

# WHEN THE BIG ONE THAWS

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"Who's this? Who's this?"

The rental agent bent forward, old eyes blue and magnified behind his glasses, fingertips of his right hand reaching down, reaching forward, tapping the top of Peter's bald head.

Peter toddled back a step, popping his lips, waving his pudgy arms in excitement.

Phillip watched beside his wife from a few feet away, by the corkboard covered with thumb-tacked index cards. Men love touching babies, love putting their fingertips on them, letting the fingertips trail, knowing the baby came out between the mother's legs. Like touching the mother herself between her legs. Like trailing the fingertips up there, in there, across the pink hairs on the bald head, while everyone stands around smiling.

"Who are you? Who are you?"

"Peter." Phillip walked over, leaving Jill. "That's his name." He smiled at the rental agent, picked Peter up in his arms, away from the fingertips with their large nails, holding the sour milk weight against his chest, right hand going up behind the snaky sideways leans of the neck to support the weight of the head.

The rental agent swiveled around in his dark suit, grinning open-mouthed at Jill.

The apartment was the converted loft of a grey-boarded carriage house. They inspected the carriage house first, the rental agent swinging one side of the entrance out, stepping backwards in his galoshes, the tall, wooden door wobbling its height. Inside, a floor of frozen mud made blacker by shallow snow drifts, blown in against long-ago imprints of tire treads and boot prints. Three absurdly large metal hoops leaned against the side of the first stall, coos and flappings from somewhere high up in the brand-new rafters, unseen.

"Did you even want to go inside, Mr. Lowe?"

"The structure's sound?"

"It's built to code. The apartment."

Swinging the tall door shut again, the rental agent slapped his gloved hands

against each other, squinting at Phillip and Jill, then jerked his forehead back at the long, rutted driveway they had bounced down. "Lots of privacy. You can be as loud as you want, here."

Access to the apartment was up a zig-zagging interior stair added at the time of the renovation. Their boots sounded hollower with each turn.

The agent stopped below the top step, inserting one of a ring of keys into the shiny brass lock, twisting right, pushing the door open with his fingertips, grinning at the Lowes. "Go first. Go ahead."

They stepped up into a small kitchen. Faint smell of vinyl glue, and caulking. Above the aluminum sink, a sensible, square window showed the coniferous tops of pine trees, boughs weighed down under the white, sandpapery glistenings of snow.

Jill turned around and around, long red hair swinging behind her blue-eyed appraisal. "I like it." She glanced up into Phillip's eyes. "It's small, but that's a great view."

"Let's see the rest of it."

After walking Indian-style through all the bright, empty rooms the three of them stood in the largest, the living room.

A wide picture window overlooked the frozen lawn below, black, winding driveway to the right, disappearing into sky-profiled pines; shorter, leafless deciduous trees to the left, and beyond their black trunks, a frosted pond.

The agent came up, a head shorter, alongside Phillip. "When the summer comes, you can get all kinds of fiddleheads down there, down by the shore of that pond. Steam 'em, and they taste like asparagus."

Jill joined them. "So that is a pond? I thought it might just be a clearing covered with snow." She was standing on the other side of the agent, looking down through the wide glass, down into the near distance, at the shrubs surrounding the flat white emptiness.

"So why's the place so cheap? Isn't that what always gets asked at this point in the story?"

The agent covered his chin with his right hand, giving Phillip a sly look. "Yeah, it sure is." His blue eyes lifted until the black pupils clicked on Phillips'. "There's stories about that pond down there. Are they true?" He gave an elaborate shrug, twisting his head around to look at Jill on the other side of him. From below, from the way the three of them were standing, someone might think she was with him rather than with Phillip. "The story itself is stupid. The story is that down there, down in that pond, at the bottom, frozen in the mud at the bottom, is a big frog."

Phillip laughed. "A frog? That's the best you can do?"

The agent stepped backwards out from between the two of them, walking away from the window, his back to them, spreading his hands out. "That's the story."

Jill looked at the agent's back, then at Phillip, then back at the agent. "How big a frog?" She looked back at Phillip again, letting out a giggle. "I mean..."

