

FROM 'THE DARK HALF' OF THE NO. 1 BESTSELLING WRITER

# STEPHEN KING

THE BACHMAN BOOKS



writing as

RICHARD BACHMAN

The Bachman Books

by

Stephen King

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## Why I Was Bachman

1

Between 1977 and 1984, I published five novels under the pseudonym of Richard Bachman. These were *Rage* (1977), *The Long Walk* (1979), *Roadwork* (1981), *The Running Man* (1982), and *Thinner* (1984). There were two reasons I was finally linked with Bachman: first, because the first four books, all paperback originals, were dedicated to people associated with my life, and second, because my name appeared on the copyright forms of one book. Now people are asking me why I did it, and I don't seem to have any very satisfactory answers. Good thing I didn't murder anyone, isn't it?

2

I can make a few suggestions, but that's all. The only important thing I ever did in my life for a conscious reason was to ask Tabitha Spruce, the college co-ed I was seeing, if she would marry me. The reason was that I was deeply in love with her. The joke is that love itself is an irrational and indefinable emotion.

Sometimes something just says *Do this or Don't do that*. I almost always obey that voice, and when I disobey it I usually rue the day. All I'm saying is that I've got a hunch-player's approach to life. My wife accuses me of being an impossibly picky Virgo and I guess I am in some ways-I usually know at any given time how many pieces of a 500-piece puzzle I've put in, for instance-but I never really planned anything big that I ever did, and that includes the books I've written. I never sat down and wrote page one with anything but the vaguest idea of how things would come out.

One day it occurred to me that I ought to publish *Getting It On*, a novel which Doubleday almost published two years before they published *Carrie*, under a pseudonym. It seemed like a good idea so I did it.

Like I say, good thing I didn't kill anybody, huh?

3

In 1968 or 1969, Paul McCartney said a wistful and startling thing in an interview. He said the Beatles had discussed the idea of going out on the road as a bar-band named Randy and the Rockets. They would wear hokey capes and masks a la Count Five, he said, so no one would recognize them, and they would just have a raveup like in the old days.

When the interviewer suggested they would be recognized by their voices, Paul seemed at first startled . . . and then a bit appalled.

4

Cub Koda, possibly America's greatest houserocker, once told me this story about Elvis Presley, and like the man said, if it ain't true, it oughtta be. Cub said Elvis told an interviewer something that went like this: I was like a cow in a pen with a whole bunch of other cows, only I got out somehow. Well, they came and got me and put me in another pen, only this one was bigger and I had it all to myself. I looked around and seen the fences was so high I'd never get out. So I said, "All right, I'll graze."

5

I wrote five novels before *Carrie*. Two of them were bad, one was indifferent, and I thought two of them were pretty good. The two good ones were *Getting It On* (which became *Rage* when it was finally published) and *The Long Walk*. *Getting It On* was begun in 1966, when I was a senior in high school. I later found it moldering away in an old box in the cellar of the house where I'd grown up-this rediscovery was in 1970, and I finished the novel in 1971. *The Long Walk* was written in the fall of 1966 and the spring of 1967, when I was a freshman at college.

I submitted *Walk* to the Bennett Cerf/Random House first-novel competition (which has, I think, long since gone the way of the blue suede shoe) in the fall of 1967 and it was promptly rejected with a form note . . . no comment of any kind. Hurt and depressed, sure that the book must really be terrible, I stuck it into the fabled TRUNK, which all novelists, both published and aspiring, carry around. I never submitted it again until Elaine Geiger at New American Library asked if "Dicky" (as we called him) was going to follow up *Rage*. *The Long Walk* went in the TRUNK, but as Bob Dylan says in "Tangled Up in Blue," it never escaped my mind.

None of them has ever escaped my mind-not even the really bad ones.

6

The numbers have gotten very big. That's part of it. I have times when I feel as if I planted a modest packet of words and grew some kind of magic beanstalk . . . or a runaway garden of books (OVER 40 MILLION KING BOOKS IN PRINT!!!, as my publisher likes to trumpet). Or, put it another way-sometimes I feel like Mickey Mouse in *Fantasia*. I knew enough to get the brooms started, but once they start to march, things are never the same.

