

The Road Virus

Heads North

I actually have the picture described in this story, how weird is that? My wife saw it and thought I'd like it (or at least react to it), so she gave it to me as a . . . birthday present? Christmas present? I can't remember. What I can remember is that none of my three kids liked it. I hung it in my office, and they claimed the driver's eyes followed them as they crossed the room (as a very small boy, my son Owen was similarly freaked by a picture of Jim Morrison). I like stories about pictures that change, and finally I wrote this one about my picture. The only other time I can remember being inspired to write a story based on an actual picture was "The House on Maple Street," based on a black-and-white drawing by Chris Van Allsburg. That story is in Nightmares and Dreamscapes. I also wrote a novel about a picture that changes. It's called Rose Madder, and is probably the best read of my novels (no movie, either). In that story, the Road Virus is named Norman.

Richard Kinnell wasn't frightened when he first saw the picture at the yard sale in Rosewood.

He was fascinated by it, and he felt he'd had the good luck to find something which might be very special, but fright? No. It didn't occur to him until later ("not until it was too late," as he might have

STEPHEN KING

written in one of his own numbingly successful novels) that he had felt much the same way about certain illegal drugs as a young man.

He had gone down to Boston to participate in a PEN/New England conference titled "The Threat of Popularity." You could count on PEN to come up with such subjects, Kinnell had found; it was actually sort of comforting. He drove the two hundred and sixty miles from Derry rather than flying because he'd come to a plot impasse on his latest book and wanted some quiet time to try to work it out.

At the conference, he sat on a panel where people who should have known better asked him where he got his ideas and if he ever scared himself. He left the city by way of the Tobin Bridge, then got on Route 1. He never took the turnpike when he was trying to work out problems; the turnpike lulled him into a state that was like dreamless, waking sleep. It was restful, but not very creative. The stop-and-go traffic on the coast road, however, acted like grit inside an oyster—it created a fair amount of mental activity . . . and sometimes even a pearl.

Not, he supposed, that his critics would use that word. In an issue of *Esquire* last year, Bradley Simons had begun his review of *Nightmare City* this way: "Richard Kinnell, who writes like Jeffrey Dahmer cooks, has suffered a fresh bout of projectile vomiting. He has titled this most recent mass of ejecta *Nightmare City*."

Route 1 took him through Revere, Malden, Everett, and up the coast to Newburyport. Beyond Newburyport and just south of the Massachusetts–New Hampshire border was the tidy little town of Rosewood. A mile or so beyond the town center, he saw an array of cheap-looking goods spread out on the lawn of a two-story Cape. Propped against an avocado-colored electric stove was a sign reading YARD SALE. Cars were parked on both sides of the road, creating one of those bottlenecks which travellers unaffected by the yard sale mystique curse their way through. Kinnell liked yard sales, particularly the boxes of old books you sometimes found at them. He drove through the bottleneck, parked his Audi at the head of the line of cars pointed toward Maine and New Hampshire, then walked back.

A dozen or so people were circulating on the littered front lawn of

EVERYTHING'S EVENTUAL

the blue-and-gray Cape Cod. A large television stood to the left of the cement walk, its feet planted on four paper ashtrays that were doing absolutely nothing to protect the lawn. On top was a sign reading MAKE AN OFFER—YOU MIGHT BE SURPRISED. An electrical cord, augmented by an extension, trailed back from the TV and through the open front door. A fat woman sat in a lawn chair before it, shaded by an umbrella with CINZANO printed on the colorful scalloped flaps. There was a card table beside her with a cigar box, a pad of paper, and another hand-lettered sign on it. This sign read ALL SALES CASH, ALL SALES FINAL. The TV was on, tuned to an afternoon soap opera where two beautiful young people looked on the verge of having deeply unsafe sex. The fat woman glanced at Kinnell, then back at the TV. She looked at it for a moment, then looked back at him again. This time her mouth was slightly sprung.

Ab, Kinnell thought, looking around for the liquor box filled with paperbacks that was sure to be here someplace, *a fan*.

He didn't see any paperbacks, but he saw the picture, leaning against an ironing board and held in place by a couple of plastic laundry baskets, and his breath stopped in his throat. He wanted it at once.

He walked over with a casualness that felt exaggerated and dropped to one knee in front of it. The painting was a watercolor, and technically very good. Kinnell didn't care about that; technique didn't interest him (a fact the critics of his own work had duly noted). What he liked in works of art was *content*, and the more unsettling the better. This picture scored high in that department. He knelt between the two laundry baskets, which had been filled with a jumble of small appliances, and let his fingers slip over the glass facing of the picture. He glanced around briefly, looking for others like it, and saw none—only the usual yard sale art collection of Little Bo Peeps, praying hands, and gambling dogs.

He looked back at the framed watercolor, and in his mind he was already moving his suitcase into the backseat of the Audi so he could slip the picture comfortably into the trunk.

It showed a young man behind the wheel of a muscle car—maybe a Grand Am, maybe a GTX, something with a T-top, anyway—cross-

STEPHEN KING

ing the Tobin Bridge at sunset. The T-top was off, turning the black car into a half-assed convertible. The young man's left arm was cocked on the door; his right wrist was draped casually over the wheel. Behind him, the sky was a bruise-colored mass of yellows and grays, streaked with veins of pink. The young man had lank blond hair that spilled over his low forehead. He was grinning, and his parted lips revealed teeth which were not teeth at all but fangs.

Or maybe they're filed to points, Kinnell thought. Maybe he's supposed to be a cannibal.