"Supposedly, pretty big. How big?" His shoulders lifted in his overcoat again. "What happened was, last year we rented this place, and the couple living here, they claimed the frog tried to get in." He raised his eyebrows. "See, the thing is, that pond starts to thaw come Spring, and you start hearing all these little frogs come back to life. Frogs can freeze over the Winter, and when Spring comes back, they thaw out and go right on living. Did you know that? Well, with this other couple, they were middle-aged, they'd hear the little frogs start to come back to life each night while they lay in bed with their windows open, that trill or call or whatever it is frogs give out, more and more little frogs thawing all the time, until it got quite noisy at night, but it was a pleasant noisiness, a country noisiness, and then one night they heard this loud-- this very loud-- croak start up. The big one had thawed. Took him so long to thaw because he was so big. Well, every night after that they'd hear fewer and fewer of the little

frogs chirping, because supposedly the big frog was sliding on his belly along the bottom of the pond, down in the green mud, down in the wavy shadows, big and cold, eating them all, getting quicker all the time to snap in the last few. Until it reached the night when they didn't hear any little frogs at all, because they supposedly all got eaten by then. So the wife says to her husband, 'I wonder what he's gonna eat now?' Let me show you something."

He led them back down around the zig-zags of the stairs, to the front door. Right index finger out, he pointed at the door frame, by the knob. "See that big split there?" Looking closer, Phillip and Jill both noticed the nice wood had the long scar of a vertical split in it, filled in with a paler paste.

"This couple, they claimed that frog hurled itself against the door from outside, trying to get in, and split this door frame. I've repaired it since."

Phillip studied the long vertical split in the wood stretching from the floor to his neck. "A frog did that?"

"They claim. After that, they left. They were afraid that okay, maybe the frog didn't get them that time, but if it keeps eating it's going to get bigger and bigger, right? And maybe next time, or next year, it'll be big enough to break down the door and get in. Climb up the stairs. Year before that, the couple living here claimed around Spring they started seeing this large dog on their front lawn every night, looking up at their windows. Only it didn't move like a dog across the lawn."

"Let me guess. It hopped."

"They just said it moved strange. Strange enough to where they left. You asked me, I'm telling you why the rent's so cheap. Locals won't live here. And we don't get a lot of outsiders."

Jill reached out, touched the split. "Actually, we're not outsiders." She swung her eyes at Phillip. "My husband and I decided to move back here. Back to our home town."

Phillip first met Jill by the trash area of his apartment building in Portland, Maine. He was carrying his black garbage bag of single-serving frozen food containers around the brick corner of the building, stepping around the mud puddles, and there, in the wet sunlight by the battered aluminum cans, some so weather-worn they were blackening, stood this red-haired girl lighting a cigarette.

He set his big bag on top of a smaller, bright-yellow one in an unlidded container, trying to think of something witty to say, something that related to garbage, but nothing came to mind and he couldn't keep tamping down on top of his bag while he waited for inspiration, when he heard her voice behind him say, "How's it goin'?"

They talked over an hour back there, he bumming cigarettes from her halfway through. When he wasn't smoking he kept his hands jammed in his pockets, knowing he probably shouldn't but the hands felt heavy and big and awkward whenever he slid them out, to where he was concentrating more on what to do with them each moment than he was on their conversation, and her.

Her. Most people aren't gorgeous, and certainly not him, but she was perfect. Eyes, cheekbones, mouth, hair: one of those people who look like the Fall never happened. She laughed at his jokes, which he only dared tell after she had already giggled at everything else he said, really cracked up until the tears were running like sweet syrup out of her blue eyes, and her red lips stayed partly open even between laughs, trembling for the next punchline. She herself had no problems with her hands at all: they waved in the air, sometimes with her direction, sometimes on their own; occasionally she slapped the outsides of the long, baggy white shorts she was wearing with the underpads of her hands, and the solid, toned sound of her long fingers slapping against the outside of her clothed thighs made him imagine her in bed with only her tee shirt on, bare legs and red pubic hair looking twice as large as the rest of her.

She invited him to a party her friends were giving and although he hated

those things, where you're sitting on a sofa for hours drinking drinks you eventually have to make yourself while some other person you never saw before dominates the conversation, he surprised himself and accepted.

