

THE RAFT

It was forty miles from Horlick University in Pittsburgh to Cascade Lake, and although dark comes early to that part of the world in October and although they didn't get going until six o'clock, there was still a little light in the sky when they got there. They had come in Deke's Camaro. Deke didn't waste any time when he was sober. After a couple of beers, he made that Camaro walk and talk.

He had hardly brought the car to a stop at the pole fence between the parking lot and the beach before he was out and pulling off his shirt. His eyes were scanning the water for the raft. Randy got out of the shotgun seat, a little reluctantly. This had been his idea, true enough, but he had never expected Deke to take it seriously. The girls were moving around in the back seat, getting ready to get out.

Deke's eyes scanned the water restlessly, side to side (*sniper's eyes*, Randy thought uncomfortably), and then fixed on a point.

'It's there!' he shouted, slapping the hood of the Camaro. 'Just like you said, Randy! Hot damn! Last one in's a rotten egg!'

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'Deke—' Randy began, resetting his glasses on his nose, but that was all he bothered with, because Deke was vaulting the fence and running down the beach, not looking back at Randy or Rachel or LaVerne, only looking out at the raft, which was anchored about fifty yards out on the lake.

Randy looked around, as if to apologize to the girls for getting them into this, but they were looking at Deke — Rachel looking at him was all right, Rachel was Deke's girl, but LaVerne was looking at him too and Randy felt a hot momentary spark of jealousy that got him moving. He peeled off his own sweatshirt, dropped it beside Deke's, and hopped the fence.

'Randy!' LaVerne called, and he only pulled his arm forward through the gray twilit October air in a come-on gesture, hating himself a little for doing it — she was unsure now, perhaps ready to cry it off. The idea of an October swim in the deserted lake wasn't just part of a comfortable, well-lighted bull-session in the apartment he and Deke shared anymore. He liked her, but Deke was stronger. And damned if she didn't have the hots for Deke, and damned if it wasn't irritating.

Deke unbuckled his jeans, still running, and pushed them off his lean hips. He somehow got out of them all the way without stopping, a feat Randy could not have duplicated in a thousand years. Deke ran on, now only wearing bikini briefs, the muscles in his back and buttocks working gorgeously. Randy was more than aware of his own skinny shanks as he dropped his Levi's and clumsily shook them free of his feet — with Deke it was ballet, with him burlesque.

Deke hit the water and bellowed, 'Cold! Mother of Jesus!'

Randy hesitated, but only in his mind, where things took longer – *that water's forty-five degrees, fifty at most*, his mind told him. *Your heart could stop*. He was pre-med, he knew that was true . . . but in the physical world he didn't hesitate at all. He leaped it, and for a moment his heart *did* stop, or seemed to; his breath clogged in his throat and he had to force a gasp of air into his lungs as all his submerged skin went numb. *This is crazy*, he thought, and then: *But it was your idea, Pancho*. He began to stroke after Deke.

The two girls looked at each other for a moment. LaVerne shrugged and grinned. 'If they can, we can,' she said, stripping off her Lacoste shirt to reveal an almost transparent bra. 'Aren't girls supposed to have an extra layer of fat?'

Then she was over the fence and running for the water, unbuttoning her cords. After a moment Rachel followed her, much as Randy had followed Deke.

The girls had come over to the apartment at midafternoon – on Tuesdays a one-o'clock was the latest class any of them had. Deke's monthly allotment had come in – one of the football-mad alums (the players called them 'angels') saw that he got two hundred a month in cash – and there was a case of beer in the fridge and a new Night Ranger album on Randy's battered stereo. The four of them set about getting pleasantly oiled. After a while the talk had turned to the end of the long Indian summer they had been enjoying. The radio was predicting flurries for Wednesday.

LaVerne had advanced the opinion that weathermen predicting snow flurries in October should be shot, and no one had disagreed.

Rachel said that summers had seemed to last forever when she was a girl, but now that she was an adult ('a doddering senile nineteen,' Deke joked, and she kicked his ankle), they got shorter every year. 'It seemed like I spent my life out at Cascade Lake,' she said, crossing the decayed kitchen linoleum to the icebox. She peered in, found an Iron City Light hiding behind a stack of blue Tupperware storage boxes (the one in the middle contained some nearly prehistoric chili which was now thickly festooned with mold – Randy was a good student and Deke was a good football player, but neither of them was worth a fart in a noisemaker when it came to house-keeping), and appropriated it. 'I can still remember the first time I managed to swim all the way out to the raft. I stayed there for damn near two hours, scared to swim back.'

She sat down next to Deke, who put an arm around her. She smiled, remembering, and Randy suddenly thought she looked like someone famous or semi-famous. He couldn't quite place the resemblance. It would come to him later, under less pleasant circumstances.

'Finally my brother had to swim out and tow me back on an inner tube. God, he was mad. And I had a sunburn like you wouldn't believe.'

'The raft's still out there,' Randy said, mostly to say something. He was aware that LaVerne had been looking at Deke again; just lately it seemed like she looked at Deke a lot.

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But now she looked at him. 'It's almost *Halloween*, Randy. Cascade Beach has been closed since Labor Day.'

'Raff's probably still out there, though,' Randy said. 'We were on the other side of the lake on a geology field trip about three weeks ago and I saw it then. It looked like . . .' He shrugged. ' . . . a little bit of summer that somebody forgot to clean up and put away in the closet until next year.'

He thought they would laugh at that, but no one did – not even Deke.

'Just because it was there last year doesn't mean it's still there,' LaVerne said.

'I mentioned it to a guy,' Randy said, finishing his own beer. 'Billy DeLois, do you remember him, Deke?'

Deke nodded. 'Played second string until he got hurt.'

'Yeah, I guess so. Anyway, he comes from out that way, and he said the guys who own the beach never take it in until the lake's almost ready to freeze. Just lazy – at least, that's what he said. He said that some year they'd wait too long and it would get ice-locked.'

He fell silent, remembering how the raft had looked, anchored out there on the lake – a square of bright white wood in all that bright blue autumn water. He remembered how the sound of the barrels under it – that buoyant *clunk-clunk* sound – had drifted up to them. The sound was soft, but sounds carried well on the still air around the lake. There had been that sound and the sound of crows squabbling over the remnants of some farmer's harvested garden.

'Snow tomorrow,' Rachel said, getting up as Deke's hand wandered almost absently down to the upper swell of her

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breast. She went to the window and looked out. 'What a bummer.'

'I'll tell you what,' Randy said, 'let's go on out to Cascade lake. We'll swim out to the raft, say good-bye to summer, and then swim back.'

If he hadn't been half-loaded he never would have made the suggestion, and he certainly didn't expect anyone to take it seriously. But Deke jumped on it.