Am I bitching? No. At least they're very gentle bitches if I am. I have tried my best to follow that other Dylan's advice and sing in my chains like the sea. I mean, I could get down there in the amen corner and crybaby about how tough it is to be Stephen King, but somehow I don't think all those people out there who are a) unemployed or b) busting heavies every week just to keep even with the house payments and the MasterCard bill would feel a lot of sympathy for me. Nor would I expect it. I'm still married to the same woman, my kids are healthy and bright, and I'm being well paid for doing something I love. So what's to bitch about?

Nothing.

Almost.

7

Memo to Paul McCartney, if he's there: the interviewer was right. They would have recognized your voices, but before you even opened your mouths, they would have

recognized George's guitar licks. I did five books as Randy and the Rockets and I've been getting letters asking me if I was Richard Bachman from the very beginning.

My response to this was simplicity itself: I lied.

8

I think I did it to turn the heat down a little bit; to do something as someone other than Stephen King. I think that all novelists are inveterate role-players and it was fun to be someone else for a while-in this case, Richard Bachman. And he *did* develop a personality and a history to go along with the bogus author photo on the back of *Thinner* and the bogus wife (Claudia Inez Bachman) to whom the book is dedicated. Bachman was a fairly unpleasant fellow who was born in New York and spent about ten years in the merchant marine after four years in the Coast Guard. He ultimately settled in rural central New Hampshire, where he wrote at night and tended to his medium-sized dairy farm during the day. The Bachmans had one child, a boy, who died in an unfortunate accident at the age of six (he fell through a well cover and drowned). Three years ago a brain tumor was discovered near the base of Bachman's brain; tricky surgery removed it. And he died suddenly in February of 1985 when the *Bangor Daily News*, my hometown paper, published the story that I was Bachman-a story which I confirmed. Sometimes it was fun to be Bachman, a curmudgeonly recluse a la J. D. Salinger, who never gave interviews and who, on the author questionnaire from New English Library in London, wrote down "rooster worship" in the blank provided for religion.

I've been asked several times if I did it because I thought I was overpublishing the market as Stephen King. The answer is no. I didn't think I was overpublishing the market . . . but my publishers did. Bachman provided a compromise for both of us. My "Stephen King publishers" were like a frigid wifey who only wants to put out once or twice a year, encouraging her endlessly horny hubby to find a call girl. Bachman was where I went when I had to have relief. This does nothing, however, to explain why I've felt this restless need to *publish* what I write when I don't need the dough.

I repeat, good thing I didn't kill someone, huh?

10

I've been asked several times if I did it because I feel typecast as a horror writer. The answer is no. I don't give a shit what people call me as long as I can go to sleep at night.

Nevertheless, only the last of the Bachman books is an out-and-out horror story, and the fact hasn't escaped me. Writing something that was not horror as Stephen King would be perfectly easy, but answering the questions about why I did it would be a pain in the ass. When I wrote straight fiction as Richard Bachman, no one asked the questions. In fact, ha-ha, hardly anyone read the books.

Which leads us to what might be-well, not the reason why that voice spoke up in the first place, but the closest thing to it.

11

You try to make sense of your life. Everybody tries to do that, I think, and part of making sense of things is trying to find reasons . . . or constants . . . things that don't fluctuate.

Everyone does it, but perhaps people who have extraordinarily lucky or unlucky lives do it a little more. Part of you wants to think-or must at least speculate that you got whopped with the cancer stick because you were one of the bad guys (or one of the good ones, if you believe Durocher's Law). Part of you wants to think that you must have been one hardworking S.O.B. or a real prince or maybe even one of the Sainted Multitude if you end up riding high in a world where people are starving, shooting each other, burning out, bumming out, getting loaded, getting 'Luded.

But there's another part that suggests it's all a lottery, a real-life game-show not much different from "Wheel of Fortune" or "The New Price Is Right" (two of the Bachman books, incidentally, are about game-show-type competitions). It is for some reason depressing to think it was all-or even mostly-an accident. So maybe you try to find out if you could do it again.

Or in my case, if *Bachman* could do it again.

12

The question remains unanswered. Richard Bachman's first four books did not sell well at all, perhaps partly because they were issued without fanfare.