Her friends were actually pretty nice, even the males. The dozen of them gathered in her friend Audrey's orange living room, the ocean of starry black night portholed at the windows, hip-slinking cats and bamboo and rattan stuff inside, plus lots of silvery Leger prints on the wall, all of them listening to tejano music at a low volume while they talked, most of them keeping the conversation general enough so he could participate. He even took the floor a few times himself, telling stories where he was the fool, Jill leaning her shoulder against his a few times, squeezing his knee at the end of one story that got a particularly good laugh from the others in their sweaters and eyeglasses .

Afterwards, he and Jill stayed to help Audrey carry the dirty plates and drink glasses into the kitchen. Jill gave his free arm a spontaneous hug. "So, did you have a good time, soldier?" "I really did." He put the encrusted plates down. "I kept expecting some loud asshole to show up, but they never did." Audrey turned around from the sink, not wanting to miss the opportunity for a punchline. "Oh, we made a point of not inviting Raymond."

Phillip laughed. "Raymond? Who's that?" He had politely addressed the question to Audrey, but her glance towards Jill demurred the answer to her.

Jill came out of their new kitchen with pins between her lips. "Dug it feel funny bean bag in Maine?"

Phillip looked up from the chair he had been sitting in, watching Peter toddle around inside the wooden bars of his playpen. "Somewhat."

She walked across the evening dimness of their now-furnished living room, to the picture window. Outside, in the cold below, within the darkening bare branches around its shore, the frosted top of the pond

glowed with moonlight. The flare of a match summoned her yellow face in the window's black glass. "You seem depressed." She turned around, blowing the smoke sideways away from her.

He threw his right calf over the arm of his chair, still studying Peter. "When we left here, two years ago, I just felt this...mantle of weight lift off my shoulders. Like now we're finally free, finally on our own, away from everyone else. Now we can start over again." He smiled the type of smile that indicates a lot of things, but not humor. "And here we are, once again, back in Maine."

She sat on the arm of the chair that didn't have his leg flung over it. "Well, we couldn't find jobs in Colorado, though."

He looked up sideways at her from where he sat. "That 'we' is so much like you." Actually, she found plenty of jobs, to where at the end she was working two jobs a day to pay their rent and get them groceries, two good-paying jobs, as a loan officer and a cashier, while he was shaken out of job after job. "I'll call the paper factory Monday."

She slid off the arm of the chair slowly, inwards, keeping her hand under his, her wonderful weight settling on his lap. A kiss on his forehead, arm around his neck. "Phil, listen, we'll save up again, try somewhere else. Nothing says we have to stay here forever. Next time, who knows? Maybe go all the way to California. We can even start planning now."

Phillip got hard despite his depression, despite the fact he was still staring straight ahead, under the forehead kisses, at little Peter.

"Raymond's my former boyfriend." It was after Audrey's party. They were sitting on the top wooden step of the back stoop of the apartment building they both lived in on separate floors, smoking cigarettes. Since the small building was on a hill, Phillip could see down into the city of Portland itself, the suspended yellow rectangles, the heavy, red-bricked shapes under the starlight.

"Former? Really?"

"Yeah." Jill rubbed her palm on the top of his thigh. "Worried?"

He snorted. "Well, I-- we're not, I mean--"

She put a friendly arm across his shoulder, forearm against his nape, and it was the nicest gesture he had ever felt. The camaraderie of it, the light weight of the semi-embrace, the unselfconscious reaching out. "Don't worry. We went out for two years. I liked him. I'm being honest. He was wild, he was crazy, he did a lot of things I didn't dare do."

Phillip cleared his throat, which was getting congested for some reason, studying her porchlight-lit face, which rotated through profile and three-quarters profile as she talked, trying to gauge by the moments when the face relaxed in the pauses between the slight eyebrow liftings of her continuing words how she actually felt about her former boyfriend now. "I can't see you not daring to do anything."

"Yeah, maybe now. But back then, I guess I was shy." She swung her pale, angled face to look at him, look at him levelly, taking one of so many dares needed to be taken early in a relationship. "Like you. Huh?"

"I guess, well, in some ways, to a degree..." He rose to his own dare. "Yeah."

Jill slid her hand in his, like a schoolgirl. "Do you trust me?"

"Yes, I trust you."

"Will you always trust me?"

"Always."

That brief exchange was better than any kiss he had ever gotten, until he got a kiss from her twenty minutes afterwards.