'All right! Awesome, Pancho! Fooking *awesome!*' LaVerne jumped and spilled her beer. But she smiled – the smile made Randy a little uneasy. 'Let's do it!'

'Deke, you're crazy,' Rachel said, also smiling – but her smile looked a little tentative, a little worried.

'No, I'm going to do it,' Deke said, going for his coat, and with a mixture of dismay and excitement, Randy noted Deke's grin – reckless and a little crazy. The two of them had been rooming together for three years now – the Jock and the Brain, Cisco and Pancho, Batman and Robin – and Randy recognized that grin. Deke wasn't kidding; he meant to do it. In his head he was already halfway there.

Forget it, Cisco – not me. The words rose to his lips, but before he could say them LaVerne was on her feet, the same cheerful, loony look in her own eyes (or maybe it was just too much beer). 'I'm up for it!'

'Then let's go!' Deke looked at Randy. 'Whatchoo say, Pancho?'

He had looked at Rachel for a moment then, and saw something almost frantic in her eyes – as far as he himself was concerned, Deke and LaVerne could go out to Cascade Lake together and plow the back forty all night; he would not be delighted with the knowledge that they were boffing

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each other's brains out, yet neither would he be surprised. But that look in the other girl's eyes, that haunted look—

'Ohhh, *Ceesco!*' Randy cried.

'Ohhhh, *Pancho!*' Deke cried back, delighted.

They slapped palms.

Randy was halfway to the raft when he saw the black patch on the water. It was beyond the raft and to the left of it, more out toward the middle of the lake. Five minutes later the light would have failed too much for him to tell it was anything more than a shadow . . . if he had seen it all. *Oil slick?* he thought, still pulling hard through the water, faintly aware of the girls splashing behind him. But what would an oil slick be doing on an October-deserted lake? And it was oddly circular, small, surely no more than five feet in diameter—

'*Whoooo!*' Deke shouted again, and Randy looked toward him. Deke was climbing the ladder on the side of the raft, shaking off water like a dog. 'Howya doon, Pancho?'

'Okay!' he called back, pulling harder. It really wasn't as bad as he had thought it might be, not once you got in and got moving. His body tingled with warmth and now his motor was in overdrive. He could feel his heart putting out good revs, heating him from the inside out. His folks had a place on Cape Cod, and the water there was worse than this in mid-July.

'You think it's bad now, Pancho, wait'll you get out!' Deke yelled gleefully. He was hopping up and down, making the raft rock, rubbing his body.

Randy forgot about the oil slick until his hands actually grasped the rough, white-painted wood of the ladder

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on the shore side. Then he saw it again. It was a little closer. A round dark patch on the water, like a big mole, rising and falling on the mild waves. When he had first seen it the patch had been maybe forty yards from the raft. Now it was only half that distance.

How can that be? How—

Then he came out of the water and the cold air bit his skin, bit it even harder than the water had when he first dived in. 'Ohhhhhh, *shit!*' he yelled, laughing, shivering in his Jockey shorts.

'Pancho, you ees some kine of beeg asshole,' Deke said happily. He pulled Randy up. 'Cold enough for you? You sober yet?'

'I'm sober! I'm sober!' He began to jump around as Deke had done, clapping his arms across his chest and stomach in an X. They turned to look at the girls.

Rachel had pulled ahead of LaVerne, who was doing something that looked like a dog paddle performed by a dog with bad instincts.

'You ladies okay?' Deke bellowed.

'Go to hell, Macho City!' LaVerne called, and Deke broke up again.

Randy glanced to the side and saw that odd dark circular patch was even closer — ten yards now, and still coming. It floated on the water, round and regular, like the top of a large steel drum, but the limber way it rode the swells made it clear that it was not the surface of a solid object. Fear, directionless but powerful, suddenly seized him.

'*Swim!*' he shouted at the girls, and bent down to grasp Rachel's hand as she reached the ladder. He hauled her up. She bumped her knee hard — he heard the thud clearly.

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'Ow! Hey! What—'

LaVerne was still ten feet away. Randy glanced to the side again and saw the round thing nuzzle the offside of the raft. The thing was as dark as oil, but he was sure it wasn't oil — too dark, too thick, too *even*.

'Randy, that *hurt!* What are you doing, being fun—'

'LaVerne! *Swim!*' Now it wasn't just fear; now it was terror.

LaVerne looked up, maybe not hearing the terror but at least hearing the urgency. She looked puzzled but she dog-paddled faster, closing the distance to the ladder.

'Randy, what's wrong with you?' Deke asked.

Randy looked to the side again and saw the thing fold itself around the raft's square corner. For a moment it looked like a Pac-Man image with its mouth open to eat electronic cookies. Then it slipped all the way around the corner and began to slide along the raft, one of its edges now straight.

'Help me get her up!' Randy grunted to Deke, and reached for her hand. 'Quick!'

Deke shrugged good-naturedly and reached for LaVerne's other hand. They pulled her up and onto the raft's board surface bare seconds before the black thing slid by the ladder, its sides dimpling as it slipped past the ladder's uprights.

'Randy, have you gone crazy?' LaVerne was out of breath, a little frightened. Her nipples were clearly visible through the bra. They stood out in cold hard points.

'That thing,' Randy said, pointing. 'Deke? What is it?'

Deke spotted it. It had reached the left-hand corner of the raft. It drifted off a little to one side, reassuming its

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round shape. It simply floated there. The four of them looked at it.

'Oil slick, I guess,' Deke said.

'You really racked my knee,' Rachel said, glancing at the dark thing on the water and then back at Randy. 'You—'

'It's not an oil slick,' Randy said. 'Did you ever see a round oil slick? That thing looks like a checker.'

'I never saw an oil slick at all,' Deke replied. He was talking to Randy but he was looking at LaVerne. LaVerne's panties were almost as transparent as her bra, the delta of her sex sculpted neatly in silk, each buttock a taut crescent. 'I don't even believe in them. I'm from Missouri.'

'I'm going to bruise,' Rachel said, but the anger had gone out of her voice. She had seen Deke looking at LaVerne.

'God, I'm cold,' LaVerne said. She shivered prettily.

'It went for the girls,' Randy said.

'Come on, Pancho. I thought you said you got sober.'

'It went for the girls,' he repeated stubbornly, and thought: *No one knows we're here. No one at all.*

'Have you ever seen an oil slick, Pancho?' He had put his arm around LaVerne's bare shoulders in the same almost-absent way that he had touched Rachel's breast earlier that day. He wasn't touching LaVerne's breast — not yet, anyway — but his hand was close. Randy found he didn't care much, one way or another. That black, circular patch on the water. He cared about that.

'I saw one on the Cape, four years ago,' he said. 'We all pulled birds out of the surf and tried to clean them off—'

'Ecological, Pancho,' Deke said approvingly. 'Mucho ecological, I theenk.'