Each month paperback houses issue three types of books: "leaders," which are heavily advertised, stocked in dump-bins (the trade term for those showy cardboard displays you see at the front of your local chain bookstore), and which usually feature fancy covers that have been either die-cut or stamped with foil;" subleaders, " which are less heavily advertised, less apt to be awarded dump-bins, and less expected to sell millions of copies (two hundred thousand copies sold would be one hell of a good showing for a sub-leader); and just plain books. This third category is the paperback book publishing world's equivalent of trench warfare or . . . cannon fodder. "Just plain books" (the only other term I can think of is sub-sub-leaders, but that is *really* depressing) are rarely hardcover reprints; they are generally backlist books with new covers, genre novels (gothics, Regency romances, westerns, and so on), or series books such as *The Survivalist*, *The Mercenaries*, *The Sexual Adventures of a Horny Pumpkin* . . . you get the idea. And, every now and then, you find genuine *novels* buried in this deep substratum, and the Bachman novels are not the only time such novels have been the work of well-known writers sending out dispatches from deep cover. Donald Westlake published paperback originals under the names Tucker Coe and Richard Stark; Evan Hunter under the name Ed McBain; Gore Vidal under the name Edgar Box. More recently Gordon Lish published an excellent, eerie paperback original called *The Stone Boy* under a pseudonym.

The Bachman novels were "just plain books," paperbacks to fill the drugstore and bus-station racks of America. This was at my request; I wanted Bachman to keep a low profile. So, in that sense, the poor guy had the dice loaded against him from the start.

And yet, little by little, Bachman gained a dim cult following. His final book, *Thinner*, had sold about 28,000 copies in hardcover before a Washington bookstore clerk and writer named Steve Brown got suspicious, went to the Library of Congress, and uncovered my name on one of the Bachman copyright forms. Twenty-eight thousand copies isn't a lot-it's certainly not in best-seller territory-but it's 4,000 copies more than my book *Night Shift* sold in 1978. I had intended Bachman to follow *Thinner* with a rather gruesome suspense novel called *Misery*, and I think that one might have taken "Dicky" onto the best-seller lists. Of course we'll never know now, will we? Richard Bachman, who survived the brain tumor, finally died of a much rarer disease-cancer of the pseudonym. He died with that question-is it work that takes you to the top or is it all just a lottery? -still unanswered.

But the fact that *Thinner* did 28,000 copies when Bachman was the author and 280,000 copies when *Steve King* became the author, might tell you something, huh?

13

There is a stigma attached to the idea of the pen name. This was not so in the past; there was a time when the writing of novels was believed to be a rather low occupation,

perhaps more vice than profession, and a pen name thus seemed a perfectly natural and respectable way of protecting one's self (and one's relatives) from embarrassment. As respect for the art of the novel rose, things changed. Both critics and general readers became suspicious of work done by men and women who elected to hide their identities. *If it was good*, the unspoken opinion seems to run, *the guy would have put his real name on it. If he lied about his name, the book must suck like an Electrolux.*

So I want to close by saying just a few words about the worth of these books. Are they good novels? I don't know. Are they honest novels? Yes, I think so. They were honestly meant, anyway, and written with an energy I can only dream about these days (*The Running Man*, for instance, was written during a period of seventy-two hours and published with virtually no changes). Do they suck like an Electrolux? Overall, no. In places . . . welllll . . .

I was not quite young enough when these stories were written to be able to dismiss them as juvenilia. On the other hand, I was still callow enough to believe in oversimple motivations (many of them painfully Freudian) and unhappy endings. The most recent of the Bachman books offered here, *Roadwork*, was written between 'Salem's Lot and *The Shining*, and was an effort to write a "straight" novel. (I was also young enough in those days to worry about that casual cocktail-party question, "Yes, but when are you going to do something *serious*?" ) I think it was also an effort to make some sense of my mother's painful death the year before -- a lingering cancer had taken her off inch by painful inch. Following this death I was left both grieving and shaken by the apparent senselessness of it all. I suspect *Roadwork* is probably the worst of the lot simply because it tries so hard to be good and to find some answers to the conundrum of human pain.

