

FOUR OCTOBERS

*A Collection
of Novellas*

RICK HAUTALA



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*With special thanks to
all of the “Texans”
who fought side by side with me
at the Alamo.*

“I want my place, my own place, my true place in the world, my proper sphere, my thing which Nature intended me to perform when she fashioned me thus awry, and which I have vainly sought all my life-time.”

—Nathaniel Hawthorne

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Introduction

A few words are in order...

I've always considered myself primarily a novelist. I know a lot of beginning writers think (or are told by writing professors who haven't published much—if anything—outside of the university press “lit-ry” magazines) that they must hone their skills writing short stories before they're ready to, they say, “tackle the novel.”

Well, I am nothing if not the exception that proves the rule. I had three novels published and two more under contract before I sold my first short story.

It's not that I hadn't tried my hand at short stories before then. In college and shortly afterwards, I had written a handful of stories before I dove into my first novel. (That book—*Moondeath*—beat the odds on its own because, unlike most first novels, it didn't languish in a desk drawer for long; it actually saw the light of print.) Before then, though, I got some nice rejection letters for the few stories I sent out. Not enough to paper the wall, but that's only because I didn't write or submit many of them. One rejection in particular that I remember came from Ben Bova, who very kindly told me that the science in my story just didn't make sense. He was right; the story sucked, big time.

It wasn't long, though, before I discovered that the length of the novel suited my temperament much better than the short story. I felt—and still feel—as though it's easier to write a novel than a short story. Masters of the craft, like Harlan Ellison, are rare and wonderful. If you put my feet to the fire, however, I'd have to say, hands down, I enjoy writing screenplays the most. I don't know why. I just do.

Notice, though, that I didn't say anything about writing a “good” novel or a “good” short story. No matter what we may think about our own work, it's not up to us as writers to judge the quality of our writing beyond simply putting everything we can at that particular moment into our current project, be it short story, novel, screenplay, or dirty limerick.

If we're lucky, we find a form that suits our temperament, and we stick with it. I have always enjoyed roaming around in the vast landscape, the wide canvas of a novel. My Uncle George Pistenmaa was a carpenter his whole life. He always said that he enjoyed rough framing houses because he could make enough little mistakes so the big ones didn't show. Continuing that analogy: a short story is like making a piece of fine furniture. One nick... one slip of the saw... one half-moon dimple from your hammer head, and it's ruined.

Well, I like the size and scope of a novel, and I've written my fair share, some maybe even “good,” although I am painfully aware that all of them have enough small mistakes in them so, I hope, the bigger ones don't show.

But a while back (I don't want to get into all of the particulars, but suffice to say that there were many personal and professional reasons), I had a bit of a career/midlife crisis.

In fact, I hit the wall.

Part of the problem—a very small part, believe me—was that ever since I'd sold my first novel, I had never written or sold anything, not a novel or a short story, that hadn't already been contracted for. Editors and publishers would contact me and ask for a short story, and I'd write one, usually around the “theme” of their particular anthology... You know, like “Lesbian-vampire nuns in the Middle Ages”... Stuff like that.

And the novels...?

Yeah, I was doing all right with them. Not as well as I (and everyone else) did in the mid-1980 heyday of horror, but I was holding my own. I was still selling books while other writers who had started when I did had to go back to that dreaded “DAY JOB.” Many of them eventually vanished. Gave up writing. In some cases that was a good thing; in other cases, it was sad.

The problem was, I wasn’t too happy with the prospects. As I looked ahead, I saw myself churning out a novel a year for the rest of my life, and that scared and depressed me.

So I decided to do something about it.

Unlike many other writers, I didn’t quit. I did the more sensible thing. I decided to write something *just for myself*.

What a concept!

No contract.

No expectations.

No nothing.

Just let a story un-spool from my imagination. Dig into my memories of childhood and play with ideas and images, characters and events, and see what came out. I could always toss it into File 13 if I didn’t like it.

But this sounded like fun. It sounded like something I hadn’t done in so long I began to wonder if I’d ever really done it.

So I started a story—“Miss Henry’s Bottles”—and went with it, working on it a little here, a little there, over a couple of years until I had something like a hundred pages.

I didn’t know *what* I had, and I didn’t care because no one wanted to buy it. No one contracted for it. No one had paid me for it. So it was mine, mine, all *mine*. And I had truly enjoyed the process of just telling a story... or letting a story tell itself.

Coincidentally, the same day I finished “Miss Henry’s Bottles,” Rich Chizmar at Cemetery Dance Publications called and asked if I happened to have any novella-length works on hand.

Did I?

Well, yeah, I did. But truth to tell, I wasn’t sure I wanted to send it to him. Remember what I said about judging our own work? Well, when we’re writing for ourselves, forgetting all about entertaining an audience or having the pressure of being paid for the work, we’re sole judge and jury. I reluctantly sent the story to Rich, and he loved it... loved it enough to include it in his anthology *Trick or Treat*.

Thankfully, the novella got some good attention, some nice reviews and kind comments from readers. I was grateful and relieved because “Miss Henry’s Bottles” was, if nothing else, my special baby.

But what I discovered in writing it was that I enjoyed the length of the novella. It had the full impact of a short story and a bit more room to bang around in. I almost felt at home. So not long after that, again simply to please myself and no one else, I started writing “Cold River.” By this time, I had gotten out of the depression that had settled in around me. (I told you I’m not going to discuss it.) I was contracted for and writing “real” novels... you know, for money under my own name and under my pseudonym, A. J. Matthews.

Once I finished “Cold River” and sent it off to Rich Chizmar for inclusion in the Cemetery Dance Publications novella series, I’d been bitten by the novella bug. It felt good—especially when I’m in that postpartum depression time between novels—to work on something that didn’t have the heft of a whole novel but didn’t have the brevity of a short story.

So I started work on “Tin Can Telephone,” and I took an old idea I’d had more than ten years ago and polished up an aborted story titled “Blood Ledge.” And now you have all four of them collected here.

Lucky you.

And lucky me because in bringing these all together, I realized something about all four of the novellas. ~~Although none of them are strictly autobiographical (thank God!), they all draw quite heavily on my memories and impressions of my childhood. Maybe that's where true inspiration comes from—sweet and not so sweet childhood memories and impressions.~~

And that explains why I'd like to dedicate *Four Octobers* to Mr. Ray Bradbury, whom I lovingly refer to as the "Halloween Man." I've never had the pleasure of meeting him in person or speaking with him, but his stories have influenced me more than anything else I read when I was in the formative stage of being a "pre-writer." (You know, that awkward and frustrating period when you just *know* you think and feel things deeply and intensely, but you can't even begin to express what *why*.)