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Randy said, 'It was just this big, sticky mess all over the water. In streaks and big smears. It didn't look like that. It wasn't, you know, *compact*.'

It looked like an accident, he wanted to say. *That thing doesn't look like an accident; it looks like it's on purpose.*

'I want to go back now,' Rachel said. She was still looking at Deke and LaVerne. Randy saw dull hurt in her face. He doubted if she knew it showed.

'So go,' LaVerne said. There was a look on her face — *the clarity of absolute triumph*, Randy thought, and if the thought seemed pretentious, it also seemed exactly right. The expression was not aimed precisely at Rachel . . . but neither was LaVerne trying to hide it from the other girl.

She moved a step closer to Deke; a step was all there was. Now their hips touched lightly. For one brief moment Randy's attention passed from the thing floating on the water and focused on LaVerne with an almost exquisite hate. Although he had never hit a girl, in that one moment he could have hit her with real pleasure. Not because he loved her (he had been a little infatuated with her, yes, and more than a little horny for her, yes, and a lot jealous when she had begun to come on to Deke back at the apartment, oh yes, but he wouldn't have brought a girl he actually *loved* within fifteen miles of Deke in the first place), but because he knew that expression on Rachel's face — how that expression felt inside.

'I'm afraid,' Rachel said.

'Of an *oil slick*?' LaVerne asked incredulously, and then laughed. The urge to hit her swept over Randy again — to just swing a big roundhouse open-handed blow through the air, to wipe that look of half-assed hauteur from her

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face and leave a mark on her cheek that would bruise in the shape of a hand.

'Let's see you swim back, then,' Randy said.

LaVerne smiled indulgently at him. 'I'm not ready to go,' she said, as if explaining to a child. She looked up at the sky, then at Deke. 'I want to watch the stars come out.'

Rachel was a short girl, pretty, but in a gamine, slightly insecure way that made Randy think of New York girls — you saw them hurrying to work in the morning, wearing their smartly tailored skirts with slits in the front or up one side, wearing that same look of slightly neurotic prettiness. Rachel's eyes always sparkled, but it was hard to tell if it was good cheer that lent them that lively look or just free-floating anxiety.

Deke's tastes usually ran more to tall girls with dark hair and sleepy sloe eyes, and Randy saw it was now over between Deke and Rachel — whatever there had been, something simple and maybe a little boring on his part, something deep and complicated and probably painful on hers. It was over, so cleanly and suddenly that Randy almost heard the snap: a sound like dry kindling broken over a knee.

He was a shy boy, but he moved to Rachel now and put an arm around her. She glanced up at him briefly, her face unhappy but grateful for his gesture, and he was glad he had improved the situation for her a little. That similarity bobbed into his mind again. Something in her face, her looks—

He first associated it with TV game shows, then with commercials for crackers or wafers or some damn thing. It came to him then — she looked like Sandy Duncan, the

actress who had played in the revival of *Peter Pan* on Broadway.

'What is that thing?' she asked. 'Randy? What is it?'

'I don't know.'

He glanced at Deke and saw Deke looking at him with that familiar smile that was more loving familiarity than contempt . . . but the contempt was there, too. Maybe Deke didn't even know it, but it was. The expression said *Here goes ole worry-wart Randy, pissing in his didies again*. It was supposed to make Randy mumble an addition – *It's probably nothing, Don't worry about it, It'll go away*. Something like that. He didn't. Let Deke smile. The black patch on the water scared him. That was the truth.

Rachel stepped away from Randy and knelt prettily on the corner of the raft closest to the thing, and for a moment she triggered an even clearer memory-association: the girl on the White Rock labels. *Sandy Duncan on the White Rock labels* his mind amended. Her hair, a close-cropped, slightly coarse blond, lay wetly against her finely shaped skull. He could see goosebumps on her shoulder blades above the white band of her bra.

'Don't fall in, Rache,' LaVerne said with bright malice.

'Quit it, LaVerne,' Deke said, still smiling.

Randy looked from them, standing in the middle of the raft with their arms loosely around each other's waists, hips touching lightly, and back at Rachel. Alarm raced down his spine and out through his nerves like fire. The black patch had halved the distance between it and the corner of the raft where Rachel was kneeling and looking at it. It had been six or eight feet away before. Now the distance was three feet or less. And he saw a strange look in her

eyes, a round blankness that seemed queerly like the round blankness of the thing in the water.

Now it's Sandy Duncan sitting on a White Rock label and pretending to be hypnotized by the rich delicious flavor of Nabisco Honey Grahams, he thought idiotically, feeling his heart speed up as it had in the water, and he called out, 'Get away from there, Rachel!'

Then everything happened very fast – things happened with the rapidity of fireworks going off. And yet he saw and heard each thing with perfect, hellish clarity. Each thing seemed caught in its own little capsule.

LaVerne laughed – on the quad in a bright afternoon hour it might have sounded like any college girl's laugh, but out here in the growing dark it sounded like the arid cackle of a witch making magic in a pot.

'Rachel, maybe you better get b—' Deke said, but she interrupted him, almost surely for the first time in her life, and indubitably for the last.

'It has colors!' she cried in a voice of utter, trembling wonder. Her eyes stared at the black patch on the water with blank rapture, and for just a moment Randy thought he saw what she was talking about – colors, yeah, colors, swirling in rich, inward-turning spirals. Then they were gone, and there was only dull, lustreless black again. 'Such beautiful colors!'

'Rachel!'

She reached for it – out and down – her white arm, marbled with gooseflesh, her hand, held out to it, meaning to touch; he saw she had bitten her nails ragged.

'Ra—'

He sensed the raft tilt in the water as Deke moved

toward them. He reached for Rachel at the same time, meaning to pull her back, dimly aware that he didn't want Deke to be the one to do it.

Then Rachel's hand touched the water – her forefinger only, sending out one delicate ripple in a ring – and the black patch surged over it. Randy heard her gasp in the air, and suddenly the blankness left her eyes. What replaced it was agony.

The black, viscous substance ran up her arm like mud . . . and under it, Randy saw her skin dissolving. She opened her mouth and screamed. At the same moment she began to tilt outward. She waved her other hand blindly at Randy and he grabbed for it. Their fingers brushed. Her eyes met his, and she still looked hellishly like Sandy Duncan. Then she fell outward and splashed into the water.

The black thing flowed over the spot where she had landed.

'What happened?' LaVerne was screaming behind them. 'What happened? Did she fall in? What happened to her?'

Randy made as if to dive in after her and Deke pushed him backwards with casual force. 'No,' he said in a frightened voice that was utterly unlike Deke.

All three of them saw her flail to the surface. Her arms came up waving – no, not arms. One arm. The other was covered with a black membrane that hung in flaps and folds of something red and knitted with tendons, something that looked a little like a rolled roast of beef.