The reverse of this is *The Running Man*, which may be the best of them because it's nothing but story-it moves with the goofy speed of a silent movie, and anything which is *not* story is cheerfully thrown over the side.

Both *The Long Walk* and *Rage* are full of windy psychological preachments (both textual and subtextual), but there's still a lot of story in those novels-ultimately the reader will be better equipped than the writer to decide if the story is enough to surmount all the failures of perception and motivation.

I'd only add that two of these novels, perhaps even all four, might have been published under my own name if I had been a little more savvy about the publishing business or if I hadn't been preoccupied in the years they were written with first trying to get myself through school and then to support my family. And that I only published them (and am allowing them to be republished now) because they are still my friends; they are undoubtedly maimed in some ways, but they still seem very much alive to me.

14

And a few words of thanks: to Elaine Koster, NAL's publisher (who was Elaine Geiger when these books were first published), who kept "Dicky's" secret so long and successfully to Carolyn Stromberg, "Dicky's" first editor, who did the same; to Kirby McCauley, who sold the rights and also kept the secret faithfully and well; to my wife, who encouraged me with these just as she did with the others that fumed out to be such big and glittery money-makers; and, as always, to you, reader, for your patience and kindness.

Stephen King

Bangor, Maine

RAGE

So you understand that when we  
increase the number of variables,  
the axioms themselves never change.

-Mrs. Jean Underwood

Teacher, teacher, ring the bell,  
My lessons all to you I'll tell,  
And when my day at school is through,  
I'll know more than aught I knew.

-Children's rhyme, c. 1880

## Chapter 1

The morning I got it on was nice; a nice May morning. What made it nice was that I'd kept my breakfast down, and the squirrel I spotted in Algebra II.

I sat in the row farthest from the door, which is next to the windows, and I spotted the squirrel on the lawn. The lawn of Placerville High School is a very good one. It does not fuck around. It comes right up to the building and says howdy. No one, at least in my four years at PHS, has tried to push it away from the building with a bunch of flowerbeds or baby pine trees or any of that happy horseshit. It comes right up to the concrete foundation, and there it grows, like it or not. It is true that two years ago at a town meeting some bag proposed that the town build a pavilion in front of the school, complete with a memorial to honor the guys who went to Placerville High and then got bumped off in one war or another. My friend Joe McKennedy was there, and he said they gave her nothing but a hard way to go. I wish I had been there. The way Joe told it, it sounded like a real good time. Two years ago. To the best of my recollection, that was about the time I started to lose my mind.

## Chapter 2

So there was the squirrel, running through the grass at 9:05 in the morning, not ten feet from where I was listening to Mrs. Underwood taking us back to the basics of algebra in the wake of a horrible exam that apparently no one had passed except me and Ted Jones. I was keeping an eye on him, I can tell you. The squirrel, not Ted.

On the board, Mrs. Underwood wrote this:  $a = 16$ . "Miss Cross," she said, turning back. "Tell us what that equation means, if you please."

"It means that  $a$  is sixteen," Sandra said. Meanwhile the squirrel ran back and forth in the grass, tail bushed out, black eyes shining bright as buckshot. A nice fat one. Mr. Squirrel had been keeping down more breakfasts than I lately, but this morning's was riding as light and easy as you please. I had no shakes, no acid stomach. I was riding cool.

"All right," Mrs. Underwood said. "Not bad. But it's not the end, is it? No. Would anyone care to elaborate on this fascinating equation?"

I raised my hand, but she called on Billy Sawyer. "Eight plus eight," he blurted.

"Explain."

"I mean it can be . . ." Billy fidgeted. He ran his fingers over the graffiti etched into the surface of his desk; SM L DK, HOT SHIT, TOMMY '73. "See, if you add eight and eight, it means . . ."

"Shall I lend you my thesaurus?" Mrs. Underwood asked, smiling alertly. My stomach began to hurt a little, my breakfast started to move around a little, so I looked back at the squirrel for a while. Mrs. Underwood's smile reminded me of the shark in *Jaws*.

Carol Granger raised her hand. Mrs. Underwood nodded. "Doesn't he mean that eight plus eight also fulfills the equation's need for truth?"

"I don't know *what* he means," Mrs. Underwood said.