So I'll wrap up this rather long-winded introduction simply by saying—

Thank you, Mr. Bradbury.

You're father to a whole generation of wonder seekers.

Tin Can Telephone

October, 1957

The predawn air crackled with frost as we made our way through the narrow strip of woods beside my house. It was early October, and the leaves of the oak trees had just started to turn brown and drop. Those still on the trees rattled in the darkness with a dull, leathery sound, almost like the flutter of butterfly wings, as a gentle wind blew down from the north.

It was about a quarter to five on Monday morning, and the three of us were heading out into my grandfather's field. There was me—my name's Johnny; I was named after my grandfather, Jussi, which is Finnish for John—my older sister, Elena, who was in seventh grade, and my best friend, Chucky Nielson. Chucky lived two houses down the street from me on Stockholm Avenue.

It was a school day, and if this had been like any ordinary school day, I would have stayed in bed until the last minute, snoozing until my mother called up to me that it was time to get ready.

But this day was not ordinary.

Not at all.

It had started a little after four o'clock in the morning when the tin can started banging against my bedroom wall, making a loud, jangling sound like a cowbell. The tin can—an old Bird's Eye orange juice can—was tied to a long piece of string that ran out through the narrow slit of my open window. As soon as it started banging like that, I leaped out of bed. My feet got tangled in my bedspread, and I almost fell down as I darted over to the window.

It was dark outside when I looked down into the yard, but I could make out Chucky, staring up at me. His face was as pale and round as a full moon. I started to run the window up, but Chucky waved at me impatiently.

"Use the phone," he said in a loud whisper, holding up the tin can that was tied to the other end of the string.

Still a little groggy, I grasped the tin can, took a few steps back until the string was taut, and held the can up to my mouth.

"Yeah. Hey. I'm awake," I said.

When I shifted the tin can to my ear, I heard Chucky say, "Neat. Now get your butt down here." His voice was faint, and it buzzed like a bumblebee inside my ear. It would have been a lot easier just to open the window and talk to him, but this whole tin can telephone thing had been Chucky's idea so we wouldn't wake up my parents. I went along with it, mostly because Chucky usually went along with most of my stupid ideas. I call them stupid now, but like a lot of things that either never work or the way you planned or are just plain numb to begin with, they seemed like a good idea at the time.

"Get a move on. What the heck are you waiting for?"

"I'll be right down," I said and then, remembering the tin can in my hand, held it up to my mouth and repeated myself. "I'll be right down."

When I dropped the tin can, it clunked loudly against the wall. For a moment, I was worried that the sound, transmitted along the string, might have hurt Chucky's ear, but then I remembered how faint his voice had sounded coming through the can, so I didn't worry about it.

I got dressed in a hurry, pulling on the jeans I had worn all weekend and grabbing a clean T-shirt from my bureau. I knew it was pretty cold outside from the draft that was coming in my window, so I pulled my red sweatshirt on over my head before leaving my bedroom.

Just as I was closing the bedroom door behind me, hoping not to disturb anyone else in the house, the door to my sister's room opened, and Elena looked out at me. My parents already knew what we were up to this early in the morning, but this was an adventure, and I wanted at least to pretend that we were sneaking. I didn't want them—and I certainly didn't want my *sister*—coming with Chucky and me. That'd ruin everything, for sure.

"Hold on," Elena said in a sharp whisper. "I'm coming with you."

Her left eyebrow rose expectantly, like I really had a choice and could say *no*, but she knew and I knew if I protested, she'd make such a fuss that it would wake up my folks, and then probably everybody would come traipsing along with Chucky and me. I hesitated, but only for a second or two before nodding silently and then started down the stairs with my sneakers and socks in hand.

Chucky's expression froze when he saw that Elena was with me. It wasn't that he didn't like my sister. In fact, he'd told me lots of times that he "kinda liked" her, but *this* was *our* plan, and we didn't want anyone else tagging along... especially a girl. My teeth chattered from the cold as I sat down on the top step of the back porch and quickly pulled on my socks and sneakers.

"So," I said once I was fully dressed. "You sure you know where to look?"

Chucky didn't answer right away as I led the way across the backyard, heading towards the narrow strip of woods and my grandfather's field beyond.

"Supposed to be coming from the northwest," Chucky finally said.

I thought he sounded unusually subdued, and I was sure it was because Elena was with us. Chucky never acted like himself whenever there was a girl around, even my sister. It was like he got a little nervous or something and didn't want to say or do anything they might think was stupid or childish. Because my sister was two years older than me, I figured that's what was bothering Chucky. I realized now that he had a crush on her.

"Which way's northwest?" Elena asked.

She was wearing jeans and a dark, hooded sweatshirt. I couldn't see her face clearly as she turned and faced Chucky, then looked up at the night sky. Through the trees, we could see a dull blue broad swatch of the Milky Way arching from horizon to horizon. The moon had already set, so the shadows under the trees were dense and kind of scary.

"North's that-a way," Chucky said, waving his hand in the general direction we were walking.

When we stepped out from under the oak trees, a subtle chill ran through me. It was more than the cold night air, I now realize, but I remember feeling small and insignificant beneath the vast night sky. I had never felt nervous like this outside at night before. There were plenty of nights in the summer when Chucky and I camped out with some of our other neighborhood friends—usually Billy and Roy. And we'd spend hour after hour, lying on our backs and staring up at the sky as we talked about all sorts of stuff.

But this time, I felt something different.

"Have you heard it?" I asked, wanting to break through the little bit of nervousness I was feeling.

"Jeeze, who hasn't?" Chucky said. "It's been on TV and radio all weekend."

I nodded, suspecting that the gesture was wasted in the darkness.

"I just don't see what's the big deal," Chucky went on. "I mean—how can anyone make any sense out of those sounds. It's just a bunch of beeps."

"You wanna know what it means?" Elena said.

Chucky and I both paused, waiting for her to go on.

"It means the Russians can drop A-bombs on us now. My history teacher, Mr. Ives, said so."

Maybe it was just me, but I was pretty sure I heard a tremor in her voice.

"The Russians aren't gonna bomb us," I said. "This is science."

I remember putting more feeling into what I said than I actually felt, probably because I always

enjoyed contradicting my sister. "This is really exciting." My foot snapped a dry twig on the ground. The sudden sound made me jump in spite of myself. "This means we'll be going to the moon and Mars and stuff."

Chucky sniffed with laughter. "Yeah, right," he said, shaking his head. "Nobody's going *anywhere* in that thing. Have you seen what it looks like? Sputnik ain't much bigger than a tin can."