He liked that; liked the idea of a cannibal crossing the Tobin Bridge at sunset. In a Grand Am. He knew what most of the audience at the PEN panel discussion would have thought—*Oh, yes, great picture for Rich Kinnell; he probably wants it for inspiration, a feather to tickle his tired old gorge into one more fit of projectile vomiting*—but most of those folks were ignoramuses, at least as far as his work went, and what was more, they treasured their ignorance, cossetted it the way some people inexplicably treasured and cossetted those stupid, mean-spirited little dogs that yapped at visitors and sometimes bit the paperboy's ankles. He hadn't been attracted to this painting because he wrote horror stories; he wrote horror stories because he was attracted to things like this painting. His fans sent him stuff—pictures, mostly—and he threw most of them away, not because they were bad art but because they were tiresome and predictable. One fan from Omaha had sent him a little ceramic sculpture of a screaming, horrified monkey's head poking out of a refrigerator door, however, and that one he had kept. It was unskillfully executed, but there was an unexpected juxtaposition there that lit up his dials. This painting had some of the same quality, but it was even better. *Much* better.

As he was reaching for it, wanting to pick it up right now, this second, wanting to tuck it under his arm and proclaim his intentions, a voice spoke up behind him: "Aren't you Richard Kinnell?"

He jumped, then turned. The fat woman was standing directly behind him, blotting out most of the immediate landscape. She had put on fresh lipstick before approaching, and now her mouth had been transformed into a bleeding grin.

EVERYTHING'S EVENTUAL

"Yes, I am," he said, smiling back.

Her eyes dropped to the picture. "I should have known you'd go right to that," she said, simpering. "It's so *you*."

"It is, isn't it?" he said, and smiled his best celebrity smile. "How much would you need for it?"

"Forty-five dollars," she said. "I'll be honest with you, I started it at seventy, but nobody likes it, so now it's marked down. If you come back tomorrow, you can probably have it for thirty." The simper had grown to frightening proportions. Kinnell could see little gray spit-buds in the dimples at the corners of her stretched mouth.

"I don't think I want to take that chance," he said. "I'll write you a check right now."

The simper continued to stretch; the woman now looked like some grotesque John Waters parody. Divine does Shirley Temple. "I'm really not supposed to take checks, but *all right*," she said, her tone that of a teenage girl finally consenting to have sex with her boyfriend. "Only while you have your pen out, could you write an autograph for my daughter? Her name is Robin?"

"What a nice name," Kinnell said automatically. He took the picture and followed the fat woman back to the card table. On the TV next to it, the lustful young people had been temporarily displaced by an elderly woman gobbling bran flakes.

"Robin reads all your books," the fat woman said. "Where in the world do you get all those crazy ideas?"

"I don't know," Kinnell said, smiling more widely than ever. "They just come to me. Isn't that amazing?"

The yard sale minder's name was Judy Diment, and she lived in the house next door. When Kinnell asked her if she knew who the artist happened to be, she said she certainly did; Bobby Hastings had done it, and Bobby Hastings was the reason she was selling off the Hastingses' things. "That's the only painting he didn't burn," she said. "Poor Iris! She's the one I really feel sorry for. I don't think George cared much, really. And I *know* he didn't understand why she wants to sell the house." She rolled her eyes in her large, sweaty face—the

STEPHEN KING

old can-you-imagine-that look. She took Kinnell's check when he tore it off, then gave him the pad where she had written down all the items she'd sold and the prices she'd obtained for them. "Just make it out to Robin," she said. "Pretty please with sugar on it?" The simper reappeared, like an old acquaintance you'd hoped was dead.

"Uh-huh," Kinnell said, and wrote his standard thanks-for-being-a-fan message. He didn't have to watch his hands or even think about it anymore, not after twenty-five years of writing autographs. "Tell me about the picture, and the Hastingses."

Judy Diment folded her pudgy hands in the manner of a woman about to recite a favorite story.

"Bobby was just twenty-three when he killed himself this spring. Can you believe that? He was the tortured-genius type, you know, but still living at home." Her eyes rolled, again asking Kinnell if he could imagine it. "He must have had seventy, eighty paintings, plus all his sketchbooks. Down in the basement, they were." She pointed her chin at the Cape Cod, then looked at the picture of the fiendish young man driving across the Tobin Bridge at sunset. "Iris—that's Bobby's mother—said most of them were real bad, lots worse'n this. Stuff that'd curl your hair." She lowered her voice to a whisper, glancing at a woman who was looking at the Hastingses' mismatched silverware and a pretty good collection of old McDonald's plastic glasses in a *Honey, I Shrank the Kids* motif. "Most of them had sex stuff in them."

"Oh no," Kinnell said.

"He did the worst ones after he got on drugs," Judy Diment continued. "After he was dead—he hung himself down in the basement, where he used to paint—they found over a hundred of those little bottles they sell crack cocaine in. Aren't drugs awful, Mr. Kinnell?"

"They sure are."

"Anyway, I guess he finally just got to the end of his rope, no pun intended. He took all of his sketches and paintings out into the backyard—except for that one, I guess—and burned them. Then he hung himself down in the basement. He pinned a note to his shirt. It

EVERYTHING'S EVENTUAL

said, 'I can't stand what's happening to me.' Isn't that awful, Mr. Kinnell? Isn't that just the horriblest thing you ever heard?"

"Yes," Kinnell said, sincerely enough. "It just about is."

"Like I say, I think George would go right on living in the house if he had his druthers," Judy Diment said. She took the sheet of paper with Robin's autograph on it, held it up next to Kinnell's check, and shook her head, as if the similarity of the signatures amazed her. "But men are different."

"Are they?"

"Oh, yes, much less sensitive. By the end of his life, Bobby Hastings was just skin and bone, dirty all the time—you could smell him—and he wore the same Tee-shirt, day in and day out. It had a picture of the Led Zeppelins on it. His eyes were red, he had a scraggle on his cheeks that you couldn't quite call a beard, and his pimples were coming back, like he was a teenager again. But she loved him, because a mother's love sees past all those things."