A general laugh. "Can you fulfill the equation's truth in any other ways, Miss Granger?"

Carol began, and that was when the intercom said: "Charles Decker to the office, please. Charles Decker. Thank you."

I looked at Mrs. Underwood, and she nodded. My stomach had begun to feel shriveled and old. I got up and left the room. When I left, the squirrel was still scampering.

I was halfway down the hall when I thought I heard Mrs. Underwood coming after me, her hands raised into twisted claws, smiling her big shark smile. *We don't need boys of your type around here . . . boys of your type belong in Greenmantle . . . or the reformatory . . . or the state hospital for the criminally insane . . . so get out! Get out! Get out!*

I turned around, groping in my back pocket for the pipe wrench that was no longer there, and now my breakfast was a hard hot ball inside my guts. But I wasn't afraid, not even when she wasn't there. I've read too many books.

## Chapter 3

I stopped in the bathroom to take a whiz and eat some Ritz crackers. I always carry some Ritz crackers in a Baggie. When your stomach's bad, a few crackers can do wonders. One hundred thousand pregnant women can't be wrong. I was thinking about Sandra Cross, whose response in class a few minutes ago had been not bad, but also not the end. I was thinking about how she lost her buttons. She was always losing them-off blouses, off skirts, and the one time I had taken her to a school dance, she had lost the button off the top of her Wranglers and they had almost fallen down. Before she figured out what was happening, the zipper on the front of her jeans had come halfway unzipped, showing a V of flat white panties that was blackly exciting. Those panties were tight, white, and spotless. They were immaculate. They lay against her lower belly with sweet snugness and made little ripples while she moved her body to the beat . . . until she realized what was going on and dashed for the girls' room. Leaving me with a memory of the Perfect Pair of Panties. Sandra was a Nice Girl, and if I had never known it before, I sure-God knew it then, because we all know that the Nice Girls wear the white panties. None of that New York shit is going down in Placerville, Maine.

But Mr. Denver kept creeping in, pushing away Sandra and her pristine panties. You can't stop your mind; the damn thing just keeps right on going. All the same, I felt a great deal of sympathy for Sandy, even though she was never going to figure out just what the quadratic equation was all about. If Mr. Denver and Mr. Grace decided to send me to Greenmantle, I might never see Sandy again. And that would be too bad.

I got up from the hopper, dusted the cracker crumbs down into the bowl, and flushed it. High-school toilets are all the same; they sound like 747s taking off. I've always hated pushing that handle. It makes you sure that the sound is clearly audible in the adjacent classroom and that everybody is thinking: Well, there goes another load. I've always thought a man should be alone with what my mother insisted I call lemonade and chocolate when I was a little kid. The bathroom should be a confessional sort of place. But they foil you. They always foil you. You can't even blow your nose and keep it a secret. Someone's always got to know, someone's always got to peek. People like Mr. Denver and Mr. Grace even get paid for it.

But by then the bathroom door was wheezing shut behind me and I was in the hall again. I paused, looking around. The only sound was the sleepy hive drone that means it's Wednesday again, Wednesday morning, ten past nine, everyone caught for another day in the splendid sticky web of Mother Education.

I went back into the bathroom and took out my Flair. I was going to write something witty on the wall like SANDRA CROSS WEARS WHITE UNDERPANTS, and then I caught sight of my face in the mirror. There were bruised half-moons under my eyes, which looked wide and white and stary. The nostrils were half-flared and ugly. The mouth was a white, twisted line.

I Wrote EAT SHIT On the wall until the pen suddenly snapped in my straining fingers. It dropped on the floor and I kicked it.

There was a sound behind me. I didn't turn around. I closed my eyes and breathed slowly and deeply until I had myself under control. Then I went upstairs.

## Chapter 4

The administration offices of Placerville High are on the third floor, along with the study hall, the library, and Room 300, which is the typing room. When you push through the door from the stairs, the first thing you hear is that steady clickety-clack. The only time it lets up is when the bell changes the classes or when Mrs. Green has something to say. I guess she usually doesn't say much, because the typewriters hardly ever stop. There are thirty of them in there, a battle-scarred platoon of gray Underwoods. They have them marked with numbers so you know which one is yours. The sound never stops, clickety-clack, clickety-clack, from September to June. I'll always associate that sound with waiting in the outer office of the admin offices for Mr. Denver or Mr. Grace, the original dipso-duo. It got to be a lot like those jungle movies where the hero and his safari are pushing deep into darkest Africa, and the hero says: "Why don't they stop those blasted drums?" And when the blasted drums stop he regards the shadowy, rustling foliage and says: "I don't like it. It's too quiet."