"Yeah, but it's in *orbit* around the *Earth*." I looked up at the night sky again and felt a sudden swelling of awe. "Nobody's ever done something like this before. Not even the US Army."

Nobody had a reply for that, so we continued out into the field. Frost laced the dried stalks, weeds and grass that brushed against our pants legs. It wasn't long before the cuffs of our jeans were damp. Looking down the gentle slope toward the Stockholm Avenue and the darkened houses that lined it, I once again experienced that odd chill. I knew it was more than the night air. The stars had never shone so bright, and the sky actually seemed to shimmer with a subtle, pulsating glow. Once we got to the middle of the field, the three of us stopped and just stood there with our heads tilted back. We stared up at the sky, waiting to see one of the stars move.

"You sure it's coming from the northwest?" I asked after what seemed like a really long time but which probably had been no more than a couple of minutes.

"That's what the newspaper said," replied Chucky. He was standing a few feet behind me, so I couldn't see him. Elena was off to my right, a little downhill.

I knew which way west was because many an evening I had watched the sun set from my bedroom window on the back of the house as I sat at my desk, supposedly doing homework but usually drawing or daydreaming. So I figured if I faced west, north would be directly to my right, across the field. That meant northwest was halfway between them, but I had been looking up at the sky already so long my neck was beginning to hurt. I would have lain down on the grass if it hadn't been so cold and damp.

"I'll bet we already missed it," I finally said.

"The newspaper said it'd go by around quarter to five," Chucky said.

"You got a watch?"

"No. You?"

I shook my head. I couldn't see Chucky standing behind me, but his voice was close to my ear. It had been just 4:30 when we left the back porch of my house, and it couldn't have taken us more than five minutes or so to get out here, so there was no way we could have missed it. Still, I felt as though we had. The ache in my neck was getting steadily worse, and I lowered my head and twisted it from side to side to relieve it.

Suddenly Elena cried out, "There it is!"

The pitch of excitement in her voice made me snap my head back. My eyes were watering from the cold, and I was staring so hard at the star-sprinkled sky that everything seemed to blur.

"Where?" I asked as a tingling rush of excitement ran up my back. The air pressure around me seemed suddenly to increase, and for a few seconds, I thought I could hear a low humming sound in the air.

"Right there! See!" Elena said, using that impatient tone of voice she always used when she talked to me. She was pointing up, her silhouette a black cutout against the starry sky.

I looked where she was pointing, straining to see the satellite and afraid it would streak past before I could, but after a heartbeat or two, I saw a tiny white dot moving against the backdrop of stars.

It wasn't much to see, and I experienced a slight twinge of disappointment. I thought the humming sound I'd heard a few seconds ago might have been Sputnik, but I now realized that the satellite was too high and too small to make any sound that I could hear on the ground. My vision throbbed in time with my pulse as I slowly rotated my head, tracking the tiny dot of light as it streaked across the sky from northwest to southeast.

"It's just like a little shooting star," my sister said, sounding more disappointed than I was.

~~"Yeah, but it's manmade,"~~ I whispered, trying to grasp the sense of wonder and excitement that filled me. All around me, the air seemed to crackle with energy. A wave of warmth blew across the back of my neck.

"You see it, Chucky?"

I turned and glanced behind me, surprised for a moment how, after staring up at the sky for so long, everything on the ground appeared so dark.

Chucky was nowhere in sight.

I thought he might have decided to lie down in the grass rather than tilt his head back so long, but I couldn't see anything that might have been him.

"Chucky?" I called out.

An edge of panic slipped into my voice, and I forgot all about the artificial satellite zipping by overhead as I tried to locate my friend.

"Chucky?" I shouted again, louder.

Still no answer, and as my eyes adjusted to the darkness and I looked all around where we stood, I realized that he was nowhere in sight. The field sloped gently down toward the street, but there wasn't any place within a hundred yards where Chucky could be hiding... not unless, while Elena and I were concentrating on the sky, he had slipped away unheard and was hiding in the woods, crouched behind a tree or something.

But coming out to see Sputnik had been Chucky's idea, so it didn't make sense that he would take off just as it came into sight.

The cold feeling in the bottom of my stomach was getting bad, now, like I had gulped down a mouthful of snow. In spite of the predawn chill, trickles of sweat rolled down the back of my neck. When I glanced over toward the woods, my vision flickered like there was heat lightning in the air. The deep shadows underneath the oaks reached out like hands into the field. For a moment, the trees seemed to sway sickeningly to the right, like the light behind them was shifting rapidly to one side. I wondered if the satellite was bright enough to do that but mostly I was panicking because my friend had disappeared.

"Will you guys shut up?" Elena said, her voice laced with irritation. "It's almost gone already."

"So's Chucky," I said.

Elena didn't answer me for a moment, and I could see that her head was still thrown back as she tracked the satellite's progress to the southeast horizon above the old chicken coop. I caught another glimpse of it just before it dropped out of sight behind the trees.

"I'm cold," Elena said. "Let's go back and make some cocoa."

"We have to find Chucky first," I said, fighting the tremor in my voice.

"What the heck are you talking about?" Elena said, but in the darkness, I could see her head swiveling from side to side as she looked around for Chucky. The predawn stillness seemed so dense it was almost like being underwater, and I wondered how far any sound could travel; but we were both silent for a long time, neither one of us daring to call out. Finally, Elena sighed and said, "He probably got cold and went home."

"No," I said, shaking my head. "Not without telling us he was."

"Then he's just goofing around, trying to scare us, I'll bet."

"I don't think so," I replied, still shaking my head and gnawing my lower lip.

I remembered how hushed the night had gotten and the funny feeling I'd had just before we saw the satellite. Maybe Chucky had said that he was leaving, and I was so intent on seeing Sputnik that I hadn't even heard him. Off to the east, the first traces of dawn smudged the sky with a cold gray that looked like scorched metal.

“Well I’m not hanging around out here and looking for him,” Elena said. “If he wants to act like a jerk, he can act like a jerk.”

She started to leave, but I reached out and snagged the sleeve of her sweatshirt. She shook me off and shouted, “Cut it out.” With that, she started back across the field toward the woods and home. It wasn’t long before her silhouette blended into the ink-stain shadows under the trees, and she was gone.

For the longest time, I just stood there, watching until the porch light winked on in our house. The single, lonely glimmer of yellow light made me feel all the more alone as I started slowly back to the house.

“Chucky?” I called out softly a few times, but there was no answer.

My shoulders were tensed and the back of my neck prickled because I was half-expecting him to burst out from his hiding place—wherever it was—and holler, “Boo!” but that never happened. The only sounds I could hear were the soft rattling of the wind in the oaks and a solitary cricket, chirruping somewhere in the darkness of the field. I wondered how that little insect could have survived the cold this long, and a wave of deep sadness swept over me because I think I knew, even then, that I would never see my friend again.

