and wonder whether he would suddenly appear as a ghost. Unexpectedly I felt pity for him, lying so alone in the dark. If something wanted to eat him, it would. His mother wasn't here to stop it and neither was his father, nor any of his friends, nor Jesus Christ. He was dead and he was all alone, and I realized that if I didn't stop thinking about it I was going to cry.

So I told the others a Le Dio story; Le Dio is a soldier I invented who had a lot of adventures in the Second World War. It wasn't a very good one. And when it ended, as the Le Dio stories usually did, with a single American soldier coughing out a dying promise of his love for America and for a girl back home, it was not his face I saw in my mind's eye but the face of a much younger boy, already dead, his eyes

closed, blood running from the left corner of his mouth. And behind him, instead of war-scarred France, I saw only dark forest and the railway tracks dark at the top of a bank against the starry sky.

## CHAPTER 15. A Dream of Deep Water

I woke up in the middle of the night. I didn't know where I was, and I wondered why it was so cold in my bedroom and who had left the windows open.

Then I realized that this wasn't my room. This was somewhere else. And someone had his arms wrapped around me, while someone else was kneeling beside me, head turned as if listening to something.

'What's happening?' I asked in puzzlement. The thing holding me made a noise. It sounded like Vern. That made me wake up properly and remember where I was. But what was everybody doing awake in the middle of the night? I had been asleep for some hours.

'Don't let it get me,' Vern said. 'I promise I'll be good.'

I sat up, frightened. 'Chris?'

'Shut up, Vern,' Chris said. He was the one next to me, listening. 'It's nothing.'

'Oh, yes it is,' Teddy said heavily. 'It's something.' 'What is?' I asked. As if to answer my question, a long and hollow team rose from the forest. It was the sort of scream you might expect from a woman who was dying in extreme pain and extreme fear.

'Oh, Jesus,' Vern whispered, his voice high and filled with tears. He tightened his hold on me, making it hard for me to breathe and adding to my own terror. I threw him loose, but he came straight back, like a young dog which can't think of anywhere else to go.

'It's Brower,' Teddy whispered. 'His ghost is out walking in the forest.'

'Oh, God!' Vern shouted. 'I promise I won't take any more sexy magazines from the shops. I promise to eat my vegetables. I won't swear. I won't...'

'Shut up, Vern,' Chris said. But Vern's voice only dropped back to a whisper. Chris sounded strong, but underneath I could hear iff. I wondered if the hair was standing up on his neck as it was on mine.

'It's a bird, isn't it?' I asked Chris.

'No. At least I don't think it is. I think it's a wild cat. My dad says they scream like hell at certain times of the year. It sounds like a woman, doesn't it?'

'Yes,' I said.

'But no woman could scream that loud,' Chris said ... and then added helplessly, 'Could she, Gordie?'

'It's his ghost,' Teddy whispered again. 'I'm going to go and look for it.'

I don't think he was serious, but we took no chances. When he started to get up, Chris and I pulled him back down.

'Let me go, you asses!' Teddy shouted. 'If I say I want to go and look for it, then I'm going to go and look for it! I want to see it! I want to see the ghost! I-'

The wild cry rose into the night again, cutting the air like a knife and freezing us with our hands on Teddy. The scream climbed impossibly high, hung there for a moment and then slid down to the lowest imaginable sound. This was followed by a burst of what sounded like mad laughter ... and then there was silence again.

'Jesus Christ,' Teddy whispered, and he talked no more of going into the forest to see what was making that screaming noise. All four of us stayed close together and I thought of running. I doubt I was the only one. If we had been camping in Vern's field -where our parents thought we were - we probably would have run. But Castle Rock was too far, and the thought of trying to run across that bridge in the dark made my blood freeze. Running deeper into Harlow and closer to the body of Ray Brower was equally unthinkable. We had nowhere to go. If there was a ghost out there, and if it wanted us, it would probably get us.

Chris suggested that we keep guard and everyone was agreeable to that. We spun coins to see who would go first. It was Vern, and I was last. Vern sat by the camp-fire while the rest of us lay down again, close to one another, like sheep.

I was sure that sleep would be impossible, but I did sleep - a light, uneasy sleep that was as near to being awake as it was to being asleep. My half-sleeping dreams were filled with wild cries which were possibly real or possibly imagined. I saw - or thought I saw - something white and shapeless float through the trees.

At last I slipped into something I knew was a dream. Chris and I were swimming at White's Beach, a lake in Brunswick. It was where Teddy had seen the boy hit his head and almost drown. In my dream we were out in deep water, swimming lazily along, with a hot July sun up in the sky. From behind us came cries and shouts of laughter. On the sandy beach, people lay face down on blankets, and little children played with plastic buckets at the edge of the water or sat happily pouring sand into their hair. Teenagers formed grinning groups and the boys watched the girls walk endlessly up and down in twos and threes, never alone, the secret places of their bodies wrapped in swimsuits.

Mrs Cote, our English teacher from school, floated past us on a rubber boat. She was lying on her back, dressed in her usual September-to-june uniform of a grey suit.

'Be careful boys,' she said. 'If you're not good I'll hit you so hard that you'll go blind. Now, Mr Chambers, we'll hear the poem "Mending Wall", please.'

'I tried to give the money back,' Chris said. 'Mrs Simons said OK, but she took it! Do you hear me? She took it! Now what are you going to do about it? Are you going to hit her until she's blind?'

"Mending Wall", Mr Chambers, if you please.'