'Help!' Rachel screamed. Her eyes glared at them, away from them, at them, away – her eyes were like lanterns being waved aimlessly in the dark. She beat the water into

a froth. 'Help it hurts please help it hurts IT HURTS IT HURRRRR—'

Randy had fallen when Deke pushed him. Now he got up from the boards of the raft and stumbled forward again, unable to ignore that voice. He tried to jump in and Deke grabbed him, wrapping his big arms around Randy's thin chest.

'No, she's dead,' he whispered harshly. 'Christ, can't you see that? She's *dead*, Pancho.'

Thick blackness suddenly poured across Rachel's face like a drape, and her screams were first muffled and then cut off entirely. Now the black stuff seemed to bind her in crisscrossing ropes. Randy could see it sinking into her like acid, and when her jugular vein gave way in a dark, pumping jet, he saw the thing send out a pseudopod after the escaping blood. He could not believe what he was seeing, could not understand it . . . but there was no doubt, no sensation of losing his mind, no belief that he was dreaming or hallucinating.

LaVerne was screaming. Randy turned to look at her just in time to see her slap a hand melodramatically over her eyes like a silent movie heroine. He thought he would laugh and tell her this, but found he could not make a sound.

He looked back at Rachel. Rachel was almost not there anymore.

Her struggles had weakened to the point where they were really no more than spasms. The blackness oozed over her – *bigger now*, Randy thought, *it's bigger, no question about it* – with mute, muscular power. He saw her hand beat at it; saw the hand become stuck, as if in molasses on flypaper;

saw it consumed. Now there was a sense of her form only, not in the water but in the black thing, not turning but being turned, the form becoming less recognizable, a white flash – *bone*, he thought sickly, and turned away, vomiting helplessly over the side of the raft.

LaVerne was still screaming. Then there was a dull *whap!* and she stopped screaming and began to snivel.

He hit her, Randy thought. *I was going to do that, remember?*

He stepped back, wiping his mouth, feeling weak and ill. And scared. So scared he could think with only one tiny wedge of his mind. Soon he would begin to scream himself. Then Deke would have to slap him, Deke wouldn't panic, oh no. Deke was hero material for sure. *You gotta be a football hero . . . to get along with the beautiful girls*, his mind sang cheerfully. Then he could hear Deke talking to him, and he looked up at the sky, trying to clear his head, trying desperately to put away the vision of Rachel's form becoming blobbish and inhuman as that black thing ate her, not wanting Deke to slap him the way he had slapped LaVerne.

He looked up at the sky and saw the first stars shining up there – the shape of the Dipper already clear as the last white light faded out of the west. It was nearly seven-thirty.

'Oh Ceescos,' he managed. 'We are in beeg trouble thees time, I theeenk.'

'What is it?' His hand fell on Randy's shoulder, gripping and twisting painfully. 'It ate her, did you see that? It ate her, it fucking ate her up! What is it?'

'I don't know. Didn't you hear me before?'

'You're supposed to know, you're a fucking brain-ball,

you take all the fucking science courses!' Now Deke was almost screaming himself, and that helped Randy get a little more control.

'There's nothing like that in any science book I ever read,' Randy told him. 'The last time I saw anything like that was the Halloween Shock-Show down at the Rialto when I was twelve.'

The thing had regained its round shape now. It floated on the water ten feet from the raft.

'It's bigger,' LaVerne moaned.

When Randy had first seen it, he had guessed its diameter at about five feet. Now it had to be at least eight feet across.

'*It's bigger because it ate Rachel!*' LaVerne cried, and began to scream again.

'Stop that or I'm going to break your jaw,' Deke said, and she stopped – not all at once, but winding down the way a record does when somebody turns off the juice without taking the needle off the disc. Her eyes were huge things.

Deke looked back at Randy. 'You all right, Pancho?'

'I don't know. I guess so.'

'My man.' Deke tried to smile, and Randy saw with some alarm that he was succeeding – was some part of Deke enjoying this? 'You don't have any idea at all what it might be?'

Randy shook his head. Maybe it was an oil slick, after all . . . or had been, until something had happened to it. Maybe cosmic rays had hit it in a certain way. Or maybe Arthur Godfrey had pissed atomic Bisquick all over it, who knew? Who *could* know?

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'Can we swim past it, do you think?' Deke persisted, shaking Randy's shoulder.

'No! LaVerne shrieked.

'Stop it or I'm gonna smoke you, LaVerne,' Deke said, raising his voice again. 'I'm not kidding.'

'You saw how fast it took Rachel,' Randy said.

'Maybe it was hungry then,' Deke answered. 'But maybe now it's full.'

Randy thought of Rachel kneeling there on the corner of the raft, so still and pretty in her bra and panties, and felt his gorge rise again.

'You try it,' he said to Deke.

Deke grinned humorlessly. 'Oh Pancho.'

'Oh Ceesco.'

'I want to go home,' LaVerne said in a furtive whisper. 'Okay?'

Neither of them replied.

'So we wait for it to go away,' Deke said. 'It came, it'll go away.'

'Maybe,' Randy said.

Deke looked at him, his face full of a fierce concentration in the gloom. 'Maybe? What's this maybe shit?'

'We came, and it came. I saw it come – like it smelled us. If it's full, like you say, it'll go. I guess. If it still wants chow—' He shrugged.

Deke stood thoughtfully, head bent. His short hair was still dripping a little.

'We wait,' he said. 'Let it eat fish.'

Fifteen minutes passed. They didn't talk. It got colder. It was maybe fifty degrees and all three of them were in their

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underwear. After the first ten minutes, Randy could hear the brisk, intermittent clickety-click of his teeth. LaVerne had tried to move next to Deke, but he pushed her away – gently but firmly enough.

'Let me be for now,' he said.

So she sat down, arms crossed over her breasts, hands cupping her elbows, shivering. She looked at Randy, her eyes telling him he could come back, put his arm around her, it was okay now.

He looked away instead, back at the dark circle on the water. It just floated there, not coming any closer, but not going away, either. He looked toward the shore and there was the beach, a ghostly white crescent that seemed to float. The trees behind it made a dark, bulking horizon line. He thought he could see Deke's Camaro, but he wasn't sure.

'We just picked up and went,' Deke said.

'That's right,' Randy said.

'Didn't tell anyone.'

'No.'

'So no one knows we're here.'

'No.'

'Stop it!' LaVerne shouted. 'Stop it, you're scaring me!'

'Shut your pie-hole,' Deke said absently, and Randy laughed in spite of himself – no matter how many times Deke said that, it always slew him. 'If we have to spend the night out here, we do. Somebody'll hear us yelling tomorrow. We're hardly in the middle of the Australian Outback, are we, Randy?'