The search for Chucky started shortly after daybreak. I went home and told my parents that Chucky had been with us but had disappeared just as Sputnik went by overhead. Even then, I wondered if there might be a connection between the two things, but I knew that was impossible.

My dad called Chucky’s house, but Mrs. Neilson told him that Chucky wasn’t in his room, that he had left his bed unmade, and that his sneakers and jacket were missing from the front entryway where he always left them. She said something more to my dad. I couldn’t make out exactly what it was over the phone, but she sounded really upset, but not as upset as I was.

After he got off the phone, my father and I went back out to the field and looked around. The sun was up by then, and I remember a weird feeling of unreality as we walked through the same woods we had passed through not more than an hour or two ago. Now, everything looked so different, so normal. I had a hard time convincing myself that we had just been out here. It seemed like I was remembering a dream or something that had happened a long time ago.

My father and I traipsed all around the field, looking for any sign of Chucky. We found the beaten-down grass and broken weed stalks where the three of us had been standing. We even found the spot where I was sure Chucky had been standing when the satellite went by overhead, but there were no other signs of my friend.

I followed my father as he walked the perimeter of the field, his head lowered as he scanned the grass. He liked to hunt deer up in Maine in November, and he was a pretty good tracker, but other than a few rabbit trails in the dewy grass, we didn’t find anything.

I had no idea what to think.

The cold wind in my face made my eyes water, and I was afraid my father would think I was crying, so I kept wiping my eyes on the back of my hand when he wasn’t looking at me.

“Don’t worry, bud,” my father said. He stopped a few steps ahead of me and waited for me to catch up, then placed his hand gently on my shoulder. “I’m sure he’ll turn up safe and sound.”

“Yeah,” I said, but then my throat closed off and made a funny little squeaking sound, and I didn’t believe him. After another complete circuit of the field, we were about to head back to the house to call the police when I noticed something close to where I had been standing with Elena and Chucky.

“What’s that?” I asked as I pointed toward what, at first, I thought must have been a trick of the light or something. Summer was long gone, and the grass in the field was dying and turning yellow. It glowed like gold in the slanting morning sun, and thin trails of steam were rising into the air as the frost evaporated.

But there was one spot close to where Chucky had been standing that looked different.

My father kept his hand on my shoulder as we walked toward it. The closer we got, the more defined the spot became. There was a faint circle where the grass was browner than the rich gold the rest of the field. It looked as though maybe the sun or a close flame had seared it. Wiping the tears from my eyes, I tried to focus on it, but that made it harder to see. It was like staring at something at night when if you shift your gaze just a little to one side, you can see things better.

“That brown spot there?” my father said, squinting and tilting his head to get a better look at it. He glanced at me, and I raised my hand, jabbing it at the circular brown spot. He slipped his hand from my shoulder and walked a little closer to it, frowning as he looked from side to side.

“Yeah. Looks kind of like the grass was burned or something,” he said.

Crouching low, he knelt down in the center of the spot and studied the ground.

I took a few cautious steps closer, but I didn’t want to step inside the circle. Something told me to be careful. When I was standing just at the edge of it, it looked about eight or ten feet in diameter. My father straightened up and walked to the other side of it. Shaking his head again, he said, “I can kind of see it, but I’m not sure—It just looks like a patch of dead grass to me.”

“No. See? It’s a perfect circle.” I wasn’t even sure if I had spoken out loud as I slid one foot forward into the circle. Nothing happened until I stepped forward and was completely inside the circle. The instant I did that, a funny dizzy feeling swept over me so intensely it frightened me. My legs were trembling, the muscles in my thighs thrumming like tuning forks as I took another step forward.

From inside the circle, it appeared to be much more clearly defined. Beyond it, the rest of my grandfather’s field shimmered like I was looking at it through dense heat waves. Even as I watched the edges of the grass at my feet started to crinkle up and turn darker brown. The edges of the dying grass turned into ash as a wave of warmth surrounded me. I expected the whole area to burst in flame at any moment. A strange smell filled my nose. It reminded me of burning hair, and it made me cough.

“What do you say we head back up to the house?” my father said.

I stared at him, struggling not to cry out as the pressure inside the circle squeezed my chest, making me gasp.

“Yeah,” I finally said, but the air seemed to absorb my voice before my father could hear it.

Everything around me appeared to be moving in slow motion. My father was looking straight at me, and it seemed to take forever just for him to blink his eyes once. The wind flattened the grass around him like a huge, invisible hand was pressing down on it from the sky, but I couldn’t feel even the faintest stirring of a breeze on my face. Wisps of smoke curled up like tiny blue threads from the dead blades of grass, which was turning into charcoal powder. The crackling sound got steadily louder until it filled my ears, reminding me of the sound a campfire makes when it’s blazing away.

My father’s mouth moved as he said something to me, but it took so long for him to form each word that all I heard was a low, dragging sound like a long, pained groan that wavered weirdly up and down. The air inside the circle had created a dense, translucent barrier between us. A subtle current of electricity passed through me, making my hair stand on ends. I had the distinct impression that my feet had somehow lifted off the ground, and I was hovering in the air several inches above the browning grass. I waved my arms wildly for balance and cried out to my father, but there wasn’t enough air inside the circle for me to catch my breath. It was like wide, metal bands were squeezing my chest until my eyes bugged out of my head.

My father started moving toward me in slow motion. It looked to me as though his body left long, trailing smears of color behind him. My vision doubled, then tripled, and then multiplied so much I couldn’t focus on anything. The field and the sky and my father’s face all spun crazily around me. I felt like I was being sucked up into the sky.

I have no idea what happened next. I guess I blacked out because the next thing I remember, ~~opened my eyes and was looking up at my father. He was leaning over me with a look of deep concern on his face. The ground was cold and hard beneath me, and my arms felt like they were made of rubber as I raised them slowly and touched my face. The skin was as cold as granite, and when I took a breath, my ribs made crackling sounds, like crumpled paper.~~

“Take it easy there, bud,” my father said.

His voice was so low I could hardly hear him, but I was relieved to hear everything sounding perfectly normal again. My vision gradually shifted until it was no longer distorted.

“Don’t try standing up just yet. Take a few good, deep breaths until your head clears.”

“Wha—what happened?”

My voice sounded as weak as a mouse’s squeak.

“You fainted,” my father said.

He didn’t look all that concerned, but I wondered if he was holding back something because I didn’t want me to be scared about what had happened.