Chris threw me a desperate look, as if to say 'Didn't I tell you it would be like this?' and then began: 'Something there is that doesn't love a wall, that sends the -' And then his head went under, his mouth filling with water in the middle of repeating the poem.

He broke through the surface, crying, 'Help me, Gordie! Help me!'

Then he was dragged under again. Looking into the clear water, I could see two bare swollen bodies holding his ankles. One was Vern and the other was Teddy, and

their open eyes were empty and white. Chris's head broke out of the water again. He reached one hand towards me and out of his mouth came a screaming, womanish cry that rose and rose in the hot, sunny, summer air. I looked wildly towards the beach, but nobody had heard. Chris's scream was cut off as the bodies pulled him under the water again. As they dragged him down to black water, I could see his eyes turned up to me and his hands reaching out helplessly. But instead of diving down and trying to save him, I swam madly for the shore, or at least to a place where the water would not be over my head. Before I could get there - before I could even get close - I felt a soft, rotten hand wrap itself firmly around my leg and begin to pull. A scream started to rise in my chest ... but before it came out, the dream passed into reality. There was Teddy with his hand on my leg. He was shaking me awake. It was my turn to keep guard.

## **CHAPTER 16. The Deer**

The others slept heavily through the rest of the night. I was sometimes awake and sometimes half asleep. The night was far from silent, with the cries of birds and mice and insects; but there were no more screams.

Finally I came awake and realized that something was different. It took a moment or two to know what it was: although the moon was down, I could see my hands resting on my jeans. My watch said quarter to five. It was dawn.

I stood and walked a few yards into the forest. I stretched and began to feel the fear of the night before slide away. It was a good feeling.

I climbed up the bank to the railway tracks and sat on one of the tracks, spinning and catching stones. I was in no hurry to wake the others. The new day felt too good to share.

I don't know how long I sat there, watching dawn turn to full morning, watching the sky change from purple to blue. I was about to get up when I looked to my right and saw a deer standing between the tracks not ten yards from me.

My heart flew up into my throat. I didn't move. I couldn't move. Her eyes weren't brown, but a dark, dusty black. She looked calmly at me, her head held a little low in what looked like curiosity, seeing a boy with his hair standing up from sleep in jeans and brown shirt, sitting there on the tracks. What I was seeing was a gift, given with a kind of terrible carelessness.

We looked at each other for a long time ... I think it was a long time. Then she turned and walked off to the other side of the tracks. She found grass and began to eat. I couldn't believe it. She hadn't gone away; she had begun to eat. She didn't look back at me and didn't need to: I was frozen solid.

Then the tracks started to shake under my body and seconds later the deer's head came up and turned back towards Castle Rock. She stood there for a moment and then she was gone in three leaps, disappearing into the forest with no sound except one dry branch that cracked like a gun.

I sat and looked at the place where she had been until the actual sound of the train came through the stillness. Then I slid back down the bank to where the others were sleeping.

The train woke them up. They yawned and scratched. There was some nervous talk about the 'screaming ghost', as Chris called it, but not as much as you might imagine. In daylight it seemed more foolish than interesting - almost embarrassing. Best forgotten.

I nearly told them about the deer, but in the end I didn't. That was one thing I kept to myself. I've never spoken or written about it until just now, today. And I have to tell you that it seems less important when it is written down. But for me it was the best part of that trip, the cleanest part, and it was a moment I found myself returning to, almost helplessly, when there was trouble in my life: my first day in the forest in Vietnam, when this guy walked up with his hand over his nose, and he took his hand away and there was no nose there, because a bullet had taken it off; the time the doctor told us that our son might have a brain infection; the long, crazy weeks before my mother died. I would find my thoughts turning back to that morning. But the most important things are the hardest to say. It's hard to make strangers care about the good things in life.

## **CHAPTER 17. Leeches**

The tracks now bent south-west and ran through thick forest. "We ate a breakfast of wild fruit. Vern wished aloud for a couple of fried eggs with bacon on the side.

This was the last day of the heat and I think it was the worst of all. By nine o'clock the sky was a pale steel colour that made you feel hotter just from looking at it. The sweat ran from our chests and backs, and washed away some of the dirt. Insects were a constant annoyance. We knew we still had eight or ten miles to walk, but the thing pulled us towards itself and kept us walking fast, even in that heat. We were all crazy to see that boy's body - I can't say it any more simply or honestly than that. We didn't know whether it was going to be harmless or horrible, but we wanted to see it.

It was about half past nine when Teddy and Chris saw water. They shouted to Vern and me, and we ran over to where they were standing. There was a deep pool, which was fed by a little stream, which continued under the tracks.

'Do you think it's deep enough to swim in?' Vern asked, looking hungrily at the water.

'There's only one way to find out,' Teddy said.

'Who goes first?' I asked.

'Me!' Chris said. He went running down the bank, kicking off his shoes and untying his shirt from around his waist as he went. He pushed his trousers down with his thumbs, pulled off his socks and made a shallow dive. He came up shaking his head to get his wet hair out of his eyes. 'It's great!' he shouted.

'How deep is it?' Teddy called back. He had never learned to swim.

Chris stood up in the water and his shoulders broke the surface. I saw something grey on one of them. I decided it was a piece of mud and didn't think any more about it. If I had looked more closely I could have saved myself a lot of bad dreams later on. 'Come on in, you pussies!' Chris called.

We all got undressed. Vern was in next, then me. The water was clean and cool. I swam across to Chris, loving the feel of having nothing on except water. I stood up and we grinned in each other's faces.

'Great!' We both said it at exactly the same moment.