I had gotten to the office late just so Mr. Denver would be ready to see me, but the receptionist, Miss Marble, only smiled and said, "Sit down, Charlie. Mr. Denver will be right with you."

So I sat down outside the slatted railing, folded my hands, and waited for Mr. Denver to be right with me. And who should be in the other chair but one of my father's good friends, Al Lathrop. He was giving me the old slick-eye, too, I can tell you. He had a briefcase on his lap and a bunch of sample textbooks beside him. I had never seen him in a suit before. He and my father were a couple of mighty hunters. Slayers of the fearsome sharp-toothed deer and the killer partridge. I had been on a hunting trip once with my father and Al and a couple of my father's other friends. Part of Dad's never-ending campaign to Make a Man Out of My Son.

"Hi, there!" I said, and gave him a big shiteating grin. And I could tell from the way he jumped that he knew all about me.

"Uh, hi, uh, Charlie." He glanced quickly at Miss Marble, but she was going over attendance lists with Mrs. Venson from next door. No help there. He was all alone with Carl Decker's psychotic son, the fellow who had nearly killed the chemistry-physics teacher.

"Sales trip, huh?" I asked him.

"Yeah, that's right." He grinned as best he could. "Just out there selling the old books."

"Really crushing the competition, huh?"

He jumped again. "Well, you win some, you lose some, you know, Charlie."

Yeah, I knew that. All at once I didn't want to put the needle in him anymore. He was forty and getting bald and there were crocodile purses under his eyes. He went from school to school in a Buick station wagon loaded with textbooks and he went hunting for a week in November every year with my father and my father's friends, up in the Allagash. And one year I had gone with them. I had been nine, and I woke up and they had been drunk and they had scared me. That was all. But this man was no ogre. He was just forty-baldish and trying to make a buck. And if I had heard him saying he would murder his wife, that was just talk. After all, I was the one with blood on my hands.

But I didn't like the way his eyes were darting around, and for a moment just a moment-I could have grabbed his windpipe between my hands and yanked his face up to mine and screamed into it: *You and my father and all your friends, you should all have to go in there with me, you should all have to go to Greenmantle with me, because you're all in it, you're all in it, you're all a part of this!*

Instead I sat and watched him sweat and thought about old times.

## Chapter 5

I came awake with a jerk out of a nightmare I hadn't had for a long time; a dream where I was in some dark blind alley and something was coming for me, some dark hunched monster that creaked and dragged itself along . . . a monster that would drive me insane if I saw it. Bad dream. I hadn't had it since I was a little kid, and I was a big kid now. Nine years old.

At first I didn't know where I was, except it sure wasn't my bedroom at home. It seemed too close, and it smelled different. I was cold and cramped, and I had to take a whiz something awful.

There was a harsh burst of laughter that made me jerk in my bed-except it wasn't a bed, it was a bag.

"So she's some kind of fucking bag," Al Lathrop said from beyond the canvas wall, "but *fucking's* the operant word there."

Camping, I was camping with my dad and his friends. I hadn't wanted to come.

"Yeah, but how do you git it up, Al? That's what I want to know." That was Scotty Norwiss, another one of Dad's friends. His voice was slurred and furry, and I started to feel afraid again. They were drunk.

"I just turn off the lights and pretend I'm with Carl Decker's wife," Al said, and there was another bellow of laughter that made me cringe and jerk in my sleeping bag. Oh, God, I needed to whiz piss make lemonade whatever you wanted to call it. But I didn't want to go out there while they were drinking and talking.

I turned to the tent wall and discovered I could see them. They were between the tent and the campfire, and their shadows, tall and alien-looking, were cast on the canvas. It was like watching a magic lantern show. I watched the shadow-bottle go from one shadow-hand to the next.

"You know what I'd do if I caught you with my wife?" My dad asked Al.