The truth was, I was very much afraid. I have never fainted before in my life. I didn’t even know anyone who had ever fainted before, and my first thought was: *How close was I to dying?*

After I took a few more tentative breaths, my father slipped one arm under me and helped me to my feet. I was really wobbly. The field kept pitching wildly from side to side, like the deck of a ship, and a raw, burning sourness twisted deep in my stomach. I felt like I was going to throw up even though I hadn’t eaten anything for breakfast and didn’t have anything to throw up. A high-pitched buzzing sound filled my ears. At first I thought it might be crickets, singing in the field, but after a moment, I realized the sound was inside my head. It had a faint, metallic ring to it that made me think of the sound of Chucky’s voice over the tin can telephone.

“Think you can make it back to the house?” my father asked, his forehead wrinkled with concern.

I nodded but didn’t say anything, afraid that my voice would sound funny, and that he would laugh at me. Every breath I took felt like a little sip of fire in the back of my nose and throat. My legs felt rubbery, and I would have dropped to the ground again if my father hadn’t been supporting me.

As we made our way across the field back to the house, my father chuckled softly as he scruffed my hair.

“You ain’t just faking this so you can get out of going to school, are you?”

I started to protest, but before I could say anything, he quickly said, “Just kidding.” After a short pause, he added, “You did have me worried there for a minute, though.”

The muscles in my neck still felt brittle, like they were going to snap when I nodded. Something thick and hot clogged my throat and made my voice sound funny—at least to me—when I spoke.

“I’ve never done anything like that before.”

My father regarded me with a soft expression of concern in his eyes.

“Don’t worry about it, bud,” he said. His hand was resting lightly on my shoulder, and I felt a little less scared. “It’s probably just a combination of getting up so early, not having any breakfast, and—you know, wondering about what Chucky’s up to.”

Chucky’s gone, and I’ll never see him again, I wanted to say, but I didn’t.

I’m not sure why I thought that then, but I was certain that, after this October morning in 1957, I would never see Chucky Nielson alive again.

I felt a little better after eating breakfast, so I went to school that morning as usual. Things seemed really weird, though, not at all normal. I was so used to having Chucky around that, over and over again throughout the day, I would look up from my desk or turn around at lunch, expecting to see him standing or sitting there, gawking at me with that big, goofy grin of his.

But he wasn’t there, and I knew it wasn’t just that he was sick at home for a day or two. He w

gone, and I told myself that I would just have to get used to it.

~~Of course, the police and plenty of the people from town spent the next several days looking for Chucky, but no one found a trace of him, and they never figured out where he had gone. Later that day they even got some divers to go down into Nickerson's Quarry and a few of the granite quarries where we swam in the summer, but they didn't find him.~~

Chucky's parents went crazy with grief. His father started drinking more than he should, and his mother eventually turned into kind of a hermit. That afternoon, after school, the police talked to me and my parents. I wasn't very much help. Chucky had never said anything to me that gave an indication he was planning on running away or anything. I knew they were thinking that Chucky may have committed suicide, but they never came right out and asked me if I thought that's what happened.

I insisted that I knew Chucky, and he would *never* do anything like that. He was my best friend and I just couldn't get used to the idea that he had just disappeared like that. There was talk about kidnappers and all sorts of other things, but the simple fact was, my friend was gone.

But I did have one idea where to look, so when I got home from school and after I'd done my chores, just as the sun was setting, I went out to my grandfather's field. The brown circle of grass was still there. If anything, it looked darker than before in the waning light. The grass was crisp and dark brown, and black on the edges in the fading, purple twilight.

"Chucky...?" I called out softly.

A painful tightness gripped my throat and made my voice sound higher than usual. Although the evening was cool, a sheen of sweat broke out across my forehead and ran like icy strings down the inside of my shirt.

I realized that the wind that had been blowing gently before had stopped, and a hush in the air pressed against my face like invisible hands. This time—thank God—I didn't feel that sudden blast of withering heat behind me or feel any kind of concussion in the air, but then I heard something that made me jump.

"...Johnny..."

For a split second, I thought it was my mother, calling me in for supper; but an instant later, I realized it was Chucky. His voice sounded so faint and faraway I had to strain to hear it as I leaned forward, my head as close to the circle of brown grass as I dared to get it.

"What the heck, Chucky?" I said out loud, feeling foolish talking to someone I couldn't even see. "Where the heck are you? What are you doing?"

"...I'm right here. I can hear you, but I can't see you..."

"I can't see you, either," I said, swallowing so hard my throat made a loud gulping sound that hurt. I took a breath, trying to find a slight measure of courage. "Are you—"

I was going to ask him if he was dead, but I didn't dare to because I was pretty sure of the answer. Overhead, the October sky was streaked with narrow bands of purple and indigo clouds. A breeze suddenly rushed across the field, cold and hard. It ruffled my hair and made me shiver. I looked longingly over my shoulder at the line of trees between me and the house, and was amazed how far away safety looked.

"So where are you? How come I can't see you?"

There was a long pause, and in that silence, I almost convinced myself that I was imagining all this. But then Chucky's voice came to me again, sounding fainter, if anything, but it was still there. and it was real.

"...I can't really tell. But I don't think I..."

His voice twisted up into a funny, fluttering sound and then faded away before he finished what he was going to say. It was lost beneath the low, rushing sound inside my head.

I realized that I had dropped to my hands and knees in the center of the circle of dead grass. I didn't remember consciously stepping inside the circle. What had happened to me that morning was still so fresh and clear it sent a lightning bolt of panic shooting up my spine. Uttering a low, strangled cry, I rolled to one side, tucking my chin down against my chest the way we had learned "tumbling" in gym class.

As soon as I was outside the circle, I realized that all the other sounds around me had been muffled, like my ears were full of water, but now I could hear everything clearly. Off in the distance my mother was calling me from the back steps. Her voice echoed from the woods behind the house.

Licking my lips, I leaped to my feet and furiously brushed the dead grass off my pants. I couldn't believe how drained I felt. It reminded me of last winter, when I'd had the Asian flu. All of my joints were burning, and the muscles in my arms and legs felt like they had turned into oatmeal. I tried to holler back to my mother, but no sound came out when I opened my mouth.

"John-ny!"

The memory of hearing Chucky call my name and talk to me made me shiver, and as I turned around and ran for home and supper, I tried to convince myself that it hadn't been Chucky I heard.

Not really.

It was impossible.

I had to be imagining it. It was like I had slipped into a world like in those scary science fiction movies I had to sneak into because my parents wouldn't give me the money to go see them.