We played around in the water for almost half an hour before we realized that the pool was full of leeches. We were diving, swimming between each other's legs, pushing one another beneath the surface of the water. Then Vern swam into the shallower part, went under and stood on his hands. When his legs were up in the air I saw that they were covered in blackish-grey lumps, just like the one I had seen on Chris's shoulder. They were big leeches.

Chris's mouth dropped open and I felt all the blood in my body freeze. Teddy screamed and his face went pale. Then all three of us made our way as fast as we could for the side. I know more about leeches now than I did then, but, although I know they are mostly harmless, I feel the same horror about them now as I have felt ever since that day in the pool. You don't feel them come on to your body. If you don't happen to see them, they'll go on feeding until their swollen bodies fall off you or they actually burst.

We pulled ourselves up on to the bank and Teddy started screaming as he looked down at himself. He started to pull the leeches off his bare body, still screaming.

Vern broke the water and looked at us in puzzlement. 'What the hell's wrong with him?'

'Leeches!' Teddy screamed, pulling two off his legs and throwing them as far as he could.

'OhGodOhGodOhGodOhGod!' Vern cried. He swam over to the edge of the pool and pulled himself out.

I was still feeling cold; the heat of the day was interrupted. I kept telling myself not to scream, not to be a pussy. I picked half a dozen off my arms and several more off my chest.

Chris turned his back to me. 'Gordie? Are there any more? Take them off if there are, Gordie, please.' There were more - five or six of them, running down his back like horrible black buttons. I pulled their soft, boneless bodies off him.

I was starting to feel a little better. I brushed my hair away from my ears... and that's when I felt the big one. It had gone down inside my ear, it seemed, so that only its back was still outside, and that's the part I had touched. I tried to get hold of it, but I couldn't see it. I held on to it tightly and pulled. It burst in my fingers as I pulled it off, and blood - my blood - ran down the side of my face and into my ear in a warm stream. I couldn't stop the tears coming then. I washed my ear and got dressed.

Vern ran up to me, still bare. 'Are they off me, Gordie? Have they all gone?'

He spun in front of me like a crazy dancer. I nodded that they were and kept on crying for a while. Finally the tears began to slow down.

When we were all dressed we just stood there looking at one another for a moment, and then we began to climb the bank up to the tracks. I looked back at the burst leeches lying on top of the flattened grass where we had danced and screamed them off our bodies.

## **CHAPTER 18. Short Shadows, Dusty Shoes**

We walked on, and were beginning to think that we were getting close. But we weren't as close as we thought. We knew we wanted to reach the place where the Back Harlow Road met the tracks, we knew that the Back Harlow Road ran by the Royal River, and we knew the Royal River was only ten miles from Castle River. But those ten miles were measured in a straight line, and the railway tracks made a long, slight curve around some hills called The Bluffs. If we had looked at a map we'd have seen that curve easily, and we'd have realized that it was more like sixteen miles between the two rivers, walking along the tracks. And there was nowhere else to walk.

Chris began to suspect the truth when midday had come and gone and the Royal still hadn't appeared. We stopped while he climbed a tall tree and looked round. He came down and told us it was going to be at least four in the afternoon before we reached the Royal, if we moved fast.

'Jesus!' Teddy swore. 'What are we going to do now?'

We looked into each other's sweaty faces. We were hungry and tired. The big adventure had turned into hard work. We were dirty and sometimes frightened. By now our parents would be wondering where we were, and the police might even be looking for us if Milo Pressman or the engineer on the train crossing the bridge had told them anything. We had been planning to hitchhike back to Castle Rock, but four o'clock was just three hours from dark and nobody picks up four boys in a back country road after dark.

Finally Chris said, 'It's still closer if we carry on. Let's go.'

He turned and started to walk along the tracks in his dusty shoes, head down, his shadow short at his feet. A few seconds later the rest of us followed, one after another.

## **CHAPTER 19. A Serious Matter**

I have sometimes wondered why we decided to walk from Castle Rock to Harlow on the railway tracks. I imagine a conversation between the four of us.

'We could easily hitchhike up Route 7,' I say, 'until it joins the Back Harlow Road. With a little luck we'll find Ray Brower only a few hours after we leave.'

'That's too easy, man' says Teddy, and Vern adds, 'Don't be such a pussy, Gordie. It will really be something to walk along the tracks.' Chris only smiles.

So we didn't take the shorter way, the easier way. They say the effect of events can grow larger and larger as the years pass, so who knows? If we hadn't walked along the tracks maybe Chris and Teddy and Vern would still be alive today. No, they didn't die in the forest or on the railway tracks. No one dies in this story except some leeches and Ray Brower, and he was dead before the story started, actually. But it is true that of the four of us who spun coins to see who would go down to the Florida Market to get food, only the one who went is still alive, at the ripe old age of thirty-four.

Maybe we knew, or half knew, that going to see a dead body was a big thing, as big as sleeping with a girl for the first time. And the big things in life should never be easy; they should be marked in some way as important. You don't hitchhike to a thing like that, perhaps. So if walking along the tracks turned out to be harder than we had expected, maybe we thought that was right. Events had turned our trip into what we had always suspected it was: a serious matter.

What we didn't know as we walked around The Bluffs was that Billy Tessio, Charlie Hogan, Jack Mudgett, Norman 'Fuzzy' Brackowicz, Vince Desjardins, Chris's older brother Eyeball and Ace Merrill himself were all on their way to take a look at the body themselves. They were climbing into Ace's black 1952 Ford and Vince's pink 1954 Studebaker even as we started on the last part of our trip.