He met Raymond once, later on, very briefly. By then, Jill and he were living together, planning to move to Colorado. Bony face, wide mouth. The type of man men don't like. The accidental meeting seemed to go pretty well until Raymond put a light touch of his hand on Phillip's shoulder. He had eyes few people do: the gaze that holds yours as long as it wants. "You can't keep her," he announced. He

took a step back in his long coat, arms swinging at his sides, eyes flicking up and down Phillip. "She'll want wildness back some day. Some day she'll remember the way we used to kiss, the nights we got drunk on the floor, the games in the middle of the bed. You can't keep her."

Jill's oven-mitted hand lowered the oven door. Inside, in the boxed heat, Phil's favorite dinner looked about ready, bubbles popping on the brown surface.

As the boot steps continued trudging up the zig zag of stairs she pulled off the apron with its corny cooking-related puns. She was wearing a blouse and skirt, the first time she didn't have jeans and a sweater on in two weeks, with a light touch of green mascara at her eyes and a fingertip of perfume behind each pink, translucent ear. Tony Bennett was playing on the stereo.

She timed her opening of the door so he would see her from the last landing. He swung around the corner of wall, head down, looked up from the shadows at her standing in the lit entrance to their home, her long body clothed to show each curve and hollow to its best advantage, and grinned.

Jill had no intention of asking him how it went. She'd wait for him to bring it up, in his own way. Their hug at the top of the stairs turned into a kiss, two kisses, a grateful whisper in her ear: "You do so much for me."

Sliding his coat off, looking around to see where to put it, passing it to her reaching hands, he ran fingers through his snow-wet hair. "I got it."

Her face lit up. "You did? I'm so proud of you!"

After they let go of each other he filled a glass at the sink with water. "Braxton said I was one of the best workers they ever had."

"That was nice of him."

"I start next Monday."

She lifted her red eyebrows. "Great, so we have the rest of the week alone together." She mimicked reciting a poem: "A continuation of our vacation." She hadn't started to look for work here yet, since they

both figured it would be easy for her to get a job, since she knew so many people.

Over the beef stew, served out of a wide white bowl, porcelain sides trembling with banana candlelight, she finished a forkful, swallowed, noticed the salt shaker and said, "Oh, I saw Raymond in town today."

"You did?"

"Yeah. Just briefly. Very briefly. Just, 'Hi, I thought you moved', that kind of thing."

"Oh. Hmm. What's he doing now?"

"He's still with the paper. Same old same old."

"Hmm. Did you talk long?"

"No. It was very brief."

"Where'd you see him?" He put a hot, soggy cube of beef between his lips.

"At the, the supermarket."

"While you were buying this food?"

"Yeah."

"I really appreciate you making this dinner for me."

"Oh, I really wanted to."

"So..." He didn't have any utensils in his hands at the moment. His hands waved around a little in the candlelight. "What did each of you say?"

"I was in the vegetable section and I saw him, and I didn't have any reason to talk to him, but then he got behind me in the line at the checkout, and he asked when I moved back here, and where I was staying, and I told him we had moved outside town. I didn't give him the neighborhood or anything. And he said something like good to see you again, and I got my groceries, and that was it."

"You said though that he also mentioned he was still working at the paper."

"Yeah. He said something like, 'I'm still at the paper.'"

Jill loaded the last of the plates sideways into the dishwasher, shut the door, clickingly twirled the knob, and stuffed a bath towel into the space under the door where they had noticed a leak.

Philip came out with his shirt off, nipples erect in the slight chill of the apartment. "Peter's asleep."

"Great, that's great." She cocked her ear, wagging an index finger at the slightly raised screen, at the blackness of the cold night beyond the mesh. "Listen. Hear?" Bracing his hands on either side of the aluminum sink, under the night's faint sounds of melting snow he heard a single rhythmic trill.

Her left hand rubbed up and down his bent back. "When I was a little girl I always saw robins as the harbingers of Spring." She watched the back of her hand slide up and down over his knobby spine, gold ring revolving on her finger as it rubbed over the skin. "I guess now instead it's frogs."

Phillip went down the stairs of their basement apartment in Boulder, into their low-ceilinged living room, and immediately knew something was wrong.

Jill stood in the middle of the carpet in her cut-offs, swaying her hips side to side nervously.