I knew I'd better not tell anyone what had happened—especially not my parents. They'd think I was crazy, for sure, and I might end up in the mental hospital. We'd all heard those stories about the "nut house" over in Danvers. "Coffee Hill," we called it, because it was "chock full of nuts."

So I kept my mouth shut about what had happened, and after supper, I washed up and went straight upstairs to bed, earlier than usual. My parents seemed to understand that I wanted time to myself, but after I had tucked myself in, my mother came upstairs to talk to me. She told me that she understood how upset I was about what had happened to Chucky, and she reassured me that everything would be all right. He'd show up, and we'd all laugh about how concerned we'd been.

But I knew differently.

I knew things wouldn't be all right ever again.

The problem was, no one knew what had happened to my best friend. He still hadn't shown up at his home by suppertime, and the police were still out looking for him until long after dark. The divers didn't find him in the quarries, but that didn't prove anything. There were hundreds of places he might be hiding, if he was hiding, or he could have run away to another town.

I was pretty sure he was someplace else, and I knew he wasn't coming back.

After my mother turned out the light and I settled down in bed, I couldn't help but listen to the wind, whistling through the crack in the window. It made the tin can telephone bang against the wall, but I was too scared to get out of bed and move it. I imagined that the sound wasn't the wind at all. I imagined that it was Chucky, calling to me from out of the darkness. I knew he was trying to let me know that he was in some kind of trouble and that he needed my help.

All night, I hovered somewhere between being asleep and awake, and the dreams I had and the things I imagined kept me tossing and turning until dawn.

When the sky first started to get lighter in the east, blending from black to coal dust gray, I had come to the conclusion that I was the only one who could figure out where Chucky had gone, and I was the one who could save him.

Or at least try.

It wasn't hard to convince my folks to let me stay home from school that day. When I complained that I wasn't feeling well, my father sat on the edge of my bed, held the back of his hand against my

forehead, and told my mother that I probably needed to stay home and rest.

My mother wasn't too keen on the idea because she had plans to go shopping and then out to lunch with her friends, Mildred Story and Vera Miller. I told her I'd be fine, that all I was going to do was stay here in bed, maybe read a few comic books, and try to sleep.

They both believed me, so I was tingling with excitement as I listened to them getting ready to leave. My father left at the usual time for his job at the town water plant. Then my sister—after complaining that it wasn't fair that I got to stay home when I wasn't even sick—left for school. An hour or so later, after checking in on me and reminding me for the millionth time not to answer the telephone or doorbell, my mother left when Mildred drove up into the driveway and honked her horn. The dust hadn't even settled behind them before I was out of bed, dressed, and out the back door, running through the woods to my grandfather's field with the shovel I'd gotten from the garage, bouncing on my shoulder the way a soldier carries his rifle.

The excitement and anticipation I'd been feeling quickly evaporated when I saw the circle of brown grass in the field.

It was darker than ever. Some of the grass was as black and fragile as ash. I shuddered as I stared at this proof that at least part of what I thought had happened really had happened. During the night, I had tried to convince myself that it wasn't real, that nothing had happened yesterday, and if I had gone to school this morning as usual, I'd see Chucky sitting behind me where he always sat, one row over and one seat back.

But as I stared down at the withered grass, not daring yet to step inside the circle, my hands grew slick from the grip I had on the handle of the shovel.

I knew this really *was* happening, no matter how much I might think otherwise. I couldn't stop the weird feeling that I was dreaming as I took a few steps closer to the circle of grass.

Swallowing hard, I licked my lips.

"Chucky?" I called out. "Are you there?"

The day was unseasonably warm, the sun almost broiling as it beat down upon my shoulders. I don't know how long I stood there, waiting for a reply, but the only sound I heard was the soft rustle of the wind in the grass.

I took a deep breath and placed the tip of the shovel on the ground, resting my foot on the top of the blade and leaning the way I'd see town workers do when they were at a construction site.

When the wind suddenly died down, that same weird, prickling sensation came over me. I could hear one or two crickets chirping in the field. Then the sound of a car coming down the road drew my attention.

I panicked, thinking my mother might be coming back to the house because she'd forgotten something or, more likely, because she wanted to check in on me. When I saw Old Man Wayrenen's rusted Ford pickup truck rounding the corner, heading toward town, I let my breath out and relaxed a little.

I shook my head, suddenly realizing that I had been just standing there, staring at the circle of brown grass for so long my vision began to shimmer. I wasn't sure if there was something wrong with my eyes, if I was crying, or if the air inside the burned circle really looked denser, but all around me the air was rippling and shimmering. It made me think of the times I'd jumped into Nickerson Quarry and rolled over and looked back up at the sky from underwater. The sky, even the sunlight, jiggled so much it made me feel dizzy. I fought back the fear that I was going to faint again, and this time my father wasn't there to help me.

"Hang on, Chucky," I whispered under my breath as I shucked off my sweatshirt and dropped it on the ground. Gripping the shovel tightly with both hands, I held my breath and took my first step inside the circle.

Unlike the last time, I didn't feel anything really weird once I was standing in the circle. Maybe I was getting used to it. I did notice that my hair prickled a little, and when I looked down at the back of my arms, the tiny hairs were standing straight up like the hair on a frightened cat. I ran my forefinger along my forearm and flattened out the hairs, but they stood back up as soon as I took my finger away.

"Really weird," I muttered. I couldn't help but notice that my voice sounded so distorted I had the distinct impression someone else had spoken, not me.

Before I started digging, I took another look around the field, surprised by how distant and dreamlike everything appeared. It was like I was looking through a pane of old-fashioned glass that distorted my vision and made everything ripple whenever I moved my head. I guess I started to daydream about something because all of a sudden I started to feel really sleepy. I covered my mouth with my hand. I yawned, but I suddenly jerked wide awake when I heard a voice.

"...Get digging..."

I had been expecting to hear Chucky's voice, so I was surprised to hear what sounded like a full-grown man talking to me.

"Are you talking to me?" I asked, unable to control the tremor in my voice.

I waited for a reply, but none came—at least none that I heard clearly—so I gritted my teeth, took hold of the shovel, and jabbed the rusted blade into the turf at my feet.

Over the years, Chucky and I had done plenty of digging, so I had been expecting more resistance than I got. I assumed the turf would be a hard tangle of knotted grass and weed roots, but the shovel blade sank into the soil so cleanly and easily it threw me off balance. As I scrambled to keep my balance, I let go of the shovel, and the handle bounced painfully off my shoulder as I fell to the ground.

Embarrassed that someone might have seen me, I scrambled to my feet, brushed off my pants, and then bent down to pick up the shovel. The soil, I saw, was as rich and dark as the soot of a burned campfire. I scraped at it with the shovel and saw that it was so loose I could just as easily have scooped it away with my hands as with a shovel. As I set to work, I found myself wishing that Chucky was here to help me. I really missed my best friend.