Billy and Charlie had managed to keep their enormous secret for just about twenty-four hours. Then Charlie told Ace while they were drinking at the bar, and Billy told Jack Mudgett while they were fishing from the Boom Road Bridge. Both Ace and Jack had sworn to keep the secret - and that was how everyone in their gang knew about it by midday.

Fuzzy suggested that they could all become heroes by 'finding' the body. They could tell the police they had gone to the Royal River to fish and had found the body instead.

They were driving fast up the road from Castle Rock to the Back Harlow area just as we finally started to get close.

## **CHAPTER 20. The Body**

Clouds began to gather in the sky around two o'clock, but at first none of us thought it would rain. After all, it hadn't rained since the early days of July. But they kept building up to the south of us in great purple columns, and they began to move slowly in our direction.

Finally we had to accept that it was going to rain. In the hour between two and three the quality of the day's light began to change. It was just as hot as before, but we knew. The birds knew as well; they seemed to appear from nowhere and fill the sky with their cries. The light grew less definite and our shadows became less clear. The sun had begun to sail in and out of the thickening clouds, and the southern sky

turned brown. We watched the enormous thunderclouds come closer and threaten the land. Sometimes lightning flashed within the clouds and changed their purplish colour to a light grey. Then we saw lightning flash down from the nearest cloud. It was followed by a long, shaking burst of thunder.

We complained a bit about how wet we were going to get, but of course we were looking forward to it. It would be cool ... and there would be no leeches in this water.

Around half past three we saw running water through a break in the trees.

'That's it!' Chris shouted happily. 'That's the Royal!'

We began to walk faster. The storm was getting close now. The air began to move and the temperature dropped suddenly I looked down and saw that my shadow had completely disappeared.

We were walking in pairs again, two on either side of the tracks, so that we could look down both sides of the railway bank. My mouth was dry with nervousness. The sun finally sailed behind the clouds and didn't reappear. The light became dull. We could smell the river clearly - or perhaps it was the smell of the rain in the air.

A sudden impossible flash of lightning lit the area, making me cry out and cover my eyes. I heard the tearing fall of some big tree about sixty yards away. The crack of thunder which followed made me stop for a second in fear. I wanted to be at home reading a good book in a safe place.

'Jesus!' Vern screamed in a high voice. 'Look at that!'

I looked up in the direction Vern was pointing and saw a blue-white fireball rolling fast up the left track, sounding exactly like an angry cat. It hurried past us as we turned in amazement to watch it go. Twenty feet beyond us it suddenly burst and disappeared.

'What am I doing here?' Teddy said.

'Man!' Chris said happily. 'It is going to rain like it's never rained before!'

But I agreed with Teddy. The sky was alarming. Lightning flashed down again and this time there was no pause before the following thunder.

My ears were still ringing from the thunder when Vern began to shout: 'THERE! THERE HE IS! I SEE HIM!'

I can see Vern still, if I want to. All I have to do is sit back for a minute and close my eyes. He's standing there on the left of the tracks, one hand protecting his eyes from the lightning that has just come down, the other stretched out and pointing.

We ran up beside him and looked. I was thinking to myself, Vern's just imagining it, that's all. But he wasn't, although for a second I wished he was. In that moment I knew I never wanted to see a dead body, not even of a tiny animal.

At the bottom of the bank was a boggy, smelly mess of bushes and appearing out of the bushes was a single, pale, white hand.

Did any of us breathe? I didn't.

The wind was blowing quite strongly at times now, and was coming at us from no particular direction. I hardly noticed. Why couldn't we have seen the whole body instead of just that one hand, horribly white, the fingers resting upside down on the

ground? That hand told us the truth of the whole matter. It made us know that death was real. The memory of that hand comes back to me every time I hear or read of some tragic disaster. Somewhere, joined to that hand, was the rest of Ray Brower.

Lightning flashed. Thunder cracked after each flash of lightning.

'Jesus!' Chris whispered.

Vern's tongue was running over his lips as if he had just tasted something new and different - something which excited him and disgusted him at the same time.

Teddy only stood and looked. The wind blew his dirty hair first away from his ears and then back over them. His face was totally blank.

There were black insects walking on the hand.

A great whispering noise began to rise in the forest on both sides of the tracks, as if the forest had just noticed we were there and was commenting on it. The rain had started.

Enormous drops of rain fell for five seconds and then stopped. There was a pause, and then the storm really started. Immediately we were all completely wet. The whispering sound changed; now it sounded like millions of hammers. It was as if the forest was blaming us for our discovery.

Chris jumped over the side of the bank and I followed. Vern and Teddy were close behind us, but Chris and I were the first to reach the body of Ray Brower. He was face down. Chris looked into my eyes. I nodded slightly, as if he had spoken aloud.

I think he was down here and fairly undamaged instead of up there between the tracks and completely knocked out of shape because he was trying to get out of the way when the train hit him. He had landed with his head towards the tracks, arms over his head like someone about to dive. He had landed in boggy ground which was rapidly filling with water. His hair was dark red. There was blood in it, but not a lot - not enough to make you feel sick. The insects were worse. He was wearing a dark green T-shirt and blue jeans. His feet were bare and a few feet behind him, caught in a bush, I saw a pair of dirty shoes. For a moment I was puzzled - why was he here and his shoes there? Then I realized, and the realization was like a heavy blow to the stomach. My wife, my children, my friends - they all think that having an imagination like mine must be quite nice: not only do I make a lot of money from it, but I can also see films in my mind when I want to. But sometimes my imagination turns out to have long, sharp, cruel teeth. You see things you would prefer not to see, things that keep you awake all night. I saw one of those things then; I saw it clearly and with absolute certainty. He was knocked clean out of his shoes. The train had knocked him out of his shoes just as it had knocked the life out of his body.