He tossed his keys atop the little TV they bought when he found his first job.

"Hi."

"Hi, baby." She went into the front of his body, warm and breathy, kissing him on the lips, licking the fronts of his teeth, then kissing his ear, something she never did.

"Everything OK?"

"Yeah, it sure is." A secret little smile on her lips, blue eyes holding his.

He shrugged, nervous.

"What...what in particular makes everything OK?"

Stepping back on her bare feet in their little basement living room, red-haired, leggy and fey, she lifted her loose, white and orange southwestern-designed top, showing him her shapely, belly-buttoned stomach, sloppy grin on her lips.

He grinned. "What?"

She pointed to her eye.

"I?"

She held her right hand in mid-air, thumb horizontal, index finger horizontal an inch above the thumb.

"Little word? Am?"

She pointed to her stomach.

"Nauseous?"

She pointed to her stomach.

He surprised himself, rushing forward, eyebrows at an incredible slant, tears already in his eyes, grabbing his arms around her slender wonderfulness, holding her giggles and wiggles against him, against him, careful not to press his stomach too hard at hers.

Peter stood in his wooden-barred playpen, holding onto a square bar with one hand. Googling nonsense, spittle on his lips, he suddenly let go the bar, standing on his own fat, wobbling feet.

Phillip, seated, drinking, smoking, stared at him.

In his mind, for the uncountable time, the words came out of her red lips again, her white teeth appearing and disappearing with the pronunciations. In Colorado. Shopping for blue paint. "I told you I saw Raymond just before we left Maine, didn't I? I could have sworn I did."

Why would you see him?

We bumped into each other.

Bump. Bump. Bump-bump-bump.

I could have sworn I did.

I was surprised. Audrey calling, saying, when she gets back, let her know I called. Oh. Tell her I saw asshole, and he says Colorado's the pits. Sour grapes, huh?

I could have sworn I did.

Standing in line to pay for the paint. Jill oblivious. He, counting days. We moved to Colorado two months ago.

Holding her around the waist that first night, tears in his eyes. When? When is it coming?

Well, the doctor says I'm two months pregnant. So, this is May...

Peter gurgled at Phillip.

That way he waved his right hand in the air, gleefully, like it was on fire. Did Phillip do that as a child? Scrunching one eyebrow when he was confused. Phillip

never did that. Where did that expression come from? Or did he as a kid, and grew out of it, grew out of even the memory of it?

Once again, he remembered back to that one time he met Raymond, trying to recall every gesture Raymond made, every facial expression, but all he could really remember, all that stayed in his mind, was Raymond's obnoxious habit of openly touching his crotch while he talked, standing there tall in his long hair and wide mouth, openly reaching his right hand down to tap his balls in his pants while he talked to Phillip. What a pig. What an absolute pig.

Are you going to wake up some day, and not be mine?

Are you a reminder of another, growing bigger all the time between us?

He lit another cigarette, listening to the little frogs outside, studying Peter.

"Why were you late tonight?"

Jill slid out of her lightweight coat, tapping across the kitchen floor to the sink. "I had a, the car's right front tire was low, so I drove real slow over to this gas station, and there was this line of cars waiting to get air in their tires." She drank some water from the glass she had been holding in front of her while she explained, blue eyes blinking as the water went down, as her throat bobbed.

Later, in the shadows of their bedroom, closed books on the carpet on either side of their bed, chorus of frogs at the dark windows, she rolled over under the ghostly sheets, squid-black spaghetti strap loosening off the moon glow of shoulder, and slid her long bare leg between his thighs, hands on his chest, gently balancing little kisses on his lips, right hand slipping down, pulling his cock up until it was long and rigid.

Phillip rolled her over onto her back, lifting a leg to lay it down between hers, but she touched his rising hip. "Wait. Let's try it like this."

Her hands escorting him onto his own back, she rose up on her knees in the darkness above him, spreading her legs in her kneel, settling one calf down on either

side of his hips. "Let's try it like this."  
She maneuvered his cock until it was pointing straight up, then lowered herself on it, around it, warm and wet. "Let's try it like this."

The bellow from the windows made them both jump.

Phillip raised his head from his pillow, hips still pumping up. "What the fuck..."

Jill's long-haired head, bobbing in the shadows above the bed, swung left.