The woman who had been looking at the silverware and the glasses came over with a set of Star Wars placemats. Mrs. Diment took five dollars for them, wrote the sale carefully down on her pad below "ONE DOZ. ASSORTED POTHOLDERS & HOTPADS," then turned back to Kinnell.

"They went out to Arizona," she said, "to stay with Iris's folks. I know George is looking for work out there in Flagstaff—he's a draftsman—but I don't know if he's found any yet. If he has, I suppose we might not ever see them again here in Rosewood. She marked out all the stuff she wanted me to sell—Iris did—and told me I could keep twenty per cent for my trouble. I'll send a check for the rest. There won't be much." She sighed.

"The picture is great," Kinnell said.

"Yeah, too bad he burned the rest, because most of this other stuff is your standard yard sale crap, pardon my French. What's that?"

Kinnell had turned the picture around. There was a length of Dymotape pasted to the back.

"A title, I think."

"What does it say?"

STEPHEN KING

He grabbed the picture by the sides and held it up so she could read it for herself. This put the picture at eye-level to him, and he studied it eagerly, once again taken by the simpleminded weirdness of the subject: kid behind the wheel of a muscle car, a kid with a nasty, knowing grin that revealed the filed points of an even nastier set of teeth.

It fits, he thought. If ever a title fitted a painting, this one does.

"*The Road Virus Heads North,*" she read. "I never noticed that when my boys were lugging stuff out. *Is it the title, do you think?*"

"Must be." Kinnell couldn't take his eyes off the blond kid's grin. *I know something, the grin said. I know something you never will.*

"Well, I guess you'd have to believe the fella who did this was high on drugs," she said, sounding upset—authentically upset, Kinnell thought. "No wonder he could kill himself and break his mamma's heart."

"I've got to be heading north myself," Kinnell said, tucking the picture under his arm. "Thanks for—"

"Mr. Kinnell?"

"Yes?"

"Can I see your driver's license?" She apparently found nothing ironic or even amusing in this request. "I ought to write the number on the back of your check."

Kinnell put the picture down so he could dig for his wallet. "Sure. You bet."

The woman who'd bought the Star Wars placemats had paused on her way back to her car to watch some of the soap opera playing on the lawn TV. Now she glanced at the picture, which Kinnell had propped against his shins.

"Ag," she said. "Who'd want an ugly old thing like that? I'd think about it every time I turned the lights out."

"What's wrong with that?" Kinnell asked.

Kinnell's Aunt Trudy lived in Wells, which is about six miles north of the Maine–New Hampshire border. Kinnell pulled off at the exit which circled the bright green Wells water tower, the one with the comic sign on it (KEEP MAINE GREEN, BRING MONEY in letters four feet

EVERYTHING'S EVENTUAL

high), and five minutes later he was turning into the driveway of her neat little saltbox house. No TV sinking into the lawn on paper ash-trays here, only Aunt Trudy's amiable masses of flowers. Kinnell needed to pee and hadn't wanted to take care of that in a roadside rest-stop when he could come here, but he also wanted an update on all the family gossip. Aunt Trudy retailed the best; she was to gossip what Zabar's is to deli. Also, of course, he wanted to show her his new acquisition.

She came out to meet him, gave him a hug, and covered his face with her patented little birdy-kisses, the ones that had made him shiver all over as a kid.

"Want to see something?" he asked her. "It'll blow your pantyhose off."

"What a charming thought," Aunt Trudy said, clasping her elbows in her palms and looking at him with amusement.

He opened the trunk and took out his new picture. It affected her, all right, but not in the way he had expected. The color fell out of her face in a sheet—he had never seen anything quite like it in his entire life. "It's horrible," she said in a tight, controlled voice. "I hate it. I suppose I can see what attracted you to it, Richie, but what you play at, it does for real. Put it back in your trunk, like a good boy. And when you get to the Saco River, why don't you pull over into the breakdown lane and throw it in?"

He gaped at her. Aunt Trudy's lips were pressed tightly together to stop them trembling, and now her long, thin hands were not just clasping her elbows but clutching them, as if to keep her from flying away. At that moment she looked not sixty-one but ninety-one.

"Auntie?" Kinnell spoke tentatively, not sure what was going on here. "Auntie, what's wrong?"

"*That*," she said, unlocking her right hand and pointing at the picture. "I'm surprised you don't feel it more strongly yourself, an imaginative guy like you."

Well, he felt *something*, obviously he had, or he never would have unlimbered his checkbook in the first place. Aunt Trudy was feeling something else, though . . . or something *more*. He turned the picture

STEPHEN KING

around so he could see it (he had been holding it out for her, so the side with the Dymotaped title faced him), and looked at it again. What he saw hit him in the chest and belly like a one-two punch.

The picture had *changed*, that was punch number one. Not much, but it had clearly changed. The young blond man's smile was wider, revealing more of those filed cannibal-teeth. His eyes were squinted down more, too, giving his face a look which was more knowing and nastier than ever.

The degree of a smile . . . the vista of sharpened teeth widening slightly . . . the tilt and squint of the eyes . . . all pretty subjective stuff. A person could be mistaken about things like that, and of course he hadn't really *studied* the painting before buying it. Also, there had been the distraction of Mrs. Diment, who could probably talk the cock off a brass monkey.

But there was also punch number two, and that *wasn't* subjective. In the darkness of the Audi's trunk, the blond young man had turned his left arm, the one cocked on the door, so that Kinnell could now see a tattoo which had been hidden before. It was a vine-wrapped dagger with a bloody tip. Below it were words. Kinnell could make out DEATH BEFORE, and he supposed you didn't have to be a big best-selling novelist to figure out the word that was still hidden. DEATH BEFORE DISHONOR was, after all, just the sort of a thing a hoodoo travelling man like this was apt to have on his arm. *And an ace of spades on the other one*, Kinnell thought.