That was what finally made me realize that the guy was dead. He wasn't ill, he wasn't sleeping. He wasn't going to get up in the morning any more, or eat too many apples, or worry about school exams. He was dead, completely dead. He wasn't going to go out with his friends in the spring to collect bottles uncovered by the departing snow. He wasn't going to get into fights in the playground. He wasn't going to pull a single girl's hair. He was everything like wasn't, can't, don't, shouldn't, wouldn't, couldn't. He was one big not. He was dead. I could go on all day and not explain the

distance between his bare feet on the ground and his dirty shoes hanging on the bush. It was about three feet, it was millions and millions of miles. He was disconnected from his shoes and there was no hope of reconnection. He was dead.

We turned him face up into the pouring rain, the lightning, the steady crack of thunder.

There were insects all over his face and neck. They ran in and out of the round collar of his T-shirt. His eyes were open but horribly wrong: one was rolled back so far that we could see only white, the other stared straight up into the storm. There was some dried blood around his mouth and on his chin, and a wound on the right side of his face. Still, I thought, he didn't look too bad. I had once walked into a door my brother Dennis was pushing open, and I had looked worse than this.

An insect came out of his mouth, walked across his cheek, stepped on to the leaf of a plant and was gone.

'Did you see that?' Teddy asked in a high, strange voice. 'I bet he's full of insects! I bet his brains are -'

'Shut up, Teddy,' Chris said.

Lightning lit up his one good eye. You could almost believe he was glad to see us, boys his own age. His body was swollen and there was the slight smell of some gas.

I turned away. I was sure I was going to be sick, but my stomach was dry and steady. I pushed two fingers down my throat, trying to make myself puke, wanting to, needing to. But nothing happened.

The noise of the rain and the thunder had completely covered the sound of cars approaching along the Back Harlow Road, which lay a few yards beyond this boggy area. It also covered the sound of them pushing through the trees and the bushes. The first we knew of them was Ace Merrill's voice calling above the noise of the storm, saying: 'What have we got here?'

## **CHAPTER 21. Ace Merrill**

We all jumped in surprise and Vern cried out. He admitted later that he thought, just for a second, that the voice had come from the dead boy.

On the far side of the boggy area, where the forest started again and hid the end of the road, Ace Merrill and Eyeball Chambers stood together.

'Hell!' Eyeball said. 'That's my little brother!'

Chris was staring at Eyeball with his mouth open. His wet shirt was still tied around his waist. His backpack, darker green now because of the rain, was hanging against his bare back.

'You go away, Rich,' he said. 'We found him.'

'It doesn't matter. We're going to report him.'

'No, you're not,' I said. I was suddenly angry with them. I was determined that this one time the older guys weren't going to just take something from the younger

ones. They had come in cars. I think that's what made me angriest. After all our hard work, they had come in cars. 'There are four of us, Eyeball.'

In answer, Vince Desjardins, Charlie Hogan and Vern's brother Billy stepped through the trees behind Ace and Eyeball, and they were followed by Jack Mudgett and Fuzzy Brackowicz.

'Here we all are,' Ace said, grinning. 'So you just -'

'VERN!' Billy Tessio cried in a terrible, accusing voice. 'You little worm! You were under the front of the house. You heard us talking!'

Vern looked frightened.

Charlie Hogan supported Billy. 'I ought to beat the puke out of you!'

'Yeah? Come on, then,' Teddy suddenly shouted. His eyes were shining crazily behind his rain-washed glasses. 'Come on, then. We'll fight you for the body. Come on, you big men.'

Billy and Charlie stepped forward, but Ace put a hand on their shoulders. 'Now listen, you guys,' he said patiently, as if we weren't standing in a rainstorm. 'There are more of us than there are of you. We're bigger. We'll give you one chance to disappear. I don't care where. Just leave.'

Eyeball laughed and Fuzzy slapped Ace on the back.

'Because we're taking him.' Ace smiled gently. 'If you go, we'll take him. If you stay, we'll hurt you and then take him. Anyway, Charlie and Billy found him first.'

'They were pussies!' Teddy shouted back. 'Vern told us about it.'

They were too frightened to do anything about it.' He copied Charlie Hogan's voice.' 'It's a pity we stole that car! It's a pity we went to the Back Harlow Road! Oh, Billy, what are we going to do? Oh, Billy, I think I just puked on my shoes!''

Charlie started forward again. I looked wildly at Ray Brower. He stared calmly up into the rain with his one eye. There was still thunder, but the rain was getting lighter.

'What do you say, Gordie?' Ace asked. He was holding Charlie lightly by the arm. 'You must have at least some of your brother's sense. Tell these guys to go away. I'll let Charlie beat up the one with glasses a bit, but that's all. What do you say?'

He was wrong to mention Denny. I had wanted to explain that we had really found the body first, since Charlie and Billy hadn't been interested. I wanted to tell him about the train on the bridge; about Milo Pressman and his fearless but stupid dog; about the leeches. I wanted to say: come on, Ace, be fair. But he had to mention Denny, and instead of a reasonable argument, what I heard coming out of my mouth was certain death: 'Go to hell, Ace,' I said.

Ace's mouth formed a perfect O of surprise. Everyone, on both sides of the bog, stared at me in amazement.

Then Teddy screamed happily, 'That's telling him, Gordie! Yeah, man!'