The bellow again, deep-throated, immense.

Off in the hallway distance, through walls and paintings on walls, came the opening sobs of Peter's sudden awakening.

Jill was working late tonight.

Phillip had eaten alone.

He picked up the telephone. Pushed the square pads, one by one.

Fewer frogs trilled outside. Either they were gone, or were trying to be quiet, very quiet, in the mud.

"Hello?"

"Hello, is this Mrs. Barbar?"

"Yes it is. Who's this?"

"Mrs. Barbar, my name is John Steam and I represent a new baby food company called Hot Tots and we're conducting--"

"Well, I wouldn't--"

"I realize you no longer have any young ones still at home, Mrs. Barbar, but we're paying people large amounts of money and free gifts if they'll just answer a couple of questions about when they did have children, or one child, in your case. This will only--"

"But I...how would you know I had a child?"

"That's a separate department, Mrs. Barbar, but I believe they check County records, just to make sure we don't waste any of our time. This research call will only take a minute or two, and then I'm authorized to release a check to you for one hundred dollars plus gift certificates good for over four hundred dollars in name brand merchandise, such as coupons good for free

gasoline at any service station. Now you had one child, according to the Research Department's notes?"

"Yes, that true. A son."

"What we're interested in, Mrs. Barbar, is finding out if your son had any particular gestures or facial expressions as a toddler that would more or less make him stand out from other children. Gestures or facial expressions that were uniquely his, so to speak."

"Well, I...why on earth would you want to--"

"We're merchandising our new product, I believe I mentioned the name to you, Hot Tots? And we will have a very realistic painting of a baby's face on the cover of our product, and our Research Department has determined that quite a few grandparents buy food for their grandchildren, so we want to put an expression on that baby's face which will more or less match the expression on the face of the grandparents' own child when it was growing up. It's what's known in the baby food industry as a 'grabber'. Now did your own son, when he was a toddler, did he have any particular facial expressions, or any particular gestures or mannerisms, Mrs. Barbar?"

"Well, I don't...he used to giggle a lot."

"That's good. 'Giggle a lot'. Thank you. Any particular facial expressions though?"

"Not that I...he was a normal baby. He cooed a lot."

"That's great. That's great, Mrs. Barbar. Did he..did he, for instance..."  
Phillip spread his right hand over his face, closing his wet eyes, alone in the silence within, the black and crimson cathedral, the arched, potato-yellow ceilings. Did he really want to go down those dark stairs?  
"Did he, for instance, ever wave his arms around, as if they were on fire?"

"As if they were what?"

"On fire. As if they were burning. As if he were being consumed by flames. As if the flesh were sizzling and popping on his bones."

"I guess I don't remember."  
"That's fine, Mrs. Barbar."  
"Am I helping you?"  
"I don't know."

Jill tapped the long side of the wooden spoon atop the rim of the dutch oven, beef stew bits falling back into the bubbles. "Phil, do you think we should call the police?"

"And tell them what? There's a big frog in our pond?"

"Well, a really big frog."  
"They'd laugh at us."

"I'm worried about Peter."

Seated at the round table in the kitchen, he spread his arms apart. "It's ridiculous. It's just...stupid. No matter what happens, we'll deal with it. We are not going to be destroyed by something as stupid as that. Something that stupid has no power over us. We're too strong for that."

She made another downwards series of more timid-sounding taps. "I agree it's stupid, but it just seems like it's getting out of hand. I mean, what happens if it does show up on our doorway? What happens if it does start coming up the stairs?"

"It won't. It can't. It will never get into our lives. I won't let it. I swear to you."

Later, over vanilla ice cream eaten in bed in the blue darkness of television, Jill mentioned Audrey had asked her to spend the night at her place tomorrow.

"Why?"

"They're putting her dog to sleep in the morning. It'll be her first night alone, without him." She smiled quietly at him, big blue eyes sad.

Do you? Will you always?

"Okay."

"Really, Phil? Is it okay?"

"Yeah. It's fine."

From across the sheet she held his right hand in hers, palms moving over it as if molding it. "You know, you know maybe this weekend, or next weekend, we could have Audrey baby-sit Peter, and maybe the two of us could go away together somewhere. Maybe up to Canada, Nova Scotia or something."

Philip watched the molding. "That'd be nice."