"You hate it, don't you, Auntie?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, and now he saw an even more amazing thing: she had turned away from him, pretending to look out at the street (which was dozing and deserted in the hot afternoon sunlight) so she wouldn't have to look at the picture. "In fact, Auntie *loathes* it. Now put it away and come on into the house. I'll bet you need to use the bathroom."

Aunt Trudy recovered her *savoir-faire* almost as soon as the watercolor was back in the trunk. They talked about Kinnell's mother (Pasadena), his sister (Baton Rouge), and his ex-wife, Sally (Nashua).

EVERYTHING'S EVENTUAL

Sally was a space-case who ran an animal shelter out of a double-wide trailer and published two newsletters each month. *Survivors* was filled with astral info and supposedly true tales of the spirit world; *Visitors* contained the reports of people who'd had close encounters with space aliens. Kinnell no longer went to fan conventions which specialized in fantasy and horror. One Sally in a lifetime, he thought, was enough.

When Aunt Trudy walked him back out to the car, it was four-thirty and he'd turned down the obligatory dinner invitation. "I can get most of the way back to Derry in daylight, if I leave now."

"Okay," she said. "And I'm sorry I was so mean about your picture. Of course you like it, you've always liked your . . . your oddities. It just hit me the wrong way. That awful *face*." She shuddered. "As if we were looking at him . . . and he was looking right back."

Kinnell grinned and kissed the tip of her nose. "You've got quite an imagination yourself, sweetheart."

"Of course, it runs in the family. Are you sure you don't want to use the facility again before you go?"

He shook his head. "That's not why I stop, anyway, not really."

"Oh? Why do you?"

He grinned. "Because you know who's being naughty and who's being nice. And you're not afraid to share what you know."

"Go on, get going," she said, pushing at his shoulder but clearly pleased. "If I were you, I'd want to get home quick. I wouldn't want that nasty guy riding along behind *me* in the dark, even in the trunk. I mean, did you see his teeth? *Ag!*"

He got on the turnpike, trading scenery for speed, and made it as far as the Gray service area before deciding to have another look at the picture. Some of his aunt's unease had transmitted itself to him like a germ, but he didn't think that was really the problem. The problem was his perception that the picture had changed.

The service area featured the usual gourmet chow—burgers by Roy Rogers, cones by TCBY—and had a small, littered picnic and dog-walking area at the rear. Kinnell parked next to a van with Missouri

STEPHEN KING

plates, drew in a deep breath, let it out. He'd driven to Boston in order to kill some plot gremlins in the new book, which was pretty ironic. He'd spent the ride down working out what he'd say on the panel if certain tough questions were tossed at him, but none had been—once they'd found out he didn't *know* where he got his ideas, and yes, he *did* sometimes scare himself, they'd only wanted to know how you got an agent.

And now, heading back, he couldn't think of anything but the damned picture.

Had it changed? If it had, if the blond kid's arm had moved enough so he, Kinnell, could read a tattoo which had been partly hidden before, then he could write a column for one of Sally's magazines. Hell, a four-part series. If, on the other hand, it *wasn't* changing, then . . . what? He was suffering a hallucination? Having a breakdown? That was crap. His life was pretty much in order, and he felt good. *Had*, anyway, until his fascination with the picture had begun to waver into something else, something darker.

"Ah, fuck, you just saw it wrong the first time," he said out loud as he got out of the car. Well, maybe. Maybe. It wouldn't be the first time his head had screwed with his perceptions. That was also a part of what he did. Sometimes his imagination got a little . . . well . . .

"Feisty," Kinnell said, and opened the trunk. He took the picture out of the trunk and looked at it, and it was during the space of the ten seconds when he looked at it without remembering to breathe that he became authentically afraid of the thing, afraid the way you were afraid of a sudden dry rattle in the bushes, afraid the way you were when you saw an insect that would probably sting if you provoked it.

The blond driver was grinning insanely at him now—yes, at *him*, Kinnell was sure of it—with those filed cannibal-teeth exposed all the way to the gumlines. His eyes simultaneously glared and laughed. And the Tobin Bridge was gone. So was the Boston skyline. So was the sunset. It was almost dark in the painting now, the car and its wild rider illuminated by a single streetlamp that ran a buttery glow across the road and the car's chrome. It looked to Kinnell as if the car (he was pretty sure it was a Grand Am) was on the edge of a small

EVERYTHING'S EVENTUAL

town on Route 1, and he was pretty sure he knew what town it was—he had driven through it himself only a few hours ago.

“Rosewood,” he muttered. “That’s Rosewood. I’m pretty sure.”

The Road Virus was heading north, all right, coming up Route 1 just as he had. The blond’s left arm was still cocked out the window, but it had rotated enough back toward its original position so that Kinnell could no longer see the tattoo. But he knew it was there, didn’t he? Yes, you bet.

The blond kid looked like a Metallica fan who had escaped from a mental asylum for the criminally insane.

“Jesus,” Kinnell whispered, and the word seemed to come from someplace else, not from him. The strength suddenly ran out of his body, ran out like water from a bucket with a hole in the bottom, and he sat down heavily on the curb separating the parking lot from the dog-walking zone. He suddenly understood that this was the truth he’d missed in all his fiction, this was how people really reacted when they came face-to-face with something which made no rational sense. You felt as if you were bleeding to death, only inside your head.

“No wonder the guy who painted it killed himself,” he croaked, still staring at the picture, at the ferocious grin, at the eyes that were both shrewd and stupid.

There was a note pinned to his shirt, Mrs. Diment had said. “I can’t stand what’s happening to me.” Isn’t that awful, Mr. Kinnell?