Randy said nothing.

'Are we?'

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'You know where we are,' Randy said. 'You know as well as I do. We turned off route 41, we came up eight miles of back road—'

'Cottages every fifty feet—'

'Summer cottages. This is October. They're empty, the whole bucking funch of them. We got here and you had to drive around the damn gate, NO TRESPASSING signs every fifty feet—'

'So? A caretaker—' Deke was sounding a little pissed now, a little off-balance. A little scared? For the first time tonight, for the first time this month, this year, maybe for the first time in his whole life? Now there was an awesome thought – Deke loses his fear-cherry. Randy was not sure it was happening, but he thought maybe it was . . . and he took a perverse pleasure in it.

'Nothing to steal, nothing to vandalize,' he said. 'If there's a caretaker, he probably pops by here on a bimonthly basis.'

'Hunters—'

'Next month, yeah,' Randy said, and shut his mouth with a snap. He had also succeeded in scaring himself.

'Maybe it'll leave us alone,' LaVerne said. Her lips made a pathetic, loose little smile. 'Maybe it'll just . . . you know . . . leave us alone.'

Deke said, 'Maybe pigs will—'

'It's moving,' Randy said.

LaVerne leaped to her feet. Deke came to where Randy was and for a moment the raft tilted, scaring Randy's heart into a gallop and making LaVerne scream again. Then Deke stepped back a little and the raft stabilized, with the left front corner (as they faced the shoreline) dipped down slightly more than the rest of the raft.

SKELETON CREW

It came with an oily, frightening speed, and as it did, Randy saw the colors Rachel had seen – fantastic reds and yellows and blues spiraling across an ebony surface like limp plastic or dark, lithe Naugahyde. It rose and fell with the waves and that changed the colors, made them swirl and blend. Randy realized he was going to fall over, fall right into it, he could feel himself tilting out—

With the last of his strength he brought his right fist up into his own nose – the gesture of a man stifling a cough, only a little high and a lot hard. His nose flared with pain, he felt blood run warmly down his face, and then he was able to step back, crying out: 'Don't look at it! Deke! Don't look right at it, the colors make you loopy!'

'It's trying to get under the raft,' Deke said grimly. 'What's this shit, Pancho?'

Randy looked – he looked very carefully. He saw the thing nuzzling the side of the raft, flattening to a shape like half a pizza. For a moment it seemed to be piling up there, thickening, and he had an alarming vision of it piling up enough to run onto the surface of the raft.

Then it squeezed under. He thought he heard a noise for a moment – a rough noise, like a roll of canvas being pulled through a narrow window – but that might have only been nerves.

'Did it go under?' LaVerne said, and there was something oddly nonchalant about her tone, as if she were trying with all her might to be conversational, but she was screaming, too. 'Did it go under the raft? Is it under us?'

'Yes,' Deke said. He looked at Randy. 'I'm going to swim for it right now,' he said. 'If it's under there I've got a good chance.'

'No!' LaVerne screamed. 'No, don't leave us here, don't—'

'I'm fast,' Deke said, looking at Randy, ignoring LaVerne completely. 'But I've got to go while it's under there.'

Randy's mind felt as if it was whizzing along at Mach two — in a greasy, nauseating way it was exhilarating, like the last few seconds before you puke into the slipstream of a cheap carnival ride. There was time to hear the barrels under the raft clunking hollowly together, time to hear the leaves on the trees beyond the beach rattling dryly in a little puff of wind, time to wonder why it had gone under the raft.

'Yes,' he said to Deke. 'But I don't think you'll make it.'

'I'll make it,' Deke said, and started toward the edge of the raft.

He got two steps and then stopped.

His breath had been speeding up, his brain getting his heart and lungs ready to swim the fastest fifty yards of his life and now his breath stopped like the rest of him, simply stopped in the middle of an inhale. He turned his head, and Randy saw the cords in his neck stand out.

'Panch—' he said in an amazed, choked voice, and then he began to scream.

He screamed with amazing force, great baritone bellows that splintered up toward wild soprano levels. They were loud enough to echo back from the shore in ghostly half-notes. At first Randy thought he was just screaming, and then he realized it was a word — no, two words, the same two words over and over: '*My foot!*' Deke was screaming. '*My foot! My foot! My foot!*'

Randy looked down. Deke's foot had taken on an odd sunken look. The reason was obvious, but Randy's mind

refused to accept it at first — it was too impossible, too insanely grotesque. As he watched, Deke's foot was being pulled down between two of the boards that made up the surface of the raft.

Then he saw the dark shine of the black thing beyond the heel and the toes, dark shine alive with swirling, malevolent colors.

The thing had his foot ('*My foot!*' Deke screamed, as if to confirm this elementary deduction. '*My foot, oh my foot, my FOOOOOOT!*'). He had stepped on one of the cracks between the boards (*step on a crack, break yer mother's back*, Randy's mind gibbered), and the thing had been down there. The thing had—

'*Pull!*' he screamed back suddenly. '*Pull, Deke, goddammit, PULL!*'

'What's happening?' LaVerne hollered, and Randy realized dimly that she wasn't just shaking his shoulder; she had sunk her spade-shaped fingernails into him like claws. She was going to be absolutely no help at all. He drove an elbow into her stomach. She made a barking, coughing noise and sat down on her fanny. He leaped to Deke and grabbed one of Deke's arms.

It was as hard as Carrara marble, every muscle standing out like the rib of a sculpted dinosaur skeleton. Pulling Deke was like trying to pull a big tree out of the ground by the roots. Deke's eyes were turned up toward the royal purple of the post-dusk sky, glazed and unbelieving, and still he screamed, screamed, screamed.

Randy looked down and saw that Deke's foot had now disappeared into the crack between the boards up to the ankle. That crack was perhaps only a quarter of

STEPHEN KING

an inch wide, surely no more than half an inch, but his foot had gone into it. Blood ran across the white boards in thick dark tendrils. Black stuff like heated plastic pulsed up and down in the crack, up and down, like a heart beating.

Got to get him out. Got to get him out quick or we're never gonna get him out at all . . . hold on, Cisco, please hold on . . .

LaVerne got to her feet and backed away from the gnarled, screaming Deke-tree in the center of the raft which floated at anchor under the October stars on Cascade Lake. She was shaking her head numbly, her arms crossed over her belly where Randy's elbow had gotten her.

Deke leaned hard against him, arms groping stupidly. Randy looked down and saw blood gushing from Deke's shin, which now tapered the way a sharpened pencil tapers to a point — only the point here was white, not black, the point was a bone, barely visible.

The black stuff surged up again, sucking, eating.

Deke wailed.

Never going to play football on that foot again, WHAT foot, ha-ha, and he pulled Deke with all his might and it was still like pulling at a rooted tree.