The big one bellowed again from somewhere in the darkness below, bringing the outside in, to their hand-holding.

Phillip reached down into the wood-barred playpen, lifting Peter out, lowering him until his Pooh slippers touched the floor, then suddenly still holding onto him, bent awkwardly over, as the fat little legs folded downwards until the diapered ass was on the carpet.

Peter's googling interrogatories from way down there, little fingers bending over his own ear, made the apartment feel even more silent in her absence.

"You can crawl around. I have to make a phone call."

The eight o'clock roar of hunger sounded from outside, from the cold darkness.

Phillip punched the music of Audrey's number, looking around at the windows.

"Hello?"

"Audrey? This is Phil, Jill's husband."

"Oh! Hi."

"Is-- by the way, I was very sorry to hear your dog had, needed to pass on."

"My...Yeah. Yeah, it's been rough."

"Is Jill there? May I speak with her?"

"Is...it's the craziest thing. She-- we were making some brownies? And this weird thing happened with the mixer, it just like sprayed half-mixed brownie stuff all over her, so she's in the shower right now."

"Oh. Hmm. Well, I mean, could I hold on?"

"Well, I don't think that'd be a good idea."

"It wouldn't be--"

"--No, because she's going to be in there a long time. It got in her hair, and in her eyelashes and everything. It'll take a long time to get it out of her."

"Oh. Well. Would you ask her to call me, please."

"Oh, sure. Of course."

Phillip finished washing Peter in the kitchen sink, sitting his pudgy little ass beside the aluminum controls as he pressed a towel against his fat body, gently blotting the moisture, Peter's right arm waving in the air as if it were on fire.

"Why do you do that, huh? Does it feel good to do that?"

Peter stared wet-lipped at Phillip's mouth, then tracked up to his eyes like a drunk.

"I guess it must just feel good to do that."

And in the quiet of the kitchen, in the quiet of that moment, Phillip finally saw something in Peter's face. Using his outstretched right index finger, he carefully swung his son's double chin left, then right.

Phillip wasn't a gorgeous-looking man, certainly not, but in that quiet moment he looked close enough to handsome. He reached down into the sink's warm water, pulled the plug. Looked sideways at the watchful Peter, smiled. "You have my nose."

Another bellow sounded from outside. Louder than the other ones had been.

Was it getting bigger? Or closer?

Peter scrunched up his bare shoulders at the sound, baby-idiot eyes rolling around the kitchen.

"It's okay. It's just a big, stupid frog."

Picking Peter up in his arms, holding him against his chest, dampness from Peter's body getting into the front of his shirt, he carried him into the living room, hand behind the small, sideways-switching head, supporting it.

Using an elbow, he pushed the drape in the wide picture window to one side, looking way down at the lawn.

No more snow, no moonlight out tonight, only starlight.

Was there something large on the lawn?

He leaned his face closer to the glass, until the tip of his nose bent, looking down.

That large splotch down there of darkness, was that just a treetop shadow? Was it moving? Or was that just the treetop waving in the high night breeze?

"Hi, it's Phillip again, Jill's husband."

"Hi."

"Umm...is Jill there?"

"No. She went to the store."

"She did? I was hoping she would call me back after she got out of the shower."

"She had to race to the store to get a pizza before they closed. And after that, on the way back, she's stopping at an all-night laundry to get her clothes cleaned. My clothes washer's broken. All the screws fell out of the lid."

They only had one car. Jill used it to drive to Audrey's.

"What clothes are she wearing now?"

"Mine. Yeah."

"Won't the pizza get cold?"

"We'll just reheat it."

"Well, would you have her call me please? When she gets back?"

"Oh, sure."

Phillip sat on the living room carpet with Peter, who he hadn't bothered to put in pajamas yet, gently tossing straws underhand at him. As Peter's short fingers grasped each one up from the carpet, he'd beat the paper-wrapped white lengths against the fabric as though the floor were a big drum.

"Your mom's at an all-night laundry. She'll be home this morning."

The phone rang.

A loud crash sounded at the bottom of the zig-zagged stairs.

He snatched up the phone. "Hello? Jill?"

The ear-filling sound of ether and melting snow.

"Jill? Hello?"

Another thunderous crash from down below.

Phillip let the black phone receiver lower from his ears.