"Probably ask if I needed any help," Al said, and there was another burst of laughter. The elongated shadow-heads on the tent wall bobbed up and down, back and forth, with insectile glee. They didn't look like people at all. They looked like a bunch of talking praying mantises, and I was afraid.

"No, seriously," my dad said. "Seriously. You know what I'd do if I caught somebody with my wife?"

"What, Carl?" That was Randy Earl.

"You see this?"

A new shadow on the canvas. My father's hunting knife, the one he carried out in the woods, the one I later saw him gut a deer with, slamming it into the deer's guts to the hilt and then ripping upward, the muscles in his forearm bulging, spilling out green and steaming intestines onto a carpet of needles and moss. The firelight and the angle of the canvas turned the hunting knife into a spear.

"You see this son of a bitch? I catch some guy with my wife, I'd whip him over on his back and cut off his accessories."

"He'd pee sitting down to the end of his days, right, Carl?" That was Hubie Levesque, the guide. I pulled my knees up to my chest and hugged them. I've never had to go to the bathroom so bad in my life, before or since.

"You're goddamn right," Carl Decker, my sterling Dad, said.

"Wha' about the woman in the case, Carl?" Al Lathrop asked. He was very drunk. I could even tell which shadow was his. He was rocking back and forth as if he was sitting in a rowboat instead of on a log by the campfire. "Thass what I wanna know. What do you do about a woman who less-lets-someone in the back door? Huh?"

The hunting knife that had turned into a spear moved slowly back and forth. My father said, "The Cherokees used to slit their noses. The idea was to put a cunt right up on their faces so everyone in the tribe could see what part of them got them in trouble."

My hands left my knees and slipped down to my crotch. I cupped my testicles and looked at the shadow of my father's hunting knife moving slowly back and forth. There were terrible cramps in my belly. I was going to whiz in my sleeping bag if I didn't hurry up and go.

"Slit their noses, huh?" Randy said. "That's pretty goddamn good. If they still did that, half the women in Placerville would have a snatch at both ends."

"Not my wife," my father said very quietly, and now the slur in his voice was gone, and the laughter at Randy's joke stopped in mid-roar.

"No, 'course not, Carl," Randy said uncomfortably. "Hey, shit. Have a drink."

My father's shadow tipped the bottle back.

"I wun't slit her nose," Al Lathrop said. "I'd blow her goddamn cheatin' head off."

"There you go," Hubie said. "I'll drink to it."

I couldn't hold it anymore. I squirmed out of the sleeping bag and felt the cold October air bite into my body, which was naked except for a pair of shorts. It seemed like my cock wanted to shrivel right back into my body. And the one thing that kept going around and around in my mind-I was still partly asleep, I guess, and the whole conversation had seemed like a dream, maybe a continuation of the creaking monster in the alley-was that when I was smaller, I used to get into my mom's bed after Dad had put on his uniform and gone off to work in Portland, I used to sleep beside her for an hour before breakfast.

Dark, fear, firelight, shadows like praying mantises. I didn't want to be out in these woods seventy miles from the nearest town with these drunk men. I wanted my mother.

I came out through the tent flap, and my father turned toward me. The hunting knife was still in his hand. He looked at me, and I looked at him. I've never forgotten that my dad with a reddish beard stubble on his face and a hunting cap cocked on his head and that hunting knife in his hand. All the conversation stopped. Maybe they were wondering how much I had heard. Maybe they were even ashamed.

"What the hell do you want?" my dad asked, sheathing the knife.

"Give him a drink, Carl," Randy said, and there was a roar of laughter. Al laughed so hard he fell over. He was pretty drunk.

"I gotta whiz," I said.

"Then go do it, for Christ's sake," my dad said.

I went over in the grove and tried to whiz. For a long time it wouldn't come out. It was like a hot soft ball of lead in my lower belly. I had nothing but a fingernail's length of

penis-the cold had really shriveled it. At last it did come, in a great steaming flood, and when it was all out of me, I went back into the tent and got in my sleeping bag. None of them looked at me. They were talking about the war. They had all been in the war.

My dad got his deer three days later, on the last day of the trip. I was with him. He got it perfectly, in the bunch of muscle between neck and shoulder, and the buck went down in a heap, all grace gone.