I lost all sense of time as I worked, but I noticed that my shadow shifted quickly across the ground as though the sun were speeding past me. I ignored it and just kept digging, not really paying attention to whatever progress I was making. It seemed, somehow, not to matter. All that mattered was that I keep digging, throwing shovelful after shovelful of loose, black dirt over my shoulder outside of the circle.

As I worked, I was vaguely aware that I was getting hungry and thirsty, but I had no intention of stopping to rest. I had developed a rhythm that was unlike any other time I had ever dug a hole. Even though sweat was pouring down my face and inside my T-shirt, I didn't feel the least bit of strain in my muscles or joints. After a first little bit of breathlessness, I found that I was breathing deeply and evenly, the air pouring like water into my lungs. I imagined that, to someone watching from the field or from down on the road, I must have looked like a digging machine, spewing out fantails of rich, dark soil that arched against the sky before landing several feet outside the circle. I didn't stop to think how peculiar it was that I hadn't hit any rocks or anything until my shovel blade struck against something so hard it made a loud gong sound that rattled my teeth. The blade scraped against the buried object, shooting out a spray of orange sparks, and then sank into the wall of dirt.

I stopped digging and, for the first time, realized how hard I had been working. My body was drenched with sweat, and my clothes hung heavily on me. A deep vibration thrummed inside my body, and it hurt when I took a breath, but I paid no attention to it as I dropped to my knees and plunged my fingers into the soil to see what I had hit. This was an old New England field, so I had been expecting

to feel the rough surface of buried granite. I was surprised when I felt a piece of smooth, flat metal dug deeper with my fingers until I found the edge and tried to pry it free, but the thing wouldn't budge.

"What the heck?" I muttered in frustration as I sat back on my heels.

Sweat was coursing down my forehead and into my eyes. When I wiped my face with the back of my arm, the grit scraped my skin hard enough to draw blood. I was panting heavily, and as I shifted my gaze out over the field, I realized I'd been working like a maniac. Exhaustion wrung me out, and I'm sure I could have used a drink of water, but I didn't want to stop.

I couldn't stop.

Not yet.

When I turned and glanced over my shoulder at the house, a whirlwind of tiny white spots corkscrewed across my vision like a swirl of fireflies that left behind trailing afterimages, glowing bright blue and violet before they faded away. A powerful wave of dizziness swept over me again. I felt as though my head kept turning, spinning all the way around in a complete circle on my neck. The whole world went suddenly silent, and the sky and field seemed to blend into a single multicolored out of focus smear.

Whimpering softly, I leaned back and took a breath. To keep myself from keeling over, I braced myself with both hands on the ground, my fingers digging into the loose soil. The silence rang in my ears like metal striking metal. My biggest fear was that I was going to pass out again, and that my parents would find me out here in the field, unconscious or this time maybe dead.

My eyes ached as I peered down into the hole I had dug. I was surprised to see how deep it was. I hadn't been conscious of working so hard, and I had gone down maybe three or four feet in an area at least as wide as I could reach with my arms fully extended to either side. I had let go of the shovel and as I looked at it now, I saw that the tip of the blade was resting against the metal object I had struck. Leaning closer, I studied it carefully, positive of only one thing.

It sure as heck wasn't any rock.

Even from the little corner of it that I'd exposed, I could see that it was a flat piece of what had once looked like highly-polished metal. The shovel hadn't even dented it although I'd hit it hard enough to make it ring like a bell and send sparks flying. And even after being underground for, however long, it hadn't corroded or rusted in the least. I held my breath as I moved closer to it and kneeling down to get as comfortable as possible, started digging carefully around the thing, trying to locate its edges.

My hands were smeared with clots of black soil that looked almost like dried blood. The tips of my fingers were skinned and bleeding. As I worked, that weird feeling came over me again, and I felt as though I was trapped inside a large, transparent bubble. The outside world flickered and distorted, large parts of it disappearing in little swirls of darkness, like rushing storm clouds. A dense hush enveloped me, killing any other sounds. Teasing prickles of electricity ran across my skin, and a couple of times, when I touched the metal surface of the thing, I was sure I saw lacy blue sparks shoot off between it and my fingertips.

Glancing up quickly, I saw that the sun was starting to drop behind the horizon. If my mother came home and found me out here, not in bed where I was supposed to be, she'd be really upset with me, but I no longer cared. I had to find out what this thing was.

Almost blind with desperation, I scraped and dug and clawed into the earth, clearing it away in large handfuls that I threw over my shoulder without looking where they landed. Eventually, I exposed the whole top of the metal thing, a flat, rectangular piece of metal with a small handle lying inside a dented impression on the top.

It looked a lot like the top of a metal filing box, like the one my father used to keep his important

papers. Panting from a mixture of excitement, exertion, and a deep, winding fear, I dug down around the sides of the box until I had pushed aside enough dirt so I could try to pull it free again.

Grunting with the effort, I wiggled it from side to side, moving it like an old, rotten tooth, but still it didn't come free.

"Come *on*... Get *out* of there... You *lousy* son of a *bitch!*" I muttered, using an expression I heard my father use a time or two but which I would never have dared say out loud if there had been any adults nearby.

Sweat was streaming down the sides of my face and falling onto the ground, making loud plopping sounds as it hit the soil like heavy drops of rain. My hands and forearms were throbbing from the effort, so I shifted around and sat back in the hole, positioning my heels on the top of the box. Bracing myself against the wall of dirt, I pushed on it until my pulse was thundering in my ears. I closed my eyes, and sweat ran into the corners of my eyes, making them sting, but I didn't stop pushing until the metal box finally shifted. Then with a grunt and a roar, I let out the breath I'd been holding and sagged forward, totally spent. I kept my eyes closed until my racing pulse finally began to slow down.

Now what? I thought as I opened my eyes and stared at the box.

It was pushed back several inches, and a wide wedge of darkness had opened up in front of it. I thought I might have broken it or bent it out of shape, but the top looked undamaged as I knelt down and started scooping away the dirt I had loosened. After wiggling the box back and forth a few more times, I lifted and it came free so fast I fell backwards and landed hard. The box banged against my knee, and I was pretty sure that it had cut my leg even through the thick denim of my jeans. I didn't care, though, as I lurched forward and fumbled the box around to find the latch.

I was afraid it might be locked.

If it was, I would have to get a screwdriver from my father's tools so I could pry it open. There was no way I wasn't going to find out what was in it. I was surprised how easy it was when the latch clicked open when I pressed down on it with my thumb.