Yes, it was awful, all right.

Really awful.

He got up, gripping the picture by its top, and strode across the dog-walking area. He kept his eyes trained strictly in front of him, looking for canine land mines. He did not look down at the picture. His legs felt trembly and untrustworthy, but they seemed to support him all right. Just ahead, close to the belt of trees at the rear of the service area, was a pretty young thing in white shorts and a red halter. She was walking a cocker spaniel. She began to smile at Kinnell, then saw something in his face that straightened her lips out in a hurry. She headed left, and fast. The cocker didn’t want to go that fast, so she dragged it, coughing, in her wake.

STEPHEN KING

The scrubby pines behind the service area sloped down to a boggy acre that stank of plant and animal decomposition. The carpet of pine-needles was a road-litter fallout zone: burger wrappers, paper soft-drink cups, TCBY napkins, beer cans, empty wine-cooler bottles, cigarette butts. He saw a used condom lying like a dead snail next to a torn pair of panties with the word TUESDAY stitched on them in cur-sive girly-girl script.

Now that he was here, he chanced another look down at the picture. He steeled himself for further changes—even for the possibility that the painting would be in motion, like a movie in a frame—but there was none. There didn't have to be, Kinnell realized; the blond kid's face was enough. That stone-crazy grin. Those pointed teeth. The face said, *Hey, old man, guess what? I'm done fucking with civilization. I'm a representative of the real generation X, the next millennium is right here behind the wheel of this fine, high-steppin' mo-sheen.*

Aunt Trudy's initial reaction to the painting had been to advise Kinnell that he should throw it into the Saco River. Auntie had been right. The Saco was now almost twenty miles behind him, but . . .

"This'll do," he said. "I think this'll do just fine."

He raised the picture over his head like a guy holding up some kind of sports trophy for the postgame photographers and then heaved it down the slope. It flipped over twice, the frame catching winks of hazy late-day sun, then struck a tree. The glass facing shattered. The picture fell to the ground and then slid down the dry, needle-carpeted slope, as if down a chute. It landed in the bog, one corner of the frame protruding from a thick stand of reeds. Otherwise, there was nothing visible but the strew of broken glass, and Kinnell thought that went very well with the rest of the litter.

He turned and went back to his car, already picking up his mental trowel. He would wall this incident off in its own special niche, he thought . . . and it occurred to him that that was probably what *most* people did when they ran into stuff like this. Liars and wannabees (or maybe in this case they were wannasees) wrote up their fantasies for publications like *Survivors* and called them truth; those who blundered into authentic occult phenomena kept their mouths shut and used

EVERYTHING'S EVENTUAL

those trowels. Because when cracks like this appeared in your life, you had to do something about them; if you didn't, they were apt to widen and sooner or later everything would fall in.

Kinnell glanced up and saw the pretty young thing watching him apprehensively from what she probably hoped was a safe distance. When she saw him looking at her, she turned around and started toward the restaurant building, once more dragging her cocker spaniel behind her and trying to keep as much sway out of her hips as possible.

You think I'm crazy, don't you, pretty girl? Kinnell thought. He saw he had left his trunk lid up. It gaped like a mouth. He slammed it shut. *But I'm not crazy. Absolutely not. I just made a little mistake, that's all. Stopped at a yard sale I should have passed up. Anyone could have done it. You could have done it. And that picture—*

"*What picture?*" Rich Kinnell asked the hot summer evening, and tried on a smile. "I don't see any picture."

He slid behind the wheel of his Audi and started the engine. He looked at the fuel gauge and saw it had dropped under a half. He was going to need gas before he got home, but he thought he'd fill the tank a little farther up the line. Right now all he wanted to do was to put a belt of miles—as thick a one as possible—between him and the discarded painting.

Once outside the city limits of Derry, Kansas Street becomes Kansas Road. As it approaches the incorporated town limits (an area that is actually open countryside), it becomes Kansas Lane. Not long after, Kansas Lane passes between two fieldstone posts. Tar gives way to gravel. What is one of Derry's busiest downtown streets eight miles east of here has become a driveway leading up a shallow hill, and on moonlit summer nights it glimmers like something out of an Alfred Noyes poem. At the top of the hill stands an angular, handsome barn-board structure with reflectorized windows, a stable that is actually a garage, and a satellite dish tilted at the stars. A waggish reporter from the *Derry News* once called it the House that Gore Built . . . *not* meaning the vice president of the United States. Richard Kinnell sim-

STEPHEN KING

ply called it home, and he parked in front of it that night with a sense of weary satisfaction. He felt as if he had lived through a week's worth of time since getting up in the Boston Harbor hotel that morning at nine o'clock.

No more yard sales, he thought, looking up at the moon. *No more yard sales ever.*

"Amen," he said, and started toward the house. He probably should stick the car in the garage, but the hell with it. What he wanted right now was a drink, a light meal—something microwaveable—and then sleep. Preferably the kind without dreams. He couldn't wait to put this day behind him.

He stuck his key in the lock, turned it, and punched 3817 to silence the warning bleep from the burglar-alarm panel. He turned on the front-hall light, stepped through the door, pushed it shut behind him, began to turn, saw what was on the wall where his collection of framed book covers had been just two days ago, and screamed. In his *head* he screamed. Nothing actually came out of his mouth but a harsh exhalation of air. He heard a thump and a tuneless little jingle as his keys fell out of his relaxing hand and dropped to the carpet between his feet.

The Road Virus Heads North was no longer in the puckerbrush behind the Gray turnpike service area.

It was mounted on his entry wall.