A third hurtle against the door down there, snaps and strains of wood rising up the zig-zagged flights.

Putting the receiver down, he walked over to the front door in the kitchen, surprised in his strides at how his calves trembled.

He stood in front of the white paneled door as if it were a taller person, looking at the brass chain slid into place, square links in a sag from door to frame.

A fourth assault from below, and a sound a lot like the door down there bursting open, bouncing off the opposite wall.

But it couldn't be.

And then no more crashes, no more wood splintering, no more bellows.

Silence.

He reached his right hand up, forward. Slid the brass end of the chain along inside its track to where the groove widened. Lifted the end of the chain out, let it drop out of his fingers, fall to a heavy swing against the white-paneled door.

Lifting up on the knob, twisting it, he swung the door open.

The flight went down fourteen steps, where it zigged out of sight to the right, behind the corner of a plain wall.

He stood at the top, white appliances behind him, the light from the kitchen falling down across the fourteen steps, bringing them out of the lowering dimness like grey rising out of black.

Turn on the hallway light?

He looked at the simple wall switch, but didn't.

Listened.

First a coolness rose up to him, the coolness of the outside, of the night, a coolness touched with the damp of the outside, of the night, of a breach.

Then the smell came up, so faint at first he had to widen his nostrils to confirm it, but soon rank enough to fill the stairwell. A raw smell, like fish, like mud.

From way down below, from around the lowering zig-zags of the stairs, he heard something shift.

Shift again.

And something about the shifting sounds, the spaces between them, or maybe their increase, told him the sounds weren't random. Deep down in his mind he knew behind the sound wasn't wind, or settling, but intelligence.

Something started clumsily, widely making its wet way up the stairs.

Another man, maybe louder and more boastful, might have turned and run. He didn't. An earlier Phillip may have turned and run. He didn't.

He stayed framed in the doorway. "You want me to face you? I'll face you."

He stood there listening to the slow, laborious ascent up the stairs, around the lower zig-zags.

At last, after so long, he heard something big and cold round that last lower corner, fourteen steps below him in the darkness.

A wide shadow, grey and green, fell across the lower five steps leading up to Phillip.

And then, hugely, hungrily, the shadow hopped. Upwards.

Pulled itself forward. Upwards.

Seven steps below Phillip.

Six.

Then a roar came out, a roar so full of fury the panes in the window above the kitchen sink behind Phillip rattled.

A roar full of frustration.

Phillip reached to the wall, flicked the light switch up.

Down below him, six steps down, a wet, fat, massive grey-green bulk filled the stairs from wall to wall, its breathing sides riding up the walls, its eyes, far apart from each other, each above the wide body in its own round tumor, blinking slowly.

The mass tried to ascend further, but its own soft bulk held it wedged where it was.

On either wall, five feet up, webbed green feet flexed.

Phillip looked down at it. He shook his head. "So there you are. After so long. Know what? Fuck you."

The eyes swiveled coldly towards his voice. The wide mouth opened, big as a car trunk, and a tongue the color of internal organs snaked out, flying up the remaining stairs.

The forked tip of the tongue quested left, right, as if it had its own eyes, inches from Phillip's waist, like a dog at the end of its leash.

"Fuck you."

The big mouth retracted the tongue, swallowing it up, slow blinks from the rotating eyes.

"Fuck. You."

The tongue shot out and up again, crimson and black, straining, questing, turning purple, ready to curl around, but still three inches too short.

Phillip laughed. "You can't reach me. You can try all you want, until your tongue falls out, but you'll never touch me.

"And furthermore," Phillip said, and he was crying by now, but a good cry, a cry that indicates a lot of things, but not sorrow, "I'm not going to call Audrey's house anymore tonight. I'm going to wait for my wife to come home in the morning, we're going to play with my son, and then we're going to kill you."

He turned around, wet-faced, nodding at Peter. Nodding at his son.

Peter toddled forward, reaching his small, pudgy hand down as he ran, and like a little pig touched his tiny balls.

Stopped in front of Phillip.

Touched his balls again.

Phillip backed up in horror.

The tongue whipped around his waist, just above his belt.

Before he could react, before his almost-handsome face could shift from the expression of joyful release, the tongue whisked him backwards in the air, whisked him down those dark stairs.