My heart seemed to stop beating as I raised the lid and looked inside. If I'd been hoping to find some kind of treasure, maybe some money or jewels, I was sorely disappointed. My heart sank in my stomach when I saw nothing but a piece of folded paper. I'd been expecting an antique treasure map or something old and valuable, so I was disappointed even more when I saw that the sheet of paper was crisp and white. Still, my hands were shaking almost out of control as I smoothed the paper flat against my leg and, leaning my back against the edge of the hole, opened it up.

My disappointment grew even bigger when I saw that the only thing folded up inside the paper was a newspaper clipping. This, at least, looked old and might be valuable, I thought, but my jaw dropped when I read the date at the top of the page.

Friday, October 11, 1957.

"What the heck?" I muttered.

I frowned and shook my head, trying to let this sink in. I may have passed out yesterday morning and I may not have slept well and been feeling a little sick this morning, but I was positive that today was Tuesday, October 8.

Wasn't it?

I shook my head in bewilderment as I unfolded the paper and saw a single line of flowing script at the top. It wasn't difficult to read, but I had to scan it four or five times before what was written there sank in all the way. In ink, someone had written—

Whatever you do, Johnny, don't go fishing with Billy on Thursday.

The air left me with a loud whoosh.

What was going on?

How could something like this, apparently addressed to me, be buried out here in Grandfather field?

And how could this box have a page in it from the Gloucester Daily Times that's dated three days from now?

My first and almost only thought was that I must have been sicker than I realized.

Maybe when I passed out, I had been in a coma or something for a couple of days or even longer. Maybe I really was heading to "Coffee Hill."

But as I sat there on the cold dirt, staring in amazement at this newspaper clipping, I didn't doubt that I knew what day it was.

It was Tuesday, the *eighth* of October.

And it was getting late.

If she wasn't already home from shopping, my mother would be soon, and I would catch holy hell for leaving the house like this. I couldn't remember if I'd even bothered to lock the doors, like my parents were always telling me.

I knew I had to get back and clean myself up, but before I did that, I opened up the newspaper and scanned the headline on the front page.

LOCAL BOYS HIT BY TRAIN ON BRIDGE

There was a photograph of Andrew's Bridge, the train bridge all of us kids used as a shortcut whenever we were going out to the quarry, either to swim in the summer or fish for sunnies in the spring and fall.

A heavy pounding sound filled my head as I stared at the newspaper article, not daring to believe what I was reading. It reported that my friend, Billy Tyler, and I had been struck and killed by a train late in the afternoon on Thursday, October tenth. The engineer of the train was quoted as saying that he never even saw us until it was too late.

"But this... this is two days from now," I whispered.

I know I said it, but it seemed as though someone else was close behind me, whispering those same words into my ear.

I turned around quickly, half expecting to see Chucky standing there, smiling at the joke he played on me, but the field was eerily empty. The dead grass rattled as it swayed in the wind, but I couldn't hear or feel even the slightest breeze. That same curious hush, like my ears were packed with cotton, settled around me.

"This *can't* be... This can't be *real!*"

I kept shaking my head, all the while wishing I could close my eyes and make everything just go away.

But I couldn't stop staring at the newspaper, reading again and again how the train had run over both Billy and me before it could stop. The funeral service—*my funeral!*—was scheduled for next Monday, October fourteenth.

I no longer noticed the tears that were streaming down my face. A hot, sour taste clogged the back of my throat, gagging me and making my stomach churn. I wanted to get up and run away from the hole and the metal box, but I didn't know where to go or what to do. My parents weren't home, as far as I knew, and anyway, I didn't want to show them this.

I couldn't.

They wouldn't understand it any more than I did.

Who did that leave?

I had to talk to someone!

Not my sister, certainly. She'd just accuse me of making it all up to get attention or whatever. And I didn't think any of my other friends would understand either... not even Billy, if I showed him.

The person I needed to talk to about this was Chucky, but he was... God only knew where.

My shaking hands were so out of control I could hardly hold onto the papers. When I stared down at them, my vision telescoped, and they looked impossibly far away. They might as well have belonged to someone else, for all the control I had over them. After a while—I have no idea how long—I realized there was something stuck to the bottom of the newspaper. It was a small, square piece of yellow paper that was glued to the page. When I pulled it off, it peeled away easily without tearing the paper. On this little slip of paper was another message, in the same handwriting.

I remember that Roy was—or is—a Yankees fan, so if you want to win a Coke or maybe a couple of packs of baseball cards, bet him that Milwaukee wins the World Series this year. The Yankees will lose the seventh game. Trust me on this.

—Your friend, Chuck

"Trust me on this," I whispered with a heavy sigh.

That was what Chucky always said, especially when he was trying to convince me to do something really stupid.

I stared at the little square of yellow paper until my vision blurred. Shaking my head in disbelief, I turned it over and rubbed my thumb across the thin strip of glue that had made it stick to the newspaper. I had never seen anything like this before. I carefully stuck it back onto the newspaper clipping, and folded both back inside the sheet of paper. As I leaned forward, about to put everything back, I noticed something else in the bottom of the metal box.

I could barely breathe as I put my hand inside the metal box. The air inside it was cool and moist. It felt like I was dipping my hand into the quarry to check the water temperature, and I cringed, waiting for it to snap suddenly onto my hand like a mousetrap.

Instead, my hand closed around a rounded object. I was trembling as I slowly drew it out into the sunlight and stared at it.

It was an old Bird's Eye orange juice can with a hole punched out of the bottom. A piece of string about six inches long was knotted on the inside and hanging down. The string wasn't like any kind of string I'd ever seen before. It was really thin and had a shiny, slippery feel to it, almost like it had been waxed or something.

But I knew what this was.

It was an old tin can telephone, at least half of one. My hand and wrist started to ache when the can began to vibrate like a tuning fork in my hand. Another, stronger wave of dizziness almost overcame me, and I could feel myself fainting. When my eyes fluttered closed for a moment, a high-pitched buzzing sound filled my ears, sounding like a swarm of bumblebees in the field. I had no idea if the sound was inside my head or coming from somewhere nearby, but after a while—again, I don't know how long—I was positive that I was listening to a voice, speaking to me. It was faint and tinny, like the voices I heard over the crystal radio I'd made from the Radio Shack kit my father got me for Christmas last year, and I couldn't make out what it was saying.

When I opened my eyes, my eyelids fluttered as I looked all around. I felt absolutely dazed. I had been expecting the voice to fade away, as if it had all been inside my head the whole time, but I could still just barely hear it. I still couldn't make out anything it was saying, but I could tell by the sound

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