I stood still, unable to believe what I had done. I was like an actor on stage who has just spoken the wrong words. Out of the corner of my eye I saw that Chris was digging in the bottom of his backpack, but I didn't immediately understand.

'OK,' Ace said softly. 'Let's get them. Don't hurt anyone except the Lachance boy. I'm going to break both his arms.' And he meant it.

They started to walk towards us through the rain. Jackie Mudgett took a knife out of his pocket. Vern and Teddy dropped into fighting positions on either side of me. Teddy did so eagerly, Vern with a desperate look on his face.

Ace and his gang moved towards us in a line through the mud. The body of Ray Brower lay at our feet. I got ready to fight... and that was when Chris used the gun he had taken from his father's desk.

KA-BLAM!

God, what a wonderful sound that was! Charlie Hogan jumped up into the air. Ace Merrill, who had been staring straight at me, turned round and looked at Chris. His mouth made that O again. Eyeball looked amazed.

'Chris that's Daddy's gun,' he said. 'He's really going to hurt you for that.'

'That's nothing compared to what you'll get,' Chris said. His face was horribly pale and his eyes flashed. 'You all know Charlie and Billy didn't want to come at first. We wouldn't have walked all the way out here if they were going to come. They just went somewhere and puked the story up and let Ace Merrill do all the thinking.' His voice rose to a scream. 'But you aren't going to get him, do you hear me?'

'Now listen,' Ace said. 'You'd better put that down before you shoot your foot off. You haven't got the courage to shoot a mouse.' He began to walk forward again, smiling the gentle smile as he came. 'I'm going to make you eat that gun.'

'Ace, if you don't stand still, I'm going to shoot you, I swear to God.'

'You'll go to jail,' Ace said. He continued to advance. He was still smiling. The rest of us were frozen, watching and waiting. Ace didn't think a twelve-year-old boy would shoot him; I thought he was wrong. I thought Chris would shoot Ace before he would let Ace take his father's gun away from him. In those few seconds I was sure there was going to be bad trouble, the worst I'd ever known. Killing trouble, maybe. And all about who would report finding a dead body.

Chris said softly, with great regret, 'Where do you want it, Ace? Arm or leg? I can't decide. You decide for me.'

And Ace stopped.

## **CHAPTER 22. Hailstones**

His face fell and I saw sudden terror in it. It wasn't Chris's words, I think, it was the way he spoke them - the real regret that things were going to go from bad to worse.

Ace controlled himself. 'All right,' he said softly, speaking to Chris. 'But you know what's going to happen to you, don't you?'

'No, I don't,' Chris said.

'You little worm!' Eyeball said loudly. 'You're going to end up in hospital.'

'Kiss my ass,' Chris told him.

With an angry cry Eyeball started forward, and Chris put a bullet into the water about ten feet in front of him. Eyeball jumped back, cursing.

'OK,' Ace said. 'Now what?'

'Now you guys are going to get back into your cars and go back to Castle Rock. After that, I don't care. But you aren't getting him,' He touched Ray Brower lightly with his foot. 'Do you understand?'

'But we'll get you,' Ace said. He was starting to smile again. 'Don't you know that? We'll hurt you. Sincerely. I can't believe you don't know that.'

'Oh, why don't you go home and...'

Then the storm came back and the sound drowned out his words. This time the storm was even stronger; and this time it was hail instead of rain. The hailstones were enormous, and the sound they made when they hit the leaves and the trees was unbelievably loud. Stones began to hit my shoulders; it felt as if some evil creature was throwing them, intending to hurt. But the hailstones also began to hit Ray Brower's face with an awful sound, as if they were sinking into him.

Vern gave in first. With a scream he ran up the bank. Teddy waited only a minute, then followed Vern, his hands held up over his head. On the other side Vince Desjardins disappeared back under the cover of some trees and Fuzzy Brackowicz soon joined him. But the rest of them stayed where they were and Ace began to grin again.

'Stay with me, Gordie,' Chris said in a low, shaky voice, 'Stay with me, man.'

'I'm here.'

'Go away now,' Chris said to Ace, and he was able by some magic to get the shaking out of his voice. He sounded as if he was giving instructions to a stupid child.

'We'll get you,' Ace said. 'We won't forget this.'

'OK,' Chris said. 'That's another day.'

'We're going to enjoy getting you, Chambers. We'll -'

'Get out of here!' Chris suddenly screamed, and pointed the gun. Ace stepped back.

He looked threateningly at Chris for a moment longer, nodded, then turned round. 'Come on' he said to the others. He looked back over his shoulder at Chris and me once more. 'We'll see you later.'

They went back into the trees between the bog and the road. Chris and I stood perfectly still, in spite of the hail which was so hard that it was making our skin red and which was piling up all around us like snow. We stood and listened until we heard the sound of the engines of two cars.

Chris went and checked that they were really gone. When he came back he said, 'We did it.' I was shaking all over.

We looked at each other warmly for a second and then looked down together. A nasty thrill of fear shot through me and the sound of Chris moving his feet let me know that he too had seen it. Ray Brower's eyes had become wide and white, as if he was staring blindly. A second later I understood what had happened, but understanding didn't make the horror less. His eyes had filled up with round, white

hailstones. Now water was running down his cheeks as if he was crying. Chris and I just looked at each other helplessly.

Branches cracked behind us. I spun round, sure that Ace and the others were coming back, but it was Vern and Teddy.

'What are we going to do, man?' Chris asked. He was still looking down at the body and I didn't know whether he was talking to me or to it.