It had changed yet again. The car was now parked in the driveway of the yard sale yard. The goods were still spread out everywhere—glassware and furniture and ceramic knickknacks (Scottie dogs smoking pipes, bare-assed toddlers, winking fish), but now they gleamed beneath the light of the same skullface moon that rode in the sky above Kinnell's house. The TV was still there, too, and it was still on, casting its own pallid radiance onto the grass, and what lay in front of it, next to an overturned lawn chair. Judy Diment was on her back, and she was no longer all there. After a moment, Kinnell saw the rest. It was on the ironing board, dead eyes glowing like fifty-cent pieces in the moonlight.

The Grand Am's taillights were a blur of red-pink watercolor paint.

EVERYTHING'S EVENTUAL

It was Kinnell's first look at the car's back deck. Written across it in Old English letters were three words: THE ROAD VIRUS.

Makes perfect sense, Kinnell thought numbly. Not him, his car. Except for a guy like this, there's probably not much difference.

"This isn't happening," he whispered, except it was. Maybe it *wouldn't* have happened to someone a little less open to such things, but it *was* happening. And as he stared at the painting he found himself remembering the little sign on Judy Diment's card table. ALL SALES CASH, it had said (although she had taken *his* check, only adding his driver's license ID number for safety's sake). And it had said something else, too.

ALL SALES FINAL.

Kinnell walked past the picture and into the living room. He felt like a stranger inside his own body, and he sensed part of his mind groping around for the trowel he had used earlier. He seemed to have misplaced it.

He turned on the TV, then the Toshiba satellite tuner which sat on top of it. He turned to V-14, and all the time he could feel the picture out there in the hall, pushing at the back of his head. The picture that had somehow beaten him here.

"Must have known a shortcut," Kinnell said, and laughed.

He hadn't been able to see much of the blond in this version of the picture, but there had been a blur behind the wheel which Kinnell assumed had been him. The Road Virus had finished his business in Rosewood. It was time to move north. Next stop—

He brought a heavy steel door down on that thought, cutting it off before he could see all of it. "After all, I could still be imagining all this," he told the empty living room. Instead of comforting him, the hoarse, shaky quality of his voice frightened him even more. "This could be . . ." But he couldn't finish. All that came to him was an old song, belted out in the pseudo-hip style of some early fifties Sinatra clone: *This could be the start of something BIG . . .*

The tune oozing from the TV's stereo speakers wasn't Sinatra but Paul Simon, arranged for strings. The white computer type on the blue screen said WELCOME TO NEW ENGLAND NEWSWIRE. There were

STEPHEN KING

ordering instructions below this, but Kinnell didn't have to read them; he was a Newswire junkie and knew the drill by heart. He dialed, punched in his MasterCard number, then 508.

"You have ordered Newswire for [slight pause] central and northern Massachusetts," the robot voice said. "Thank you very m—"

Kinnell dropped the phone back into the cradle and stood looking at the New England Newswire logo, snapping his fingers nervously. "Come on," he said. "Come on, come on."

The screen flickered then, and the blue background became green. Words began scrolling up, something about a house fire in Taunton. This was followed by the latest on a dog-racing scandal, then tonight's weather—clear and mild. Kinnell was starting to relax, starting to wonder if he'd really seen what he thought he'd seen on the entryway wall or if it had been a bit of travel-induced fugue, when the TV beeped shrilly and the words **BREAKING NEWS** appeared. He stood watching the caps scroll up.

NENphaug19/8:40P A ROSEWOOD WOMAN HAS BEEN BRUTALLY MURDERED WHILE DOING A FAVOR FOR AN ABSENT FRIEND. 38-YEAR-OLD JUDITH DIMENT WAS SAVEGELY HACKED TO DEATH ON THE LAWN OF HER NEIGHBOR'S HOUSE, WHERE SHE HAD BEEN CONDUCTING A YARD SALE. NO SCREAMS WERE HEARD AND MRS. DIMENT WAS NOT FOUND UNTIL EIGHT O'CLOCK, WHEN A NEIGHBOR ACROSS THE STREET CAME OVER TO COMPLAIN ABOUT LOUD TELEVISION NOISE. THE NEIGHBOR, MATTHEW GRAVES, SAID THAT MRS. DIMENT HAD BEEN DECAPITATED. "HER HEAD WAS ON THE IRONING BOARD," HE SAID. "IT WAS THE MOST AWFUL THING I'VE EVER SEEN IN MY LIFE." GRAVES SAID HE HEARD NO SIGNS OF A STRUGGLE, ONLY THE TV AND, SHORTLY BEFORE FINDING THE BODY, A LOUD CAR, POSSIBLY EQUIPPED WITH A GLASSPACK MUFFLER, ACCELERATING AWAY FROM THE VICINITY ALONG ROUTE ONE. SPECULATION THAT THIS VEHICLE MAY HAVE BELONGED TO THE KILLER—

Except that wasn't speculation; that was a simple fact.

Breathing hard, not quite panting, Kinnell hurried back into the entryway. The picture was still there, but it had changed once more. Now it showed two glaring white circles—headlights—with the dark shape of the car hulking behind them.

EVERYTHING'S EVENTUAL

He's on the move again, Kinnell thought, and Aunt Trudy *was* on top of his mind now—sweet Aunt Trudy, who always knew who had been naughty and who had been nice. Aunt Trudy, who lived in Wells, no more than forty miles from Rosewood.

“God, please God, please send him by the coast road,” Kinnell said, reaching for the picture. Was it his imagination or were the headlights farther apart now, as if the car were actually moving before his eyes . . . but stealthily, the way the minute hand moved on a pocket watch? “Send him by the coast road, please.”

He tore the picture off the wall and ran back into the living room with it. The screen was in place before the fireplace, of course; it would be at least two months before a fire was wanted in here. Kinnell batted it aside and threw the painting in, breaking the glass fronting—which he had already broken once, at the Gray service area—against the firedogs. Then he pelted for the kitchen, wondering what he would do if this didn't work either.