Deke lurched again and now he uttered a long, drilling shriek that made Randy fall back, shrieking himself, hands covering his ears. Blood burst from the pores of Deke's calf and shin; his kneecap had taken on a purple, bulging look as it tried to absorb the tremendous pressure being put on it as the black thing hau'ed Deke's leg down through the narrow crack inch by inch.

Can't help him. How strong it must be! Can't help him now, I'm sorry, Deke, so sorry—

SKELETON CREW

'Hold me, Randy,' LaVerne screamed, clutching at him everywhere, digging her face into his chest. Her face was so hot it seemed to sizzle. 'Hold me, please, won't you hold me—'

This time, he did.

It was only later that a terrible realization came to Randy: the two of them could almost surely have swum ashore while the black thing was busy with Deke — and if LaVerne refused to try it, he could have done it himself. The keys to the Camaro were in Deke's jeans, lying on the beach. He could have done it . . . but the realization that he could have never come to him until too late.

Deke died just as his thigh began to disappear into the narrow crack between the boards. He had stopped shrieking minutes before. Since then he had uttered only thick, syrupy grunts. Then those stopped, too. When he fainted, falling forward, Randy heard whatever remained of the femur in his right leg splinter in a greenstick fracture.

A moment later Deke raised his head, looked around groggily, and opened his mouth. Randy thought he meant to scream again. Instead, he voided a great jet of blood, so thick it was almost solid. Both Randy and LaVerne were splattered with its warmth and she began to scream again, hoarsely now.

'Oooog!' she cried, her face twisted in half-mad revulsion. 'Oooog! Blood! Oooog, blood! Blood!' She rubbed at herself and only succeeded in smearing it around.

Blood was pouring from Deke's eyes, coming with such force that they had bugged out almost comically with the force of the hemorrhage. Randy thought: *Talk about vitality!*

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Christ, LOOK at that! He's like a goddammed human fire hydrant! God! God! God!

Blood streamed from both of Deke's ears. His face was a hideous purple turnip, swelled shapeless with the hydrostatic pressure of some unbelievable reversal; it was the face of a man being clutched in a bear hug of monstrous and unknowable force.

And then, mercifully, it was over.

Deke collapsed forward again, his hair hanging down on the raft's bloody boards, and Randy saw with sickish amazement that even Deke's scalp had bled.

Sounds from under the raft. Sucking sounds.

That was when it occurred to his tottering, overloaded mind that he could swim for it and stand a good chance of making it. But LaVerne had gotten heavy in his arms, ominously heavy; he looked at her slack face, rolled back an eyelid to disclose only white, and knew that she had not fainted but fallen into a state of shock-unconsciousness.

Randy looked at the surface of the raft. He could lay her down, of course, but the boards were only a foot across. There was a diving board platform attached to the raft in the summertime, but that, at least, had been taken down and stored somewhere. Nothing left but the surface of the raft itself, fourteen boards, each a foot wide and twenty feet long. No way to put her down without laying her unconscious body across any number of those cracks.

Step on a crack, break your mother's back.

Shut up.

And then, tenebrously, his mind whispered: *Do it anyway. Put her down and swim for it.*

SKELETON CREW

But he did not, could not. An awful guilt rose in him at the thought. He held her, feeling the soft, steady drag on his arms and back. She was a big girl.

Deke went down.

Randy held LaVerne in his aching arms and watched it happen. He did not want to, and for long seconds that might even have been minutes he turned his face away entirely; but his eyes always wandered back.

With Deke dead, it seemed to go faster.

The rest of his right leg disappeared, his left leg stretching out further and further until Deke looked like a one-legged ballet dancer doing an impossible split. There was the wishbone crack of his pelvis, and then, as Deke's stomach began to swell ominously with new pressure, Randy looked away for a long time, trying not to hear the wet sounds, trying to concentrate on the pain in his arms. He could maybe bring her around, he thought, but for the time being it was better to have the throbbing pain in his arms and shoulders. It gave him something to think about.

From behind him came a sound like strong teeth crunching up a mouthful of candy jawbreakers. When he looked back, Deke's ribs were collapsing into the crack. His arms were up and out, and he looked like an obscene parody of Richard Nixon giving the V-for-victory sign that had driven demonstrators wild in the sixties and seventies.

His eyes were open. His tongue had popped out at Randy.

Randy looked away again, out across the lake. *Look for lights*, he told himself. He knew there were no lights over there, but he told himself that anyway. *Look for lights over*

STEPHEN KING

there, somebody's got to be staying the week in his place, fall foliage, shouldn't miss it, bring your Nikon, folks back home are going to love the slides.

When he looked back, Deke's arms were straight up. He wasn't Nixon anymore; now he was a football ref signaling that the extra point had been good.

Deke's head appeared to be sitting on the boards.

His eyes were still open.

His tongue was still sticking out.

'Oh Ceesco,' Randy muttered, and looked away again. His arms and shoulders were shrieking now, but still he held her in his arms. He looked at the far side of the lake. The far side of the lake was dark. Stars unrolled across the black sky, a spill of cold milk somehow suspended high in the air.

Minutes passed. He'll be gone now. You can look now. Okay, yeah, all right. But don't look. Just to be safe, don't look. Agreed? Agreed. Most definitely. So say we all and so say all of us.

So he looked anyway and was just in time to see Deke's fingers being pulled down. They were moving – probably the motion of the water under the raft was being transmitted to the unknowable thing which had caught Deke, and that motion was then being transmitted to Deke's fingers. Probably, probably. But it looked to Randy as if Deke was waving to him. The Cisco Kid was waving adiós. For the first time he felt his mind give a sickening wrench – it seemed to cant the way the raft itself had canted when all four of them had stood on the same side. It righted itself, but Randy suddenly understood that madness – real lunacy – was perhaps not far away at all.

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Deke's football ring – All-Conference, 1981 – slid slowly up the third finger of his right hand. The starlight rimmed the gold and played in the minute gutters between the engraved numbers, 19 on one side of the reddish stone, 81 on the other. The ring slid off his finger. The ring was a little too big to fit down through the crack, and of course it wouldn't squeeze.

It lay there. It was all that was left of Deke now. Deke was gone. No more dark-haired girls with sloe eyes, no more flicking Randy's bare rump with a wet towel when Randy came out of the shower, no more breakaway runs from midfield with fans rising to their feet in the bleachers and cheerleaders turning hysterical cartwheels along the sidelines. No more fast rides after dark in the Camaro with Thin Lizzy blaring 'The Boys Are Back in Town' out of the tape deck. No more Cisco Kid.

There was that faint rasping noise again – a roll of canvas being pulled slowly through a slit of a window.