'We're going to take him back, aren't we?' Teddy asked, puzzled. 'We're going to be heroes. Isn't that right, man?' He looked from Chris to me and back to Chris again.

Chris looked up as if he was suddenly waking up from a dream. He walked over to Teddy and pushed him in the chest so hard that he fell down in the mud. 'You shut up!' Chris said. 'You pussy!'

'It was the hail!' Teddy cried out, angry and ashamed. 'It wasn't those guys, Chris! I'm frightened of storms! I can't help it!' He began to cry, sitting there in the mud and the water.

'What about you?' Chris asked, turning to Vern. 'Are you afraid of storms too?'

Vern shook his head, surprised by Chris's anger. 'No, man, I thought we were all going to run.'

'But you ran first, you pussy, so how did you know we were all going to run?'

Vern swallowed nervously and said nothing.

He turned to me. 'We're going to carry him back, Gordie.'

'If you say so, Chris. But what if those guys -'

'I don't care about those guys. You are all pussies.'

'Chris, they could call the police, for revenge.'

'I DON'T CARE!' he screamed, and leapt at me. But one of his feet hit Ray Brewer's body. He fell to the ground and lay in the exact position Ray Brewer was lying. I looked wildly at Chris's feet to make sure his shoes were still on. Then he began to cry and scream, beating his hands and feet on the wet ground. Teddy and Vern were staring at him in amazement, because nobody had ever seen Chris Chambers cry before. After a moment or two I walked back to the bank, climbed it and sat down on one of the tracks. Teddy and Vern followed me. There we sat in the rain.

## **CHAPTER 23. A Twenty-Year-Old Dream**

It was twenty minutes before Chris climbed the bank to sit down beside us. The clouds had begun to break and in places the sun was shining through. Chris was covered in mud from head to foot.

'You're right, Gordie,' he said. 'He doesn't belong to anyone.' I nodded. Five minutes passed. No one said anything. Then I had a thought: what if they did call the police? I went back down the bank and over to where Chris had been standing. I got down on my knees and began to search through the water and grass with my fingers.

'What are you doing?' Teddy asked, joining me.

'To your left, I think,' Chris said, and pointed.

I looked and after a minute or two I found both cartridges. They flashed in the sunlight. I gave them to Chris. He nodded and pushed them into his pocket.

'Now we go,' Chris said.

'No, man!' Teddy cried. 'I want to take him!'

'Listen, stupid,' Chris said. 'If we take him back we could get into real trouble. Gordie was right. Those guys could tell any story they wanted. What if they said we killed him? How would you like that?'

Teddy was silent.

'We're going to walk fast back to the bridge,' Chris said. 'Then we'll leave the tracks and come into Castle Rock from the other direction. If people ask where we were, we'll say we were camping up on Brickyard Hill and got lost.'

'Milo Pressman knows better,' I said.

'We'll say Milo frightened us and that's when we decided to go up on the Brickyard.'

I nodded. We were all on our feet now, ready to go. The birds were singing madly, pleased with the rain and now the sun and all the worms appearing above ground. We all turned round, as if pulled by strings, and looked back at Ray Brower.

He was lying there, alone again. We had turned him over, so it looked as if he was just lying in the sunshine. Then you saw the blood on the chin and under the nose, and his slightly swollen body. You saw that the flies had come out with the sun and were beginning to settle on the body. You remembered the smell. He was a boy our age, and he was dead.

'OK,' said Chris. 'Let's go.'

We started back the way we had come. We didn't talk. I don't know about the others, but I was too busy thinking to talk. There were things that worried me about the body of Ray Brower - they worried me then and they worry me now.

He didn't seem to be badly hurt. But the train must have hit him - why else would his shoes be of his feet? Perhaps the train had hit him hard enough to knock him down the bank but not hard enough to kill him. That was just possible, if he had been trying to get out of the train's way. Then he had lain awake down there in the mud, too frightened to move, in pain and not knowing where he was. I caught a wounded bird once and it died of fear in my hands. Perhaps Ray Brower had died because he was simply too frightened to go on living.

But there was another thing, which worried me most of all. All the news reports said that he had been carrying a bucket when he went off to pick fruit. Back in Castle Rock, I went to the library and checked in the newspapers. But we never saw the bucket. Where was it? He must have thrown it away somewhere between Chamberlain and the boggy ground in Harlow where he died. He must have thrown it away when he was just too lost and frightened to go on carrying such a useless object.

I've thought of going back to look for the bucket. I've thought of driving to the end of the Back Harlow Road and chasing a twenty-year-old dream. I get my backpack out of the car, take off my shirt and tie it around my waist. I find the boggy ground. Is the grass growing yellow there in the shape of a human body? Of course

not, there's no sign. Then I climb the bank up to the now rusty tracks and rotted wood and start walking towards Chamberlain. I feel sure that somewhere, to one side of the tracks, I would find the bucket. It would show that there had once been a thirteen-year-old Gordon Lachance.

It's a stupid idea, of course, but the line between childhood and adulthood is narrower than most people like to think. And at times we all feel closer to the children we once were than to the boring, sensible adults we have become. And I remember those days at the end of that summer so well, and I think: that boy was me. And then the fearful thought comes: Which boy do you mean?

## CHAPTER 24. Love Has Teeth

We got back to Castle Rock a little past five o'clock on Sunday morning. We had walked all night. Nobody complained, although our feet hurt and we were unbelievably hungry. We crossed the bridge in safety, passed through the dump with no sign of Milo Pressman and the now-not-so-awful Chopper, and finally reached town. We stood in front of our tree house and looked at it, so that we didn't have to look at one another.