It has to, he thought. *It will because it has to, and that's all there is to it.*

He opened the kitchen cabinets and pawed through them, spilling the oatmeal, spilling a canister of salt, spilling the vinegar. The bottle broke open on the counter and assaulted his nose and eyes with the high stink.

Not there. What he wanted wasn't there.

He raced into the pantry, looked behind the door—nothing but a plastic bucket and an O Cedar—and then on the shelf by the dryer. There it was, next to the briquets.

Lighter fluid.

He grabbed it and ran back, glancing at the telephone on the kitchen wall as he hurried by. He wanted to stop, wanted to call Aunt Trudy. Credibility wasn't an issue with her; if her favorite nephew called and told her to get out of the house, to get out *right now*, she would do it . . . but what if the blond kid followed her? Chased her?

And he would. Kinnell *knew* he would.

He hurried across the living room and stopped in front of the fireplace.

“Jesus,” he whispered. “Jesus, no.”

STEPHEN KING

The picture beneath the splintered glass no longer showed oncoming headlights. Now it showed the Grand Am on a sharply curving piece of road that could only be an exit ramp. Moonlight shone like liquid satin on the car's dark flank. In the background was a water tower, and the words on it were easily readable in the moonlight. KEEP MAINE GREEN, they said. BRING MONEY.

Kinnell didn't hit the picture with the first squeeze of lighter fluid; his hands were shaking badly and the aromatic liquid simply ran down the unbroken part of the glass, blurring the Road Virus's back deck. He took a deep breath, aimed, then squeezed again. This time the lighter fluid squirted in through the jagged hole made by one of the firedogs and ran down the picture, cutting through the paint, making it run, turning a Goodyear Wide Oval into a sooty teardrop.

Kinnell took one of the ornamental matches from the jar on the mantel, struck it on the hearth, and poked it in through the hole in the glass. The painting caught at once, fire billowing up and down across the Grand Am and the water tower. The remaining glass in the frame turned black, then broke outward in a shower of flaming pieces. Kinnell crunched them under his sneakers, putting them out before they could set the rug on fire.

He went to the phone and punched in Aunt Trudy's number, unaware that he was crying. On the third ring, his aunt's answering machine picked up. "Hello," Aunt Trudy said, "I know it encourages the burglars to say things like this, but I've gone up to Kennebunk to watch the new Harrison Ford movie. If you intend to break in, please don't take my china pigs. If you want to leave a message, do so at the beep."

Kinnell waited, then, keeping his voice as steady as possible, he said: "It's Richie, Aunt Trudy. Call me when you get back, okay? No matter how late."

He hung up, looked at the TV, then dialed Newswire again, this time punching in the Maine area code. While the computers on the other end processed his order, he went back and used a poker to jab at the blackened, twisted thing in the fireplace. The stench was

EVERYTHING'S EVENTUAL

ghastly—it made the spilled vinegar smell like a flowerpatch in comparison—but Kinnell found he didn't mind. The picture was entirely gone, reduced to ash, and that made it worthwhile.

What if it comes back again?

"It won't," he said, putting the poker back and returning to the TV. "I'm sure it won't."

But every time the news scroll started to recycle, he got up to check. The picture was just ashes on the hearth . . . and there was no word of elderly women being murdered in the Wells-Saco-Kennebunk area of the state. Kinnell kept watching, almost expecting to see A GRAND AM MOVING AT HIGH SPEED CRASHED INTO A KENNEBUNK MOVIE THEATER TONIGHT, KILLING AT LEAST TEN, but nothing of the sort showed up.

At a quarter of eleven the telephone rang. Kinnell snatched it up. "Hello?"

"It's Trudy, dear. Are you all right?"

"Yes, fine."

"You don't *sound* fine," she said. "Your voice sounds trembly and . . . funny. What's wrong? What is it?" And then, chilling him but not really surprising him: "It's that picture you were so pleased with, isn't it? That goddamned picture!"

It calmed him somehow, that she should guess so much . . . and, of course, there was the relief of knowing she was safe.

"Well, maybe," he said. "I had the heebie-jeebies all the way back here, so I burned it. In the fireplace."

She's going to find out about Judy Diment, you know, a voice inside warned. She doesn't have a twenty-thousand-dollar satellite hookup, but she does subscribe to the Union Leader and this'll be on the front page. She'll put two and two together. She's far from stupid.

Yes, that was undoubtedly true, but further explanations could wait until the morning, when he might be a little less freaked . . . when he might've found a way to think about the Road Virus without losing his mind . . . and when he'd begun to be sure it was really over.

"Good!" she said emphatically. "You ought to scatter the ashes,

STEPHEN KING

too!" She paused, and when she spoke again, her voice was lower. "You were worried about me, weren't you? Because you showed it to me."

"A little, yes."

"But you feel better now?"

He leaned back and closed his eyes. It was true, he did. "Uh-huh. How was the movie?"

"Good. Harrison Ford looks wonderful in a uniform. Now, if he'd just get rid of that little bump on his chin . . ."

"Good night, Aunt Trudy. We'll talk tomorrow."

"Will we?"

"Yes," he said. "I think so."

He hung up, went over to the fireplace again, and stirred the ashes with the poker. He could see a scrap of fender and a ragged little flap of road, but that was it. Fire was what it had needed all along, apparently. Wasn't that how you usually killed supernatural emissaries of evil? Of course it was. He'd used it a few times himself, most notably in *The Departing*, his haunted train station novel.

"Yes, indeed," he said. "Burn, baby, burn."

He thought about getting the drink he'd promised himself, then remembered the spilled bottle of vinegar (which by now would probably be soaking into the spilled oatmeal—what a thought). He decided he would simply go on upstairs instead. In a book—one by Richard Kinnell, for instance—sleep would be out of the question after the sort of thing which had just happened to him.