We went over to it. My father was smiling, happy. He had unsheathed his knife. I knew what was going to happen, and I knew I was going to be sick, and I couldn't help any of it. He planted a foot on either side of the buck and pulled one of its legs back and shoved the knife in. One quick upward rip, and its guts spilled out on the forest floor, and I turned around and heaved up my breakfast.

When I turned back to him, he was looking at me. He never said anything, but I could read the contempt and disappointment in his eyes. I had seen it there often enough. I didn't say anything either. But if I had been able to, I would have said: *It isn't what you think.*

That was the first and last time I ever went hunting with my dad.

## Chapter 6

Al Lathrop was still thumbing through his textbook samples and pretending he was too busy to talk to me when the intercom on Miss Marble's desk buzzed, and she smiled at me as if we had a great and sexy secret. "You can go in now, Charlie."

I got up. "Sell those textbooks, Al."

He gave me a quick, nervous, insincere smile. "I sure will, uh, Charlie."

I went through the slatted gate, past the big safe set into the wall on the right and Miss Marble's cluttered desk on the left. Straight ahead was a door with a frosted glass pane. THOMAS DENVER PRINCIPAL was lettered on the glass. I walked in.

Mr. Denver was looking at *The Bugle*, the school rag. He was a tall, cadaverous man who looked something like John Carradine. He was bald and skinny. His hands were long and full of knuckles. His tie was pulled down, and the top button of his shirt was undone. The skin on his throat looked grizzled and irritated from overshaving.

"Sit down, Charlie."

I sat down and folded my hands. I'm a great old hand-folder. It's a trick I picked up from my father. Through the window behind Mr. Denver I could see the lawn, but not the fearless way it grew right up to the building. I was too high, and it was too bad. It might have helped, like a night-light when you are small.

Mr. Denver put *The Bugle* down and leaned back in his chair. "Kind of hard to see that way, isn't it?" He grunted. Mr. Denver was a crackerjack grunter. If there was a National Grunting Bee, I would put all my money on Mr. Denver. I brushed my hair away from my eyes.

There was a picture of Mr. Denver's family on his desk, which was even more cluttered than Miss Marble's. The family looked well-fed and well-adjusted. His wife was sort of porky, but the two kids were as cute as buttons and didn't look a bit like John Carradine. Two little girls, both blond.

"Don Grace has finished his report, and I've had it since last Thursday, considering his conclusions and his recommendations as carefully as I can. We all appreciate the seriousness of this matter, and I've taken the liberty of discussing the whole thing with John Carlson, also."

"How is he?" I asked.

"Pretty well. He'll be back in a month, I should think."

"Well, that's something."

"It is?" He blinked at me very quickly, the way lizards do.

"I didn't kill him. That's something."

"Yes." Mr. Denver looked at me steadily. "Do you wish you had?"

"No."

He leaned forward, drew his chair up to his desk, looked at me, shook his head, and began, "I'm very puzzled when I have to speak the way I'm about to speak to you, Charlie. Puzzled and sad. I've been in the kid business since 1947, and I still can't understand these things. I feel what I have to say to you is right and necessary, but it also makes me unhappy. Because I still can't understand why a thing like this happens. In 1959 we had a very bright boy here who beat a junior-high-school girl quite badly with a baseball bat. Eventually we had to send him to South Portland Correctional Institute. All he could say was that she wouldn't go out with him. Then he would smile." Mr. Denver shook his head.

"Don't bother."

"What?"

"Don't bother trying to understand. Don't lose any sleep over it."

"But why, Charlie? Why did you do that? My God, he was on an operating table for nearly four hours--"

"Why is Mr. Grace's question," I said. "He's the school shrink. You, you only ask it because it makes a nice lead-in to your sermon. I don't want to listen to any more sermons. They don't mean *shit* to me. It's *over*. He was going to live or die. He lived. I'm glad. You do what you have to do. What you and Mr. Grace decided to do. But don't you try to understand me."

"Charlie, understanding is part of my job."

"But helping you do your job isn't part of mine," I said. "So let me tell you one thing. To sort of help open the lines of communication, okay?"

"Okay..."