At last Teddy said, 'I'll see you in school on Wednesday. I think I'm going to sleep till then.'

'Me too,' Vern agreed. 'But Billy's going to get me.'

'So what?' Chris said. 'Richie's going to get me and Ace is probably going to get Gordie and one of the others will get Teddy. But we did it.'

'That's right,' Vern said. But he still sounded unhappy.

Vern and Teddy left. I hesitated for a second before going home, and Chris said, 'I'll walk with you.'

'OK.'

We walked for a while without talking. Castle Rock was wonderfully quiet in the day's first light. I almost expected to turn a corner and see my deer standing there.

Finally Chris spoke. 'Vern and Teddy will tell others,' he said.

'Yes,' I said. 'But not today or tomorrow, if that's what you're worried about. Maybe not for years.'

He looked at me, surprised.

'At first they won't know what to say,' I explained. 'And then it will start to seem like a dream and they'll be too embarrassed to talk about it, and then ... it sounds crazy, but I think they'll almost forget it ever happened.'

He nodded. 'You see through people, Gordie.'

We had reached the corner of my street. I wanted to say something more to Chris and didn't know how to.

'Shake hands, man,' he said, sounding tired.

'Chris-'

'Shake.'

We shook.

'I'll see you.'

He grinned. 'Not if I see you first.'

He walked off, still laughing, as if he didn't hurt like me and wasn't covered in insect bites; as if he didn't have a care in the world, and wasn't returning to a dirty three-room house with no running water and broken windows covered with plastic.

Even if I had known the right thing to say I probably couldn't have said it. Talking destroys the effects of love. Love isn't soft, like those poets say. Love has teeth which bite and the wounds never close. No word can close those love-bites. In fact, if the wounds dry up, the words will stop too.

## **CHAPTER 25. Empty Kitchen**

Back home the kitchen was empty. I took off my clothes and washed all over, until the skin began to hurt. I made myself an enormous breakfast. While I was eating, my mother came into the kitchen.

'Gordon, where have you been?'

'Camping,' I said. 'We started in Vern's field and then went up the Brickyard Hill. Vern's mother said she would speak to you. Didn't she?'

'She probably spoke to your father,' she said, and walked over to the cupboard. She sighed. 'I miss Dennis most in the mornings,' she said. 'I always look in his room and it's always empty.'

'That's terrible,' I said.

'He always slept with the curtains open and the blankets... Gordon? Did you say something?'

'Nothing important, Mum.'

## **CHAPTER 26. Some People Drown**

The story never did get out. Ace Merrill phoned the police without leaving his name, and that's how they found the body. Neither his gang nor ours became heroes.

Milo Pressman never said a word. Chris's dad hadn't noticed that Chris was gone; he was too drunk. Teddy's mum got worried on the second night and called Vern's mum. Vern's mum said that we were in the field - she knew because she could see the lights on in the tent. Teddy's mum said she hoped no one was smoking cigarettes in there. Vern's mum said she was sure none of Vern's or Billy's friends smoked.

So the story never came out - but that wasn't the end of it. One day near the end of the month, when I was walking home from school, a black Ford stopped in front of me. I knew straight away whose car it was, before Ace and Fuzzy got out of it.

I dropped my school books and ran, but they caught me within a few yards. If an old lady hadn't come out of her house, I don't know what would have happened.

As it was, they broke my nose and two fingers, as well as giving me a large number of minor injuries.

Chris's brother broke his arm in two places and left his face as colourful as a sunrise. Teddy and Vern were hurt too. Various stories went round the school, all wildly wrong.

When the injuries mended, Vern and Teddy just drifted away. They had discovered a whole new group of people our age who would do what they said. They started bringing them to the tree house, and Chris and I started going there less and less. I think the last time I went there was in the spring of 1961, Teddy and Vern slowly became just two more faces in school. We nodded and said Hi. That was all. It happens. Friends come in and out of your life like waiters in a restaurant. But when I think of that dream, the swollen dead bodies under the water pulling at my legs, it seems right that friends should come and go. Some people drown. It's not fair, but it happens. Some people drown.

## **CHAPTER 27. Tears for a Friend**

Vern Tessio was killed in a fire that destroyed a house in Lewiston in 1966. There had been a large party in the house the night before. Someone fell asleep holding a cigarette - Vern himself, perhaps, dreaming of his lost pennies.

Teddy, who had always wanted to join the army, was refused, of course. Everyone knew he would be, because of his eyes and his ears - everyone except Teddy. He started missing school, going to the places Ace and Fuzzy and the rest had gone before him. After school he got a job filling holes in the road. He bought himself a car. One day when it was full of his friends, and they were all drinking, he crashed into a tree, turned the car over. It rolled six times and no one came out alive.

Chris joined the college courses. His parents thought he was crazy; his friends thought he was a pussy; his teachers didn't want this leather-jacketed and leather-booted person on their courses. He and I studied together almost every night, trying to win back the seven years of education Chris had lost. We were hanging on to each other in deep water.

We both graduated. Chris went to university to study law. Near the end of the spring term in 1968, Chris was queuing in a restaurant when two men in front of him started to argue about who was there first. Chris, who had always been the best of us at making peace, stepped between them and got a knife in his throat. He was dead in seconds. I wasn't there. Chris was in graduate school, and I had already graduated from university and was married. When I read about it in the newspaper I told my wife I was going out to get a drink. I drove out of town, parked and cried for him. I cried for nearly half an hour without stopping.

Me? I'm a writer now.

- THE END -

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