Randy was standing with his bare feet on the boards. He looked down and saw the cracks on either side of both feet suddenly filled with slick darkness. His eyes bulged. He thought of the way the blood had come spraying from Deke's mouth in an almost solid rope, the way Deke's eyes had bugged out as if on springs as hemorrhages caused by hydrostatic pressure pulped his brain.

It smells me. It knows I'm here. Can it come up? Can it get up through the cracks? Can it? Can it?

He stared down, unaware of LaVerne's limp weight now, fascinated by the enormity of the question, wondering what the stuff would feel like when it flowed over his feet, when it hooked into him.

STEPHEN KING

The black shininess humped up almost to the edge of the cracks (Randy rose on tiptoes without being at all aware he was doing it), and then it went down. That canvasy slithering resumed. And suddenly Randy saw it on the water again, a great dark mole, now perhaps fifteen feet across. It rose and fell with the mild wavelets, rose and fell, rose and fell, and when Randy began to see the colors pulsing evenly across it, he tore his eyes away.

He put LaVerne down, and as soon as his muscles unlocked, his arms began to shake wildly. He let them shake. He knelt beside her, her hair spread across the white boards in an irregular dark fan. He knelt and watched that dark mole on the water, ready to yank her up again if it showed any signs of moving.

He began to slap her lightly, first one cheek and then the other, back and forth, like a second trying to bring a fighter around. LaVerne didn't want to come around. LaVerne did not want to pass Go and collect two hundred dollars or take a ride on the Reading. LaVerne had seen enough. But Randy couldn't guard her all night, lifting her like a canvas sack every time that thing moved (and you couldn't look at the thing too long; that was another thing). He had learned a trick, though. He hadn't learned it in college. He had learned it from a friend of his older brother's. The friend had been a paramedic in Nam, and he knew all sorts of tricks — how to catch head lice off a human scalp and make them race in a matchbox, how to cut cocaine with baby laxative, how to sew up deep cuts with ordinary needle and thread. One day they had been talking about ways to bring abysmally drunken folks around so these abysmally drunken people wouldn't puke down

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their own throats and die, as Bon Scott, the lead singer of AC/DC, had done.

'You want to bring someone around in a hurry?' the friend with the catalogue of interesting tricks had said. 'Try this.' And he told Randy the trick which Randy now used.

He leaned over and bit LaVerne's earlobe as hard as he could.

Hot, bitter blood squirted into his mouth. LaVerne's eyelids flew up like windowshades. She screamed in a hoarse, growling voice and struck out at him. Randy looked up and saw the far side of the thing only; the rest of it was already under the raft. It had moved with eerie, horrible, silent speed.

He jerked LaVerne up again, his muscles screaming protest, trying to knot into charley horses. She was beating at his face. One of her hands struck his sensitive nose and he saw red stars.

'Quit it!' he shouted, shuffling his feet onto the boards. 'Quit it, you bitch, it's under us again, quit it or I'll fucking drop you, I swear to God I will!'

Her arms immediately stopped flailing at him and closed quietly around his neck in a drowner's grip. Her eyes looked white in the swimming starlight.

'Stop it!' She didn't. 'Stop it, LaVerne, you're choking me!'

Tighter. Panic flared in his mind. The hollow clunk of the barrels had taken on a duller, muffled note — it was the thing underneath, he supposed.

'I can't breathe!'

The hold loosened a little.

'Now listen. I'm going to put you down. It's all right if you—'

But *put you down* was all she had heard. Her arms tightened in that deadly grip again. His right hand was on her back. He hooked it into a claw and raked at her. She kicked her legs, mewling harshly, and for a moment he almost lost his balance. She felt it. Fright rather than pain made her stop struggling.

'Stand on the boards.'

'No!' Her air puffed a hot desert wind against his cheek.

'It can't get you if you stand on the boards.'

'No, don't put me down, it'll get me, I know it will, I know—'

He raked at her back again. She screamed in anger and pain and fear. 'You get down or I'll drop you, LaVerne.'

He lowered her slowly and carefully, both of them breathing in sharp little whines — oboe and flute. Her feet touched the boards. She jerked her legs up as if the boards were hot.

'Put them *down!*' he hissed at her. 'I'm not Deke, I can't hold you all night!'

'Deke—'

'Dead.'

Her feet touched the boards. Little by little he let go of her. They faced each other like dancers. He could see her waiting for its first touch. Her mouth gaped like the mouth of a goldfish.

'Randy,' she whispered. 'Where is it?'

'Under. Look down.'

She did. He did. They saw the blackness stuffing the cracks, stuffing them almost all the way across the raft now. Randy sensed its eagerness, and thought she did, too.

'Randy, please—'

'Shhhh.'

They stood there.

Randy had forgotten to strip off his watch when he ran into the water, and now he marked off fifteen minutes. At a quarter past eight, the black thing slid out from under the raft again. It drew about fifteen feet off and then stopped as it had before.

'I'm going to sit down,' he said.

'No!'

'I'm tired,' he said. 'I'm going to sit down and you're going to watch it. Just remember to keep looking away. Then I'll get up and you sit down. We go like that. Here.' He gave her his watch. 'Fifteen-minute shifts.'

'It ate Deke,' she whispered.

'Yes.'

'What is it?'

'I don't know.'

'I'm cold.'

'Me too.'

'Hold me, then.'

'I've held you enough.'

She subsided.

Sitting down was heaven; not having to watch the thing was bliss. He watched LaVerne instead, making sure that her eyes kept shifting away from the thing on the water.

'What are we going to do, Randy?'

He thought.

'Wait,' he said.

At the end of fifteen minutes he stood up and let her first sit and then lie down for half an hour. Then he got

STEPHEN KING

her on her feet again and she stood for fifteen minutes. They went back and forth. At a quarter of ten, a cold rind of moon rose and beat a path across the water. At ten-thirty, a shrill, lonely cry rose, echoing across the water, and LaVerne shrieked.

'Shut up,' he said. 'It's just a loon.'

'I'm freezing, Randy - I'm numb all over.'

'I can't do anything about it.'

'Hold me,' she said. 'You've got to. We'll hold each other. We can both sit down and watch it together.'

He debated, but the cold sinking into his own flesh was now bone-deep, and that decided him. 'Okay.'

They sat together, arms wrapped around each other, and something happened - natural or perverse, it happened. He felt himself stiffening. One of his hands found her breast, cupped in damp nylon, and squeezed. She made a sighing noise, and her hand stole to the crotch of his under-pants.

He slid his other hand down and found a place where there was some heat. He pushed her down on her back.

'No,' she said, but the hand in his crotch began to move faster.

'I can see it,' he said. His heartbeat had sped up again, pushing blood faster, pushing warmth toward the surface of his chilled bare skin. 'I can watch it.'

She murmured something, and he felt elastic slide down his hips to his upper thighs. He watched it. He slid upward, forward, into her. Warmth, God, she was warm there, at least. She made a guttural noise and her fingers grabbed at his cold, clenched buttocks.