In real life, he thought he might sleep just fine.

He actually dozed off in the shower, leaning against the back wall with his hair full of shampoo and the water beating on his chest. He was at the yard sale again, and the TV standing on the paper ashtrays was broadcasting Judy Diment. Her head was back on, but Kinnell could see the medical examiner's primitive industrial stitchwork; it circled her throat like a grisly necklace. "Now this New England Newswire update," she said, and Kinnell, who had always been a vivid dreamer, could actually see the stitches on her neck stretch and relax as she spoke. "Bobby Hastings took *all* his paint-

EVERYTHING'S EVENTUAL

ings and burned them, including yours, Mr. Kinnell . . . and it is yours, as I'm sure you know. All sales are final, you saw the sign. Why, you just ought to be glad I took your check."

Burned all his paintings, yes, of course he did, Kinnell thought in his watery dream. *He couldn't stand what was happening to him, that's what the note said, and when you get to that point in the festivities, you don't pause to see if you want to except one special piece of work from the bonfire. It's just that you got something special into The Road Virus Heads North, didn't you, Bobby? And probably completely by accident. You were talented, I could see that right away, but talent has nothing to do with what's going on in that picture.*

"Some things are just good at survival," Judy Diment said on the TV. "They keep coming back no matter *how* hard you try to get rid of them. They keep coming back like viruses."

Kinnell reached out and changed the channel, but apparently there was nothing on all the way around the dial except for *The Judy Diment Show*.

"You might say he opened a hole into the basement of the universe," she was saying now. "Bobby Hastings, I mean. And this is what drove out. Nice, isn't it?"

Kinnell's feet slid then, not enough to go out from under him completely, but enough to snap him to.

He opened his eyes, winced at the immediate sting of the soap (Prell had run down his face in thick white rivulets while he had been dozing), and cupped his hands under the shower-spray to splash it away. He did this once and was reaching out to do it again when he heard something. A ragged rumbling sound.

Don't be stupid, he told himself. *All you hear is the shower. The rest is only imagination. Your stupid, overtrained imagination.*

Except it wasn't.

Kinnell reached out and turned off the water.

The rumbling sound continued. Low and powerful. Coming from outside.

He got out of the shower and walked, dripping, across his bedroom on the second floor. There was still enough shampoo in his

STEPHEN KING

hair to make him look as if it had turned white while he was dozing—as if his dream of Judy Diment had turned it white.

Why did I ever stop at that yard sale? he asked himself, but for this he had no answer. He supposed no one ever did.

The rumbling sound grew louder as he approached the window overlooking the driveway—the driveway that glimmered in the summer moonlight like something out of an Alfred Noyes poem.

As he brushed aside the curtain and looked out, he found himself thinking of his ex-wife, Sally, whom he had met at the World Fantasy Convention in 1978. Sally, who now published two newsletters out of her trailer home, one called *Survivors*, one called *Visitors*. Looking down at the driveway, these two titles came together in Kinnell's mind like a double image in a stereopticon.

He had a visitor who was definitely a survivor.

The Grand Am idled in front of the house, the white haze from its twin chromed tailpipes rising in the still night air. The Old English letters on the back deck were perfectly readable. The driver's-side door stood open, and that wasn't all; the light spilling down the porch steps suggested that Kinnell's front door was also open.

Forgot to lock it, Kinnell thought, wiping soap off his forehead with a hand he could no longer feel. *Forgot to reset the burglar alarm, too . . . not that it would have made much difference to this guy.*

Well, he might have caused it to detour around Aunt Trudy, and that was something, but just now the thought brought him no comfort.

Survivors.

The soft rumble of the big engine, probably at least a 442 with a four-barrel carb, reground valves, fuel injection.

He turned slowly on legs that had lost all feeling, a naked man with a headful of soap, and saw the picture over his bed, just as he'd known he would. In it, the Grand Am stood in his driveway with the driver's door open and two plumes of exhaust rising from the chromed tailpipes. From this angle he could also see his own front door, standing open, and a long man-shaped shadow stretching down the hall.

Survivors.

EVERYTHING'S EVENTUAL

Survivors and *visitors*.

Now he could hear feet ascending the stairs. It was a heavy tread, and he knew without having to see that the blond kid was wearing motorcycle boots. People with DEATH BEFORE DISHONOR tattooed on their arms always wore motorcycle boots, just as they always smoked unfiltered Camels. These things were like a national law.

And the knife. He would be carrying a long, sharp knife—more of a machete, actually, the sort of knife that could strike off a person's head in a single stroke.

And he would be grinning, showing those filed cannibal teeth.

Kinnell *knew* these things. He was an imaginative guy, after all.

He didn't need anyone to draw him a picture.

"No," he whispered, suddenly conscious of his global nakedness, suddenly freezing all the way around his skin. "No, please, go away." But the footfalls kept coming, of course they did. You couldn't tell a guy like this to go away. It didn't work; it wasn't the way the story was supposed to end.

Kinnell could hear him nearing the top of the stairs. Outside, the Grand Am went on rumbling in the moonlight.

The feet coming down the hall now, worn bootheels rapping on polished hardwood.

A terrible paralysis had gripped Kinnell. He threw it off with an effort and bolted toward the bedroom door, wanting to lock it before the thing could get in here, but he slipped in a puddle of soapy water and this time he *did* go down, flat on his back on the oak planks, and what he saw as the door clicked open and the motorcycle boots crossed the room toward where he lay, naked and with his hair full of Prell, was the picture hanging on the wall over his bed, the picture of the Road Virus idling in front of his house with the driver's-side door open.

The driver's-side bucket seat, he saw, was full of blood. *I'm going outside, I think*, Kinnell thought, and closed his eyes.