He watched it. It wasn't moving. He watched it. He

SKELETON CREW

watched it closely. The tactile sensations were incredible, fantastic. He was not experienced, but neither was he a virgin; he had made love with three girls and it had never been like this. She moaned and began to lift her hips. The raft rocked gently, like the world's hardest waterbed. The barrels underneath murmured hollowly.

He watched it. The colors began to swirl - slowly now, sensuously, not threatening; he watched it and he watched the colors. His eyes were wide. The colors were in his eyes. He wasn't cold now; he was hot now, hot the way you got your first day back on the beach in early June, when you could feel the sun tightening your winter-white skin, reddening it, giving it some

(colors)

color, some tint. First day at the beach, first day of summer, drag out the Beach Boys oldies, drag out the Ramones. The Ramones were telling you that Sheena is a punk rocker, the Ramones were telling you that you can hitch a ride to Rockaway Beach, the sand, the beach, the colors.

(moving it's starting to move)

and the feel of summer, the texture; Gary U.S. Bonds, school is out and I can root for the Yankees from the bleachers, girls in bikinis on the beach, the beach, the beach, oh do you love do you love

(love)

the beach do you love

(love I love)

firm breasts fragrant with Coppertone oil, and if the bottom of the bikini was small enough you might see some

(hair her hair HER HAIR IS IN THE OH GOD IN THE WATER HER HAIR)

STEPHEN KING

He pulled back suddenly, trying to pull her up, but the thing moved with oily speed and tangled itself in her hair like a webbing of thick black glue and when he pulled her up she was already screaming and she was heavy with it; it came out of the water in a twisting, gruesome membrane that rolled with flaring nuclear colors – scarlet-vermilion, flaring emerald, sullen ocher.

It flowed down over LaVerne's face in a tide, obliterating it.

Her feet kicked and drummed. The thing twisted and moved where her face had been. Blood ran down her neck in streams. Screaming, not hearing himself scream. Randy ran at her, put his foot against her hip, and shoved. She went flopping and tumbling over the side, her legs like alabaster in the moonlight. For a few endless moments the water frothed and splashed against the side of the raft, as if someone had hooked the world's largest bass in there and it was fighting like hell.

Randy screamed. He screamed. And then, for variety, he screamed some more.

Some half an hour later, long after the frantic splashing and struggling had ended, the loons began to scream back.

That night was forever.

The sky began to lighten in the east around a quarter to five, and he felt a sluggish rise in his spirit. It was momentary; as false as the dawn. He stood on the boards, his eyes half closed, his chin on his chest. He had been sitting on the boards until an hour ago, and had been suddenly awakened – without even knowing until then that he had fallen

SKELETON CREW

asleep, that was the scary part – by that unspeakable hissing-canvas sound. He leaped to his feet bare seconds before the blackness began to suck eagerly for him between the boards. His breath whined in and out; he bit at his lip, making it bleed.

Asleep, you were asleep, you asshole!

The thing had oozed out from under again half an hour later, but he hadn't sat down again. He was afraid to sit down, afraid he would go to sleep and that this time his mind wouldn't trip him awake in time.

His feet were still planted squarely on the boards as a stronger light, real dawn this time, filled the east and the first morning birds began to sing. The sun came up, and by six o'clock the day was bright enough for him to be able to see the beach. Deke's Camaro, bright yellow, was right where Deke had parked it, nose in to the pole fence. A bright litter of shirts and sweaters and four pair of jeans were twisted into little shapes along the beach. The sight of them filled him with fresh horror when he thought his capacity for horror must surely be exhausted. He could see *his* jeans, one leg pulled inside out, the pocket showing. His jeans looked so *safe* lying there on the sand; just waiting for him to come along and pull the inside-out leg back through so it was right, grasping the pocket as he did so the change wouldn't fall out. He could almost feel them whispering up his legs, could feel him buttoning the brass button above the fly—

(do you love yes I love)

He looked left and there it was, black, round as a checker, floating lightly. Colors began to swirl across its hide and he looked away quickly.

'Go home,' he croaked. 'Go home or go to California and find a Roger Corman movie to audition for.'

A plane droned somewhere far away, and he fell into a dozing fantasy: *We are reported missing, the four of us. The search spreads outward from Horlicks. A farmer remembers being passed by a yellow Camaro 'going like a bat out of hell.' The search centers in the Cascade Lake area. Private pilots volunteer to do a quick aerial search, and one guy, buzzing the lake in his Beechcraft Twin Bonanza, sees a kid standing naked on the raft, one kid, one survivor, one—*

He caught himself on the edge of toppling over and brought his fist into his nose again, screaming at the pain.

The black thing arrowed at the raft immediately and squeezed underneath — it could hear, perhaps, or sense . . . or *something*.

Randy waited.

This time it was forty-five minutes before it came out. His mind slowly orbited in the growing light.

(do you love yes I love rooting for the Yankees and Catfish do you love the Catfish yes I love the

(Route 66 remember the Corvette George Maharis in the Corvette Martin Milner in the Corvette do you love the Corvette

(yes I love the Corvette

(I love do you love

(so hot the sun is like a burning glass it was in her hair and it's the light I remember best the light the summer light

(the summer light of)

afternoon.

Randy was crying.

He was crying because something new had been added now — every time he tried to sit down, the thing slid under the raft. It wasn't entirely stupid then; it had either sensed or figured out that it could get at him while he was sitting down.

'Go away,' Randy wept at the great black mole floating on the water. Fifty yards away, mockingly close, a squirrel was scampering back and forth on the hood of Deke's Camaro. 'Go away, please, go anywhere, but leave me alone. I don't love you.'

The thing didn't move. Colors began to swirl across its visible surface.

(you do you do love me)

Randy tore his eyes away and looked at the beach, looked for rescue, but there was no one there, no one at all. His jeans still lay there, one leg inside out, the white lining of one pocket showing. They no longer looked to him as if someone was going to pick them up. They looked like relics.

He thought: *If I had a gun, I would kill myself now.*

He stood on the raft.

The sun went down.

Three hours later, the moon came up.

Not long after that, the loons began to scream.

Not long after *that*, Randy turned and looked at the black thing on the water. He could not kill himself, but perhaps the thing could fix it so there was no pain; perhaps that was what the colors were for.

(do you do you do you love)

He looked for it and it was there, floating, riding the waves.

STEPHEN KING

'Sing with me,' Randy croaked. 'I can root for the Yankees from the bleachers . . . I don't have to worry 'bout teachers . . . I'm so glad that school is out . . . I am gonna . . . sing and shout.'

The colors began to form and twist. This time Randy did not look away.

He whispered, 'Do you love?'

Somewhere, far across the empty lake, a loon screamed.